

Libertarianism as Moral Overlearning

Editor's Pick. Written by Bryan Caplan.

If you have a conscience, you should care about moral overlearning. What good is moral “knowledge” if people fail to use it? But the concept is especially pressing for libertarians. Libertarians often argue that they are merely holding governments to ordinary moral standards. It’s wrong for a private individual to physically attack other people who are behaving peacefully. It’s wrong for a private individual to take other people’s property without their consent. So why is it OK for government to do these things? Yet non-libertarians usually find these observations unconvincing.

My claim: The fundamental difference between libertarians and non-libertarians is that libertarians have *overlearned* common-sense morality. Non-libertarians only reliably apply basic morality when society encourages them to do so. Libertarians, in contrast, deeply internalize basic morality. As a result, they apply it automatically in the absence of social pressure – and even when society *discourages* common decency.

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