

Can You Explain Why Slavery is Wrong?

We have been using the **slavery analogy** to support the validity of the Non-Aggression Principle. In a serious oversight by the writers here at NAP Parenting, we assumed that because that particular debate was over, we could use it as precedent to pursue the **rights of children** next.

When explaining the NAP, we often ask, “Why is slavery wrong?” and expect or provide the answer: “Because you can’t own people. They have sovereignty, they have autonomy, they own themselves.” Then we would argue: “Children are people, so they have the same inalienable rights. With the same **personhood** and **self-ownership**, they deserve the same protections. Like adults, they have the right to live free from aggression.”

Apparently we’ve spent too much time in an echo-chamber of NAP-followers, as we assumed that “self-ownership” was a well-accepted premise. We were wrong.

If Google is any indicator, this argument is **not** at the front of people’s minds. Try for yourself by searching some combination of the following: **“Why is/what makes slavery wrong/immoral/unethical?”**

Fortunately, the top results are at least regarding Philosophy, so we’re in the right field! People know that the question is philosophical in nature, as opposed to material or political or ideological. The answer should be derived through a process of reasoning and logic, and the results should be consistent throughout human time and space.

But beyond that, when it comes to the **application of philosophy** and its methods, the results are completely chaotic! We can’t present every argument, but we’ll list the few broad categories they tend to fall into, in order of approximate prevalence.

Our Informal Internet Search Result Census: “Why is slavery immoral?”

Most common, and most surprising, are the “Just because” answers. Literally no grounding at all. “It’s wrong because it’s wrong.” That ain’t philosophy, folks. Can we even call it **circular reasoning**? It’s tough to make a circle out of a single point...

Then we have the dreaded **argument from outrage**: “SLAVERY! ARE YOU SERIOUS HOW CAN YOU ASK THE QUESTION?? WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU!” That’s a lot like the first one, except typed angrily. We’re tempted to rebut: “NO! SLAVERY IS GREAT WHATS WRONG WITH YOU!!”, but we have the feeling they wouldn’t pick up on the sarcasm.

Next most common would be the **argument ad populum**: “Because the people of the

world say so.” There’s some truth to that, that morality is a human convention, subject to our experience. But the people of the world accepted slavery for thousands of years. So was it right then? What is the role of philosophy if we settle everything by voting anyway? Surely we can do better than “might makes right”.

There are economic and other consequentialist arguments. “Slavery is wrong because it’s inefficient, free people work better.” If slavery was efficient would it be ok? Are they saying they’d be fine with slavery if Jeff Bezos was running the sale and distribution, and he promised to plant a tree for every slave sold? The ends don’t justify the means.

There are religious answers, which don’t start from principles or rely on logic, and so are not philosophical. This God says we should have slaves, that God says be nice to your slaves *if* they praise him, but then on a different page says free your slaves... Who can keep up?

Then we come across “The Golden Rule” and “How would you feel?”, which get us a little closer, but are still shaky and subjective. Not all slaves were miserable or subject to pain and hardship. Health care, housing, and they were exempt from being drafted to war... A lot of people are terrified of liberty. Or talk to people who are pro-spanking and pro-genital mutilation, they’ll tell you they couldn’t be happier with their abusive childhoods! We’re also back to the **argument ad populum**, that because most people would feel bad about something, it’s immoral. We can’t rely on people’s feelings to make moral claims.

Compiling this short list, we could be accused of straw-manning, or not presenting the best arguments. For what it’s worth, we’ve been pushing back on these same arguments for decades. When we hear them, we engage, we inquire, we study them. So although we’re presenting them casually and summarily, it’s not from a lack of understanding or willingness to grapple with them. We WANT to hear the best argument! Post it below if you got it!

Finally, we’ll discuss the elusive “People are sovereign, own themselves, can’t be owned by others” premise, which accounts for maybe 5% of the top Google results related forum responses.

We’ve encountered some reasonable refutations of this premise, with the biggest critique being around the claim that it’s “self-evident”. In that way, it looks like the other weak arguments. When I’m asked to prove that I own myself, I don’t have a quick and easy answer, I can’t produce a receipt. But I am responsible for my actions, and I chose how and when to use my body. These are qualities of ownership. And even with a gun pointed at my head, the decision to cooperate is still ultimately mine. I couldn’t forfeit control if I wanted

to.

The critics say that “I own/control my body” is circular, convoluted word-play; that there is no “I” *other than* the sum components of my body, so the former can not be said to control the latter! Admittedly, it’s hard to **prove** that there is any such thing as the self, or ownership, or right and wrong at all! And this is where the conversation can become painfully abstract. We’ll attempt to untangle things.

With due respect to the Zen tradition, we’re not going to solve the violence of the world by refuting the existence of an “I”, or of categories, or of the ancient and ubiquitous concepts of good and evil. It’s true that by zooming-out or in, we all appear to be mere stardust, or it could be said that we’re “all one”. *Those frameworks aren’t incorrect*, but they also don’t help us solve problems, or direct our action. Spend 40 years meditating on the conclusion that “there is no conclusion!”, and you achieve precisely nothing for the world. You still feel awful when you hear your neighbors throwing plates at each other, and you’re no closer to solving that problem. **Philosophy without action is meaningless**, or self-defeating. Any philosophy that leaves us all shrugging our shoulders and doing whatever we feel like doing, is less of a philosophy and more of a justification for hedonism, effectively nihilistic. In that way **we consider moral philosophy like the study of nutrition: it should be prescriptive, challenging, but also possible to actualize.**

So our first axiom appeals to convention, linguistics, and the way our common experience is framed. We start with the conventional assumptions that “I exist”, that “I” am not just my body, and that I have some responsibility and choice for my actions. We presume that “I” have a relationship with my body and my actions.

Examining the relationship “I” have with my body and my actions, we would say that I generate, inhabit, possess, control, am responsible for... **Ownership, the act or state of possessing**, is a fitting description of that complex relationship.

Self-ownership, which implies behavior and property ownership is something that even toddlers and dogs have rules around: “*Hey that’s mine! Try to take it again and I’ll defend it.*” And if they don’t understand, we teach them, “Baby, don’t try to grab Fido’s chew-toy! It’s his. You have your toy. And Fido, stop trying to eat baby’s Cheerios!” This isn’t a proof of its validity by any means, but it does indicate that we’re biologically primed for it, and we *could* and do work within this paradigm. Self-ownership is a concept that does not require any further “uber”-evolution to grasp now.

We also argue that it’s useful and ethically correct to attempt to identify and act on virtue; we **should** do what’s right compared to what’s wrong, if we can understand the difference. We have the ability and drive to distinguish and categorize actions, shouldn’t we attempt to use that power consistently and for a good cause? When critics ask “Who are you to

judge?”, we reply, “We’re human! We have the greatest capacity to judge the world has ever known! Let’s hone it and honor it and use it wisely and consistently! Let’s study the *science of judging behavior*, which we would call moral philosophy, and let’s elevate that field to the highest regard! How can we get anything right without using our judgement?”

Yes, there are assumptions in this approach. But without them, there’s no moral philosophy at all — no standards, no categories, no direction, no ability to compare behavior and intention. If we’re “mere stardust”, if the self and free-will are illusions, why have any discussion at all? If all choices are morally equal, our lives lose all relevance and meaning, and there can be no prescription for virtue.

Self-ownership makes morality tenable, and naturally gives rise to the question: *what does it mean to violate the principle of ownership?* The Non-Aggression Principle simply defines **aggression** as a violation of ownership. Adhering to the NAP means respecting others’ ownership rights. It’s prescriptive and entirely possible to achieve, you’re probably following it right now!

The concept of self-ownership and the resulting principle of non-aggression concisely prohibit slavery, murder, theft, rape, assault, fraud, and yes, spanking. But making the argument that we own ourselves is just half of the battle. Universalizing the concept, and explaining that it means you shouldn’t hit your kids, is a very different fight.

A simple explanation for the current philosophical disorder is that people are just not philosophically grounded, and that can be disheartening. People “play” philosophical by having *some* reason for their position, but do they demand that the reason meets any consistent or rational standards? And here we are, dreaming of **saying the magic thing** that brings about world peace, but who is listening? And do they speak our language? When we push for philosophical rigor in conversation, we probably lose at least 90% of our audience. And even the philosophical folks are often just tuning-in for the stimulating conversation, unwilling to stake their future decisions and lifestyle on its conclusion. We’ve met liberty-loving parents who understand our argument and concede entirely, who will chat with us for hours about it, and still go home and hit their kids.

The good news in all this: **the masses don’t have to get it**. We don’t all have to be philosophers! **Slavery is over, and it’s wrong in people’s minds**. Why? Because schools teach philosophy so well? Of course not. **The truth is people actually don’t know why slavery is wrong!** Let that sink in...

It’s wrong in people’s minds because **abolitionists gave their lives to make it so**. They applied the right pressure to the right people at the right time, and that’s the whole story.

A small group of passionate people with pen and paper, a powerful argument, and a more powerful will.

Today the masses have forgotten the premises of the argument, but they swear by its conclusion. Maybe the best we can do is get people to the same place regarding aggression with children. A place where they know it's wrong, but don't know why. We'd settle for that.