

Liberty and Patterns

In chapter seven of Anarchy, State, and Utopia Robert Nozick makes the claim that “liberty upsets patterns.” Nozick refers to patterns as a systematic way that wealth and resources are distributed across a society. He argues that whenever people are allowed to work and exchange goods freely, there will be too many variables influencing the distribution of wealth for a distinct pattern to emerge. The only way to maintain a pattern would be for the government to continually interfere by either prohibiting certain actions or redistributing wealth. I believe that Nozick makes a valid point, but I do not completely agree with his claim. Even in a free-market society, certain patterns will emerge. While no pattern may be dominant, there will be cases where people with certain traits or qualities will tend to be more or less wealthy than their counterparts. In this paper, I will show the merits of Nozick’s arguments while also showing that liberty and patterns are not always mutually exclusive.

Before examining Nozick’s theories, it is important to clarify what he means by “liberty” and “patterns”. When referring to liberty, Nozick is discussing economic liberty. Economic liberty means that individuals have the right to manage their wealth and resources without outside interference. By patterns, Nozick specifically means patterns of wealth distribution. Nozick defines a distribution pattern to be a systematic way that wealth is distributed in a society. For example, each person in a society could

possess an amount of wealth proportional to his IQ score. Such a distribution may not be considered just, but it is a consistent pattern.

Nozick begins his argument by using basketball great Wilt Chamberlain as an example of how liberty can disrupt patterns. In Nozick's hypothetical, everyone in society has an equal amount of wealth. However, Wilt's basketball skills are so impressive that millions of people come to watch him play. Since he is extremely valuable to his team, one quarter of every dollar earned from ticket sales is redirected to Wilt. At the end of the year, Wilt has accumulated at least \$250,000 dollars, much more than anyone else in society. Clearly, Wilt has not infringed on anyone else's rights. He did not force anyone to pay him money. He did not steal his fortune from anyone else. However, by being allowed to showcase his talents, Wilt has upset the initial distribution of wealth. According to Nozick, the only way to return to the original, patterned distribution is for the government to take some of Wilt's wealth and redistribute it. This type of government interference is directly opposed to Nozick's concept of a minimal state. According to Nozick, a minimal state is one that only prevents a person's rights from being violated. It does not pro-actively interfere with its citizens. Nozick believes that a minimal state is a necessary condition for liberty. Since individuals cannot interfere with others' rights, they cannot transfer that power to a state. Any state beyond a minimal state is considered to be unjust. So in order to maintain the initial pattern, the government must act beyond a minimal state and therefore sacrifice the liberty of its citizens.

A possible Socialist criticism of Nozick's Wilt Chamberlain example is that it is possible to set up a system where everyone is paid the same amount for their work.

Every individual is employed by the government and the government decides how much each individual is entitled to so that everyone gets a basic share. However, as Nozick points out, there would still be an unequal distribution of wealth if the government did not interfere with how its citizens managed their wealth. Suppose after Wilt was done playing his daily basketball, he decided to play a night game. Being such a great entertainer, people watched him and paid for putting on a show. Once again, Wilt has accumulated more wealth than his counterparts. It is also possible for citizens to exchange goods other than money. A person may pay another person in raw materials for a service they provided. Now, the person who provided the service has more goods than the other people in society. It would then require government interference to return the distribution to its original form.

A Socialist may argue that if a person's basic needs are met, then there is no reason for them to put in extra work. Nozick responds that there is a difference between needs and wants. A person may have all of their basic needs satisfied, but may still desire goods beyond those needs¹. For example, Nozick desires to have a library in his backyard. In a Socialist system, Nozick's daily work does not cover the cost of the library, but since he is a great lecturer, Nozick is able to make the additional money needed by giving lectures. In order to get everything he wants, Nozick needs to do more than his daily share and accumulate more wealth.

The Wilt Chamberlain example can also be extended beyond distributions of wealth that give everyone an equal share. It does not matter if the initial distribution is based on IQ, race, hand size, etc. Wilt has a unique talent that people are willing to pay to see. In any economically free society, there will be people with unique abilities that

¹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* Page 162

earn them a substantial share of money. These abilities do not always have to be a skill. For example, a person could be lucky. They could win millions by buying a single lottery ticket or could inherit a fortune from their parents. Nozick points out that the differences in the way people choose to manage their wealth will disrupt patterns. People will have different preferences for where they spend their money, whether or not they pass money on to their children, donate to charities, etc. Certainly, these preferences will disrupt a patterned distribution.

