Just War, Conflation, Systemic Anarchy

Send him mail.

"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.

I never seem to run out of topics, thanks to my brisk life on the Internet among the online voluntaryists. In a recent post on Facebook, Skyler Collins talked about being thankful for the intellectual disagreement in the world of voluntary individualism. Remember there is nothing in the word voluntary that compels agreement, although I find most voluntaryists to be very agreeable people, intellectually and compassionately.

I will take this opportunity to share with you three debates I have recently had with friends, and with myself based on reading and listening to podcasts. The topics are:

- Is there such a thing as a just war and what are the hazards of exploring that abyss?
- Does the conflation of events and people possibly result in the loss of knowledge?
- Is anarchy a system or a non-system?

How to Label a War as Just

A Facebook friend recently posted a chart that was represented as requirements for a just war. While I laud the urge to establish rules against unjust war, I feel very uncomfortable with the idea that if you can describe just war, then you can describe an opposite, such as unjust peace or unjust war. I stated my position as being that defining just war was a dangerous and slippery slope, and that the action required to implement such a definition was beyond what could reasonably be expected of most human beings. Unfortunately, my position elicited both an *ad hominem* response and a *non sequitur*. So, the intent of airing the issue here is in hopes of engaging in intellectual, not emotional, debate. I would welcome feedback far more than I would want unexamined agreement.

Just to illustrate the problems of establishing criteria for excusing a war on the grounds of

justness, I will paraphrase the list proposed by my correspondent. And since my disagreement with him is with the content of the proposal, I will withhold his name to avoid any appearance that I have less than great admiration for his philosophies in the main.

Title: How to tell if a war is just (must meet all of these criteria)

- All peaceful options have been tried.
- The problem to be corrected must be evil.
- There are violations of sound policy and principles.
- The fight is not suicidal.
- Anything beyond the solution would be excessive.
- There must be a reachable solution.

It is not my aim just to gainsay the above ideas, then to declare myself the winner. Rather, I would contend that any such list has grave logical problems, and beyond that, terrible likely consequences. The first question seems to be, who would be entrusted with an analysis on these criteria or any like them? If humans were universally capable of determining what is a just war, such a list would be superfluous. Who shall decide, and then who shall monitor the decider?

How could anyone determine that “all” peaceful options had been tried? How do you decide what is evil? In a democracy does that mean that if one more vote is cast for evil than half of those voting, then the problem is evil, or does it just mean that one more vote than half wants to see a fight? Even in a democracy, and certainly in a tyranny, does it mean that a leader has determined evilness? Who decides what are sound policy and principle? FDR, GWB, Barack Obama? Are policies and principles in place before the war or are they made up as the war arises and proceeds? What would be some policies and principles that would both pre-exist and justify a war. Is there an implication that either might makes right or that right makes might? Can a war be conducted without collateral violence or excessive destruction, and is there any way to know what the boundaries are before the war is over? If there is a reachable solution, why wasn’t that reached under number one?

My assertion is that it is impossible to make rules defining just war. What is just and what is war? Does everyone agree on the difference between just and justified? Does everyone understand the difference between a reason for war, and a determination of a just war?

To me, the dire consequences, of talking about just war, are that such discussions imply that there is such a thing as a just war. An equally sound contention is that a condition of justness and a condition of war are mutually exclusive. Justness is a casualty of war.

I have previously remarked to others, that I am not a pacifist but I have sincere doubts

about mankind's ability to deal with an oxymoron, which just war seems to be. I was disappointed to get the retort that if I didn't support self-defense then I was a pacifist. I have never said or written a word disparaging of self-defense, and that pacifist argument is a red herring. The principle of self-defense applies far beyond the particular setting of war. And self-defense needs no justification – it is a natural right that goes before any apology about collective war. Whether for good or for bad, self-defense is rational.

Lastly, if a good human can ply these conceptual liberties to define the undefinable – just war – then why can't an evildoer do as well. Once you even admit that there is a possibility of separating good war from bad war, you are issuing a license for all war to be considered just. The same goes for the old dodge of settling for the lesser of two evils. As a matter of history, I would be quite surprised if any war in the human age had not been called "just" by some self-appointed arbiter, at least one for every side.

But here is the rub, people who are looking for peace, don't want criteria for finding that a war is just, and people who want to make war will only offer such a set of so-called criteria when it aids their *casus belli*.

Conflation

Conflation is the practice of taking coincidence and attempting to create the idea that there is a causal connection. This practice will be part of about 95% of all "debate" and will comprise a very large part of each "debate." Its presence disqualifies the activity as true debate. It is a sort of intellectual dishonesty that is unacceptable when used deliberately and catastrophic when done through ignorance.

A classic example of conflation is "wet sidewalks cause rain." Causality is reversed. But frequently conflation is used to gloss over the lack of a causal relationship. Whether you believe that President Reagan rid the world of communism or not, the only evidence is made of conflated facts. The USSR collapsed while Reagan was in the White House. To make much of that coincidence, you have to ignore that most of the Russian Federation is still communist. And how would one account for Red China, Vietnam, Venezuela, North Korea, and Cuba, among others. I think that a far more compelling argument can be made that so far in history, all states have failed. One may counter by questioning, "what about the current set of viable states?" First, the phrase "viable states" is an oxymoron, absurd until time and change stand still (which is itself an absurdity). Name any current state, and we can list a set of its lethal failures in an hour.

