

Jeanne Hoffman: Welcome to this Kosmos Online podcast! I'm Jeanne Hoffman. Today I'm joined by Matt Zwolinski, who is here to talk about his popular blog, Bleeding Heart Libertarians. Dr. Zwolinski is associate professor of philosophy at the University of San Diego and co-director of USD's Institute of Law and Philosophy. Welcome Dr. Zwolinski, thanks for being on our podcast!

Matt Zwolinski: Thanks, it's great to be here!

JH. Your new blog, Bleeding Heart Libertarians, is causing quite a stir. What must one believe to qualify as a "bleeding heart libertarian"?

MZ. Well bleeding heart libertarians are, in the first instance, libertarians, so they believe all the things libertarians typically believe. They believe in free markets, spontaneous order, the importance of strong rights to private property and limited government. Of course libertarianism, at least as I understand the term, refers to a range of political views and within that range you get some fairly different positions. You have people who call themselves classical liberals like Richard Epstein. You have people that are called minimal state libertarians like Robert Nozick or Ayn Rand, and then you get anarcho-capitalists in people like Murray Rothbard. So you can get people from all of that range in bleeding heart libertarians.

But it's a range of views distinguished, first of all, by their commitment to the standard libertarian beliefs, and then second of all that, they believe that these libertarian institutions are good for the poor. Now there's a weak version of bleeding heart libertarians where that's as far as you'd go. You'd say I'm a libertarian, I believe in the things libertarians believe in, and I think those things are good for the poor. I call that a weak version because I think there's a stronger version—and this is the version that I endorse—which is, not only do these institutions *happen* to be good for the poor, it's not just a coincidence, the fact that they're good for the poor and vulnerable is actually an important part of the moral justification of libertarian institutions. It's a big part of the reason we have to endorse those.

So to see if you kind of qualify as a bleeding heart libertarian in that strong sense, try a thought experiment. Suppose that all the critics of libertarianism were right about the empirical claims that they make: that markets are rife with failures, they tend to cause the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer, that this leads to the exploitation of workers by capitalists. If all those claims were really true, and libertarians don't believe that they are, but suppose they were. Would you then still be a hardcore libertarian? If the answer to that is no, then I think you might be a bleeding heart libertarian.

JH. So have you had success so far changing minds on this or that issue, whether it's softening libertarians or hardening progressives? Or is the effort not so much to change minds as it is to help people see that they may agree maybe on a lot more than they had thought?

MZ. Yeah, it's really hard to say whether we've had any success changing minds. All we really have to go on is the comments people make on the streets or conferences and then the responses we get at the blog itself in the comments thread and it's hard to know how representative those comments really are. The most striking response I've seen is not that *hey, you've changed my mind* it's more along the lines of *hey this is kind of what I'd thought all along, I didn't really have a label to identify it, and I wasn't so sure it was really a philosophically respectable position, and now maybe I see that it is*. I think there are a lot of people out there who think that, yeah, on the one hand libertarians have a lot of important and useful things to say on the way markets and political processes work, but that people on the political left have some important maybe not-so-crazy things to say about helping the poor and things like social justice, and gosh wouldn't it be nice if those two things can be reconciled. And so the blog is showing them that other people agree, and that maybe there's a way to work that stuff out.

JH. What's the most common critique you receive from progressives who remain unsatisfied with bleeding heart libertarianism?

MZ. Yeah, well there is a bunch, varying both in content and in quality. So you know, you get a lot of the normal things libertarians hear, that markets are rife with market failure, they lead to monopolies, didn't libertarianism cause The Great Depression, things like that to which anyone who's been around libertarians for any length of time has a ready response. I think the most interesting—I don't know if it's the most common critique I've received—is that the approach libertarians, I guess this isn't specifically focused on bleeding heart libertarians but general to libertarianism as a whole, libertarians approach complex social and economic problems in a way that is too abstract, too theoretical, not sensitive enough to context or variations in local conditions or historical contingencies. In other words, libertarians are applying a kind of pre-packaged ideology onto a host of complex issues, and so they're over-simplifying their responses to things. When you ask libertarians what they should do about problem x, they sort of whip out their first principles and deductive logic and they give you an answer without ever having to look at the details of the situation.

I think there's an element of fairness to that critique, and it comes from people who are not socialists. They're people who tend to occupy a more middle ground position, and so I think tend to be more difficult to defeat in argument if that's what your goal is. These are people who think markets have some good things about them, that there are some morally praiseworthy facts about free markets, and in fact we should see markets as a kind of tool, social tool to use in some circumstances to achieve certain kinds of goals. But, they say, it's not a tool that can be used for every problem and to see whether the tool of free market price system is better suited to solve a particular task, or some kind of government intervention might be better suited to accomplish that particular task, we actually have to look at the details and get down in the weeds.

