The Ethics of Voluntaryism

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"One Voluntaryist's Perspective" is an original column appearing most Mondays at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found here. OVP-only RSS feed available here.

Having recently written columns explaining both the philosophy of voluntaryism and the voluntary principle on which its based, I thought it would be fun to take a stab at voluntaryist ethics. We who value morality and doing the right thing have an obligation – self-imposed – to find a philosophy compatible with moral living. Voluntaryism is that philosophy. I will first define my terms, and then follow with an outline.

Definitions

In "Morality and Voluntaryism", I offered what I consider to be the most coherent definition of morality, and the most compatible with it's etymology. I will here reconstruct and amend that definition and its antecedents as concisely as possible, in logical order.

- *Person* – A sapient individual who behaves purposefully.
- *Values* – A person's subjective judgment of what is important or preferable in life.
- *Community* – Cooperative interaction among persons.
- *Fraternity* – Association of common interest by persons.
- *Society* – Two or more persons who value and create community and fraternity.
- *Morality* – The proper behavior of a person in society.
- *Proper behavior* – Purposeful actions that build or maintain society.
- *Immorality* – The improper behavior of a person in society.
- *Improper behavior* – Purposeful actions that are destructive to society.
- *Virtue* – A positive character trait deemed morally good by society.
- *Ethics* – The science or study of morality and virtue.

Means and Ends

A person's values are his own. What he wants out of life is up to him to determine. What wasn't up to him, however, was being born. That was up to his parents, or at least his

mother. But born he was, into a life already existing within society. He and his family constitute the first society that he experiences. There begins his evaluations. He will either decide that society is worthwhile, or not. If he does, the question must be asked, worthwhile to what end?

Praxeology is the science of human action, and praxeological theory begins with the action axiom, which is, that human action is purposeful, which purpose is ultimately the removal of felt uneasiness by the actor, which felt uneasiness is removed by the utilization of means over a period of time. The uneasiness that one feels depends on one's values. If a person values life, then he will feel uneasy about thirst and hunger and will act to satiate it, thereby removing his feeling of uneasiness. If a person values reason, then he will feel uneasy about cloudy thinking and poorly made arguments and will act to clear his mind and formulate better arguments, thereby removing his feeling of uneasiness. The action axiom is considered axiomatic because it's self-evident, meaning, both the formulating of and the attempt to refute, proves it. The former feels uneasy about not understanding human action fundamentally, the latter about being told that's something is axiomatic, and both act to remove their respective feeling of uneasiness.

The creation and maintenance of society is, at least, an end. Many – probably most – people value society and feel uneasy when society is non-existent or on the decline. If morality is the proper behavior of a person in society, then anybody who values society and feels uneasy about the prospect of it disappearing should – having an obligation to themselves – behave morally, and probably even virtuously. If a person currently finds himself devoid of moral understanding, then he should take up the study of ethics. Ethics is how we reason over what behaviors by persons is either moral or immoral and either virtuous or vicious. And it just so happens that the creation and maintenance of society depends on the practice of voluntaryism.

Voluntaryism

Voluntaryism is a philosophy based on the voluntary principle, which is that *all human relations should happen voluntarily, or not all*. In "The Philosophy of Voluntaryism", I made the case for why applying the voluntary principle is wiser in pursuit of several commonly-held ends – peace, prosperity, family bond, education, self-improvement, *et cetera* – than the alternative, ie. coercion. These ends have a lot to do with society. In fact, society only exists where persons are peaceful, families have strong bonds, self-improvement is valued, and interpersonal conflict is reduced, or avoided altogether. As such, voluntaryism is not only compatible, but *required* by morality. It would not be inaccurate to say that voluntaryism is virtuous. What follows is an outline on the ethics of voluntaryism.

Self-Improvement

Society is built by people, people who value community and fraternity. Before a person will desire to live in society, they must understand and experience the benefits of society. Increasing this understanding and experience is to improve oneself. While life has a way of forcing unexpected and undesirable situations upon is from which we can learn (improve) a great deal, when the unexpected and undesirable is forced on us by other people in our society, we are likely to feel anger and resentment toward them. This is not conducive to the maintenance of society, and so one person coercing another in hopes of improving them in some virtuous way is not only foolish, but immoral.

Interpersonal Relations

That we should relate with others on a voluntary basis is the voluntaryist argument. It also happens to be the basis for community and fraternity, which are what make society. On the other hand, relating with others on a coercive basis, actions like murder and robbery, are destructive toward community and fraternity, between individuals and among larger society. Therefore, coercion is immoral. But is all coercion immoral? I think that if the immorality of a behavior is judged by its effect on the maintenance of society, then coercion must be separated into two types – initiatory and retaliatory – because in many cases failing to use coercion in retaliation to coercion used by others would protect their immoral actions. That's not to say that retaliating to coercion must always be done coercively – wisdom will inform strategy – but it is to say that doing so is not immoral.

