
The Voluntaryist

Whole Number 95

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

December 1998

Myth and Truth About Libertarianism

By Murray N. Rothbard

Myth # 1: *Libertarians believe that each individual is an isolated, hermetically sealed atom, acting in a vacuum without influencing each other.* This is a common charge, but a highly puzzling one. In a lifetime of reading libertarian and classical liberal literature, I have not come across a single theorist or writer who holds anything like this position. ...

Libertarians are methodological and political individualists, to be sure. They believe that only individuals think, value, act, and choose. They believe that each individual has the right to own his own body, free of coercive interference. But no individualist denies that people are influencing each other all the time in their goals, values, pursuits and occupations. As F. A. Hayek pointed out in his notable article, "The Non-Sequitur of the 'Dependence Effect,'" John Kenneth Galbraith's assault upon free-market economics in his best-selling *THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY* rested on this proposition: economics assumes that every individual arrives at his scale of values totally on his own, without being subject to influence by anyone else. On the contrary, as Hayek replied, everyone knows that most people do not originate their own values, but are influenced to adopt them by other people. No individualist or libertarian denies that people influence each other all the time, and surely there is nothing wrong with this inevitable process. What libertarians are opposed to is not voluntary persuasion, but the coercive imposition of values by the use of force and police power. Libertarians are in no way opposed to the voluntary cooperation and collaboration between individuals: only to the compulsory pseudo-"cooperation" imposed by the state.

Myth #2: *Libertarians are libertines: they are hedonists who hanker after "alternative life-styles."* This myth has recently been propounded by Irving Kristol, who identifies the libertarian ethic with the "hedonistic" and asserts that libertarians "worship the Sears Roebuck catalogue and all the 'alternative life styles' that capitalist affluence permits the individual to choose from." The fact is that libertarianism is not and does not pretend to be a complete moral or aesthetic theory; it is only a political theory, that is, the important subset of moral theory that deals with the proper role of violence in social life. Political theory deals with what is proper or improper for

government to do, and government is distinguished from every other group in society as being the institution of organized violence. Libertarianism holds that the *only* proper role of violence is to defend person and property *against* violence, that any use of violence that goes beyond such just defense is itself aggressive, unjust, and criminal. Libertarianism, therefore, is a theory which states that everyone should be free of violent invasion, should be free to do as he sees fit except invade the person or property of another. What a person does with his or her life is vital and important, but is simply irrelevant to libertarianism.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that there are libertarians who are indeed hedonists and devotees of alternative lifestyles, and that there are also libertarians who are firm adherents of "bourgeois" conventional or religious morality. There are libertarian libertines and there are libertarians who cleave firmly to the disciplines of natural or religious law. There are other libertarians who have no moral theory at all apart from the imperative of non-violation of rights. That is because libertarianism *per se* has no general or personal moral theory. Libertarianism does not offer a way of life; it offers liberty, so that each person is free to adopt and act upon his own values and moral principles. Libertarians agree with Lord Acton that "liberty is the highest political end"-not necessarily the highest end on everyone's personal scale of values.

There is no question about the fact, however, that the sub-set of libertarians who are free-market economists tends to be delighted when the free market leads to a wider range of choices for consumers, and thereby raises their standard of living. Unquestionably, the idea that prosperity is better than grinding poverty is a moral proposition, and it ventures into the realm of general moral theory, but it is still not a proposition for which I should wish to apologize.

Myth #3: *Libertarians do not believe in moral principles; they limit themselves to cost-benefit analysis on the assumption that man is always rational.* This myth is of course related to the preceding charge of hedonism, and some of it can be answered in the same way. There are indeed libertarians, particularly Chicago-school economists, who refuse to believe that liberty, and individual rights are moral principles, and instead attempt to arrive at public policy by weighing alleged social costs and benefits.

In the first place, most libertarians are "subjectivists" in economics, that is, they believe that the

continued on page 3

The Voluntaryist

Editor: Carl Watner

Subscription Information

Published bi-monthly by The Voluntaryists, P.O. Box 1275, Gramling, SC 29348. Yearly subscriptions (six issues) are \$18 or .06 ounce or 1.866 grams of fine gold. For overseas postage, please add \$5 or 1/3 of the regular subscription price. Single back issues are \$4 each or 1/5 of the regular subscription price. Please check the number on your mailing label to see when you should renew.

Back issues of this publication are available on microfiche from John Zube, Box 52, Berrima, NSW 2577, Australia.