One of the criticisms that Nozick answers about his theories is that if people know there is a patterned distribution, then they will refrain from actions that upset the pattern. Besides assuming unrealistically that every single person will want to maintain the pattern, Nozick states that this criticism requires that every person knows what is best for the pattern in every situation, and also that every person is able to coordinate with every other person in the society. Clearly, this is not something that an individual can do. Even if everyone in a society agreed to work towards a distribution, it would take some sort of agency to plan, enforce, and coordinate everyone's actions.

While Nozick's arguments are strong, I believe that his conclusions about the relationship between liberty and patterns are not entirely correct. Nozick assumes that no distinctive pattern can exist when there is individual economic liberty. I do not believe that this is true. I believe that in a free market patterns will emerge. There are certain skills and qualities that generally make people successful. For example, the average salary of a college graduate is substantially higher than that of a non-graduate. Even though this pattern does not apply to every case, it is definitely noticeable.

In his essay, Capitalism and Freedom, Milton Friedman generally outlines the types of individuals who tend to be wealthier than their counterparts in a free market society. First, there are those who are born into wealth. Even if they are not as talented or hardworking as others, their inherited starting position gives them an advantage. Next, there are those who are endowed with great natural ability. By possessing talents and skills that society deems valuable, it is easier for people in this category to accumulate wealth. Third, there are those whose preferences and values emphasize wealth. A person who desires to be wealthy and is willing to put in the work and effort that wealth requires will generally be more successful than his peers. Lastly, there are those who are just lucky. While Nozick claims that there are no patterns in a free market society, Friedman clearly breaks the types of distributions that occur into distinct categories.

Nozick recognizes this criticism and tries to respond to it. He claims that while certain categories of people may be generally wealthier than others, these trends are only “pattern strands.”² They do not represent society as a whole. I disagree. While a pattern may not be the only pattern governing the distribution of wealth in a society, it can still be a recognizable pattern. Consider the aforementioned example of college graduates. Certainly, being a college graduate is not the only factor in acquiring wealth, but since college graduates are generally wealthier, there is still a relationship between a college degree and wealth.

However, the patterns that emerge in a free market are unintentional patterns. They are the result of allowing individuals to make their own economic decisions. It is important to distinguish these patterns from intentional distributions. As Nozick shows, when a government actively works to promote a specific distribution, individual liberty

² Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, page 157

will disrupt the pattern. Nozick's claim that "liberty upsets patterns" is still sound in those cases. It is the natural patterns of a free market society that are not upset by liberty.

A follower of Nozick might argue that since the college graduate example does not hold in every instance it is not a pattern. My response is that if it is a requirement for a pattern to be true in every case, then there can be no patterns. Even with government interference, there will be random deviations from a pattern. As an extreme example, consider a socialist society that regulates every transaction that is made between its citizens. The society makes sure every citizen has the same amount of wealth at all times. However, since the society is run by humans, there will eventually be some mistakes. There could be a computer error, or a checking oversight, or even a case of fraud. Government interference may reduce the deviation from a pattern, but it cannot eliminate it.

Another argument against Nozick's reasoning is that it is possible to make a pattern from a superposition of other patterns. For example, a society may want to reward both intelligence and hard work. In that case, the distribution pattern would be the sum of the two base patterns. In a free market society, there are many different patterns in the distribution of wealth. The overall pattern governing the distribution is the sum of these different patterns. Using Nozick's notation, this rule can be expressed as follows: We have n different patterns in society, each labeled $D_1, D_2, D_3 \dots D_n$. So the general pattern D_g would be $D_1 + D_2 + D_3 \dots + D_n$.

Overall, Nozick is correct that liberty upsets patterns. It is only his conclusion that no distinct pattern can exist in an economically free society that I feel is incorrect. However, the conflict between liberty and patterns raises an important question: If

liberty interferes with patterns should a society reject patterns? I believe the answer is yes. As I reasoned earlier, liberty and patterns are not mutually exclusive. A society that has economic liberty will not be without patterns. However, a society should not set a specific distribution as a goal. If a society did strive for a specific pattern, they would have to abridge individual rights in order to minimize deviations from the pattern. Instead, the distributional patterns of wealth in an economically free society should be the ones that happen naturally. A criticism of my argument might be that a government in a free market society is striving to promote the distribution D_g that I mentioned earlier. However, D_g is not the result of any action of the government. It is the combined result of the economic choices of individuals.

Even though I do not completely agree with Nozick's conclusions about liberty and patterns, I believe that he makes an interesting and thorough argument. His line of reasoning is clear and logical and he makes excellent use of his examples. He also does a good job incorporating other writer's theories into his work. The only criticism I have of Nozick's work is that he takes his conclusions too far. He does an excellent job illustrating how liberty disrupts patterns, but never offers a valid explanation why there can be no patterns in a free market society. While I do not agree with everything Nozick wrote, I believe that overall he presents a solid case for how "liberty upsets patterns."