

Anthony Comegna: Last week, Georgetown philosopher Jason Brennan joined us to talk about classical liberalism and contemporary political philosophy and we covered a wide range of contributions and themes that dominate the landscape, but what about the things we are best at? The things we do the worst, what work should we be doing but we don't? Let's get down to it with part two from Jason Brennan.

All right, let's keep teasing out these threads of sort of classical liberalism's current status within the Academy and the relative depth of imprint that it's made there. Last week we talked about natural rights theory, equality, justice, the sort of sanctity of conscience, tolerance, openness and anti-authoritarianism that at least we hope to aspire to and certainly fall short of quite a bit. What other areas do you think that classical liberal scholars have contributed to in really serious and important ways?

Jason Brennan: Perhaps maybe the most important thing we're doing, in part because it's the most high stakes, is pushing the argument for free migration. Free right to move anywhere that you want. For whatever reason, in the past few hundred years, classical liberals haven't really been focusing on this, but I think there's been a recognition in the past 10 years that the right to be able to live where you want to live, to be able to take a job wherever you are offered a job. To be able to move freely from one country to another is as fundamental and important as really any right. In fact, it's probably more important than things like the right to free speech. It's certainly more important than the right to vote. It's more important than like the right to be able to own a business. It's one of the most fundamental rights, in part because the stakes are just so incredibly high and so I think classical liberals have been on the vanguard of pushing this idea and now it is the thing that's being talked about that people are confronting seriously.

I'm right now writing a book with Dick Arneson called "Debating Capitalism" where we're going to be debating. We're not capitalism for and against, but rather what's the best form of capitalism. And he'll be advocating for social democracy and I'll be advocating, like free market welfare states, and I'll be advocating for something less than that. And chapter one of my book in my half is pretty much, "Look, either social democracy or open borders." If you have any kind of leftist intuitions and you know anything about the economics of open borders, like open borders beats social democracy by many orders of magnitude. So therefore open borders over social democracy. And the reason it has to do with what a social democracy is, like Sweden, is a political system in which the ultra, ultra rich are taxed and their money is redistributed to people who are merely very rich but at the expense of people who are genuinely poor.

So imagine like a new candidate comes to office and says or is trying to win the presidency. He says, "I want to tax the top 1% and give the money to the top 5% because I think the top 5% aren't getting rich fast enough compared to the top 1%" and you say, "Hey, Senator, it turns out that your policies genuinely harm the bottom 95%. make them much worse off. In fact, they're so bad that they

cut world production in half and make them languishing in poverty. I have ample empirical evidence here that if we were just to allow the different set of policies that this would actually cause them to have their income grow by a factor of at least five" and he's like, "Yeah, I don't care about those people." You wouldn't call that guy a left wing guy.

But that's basically what Social Democrats advocate and their argument is "Yeah, but we're talking about people outside our borders so they don't really matter." So I think that's something that classical liberals are pushing hard. It's incredibly important and people are starting to pay attention to it. These ideas are starting to spread now.

Anthony Comegna: But it sounds like the assumption in there, and I mean maybe you can flesh it out more for us, is that a sort of a classic right-wing libertarian gem that, you can't have both open borders and a welfare state, but what if you can? Certainly there are plenty of people who argue that you can and you should, that it's a moral duty to do that. So how would you respond?

Jason Brennan: Yeah, even in the book I say I'm not really sure how much of a conflict there is, but it depends on what you mean by "We're going to have a welfare state and open borders."

If we had open borders, there would be tremendous economic growth and because of that there would be a bigger tax base and there'd be more ability to pay for certain kinds of welfare services. But I think even optimistically, and I'm pretty optimistic about that stuff. I think even optimistically, what you can't have is the kinds of social services that the typical person in Sweden or Norway or Finland gets and just give that to anyone who would move there. It's too expensive, so you have to make a choice. Either we create a two-tiered society where domestic born people get one very high set of social services and access to welfare and immigrants are excluded from that and get close to nothing. Or alternatively you water it down and everyone has access to the same kind of welfare services, but they're much lower for everybody.

