

The Philosophy of Voluntaryism



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“One Voluntaryist’s Perspective” is an original column appearing most Mondays at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found here. OVP-only RSS feed available here.

Philosophy is, etymologically, the “love of wisdom”. One of the best ways I’ve read to define wisdom is this saying, “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.” In other words, knowledge is what is known, and wisdom is the proper use of that knowledge in relation to one’s purposes. The discovery and application of wisdom is the purpose of philosophy. And because wisdom is useful in all sorts of endeavors, there are different types of philosophies. Voluntaryism is a multifaceted philosophy with broad application.

Voluntaryism

The foundation of the philosophy of voluntaryism is the voluntary principle, which states that *all human relations should happen voluntarily, or not at all*. Like all principles, the voluntary principle is only useful if it’s application leads to the ends desired by the individual observing it. Voluntaryists, those who practice voluntaryism, do so because they believe that the voluntary principle is the proper means to achieve their desired ends. Which ends are those? And why is the voluntary principle the proper means to achieve them? Or rather, what is so wise about practicing voluntaryism? And just how far does it go? How “broad” is it, really? And even, is it ever wise to disregard the voluntary principle?

Self-Improvement

I think that the beginning of any desire to live by the principles espoused in a given philosophy is the intention to improve one’s life. If following a philosophy means anything, it means becoming wiser about how to go about obtaining one’s valued ends. And desires and values necessarily imply individualism, the belief that the individual has needs and wants and deserves to have them met so long as he allows every other individual to do likewise. And so, the human relation that every voluntaryist must start with is the self. He must recognize his right and ability to adopt whatever philosophy or philosophies that he wants for himself, and to do so voluntarily.

One should not shame or guilt or otherwise coerce himself into accepting the voluntary principle, for it would then be a violation of said principle, thereby showing by his actions that he does not really consider it valid. No, committing to be a voluntaryist must be made voluntarily. And further, if the voluntary principle is a valid principle for self-improvement, then self-reflection and self-actualization on the basis of non-coercion will aid in improving one's mental health (mood, confidence, outlook, *et cetera*).

Virtue

Along the lines of self-improvement, many value the virtues. Virtue is "a positive trait or quality deemed morally good." Wisdom, love, courage, patience, temperance, justice, *et cetera*, are virtues, but how virtuous is the action if it's coerced? As Murray Rothbard wrote (p. 128), "The concept of 'morality' makes no sense unless the moral act is freely chosen." Thus, if you value virtuous living, then you must allow the virtues to be expressed voluntarily, both by yourself and others. Otherwise, the only thing being freely chosen is the act to coerce others into virtue, and that seems immoral, the opposite of virtue. It's a peculiar person who values virtue to the point of violating it.

Interpersonal Relations

What are the chances that someone utilizing coercion, the "political means" as Franz Oppenheimer calls it (p. 25), in their interpersonal relations will ever find peace and happiness? Quite unlikely, for the use of coercion puts one at odds with the rest of society. Coercion is predation, and predators are often hunted down and slaughtered in order to make society safer. We'll get to political predation, which is far safer for the predator, but for now I'm talking about what is often called private crime. Murder, robbery, rape, battery, and the like, are incompatible with the values that most people hold. The voluntary principle clearly prohibits crimes of this sort, with the benefits to the individual and society obvious to all.

However, what is not always so clear is who owns what. This matters if we are to know if a murder, robbery, rape, or battery has actually occurred. Different theories of ownership abound, some more defensible than others, but most people accept self-ownership and the right of personal possession. The less directly used something is, the more uncertain things are in property rights theory. In any event, the voluntary principle is very encouraging toward first agreeing on who owns what with all involved parties, before commencing to murder, rob, rape, or batter. And actually, why are we even considering such actions? What moves us to desire ends that require these means? Where has the voluntary principle been violated toward us by others or by us toward ourselves that we would resort to actions of this nature?

Consider also the Golden Rule. There have been many formulations of the Golden Rule over

the centuries, but they all have one thing in common: consideration of others as individuals, rather than as means to be manipulated and coerced. When we coerce others, we are inviting coercion upon ourselves. If that sounds unpleasant or undesirable to you, then your relations with others should happen in accordance with the voluntary principle.

