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## Libertarianism

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Libertarianism refers to a normative political theory that gives top priority to the value of freedom of choice over other competing political values; moreover, libertarianism understands a person to possess freedom of choice so long as no other agent coercively interferes with his or her choices. Since the state characteristically acts by defining laws and coercively enforcing them, libertarians' hostility to coercion typically leads them to conclude that only a very minimal state is legitimate—namely, a state whose only purposes are to protect citizens against acts of coercion (murder, assault, theft, and so on) and acts of fraud in a system of free enterprise. As a result, libertarians regard the modern welfare state to be illegitimate.

Defined in this way, libertarianism names a family of political theories rather than a single theory; diversity among libertarian political theories arises depending on just how strong a priority is given to the value of freedom of choice (a stronger priority tending to push libertarianism in the direction of anarchist political theories, such as anarcho-capitalism). Diversity among libertarian political theories also arises depending on the type of argument a libertarian uses to justify assigning this priority to freedom of choice. Some libertarians justify this priority in a consequentialist fashion—that is, by appealing to the beneficial consequences (understood in terms of happiness or efficiency) of allowing individuals the freedom to act on their choices. By contrast, non-consequentialist libertarians adopt a rights-based approach to justifying libertarianism: Some regard a natural right to freedom of choice to be an intuitively obvious moral truth, whereas others purport to derive this right from an even more basic moral principle, such as a principle of self-ownership (i.e., full ownership of one's body and labor). These different foundational choices will in some cases lead to differences in practical recommendations (e.g., regarding how to treat economic monopolies, how to raise funds for legitimate government activities, and how to deal with pollution and other environmental issues).

Historically, many libertarians trace their roots back to the seminal writings of John Locke, in particular his *Second Treatise on Government* (1689), a founding text of liberalism, which from a principle of self-ownership argues in favor of strong rights to property and in favor of limited government (though it is a matter of scholarly dispute exactly how limited a Lockean state would be). In light of this claimed historical pedigree and further historical connections with past influential thinkers, such as Adam Smith, some libertarians prefer to call themselves *classical liberals*, as distinct from *egalitarian liberals*, who depart from classical liberalism's strong defense of free markets and property rights. Indeed, some libertarians refuse to apply the term *liberal* to anyone but classical liberals, regarding egalitarian liberal as a corruption of the term insofar as it envisions an expansive role for the state; meanwhile, some egalitarian liberals return the favor by refusing to consider libertarians as liberals, on the grounds that libertarianism in principle permits economic inequalities of such a size as to make a mockery of liberalism's core commitment to equal citizenship. What can be safely said is that libertarians and egalitarian liberals share both the core liberal commitment to constitutionalism, understood as government under the rule of law, and the core liberal commitment to the robust protection of civil liberties such as freedom of expression, religion, and association. In this sense, both libertarians and egalitarian liberals are heirs to the intellectual tradition that has its roots in thinkers such as Locke.

## Natural Rights Libertarianism

Perhaps reflecting libertarianism's Lockean heritage, the most familiar form of libertarianism is the form (mentioned above) that appeals to a natural right to freedom of choice grounded in a moral principle of self-ownership, according to which we have a property right to our body and labor. Those who accept such a principle of self-ownership find it appealing for its ability to explain, in one fell swoop, the wrongness of phenomena such as slavery, murder, rape, and other forms of bodily assault as well as the wrongness of horrifying hypothetical cases such as the forced harvesting of, say, kidneys and eyes in order to meet the need for donor organs. Indeed, this principle establishes an extremely strong moral presumption against any use of nonconsensual physical force, the one permissible exception being said to be the use of non-consensual physical force to prevent or punish violations of the self-ownership principle itself. On this basis, libertarians conclude that governments must limit their functions exclusively to the prevention of force and fraud. (Fraud is understood as the breaking of a contract. Libertarians do not judge the coercion inherent in enforcing contracts to be

objectionable since in making a contract, signatories have consented to be liable to coercion in case of non-compliance.) A government that adopts functions beyond the prevention of force and fraud violates the moral presumption against coercion. Thus, for instance, a government that bans the consumption of recreational drugs has violated the principle of self-ownership, which permits individuals to do to their bodies whatever they please, so long as they do not violate others' self-ownership rights.

