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## If Only Conservatives Were More Like Libertarians

Caroline Baum - Aug 15, 2012

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Have you ever wondered why conservatives are so opposed to government interference in the marketplace yet so tolerant, even welcoming, of its role in our personal lives? You could say the same about liberals, whose preferences for government involvement run in the opposite direction.

Either way, it strikes me as inconsistent. If you believe in the principle of live-and-let-live, it should apply to all aspects of your life. When the Wall Street Journal's conservative editorial page invokes "free markets, free people," I always wonder, what happened to the free-people part?

The idea that government knows best is anathema to fiscal conservatives, who believe in a limited government of enumerated powers. How is it that same government can be the ultimate authority on how we live our lives, whom we can marry, how we raise our children, where we worship, what we inhale and ingest, and what we do behind closed doors?

I ask David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian [Cato Institute](#) in [Washington](#), to crawl inside a conservative's head and explain it to me.

"Sometimes libertarians assume that the questions we ask are the same questions other people ask," he says. For example, "a libertarian might ask: What is the role of government? What are the rights of individuals? A conservative, on the other hand, might ask: What is good for an orderly society? Different questions yield different answers."

### ***Rousseau's Romanticism***

Armed with the necessary fodder, I ask a conservative the same question and get pretty much the same answer: It's all about how you frame the question.

"You have to approach it through a prism of liberty and what are the conditions for securing and preserving liberty for everyone," says David Azerrad, associate director of the Center for Principles and Politics at the [Heritage Foundation](#), a conservative think tank in Washington. "We're not 'legislating morality,' as libertarians claim, but creating the conditions that allow for liberty."

Uh-huh. I understand the words, but I'm having trouble getting my arms around the concept. I try a specific example.

What about a gay couple I know who adopted two, mixed-race, crack-cocaine babies? Aren't these children better off growing up with two loving, caring parents than as products of the foster-care system? So what if both parents are "daddy"?

To me, it's a rhetorical question. To conservatives, judging by their opposition to gay marriage and gay adoption, it clearly isn't.

Azerrad tells me I'm assuming "a very Rousseauian approach to politics" by taking individual examples and appealing to the heart. (I knew cutting social philosophy in college would catch up with me someday.)

Given conservatism's inherent suspicion about the state, "when it recognizes a role for the state, clearly there's something important at stake," he says. And that means "supporting certain institutions and actively promoting them."

Take marriage, for example. The only reason the state has an interest in it is because children are involved, and research has shown the nuclear family is best for raising kids, Azerrad says. (I wonder if there's an exemption for childless couples.)

It would be one thing if Homo sapiens could no longer reproduce; if the present generation were the last one on Earth. "Then we could all be libertarians," he says.

Because they can, and do, reproduce, the state has an interest in those children being raised in "optimal conditions," Azerrad says. "The overarching principles are: How do you structure a community and what institutional setups are conducive to preserving it."

### ***Big Job***

That sounds like a big assignment for an entity that can't make the trains run on time -- and [loses money](#) when they do. What gives the government the moral authority to tell us how best to live our lives? It almost sounds presumptuous. All that laissez-faire stuff about a voluntary exchange between individuals as the basis for a market economy collapses when applied to choices in our personal lives?

Typically, conservatives line up in support of family values (what if the family is dysfunctional?), a strong military and national defense, the right to bear arms, the death penalty and school prayer. They oppose embryonic stem-cell research, abortion, divorce, gay marriage, gay adoption and euthanasia. It's the conservative version of a cradle-to-grave model, all spelled out in great detail.

Just contrast conservatives' list of do's and don'ts with that of libertarians, who just want to be left alone.

“Conservatives understand that letting people do their own thing builds a strong economy,” Cato’s Boaz says. “Why can’t a strong society be built from a few rules you learned in kindergarten? Don’t hit other people, don’t take their stuff and keep your promises.”

If it were that simple, we could scrap the [82,419-page Federal Register](#), the government’s book of rules and regulations. Neither conservatives nor libertarians -- nor liberals, for that matter -- would have a problem with that.

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