Thick And Thin Libertarianism And Tom Woods

Cathy Reisenwitz

December 21st, 2013

On his blog, libertarian bestselling author and Ron Paul homeschooling curriculum writer Tom Woods has written some thoughts about thin and thick libertarianism and how they apply to the Duck Dynasty controversy.

If you've been living in a cave, the star of reality television show Duck Dynasty said some unfortunate things about gay people and some really unfortunate things about black people living in the Jim Crow South to GQ magazine. The remarks were homophobic and racist, and he was suspended from his show by A&E.

Somehow Woods ties this to thick libertarianism, and uses it as a jumping off point to critique a movement he dislikes.

First, he describes and takes issue with thick libertarianism. "Some libertarians say the traditional libertarian principle of nonaggression is insufficient." He says, "If [people] support nonaggression, they are libertarians."

The position thick libertarians take on the non-aggression principle is that it's a starting place, not a place to end. The trouble with it is that there are multiple ways to define aggression. As Jason Brennan points out, "What counts as aggression depends upon what rights people have."

Woods then defines thick libertarianism as requiring people to "have left-liberal views on religion, sexual morality, feminism, etc., because reactionary beliefs among the public are also threats to liberty."

More accurately, thick libertarianism asks people to oppose racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of bigotry because bigotry against some is a threat to liberty for all. If Woods disagrees with this idea, it's not clear how or why.

Speaking of the way thick libertarians see social views that aren't "left-liberal," Woods asks, "Why is it only the traditional moral ideas of the bourgeoisie that are supposed to be so threatening?" I didn't realize the racism, sexism and homophobia thick libertarians critique were the traditional moral ideas of the bourgeoisie. I think it's more realistic to say, and polling data bears this out, that these kind of socially illiberal attitudes are much more prevalent among the poorly educated than whoever Woods describes as "bourgeoisie."

While it's difficult to survey for racism, as most racists don't self-identify as such, survey data has shown lower IQ scores are associated with not being able to agree with statements such

as “I wouldn’t mind working with people from other races.” There’s actually a strong positive correlation between education and approval of interracial marriage. One survey and another study found a negative correlation between parental income and homophobia.

But whether they are bourgeois or uneducated has zero bearing on whether they’re threats to liberty. Again, it would be great for Woods to get into whether or not bigotry constitutes a threat to liberty.

I would argue that denying someone goods or services on the basis of their sex, gender, orientation, religion, etc. is a curtailment of their liberty, at the very least to enjoy those goods and services.

That does not justify legally forcing someone to stop discriminating. However, it does justify calling out the pernicious effects of discrimination. That, in essence, is thick libertarianism. It’s concerned with both kinds of threats to freedom, government-created and cultural. And it proposes voluntary solutions, like education, or reality television show suspensions, to those threats.

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