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Is “Bambi” Libertarian?

by Scott McPherson

Many libertarians are labeled amoral or immoral because they refuse to allow ethics to impinge upon politics. For libertarians, government exists not to make people do what are generally perceived as good things so much as it exists to keep them from doing genuinely bad things to other people. As Murray Rothbard put it, “It is not the business of the law ... to make anyone good or reverent or moral or clean or upright. This is for each individual to decide for himself.”

This isn’t to say that libertarians have no opinion on morally questionable activities. Many do; libertarians are likely to condemn many of the same things as a conservative or a liberal — they just don’t want the “offenders” thrown in jail for their moral failings.

Understandably, this position puts libertarians very much at odds with both conservatives and liberals because they both are quite prepared to have the state legislate moral behavior. Conservatives want things such as gambling, drug use, prostitution, and pornography either heavily regulated or, preferably, proscribed altogether. Typically, leftists take a, well, more liberal view of social conduct and allow for greater freedom of action in individual relationships, but are far less tolerant of “politically incorrect” acts and speech. Of course, the line between the two is becoming increasingly blurred.

One area where both liberals and conservatives are sure to agree is Las Vegas’s newest pleasure pastime — a game called Hunting for Bambi. In the desert outside Sin City, men are paying amounts ranging from \$5,000 to as much as \$10,000 to run around with a paintball gun and shoot at naked women. According to the *Washington Times*, “Men have come from as far away as Germany to participate in the game” where they don a camouflage uniform, load up a CO2-powered pistol, and chase down women — called Bambis — and shoot at them with exploding paint-filled pellets ... just for fun.

This game surely has all the ingredients for a genuine uproar that can cross party lines. Think of it: From the perspective of a right-winger, it's an offensive and degrading sport that violates community norms regarding proper or moral behavior. For leftists, it's an offensive and degrading sport that makes women the objects of pent-up male sexual aggression. One side reaches its conclusion on the basis of a puritanical moral worldview, usually grounded in religion, while the other would insist that such activities further expose our patriarchal, woman-hating, sexist society for what it is. Both sides may have an argument.

But the really important question is: Should the game be illegal? Not that anyone is suggesting that it ought to be — not yet, anyway — but the question needs answering because it is relevant to so many other “games” that Americans would like to play that *are* illegal, such as prostitution or drug use. If Hunting for Bambi gets a pass, should not these, as well?

Let's take a look at the essentials. In the Bambi game, the girls are not forced to take part. They voluntarily strip to their birthday suits and offer themselves as “targets” for the “hunters” — and for their trouble, they are well compensated. The *Times* report asks, “So why do women agree to strip down and run around the desert dodging paintballs? [One Bambi] says it's good money. ‘It's \$2,500 if you don't get hit ... \$1,000 if you do.’” Not bad for an afternoon's work.

On the other hand, if these same women wanted to have sex for money, or were using or selling an arbitrarily prohibited substance, they would be breaking the law and would face a heavy penalty.

But what's the difference? In each case, the parties to the trade are there of their own volition (and in two of them there is the common feature that the women are both naked and physically active), and no force is involved (though physical pain is a factor, as the paintballs have been known to draw Bambis' blood, though philosophically speaking, this is no different from the kind of violence one sees in a boxing ring or a football game). Finally, each participant believes he or she is gaining from the exchange, or else money wouldn't be changing hands. Where is the need for government intervention?

Many Americans feel that allowing drug use or prostitution to go on without legal persecution could have negative consequences, such as an erosion of our “national character.” They may be right, but they also conveniently ignore the negative repercussions of prohibition. For instance, the Bambi women are protected, theoretically at least, from exploitation precisely because their job *is* legal. If their employer defrauds them in some way, they have recourse to the law.

Compare this with the plight of prostitutes, who depend on the good character of their pimp for protection. So, too, the drug user or drug dealer, whose only real option for settling

conflicts is violence (which explains why no one does a drive-by shooting over a bottle of Jack Daniels any more). Some would argue that such victims are only “getting what they deserve,” but this is just an extension, not an explanation and certainly not a justification, of the fallacious view that certain peaceful acts deserve punishment.

This isn't to suggest that people should abandon their moral beliefs and view all peaceful conduct as being moral by default. There are certainly peaceful pursuits that deserve moral condemnation, but that doesn't mean they ought to be illegal. Free people create governments to protect their individual rights, which can be violated only through the use of force or fraud. If neither can be proved in any given relationship, then the state, and the moral bullies who run it, should butt out. They should certainly feel free to preach, teach, persuade, educate, or verbally condemn those whose activities they find offensive — that too is a symbol of a free society — but if a Bambi wants to run around naked, sleep with John, or sell drugs for money, it's nobody's business but hers.

Libertarians, like other Americans, have deeply felt convictions about what constitutes proper moral behavior. They are Christians, atheists, Objectivists, humanists, environmentalists; they go to church, football games, movies, and potluck socials, and one isn't likely to find them disproportionately represented on the firing line in the Nevada desert; some take drugs, most don't. In short, their preferred pastimes are much the same as anyone else's, and far from being amoral, they too hold opinions on the way people ought to act.

The difference, however, is that libertarians are united in their belief that so long as no one's rights are being violated, the government cannot be morally called in to act as regulator of civil society. “The right to think and act as one chooses necessarily includes the right to choose incorrectly,” wrote philosopher Leonard Peikoff. “The goal of a proper society, accordingly, is not to compel truth or virtue (which would be a contradiction in terms), but to make them *possible* — by ensuring that men are left free.”

Hunting for Bambi is rightfully legal. So too should be every other form of peaceful recreation, however offensive to some, or even most, Americans.

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