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"If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself."

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Lysander Spooner: Ireland and Proprietary Justice

By Carl Watner

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One of the ideas central to anarchism is the concept of proprietary justice. The proprietary theory of justice is concerned with just one thing: the crucial determination of just versus unjust property titles; that is, of property titles of individuals in their own bodies and in the material objects around them. The determination of property titles is highly critical because, in the deepest sense, all property is ultimately private. It must ultimately be controlled or belong to some individual person or group of persons. Since individual survival is impossible without appropriation, the significant question in all social analysis is whether the actual owners, the actual users of property, are legitimate or criminal. The basic purpose of this paper is to present the ideas of proprietary justice as formulated by the 19th century individualist-anarchist, Lysander Spooner. Spooner's views on proprietary justice will be illustrated by the position he took on the Irish landlord question in his 1880 pamphlet, REVOLUTION, and by examining his critique of government by consent.

"Lysander Spooner has many great distinctions in the history of political thought. For one thing, he was undoubtedly the only constitutional lawyer in history to evolve into an individualist-anarchist, for another, he became steadily and inexorably more radical as he grew older. Of all the host of Lockean natural rights theorists, Lysander Spooner was the only one to push the theory to its logical - and infinitely radical - conclusion: individualist-anarchism." [1] There is no need here to go into a detailed examination of Spooner's position on slavery and human self-ownership. He was a radical abolitionist even among the Garrisonians of his day. "That human beings are born with the inalienable quality of freedom underlies all of Spooner's arguments. For him 'it was a self-evident truth that ... all men are naturally and rightfully free.' 'A man cannot be a subject of human ownership.' 'A man cannot alienate his right to liberty and to himself, - still less can it be taken from him.' Just by being born, a man is free." (Shively, 1971, I, pp. 34-35) As regards the application of the proprietary theory of justice to property titles of individuals to their own bodies, Spooner was a firm

defender of the self-ownership axiom: the absolute right of each and every person to own his own body, mind, and labors thereof, and to be free of coercive interference with that mind, body, and labors.

As to the material objects that surround a person, and as to the land space which a person occupies, Spooner defended unlimited private land ownership. His proprietary theory of justice, in this case, was built upon the homesteading axiom:

The right of property, in material wealth, is acquired, in its first instance, in one of these two ways: first, by simply taking possession of natural wealth, or the productions of nature; and, secondly, by the artificial production of other wealth.

1. The natural wealth of the world belongs to those who first take possession of it. ... There is no limit, fixed by the law of nature, to the amount of property one may acquire by simply taking possession of natural wealth, not already possessed, except the limit fixed by his power or ability to take such possession, without doing violence to the person or property of others. So much natural wealth, remaining unpossessed, as any one can take possession of first, becomes absolutely his property.

2. The other mode, in which the right of property is acquired, is by the creation, or production, of wealth, by labor. The wealth created by labor, is the rightful property of the creator, or producer. This proposition is so self-evident as hardly to admit of being made more clear; for if the creator, or producer, of wealth, be not its rightful proprietor, surely no one else can be; and such wealth must perish unused. (Spooner, 1855, pp. 21-25) [2]

The implication of Spooner's thinking is that once a piece of land justly passes into Mr. A's ownership, he cannot be truly said to own that land unless he can convey or sell that title to Mr. B. To prevent Mr. B from exercising his title simply because he doesn't choose to use the land himself, but rather rents it out voluntarily to Mr. C, is an invasion of B's freedom of contract and of his right to "use" his justly acquired property in a way that suits him.

