

Lecture Notes 8 : Libertarianism for the Left

Self-ownership (SO) claims answer the question: 'who is the rightful owner of one's person and its powers?'

World-ownership (WO) claims answer the question: 'who is the rightful owner of such-and-such worldly resource (including nature, machinery, physical space etc.)?'

SO and Freedom

Assume a system of joint world-ownership, such that each person has a veto right over the use, possession, and disposal over every single part of the world (by others). Call this JO.

Is JO compatible with SO?

If YES, then SO is compatible with substantive equality of condition.

If NO, then SO is not compatible with minimal-state capitalism.

If Nozick were to accede to this (absurdly weak) conception of SO, he would have to grant that it is compatible with equality of condition, and with an extensive state. For the joint owners might very well opt for an egalitarian distribution of resources.

Say Nozick were not to accede to this conception. Then if you're unemployed, and lack money to get shelter, food, etc. then you're in a position exactly analogous to that of the denizens of the JO-world.

If YES, then

(1) SO is compatible with JO.

(2) JO generates equality of condition, which is incompatible with minimal-state capitalism.

∴ (3) SO is incompatible with minimal-state capitalism.

If NO, then

(4) SO is incompatible with JO.

(5) This incompatibility is due to the disempowerment of persons under JO.

(6) The poor, under minimal-state capitalism are similarly disempowered.

∴ (7) SO is also incompatible with minimal-state capitalism.

The Left-Libertarian Project

Left-libertarians want to argue, *contra* Nozick, that:

(8) Taking SO seriously is compatible with favouring substantive equality of condition.

More specifically, they take advantage of an apparent discrepancy in respect of the scope of rights-contents.

The Able-Infirm example

Able (A) and Infirm (I) live on an abandoned island with three coconut trees. Coconuts translate directly into units of welfare W . A and I have identical utility functions, but A can produce many coconuts per hour, whereas I can only produce a few, because he can't reach up the trees.

The original distribution (W_A, W_I) is:

D1: (9, 5)

Under D1, I is worse off than A through no fault of his. Many egalitarians think this unfair. One thing we can do is give, say, two coconut trees to I and allow A to pay I a rent for access. This way we can get any desired distribution, such as:

D2: (7, 7)

Does the D2 ownership structure violate anyone's SO? It does not seem to violate I's SO. It does not, moreover, violate A's self-ownership, because it is like a *caveat emptor* condition on A's acts of appropriation. We can say to A:

'you can produce and consume as much as you like, as long as you give X% to I'

This does not violate A's SO, any more than renting a flat on condition you don't burn it, or that you paint it, or that you return X% of the flowers you grow in it, violates your SO.

Who cares?

The import of left-libertarianism is that, even if you start from stringent SO-based premises, you can still get an extensive state if you add certain egalitarian WO-based premises. This shows, moreover, that 'libertarian socialism' is not an oxymoron (as 19th century anarchists knew).

Study questions

Are self-ownership and redistributive taxation incompatible?
Does self-ownership guarantee freedom?

Further Reading

Nozick (1974), part III.
Cohen (1995), ch. 4.