

Forum Digest for lectures 5 and 6 (lecture release date was March 26th)

(1) Libertarianism and Utilitarianism

Several students tried to combine utilitarianism and libertarianism in their posts. Notice though that combining these two theories is not as straightforward a possibility as one might think. According to utilitarianism, the right or just government policy is the one that maximizes overall utility. As such, utilitarians would only support libertarian policies (e.g. no redistributive taxation, no paternalist policies, etc.) if these policies maximized overall utility. However, if it turns out that redistributive taxation maximizes overall utility, utilitarianism would require such taxation. Remember also that utilitarians reject the notion of natural rights, which is just another way of saying that they reject Nozick's natural rights based justification of libertarian policies (e.g. no redistributive taxation, no paternalist policies, etc.).

Turning now to libertarianism. Libertarianism is a political philosophy (a theory about what government policy is right or just) which can, in principle, be defended using either categorical or consequentialist moral reasoning (but not both at once). One example of a categorical libertarian is Nozick, who argues that redistribution is unjust because it violates individual natural rights and self-ownership. So, even if it turns out that redistribution maximizes overall utility, Nozick would consider it unjust, precisely because it violates natural rights and self-ownership. The question for someone like Nozick is what grounds these natural rights? And why do individuals have a natural right to life, liberty, and property. Why do they not have other natural rights, like, say, a natural right to health or to lead a meaningful life?

By contrast, one example of a consequentialist libertarian is Milton Friedman, who thinks that people have the same rights as those posited by Nozick but follows Mill in (i) denying that rights are natural, and (ii) claiming that they must be defended in terms of the value of the consequences of their recognition. This means that Nozick and Friedman agree *that* libertarianism is the correct political philosophy but disagree over *why* it is the correct political philosophy (i.e. over whether morality that supports libertarianism is categorical or consequentialist).

(2) Voluntarism vs. redistributive taxation.

Several participants suggested in their posts that voluntary schemes to provide health insurance to the poor would be better than health care financed by redistributive taxation. Two observations: First, in order for these claims to be well-

supported, one needs to explain in what way(s) voluntarism is better (e.g. is it more efficient or ...?). Second, even if it is granted that voluntarism is better in some sense, the question remains why this also makes it unjust to finance health care for the poor through redistribution (e.g. on the face of it, even if something is less good in the sense of being less efficient that, by itself, does not make it unjust) – what in other words is the relation between something's being better/efficient and it's being just?

Other participants followed a slightly different argumentative strategy, taking Nozick's claims about the implications of self-ownership as their starting point. One question that still needs answering is the following: Even if it is granted that people own themselves and that this includes ownership of their labor, why, exactly, does it follow that they should also receive **all** of the fruits of their labor? Given that people make use of all sorts of things other than themselves and their talents when they contribute to the labor market (education, infrastructure, social valuation of the goods they produce, etc.) would it not make more sense to think that individuals should receive **part** of the fruits of their labor?

Notice also that it is irrelevant to the Nozickian argument whether the money raised through taxation is well spent or spent in a way beneficial to all. After all, according to Nozick, the government does not become entitled to engage in involuntary taxation by spending the money well or for the common good.

(3) Libertarianism and existing inequalities

It is important to realize that Nozickian libertarianism cannot be used to justify existing inequalities in the distribution of goods and wealth because of the history of violence and plunder from which existing property relations have developed. Nozick would concede that a one off redistribution of global wealth would be needed to generate a just starting point for a free market (principle of rectification of historic injustices, i.e. rectification of violations of individual natural rights in acquisition and transfer of goods).

(4) Entitlement and desert

Some have argued against redistribution on the grounds that the recipients don't deserve what they get (e.g. they are poor because they are lazy, etc). It is important to recognize that, at least when it comes to Nozickian libertarianism, desert is completely irrelevant when it comes to arguing against redistributive taxation. This is to say, for Nozickian libertarianism it is irrelevant whether the poor do or do not deserve what they would get from redistributive taxation. Rather, redistributive taxation is unjust because it violates individual self-ownership and natural rights to life, liberty, and property.