



Episode 1,200: Walter Block on His Life With Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard

Guest: Walter Block

WOODS: Somebody in my private group – I opened up a thread about questions to ask you, and I did this with the Judge earlier this week. I have a private Facebook group. SupportingListeners.com is how you get in it. And somebody asked what I thought is a really good question, which is that you are always having your brain picked wherever you go. I want to know about the monkey man on my back or the space alien or how do we homestead in space – like whatever, all these marginal questions. People can also ask you basic questions, like the minimum wage or Hayekian triangles or whatever. But you almost never get asked about Walter Block, the man. We don't know anything about you. Like I don't know what you like to do in your spare time. Do you have spare time? Do you write all day long? Do you have hobbies? Do you go to the movies? Do you exercise? What can you tell us about you, Walter Block?

BLOCK: Well, yes, I have hobbies. I'm an average athlete, but I'm an avid athlete. I was on the track team with Bernie Sanders when we went to high school together. I was a mediocre runner; he was one of the best runners in the city. I used to play handball, and I am an A handball player because I won a B tournament after a long struggle. I used to play volleyball, but I have this physical debility: I can't get my elbows together, and you need your elbows together if you're going to be a good volleyball player. And I was good at rolling on the floor to get the ball and spiking and setting, but I just couldn't bump or pass the ball, and that's very important.

So I gave that up, and then I took up handball, as I mentioned, and now what I do is competitive race walking. I have two fake hips and one fake knee, and when you run, you put five times your bodyweight on the floor every time you step, whereas when you walk, if you do it right, you put only 125, 130% of your bodyweight on the floor, so it's much more gentle. But it's very, very competitive, and I've done any number of races from a half mile to a half marathon, which is 13 miles. One of these days I'm going to do a full marathon, although it's tough at my age, 76. So I do a lot of competitive racing.

Also I do competitive master swimming. At one time, I think I had the record for the butterfly in 200 in Louisiana, because no one else does the 200 butterfly at my age [laughing], and it's always age group. But it was a pathetic time, something like eight minutes, which is just horrible. So I do a lot of athletic stuff. My typical week, I do two races on Saturday and Sunday, and then Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I swim for about an hour. So that's sort of my athletic background.

WOODS: Do you wake up early in the morning?

BLOCK: Yeah, well, if I teach at 9:30, I have to wake up at 8. I ordinarily get up at 8. I'm not like a Rothbardian here [laughing].

WOODS: Okay, yeah, yeah, but you're also not one of these crazy 5:30 a.m. people either.

BLOCK: No, no. Look, when I become emperor of the universe, no one will be allowed to get up until about 7:30 [laughing].

WOODS: Yeah, there you go. One of my favorite lines ever from *The Simpsons* was that Bart was being punished and one of the punishments was he had to get up early in the morning with his principal and look through the telescope. And he was told he had to get up at 4:30 in the morning. And he looked puzzled and he said, "There's a 4:30 in the morning now?"

BLOCK: [laughing] Well, Murray Rothbard used to stay up until 4:30 or 5 in the morning —

WOODS: Yeah, that guy's crazy.

BLOCK: And when I was in his ambit, I sort of followed along. And you know, Murray would go to sleep at 4, 5, 6 in the morning and get up at 2 in the afternoon and work pretty much all day. I don't think Murray was much of an athlete [laughing].

WOODS: No, probably not, but he had an interest in so many things —

BLOCK: Oh, yeah.

WOODS: — like whether it was chess or —

BLOCK: Jazz music.

WOODS: Yeah, or all kinds of things. Even soap operas —

BLOCK: Oh, yeah.

WOODS: He just knew everything about everything.

BLOCK: Oh, I have to correct you. Not even soap operas. Soap operas, he was a real aficionado of that.

WOODS: Yeah, I don't know how he — of course, it's the great mystery of Rothbard. It will never be solved.

BLOCK: Well, the solution is there were five Rothbards.

WOODS: What other solution could there be? I just wish the other four were still running around, because we sure could use them.

BLOCK: You know, one of the problems I have with the Mises Institute is on the second floor, they have this cardboard cutout of Murray —

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: — about the right height and with that little hat. And every once in a while, I'll look at it and before my brain kicks in, sort of my subconscious says, "Murray! Murray! He's there!"

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah. You've told the story a bunch of times, but I still would like to hear it — maybe I can draw more details of it — about your own conversion to libertarianism. And "conversion" is so weird. It sounds like a religious term. But it is a conversion. It's a change in the way you think and the way you look at the world, so it's an appropriate word. But you more or less started off — would you describe yourself as a social democrat? Not a Marxist, right? Were you?