Potpourri from the Editor's Desk

No. 1 "Coercivists and Voluntarists"

Coercivists believe that all order in society must be consciously designed and implemented by a sovereign government power. Coercivists cannot fathom how individuals without mandates from above can ever pattern their actions in a way that is not only orderly, but also peaceful and productive. For the coercivist, direction by sovereign government is as necessary for the creation of social order as the meticulous craftsmanship of a watchmaker is necessary for the creation of a watch.

At the other end of the spectrum are voluntarists. Voluntarists understand two important facts about society that coercivists miss. First, voluntarists understand that social order is inevitable without coercive direction from the state as long as the basic rules of private property and voluntary contracting are respected. This inevitability of social order when such rules are observed is the great lesson taught by Adam Smith, Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek, and all of the truly great economists through the ages.

Second, voluntarists understand that coercive social engineering by government—far from promoting social harmony—is fated to ruin existing social order. Voluntarists grasp the truth that genuine and productive social order is possible only when each person is free to pursue his own goals in his own way, constrained by no political power. Coercive political power is the enemy of social order because it is unavoidably arbitrary—bestowing favors for reasons wholly unrelated to the values the recipients provide to their fellow human beings. And even if by some miracle the exercise of political power could be shorn of its arbitrariness, it can never escape being an exercise conducted in gross ignorance. It is a simpleton's fantasy to imagine that all the immense and detailed knowledge necessary for the successful central direction of human affairs can ever be possessed by government.

Society emerges from the cooperation of hundreds

of millions of people, each acting on the basis of his own unique knowledge of individual wants, talents, occupations, and circumstances. No bureaucrat can know enough about software design to outperform Bill Gates, or enough about retailing to successfully second-guess the folks at Wal-Mart, or enough about any of the millions of different industries to outdo people who are highly specialized in their various trades.

The coercivist-voluntarist vocabulary is superior to the left-right, or liberal-conservative, vocabulary at distinguishing liberty's friends from its foes. Support for high taxes and intrusive government is a "liberal" trait. A supporter of high taxes and regulation is also, however, properly labeled a coercivist. But note: no less of a coercivist is the conservative who applauds government regulation of what adults voluntarily read, view, or ingest. Both parties believe that social order will deteriorate into chaos unless government coercion overrides the myriad private choices made by individuals.

Voluntarists are typically accused of endorsing complete freedom of each individual from all restraints. This accusation is nonsense. While they oppose heavy reliance upon coercively imposed restraints, sensible voluntarists do not oppose restraints *per se*. Voluntarists, in contrast to coercivists, recognize that superior restraints on individual behavior emerge decentrally and peaceably. Parents restrain their children. Neighbors use both formal and informal means to restrain each other from un-neighborly behaviors. The ability of buyers to choose where to spend their money restrains businesses from abusing customers.

A free society is chock-full of such decentrally and noncoercively imposed restraints. Indeed, it is the voluntary origins of such restraints that make them more trustworthy than coercively imposed restraints. A voluntary restraint grows decentrally from the give and take of everyday life and is sensitive to all the costs and benefits of both the restraint itself and of the restrained behavior. But a coercive restraint too often is the product not of that give and take of all affected parties but, instead, of political deals. And political deals are notoriously biased toward the wishes of the politically well-organized while ignoring the wishes of those unable to form effective political coalitions. What's more, members of the political class often free themselves from the very restraints they foist upon others. Coercively imposed restraints are not social restraints at all; rather, they are arbitrary commands issued by the politically privileged.

—Donald Boudreaux, "Notes From FEE," THE FREEMAN, August 1997.

No. 2 "The IRS Code, The Law & Legalized Duplicity"

The Bob Livingston Letter is by no definition a "tax protest" letter. In the strictest sense, there is no

such thing as a "tax protester" because it is an impossibility to be a tax protester with only credit as money in the United States. I fully understand that this statement is not understandable to those who have not studied monetary realism. The term "tax protester" is a creation of the IRS. It is full of design as follows: It implies that everyone by law is a "taxpayer." For their purpose it is very important to their scheme and propaganda for everyone to think of themselves as "taxpayers." A "taxpayer" is one who pays taxes and implies that one who is a "taxpayer" is bound by law to pay taxes. The goal of the income tax system is for everyone to become income tax debtors by thinking of themselves as "taxpayers." The deceit has succeeded beyond all comprehension.

On the contrary, no one is a taxpayer or tax debtor unless they decide to "volunteer" to be one. We make ourselves "liable" by volunteering and making a 1040 return. We do this under duress of propaganda deceit.

