

This is a point-by-point reply to [Why I Hate Your Freedom](#), Scott Alexander's comprehensive list of arguments against libertarianism.

1.1: Who are you?

I am Sarah. I am a libertarian, but I don't represent "the" libertarian position, because there isn't one. We are about the most argumentative, fractious, anti-authoritarian people on the planet. We're the kind of people who get squicked at the idea of having a *club president*. The best you can hope to get is a representation of an individual libertarian's views.

1.2: Are you a statist?

[Scott, summarized: "I'm not a statist because I reject the great cosmic battle between the State and the Individual."]

You can make anything sound silly by calling it a great cosmic battle.

If you're an open-source programmer, are you engaged in a great cosmic battle against Microsoft? Of course not. You might have friends who work at Microsoft. You might have seen a PowerPoint presentation you liked somewhere. But you think there are systematic reasons why software tends to be worse when it's not subject to constant tinkering and improvement by the public.

Likewise, as a libertarian, I think there are systematic reasons why government solutions tend to be flawed.

There's the knowledge problem. Command-and-control organizations tend to be ignorant of conditions on the ground; this is the same principle that creates clueless, pointy-haired bosses.

There's public choice issues. Government officials tend to always vote themselves more power and never less. Elected governments tend to be fiscally unsustainable because the people vote themselves tax cuts and spending increases.

There's regulatory capture. Lobbyists for industries make sure the industry is "regulated" in a way that gives an advantage to established players.

So, yeah, I'm an anti-statist, because I think there are problems that are common to governments in general, and show up in the vast majority of government interventions.

1.3 Do you hate libertarianism?

[Scott, summarized: "If libertarian means you have to oppose the State in all its actions, then I'm against libertarianism."]

I'm not sure what it means to "oppose the State in all its actions," in practice. I don't go around harassing traffic cops and public school teachers. I'm hardly in a position to make the State wither away, just by posting about it on Facebook. (And most libertarians, past a certain age, more or less give up the political ranting game. They either try to make the world better by extra-political means, or they go into professional advocacy organizations like Cato.)

I, personally, am not all that politically active. But I'm not a moderate either. I think the status quo doesn't work and can't last. My attitude isn't so much "fight the government!" as "try to navigate a world where the government doesn't work too well, and try to build things that do work in between the piles of rubble."

1.4 Why write a Non-Libertarian FAQ? Isn't statism a bigger problem than libertarianism?
[Scott, summarized: everybody knows totalitarianism is bad, but nobody's done a systematic anti-libertarian counterargument. And the internet is full of libertarians.]

The fact that you're writing a Non-Libertarian FAQ should be interesting. We're a tiny minority. It's a big deal if a libertarian candidate breaks 5% in the polls. And yet you think we're worth refuting. It looks like we're kind of punching above our weight in the marketplace of ideas. Which doesn't prove we're right, but is kind of a credit to us as a hypothesis worth privileging.

1.5 How is this FAQ structured?
[Scott, summarized: moral and practical issues are separate.]

1.6 Didn't Ayn Rand say "The moral is also the practical"?
[Scott, summarized: Yes, but she was wrong.]

2.1 Laissez-faire can be proven to be the best economic system.
[Scott, summarized: Econ 101 is a simplification of the truth, like Newton's laws. It doesn't always work in practice. You still have to be empirical.]

Absolutely! Empiricism is good! But: may I refer you to Deirdre McCloskey's excellent rant about Facts?

<http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2012/06/factual-free-market-fairness/>

The facts support the basic contention of classical economics: that liberalization of trade and lighter industrial regulation creates greater economic growth, on the whole. Consider East vs. West Germany. Consider India, before and after the free-market reforms of 1991, which boosted growth from 3.5% to 9% after decades of stagnation under the previous policies of protectionism, central planning, and the License Raj. You can even zoom out and look at the whole human race; global GDP and population was almost constant for most of human history until the 18th century, when, beginning in Europe, the first capitalist economy emerged and GDP began its familiar exponential climb.

Free markets do something right. No, we can't prove a priori that the laissez-faire solution is always best, but *something* powerful is clearly going on when you permit free commerce, and something harmful when you stifle it too much. The facts make that claim uncontroversial.

2.2 Don't bother. I've seen examples of 'free market failures.' It always ends up being because of government, not the free market.

[Scott, summarized: You can always come up with an excuse for why the evidence doesn't break your theory. If you have to make too many excuses, something's wrong with your theory.]