Which one is better? That's a good philosophical question. It's a good thing to debate, but what doesn't seem to be feasible is Sweden opens its borders to anyone who wants to move there, but everyone gets the same kind of level of welfare that current Swedish people get. So either way, you might be like, "Well, we're going to have social democracy for the top 5% or you're going to have less than social democracy for everybody." Which is better? Which is more fair? Which is more just? That's an exercise for the listener.

Anthony Comegna: Okay. So what other areas do you think have been really serious and important contributions?

Jason Brennan: When I look at what's happening in political philosophy, especially as done by philosophers, maybe not as much done in political science department by so-

called political theorists. I think there's a big movement towards PPE: politics, philosophy, and economics.

So what happened historically was if you go back in time and read Adam Smith or Thomas Hobbes or Locke or so on, they're not just pure philosophers, they're economists, they're historians, they're sociologists, they're... For them thinking about the efficacy of institutions and the causal mechanisms of how they work and the social science of institutions is part of what you do to be a philosopher. You have to care about consequences. You have to care about why we have the institutions we have. You don't just do pure normative theory. And then, because of specialization, what sort of happened by, you know, say 40 years ago, as you see philosophers who, it doesn't even occur to them to ask how institutions work. They just think their job is to come up with something like a moral utility curve, a ranking of all possible states of affairs from better to worse from a moral point of view.

And then they just hand that to economists and sociologists and tell us how far up on that curve we can get. But I think there's been a recognition that that even though in principle that's okay, but in fact it doesn't work. In fact, what happens is philosophers who don't study the social sciences will just make bad social scientific assumptions about how the world works. And then they'll end up writing theories that are, in a sense, highly irrelevant because they're based on a misunderstanding of what's happening and why. So there's been a big movement towards, if you're going to do serious political philosophy, you have to think about, you have to know the empirics, it will matter. And you see more and more of that I think in modern political philosophy where people start citing economists and historians and social scientists again, they're not just citing other philosophers.

The reason I think that's good for classical liberalism is that if people... Economics is not a classical liberal doctrine, but it certainly moves you in that direction compared to where the average philosopher is.

Anthony Comegna: Bringing back politic economy. I love it.

Jason Brennan: Absolutely. I think there's a movement towards political economy and you see so many jobs in it and departments calling themselves that and so on.

Anthony Comegna: Yeah, that's a healthy turn, I think.

Jason Brennan: The humane sciences. The humane studies they used to call them.

Anthony Comegna: Imagine that. I love it. So what do you think are some of our more overlooked contributions?

Jason Brennan: What's overlooked...

Anthony Comegna: Or something that should be regarded as much more important than perhaps it is?

Jason Brennan: I think Robert Nozick is highly underrated and the reason is because everyone misreads him. So that's a classic book that even today, if you take a political philosophy class at almost any university, you will be assigned that book.

But your professor will probably teach it wrong. He'll probably teach it wrong even if he's a libertarian. I think people miss what's going on in that book and miss how insightful it is. Chapter 10 of that book is really brilliant and most people don't understand what he's doing with it, but he's trying to give us a theory of like, "Well what is the best society?" And he's giving us an abstract theory about, it's the thing that people would choose if they could, if they could choose anything and they had to get other people to move there and they had this kind of hypothetically rather than a [inaudible] bargain. They're creating societies from scratch in a world of infinite universes and you have to recruit people to come live there and they can leave at any time, which societies would prevail and he recognizes there wouldn't just be one kind of society that would prevail. But you have the super structure that allows for freedom of movement and freedom of choice among all the different societies.

That's right. That's really the best theory of what a perfectly just system is that anyone's come up with I think. But people ignore it. They misread his critique of more than minimal States, so they misunderstand that. So that's one thing that I think we have this real gem of a book and it's just completely misunderstood. I mean there's other things too, but that's just one off the top of my head.

