



Episode 807: The Thick vs. Thin Libertarianism Debate: Have I Been Wrong All This Time?

Guest: C. Jay Engel

WOODS: All right, you are a member of my Supporting Listeners program as well, SupportingListeners.com. There was a mini campaign to get you on the show, which, by the way, I have been meaning to do, by the way, so it's not entirely that they – but they almost certainly accelerated it, so that's great. And here you are, and I'm really glad to talk to you.

I want to talk about a topic that I talked about on the show a long time ago and have not revisited. I could talk to you about a lot of different topics based on your blog posts and your writing, but I wanted to talk about this one, because this is an area where I am sort of rethinking things. And maybe it's just a question of I'm going to word things differently from now on. Maybe it's not really a change in my position. I don't know. I'm going to talk it through with you and see if I've changed my position. I want people to know that I do – you know, even at my age, sometimes you do say maybe I was thinking about this the wrong way. And that is the subject of thick and thin libertarianism. And with you being the guest, I'm going to let you describe what that is. And then we'll talk about what's the correct way to approach libertarianism: thick or thin.

ENGEL: Yeah, this is part of the problem, Tom: there are so many different uses of the phrase and they divide them so differently, that sometimes when you're talking to some people, the obvious conclusion is, no, we want to stay very clear of what might be call thick libertarianism, and other times it sounds somewhat reasonable or sounds somewhat necessary, because sometimes the phrases are couched in terms of, Do you have other beliefs or convictions or things besides propositions related to the nonaggression principle and their logically implied deductions? Do you have any other beliefs? Well, of course. Everyone does. So if you phrase it like that and if that's how you're going to describe thick libertarianism, then there's no such thing as a thin libertarianism; it's impossible.

The problem is that the debate has morphed in such a way as that there have been accusations from self-described thick libertarians – the strict or the plumb-line libertarians, as Walter Block would call them, they accuse people like that of dismissing all of everything related to the worldview and the foundations of thick libertarianism. They accuse them of not being proper libertarians, because they don't hold to certain social ideas that are perhaps more trendy than others. They always use catchphrases like "economic privileges" and racism and sexism and the patriarchy and

social injustices — these very vague terms that really can't be discussed without getting into the proper definition.

So that's the first part of the debate, just defining the terms, and I would argue that some people define them better than others. And some people define them in such a way as nobody should be called a thick libertarian if they've read the material and they're familiar with the literature, and other people couch it in terms such that nobody should deny having these extra nonaggression principle propositions that they ascent to. So that's one of the first problems, is that we don't really know what we're talking about, and so it depends on who's using the phrase, how it's being applied, and what it's being compared to when you're talking about the distinctions. And so that's the first way I would answer.

WOODS: So for the sake of our conversation, then, let's define it in the following way: let's say that a thin libertarian is somebody who believes that you can be a libertarian in good standing as long as you believe in the nonaggression principle. It doesn't matter what other kooky beliefs you have; it doesn't matter if you believe the trendiest progressive social beliefs. None of that is relevant. As long as you're not going to clock someone over the head, then you're fine as a libertarian. Now, that doesn't mean we can't still argue with you. We can, but we can't say, You're not a libertarian. Which, by the way, that just annoys me when people spend their time saying this one is and this one isn't. When it's really, really obvious that somebody isn't I'll say that, but I just find this to be splitting hairs half the time.

But on the other hand, thick libertarianism would say, Yeah, yeah, yeah, the nonaggression principle, but there are certain — and I don't want to ridicule these people, because there are smart people who hold this. Their view is that yes, the nonaggression principle is necessary, but it's not sufficient, they would say, because there are other supporting beliefs that are necessary to keep a society free, to keep people believing in the nonaggression principle, and we believe these things involve liberation from institutions other than the state. So liberation from patriarchy or liberation from racial oppression or any other form of — sexual liberation. All these sorts of things are necessary adjuncts. You must have the right personal opinions on those things to be really a full libertarian.

Now, again, it is a question of definition, because there are some people who would say, I personally think that for libertarianism to succeed in the long run we need to have these more liberal views, but I understand that people disagree with me on that are still libertarians in good standing. I think Gary Chartier is an example of that. But I've known people who really do think you're not a libertarian unless you actually want to practice all the things you think should be legal.

So let's just talk about it like that. The nonaggression principle to me, I've argued for thin libertarianism, and I think that the thick people generally have very social-justice-warrior-style social views. I think these are despicable. I think that they're wrong. I think they put them on the wrong side of a lot of disputes in society. So I am totally dead set against those people, and I think they make libertarianism an unnecessarily hard sell to the public, because it sounds like libertarians are social justice warriors who just want to make a buck. That's not what I am.

