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Thin and Thick Libertarianism

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Abstract:

Thin (or pure) libertarianism is a political philosophy which claims that violence is justified only in defense, not for invasion of other people or their (justly owned based on homesteading) property. Thick libertarianism typically but not always includes this non-aggression principle (NAP) but adds to it a whole host of additional requirements: views on egalitarianism, free association, homosexuality, discrimination, and more. The present essay constitutes a defense of the former vis a vis the latter.

I. Introduction

Gordon (2011), in his review of Gillespie and Welch (2011) maintains that these authors' "... ambivalence toward (Ron) Paul reflects a fundamental problem with their book. To them, libertarianism is not only a political theory and program: it is a social attitude and even an aesthetic sensibility as well. Because Paul does not for the most part share their social preferences, they cannot fully embrace him. He is not really one of their sort."

Gordon (2011) is a paradigm case of thin libertarianism.¹ He limits the sco-

pe of this philosophy to promoting the NAP; he does not allow extraneous considerations to broaden this concept. In the view of Rockwell (2014) "The 'thin' libertarian believes in the nonaggression principle, that one may not initiate physical force against anyone else." One might add that the sole concern of the thin libertarian is explaining and understanding the permissible use of force: only in defense, period.

In sharp contrast, Gillespie and Welch (2011) add much more to this perspective: views on music (rock and roll is good), on tolerance (this is a key element of libertarianism for them), on inter-racial marriage (something to be celebrated), many career changes (to be welcomed), large corporations (eschewing them). Zwolinski (2011), another thickist, adds the following to the requirements for libertarianism: "Tiger Woods' Cablinasianism... tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and cultural dynamism ..."²

see Albright, 2014; Block, 2014A, 2014B, 2014C; Cantwell, 2014; Gordon, 2011; Hornberger, 2014; McCaskey, 2014; Mosquito, 2014A, 2014B; Rockwell, 2014; Sanchez, 2014; Smith, 2014; Vance, 2014; Wenzel, 2014A, 2014B.

² For other advocates of thick libertarianism, see Gillespie and Welch, 2011; Johnson, 2008; Long, 2007, 2008A, 2008B; Richman, 2014; Tucker, 2014; Vallier, 2013, 2014; Zwolinski, 2011.

¹ For other supporters of thin libertarianism,

What is the justification of thick libertarianism on the part of its exponents? Zwolinski (2011) defends this perspective on the ground that thin libertarians may have "... beliefs and practices that are incompatible with the very moral foundation on which libertarianism rests." The point is, people become libertarians for a *reason*: typically because they are trying to promote values such as "tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and cultural dynamism." Be a person ever so much committed to the NAP, he still may not be a libertarian in good standing if he not only does not support this self-same "tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and cultural dynamism" but actually opposes these values. That is, if a person adheres fully to the last jot and tittle of the NAP, but is intolerant, non-cosmopolitan, and favors an unchanging culture, he is either not a full or good libertarian, or, at worst, not a supporter of this philosophy at all.

Perhaps the most thorough-going thick libertarian is Johnson (2008). He offers four reasons in support of this position. We devote part II of this paper to a response to all four of them. We conclude in section III.

1. Thickness for Application

Johnson's (2008) first defense of libertarian thickism concerns what he calls "application." He states: "... there might be some commitments that a libertarian can reject without formally contradicting the nonaggression principle, but which she (sic) cannot reject without in fact interfering with its proper application. Principles beyond libertarianism alone may be necessary for determining where my rights end and yours begin..."

This is of course true. There is nothing in the NAP³ that specifies where my

³ For the thin libertarian, apart from a theory

fist ends, and your nose begins. Nor can we directly deduce from the NAP alone what is the proper age cut-off for statutory rape.⁴ All of these challenges are ones of continua (Block and Barnett,) and no political philosophy, bar none, thick or thin, can provide a precise answer to any of them. But this hardly justifies jettisoning Rothbardian (1982) or NAP libertarianism (Hoppe, 1988).

This author continues: "Or, perhaps more controversially, think of the feminist criticism of the traditional division between the 'private' and the 'political' sphere, and of those who divide the spheres in such a way that pervasive, systemic violence and coercion within families turn out to be justified, or excused, or simply ignored as something 'private' and therefore less than a serious form of violent oppression. If feminists are right about the way in which sexist political theories protect or excuse systematic violence against women, there is an important sense in which libertarians, because they are libertarians, should also be feminists."

Being a "feminist" means favoring laws against prostitution, supporting legislation that bans the non-existent "pay-gap" between men and women, approving of "affirmative action" to dismember

of how private property rights arise (homesteading; on this see Block, 1990, 2002A, 2002B; Block and Edelstein, 2012; Block and Yeatts, 1999-2000; Block vs Epstein, 2005; Bylund, 2012; Grotius, 1625; Hoppe, 1993, 2011; Kinsella, 2003, 2006; Locke, 1948; Paul, 1987; Pufendorf, 1673; Rothbard, 1973, 32; Rozeff, 2005; Watner, 1982) and how they are transferred (legitimate title transfer, on this see Nozick, 1974), the NAP pretty much exhausts the entire philosophy, which, after all, is merely a theory depicting the proper use of violence.