Anthony Comegna: Yeah, I mean Nozick certainly gets the short end of the stick in pop discussion of classical liberal philosophy. You know, anywhere on the internet Nozick is going to be sort of ranked up there with Milton Friedman as a milquetoast, quasi status or something. But I think you make a good point and that might be one reason I love video games that sort of play on that theory or that that aspect of building your own ideal system and just sort of letting it go. Now, where do you think that classical liberal political philosophers have failed most seriously or turned up short?

Jason Brennan: What have they missed?

I'm not sure they're really failing. I think, generally speaking, the work you see published is good work and part of the reason for that is that there's such a strong screening mechanism that really only the good work gets published. I was joking about this the other day. I write a lot of stuff that's critical of democracy, but man, when I write a paper, if I'm critical of democracy, I have to be super careful about everything I say because people, democracies a religion and if I'm mocking their God and so I have to get everything right or it's not going to get published. If you write a paper that defends democracy, it can be

utter garbage because it has the right conclusion and it'll get published pretty easily and you can completely straw man the other side and get away with it.

For that reason, I'm not saying that classical liberal philosophers are better. I think that because they have an unpopular point of view that for them to get published, their papers have to be really, really good. If it's going to get into a mainstream journal, and it's also, by the way, true of Marxist philosophers. I mean there's lots of Marxist journals that are garbage, but when you see a paper that is Marxist published in a mainstream political philosophy journal, it tends to be really, really good because they have that same kind of prejudice against them. They have to pass a higher bar. So I don't think that the problem is their lack of attentiveness. I don't think it's a lack of care or a lack of that. I think the work that you see being done by political philosophers is really good. If anything, I would be critical of what you see on the internet and kind of baby libertarianism where people don't understand the debates.

I mean there's so many examples of this, but just if I go on Facebook right now and I look at my like kind of college libertarian friends, there'll be passing along memes that make fun of the idea of like state provision of public goods. They'll have something like that guy wasn't he Milton or something from office space? Not the other guy. But they're like the consultants come in and they talk to this person and like, "So what do you do?" And he's like, you know, "I match up like the taxpayers want roads." He's like, "Oh, so you provide the roads." "Well, no the taxpayers pay for them." "Well, does the government build them?" "No, private companies build them." "Oh, so then why do we need the government?" And they're like, "Aha, a decisive refutation of the public goods argument."

And it isn't. Because you're not actually taking it seriously. You don't understand the mechanism by which a public goods argument works. So, that's not a response to it. If you know that argument just like that's straw manning, it's irrelevant. Or they'll say things like, "Libertarianism, because don't you agree that we shouldn't aggress against one another?" "Yes, I agree to that says almost everybody." "Good, so therefore libertarianism." What?

I mean, a Marxist is going to go, no, you don't understand. I think that private property is a form of aggression and only socialism is non-aggression and you don't have a response because you haven't taken seriously the reason they think what they think. So if anything, the problem is sort of like the pop version of libertarianism is not sophisticated enough. It doesn't understand why the other side disagrees and it doesn't respond to them adequately. By the way, that's not a problem with libertarianism per se. If you go and read the equivalent Marxist arguments that like people are posting on Facebook, they're equally bad in a stupid manner, as much as straw manning as everyone else. If you read like left liberals just, you know, it's not very good. So there is a problem in that like the people that are the masses of people who affiliate with an ideology often have both an unsophisticated understanding of their own

ideology and an even less sophisticated understanding of why people disagree with them.

Anthony Comegna: I think that's absolutely true. And I mean it makes me wonder though. So maybe the area of quote, failure to focus on is perhaps more things to do with perspective than the quality of ideas. So I'm wondering, what areas do we not focus on enough that we should be doing more work in? Where could we be making important interventions that we just haven't yet? Why are we resistant perhaps to intervening in some fields like taking, say, intersectionality seriously and incorporating it into our work.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, you're right. I was thinking about that kind of thing too, like issues about race and gender and power relations between races and genders. There's often a heavy aversion to thinking about that stuff and I don't think it's because libertarians have nothing smart to say about it. I think they actually have lots of very smart things to say about it. I think they have lots of evidence that, for example, market societies break down barriers, that they incentivize people to overcome their prejudices. The *Doux Commerce* thesis is correct. There's really good evidence for it that that markets, you know Gary Becker's thesis about why markets have a tendency to eliminate discrimination is right. We have good evidence for it. I think also that, I mentioned open borders before. The open border system is a system which would tremendously benefit non white people.