Spooner had expressed these ideas in his pamphlet on the Irish land question. It was quite appropriate that Spooner chose Ireland as the topic of his essay because for many centuries Celtic Ireland had no State or anything like it. Ancient Ireland persisted in the libertarian path for roughly a thousand years until its

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brutal conquest by England in the 17th century. Private ownership of property played an essential role in the legal and social institutions of ancient Irish society. Irish law developed under the "brehons," who were professional jurists that had no State affiliation or sanction. The English invasions, which began in the 12th century, commenced the gradual imposition of English feudal concepts and of English common law upon a culture that found these ideas totally incompatible with their life-style. Eventually the property rights of the Irish people were destroyed by the English conquerors. In the eyes of the English, the Irish and the nature of Irish customs, made them rebels to all good government. Ireland, even as late as the 17th and 18th centuries, remained a tribal society in which there was no clear cut landlord-tenant relationship. When James I confiscated large tracts of Ireland he considered that he was exercising the right of the conqueror by relieving the defeated Irish chieftains of their property. To the peasant, however, who lived on the confiscated land, it was his property (that is, his chieftain had no right to surrender it) and had been since time immemorial. [3]

When it comes to government power, there are no good men.

- Robert LeFevre

As the Irish land system evolved into the 19th century, the Irish tenant farmers had no rights. The peasant tenant rented his plot of land, often built a stone cottage with his own labor, and tried to scratch a living from the soil. When he fell behind in his rents he was summarily evicted and given no compensation for the improvements he had made because there was no defined contract. Ireland was also cursed with the absentee landlord, which had started with the original grants of land to royal favorites, many of whom had no intention of living in Ireland. The great famine of the late 1840's, caused by the potato blight, aggravated the condition of the Irish peasants. Like circumstances (crop failure) repeated themselves in the late 1870's and it was under conditions of eviction and near-

starvation that Spooner addressed himself to the Irish land question.

Spooner's pamphlet was titled: REVOLUTION: THE ONLY REMEDY FOR THE OPPRESSED CLASSES OF IRELAND, ENGLAND, AND OTHER PARTS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE. A REPLY TO "DUNRAVEN." His attack was directed against the Earl of Dunraven, who had toured the United States in late 1879 and who characterized himself as the typical English aristocrat. The major thrust of Spooner's pamphlet may be set out in a few paragraphs:

The whole force of your (Dunraven's) letter, as a defense of Irish landlords, rests upon the assumption that they are the real and true owners of the lands they now hold. But this assumption is a false one. These lands, largely or mostly, were originally taken by the sword, and have ever since been held by the sword. Neither the original robbers, nor any subsequent holders, have ever had any other than a robber's title to them. And robbery gives no better title to lands than it does to any other property.

No lapse of time can cure this defect in the original title. Every successive holder not only endorses all the robberies of all his predecessors, but he commits a new one himself by withholding the lands, either from the original and true owners, or from those who, but for those robberies, would have been their legitimate heirs and assigns.

And what is true of the lands in Ireland is equally true of the lands in England. The lands in England, largely or mostly, were originally taken by the sword, and have ever since been held by the sword; and the present holders have no better titles to them than simple, naked robbery has given them ...

The fact that the direct descendants of the original holders of those lands cannot now be individually traced, and reinstated in the property of their ancestors, cannot screen the present holders from their just liability; since the original robbery of the lands, and the entailing them in the families of the original robbers, have not only deprived the direct descendants of the original holders of their rights, but have also deprived all other persons of their natural rights to buy these lands. These other persons, therefore, as well as the direct descendants of the original holders, have a wrong to be redressed ...

The real government of England, the actual ruling power, for more than a thousand years, has been a mere band of robbers; a mere confederacy of villains. And it is nothing else today. They have not only plundered and enslaved the great body of the people of

England and Ireland, but, as far as possible, the peoples of all other parts of the globe. ...

The plundered people of England and Ireland need neither emigration, legislation, mitigation, nor modification. They need, and if they do their duty to themselves and to you (Dunraven), they will have, REVOLUTION, RETRIBUTION, RESTITUTION, AND AS FAR AS POSSIBLE, COMPENSATION. (pp. 4-9)

“REVOLUTION had the widest circulation of any writing by Spooner because Irish nationalists used it extensively to further their cause. While the issues of economic and political exploitation aroused Spooner, we can be sure he had no sympathy with Irish nationalism itself - that is, with the forming of a powerful nation-state ruled by Irishmen but otherwise modeled on England.” (Shively, 1971, I, p. 6) Even within the individualist-anarchist movement of his own time, which was interested in and highly supportive of 'the no-rent movement' and the Irish Land League, Spooner's pamphlet aroused controversy.