Less obvious, but no less true, according to libertarians, is the claim that individuals' self-ownership rights are violated when a government builds a park or library or provides some other public good. For provision of these goods requires resources, and since a state acquires its resources via coercive taxation, libertarians argue that such state-supplied goods in effect conscript citizens into working to supply such goods, whether they desire them or not. Hence, the famous claim of Robert Nozick, one of the 20th century's best known libertarians, that "taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor" (Robert Nozick, 1974, p. 169). Along similar lines, libertarians frequently denounce taxation as a form of state-sponsored theft, at least when the taxes are used for ends other than the prevention of force and fraud.

This condemnation of taxation as a form of theft, however, presumes that a person has a natural property right to retain in full whatever he or she comes to possess as a result of economic transactions or gift giving—a right that is violated when a state appropriates a portion of these possessions for its own purposes. In response, critics of libertarianism argue that a natural property right to external possessions does not straightaway follow from rights of ownership to one's body and labor. And if in counterreply libertarians assert that owning one's labor entitles one to sell it in exchange for some external good (such as money), critics will insist that this merely pushes the question back a level, for it must be asked how the person from whom one acquired the external good came himself or herself to possess a property right to that good. Perhaps the answer is that this person acquired it in exchange with an even earlier possessor. But then the same question can be asked of the earlier possessor. And so on. It follows that a chain of economic and gift transactions must stretch back into time and at some point terminate in an act whereby a person comes to acquire some previously unowned resource (say, a hitherto uninhabited piece of land). According to critics of libertarianism, this act of original acquisition is left unexplained by a principle of self-ownership, for it is unclear how ownership of one's body and labor could create a title to some previously unowned external good distinct from one's body.

Undoubtedly, the most famous attempt to use the principle of self-ownership to justify the original acquisition of unowned resources is Locke's own attempt. In what has come to be known as the labor-mixing argument, Locke in essence argued that since you own your labor, it follows that when you mix your labor with some previously unowned resource (tilling the soil, say, or gathering apples from a tree), you come to own the resulting mixture (cultivated land, a bushel of apples, etc.). Well-known objections to this argument exist, however; Locke himself worried about excessive acquisition and insisted in response to this worry that an act of acquisition must leave "enough and as good" of unowned resources for others to acquire. Assessing the labor-mixing argument as well as the more general challenge of justifying the original acquisition of unowned goods remains an active area of debate. Indeed, within this debate, a group of political theorists who call themselves *left-libertarians* has arisen. Such theorists accept the principle of self-ownership of one's body and labor but argue that external goods initially belong to everyone in an egalitarian manner. On this view, private appropriation is permissible, but individuals who appropriate more than their equal share of external goods owe others compensation. On these grounds, some left-libertarians have even endorsed a measure of income redistribution as a form of compensation for hitherto uncompensated past acts of appropriation.

## Consequentialist Libertarianism

As earlier indicated, not all libertarians base their theory on a principle of self-ownership or on any other principle from which a natural right to freedom of choice is said to flow. Instead of looking to an abstract principle of rights, these libertarians argue that a minimal government restricted to preventing force and fraud leads to better overall future consequences than do more expansive governments: Resources will be used more

efficiently, markets will respond rationally to people's needs, people will do a better job of looking after themselves, and hence, the society will in general be more happy and prosperous. This style of reasoning is consequentialist in nature, *consequentialism* being the name for the moral doctrine according to which the right action to perform is the one with the best overall consequences. (Utilitarianism is the best known, but not the only, consequentialist moral theory.)

The main consequentialist arguments for libertarianism comprise arguments based on incentives and an argument based on the practical constraints faced by governments. Those who appeal to incentives argue that the public provision of goods found in welfare states dampens private incentives to work and to invest in one's skills; they argue that holding property in common reduces individual incentives to care for it (the so-called tragedy of the commons) and that, by contrast, a competitive free market (which entails both the promise of profit and the peril of being outdone by one's rivals) creates incentives for firms to use the most efficient means to produce goods that consumers desire and creates incentives for individuals to acquire skills that are of use in this production.

