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## [Freedom, Selfishness, and Cooperation](#)

David Boaz - April 25, 2011



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Most critics of [libertarianism](#) give little evidence that they've actually read any libertarian books or even talked to a libertarian. Pundits usually base their analysis on the fact that [Ayn Rand](#) (who insisted she wasn't a libertarian) wrote a book called *The Virtue of Selfishness*. My colleague Tom Palmer says that academic critics almost always [cite](#) one chapter of one book, [Robert Nozick's](#) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, and declare that they have grappled with libertarian ideas. Michael Gerson, formerly chief speechwriter for President [George W. Bush](#) and now a columnist for the *Washington Post*, falls into the former category. He's heard that Ayn Rand was dogmatic and selfish, and that's his [repeated analysis](#) of [libertarianism](#).

In his [latest column](#) he writes that "both libertarians and Objectivists are moved by the mania of a single idea—a freedom indistinguishable from selfishness. This unbalanced emphasis on one element of political theory—at the expense of other public goals such as justice and equal opportunity—is the evidence of a rigid ideology."

This is rich, coming from a speechwriter who helped Bush plump for a "Freedom Agenda" that apparently included a trillion dollars of new spending, the largest expansion of entitlements in 40 years, federal takeovers of education and marriage, presidential power to arrest and incarcerate American citizens without access to a lawyer or a judge, and two endless "nation-building" enterprises.

But is it true? Is the libertarian conception of freedom "indistinguishable from selfishness"? Of course not. Libertarians want to live in what [Adam Smith](#) called the Great Society, the complex and productive society made possible by social interaction. We [agree with George Soros](#) that "cooperation is as much a part of the system as competition." In fact, we consider cooperation so essential to human flourishing that we don't just want to talk about it; we want to create social institutions that make it possible. That is what property rights, limited government, and the rule of law are all about.

It might be nice if love could bring about all the complex tasks of cooperation and competition by which we achieve our purposes, without all the emphasis on self-interest and individual rights, and many opponents of [liberalism](#) have offered an appealing vision of society based on universal benevolence. But as Adam Smith pointed out, "in civilized society [man] stands at all times in need of the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes," yet in his whole life he could never befriend a small fraction of the number of people whose cooperation he needs. If we depended entirely on benevolence to produce cooperation, we simply couldn't undertake complex tasks. Reliance on other people's self-interest, in a system of well-defined property rights and free exchange, is the only way to organize a society more complicated than a small village.

The market is an essential element of civil society. The market arises from two facts: that human beings can accomplish more in cooperation with others than alone and that we can recognize this. If we were a species for whom cooperation was not more productive than isolated work, or if we were unable to discern the benefits of cooperation, then we would remain isolated and atomistic. As [Ludwig von Mises](#) explained, "Each man would have been forced to view all other men as his enemies; his craving for the satisfaction of his own appetites would have brought him into an implacable conflict with all his neighbors." Without the possibility of mutual benefit from cooperation and the division of labor, neither feelings of sympathy and friendship nor the market order itself could arise.

Throughout the market system individuals and firms compete to cooperate better. The rapid feedback of the market process provides incentives for successful forms of organization to be copied and unsuccessful forms to be discouraged.

Cooperation is as much a part of the [market system](#) as competition. Both are essential elements of the simple system of natural liberty, and most of us spend far more of our time cooperating with partners, coworkers, suppliers, and customers than we do competing.

The real issue is not compassion but coercion. Is it compassionate to take from some by force in order to give to others? No, it's compassionate to give of yourself, and coercive to take from others. Is it "generosity," as [the governor of Vermont says](#), for a few wealthy people to urge a tax increase on the wealthy? No, it would be generous for Ben and Jerry and their 50 wealthy friends to voluntarily donate money to "help meet basic human needs" (as I'm sure they do); proposing to tax others is the exercise of force, not generosity.

Michael Gerson once [described](#) an [online fantasy game](#) as "a large-scale experiment in libertarianism." If you prefer reality, here's a couple of points to keep in mind. First, transfer payments and welfare programs that make people dependent on government undermine personal responsibility—the very virtues that conservatives claim to celebrate—and trap people in multi-generational poverty. Second, even if you think the American transfer-payment apparatus was once affordable, Presidents [Bush](#) and [Obama](#) have sent its costs skyrocketing.

The American, and libertarian, belief in freedom is not a "mania," nor is it "selfishness." It's a philosophy of individual rights, the rule of law, and the

institutions necessary for social cooperation. Read [Locke](#), [Hume](#), Smith, [Tocqueville](#), [Hayek](#)—and yes, Rand—if you seriously believe that the philosophy of freedom can be summed up as “selfishness.”

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**Gary Moeller** · State University of New York at Albany

My understanding of Libertarianism is that government shall not regulate what people are allowed to do, unless their actions infringe on the rights of another. There would be no laws prohibiting "victimless crimes," such as drug use, prostitution, etc. There would be no government regulation of firearms, food safety, gambling... I think the government would mostly be responsible for National Defense, but little else.

It sounds good, in theory, but is it workable? I sincerely doubt it. It strikes me as too idealistic, too unrealistic.

Would corporations, freed from regulations, whether they be environmental, or financial rules, (for instance, would there be a minimum wage, or safety regulations for industry) treat workers fairly? Again, I doubt it, because doing so would have a negative impact on profits.

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**Lewis Green**

Excellent summation David. Thank you.

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**Lewis Green**

I believe the following, which is taken from the post, and I have no evidence to suggest it isn't true: "The real issue is not compassion but coercion. Is it compassionate to take from some by force in order to give to others? No, it's compassionate to give of yourself, and coercive to take from others. Is it "generosity," as the governor of Vermont says, for a few wealthy people to urge a tax increase on the wealthy? No, it would be generous for Ben and Jerry and their 50 wealthy friends to voluntarily donate money to "help meet basic human needs" (as I'm sure they do); proposing to tax others is the exercise of force, not generosity."

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Happy Easter, everyone.



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