In 1891, four years after Spooner's death, Benjamin Tucker (publisher of the famous anarchist journal, LIBERTY, and close associate of Spooner) took Spooner to task. Spooner's concepts of proprietary justice were “positively foolish” because they were “fundamentally foolish,”

- because, that is to say, its discussion of the acquisition of the right of property starts with a basic proposition that must be looked upon by all consistent Anarchists as obvious nonsense. I quote this basic proposition. “The natural wealth of the world belongs to those who first take possession of it So much natural wealth, remaining unpossessed, as any one can take possession of first, becomes absolutely his property.” In interpretation of this, Mr. Spooner defines taking possession of a thing, as the bestowing of valuable labor upon it, such, for instance, in the case of land, as cutting down the trees or building a fence around it. What follows from this? Evidently that a man may go to a piece of vacant land and fence it off; that he may then go to a second piece and fence that off; then to a third, and fence that off; then to a fourth, a fifth, a hundredth, a thousandth, fencing them all off; that, unable to fence off himself as many as he wishes, he may hire other men to do the fencing for him; and that then he may stand back and bar all other men from using these lands, or admit them as tenants at such rental as he may choose to exact. (LIBERTY, No. 180, p. 4. March 21, 1891)

In these circumstances, Tucker questioned: “What becomes of the Anarchistic doctrine of occupancy and use as the basis and limit of land ownership?”

To further illustrate his differences with Spooner, Tucker related a conversation that he had with Spooner concerning the rightfulness of the Irish resistance to absentee landlords and the no-rent movement:

Mr. Spooner bases his opposition to Irish and English landlords on the sole ground that they or their ancestors took their lands by the sword from the original holders. This is plainly stated - so plainly that I took issue with Mr. Spooner on this point when he asked me to read the manuscript (REVOLUTION) before its publication. I then asked him whether if Dunraven or his ancestors had found unoccupied the very lands that he now holds, and had fenced them off, he would have any objection to raise against Dunraven's title to and leasing of these lands. He declared emphatically that he would not. Whereupon I protested that his pamphlet, powerful as it was within its scope, did not go to the bottom of the land question. (LIBERTY, No. 162, p. 6, April 18, 1891)

As we have already seen, Spooner could not support a national government for the Irish, even if it were one free of English interference. This was so because of his proprietary theory of justice. One continuing political theme in Ireland, since the beginning of English domination, was the desire for Ireland to have its own parliament. Many Irish patriots viewed the American rebellion and Revolutionary

“Doug Casey on the State”

I'm opposed the very existence of the State. I'm opposed to it on moral grounds, because its essence is coercion. I'm opposed to it on economic grounds, because it's more a threat to everyone's property than a guardian of it. On practical grounds, since it's necessarily inefficient in doing what it's supposed to do, and does everything it's not supposed to do. On aesthetic grounds, since it inevitably draws the worst kind of people to its employment. On evidential grounds, since its main products are wars, taxes, regulations, inflation, pogroms, and the like.

But that's just scratching the surface. We could write a book about why the State is the worst idea anybody has ever had.

I'll just say that it speaks poorly of the average person, that he not only thinks the State is necessary, but enthusiastically supports it. And a constitution - whatever its positive aspects - enshrines and legitimizes the idea of the State.

- Doug Casey's INTERNATIONAL MAN, “Freedom of Assembly,” December 7, 2018.

War against England, as one phase of the constitutional struggle to rid the British empire of the domination of an English parliament. What many of

the American revolutionaries and Irish nationalists did not realize was that requiring governments to rest on consent was to lay the groundwork for anarchy and to begin down the slippery slope to anarchism. Political theorists attempted to avoid the anarchistic implications of the natural rights-social contract position by resorting to the doctrine of tacit consent. [4] "It was the great achievement of the nineteenth century anarchist Lysander Spooner to demolish the tacit consent doctrine, particularly as it applies to the U.S. Constitution. Spooner's natural rights theory, combined with his refusal to recognize the surrender of rights through tacit consent, brings out the radical anarchism latent in the Lockean tradition." (Smith, 1978, p. 224)

