

Trade as an Ethic for Social Cooperation



Send him mail. [f](#) [t](#)

"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](#).

Last week we explored the implications of man's nature as a rational, and volitionally rational being. We've identified two major implications of this nature. The first of these is rights, which are the conceptual barriers to our self-owning actions and the negative obligation upon all others to honor such barriers. The second is trade. Trade is the process by which rational beings exchange or cooperate for mutual, but individually- and subjectively-calculated, benefit.

As the saying goes, "no man is an island." This platitude is often lobbed at liberty advocates of all varieties, containing the unspoken assumptions that,

1. coerced association is the only kind possible, and
2. those who question its validity are advocating zero cooperation.

We can easily reject this classic argument just by examining these presumptions. The saying, however, is *valid* and illustrative of an undeniable truth about humanity. Humans have found interaction and interdependence to be both psychologically and economically advantageous to a degree that we can and should reject the idea of total isolation as an ideal. We need not reject this reality.

If we do accept that humans are better off connected socially, and cooperating, then the question is: on what *basis* should this cooperation be motivated? How do we obtain the cooperation from others we want or need, when each of these others is an individual self-owner who is entitled to her own determinations and free range of self-owning action? *Trade* is the answer to that question.

Trade is more than just a label for our economic activity. It is a concept that pervades all of our interaction with others. As an ethic for seeking and obtaining cooperation of other self-owners, trade requires that we honor their rationality and right of self-determination by

finding a way to appeal to their desires as determined by themselves. This ethic can, and should, be applied to all of our social interactions.

- In a situation where we might be inclined to compel our child's cooperation by a threat of punishment, guilt, etc., we might instead honor the logical capacity that they do have at a very early age by spending the extra time and effort to help them realize the way they individually benefit from the desired action.
- When we might expect assistance from a friend or family member in an endeavor to assist us out of obligation or as a response to a display of our need, we can instead find a way to appeal to their self-interest by offering an exchange, whether monetary or otherwise.
- We can see our marriages, instead of as a formality that entitles us to the obligatory endurance of our partner, as an exchange that we are required to continue to make desirable to the other in order to appeal to their self-interest.

One inescapable presumption contained in every act of voluntary trade is the *validity* of the self-interest of each participant. By making a voluntary exchange, whether I am exchanging a physical good, money, or my time and effort, I am presuming the validity of my self-interest and the self-interest of the other party to the exchange. Many of the "duties" imposed by our culture, whether governmental, traditional, or religious, seem to stem from an effort to circumvent this trade ethic and thus deny the principle of individual self-determination and self-interest.

As we can see, the notion of trade rests upon some very essential philosophical presumptions, and has some very undeniable implications. In future columns we'll examine these in detail. Next week we'll look specifically at the way trade requires diversity, and how *voluntary trade* (unlike its parasitic, coercive counterfeits) has formed the foundation and engine of everything we now recognize as civilization.