ENGEL: Yeah, and here's the thing: when we confront the issue, if we couch it in terms of first defining what is the task of the political philosopher — this was one of the things that Rothbard touched on in his *Ethics of Liberty*. What is the task of political philosophy? What are we trying to accomplish when we engage in that science? And the question is, if we're going to focus on the implications of the use of force in society and that's the task of the political philosopher, to determine what is legal and what is criminal, which types of interpersonal relations are going to be considered just or not just. When you couch it in terms of the use of coercion and aggression in society, then everything becomes clear, because if libertarianism is a political philosophy, or more broadly a legal philosophy about the use of force, then it can't by its very definition, and by the very task of its own science, it can't touch on those extra aggression-related propositions.

And let me just quote from this sentence from Charles Johnson's essay, "Libertarianism Through Thick and Thin," and you can link to this on the show notes page —

WOODS: I will, yeah.

ENGEL: So his opening question — and I'm just going to give this an abbreviated quotation — he asks:

"To what extent should libertarians concern themselves with social commitments, practices, projects...other than the standard libertarian commitment to expanding the scope of freedom from government coercion?"

So he's confronting the issue of thick libertarianism through the lens of to what extent should libertarians concern themselves. And the answer to that is it assumes too much. You can't ask what should libertarians believe about these extra-NAP ideas, because libertarians as such — libertarianism qua libertarianism does not touch on those things, because the task of political philosophy is outside the bounds of those specific commitments — is what he calls them.

So to respond to that type of question, we should clarify. We should say, Okay, well, to what extent should human beings or those interested in the flourishing of civilization or those interested in culture and things like that — Libertarianism focuses its commentary on specific aspects of the use of coercion and aggression, and based on the principles that it derives from this study, it has certain conclusions about the state, but specifically speaking it also touches on any type of interpersonal relations. The reason the Rothbardians declared that the state was unjust was because under their framework the state was not exempt from the same types of laws that human individuals are bound. So when you address the question of should libertarians concern themselves with extra-NAP ideas, the question is, Well, yes, they could, but not in the capacity of a libertarian.

WOODS: All right, now let me tell you where I am today, and I'm not necessarily sure that this means that I'm contradicting myself. Maybe I am, and that just means I've changed my mind. But when I look around at things that really are annoying me today — which, again, I understand libertarianism is not all about things that annoy me. However, they annoy me for a reason. When I look around at — and I'll say this again before I go on: I understand that on private property people can do what they want,

they can say what they want, they can prohibit what they want. I get it. I know that. I understand libertarianism.

My point is that today, these days, who is the real threat to free speech? I don't feel like it's the U.S. government. I don't feel like it's the state or local government. To the contrary, I think these institutions by and large are more likely to defend somebody's freedom of speech than is a corporation or than are a lot of local groups, than is your job. Because for example, if I were to come out and say I believe this 200 genders – well, I don't know how many genders there are now, but I believe this theory is entirely without scientific merit, it is entirely arbitrary, and it has absolutely no basis in fact whatsoever, I would be at risk almost certainly of being a social pariah and losing my job. I mean, there is a huge risk of that.

So it seems like it's just not enough to say, Well, as long as the state isn't interfering with people's freedom of speech that's fine. I'm not saying that employers ought to be forced to keep people on their payroll they don't want on there. I'm not saying they ought to be forced to do it. However, I'm saying that it outrages me when they act this way. And it's perfectly legitimate for a libertarian to be outraged by the way a private actor behaves. I don't know where people got the idea that you're not allowed to be upset as long as something occurs on a free market. You can still be upset.

And I feel like right now we have a situation where there are a lot of things that a lot of people feel like they are not allowed to say. There are certain views you're supposed to have about Black Lives Matter, for example. There's one allowable opinion on that, and if you don't share that opinion, good luck to you professionally. You are ruined. You're going to be smeared and destroyed. These people will destroy you, the social justice warriors. They want to destroy your career.

So it seems really stunted for a libertarian simply to sit back and say, Well, hey, private property. That just seems like you're missing the major, major battle of our time. You're sitting on the sidelines of it. And so I feel like if I want to have a free society, then maybe there are supplementary things that people are going to have to believe, which is that freedom of discussion is a good thing. And secondly I think what the social justice warriors are teaching does not promote freedom, and so I think to be a really effective libertarian you've got to be dead-set against what they're saying. So why am I wrong to think that?