⁴ We know that 5 years of age is way too young, as is 25 way too old, and that the proper demarcation is somewhere in the teens, but not precisely where in that range cannot be deduced from any libertarian principle.

the so-called “glass ceiling,” opposing biological explanations of human differences,⁵ etc. Why not, instead, merely oppose the initiation of violence against women⁶ whether in “public” or “private.” To think that a libertarian must admire feminism is to empty all meaning out of the freedom philosophy. If this is really required of thick libertarians, they are no libertarians at all; rather, they are attempting to hijack this magnificent perspective to their own dubious ends.

2. Thickness from Grounds

In the view of Johnson (2008): “... libertarians have many different ideas about the theoretical foundation for the nonaggression principle—that is, about the best reasons for being a libertarian. But whatever general foundational beliefs a given libertarian has, those beliefs may have some logical implications other than libertarianism alone. Thus there may be cases in which certain beliefs or commitments could be rejected without contradicting the nonaggression principle per se, but could not be rejected without logically undermining the deeper reasons that justify the nonaggression principle.” Although you could consistently accept libertarianism without accepting these commitments or beliefs, you could not do so reasonably: rejecting the commitments means rejecting the proper grounds for libertarianism. Consider the conceptual reasons that libertarians have to oppose authoritarianism, not only as enforced by governments but also as expressed in culture, business, the family, and civil society. Social systems of status and authority include

⁵ Larry Summers, former president of Harvard University, famously lost that position of his due to thinking out loud about this issue.

⁶ And of course men and children too

not only exercises of coercive power by the government, but also a knot of ideas, practices, and institutions based on deference to traditionally constituted authority.”

There are several grave difficulties here. People become libertarians for all sorts of reasons, not just the ones offered by thickists. Some are utilitarians. Others favor natural rights. The objectivists deduce this stance from pure logic, starting with “A is A.” There are also the Hoppeans (1993), who claim those who deny libertarianism, or oppose it, commit a performative contradiction. Then there are religious people, who claim that God mandates we all embrace the freedom philosophy. Conservatives may favor this philosophy since it is (almost) congruent with the U.S. Constitution. For the thickists, then, libertarianism would be of many mansions: as many as there are different reasons for taking it up in the first place. No, no, no, proper (thin) libertarianism is all of one piece: support for the NAP. Period.

Further, just because someone becomes a libertarian for reason X, does not mean we, or he, should conflate libertarianism with X. They can still be, and should be, distinct. Suppose that people take up this philosophy on racist grounds; either to promote hatred for minority groups, or to oppose it, it matters not one whit.⁷ Still, we can distinguish racism, or anti-racism, from libertarianism.

The view of the thickists – that the motivation for becoming a libertarian should inform what libertarianism is all about – does indeed apply to politics.

⁷ Obviously, we are here implicitly defining racism so as to be compatible with the NAP: the racist may hate minority group members, but does not engage in, or advocate, violating the NAP so as to denigrate anyone’s rights.

But, it is not relevant to libertarianism. Rather, it holds true for the Democratic and Republican parties; and also to other political philosophies, such as Communism and Nazism. To adopt thickism would turn libertarianism into something all too much resembling these other philosophies.

There is no greater “deference to traditionally constituted authority” than what the orchestra conductor wields over his musicians. If they do not play exactly to his specifications, he stops the entire rehearsal, and singles out the player who has aroused his antagonism for humiliation. *He even demands of the wind instrumentalists that they breathe when he wishes, not to their own specifications.* You cannot be any more “authoritarian” than to order people about as to when they may and may not draw breath. Is libertarianism, then, to oppose orchestras? That would appear to be the implication of thickism.

3. Strategic Thickness –The Causes of Liberty

Continues our author (Johnson, 2008) “there ... are preconditions for implementing the nonaggression principle in the real world. Although rejecting these ideas, practices, or projects would be logically compatible with libertarianism, their success might be important or even necessary for libertarianism to get much purchase in an existing statist society... To the extent that other ideas, practices, or projects are preconditions for a flourishing free society, libertarians have strategic reasons to endorse them, even if they are conceptually independent of libertarian principles. Thus, for example, left-libertarians such as Roderick Long have argued that libertarians have genuine reasons to be concerned about large

inequalities of wealth or large numbers of people living in absolute poverty... Not because free market principles somehow logically mandate some particular socio-economic outcome... Rather, the point is that there may be a significant causal relationship between economic outcomes and the material prospects for sustaining a free society.”

Let us posit that poverty and income inequality will undermine the likelihood of the free society⁸ being implemented and sustained.⁹ Still, it does not follow, logically, that libertarianism should be *defined* as opposing these two conditions. Rather, we should say that libertarianism *consists* of the NAP¹⁰ and that if we want to promote liberty, an entirely separate matter, we should oppose poverty and favor inequality as a means toward that end.¹¹

8 As thinist libertarians see it

9 This is of course an empirical question. My assessment is that poverty emanates from statism (Murray, 1984), and that while income inequality would of course exist under laissez faire, it is at present exacerbated by crony capitalism. For, in the former case the only way to become wealthy is to enrich others, whereas in the latter case, under exploitation entrepreneurs become rich by impoverishing their victims.

