

David Hume, Spooner Quote #19, Context



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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.

Every day of your life you can expect to be bowled over. You can discover a whole new aspect of your life and times on this Earth. Voluntaryism is about opening your appreciation ports to allow the amazing to enter. The items I will discuss below are some of the most exciting things that exploded into the time and space that comprise my view on the Universe from the past two weeks.

David Hume

I have known for a long time that David Hume, the Scot academician who was great friends with Adam Smith, was very important in classical liberalism, the area of philosophy that underlies what we call libertarianism today. But in a voluntary life, it can sometimes be difficult to get around to all the ideas that you want to explore. By chance, the Socrates Cafe Louisville led me to pick up a book that included Hume's view on ethics. I was blown away. Where has Hume been all my life? In addition to the wisdom, his prose is a symphony.

The work we read and discussed was Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. There was much to take away from this, but I will only cover the thing that most impressed me. It wasn't a brilliant metaphor such as Adam Smith's invisible hand — it was a compelling explanation of the reality behind the invisible hand. It was the most clear essay on morality that I have ever encountered.

Hume has covered a front much larger than the market-oriented invisible hand, and he has gotten into the territory of Ludwig von Mises' *Human Action*.

My fellow toilers at Socrates Cafe, in two hours of reading and talking, came to rest on the hook of whether we should clump Hume together with a school of philosophy called Utilitarianism. My gut reaction was that this was an under-appreciation of what Hume's

much more vast view was. To be sure, Hume referred to UTILITY and USEFULNESS throughout the work (he wrote these qualities with all caps to show how important they were in his estimation). Previously, I had thought, however, that utilitarianism was about the practicality of certain interventions. The Encyclopedia Britannica says this:

Utilitarianism, in normative ethics, a tradition stemming from the late 18th- and 19th-century English philosophers and economists Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill according to which an action is right if it tends to promote happiness and wrong if it tends to produce the reverse of happiness—not just the happiness of the performer of the action but also that of everyone affected by it.

Notwithstanding that we all probably have different views of happiness, the above seems very close to Henry Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson*. In other words, the idea is that policy makers should take consequences into consideration before intervention.

Where I believe that Hume stands above this idea is that, in my opinion, Hume sees usefulness as a natural driver of society's ethical structures (laws, mores, matters of justice, etc.) It is not an easy task for a human to seek an abstraction such as happiness and it is impossible for a "social leader" to presume a right or not wrong manifestation of the abstraction. Usefulness is a concrete thing with a concrete meaning to each user.

Hume looked at utility against two extreme scenarios, one was a perfect world in which scarcity was absent, and the other was a perfect instance of rulers and subjects being so well defined that there were no questions of who should obey whom — a pristine master-slave world. Hume contended that there was no need for morals and justice in either case because they were not meaningfully useful. But Hume recognized that societies are not like either of those extremes — in the central region of that spectrum rules may arise. But these rules should follow utility, and they will if natural usefulness, inherent usefulness, usefulness that comes from some invisible hand, is allowed to play out in a non-artificial manner.

Most people today have a tenuous grip on what usefulness really is. They ignore that form follows function. They confuse it with practicality for special interests, blindness for consequences, revision of definitions to skirt reality. Most of the issues of today are due to mistaking of what should be and what are naturally beneficial rules.

Spooner Quote #19

If, for example, A claims that his consent is necessary to the establishment or maintenance of government, he thereby necessarily admits that B's and every other man's are equally necessary; because B's and every other man's right are just as good as his own. On the other hand, if he denies that B's or any other particular man's consent is necessary, he thereby necessarily admits that neither his own, nor any other man's is necessary; and that government need not be founded on consent at all.

Need and necessity are words that relate to natural requirements. Requirements are things that arise through the natural procession of events, i.e. night is required to follow sunset. Food is edible. Air is breathable.

Fictions are requirements only as long as users of those fictions agree affirmatively on the observance of those fictions. The only way to preserve fictions beyond agreement is through violence and the denigration of some people by other people. This extreme preservation lacks natural usefulness, it has limited usefulness, it maintains usefulness for some constrained set of things in space and time.

Logic Fallacy #35 – Context

This is a specific form of red herring. People will often respond to pictures, numbers, and words by charging that they are presented without context or out of context.

I recently posted a link on Facebook pointing toward a well-founded sentiment, in my opinion, to the effect that calling the police hardly ever has a positive, much less predictable outcome. That link was illustrated by a photograph of apparent police and apparent civilians, in which the apparent police appeared to have done violence and appeared preparing to do more to the apparent civilians.

A Facebook friend commented that he he didn't have any contextual information on which to make a judgment, he might have said literally that the picture had "no context." First of all, only a *tabula rasa* or a void has no context. The picture, by definition, depicted something, and that something presented a more-or-less substantial context, the substance of which is in the eyes of the various beholders.

My interlocutor could have said, "I choose to discount the context which is there as it is not sufficient for me to make a judgment." He could have said, "I choose not to debate." But dismissing an opportunity for objective observation is not a supportable response when

shown evidence. The objective response is to query what other objects need to be added to the context. Complaints about context are not conducive to scientific fact finding. If the aims of each participant in the debate are to expand knowledge of facts, then a given context is only temporary.

The best way to accept surprise is to soften up a bit on what we think we know. An oracle proclaimed Socrates to be the wisest man in Athens, but Socrates knew that wisdom is only founded on a recognition by each of us that we know nothing. But we are continuing to learn, to gather evidence, to adjust to nature, and to judge.

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