

LIBERTARIAN LIFESTYLES

DAVID BUTLER — KEVIN MCFARLANE



THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

DAVID BUTLER

“Mankind is endowed with certain inalienable rights, and among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

So says the American Declaration of Independence at least. And yet, at a time when so much misery stretches into the furthest reaches of man's life, it is hard not to question whether people are “pursuing happiness” at all. Could it be that in today's society it is no longer man's happiness that is taken as the standard of values, but man's misery?

More times than I care to remember I have heard people automatically rule out arguments for various activities that are grounded in that person's own benefit. An everyday occurrence, you might think — and the horrifying truth is that you would be right. Consider for a moment what a person's motivations must be if their own happiness is held as immoral. Are we required to show that we *won't* derive satisfaction from something before it is legitimate for us to undertake it? Or worse, are we actually required to *suffer* — demonstrating the extent of the value-inversion in contemporary society?

Such a situation could only arise if people hold a fallacious view of the nature of happiness; for example that their suffering is required in order to make others happy. Stated explicitly, it is easy to see what nonsense this is, and furthermore even if it were true, why should you wish to further another's happiness if it can only be bought at the price of your self-immolation?

Alternatively, some claim that it is wrong to be happy until everyone else is too. A minute's reflection will show that universal observation of this dictum would serve to guarantee that none could ever be happy — the exact opposite of its implied motivation. It also carries the implication that it

is somehow possible to “redistribute happiness”; that there is a fixed total amount which needs to be equalised. This conception of the nature of happiness is plainly false. Happiness is a mental feeling, it *cannot* be given. A successful pursuit would require observation of a chosen code of values in order to maintain a long-term outlook. Such a code would serve to curb your desire to pursue any random hedonistic whim at the price of your future happiness, while also serving as a reminder that your happiness is not to be bought at the price of someone else's misery, just as their happiness shouldn't be bought at the price of yours — clearly opposite sides of the same coin.

This view of happiness carries with it certain implications for the structure of society. It requires flexibility, a feeling of “looseness” in our social arrangements, the political implication of which is the absence of coercion. The resulting voluntary society would allow each person to pursue their own life-style whether it is based around the individual or the collective. Such a society would recognise the full dignity of the individual, that he or she is unique and derives happiness to different degrees from different things. Consequently any attempt to enforce one person's preferences on others can only decrease the opportunities for the pursuit of happiness of the people so constrained.

No “benevolent dictator” could ever acquire the information necessary to improve on the performance of a free society, and even if one could it shouldn't, as it would entail removing the very essence of life. Such is the beauty of liberty — the taste, the feel of freedom and the knowledge that the pursuit of happiness is man's birthright that should never be denied. You have only one life. Don't throw it away on a lifestyle that demands sacrifices and misery. Only you can free yourself from its bondage, and even the choice to do so is yours alone.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



ON “LIBERTARIAN” AND “UNLIBERTARIAN” BEHAVIOUR

KEVIN MCFARLANE

In a number of recent conversations with libertarians, and in publications, I have noticed the use of phrases referring to “libertarian” or “unlibertarian” behaviour. For example, somebody recently suggested that the taking of heroin was not libertarian. Nick Elliott, in *The Moderate*, No. 1, writes that “producing pornography seems to me to be one of the most inherently libertarian occupations”. He goes on to give reasons for this. Brian Micklethwait disagrees with this assertion as he explains in “Moderate Porn” (page nine of *Libertarianism Page By Page*). Ayn Rand has been described as unlibertarian, presumably for regarding pornography, homosexuality, drug taking and “hippyism” as evil, or alternative lifestyles in general as “irrational”.

