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# Why George Monbiot is wrong about libertarianism [1]

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In his article on libertarianism today [3], George Monbiot makes a common argument. Disregarding his worn-out (and, sadly for my bank manager, untrue) claim that libertarians are in the pocket of big business, the main claim Monbiot makes is that libertarians have misappropriated or miscontrued the word freedom, and so are advocating something different to ?true? freedom.

Invoking Isaiah Berlin?s *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Monbiot distinguishes between negative freedom ? being left alone ? and positive freedom ? which might best be thought of as individual autonomy. From this, he tries to argue that freedom includes claims over other people?s property (such as the freedom to enjoy a tree owned by one's landlord). Monbiot?s assumption that the government should promote freedom *whatever freedom is* reduces him to a semantic consideration of what the word means, rather than over the real question: what the state should be doing to promote the best outcomes.

As Berlin pointed out, the word freedom may be rhetorically useful, but it means different things to different people. So, instead of painstakingly trying to show that my idea of freedom is ?true? and Monbiot?s is ?false? (a silly endeavour), we could use completely different words that avoid confusion. As long as we can separate the idea of ?not interfering with other people?s stuff? from Monbiot?s ?positive? idea of freedom that involved interfering with other people?s stuff to increase people?s welfare, we can use those to think about the concepts we?re discussing. There is no need to debate over the meaning of a lofty-sounding word as Monbiot does ? the only thing we need is clarity over the terms so that we can start discussing their real-world impact.

As FA Hayek, Adam Smith, Ludwig von Mises and other liberals and libertarians argue, the system with the best outcomes for nearly everybody is, by and large, the one in which nobody interferes with other people?s stuff (including their bodies). This doesn?t mean that not interfering in other people?s stuff is the only thing that?s valuable in the world. Far from it ? it means that a state that upholds this rule and little else is most likely to prompt the emergence of the other good things. Monbiot will disagree with arguments made by Mises that a *laissez-faire* free market is, by-and-large, the best system for all involved including the poor. Monbiot appears to think that most libertarians view ?not interfering with people?s stuff? as an end; but for me, Mises and most libertarians I know it is a means.

What might sound to Monbiot like a profound philosophical question ? ?what is freedom?? ? is actually a relatively trivial question of coming to a mutual agreement over what terms mean, so we can debate clearly without making the mistakes that Monbiot does in his piece.

The rest of the piece is largely a hodgepodge of common attacks on libertarianism. Bizarrely, he uses

Claire Fox, the Marxist director of the Institute of Ideas, as his example of a right-wing libertarian. The question that he claims confounded Fox, ?Do you accept that some people's freedoms intrude upon other people's freedoms??, is indeed quite simple: grounded in the principle of ?not interfering with other people?s stuff?, the only times this intrusion can take place is when who owns what isn?t well defined. But that?s a practical challenge, not a conceptual one.

Monbiot claims that libertarians are in favour of people?s right to pollute, apparently ignorant of the work classical liberals like Mark Pennington, who has worked on how to create effective market institutions to curb pollution. In short, Pennington argues that the only way to efficiently balance the need for *some* pollution (as an unavoidable by-product of much important economic activity) with the interests of those affected by pollution is by assigning property rights to those affected. That way, they can compromise with each other in a mutually beneficial way that takes account of the preferences of those involved. Monbiot seems to think that, because libertarians don?t favour state-centric approaches to problems, they don?t think those problems exist at all.

At times he does not seem even to understand his positive/negative liberty distinction, claiming that ?The negative freedom not to have our noses punched is the freedom that green and social justice campaigns, exemplified by the Occupy movement, exist to defend.? Does he think that libertarians are against this freedom? If so, I can understand why he objects so strongly to libertarianism, but I wish he would do the basic research required of an undergraduate student before he tries to criticise the idea.

Despite all the mischaracterizations, it?s encouraging that George Monbiot has begun to write about libertarians so frequently. We are on the rise ? in politics, in economics and in academia ? and this understandably threatens people like Monbiot whose world centres on the state.

I?ve quoted it before, but pieces like this always remind me of a saying I like: ?First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you. And then you win.?

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