

Libertarian Foundations (by Jan Narveson, jnarveso@uwaterloo.ca)

1. The Principle of Liberty, in several forms

- Historical note: the formulations of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Mill are famous examples

[Hobbes: "Seek peace, and follows it; and "by all means to defend ourselves" (i.e., *only* when you can't get peace may you resort to violence)

Locke: "Do not harm any other in his [or her] life, health, liberty, or property"

Kant: The Supreme "**Universal Principle of Right**": "Every action is right which ... can coexist along with the freedom of the will of each and all in action, according to a universal law."

Mill: "... the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."

- they are not always thought to be the same, nor libertarian at all

- but they are, and are equivalent

- they can be stated as *prohibiting aggression*, by anyone against anyone

- **note**: this means, first, *unwelcome* use of force. (My dentist uses "force" but I pay him to do so,

because in this case I judge it as beneficial to me.) The objectionable use of force leaves one *net* worse off - the costs it imposes on its victim are greater than its benefits (if any)

- note: given liberalism (see below) what this amounts to is that *all interactions are to be mutually voluntary*

- further note: we are only talking about persons whose reasoned consent is *possible*. *How to treat children* (or incompetents) is another matter (though a very important "other matter" to be sure! [John Stuart Mill famously says that his Principle of Liberty does not apply to "children, idiots, and savages"

Nowadays we wouldn't accept the exclusion of "savages" except in the sense of people who make war all the time and have no moral sense - if any.]

2. Human Nature

- what the nonaggression principle requires: enough of a notion of what persons are like so that we can identify what constitutes aggressing against them

- this could easily be regarded as controversial

- We hope to make it noncontroversial via *liberalism* (see next)

- This discussion shows how the liberal view fits in

3. side note on liberalism

- Political liberalism may be explicated as follows. We ask first this question:

- In whose interests should governments govern?

- One answer is that of "RealPolitik": Dictators, politically ambitious people, and the character Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic declare that it should be in the interests of *the governors*

- But all of us Good Guys deny this. We say that governments ought to govern *for the good of the governed*

- We next ask this second question: *Who decides what's good for a person?*

- *Conservatism* says: Wise people, or the majority, or the theorist in question, do this.

- (This comes down to, *the government* deciding this)

- *Liberalism* says that it is *the individual himself (or herself) who does this*.

- Liberalism treats the individual as the ultimate authority on what's good for himself.

- [Note: this does not mean that it takes the individual's view of his own good as *true by definition*. No individual does this, after all - we all agree that we can make mistakes, or learn more, or have a change of heart. But it doesn't follow that it is *rational* for us to accept anyone *else* as the ultimate authority over our lives.]

4. Rationality: while disputed, there is a familiar view which I go by. It says this:
 an individual acts rationally when he utilizes his best information about the upshots or consequences of his various possible actions to do what maximally promotes his values (= his interests, or wants). He sizes up his values, sizes up his options, does his homework well, and reasons to the best action on that basis.

- Note: we do not assume that all of our interests are *egoistic*. In most cases, they are not.
- However, if A is interested in B, then what does B have to say about this? Liberalism requires that B *agree* with A's interest in him or her. Otherwise A would be a dictator over B, contrary to Liberalism
- Rationality is *not* by definition *moral*. We are trying to *found* morality on our interests.
- You do not do this by just building the morality you want into your definition or analysis of human nature. That is a circular procedure, and philosophically useless. (Despite which, it's done often enough!)

5. Now our question is: why prefer the nonaggression principle to any and all others?

- Note that the implicit assumption is that people prefer not to be *victims* of aggression.
- This can be solidified
- But our question is, why think that the moral prohibition on aggression is the way to go? What makes that a rational moral (and thus, political) view?

6. side note on morals:

- note: we are talking about the rules for *groups* - for *society*
- we are not here talking (directly) about *how to live*. What Robinson Crusoe should do is an interesting question, but not a *moral* one in the sense relevant here.
- (Robinson Crusoe's subject could be called *ethical*, though, in the sense of 'ethics' in which, for example, Aristotle's Ethics is about ethics. Only parts of Aristotle's Ethics are about *morals* in the narrower sense of the subject here.)
- morals is *informal* - *decentralized*
- politics and Law, by contrast, involves solidifying and centralizing social control in a single agency.
- That is: our morality is our reactions to other people's behavior (and our own) in which we purport to be reacting from a *general* point of view. We claim that humanity as such is for or against the action in question
- morality by definition proposes principals and judgments as *interpersonally authoritative*.
- It aims, then, to come up with a *single* set of principles to apply to *all*
- (A good example of a nonsensical "morality" is: let each person do absolutely whatever he likes! Another nonsensical one is: do whatever the gods like! An analogously silly theory is fundamental universal ethical relativism: that what's right for everyone is *whatever his group says is right*.)
- morals is "informal" in that there are no moral legislator or police or philosopher kings or popes: there is just us, responding to each other's behaviors
- Morals is logically prior to politics: a political move is good or bad if it is morally good or bad. An individual's action is not good or bad because so me politician declares it so
- A *rational* morality is based on *reason*. But reason is *individual*
- So: a rational morality has to be based on *everyone's reason*
- This is incorporated in the "social contract" view of moral foundations: moral principles are those which are *best for all* because they are *best for any person, given the characteristics of everyone else*
- Thus a rational morality is bound to be *cooperative*

7. Familiar views (e.g. Locke) take the libertarian principle as *self-evident*, needing no foundations.

This won't do.

