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THE LIBERTARIAN VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE*

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Summary

It is often assumed that libertarianism presupposes rational, autonomous, strong individuals and is committed to "rugged individualism". Not only critics of libertarianism but also some libertarians themselves believe this is the case. However, I disagree. In this paper, I argue that libertarians should not advance any particular controversial conception of human nature. Rather, they should acknowledge the great diversity amongst humankind as an undeniable fact and be wary of presenting some ideal form of human life.

With respect to human nature as it is, it is partly because real people vary in so many respects — such as their beliefs, ideals, values, talents, capacities, inclinations, tastes, temperament, knowledge and so on — that everyone is to be allowed the liberty-right to pursue their own individual happiness at will and governments should refrain from imposing any particular ideal on their citizens and inhabitants.

And as for the ideal of human life, libertarianism must remain neutral among competing conceptions of the good life. It is true and only natural that libertarians, like others, should have their own views regarding human happiness and excellence, which are likely to differ from those of communitarians, welfare liberals and conservatives. However, libertarians do not hold such views *qua* libertarians, for a libertarian may voluntarily lead a life in a collectivist community or a disciplined monastery without any self-contradiction. Libertarianism is a doctrine of justice, not human well-being or happiness.

Nevertheless, at the very least libertarianism makes one assumption concerning human nature, and that is that bar some exceptions, all adults share minimal rationality and autonomy. Hence comes the right of self-determination. While communitarians, left or conservative, exaggerate cultural diversity across nations and ethnic groups and make little of the diversity between individuals in a group, libertarians recognize basic universal humanity all over the world on the one hand and emphasize the differences between individuals on the other.

I. *Views on Human Nature as the Reality and as the Ideal*

I will clarify the views on human nature presupposed in libertarianism in this paper. But I do not expect that all libertarians will necessarily agree with my claims here; many libertarians may indeed oppose some of them. I only propose my theses as what I consider to

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be the best version of libertarianism.

At first, it is important to bear in mind the fact that the word "human nature" can mean both the reality and the ideal and to distinguish these two meanings. True, they are connected; we could not speak of an ideal human being without taking note of real people, and beliefs regarding the ideal human being may change real people either for the better or worse. Nevertheless, they remain distinctly separate.

Communitarians such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre tend to confuse the reality of human beings with the ideal. Thus, they insist that human beings are essentially and completely social beings who are constructed by belonging to their communities, while at the same time deploring the alleged fact that people in modern society are too individualistic. But that critique of modern individualism is based on a communitarian normative view of human nature and not on the characterization of human beings as essentially social. If real people are as completely social and constructed by communal belonging as communitarians presume, then it would be unnecessary to order people to be socially minded.

II. *Human Beings as They Are*

Simply put, the libertarian view of human nature as it is is that real people vary in so many respects that we have no single picture thereof. A good example is Nozick's colorful description of human diversity. He wrote, "People are different. They differ in temperament, interests, intellectual ability, aspirations, natural bent, spiritual quests, and the kind of life they wish to lead. They diverge in the values they have and have different weightings for the values they share," and named some 40 men and women including, for example, Buddha, Columbus, Kropotkin, Wittgenstein, Elizabeth Taylor, "you, and your parents." He concluded by asking, "Is there really *one* kind of life which is best for each of these people?" (Nozick [1974], pp. 309 f.) Of course there is not. Since human beings are so varied, libertarians typically argue that we should be free to live our own lives, and no particular view of human good should be imposed on us by governments, communities, or anyone else.

Michael Sandel [1982], one of the representative communitarian political philosophers, argued that liberalism presupposes the "unencumbered self" and that this liberal picture is mistaken because individuals form their identities by growing up in particular communities. It is debatable as to whether this critique of Sandel applies to John Rawls [1971], who was the main target of his polemic against liberalism. Some defend Rawls, arguing that what Sandel calls the "unencumbered self" is the party in Rawls' hypothetical original position and that Rawls clearly distinguishes between the parties in the original position and real people. Nevertheless, I find something in Sandel's critique of Rawls, as the *moral* agents presupposed by Rawls appear to lack particularities since they are the undifferentiated parties behind the veil of ignorance in the original position, who are thought to consent to his two principles of justice.

But Sandel mistakenly attributed the presupposition of the "unencumbered self" to liberalism in the broad sense, which includes both social democrat Rawls and libertarian Nozick. In the latter's natural rights theory, every person is a particular flesh and blood individual, not an unencumbered self, and has ownership in his or her own person and ability. The same can be said of most other libertarians.

