
Are Taxes Theft?

November 8, 2007

The Honorable Clarence Thomas

Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court

1 First Street NE

Washington, DC 20543

Dear Justice Clarence Thomas:

I recently read (and very much enjoyed) an interview in Hillsdale College's IMPRIMIS (October 2007) about your new book, MY GRANDFATHER'S SON. I was very much impressed with two passages in that interview.

The first regarded the relationship between freedom and responsibility:

What my grandfather believed was that people have their responsibilities, and if they are left alone to fulfill their responsibilities, that is freedom. [p. 5]

The second concerned his attitude toward "the idea of taxation [which] offended him":

My first ideas about taxation had to do with the fact that we worked for everything we had. My grandfather would give whatever he could to relatives who needed it - to the elderly, to people with lots of kids, to people who had fallen on hard times. We'd harvest food and take it to folks who needed it. But the idea of someone coming and exacting from us what we had worked for, he was offended at that idea. [p. 3]

Did your grandfather ever make a connection between these two observations? Would he have thought that taxation violated the idea of his being "left alone" to fulfill his responsibilities? Did the fact that he had less property after being "taxed" mean that he couldn't fulfill his responsibilities (as well as if he had been allowed to keep all his property)?

The reason I ask these questions is because I look upon taxation as theft, and contrary to the moral commandment "Thou shalt not steal."

Do you think your grandfather would have agreed with me?

Sincerely,

Carl Watner

[Justice Thomas acknowledged receiving my letter on February 19, 2008. In a hand-written addition to that acknowledgement he added: "I will only say that my grandfather felt very strongly that one should keep the fruits of his labor."] [V]

I ... describe[d] the fierce pride of the [mountain] people; their self-reliance and love of liberty; the rebellion against taxation and all government restrictions or even "benefits"; how out of centuries of tyranny they had learned the lesson well that for every benefit, a freedom must always be surrendered.

—Catherine Marshall, CHRISTY (1967), Chapter Thirty-four.

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Voluntaryism

By Carl Watner

[The following article was posted as the entry for "Voluntaryism" at www.wikipedia.org in late March 2008.]

This article is about the philosophy of life that holds that everything that is invasive and coercive, including Government, is evil and ought to be abandoned, and that mankind ought to embrace the Voluntary system, which includes all that is non-governmental and non-compulsory, in other words all that people do for themselves, their neighbors, and their posterity, of their own free will.

Voluntaryism is the doctrine that association among people should only be by mutual consent. It represents a means, and end, and an insight. Voluntaryism does not argue for the specific form that voluntary arrangements will take, only that force be abandoned so that individuals in society may flourish. Since voluntaryists hold that the means must be consistent with the end, the goal of an all voluntary society must be sought voluntarily. People cannot be coerced into freedom. Hence, voluntaryists advocate the use of the free market, education, persuasion, and non-violent resistance as the primary ways to change people's ideas about the State and their behavior toward it. The voluntaryist insight that all tyranny and governments are grounded upon popular acceptance, explains why voluntary means are sufficient and, in fact, the only way to attain a voluntaryist society.

Overview

Voluntaryism is grounded on two axioms. First, the self-ownership axiom holds that each person is and ought to be in control of their own mind, body, and soul. Second, the homesteading axiom holds that each person by the application of his or her own labor to un-owned resources thereby becomes its rightful and legitimate owner.

It is a commonplace observation that human action represents behavior aiming at an improvement over the current state of affairs (from the individual actor's point of view). Otherwise, that person would not initiate action to bring about change. Therefore, every market transaction is intended to be (and normally achieves) an improvement in satisfaction, and benefits both parties to the exchange. Thus, both parties to a trade improve their state of affairs. On the free and unhampered market this occurs millions and millions of times each day. Its cumulative effect is the prosperity and high standard of living that people experience in a free market economy. Government

intervention and central planning (based on compulsion) can only force some people to do what they would otherwise not choose to do, and thereby lessens their satisfaction and impedes economic progress.

