

**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

JUNE 28, 2011, 12:36 PM ET

## How Reasonable is Libertarianism?

Last week, Slate's Stephen Metcalf wrote [a sweeping attack on libertarianism](#), concentrating on the late philosopher Robert Nozick.

That piece inspired a lot of commentary, and has now led to a [Bloggingheads exchange](#) between Julian Sanchez, of the Cato Institute (a libertarian think tank), and Matthew Yglesias, of the Center for American Progress. The video is worth at least dipping into, but what caught my eye was some remarks that Yglesias [made as he posted it](#):

---

*I managed to go an hour and fifteen minutes with Julian without even putting forward my main claim. But what I wanted to say was that on the level of philosophy, I think there's very little that separates generous interpretations of all thinkers in the broad liberal tradition. All secular rationalist cosmopolitans have an enormous amount in common. The fact that secular rationalist cosmopolitans are so overwhelmingly dominant among college professors, meanwhile, tends to distract from the fact that secular rationalist cosmopolitans are actually rather thin on the ground. But if everyone on the earth accepted any of the various brands of liberal or libertarian thinking, we'd be in a much better place.*

---

Commentators immediately jump in to object that, for example, widespread adoption of Ayn Rand's breed of libertarianism, which holds that it is immoral to act altruistically to help those in need, would not lead "us" to a better place.

But I imagine that there are few people who would not be provoked by this brief post. What does Yglesias mean by "secular rational cosmopolitans"? Do only agnostics and atheists qualify—or anyone who embraces a secular state structure, such as that of the United States? The reference to secularists being "thin on the ground" suggests the former, but that is an awfully strong claim.

A taste of the discussion:

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)