

Behind the Caricature: Reply to a Befuddled Author

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(A reply to Alan Haworth's letter, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1998.)

The editors of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* allowed Alan Haworth to reply^[1] to my short review of his *Anti-Libertarianism*.^[2] The editors would not allow me to respond to Haworth. Thanks to the openness of internet publication and the Libertarian Alliance website, this can now be rectified and Haworth's reply can no longer escape a public critical response.

Haworth begins by quoting himself in the same sort of sneering at libertarians that I had noted in the review: "self-styled libertarians ... acolytes ... truly elect" and goes on specifically to mention "the activities of such minority groups as the Libertarian Alliance" (but he sneers at every kind of libertarianism in his book, as far as I can see). He thinks he can keep his criticism mainstream and thus escape the charge that he has "missed the point". But we ought to be looking for the strongest form of a thesis to criticise, and when someone tries to help us we should be grateful and try to answer his arguments. Unfortunately, Haworth seems more interested in anti-libertarian propaganda. How can it be of any significance if it were only a "minority group" that has answers to his criticisms? But in fact he appears inexcusably, sometimes laughably, ignorant of most standard libertarian literature outside the few targets he takes to represent the mainstream.

I have, he states, written an "immoderate and misleading review". I happily embrace the charge of "immoderate". Haworth has certainly written a moderate book—at best. Is my review misleading? We shall see. Apparently he is even annoyed (as his tone and style shows, though he tries to save face by calling this "weary resignation") that I agree with some of his points about Hayek, Nozick and Rothbard and that I urge people to read his criticisms. How these specific agreements show my "complete inability to answer the greater part of [his] case" escapes me—and him. If he has any case that I have supposedly missed then what is stopping him from saying what it is? Despite my filling the rest of the review with critical points, Haworth charges me with being "bereft of rational argument" (by which he can only really mean that he is bereft of a reply to the arguments I gave). I "resort, instead, to manoeuvres ... [irrelevant sneer omitted] ... to deflect attention from the inadequacy of the libertarian case by changing the subject." We shall look at the cited cases, but I cannot help feeling that he is judging others by his own abysmal standards. If I genuinely wanted to deflect attention from weak arguments, why would I explicitly agree with some of his arguments? And if I wanted to avoid criticism, why would all my points be answers to arguments of his? It is also both bad manners and the *ad hominem* fallacy to impugn the honesty of a critic to avoid his arguments.

Haworth asserts that my stated conception of liberty is "*recherche*". He thinks this will have "a tenuous connection with the real meanings of 'freedom' and liberty". But words do not have "real meanings" in any fixed sense. In any case, the basic idea of interpersonal liberty as people not proactively imposing on each other is at one with commonsense understanding. And I apply it quite simply and explicitly to a few points that Haworth makes, in an honest attempt to answer his points. But he refuses to reply to any of these. Even a poor attempt would be better than merely, irrelevantly and erroneously, supposing that my conception is too unusual to be worth replying to. Fortunately for Haworth, he can now read about the conception at length in *Escape from Leviathan*.

I am also charged with "trying to change the subject by taking [him] to task for not having said things which [sic] it would have been quite beside the point to say in any case." His sole example is that I supposedly criticized him for "not having paid close attention to the precise meaning of 'right-wing'." I did nothing of the kind. The meaning of words is nothing to do with solving serious intellectual problems. I was explaining how it is possible to add a North-South dimension to the Left-Right one^[3] that helps to make it clear that—and *this* is the point—"the market is *not* the central tenet of libertarianism (contra p. 36). Libertarianism embraces all voluntary behaviour ..., including charity such as the Good Samaritan's (which example Haworth would twist to defend state intervention [pp.

100—103]).” Is Haworth dishonestly evading this point or is he simply incapable of understanding it? (Note that this is not an *ad hominem*, for I am not using it as an excuse to dismiss or avoid his arguments—in the Haworthian style. Neither do I think it bad manners to give tit for tat.)

It is necessary for Haworth to explain how equal opportunities legislation is *not* female privilege (which point of mine he carefully omits) because it supposedly *protects* “the property women hold in their persons”. For far from being an “uncontroversial assertion” I can make no sense of it: what have equal opportunities to do with self-ownership? So as it stands this is not merely a prejudice but a particularly bizarre one. In any case, one purpose for philosophy is to challenge assertions that are assumed to be “uncontroversial”. (And I was not “alluding to a footnote” for I gave the full reference.)