Voluntaryists argue that although certain goods and services are necessary to human survival, it is not necessary that they be provided by the government. Voluntaryists oppose the State because it uses coercive means in the collection of revenues and in outlawing would-be service providers. It is impossible to plant the seed of coercion and then reap the fruits of voluntaryism. The coercionist always proposes to compel people to do something they ordinarily wouldn't do, usually by passing laws or electing people to office. These laws and officials ultimately depend upon physical violence to enforce their wills. Voluntary means, such as non-violent resistance, for example, violate no one's rights. Voluntaryism does not require of people that they violently overthrow the government or use the electoral process to change it; it merely requires that they cease to support their government and obey its orders, whereupon it will fall of its own dead weight.

Voluntaryism and Anarchism

Libertarian theory, relying upon the self-ownership and homesteading axioms, condemns all invasive acts and rejects the initiation of violence. Anarchists, in particular, assert that the State acts aggressively when it engages in taxation and coercively monopolizes the provision of certain public services such as the roads, courts, police, and armed forces. It is this anarchist insight into the nature of the State - that the State is inherently and necessarily an invasive institution - which distinguishes the anarchist from other libertarians.

By this definition, voluntaryists are clearly peaceful anarchists. Many late 20th and early 21st Century voluntaryists based their thinking upon the ideas of Murray Rothbard and Robert LeFevre, who rejected the concept of "limited" government. Every government "presumes to establish a compulsory monopoly of defense (police and courts) service over some geographical area. So that individual property-owners who prefer to subscribe to another defense company within that area are not allowed to do so." Also, every government obtains its income by stealing, euphemistically labeled "taxation." "All governments, however limited they may be otherwise, commit at least these two fundamental crimes against liberty and property." [1]

What especially distinguishes voluntaryists from

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Moral Challenge II

By Carl Watner

I am getting increasingly frustrated (as I write this it is August 2007) because so very few seem to comprehend my moral argument that taxation is theft. Even members of my own family don't seem to get it. It appears to me that there are two components to the argument that taxation is theft.

First is the moral argument: If you define theft as the taking of a person's property against their will, it ought to be perfectly straightforward to conclude that unless taxes are voluntary, it must be theft when the government collects taxes under penalty of imprisonment or confiscation of property. It might be plausible to argue that taxes are theft, but that they require an exemption from the general social prohibition against stealing. But so far, no one I have argued with has explained why taxation is a morally justified form of theft. They simply argue that taxes are not theft because the government is owed the money. Government is owed the money because it has provided some sort of protection service. Thus, when the government coercively demands taxes from its citizens, it is simply being reimbursed for the service it has provided.

Second is the practical argument: Most people believe that if taxes were voluntary, then government would shrivel up and die. If they are religious, they argue that God couldn't have willed thievery. If they take a secular view, they simply believe that government wouldn't have the money to support itself. "But government," they argue, "is a necessary component of human society." Since government "must" have money to exist, its income (taxes) can't be theft.

One way I have tried to approach the general argument that "taxation is theft" is to admit that human beings "need" protection services, just as they "need" food, shelter and clothing. The question that then must be answered is: How is that protection to be provided? In the case of food, shelter, and clothing we have ample proof that the voluntary provision of these goods and services is possible. Why must the provision of protection be an exception?

It appears that most people cannot get past "what is seen and not seen." They "see" only what exists. They cannot even begin to imagine the free market provision of protection services because they have

"Look at something and see what is really there, not what you think is there."

been indoctrinated by both Church and State to believe that these services must be (and can only be) provided by a coercive, monopolistic government. What they don't stop to think about is that if people weren't forced to pay taxes, they (the people, the citizens) would have ample funds to supply themselves with protection. If people were not coerced into paying for government's high-priced and inefficient monopoly protection they could turn to alternative sources of protection. I am sure that variants of protection would come into being which we cannot even imagine or dream of now. Witness all the other miracles of the free market. Who could have dreamed of, a hundred years ago, all the ways electricity is utilized today, or the advent of plastics, nylons, or computers. Imagine what protection services might be offered if government was not there to monopolize its production and stifle both invention and competition. But really, the practicality of the market provision of protection is irrelevant to the moral question. Was plantation slavery in the South justified because slaves were the only means of harvesting cotton?

