Libertarian: Thick or Thin?
Guest: Gary Chartier
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WOODS: I wanted to have you come on here and talk not about a book of yours, which we've done in the past, but about some controversy that seems to be gathering steam in libertarian circles. It's controversy that I think is not that interesting to the general public but is intensely interesting to us, and it's a kind of controversy on which you and I might be on opposite sides, so I thought it might be interesting for people to hear us hash it out in what will be more of a conversation that a strict interview format. There are two issues that I want to raise, and I don't know if we're going to get to both of them. They're issues that I think are sometimes conflated with one another, but they are distinct. One is this debate over thick versus thin libertarianism, and the second is the idea of left-libertarianism as a distinct body of libertarian thought and theory. So which one of these do you think we should start with first?

CHARTIER: It seems like a lot of the current conversation has focused on the broad question of thick versus thin libertarianism, Tom, so maybe we might start there.

WOODS: Yeah, let's start there. Now, let me tell you my understanding of this debate, and then you clarify anything where I am wrong. My understanding of it is as follows: that somebody who describes himself as a thin libertarian would be somebody who says, I believe in the non-aggression principle, I am opposed to the initiation of physical force, and that's it. I have other views in my life, but they don't bear on my libertarianism. I am against the initiation of physical force whether it's by somebody I like or somebody I dislike, whether it's on behalf of a cause I approve of or one I don't approve of.

A thick libertarian, by and large, would say, I agree with that. I agree with the non-aggression principle. But in order for libertarianism to be fully coherent, in order for it to really be what it claims to be, which is a philosophy for freedom, it can't confine itself to that. For it to be coherent, it needs to be filled up with a few other commitments to other kinds of ideas that also involve human freedom, even if they don't directly involve the use of coercion. Now is that a fair assessment of what's going on here?

CHARTIER: Well, I think that's basically right, Tom. If we think about the way in which, let's say, Charles Johnson—and you know, the canonical essay on this topic "Libertarianism Through Thick and Thin" tries to lay the matter out. Charles, it seems to me, wants to say: if we start out with the idea of principled non-aggression, then we can see that some other ideas and some other commitments turn out to be connected with that idea in a variety of ways. We can talk in more detail about some of the options, but of course, some ideas are just directly entailed by that. Some follow from the underlying commitments that lead us to embrace principled non-aggression, and then others might have more pragmatic or strategic links with the idea of non-aggression, but for Charles at any rate, and I think he represents for a lot of people a pretty standard expression of the idea, the notion that from principled non-aggression we can build connections with some other ideas not in conflict with that, but in ways that are supportive and expressive of it.

WOODS: Now, do you think a typical representative of that position would be inclined to think that somebody who doesn't hold that view is not a full libertarian, isn't really a libertarian, or would a thick libertarian say, no, that person is a libertarian, but we're saying that if you fully understand the implications

of what you believe, then you would be more likely to be a thick libertarian, you would be maybe more persuaded that there is the need for more than just the non-aggression principle. In other words, am I disqualified from libertarianism in the eyes of most people who are thick libertarians if I am not one? Because I think of myself as being not one.

CHARTIER: Yeah, I don't know anybody who embraces thickism who is interested in reading other people out of the movement. So no, absolutely, I think your second option comes much closer to what I think everybody who talks in those terms I can think of wants.

WOODS: Okay, well, if that's the case, then that's fine. Although, Sheldon Richman said not too long ago, and you're not obligated to defend other people's statements, and I love Sheldon, and I have had him on the program, but he said that although it's conceivable that he could imagine that somebody, let's say, who's a racist could be a libertarian, he finds it in practice very hard to imagine that that could be the case. Yet you look at most of the key people who are central in formulating libertarian thought – Ludwig von Mises, Ayn Rand, I could come up with others –and we look at their views on sexual orientation or race might be viewed as throwbacks to earlier times, and yet they clearly were libertarians in their outlook. So I haven't empirically refuted Sheldon's claim?