Whether or not it is coincidental, it is certainly interesting to observe that one of the earliest applications of the proprietary theory of justice to government "by consent" was enunciated in THE CASE OF IRELAND'S BEING BOUND BY ACTS OF PARLIAMENT IN ENGLAND, STATED by William Molyneux, written in 1698. Molyneux, a friend and correspondent of John Locke, was intent on proving that Ireland was not obligated to obey the acts of Parliament. His argument was based on past English history and Irish precedent, as well as the doctrine of natural rights: "I shall venture to assert, that the Right of being subject ONLY to such Laws, to which Men give their own Consent, is so inherent in all Mankind, and founded on such immutable Laws of Nature and Reason, that 'tis not to be aliened, or given up by any Body of Men whatever I have no other Notion of Slavery; but being bound by a Law, to which I do not consent." (pp. 113, 169) According to Molyneux,

The obligation of all Laws having the same Foundation, if One Law may be imposed without Consent, any Other Law whatever, may be imposed on us without our Consent. This will naturally introduce Taxing us without our Consent; and this as necessarily destroys our Property. I have no other Notion of Property, but a Power of Disposing my Goods as I please, and not as another shall Command: Whatever another may Rightfully take from me without my Consent, I have certainly no Property in. To Tax me without Consent, is little better, if at all, than downright Robbing me. I am sure the Great patriots of Liberty and Property, the Free People of England, cannot think of such a thing but with Abhorrence. (p. 170)

Spencer, writing a century and a half after Molyneux (and so far as we know, unaware of these earlier utterances) used the same powerful logic to formulate the doctrine of anarchistic opposition to government based on proprietary justice. Said Spooner:

It was a principle of the Common Law, as it is of the law of nature, and of common sense, that no man can be taxed without his personal consent. ... Taxation without consent is as plainly robbery, when enforced against one man, as when enforced against millions; Taking a man's money without his consent, is also as much robbery, when it is done by millions of men, acting in concert, and calling themselves a government, as when it is done by a single individual, acting on his own responsibility, and calling himself a highwayman. Neither the numbers engaged in the act, nor the different characters they assume as a cover for the act, alter the nature of the act itself.

If the government can take a man's money without his consent, there is no limit to the additional tyranny it may practice upon him; for, with his money it can hire soldiers to stand over him, keep him in subjection, plunder him at discretion, and kill him if he resists. ... It is therefore a first principle, a very *sine qua non* of political freedom, that a man can be taxed only by his personal consent. ...

John of Paris (1255-1306) insisted that "individuals as individuals have right and power and true dominion:" They acquired this right, not from any ruler, either pope or king, but by their own "skill, labour, and industry." The pope was only an administrator of property that belonged to the church, the king only a judge who could settle disputes about lay possessions. Neither was the source of the individual's right to property.

- Larry Siedentop, INVENTING THE INDIVIDUAL (2014), pp. 291-292.

Governments have no more right, in nature or reason, to assume a man's consent to be protected by them, and to be taxed for that protection, when he has given no actual consent, than a fire or marine insurance company have to assume a man's consent to be protected by them, and to pay the premium, when his actual consent has never been given. To take a man's property without his consent is robbery; and to assume his consent, where no actual consent is given, makes the taking none the less robbery. If it did, the highwayman has the same right to assume a man's consent to part with his purse, that any other man, or body of men, can have. And his assumption would afford as much moral justification for his robbery as does a like assumption, on the part of the government, for taking a man's property without his consent. The government's pretense of protecting him, as an equivalent for the taxation, affords no justification. (Spencer, 1852, pp. 222-223)