Many people admit that much of what passes for taxation today is theft, but they still cannot get past the idea that some amount of taxation is "just and proper." It reminds me of the argument for the "just" price on the market. The only fair price is what a willing buyer and seller agree on; and it is only fair at the time and place where they decide to trade. The only possible way to determine a "just" tax is in the same manner. How could government know how much protection people "need"? Let market purchasers of protection services buy what services they want, at what prices they deem advantageous to themselves. This is the only way to truly determine how much protection we (as a society) should have. The only way to find out how much government is necessary is to see how much government people are willing to pay for - which means making their contributions to government voluntary. When people and citizens are ready to apply the general social prohibition against stealing to the government itself, then we (as a society) will have truly reached the realization that "taxes are theft." ▣

Those who are silent in the face of stealing become partners of the thief. "Those who are silent in the face of murder—become partners of the killer. Those who do not condemn—approve."

—Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, from her "Protest" (1942) attempting to alert the world to the atrocities taking place in the Warsaw ghetto.

voluntarily.

Objection 3: If there were no government, what would prevent criminals from taking over control of society?

Answer: First of all, voluntaryists would point out that criminals have taken over control of our society. It is only the fact that our criminal governors have so legitimated themselves in the eyes of most people that they are no longer considered criminal.

The existence of a peaceful society depends upon the fact that the large majority of people residing therein respect other people and their property. In the absence of coercive government to "protect" these peaceful people, there would be private defense and mutual protection agencies, voluntarily funded, to protect people from would-be aggressors. Each patron would contract for the level of protection he or she desired and could afford. In such a society, sureties and insurance companies would probably provide a great deal of protection, since they would have the most to lose from destruction and theft of property and life. Sureties or bonding companies would ultimately be responsible for the good behavior of those they covered.

Objection 4: Who would pay for the roads?

Answer: Those who use them and require their existence. Although roads have been a government monopoly throughout much of history, there is much historical evidence that roads could be built and operated on a for-profit basis. Government monopolization and control of the roads has led to many inefficiencies, deaths, and environmental destruction. [14]

Objection 5: Is it right that voluntaryists benefit from government services and yet do not wish to pay for them?

Answer: Voluntaryists recognize that there is no such thing as a free lunch. They are not asking for government services in the first place. Governments by their coercive provision of certain services eliminates the voluntaryist's range of choice among providers. The voluntaryist may need to know "what time it is," but that doesn't mean that the government has a right to eliminate all competitors and force the consumer to purchase from only a government agency. If a thief steals your watch, outlaws all other forms of telling time, tells you the time, and then demands that you pay him for providing you with this service, would you consider yourself obligated to pay him? Of course not. Similarly, the voluntaryist holds that the government should not be providing any services in the first place (any more than the thief should have stolen your watch or outlawed would-be competitors). When government uses coercion to enforce its will, many problematic situations arise. Voluntaryists try to resolve them by abandoning government, and using private services when available and affordable. ▣

Footnotes

[1] Murray Rothbard, "Yes," REASON Magazine, May 1973, pp. 19, 23-25, and reprinted in Carl Watner (ed.), I MUST SPEAK OUT, San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes (1999), pp. 47-48.

[2] G. E. Aylmer (ed.), THE LEVELLERS IN THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1975), p. 68.

[3] *ibid.*, p. 80.

[4] *ibid.*, p. 68.

[5] George H. Smith, "Nineteenth-Century Opponents of State Education," in Robert B. Everhart (ed.), THE PUBLIC SCHOOL MONOPOLY, Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing (1982), pp. 109-144 at pp. 121-124.

