

JOURNAL OF
Markets
& **Morality**

Volume 24, Number 1

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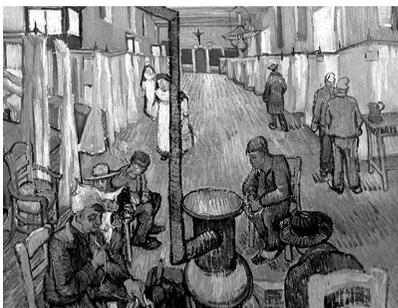
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Postmaster: Please send address changes to
JOURNAL OF MARKETS & MORALITY
98 Fulton East
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503

JOURNAL OF MARKETS & MORALITY (ISSN 1098-1217; E-ISSN 1944-7841) is an interdisciplinary, semiannual journal (Spring and Fall) published by the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty, a nonprofit, educational organization that seeks to promote a free and virtuous society characterized by individual liberty and sustained by religious principles. The views expressed by the authors are their own and are not attributable to the editors, the editorial board, or the Acton Institute.

On the Cover



Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)
Dormitory in the Hospital in Arles (1889)

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Index and Database Information

JOURNAL OF MARKETS & MORALITY is indexed in Atla Religion Database®, *EconLit*, *e-JEL*, *JEL on CD*, EBSCOhost® Electronic Journals Service (EJS)

Archives are available at:
<http://www.marketsandmorality.com>

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Governing Least: A New England Libertarianism

Dan Moller

Oxford University Press, 2019 (336 pages)

We are by now familiar with the so-called Adam Smith problem—the supposed contradiction between the central tenets of *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—and equally familiar, I suspect, with the reconciliation of these contradictions, which, it turns out, are not contradictions at all. We are rationally self-interested creatures who endeavor to maximize our well-being; and also generous altruists who desire to help others to overcome their struggles, defeat illness, and improve their station in life. But too few of us who identify as libertarians ably account for both positions when, say, we advocate property rights or criticize state-coerced wealth transfers.

In *Governing Least: A New England Libertarianism*, Dan Moller strikes the right balance between the alleged contradictions between rationally self-interested and altruistic sides. Let us face it: libertarians on the whole are not known as the cheeriest or humblest of debaters. Moller's refreshing optimism, charity toward rivals, and rigorous argumentation distinguish him as an amiable yet formidable voice for reason and markets over institutionalized force and coercion. One might expect a book with this title to focus on literary luminaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton; but they are not Moller's principal subjects. Indeed, this book is not about particular New Englanders who espoused libertarianism, and it does not spend much time explaining what is so "New England" about this approach. Nevertheless, Moller does think that the literary luminaries above represent a positive ethos or aura that characterizes a classical liberal approach to reparations, redistribution, justice, inequality, aid, markets, colonialism, and poverty. *These* ideas, not people, are Moller's principal subjects.

The sixteen chapters in this book render four overarching arguments that mark four thematic sections of the book. The first argument concerns a commonsense moral defense of private property that undermines the case for wealth redistribution. It emphasizes the importance of morality to counter any inference "from the fact that we ought to render aid that there cannot be an objection to the state *compelling* us to do it" (118). The second addresses how markets enable human flourishing and price signaling and considers at length the concept and the role of luck (and its correlative, opportunity) in market systems. Even imperfect markets "are sources of huge welfare gains to all" (129). The third is historical, mapping different times and places to answer the question, "If capitalism is so bad, why has it worked out so well?" (183). Countries enriched by capitalism are "less rapacious, more attentive to the costs of war, [and] more cognizant of the wisdom of Adam Smith and others that wealth lies in trade and innovation, not in robbery and conquest" (218). The final argument undertakes the weighty topics of political correctness and utopianism, indicting libertarians for ignoring the legitimate ends of the former and for embracing the latter despite the impracticalities and potentially detrimental consequences involved.

These four arguments combine to present a judicious, sensible plea for libertarianism or classical liberalism that should, I think, appeal to naysayers on the left, that is, to those who deny that free markets and limited government are the optimal means of improving economic conditions writ large. I conflate libertarianism and classical liberalism here because Moller does the same. Moller seriously contemplates the strongest arguments on both sides of an issue, and entertains reasonable and practical solutions. The New England feature of his methodology is twofold: first, it emerges “from everyday moral beliefs we have about when we are permitted to shift our burden to others” (1); and second, “it ranges widely across history, economics, and politics, as well as philosophy” (2). The first of these features demands further explanation.

The notion of “burden shifting” is familiar to anyone learned in the law. During litigation, when one party to a case sufficiently meets his evidentiary standard, the burden then shifts to the opposing party to supply adequate contrary evidence. Moller does not use the term *burden shifting* in quite the same manner, but the underlying calculus holds. Implicit in the welfare-state model, for instance, is the perverse presumption that certain people, backed by state coercion, enjoy an overriding privilege and authority to command someone else to alleviate their burdens or the burdens of their chosen group.