A CATEGORY MISTAKE

But the use of the terms “libertarian” or “unlibertarian” to characterise *behaviour* is inappropriate. Libertarianism describes a political framework of laws defining the *limits* of human action, these laws defining what one *ought not* to do to other human beings. Once those limits are set libertarianism is ethically neutral. Libertarianism *qua* political philosophy does not pass judgement on people’s personal lifestyles. The moral status of adultery or homosexuality or prostitution or hatred is a matter which cannot be determined by libertarianism. To assert that drug taking is or is not “libertarian” is a category mistake. The proper domain for such an assertion is ethics — the content of which is independent of the political system in which that content is framed.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF “LIBERTARIAN” BEHAVIOUR

Individual libertarians subscribe to a number of different moral philosophies. The only sense in which behaviour can be characterised as unlibertarian is when it is perceived as being coercive — since coercion violates the political principles of libertarianism. Nevertheless, even in this sense one should not really be referring to “libertarian” or “unlibertarian” behaviour but, rather, employing ethical terminology such as “right” and “wrong”. But if one insists on using the terms “libertarian” and “unlibertarian” one arrives at a very simple characterisation. All coercive behaviour is unlibertarian. All non-coercive behaviour is libertarian because it is compatible with the political principles of libertarianism.

To say that Ayn Rand is “unlibertarian” is false. Her philosophy *permits* all non-coercive behaviour. She does not, however, personally *approve* of all non-coercive behaviour and regards some of it as evil, as I do. (But I do not share her particular specification of evil or irrational activities and beliefs.) The production of pornography is libertarian in the sense that it is compatible with libertarianism, as is the production of anti-pornography. But then to say that such an activity is libertarian does not tell us anything.

A CLARIFICATION

When people describe Rand as unlibertarian they are confusing her *ethical* philosophy (the ethics of Objectivism) with

her *political* philosophy (the politics of laissez-faire capitalism). Since most libertarians would not characterise various deviant activities as specifically evil (which is not to say that they would wholeheartedly embrace them) it is assumed that those few libertarians who do characterise these activities as evil must be unlibertarian. But they would only be unlibertarian if they think that such activities should be outlawed. Since Rand holds that the government’s only legitimate function is to enforce the ban on the initiation of physical force she clearly cannot be described as unlibertarian.

It is even possible to be a racist and a libertarian, as Brian Micklethwait has correctly argued in “Migrants and Markets” (page seven of *Libertarianism Page By Page*), provided one does not advocate coercion. (For further details, see Micklethwait.) The problem is that virtually all racists *do* advocate coercion. And a racist is not likely to be attracted to libertarianism in the first place. If he/she is so attracted then he/she will not find many friends.

A NOTE FOR EXTERNAL OBSERVERS

Because the moral basis of libertarianism is narrowly limited to the prohibition of *coercive* behaviour only, most libertarians will tend to hold “liberal” moral and social philosophies. That is, they will tend to reserve the judgement “evil” for those actions which are coercive. The non-coercive ones will be personally evaluated as “desirable” or “undesirable” rather than “good” or “evil”.

Non-libertarians often make the error of conflating the “legalisation of something” with “being in favour of that thing”. For example, if a libertarian advocates the legalisation of hard drugs, prostitution, video nasties, free speech for racists, child sex and other such unpopular and undesirable pastimes it is assumed that he must be in favour of hard drugs, prostitution, video nasties, racism and child sex. But such a thesis is clearly false. Most people would oppose laws banning others from listening to classical music. Yet this does not imply that they like classical music.

A more serious charge is to accuse libertarians of either being flippant in advocating the freedom of people to do unpleasant things, or of paying too little attention to the consequences of unrestricted social freedom. However, if one claims to be an advocate of freedom it is no good advocating the freedom of others to do only those things one happens to agree with. One must advocate the freedom of others to do those things one *disagrees* with (provided that those activities involve only voluntary exchange).

ON TRENDY LIFESTYLES

Anarchists and other radicals seem to think that genuine freedom consists of purposefully doing unconventional and anti-conformist things like smoking pot and joining hippy convoys. Those who do not like such activities are derided as “square”. But if an anarchist prefers not to smoke pot that is his choice. That is what freedom means. What anarchism means I do not know. The only sensible anarchism is anarcho-capitalism, if it is workable.