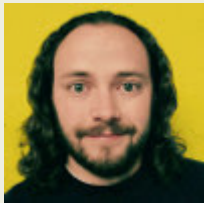


Voluntaryism among Other Philosophies



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"One Voluntarist'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](#).

Voluntaryism is the philosophy based on the voluntary principle, that all human relations should happen voluntarily or not at all. In my opinion, this principle, like all principles, is only valid when its adoption creates a self-imposed obligation on how one should behave toward other humans. As a voluntarist then, my primary commitment is to voluntary human relations, meaning, all other considerations like acceptable property norms or the justified use of force are secondary. Here I want to examine a few other philosophies that have attracted me – libertarianism, anarchism, nihilism, stoicism – as they relate to voluntaryism.

Libertarianism

One view of libertarianism is that it's the philosophy of liberty. If one values and prefers being "free from restraint" by others, one may be properly labeled a libertarian. However, libertarians come in all sorts of flavors. While they all seem to be committed to the principles of self-ownership (everyone owns their own body) and non-aggression (the initiation of aggression against others is wrong), where that takes them logically varies.

At the highest level we have two camps: minarchist libertarians (limited government/state) and anarchist libertarians (no government/state). Among minarchists we find Objectivists (of Ayn Rand persuasion), Constitutionalists, and Geolibertarians (of Henry George persuasion). There are, however, budding strands of Objectivism and Georgism within anarchism. Among anarchists we find, among many others, voluntarists, anarcho-capitalists, left anarchists, mutualists, and agorists.

In general, libertarianism is not opposed to participation in electoral politics, or in political voting. There are libertarian political action committees, institutions of policy analysis, and even an organized and registered Libertarian Party. Voluntaryism, in contrast, is opposed to participation in electoral politics and in political voting. Each is an attempt at control over others either directly, if one is running for office, or indirectly. The abstention from

participating in electoral politics is the only compatible position with the voluntary principle. While my views would qualify me as a libertarian, my commitment to the voluntary principle pushes me away from minarchism and political participation.

Anarchism

Anarchy means simply “without rulers”, but what qualifies somebody as a ruler is more complicated. In my opinion, rulers are initiators of coercion (the use of force or threats). Unfortunately, this too begs the question. When is an act considered an initiation of coercion? If I take your wallet from your pocket, I have initiated coercion. If I take *my* wallet from your pocket, I have not. The difference is in who has title, ownership, of the wallet. Herein lies a significant division among anarchists.

The belief in what constitutes a valid claim of ownership (exclusive right of control) over resources (movable and immovable, ie. land, bodies of water) varies greatly within anarchist thought. Left anarchists (socialists, communists, syndicalists, *et cetera*) generally hold to an occupancy and use property norm. You must continually occupy and use a given resource if you are to maintain title to it. As such, absentee ownership (of factories, housing, *et cetera*) is considered invalid. To use force to secure absentee ownership is an initiation of coercion, and so is incompatible with anarchist principles. Likewise for all forms of hierarchy (misnomer for echelons of authority) that set up wage labor and unequal bargaining power.

In contrast, right anarchists (capitalists, objectivists, agorists) generally hold to an original appropriation property norm. As long as you appropriate (put to some use out of a state of nature) or trade for resources, you maintain title until you abandon, gift, or trade it away. There is no limit to how much property one may legitimately own, as under right anarchism occupancy is not required in order to maintain title. To use force to take over property that belongs to an absentee owner is considered an initiation of coercion, and so is incompatible with anarchist principles.

Everyday you can find philosophical battles between left and right anarchists all over the Internet. I participate in them all the time. They are often fun and enlightening. Where does voluntarism fit? I would say that voluntarists hold the moral and philosophical high grounds over both left and right anarchists. It doesn't matter which property norm one adopts so long as he's committed to relating voluntarily with others. This means that the further away from his person the property in dispute sits, the less likely he'll be to use violence. The voluntarist isn't interested in taking over either the right's or the left's property. He tends to his own affairs, to negotiating and contracting with those around him to secure his property, whatever norm it falls under. If a dispute arises, he takes it before the rest of society before committing to the use of violence. My views likewise qualify me as an anarchist, leaning to the right, but my commitment to the voluntary principle keeps

me away from resorting to violence over property norms.

