

False Burdens of Voluntaryism: The Utopian Presumption



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In this week’s column I’d like to address the criticism that anarchism (voluntaryism) implies or requires a Utopian or overly optimistic view of man’s nature and tendencies.

To an extent, this is a variation of the fallacy we laid to rest last week... the utilitarian burden of anarchism. It presupposes an overall utilitarian net analysis, and calculation of collective “good” as abstracted apart from the “good” for any specific individual (the only determination of “good” which can really be held as operative and assessable in any given situation).

This variation holds that because anarchism must be presupposing such a net analysis, and that overall conditions would be an improved or perfect society of individuals governing each other without harming one another, that anarchism thus fails in light of any demonstration of humans behaving coercively or harmfully to one another. This false burden should be rejected, instead of accepted in a line of discussion that might be intended to demonstrate the many ways in which people do in fact cooperate peacefully.

What is Anarchism?

We have to remember what anarchism is, at it’s core. It isn’t all of the leftist baggage that got tacked on to anarchism through a couple of centuries of its being extolled primarily by anti-property socialist anarchists. It isn’t a managerial counter-plan for all of society to be plugged in and switched on via already-existing, and a presumptively-operative apparatus for rule. In its strictest, definitive sense, anarchism is not a systematic philosophy, but a singular conclusion about government. It is nothing more, nor less, than the conclusion that the state is morally invalid and that every instance of its operation therefore warrants reduction. That conclusion has been reached from a variety of ethical foundations, that are often completely contradictory. The anarchism for which I argue, and anarcho-capitalism

and voluntarism as I understand them, contend this on the basis of the non-aggression principle. Therefore anarchism in this context means nothing more than the idea that using aggression against rights to accomplish something is wrong, and thus government must, for moral reasons, be “off the table” as an option for accomplishing anything.

Anarchism as Non-Utopianism

Part of the “Utopian” criticism comes from a failure in understanding what a “stateless society” would be, and what is being asserted as attainable at the societal level by an anarchist. Anarchism isn’t the idea that the total absence of aggressive force is possible, it’s the idea that institutionalizing it and legitimizing it for a select few (government) is wrong. When people engage therein, they should face the same risk of reprisals as any non-governmental individual would for doing so.

Anarchism is properly seen as the *least* Utopian of all approaches to the state. This is because it recognizes the *true nature* of the state as being merely a group of those same flawed humans whose nature is supposedly so bad that we must control them with the state. This idea that the people labeled “government” immediately shed those flaws, or somehow become limited by the pieces of paper which pretend to grant them their power merely by virtue of that label or capability, is *itself* a Utopian presumption. It is also one that runs counter to all historical evidence, since history demonstrates fully that humans empowered as government *don’t* obey the written limits of their power, and that they tend toward greater abuses of power when thus empowered.

Anarchism does *not* depend on the contention that people are good by nature. If people are bad, that’s all the *more* reason for them NOT to be governing other people. After all, government is just people, but people with a specific duty and who think they’re obligated to do things that they would never deem moral without such a title.

Anarchism, or statelessness, would limit the damage that any one human can do in the act of “governing” to governing his or her self, instead of creating an apparatus and moral duty for them to go beyond that sphere with a societal presumption of legitimacy. It also exposes *all* human beings to the same risks or reprisals by their victims and would-be collaborators when they do commit aggression.