

Living Slavery And All That

Guest post by Alan P. Koontz. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, August 1985.

In various forums, at least since the birth of the [Libertarian Party], Murray Rothbard has invoked what he calls the “slavery analogy,” to point up the morality of political voting. The question is: Does the slavery analogy really help in this way?

To begin with, Rothbard’s slavery analogy illustrates the nature of the State. The condition of the slaves relative to their master is more or less the same as that of the subjects to the State. The master, by either directly or indirectly (through a foreman) exceeding his natural rights, denies his slaves’ natural rights, just as the State denies the natural rights of its subjects by its very existence.

The condition of the slaves is thus a given before the question of “voting rights” arises. Their condition indicates that they have a ruler regardless of whether or not the slaves can vote. The same is true of the subjects of the State. Suppose, then, that the slaves are granted a choice of, say, two foremen by the master. The slaves may cast ballots to decide which foreman will execute rule over the slaves. The foreman who receives the most votes will be the choice of all the slaves. Presumably, the slaves will each choose what he or she thinks is the lesser of the two evils. The situation of the slave thus becomes analogous to that of the subject who has been granted the “right to vote” for his ruler. In light of this slavery analogy, Rothbard asks: What is immoral about choosing the lesser of two evils, if that is the only choice one has under the circumstances?

To answer his question: First of all, the choice is one which affects the lives of others besides the chooser. Using the slave analogy, the vote of each slave isn’t just a choice of which foreman will rule that slave, but is a choice of who will rule *all* of the slaves. Thus each slave that votes is acting in the capacity of the master respecting his slaves. To vote for a foreman is to take part in the process of other people’s enslavement. It should be clear, at least to Rothbard, that by voting, the slave in respect to his peers is going as far beyond his or her natural rights as the master (or the foreman) does respecting his or her slaves.

Moreover, the possibility certainly exists in the slavery analogy that not all the slaves may be in agreement as to which of the two foremen is the lesser of the two evils. Most importantly, some or all of the slaves may decide that the lesser of the two evils is still evil and on this basis refuse to vote. In either case, the immorality of voting is quite obvious.

It is also obvious that assuming one only has the choice of the lesser or greater of the two evils in the slavery analogy is begging the question. As Frank Chodorov once asked, in this

regard: "Under what compulsion are we to make such a choice? Why not pass up both of them?" Indeed there is nothing in the slavery analogy that says the slaves must choose one or the other of the two foremen. By making such a choice the slaves are merely doing yet another thing that the master wants them to do. Instead of choosing either foremen, one or more of the slaves may choose neither. This third choice, also open to the slaves, *is* a moral one for it doesn't affect coercion towards others, unlike voting.

Furthermore, the refusal to vote is a first step toward restoring individual sovereignty. If the slave does what the master wants him or her to do he or she will most assuredly remain a slave. (The master, for example, wouldn't give his or her slaves the "right to vote" if the slaves could thereby become free.) By refusing to vote the slave is not doing what the master wants him or her to do. If most of the slaves refused to vote the master would have to choose the foreman for them. However, the master (and foreman) would then be up against a group that has refused to barter his or her individual sovereignty for the lesser of the two evils the master had originally offered; let alone give it up for nothing. And so would it be for the State that failed to get barely any of its subjects to participate in the electoral process.

In short, the answer to the opening question is: No, on the contrary.