[6] Henry David Thoreau, WALDEN, OR LIFE IN THE WOODS and ON THE DUTY OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, with an Afterword by Perry Miller, New York: New American Library (Twenty-first printing, 1960), p. 233.

[7] *ibid.*, pp. 222, 223, 232.

[8] Carl Watner (ed.), A VOLUNTARY POLITICAL GOVERNMENT: LETTERS FROM CHARLES LANE, St. Paul: Michael E. Coughlin, Publisher (1982), p. 52.

[9] Albert Jay Nock, MEMOIRS OF A SUPERFLUOUS MAN, New York: Harper and Brothers (1943), p. 307.

[10] Robert Ringer, RESTORING THE AMERICAN DREAM, New York: QED (1979), p. 135.

[11] Lysander Spooner, NATURAL LAW; OR THE SCIENCE OF JUSTICE (Section I), Boston: A. Williams & Co. (1882), p. 6 in Volume I, Charles Shively (ed.), THE COLLECTED WORKS OF LYSANDER SPOONER IN SIX VOLUMES, Weston: M & S Press (1971).

[12] Ringer, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

[13] James Bryce, Volume II, THE AMERICAN COMMONWEALTH (original publication date 1888), New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons (1959), p. 494. (This is found in the Capricorn Books edition, edited by Louis M. Hacker in Volume II, Part VI, Chapter 4, "The Influence of Religion," paragraph 15.) Also see Carl Watner, "The Most Generous Nation on Earth: Voluntarism and American Philanthropy," Whole Number 61, THE VOLUNTARYIST (April 1993).

[14] See Gabriel Roth (ed.), STREET SMART: COMPETITION, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND THE FUTURE OF ROADS, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006 on both a discussion of for-profit roads and government inefficiencies in this area.

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Mark Spangler (ed.), CLICHES OF POLITICS, Irvington-on-Hudson: Foundation for Economic Education (1996). Earlier editions were titled "Cliches of Socialism." This anthology dispels many of the myths that justify the pleas for political solutions to our social problems.

Carl Watner with Wendy McElroy (eds.), NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION SYSTEMS: ESSAYS IN OPPOSITION, Jefferson: McFarland & Company (2004).

"If you can't be thankful for what you receive, be thankful for what you escape."

ing. The presence of other men makes the division of labor and specialization in production possible, but it does not essentially change the nature of the world. When man lives alone on an island, and when there is no interaction with others, the question of justice does not arise.

However, in the context of human society, justice, for the voluntaryist, is a negative duty. It consists in respecting other people's bodies and property, and in doing them no physical harm. For the voluntaryist, justice does not imply any special obligation of benevolence or charity. Nothing is due a man in strict justice but what is his own. Perhaps he may have an ethical duty towards helping others; either their merits or their sufferings may reasonably lead them to expect something from others which is not strictly their own. As Lysander Spooner pointed out, "Man, no doubt, owes many other ... duties to his fellow men; such as to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, But these are simply ... duties, of which each man must be his own judge, in each particular case, as to whether, and how, and how far, he can, or will, perform them." [11]

As for considering the justice of forced charity, Robert Ringer explained, "I do not believe that I or any other person has the right to force other men to be charitable. In other words, I am not against charity, but I am against the use of force." [12] The fact that someone thinks others are not contributing enough to charity or to the poor is no justification for forcing them to contribute more. If a man has legitimately earned his property, it is theft to take it from him against his will for any purpose. One man's honestly earned wealth is not another man's entitlement (nor the cause of another's impoverishment). We might not like one person being rich and another being poor, but it is not our right to take from one and give to another. If we think the poor are too poor, then we may devote more of our own resources and property to them, and we also may try to persuade others to do so. What we may not do is place someone in jail because he refuses to abide by our dictates in the matter; we may not pass a law that, in effect, does the same thing; and we may not use the plight of the poor as a justification for stealing the property of others, even if, after the fact, we give the stolen property to the poor.

