Man's Law, Architecture, Reason

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"Finding the Challenges" is an original column appearing every other Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena. Archived columns can be found here. FTC-only RSS feed available here.

As I get ideas on topics of discussion for these columns, I write them down. Then I can hardly wait to take up my keyboard to go thundering off on a narrative rampage. This time, I have three great ideas, but I am without a clue as to how to begin. This could be due to my still-working on our horses, last night, until long after the electric eye at the barn turned on the floodlight. Then this morning at 7 am, I was wading through a creek to open a gate, so those same four horses could run free on the farm. Often it is even more difficult to set myself free, because I volunteer for so much. And there's another idea for a future column — how to get yourself bound up in the consequences of your own free will.

In this case, however, I am facing a deadline of sorts. And sometimes what is usually done voluntarily is now an obligation. This is a paradox. What is in the long run a voluntary labor of love, seems in the now to be an obligation. The trick, that I have played on myself here, is to always come back to the basics if one can. In the world of individualism, all behaviors go back to the individual will. There is no greater impulse than one's instinct to move ahead.

So, I will begin each of the paths below with a first step, just as I would a journey of a thousand miles.

Man's Law — Taggers, Property, and Risk

> *Every normal man must be tempted, at times, to spit upon his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin slitting throats. — Henry Louis Mencken*

A few days back, I was listening to a podcast where two modern pop musicians were the

guests. One of them confessed to having been a tagger while he was in his high school years. A tagger, for reference, is a graffiti artist. His stage-mate immediately started teasing in a mock lecture about what a pitiful scofflaw he had been, "don't you know you have to obey all of man's law?"

That same day, I had been caught at a freight rail crossing by a very long train. I had noted idly that nearly every car had been tagged, most of them profusely and some of them artfully.

And the two events conjoined to lead me to think about them according to my own voluntaryist set of principles. It is one of the consequences of being a voluntaryist — you cannot let a random set of things go by without testing the applicability of your view of the world, and hoping that your view holds up. First principle is self-ownership, which includes my right to keep myself in the condition that I prefer.

I am not usually offended in any way by the presence of graffiti. There are at least three reasons. Some of it is quite artful and more interesting than the original object (which also retains its intended use, unimpaired by the graffiti). I have never lived in a world without graffiti. And it seems as though graffiti is a natural outcropping of human nature.

For practical reasons, I further believe that steps to stop taggers are not effective. It is not a high priority of society, probably correctly so, as we have much larger fish to fry. But it is not a victimless act. The owners of railroad cars and building walls have a reasonable expectation that their ownership and preferences about their property be observed.

The trouble is that the phenomenon has been created by risk taking. The shipper who sends containers all over the world understands that there is risk of graffiti. They also understand that the maintenance of far-flung holdings presents many risks. When you are managing risk to your property, there are basically two options, remove it from risk exposure, or calculate the risk's cost and accept it. No one has the right to expect government to hold you free from risk, nor to ask taxpayers to pay for the protection of your private ventures.

Property owners are free to place their property at risk. This is not a get out of jail free card, however, for the tagger. The tagger must be aware of risk as well.

It seems to me that the world is full of graffiti, and that the degree to which that is true is a fair index of how society deals with the risks. If society is dealing with the risks, voluntarily, there is not much need for official policy on the matter.

The Architecture of Language

Again, I have been struck dramatically by an idea given utterance by Neil deGrasse Tyson

on Cosmos. He opined that our language has a very ancient architecture. We still talk about the sun, moon, and stars with much the same language as was in vogue before Copernicus told that the Earth revolves around the Sun, not the contrary, before we learned that the Earth was not flat, and long before we had any computing devices that were not a bag of rocks.

Tyson said, in effect, that we still talk about the very latest things as though we were presenting them to King Arthur's Roundtable.

We are often, historically, as the conquered, forced to adopt the language of the conqueror. But what other inborn matters affect the way we talk and think? Modern linguists spend their careers looking at the constructions of languages, without reaching satisfactory conclusions, despite the frequent brilliance of what they do discover and infer.

The truth of the matter is that our languages remain far behind our modernity. The trouble is that we think in the symbols of language. We need language, but it may hinder our thought processes. This is one of the reasons why I have such a low estimation of our ability to see far into the future. This is why I cast such a jaundiced eye on temporary enthusiasms such as human-robot hybridization, 3D printing, and Star Trek-style beaming of people from one place to another. These are the dreams of a species with linguistic skills a half-millennium out of date.

The Age of Reason

I think of one of Lysander Spooner's greatest questions when I think about the Age of Reason — it has either gotten us to where we are today, or failed to prevent it. In either case, a failure.

You may have seen where Kilgore blogged on EVC that he is thinking about developing a discussion group on the topic, "Whatever Happened to the Age of Reason?" As Kilgore's alter ego, and conscience, I plan to have quite a bit of input in the development of this endeavor.

One of the ideas worth exploring is that perhaps the Age of Reason or the Age of Enlightenment underlies the founding of the United States of America, particularly through the voices of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine. This is because the Age is typically said to be about individualism, intellect, and the freedom to employ both to elevate the human experience. Another view, however, is that the philosophy of the Age may have underlain America's Declaration of Independence (authored primarily by Jefferson), but did it have anything to do with the later Constitution, which is actually all about restrictions?

Why then do we have things like cable news and reality television? Worse, why do we

have things like the record of governments over the past 150 years, being mostly a record of official murder? Did the Age of Reason end? Did logic and order die a natural death? Was the recognition of enlightenment a cruel overstatement of human destiny?

I will continue to explore this concept in future columns, the idea that man paradoxically contains both the seeds of reason and unreasoning.

Next column, I will get back to the series on logic fallacies. You could say that the sections on language and reason above provide much of the context for the logic fallacy of appeal to authority. Perhaps I will work on that connection next.

In the meantime, it is important to recognize that the principles of voluntaryism are not simple, one-size-fits-all instructions. There are puzzles, and so it will always be. One of the paramount causes of these puzzles is the inexactitude of our language. Fundamentally, we are all operating with language on a learners' permit. The way we learn is through trial-and-error, but we often choose the wrong exemplars and the wrong outcomes from which to draw conclusions. Another potent cause of the puzzles is that we don't know how to make choices on a grand scale, but we insist on doing so anyway. We insist, rather than to appreciate that conclusions can only be reached for the self, not the collective. We like to label things, such as the "Age of Reason," without asking "so what?" To what end do we philosophize?

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