

Polish Journal
of Political
Science

Volume 11 Issue 1 (2025)

Polish Journal of Political Science
Volume 11 Issue 1

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The journal is published by the Interdisciplinary Research Center
of the University of Warsaw "Identity – Dialogue – Security"
(Interdyscyplinarne Centrum Badawcze Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego
„Tożsamość – Dialog – Bezpieczeństwo”)

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Polish Journal of Political Science

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Warsaw 2025

eISSN 2391-3991

Original version: e-book

Submit your paper: pjps@uw.edu.pl



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Walter E. Block*

Contra Matt Zwolinski on Murray Rothbard on Ownership and Property**

DOI: [10.58183/pjps.03012025](https://doi.org/10.58183/pjps.03012025)

Abstract

Murray Rothbard offers a libertarian analysis of ownership and property rights. He predicates this theory on three foundational principles: the homesteading of virgin land; legitimate title transfer thereafter, such as through barter, purchase, sale, lending, borrowing, gambling, or gift-giving; and free association: no one should be compelled to associate with anyone else against his will. Matt Zwolinski erroneously demurs. He confuses ownership with control and is confused about one of the most important distinctions in all of political economic philosophy: that between the normative and the positive. The present paper is an attempt to defend the views of the former against the critique of the latter.

Keywords

self-ownership, property rights, libertarianism, freedom

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** I owe a debt of gratitude to David
Gordon for his comments on an
earlier version of this paper. Need-
less to say, I alone am responsible
for all remaining errors of omission
and commission.

Introduction

Murray Rothbard and Matt Zwolinski, both eminent and widely published libertarians, diverge in their conception of what this philosophy is all about. According to the old aphorism, if you attack the king, you must kill him. Rothbard is not widely known as the king of libertarianism, but his well-deserved moniker is “Mr. Libertarian,” which is as close as one can get to that honorific in this vale of tears we inhabit. It is fair to say that although Rothbard was by no means the first libertarian ever to publish, without him this perspective would not have attained the relevance it now enjoys. His publications of 1973 and 1998 together constitute the bible of libertarianism. Another important contributor is Robert Nozick,¹ who rejects Rothbard’s anarcho-capitalism but accepts much of the rest of Rothbard’s magnificent contribution. Has Zwolinski killed (the ideas of) Rothbard? Certainly not, as I demonstrate in the present essay.

My research methodology consists of quoting heavily from Zwolinski² and then attempting to refute his deviations from the one true philosophy of libertarianism, the one articulated by Rothbard. My research objective is to get the proverbial one millionth of an inch closer to the Truth, with a capital T, insofar as libertarianism is concerned. The questions I pose are in the form of criticisms. Both gifted authors are, of course, libertarians, so there is a limit to how far one can deviate from the other. But when they do, I side with Rothbard and criticize Zwolinski.

1. R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Basic Books 1974.

2. M. Zwolinski, *Reading The Ethics of Liberty, Part 3 – Rothbard’s Confusion About Self-Ownership*, 2012, <http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2012/10/reading-the-ethics-of-liberty-part-3-rothbards-confusion-about-self-ownership/>, (access 20.01.2025).

3. Unless otherwise specified, all subsequent quotes from Zwolinski will be from this one essay of his. Ditto for references to Rothbard. Unless otherwise stated, all references refer to M.N. Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*, New York University Press 1998.

4. Ibidem.

5. There is not much support for Rothbard emanating from Zwolinski. The latter also criticizes the former in: M. Zwolinski, *Reading The Ethics of Liberty, Part 1 – Hoppe’s Introduction*, 2012, <http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2012/06/reading-the-ethics-of-liberty-part-1-hoppes-introduction/>, (access 20.01.2025); M. Zwolinski, *Reading The Ethics of Liberty, Part 2 – Rothbard on Natural Law*, 2012, <http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2012/07/reading-the-ethics-of-liberty-part-2-rothbard-on-natural-law/>, (access 20.01.2025); M. Zwolinski, *Reading The Ethics of Liberty, Part 4 – Rothbard’s Second Argument for Self-Ownership*,

