

# STIRNER VERSUS CALVIN



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## LIBERTARIANISM: POLITICS OR PSYCHOLOGY?

The issue of home education, and therefore of the upbringing of children, brings us to a question that is fundamental to the nature of libertarianism. Is libertarianism solely a movement which concerns itself with bringing about political and economic change in a direction which enhances individual liberty and private property rights? Or should libertarians also address issues of psychology, and seek to examine and promote ways in which individuals can lead happier and more successful lives, accepting their own freedom and that of others, regardless of whether any real progress towards a libertarian society has yet been achieved? Chris Tame and Brian Micklethwait take the latter view. Other libertarians argue that to adopt such strategies would be to distract attention from the central purpose of political

action to achieve freedom. Yet when we examine the issue of education, it is obvious that these issues are really one and the same. For what should education be primarily about, for libertarians, other than the development of a psychological outlook among young people which recognises their own freedom and that of others, and the practical business of how each individual can achieve success and happiness according to his or her unique goals, capabilities and desires?

One only has to look around one to recognise that entirely separately from the realm of politics and ideology exist different mindsets which are either favourable or unfavourable to individual liberty. A lady I know used to own a restaurant in the English countryside with a cocktail bar where the staff would "free pour" the drinks, that is, hold the spirit

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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**

bottles while pouring, giving very generous measures which were greatly appreciated by those of us who visited the restaurant. A customer, however, observing this practice, reported the restaurant to the local trading standards authority, and the restaurant owner was subsequently fined and threatened with the removal of her licence to serve alcohol. (In this country it is illegal in restaurants and bars to “free pour” spirits; they must be served in spirit dispensers in measly measures of one-sixth of a gill.) To take another example, it is a fairly common practice in this country for some business people to find out some way in which their competitor is breaching some regulation, and then report them to the authorities with a view to having the competitor fined or closed down by the state. By contrast, in Italy, whenever tax inspectors or other bureaucrats suddenly arrive in a locality, the first entrepreneur to spot them will ring up every other business in town to warn them of the presence of the enemy.

Evidently huge numbers of people in this country — perhaps the large majority of the population — are confined in “internal” mental prisons of their own making, and in many cases this is combined with a desire to incarcerate others in that prison. These “internal” prisons — which can result from the bad upbringing of children, compulsory school, “peer pressure”, oppressive laws, general social attitudes and other external forces acting upon the individual — oppress the individual far more than the daily “external” oppressions imposed by the state, and in addition prevent the individual from achieving fulfilment and the optimum development of all of his or her potential. This issue can hardly be ignored by libertarians. A self-realised individual can find all kinds of ways of dodging the oppressions of the state (even without having to break the law) and achieving happiness, even in the absence of political change. An individual in a mental prison, whose potential has hardly been developed, and who is suffering alienation from self, is unlikely to see much value in a general extension of freedom at the political level, and may even regard it as threatening, if it appears to remove various “free lunches” which the individual has been persuaded to believe exist. This factor appears to be the principal reason why so many “political” people in this country have utterly closed minds towards libertarian arguments. Again and again I have had the experience, when conversations turn towards political and intellectual questions of encountering a stone wall of hostility as soon as I begin to advance informed libertarian arguments. It is not as if these people — many of whom are well-informed about politics — put forward counter-arguments, or seek to challenge the facts and analysis on which I base my case. Rather they simply block out anything which challenges their comfortable statist view of the world. And as libertarians who are members of the Conservative Party will doubtless confirm, such attitudes are just as widespread among Tories as they are among Labour supporters. Only when we transform the psychological regime — in which the educational process plays a central role — into one which every individual human mind can develop freely, and to its full potential, will we see a breakdown in these attitudes, and the positive welcoming of ideas which can bring about a qualitative improvement in human lives. As the distinguished psychologist Dr Karen Horney wrote in her study of neurosis:

Certainly a totalitarian regime can successfully prevent individual growth and by its very nature must aim at

stunting it. And no doubt only that political regime which gives as many individuals as possible the freedom to strive toward their self-realization is worth striving for. But even the best changes in the external situation do not in themselves bring about individual growth. They cannot do more than supply it with a better environment in which to grow.<sup>1</sup>

