6
Should the Left Embrace Left-Libertarianism?

6.1 Introduction

Left political philosophers have adopted a vast array of theoretical perspectives for diagnosing the ills of contemporary capitalist societies and they offer a plethora of different prescriptions for remedying these injustices. In this chapter I critically assess another principled account of justice that functions at the level of ideal theory – left-libertarianism. ‘Left-libertarian theories of justice hold that agents are full self-owners and that natural resources are owned in some egalitarian manner’ (Vallentyne and Steiner, 2000b, p. 1). Debates concerning the viability of left-libertarianism as a political theory are beginning to gain momentum. Barbara Fried (2004, 2005) argues that one of the pillars of left-libertarianism – self-ownership – is an indeterminate concept and that left-libertarianism is indistinguishable from liberal egalitarianism. Mathias Risse (2004) argues that left-libertarianism is incoherent. Left-libertarians have retorted (Vallentyne, Steiner and Otsuka, 2005) by arguing that their theory is coherent, determinate and relevant. For the most part, the central focus of these spirited debates has been on the philosophical underpinnings of left-libertarianism rather than on its practical prescriptions.

In this chapter I approach these debates from a slightly different angle. There are many different ways of assessing a political theory. One way is to focus on its coherence or determinacy by examining, for example, the logical compatibility of its foundational premises. But another strategy is to place greater attention on the practical prescriptions of the theory and assess the viability of such prescriptions in terms of the actualization of the values and aims of the theory underpinning those prescriptions. Such an appraisal functions from the vision of
political theory that John Dunn advocates in ‘Reconceiving the Content and Character of Modern Political Community’. Recall that Dunn argues that the purpose of political theory is to diagnose practical predicaments and to show us how best to confront them. How does left-libertarianism fare in this respect? More specifically, should the left embrace left-libertarianism as a political theory equipped to diagnose and address the ills of contemporary capitalist societies? One of the main attractions of left-libertarianism is that its proponents advocate novel and provocative solutions to remedying current injustices. Van Parijs (1995), for example, argues that citizens should be entitled to an unconditional basic income. Steiner (1994) claims that germ-line genetic information is a natural resource and is thus subject to egalitarian ownership. A comprehensive assessment of the practical prescriptions of left-libertarianism would go well beyond the confines of what I could examine in this book. Thus I set a more modest goal – to assess two prominent contributions to left-libertarianism, the arguments put forth by Michael Otsuka (2003) in Libertarianism Without Inequality and by Philippe Van Parijs (1995) in Real Freedom For All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism? These two versions of left-libertarianism are important arguments to consider as both place a significant focus on deriving institutional prescriptions. Given my focus is on the practical implications of left-libertarianism as a political theory, these two arguments are relevant ones to explore and assess. In this chapter I shall focus on Otsuka’s arguments. I turn to Van Parijs’s principled defence of a citizen’s unconditional basic income (UBI) in the next chapter.

Otsuka argues that John Locke’s writings can provide an inspiration for a strongly egalitarian version of libertarianism. He believes that stringent rights of control over one’s body and life are compatible with egalitarian rights of ownership of the world. In the next section, I outline the central features of Otsuka’s account of just initial acquisition and contrast this account with that advanced by right-libertarians. I argue that the critique of right-libertarianism Otsuka advances can also be made on liberal egalitarian grounds and that doing so is preferable for it does not rely on the contentious and conflicting premises which left-libertarianism is premised upon. My central criticisms of Otsuka’s version of left-libertarianism focus on three of the main prescriptions he advances in Libertarianism Without Inequality. The following are the prescriptions: