

Human Action, Rothbard on Human Action, Empty Symbols



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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, pre-TSA world traveler, domestic traveler. Archived columns can be found here. FTC-only RSS feed available here.

You can go through weeks at times in your life, when it may seem as though there is not enough intellectual stimulus to keep an earthworm wriggling. But now I am involved in a whirlwind. I participate in a writers’ group, two philosophy discussion groups, a group studying mindfulness, Springtime, and track season for my youngest granddaughters. In addition, I have begun reading and listening to Ludwig von Mises’ *Human Action*. I am listening to the audio, wonderfully read by Jeff Rigginbach, and I am keeping up by reading a PDF version on my computer and cell phone. Wow! Quantity and quality. The audiobook is more than 57 hours in length. That should take care of a few round trips to Lexington and Louisville.

Human Action

“Only the individual thinks. Only the individual reasons. Only the individual acts.” So wrote Ludwig von Mises.

The great painter, George Seurat, introduced us to a technique call pointillism wherein he made a vision of concrete life through the abstract action of placing single dots on the canvas. Each of those dots had a position and a color and the intent of the artist that they should contribute to a whole. The viewer sees a magic scene. Please see “Sunday in the Park” [here](#).

Our books and newspapers have for a few centuries carried organized dots to our eyes,

from which we make pictures and stories. Now our televisions, computers, projectors, and all presenters of digital information do the same.

Ludwig von Mises, writing in Switzerland in 1940, in the shadow of the Third Reich, imagined pointillist economics. The single irreducible source of human events is the individual human. Just as Seurat discovered that the overall effect of dots was an image that was greater than the sum of its parts, Mises intuited that the most rational view of economic history was in an understanding of its component parts. Just as computer scientists know that the nearly infinite colors of pictures are made up of dots composed of varying intensities of red, green, and blue subdots, Mises figured that the behavior of human society can be concretely evaluated by the place and time of a human action with varying intensities of thinking, reasoning, and acting.

This is an introduction to my continuing observations derived from Mises, which I hope to share with you more in future columns.

Rothbard Quote #17 — On *Human Action*

Mises' original work was written in German. I am listening to a translation published by the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama. But one of Murray Rothbard's most towering works is an "explanation" of Human Action, with the title of *Man, Economy, and State*. In his first chapter he writes,

"Human action, on the other hand, can be meaningfully interpreted by other men, for it is governed by a certain purpose that the actor has in view. The purpose of a man's act is his end; the desire to achieve this end is the man's motive for instituting the action."

In my professional life, I am a software engineer. I may be retired but I can never again not be a software engineer. The most basic principle is that all software must be pursued only with a human user goal in mind. For instance, manage a checkbook. If there is no user goal, of what possible use could the software be? It is not the engineer's task to determine whether the goal itself is valid. Why would a human user seek the invalid? Purpose is the place where humans see the intent of other humans. Purpose drives action, and the revelation of purpose drives out attempts to cloak purpose. Only purpose can remain, not falsehoods pretending at purpose. One might remember this the next time we see or hear a candidate for POTUS laboring mightily to distract us from the true purposes of his endeavor.

One of the early parts of Mises' book cites this tremendously useful idea from Baruch

Spinoza — as light is the illuminator of darkness, so truth will illuminate falsehood.

Logic Fallacy #47 — Empty Symbols

Symbols are empty. Apples and oranges are also empty of anything that is not orange stuff or apple stuff. Yet we feel free to use apples and oranges symbolically to represent something else entirely — things are both different and alike at the same time.

This week at Socrates Cafe Louisville we got all amped up over several symbols. I speak of a statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford University, of a statue of Joe Paterno at Penn State, of a couple of red, white, and blue flags (USA and Confederacy), of flags in general.

The critical junction where symbols become problems is that since any symbol is a fake relationship to the real thing symbolized, the fake can be further faked, and the real rolls farther away. Look at the swastika — it was a symbol of evil in 20th century Europe but a symbol for good throughout a Hindu culture both before and after Nazi Germany.

In the case of Cecil Rhodes, we have an Englishman who did both good and bad, depending on what one's frame of reference indicates. He oppressed colonial Africans but funded the Rhodes Scholar program. But today, some students want Lord Cecil's statue removed from the cloisters of Oxford.

With Joe Paterno, we have an exemplary football coach who nonetheless fell asleep at the switch of the program he ran. We now ring out the symbol of the captain going down with the ship (don't ask me to explain the utility of that chestnut). Furthermore, the symbol "Joe" and the symbol "Paterno" were misapplied by an orange-headed politico, and a great deal of symbolic hoopla was made about that. And, by the way, what symbolic mischief is being done with artificially colored hair and suntans from bottles. And while we're at it, let's not forget to note the underlying sports team symbolism dancing around this issue. The politico was pandering to the blue-clad Nittany Lions, mistakenly while addressing a crowd undoubtedly full of blue-and-gold attired Pittsburgh Panthers.

Now, we turn to the stars and bars. After a white-on-black massacre in a church in Charleston, last year, the people in South Carolina who hated that the stars and bars were still part of the culture used the event, symbolically, to at last prevail over the people in South Carolina who loved that the stars and bars were still part of the culture. The flag no longer flies over statist institutions and many private entities. Meanwhile, in Mississippi the stars and bars icon is still part of that state's flag, and the pot boils.

And I confess that only two columns ago, I regaled you with "The Wearin' o' the Green," and an observance of St. Patrick's Day.

The human race would quickly cease to have importance or impact without its individuals who think, reason, and act. The collective becomes extinct without its individuals. Beyond that, we must communicate our thinking, reasoning, and acting through both real and symbolic content. Wouldn't we be better off with symbols that are closer to truth?

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