Spencer's analysis of government and taxation points up that it is impossible to define taxation in a way which makes it different from robbery. Taxation is theft, despite government rhetoric. Simply put, a man cannot be presumed to have parted with his property without first having given his express, personal agreement. Spencer further developed these ideas in a series of three post-Civil War pamphlets, titled, NO TREASON. According to Spencer, governments and nations, if they can be said to rightfully exist at all, can exist only by consent; and this means: "the separate, individual consent of every man who is required to contribute, either by taxation or personal service, to the support of the government. ... Either the separate, individual consent of every man, who is required to aid, in any way, in supporting the government, is necessary, or the consent of no one is necessary." (NO TREASON, No. I, pp. 10-11) In NO TREASON, No. II, Spencer argued that "Either, 'taxation without consent is robbery,' or it is not. If it is not, then any number of men, who choose, may at any time associate; call themselves a government; assume absolute authority over all weaker than themselves; plunder them at will; can kill them if they resist. If, on the other hand, 'taxation without consent is robbery,' it necessarily follows that every man who has not consented to be taxed, has the same natural right to defend his property against a tax gatherer, that he has to defend it against a highwayman." (p. 13)

In his final pamphlet of this series, NO TREASON, No. VI, THE CONSTITUTION OF NO AUTHORITY, Spencer broke new ground by thoroughly demolishing the theory of tacit consent. Spencer argued that merely living in a certain geographic place in control of government, or voting in government elections, in no way implied one's consent to the government of that territory. Elections mean nothing; for Spencer showed that a majority of people never vote, and of those who do, the actual numbers supporting the elected candidates are so small (as a percentage of the population) as to be ludicrous. "Elections are secret; therefore, you cannot

It is certainly correct that a [free] market presupposes the recognition and enforcement of those rules that underlie its operation. But from this it does not follow that this task must be entrusted to a monopolistic agency. In fact, a common language or sign-system is also presupposed by the market; but one would hardly think it convincing to conclude that hence the government must ensure the observance of the rules of language. Like the system of language, then, the rules of market behavior emerge spontaneously
- Hans-Hermann Hoppe, THE ECONOMICS AND ETHICS OF PRIVATE PROPERTY (1993), p. 15.

call representatives legal agents, since they do not know specifically whom they do represent." They claim to represent those that voted for them, those that voted against them, and those that never voted at all; clearly a violation of every legal principle of agency and every proviso against conflict of interest. "On the question of the Constitution itself, no vote ever had been taken, and as a legal contract the Constitution has no validity." (Shively, 1971, 3) According to Spencer:

the Constitution was never signed, nor agreed to, by anybody, as a contract, and therefore never bound anybody, and is now binding upon nobody; and is, moreover, such a one as no people can ever hereafter be expected to consent to, except as they may be forced to do so at the point of the bayonet, (p. 59)

The proprietary theory of justice highlights the anarchist opposition to government. All States and governments, wherever and whenever they exist, have two characteristics to which anarchism objects. First, governments presume to establish a monopoly of defense services (police, courts, army, etc.) over a certain geographic area. Land owners who rightfully own the land in that given geographic area have no choice except to patronize the government defense services. Entrepreneurs and businessmen, who wish to provide competing defense services, are prohibited from using their property in such a fashion. Secondly, all governments support themselves by compulsory levies: by taxation. Taxation is the equivalent of robbery because a just property owner is being deprived of his goods or money against his will. If he resists, he is either threatened or imprisoned and his goods seized and confiscated. The fact that the government is offering goods and services in exchange for its tax revenues is of no consequence to the property owner who does not want the proffered service or is indifferent to it. Even if government were voluntarily financed, the forcible control of certain geographic areas would be a violation of the proprietary justice strictures. Justice in land ownership and the ownership of material objects in the world can only be legitimate if they can ultimately be traced back through the self-ownership and homesteading axioms. Governments violate the rights of the self-owner when it conscripts his services, in the form of personal labor, and when it seizes the material wealth he has created or produced. It violates the right of the homesteader or his heirs or successors to the land which they first homesteaded. Governments necessarily deny legitimate owners the rightful use of their labor and materially owned objects.

