

Libertarianism (and classical liberalism, of which it is a subset) presupposes a specific, but implicit, conception of liberty. Imagine two lists of property-rights: one list is all those that are libertarian and the other is all those that are not. What determines into which list a property-right is assigned? If libertarianism is really about liberty, then it can only be whether the property-right better fits what liberty is in a more abstract sense than property. Therefore, it greatly clarifies matters to have an explicit theory of this presupposed conception.

‘Liberty’ in its most general sense means ‘the absence of a constraint’ (the opposite of the presence of an assistance). But we are only interested in interpersonal liberty: the absence of some kind of a constraint on people by other people. What is it that we don’t want other people to constrain? At its most abstract, this can only be our having our wants (or preferences)—whatever they happen to be—satisfied or fulfilled. Mere failure to assist some want-satisfaction (to provide a benefit) is not in itself to constrain that want-satisfaction (to impose a cost). Therefore, abstract interpersonal liberty is the absence of interpersonally imposed constraints on want-satisfaction; for short, no proactively imposed costs—or no (proactive) impositions. However counterintuitive at first, this eleutherology is the abstract (non-propertyarian and non-normative) pure liberty that libertarianism presupposes.

There are three severe optimisation problems: clashes, defences, and rectification. 1) What if I want to do something that proactively imposes on you (say by causing smoke), but to stop me would also proactively impose on me (I need a fire for warmth and cooking)? Our want-satisfactions clash. The most libertarian option is to minimise the overall proactive impositions, which might entail compromise or compensation. 2) How far can one go to defend oneself from proactive impositions? Not so far as to cause ‘overkill’: proactively imposing to a greater extent than anything threatened (e.g., mining one’s garden to stop children using it as a shortcut). 3) If a proactive imposition occurs, what would rectify it? Whatever matches the level of the imposition, which can include a risk-multiplier proportional to the chance of the imposer escaping detection. These constitute an optimisation policy.

If such liberty were to be put into practice in a state of nature, then what general things would this entail? Primarily, people want to have ultimate control of the bodies that they more or less are. They do not proactively impose on other people by doing so (except in the trivial, and reciprocal, sense of being composed of resources that might otherwise have been available). Therefore, liberty entails that they have this. Then they want to have ultimate control of any unused resources they start using, and thereby involve in their want-satisfactions. They do not proactively impose on other people by doing so (except in the trivial, and reciprocal, sense that those resources might otherwise have been available). Therefore, liberty entails that they have this. Otherwise, all interpersonal interactions and exchanges need to be consensual or they would proactively impose. These are the principal, *prima facie*, positive, libertarian rules that fit abstract liberty almost perfectly. These rules internalise externalities with respect to want-satisfaction, and are thereby economically efficient (tending to maximise overall want-satisfaction in the more general sense). To flout these positive rules infringes liberty *prima facie*. But problem cases may require the use of the abstract theory or optimisation policy.

The above positive rules can be instituted as enforceable private-property in order to better protect and promote liberty. Consequently, appropriate private-property is actually a contingent, practical, libertarian rule; not what liberty or libertarianism is in itself.

Moreover, it is a completely separate matter whether the positive system of liberty-in-practice is morally desirable. This can only be conjecturally explained, and defended from any criticisms, not given epistemological support (see other essays on critical rationalism).¹

¹ See <https://philpapers.org/rec/LESQCL> and <https://philpeople.org/profiles/jan-clifford-lester>