§1. What is left libertarianism?

T1 ‘You may acquire previously unowned worldly resources if and only if you leave enough so that everyone else can acquire an equally advantageous share of unowned worldly resources.’

(Michael Otsuka, *Libertarianism Without Inequality*, p.24)

T2 ‘Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men… yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself… The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his…’


T3 ‘Left libertarianism holds that there is a very significant difference in the moral status of agents… and natural resources… About the former they maintain that full self-ownership is the most appropriate reflection of the status… and about the latter they independently maintain that egalitarian ownership is the most defensible stance.’

(Peter Vallentyne et al, *Why Left-Libertarianism Is Not Incoherent, Indeterminate, or Irrelevant*, p.209)

What does it mean for things other than ourselves to be owned in an egalitarian fashion…?

§2. Equal portions

T4 ‘…our equal original property rights entitle us to equal bundles of things… We are each entitled to an equal share of (at least) raw natural resources.’

(Hillel Steiner, *An Essay on Rights*, p.236)

Suppose that there are $n$ persons in the world…

Then each person starts off with private property rights over a $1/n$th portion of the total raw natural resources in the world…
The idea is that the world’s raw natural resources should be divided up into \( n \) equally valuable portions…

But how do we decide that a particular pair of bundles is equally valuable…?

What does the world mean…?

Which persons count…?

P1 If Steiner’s theory of justice is true then the talented can to turn the untalented into their wage labourers without introducing any injustice.

P2 The talented cannot turn the untalented into their wage labourers without introducing any injustice.

C Steiner’s theory of justice is false.

T5 ‘The starting gate theory holds that justice requires equal initial resources… But it also holds that justice requires laissez-faire thereafter, presumably, with some version of the Locke an theory [of labour-mixture]… But these two principles cannot live comfortably together.’

(= Ronald Dworkin, Equality of Resources, p.309)

T6 ‘Equality can have no greater force in justifying initial equal holdings… than later in justifying redistributions when wealth becomes unequal because people’s talents are different…. The same point may be put the other way around… The theory of Lockean acquisition… can have no less force in governing the initial distribution than it has in justifying title through talent and effort later…’

(= Ronald Dworkin, Equality of Resources, p.309)

The incoherence objection…

P1 If justice requires an equal distribution of resources at first, it also requires an equal distribution of resources at every subsequent point in time.

P2 If justice requires laissez-faire at every subsequent point in time, it also requires laissez-faire at first.

P3 There can be no point in time at which justice requires both laissez-faire and an equal distribution of resources.

C Justice cannot require an equal distribution of resources at first, and laissez faire at every subsequent moment in time.

Why does justice not permit that resources are at first distributed according to beauty…? Because this is a morally irrelevant factor… But it is still a morally irrelevant factor at every subsequent time…!
§3. Joint ownership

Joint ownership is ownership not by a particular person, but by a group of people, who make decisions about the use and management of their property collectively…

How exactly are decisions about the use of the owned thing made…?

T7 ‘What is the point of owning myself if I can do nothing without the agreement of others? Does not joint world ownership entitle a person to prohibit another’s wholly harmless use of an external resource… and is it not, therefore, inconsistent with the most minimal effective self-ownership (and independently indefensible to boot)?


T8 ‘Self-ownership is not eliminated, but it is rendered useless, rather as it is useless to own a corkscrew when you are forbidden access to bottles of wine.’

(Jerry Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, p.98)

P1 If the world’s raw natural resources are jointly owned by everybody, then I have a moral right to take a gulp of the water from the stream only if everybody else agrees.

P2 I have a moral right to take a gulp of water from the stream regardless of whether everybody else agrees.

C The world’s raw natural resources are not jointly owned by everybody.

The egalitarian argument against self-ownership…

P1 If we are full self-owners, then justice permits huge inequalities.

P2 Justice doesn’t permit huge inequalities.

C Justice doesn’t require that we are full self-owners.

Left-libertarians want to resist P1…

P1 The world is either owned in some egalitarian fashion or it isn’t.

P2 If we are full self-owners and the world isn’t owned in some egalitarian fashion, then justice permits huge inequalities.

P3 If we are full self-owners but the world is owned in some egalitarian fashion, then justice severely restricts personal liberty.

C1 If we are full self-owners then either justice permits huge inequalities or it severely restricts personal liberty.

P3 Justice doesn’t permit huge inequalities.

P4 Justice doesn’t severely restrict personal liberty.

C2 We are not full self-owners.
We could protect liberty by collectively deciding to carve up the world’s raw natural resources into \( n \) equally valuable bundles and then give one to each person as his or her private property…

§4. Common ownership

Perhaps the use rights and income rights over the world’s raw natural resources belong to people individually… But the control rights and transfer rights belong to people jointly…

Since members of the community do not have control rights or transfer rights over the property, there is no incentive for them to invest in this property to make it more efficient in terms of yielding income…

There is also an incentive for members of the community to over-use the property.

Perhaps members of the community should have a right unilaterally to transfer ownership of part of the world’s natural resources to themselves as long as they compensate everybody else…

References