An Open Letter to The Left: No, Libertarians Are Not Selfish

Written by Aaron Virkler.

Dear progressives, Democrats, socialists, social democrats, democratic socialists, and those that generally identify with the colloquial version of the word “liberal”:

No, libertarians are not selfish people.

We don’t hate poor people, and we don’t want to see the less fortunate of our society left behind in what you might describe as “economic Darwinism.”

My goal here, is to dispel this misconception and to help you gain an understanding of how libertarian principles relate to the concept of caring for the less fortunate.

First, I wish to start with a disclaimer – I do not speak for all libertarians – at our roots, we are individuals who form our own opinions, and draw our own conclusions, about how we function in a society of other individuals. You may wonder why then, that I should write this letter in the first place? While I do not speak for all libertarians, I have drawn my own conclusions from a consensus of the interactions I have had with others that share my ideology. I can safely say that the vast majority (at least) will agree that we are not selfish, but perhaps, are misunderstood by people who do not share our same core values.

The claim that libertarians are selfish is derived from a fundamental misunderstanding of our ideology. Self ownership, non-aggression, and private property rights are the core principles of libertarianism. Even at face value, none of those principles imply any opposition to helping the less fortunate. They imply that you – the individual – are best suited to make the decisions which affect you; that you should not initiate any act of aggression and should only use force in self defense; and that your property should be kept, distributed, or exchanged to whatever small or large degree that befits you. It’s a simple, logically and morally consistent, ideology that empowers the smallest minority in existence – the individual.

Why the misunderstanding of this ideology? There seems to be an amount of uncertainty as it pertains to how we plan to offer a safety net to those who need it the most (in lieu of welfare). To many of the left-leaning ideologies, social programs (designed to help the poor, disabled, homeless, abused, displaced, and just generally unlucky) are indispensable functions of society and deserve the consistent financial backing offered through taxation. Because taxes are compulsory, it seems these programs are best financed through taxation.

Libertarians do not oppose the idea of a safety net in principle; rather, we disagree with how the funds for these government-run programs are collected – taxation!

To the libertarian, taxation is simply a glorified form of theft. If we circle back to the core libertarian principles; when you account for the fact that there are no exceptions to self-ownership, non-aggression, and private property; it is clear why we oppose taxation. Theft by any other name is still theft.

You may have heard some in the libertarian camp call for cuts to, or the abolition of, welfare. This is not because we wish to deprive the less fortunate of a safety net to assist in the purchase of essential goods. This is rather because we see the welfare system as one that has grown beyond the scope of assistance, and has instead become a system that incentivizes an impoverished individual to remain in a state of poverty. It is hard to believe that enrollment in a welfare program is a point of pride for anyone that is in a situation in which they believe it is required.

In my opinion, the majority of people considering welfare enrollment are apprehensive to do so. Like most Americans, they wish to raise the standard of living for themselves and their families on an independent basis. We seek to empower these individuals from a voluntary platform. It's the difference between teaching someone to fish versus giving them a fish.

"Without taxes, these social programs are doomed to go unfunded, and will fail." – Actually, without taxes, we would have less money dumped into wars we haven't declared (wars which kill the less fortunate of other countries) and more money to donate to the charities of our choosing. You would have the option to contribute as much as you want to the cause that matters the most to *you*, instead of wondering if the politician you disliked in the first place will spend their next term thinking of the worst ways to squander it!

"But we can't count on charity, it just wouldn't be enough." – If government could eliminate poverty, it would have done so by now. History has yet to show us a case where the redistribution of wealth has brought people out of poverty on a permanent basis.

If the redistribution of wealth (to any degree) cannot *force* poverty out of existence, then why is it so difficult to believe an approach in the opposite direction is a viable alternative?

The idea that charity is unreliable underestimates the charitable nature of human beings. In 2015, an estimated $373,250,000,000 was donated by Americans alone, up from $359 billion in 2014. In fact, over the long run, charitable contributions have only increased, with exceptions to times of recession. As a more personal example, a recent campaign led by the staff right here at Being Libertarian raised over $10,000 in just 5 days! And if that doesn't convince you, then just look at the fact that Bernie Sanders collected $228,000,000 in voluntary donations with the broad notion that the less fortunate should receive help

from those that can afford it. Imagine the potential number of lives that money could have changed for the better had it been donated to the poor, hungry, and homeless! Now imagine the potential growth for charity in a world where all of us have more expendable income to donate to the less fortunate!

This all may lead to some misconception that libertarians see taxes as an excuse not to contribute. The truth is, we see taxes as an obstacle that hinders us from contributing more.

We understand that the functional intent of charity and welfare are similar; a contribution from those that have, to those that do not have. We simply seek the most humane method to fund the programs that serve the intent. We wish to empower the unfortunate, not enslave them to a system of dependence. We have a vested interest in charity and acts of Voluntarism. It is a core function to realizing the potential for a free and voluntary society to exist. It does us no good to advocate for voluntary contribution to be at the forefront of societal welfare and then disregard the ability to lead by example.

Please, dispel this misconception of selfishness being an inherent trait of libertarians. Helping others on a voluntary basis is in no way a selfish preference. Altruism comes from the hand that voluntarily extends to those that need the help, not from the hand that takes from those that wish to help in the first place.

Sincerely,

A Selfish Libertarian

Originally published at BeingLibertarian.com