A second, related consequentialist argument for libertarianism stresses the practical problems that governments face in gathering the information they need to make good decisions; this argument is most famously associated with Friedrich August Hayek. Hayek noted that prices in a competitive market function as signals, widely dispersing useful information to potential producers (e.g., a sharp rise in price means a valued product is undersupplied). Prices also give people an incentive to respond to this information by changing production patterns. For instance, a good that is undersupplied relative to demand can fetch a high price, thereby giving producers incentive to supply more of the good, whereas a good that is oversupplied will experience a drop in price, thereby giving producers of that good incentive to switch production to more desired goods. Hayek argued that no individual or group of individuals (such as the planning board of a socialist economy) could possibly replicate the informational and incentive effects of a free market system of competitively determined prices; he concluded from this that the free market was the most rational system of allocating goods.

These consequentialist arguments have been tremendously influential among mainstream economists, though most such economists do not end up endorsing as pure a form of laissez-faire capitalism as libertarians desire. For a large body of economic doctrine is devoted to the topic of market failures—situations in which the market fails to respond to need or fails to allocate resources efficiently—and many economists conclude on consequentialist grounds that such failures call for government intervention. Examples of market failure discussed in the literature include natural monopolies, externalities (a term that refers to costs of production that producers externalize, i.e., push off onto others—pollution being a key example), and public goods that are undersupplied by the free market owing to the free-rider problem (when the costs and benefits of common resources are not shared fairly). Consequentialist libertarians respond to these worries either by proposing market solutions to these issues (thereby denying that they are genuine cases of market failure) or by agreeing that markets are less than wholly efficient in such cases but then arguing that government interventions would be even more wasteful (a line of argument most closely associated with the public choice school of economics).

## Criticisms of Libertarianism

Libertarians face criticism from both the Right and the Left. Right-leaning critics who are anarcho-capitalists object to libertarianism's willingness to endorse any state at all, whereas Left-leaning critics argue that libertarianism's case for the minimal state assumes a flawed account of freedom, fails to recognize competing values such as fairness and the meeting of basic needs, and ignores the social inputs that are a necessary part of any system of production, so that one's possessions are never purely the fruits of one's own labor. While of course these are not the only criticisms made of libertarianism, they are among the most prominent, and each will be discussed in turn.

## Anarcho-Capitalism

Anarcho-capitalists such as Murray Rothbard argue that the functions performed by a libertarian minimal state can and ought to be performed instead by private firms operating in a capitalist free market system. Hence, instead of a public system of police, law, and courts, anarcho-capitalists envision a competitive market of private defense agencies, each offering potential customers its own code of protection, complete with its own security agents to enforce this code and its own courtlike procedures for interpreting and applying it. Nor, according to anarcho-capitalists, would there be need for a government to print and regulate currency; there would likewise be a competitive market of private currencies. And so on for the remaining functions typically associated with government. In short, anarcho-capitalists argue that insofar as libertarianism approves of a minimal state rather than trusting individuals to meet all their needs through a system of free exchange, it shows insufficient regard for freedom of choice.

Consequentialist libertarians have an easier time replying to the criticisms of anarcho-capitalists than do natural rights libertarians, for consequentialists can simply argue that a minimal state would in fact do a better job of preventing violence than would private defensive agencies (who may end up fighting each other)—or at least, that it is not sufficiently clear that anarcho-capitalism would deliver better results to make it worth the risks of dismantling the state entirely. By contrast, natural rights libertarians must argue that the minimal state does not violate the economic rights of entrepreneurs who would like to set up their own private defense agency to compete with the public system of police and courts, but who are denied this opportunity by the minimal state's coercively enforced monopoly on the supply of protection. One celebrated libertarian argument in this regard was made by Nozick, who in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* argued that in a competitive market of private defense agencies, a dominant defense agency would eventually arise and establish a monopoly; hence, a minimal state would in essence naturally arise from within an anarchocapitalist system.

## Criticisms of Libertarian Liberty

Some critics from the Left argue against libertarians' account of freedom of choice. One form of this criticism argues that libertarianism's exclusive focus on physical coercion is too narrow, for concentrated economic power can itself be a form of coercive power: Monopolists can charge exorbitant prices for their goods, and business owners can wield their threat of firing to extort actions from desperate employees that the employees would never otherwise consent to perform. In this view, freedom does not necessarily increase as government shrinks, for without antitrust laws, employee protections, and other legal instruments, many individuals may find themselves the unfree victims of economic coercion.

