

A Critique of Stefan Molyneux's Discussion with Stephan Kinsella on Schooling

Author's Note: I used to be able to link to a bunch of the debates I had with Stefan Molyneux, but it looks like he purged his site of them all. That's too bad, because some of it was good content of mine. I wrote this article in 2010. It was posted to the FDR boards and ended up being a giant thread, even David Friedman was commenting. I was looking for our debates to link to some of my friends, but it looks like they have been purged from the earth. I know he made a podcast addressing my criticism here, but I don't know where to even start looking for that. Anyway, this is a good article for anyone to read. I would, today, refrain from using the term equal and define some of the other concepts differently, but it is still a good article.

I was directed to a video recently of Stefan Molyneux's where he has a discussion with libertarian Stephan Kinsella on parenting. Since I know a lot of the people in the School Sucks atmosphere also cross-pollinate with Freedom Radio, I thought I would comment on the video a bit since it is likely that others have seen the video also.

For those of you that haven't, here is the link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zWLMtZHaJE>. However, My blog should be readable without going through the whole 53 minute video.

When I listen to libertarian minarchists discuss ideas that apologize for the state in mild ways, I never feel it is appropriate for me to get angry, attack, or generally be a dick. I think they have wrong ideas in some realms, but they are not the ones who have an emotional drive to control my actions and my life. However, their ideas are also pretty dangerous in their own right, despite their comparatively respectful outlook. I have the same feelings about Molyneux and Kinsella. While I disagree with them, I do not feel that they are horrible people from the ideas they espouse here. Yet, I do think they have some dangerous ideas.

I will take key lines and discuss them. This may be lengthier than other posts, but I think this expresses the profound difference between an unschooling approach vs. an approach similar to Montessori (for disclosure, I went to a Montessori School for several years as a child, and enjoyed it much more than the public school I went to afterward). I will criticize some of the language they use, and it might seem to some to be a little nitpicky, however, language in many ways defines how we think and how memes get spread.

The first question Molyneux asks of Kinsella is: "How do you manage the behavior of pre-rational creatures?" (3:26)

One of my strategies in sniffing out unequal or one sided relationships is to always shift the players around. Lets say a politician asked the question “How do you manage the behavior of the people?” Your response would likely be something like “Who are you? I am not your subject to be managed!” Of course you are probably thinking, well this is the difference between a young child who lacks experience and mental capabilities and an adult. I would somewhat agree, but also have strong disagreement. There is a little bit more subtlety at work.

If a person is okay with how they are and live for their own happiness, they don't need to be managed. Let me give an example: If I am assisting my Grandmother as she goes on the internet to look for an image of a happy chicken and starts typing “Gay cock” in Google, I don't need to manage her emotions because they're perfectly fine. What might help her is information and guidance from someone more knowledgeable, not emotional management.

When we desire to manage someone else's emotions it's assuming that their emotions are problematic and are in need of control. Children's emotions are perfectly natural and healthy and don't require management. What they do need is someone to offer them guidance and information that they don't have.

Later on Kinsella introduced the concept of “positive discipline” in commenting on the Montessori system (7:00 onwards).

To me, the concept that a child must be controlled and managed has yet to change. They have a less blatant attempt at controlling people, but it has yet to leave the discussion. Curiosity and great empathy towards the child is not the main focus in positive discipline, but rather controlling the child to be what you think it should be albeit in a less abrasive way. It is still assuming the child is dysfunctional and has behavior problems that need to be controlled rather than understood and worked with at a deeper level to see what causes the behavior. In researching positive discipline for this blog it seems like the authors use more friendly language to disguise controlling, disrespectful behavior on the parents behalf. Here is a link to the Wikipedia page on Positive discipline for your own reference: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_Discipline

At 10:10 Kinsella talks about how much better the homework is at his son's school since it isn't given day to day, but rather has a system that gives it a week at a time and the child is expected to arrange that into his own schedule so he can learn the skills of self-scheduling and self-discipline.

Stefan Molyneux makes a beautiful example of free range cows in his most popular video *True News 13: Statism is Dead - Part 3 - The Matrix* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P772Eb63qIY>). In it, he talks about farmers give cows

more freedom to increase their productivity so they can be more productive to the farmer. He uses this to show how the state gives people limited freedom to take the product of the people's labor.

In the discussion, Kinsella does the same thing for the child. He doesn't give child more freedom because he should be free or because the child should live for their own happiness, but rather because it will increase the amount of what he think the child should learn. While it isn't as vile as what the state does in intent (since he probably does think it is in the child's self-interest), his child's emotions and thoughts are ultimately disregarded and must live to the ends that his teachers and parents ultimately dictate.

The greatest education that could be given to a child (or better put, not taken away) is foremost, to have respect for his own desires and thoughts. In a system where a child must subjugate his thoughts to the desire of parents or teachers he might learn some stuff, but it will be at the cost of his own self-respect.

At 14:30 they talk about letting the children experience consequences by refraining from giving information they might desire.

While I have no problem with a child experiencing consequences, I do have a problem with knowingly not giving them information that they would likely appreciate. However, the bigger problem I have with how they are speaking can be shown by using our earlier experiment.

If I said "I believe in letting my wife experience consequences." That would sound like I am teaching my wife in an unequal relationship. If I had information that she would like and I didn't share it with her, and she experiences consequences as a result and finds out that I could have provided it, she would naturally think I'm an ass.

