

**Eric Mack.** *Libertarianism*. Polity 2018. 176 pp. \$59.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781509519293); \$19.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781509519309).

This text is a critical introduction to the history and foundations of libertarian thought, along with an analysis of both internal and external criticisms of libertarian doctrine. ‘Libertarianism is advocacy of individual liberty as a fundamental political norm’ (1). This norm does not protect only personal liberty; it protects economic liberty as well (20). This fundamental political norm constrains the permissible behavior of both private citizens and state officials. (2) The first two chapters of this text identify fundamental libertarian themes and historical thinkers who have attempted to defend those themes.

Eric Mack divides libertarians into three general camps. The first is the natural rights camp, which holds that ‘certain deep truths about human beings and their prospective interaction allows us to infer that each person has basic ... moral rights’ (4). Not surprisingly, Locke is the representative natural rights theorist. As Mack develops Locke’s argument, a common libertarian theme comes to the fore. The idea is that individuals rightly pursue their own happiness (12). Recognition of this fact combines with the idea that we all have the same equal moral standing (12). Given these two facts about persons, along with some other premises I lack the space to consider, Locke reaches the libertarian position that protects both personal and economic liberty. ‘(N)o one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions’ (13).

The second is the mutual advantage camp. This group holds that ‘general compliance with certain principles of justice engenders a cooperative social and economic order that is advantageous to all its members’ (5). Hume is the primary exemplar of this camp in the text. Hume seems to endorse extensive protection of both personal and economic liberty. However, he does not take the fact that we all rationally pursue our own happiness and that none of us has moral authority over others to underpin those liberties. Instead, Hume argues that three ‘Laws of Nature’ are to the advantage of all. These principles are, broadly, the institution of private property; transfer of property by consent, as opposed to force; and the obligation to keep promises (23-24). These laws are obligatory because of their general contribution to the well-being of all. Hume seems to oppose episodic deviations from these principles because, even if one could gain from violating them on rare occasions, we are ‘amply compensated by the steady prosecution of the rule, and by the peace and order, which establishes society’ (25).

The third camp, which receives less treatment in the text, is the utilitarian brand of libertarianism. These libertarians argue that compliance with ‘pretty much the same constraining norms that are celebrated by the natural rights and mutual advantage approaches’ (5) will maximize overall utility. Mill’s utilitarian version of classical liberalism is one of the consequentialist defenses Mack considers. Mill approaches the libertarian camp by arguing that rights need to be protected all the time, even when breaches of those rights might maximize overall utility. Mill’s argument is utility-based though. As Mack puts it, ‘any interruption in the protection of security will undercut security at large, and, presumably, the resulting loss of utility will be greater than any local gain in utility that might be eked out in special circumstances’ (30). Mill also endorses a presumption in favor of economic freedom. However, ‘this presumption does not provide an absolute barrier against interference with economic actions. For, each economic action is “a social act” which is therefore subject to social control for the sake of promoting general utility’ (32).

Mack also considers Herbert Spencer’s utilitarian defense of classical liberalism/libertarianism. Spencer is considered in part because he seeks to find a means of freeing individual rights from the

obligation to pursue general utility. Spencer distinguishes between utility as the goal of morality in general, and as the goal to be promoted by specific actions (35). Spencer argues that happiness is an individual matter; people will find happiness in different things in different ways. And ‘even if we had an understanding of the greatest happiness that would allow us to say that one complex outcome would possess greater happiness than another, we would not know what specific actions would produce the better outcome’ (36).

Nozick and Hayek are the focus of chapters 3 and 4. In these chapters, there are three contentions of interest. The first is that Nozick and Rawls offer essentially the same argument to determine what ‘principles of justice ... rational individuals would agree upon to govern their interactions’ (41). And this argument better supports Nozick’s claims than Rawls.’ Both authors reject the idea all members of society must pursue some particular outcome. Each individual rightly pursues their own ends; and this fact allows us to infer that individuals need not pursue, say, general utility. However, Nozick sees that the Difference Principle is an outcome that policy will direct all to achieve (perhaps through taxation or the like), even if they are not required to *pursue* it. Nozick thus rejects even the Rawlsian claim that justice requires maximizing the position of the worst off individuals. Instead, Nozick contends that one must not treat others ‘as though they are resources for one’s disposal’ (48). This better accommodates the moral separateness of persons than the Rawlsian scheme.

The second key idea comes from Hayek. The idea is that proponents of pattern and end-state theories are barking up the wrong tree when they discuss justice. Part of Hayek’s vital contribution to libertarian theory is the denial that we have any knowledge of what policies will likely produce what outcomes. Utilitarians and Rawlsians often ask us to compare available outcomes, but Hayek argues that we have no means of determining what outcomes are available (93). Hayek’s crucial insight into society is that free individuals will likely not produce any particular pattern of goods. Indeed, it is important not to think about engineering society from the top down because local knowledge is crucial for both economic efficiency and the individual’s pursuit of her values. What is more, top-down engineering will lack knowledge of economic values that is available only through prices (58). Those prices will emerge only through markets.

Finally, these chapters contain Nozick’s two primary arguments against pattern and end-state theories. First, such theories promise individuals that they finally have what justice demands. But this promise comes with the expectation that one may use one’s holding in lots of ways without introducing injustice into the world. Theorists like Rawls, for example, cannot make this claim. For, the satisfaction of the Difference Principle will require constant shuffling of holdings, new regulations, and presumably new taxes (87). Second, the theories in question make it difficult for individuals to plan. We might discover that the achievement of the Difference Principle requires a wealth tax, for example. However, if one begins acquiring wealth before that tax is implemented, one might discover that one’s prior actions were not as fruitful as one might have hoped. Mack claims, in a later chapter, that Rawls cannot both claim that libertarianism is defective ‘because it does not acknowledge the need for a constantly vigilant basic structure that continually changes the rules and policies’ while also holding that ‘there are no ... unpredictable interferences with citizens’ expectations and acquisitions’ (129).

The final chapter in the main text considers both internal and external objections to libertarianism – or at least parts of the theory. In this chapter, Mack outlines internal debates about just how extensive a state may be, absent consent. He then returns to the objection Rawls presses against libertarianism in *Political Liberalism*. Suffice it to say, Mack finds Rawls particularly unconvincing in this regard. He then offers charitable interpretations of anti-libertarian positions found in both

Murphy and Nagel, on the one hand, and G.A. Cohen, on the other. His critical evaluation and rejection of these arguments are important for those who might wish to see how libertarians respond to challenges that are more egalitarian.

There are two quirky aspects of this book. The first is the relegation of a wonderful discussion of contemporary and influential non-Nozickian libertarian theorists to a 'bonus online chapter.' The chapter is easily accessible; it is just not in the body of the physical book. This chapter contains a presentation and critical analysis of Hillel Steiner's 'left-libertarianism,' Loren Lomasky's classical liberalism, Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl's Aristotelian arguments for a libertarian political order, and David Schmidtz's defense of (something like) libertarianism. The second is that Mack's own positive contributions to libertarian theory, which span over 40 years, are scattered through his discussions of other authors and directly discoverable only if one hunts down Mack's articles identified in the bibliography. However, if one wishes to see where *Nozickian* theory has gone since Nozick, it would be nice to see a more direct statement of Mack's own arguments. Despite those quirks, this book avoids the jargon that occupies most philosophical texts and provides the best available introduction to the history and current state of libertarian theorizing.

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