- Locke sometimes seems to invoke theology, as do many others.
- but the view that what makes something right is the word of a cosmic "authority" is incoherent, and was refuted by Plato over two millennia ago [see *Euthyphro*]
- a couple of notes about *intuitionism* and related ideas:
- Intuitionism is the view that what makes moral claims true is *incapable of being further justified*. So, at least some moral claims are, on this view, *self-evident*
- they leave one bereft of argument against persons who disagree - as many obviously do on this matter
- Intuitions can get us started, but they are useless as *foundations* for *interpersonal* judgments, which morality by definition is

7. Morality has to do with *interaction*: people "bump into each other": what A does affects B, for better or worse, and vice versa.

- the plausibility of libertarianism is seen from Prisoner's Dilemma diagrams

[Prisoner's Dilemma: in a two-person case, A's and B's preferences are opposed at the extremes: A's best is B's worst and vice versa. But their second and third-best outcomes are the same. Each would prefer to benefit at the expense of the other - but if both try, both come out *worse* than if they had settled for second-best.]

- As a relevant example: A and B make a deal: A will provide B with a service in exchange for some money.

- A is best off if he gets the money but does *not* perform the service (which costs him effort, etc.); B is best off if he gets the service but does *not* pay (which costs him money, of course).

- But if both try for their best, both come out *third*-best. (e.g. if we both try to cheat each other, we both end up with nothing but wasted effort and hard feelings); whereas if both accept the "second-best" both come out ahead. (For example, if I buy something, I come away with the thing I'd rather have than that much money, and the seller comes away with that much money, which he'd rather have than the item.)

- The relevant fundamental case in point is *violence*. A can benefit by doing violence to B (sometimes); B can benefit by doing violence to A (sometimes). But if they both try to do this, both end up dead, or wounded, etc.; if they had cooperated, they would both have benefited and come away intact. This is Thomas Hobbes's idea. His "first law of nature" (which is equivalent to the Libertarian principle) says: *Seek peace and confine violence to defense*. (That is: force is legitimate *only* to counter force used by others. It is not legitimate as a way to promote your general interests.)

- [There are other game-theoretic situations besides Prisoner's Dilemma, and it is important how much the non-moral condition would be like a PD rather than one of the others. But PD is a plausible analysis of familiar human interactions.]

8. A big question concerns *group action*. Should we gang up to exploit other groups?

- Note that *politics* does this, always. Laws benefit farmers, say, at the expense of everyone else; or certain businesses; or the poor; or the rich; or

- Example: *Democracy* looks like *gang warfare*: the majority exploits the minority, in innumerable ways. All you need as an excuse to beat up on Jones is to have the majority on your side! Friends of democracy need to install restrictions on it to keep this from happening. (It's very difficult! Constitutional restrictions such as in the American "Bill of Rights" help, but not much...)¹

- some considerations suggest that we can treat groups *equivalently with individuals* for these purposes.

¹ See my forthcoming book: *You and The State - A Fairly Short Introduction to Political Philosophy*. (Rowman & Littlefield, due out within the next couple of weeks.)

- whether those considerations are *sufficient* is the question!
- However, it has to be pointed out that there is no end to different groups in the world. We each belong to numerous ones, and their interests vary and often conflict. A moral view favoring some groups at the expense of others would not be acceptable to the others.
- Proposal: the best moral proposal would be *uniform for all* - it would give no group, as such, a fundamental advantage over any other group
- The Libertarian principle gives everyone complete protection (morally speaking) against violence, in relation to *all* others (whatever group they may belong to).
- This leaves us free to benefit from voluntary interaction, which is open-ended and has been shown to be hugely beneficial for all participants [cf. especially the free market]
- Whereas any other moral view imposes net costs on *some* people for the benefit of *others*. And why would anyone in the group imposed on agree to that?
- We all agree that we don't want to be hurt, killed, sickened, of impoverished.
- We don't all agree that we should devote our efforts to helping this, that, or the other particular person or persons
- *Help*, on the libertarian view, needs to be *voluntary*. *Non-harm* may, if necessary, be *coerced*. (The individual who uses coercion can hardly complain if we use it against *him*. We may use force to prevent people from murdering or robbing or (in serious cases) lying to each other. But libertarianism says we may *not* use it to *benefit* ourselves or others.)
- We say this because the maximum benefit *to all* comes from *cooperation*, not *violence*.
- I'll put it this way: *liberty* is the *common good*