In his pamphlet on NATURAL LAW; OR THE SCIENCE OF JUSTICE: A TREATISE ON NATURAL LAW, NATURAL JUSTICE, NATURAL RIGHTS, NATURAL LIBERTY, AND

NATURAL SOCIETY; SHOWING THAT ALL LEGISLATION WHATSOEVER IS AN ABSURDITY, A USURPATION, AND A CRIME, written in 1882, Spooner summarized the proprietary theory of justice by referring to it as the “science of mine and thine.” It is the science of peace, “it is the science which alone can tell us on what conditions mankind can live in peace with each other.” According to Spooner these conditions are:

first, that each man shall do towards every other, all that justice requires him to do; as, for example, that he shall pay his debts, that he shall return borrowed or stolen property to its owner, and that he shall make reparation for any injury he may have done to the person or property of another.

The second condition is, that each man shall abstain from doing to another, anything which justice forbids him to do: as, for example, that he shall abstain from committing theft, robbery, arson, murder, or any other crime against the person or property of another

Through all time, so far as history informs us, wherever mankind have attempted to live in peace with each other, both the natural instincts, and the collective wisdom of the human race have acknowledged and prescribed, as an indispensable condition, obedience to this one only universal obligation; viz., that each should live honestly towards every other.

Progress cannot be planned by government.
- Ayn Rand, “The Anti-Industrial Revolution,” (1971).

The ancient maxim makes the sum of a man’s legal duty to his fellow men to be simply this: “To live honestly, to hurt no one, to give to every one his due.”

This entire maxim is really expressed in the single words, to live honestly; since to live honestly is to hurt no one, and give to every one his due. (pp. 5-6)

Based on his concept of natural law and proprietary justice, Spooner also demonstrated in this pamphlet that if there is no such thing as natural justice, then governments have no business to exist at all. Spooner argued for anarchism and the abolition of government in the following ways. First, if we admit the existence of natural law and an objective reality, there is no reason for government to monopolize the administration of justice or defense services. Because the principles of justice are grounded in objective, natural laws, they fall within the province of human knowledge and are knowable by all who choose to study and reason them out. Just as we do not require a government to dictate what is right or wrong in steel-making, so we do not require a government to dictate

what is right or wrong in the realm of justice. If it is possible to verify objectively that one legal procedure is valid, whereas another is not, then it does not matter who employs the procedure in question. We should look to reason and fact; not to government. [5]

Secondly, if we deny the existence of natural law and objective reality, then we certainly do not require such an institution as government. What purpose could it then serve? If there is no such thing as objective truth to differ about, then “there is no moral standard, and never can be any moral standard by which any controversy whatever, between two or more human beings, can be settled in a manner to be obligatory upon either;” and the human race must be inevitably at war; “forever striving to plunder, enslave, and murder each other; with no instrumentalities but fraud and force to end the conflict.” If there be no such thing as justice, then there can be no such acts as crimes.

The proprietary theory of justice furnishes the basis for a moral rationalism - a moral theory that insists that institutions, such as government, are subject to moral scrutiny regardless of their long tradition. It also insists that individuals are subject to moral scrutiny regardless of their “official” governmental offices. It provides for the rational dignity of the individual human being, and provides a justification for human existence independent of the need for any social consensus. By permitting the individual to stand alone, outside the social or political bodies of mankind, it provides the only basis on which the individual may rightfully criticize in both word and deed every other individual and existent social institutions.

Thus concludes our survey of Lysander Spooner’s thought as it relates to the proprietary theory of justice. Hopefully this essay has contributed to understanding the logic and significance of his theories within the context of anarchist thought and history.

FOOTNOTES

[1] I am indebted to Murray Rothbard for many of the introductory ideas in this essay. Particularly see his introduction to NATURAL LAW in the September 1974 LIBERTARIAN FORUM.

[2] Spooner adds the following footnote to his explanation: “Some persons object to this principle, for the reason that, as they say, a single individual might, in this way, take possession of a whole continent, if he happened to be the first discoverer; and might hold it against all the rest of the human race. But this objection arises wholly from an erroneous view of what it is, to take possession of anything. To simply stand upon a continent, and declare one’s self the possessor of it, is not to take possession of it. One would, in that way, take

possession only of what his body actually covered. To take possession of more than this, he must bestow some valuable labor upon it, such, for example, as cutting down the trees, breaking up the soil, building a hut or a house upon it, or a fence around it. In these cases, he holds the land in order to hold the labor which he has put into it, or upon it. And the land is his, so long as the labor he has expended upon it remains in a condition to be valuable for the uses for which it was expended; because it is not to be supposed that a man has abandoned the fruits of his labor so long as they remain in a state to be practically useful to him.” (p. 22)

[3] I am especially indebted to Peden, Davies, and Marlow for the general comments I make about Ireland.

