

Thick Voluntaryism, Thin Libertarianism



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“One Voluntarist’s Perspective” is an original column appearing most Mondays at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found here. OVP-only RSS feed available here.

While voluntaryism sprung from libertarianism, it has become a philosophy all its own thanks to Carl Watner’s development of the voluntary principle, “that all human relations should happen voluntarily, or not at all.” This thickening of voluntaryism brought in such ideas as eschewing the political process, nonviolent resistance, and opposing not only physical coercion, but social coercion also. I think this “thick voluntaryism” is required by the voluntary principle. But what about so-called “thick libertarianism”?

What is Liberty?

Let’s back up. What is liberty? From the Latin *libertatem*, it means “free from restraint.” Restraint comes from the Latin *restringere*, and means “draw back tightly, confine, check.” Confine in the sense of “draw back tightly” is physical, and so means “to border on, keep within limits.” If a libertarian is an advocate for the philosophy of liberty, and liberty is freedom from restraint, and restraint is physical confinement, then libertarianism, by definition, is concerned only with the initiation of aggression, of physical confinement, of restraint, of the violation of liberty. How then do we go from this “thin” conception to thick libertarianism?

Expansive, Thin Libertarianism

Reading the piece by Charles Johnson that started this whole thing, I had the thought that what he seems to be describing is not “thickness” but rather, “expansiveness”. Picture a thin-stranded decentralized web. The strands proceed everywhere, into every nook and cranny, but the strand itself is committed only to rooting out initiations of aggression in the various political, cultural, economic, and social circles. This is “expansive, thin libertarianism”. Now picture a thick-stranded decentralized web that has far fewer strands, ignoring most nooks and crannies in society, instead only focusing on the state. The thickness here is representative of the blindness that some libertarians have to violations of liberty in arenas non-political. This is, I guess you could say, “incomplete libertarianism”

because it's ignorant or apathetic to violations of liberty outside of direct action by the state.

Thick Libertarianism

If what is meant by "thick libertarianism" is "expansive, thin libertarianism" then consider me an advocate of thick libertarianism. On the other hand, if "thick libertarianism" is a thick-stranded decentralized web with just as many strands as "expansive, thin libertarianism," the nooks and crannies becoming crowded as the web forces, in the physically violent sense, itself in, all in the name of preventing all possible violations of liberty it necessarily violates liberty, then I wholeheartedly oppose "thick libertarianism." And if it is confined to respecting the liberty of all non- or might-one-day-be-a-violators of liberty, then what is the point?

Final Thoughts

If a libertarian is concerned about non-physical forms of coercion, such as blackmail, "targeted moral agitation, ...ridicule, social ostracism, targeted boycotts, ...slowdowns and strikes in a particular shop, [and] general strikes," then he should graduate from libertarianism to voluntarism, where there is necessarily thickness as it concerns coercion (or rather, thinness toward a broad definition of coercion). However, while voluntarism opposes all forms of coercion, in say, parenting, it doesn't help parents with alternatives. For that they must seek out the various parenting philosophies focusing on positive discipline, attachment, and effectiveness. Likewise for educational philosophies, like radical unschooling, once one is committed to non-coercion. The thick vs. thin libertarianism debate comes down, for me, to one question: Why must we stretch libertarianism beyond liberty, freedom from restraint, from physical confinement, from aggression? And what may be the consequences of doing so? I remain open-minded.

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