The reason it seems wrong for John Doe to insist that the state must compel others to cure his hardship is that the possible benefits to him, should the state comply, do not outweigh the harms visited upon others who are coerced, by force or the threat of force, to give up their hard-earned money. Simply moving the burden from one person or group of people to another person or group of people does not eliminate the burden. The historical record, however, proves that free markets and limited government, better than alternative systems, create the conditions necessary to mitigate or minimize the burden itself. “What matters,” says Moller, “isn’t the relative importance of negative liberties as against other political values, but whether it’s permissible for the state to compel the transfer of burdens in the manner of an expansive welfare state” (6).

Moller suggests that there is widespread, standing agreement about such fundamental principles and values as equality, fraternity, freedom, and so forth. The *disagreement* between libertarians and most nonlibertarians is over whether the compulsory apparatus of the state is the primary or best mechanism for concretely realizing those values and principles in actual practices and institutions. “The disagreement between libertarians and their antagonists,” he submits, “is not over how much values like freedom or equality matter, but over whether it is permissible for the state to use *force* to promote these values in various ways” (6). Elsewhere he states, “No one is against reducing abject poverty. What libertarians oppose is the state bringing about such goals by compulsory means” (28).

Seeking common ground, and to reach nonlibertarians on their own terms, Moller acknowledges his assumptions (when he assumes) and sets aside absolutist, purist premises regarding individual rights, pursuing instead pragmatic inquiries and outcomes based on consensus views and practical reasoning. He wishes for inevitable conflict to remain at the level of discourse and rhetoric rather than violence or force. “Libertarians find it easier to believe that in the end we need to address” complex problems involving inequalities “by

reason and persuasion than that we should abandon moral norms about when it's permissible to use force against our neighbors" (47). This line echoes his succinct definition of libertarianism: "Libertarianism is the widely reviled idea that we should use reason and persuasion to accomplish our distributive aims. *Only* reason and persuasion" (1).

Moller takes reparations seriously, examining two forms: transfers "of cash or land or in-kind goods" (220), and "symbolic forms of atonement" (220) such as formal apologies. His proposition that reparations are warranted under particular circumstances is unlikely to receive broad support from other libertarians. But he never specifies what, exactly, those reparations would look like, nor how or when to institute them. In his telling, a "compendium of evil," (220) including colonialism and slavery, requires restitution, but the more he delineates the problems and difficulties involved in measuring historical injustices and classifying who qualifies as an eligible victim, the more he sounds *opposed* to reparations. It is as if, by proclaiming his support for reparations *in theory*, his apparent rejection of reparations *in practice* seems more palatable.

New England libertarians would *not* demand of their neighbor heightened risk, injury, or harm to elevate their personal interests or themselves. Reasonable people with diverse perspectives, disputing in good faith, can unite in their appreciation for Moller's cautious rationale and mild temperament. A short review cannot do justice to his complex analysis, colorful style, persuasive force, and rhetorical nuance. Yet it can, I hope, supply at least marginal support for Jason Brennan's ringing endorsement, which is stamped on the book's back cover: "This is a masterful work. It may even be a masterpiece." I would go further and say that, without a doubt, it *is* a masterpiece. Moller could be the next Robert Nozick.

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OTHER BOOKS OF INTEREST

Locke Among the Radicals: Liberty and Property
in the Nineteenth Century

Daniel Layman

Oxford University Press, 2020 (270 pages)

John Locke believed that individuals had a right to claim property, but that there was also a common right for property to be shared among people. The four major figures in this book, Thomas Hodgskin, John Bray, Lysander Spooner, and Henry George, generally agreed with Locke's natural rights' view of property but found in it a contradiction that showed itself in the unequal distribution of property and power in the capitalistic nineteenth century. As a result, each of the four developed their own radical interpretations of the relationship between labor, property, rights, and liberty. A welcome contribution to the history of Anglo-American political thought and to the history of liberalism, in all its varieties.

F. W. Maitland and the Making of the Modern World

Alan MacFarlane

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018 (xiv + 162 pages).

Originally a section of MacFarlane's *The Making of the Modern World: Visions from the West and East* (Palgrave, 2002), this engaging and useful little book will be of interest to legal historians, legal theorists, political theorists, and historians of liberalism. Maitland was primarily a legal historian, and indeed has been called the founder of legal history. In his work, he is concerned with explaining the breakdown of hierarchy, the tendency toward equality, and the rise of the individual above the collective that defined modern liberty. Maitland traced the theme of liberty in English history, with particular focus on

Other Books of Interest

the development of the common law. MacFarlane explains Maitland's thought and his methods, and puts these ideas in historical context.