Nihilism

Leaving the realm of political philosophy for the remainder of this essay, our first stop is the ever-maligned nihilism. “Everything is meaningless!” seems to be the nihilist battle cry, which makes it easy to understand why so many people criticize it, because people do find meaning in things, starting with their own lives. Full disclosure: my understanding of nihilism is quite limited, but what I do understand appeals to me. I’ve heard nihilism defended simply by incessantly asking “why?” to every answer given on a question of meaning. Sooner or later, what is revealed is that something has meaning only because it’s been assigned by someone, either themselves, or a higher power. That assignment is based on values, which are subjectively determined by each and every being. Outside of subjectively determined values and assignment of meaning, there is none. What remains is like an empty universe.

Moral nihilism is nihilism applied to ethics. A moral nihilist would say, “Nothing is inherently moral or immoral.” My difficulty with moral nihilism is that I consider it oxymoronic. To me, morality is not whatever people think (subjectively) it is, rather its an objective determination of moral or immoral as proper or improper behavior for people in society. Murder is immoral because it’s improper for a person to engage in if he is to maintain society (community and fraternity) with other people. Likewise for theft, battery, rape, coercion, dishonesty, being a jerk, *et cetera*. Of course others don’t agree on how I define morality (which is objectively based on the meaning of the Latin *moralis*, its root word), but at some level the meanings of words, queue nihilism, are assigned by users, not the universe. In which case, “moral nihilism” is as meaningless as I consider it to be oxymoronic. What does any of this have to do with voluntaryism?

If value is subjectively determined and meaning assigned, then neither is being forced on us by others. It is true that we could get ourselves into some trouble if we don’t recognize the value and meaning of things to others, and learn to respect that, but otherwise what we value and the meaning we find in things, beginning with our lives, is up to us. The freer we are from restraint or coercion by others – the more we are living voluntarily – the better able we are to express our values in the ways and toward the things that we personally find meaningful. In other words, when we aren’t told what to value or the meanings of things, we are allowed to figure those out for ourselves. In my opinion, when value and meaning are voluntarily discovered and assigned, we are more likely to live *fully human*.

Stoicism

My understanding of stoicism is likewise limited, but like nihilism, what I understand appeals to me. In my own summary, stoicism is the practice of placing the mind as master

over the heart, and in living virtuously (morally) in order to find outer peace, inner tranquility, and happiness. Placing the mind as master over the heart does not mean that the stoic should suppress his emotions, on the contrary, he should feel them completely and allow them to run their course (beginning, middle, and end) but to do so in a way that does not jeopardize his commitment to behaving virtuously toward others or toward himself. The stoic recognizes and accepts that we are emotional beings and that our emotions are the result of eons of evolution, which means they were and are necessary for our survival on some level. But as we are emotional beings, we are also intelligent beings.

In practice, stoicism places the individual as the highest authority in his life. The supreme law of the individual is his conscience. The stoic, because he values and finds meaning in it, will study virtue and allow the principles that he adopts to guide his behavior. When someone else comes along and tries to control him, to coerce him, the stoic won't be fooled into believing that his attacker has any right to do as he's doing. How the stoic reacts is a matter of clear-headed and passion-motivated wisdom, from a sense of duty to himself and his valued loved ones, instead of from a sense of duty to his attacker or his attacker's false and platitude-based authority.

Like the stoic, the voluntaryist likewise recognizes no authority in his life above himself. The voluntary principle is foundational to living virtuously. For both the stoic and the voluntaryist, the initiation of coercion toward other humans is wrong (unjust, dishonest, immoral). I would say that to be a stoic is to be a voluntaryist (though not necessarily vice versa). I am a voluntaryist working on becoming a better stoic.

Final Thoughts

Philosophy is amazing, isn't it? Though I am primarily a voluntaryist, I also identify as a libertarian, an anarchist, an apprehensive nihilist, and a budding stoic. Each of these have value and meaning to me, so I've *freely chosen* to practice them. What more can I say? Other than recommending that you give each of these your full weight of intellectual inquiry. What a different, better, world it would be if it were full of voluntaryists, nihilists, and stoics. One can only imagine.

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