CHARTIER: Well, I certainly would agree with you, Tom, that those people qualify pretty paradigmatically as libertarians, and I can't speak for certain for Sheldon, but I am fairly confident that that's a point on which he would unequivocally agree. It seems to me that we can certainly come up with examples and maybe very good examples of people who don't make the connections that particular proponents of the thickest view might think they ought to. All I want to claim, at any rate, is that really thinking through the connections among ideas ought to lead one in a certain direction. I have zero interest in maintaining that everybody can be expected to have thought through issues in just the same way, much less the claim that somebody who hasn't thought through those issues in what I would take to be the right way somehow ought to be read out of the movement.

WOODS: All right, so let's get into some specifics, then. What would be some ideas that somebody who would call himself a thick libertarian would think ought to supplement the non-aggression principle to yield you maybe a more robust overall philosophy?

CHARTIER: Sure, okay, so here's an example. One kind of thickness that Charles distinguishes in that foundational essay is strategic thickness. Here the idea is that if we're going to effectively pursue the promotion of political liberty, there are going to be cultural concerns that we'll have, simply because promoting those cultural concerns will make the goal of bringing about political liberty more achievable. One example that I recall he offers is that it is perfectly conceivable, in an abstract way, that a libertarian society might include a lot of people who are very deferential to authority and don't want to think for themselves, and as long as that pattern of behavior is maintained non-violently, we'd all agree that that's perfectly compatible with principled non-aggression. However, I think the argument would be that if we're going to maintain a free society over time, a general habit of deference to authority and people who aren't inclined to think critically about claims made by authority figures, that might over time make it difficult for that society to maintain liberty as a principled political value and might make it easier for authoritarian institutions and patterns of behavior to return. So is that a case where it's a requirement that we promote critical thinking and skepticism about certain kinds of social authority? No, it's not, but the argument would be that there's real strategic value to promoting those values because a society where those values are embraced will be more robust in [inaudible 0:11:46.4].

WOODS: Well, I agree with that completely. I mean, I spend all my time practically trying to get people out of the conventional modes of thought that they've fallen into, people who think the entire range of opinion is bookended by Fox News and MSNBC. You're right: if that's the pattern of thought they're in, then it's going to be very difficult to make any progress. So I wonder to what extent this is a semantic issue, then, because I agree with everything you just said. I wouldn't bind it up in libertarianism and say, well, I've got *libertarianism plus*, because I have also got these other concerns. I mean, I don't know, maybe we're just dealing with semantics.

But on the other hand, maybe not, because I think there would be some thick libertarians who would say that we have to fight against let's say, patriarchy, or we need to fight against hierarchies in society that it's true are not directly enforced by violence but are enforced through, let's say, force of habit.

CHARTIER: Sure. There might well be people who would say that, and on the other hand, it's important to point out there would be other folks, it seems to me, who would embrace what I would regard as a thick libertarian position who would say that embracing certain kinds of social hierarchies is precisely necessary to maintain the moral foundation of a society that would be liberty-friendly. So I just want to really emphasize, as you said earlier, that being a thick libertarian doesn't at all entail particular commitments. I mean, that requires further argumentation. You can imagine people who are social liberals who think that their social liberalism is linked with their libertarianism, and also folks who are conservatives who think the same thing. Also, as Charles notes, Objectivists might have certain kinds of fairly robust social preferences that they'd regard as particularly connected to libertarianism. So I think the point is it's just really crucial to emphasize that what we're talking about here is a structural picture of the relationship between ideas and kinds of practice, not a particular substantive set of commitments.