It would benefit white people too, but it would tremendously benefit non white people around the world much more than anything that like your typical left wing philosopher is advocating. So we don't talk about that. And I think we don't talk about it in part for two reasons.

One is because some philosophers say or some like libertarian thinkers go, "Well, libertarianism is a theory of what the state should do and social relations, however important those are, those aren't state activity. And I don't believe that States should regulate people's freedom of association. And so if people are racist, well that's bad, but it's not the state's job to fix it." Which doesn't mean it's not worth talking about. And it's still worth talking about how different kinds of institutions can overcome those problems or not. And the other thing they do is I think it's just a kind of unwillingness to affiliate with certain people.

Like we think of ourselves as members of tribes, political tribes, those people who talk about this, they're over in that tribe over there. So anything they take seriously, we shouldn't take seriously because that's our way of telling them that we don't like them. What we count as problems worth working on is partly determined by our tribal affiliation. So since the other tribe came up with this problem, we ignore it.

The problem too is that we see all these books that are basically slandering libertarians. There's a certain segment of low quality, not intellectually

sophisticated academics who don't have technical skills. The ability to sort of assess causality or to do math or apparently even to read quotations from other books and correctly re-quote them. They have this weird thing about inserting quotations and inserting words into quotes that weren't there or removing words that makes the thing change.

And it's often, you see a lot of that in history, where you have just like leftist historians who just lack minimal intellectual seriousness and engage in behaviors that I would have you expelled from my program if you did this. It would be considered academic dishonesty. But the only argument they know how to make is if you disagree with me, you're racist. And so what they do is they take people like James Buchanan and Milton Friedman and they misquote them, insert words into their phrases and then call them racist and we dismiss them.

So it's clear that for some people that we're supposed to be engaging with, they basically see the world as racist and not racist and that's all they care about. So you have to be able to engage with them, not them in particular, someone like Nancy MacLean, she's just intellectually dishonest, but engage with like people who are concerned about those things. There's a reason those kinds of arguments resonate is because this is an issue that matters. So you need to be able to engage in that issue in a sophisticated way.

Anthony Comegna: Now that brings me very perfectly right to my next question, which is that you and a one of my old mentors from my student days here at IHS, Phil Magnus, you guys published a book relatively recently called "Cracks in the Ivory Tower" and I often think that academics are painfully unaware of how medieval their institution is. I mean literally the medieval institution, the modern university, and I have serious doubts as to whether it will even be around still in 20 to 30 years, at least in any recognizable form. I sort of think about it like old boarding schools, say in the 19th century or something, that was a regular thing apparently. And now we kind of don't understand how they're supposed to work. They're very rare. We understand they're still around. And I guess people like Judge Kavanaugh and his Chevy Chase crew went to them or something, but it's not a place where normal people go.

I'm wondering if that's sort of how the university system will look 30 years from now and it will all more or less have just disappeared right out from under people who seem to think that their position of power and authority and influence will be entrenched forevermore and that that's the rightful way of the universe. But things are changing awfully quickly. So I don't know. What do you think about that? Will the university system still be around like this in 30 years time?

Jason Brennan: Yeah. Good question. I mean, for what that book is about, we don't get into issues about left wing versus right wing. We completely avoid that. But what that book is meant to be is a public choice analysis of the modern university. We

say universities engage in a lot of immoral and dysfunctional behavior. This is explained not by them being populated by bad apples in the left or the right, but explained by bad incentives created by bad internal rules. And then we go through and critique the behaviors, including not the behaviors that obviously spring to mind, but things that are kind of invisible to people. So one of our chapters, am I allowed to swear on this podcast? I swear in the book.