Yeah, true. Except -- consider what it would look like if we were right? If liberals tended to see 'market failures' everywhere, in places where no market failure existed? We'd be arguing against the details of your examples, right? I thought you wanted empiricism!

2.3. Give an example of a government intervention that actually improves a market.

[Scott, summarized: food labeling.]

Wait. You picked *food labeling*?

Excuse me while I have a good cry.

You are aware that FDA guidelines sparked a "low fat is healthy" meme, and companies tried to label foods "low fat" and raised the sugar content to compensate, and that this may have sparked a diabetes epidemic?

Explain to me again why government intervention is good for nutrition?

2.3.1. But the free market would solve this problem. Without government, if people want to buy healthy foods, private industry will invent a better certification procedure that health-conscious people can choose to follow.

[Scott, summarized: food regulation is spotty, and food companies do put a lot of misleading stuff on their labels, and consumers don't research it, and most people don't have particularly healthy diets.]

Well, it's true that if you don't enforce a rule by regulation, there's no real guarantee that the market will provide what you're hoping for. (And, yes, many libertarians are over-optimistic about that.) Unregulated food labeling isn't bound to result in an excellent system of unbiased nutritional information, just by popular demand.

But step back for a sec. Do people really want nutritional information? It looks like health-conscious folks eat pretty healthily, with or without help from the government, and non-health-conscious folks don't, and perhaps shouldn't be taxed for a goal that doesn't particularly interest them.

I've known folks who wouldn't touch non-grass-fed meat, and folks who thought life without cake would be too bitter to endure. Back when I was counting calories, I plugged everything into an online calculator, made by some enterprising soul, independently of FDA regulations (it included macronutrient counts for a lot of non-processed foods). The market doesn't give you everything you, Scott Alexander, might want, but it does give you a diversity of options, and it gives people what they're motivated to spend time, money, and effort on. That seems like a better deal than offering what a few bureaucrats want -- especially if their errors can cause such wide-ranging harm.

2.4. Government intervention in the free market destroys the economy.

[Scott: Economies have been better under Democrats than Republicans.]

This is a really shoddy argument. Who's to say policies enacted today can't have effects on the economy five years from now, under the next President? Who says Presidents even *have* that much control over the economy? (Surely Congress matters too, at least.)

I don't have time or expertise to debate in detail whether FDR prolonged the Great Depression, but even in the article Scott linked, there's clearly two recessions in the Depression, one in 1933 and one in 1938. The author blames the second recession on FDR's misguided attempt to balance the budget in 1937, but FDR was doing a *lot* of things wrong, like raising reserve requirements in 1935 and contracting the money supply. I'm inclined to think the evidence is strongest for monetary policy being the problem, but it's a complicated issue.

2.4.1 That's confusing correlation and causation! A few poorly controlled statistics aren't even close to enough evidence to tease apart economic issues.

[Scott, summarized: well, you can't say that laissez-faire helps then!]

We don't have a lot of natural experiments in economics, unfortunately. And the economy has business cycles. None of the "laissez-faire periods" on the timescale of Presidential administrations lasted a whole business cycle, let alone several, so we really can't test whether they moderate recessions or not.

That said, as I remember there was really only one clear-cut 20th century example of fiscal stimulus working exactly the way Keynes said it would (the Revenue Act of 1964), and this is hardly a good example for liberals, given that it was a tax cut that reduced unemployment and increased tax revenue.

2.5. Government hurts the economy by taxing the rich. Since the rich are the engine of economic growth, taxes on them should be as low as possible. Otherwise, they will have no incentive to produce wealth.

[Scott, summarized: We've had good growth in periods with high taxes on the rich.]

Good point! Yeah, you can have growth and taxes on the rich at the same time. We had it in the 1950's. Today, we have much slower growth than we did at mid-century, and I think it's for unrelated reasons, connected to the thesis in "[The Great Stagnation](#)." I tend to think that raising taxes on the rich *now* would slow growth, but not because the rich would go on strike.

Rather, a major motivation for innovating is the slim chance of becoming fabulously wealthy. Since we have more regulations, more credentialism, more foreign competition, and just overall more barriers to entry for a plucky young entrepreneur than we did in the 1950's, it takes a bigger payoff to motivate people to drive technology forward. If we don't let anybody get fabulously wealthy, we may not get the transformational technological improvements that drive economic growth. (Of course, we may not get them anyway, but high taxes on the rich seem to at least be unhelpful.)