The Practical Perspective

Americans have often been referred to as the most generous people on earth. Although there has never been a true voluntaryist society, America, from its colonial roots to the early 20th Century, more closely approximated voluntaryist parameters than many other nations. What did we find happening in such circumstances?

In early America, private and community care for the poor often preceded government's assumption of those responsibilities. If Americans wanted a school, a library, an orphanage, or a hospital they simply

built it for themselves. The vitality and success of American communities rested on their voluntary nature. History and theory demonstrate that a free people produce many more goods and services than their counterparts in a centrally organized economy. Thus, there is more to go around in a free society, and the poor there generally have a higher standard of living than the poor in a collectivist society. This economic largess is largely the result of the investment in tools and individual savings which are promoted by the free market economy.

Not only were there probably fewer "poor" in America, but those of the lower classes were able to better care for themselves and their poorer kin. Until the advent of State welfare in the early 20th Century, mutual aid societies, church and fraternal organizations flourished. By 1920, about 18 million Americans belonged to some type of mutual aid society or fraternal order, which often provided some form of health, disability, and death benefits to their members. With the advent of the Great Depression (which voluntaryists assert was caused by government financial policies), government welfare programs began crowding out private efforts.

"Anarchism is founded on the observation that since few men are wise enough to rule themselves, even fewer are wise enough to rule others."

—Edward Abbey, *A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS* (1989), Chapter 3, p. 23.

The private sector in America has not only proved itself capable of producing and creating large amounts of wealth, but it has also demonstrated its willingness to contribute to community causes and helping the poor. The record of American philanthropy is so impressive that it would require several books to list its achievements. So when one asks, "What would happen to the poor in a free society?" one only has to look at American history for an answer. As James Bryce writing in 1888 observed, "In works of active beneficence, no country has surpassed, perhaps none has equaled the United States." [13]

Objection 2: The voluntaryist insight points out that the State depends on the cooperation of its citizens. Aren't these citizens showing by their actions that they are consenting to the government they have?

Answer: Yes, citizens may obey their governments, but they are no more consenting to their "voluntary" enslavement than a victim of a robbery consents to his victimization. The victim of a robbery (your money or your life) "voluntarily" hands over his wallet to prevent a worse occurrence (his own death). When governments eliminate criminal penalties for failure to file and pay taxes, we can begin looking at how much real support governments might obtain

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other free-market anarchists is their stance on strategy; especially their reliance on nonviolence and non-electoral means to achieve a free society. Like many European and American anarchists during the 19th and 20th Centuries, voluntaryists shun involvement with electoral politics. Rejection of the political means is premised on the insight that governments depend on the cooperation of those they rule. Etienne de la Boetie, a mid-16th Century Frenchman, who was the first to point out this voluntaryist insight, called for peaceful non-cooperation and non-violent resistance to the State. Despite the advocacy of violence by a number of anarchists throughout history, most anarchists have sought to persuade people, rather than coerce them. Le Boetie's call for peaceful resistance has been echoed by contemporary anarchists, as well as by a significant number of those who have been described as near-anarchist in their thinking, such as Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Gandhi.

Origins

Voluntaryism has a long and rich historical tradition in the English-speaking world. Its heritage can be traced at least as far back as the Leveller movement of mid-17th Century England. The Levellers can be best identified by their spokesmen John Lilburne (?1614-1657) and Richard Overton (?1600-?1660s) who "clashed with the Presbyterian puritans, who wanted to preserve a state-church with coercive powers and to deny liberty of worship to the puritan sects." [2]

The Levellers were nonconformist religious types who agitated for the separation of church and state. During the late 16th and 17th Centuries, the church covenant was a common means of organizing the radical religious sects. The church, to their way of thinking, was a voluntary association of equals. To both the Levellers and later thinkers this furnished a powerful theoretical and practical model for the civil state. If it was proper for their church congregations to be based on consent, then it was proper to apply the same principle of consent to its secular counterpart. For example, the Leveller 'large' Petition of 1647 contained a proposal "that tythes and all other inforced maintenances, may be for ever abolished, and nothing in place thereof imposed, but that all Ministers may be payd only by those who voluntarily choose them, and contract with them for their labours." [3] One only need substitute "taxes" for "tythes" and "government officials" for "Ministers" to see how close the Levellers were to the idea of a voluntary state.