Main Analysis

Zwolinski³ starts off his critique of Rothbard’s “The Ethics of Liberty”⁴ with a negative assessment of the latter’s Chapter 6.⁵ He begins with an important insight: “(...) ownership really is an essentially interpersonal concept. To claim ownership over a thing – or over one’s self! – is to make a claim against others. It is to claim, at a minimum, that they must refrain from interfering in your use of the thing.”⁶ This is an accurate and well-founded observation. For example, if Crusoe is on an island by himself, his ownership of his own body and the items he possesses is moot. There is, by definition, no one else there to contest any such claims. This takes virtually all the wind out of the sails of the relevance of the ownership concept.

But then Zwolinski runs into a bit of difficulty. He continues: “That kind of interpersonal claim is the essence of property. Without it, you simply don’t have property. A thief might control the purse he has stolen from you, but he doesn’t own it. Your ownership of the purse, in contrast, isn’t defeated

by the fact that the thief is now controlling it. What gives you ownership is not actual control, but the normative right to control.⁷ This must be disagreed with. Ownership means control over the item and the ability to prevent others from interfering with it. Right now, the criminal has both. He, not the rightful owner, is the owner de facto. Of course, the thief is not the rightful owner de jure, but that is an entirely different matter. Zwolinski accuses Rothbard of being guilty of a “continuing conflation between normative and descriptive claims,”⁸ but here he himself is guilty of this precise philosophical error. Whether or not we can deduce an “ought” from an “is” is a highly technical matter. Whether or not there is a distinction between them is not. Ownership, here, is a positive, not a normative, claim. The robber now owns what he took from the victim, Zwolinski to the contrary notwithstanding. This is unjustified, of course. But it is a fact, if ownership consists of the ability to control something and prevent others from doing so. The thief now has this ability, not the rightful owner.

Zwolinski continues to demonstrate that his understanding of the normative–positive distinction is somewhat suspect. He states: “I’m not saying that Crusoe doesn’t own himself, or the nuts and berries he mixes his labor with. I’m saying that Rothbard hasn’t shown that he does. Pointing to the ‘natural fact’ that Crusoe controls himself and his berries does not establish that he owns them in the sense of having a moral claim against others. To think that it does is to confuse the ‘is’ of what Crusoe possesses with the ‘ought’ of what he has a right to possess.”⁹ Let us pause for a moment on this issue. When Crusoe is on the island all by his lonesome, the issue of ownership simply does not arise. For part and parcel of ownership is the ability¹⁰ to prevent others from encroaching on that which is owned. It is only when Friday¹¹ shows up that ownership comes into being; if Crusoe truly owns a coconut, he is able to prevent Friday from using it without his permission. If he cannot prevent this incursion, he is, to that extent, still of course the rightful owner, but no longer the actual one.

Let us now welcome Friday to the island. Rothbard would claim that Crusoe not only owns himself and all the land and other products with which he has “mixed his labor,” but also rightfully so. Zwolinski agrees but denies that Rothbard has established any such thing. Au contraire, the latter certainly has accomplished this task. How does he do it? One of the most brilliant insights in all of political economic philosophy is Rothbard’s tripartite division of possible ownership scenarios. First is the libertarian one: each of us owns ourselves; no one owns anyone else. Second, we each own a proportional share of everyone else. Given that there are now some eight billion of us on the third rock from the sun, we each own one eight-billionth of ourselves and, also, one eight-billionth of everyone else, too. Rothbard dismisses this as preposterous. We can’t own ourselves, but we can own

2012, <http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2012/10/reading-the-ethics-of-liberty-part-4-rothbards-second-argument-for-self-ownership/>, (access 20.01.2025); M. Zwolinski, *How Not to Argue for Libertarianism*, 2011, <http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2011/05/how-not-to-argue-for-libertarianism/>, (access 20.01.2025). For a defense of Rothbard (1998) against the attacks made against him by Zwolinski, see: D. Gordon, *Zwolinski and Woods on the Basic Income Guarantee*, Mises Institute 2015, <https://mises.org/wire/zwolinski-and-woods-basic-income-guarantee>, (access 20.01.2025); D. Gordon, *Zwolinski on the NAP*, Mises Institute 2013, <https://mises.org/wire/zwolinski-nap>, (access 20.01.2025); D. Gordon, *In Defense of Non-Aggression*, Mises Institute 2013, <https://mises.org/library/defense-non-aggression>, (access 20.01.2025).