I often hear (rather than read) the complaint that libertarians, especially anarcho-capitalists, are too optimistic about human nature. They are said to assume, quite unrealistically, that all people are so nice that we do not need the state, police, or courts. This complaint is also ill-founded. The majority of libertarians are neither optimists nor pessimists; they believe that there are always some wrongdoers in society and that even ordinary people sometimes do wrong. Thus, such anarcho-capitalists as David Friedman (Friedman [1989], pt. 3) and Murray Rothbard (Rothbard [1978], ch. 12) admit the necessity of the enforcement of law, though they believe the agents of law enforcement should be private security agencies rather than government officials. The true difference between libertarians and other writers is not that the former are optimists about human nature, but that they are not optimists regarding politicians and officials. Libertarians do not think they are more trustworthy than private citizens; rather, libertarians tend to think public officials are more dangerous since public money and powers are at their disposal, whereas private citizens can only make use of their own rights and property at their own cost.

Libertarians are not optimists regarding human nature, but do not assume either, as many economists today seem to do, that everyone is self-interested. They think that people also care for others to some extent. But they also believe that each person's aim is different and that the common good is only formal or thin in substance (Friedman [1989], chs. 1-3).

Let us move from the morality of mankind to its rationality. It is often said, by both the critics of libertarianism and libertarians themselves, that it assumes rational, autonomous, strong individuals. That is true in the case of some libertarians who are economics-oriented. For example, the libertarianism of Mises and Rothbard based on "praxeology" seems to assume universal rationality in every agent. But such assumptions are often unrealistic and problematic, as recent "behavioral economics" demonstrates.

Libertarians need not assume strong rationality in people as they are. Ordinary people's lives are not very rational or autonomous: their values and preferences vary and are subject to external influences. Nevertheless, laissez faire is usually better than government intervention since one usually knows one's own interests much better than anyone else, even though one does not possess perfect information or rationality. It is too common among critics of economic liberalism to throw doubt on the laissez faire economy by pointing out that human beings are not as rational as orthodox economists assume. But it is necessary for the critics to show that the state is better able than the people to identify their interests in order to argue for the paternalism of the state in preference to individual decision-making (Epstein [2003], chs. 8-9).

Though libertarians thus emphasize the diversity among people, they still acknowledge the existence of a common human nature consisting of such empirical factors as limited altruism, limited rationality, limited knowledge, sociability, love of one's relatives, and such. In this respect they part company with social constructivism. There are some legal theorists who assume common humanity understood in such an empirical way; they include H. L. A. Hart (Hart [1961], ch. 8, sec. 2), who is not libertarian, and Randy Barnett (Barnett [1998]), who is. They believe the most basic principles of justice have universal validity.

Marxists such as G. A. Cohen oppose the assumption of limited altruism, though they do not necessarily oppose the other assumptions. In their opinion, limited altruism is not universal human nature at all, but merely an aberration from it made by an unjust social structure. Thus, Cohen considers that modern man's egoism is only characteristic of a capitalist society and

that it is possible that people will participate, of their own free will, in an egalitarian distribution in a decent society. Some other Marxists even believe that after the abolition of capitalism, people will be so socialized that they will identify with other people's interests (Cohen [1995], ch. 5). But history teaches otherwise: human beings have tended to be egotistical since the beginning of history. Even if people were exposed to Marxist propaganda from birth, very few of them would give up their interests of their own will merely for egalitarian reasons.

When we inquire into human nature, perhaps we had better make use of recent scholarship in the field of evolutionary psychology (e.g., Ridley [1996] and Pinker [2002]) rather than universalize our episodic knowledge or rely on armchair philosophical anthropology.

To sum up, libertarians respect the differences among persons in a group, while at the same time acknowledging the common nature of humankind. Their position forms a striking contrast to that of communitarians, who make much of the common tradition of a community and downplay common humanity. Libertarians also differ from postmodernists who make heavy weather of every single difference among people and regard the concept of human nature as a myth.

III. *Human Beings as an Ideal*

Libertarians maintain that there may well be various views of the ideal human being as well. They naturally have their own opinions as to the ideal and happiness, and their opinions may have much in common, though they do not have them *qua* libertarians. A libertarian may voluntarily lead a life in a collectivist community or a disciplined monastery without any self-contradiction. Libertarianism is a doctrine on justice, not individual happiness or well-being. It is contrary to the libertarian love of freedom and liberal neutrality to legitimate some particular ideal of life. Each individual should be free to decide on the nature of happiness or human good as well as on such personal matters as religion and hobbies. It is no business for governments to decide how individuals should live their own lives.

