

Libertarianism (and classical liberalism generally) 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 the determining factor must be whether the property-right fits what liberty is—in a sense more abstract than property. Therefore, it greatly clarifies matters to have an explicit theory of this presupposed conception.

‘Liberty’ in its most general sense means ‘absence of constraint’ (a complete contrast is ‘presence of assistance’). The issue here is interpersonal liberty: the absence of constraints on people by each other. But what is to be unconstrained? At its most abstract, this must be having our wants (or preferences)—whatever they happen to be—satisfied or fulfilled. Not assisting a want-satisfaction (not providing a benefit) is not proactively constraining that want-satisfaction (proactively imposing a cost). Therefore, abstract interpersonal liberty is ‘the absence of interpersonally imposed proactive constraints on want-satisfaction’. But for brevity, ‘no proactively imposed costs’ or simply ‘no (proactive) impositions’. This eleutherology is the abstract—not proprietarian or normative—liberty that libertarianism presupposes.

There are three abstract maximisation problems: clashes, defences, and rectifications. 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 overall proactive impositions, with situation-specific compromise or compensation. 2) What can one do to defend oneself from proactive impositions? Nothing that causes ‘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 statistical chance of the imposer’s escaping detection). Broad interpersonal comparisons of cost-impositions are unavoidable. These are an abstract libertarian maximisation policy.

If such abstract liberty were to be practiced or observed 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 having this, unless trivially and reciprocally by existing and being composed of resources now unavailable. Therefore, liberty entails that they have this. Next, they want to have ultimate control of any unused resources they start using, and thereby closely involve in their want-satisfactions. They do not proactively impose on other people by having this, unless trivially and reciprocally by their chosen use and those resources now being unavailable. 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 three principal, prima facie, positive, libertarian rules that fit abstract liberty almost perfectly. These rules maximally internalise externalities with respect to want-satisfaction, and are thereby economically efficient (tending to maximise overall want-satisfaction). To flout these positive rules infringes liberty prima facie. But problem cases may require the abstract theory or maximisation policy.

In order to better protect and promote liberty, the above positive rules can be instituted as enforceable private property (one added sophistication is similarly derivable [intellectual property](#)). Consequently, self-ownership and such private property are contingent, practical, libertarian rules; and not what liberty or even libertarianism is inherently.

Moreover, it is a further completely separate matter whether this positive system of liberty-in-practice is moral or just. And, as with the positive theory, this can only be conjecturally explained and defended—not given epistemological support.

A more-detailed explanation of this liberty-centred, [critical-rationalist](#), theory is [here](#).