ENGEL: Well, I don't. I don't at all. And this is one of the points that Dan Sanchez made, actually. He commented on the Charles Johnson piece that I just mentioned, and he made a very clear phrase: "Relation is not identity." There are things that are related to the flourishing of a free society that are going to encourage the use of free speech and the honest debates and arguments that we're allowed to have as human beings about social institutions, about the state, about economics, and so on that don't have to be – people don't need to be immediately dismissed and shunned from society because they hold an opinion that Jesse Jackson disagrees with.

So there's all sorts of different – there might even be more propositions and opinions related to the strict boundaries of the nonaggression principle than there are actually implications of it. I mean, there's so much literature on sociology. I mean, even in the Austro-libertarian movement, from people like Hoppe and later Rothbard, there's all

sorts of great commentary that's going to help with the establishment in the future of a free society, but like Dan Sanchez said, relation is not identity. The things surrounding the libertarianism itself should not be confused with the doctrine itself.

So I am completely on your side, and I actually think a lot of those defenders of thin libertarianism are on your side as well, that there's no reason that we need to ignore those types of issues; it's just that we don't speak about them in capacity of being a libertarian scholar. On the Lew Rockwell blog probably a year ago, Walter Block was asked about Murray Rothbard's dismissal of David Friedman. David Friedman, of course it was said by Rothbard that his anarchism was not good enough because he did not "hate the state." And so this guy said, okay, Block, this is an extra-libertarian preference; what's going on here? And Block said, Of course it's an extra-libertarian preference. Murray didn't say that David was not a libertarian, only that he didn't like that viewpoint.

So we all live our lives in capacity of different strains of thought. Sometimes we act as an economist, and when we're acting as a value-free Misesian economist, we're talking about the implications of praxiology and human action. We're not making moral or ethical statements when we're acting in that capacity. When we're doing arithmetic or mathematics, we're not making value judgments. So when we talk about things like the free speech issue and the ability of a human being to have a position and be able to vocalize it without being squelched by corporations and everyone else on the social left, we can be brave in defending these things without having to say that this is the way that libertarians should think. Well, maybe it's just the way that human beings should think, even though it's outside the parameters of a libertarian qua libertarian debate.

WOODS: All right, I think that may actually more or less handle it, but let's get back into this juicy discussion after thanking our sponsor.

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All right, I guess when I think about it I'm not actually saying and I never would say that somebody who disagrees with me on the sorts of things I just raised is not a libertarian. Now, I've heard people — there are lefty libertarians — not all of them. I think even just a small minority even of those people who really just want to keep libertarianism confined to this sort of weird avant-garde version of libertarianism —

And by the way, let me point out one of my favorite points to make. I don't want to mention any names, but there's a certain leather jacket wearing, famous — well, reasonably well known libertarian, and the funny thing is he, in terms of social issues, he and I couldn't be farther apart in our opinions. And yet the funny thing is — And so I would be looked at as this stodgy, old conservative type. And yet, whenever it comes time to nominate a nominee or vote for somebody, I'm always in the radical camp. I want the most radical libertarian, and he always wants the respectable, safe, says-all-the-right-things libertarian. And I just think, You're the avant-garde guy, and I'm the stodgy, old conservative? What's the matter with you?

ENGEL: Yeah —

WOODS: But okay, all right, sorry, go ahead.

ENGEL: Well, this is really the nub of why this issue came to light, because I call this — I was just thinking about this issue before we talked today, and there's the technicalities of libertarianism, and sometimes you can get one of these thick libertarians to say, Okay, the NAP is core, and sure, technically, yes, we want — but also want to have the right opinions on bigotry, and you're not a racist, are you? and things like that.

But here's the problem. This is the classic bait-and-switch issue that always comes up. When they say things like they want to make sure you're not a bigot or a member of the patriarchy or things like that, and you say, Sure, I'm not a racist; I don't adhere to the idea that one race is morally superior to another race by virtue of biological factors; I don't adhere to that system at all. But then when you go on to say that, Well, I disagree that the marketplace is naturally — or the way the world is is naturally harsh toward a certain race, or I disagree that Harvard should have these racial quotas, or things like that, they say, Wait, I thought you said you weren't a racist, or, I thought you said you weren't a bigot.

So the problem is that these things always morph into conflict, because nobody's defining their terms. So we're going to make sure that yes, nobody's — Paul Gottfried has a great book on this; I don't know if you've read it: *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*.

WOODS: I sure have.

ENGEL: Yeah, that's one of my favorite books of his. But he goes through, and he just talks about how there's been this transition in the state from focusing on labor issues and the old union issues and wages — and of course those things are always going to be around, because those are tools of state power. But we've come into an era of what he calls the therapeutic state, in which if you don't agree with — These are phrases coming out of the United Nations.