Another criticism of the libertarian account of freedom of choice argues against libertarianism's definition of freedom exclusively in terms of the absence of coercive interference. Freedom so defined is referred to as negative liberty, and the critics in question argue that freedom is instead best understood as autonomy or positive liberty, where the autonomy or positive liberty to perform some action requires not just the absence of coercive interference blocking that action but also the presence of a genuine ability to perform that action. On this definition, for instance, a person who is too poor to afford a university education is not free to attend university and a wheelchair-bound person is not free to work at a second-story business if there are no elevators. Accordingly, these nonlibertarians conclude that overall liberty is enhanced by a state that relieves poverty through redistributive taxation or that requires accommodations for the disabled.

Libertarians typically respond to these criticisms by denying that economic power amounts to a form of coercive power and by arguing that it is a mistake to define liberty in terms of ability. For instance, in support of this latter claim, a libertarian might argue that although most people lack the mental ability to become physicists

professors, it would be misleading to conclude (as proponents of positive liberty apparently must) that most people lack the freedom to become physics professors.

## Competing Values

Libertarianism is also criticized for assigning freedom of choice priority over all other values, it being argued instead that in some contexts values such as fairness or the meeting of basic needs ought to take priority over freedom. Regarding the value of fairness, for instance, critics point out that libertarians reject equal opportunity provisions, such as antidiscrimination employment laws and publicly financed primary and secondary schools; these critics then argue that without such provisions, one's life prospects could be unfairly diminished by accidents of birth, such as one's race or sex or one's family's socioeconomic class. Regarding the value of meeting basic needs, critics, for example, argue that the health needs of a large number of individuals would go unmet in a libertarian society since no health insurance firm can make a profit by insuring individuals with known chronic and serious health problems. A common libertarian reply to these charges is to argue that private charity is the best response to these problems of poverty and health care need.

## Society as a Partner in Production

Some critics of libertarianism defend the legitimacy of taxation by challenging the libertarian claim that individuals have a right to retain in full whatever they come to possess by exchange in a market system. This challenge proceeds by arguing that a person's possessions are not the result of exclusively individual efforts but result instead from individual efforts conjoined with a set of social conditions that make the individual's prosperity possible. According to this view, one person's success is never wholly self-made but depends on factors such as the prevailing level of education in one's society, the prevailing level of technology, and the prevailing level of wealth; also crucial are the levels of government investment in infrastructure (e.g., highways and utilities), government stabilization of the economy (e.g., controlling the money supply), and more generally, the cultural capital of one's society (by which is meant the benign cultural practices and social institutions that ensure that the daily interactions of thousands, or millions, of one's fellow citizens are by and large peaceful). For these reasons, according to these critics, society should be viewed as a silent partner that is ever present alongside individual efforts of production; taxation thus represents society's due return on its contribution to production. If society (through its duly elected representatives in government) decides to spend this social wage on additional purposes over and above those of preventing force and fraud, such as the construction of parks and libraries and support for the arts, say, then according to these critics, that is its prerogative. Libertarians commonly respond that the notion of society employed in this argument is at best a vague and unhelpful generalization and at worst a collectivist illusion denying the moral primacy of the individual.

## Conclusion

Debates between libertarians and their critics were a vibrant part of 20th-century political theory, and the debate looks set to last throughout the 21st century and beyond, in part owing to developments such as an increasingly global economy. Many libertarians welcome this development, viewing a world of free economic agents as an appealing prospect. By contrast, many non-libertarians view economic globalization with alarm, seeing it as a threat to values such as fairness and autonomy. As such, the stage is set for the development of new arguments and ideas in this long-running debate.

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- libertarianism
- self-ownership
- consequentialism
- minimal state
- natural rights
- anarcho-capitalism
- positive liberty

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**See Also:**

- [Anarchy](#)
- [Capitalism](#)
- [Equality](#)
- [Justice](#)
- [Liberalism](#)
- [Liberty](#)
- [Locke, John](#)
- [Market Failure](#)
- [Normative Political Theory](#)
- [Property](#)
- [Rights](#)
- [Utilitarianism](#)
- [Welfare State](#)

## Further Readings

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