WOODS: Okay, well, that also is something that I guess I didn't realize. Let me propose this idea. Let's say we've got, as you say, let's say we've got some social liberals and some social conservatives. I can think of, as I am sure you can too, reasons that each of them could find our preferred social system—I hate to use the word system, because it's not really a system; it's just leave everybody alone—but I can think of good reasons for both of them to favor this outcome. And I think, by the way, that's why you saw the conservatively dressed businessman and the pot-smoking hippie at the Ron Paul rally together, because they could both see reasons for this. So I can imagine a social liberal saying, I want a society in which I am free to express myself and in which there are no legal constraints on that. I can imagine a social conservative saying, I would like a society in which I can live in a neighborhood of like-minded people and in which the economy is productive enough that I can afford to have my wife at home educating the kids in a home school. Now, I have no objection if people want to live either of those ways. That's their decision. And I am afraid that sometimes the way thick libertarianism is presented by some people, it's presented to privilege the former of these possibilities as opposed to the latter, as to be unsympathetic to the social conservative—because, after all, he doesn't favor full self-expression. His wife is a slave in the household, even if she voluntarily accepts it; that would be the thinking. And so those people are disparaged. And I don't want to disparage those people. Because I can tell you, Gary, and I have got the emails to prove it: I've converted a lot of those people, and I don't want them to turn around me to me and say, well, I would love to embrace your philosophy, but everybody who's in it seems to hate the way we live.

CHARTIER: I can't speak for everyone. I can tell you that as a pretty enthusiastic critic of institutional schooling, I am all for the homeschoolers and the unschoolers, and I certainly don't want to send a message that my conception of libertarianism ought to be in any way alienating to them. But I do understand that a free society—I think we all agree about this—creates space for a pretty broad array, a pretty diverse array, of forms of life, forms of expression, and some of those are going to be more congenial, obviously, than others. And it's going to be the case that there will be ongoing disagreement about that, and obviously one reason I favor a free society is that the state, the legal system, the realm in which force is used, stops being the site where contests among those alternatives are carried out and instead they can be carried out through various sorts of means of peaceful persuasion. So I am not at all suggesting that a libertarian society ought to be monochromatic in the social forms that it fosters.

WOODS: Now what about this concern about authority? How would that extend to how a thick libertarian might think about religion? If I were to talk about left-libertarians, that would be one thing. They're an identifiable group with a set of beliefs. Thick libertarians could be thick libertarians for all different sorts of reasons, so I realize it's kind of a slippery designation, but I could imagine somebody saying that to have the frame of mind in which you are deferential to authority is a frame of mind that's going to be unfriendly to the spreading of our ideas—which really run counter to what a lot of traditional authority is going to tell you. So couldn't there be the possibility that some thick libertarians would say, in order to prepare the way for the libertarian society we also have to try to undermine the religious views of people, because that's the ultimate example of people irrationally deferring to authority. And if that is the message they're going to send, then again we've written off, I don't know, half the population?

CHARTIER: Yeah, I'm sure there are people who do think that. Okay? I don't doubt that there are people who believe that there really is an intimate connection between skepticism about religious belief and skepticism about political authority and obviously as you know, there is really a history in the anarchist movement of thinking and talking this way. Think about Bakunin's essay "God and the State," for instance, in the latter part of the nineteenth century. So there is certainly a history of thinking and talking that way. It's

not a way I would be inclined to think and talk, as you might guess. It's not an approach that I'm favorable to. I'm quite comfortable with affirming religious beliefs and religious community, but yeah, I do think there are people who would make the judgment, probably at least on better days on empirical grounds, that there was a connection between embracing religious beliefs and communities on the one hand and support for certain kinds of dodgy political authority on the other. I would just say I don't think that has to be the case and try to show why it was.

WOODS: You know, it may have something to do with where I come from. I think we like to portray ourselves sometimes as these disembodied spirits, unaffected by the circumstances of our lives, but I would be the last to describe myself that way. I grew up in a, I don't know, somewhat right-of-center household. My father was for Reagan, but he wasn't a free-market ideologue by any means, and we supported all the military stuff. So I have a lot to repudiate and do penance for, it's true. But still, having grown up that way, I got to know a lot of people who had those beliefs and had those commitments, and then when I changed on a lot of those things, I changed because I realized that things I believed in all the time were not compatible with other things I had been taught to believe, that I if I really did cherish certain things, then I can't support the wars. If I cherish family life, I can't support ripping husbands and wives away from each other for a year at a time. If I believe in absolute moral truths, then one of them is you can't bomb civilians. In other words, I came to realize that my own core was still basically okay—the base was okay, but the superstructure was wrong, if I may borrow those terms. So I could speak to people who had the same sort of base that I had and show them that their superstructure was all wrong. And I have been able to reach a lot of people in that way.