A good example of this is Trump's position on immigration. I disagree with a lot of Trump's reasoning and conclusions. He's not a Misesian economist. He's not a Rothbardian at all. But when we can't confront his statements about trade with actual economic arguments, but instead the first thing we have to go to is, Well, he's just xenophobic; he just hates this people group. We can't even have a conversation, because we're not even allowed to take it to the intellectual level. We have to stay up high with this bumper sticker — It's funny that I would use this in a derogatory sense, but this college-level, just back and forth phrases about whether or not he is a racist. We can't even have a conversation.

So when you take all these things into account and the way the world is, this is the classic bait-and-switch issue. They get you to agree with the fact that yes, we don't want to be bigots. As human beings, we don't want to be racist. And then they try to make this somehow really similar to libertarianism, so that when you come in and you critique some leftist propaganda, you're suddenly betraying your libertarianism. So everything gets muddled around, and then you get accused of not having the libertarian spirit. Yeah, maybe technically you adhere to certain propositions

related to libertarianism, but you're not complying with the spirit that makes libertarianism an ideal system, whatever that means. I don't know what that means, because we can't get into strict definitions.

WOODS: I think that's, from the left's point of view, the merit of these words, that that they don't have strict definitions, because that keeps everybody off balance, because there's no objective way you can decide whether you meet these criteria or not. Are you a racist or not? No one really defines that term. In fact, now they're taking the term "white supremacist." Now, we all used to know what that meant. White supremacist: that's somebody who wants to lord it over other races, right? That's what being a supremacist means. And yet, white supremacist now means somebody who, what? Wants to restrict immigration? I mean, look, most countries in the world have some immigration restrictions, so are they all racial supremacists? Of course, the term is never used to refer to groups other than whites, obviously. But it's precisely that they are toxic words that destroy people's careers, and you can't nail them down.

And to hear libertarians feeling like, Well, we're a real minority, so if maybe we could latch on to the public revulsion at racism, that'll win us some converts. But actually, it wins you no leftist converts, basically. Or you could round it off to zero. It's a rounding error. You win no leftist converts, because they don't believe you anyway, because they believe you want to pollute the water and make kids drop dead from poisoned sandwiches. They don't care what your opinion on racism is; why would they? Whereas on the right, where they might have given you a hearing because of your views on the economy, if you sound like a social justice warrior, they'll say, I've had enough of this anti-intellectual, "everybody's a racist and no one will tell me what that word means" nonsense.

ENGEL: Yeah, exactly, and this right here is the problem, and Hans Hoppe talks about this. These are the state's tools. I mean, people who get very excited about talking about these trendy social issues that have no meaning, no intellectual merit whatsoever, this is what the state thrives on. This is part of the trend of the therapeutic state and the state convincing those people who are in certain positions that they are victims of whatever class they decided to pick that day, whether it's whites or Christians or males or what have you. In fact, I was talking with a libertarian — you know, my wife and I, we met them and we told them that frankly that I have a full-time job and I've got a couple businesses, and my wife wants to stay at home with the kids. And their immediate response was, "Well, that's not very libertarian, because you're subscribing to old fashioned hierarchical norms, and isn't the libertarian supposed to be against these types of hierarchical structures? And you guys claim that you're against state hierarchy, but you're not consistent in applying that to the home."

And that immediately tells me that something fishy is going on in the thick libertarian movement, such that the very definition of our label is at stake. And that's the problem, because it's not just — when you get into the technicalities, that's fun and interesting, but when you look at the results of thinking this way, when you look at the implications of being confused and muddled in the way that you carry out these conversations, you realize that you're actually harming the libertarian movement. It's not a good strategy, and it's making the libertarian tent dangerously narrow, such that the very heroes of our movement — who of course many people don't even want to call them heroes anymore, such as Murray Rothbard and even Mises and even Ron Paul,

who's done more for the liberty movement than perhaps anybody in our time. But when you get muddled like this and you get confused, the entire argument begins to break down into this namby-pamby, meaningless, phraseology, bumper-sticker type debates that have no merits and that can accomplish nothing.

WOODS: Let's get specific then, although you did just give a specific about the way certain titans have been treated. But this might all sound very vague, what we've been saying. What exactly would be an example of somebody who is a thick libertarian who is adopting a position as a libertarian and claiming that that is the libertarian position and you think confuses things?

ENGEL: Yeah, let me give you an answer actually right from Charles Johnson's essay once more. It's right in the middle of the second page, and it's big and bold, and he writes:

"If feminists are right about the way in which sexist political theories protect or excuse systematic violence against women, there is an important sense in which libertarians, because they are libertarians, should also be feminists."