[4] Josiah Tucker in 1781 was probably the first to point out the anarchistic implications of the arguments of Molyneux, Locke, and the American rebels. I am indebted to George H. Smith for pointing this out to me.

[5] Roy Childs and George H. Smith originally developed these ideas, largely building on Spooner’s foundation.

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Rediscovering the Golden Rule

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So I continued to read about various types of libertarianism and anarchism. I eventually realized that the simplest, most coherent anarchist philosophy was fundamentally an elaboration of the Golden Rule. I think voluntarism is the best way to describe this belief and way of life. Once I saw how politics goes against the Golden Rule, it was easy to generalize the principle by applying it more consistently in my personal life. In turn, I think I became a better parent and husband.

Many [most or all?] kingdoms and empires were in truth little more than large protection rackets. The king was the *capo di tutti capi* who collected protection money, and in return made sure that neighbouring [sic] crime syndicates and local small fry did not harm those under his protection. He did little else.
- Yuval Noah Harari, SAPIENS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF MANKIND (2015), p. 358.

Embracing the Golden Rule fully was also psychologically liberating for me. By recognizing the proper and effective limits to my actions, I stopped worrying about matters beyond my control or responsibility. Life is too short to be focused on frustrating attempts to control others. Isn’t it enough to manage one’s own life?

[Note: For the ancient Egyptian version of the Golden Rule I quote, see p. 95 in Richard Jasnow’s “A Late Period Hieratic Wisdom Text (P. Brooklyn 47.218.135),” published in 1992 by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, number 52). It’s available online at www.webcitation.org/78cxXbRCj.] 

Rediscovering the Golden Rule

By Devon Brewer

The Golden Rule may be the most basic moral approach to dealing with others. It seems universal across cultures and religions. The Golden Rule is instinctive. We all know it, even as children without education.

I like the negative form of the Golden Rule the best. One of the earliest written versions comes from ancient Egypt: "That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another." By definition, politics and government violate this rule. Through government, some people make other people do something (or not do something) against their will, even when no one would be harmed if government didn't get involved. I believe voluntarism, at its heart, is the Golden Rule.

I was politically active most of my life. I followed political news closely, argued with others about politics, voted in every possible election I could, and gave small amounts of money to a few political campaigns. My political views shifted over time, eventually crossing most of the political spectrum.

Somehow, whenever we participate in politics, regardless of viewpoint, we forget the Golden Rule. Political advocates, civic leaders, and school curricula make political participation seem righteous and noble. We make excuses for our political involvement, such as "helping others," "getting what we deserve," and "standing up for ourselves." These excuses blind us to the fact that through government, we take from and

harm others (and ourselves). Democratic practices - mob rule - violate the Golden Rule just as much as dictatorial ones.

People engage in politics to control other people through government - whether to "change the world" or prevent change. My focus on controlling others through government seeped into my personal life. Sometimes I tried to interfere with the lives of my children and wife, attempting to control them in ways that I wouldn't have liked had they done the same to me. Of course, I told myself that I was acting in their best interests. It can be especially difficult to respect the Golden Rule as a parent. Nurturing, protecting, teaching, and encouraging a child are essential, but can easily slip into manipulating. Fortunately for me, my family endured my behavior. But I regret very much the times that I broke the Golden Rule with them.

Over several years, I gradually rediscovered the Golden Rule. Remarkably, my reawakening began with my growing disillusionment with politics and learning more about libertarianism. Yet even libertarianism, as practiced by the Libertarian Party in the United States and expressed often in REASON magazine, was ultimately insufficient. The party in particular supposedly holds sacred the non-aggression principle, which is really just a fancy version of the Golden Rule in its negative form. Yet the party seeks to rule in government, contradicting the principle.

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