10 Plus homesteading and licit title transfer, see footnote 3 supra.

11 Williams (2015) insightfully mentions that the important element of inequality is not so much, or, indeed, at all, its presence or absence. Rather, the crucial point is how it is brought about. If through the churning of the free marketplace, well and good, no matter how great it is. On the other hand, if it is generated through illegitimate crony capitalism, or socialism, then it is unjust no matter how small. Suppose there is a bi modal distribution of chess playing ability, or times in the marathon race: great inequality, no “middle class.” If this stems from violence, coercion, it is to be greatly regretted, but not because of the inequality in these measures; rather, due to the violence and coercion that created it. On the other hand, if the inequality in chess, running ability occurs “naturally,” with no rights violations at its source, then it is a matter of complete indifference for libertarianism, at least for the thin version thereof.

Suppose, work with me here, it were discovered that the best way to bring about the libertarian philosophy were to do something entirely incompatible with this viewpoint, say, murder all first-born sons. Would we then *define* libertarianism as inclusive of this sort of murder, now for a “good” purpose? Of course not. We would merely take note of this curious empirical causal relationship, and as consistent libertarians, oppose this means of attaining our goal.

Let us try again. Posit that the best way to attain good health is to “eat your vegetables” as our parents urged us to do. Do we *define* good health in terms of vegetable eating? Of course not. We full well know that some people who practically drown themselves in green and leafy food are in poor health, while others, thanks to a fortunate biological inheritance, eschew these foodstuffs entirely, and yet enjoy robust good health. The point is even under this supposition we can still *distinguish* between a vegetable-based diet and good health, even given that the former is causally related to the latter. This is the mistake of libertarian thickism: it conflates cause and effect.

The point is, it is an empirical issue as to what is the best way to promote libertarianism. Possibly, “thinking for yourself” is a good means to this end, and thus those who want to promote this philosophy should try to convince people not to accept the word of authorities. On the other hand, it is the intellectuals who, presumably, are the most likely to think for themselves and not accept a viewpoint merely because an authority figure espouses it. And, yet, they are among the most bitter opponents of the freedom philosophy. Perhaps, then, in order to most efficiently promote libertarianism we should brut about the ar-

gumentum ad verecundiam? This entire discussion is beside the point. We must sharply distinguish between discussions about the best means of promoting a philosophy, and the definition of the philosophy itself, which is entirely apart from the former. Let me try again. Posit that the best way to promote liberty is to tell jokes to people. That is it; humor is the way to go. Does this mean that libertarianism suddenly becomes the funny philosophy? Hardly.

Moreover, it might be thought that religious people do not “think for themselves.” Instead, their ideas emanate from a “Higher Power.” Must we now conflate libertarianism and atheism? This seems to be the logical implication of thickism, but it is highly problematic, given the many and magnificent contributions to the private property rights perspective made by followers of religion.

4. Thickness from Consequences – The Effects of Liberty

Johnson (2008) writes: “... there may be social practices or outcomes that libertarians should (in some sense) be committed to opposing, even though they are not themselves coercive, because 1) government coercion is a precondition for them and 2) there are independent reasons for regarding them as social evils.” So far, so good, although at this level of abstraction it is difficult to know what this author has in mind. But then the rubber meets the road: “Thus, for example, left-libertarians such as Kevin Carson¹² and Matt MacKenzie have argued forcefully for libertarian criticism of certain business practices—such as low-wage sweatshop labor—as exploitative.”

¹² For critiques of Carson (2004) from a thinnest point of view, see Block, 2006;

The gist of this argument is that under strict *laissez faire*, sweatshops would not be exploitative; rather, justified. However, in the real world “The state-socialist solution of expansive government regulation of wages and conditions ... distort the market, violate the rights of workers and bosses to freely negotiate the terms of labor, and harm the very workers that the regulators professed to help.” Thus, sweatshops are no longer justified, rather exploitative. How the conclusion follows from these premises is a bit difficult for a thin libertarian such as myself to follow. One must be a thickest, presumably, to see it. Yes, the world, at present, does not conform to the niceties of full free enterprise. Workers are indeed made worse off by government depredations. They see sweatshops as the best opportunities open to them. And therefore the thick libertarian would preclude this option as a choice open to them? This is highly problematic.

III. Conclusion

Thick libertarianism is an attempt to hijack proper libertarianism. It is like a parasite,¹³ fastening itself onto the body of plain old or thin libertarianism. If they want to set up a new political economic philosophy, two parts left progressivism and one part libertarianism, bless them. The world can always use a new perspective, particularly one that is not all bad. But why call it “libertarian.” Here, in the spirit of camaraderie are some suggestions for our breakaway colleagues on the left: Bleeding Heartists, Free Market Socialists, Private Property Right Communists, Communalist Capitalists.

¹³ The “Bleeding Heart” Libertarian blog (<http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/>) is one of their main means of communication with each other.

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