Bavinck: A Critical Biography

James Eglinton

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020 (480 pages)

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) was a Dutch neo-Calvinist theologian and contemporary of Abraham Kuypers. A recent resurgence of interest in Bavinck has been marked by new translations and publications of his works. With this publication, Eglinton provides a new hermeneutic for reading Bavinck that recognizes the unity of his orthodox and modern views. This thoroughly researched book, drawing on sources in multiple languages, should interest scholars concerned with religion in the modern age, the overlap between religion and culture, and the history of Calvinism. Ministers and theology students can learn from the examples of how Bavinck answered cultural problems, many of which remain relevant today.

Neoliberal Social Justice: Rawls Unveiled

Nick Cowen

United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021 (256 pages)

Social justice is everywhere these days, so why not make it part of neoliberal capitalism as well? This is precisely what Nick Cowen, a senior lecturer at the University of Lincoln, sets out to do in this new book. There is a twist, however, as Cowen argues that neoliberalism (specifically markets and constitutions) already produces results more favorable to social justice ideals than does socialism. Cowen defends Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, uses it to judge social institutions, and concludes that neoliberalism in practice is compatible with Rawlsian goals of equality and justice.

The Ethical Formation of Economists

Wilfried Dolfsma and Ioana Negru

Routledge, 2019 (190 pages)

The editors of this collection of essays believe economics is value-laden, and they hope to collapse the normative and positive divide in the field, while calling for economists to work within the three moral frameworks: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. But how can economists be better aware of the ethical dimension of their discipline? The book appears to be aimed primarily at economists who want to increase their awareness of the ethical issues in economic forecasting and translating their narrow research into public policy. The contributors include established professors of economics and philosophy in Europe and the United States.

Contributors

Gregory M. Collins (PhD, The Catholic University of America) is postdoctoral associate and lecturer in the program on ethics, politics, and economics at Yale University. He is the 2020 recipient of the Novak Award.

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Paul Oslington (PhD, University of Sydney; DTheol, University of Divinity, Melbourne) is professor of economics and theology at Alphacrucis College, Sydney, Australia. In addition, he is an honorary professor at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra, and an honorary professor in the newly formed Centre for the History of the Social Sciences at University of Western Australia. He edited *The Oxford Handbook of Economics and Christianity* 2014, and his most recent book is *Political Economy as Natural Theology: Smith, Malthus and Their Followers* (Routledge 2018). Currently, he is working on a history of economic thinking in the Christian tradition commissioned by Harvard University Press.

Pavel Procházka (PhD; ThD), born in 1951, received his master's degree in theology from the Comenius Evangelical Theological Faculty in Prague (1971–1976). He completed his postgraduate studies at the Ecumenical Institute Chateau de Bossey in Switzerland (1980–1981) and his doctoral studies at the Hussite Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague (1994–1999). He became professor at the Faculty of Education of the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica in 2010 after a successful inauguration procedure at the Faculty of Arts in Nitra. He has been working as a university teacher

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Editorial Objectives

The mission of the journal is to provide a forum for the intellectual exploration of the relationship between economics and morality from both social science and theological perspectives. An important objective then is to bring practitioners in a variety of related fields— theology, philosophy, economics, business, sociology, and history, among others—into discussion across customary disciplinary boundaries. The journal maintains a special focus on the insights drawn from Christian social thought, the natural law tradition, and free-market economics. These means serve the overarching objective of seeking to discover and explicate the truth about the human person and the person's relation to God, society, and the created world.

Editorial Scope

The editor welcomes articles written by professional scholars in economics, theology, philosophy, and related fields. Younger scholars and those in the process of completing doctorates are also encouraged to submit manuscripts for publication. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the journal, the editorial staff requests that articles with a strongly quantitative aspect be submitted to other more suitable publications. Figures, charts, and diagrams should be kept to a minimum.

Review Process

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The manuscript should be submitted with double-line spacing and have standard one-inch margins around the perimeter of the document. The author's credentials (i.e., autobiographical data) must be uploaded as a separate, supplementary file and the author should not be identified anywhere in the article. There is no need to submit print copies of the manuscript.

Articles should be between 3,000 and 6,000 words in length (not including references) and should include a title of not more than 12 words. Charts, graphs, and figures should be kept to a minimum. Authors must supply an abstract between 100–150 words. Book reviews should be between 750–1,000 words and will not be accepted if fewer than 500 or more than 1,500 words. All reviews must supply the following information: author, title, publisher, year of publication, and number of pages. A brief autobiographical note should accompany any submission and include full name, title, affiliation, mailing address, e-mail address, and full international contact information uploaded as a separate, supplementary file. Headings must be short, clearly defined, and unnumbered. Endnotes should be used and must be in accord with Chicago Manual of Style standards.

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