Which brings as to the idea of crime. Crime is a concept that varies from society to society as its definition evolves over time through the development of norms, customs, and conventions. The fact that a given society was ever created and maintained is a testament that what it considers crime should also be considered immoral. Behaviors like murder, robbery, rape, battery, and fraud are considered crimes by most human societies that exist or have existed (exceptions based on race, gender, or age, notwithstanding). All of these behaviors are also coercive. On both fronts, then, they are immoral.

As important as it is to understand the immorality of criminal behavior, it's just as important to understand the morality of how we deal with criminals. Should every crime be punished the same, say, by death? Or should punishment be meted out on the basis of proportionality? Or, should we judge separately corporal punishment from punishments like social ostracism and banishment (Ch. 14)? These are questions for ethicists, philosophers, and even historians, as historical analysis can be quite revealing on the question of punishment to crime and the maintenance of societies that have existed in the past. In any event, interpersonal relations, to be considered moral, must be initiated on a voluntary basis.

Parenting

The amount of research that has gone into parenting seems to have increased severalfold the last few decades, all of it quite supportive of the voluntaryist insight. How one is raised, from infancy to adulthood is a major factor to how an individual is likely to behave as an adult. If a particular parenting practice can be shown to be harmful to a person, leading to the development of behavior damaging toward the maintenance of society (anti-social behavior), then it's rightly considering immoral. The use of violence in the home is a strong indicator that children will grow up either as bullies, which leads to crime, or as pushovers, which leads to deficiency in self-esteem and confidence, or worse, a ticking time-bomb of pent up resentment and rage. Both outcomes are antithetical to society.

But that's the moral argument against certain parenting practices as it concerns larger society, or macro-society. What about micro-societies, like the family, or even a single relationship between two people? Which parenting practices are damaging to the parent-child relationship and to family bond? Spanking, time-outs, arbitrary punishments of every sort, as well as conditional love and manipulation through praise and privilege granting/restriction is just as damaging to the society between the parent and child as it is between the parent and another adult, like a spouse or a friend. In either case, negative feelings like resentment and hate are fostered leading to the degeneration of said micro-societies, hence such parenting practices are immoral.

Further, children experiencing schooling – where kids are forced to endure a prison-like environment, compulsory labor, and coerced to receive and memorize someone's version of unquestionable knowledge – will have a harder time with self-control, being intrinsically motivated, and thinking critically about the plethora of ideas they will encounter in the world that will either lead to empowerment or to self-destruction; not too mention the destructive nature of schooling on the relationship between teacher and student and parent and child. In other words, schooling is a violation of the voluntary principle, as well as immoral on the basis that society of any size will not be maintained where its members are not accustomed to empathy, compassion, respect, liberty, negotiation, interest-motivated action, and reason.

Economics

Because means must be utilized in order to achieve desired ends, they must first be allocated so as to reduce conflict. Ownership is the exclusive right of control of a given resource. Before we can even act, we must have the exclusive right of control over our bodies. Self-ownership, as it's called, is an antecedent to the voluntary principle, and is the only principle that if respected by everyone in society reduces, rather than increases, conflict over every person's body. Further, the fact that we act before asking anyone permission is a claim of self-ownership, thereby proving its acceptance in deed, if not in word. Morality, then, demands the principle of self-ownership be recognized as valid and respected.

Having ownership title to our bodies is the first step toward achieving our desired ends. The second is having title to other resources we require for use as means, starting with the maintenance of our bodies. We need water, food, and shelter if we are to stay alive, but so does everyone else. How should these and other scarce resources be allocated? There are different ways to allocate scarce resources, each more or less successful in reducing conflict, conflict which leads to violence and a break down of society. I remain unconvinced that any other mechanism of allocation than "first appropriation" (homesteading) is better at reducing conflict. First appropriation is the basis for private property rights. The first appropriator (take possession of, to make one's own) of a resource is its rightful owner. What would happen in a society where first appropriators were not granted ownership? Every resource would be up for grabs, leading to ownership by the most powerful, or as it's called "might makes right". This is clearly an improper mechanism of allocation for people in society. Anything other than first appropriation, and that which logically follows – title transfer (trade and contracts), gifting, forced restitution – is not conducive to the maintenance of society.

Once a culture of private property rights is established, economic calculation is made possible. Being able to judge what one has to trade – resources or skills – through market pricing – which depends on voluntary trade – allows a person to cooperate with others through the division of labor in order to achieve his desired ends. Without economic calculation from market pricing made possible through a culture of private property rights, people would be forced to produce what they need all on their own, or to trade outside of legal channels. The impoverishment that results is disastrous toward the maintenance of society, leading to an increase in conflict, crime, and decivilization. The laws of economics dictate what happens to markets that fail to keep trade voluntary and private property rights respected. When trade is coercively interfered with and property rights violated, society suffers. Only free markets are moral and compatible with voluntaryism.

Politics

In "The Voluntary Principle" I briefly recounted the political origins of voluntaryism. What began as a push for religious freedom became a push for freedom from all coercive government. Voluntaryists of the past recognized the immoral foundations of government monopolization and taxation. The moral principle that is therein violated found it's label among modern libertarians, which is the non-aggression principle (NAP). The NAP states that it is morally wrong to initiate aggression – an uninvited border crossing – against the private property – body and resources – of another. If members of society were allowed to violate the NAP, society, clearly, wouldn't survive. Under the NAP, it is morally wrong to murder, rob, rape, batter, and defraud your fellow humans.

