

## MISES'S DEFENSE OF LIBERTY: A CRITIQUE

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THE EXPLANATION AND MASTERFUL DEFENSE of the philosophy of freedom is at the core of Ludwig von Mises's 1927 treatise, *Liberalism*. To state where, and in what ways, proponents of limited government might find the arguments presented in this book absolutely agreeable would be to consume a degree of energy too unreasonable to satisfy the thrifty and efficient partialities peculiar to the Classical Liberal. Consequently, this paper will limit itself to the examination of the work's one notable deficiency: the conspicuous absence in it of a *moral justification* for a free society; that is, an explanation of why it is morally better for a people to live freely rather than to exist in bondage.

### Mises's Defense of Liberty

Mises's support of liberty, as approached in *Liberalism*, is solely vested in the promise of productivity; that a system guided by liberty is best suited to satisfy economic demand. Never to be misunderstood, Mises rightly addresses and explains the exclusively economic manner in which he champions liberty: "Liberalism is a doctrine directed entirely towards the conduct of men in this world ... it does not concern itself directly with their inner, spiritual and metaphysical needs."

He further explains:

The liberal will not oppose [moral arguments for or against liberty] in any way because his reasoning in favor of freedom for all, without distinction, is of an entirely different kind. We liberals do not assert that God or Nature meant all men to be free, because we are not instructed in the designs of God and of Nature, and we avoid, on principle, drawing God and Nature into a dispute over mundane questions. What we maintain is only that a system based on freedom

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for all workers warrants the greatest productivity of human labor and is therefore in the interest of all the inhabitants of the earth.

In other words, people should be free not because liberty is to be viewed as a morally superior idea, but because freedom allows human labor to realize its highest attainable productivity. From a scientific perspective, Mises's reasoning is inescapable; the history of man bespeaks its authenticity. However, there exists a glaring philosophical deficiency in Mises's argument which leaves it vulnerable to broad dismissal.

### **Mises's Dilemma**

Mises's dilemma reveals itself in this: if a particular government—having no interest at all in the productivity of its workers—were to dispense with freedom, then Mises would be, in all ways, restricted from gainsaying that particular government. Or to illustrate further, if a particular government—whose central aim was not productivity, but, say, conquest or material equality—were to adopt an oppressive and interventionist system, what substantive objection to it could Mises possess?

Might he repeat himself? Might Mises again offer that liberty provides better for productivity?

“Why should I trouble myself with being productive,” the Tyrant might respond, “I care only to exercise total control over my subjects.”

Might Mises again offer that higher productivity is in the interest of all the inhabitants of the earth?

“Why should I care about the interests of others,” the Tyrant might reply, “My concern is only for myself.”

If one refuses to speak morally whatsoever of a particular action, then one is forced to discuss the action only in terms of the incidental effects which may arise as a result of the action's implementation, and which the action's architect may dismiss as insignificant in consideration of his principal goal.

It would seem the case that many collectivist administrations have pursued redistributive agendas in spite of productivity and, historically, to its detriment, however because his reasoning in favor of liberty for all is not of a moral, but strictly of an economic kind, Mises cannot oppose such a socialistic government other than to decry its inefficiency. By his standard, the degree to which the overseer succeeds in his productive efforts is the only explanation required to legitimize his command over the slave.

Without a moral justification, Mises's defense of liberty—once the aim of productivity has been abandoned—is forced to affirm with cold indifference that a society of slaves is no better or worse than one of free men.

Should a society be free or planned? Who has the truth of it, Mises or the Tyrant? Confusingly, under Mises's worldview, both he and the Tyrant are equally correct.

### Mises's Ethical Relativism

Ludwig von Mises was an ethical relativist; that is, he believed that all statements of value were reflective of the individuals to whom they belonged, and that, because of this reality, no absolute truth could be derived from such statements. When the ethical relativist speaks of particular actions having value, what he is really saying is that he subjectively values particular actions; he does not confer any degree of worth upon the actions in question. In his *Theory and History*, Mises asserts:

All judgments of value are personal and subjective. There are no judgments of value other than those asserting *I prefer, I like better, I wish...* In view of this fact it is useless to talk about absolute and eternal values.

In other words, Mises believes that value judgments are no more than individual-specific preferences of taste; the moral equivalent of being partial to the color red instead of the color blue.

So then, it is Mises's belief that the Classical Liberal—in his espousal and promotion of competition, private property, and non-aggression—is not necessarily advocating that these values and actions are objectively *good* or that society rightly *ought* to embrace these options, instead he is claiming only that *he* favors these things and that they are independently no better or worse than restraint, public-ownership, and unprovoked violence.

Mises's subjectivism restricts him from asserting that any moral action is good or right because such a commentary is a judgment of value and, as far as Mises's relativism is concerned, such judgments are merely matters of fancy; they do not express anything of substance, merely the preference of the commentator.