Or as Chris Tame has put it in a nutshell, “Politics is not enough”. The task of encouraging a culture of psychological attitudes favourable to individual liberty, to human happiness, and the maximum development of each person, is one at least as great as that of bringing about political and economic change in a libertarian direction. Indeed, I would argue that any hope of success in the latter depends on the development of the former. Many examples exist of cultures which owe little to the influence of politics or ideology. In France, a culture of understanding of food and its preparation permeates the entire society, and the result is the finest cuisine in the world; this culture hardly exists in Britain, as anyone can tell who has eaten out in both countries. And the United States has a strong — if not universal — culture of personal success, entrepreneurship and money-making which is not only absent from, but heartily despised by many sections of British society. (It should, however, be noted that the formal schooling institutions of the United States are generally hostile to this culture. For example, while the libertarian Erwin Strauss, who is known as “Filthy Pierre”, was a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he ran a business selling books to students at prices well below those of the official college bookshop. He took so much business from the official shop that the college authorities expelled him.)

### FREEDOM OR SELF-OWNERSHIP?

Critics of the free market often argue that most people in a capitalist system are not really free, because they are financially dependent on someone else. Employees are dependent for their continued livelihood on the good-will of their bosses, mortgage-holders are dependent on their home loan not being withdrawn, tenants are dependent on the goodwill and prompt payment of the landlord, entrepreneurs are dependent on loans from banks or investors. If the individual does not have money, socialists argue, “freedom” under capitalism means simply freedom to starve. It must be admitted that there is a considerable insight in this objection. Freedom is of little value — and may in some circumstance even be considered harmful — to the individual who does not know how to use it to best advantage. For example, the individual who is dependent on state welfare and simply does not know how to survive in a free market might consider the introduction of a libertarian society as positively threatening. The great 19th-century German philosopher of egoism Max Stirner made the distinction between the “negative” concept of “freedom”, in the sense of merely the absence of external constraints, and the “positive” one of self-ownership or “ownness”:

Of what use is a freedom to you, indeed, if it brings in nothing? And, if you became free from everything, you would no longer have anything; for freedom is empty of substance. ... Free — from what? Oh! what is there that cannot be shaken off? The yoke of serfdom, of sovereignty, of aristocracy and princes, the dominion of the desires and passions; yes, even the dominion of one’s

own will, of self-will, for the completest self-denial is nothing but freedom — freedom, to wit, from self-determination, from one's own self. ... However, the freer I become, the more compulsion piles up before my eyes; and the more impotent I feel myself. The unfree son of the wilderness does not yet feel anything of the limits that crowd the civilized man: he seems to himself freer than this latter. ... "Now that you have become free from sin, you have become servants of righteousness." Republicans in their broad freedom, do they not become servants of the law? How true Christian hearts at all times longed to "become free", how they pined to see themselves delivered from the "bonds of this earth-life"! ... Being free from anything — means only being clear or rid. "He is free from headache" is equal to "he is rid of it." ... Ownness, on the contrary, is my whole being and existence, it is I myself. I am free from what I am *rid* of, owner of what I have in my *power* or what I *control*. *My own* I am at all times and under all circumstances, if I know how to have myself and do not throw myself away on others. To be free is something that I cannot truly will, because I cannot make it, cannot create it: I can only with it and — aspire toward it, for it remains an ideal, a spook. The fetters of reality cut the sharpest welts in my flesh every moment. But *my own* I remain. ... Why will you not take courage now to really make *yourselves* the central point and the main thing altogether? ... Now why, if freedom is striven after for love of the I after all — why not choose the I himself as beginning, middle, and end? Am I not worth more than freedom? Is it not I that make myself free, am I not the first? Even unfree, even laid in a thousand fetters, I yet am; and I am not, like freedom, extant only in the future and in hopes, but even as the most abject of slaves I am — present. Think that over well, and decide whether you will place on your banner the dream of "freedom" or the resolution of "egoism," of "ownness". ... My freedom becomes complete only when it is my — might; but by this I cease to be a merely free man, and become an own man. ... Might is a fine thing, and useful for many purposes; for "one goes further with a handful of might than with a bagful of right." You long for freedom? You fools! If you took might, freedom would come of itself. See, he who has might "stands above the law." ... The cry for "freedom" rings loudly all around. But is it felt and known what a donated or chartered freedom must mean? It is not recognized in the full amplitude of the word that all freedom is essentially — self-liberation — that I can have only so much freedom as I procure for myself by my ownness. ... The man who is set free is nothing but a freed man, a *libertinus*, a dog dragging a piece of chain with him: he is an unfree man in the garment of freedom, like the ass in the lion's skin. ... The friends of freedom are exasperated against selfishness because in their religious striving after freedom they cannot free themselves from that sublime thing, "self-renunciation". The liberal's anger is directed against egoism, for the egoist, you know, never takes trouble about a thing for the sake of the thing, but for his sake: the thing must serve him.<sup>2</sup>

