

A Hitchhiker's Guide to Libertarian Infighting

One of the first things people realize upon becoming acquainted with libertarianism is how much libertarians fight amongst themselves about questions that seem highly esoteric and about which very few normal people would care. Esoteric though they may be, understanding these questions is central to understanding why we libertarians believe what we do. Many of these debates are decades or centuries old and no simple chart could hope to capture the nuance in the arguments. To make it even more confusing, it's often the case that libertarians come to very similar conclusions through completely different thought processes.

That being said, one of the best ways I've thought of to sort libertarians is by their answers to 2 questions, with the answers to each question generally falling into two camps. The two questions are:

1. What is libertarianism?
2. Why do you support it?

What is libertarianism?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, libertarians don't even agree on what libertarianism is (though everyone seems to be confident that their definition is correct). In general, libertarians believe that libertarianism is primarily either

A) A rigorous and consistent application of the non-aggression principle (NAP), usually in the context of Lockean or neo-Lockean property norms. The NAP has been stated in many ways, but it usually goes something like this:

The initiation of physical force against persons or their justly acquired property, the threat of such, or fraud upon persons or their property is inherently illegitimate.

or

B) The latest name for the centuries-long struggle for freedom which should be understood in its proper historical context. These libertarians may or may not care all that much about the NAP.

Although these two conceptions of libertarianism aren't mutually exclusive, one or the other is usually more important to any given libertarian. I call the former group *Brutalists*,

referring to the architectural style that emphasizes simplicity and function over beauty and elegance (the term brutalist is not derogatory and does not imply that those people are “brutes” or brutal in any way). I refer to those in the latter group as *Humanitarians* because they, like their ideological forbears, tend to emphasize the humanitarian values that can be better achieved by free people serving each other in markets than by government force.

As many readers will undoubtedly recognize, the Humanitarianism / Brutalism distinction is drawn from a controversial article by Jeffrey Tucker entitled *Against Libertarian Brutalism*. I think Tucker’s analysis is insightful but incomplete because he lumps too many disparate views of libertarianism into his brutalism category (which is probably why his article was so controversial). I hope that this article can at least partially remedy this.

Why do you support it?

Libertarians tend to base their support for their view of libertarianism on either

A) a sense of morality or justice

or

B) consequentialist arguments about what is most likely to result in less conflict, more prosperity, etc. for a society.

I label the former category *Moralists* and the latter *Consequentialists*. I’m fully aware that these distinctions can be messy, but I still think they’re useful. The former category consists of moral realists, primarily of the deontological variety. The latter consists of moral realists espousing consequentialist ethics, moral subjectivists, moral nihilists, etc. Unsurprisingly, the latter group is more likely to be persuaded by economic arguments than by appeals to morality.

The Chart

Since libertarians have an affinity for finding their ideological views on charts, here’s one for the breakdown I just described. I’ve given a name to each quadrant (none of the names are meant to be derogatory, if you’ve got a better label than NAPertarian, let me know in the comments).

What is libertarianism?

		Humanitarianism	Brutalism
<u>Why do you support it?</u>	Consequentialist	(Classical) Liberal	Alt-Right
	Moralist	Left-Libertarians BHL	NAPertarians

So now we've got four kinds of libertarians.

1. **Classical Liberals:** Libertarianism is the latest chapter in a long fight for liberty. I support it because I believe it results in better overall outcomes for society.
2. **Left Libertarians / Bleeding Heart Libertarians:** Libertarianism is the latest chapter in a long fight for liberty. I support it primarily out of a sense of social justice, which I believe government is largely antagonistic toward.
3. **NAPertarians:** Libertarianism is the rigorous and consistent application of the non-aggression principle. I support it because I believe that it is morally superior to other political philosophies.
4. **Alt-Right:** Libertarianism is the rigorous and consistent application of the non-aggression principle. I support it primarily for consequentialist reasons (discussed more below).

The Alt-Right

Before I get a bunch of Trumpkins and alt-righters having aneurysms in the comment section, I'm not describing or attacking your movement here (maybe a post for another day). I'm only describing how I see it fitting (or not fitting) within the spectrum of contemporary libertarian thought. If a consequentialist-brutalist seems like a bit of a

contradiction, that's because it kinda is, which is partly why I don't really consider alt-righters libertarians. When they do claim to be libertarians, they typically endorse a very limited and ideologically tolerant version of what libertarianism is (brutalism) because it can *technically* be construed as compatible with their particular consequentialist worldview. But as the chart shows, theirs is the only quadrant that tends to reject both moral arguments and humanitarian values. It's no wonder a lot of libertarians have a hard time seeing the alt-right as part of our movement.

What About the Minarchists?

The statism vs. anarchism divide is the one everyone wants to talk about, but I don't think it's actually that important of a divide. Very few stay minarchists their whole lives and even if they do, who cares. Some people just can't get comfortable with what a totally stateless society might look like, but otherwise want to be as free as possible. I'd say that quite a few minarchists tend to fall in the classical liberal quadrant, although many of them, upon becoming anarchists, seem to move quickly down to the NAPertarian camp, at least initially.

Personally, I started out several years ago fully in the NAPertarian corner and I've gradually zig-zagged my way to the opposite corner as a consequentialist/humanitarian (liberal).

What about you?