

# Why Don't You Steal?

*Editor's Pick. Written by Wendy McElroy.*

As a starting point, I assume readers do not engage in the initiation of force, including theft. You may refrain from doing so because of a moral code or from a respect for rights. But, at least for me, the admonition *not* to steal isn't written in stone. I hold my values in a hierarchy by which some are simply more important than others.

Jean Valjean is the fictional character from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables*. Valjean is sentenced to a brutal prison term for stealing bread to feed his sister's starving children. In his situation, with no honest ways left to obtain food, I would probably do the same. Equally, if my husband needed an operation to live and there was no honest way to pay for it, then I would steal.

The foregoing acknowledgement comes with context:

- It would take a life-and-death situation for me to use force against another human being;
- In stealing, I would freely admit I was violating libertarian principle and just laws. I would be legally guilty, and should be found so;
- I would provide restitution when I could whether or not I was caught;
- One reason I argue for the free market is because it provides bread and medical care at prices that do not require people to steal to survive.

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