Why do we write about the income tax system? We do so because it is a fraud of monumental proportions that induces millions through deceit to sacrifice their substance and their time to this Anti-christ beast system. This is a worldwide system and I know no better description of it than to call it modern Mystery Babylon. It is not all of modern Mystery Babylon, but it is without a doubt the foundation of modern Mystery Babylon. Modern Mystery Babylon operates and thrives upon deceit. The IRS income tax system is a masterpiece of cynicism and deception. A true monument to this chicanery would have to be Satan himself. The IRS is fraud in its stated purpose of being a tax collector. It is specifically a consumption regulating agency. It is equally a national information agency identical to the Gestapo.

All modern governments rule by deceit. To rule by deceit, all governments must have an information system on all its people. The IRS is this information system in the United States. But this fact is hidden from the public mind with propaganda which has been developed into the perfect art of massive human manipulation.

The New World order is a present reality founded upon perpetual psychological warfare of all governments against their populations.

Propaganda is not something we can take or leave. It is the constant bombardment of word patterns and thought systems that penetrate the consciousness, chemically rearranging neuron structure. It is an electrochemical stimulus that programs the mind to controlled responses, which we sometimes refer to as "conventional wisdom." Programmed neurotransmitters in the brain can inhibit mental thought processes as surely as steel bars in a jail can restrain your physical freedoms.

A testament to this mind manipulation is the lawyers and accountants who are mentally victimized by the manipulative language of the tax code and it

never ever crosses their minds to inquire beyond their training. The cynical truth is that they all work for the IRS but you pay them. How about this to get sick on?

The dynamics of psychological warfare and authoritarianism are built upon group consciousness. Group consciousness is a mass programmed thought system (conventional wisdom). Stimulus from unconventional wisdom turns off the receptors and - evokes no response at all or evokes hostility.

[Excerpted from THE BOB LIVINGSTON LETTER (February 1998), Box 110013, Birmingham AL 35211, \$39 for 12 monthly issues. A recent example of this deceitful propaganda appeared in THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, February 17, 1998 (A22). Illinois Governor Jim Edgar "vetoed a \$500 state income tax credit for parents who use private schools. He claimed such use of 'public funds for private K-12 education diverts dollars from public priorities.' The governor needs a course in Taxes 101. Money belongs to individuals until taxed. Allowing people to keep more of their own money isn't a use of 'public funds'."

Another example is Senator Bob Kerrey's statement: "If all we do is pay attention to IRS abuse..., we'll miss the importance of making sure the IRS has sufficient power to stop taxpayers who want to abuse other taxpayers—and who want other taxpayers to subsidize their unwillingness to pay taxes." (WALL STREET JOURNAL, April 22, 1998, p. A1)]

Myth and Truth About Libertarianism

continued from page 1

utilities and costs of different individuals cannot be added or measured. Hence, the very concept of social costs and benefits is illegitimate. But, more importantly, most libertarians rest their case on moral principles, on a belief in the natural rights of every individual to his person or property. They therefore believe in the absolute immorality of aggressive violence, of invasion of those rights to person or property, regardless of which person or group commits such violence.

Far from being immoral, libertarians simply apply a universal human ethic to *government* in the same way as almost everyone would apply such an ethic to every other person or institution in society. In particular as I have noted earlier, libertarianism—as a political philosophy dealing with the proper role of violence—takes the universal ethic that most of us hold toward violence and applies it fearlessly to government. Libertarians make no exceptions to the golden rule and provide no moral loophole, no double standard, for government. That is, libertarians believe that murder is murder and does not become sanctified by reasons of state if committed by the

government. We believe that theft is theft and does not become legitimated because organized robbers call their theft "taxation." We believe that enslavement is enslavement even if the institution committing that act calls it "conscription." In short, the key to libertarian theory is that it makes no exceptions in its universal ethic for government.

Hence, far from being indifferent or hostile to moral principles, libertarians fulfill them by being the only group willing to extend those principles across the board to government itself.

It is true that libertarians would allow each individual to choose his values and to act upon them, and would in short accord every person the right to be either moral or immoral as he saw fit. Libertarianism is strongly opposed to enforcing any moral creed on any person or group by the use of violence except, of course, the moral prohibition against aggressive violence itself. But we must realize that no action can be considered virtuous unless it is undertaken freely, by a person's voluntary consent. As Frank Meyer pointed out:

Men cannot be forced to be free, nor can they even be forced to be virtuous. To a certain extent, it is true, they can be forced to act as though they were virtuous. But virtue is the fruit of well-used freedom. And no act to the degree that it is coerced can partake of virtue—or of vice.