Communication

Another area of application of the voluntary principle is in communication, both intra- and interpersonal. The words we use can be very powerful and come across as either friendly or unfriendly. If unfriendly, they'll have a coercive effect if those we are communicating to feel threatened in some unexpected and undesired way. Psychologist Marshall Rosenberg coined the term "nonviolent communication" (NVC) to teach the principles of self-empathy, empathy toward others, and honest self-expression. The presupposition of NVC theory is that "all human behavior stems from attempts to meet universal human needs and that these needs are never in conflict. Rather, conflict arises when strategies for meeting needs clash. NVC proposes that if people can identify their needs, the needs of others, and the feelings that surround these needs, harmony can be achieved." As it pertains to voluntaryism, NVC is a useful tool in preventing conflict that, by its nature, is likely to violate the voluntary principle, with the resulting undesirable end for those who value the peaceful meeting of their needs.

Education

How did humans evolve to learn? Are our educational needs best met through compulsory learning and regimentation, ie. schooling? Or are we best served by the voluntary principle, that is, through *free play*? Free play is the pursuit of one's own interests without interference by others. Adults engage in free play when they engage in activities that interest them. Children do likewise so long as the adults in their lives observe the voluntary principle, with fantastic results. As Peter Gray shows in *Free to Learn*, free play is how our evolutionary ancestors learned every skill necessary for survival, at least, and why unleashing the instinct to play in modern children will make kids "happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life." Radical unschooling is the education philosophy most compatible with free play, and is thus an integral part of voluntaryism, now and for the future.

Radical unschooling is "radical" in the sense that it extends individual choice to everything a child does, not just to academics. Contrary to popular belief, when children are allowed to "do whatever they want", so long as they don't violate anyone's rights, destroy anyone's property, or unintentionally hurt themselves, the results are entirely positive. Many a radical unschooled former child will tell how empowering and enlightening it was for them to be free to choose what to eat, where to sleep and when, what to consume media-wise and how much, and other such choices that they were allowed to make on a daily basis

because their parents were adhering to the voluntary principle. Parents likewise benefit from a stronger bond with their children because they aren't at war with their children's instincts and desires. As radical unschoolers, parents become their children's partners through life as a facilitator of needs and wants, educational or otherwise, and as a trusted mentor, instead of being there to stop them from experiencing life on their own terms. As such, things like "spoiled kids" and "teenage rebellion" or nonexistent features in a radical unschooling home.

Parenting

What about child discipline? The voluntary principle demands that parents approach their children on the basis of nonviolence and mutual consent. Like their learning, our evolutionary ancestors, and modern hunter-gatherers, were peaceful and respectful toward those who are still developing empathy and self-control. The first few years were filled with breastfeeding to foster the mother/baby bond, babywearing to bond with the other adults in baby's life, and bedsharing to keep baby safe (from predators) and close to the rest of the family.

As kids aged and began exploring the world around them, they're met with patience and love by those who'd already learned not to hurt other people. As such, they're never spanked or put in time-out or otherwise punished for acting like inexperienced and developing children. The voluntary principle applied in parenting, along with other positive discipline practices like Parent Effectiveness Training, works better at nurturing empathy, teaching self-control, and promoting independence while strengthening family bonds, than the various coercion-based alternatives.

Economics

My first step toward becoming a voluntaryist was in learning the laws of economics and how a market works. Once I understood the negative (toward peace and prosperity) consequences of third-party (state) interference in trade, I began rejecting the use of coercion in the market. For example, when the state sets a minimum wage, low-skilled workers are priced out of the market. Low-skilled jobs like theater escort or gas station attendant disappear, and those unable to find work fall behind in terms of developing skills and a work ethic. This leads to agitation among the lower class and a falling standard of living. Likewise for rent control, prohibitions, and occupational licensing. When markets aren't free, meaning, aren't based on the voluntary principle, then prosperity slows, and can even reverse.