BLOCK: Well, sort of a Bernie Sandersite.

WOODS: Okay, something like that, so kind of a social democrat.

BLOCK: Social democrat, social justice warrior, although in those days they didn't call it that. You know, pinko, commie, whatever.

WOODS: I think that's kind of almost a default position for people, because it just seems on the surface of it, superficially, to be the right thing. You just want to help people.

BLOCK: Yeah, yeah, you want to help people, and capitalism is evil because it exploits people, and the rest is deducible from that.

WOODS: So was it really your encounter with Ayn Rand that it just turned a light on for you? How'd that happen? Could that really be?

BLOCK: Well, it was a little process. She came to Brooklyn College to speak, and I came to boo and hiss her, because obviously she was evil because she favored free enterprise, and we all know that economic freedom leads to poverty. And I'm against poverty. I want people to be prosperous. So I booed and hissed her, along with 3,000 other students.

And at the end of the lecture, they said the Ayn Rand study club that had invited her to speak was having a luncheon in her honor and anyone could come, even if you disagreed. And I wanted to convert her to social justice, whatever. And there was this long, long table, maybe 50 people on each side, and Ayn Rand was sitting at the head; Nathaniel Branden was on one side; Leonard Peikoff, Greenspan, the senior collective of that group. And I was relegated to the other end of the table where there was a seat. And I turned to my neighbor and said, "Hey, this capitalism is evil; socialism is the way to go." And he said, "Well, the people that really know about it are at the other end of the table."

So I was a chutzpanik then, pushy, and I stuck my head between Ayn's and Nathan's and I said, "There's a socialist here who wants to debate someone on socialism and capitalism." And they said, "Who is it?" And I said, "Me." I was maybe 20 years old. I was a junior or senior in college, and I don't know, Branden maybe 35, Rand 60 or so. And Branden was very nice, very gentle, very sweet. He said, "Look, you can't sit here. There's no room, but I will come to the other end of the table and talk to you on two conditions. One, you don't let this conversation lapse. You continue until we settle it. And two, you read two books that I'll suggest."

And one book was *Atlas Shrugged*, and the other book was *Economics in One Lesson* by Henry Hazlitt. I read the books. I came to his house. I came to Ayn's house. I was part of that little group, and after four or five sessions, I was — I was never a Randian in the Randoid sense, because they have views on everything: epistemology and metaphysics. It just didn't interest me.

WOODS: Yeah, just the capitalism stuff.

BLOCK: But the free market, I was a Hazlittian on *Economics in One Lesson* and sort of part of the gang. The problem was that it was a cult. I would go to the NBI lectures, and when you asked Ayn Rand —

WOODS: Nathaniel Branden Institute.

BLOCK: Nathaniel Branden Institute seminars, lecture series. And when you asked Ayn Rand a question like: well, on page 432 of *Atlas Shrugged*, you said this. Could you please elaborate, or where'd you get it from, or, you know, a softball question, she was very polite and she would answer. But if you said: on page 432, you said this, and on page 703, you said that, and I see a contradiction between them, do you know what she would say? "Get out." You're off the mailing list. I want to have nothing to do — I mean, this is just horrible. So I had this sort of approach-avoidance schizophrenic reaction. On the one hand, these are the only free-enterprise people I knew, so I would go there for a week or two and then get disgusted and leave for four or five months and then come back because I didn't know anyone else.

The next stage in my development is Larry Moss was a fellow student of mine at Columbia, taking PhD in economics, and he kept saying, "You've got to meet his guy Murray Rothbard. He's an anarchist." I said, "Anarchist? I don't want to meet Murray Rothbard; he's an anarchist. Anarchy is crazy." I was a Randish person then. And then he and his roommate, Jerry Wolloz, ganged up on me one day on the sidewalk outside of Columbia and said, "You must meet Murray." So I met Murray, finally —

WOODS: So remind me when this would have been?

BLOCK: Oh, '65, '66.

WOODS: Okay, so Murray's not quite — so he's approaching 40 at that point. Born in '26, so —

BLOCK: Yeah, give or take, and I was maybe 25. He was 15 years older than me, so call me 25, call him 40, roughly. And in about ten minutes, he converted me to anarchism. And it took a lot longer for him to convert me to Austrianism, because I was getting my PhD under Gary Becker, and I had a certain allegiance to that. I was in —

WOODS: A Chicago economist, yeah.