So I'm concerned that when I hear people in some libertarian circles, the way they speak, they speak as if these people can't ever be reached. Now forgive me: I'm sure there have been times when I've said there are people on the left who can't ever be reached. We're probably both guilty of implicitly writing off whole groups, but I have a particular sensitivity toward this because I belonged to that group. I wasn't churchgoing when I was younger, but I still belonged to that general cohort. I still belonged to that general group, and I'm very sensitive about language and approaches that assume that these people aren't sufficiently emancipated to belong to our libertarian society. Whereas, what I take to be your view is that the libertarian society is not going to be monochromatic. If we believe in freedom of thought, then we have to expect that different people are going to have different thoughts.

CHARTIER: I think that's certainly right. I think we can absolutely anticipate an enormous variety of ideas and patterns of life in any realistically conceivable free society.

WOODS: Now, Gary, what are other things other than a general encouragement of free inquiry—what are other things that the most common thick libertarian arguments would adduce as being if not absolutely indispensable, then certainly very helpful toward creating a culture of liberty?

CHARTIER: There are, of course, various sorts of relationships that the ideas, commitments, and practices we're thinking about here might bear to the central idea of principled non-aggression. So we might think, for instance, about what Charles calls thickness from grounds. So here the idea is that for somebody who embraces a particular rationale for libertarianism, it's going to follow that that rationale itself may have implications of one kind or another which that person in virtue of accepting the rationale is committed also to embracing.

WOODS: Okay.

CHARTIER: So let's think, for instance, as an example of just the sort of general situation I'm envisioning, Murray Rothbard's *Ethics of Liberty* devotes its first part to the development of a general natural law theory of ethics. Rothbard then goes on to say: I'm not interested in selling out the implications of this theory for personal morality; I'm simply talking about political morality here. But political morality he's understanding as an outgrowth of the particular account of natural law that he's defended in the early portion of the book. So one might well imagine that someone in Rothbard's position, taking that initial moral and political framework, would reach political conclusions but would also recognize that from the same framework certain other kinds of normative conclusions follow that seem to be fairly integrally connected to the political conclusions. So without attributing this view, certainly, to Rothbard, it seems as if going all the way back to Locke, a really crucial idea at the root of belief in a free society and belief in persons as self-owners, has been the idea of equality of authority, the idea that nobody exercises any natural right to rule with regard to anybody else.

WOODS: Okay.

CHARTIER: And the notion, then, that there's no political hierarchy written in stone. Consent is required if you're going to exercise authority over me in a political context. So somebody might think, it seems to me—I would be inclined to think this way—that the underlying logic of belief in equality of authority is going to connect that belief in equality of authority with belief in moral equality more generally. Now, by that, of course, I don't mean that everybody's moral views or moral practices are equally good, just that everybody is morally equal in something like the way that the Golden Rule presupposes, that I treat others as on the same moral plane as myself. Now, somebody might well be able to articulate and defend an understanding of equality of authority that didn't involve that view, but it seems at any rate like there's a fairly natural fit there.

If you've got that view, then I think that's going to have implications for how you think about human interaction more broadly. It certainly isn't going to justify the use of force to impose some kind of standard of equal treatment, but it might well be the case, for instance, that it would turn out to be unreasonable for me to, let's say, subordinate or exclude somebody else on the basis of that person's race or ethnicity if I myself would be unwilling to be treated in that way. I am acting unreasonably. I am not respecting that basic moral equivalence if I then treat somebody else that way. So I think accepting the idea of equality of authority doesn't require me to go on to accept that underlying moral equality, but I think there's a natural fit there, and I want to argue that the basic kinds of fairness that finds expression, for instance, in the Golden Rule is a pretty natural development of that underlying idea of the moral equality of persons.

WOODS: You know, Gary, I've already kept you a little long; I'm sorry. I hope I can ask you a couple of more things here, because this is really good stuff.

CHARTIER: Sure.