6. M. Zwolinski, *Reading The Ethics of Liberty*, Part 3..., op. cit.

7. Ibidem.

8. Ibidem.

9. Ibidem.

10. Not the right.

11. Friday is a central character in Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1719.

a small bit of all of humanity? Minor detail: we would all perish, since we couldn't even feed ourselves. We couldn't so much as lift our arms or open our mouths to take in food without getting permission from the majority of our "owners": one more than 50% of the eight billion of us. Third, some people, the Joneses in Rothbard's theoretical tale, own all of the other people on the planet. Rothbard gives the back of his hand to this option, too; it is not generalizable to all people, and no one can ever come up with a relevant difference between the Jones clan and others such that it is justifiable for them to own all of us¹² What is Zwolinski's response to this jewel in the crown of libertarian theory? He dismisses it contemptuously. One is tempted to rehearse that old adage about "pearls before you know what," but this would be unfair. Professor Zwolinski does have his reasons for rejecting Rothbard's brilliant insight and, say what you will in criticism, they do demonstrate a high degree of philosophical talent on his part. First, he argues by analogy to land:

"Consider the ownership one might have in a piece of land. At its core, we might think, to own a piece of land is to have the right to use the land as one sees fit, and to exclude others from using it without one's permission. But even if we grant this 'core' concept of ownership, it leaves a great number of questions unanswered. What rights does one have to, say, the minerals located below the surface of one's land, and how deep do one's rights go? How high above one's land do they go? High enough to prohibit planes from flying over it? Satellites from orbiting above it? Does your ownership give you the right to dam any rivers that might flow through your land and onto mine? If your land blocks the only path between my land and some valuable unowned resource, like an ocean, do I have the right to cross your land without permission to get there? The point of this litany of questions – and it is one that would be easy to extend ad infinitum – is not to push a kind of skepticism. I'm not saying that these kinds of questions are unanswerable, or that all answers are equally good. What I'm saying is that different answers to these questions will get you different accounts of what it means to own something, and that Rothbard's 'either you own yourself or someone else does' argument depends on illegitimately ignoring a vast range of conceptual possibilities. Because what is true of your ownership of land is true of your ownership of yourself. One possibility, to be sure, is that we all own ourselves in the robust libertarian way that Rothbard assumes. But there are plenty of others. We might own ourselves in this robust way except that others have a claim-right against us that we provide them with assistance in situations of dire emergency. We might own ourselves in the sense of being able to use and sell our labor pretty much as we see fit, but lack the liberty-right to sell body parts like kidneys or hearts. We might have the liberty-right to use and sell our labor, but not the claim-right to the full market value of our labor. And so on."¹³

12. The footnote has been moved to the bottom of the text, click [here](#) to go to it.

13. M. Zwolinski, *Reading The Ethics of Liberty, Part 4...*, op. cit.

There are degrees of ownership of humans too. If someone is a slave, he is not a full owner; perhaps a partial owner. Then, too, if a woman is raped, to some degree she does not have full ownership of herself. The same applies to this author's mention of "dire emergency," "body parts," and labor value. One possible way to answer Zwolinski is to claim that he confuses the degree of ownership with who precisely is the owner. The two are not unrelated for some purposes, but for the issue at hand, they are as night and day, oil and water, fish and bicycles. Rothbard is talking about *who* owns something; Zwolinski mentions the *extent* to which anyone owns anything. But never the twain shall meet. They are entirely different philosophical concepts. What is true of one has no implication for the truth value of the other. But this is not fully responsive, since Zwolinski can reply, for example, in the case of "dire necessity," that other people own our labor, thus our bodies, and we of course own theirs, but only when such calamitous emergencies arise.