BLOCK: Yeah, Gary Becker, a Chicago economist. Later he left Columbia and went to Chicago, and I kept saying there wasn't room for the two of us at Columbia, so he had to leave [laughing].

WOODS: [laughing] He had to leave, of course.

BLOCK: So it took a while for me to get into the Austrian stuff.

WOODS: Did you ever write anything in criticism of Gary Becker?

BLOCK: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

WOODS: Why did I even ask?

BLOCK: [laughing]

WOODS: I didn't mean to interrupt. Go ahead and continue your story.

BLOCK: Okay. No, I've criticized Gary Becker, and I tried to convert him to Austrianism as I was getting into it, because what would happen was I was doing my PhD on rent control with Gary, and most of the times, the regression, the independent variables had the right sign and was statistically significant: namely, rent control ruins housing. But every once in a while, I'd get the wrong sign, and then very rarely the wrong sign would be statistically significant. Now, if Gary Becker were really a Chicagoite —

WOODS: Empiricist.

BLOCK: An empiricist — he would have said, "My God, I've got this young student Block who's going to overturn everything we knew about rent control."

WOODS: But instead, he just threw out those results, right?

BLOCK: Instead, he said, "Block, you" — he didn't say, "Block, you moron, go out and do it again until you get it right," because he was too polite. He was a nice guy. But he said, you know, do it again until you get it right.

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: So he knew what the right answer was, that the Austrian point is there's nothing — in my view, there's nothing wrong with statistics; it's the interpretation. Yes, sometimes statistics can illustrate praxiological insights, and sometimes they can't. And they're useful sometimes. And also, if you want to know the elasticity of the demand curve for bananas, on which we praxiologists have no view, then statistics —

WOODS: You'd have to look at it, right.

BLOCK: — are the only way to do it. But the key is: which is the dog and which is the tail? And I was trying to convert him to Austrianism, because he was telling me, you know, forget about your crappy econometrics; you know what the right answer is based on supply and demand and based on ordinary kinds of considerations that Austrians would agree with Chicagoans on, only we're logically consistent. They aren't.

WOODS: By the way, we are inside a giant parentheses right now, because we still are going to get back to you meeting Rothbard. But I'm going to stay in these parentheses. This is a huge parentheses. Any editor would be striking these out, saying, "Put this in a footnote." But

to heck with it. This is an interesting footnote. I'm interested in Gary Becker, because he tried to do what he thought was an economic analysis of crime. Is that what you criticized in your work on him?

BLOCK: No, I criticized his views on monopoly.

WOODS: Oh, okay, all right, because of your antitrust —

BLOCK: Antitrust.

WOODS: Okay.

BLOCK: No, he was a Milton Friedmanite. Milton was his teacher at Chicago when he got his PhD at Chicago. And you know, they support antitrust and they support antitrust based on this monopoly argument, that monopoly misallocates resources. And one of my articles was taking the Rothbardian — not the Misesian, but the Rothbardian view on monopoly, namely that the whole thing is a crock, and I criticized Gary on that ground.

WOODS: Is that the article where you criticize four economists? Is that that same one?

BLOCK: I really forget.

WOODS: Who even knows, right?

BLOCK: Right, because I've written so many articles [laughing]. I'd have to go and consult, because I've probably written ten articles on monopoly.

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: So I don't remember which one I did to whom and what, when, where, how, why [laughing].

WOODS: No, exactly. I just remember there's one that has four last names in the title of the article.

BLOCK: Only David Gordon would know that [laughing].

WOODS: Yeah, exactly. Why don't we go talk to David? All right, so let's get back to now — that's the longest tangent I think I've ever gone on. So now we get back, so you meet Murray Rothbard in New York, and what happens?

BLOCK: Yes. He was sort of like the people that my parents warned me against. He smoked, he drank, he stayed up late [laughing]. You know, he was —

WOODS: Were you anti-Vietnam War at that time?

BLOCK: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

WOODS: Because a lot of people — I don't think — you know, Lew, I talked to him, and he said I'm not sure I can guarantee you that I was antiwar just yet at that point. He'd been a Goldwaterite and stuff. So it's not necessarily to be expected that because you're free-market you would also have been antiwar. I mean, Murray Sabrin I think was, but it's very rare. A lot of people, they were just pro-market and pro-war.

BLOCK: Yes, it's —

WOODS: So you were pro-market and antiwar by then.