WOODS: I guess one concern I would have would be—I mean, I have no objection to what you just said, but suppose I just have a general egalitarian commitment across the board and that egalitarian commitment means that I would like to see a society in which people are as equal as possible in material conditions. But on the other hand, I don't favor the use of physical force. Now, let's say that we get to a society where the initiation of physical force is minimized and yet I still find that there's a residue of inequality that makes me uncomfortable. My concern would be: would a thick libertarian be more committed to libertarianism or to egalitarianism when push came to shove? My concern is that I think this is where modern liberalism comes from. I think it comes from the complaint that the classical liberals were too stingy. They thought that all we need to do to bring about equality and justice for the working man was to abolish state privilege, but as we shrank the state and we still saw inequality in society, that goes to show how blinkered they were. So therefore, if we really want full freedom for the person to express himself and flourish, we need positive action by the state. I am afraid that there's going to be a bleeding of one school of thought into another, and we'll have the transformation of classical liberalism into modern liberalism all over again.

CHARTIER: I think that's a very reasonable and live concern, Tom. I think certainly the values that people have matter for how they think about things. I can only report that the libertarians I know for whom this basic idea of moral equality of persons matters, are not people who are in any sort of fanatical way committed at the economic level to an interpretation of egalitarianism, and I think in any event, those of us who take this view are not at all insensitive to the risks that might involve in talking about the importance of equality without emphasizing that we're doing so in the context of our support for a freer society. So I don't want to dismiss your concern at all; I would just say I'm not sure that when I think about the people who are seriously pursuing this kind of agenda, that they're insensitive to these kinds of concerns you've articulated.

WOODS: All right, one last thing before I let you go, Gary. Getting back to Charles Johnson's libertarianism with grounds: I know there are people who, for instance, are Aristotelian liberals who have put a liberal spin on Aristotle. I'm very interested in that, by the way. In my work for the Ron Paul homeschool program at RonPaulHomeschool.com, in my Western Civ course, when I get to Aristotle, I actually spend some time talking about Fred Miller, and Roderick Long, and Doug Rasmussen, and Doug Den Uyl. I talk about all that because I think that's a really exciting development. But what I want to know is, if somebody is coming at this from that perspective, somebody becomes a libertarian through an Aristotelian lens, as long as they reach non-aggression as the general principle, then why does it matter where they came from? What are the actual specific implications of coming at this from an Aristotelian worldview that would be different—in other words, if the conclusion is non-aggression, then who cares if I came about it at random and you came about it

through Aristotle and somebody came about it through another way? That's an interesting topic of discussion over coffee, but why is it so interesting that I would have to call myself a thick libertarian, a different kind of libertarian, based on the fact that I come at it from a particular philosophical origin?

CHARTIER: Well, I'm not sure how much it matters that I attach a label to myself, but I presume the point would be that for somebody who really did embrace a given theoretical framework, let's say that Aristotelian framework, which certainly strikes me as attractive, or another one, if that person then judges that the framework that has enabled her to embrace libertarian ideas also has these other implications, it seems to me that it's going to be not just a sort of interesting coincidence that she embraces the ideas that flow from that underlying framework. Rather the embrace of those ideas is going to be fairly directly connected with her libertarianism. It's not an arbitrary random connection, so there might be some reason for her to see those as part of a broader constellation of the views of which her libertarianism forms a part rather than seeing them as held at arm's length. I guess that's all I'd want to say.

WOODS: Gary, how can I direct people to find out more about you and your work online? I know you have a blog.

CHARTIER: So one can find some things about me at my website, which is GaryChartier.net. One can also find information about some of the conversation we've been having now at some other places, including C4SS.org, and also at Charles Johnson's website, radgeek.com and also at all-left.net, if one is interested in particularly the libertarian left perspective. I'm sure there are others.

WOODS: Well, you know, Gary, I felt like we only skimmed the surface of anything having to do with left-libertarianism per se. We didn't really get to that as a general topic of conversation. So let's do that at some point, but in the meantime, between now and then let's get you on and talk about your book *Anarchy and the Law*. That sounds very interesting.

CHARTIER: Love it.

WOODS: Okay, thanks again, Gary, appreciate your doing it.

CHARTIER: Have a great day, Tom.