One other logical distinction to make is that conflation and over-generalization are not identical fallacies. The first is an error made despite the sparsity of data, while the second may include the first, it is usually characterized by being an educated guess.

The worst part of conflation is that it is often used to create misinformation among the

easily misled. The particular sort of non-information is demonstrated by something that has become fairly widespread on the Internet lately. I have encountered it specifically because I have posted a few comments that, while not congratulatory or approving of Nelson Mandela's life, have merely noted his affect on history as being substantial – and all the returns are not in. So the conflation starts at a very low level; Mandela lived his 95 years among constant turmoil and violence, therefore he bears guilt for all or part of it. A bit more sophisticated has been the canard that Mandela's life coincided with a period in which "necklacing" took place in parts of South Africa (even though Nelson was in prison for 27 years which overlapped most of the necklacing events). And lastly, I have been subjected to what I consider to be a few devious cries of "fire" in crowded theaters:

- Nelson's former wife, Winnie, was guilty of being in favor of necklacing, therefore he was in favor of it – in fact, neither the first supposition nor the conclusion have been shown to be true. In any event, Nelson divorced Winnie after his release from prison.
- Nelson was a convicted enemy of the state, therefore he was a criminal. And so were the millions of people killed or imprisoned in the gulags of the USSR.
- Mandela may have associated with communists of some stripe at some time in his life. And so might we everyone have done.

Let me issue a pair of disclaimers here: Ronald Reagan was a far better POTUS than most, and certainly was steadfast against communism. And as with most men who live to be 95, Nelson Mandela had a real rollercoaster ride, and it is unnecessary, if not impossible, to make only one thing of it.

Is Anarchy a System?

Most people come at the concept of anarchy as though it were a thing with physical dimensions, and so it may be. But to approach anarchy only in that manner mistakes its essence. Anarchy is an absence of something else, and semantically that something else is "-archy" – a state characterized by rules.

There is the first problem. Rules, in that usage, are not sufficiently defined. The anarchy that we voluntaryists yearn for is an absence of collectively man-made rules (of rulers). We can have a very clear understanding that the rules, laws, and likelihoods of nature can coexist with anarchy. So anarchy is the non-adoption of an arbitrary system of artificial rules, it cannot be a man-made system.

I am, professionally, a systems engineer, and as such I contend that every thing, person, place, or event is at once a supersystem, a system, and a subsystem. We put these together like lego blocks to make everything, or nature does it for us. I often tell my students that the only logical ends to this continuum of systems are the Universe (because we don't know beyond it) and the lowest known level of sub-atomic components (because we don't know beyond it).

In object-oriented system analysis, we have objects which are things, persons, places, and events (and a special class of objects called relationships, which actually are events). None of these can exist in a vacuum (what would be the purpose?). Objects exist in a relationship with one or more other objects. For instance, communication is a thing but it must be related to other things for it to be important (even trivially). Communication must have a sender, a channel, a receiver, and a message. Both this phenomenon and its parts must also relate downward and upward and laterally to an infinity of elements. Related things are language, data, knowledge, symbols, vibrations, etc. This is the logical form of a system. Within that context, anarchy is a system. Anarchy (object) is the lack (relationship) of rulers (object), which relationship is a set of related systems.

The important distinction is that there is no physical system of anarchy, therefore we cannot point to its moving parts. The paradox is that we all know people who believe that anarchy is a set of somewhat commonly recognized behaviors, like bomb-throwing. That is a really, really wrong perception of anarchy.

I would suggest that anarchy is change from one state (event) to another. I have in the past, although I gave up smoking in the early 70s, likened a column of cigarette smoke while the cigarette rests in an ashtray to a model demonstrating anarchy. When the column first rises it is carried on intense heat from the burning end and thus rises in a tubular column, at some point the heat of the column is overcome by the heat of the room so the column becomes turbulent (less predictable), but the eventual conclusion of this action is that the smoke becomes mixed with all of the atmosphere in the room. The three stages are caused by change. The change itself is a system. If we see the turbulence (lack of order) where one influence is being overtaken by another as anarchy, then anarchy is a subsystem of change. Since life must change, anarchy must be a systemic part of life.

The meaning to take away, I suggest, is that anarchy is not a negative, it is not a negative behavior, and it cannot have a negative result – it can only have a natural result. Here’s an idea, let’s dismiss the clichéd misunderstanding of anarchy, and share this clarification with the next politician, party-member, or pundit whom we meet.

Although this is the section of my column commonly called the conclusion, please understand that there are no conclusions offered here. This column is an invitation, without RSVP, to thoughtful consideration. I would love to get feedback, discussion, disagreement, even name calling, but most of all I would be happy if one person beside myself just thought about these ideas, if you and I could start a viral outbreak of thinking.