BLOCK: Yes, yes. Not only was I pro-market and antiwar, but my very first article ever written was in *Libertarian Forum*, and what I did was I attacked Milton Friedman for favoring getting rid of the draft. Now, you think, what's going on here? I'm a libertarian. Am I in favor of the draft? No, I'm not in favor of the draft. But Milton Friedman gave two reasons for favoring getting rid of the draft and having a volunteer military. One was freedom, and I certainly agreed with that. The other is that it would make the U.S. military more efficient. But the U.S. was pursuing an unjust war, so did I really want the U.S. military to be more efficient?

WOODS: Right.

BLOCK: No. So I would favor getting rid of the draft despite the fact that it would make the U.S. military more efficient.

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: So that's one bit of evidence that I was antiwar. The other bit of evidence is that Murray at that time made an agreement with the Peace and Freedom Party, which was totally left.

WOODS: Oh, geez, I read about this, yeah.

BLOCK: And in the Peace and Freedom Party, the Progressive Labor, the Maoists were the big group — no, they were the small group. And the big group were the Trotskyites. And Murray and I — when I say Murray and I, it's sort of like the elephant with the mouse on top and they go across a bridge and they make the bridge sway and the mouse says, "We made the bridge sway."

WOODS: Or the whole thing about, "Wilt Chamberlain and I scored 102 points. He scored 100 and I scored 2."

BLOCK: That's the same sort of —

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: So Murray and I and Jerry Tuccille and Larry Moss and Jerry Wolloz and Walter Grinder and Leonard Liggio and Joe Peden and, oh, Ron Hamawy and four or five — you know, the Murray living room group.

WOODS: George Reisman? Was he part of that group?

BLOCK: No, no, no. George Reisman split with Murray —

WOODS: Earlier than that?

BLOCK: — earlier than that. Before I came on board. There was the Circle Bastiat.

WOODS: Yeah, he was part of that.

BLOCK: And he was part of that, along with Leonard Liggio and Ron Hamawy and Ralph Raico and people like that. But he — who's that redheaded guy that works at the Hoover Institution now? I forget his name.

WOODS: I don't know the redheaded guy.

BLOCK: He was also part of the Circle Bastiat, and he —

WOODS: Robert Hessen.

BLOCK: That's it, Robert Hessen. You've got a little David Gordon in you [laughing].

WOODS: [laughing] A tiny bit. It's like Wilt Chamberlain and me.

BLOCK: Yes, you and David Gordon can think of stuff. So our group of about 10, 12 people were allied with Progressive Labor, about 300 people, and the Trotskyites had maybe 700 people. And that was the Peace and Freedom Party. So the whole reason that Murray made an alliance with them is he wanted — I mean, we only had 10 or 12 people.

WOODS: Right, yeah, what are you going to do?

BLOCK: When I first met Murray, I asked him how many libertarians are there in the world? And he said 25.

WOODS: I've repeated that so many times since you said that, because that's astonishing.

BLOCK: So you know, how much can you do? I mean, Murray was writing. He was writing a ton of stuff, but you know, he wanted to do some activism too. And with 10 people or 12 people or whatever, he didn't have much choice except to ally with people. I mean, if Murray came out against the Vietnam War, it means nothing. But if the Peace and Freedom Party comes out against war, that means something, and Murray is part of that. So I remember one time, we had this deal with Progressive Labor. They came out in favor of the gold standard for us, and we came out in favor of rent control for them.

WOODS: [laughing]

BLOCK: So you know —

WOODS: Nobody ever criticizes Rothbard for that political strategy, right?

BLOCK: [laughing] So anyway, we're having the vote, and I'm saying, "Murray, I can't vote in favor of rent control." He says, "Shut up, shut up. Vote in favor of rent control."

WOODS: [laughing]

BLOCK: [laughing] And I said, "I'll do it, but I'm crossing my fingers." He said, "Okay." On the other hand, we got the Progressive Labor to vote for the gold standard, and the Progressive Labor people, they were rebelling against the elitists. "What's this gold standard? We're Progressive Labor. We don't favor the gold standard." Bu

WOODS: [laughing]

BLOCK: But to me, it was just silly. It was giddy. The idea of hanging around Murray Rothbard was just magnificent. I mean, Murray Rothbard doesn't walk on water. He floats on — I don't know. He's magnificent. I revere Murray Rothbard, at that day and today. And to be in his presence was just exhilarating. So I regard the whole thing, voting for rent control, just sort of as silly.