The Levellers also held tenaciously to the idea of self-proprietorship. As Richard Overton wrote: "No man hath power over my rights and liberties, and I over no mans [sic]." [4] They realized that it was impossible to assert one's private right of judgment in

religious matters (what we would call today, liberty of conscience) without upholding the same right for everyone else, even the unregenerate. The existence of a State church in England has caused continuous friction since the time of the Levellers because there were always those conscientious objectors who either opposed its religious doctrine and/or their forced contributions towards its support.

Voluntaryists also became involved in another controversy in England, from about the mid-1840s to the mid-1860s. In 1843, Parliament considered legislation which would require part-time compulsory attendance at school of those children working in factories. The effective control over these schools was to be placed in the hands of the established Church of England, and the schools were to be supported largely from funds raised out of local taxation. Non-conformists, mostly Baptists and Congregationalists, became alarmed. They had been under the ban of the law for more than a century. At one time or another they could not be married in their own churches, were compelled to pay church rates against their will, and had to teach their children underground for fear of arrest. They became known as voluntaryists because they consistently rejected all state aid and interference in education, just as they rejected the state in the religious sphere of their lives. Three of the most notable voluntaryists included the young Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who published his first series of articles "The Proper Sphere of Government," beginning in 1842; Edward Baines, Jr., (1800-1890) editor and proprietor of the LEEDS MERCURY; and Edward Miall (1809-1881), Congregationalist minister, and founder-editor of THE NONCONFORMIST (1841), who wrote VIEWS OF THE VOLUNTARY PRINCIPLE (1845).

The educational voluntaryists wanted free trade in education, just as they supported free trade in corn or cotton. Their concern "for liberty can scarcely be exaggerated." They believed that "government would employ education for its own ends" (teaching habits of obedience and indoctrination), and that government-controlled schools would ultimately teach children to rely on the State for all things. Baines, for example, noted that "[w]e cannot violate the principles of liberty in regard to education without furnishing at once a precedent and inducement to violate them in regard to other matters." Baines conceded that the then current system of education (both private and charitable) had deficiencies, but he argued that freedom should not be abridged on that account. Should freedom of the press be compromised because we have bad newspapers? "I maintain that Liberty is the chief cause of excellence; but it would cease to be Liberty if you proscribed everything inferior." [5]

Although educational voluntaryism failed to stop the movement for compulsory schools in England, voluntaryism as a political creed was revived during the 1880s by another Englishman, Auberon Herbert

(1838-1906). Herbert served a two-year term in the House of Commons, but after meeting Herbert Spencer in 1874, decided not to run for re-election. He wrote "State Education: A Help or Hindrance?" in 1880, and began using the word "voluntaryist" to label his advocacy of "voluntary" taxation. He began publishing his journal, *THE FREE LIFE* (Organ of Voluntary Taxation and the Voluntary State) in 1890. Herbert was not a pure voluntaryist because, although he held that it was possible for state revenues to be generated by offering competitive services on the free market, he continued to advocate a single monopolistic state for every given geographic territory. Some of his essays are titled "The Principles of Voluntaryism and Free Life" (1897), and "A Plea for Voluntaryism," (posthumously, 1908).