It is true that some eminent libertarians hold a life of rugged individualism as their ideal (e.g. Ayn Rand [1943], [1957]). This is quite natural since such a life would be seriously hampered in a non-libertarian society. But it does not follow that every libertarian should choose this kind of life. Libertarian institutions and an individualistic way of life are not necessarily connected. Everyone is free to live in a close-knit community without privacy or identify themselves with the group to which they belong so long as they do not harm others. Libertarian societies neither favor nor discriminate against such collectivist ways of life.

Libertarians do not deny the communality of human existence or the significance of communities. The basic difference between libertarians and communitarians is that the former do not usually legitimate the coercion of an involuntary community, whilst the latter do. Libertarians also distinguish clearly between a voluntary association and an involuntary community, and between a society consisting of personal interrelationships and a state which is an institution with force, whereas communitarians are not sensitive to the difference.

Libertarian freedom is a negative one: it does *not* mean not being influenced by others or being immune from social construction or acting autonomously by virtue of reason, as many

writers understand it to mean. Based upon such concepts of (positive) liberty, those writers often claim that freedom in a market is nothing but an illusion. However, libertarians' idea of (negative) liberty is down-to-earth. Since we live in a social setting, it is only natural that we are influenced by others and take heed of their reaction to our behavior. Indeed, we ourselves influence them and often try to make them act as we wish. It is a quite legitimate exercise of our (negative) liberty.

Some communitarians pay lip service to individual freedom. Thus, Charles Taylor, in his paper "Atomism" (too often a derogatory word for individualist liberalism), argues:

> [T]he commitment we recognize in affirming the worth of this freedom is a commitment to this civilization whatever are the conditions of its survival....[I]f they can only be assured under some form of representative government to which we all would have to give allegiance, then this is the society we ought to try to create and sustain and belong to....
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> [I]t is possible that a society and culture propitious for freedom might arise from the spontaneous association of anarchist communes. But it seems much more likely from the historical record that we need rather some species of political society. And if this is so then we must acknowledge an obligation to belong to this kind of society in affirming freedom. But there is more. If realizing our freedom partly depends on the society and culture in which we live, then we exercise a fuller freedom if we can only do through instruments of common decision. This means that the political institutions in which we live may themselves be a crucial part of what is necessary to realize our identity as free beings. (Taylor [1979], pp. 58f.)

Here Taylor makes a number of mistakes. First, he does not distinguish between state and society. Second, he does not distinguish between the state as it is and the state as it ought to be. Third, he makes questionable historical assertions concerning the formation of societies where freedom flourishes. Fourth, he does not distinguish between personal and group decision-making, which often conflict with each other. Finally, Taylor's claim that it is only through instruments of common decision-making that we can determine the shape of our society and culture is simply false. Everyone determines the shape of their own society and culture by expressing their ideas in words and acts in their everyday activities, including market behavior. Taylor's implicit assumption that people in a society must share one common will through collective decision-making is far from liberal in the classical sense.

Other communitarians are more explicit in their antipathy towards individual freedom. They believe it is not an individual's free choice but rather social construction that determines his values and identity and gives his life meaning. Hence, they evaluate obligations and belonging to communities such as nations and neighborhoods much higher than individual exercises of freedom and voluntary associations.

By contrast, libertarians are moral individualists who do not find "identity" exclusively in identification with their communities. They should also distance themselves altogether from a moralistic conception of happiness which connects it to a virtuous life. Personal freedom should be protected with respect to any harmless activity, not just virtuous or valuable activity alone, because otherwise the right to pursue happiness would become a duty imposed by the authorities.

Libertarians do not necessarily deny the value of traditions and communities, but from a libertarian perspective, they are valuable insofar as individuals find them valuable. They are mere burdens to those who do not commit themselves to them. It is true that some libertarians

appeal to such ideas as autonomy and industry, and that is acceptable if they are conceived to be values in a private life, but would be questionable if they are understood to be goals to which we should all aspire. Libertarians must respect everyone's liberty to choose their own life. No one has a duty to be autonomous, rational, hard-working, or self-disciplined; one is completely free to idle away one's life or lead a day-to-day life. Even if the progress of a society were hampered by the existence of such people, it would still be preferable to a society whose members are forced to live up to some ideal way of life.

In this connection I part company with some conservative libertarians such as the later Hayek, who believe that something other than individual freedom is also necessary for a liberal society. All too often they concede too much to conservative communitarians and allow the restriction of freedom with respect to something else, whether it is tradition, national culture, or family (cf. Sciabarra [2000], pp. 355-362). Even if those things were truly so important for a liberal society, it does not follow they are so fragile that they would not exist without governmental support. Libertarians should remain skeptical of any curtailment of freedom for such purposes.

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