WOODS: Well, that whole story, by the way, can be read in what is kind of both a history and a memoir, his book *The Betrayal of the American Right*. He does talk about the details of some of his alliances with the left in the '60s. Because people have heard one or two sentences about that, but he really gives a lot of the detail of what it was all like. And then at the end, he has some regrets about it. He kind of feels the way you do, that this just didn't turn out the way I wanted it to and it really was probably a misdirection of effort. But I can understand why he did it. I actually ended up writing the introduction to that book when it finally came out, because that manuscript, as you know, had been kind of circulating but never saw the light of day. So I'll put that on the show notes page if people want to read that. You can probably read it for free online. TomWoods.com/1200 will be the show notes page for today.

So all right, but he convinced you to make the leap to anarchocapitalism?

BLOCK: Oh, within ten minutes. What he used was the Henry Hazlitt argument. I mean, I was good at Henry Hazlitt. Why should we privatize the post office? Well, because if they do a bad job, a private post office, they'll go broke and some other post office will come in. Why should we privatize this or that? For the same reason. He said, why can't we apply that to armies, courts, and police, which is the Ayn Rand thing for government?" And sort of like the lightbulb went on above my head, and I saw it. Whereas the Austrian economics really got me — what do you call it? What's it called when you have a sentence that is apodictically true and apply — synthetic a priori.

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: The synthetic a priori, really I couldn't get over that. The idea that there were sentences that were apodictically true, absolutely true, as true as two plus two is four, and I was trained as a logical positivist to say that if that's true, then it's just — what do you call it?

WOODS: Redundancy or — I know the —

BLOCK: Definition.

WOODS: Yeah, I know the word —

BLOCK: Tautology.

WOODS: Tautology, right.

BLOCK: Just tautology. But to say a synthetic a priori, it was absolutely true and yet it had something to do with the real world, I just couldn't get that across.

WOODS: Yeah, right, like all bachelors are unmarried. Well, that's just the definition question, so fine.

BLOCK: Right.

WOODS: But what Mises was saying, he thought that this was a synthetic a priori about the world and yet somehow abstracting from experience.

BLOCK: Yeah, I mean, Austrian economics is just really a bunch of synthetic a priories. Man acts. How are you going to deny that? Because your denial of it is an act. Minimum wage law leads to unemployment of people with productivity lower than the level stipulated by the minimum wage, other things equal. Well, that's absolutely true, and yet it gives us a vision of how the real world works.

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: And this was magical. And finally, I got that after a year or two of being with Murray and osmosis and reading *Man, Economy, and State*. I mean, I was reading *Man, Economy, and State*, and then I was going to Murray's house at night to play *Risk* —

WOODS: Yeah, I heard about this.

BLOCK: — and the whole idea was: what does he want to do with a little, insignificant twerp like me? And the only way I could justify my existence in his living room was to ask him tough questions. And he was such a sweetie pie. He dealt with me in such a gentle way. And I follow in my career as much as I can Murray. Murray insisted everyone call him Murray. I insist everyone call me Walter. Murray was a good mentor to everybody. I try to be a good mentor to students and people that are visiting the Mises Institute now. So in many ways, I fashion my life after him. And by the way, he and I resemble each other in many ways. We're both short, fat Jews. We both married Christian girls who were taller than us. We both got PhDs at Columbia. And I don't like to brag, but I think I'm the only person who coauthored anything with him. I did so when I was the associate editor of the *Review of Austrian Economics*. And also, one time when Murray couldn't make his class at the Brooklyn Polytech, he asked me to take over for his class, and I did. I substituted for him. I substituted for Murray Rothbard.

WOODS: That's amazing.

BLOCK: I'm the man [laughing].

WOODS: That's amazing.

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I'm not sure how many times I've told this or if I've told in on the podcast or not, but one thing that struck me, a small thing but yet very revealing about Rothbard, was one time — I got to meet him only a few times, but one of the times I asked him if he could recommend for me a book on the history of monetary policy, or the history of money in the U.S. from a pro-gold standard perspective. You know, was there a history — I mean, I know he had written *The Mystery of Banking*, but I wanted like a real history of monetary systems like the gold standard and the fiat and all that from a pro-gold standard perspective. And he said, "Well, there's actually a lot of good material on this in the minority report of the U.S. Gold Commission from 1983," because you remember, Ron Paul was on that commission.

BLOCK: Oh, yes.

WOODS: He was in the minority, but the minority report was a really excellent report. It was called "The Case for Gold," and the Mises Institute used to distribute it. And so I found a copy of that on one of the book tables, so I bought it, it was really great, and only years later did I find out that the material in there, the historical material had been written by Rothbard. I mean, it came out under the names of Lew Lehrman and Ron Paul, and they acknowledged Rothbard in the acknowledgements. But see, if that had been me, I think I would have said, "Actually, I wrote a bunch of stuff on that in the minority report of the U.S. Gold Commission." He never even mentioned that he had a hand in it at all. Now, that's a small thing, but as I say, I'm not a big enough man to do that. You're darn right I would have told you I wrote that stuff.