Earlier and Contemporary Usage in America

Although there was never an explicit "voluntaryist" movement in America till the late 20th Century, earlier Americans did agitate for the disestablishment of government-supported churches in several of the original thirteen States. These conscientious objectors believed mere birth in a given geographic area did not mean that one consented to membership or automatically wished to support a State church. Their objection to taxation in support of the church was two-fold: taxation not only gave the State some right of control over the church; it also represented a way of coercing the non-member or the unbeliever into supporting the church. In New England, where both Massachusetts and Connecticut started out with state churches, many people believed that they needed to pay a tax for the general support of religion - for the same reasons they paid taxes to maintain the roads and the courts. It was simply inconceivable to many of them that society could long exist without state support of religion. Practically no one comprehended the idea that although governmentally-supplied goods and services (such as roads, or schools, or churches) might be essential to human welfare, it was not necessary that they be provided by the government.

There were at least two well-known Americans who espoused voluntaryist causes during the mid-19th Century. Henry David Thoreau's (1817-1862) first brush with the law in his home state of Massachusetts came in 1838, when he turned twenty-one. The State demanded that he pay the one dollar ministerial tax, in support of a clergyman, "whose preaching my father attended but never I myself." [6] When Thoreau refused to pay the tax, it was probably paid by one of his aunts. In order to avoid the ministerial tax in the future, Thoreau had to sign an affidavit attesting he was not a member of the church.

Thoreau's famous overnight imprisonment for his failure to pay another municipal tax, the poll tax, to the town of Concord was recorded in his essay, "Resistance to Civil Government," first published

in 1849. It is often referred to as "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," because in it he recognized that government was dependent on the cooperation of its citizens. While he was not a thoroughly consistent voluntaryist, he did write that he wished never to "rely on the protection of the State," and that he refused to tender it his allegiance so long as it supported slavery. He distinguished himself from "those who call[ed] themselves no-government men": "I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government," conveniently overlooking the fact that improving an institution does not change its essential (in this case, coercive) nature. Despite this, Thoreau opened his essay by stating his belief that "That government is best which governs not at all," a point which all voluntaryists heartily embrace. [7]

One of those "no-government men" was William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), famous abolitionist and publisher of *THE LIBERATOR*. Nearly all abolitionists identified with the self-ownership principle, that each person - as an individual - owned and should control his or her own mind and body free of outside coercive interference. The abolitionist called for the immediate and unconditional cessation of slavery because they saw slavery as man-stealing in its most direct and worst form. Slavery reflected the theft of a person's self-ownership rights (just as taxes reflect the theft of a person's property). The slave was a chattel with no rights of its own. The abolitionists realized that each human being, man, woman, and child, was naturally invested with sovereignty over him or her self and that no one could exercise forcible control over another without breaching the self-ownership principle. Garrison, too, was not a pure voluntaryist for he supported the federal government's war against the States from 1861 to 1865.

"[N]o human is saintly enough to be entrusted with total power over another."
—David Brion Davis, *INHUMAN BONDAGE* (2006), p. 198.

Probably the most consistent voluntaryist of that era was Charles Lane (1800-1870). He was friendly with Amos Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Thoreau. Between January and June 1843 a series of nine letters he penned were published in such abolitionist papers as *THE LIBERATOR* and *THE HERALD OF FREEDOM*. The title under which they were published was "A Voluntary Political Government," and in them Lane described the State in terms of institutionalized violence and referred to its "club law, its mere brigand right of a strong arm, [supported] by guns and bayonets." He saw the coercive State on par with "forced" Christianity. "Everyone can see that the church is wrong when it comes to men with the [B]ible in one hand, and the sword in the other." "Is it not equally diabolical for the State to do so?" Lane believed that governmental rule was

only tolerated by public opinion because the fact was not yet recognized that all the true purposes of the State could be carried out on the voluntary principle, just as churches could be sustained voluntarily. Reliance on the voluntary principle could only come about through "kind, orderly, and moral means" that were consistent with the totally voluntary society he was advocating. "Let us have a voluntary State as well as a voluntary Church, and we may possibly then have some claim to the appealation of free men." [8]

