



Ron Paul's Libertarianism Revisited

For as frequently as I have defended Ron Paul against his detractors, it may surprise some readers to discover that while I consider myself to be something of a libertarian, philosophically speaking, I am poles apart from the libertarianism of which Paul is such an impassioned supporter.

In contemporary politics, and, indeed, contemporary life, it is not at all uncommon to hear partisans speak of the “*philosophical*” differences between themselves and their opponents. Few people, though, really understand what philosophy is. This is no criticism; even those of us who make our living as philosophers have not infrequently found ourselves divided as to the character of our craft.



However, whatever our differences, one thing seems certain: that two (or more) people disagree over any given policy or set of policies *might* indicate that they are philosophically at odds with one another; it does *not* entail this. Just the slightest reflection upon a couple of examples readily bears this out.

Take the issue of [the death penalty](#). Joe favors the use of capital punishment while Bill opposes it. We have, then, a conflict over policy. But if Joe endorses capital punishment because he believes that it deters potential murderers from becoming actual murderers, and Bill opposes capital punishment because he does not believe that it is the deterrent that Joe thinks it is, then far from there being a philosophical divide between Bill and Joe, the two are actually of one mind. Whether they recognize it or not, inasmuch as both Bill and Joe evaluate the moral worth of the death penalty in terms of its results alone, they are proponents of the moral philosophy known as [utilitarianism](#). From this perspective, the moral permissibility of any action is determined *solely* by its consequences.

Let's now consider another scenario.

This time, Bill and Joe are in complete agreement that capital punishment is a good thing that should be regularly implemented. However, they support it for different reasons. Bill defends capital punishment on *retributive* grounds. Along with the eighteenth century philosopher [Immanuel Kant](#), he argues that justice demands that, the consequences of the practice of the death penalty aside, every murderer *must* be made to part with his life. Joe, in stark contrast, continues to support capital punishment because of his belief that its administration will ultimately deter murder.

Here we witness nothing less than an unequivocal clash between two mutually antagonistic philosophical standpoints.

In short, in order for there to exist a genuinely philosophical dispute, the formal suppositions underwriting the substance of one discussant's position must be incompatible with those informing that



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of the other's.

When it comes to most issues, I find myself generally in agreement with Congressman Paul. That is, if Paul is a libertarian, then insofar as I tend to sympathize with the bulk of his positions on the topics that concern him, then neither, I suppose, is it inappropriate to ascribe the "libertarian" label to my views. The difference, though, between us is that Paul's libertarianism is a *doctrine*. My "libertarianism" is not. In other words, I have a libertarian *disposition*; I do not subscribe to some comprehensive creed called "libertarianism."

The distinction between Paul's thought and mine can be cast in other, perhaps clearer, terms. I am disposed to be a libertarian *because* I am disposed to be *conservative*. In this regard, I am no different from David Hume, Edmund Burke, or any number of thinkers associated with the conservative intellectual tradition. This tradition, we must recall, originally emerged precisely in order to combat the rationalistic excesses of an alternative Enlightenment tradition — a tradition of which Congressman Paul and virtually every other contemporary political actor are heirs.

[Hume](#) and [Burke](#) were "libertarians" ("liberal" in the classical and best sense of the term) in that they affirmed and defended the liberty of their fellows as emphatically and consistently as anyone of their generation (or ours). But they are conservatives because, unlike their rationalistic peers (and ours), they were acutely aware that this liberty, far from being the trans-historical, trans-cultural abstraction to which every human being who has ever lived has an "inalienable right," was in fact a concrete, historically and culturally centered phenomenon or "inheritance," as Burke described it. Indeed, they recognized that, ultimately, there is no liberty; there are only *liberties*.

Hume and Burke, for as different from one another in many regards as they undoubtedly were, knew that the universalistic and rationalistic rhetorical fictions of "[The Rights of Man](#)," "[the social contract](#)," and the like, though intended to reference timeless, "self-evident" truths, were nothing more or less than sloppy distillations of the English tradition. This isn't to say, of course, that this tradition couldn't be shared with others. Yet the rights to habeas corpus, free speech, and all of the other liberties of which this system consists and which was centuries in the making is as English as the English language itself.

When Hume, Burke, and the conservative theorists whom they inspired set their sights on "liberty," it was something local with which they were concerned.

Contemporary political discourse proves that the liberty that engages the affections of Ron Paul *as well as*, interestingly enough, *his opponents*, is a very different sort of object. This liberty is a "Human Right" that, as such, owes nothing to the contingencies of place and time, culture and history. Preceding all human societies, it is *the* standard by which each is to be measured. The institutional arrangements of society *embody* or *express* liberty; they do not, as they do for Hume and Burke, *constitute* it. I believe it is this ubiquitous negligence of the culturally-specific grounding of our liberties that accounts for Ron Paul's (and mostly everyone else's) sore neglect of our immigration-related problems.

Still, in spite of my theoretical disagreements with him, practically speaking, Ron Paul is a true champion of our liberties. For this reason, I will, I am sure, continue to defend him against the unfair attacks with which he has been bombarded.



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