The laws of supply and demand are inviolate. When states restrict supply (coercion), prices rise, hurting the poorest in society. When trade is voluntary, all else being equal, supply and demand find its equilibrium, meaning, the price charged for the good or service is just

high enough to be profitable and keep the business in operation (and people employed), and just low enough to be affordable (by its intended customer base). The money earned by the business goes toward innovation and capital investment (lowering costs), and the money saved by the customer is either invested or spent with other businesses. Violating the voluntary principle in the market has disastrous effects in society. Unemployment, welfare dependency, poverty, recessions, depressions, and more are all the result of a violation of the voluntary principle by the state through economic and monetary regulations.

Politics

Most people in society value the provision of law and order, of government, while simultaneously valuing competition in the market. They understand that monopolies charge higher prices while providing poorer quality goods and services, because their monopoly protects them from losing customers to competition. Unfortunately, this understanding is lost when it comes to the state, the institution in society that monopolizes the provision of law and order in a given territorial boundary. If the laws of economics tell us that monopolies tend toward higher prices and poorer quality, then this is as much true for the provision of law and order as it is for any service provision or good production.

Monopoly is the exclusive right of sell, enforced by coercion. If the voluntary principle were practiced in the political arena, the state would not exist. Instead, law and order would be provided through competition, by entrepreneurs. As in any other industry, competition ensures lower prices and better quality. Political theorists and economists continue to debate whether or not this holds true for government, but there are other considerations to make as it concerns voluntarism.

How does one go about monopolizing the provision of law and order, of making competition illegal? This can only happen through conquest, with superior might, and maintained through lies and propaganda. Conquest is clearly a violation of the voluntary principle, and is also a violation of many of the values that people hold, values like peace, cooperation, fraternity, and community. Conquest amounts to the extremely dangerous doctrine that "might makes right". So long as you are powerful enough, you have the right to take what you want from others. Society can't survive under such a doctrine for obvious reasons.

Once conquered, people must be taught that their new political arrangements are good, or at the very least, a "necessary evil", or else they are likely to one day rebel from the injustice they see. Lies and propaganda are thus circulated, beginning in newly formed compulsory government schools, to maintain the illusion of legitimacy by the ruling class, and to keep the extracted wealth flowing in the forms of taxation and economic regulation. A few generations pass away, and the ruling class fully believes its rule is good and necessary, the natural order of things. And so long as taxation and economic regulation

have remained relatively low, society prospers. Hans Hoppe calls it the “paradox of imperialism“. Lower taxation and less economic interference, the wealthier society becomes, and the more the state can extract to use in expanding its footprint in the world. Indeed, this has been the case with the United States, once the freest nation on Earth (but no longer), and now the largest and, arguably, most dangerous to world peace and stability.

Wisdom Goes Both Ways

As important as understanding the wisdom in observing the voluntary principle, I don't think that as a philosophy, voluntarism would be complete without also understanding when observing the voluntary principle may be foolish. If you value your life and that life is being threatened, then it's foolish to practice the voluntary principle toward your attacker. Rather, it would be wise to defend yourself. This is also true for other lives that you value, such as family, friends, and possibly your fellow countrymen.

Now, while it may be foolish to allow others to walk over you, that's not to say that direct retaliatory aggression is always the wisest course of action to take. Nonviolent resistance to both crime and conquest have a track record with varying degrees of success. It seems to me that since the philosophy of voluntarism is about the wisdom of practicing the voluntary principle, voluntarists must give due consideration to all forms of resistance in any given situation. However, it would not go against voluntarism to use force when only force can protect you and your loved ones. The voluntary principle says that all human relations *should* happen voluntarily, but *should* only applies when the voluntary principle is useful in protecting one's values, which as explored above, is most of the time when those values include self-improvement, virtue, communication, education, family bond, society, prosperity, and world peace.

Final Thoughts

And there you have it, the philosophy of voluntarism. While this exposition was lengthy, it was still brief when we consider how complex each area of human existence is as they concern the possible application of voluntarism. Right and wrong are largely a matter of means and ends, ends which are desired on the basis of one's values. I consider voluntarism to be right, and it's opposite to be wrong. But of course, my values are my own, and they've certainly changed, and will change, over time. That's partly what it means to be human. We value some things, and then others, and all the while learn wisdom from knowledge and experience. The philosophy that works for us today might not work for us tomorrow, but not because their effects on the world have changed, but because we've changed. I can't imagine the day I might not value the things that voluntarism secures, but I must remain open-minded if I value adhering to principles for the right reasons.

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