So I think yeah, that's a good argument, one libertarians should perhaps take more seriously than they do. It's not a new claim. If you look back at the history of debates in libertarianism, look for

instance at the early days of the Austrian school of economics, that pretty much exact argument was one the German Historical School was making against the Austrian School, the idea that the Austrians were taking this deductively worked-out logic and applying it to a whole host of complex problems without any attention to the historical contingencies and local details of the situation. The Austrians developed a pretty reasonable and powerful response, I think, to that line of argument. But it's one, I think, more libertarians need to think through.

JH. Well speaking of libertarians, my guess is in addition to having some criticism from progressives, you might be getting some criticism from libertarians who don't regard themselves as bleeding hearts. So what's the most criticism you get from your own side?

MZ. Yeah, we kind of set ourselves up to make absolutely nobody happy with this blog, right? The progressives don't think we're progressive enough, the libertarians don't think we're libertarian enough. There are a few lonely voices in the wilderness who like what we're doing. We're fighting a war on two fronts here.

So libertarians also have some critiques about the bleeding heart project and they do specifically focus on the bleeding heart element of the bleeding heart libertarian approach. So their main concern is with their attempt to reconcile social justice and free markets. They attack that in one of two ways. Some libertarians think the idea of social justice is either conceptually incoherent or it's immoral in a way, insofar as the implementation of social justice, whatever that happens to be, is inevitably going to require some kind of coercion through the form of coercive redistribution of wealth, coercive taxation to fund public health care, education, things like that, and so even if the concept makes sense, it's a bad concept, it's a concept we should reject that would lead us to conflict with more important moral values, mainly the rejection of coercion. That's, I think, the most common libertarian response.

There's a couple of ways of responding to that. The first is to say that, well look, you can believe in social justice, you can believe in the importance of social justice as a moral concept, as a moral constraint, without necessarily believing the state ought to directly intervene in order to produce whatever particular outcomes are identified as just by that theory of social justice. So social justice, as I see it, is a moral standard for evaluating institutions, and there are a variety of such standards. There are as many theories of social justice as there are theorists of social justice. But suppose that, just to take an arbitrary and oversimplified one, suppose your standard of social justice was that in a just society, no one who is willing to work will go hungry at night, no one who is willing to work will go unfed. Now it's possible, and a libertarian would be attracted to this kind of argument, it's possible that a purely market society, one with zero government redistribution, could satisfy that standard, if the combination of economic productivity and low prices, combined with voluntary charity served to ensure that everyone who wants to work gets fed. There's nothing special, in other words, from the perspective of social justice, about a government guarantee in the form of a written law. What matters ultimately is whether people in need actually get fed, not whether there is a law on the book that says they must get fed. So you

can believe in social justice and believe, as a matter of fact, the institutions of a market society combined with civil society satisfy that constraint. So that's one response.

The second response, and I think this is probably where I'll meet more resistance from libertarians, the second response is to say that I think that libertarians are wrong, or some libertarians are wrong, to think that the prohibition on coercion, or you might call it the non-aggression axiom, has a kind of special and inviolable moral status that's different from and higher than any other moral claim. I think that's a mistake. I think it's true that redistributive taxation is coercive, I probably disagree with some people on the left about that. I also think that it's wrong, all else being equal, to coerce people, but I think that morality is more complicated than that. I think that morality asks us to do more than just refrain from coercing people. Morality asks us to meet people's needs when we can, to give people what they deserve when we can, to establish institutions like courts of law or even just maybe a public highway system that promote a peaceful and productive society, and sometimes I think these other requests that morality makes of us are going to come into conflict with the request to refrain from coercing others, while coercion is bad, and perhaps a very serious moral bad, I think libertarians, and here I'm thinking libertarians of the Rothbardian or Randian sort, I don't think libertarians have done enough to show that it's always and everywhere worse than other possible wrongs so that whenever you get in a conflict between morality of coercion and some other kind of moral concern, the prohibition on coercion always trumps. I think that coercion is a very serious thing, but it's not clearly always and everywhere the most serious thing and that the more pluralistic libertarianism would make room for the ideas of social justice and other moral concepts and admit as a possibility these other moral concerns sometimes, and in some instances, might trump the prohibition on coercion.

JH. So I'm not going to pretend to have a philosophical outlook, so I'm stealing this from someone I heard mentioning it around the office and they said that your blog seems to take a prioritarian approach with regard to social justice, which was explained to me as a view which gives extra weight to well-being of the worst off in society. Is that correct?

MZ. Yeah, I think that's not too far off. In philosophy, prioritarianism is a view that sort of emerged from the literature on distributive justice and equality, and it emerged from the idea that a strict egalitarianism is, for a variety of philosophical reasons, untenable; its not a view that too many people want to endorse, at least in terms of the egalitarianism of outcomes. So the prioritarian view is that, when we're deciding how to divvy things up in society or design institutions that will do the divvying up of things in society, we should give extra weight, extra concern to the needs of the least well-off people in society. So if we can produce a certain amount of good for the least well off person, or for the kind of person who is in the middle class, we should give the stuff to the least well-off person.