Late 20th and early 21st Century libertarians readily appreciate the parallel between the disestablishment of State churches and the abandonment of the State itself. Although the label "voluntaryist" practically died out after the death of Auberon Herbert, its use was renewed in late 1982, when George Smith, Wendy McElroy, and Carl Watner began publishing *THE VOLUNTARYIST*. George Smith suggested use of the term to identify those libertarians who believed that political action and political parties (especially the Libertarian Party) were antithetical to their ideas. In their "Statement of Purpose" in *NEITHER BULLETS NOR BALLOTS: Essays on Voluntaryism* (1983), Watner, Smith, and McElroy explained that voluntaryists were advocates of non-political strategies to achieve a free society. They rejected electoral politics "in theory and practice as incompatible with libertarian goals," and explained that political methods invariably strengthen the legitimacy of coercive governments. In concluding their "Statement of Purpose" they wrote: "Voluntaryists seek instead to delegitimize the State through education, and we advocate the withdrawal of the cooperation and tacit consent on which state power ultimately depends."

THE VOLUNTARYIST newsletter, which began publication in late 1982, is one of the longest-lived libertarian publications in the world. Edited and published by Carl Watner since 1986, the most significant articles from the first 100 issues were anthologized in book-length form and published as *I MUST SPEAK OUT: The Best of THE VOLUNTARYIST 1982-1999* (Carl Watner, ed., San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1999).

Another voluntaryist anthology buttressed the case for non-voting: Carl Watner with Wendy McElroy (eds.), *DISSENTING ELECTORATE: Those Who Refuse to Vote and the Legitimacy of Their Opposition* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2001). The masthead of *THE VOLUNTARYIST*, perhaps, best epitomizes the voluntaryist outlook: "If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself." This statement penned by Gandhi emphasizes that the world can only be changed one person at a time, and then, only if that person wills it. The only thing that the individual can do "is present society with 'one improved unit'." As Albert Jay Nock put it, "[A]ges of experience testify that the only way society can be improved is by the individualist method ...,

that is, the method of each 'one' doing his very best to improve 'one'." This is the quiet, peaceful, patient way of changing society because it concentrates on bettering the character of men and women as individuals. As the individual units change, the improvement of society will take care of itself. In other words, "if one take care of the means, the end will take care of itself." [9]

Objections to Voluntaryism

Introductory and General Observations:

Voluntaryists meet objections to their doctrine by examining them from both the moral and practical viewpoint. From the moral side, they ask whose property is involved, has anyone's consent been obtained, is any property being used against the owner's will? From the practical side, they ask how would the situation be handled in a statist society, how is it being handled now, how might it be addressed in the absence of government intervention? Voluntaryists also realize that some social ills will always be with us. Nonetheless they ask, of the two ways to organize human society, voluntarily versus coercively, which system is likely to produce less harm, be most beneficial to people, and be more consistent with our commonly accepted ethical norms?

Voluntaryists recognize that normally the most moral behavior achieves the most practical results. In certain emergency or "life boat" situations there may be a tension between what appears to be the moral and the practical. In such cases, some voluntaryists may choose to act contrary to their principles, while others may remain true to them and suffer the consequences. However, in both cases voluntaryists continue to recognize that self-ownership, homesteading, and non-aggression are the basis of their doctrine, and "that human freedom is a higher moral objective than the arbitrary fulfillment of certain people's needs and desires." [10]

Objection 1: What would happen to the poor in a voluntaryist world?

The plight of the poor in a free society focuses on many of the major objections to voluntaryism. From the practical side, who would care for them? (Any one who wants to devote their time, energy, and resources to them.) Would they be left to starve? (Yes, they might be if there was no one willing to help them.) What ultimately is our responsibility toward our fellow man, whether he be better off or worse off than others? (Strict justice consists in not acting invasively toward others.) Do the poor have a right to alms? (No, according to the homesteading axiom the rightfully owned property of others is to be respected, not stolen.)

The Moral Perspective

The first fact we must recognize is that nature is niggardly and that goods and services of value are scarce. Left alone on an island, how does a man care for himself? Man only survives by using his mind and body to provide himself with food, shelter, and cloth-