While libertarians, who are by definition involved in a general struggle for freedom, will take issue with Stirner's argument, it is surely undeniable that freedom can have little worth unless the individual exercises real control over

his or her life. For libertarians, then, the central purpose of education should be to enable the individual to develop and exercise this control. Indeed, in Britain today the individual possesses many different legal rights which most people do not make use of. To take two examples, young people suffer from laws which prohibit them from driving cars until the age of 17, and which prevent them from working for money until the age of 16. The state only permits individuals to drive on its roads after they have passed its driving test. If there was any fairness about the matter, any individual, regardless of age, would be allowed to take the test and drive on the roads if they passed. Yet those under 17 are not permitted to take the test *at all*, no matter how good drivers they may be. The law is overtly discriminatory, and intended at reducing the mobility of the young for the purpose of habituating them to coercive restrictions imposed by the state. Yet any individual is permitted to drive a motor-boat with no legal requirement for a licence whatsoever. So a young person under 17 might conceivably find ways of achieving mobility if he or she travels predominantly to places reachable by boat.

In the same way, the laws prevent young people under the age of 16 from virtually all ways of working for money. Any individual or firm which takes on such a young person as an employee will be penalised by the law. Yet there is no age restriction on individuals becoming company directors; no law exists which prevents a ten-year-old from buying an "off-the-shelf" limited company for about £120, appointing himself or herself managing director, and selling the company's services to customers on mutually agreeable terms. If these services included the managing director's professional work on the customer's premises, then the young person could work for money on this basis without the customers breaking any law. All kinds of loopholes exist within the existing legal and political setup which enable individuals to increase their freedom and the amount of power they exercise over their own lives even without any political change in a libertarian direction. The widespread development of a consciousness which enables the individual to master and exercise his or her full powers would arguably bring about a far greater libertarian transformation than any number of measures such as privatising roads, the money supply or the airwaves.

### ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

In their survey of the development of artificial intelligence, Les Goldschlager, of Monash University, and Andrew Lister, of the University of Queensland, discuss the significant problems which computer scientists are experiencing in their attempts to replicate even the simplest mental processes which are characteristic of the human mind. The central problem is the representation and use of knowledge, which is the most fundamental function of the human mind. As Goldschlager and Lister explain:

One promising approach to knowledge representation is to recognize that knowledge is valuable only if it is *used* for something — to answer questions, to plan actions, or to infer further knowledge. It therefore seems reasonable to represent knowledge in a form which indicates the ways in which the knowledge can be used. More precisely, each item of knowledge can be represented by a 'rule' which specifies *when* to use it and *how* to use it. ... A rule of this kind is called a *production*. ... A pro-

duction system has one other essential component. This is the *working memory*, which contains short-term information about the current state of the world. ... It is interesting to speculate on whether or not there is any analogy between production systems and the human brain. Each production can be regarded as an autonomous agent, waiting to perform its particular action as soon as the appropriate conditions arise. Similarly, a group of neurons (brain cells) can be regarded as a minute agent which is ‘fired up’ to perform its particular function as soon as the appropriate stimuli are received. ... Generalizing, the convenient representation of knowledge seems to require storage mechanisms quite different from those found in present-day computers. What is needed are mechanisms which cause information to ‘jump out’ when relevant, rather than having to be searched for. Such mechanisms are apparently present in the human brain, but no-one has yet discovered how they work, much less implemented them on a computer. One realizes how much remains to be done if one compares the abilities of the most sophisticated current systems with those of a new-born child. The comparison provokes a healthy humility.<sup>3</sup>