A child doesn't have to learn every mistake on their own. We all try to learn information from other people. Let them know the stove is hot, but if they are persistent you don't need to nag. You can say another warning if you are that worried, but otherwise give them the freedom and don't be a jerk if he does get burned. Sometimes we want to experiment despite the warnings for various reasons.

In discussing the Montessori approach at around 17:00 Kinsella talks about how children are believed to have different development periods at different ages, and says, "What they say is your mind is developing each of these [developmental periods], you have different interests different social needs , or whatever. So they sort of arrange an environment around the children in which the child can learn or teach themselves"

Assuming (for argument sake) that these developmental periods do exist which produce certain desires, I'm not sure why their environment needs to be centrally planned in order

for them to learn. If they desire certain stimuli, wouldn't they gravitate towards what they desire? If you just make different environments available wouldn't they be drawn towards the environment they want? This leads to a more fundamental question: what if, in the moment, they prefer basketball to learning anything commonly considered educational? However, I will address this question in more detail later.

The quote underlies more fundamentally why I view the Montessori system analogous to minarchy, while unschooling would be the more anarchistic approach. Unschooling assumes the child is an end in himself, his desires and thoughts rules his life while the parent/teacher act only as a facilitator. In the Montessori system the teacher ultimately decides what is best, and while they do give deference to the child, it is only within a limited world where the child must submit his desires to authority when the authority requires it.

At about 23:50, Molyneux talks about how in Montessori Schools and many private schools the child is actually the customer.

But that's not true. That's the system implemented by unschooling and free schools. If the child is the customer, a market would form around a child's desires. He would play when he wants to play, learn when, what, and how he wants to learn; he would choose his teachers, or decide to learn it on his own. The Montessori School along with any other non-free school is ultimately backed up by authority and force. The teacher is the one who decides, and if you wish to leave you will usually be, ultimately, coerced back to class. Private and Montessori schools are no more serving children voluntarily as is the government serving us voluntarily.

At 38:45 they briefly talk about unschooling. Molyneux hesitantly says (conceding his lack of knowledge), "You don't have a curriculum. It is just whatever the kid is interested in, that's what you facilitate." Afterwards he seems to express strong skepticism, then goes on to talk about homeschooling where he says: "I'm not a huge fan of homeschooling, because I have a huge amount of respect for the profession of teaching. I think it is a difficult thing. I don't do my own dentistry. I don't make my own clothes. I don't make my own antibiotics. I am big on specialization. A really good teacher is a complete gem, and I don't think you can reproduce that at home." Later he stated that he doesn't find homeschooling necessary since there are a lot of good schools around him.

Unschooling is not against teachers in anyway. However it does allow children to choose their teachers voluntarily. Teaching is a great art that requires great skill, but as with any skilled dentist they should all be voluntary to the person who desires the self-improvement. If the child no longer wants the teacher than the child should leave. If he doesn't want the school, dislikes their classmates, or just wants to watch Spongebob, then they should have those options open to them.

Tomorrow I am going to work, eat, socialize, surf the internet and probably some other stuff. I want to do them when I want to do them. I accept that I can only work within certain times, but I accepted that because of the benefits I feel it will bestow on me, and I know I have the freedom to stop working at any moment if I no longer desire the benefits over the work. A child should possess the same freedom.

Molyneux has often made podcasts about how the state tries to make you ignore the gun in the room. However, this is the same thing parents and teachers do. If the student wants to play basketball while the teacher wants them working on reading, appeals to authority is what the child will hear and generally, at some point, they will understand that they will be coerced into doing what the teacher wants. There is no good argument about why a child should read if he doesn't feel like it in the moment and would prefer basketball. The child, at some level, will know this. This kind of automatically accepted authority is what makes governments automatically accepted by the same person. Since children are generally weaker than their parents and teachers, the gun is unnecessary, but the principal is the same.

Early in the podcast Molyneux questioned Kinsella, "How do you manage the behavior of your son without using spanking or other forms of aggression? Which I think would be pretty much violations of the Non-Aggression Principle" (3:03) To which I would say, if you are not using force in any way (including implied force) that your child is unschooled. John Holt (the most prominent unschooling advocate) was foremost against compulsory schooling of any sort towards the child, whether from government or from the parent. It seems that a child sent to any school outside of a free school is ultimately being forced, by their parents on the way, and by their teachers upon arrival.

Molyneux's listeners are unschooled in regard to their interest in Freedomain Radio. They did not need someone to guide them there and keep them in their seat or to provide the environment. Their own curiosity and drive for the truth guided them into exploration and Molyneux is merely the facilitator. Each person can press pause and play basketball, or not listen to a new podcast for a month while they pursue a new interest, or they can ferociously plow through all of his podcasts without eating or sleeping (which judging by the number that have been made, would cause death 10 times over).

Unschooling is a philosophy that is open and respectful to the child. He might not learn what you think he should learn, but he will learn what he thinks he should learn and he will feel powerful over his own life and future. Learning doesn't start at 6 and end at 18, but starts a birth and ends at death. The philosophy of unschooling might be summed up best in Molyneux's own words from the video: "It is assuming that the child is competent and benevolent and curious. Wants to learn, wants to explore, has good judgment and you just need to facilitate that." (25:00)