However, remember, Rothbard mentions three states of the world, and he means them to be exhaustive. One: we each own ourselves, the "robust" Rothbardian view. Two: we each own a proportionate share of ourselves plus, mutually, everyone else. Three: the Jones people are the proper proprietors of all the rest of us. But Zwolinski's "dire emergency" scenario fits only into the second of these.¹⁴ Only now, instead of owning 100% of everyone else, we own a lesser amount of them, and, of course, they own a lesser amount of us. But why should this be the case?¹⁵ As Rothbard states: "It is difficult to see why a newborn Pakistani baby should have a moral claim to a quotal share of ownership of a piece of Iowa land that someone has just transformed into a wheatfield – and vice versa of course for an Iowan baby and a Pakistani farm."¹⁶ But it is equally "difficult" to see why a Pakistani of whatever age should have a property right over any aged Iowan, and of course vice versa. Yet, this is precisely the claim that Zwolinski stakes out. It appears to me that he must defend it. Of course, he does no such thing, nor does he see any reason for doing so. He rests content, implicitly, with the view that Rothbard's tripartite distinction has been undermined. It was clear that in the case of 100% mutual quotal ownership of persons, we would all die, since we would not even be justified in feeding ourselves without the permission of 50% plus one of all people on the planet. How does Zwolinski's scenario fare? Posit that, in his view, we all own 99% of ourselves, but that everyone else owns 1% of us, and we, of course, own 1% of everyone else.¹⁷ Are we entitled to feed ourselves without the permission of everyone else? If so, Zwolinski's scenario is plausible in that it does not imply the massive death of everyone. But he is very far indeed from establishing that everyone owns 1% of the wealth, time, and effort of everyone else.

14. As do his other examples, "body parts" and labor value.

15. Add this to the list of 99%–1% anomalies: you may only feed and clothe 99% of yourself. The 7 billion owners of the remaining 1% may demand that you refrain from hang gliding, rock climbing, or engaging in any dangerous activities with "their" 1% of you?

16. M.N. Rothbard, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto*, Ludwig von Mises Institute 2006, p. 42.

17. Here, I am positing, arguendo, that Zwolinski's "dire emergency," "body parts" and labor value weigh in at 1%.

I will attempt to express this idea in a different form. There are two types of partnerships. The usual one is where the majority owner can overrule his partners every time, but the latter receive a proportionate share of the profits. For example, A owns 51% of the company, B owns 49%. Every time the two disagree on a course of action, with no exceptions, A makes the determination. The only thing A owes B is 49% of the profits. But the “partnership” proposed by Zwolinski is an entirely different matter. Here, we each own 99% of ourselves, but our “partners,” all of the remaining people on the planet, own 1% of us, and, of course, we own a similar proportion of all of them.¹⁸ But this is very different from an ordinary partnership. Let Y equal ourselves, the 99% owners, and Z be all the other owners of that remaining 1% of ourselves. This case is very different from the A–B partnership mentioned above. There, A made all the decisions. Here, Y has an obligation to allow Z to overrule him, provided that there is “dire necessity.” Can a Rothbardian *reductio ad absurdum* be launched at this proposal, as even Zwolinski acknowledges, which can totally undermine Rothbard’s second scenario where we all own a quotal share of everyone? Yes, it can. For there is always at least one person on the planet who is undergoing “dire necessity.” He has a right to go to his fellow man, all of the rest of us, to demand help. None may refuse him. In actual fact, there will be far more than one person who can reasonably call on others for help under this rubric. Thus, none of us can call our lives our own. We are always vulnerable to the dire emergency demands of others. We may not all die, as surely we would under Rothbard’s second scenario, but surely our lives would be “nasty, brutish, and short.”