BLOCK: [laughing]

WOODS: So yeah, how about that?

BLOCK: Murray is — You know, I'll see you and raise you. I've got another Murray story in that vein. Murray, before Hans Hoppe came onboard in our group, Murray was a natural rights theoretician, and Hans Hoppe when he first came to the U.S., this young pup, young punk kid of 22, 25, I don't remember. And he had this argument from argument nonsense, which I reverse, the argumentation ethics, which was really a refutation of Murray's view. And Murray —

WOODS: But it could have been a complement to Murray's view.

BLOCK: Well, that's one way to interpret it.

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: Another way to interpret it is that it's an obliteration of Murray's view.

WOODS: [laughing] Okay.

BLOCK: And that's the way Murray interpreted it. Now, here you have Murray, who's the head honcho, he's the Ayn Rand of our group. Some young punk kid, Hans, comes along with a view that is at least different from his view on a very, very important issue, namely the justification of the nonaggression principle and of all of libertarianism. And you'd think that Murray would swat at Hans and say you're wrong or you're a young kid, you're German, whatever. Instead, he acknowledged that Hans had a better theory than his — his is my interpretation of Murray's actions — which I think is unique, sort of along the lines of the Lehrman-Ron Paul report, not taking credit for it. This story is similar to that, namely Murray acknowledged the view of one of his followers — and Hans was certainly a follower of Murray. To me, this is unique.

And again, I try to emulate Murray in that way. If any of my students ever come up with anything that I did wrong, I will acknowledge that and I'll thank them for correcting me. And I've done that several times. In some of my publications, like this thing about the — what was it? The Hayekian triangle? I wrote a thing with Bill Barnett attacking the Hayekian triangle, and we listed everybody who ever did the Hayekian triangle, including me. So what I did is I in effect attacked myself or thanked Bill for correcting me on that. And it was the same thing with the lighthouse, Coase. When I read Coase, I only read the first three-quarters of it, and it looked good and I was a Coasean on the lighthouse. And Bill Barnett corrected me. He said: look, read the rest of it, and Coase is a commie. Well, that's not the way Bill would put it, but —

WOODS: They were not purely free-market lighthouses, after all.

BLOCK: Yes. Not at all. They were government lighthouses, for God's sake, and Coase didn't make that distinction. So I've made some errors in my career that I've published. I don't mind making errors before I publish, but I really don't like publishing an article and then being corrected. And yet, I emulate Murray in this regard, namely that if a publication of mine is in error and you or someone else points it out, I will say thanks for the correction and go on from there. The idea is we put our pants on one leg at a time. Even Murray Rothbard and Mises made mistakes. We're all just human. All you can do is do your best.

WOODS: You know, this conversation we're having took a turn I wasn't expecting. I was thinking I'll rattle off some interesting questions about libertarian theory and see what your answers are, but I think this kind of oral history of the libertarian movement is very, very important, so I do want to just briefly continue along this line and then I'll let you get back to Mises University. But I'd like to get your thoughts on —

BLOCK: No, no, I don't want to get back to Mises University. I want to keep going [laughing].

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah.

BLOCK: No, I'm kidding.

WOODS: But honestly, it's hard to choose, because this is such fun. But I want to get your thoughts, because I've never asked you about this, about a very common criticism of Rothbard, which is that people say that he was a nasty guy to his opponents. Like he had people who would disagree with him, and he would be vicious, he'd have breaks with them, he would not — and so these are folks — we don't have to mention names unless you feel like

it, who to this day will say, "Look, yeah, Rothbard did some valuable things, but he was so parochial, he would just — if you weren't in his circle, he was not generous towards you." What is your reaction to that?

BLOCK: 180 degrees different. Very opposite. Murray didn't break with anyone. They broke with him, for God's sake. I mean, there were people — I wrote a series, "Will You Come Back," for LewRockwell.com, and I had people like, oh, Randy Barnett and Jerry O'Driscoll and Bill Evers, who at one time were very intimate with Murray. Mario Rizzo also. And they broke with Murray. Murray didn't break with them, even though they had views that — Bill Evers was going over to Iraq to fix their schools or something crazy like that. He broke with Murray. These guys broke with Murray.