If it is morally wrong to violate the NAP, then we who value morality must discover all

possible violations of the NAP and eschew them. The state is an institution among society that enforces its monopoly on the provision of law and order; of ultimate decision-making; of the legal use of force. This monopoly has its roots in the conquest of dissenters. No state on Earth, to my knowledge, was ever founded with the unanimous consent of its constituents (young and old, male and female, black and white, rich and poor), nor did they ever in their histories obtain unanimous consent (actually, once established and coercion threatened, they couldn't). Therefore it follows that the origins and maintenance of statism – residing in conquest and the proliferation of myth that they do – are a violation of the NAP and the voluntary principle. Voluntaryists are necessarily anti-state (anarchism), as should be all who value following moral principles, like the NAP.

As libertarian anarchist Stephan Kinsella wrote, anyone who values morality and is not anti-state must maintain either: (a) the initiation of aggression is not immoral; or (b) states do not necessarily employ aggression. "Proposition (b) is plainly false. States always tax their citizens, which is a form of aggression. They always outlaw competing defense agencies, which also amounts to aggression. (Not to mention the countless victimless crime laws that they inevitably, and without a single exception in history, enforce on the populace.)" As for proposition (b), socialist dictators "and criminals also feel aggression is justified. This does not make it so. Criminals, socialists, and [non-voluntaryists] have yet to show how aggression – the initiation of force against innocent victims – is justified. No surprise; it is not possible to show this. But criminals don't feel compelled to justify aggression; why should advocates of the state feel compelled to do so?" Great question. My guess? Because they don't want to support immorality, which they are.

Morality and the Individual

Morality is as much concerned about the maintenance of larger society as it is the society between two people. What is immoral for the latter is likely immoral for the former. But what about behaviors that don't involve anyone else? Can a person alone on an island ever behave immorally? Can what he does to himself ever have moral considerations for the voluntaryist? I think so. If a person desires to escape his solitude and recreate society with others, he ought to do everything in his power to maintain his life and find a way to escape. For a person who already finds themselves among society, and desires to stay, he ought to develop a moral code for himself that will enable him to maintain his place in society.

Novelist and philosophy Ayn Rand was a bit more narrow in her view on morality (p. 10), defining it as "a code of values to guide man's choices and actions – the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life." I would consider this a qualified use of "morality", but I think it is instructive to morality herein defined because the choices and actions taken by the individual likely affect others. Without a code of values compatible with the maintenance of society, a person may eventually find himself without society, or worse, as an enemy to society (outlawry). Even a man alone on island

should maintain his society-compatible code of values if he ever wishes to rejoin society.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration is the consideration of the morality of an action prior to acting. To whom should the voluntaryist give ethical consideration? As we value peace, we should give ethical consideration to everyone that we encounter, with one exception. If who we encounter is not being peaceful – are trying to murder, rob, batter, or rape us – then our considerations need only be strategic, not ethical. That's not to say that we can't afford them ethical consideration, merely that its not required by morality. They are our enemy by virtue of their actions, and should be dealt with accordingly.

Would one give a raging tiger ethical consideration? When our fellow humans behave as ethically inconsiderate toward us as a raging tiger, they may be treated like one. Hans Hoppe calls both the raging tiger and the human predator "technical problems" (paragraph 12), as opposed to ethical dilemmas. It would not be a violation of voluntaryist ethics to "put down" either the raging tiger or the human predator. Before I'm accused of trying to justify the killing of non-killers or might-be-killers, morality would dictate that this only applies in the moment, and not after the criminal has a chance to repent and vow to change his ways. If he refuses, then he may be banished from society if he's nonviolent, or killed if he is. Either would not be immoral, nor a violation of voluntaryist ethics.

Final Thoughts

The preceding outline was an attempt to show why morality requires voluntaryism. The initiation of coercion is always improper behavior for a person in society, of any size. If we value society and all the benefits that it brings, then we have a *moral imperative* to practice voluntaryism. Building or maintaining, and destroying, are the two pressures constantly at work in society. Voluntary human relations is necessarily the former while coercion is necessarily the latter. Interpersonal relationships between parent and child, spouses, or friends, family units, neighborhoods, associations, businesses, markets, nations, and the world can't exist and function when some members are allowed to initiate coercion against others.

One other note, my evolution toward voluntaryism was a bit-by-bit realization of the efficacy of the voluntary principle to realize the values I already held. My first advance was in economics. As my understanding of sound economic theory grew, I understood the necessity of practicing the voluntary principle in achieving widespread economic prosperity. Years and several advances later, my understanding of the parent/child relationship reached the point of understanding the necessity of practicing the voluntary principle in achieving strong family bonds and a proper, play- and interest-based education of my children. My values haven't really changed much over the last decade, but

understanding the best way to realize them – voluntaryism – has.

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