

Material Property as an Extension of Self-Ownership



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“The Self Owner” is an original weekly column appearing every Wednesday 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](#).

So far we’ve defined liberty as a condition of widespread individual, personal, self-determination through the objective application of the notion of rights. For a society to be said to be one of “liberty” it must, in general, operate so that those barriers are honored. No society has done so perfectly, and almost all have to a greater or lesser degree legitimized and institutionalized the violation of those barriers. In later columns I will examine how to apply this concept of rights to society (an aggregation of individual humans) and what the application of rights implies about governments.

For now it is enough to understand that the idea of rights, or barriers to a person’s action that exist by virtue of others’ self-ownership, is an essential foundation for humans to deal with one another. This universally applicable concept allows people to interact with one another in productive and mutually beneficial ways. This gives rise to another concept, which is that of trade or exchange, but before we can examine *that* concept we must first examine the notion of material property.

We’ve already established the validity of the basic idea of property or ownership, when we examined the notion of self-ownership. Your self (your mind and body, and the entitlement to use them to the exclusion of others) is the primary *property* with which we all are born.

What does our self-ownership mean about our relationship to the material world? Do we have a valid claim to “own” physical materials other than our own selves?

Philosophers have examined the question of man’s nature for centuries, and arrived at many varying and dubious conclusions about it. One thing that seems fairly self-evident and well-established is that it is *reason*, or the rational capacity, that sets a human being apart from the rest of the animal world. Aristotle, whose logical system and methods of classifying the animal kingdom were foundational for all later advances, referred to man as the “rational animal.” This fact of man’s nature has certain implications about his

relationship to the material world.

To survive, man must use the materials found in nature as his reason allows and requires. This creates a clear prerogative to do so. In order to make such an assertion, however, we must examine the “ownership” condition of the materials of nature prior to man’s taking them and using them. There are a few possibilities:

- Scenario 1: The materials of the earth are, prior to man’s taking them, in a condition of non-ownership. This condition presents no moral obstacle to man’s use of the materials of nature and his doing so can properly become a basis for personal ownership, or a personal *right* to the material results of his labor in such a pursuit.
- Scenario 2: The materials of the earth are, prior to man’s taking them, in a condition of collective ownership by *all*. Since taking from those materials to survive would then violate that ownership claim of all other humans, this would mean man is morally obligated to choose death in order to honor an abstract, non-specific ownership by all but himself. It is, in essence, an assertion of self-sacrifice in the form of death itself as a moral ideal and as such it is unable to be practiced in principle by a living human.
- Scenario 3: The materials of the earth are, prior to man’s taking from them, owned by a superior, overseeing being and his use thereof is permitted. This scenario, for all moral applications, leaves us back at scenario one since this being has not given express directives for which specific humans own which materials of nature and has placed us in the condition we have already examined. That condition requires us to use our reason in conjunction with the earth’s materials to survive.

By examining these scenarios, we can see that to hold anything other than an individual moral entitlement to take materials from nature and use them results in a contradiction of life itself. The use of such materials results in an extension of self-ownership and creates an ownership or property in the resulting materials, provided that they had not previously been the subject of such an action by another. This concept is known as *homesteading* and the most important philosophical examinations have been done by John Locke and Murray Rothbard.

This principle then gives rise to personal material property, as well as a right to the results of exchanges thereof, which we will discuss in future columns.