But this only scratches the surface of the difficulties in this philosopher’s position. He charges that “Rothbard (...) [is] (...) illegitimately ignoring a vast range of conceptual possibilities.”¹⁹ Of course he does. He must of necessity “ignore” them since no single publication can answer all issues. Rothbard is setting the stage, laying the foundations of the edifice; word limits imposed by editors and publishers prohibit him from filling in every interstice. But followers of his have attempted to do just that. For example, mineral rights? Rothbard is no devotee of the *ad coelum* doctrine; we cannot own land down to the center of the earth, since we have not homesteaded anywhere near there.²⁰ How high do property rights extend? See Rothbard’s analysis in “Law, Property Rights, and Air Pollution,”²¹ in which he again resorts to homesteading: rights extend as high as his buildings and trees rise, so long as there is no explicit threat from “buzzing” airplanes. Why not an inch higher or lower than that? Libertarians respond to this with the continuum problem.²² Damming rivers? It all depends upon private property rights in bodies of water such as oceans, rivers, and lakes.²³ There is also a significant and burgeoning libertarian literature that tries to make sense of the complicat-

18. These numbers are for illustration purposes only; Zwolinski never puts any numbers on this. Reading between the lines, and knowing him as a staunch libertarian, my guestimate is that we own quite a bit more of ourselves, and others own less of us.

19. M. Zwolinski, *Reading The Ethics of Liberty, Part 4...*, op. cit.

20. The footnote has been moved to the bottom of the text, click [here](#) to go to it.

21. M.N. Rothbard, *Law, Property Rights, and Air Pollution*, Mises Institute 2005, <http://www.mises.org/rothbard/lawproperty.pdf>, (access 20.01.2025).

22. W.E. Block, W. Barnett II, *Continuums*, “Journal Etica e Politica / Ethics & Politics”, 2008, Vol. 1, pp. 151–166.

23. W.E. Block, P.L. Nelson, *Water Capitalism...*, op. cit.

ed issue of land blockades and crossing owners' property without permission. Let us cut Rothbard some slack; he cannot possibly address all of these questions in any single publication.

What about Zwolinski's criticism to the effect that "different answers to these questions will get you different accounts of what it means to own something."²⁴ Indeed, this is beyond dispute. But it is not at all a telling critique of Rothbard's insight. It implies, improperly, that there is no one unique, correct answer to all of them. What is Zwolinski's evidence for denying such a conclusion? It does not exist, nor does this author see any need to supply any, the absence of which undermines his criticism. That is, perhaps there is only one correct answer to all of this author's challenges. If so, they fail.

Zwolinski is guilty of sharp practice in yet another regard. Rothbard maintains there are three basic choices: 1. We all own ourselves; 2. We each own a proportionate share of everyone; and 3. Some people own all others. Zwolinski points to numerous, nay, virtually infinite, combinations and permutations thereof, which is perfectly acceptable, and concludes from that fact that the three basic categories are invalid, which is fallacious. It is as if Rothbard points to left- and right-handedness, and Zwolinski rejects this distinction on the grounds that there are ambidextrous people. Or Rothbard points to hetero- and homosexuals, and Zwolinski triumphantly rejects this since there are undoubtedly bisexuals. Or, once again, Rothbard mentions males and females, and Zwolinski rejects this distinction on the grounds of hermaphrodites or transgender people. Or, one last example I simply cannot resist: let us consider colors. Zwolinski rejects Rothbard's categorization of the basic colors blue and yellow since, when combined, they create green; or ROYGBIV, the colors of the rainbow, since there are numerous, not to say infinite, gradations between them all. Allow me to add one more point: Rothbard points to prime numbers, 1, 3, 17, 223, etc., and Zwolinski rejects this concept because there are also gradations between them: 1.1, 1.2, 1.34, 17.6, etc. It simply does not logically follow that because gradations exist, basic distinctions are invalid. Rothbard makes a valid tripartite distinction, on the basis of which he rejects the latter two options. Zwolinski, obviously correctly, points to possible gradations and then invalidly concludes these distinctions are improper²⁵ since, in many ways, we can own parts of each other rather than others in their entirety. A commendable effort, yet it falls short of providing a satisfactory conclusion.

24. M. Zwolinski, *Reading The Ethics of Liberty, Part 4...*, op. cit.

25. Rothbard mentions a square and a triangle, and the critic Zwolinski retorts, there is such a thing as a parallelogram, and a trapezoid, which are combinations, variations, of these two geometrical figures. Therefore, Rothbard's distinction between a square and a triangle is invalid.