Anthony Comegna: Sure, light swear is fine.

Jason Brennan: This was approved by Oxford university press. Chapter three is called "Why Most Academic Advertising is Immoral Bullshit."

And what we point out is that, the way that universities engage in marketing, the kinds of promises they make, the FDA would not allow a drug company to get away with that. A company selling cars, would not be allowed to get away with that. They would get sued and fined, but universities can make promises that they not only don't know whether they can keep, but in fact research shows they fail to keep. So we do a lot of stuff like that in the book and show that there's dysfunction at the fundamental root of academia. It's not just spending too much money on sports. It's not just having rock climbing walls that they don't need, it's actually the way that gen ed classes are designed and what you have to take. This is all explained by rent seeking and other kinds of bad incentives.

So we're very critical of universities. We say that people don't learn very much. We that most research isn't worth doing, that most academics are wasting each other's time and so on. We're even critical of ourselves. I admit ways that I overspend that I don't need to. At the end we're like, "Oh, well are universities going to go away?" And our answer is no, we don't think so. We think that they're here to stay. And part of the reason for that is that if someone says, "But you don't understand, all that learning that you get in a university, you can get that online. So why would we have a university?" We go, "Learning? Why are you talking about learning? What does it have to do with going to a university?" Going to a university to learn is like taking a transatlantic flight to get a meal.

That's not what it's about. And we know that because, as my friend Brian Kaplan points out, the very fact that you're paying for a degree proves you're not there to learn. If you want to get a Princeton education you can for free. Well, almost for free. You just move to Princeton and you just show up and sit in the back of the room and most professors won't even know who you are and they won't like worry about whether you're actually enrolled in the class and if you get the rare professor that actually checks "Are you enrolled in my class?" What you do is you say, "I know you're not supposed to do this but I just have an utter fascination for avant-garde Romanian poetry of the 17th century. Can I please just sit in on your class?" And the professor will be absolutely delighted and say yes 95% of the time. So you can go and watch Berkeley and MIT have made like

almost all their class materials and lectures online for free and you can go and watch that stuff and get a world class education for free.

If you're in college, you're not there for the education, you're there for the credential and right now there is no good substitute for that kind of credential, and I doubt that there could be. So as Brian Kaplan points out, and we agree, if there were a more efficient way of delivering that credential that would no longer serve as a good credential. An analogy, I think this is mine, not his, is, I say to my students imagine that diamonds suddenly became really inexpensive. What would happen to the price of engagement rings? And the answer is they would switch to something other than diamonds. It's actually important for the engagement ring to serve its signal of sincerity. Proof that I really do want to marry the person I'm offering the ring to. It has to be expensive. If it were cheap, then saying, "Will you marry me?" wouldn't convey the same message.

So to have the credentialing that universities do is about proving to potential employers and others that you're a smart, perseverant, and conformist. The perseverant part is really important. It has to be difficult and it has to take a long time. So more efficient mechanisms of delivery won't provide that kind of thing, they might make you learn more.

But we're not testing for learning. Who cares about learning? Students don't learn very much at all. Only maybe one out of 10 students learns much at all in college. They don't learn much. They forget almost everything that they learned too. They don't develop their soft skills. They don't develop much of their hard skills. But what they do do is prove to people that they have what it takes. They have the right stuff. So I don't see anything out there on the horizon that will serve as a substitute or a competitor for that. Online classes? Sure. But that's not offering what universities offer. It's offering something else.

Anthony Comegna: Yeah. You know, you say that, and it strikes me that the medieval character of the university is not the production of the good involved here. It's the sort of guild system of privilege attached to it. So you pay to get into the guild of credentialed philosophers and then to get credentialing from them. And that's essentially the function that it serves. So I wonder if the destruction of the university system or the serious shakeup of it would really require a reassessment of that factor rather than the delivery of education services.

