

Liberty as the Application of Self-Ownership



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“The Self Owner” is an original weekly column appearing every Tuesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Spencer W. Morgan. Spencer is a husband and father, and has studied History and Philosophy at the University of Utah. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Last week we discovered that defining liberty too broadly as “freedom of action” results in some contradictions when actions themselves reduce others’ capability for action. By examining the universality of the concept, we have discovered the correct definition of liberty. It is not merely freedom of action, but the freedom to take any and all *self-directing* action.

This gives us a definition that can be applied universally without contradiction, and keeps the idea of liberty grounded in its implicit core principle: self-ownership. If we are not starting from the basic notion that a person owns herself, or has a unique and exclusive prerogative for self-control, then there is no basis upon which to presume that liberty is of any value.

If liberty is only of value as an implication of and necessity for self-ownership, then we must examine and substantiate the concept of self-ownership.

What is Self-Ownership?

Ownership is an exclusive prerogative of control. It includes not merely a capability of control, but a moral entitlement thereto. If you “own” something it means you have an entitlement to exclude others from use, in order to exercise use yourself. This prerogative is, to many, “self-evident” or axiomatic as the philosophers say. An “axiom” is a truth that is so evident that it is impossible to argue against it without contradicting one’s own assertion in the process.

For example, if I were to maintain that I am *not* a self-owner, I would be using my mind to form words and express them with either speech or writing. By doing this, I am excluding all other potential users of my mind and body. In other words, I am acting upon the principle of self-ownership even in the process of trying to claim that I don’t own myself, resulting in an inescapable contradiction. If we are to believe that a person is not a self-

owner, or in other words is not morally entitled to self-use, then we must conclude that she must refrain from all self-use and leave the resource that is her person open to other potential users. Because this assertion would so deeply contradict man's evident condition in the world, and nature as needing to use his mind and body to survive and achieve happiness, we can reject such an assertion and thus reject all possibilities other than self-ownership. This is how we know that self-ownership, or an entitlement for an individual to exclude other controllers of his person and act freely in all self-directing ways, is a valid prerogative.

This is very short summary of the thinking behind the notion of self-ownership, and I would hope that its basic truth is resonant enough with most readers to not require further examination. If the reader would like a more systematic substantiation, the philosophical "heavy lifting" in this area has been done by Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard, and I would refer you to their work*.

Now that we've got a universal definition of liberty, and tied our value of liberty to a moral entitlement of self-ownership, we can label this concept for application to interpersonal relations (society). The label for this notion is a "right". In coming articles we'll talk about rights and the privileges or entitlements that are often mistakenly labeled as such.

* Murray N. Rothbard's *The Ethics of Liberty* and Ayn Rand's "Man's Rights."