

Words Poorly Used #81 — Voluntarist/Voluntaryist

I thought I had one of those rare occasions in which I disagreed with Bob Higgs, when he published this opinion on his Facebook page:

I have never understood why Auberon Herbert's neologism "voluntaryism" should be preferred to the standard English word "voluntarism." The latter evidently denotes exactly the same thing as the former. (The use of "voluntarism" to describe a certain philosophical view or school of thought is neither here nor there in the present context.) Moreover, the former is nearly unpronounceable, and when pronounced is an awkward and ugly word in English.

I was jarred by this, as I think of myself as a "voluntaryist," that is, I think of myself as believing in long term principles calling for voluntary agreements in all relationships between and among individuals. I take the "-ist" (from "-ism") to signify a belief system, as opposed to an *ad hoc*, situational ethic. But these are reasons why I misperceived Dr. Higgs' point. So, I did some research. The dictionaries do a good job of blurring the word. They are heavy on connotation (the baggage that words carry) but not annotation or denotation, or etymology for that matter. The effect, for our language in general, is that too many words are adrift — "voluntaryism" being one of them. Dr. Higgs is right, our precious label is just another unmoored word. The word "voluntarist" was used in many contexts prior to Auberon Herbert's selection of a variant, "voluntaryist," as a label for his thoughts, and his thoughts differ critically from mainstream voluntarism of today. Now what? Where is there some formal recognition of what either "voluntarist" or "voluntaryist" means as a label for a coherent set of principles. Coming up with a neo-neologism would just restart the vicious cycle — if it's borrowed, the older meaning pollutes the newer meaning, or if it's invented from scratch, it has a snowball's chance of catching on (see "anarchy").

— Kilgore Forelle