

# Living in a State-Run World

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

The articles by Messrs., Waters and Wollstein [\[1\]](#) (*Liberty*, Sept./Oct. 1987) highlight a vitally important question for libertarians: How can we act, and act morally, in a State-controlled and dominated world?

It seems to me that the most important concern is to avoid the twin, and equally destructive, traps: of ultra-purist sectarianism, where indeed we would not permit ourselves to walk on government-owned streets; and sellout opportunism, in which we could become supervisors of concentration camp while still claiming we were "libertarians" in some far off, ideal world.

Opportunists are people who severely split theory from practice; whose ideals are tucked away in some closet or trophy room and have no bearing on their daily lives. Sectarians, on the other hand, suffer from what the Catholics would call the error of "scrupulosity," and are always in danger of boxing themselves in to become hermits and virtual martyrs. All well and, good; but to avoid both pitfalls, we need some criteria to guide us.

## Morality as Religion

For Mr. Waters the problem is simple; instead of trying to avoid the trap, he rushes to embrace it. For him the answer is to throw away moral principle, which means throwing away passion, commitment, and hostility to renegades from liberty: Instead, we are to be cool and detached "scientists," proposing liberty on utilitarian and unemotional grounds. Then, presumably, we wouldn't worry about betrayal, or about any other actions, regardless how odious, libertarians might perform. So,

bring on the concentration camp supervisor, and let us talk to him sweetly about the pragmatic benefits of the price system and the division of labor!

In the first place, the fact that religious people are hostile to traitors and apostates does not make their views incorrect. Mr. Waters adopts an old canard by lumping in moral principles as "religious," thereby indicting hostility to immoral actions with the dread stamp of "religion." You don't have to be religious to detest immorality or hypocrisy, or to be angry and indignant at backstabbing by friends or lovers.

Mr. Waters's ideal of the passionless scientist is, as far as I am concerned, totally off the wall. I have known many scientists, and I have never known any who were~ not passionately indignant against what they considered the promotion of quackery or the betrayal of the ideals [e.g., truth-seeking] of science. I confess also to be annoyed at Mr. Waters invoking of my dear mentor, Ludwig von Mises, in his argument. It is true that Mises was a utilitarian, but it is also true that he was passionately devoted to liberty, and equally passionately opposed to all forms of statism, and to those who purvey it. Scientist he was; bloodless he was not....

## The Nozick Question

[*The New Republic* reported that libertarian philosopher Robert Nozick had successfully appealed against his landlord to the Cambridge Rent Control Board for a reduced rent on his apartment--editor].

Mr. Waters says that for us moralist ("religious") libertarians, the word for Robert Nozick is "apostasy." Rubbish. The word for Nozick is "hypocrisy," since he has never recanted his libertarian views. He apparently just doesn't live by them. Waters also says that every libertarian he knows "was upset, angry, and outraged" at Nozick's actions. I was not, although I agree that was their proper reaction.

As a long time Nozickologist, his actions didn't surprise me at all. It did not surprise me that he held the time-honored Northeastern urban tradition of "screwing your landlord" higher on his value-scale than the abstract principle of liberty and non-aggression. Even more amusing was Water's complaint that libertarians have gone so far as to "ostracize [Nozick] from libertarian society." Come, come, how often has anyone seen Nozick in "libertarian society?" Essentially, he abandoned libertarian society himself after his one flashy role at the LP national convention in 1975, where he was lionized soon after *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* had hit the streets. After that, the polymathic Nozick went on to other concerns and other books, and *lost interest* in libertarian questions.

For those of us who are passionately committed to libertarian principle, and consider it of supreme importance (especially if we are moralist/"religious"), such loss of interest is very difficult to understand. But that's the way it is. My own view of Nozick, based both on his personality and on the way he writes his books, is that he is considerably less interested in the content of his books than he is in the coruscating brilliance of his own thought-processes as he works his way through them. That sort of person is surely the sort of person who loses interest in the content of his previous books, and who would, happily screw a landlord he dislikes without giving much thought to libertarian principle.

To get to the screwing itself, and to the main substantive question raised by the Waters article: is being indignant at Nozick's screwing his landlord equivalent to upbraiding him (or anyone else) for walking on government-owned streets or flying from government-owned airports?