Conclusion

Let us conclude. In Zwolinski and his efforts herein, we have a worthy intellectual combatant against Rothbard. That the former does not lay a glove on the latter should not denigrate his sterling effort. Many better critics have also failed. Further, there is great benefit to these sorts of challenges: they enable us, nay, they practically require us, to delve deeper into the brilliance of Rothbard's initial contributions on this subject.

Footnotes:

12. In saying this I abstract from the institution of voluntary slavery. For libertarian support of this option, see: W.E. Block, *On slavery and libertarianism*, "Journal of Economic and Social Thought", 2015, Vol. 2, Issue 3, pp. 161-174; D. Frederick, *Voluntary Slavery*, "Las Torres de Lucca: Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política", 2014, Vol. 3 (4), pp. 115-137; *The Sanctity of Contract*, Bionic Mosquito 2014, <http://bionicosquito.blogspot.com/2014/04/the-sanctity-of-contract.html>, (access 20.01.2025); W.E. Block, *A Collection of Essays on Libertarian Jurisprudence: Alienability, once again; a libertarian theory of contracts*, "Saint Louis University Law Journal", 2014, Vol. 58, No. 2, pp. 547-554; H. Steiner, *Directed Duties and Inalienable Rights*, "Ethics", 2013, Vol. 123 (2), pp. 230-244; W.E. Block, *Privatizing Rivers and Voluntary Slave Contracts*, 2009, <http://archive.lewrockwell.com/block/block134.html>, (access 29.12.2024); W.E. Block, *Yes, Sell Rivers! And Make Legal Some Slave Contracts*, The Tyee 2009, <http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2009/07/24/SellRivers/>, (access 29.12.2024); M. Boldrin, D.K. Levine, *Against Intellectual Monopoly*, Cambridge University Press 2008; A.-K. Andersson, *An alleged contradiction in Nozick's entitlement theory*, "Journal of Libertarian Studies", 2007, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 43-63; W.E. Block, *Alienability: Reply to Kuflik*, "Humanomics", 2007, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 117-136; W.E. Block, *Secession*, "Dialogue", 2007, No. 4, pp. 1-14; W.E. Block, *Epstein on alienation: a rejoinder*, "International Journal of Social Economics", 2006, Vol. 33, No. 3-4, pp. 241-260; W.E. Block, *Ayn Rand and Austrian Economics: Two Peas in a Pod*, "The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies", 2005, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 259-269; W.E. Block, *Libertarianism, Positive Obligations and Property Abandonment: Children's Rights*, "International Journal of Social Economics", 2004, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 275-286; S. Kershnar, *A Liberal Argument for Slavery*, "Journal of Social Philosophy", 2003, Vol. 34 (4), pp. 510-536; W.E. Block, *Toward a Libertarian Theory of Inalienability: A Critique of Rothbard, Barnett, Gordon, Smith, Kinsella and Epstein*, "Journal of Libertarian Studies", 2003, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 39-85; W.E. Block, *A Libertarian Theory of Secession and Slavery*, 2002, <http://archive.lewrockwell.com/block/block15.html>, (access 12.09.2024); W.E. Block, *Alienability, Inalienability, Paternalism and the Law: Reply to Kronman*, "American Journal of Criminal Law", 2001, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 351-371; J.C. Lester, *Escape from Leviathan: Liberty, Welfare and Anarchy Reconciled*, Palgrave MacMillan 2000; W.E. Block, *Market Inalienability Once Again: Reply to Radin*, "Thomas Jefferson Law Review", 1999, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 37-88; H. Steiner, *An Essay on Rights*, Blackwell Publishers 1994, pp. 232-233; J.J. Thomson, *The Realm of Rights*, Harvard University Press 1990, pp. 283-284; W.E. Block, *Rent-a-womb market*, Thunder Bay Ontario Daily, 26.6.1988; J. Philmore, *The Libertarian Case for Slavery*, "The Philosophical Forum", 1982, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 43-58; W.E. Block, *Book review of*

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