Is it not extraordinary that we should devote so much effort to making machines think like human beings while at the same time, through the school system, devoting far greater resources to trying to get human beings to process data as if they were machines? In his memorable description of the Academy of Laputo in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jonathan Swift never imagined any project so utterly bizarre as this. The human mind — and above all the developing mind of the child and adolescent — craves freedom as the lungs crave oxygen; yet the entire schooling process seeks to stifle the mind, to restrict its growth, to force it under threat of violence to regurgitate a body of highly dubious “facts” decided upon by some external authority, and to prevent it from exercising and developing those faculties of original thought and of self-development which are its most fundamental characteristic. Future historians will doubtless marvel that in an era which has seen such spectacular developments in information technology, technology which has the potential to enhance the individual’s learning and development in a freely-chosen direction, we should still be persevering with an “educational” model created by a 16th-century tyrant and religious maniac to prevent his barbaric religious and political doctrines from exposure to the free market in ideas.

### STIRNER OR CALVIN?

We have seen above how the supporters of compulsory schooling, whatever their religious beliefs or lack of them, must necessarily accept the fundamental philosophical premises of John Calvin, the main inventor of the compulsory state school, as the intellectual basis of the system which they wish to force upon young people. A free market in education, by contrast, would have room for the application of many different philosophical approaches, with every individual free to choose those he or she likes best. Within such a free market, the philosophical approaches which most libertarians would favour would surely be those which recognise the uniqueness of every individual, and seek to develop to the full his or her unique capacities. In opposition to the doctrines of Calvin, therefore, let us hold

up as our inspiration the following words of Max Stirner, from his essay *The False Principle of Our Education*:

A knowledge which does not refine and concentrate itself so that it is carried away by will, or, in other words, a knowledge which only burdens me as a belonging and possession, instead of having gone along with me completely so that the free-moving ego, not encumbered by any dragging possessions, passes through the world with a fresh spirit, such a knowledge then, which has not become *personal*, furnishes a poor preparation for life. ... Truth itself consists in nothing other than man’s revelation of himself, and thereto belongs the discovery of himself, the liberation from all that is alien, the uttermost abstraction or release from all authority, the re-won naturalness. Such thoroughly *true* men are not supplied by school; if they are nevertheless there, they are there *in spite* of school. ... In the pedagogical as in certain other spheres freedom is not allowed to erupt, the power of the opposition is not allowed to put a word in edge-wise: they want *submissiveness*. ... If man puts his honor first in relying upon himself, knowing himself and applying himself, thus in self-reliance, self-assertion, and freedom, he then strives to rid himself of the ignorance which makes out of the strange impenetrable object a barrier and hindrance to his self-knowledge. If one awakens in men the idea of freedom then the free men will incessantly go on to free themselves; if, on the contrary, one only *educates* them, then they will at all times accommodate themselves to circumstances in the most highly educated and elegant manner and degenerate into subservient cringing souls. What are our gifted and educated subjects for the most part? Scornful, smiling slave-owners and themselves — slaves. ... Thus the radii of all education run together into one center which is called *personality*. Knowledge, as scholarly and profound or as wide and comprehensible as it may be, remains indeed only a possession and belonging so long as it has not vanished in the invisible point of the ego, from there to break forth all-powerfully as will, as supersensual and incomprehensible spirit. ... In a word, it is not knowledge that should be taught, rather, the individual should come to self-development; pedagogy should not proceed any further towards civilizing, but toward the development of free men, sovereign characters; and therefore, the will which up to this time has been so strongly suppressed, may no longer be weakened. ... [T]he necessary decline of non-voluntary learning and rise of the self-assured will which perfects itself in the glorious sunlight of the free person may be expressed somewhat as follows: *knowledge* must die and rise again as *will* and create itself anew each day as a *free person*.<sup>4</sup>

### NOTES

1. Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1951, 1965 edition, p. 308.
2. Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, translated by Steven T. Byington, (first published 1845), Dover Publications, New York, 1973 edition, pp. 157, 161, 163, 164, 165, 167.
3. Les Goldschlager and Andrew Lister, *Computer Science*, Prentice Hall, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, 1988, pp. 296, 300-301.
4. Max Stirner, *The False Principle of Our Education*, translated by Robert H. Beebe, (first published 1842), Ralph Myles, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1967, pp. 21, 23-24, 25, 26, 28.