2.5.1. If the rich have more money, it will "trickle down" and help the poor as well.

[Scott, summarized: No, it won't.]

No argument there. Economic inequality has grown even as the rich get richer. I don't believe inequality in itself is all that bad, but I do have to concede that incomes are nearly stagnant at the bottom, which *is* pretty bad.

2.6. Governments destroy productivity and innovation by imposing environmental regulations. The free market takes the environment into account in its own workings, so any government interference with the system will only make things worse.

[Scott, summarized: explains the notion of an externality and free riders.]

Well, externalities exist, yeah. I notice Scott didn't contradict the point that environmental regulations destroy productivity and innovation.

2.6.1 This would never happen in real life. I bet you individuals and corporations, free from government regulation, would come to an enlightened, mutually beneficial solution.

[Scott, summarized: no they won't. Collapse of cod industry.]

Yeah, true. You don't always win in absolutely every way with the free market. Life's not that convenient. See http://lesswrong.com/lw/gz/policy_debates_should_not_appear_onesided/. Even when a policy is good on the whole, there will usually be some cases where its consequences hurt people. We have to choose between imperfect options, and find the least imperfect one.

2.7. But governments don't just overregulate environmental issues. They also regulate for so-called "moral" reasons. For example, they might ban the use of sweatshop labor. But in a real free market system, people who disliked sweatshop labor would boycott the companies that used it, and those companies would change of their own free will.

[Scott, summarized: boycotts have free rider problems too.]

Boycotts actually aren't the major non-governmental way to put pressure on bad employers. The actual alternatives to regulation are choice (employees can quit if their boss sucks) and insurance (insurers will refuse to insure companies with bad safety practices.) A surprising number of safety rules are enforced not by the government but by insurance companies.

But apart from that, yes, it's quite true, the free market doesn't give you everything you want. Neither does the government. Look at the *actual* government. Do its decisions reflect your ideals? What about when your least favorite political party controls Congress and the White House?

2.8 Government regulation denies corporations the right to make choices that affect only them and their consenting customers.

[Scott, summarized: yeah, but a lot of the time, there are externalities. Like banks all failing at the same time.]

Once more: I concede the existence of externalities.

2.9. Socialist health care is proof that government doesn't work. After all, countries with socialist health care have less efficient health systems.

My views on health care are best summarized in the following article.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/09/how-american-health-care-killed-my-father/307617/>

Short answer is that American health care manages to be worse than BOTH socialized health care (like in England) and free-market-ish health care (like in Singapore). The main problem is that we don't have a market at *all* in health care and so there's no pressure for anyone to keep costs down.

2.10. Privatized, for-profit prisons would be a great way to save money.

[Scott, summarized: privatized prisons are terrible.]

There is nothing libertarian about a "privatized" government program. A private program is independent of government; a privatized program is paid for by taxpayer dollars but

administered by a corporation. There's no reason why the corporation should be efficient, especially when the selection process is corrupt, as it often is.

The libertarian position on prisons (at least in my opinion) is that we *put too many damn people in prison* for victimless drug crimes where they endure horrible abuse and learn to be hardened criminals. If anyone is cheering for privatized prisons, it's not me.

2.11: What makes the regulators in government think they know better than I do?
[Scott, summarized: they're experts, and they do their homework.]

Here, hidden in the exact middle of the piece, is the place where I disagree with Scott the most.

The regulators are really way more confused than you would naively assume. As are experts in general. There's a big difference between a person who's trying to cover his ass at a desk job, and one who really wants to save lives, whatever it takes, even if it leads to uncomfortable conclusions. On, say, a public health question, I'd actually take the word of a smart, agenty physicist who's new to public health but truly *trying*, over that of a public health regulator who has all the right credentials but has nothing to lose if he fails by not improving on his predecessors. The physicist may make some naive rookie mistakes that the public health regulator would scoff at; but he'd be learning faster and actually coming up with original ideas.

What I've seen from experience is that the world is not run by farsighted adults who pretty much have it under control. It's run by ordinary, somewhat cowardly people trying to save face and not get blamed. It kind of has to be seen to be believed. Just how unproductive the work of a credentialed but unmotivated professional can be, or how amazing the work of a motivated autodidact can be. In the old days, people used to get a visceral understanding of the follies of bureaucracy through joining the army. I only saw it after being trained as a mathematician and then seeing what passes for rigor in the biomedical sciences. I realized that highly credentialed and respectable professors were overwhelmingly ignorant of math and statistics that would be relevant to their work, and that they were getting things *wrong* much more than I would have assumed. It's very easy to get your credentials, and then still fail to solve real problems.