Look, the proof of it is me. I must have a dozen articles where I attack Murray, published. He wouldn't break with me. I, God forbid, never broke with him. So Murray was very gentle. Look, this thing about voluntary slavery, I've written on that several times and I've attacked Murray. Murray believes that you shouldn't have a voluntary slave contract. And I've written several articles on that. I've written — I don't remember every article, but another one was that Murray believes that money is unique, and Bill Barnett and I said no, no, money is a capital good, not a consumer good, which is an esoteric sort of thing, a very technical sort of thing. But on the voluntary slavery, that's —

WOODS: In fact, I have to stop you there, because if you talk about that, people are going to say, "What the heck in the world are you talking about?" So I do want to give you an opportunity to explain. What would be the circumstances in which — and by the way, this just goes to show, on this show, we'll talk about anything. It doesn't matter, because I'm not employed by anybody. See? This is what I'm always telling you guys. If you're not employed by anybody, you can say whatever you want. But in this case, you gave an example the other day of a case where a father may be willing to enter into a contract of that kind. What would those circumstances look like?

BLOCK: But I have to correct you. You said we can talk about anything we want, and qua libertarian, we are not — what is it? — absolutists on free speech. There is one kind of speech that should be illegal, and that's a threat.

WOODS: Well, that's true, but see, I keep my threats against the guests to an absolute bare minimum.

BLOCK: [laughing] Okay, so here's the situation. My son, God forbid, has a horrible disease, and it'll cost \$10 million to fix him up. And you, Tom, have long wanted me to be your slave because you're a weirdo and you want me to come to your plantation and pick cotton and —

WOODS: All right, now let me just point out: this is a hypothetical thing. If anybody goes to say, "See, it goes to show Woods favors slavery," I'm coming over there and smacking you in the face.

BLOCK: [laughing]

WOODS: All right, so go ahead. Go ahead. So in that circumstance, that would be the only arrangement whereby I could get what I want? Is that what you're saying?

BLOCK: Yeah, and the only way to save my son's life is to get that 10 million. The only way I can get that 10 million is to sell myself into slavery to you. So, as with all voluntary contracts, these are mutually beneficial in the ex-ante sense. So you give me the 10 million. You benefit because you value me as a slave more than the 10 million. You're a very rich man. I value my son's life more than my freedom, so I gain also. So now I'm on your plantation and I'm picking cotton and answering questions and you're whipping me, and I call the cops and I say, "Hey, Tom's committing assault and battery on me." And the cop, if he's a libertarian cop and knows the contract, will uphold the contract and say, "Block, you idiot, Woods is in the right. It's part of the contract that he can whip you, even kill you," depending on what the contract is.

WOODS: So what was Rothbard's argument against this? That you can't alienate the will, he says.

BLOCK: Right, his argument was you can't alienate the will, and my response to that is: will, schmill. I'm not selling the will; I'm selling the bod. I'm selling the right of you to commit what would otherwise be considered assault and battery or murder against me. That's all I'm selling. I'm not selling the will. I agree with Murray you can't alienate the will. I mean, the will is sort of beyond our capacity. Although as you're whipping me, I might regret this. Ex post sometimes you regret trades. But then if I think, well, yeah, it hurts, the whip hurts, but my son is alive, I might even then say I'm glad I made the deal. Or maybe not, because my will is difficult to control. So I agree with Murray, but the point that I made was that I'm not selling the will; I'm just selling you the right to molest me that you otherwise wouldn't have.

WOODS: [laughing] Geez, Walter. Do you have to use language like this?

BLOCK: Well, yeah. Call a spade a spade. You're molesting me. I'm your slave. You can do whatever you want. Now, the point that we're making here is that I wrote this stuff, and I mentioned this to Murray several times, and he never broke with me. And yet this was a 180-degree difference that I had with him. Also on abortion. Murray is a pro-choice person. Ron Paul, by the way, is pro-life. I'm an evictionist, which is a little different than both. Murray never broke with me. So to answer your question, Murray was vicious, he would break with people who would slightly disagree — Ayn Rand. This is what Ayn Rand was like. But Murray was no Ayn Rand. Murray was not a cult leader. Murray just wanted to be friends with me, and I couldn't understand why he'd want to be friends with me.

WOODS: Let me ask you this, and then I will make this the last thing so you can get back. But I have a friend — okay, let me just say this. Some people may not know this. Rothbard wrote this one-act play. And by the way, he told me I could call him Murray, but I still feel like I should call him Rothbard [laughing]. But anyway, he wrote this one-act play, *Mozart Was a Red*, and it's very funny.

BLOCK: Oh, is it very funny.

