

Liberty and the Activist Mind: Implication or Contradiction?



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Now that we’ve systematically examined liberty from the ground up (meaning from its conceptual connection to reality) and examined its implications to several areas of human interaction, I’d like to circle back and address an entirely new question.

How does a proponent of liberty act? How does a person spend their time and effort if they value this principle or wish to advance it in society?

Here is where some really unfortunate societal conditioning usually kicks in. At the conscious level, we may have responded intellectually to the principle of liberty, however at the subconscious level many of us don’t immediately (or ever) shed the anti-liberty presumptions behind the way we work toward it. We immediately take steps to implement it as though it were just another political or managerial scheme to be imposed on society through collectivist rituals (politics) without fully realizing the way the very idea is antithetical to such means of social influence. I intend to address in detail the morality of political advocacy and voting more extensively later, but right now I want to focus on an even deeper question behind this.

In the libertarian community, and the circles of disaffected evangelical conservatives, with conspiracy theorists and the general contrarians that it tends to draw from, is a very passionate group. I’ve never found two self-confessed “libertarians” that agree completely, and the characterization that organizing this community is like “herding cats” could not be more fitting.

One thing that does seem to be generally accepted, however, is a presumption of the nobility of spending one’s life obsessed with building political movements, exposing conspirators against liberty and being, for lack of softer terminology, a humorless and judgmental verbal bully ready to unleash a tirade of historical facts and negative

characterizations at the drop of a hat. Whether this approach is actually a positive influence on others is another question for another day. For the moment I just want to ask; "Is this really how someone who values liberty, or their self-determination, spends their time?"

I call this the "Steven Mallory syndrome". Those who are familiar with Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* will remember this character; the embittered genius sculptor who befriends the protagonist Howard Roark. First, let me first give my standard Rand disclaimer. I realize she didn't reach the conclusion of voluntaryism personally, and I recognize several flaws in some of the ways she applied her ethics (foreign policy) as well as some questionable personal behavior... so please don't confuse me for a card-carrying "Randroid." Nevertheless, the novels she wrote brought me to voluntaryism and continue to provide valuable lessons, one of which I am about to explain.

Roark and Mallory have a series of dialogues in which the contrast in their characters is apparent and which to me illustrate the fundamental choice an individual has in their approach to personal liberty and the myriad of its violations we inevitably encounter.

Throughout the book, the protagonist Howard Roark cheerfully and even, as it would seem, naively dodges those who seek to thwart his liberty and his purposeful use thereof (his work) at every turn, without wasting mental energy dwelling on these machinations. By contrast, Mallory becomes bitter, negative and obsessed with his enemies' efforts. For him it becomes a crippling fear and an excuse for abandoning his work (sculpting) despite his incredible genius and ability. In one passage he says, speaking to Roark:

"I know what I'm talking about-and you don't. You can't know. It's because of that absolute health of yours. You're so healthy that you can't conceive of disease. You know of it. But you don't really believe it. I do. I'm wiser than you are about some things, because I'm weaker. I understand-the other side. That's what did it to me... what you saw yesterday."

The "liberty movement" has an abundance of Mallorys. There are whole networks of activists ready to detail for you all the ways our liberties are curtailed and threatened and complain about them. Is this really the way a true advocate of liberty behaves? Is this the most consistent reaction with a true understanding of the value of liberty as an implication of self-determination?

The world is also full of people who live their daily lives, pursuing their personal goals. They regularly sidestep invasions by the state without so much as a second thought or

occasional grumble at the inconvenience, moving on using the liberty they still have to implement their self-determined goals. Many in the liberty movement, who accept a presumption of some “duty to society” for such a person to stop and focus on curtailing these violations of liberty through awareness efforts and political campaigns, are very condemning of such people. Charges of “selfishness” and “greedy” or even “traitor” are not uncommon in such contexts, and those making them seem to not have even asked the question of whether the principles (collective altruistic duty, or statism) upon which they would depend for validity, are even themselves valid principles.

If liberty is a valid idea (and we have already examined why it is) then it is valid because individual priorities and goals are of value. I’d suggest that the best “liberty advocates” among us are not those who are the most obsessed with the violations of liberty, but those who are using what they have of it to its fullest.