2.12: Doesn't [current government program] do more harm than good? Isn't that a good argument for eliminating all government programs?

[Scott, summarized: Regulation is not a one-dimensional line. And the right amount of regulation need not be zero.]

Fair enough. I'm not a crazy person; I don't want to get rid of all regulations all of a sudden, only to discover that it results in mass death and human suffering.

My usual example for a regulatory system that seems to be doing good is the aviation system. Airplanes are safe precisely because they have very careful safety protocols in engineering and

flight coordination. For historical reasons, those protocols are enforced by government. And the existence of good safety protocols is one of the reasons why the US has an aerospace industry and, say, China's is just in its infancy. If I could snap my fingers suddenly and make all flight regulations disappear instantly, planes would crash all over the world.

Fortunately, I *can't* snap my fingers and make all flight regulations disappear. That's why I have a more incremental attitude -- we should scrap government interventions that aren't working and replace them with private institutions that do work, and then see where we go from there. Empiricism! It's a good thing!

2.13: All government programs, even the ones that seem good, have unintended consequences that end up hurting more people than they help.

As stated, this is false. But there *is* a common bias towards thinking "X is good" means "Government should fund X", and "X should be improved" means "Government should regulate X." People have to call attention to unintended consequences, because they aren't obvious.

2.14: Maybe a few very-well targeted government programs are valuable. But it's a slippery slope. Once you allow any government programs at all, it's only a matter of degree before you're living in a dictatorship where you can't even flush the toilet without begging the State for permission.

[Scott, summarized: slippery slope arguments are invalid.]

The more government programs we have, the more we normalize the idea that all things are the potential province of government. You ever see New Deal Superman?

<http://dresdencodak.tumblr.com/post/33183283977/i-miss-the-early-days-when-superman-revolved>

People used to have to be told, in comic books, that it was good for government to fund health care. Because that did not use to be a normal practice. Now it's the default. Defaults have a huge framing effect -- there's a whole cognitive bias literature on that.

2.14.1: No, sorry, I still think that's too glib. What if there are real arguments against dictatorship, but most people are too stupid to understand them? Most people's opinions really are influenced by prejudice, and as soon as they see that a little government is okay, they'll be willing victims for the first would-be despot to come along.

[Scott, summarized: if people are too dumb to protect themselves from dictators, they'll be too dumb to live in libertarian society.]

It's not so much that people are dumb. It's that they get dumb about politics. They go "Team Red! Team Blue!" because they really don't have enough power to treat civic issues as though they're important responsibilities. Lots of people who hold totally idiotic political views are quite

capable of holding down a job, paying their bills, and raising healthy children. The whole point of libertarianism is that we're all more qualified to run our own private lives effectively than we are to theorize about the whole of society.

2.14.2: You can't just magic a small, responsible government into existence. Governments, by their very nature, seek more and more power until they become tyrannies. The only way to prevent that is to cut it out at its root by opposing all government programs.

[Scott, summarized: ordinary regulations don't really lead to totalitarianism.]

Good point. The Road to Serfdom was written about England; it's hardly become a fascist state. Scott's correct here.

2.14.3: Beware! That kind of complacency is exactly what the government wants!

[Scott, summarized: No, most people in government are not plotting nefariously.]

Most civil servants I know are nice people, if a little unimaginative. I suspect presidential candidates all have a little sociopath in them, but I can't be certain. But everyone, in every profession, secretly thinks their profession just knows what it's doing a little better than everyone else. Even poets think they're the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." You don't think *actual* legislators might be a wee bit inclined to be biased in favor of the idea that we'd all be better off if they were in charge of more things?

2.15: You seem very ambivalent about government policies. You're always saying things like "this could work, if it were done correctly", or "if the system is working properly". What makes you think the system is working properly?

[Scott, summarized: I think if you've got enough intelligence and energy to be a libertarian, a better use of that intelligence and energy would be to help enact a properly working system.]

I agree! Paypal was explicitly an example of that; an attempt to make the commercial world freer by making secure anonymous payments technologically possible. It's a technological solution, not a political solution. And those tend to work better, in my opinion.

Want to fight poverty? Don't write your congressman. Give to charity, or sell to the poor, or employ the poor. Want to fix medicine? You'll have better luck with a health startup than a political campaign. You probably can't change the government, but you can build something useful in the meantime.