If a person is forced by violence or the threat thereof to perform a certain action, then it can no longer be a moral choice on his part. The morality of an action can stem only from its being freely adopted; an action can scarcely be called moral if someone is compelled to perform it at gunpoint. Compelling moral actions or outlawing immoral actions, therefore, cannot be said to foster the spread of morality or virtue. On the contrary, coercion atrophies morality for it takes away from the individual the freedom to be either moral or immoral, and therefore forcibly deprives people of the chance to be moral. Paradoxically, then, a compulsory morality robs us of the very opportunity to be moral.

It is furthermore particularly grotesque to place the guardianship of morality in the hands of the state apparatus—that is, none other than the organization of policemen, guards, and soldiers. Placing the state in charge of moral principles is equivalent to putting the proverbial fox in charge of the chicken coop. Whatever else we may say about them, the wielders of organized violence in society have never been distinguished by their high moral tone or by the precision with which they uphold moral principle.

Myth #4: Libertarianism is atheistic and materialist, and neglects the spiritual side of life. There is no necessary connection between being for or against libertarianism and one's position on religion. It is true that many if not most libertarians at the present time are atheists, but this correlates with the fact that

most intellectuals, of most political persuasions, are atheists as well. There are many libertarians who are theists, Jewish or Christian. Among the classical liberal forebears of modern libertarianism in a more religious age there were a myriad of Christians: from John Lilburne, Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, and John Locke in the seventeenth century, down to Cobden and Bright, Frederic Bastiat and the French laissez-faire liberals, and the great Lord Acton.

Libertarians believe that liberty is a natural right embedded in a natural law of what is proper for mankind, in accordance with man's nature. *Where* this set-of natural laws comes from, whether it is purely natural or originated by a creator, is an important ontological question but is irrelevant to social or political philosophy. As Father Thomas Davitt declares: "If the word 'natural' means anything at all, it refers to the nature of a man, and when used with 'law,' 'natural' must refer to an ordering that is manifested in the inclinations of a man's nature and to nothing else. Hence, taken in itself, there is nothing religious or theological in the 'Natural Law' of Aquinas." Or, as D'Entreves writes of the seventeenth century Dutch Protestant jurist Hugo Grotius:

[Grotius'] definition of natural law has nothing revolutionary. When he maintains that natural law is that body of rule which Man is able to discover by the use of his reason, he does nothing but restate the Scholastic notion of a rational foundation of ethics. Indeed, his aim is rather to restore that notion which had been shaken by the extreme Augustinianism of certain Protestant currents of thought. When he declares that these rules are valid in themselves, independently of the fact that God willed them, he repeats an assertion which had already been made by some of the schoolmen...

Libertarianism has been accused of ignoring man's spiritual nature. But one can easily arrive at libertarianism from a religious or Christian position: emphasizing the importance of the individual, of his freedom of will, of natural rights and private property. Yet one can also arrive at all these self-same positions by a secular, natural law approach, through a belief that man can arrive at a rational apprehension of the natural law.

Historically furthermore, it is not at all clear that religion is a firmer footing than secular natural law for libertarian conclusions. As Karl Wifittfogel reminded us in his *ORIENTAL DESPOTISM*, the union of throne and altar has been used for centuries to fasten a reign of despotism on society. Historically, the union of church and state has been in many instances a mutually reinforcing coalition for tyranny. The state used the church to sanctify and preach obedience to its supposedly divinely-sanctioned rule; the church used the state to gain income and privilege. The Anabaptists collectivized and

tyrannized Munster in the name of the Christian religion. And, closer to our century, Christian socialism and the social gospel have played a major role in the drive toward statism, and the apologetic role of the Orthodox Church in Soviet Russia has been all too clear. Some Catholic bishops in Latin America have even proclaimed that the only route to the kingdom of heaven is through Marxism, and if I wished to be nasty, I could point out that the Reverend Jim Jones, in addition to being a Leninist, also proclaimed himself the reincarnation of Jesus. ...

We may note here that socialism becomes especially despotic when it, replaces “economic” or “material” incentives by allegedly “moral” or “spiritual” ones, when it affects to promoting an indefinable “quality of life” rather than economic prosperity. When payment is adjusted to productivity there is considerably more freedom as well as higher standards of living. For when reliance is placed solely on altruistic devotion to the socialist motherland, the devotion has to be regularly reinforced by the knout. An increasing stress on individual material incentive means ineluctably a greater stress on private property and keeping what one earns, and brings with it considerably more personal freedom, as witness Yugoslavia in the last three decades in contrast to Soviet Russia. The most horrifying despotism on the face of the earth in recent years was undoubtedly Pol Pot’s Cambodia, in which “materialism” was so far obliterated that money was abolished by the regime. With money and private property abolished, each individual was totally dependent on handouts of rationed subsistence from the state, and life was a sheer hell. We should be careful before we sneer at “merely material” goals or incentives.

