

The Voluntary Principle



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“One Voluntarist’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.

As often as I reference the voluntary principle, the centerpiece of voluntarism, you’d think I’d have written more on it specifically. Alas, nay, I have not. But I am here now to rectify that injustice to this most glorious of philosophies. First, let us look at a little history, and then, I’ll define the voluntary principle and give my perspective in it’s meaning, purpose, and application.

History

For as long as people have related with each other on a voluntary basis, voluntarist practice has existed. Simultaneously, as people have related with each other on a coercive basis, the voluntary principle is being violated. One such coercive relationship is that which we have with the state, the institution in society that enforces a monopoly on the legal use of force, or rather, on the provision of law (courts) and order (security). It is in 17th century England, among a political movement known as the Levellers, where we find the first precursors of voluntarist thought. Their history is documented in greater detail here on Wikipedia, as well as the history of voluntarism, which I highly recommend reading.

Beginning with the Levellers in the 17th century, voluntarist thought was further developed through a number of notable individuals, namely, Herbert Spencer (philosopher), Edward Banes, Jr. (editor), Edward Miall (who wrote *Views of the Voluntary Principle* in 1845), Henry David Thoreau (author of *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*), William Lloyd Garrison (an abolitionist publisher), Charles Lane (author of a series a letters in abolitionist papers titled, *A Voluntary Political Government*), and Auberon Herbert, who wrote *The Voluntarist Creed*, calling for taxation, the funding of government (the provision of law and order), to be paid voluntarily.

The term “voluntarist” was last used by Auberon Herbert, who died in 1906, until it was resurrected by Carl Watner, Wendy McElroy, and George H. Smith when they founded *The Voluntarist*, a magazine, in 1982. They considered voluntarists separate from libertarians by their rejection of electoral politics (here’s my take) as incompatible with libertarian goals, in theory and in practice. The voluntary principle was then formulated

as defined below by Carl Watner throughout the magazine.

Three years ago, I founded my website, Everything-Voluntary.com, in an effort to bring together not only voluntaryist thought as it concerned politics and economics, but also parenting and childhood education. Prior, and unbeknownst to me, voluntaryist philosopher Stefan Molyneux of Freedom Radio began promoting a voluntaryist approach to raising children. Many more voluntaryists and libertarians have likewise begun speaking and writing about parenting and childhood education from this perspective, the latter popularly called “radical unschooling” by those in that movement over the last few decades. What the whole of voluntaryist thought shares in common is the exploration and promotion of the voluntary principle. Let us now turn to that.

Definition

The voluntary principle states that

all human relations should happen voluntarily, or not at all.

As Carl Watner wrote, the voluntary principle represents “a means, an end, and an insight.” Another version of the voluntary principle is that “all human relations should happen by mutual consent, or not at all.” What follows is my own interpretation of this principle in meaning and purpose, and in the next section, application.

Meaning

The significant part of the voluntary principle is the word “should”, which implies obligation. While some may argue that there exists negative obligations that apply to everyone universally, such as abstaining from murder, battery, rape, theft, and the like, I think a better-grounded way to approach obligation is on the basis of means to an end. Self-obligation, in other words, by those who understand cause and effect. As it concerns the voluntary principle, voluntary human relations either lead to certain ends, or to others. What makes some ends more desirable than others? I think the only answer to that question is that it depends on one’s values. Every person values different things for different reasons and is willing to behave in certain ways in order to see their values realized in their lives. If the voluntary principle is to be considered a true principle, then it must be the proper means for one’s desired ends.

Purpose

What is the purpose of observing the voluntary principle? As I can only answer for myself, I will say that I remain unconvinced that peace and prosperity, both at home and within greater society and the world, can be achieved otherwise. I base this on my understanding of human nature, philosophy, ethics, and economics. In “Fundamentals of Voluntaryism”, reprinted as chapter 3 of my book, Carl Watner presents several arguments for the voluntary principle, all of which demonstrate how the voluntary

principle is necessary to achieve various commonly held ends. Most people, like me, value and desire peace and prosperity, and so they should (self-obligation) learn and live the voluntary principle. For according to sound philosophical, ethical, and economic logic, only by observing the voluntary principle can people achieve these desired ends. If that were not so, then the voluntary principle should be rejected as incompatible with these values, with my values.

Application

The voluntary principle applied in our lives is called different things in different areas. In politics, it is called the “non-aggression principle” or the “zero-aggression principle”, which states that people who value justice and desire peace in society should not initiate acts of aggression (uninvited property border crossing) against each other. This does not, however, rule out aggression used in self-defense to another’s initiation of aggression. The state is an initiator of aggression through the enforcement of its monopoly on the provision of law and order, and so exists as a violation of the voluntary principle. Therefore, law and order should be provided for on a private, competitive market basis. (Another line of voluntarist thought in the area of politics is the voluntary principle compatible strategy known as “nonviolent resistance”, as introduced by Karl Meyer in chapter 5 of my book.)

In economics, the voluntary principle is called “the free market”, which is, according to economist, philosopher, and historian Murray Rothbard in an essay reprinted as chapter 12 of my book, “a summary term for an array of exchanges that take place in society. Each exchange is undertaken as a voluntary agreement between two people or between groups of people represented by agents. These two individuals (or agents) exchange two economic goods, either tangible commodities or nontangible services.” Sound economic theory, à la the Austrian School tradition, teaches us that prosperity can only be achieved when everyone observes the voluntary principle in their economic lives.

In the home, the voluntary principle is called “peaceful parenting” (or several other similar terms). The interesting thing about peaceful parenting is that it is not only supported by modern philosophical and empirical arguments, but also by our evolution as a species. The needs of human children can only be met through a peaceful approach by caregivers, which necessarily precludes punishment and aggression. Instead, parents who want to see their children develop properly psychologically and emotionally should observe the voluntary principle, among other positive practices, in their relationship with their children. Another area of interest to the voluntarist for its incompatibility with the voluntary principle is the use of social coercion, or non-physical coercion, in order to manipulate children (and others, through unexpectancy and displeasure) to adhere to the will of parents. Social coercion is arguably more prevalent and more dangerous to the healthy mental development of children.

Parenting is not only about the psychological and emotional development of children, but also the development of the intellect. The voluntary principle applied in childhood

education is called, as previously mentioned, “radical unschooling”, and is introduced by Earl Stevens in chapter 20 of my book. Like peaceful parenting, radical unschooling is also supported not only by modern arguments, but also our biological evolution. The human mind did not evolve to be as intelligent as it is through compulsory means of education. Rather, our evolutionary ancestors were given complete freedom as children to explore the world around them through *free play*. Peter Gray, evolutionary psychologist and professor at Boston College wrote a book exploring the value of play in the development of the intellect titled, *Free to Learn*. Allowing our children to control their education (including religion) and their lives free from aggressive interference is not only optimal, but the only way to approach childhood education compatible with the voluntary principle.

Final Thoughts

I have herein brought to justice my dereliction of self-imposed duty to elucidate the central principle of our relationship with others that I personally espouse and live. It’s important to understand the meaning, purpose, and applications of the voluntary principle if we are to ever achieve peace and prosperity in society. It’s taken me three years to finally write specifically on the voluntary principle, the centerpiece of not only voluntarism, but of Everything-Voluntary.com, which has been a big part of my life over that time as a blogger, weekly columnist, and podcaster. I hope this proves both instructive and enlightening.

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