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Libertarian angst: My problem with casinos and slots

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I've got to admit that I find the whole casino-gambling/slots business to be very messy. It challenges my libertarian instincts. I've managed largely to reconcile my libertarian positions on speech (I'm a near-absolutist) and in the realm of personal conduct (what J. S. Mill dubbed "self-regarding conduct") with my left-leaning positions on government's establishing a bottom floor beneath which no decent society allows any of its citizens to fall. I've managed to reconcile my opposition to teachers' and public employees' unions (and my strong support of labor's right to organize in the private sector) with my view that we should expand the public school day to a full eight hours, plus free breakfast/lunch/dinner for those kids who would not otherwise eat nutritious meals (regardless of income status). All of these positions I've worked out over the course of my life and work on the basis largely of experience as well as ideology. I'm comfortable with where I stand.

However, casinos and slots pose a challenge. Ordinarily, I would be in favor of allowing as many casinos and slots as the market would bear. My libertarianism would ordinarily extend to such areas of commerce and communal life. But it is precisely in the "communal life" arena that I get stuck. And my getting stuck is a result of a trip that I made to Atlantic City when my son was a pre-teenager. Here's the story.

My son Isaac (now 35 years of age, and a father!) wanted to bet on a prize fight he was looking forward to in the mid 1990s. He asked me where he could place such a bet. I told him that it would be illegal to do so in Massachusetts, but perhaps it might be legal in states that had legalized betting, such as Nevada, or New Jersey. We had only a weekend - too far to travel to Nevada and back. So we hopped on a plane Saturday morning to Atlantic City. I'd made a hotel reservation for Saturday night and two plane reservations to return Sunday evening. And off we went on a gambling (of sorts) adventure.

We got to Atlantic City, checked in at our hotel, and then began making the rounds of the casinos to see if and where Isaac might place his bet. We thus went from casino to casino before we learned, alas, that betting on prize fights was not yet lawful, even in Atlantic City. So Isaac and I were disappointed. But that disappointment paled in the face of what we found in the casinos. We encountered droves and droves of elderly people who'd been bussed in to gamble, mostly at the slots. We walked around amid a veritable ocean of people just at Trump's establishment, which was one of many similar scenes we visited at other establishments. Gray-haired and balding men and women were feverishly feeding their quarters and silver dollars into

the voracious slots. Many looked very aggravated and upset when a winner failed to emerge. Some won small jackpots, but that just encouraged them to feed even more coins into the machines. Most of them were dressed in a manner that bespoke economic distress, so common in old age. It was clear that we were not seeing the middle class here, but, rather, upper-lower-class at best, probably middle-lower-class, people who were spending their precious Social Security money. The anguish of these folks as they fed their money into the machines was palpable; most seemed to be searching for a deus-ex-machina to ease daily lives of marginal existence. Isaac and I sensed a kind of desperation, a species of addiction. We encountered almost no smiles, no laughter, no joy. We found it very upsetting.

It was actually worse than this. As we walked about Atlantic City, touring the outskirts of the casino district, what we found was a veritable slum. The contrast between the glitzy (albeit in very poor architectural taste) casinos and the dilapidated buildings and streets surrounding a sort of faux-Emerald City was startling to the eyes and to the sensibilities. It seemed a metaphor telling the tale of the kind of "economic development" that casinos bring to the surrounding municipalities. Presumably, casino workers lived in these slums, or perhaps local folks who paid one trip too many to the slots.

We went back to our hotel, cancelled our reservation, headed for the airport, and were back home by Saturday evening. Elsa was surprised to see "the boys" home so soon from their Atlantic City adventure. My libertarianism was severely challenged that day. And Isaac, too, learned a valuable lesson about life and its ambiguities. One lesson was that when the state joins forces with private industry in order to sponsor and propagate an old human vice, the results can devastate both civic life and, in the long run, the civic purse as well.

I shudder at the prospect of gambling casinos and slot parlors in Massachusetts, but remain confused as to the line to be drawn in a free society. I value the "look and feel," and the substance as well, of a free society. But I also will doubtless find it difficult to live amid the ugliness and social dislocation that casino gambling and slots are bound to produce. It seems an awful way to finance governmental functions. And, besides, gambling would not really represent an initiative of the private sector; it is, more realistically examined, a government-sponsored industry. It should be relatively easy for libertarian-oriented folks to see it for what it is and land on the opposition side.

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