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Debate: "Should Libertarians Endorse Basic Income?"

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Introduction: What is Libertarianism?*

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To the surprise of many, a significant number of influential libertarians have endorsed basic income. The Nobel Prize winning economists Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman defended versions of basic income, as have Philippe Van Parijs, Hillel Steiner and Charles Murray. The contributors to this *Basic Income Studies* debate issue are an interdisciplinary group of political philosophers, political scientists, economists and even a Libertarian political candidate that are interested in examining the topic of whether libertarians should endorse basic income. Many of these contributors are self-described libertarians, while some are critics of libertarianism. So this debate is not an in-house fight between libertarians. The debate focuses on whether or not basic income is justifiable within a libertarian framework, and it is intended to spark further discussion and exploration of the questions it raises. Do individuals have a moral right to basic income? What types of institutions could justifiably implement a basic income? Do states have a moral duty to provide a basic income? Is it morally permissible for states to provide a basic income? What are legitimate or justifiable revenue sources for a basic income? Are basic income programs feasible?

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The term "libertarianism" applies to a large family of moral and political theories that emphasize the normative significance of political freedom. Libertarians often disagree about their specific political convictions, their empirical assumptions about public policy and economics, and their particular moral judgments. For instance, they disagree about whether taxation is ever justified, whether human beings are motivated primarily or only by self-interest, and whether individuals have a moral duty to provide aid to the poor. Note the cross-cultural variations in the clusters of moral and political views that the term "libertarianism" picks out. One salient example of this can be seen by examining how the associations with the term "libertarianism" differ between the United States and Europe. In the United States moral and political views that are described as *libertarian* are usually associated with (1) eliminating publicly funded social welfare programs, (2) promoting the minimal night-watchman state, (3) endorsing strong private ownership rights, and (4) affirming a strong form of ethical individualism. In the United States it is commonly held that libertarians are economically conservative and socially liberal. Given that conception of libertarianism, the concept of *libertarian socialism* seems paradoxical. However, in Europe the term "libertarian socialism" does not seem like an oxymoron because libertarianism has other associations there than it has in the United States. The European usage of "libertarianism" describes the family of political views that typically affirms a commitment to negative liberty and to minimizing the power of states, but not all of these views endorse the capitalist commitment to private ownership of the means of production. Since this debate's participants are American scholars, their intuitions about libertarianism and its requirements tend to draw from that usage of "libertarianism." The debate contributions from Peter Boettke and Adam Martin, Michael Munger, and Matt Zwolinski are firmly rooted in the traditional American conceptions of libertarianism. However, the contributions from Peter Vallentyne, Brian Powell and Daniel Moseley are more sympathetic to conceptions of libertarianism that are usually found across the Atlantic.

Libertarians often debate among themselves and with others about the central commitments of libertarianism. Someone might reasonably worry that the intensity and frequency of disagreement concerning the use of "libertarian" renders it too ambiguous and vague to be helpful.¹ To avoid problematic ambiguities in its usage, it is helpful to consider the definition provided in Peter Vallentyne's contribution: "Libertarianism...is the moral doctrine that individuals initially fully own themselves and initially have certain moral

¹ See Bird (1999) for a sophisticated development of this concern.

powers to appropriate unowned natural resources” (Vallentyne, 2011, p. 2). According to this definition, libertarians are committed to (1) the doctrine of full self-ownership and (2) maintaining that individuals have the moral power of original acquisition. Most of this debate issue’s contributors adopt Vallentyne’s definition, but at least one contributor objects to making full self-ownership a component of the definition.² Matt Zwolinski maintains that the doctrine of full self-ownership should not be a part of the definition, because it (1) makes the definition too narrow since many libertarian views do not endorse or require self-ownership, (2) gives priority to a Lockean or Nozickean conception of libertarianism without argument, and (3) overlooks the fact that some libertarians are consequentialists that deny that there is a natural right to self-ownership (Zwolinski, 2011). Zwolinski’s first concern about narrowness is well-grounded, but even if Vallentyne’s definition is too narrow it does accurately pick out a large and influential subset of libertarian views. Zwolinski’s second and third objections can be met by making it clear that the commitments to full self-ownership and to the legitimacy of original acquisition may both be justified by a more fundamental moral principle (e.g., some version of contractarianism or consequentialism).³ Libertarianism is a contested concept, and it is natural that a disagreement about the appropriate characterization of its conceptual core would emerge in a debate on whether libertarians should endorse basic income.

References

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² It is useful to compare and contrast the encyclopedia entries on libertarianism presented in Vallentyne (2010) and Zwolinski (2008).

³ Vallentyne (2011, p.1) observes this point: “For present purposes...[full self-ownership] can be understood to include both the view that this is a matter of natural right and the view that this is derivatively true on the basis of theories such as rule consequentialism or rule contractarianism.” He insists “[a]ll firms of libertarianism endorse full self-ownership and full ownership of the products of one’s labor (suitably understood)” (p. 3).

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