So I think it's not unfair to characterize the way we've discussed social justice on the blog as prioritarianism. I should preface that by saying I don't have a very well-worked-out theory of

social justice just yet. I mean, I've got some thoughts about the matter, and I think look, there are just a lot of different views that could be described as views of social justice and a lot of those views are fairly reasonable and have some important insights. So for instance, I think that a person who is a practicing catholic and who adhere to various principles of catholic social teaching, I think that person has a view that could accurately be described as a view about social justice. Or the same would be true of a Rawlsian who is committed to the difference principle as a principle for governing the basic structures of society. So those are different views of social justice with slightly different implications, and there are many others as well.

I think that most reasonable views of social justice are going to have a kind of prioritarian element. But that word 'element' is important for me. As I kind of indicated before, I'm a moral pluralist, so I think any time, not just in this instance, but any time you take a single moral idea and try and make an all-encompassing theory out of it, you're going to run into problems. That things are better in the world, all else being equal, when people are happier; that's clearly right. That happiness is the only thing that matters, from the perspective of morality, and that we should devote our entire lives to producing the greatest aggregate amount of it, that seems to me insane. Utilitarianism is a kind of hedgehog-ism and I think the same is true of prioritarianism. I think it's clearly true that, all else being equal, others need to have a greater pull on us the needier those others are. Where you run into problems with the view, and the problems that your colleague was perhaps indicating, is when you assume that's the sole criterion by which moral decisions are to be made.

So for instance, most of us think, I think, that responsibility matters too, right? Not just how badly off you are. So if the reason you're needy, the reason you're in the not-well-off class, is that you've been lazy or you've been a spend thrift, then your claim for assistance on the rest of us is, as a result, greatly diminished. Being badly off as a result of sheer bad luck is different from being badly off as a result of making bad choices and morality out to take account of that.

So that's a problem. The fact that responsibility matters is a problem maybe for a strict kind of prioritarian theory, but I don't think it's a problem for a pluralist moral theory that incorporates certain prioritarian elements, and that's the kind of view that I think is ultimately going to be defensible.

JH. OK. Would you say there's any view that makes no sense for libertarians to try and find a common ground with progressives on?

MZ. Yeah, absolutely. There are lots of things we shouldn't take on board from progressives. My point I think, or the point I try and make on the blog, is that libertarians have more common philosophical ground with progressives than either libertarians or progressives tend to realize. Progressives are wrong to think libertarians are indifferent to the plight of the poor, and libertarians are wrong to think social justice is a threat to liberty.

But of course, progressives believe things at both the level of public policy and philosophical principle that I think libertarians should absolutely not accept. At the level of philosophical principle, for instance, you have some people who believe in a strict version of equality, this sort of material equality that I think libertarians ought to reject. Libertarians tend to dismiss the idea that there's any value to people having the same amount of stuff, sort of regardless of how their different holdings arose. I think they're probably right to do that. Most libertarian critiques of equality are ones I'm pretty sympathetic with.

At the level of public policy, for instance, a lot of progressives, mostly philosophically but also if you look at sort of non-academic progressives, are very committed to protecting and promoting the interests of organized labor in their own country, even at the expense I think of much worse off people who would be benefited by perhaps some sacrifices to the privileges of organized labor. So for instance, I think in the United States, we should have almost completely open borders, allow anyone to migrate here, to work here who wants to do so. That is a policy that is strongly opposed by organized labor and many of their progressive and intellectual backers support their support of closed borders. I think that's a big mistake. I think what you're supporting when you support closed borders, because it will lower US wages, is you're protecting the interest of a class of workers who are already among the wealthiest people on the planet if you stack up their incomes and compare it with the incomes of everybody else living in the world. These people are fantastically wealthy, even if it doesn't always feel that way when you sort of look around at your neighbors and see how much more stuff they have than you. So you're protecting the interest of some of the most powerful and wealthy people on the planet at the expense of some of the most vulnerable and desperate people on the planet who simply want to come here and engage in voluntary exchanges with others, work for others who want them to work for them, in a way that makes them dramatically better off and I think makes all of us who live on this country be on aggregate better off as well.

That, I think, is a failure of progressives to take their own progressivism seriously enough, and not taking their own theories of social justice seriously enough. If social justice matters, then social justice matters, like any kind of justice, beyond borders. Human rights don't stop at the US-Mexican border, and if social justice is a matter of human rights, then neither does it.

JH. Well thanks so much for being on our podcast, Matt!

MZ. Absolutely, it was a pleasure to talk to you!

JH. Again you can read more of his work and others at [Bleeding Heart Libertarians](#). For more interviews with leading scholars, visit [Kosmosonline.org](#), connecting the network of liberty-advancing academics, and this is Jeanne Hoffman, signing off.