WOODS: But I have a friend who's a Randian, not in the cultish sense, but he is a Randian. And his view is Rothbard certainly has his merits, but we should not air our dirty laundry in public. I mean, Rand, for all her flaws, was one of us, and to make fun of her and laugh at her expense is just bad form and he shouldn't have done it, because it reflects badly on all of us to portray her that way.

BLOCK: Murray made fun of himself, for God's sakes. I mean, even Bill Buckley, who was no friend of Murray Rothbard, used to call Murray, "Murray and his merry band," or something like that. Murray was a very funny guy. My big complaint about Murray was stomach cramps. I'd be in his living room and he'd be — he was Iraq on tour, he was humorous; he'd have me laughing for hour after hour and my stomach hurt. Murray made fun of himself, for God's sake. He made fun of me, and everybody made fun of everybody else. There's nothing holy. Murray was an amiable, joyous — a joyous libertarian. So if he can make fun of himself, he can make fun of Ayn Rand.

WOODS: Yeah, okay. I accept that. I accept that. I said I have a very close friend who's very — who, that he just doesn't like. He does not like for us to go after each other in public.

BLOCK: Well —

WOODS: But sometimes it has to be done.

BLOCK: The Randians are humorless people. They don't have a sense of life. Take that in your pipe and smoke it. They're always talking about a sense of life. They have no sense of humor. There's nothing wrong with making fun. There's nothing wrong with being joyous. There's nothing wrong with, I don't know, making fun of each other. Look, the other day, I gave this talk, "Ask me anything," AMA, ask me anything.

WOODS: Yeah.

BLOCK: And a bunch of you creeps in the back, you and Bob Murphy and I forget who else, David Gordon, were plotting against me. You were going to ask me —

WOODS: [laughing] These super complicated, technical, philosophical questions, because, hey, it says, "Ask me anything."

BLOCK: Right. Well, ask me anything doesn't mean I can answer everything. But the point is you were making fun of me.

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah, that's right.

BLOCK: In a sense, you're making fun of me. Well, I take it the way you meant it.

WOODS: Yeah, it's obviously meant to be endearing.

BLOCK: Well, of course, of course it is. Well, Murray was endearing to Ayn Rand a little bit too in that play. You can sense the sense of humor. You can sense that Murray thought of Ayn Rand in not a totally negative way, but making fun. We all make fun of each other. There's nothing wrong with making fun with each other.

WOODS: The *Contra Krugman* podcast would not exist if Bob and I were not making fun of each other through the whole show.

BLOCK: There you go. There you go. I mean, I think that would be a good answer to the Randians, to say, you know, "Get a life."

WOODS: Tell me what the next Walter Block book is going to be that's released.

BLOCK: I'm working on *Defending III*.

WOODS: What about the space book?

BLOCK: The space book is already out.

WOODS: Oh, is it really?

BLOCK: It's just that the publisher sent it to my office, and I'm not in my office now in New Orleans.

WOODS: Oh, okay. What's the name of the space book?

BLOCK: [sighs]

WOODS: Oh, do you —

BLOCK: David Gordon would know.

WOODS: [laughing] Do you want me to look it up?

BLOCK: Something like *Privatizing Space*. I don't remember the name.

WOODS: [laughing] How can you not — you're already onto the next book so you can't look at the —?

BLOCK: Yeah, so —

WOODS: All right, I'm going to type into Amazon, "Walter Block space," and let's see what the heck comes up, if you're got an Amazon page for it already or not. *Space Capitalism: How Humans Will Colonize Planets, Moons, and Asteroids*. Now, there you go.

BLOCK: You expect me to remember that title, for God's sake?

WOODS: [laughing] Well, you wrote a book called *Water Capitalism*. I think you would remember this one; it's *Space Capitalism*.

BLOCK: [laughing] Well, *Water Capitalism* is just two words. There's a colon and then there are five other words.

WOODS: Yeah, okay, all right [laughing].

BLOCK: I think it was the oceans, rivers, lakes — who remembers titles of books? When I first met David Gordon, what he said was, "You're Walter Block. You wrote this obscure article in this obscure journal, dated a certain date, and the page number." And he gave me the page number.

WOODS: Right, and you'd be standing there saying, "I'm not entirely sure that I wrote that, but probably if you just said that, I guess it did happen." So *Space Capitalism* is the book. You should check that out, because it is available. I'm looking right at it. I'll link to that at TomWoods.com/1200. And if you really want to get into the heart of Walter's work you can see a lot of it at WalterBlock.com. It's really amazing. Walter, great talking to you. Thanks so much.

BLOCK: Always a pleasure to be in your company, Tom.