Jason Brennan: Thinking about universities, we didn't say this in the book. We might write a sequel book that we'll get into this point. Universities tend to be very left wing places, but they're in a sense a very right wing kind of institution because what they do is create hierarchies and reinforce them. And Tyler Cowen has a sort of funny theory about Los Angeles, where he says "Los Angeles is this incredibly hierarchical town with the winners get all the gains and losers get nothing. And yet to counterbalance this, you have permeated with like a left wing kind of talk. And then towns where people are actually very equal are towns where you have right-wing talk."

So he almost thinks that like the ideology that people espouse balances against the functioning of their institution and their society. So I think it's a plausible idea and I think you see it in academia where it's an incredibly right-wing, hierarchical, status-based institution that serves as a gatekeeper to the upper class and then we talk social justice talk as we continually undermine it. I think the average auto mechanic does a lot more to serve social justice and the average professor of peace and justice studies.

Anthony Comegna: I love that. It's profoundly conservative and traditionalist and it kind of cracks me up how blind to that the vast majority of the academic scene. Now I'm wondering though, on that medieval theme, what kinds of conditions might there be that produce some sort of new classical liberal Renaissance in academia? Is such a thing even possible?

Jason Brennan: It could be, and you know, we should say that it's true that in some fields, like as a classical liberal, you can't cut it at all unless you just hide. Like you're not going to get hired in English as a classical liberal English scholar. In other fields, classical liberals do quite fine. I mean the number one ranked political philosophy program in philosophy is the University of Arizona and it's filled with classical liberal and libertarian philosophers. And everyone knows that. I frankly have done really well and everyone, I'm out, people know what I think. And yeah, there are people that will discriminate against me for that. Maybe if I had the same productivity and had published left liberal stuff, I'd be at like Princeton rather than Georgetown. But nevertheless, I've still been rewarded for my work rather than not. In some fields, people are pretty open to it and accepting and you do well and you can have a lot of influence. In others, you can't.

Why that is, is hard to say. It seems to me that in fields where there's higher standards for work, so in economics the typical paper is you come up with a problem, you have to define that problem clearly, you have to come up with a plausible mathematical model that explains how you would analyze a problem, and then you have to find a data set in a natural experiment that actually illustrates the problem as you to test your model. You can bullshit that, but you can't do too much of it. There's a certain point that you... Lying with number, it's true that people can lie with statistics, but we don't overstate how easy it is to do that, especially when people are trained to look for you lying with statistics.

And I think that keeps people relatively honest and relatively open. In philosophy, the standard is something like, you have to start with premises that are widely accepted by people who disagree with you and show these premises logically imply a conclusion that's not obvious. And we're all trained in logic, we're trained in looking for counterexamples and we're trained for pointing out that when principles lead to absurd consequences, and I think that keeps people relatively honest.

So, in some fields there's a sort of openness to new ideas because of that. And in other fields where there aren't really standards, per se, there isn't. And so it's

many times the certain fields of the humanities where you don't have these standards and what you're actually seeing in many of these fields is that they're not even producing. It's not just they have work that's all sharing the same ideology, there's actually a movement away from producing work at all where you're having people arguing we shouldn't have to write papers in English anymore. We should just get to do activism instead of scholarship. Like why doesn't activism count as scholarship? And then people fall over one another to kind of show that they're the most morally pure and good.

So you know, math and logic I think have a check that leads to openness. Whether classical liberals will win in the end, who knows. I think unfortunately that people have a tendency to form an ideology around the age 16, if they ever form one. Again, like the last podcast, I said, eight out of 16 people have a real ideology. Of those eight out of 16 people who form an ideology, they tend to form it at age 16 and then what they learn to do in college and grad school is rationalize it better. So I don't know if people are going to change their minds, but I do think that there's been a flourishing of really good classical liberal thinking in economics and philosophy and political science over the past 20, 30 years.

Anthony Comegna: Our very best to Professor Brennan, again, and to all of you for joining us. Check back in next week for more from us at *Ideas in Progress*. And in the meantime, toss us a rate and review wherever you get the show.