I think not. Waters's fundamental error is to confuse accepting a situation none of your making, with actively making that situation worse. In short, there is nothing wrong with a libertarian living in a

rent-controlled apartment, and therefore paying a rent below the market. Nozick (or myself) is not responsible for the rent-control law; he or we have to live within the matrix of such laws. So there is nothing wrong with him living in a rent-controlled apartment, just as there is nothing wrong with him walking on government streets, flying from government airports, eating price-supported bread, etc. None of this is of Nozick's (or our) making. It would be therefore foolish and martyrish for us to renounce such apartments if available, to refuse to eat any food grown under government regulation, to refuse to use the Post Office, etc. Our responsibility is to agitate and work to remove this statist situation; apart from that, that is all we can rationally do. I live in a rent-controlled apartment, but I have also written and agitated for many years against the rent-control system, and urged its repeal. That is not hypocrisy or betrayal, but simply rationality and good sense.

Nozick's moral error [let's call it "sin" to provoke the Waters of this world] was to go much further than simply living under rent control. His immoral action was to *pursue* the landlord actively, to go to the State to agitate, time and again, to get the State to force his rent even lower. It seems to me that there is a world of difference between these actions. One is living your life within a State-created matrix, while trying to work against the system; the other is actively using the State to benefit yourself and screw your fellow man, which means initiating and abetting aggression and theft.

## Working for Government

The criterion we should use in the Nozick case is, I believe, an easy one. There are far more difficult questions. What about working as a government employee? It is true that, other things being equal, it is far better, on libertarian as well as pragmatic grounds, to work for a private employer rather than government. But suppose that the government has monopolized, or virtually monopolized, your occupation, so that there is no practical alternative to working for the government?

Take, for example, the Soviet Union, where the government has, in effect, nationalized all occupations, and where there are no, or virtually no, private employers. Are we to condemn all Russians whatsoever as "criminals" because they are government employees? Is it the only moral act of every Russian to commit suicide? But that would be idiotic. Surely there are no moral systems that *require* people to be martyrs.

But the United States, while scarcely as far gone as Russia, has had many occupations virtually monopolized by the government. It is impossible to practice medicine without becoming part of a highly regulated and cartelized profession. If one's vocation is university teaching, it is almost impossible to find a university that is not owned, economically if not legally, by the government. If one's criterion of government ownership is the receipt of over 50% of one's income from the government, then there are virtually no universities, and only one or two small colleges, that can be called "private." During the riots of the late 1960's, students at Columbia discovered that far more than 50% of the income of that allegedly "private" university came from the government. In such a situation, it is foolish and sectarian to condemn teachers for being located in a government university.

There is nothing wrong, and everything rational, then, about accepting the matrix in one's daily life. What's wrong is working to aggravate, to add to, the statist matrix. To give an example from my own career. For many years I taught at a "private" university (although I would not be surprised to find that more than half its income came from the government). The university has long teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, and years ago it tried to correct that condition by getting itself "statized" through merging with the State University of New York system, in those halcyon days rolling in dough. For a while, it looked as if this merger would occur, and there was a great deal of pressure on every member of the faculty to show up in Albany and lobby for merger into the State system. This I refused to do, since I believed it to be immoral to agitate to *add to* the statism around me.

Does that mean that all libertarians can cheerfully work for the government, apart from not lobbying

for statism, and forget about conscience in this area? Certainly not. For here it is vital to distinguish between two kinds of State activities: (a) those actions that would be perfectly legitimate if performed by private firms on the market; and (b) those actions that are *per se* immoral and criminal, and that would be illicit in a libertarian society. The latter must not be performed by libertarians in any circumstances. Thus, a libertarian must not be: a concentration camp director or guard; an official of the IRS; an official of the Selective Service System; or a controller or regulator of society or the economy.

Let us take a concrete case, and see how our proffered criterion works. An old friend of mine, an anarcholibertarian and Austrian economist, accepted an important post as an economist in the Federal Reserve System. Licit or illicit? Moral or immoral? Well, what are the functions of the Fed? It is the monopoly counterfeiter, the creator of State money; it cartelizes, privileges and bails out banks; it regulates—or attempts to regulate— money and credit, price levels, and the economy itself. It should be abolished not simply because it is governmental, but also because its functions are *per se* immoral. It is not surprising, of course, that this fellow did not see the moral problem the same way.

It seems to me, then, that the criterion, the ground on which we must stand, to be moral and rational in a state-run world, is to: (1) work and agitate as best we can, in behalf of liberty; (2) while working in the matrix of our given world, to refuse to *add* to its statism; and (3) to refuse absolutely to participate in State activities that are immoral and criminal *per se*.

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## Notes

[1] Jarret Wollstein, author of *Society Without Coercion* (Silver Springs, Md.: Society for Individual Liberty, 1969). Ethan O. Waters is a pseudonyme of some libertarian writer.