I mean, that right there is exactly what I'm talking about. You can get into the vague phraseology, and then when you come out on the other side, you realize that what they're really trying to do is get you to adhere to certain positions that, well, first of all, myself as one who's interested in cultural and sociological movements, have no business even considering being attracted to, feminism in any of its historical forms. But the idea that because there's been violence against women that we have to as libertarians be feminists is just completely nonsensical.

The example that I give in my rebuttal to Johnson, I say, look, I mean, there's been violence against Christians in the past. There's been violence against Mormons and Muslims and all types of religions. There's been white slavery, black slavery, Asian slavery, all of these things. So if we're going to be true libertarians, because these groups have been victimized aggressively, therefore we have to actually call ourselves these labels – I mean, that's absurd. And so that's a good example of what's going on in the thick libertarian mindset. They're trying to sneak in these leftist cultural ideas into the liberty movement and define some people out, or at least call them lesser libertarians or libertarians who are not in good standing or what have you. And so I think that's one of the best examples right there, is just the idea that – And it's never issues on the right that come into these thick libertarians. It's always leftist things, and that should be pretty suspicious, in my opinion.

WOODS: Well, let me ask you one other thing then, because Hans Hoppe, whom you've cited and whom I like very much – and by the way, not all my listeners will know who Hans Hoppe is, but he's a great economist; he's a very, very interesting and compelling thinker. He's done a lot to shape my own views on a lot of things. He takes the view that we're wrong to take the thin libertarian position. He's come right out and said it, that that's wrong, that you should be a right libertarian. You should not say – Because he'll say there are supplemental things that you need in a society to make it functional beyond just the nonaggression principle, and given that we need these things to make liberty itself possible, then they are an extension of libertarianism, and therefore we

ought to favor them openly and without apology. So what has been your response to that?

ENGEL: Well, I would give two responses. The first one has to go back to the definition of thick and thin. In a recent essay of his that I have read many times — I'm sure you've read it — called "A Realistic Libertarianism," he sort of makes this defense of a right libertarian. And right at the beginning he says that sure, libertarianism itself is this very narrow set of propositions relating to aggression and property rights, but in the empirical world and in practice there's more to the system than the actual propositions.

And right there, that distinction between "sure, there's a narrow definition of libertarianism and then there's the application of those principles that have to do with culture, the structure, ideas on the family, social institutions such as the church" — all of these things, as a thin libertarian, I would say to him, Absolutely, we need all of these things; it's just that I'm talking about them in my capacity as a cultural commentator or a sociologist or even a Christian, but I'm not defining libertarianism by those things. And that's the core of the issue.

The thick and thin debate is whether or not these extra-nonaggression principle ideas are simply related to libertarianism or part of the definition. If they're part of the definition of libertarianism, I would call that a thick libertarian, and I would dismiss them as misunderstanding the purpose of libertarianism in accomplishing the task of political philosophy. If those things are merely related to libertarianism, that's I think the best interpretation of Hoppe right there, is that these things are related. They're close or important. We all agree. Some of us agree more than others. I'm probably more in Hoppe's camp than some other Rothbardians, and that's okay. But I would say that those things, just because they're related to libertarianism, does not make them doctrine itself.

WOODS: All right, and with that we're going to call it quits. I'll definitely link to the Charles Johnson article, and I want to link to your response to the Charles Johnson article. And I wonder if I should link to — I mean, Hans' essay is pretty explosive. It's the sort of thing that would get you fired. But since I have no employer, it doesn't matter to me, so maybe I'll link to that, also at TomWoods.com/807. In fact, I once had somebody say, "If you think there's any merit in Hans' article, then I'm not following you anymore." And I thought, *Go jump in a lake; I don't need you to follow me. Leave me alone, you creep*. So anyway, anybody who wants to get in line to stop following me, check out TomWoods.com/807. But for those of you who don't mind controversy, that's where you can find it. Tell people where they can follow you.

ENGEL: All my political commentary is at my website, ReformedLibertarian.com. All the authors and editors there are all Christian libertarians from the Reformed tradition in Christian theology. So ReformedLibertarian.com is my political stuff. I've got all kinds of businesses. I'm a financial advisor. I run a couple businesses with my brother. So everything related to me you can go and find at CJEngel.com, and that's where you can find — I have another economic blog, *The Austrian View*, so everything that you need to know about me can be found at CJEngel.com. That's probably the simplest way.

WOODS: Okay, very good. Okay, well, thanks so much, C.J. It's good to get this off my chest, and I think you were the perfect person to talk to about it. Thanks a lot.

ENGEL: Let's do it again.