



Two Libertarianisms and Occupy Wall Street

I have noticed that there are some on the libertarian right who appear to consider themselves kindred spirits with those who have spent the last few weeks “occupying” Wall Street and other cities throughout America and beyond. This is disheartening, for what it reveals is that those who should presumably know better than all others how best to nurture and strengthen liberty are, in actuality, as ignorant of its true character as its greatest enemies.



Note, I do not suggest that the libertarian’s professions of love for liberty are insincere. Quite the contrary, for it is most likely his *fanaticism* for his beloved that imperils the latter. It is the libertarian’s *zeal* for liberty that corrupts his intellect. Like the hyper-jealous husband whose obsession with his wife renders him either forgetful of or oblivious to the real nature of marital love, so the libertarian is similarly forgetful of or oblivious to the real nature of liberty.

Bear in mind that the libertarianism that is the object of my critique is not the only school of thought so-called. “Libertarianism” is a term invariably associated today with a particular cast of mind. But there is another, older political philosophic orientation that, though of a *fundamentally* different *kind*, is no less deserving of the name.

What basically distinguishes these two varieties of “libertarianism” hasn’t anything at all to do with the positions that their exponents take on the issues with which they are confronted. Rather, in order to grasp the key difference between them, we need to look beyond *the substance* of their policy prescriptions to *the formal* suppositions that inform those prescriptions. To put it simply, the libertarianism that dominates today rests upon presuppositions that are *rationalistic*. Those undergirding its counterpart, on the other hand, are resolutely *anti-rationalistic*.

Today’s libertarianism is rationalistic inasmuch as it is rooted in “principles” or “propositions” that are allegedly “self-evident” to *every* rational being, regardless of time or place. That is, these principles or ideals — Human Rights, Freedom, Equality, Democratic Rule, the Social Contract, the Will of the People, etc. — are held not only to transcend civilization, but to subsist *in advance* of it. That this is so is borne out by the fact that government is typically treated by the libertarian rationalist merely as an *artifact*, a device that is just as easy to deconstruct as it was apparently easy to assemble in the first place. That contemporary libertarianism is rationalistic to the core can also be seen in the fact that it not only ignores the indispensable role that the traditions, habits, and customs of a people play in sustaining liberty, but treats such cultural particularities as *adversarial* to it.



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on November 3, 2011

In glaring contrast, the other type of libertarianism is all too aware that the ideals affirmed by its rationalistic counterpart, far from existing independently of the contingencies of culture, are *constituted* by it. Such ideals are *abstractions* from a tradition that is as culturally-specific as any language, and they are as dependent upon that tradition for their intelligibility as the grammatical rules of any language are dependent upon *it*. The liberty that we take for granted, then, is, ultimately, a tradition — *not* a timeless principle accessible to all peoples in all places and at all times.

The first type of libertarianism is a fiction that can and has resulted in one destructive utopian fantasy after the other; the second type — what has traditionally been regarded as *conservatism* — deserves our respect and, dare I say it, our allegiance. In contradistinction to both contemporary libertarianism as well as various modes of leftist and neoconservative thought, what we may call *conservative libertarianism* affirms two basic facts that a political philosophy neglects at its own peril.

First, just as the principles and rules of a language derive their intelligibility from the language from which they have been abstracted, the principles, rules, and ideals of a morality similarly derive their meaning from the moral tradition — the manners and habits of a distinctive kind of conduct — from which *they* have been elicited.

Second, even if this first fact was no fact at all, even if, that is, the rationalist is correct and principles subsist, in all of their nakedness, independently of conduct, this would not in the least alter the reality that we become acquainted with these principles only through our traditions. To return to the language analogy, we never learn grammatical rules and principles *as* rules and principles; we learn a living language and, as a result, the rules and principles constitutive of it. This, too, is how we become familiar with *moral* principles: by acting morally. But the specifics of “acting morally,” like the specifics of speaking a language, are determined by the particular moral tradition in question.

Both of these facts are mutually distinct. They are also, however, mutually supportive, for severally and collectively they inescapably lead us to a conclusion that it is painfully obvious has been utterly lost upon the “Wall Street Occupiers” as well as those libertarian rationalists who support them: The moral traditions to which we owe our civilization, our lifeblood, as it were, are deserving of our respect and care.

On the other hand, movements such as “Occupy Wall Street,” which imperil that civilization, invite our unequivocal contempt.



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