I have recently noticed how bad arguers, when repeatedly charged with not answering a crucial point sometimes start referring to the point as a “mantra”. This is a foolish attempt to excuse their inability to answer the point. Even if a phrase is repeated in a mantra-like fashion that does not make it false. Haworth objects thus that “Lester simply [I say nothing else, ever?] reiterates, but more insistently [how does he know it is more? What is wrong with that anyway?] the libertarian mantra according to which free market operations inevitably work to produce the general good”. But, in fact, the nearest thing to this “mantra” appears only *once* where I say that libertarians can “conjecture the desirability of libertarian rights (viewing these as compatible with the market *and* utility....)”. The next nearest thing to this point is where I make *specific* points to illustrate my assertion that “Typical libertarian views, *whether right or wrong*, are unknown or ignored on many issues” (emphasis added). My point is *not* to assert that the market is better for welfare as well as liberty, but that Haworth merely ignores specific libertarian lines of argument (which space limitations prevented me from doing more than mentioning) that this is so as though they do not exist. If Haworth were more familiar with the literature he would see that, whether he agrees with it or not, far from being “vulgar invisible-handism” it applies sophisticated economics and empirical research to explain how government failure is mistaken for market failure. It is *his* “naïve faith” in politics that is the problem. Though he will fool some others as well as himself, repeating the accusations of “vulgar invisible-handism” and “mantra” (in a mantra-like way, of course) cannot get him out of doing his homework.^[4]

Haworth’s final point is that I caricature what he says by exaggerating it. His first example (I quote Haworth properly rather than engage in muddled or mendacious paraphrase): “I did not confidently assert that democracy respects choice better than the market—only that ‘Imperfect though these [democratic procedures] may be, there is no need to swallow the improbable libertarian myth.’ That the former are necessarily much worse at respecting choice than the latter.” Here Haworth is going out of his way to make a fool of himself by doing the very thing of which he falsely accuses me. I write nothing like “confidently assert”. I merely asked, “Exactly how does democracy respect choice better than the market (p. 17)?” Presumably he does mistakenly think it does so at least *sometimes*, or he would not be writing the book. Why does he not give one example or explanation rather than dismissing the libertarian position without considering it?

And again: “Nor, as Lester claims, did I deny that ‘liberty is, analytically, about the absence of constraints.’ On the contrary, I *assert* just that, adding only that the claim, though true, is ‘tautologically vacuous’ [p. 44]” First, Haworth does not assert that ‘liberty is, *analytically*, about the absence of constraints’ even on page 44, a different page from the one I was quoting from. He writes only that, “the claim that freedom is merely the absence of *constraint* ... might seem tautologically uninformative.” He does not even paraphrase or quote himself accurately and honestly here. But I did not claim that he denied this. What I actually wrote is, “Haworth denies that liberty is “essentially” negative (p. 47)”. Now, “denies” is strictly shorthand for the *precise* way that he rejects the idea. But that is irrelevant anyway. For I made my assertion mainly as part of my explanation of the fairly ordinary libertarian conception of liberty: “people not being constrained by other people”. He has dismissed this simple explanation as “*recherche*” without criticising it or its applications to what he says. When he goes on that “Lester clearly hasn’t grasped what I have to say on the subject of Freedom” this is more irony, as his own conception is certainly “*recherche*” as well as a hopeless muddle.

This same backfiring accusation continues with Haworth’s assertion that “Lester would have liked to portray me as just another ‘loony lefty’ trotting out some fairly tired sub-Marxist clichés.” I never stated or implied anything like this. In fact, I was not trying to portray Alan Haworth in any way

whatsoever. I have no interest in Mr Haworth. This is not personal (for me, at least). I was discussing the objective arguments in his book. I was agreeing with what I thought was right in the book and making explicit what I disagreed with, and why, as best I could in the very limited space allocated by the editors.

Haworth is “quite unimpressed by Lester’s *ex cathedra* remarks on ‘what libertarians say’.” It is not difficult to have more authority than Haworth on the subject of libertarianism. What a pity he did not show a draft of his book to a few libertarian academics. They would surely have steered him towards the relevant literature of which he is so woefully ignorant. It is not that my “brand of libertarianism is so ‘pure’, so squeaky clean, that [I] am not even prepared to count Hayek as a libertarian.” It is that Haworth paints a picture of libertarians as typically endorsing sundry obnoxious social outcomes, when the most cursory survey of the academic libertarian literature should have corrected this view. Even if Hayek’s libertarian credentials were not a matter of serious dispute (he is nowhere near being even a minimal statist), that would not in any way excuse Haworth’s glaring errors of omission (which he ignorantly assumes to be “the arcane speculations in which the initiates of this or that navel-gazing *coterie* are liable to engage”). Rather than “examine the foundations of a doctrine which [sic] has proven largely influential in the real world” his few high-profile targets and his own ignorant assumptions about ‘what libertarians think’ mean he has mainly tackled something that is little better than a crude popular caricature.

Haworth has presented no sound argument that his book has been misrepresented in any way. State interference with education is at its worst when it allows people to pursue their propaganda hobbies in tax-funded posts.^[5]

Notes

[1] *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1998.

[2] *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1997.

[3] <http://www.la-articles.org.uk/pc.htm>

[4] Haworth might like to start this on the Laissez-Faire Books website: <http://www.laissezfairebooks.com/>

[5] <http://www.la-articles.org.uk/tax.htm>