Eminent philosopher, Dr. William Lane Craig, aptly explains the troubling situation faced by the relativist:

In a world [of subjective morality]... it is impossible to condemn war, oppression, or crime as evil. Nor can one praise brotherhood, equality, and love as good. For [in such a world] good and evil do

not exist—there is only the bare valueless fact of existence, and there is no one to say you are right and I am wrong.

If one refuses to assert that a particular action is objectively *evil* or *wrong*, then one must assert only that the action is *different from*, or *contrary to*, the way in which he might choose to behave.

But who could happily maintain such a position?

Who could look back upon history and indifferently say of the Holocaust, the Spanish Inquisition, or the institution of American slavery, “There is no right or wrong. Some individuals choose to conduct themselves in one manner, while other individuals choose to conduct themselves in quite a different manner. It is useless to talk about absolute and eternal values.”

It indeed seems that some things *are* wrong independent of the opinions of disparate individuals.

### **Rothbard’s Ethical Absolutism**

The ethical absolutist acknowledges that liberty is, and by necessity must be, an ideal of value, and that it possesses a distinct worth apart from its attachment to material aims. He acknowledges that liberty is good, *universally good*, and that the implementation of a liberty-based political and social system is *universally right*. He acknowledges also that he ought to attempt to reason with and persuade others, by means both philosophical and scientific, to recognize this reality.

Murray Rothbard, the prominent economist and theorist, recognized the necessity of absolutism and, though he strongly agreed with Mises on a great number of issues, he took profound exception to Mises’s ethical relativism. Rothbard offered that, “Mises’s utilitarian, relativist approach to ethics... must be supplemented by an absolutist ethics—an ethics of liberty... grounded on natural law.”

Rothbard continued:

I think it can be demonstrated that ... [some actions are] contrary to the nature of man .... Yet Mises would insist on adding “from my personal point of view.” It is not just my or your subjective “point of view” that decrees this; it is our objective, absolute insight into the discoverable nature of man.

The proponent of objective morality—theists and non-theists, alike—will oftentimes appeal to their intuition of a moral order in an effort to explain, defend, or justify their belief in absolutes. But is it possible to have

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an immediate, direct awareness of something that cannot be experimentally examined?

Dr. Craig suggests that if one were to reject as untrue the realm of absolute morality, then one would be obligated to likewise reject as untrue the realm of physical objects:

Reality is characterized by an objective moral order, which is as real and independent of our recognition of it as the natural order of things is .... On the same ground that we assume the reality of the world of objects [through our sensory experience], we assume the reality of the moral order of objective value [through our moral experience].

Further, Dr. Craig elsewhere argues, with philosopher Dr. J.P. Moreland, that we are justified in accepting the truth of beliefs so discovered. "It [is] difficult to see what could be said more strongly for a view than that [in the absence of overriding counterarguments] it square[s] with one's basic, reflective intuitions."

But if the ethical absolutist worldview is more plausible than the relativist worldview—if there does exist a detectable realm of objective moral values—what is the cause of this realm and who is the author of these values? If, as Rothbard claimed, the nature of man is discoverable, where or to whom are we to look that this nature may be found?

### **Moral Values and the Idea of God**

Is it possible that there exists a realm of absolute morality that can be scientifically or naturalistically explained?

Most plausibly not. Morality cannot be approached scientifically and one would be hard-pressed to demonstrate that objectivity might derive from biological evolution; a process subject to a degree of capriciousness so considerable that a moral system could hardly be thought of as absolute that developed by means of its randomly selective nature.

It must now be communicated that if one accepts the notion that some actions are independently and universally better or worse than some others, then it seems that one should also accept the existence of an objective Anchor by which this value can be measured. Simply put: if there exists a moral law, then there must exist a Moral Law Giver.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This is a variation of the Moral Argument for the Existence of God, which is formulated as follows: (1) If God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. (2) Objective moral values and duties do exist. (3) Therefore God exists.

To help explain the origin and existence of moral laws, Dr. Craig defers to Cambridge University professor William Sorely's 1918 lecture, *Moral Values and the Idea of God*. "The moral order is the order of an infinite, eternal Mind who is the architect of nature and whose moral purpose man and the universe are slowly fulfilling,"

Since God is the foundation for objective moral values, any consistent argument for liberty must be within the framework of a larger argument for His existence. To ignore this truth is to bar God from liberty, a domain to which He is so principal, and to attach no fundamental value at all to something that has proven itself the most central and meaningful idea in man's history.

### Conclusion

Mises's refusal to include in his monumental treatise a moral justification for freedom limits *Liberalism* to being only a partial—though important—contribution to the science. Consistency necessitates that preference be given to the grand and exceedingly comprehensive contributions of absolutist liberals, like Frederic Bastiat, who describe a liberalism which, if effectively argued and combined with the technical science of Mises, would doubtless possess the mettle to satisfy all objections to its primacy. "I have faith in the wisdom of the laws of Providence," Bastiat proclaimed, "and for the same reason I have faith in liberty."

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