3.1: Taxation and regulation are immoral, and equivalent to theft at best and slavery at worst.

[Scott, summarized: you can't argue that taxation is morally as bad as theft just because it

shares some features with theft.]

I agree!

Here's my own thought on rights and private property:

I don't really believe in natural rights. Where would they come from? How could you falsify the hypothesis "We have a natural right to X"?

What I do believe is that societies come up with enforceable obligations, which we call rights. And the way you set up rights can be better or worse for society.

We want the rules for granting access to goods to be set up in a predictable, stable fashion. We want it to be a sort of fail-safe, distributed system, so that no one person being evil can screw it up too badly for everyone. We want it to reward productivity. And that leads, more or less, to some system that looks like property rights: you keep the stuff you produce.

Basically, there's a principle here that has to do with localization of responsibility. You presumably know your own life best, you're familiar with the details of what works and what doesn't in a way that a faraway bureaucrat or a nosy neighbor can't be. So let's put responsibility for taking care of your life with you, and let's put safeguards against anybody messing with your capacity to provide for yourself out of your own efforts. That's your little bubble of personal space. It's yours.

Now, you want to make deals with people? You want to give to charity? That's fine. But it's downright unsafe to let people mess with each other's bubbles.

I'm talking about "bubbles" instead of "property" because the precise definitions of property rights aren't unique or handed down from on high. It's just a system that gets people goods in a fail-safe, reliable way.

Government provision of resources *isn't* all that reliable, when you think about it. Programs get voted in and out, funded and unfunded. If you're paying money into Social Security, you might never see it again. If the government ever spins into serious fiscal trouble, which it looks like it might, government-provided resources might get quite radically and suddenly reduced. (The 20th century welfare state, with its extensive pension obligations, can be viewed as a gamble on the next generation's productivity -- and it's a gamble it looks like we may be losing.) It's *stabler* and more flexible to take care of as many needs as possible closer to home. Independence is resilience.

I don't really believe in deontological constraints as "really for realz out there", but I do think that rigid rules have beneficial consequences. Secure property rights mean people can trust that their stuff will be around tomorrow. Rules are easier to follow than optimization targets: "Thou

shalt not kill" is easier to live by than "minimize human suffering." You want rules, you want them to be simple and enforceable, and you want them to localize responsibility. That's starting to look like a justification for property rights and limited government, isn't it?

And then there's the fact that virtue ethics work with human psychology better than utilitarian targets do. Trying to be a virtuous *person* is a pretty good hack for motivating benevolent behavior. So believing in the (socially constructed but useful) concept of "rights" and private property, believing in the idea that your life and your efforts belong to you but you have no right to control other people's lives or labor, may actually motivate the virtues of self-reliance, self-respect, responsibility, and minding your own business.

If you've ever been to Burning Man, the annual arts festival in the Nevada desert, you've heard of the Burning Man principle of "radical self-reliance." Burners are supposed to bring all the supplies they need to survive in the desert; you're responsible for your own safety. Now, in practice, "radical self-reliance" is more of an ideal than a reality. Almost everybody is going to make some mistake, and need to ask for help from another Burner. You might take a walk in the desert without bringing enough water, or you might get lost, or need to borrow a hammer. We humans are much more interdependent than we assume, and we *do* need to help each other out; total self-sufficiency is a myth. But the ideal of self-sufficiency means that people at least make a good-faith effort to take care of their own stuff, and that the whole community doesn't collapse in a cascade of freeloading.

That's basically where I stand on the libertarian virtues. Life is a lot better when people share the belief that you're responsible for your own life, and free to live it as you please so long as you place no harm or burden on others. More stuff gets accomplished, more fun gets had, and less busybodying is tolerated.

One of the best things about libertarian philosophy is that it promotes an internal locus of control. Yeah, "rights" are an abstraction, and the distinction between "negative" and "positive" rights can be blurry. But these abstractions, these intuitive mental models, promote the intuition that my life is mine and your life is yours. And that attitude leads to self-respect and respect for others and a sense of individual agency. I'm Sarah, you're Scott, and let's draw an invisible line around "Sarah's stuff" and an invisible line around "Scott's stuff," so that Sarah can be in charge of *her* stuff and Scott can be in charge of *his* stuff. Yeah, it's a simplified model of reality, but it's a way of viewing the world that encourages people to develop strength and autonomy, and just be *healthier and less helpless*. It's a big part of why I'm a libertarian.