The charge of “materialism” directed against the free market ignores the, fact that *every* human action whatsoever involves the transformation of material objects by the use of human energy and in accordance with ideas and purposes held by the actors. It is impermissible to separate the “mental” or “spiritual” from the “material.” All great works of art, great emanations of the human spirit, have had to employ material objects: whether they be canvasses, brushes and paint, paper and musical instruments, or building blocks and raw materials for churches. There is no real rift between the “spiritual” and the “material” and hence any despotism over and crippling of the material will cripple the spiritual as well.

Myth #5: *Libertarians are utopians who believe that all people are good, and that therefore state control is not necessary.* Conservatives tend to add that since human nature is either partially or wholly evil, strong state regulation is therefore necessary for society.

This is a very common belief about libertarians, yet it is difficult to know the source of this misconception. Rousseau, the *locus classicus* of the idea that

man is good but is corrupted by his institutions, was scarcely a libertarian. Apart from the romantic writings of a few anarcho-communists, whom I would not consider libertarians in any case, I know of no libertarian or classical liberal writers who have held this view. On the contrary, most libertarian writers hold that man is a mixture of good and evil and therefore that it is important for social institutions to encourage the good and discourage the bad. The state is the only social institution which is able to extract its income and wealth by coercion; all others must obtain revenue either by selling a product or service to customers or by receiving voluntary gifts. And the state is the only institution which can use the revenue from this organized theft to presume to control and regulate people’s lives and property. Hence, the institution of the state establishes a socially legitimized and sanctified channel for bad people to do bad things, to commit regularized theft and to wield dictatorial power. Statism therefore encourages the bad, or at least the criminal elements of human nature. As Frank H. Knight trenchantly put it: “The probability of the people in power being individuals who would dislike the possession and exercise of power is on a level with the probability that an extremely tender-hearted person would get the job of whipping master in a slave plantation.” A free society, by not establishing such a legitimated channel for theft and tyranny, discourages the criminal tendencies of human nature and encourages the peaceful and the voluntary. Liberty and the free market discourage aggression and compulsion, and encourage the harmony and mutual benefit of voluntary interpersonal exchanges, economic, social, and cultural.

Since a system of liberty would encourage the voluntary and discourage the criminal, and would remove the only legitimated channel for crime and aggression, we could expect that a free society would indeed suffer less from violent crime and aggression than we do now, though there is no warrant for assuming that they would disappear completely. That is not utopianism, but a common-sense implication of the change in what is considered socially legitimate, and in the reward-and-penalty structure in society.

We can approach our thesis from another angle. If all men were good and none had criminal tendencies, then there would indeed be no need for a state as conservatives concede. But if on the other hand all men were evil, then the case for the state is just as shaky, since why should anyone assume that those men who form the government and obtain all the guns and the power to coerce others, should be magically exempt from the badness of all the other persons outside the government? Tom Paine, the classical libertarian often considered to be naively optimistic about human nature, rebutted the conservative evil-human-nature argument for a strong state as follows: “If all human nature be corrupt it is needless to

strengthen the corruption by establishing a succession of kings, who be they ever so base, are still to be obeyed. ..." Paine added that "No man since the fall hath ever been equal to the trust of being given power over all." And as the libertarian F. A. Harper once wrote:

Still using the same principle that political rulership should be employed to the extent of the evil in man, we would then have a society in which complete political rulership of all the affairs of everybody would, be called for. ... One man would rule all. But who would serve as the dictator? However he were to be selected and affixed to the political throne, he would surely be a totally evil person, since all men are evil. And this society would then be ruled by a totally evil dictator possessed of total political power. And how, in the name of logic, could anything short of total evil be its consequence? How could it be better than having no political rulership at all in that society?

Finally, since, as we have seen, men are actually a mixture of good and evil, a regime of liberty serves to encourage the good and discourage the bad, at least in the sense that the voluntary and mutually beneficial are good and the criminal is bad. In no theory of human nature then, whether it be goodness, badness, or a mixture of the two, can statism be justified. In the course of denying the notion that he is a conservative, the classical liberal F. A. Hayek pointed out: "The main merit of individualism [which Adam Smith and his contemporaries advocated] is that it is a system under which bad men can do least harm. It is a social system which does not depend for its functioning on our finding good men for running it, or on all men becoming better than they now are, but which makes use of men in all their given variety and complexity. ..."

It is important to note what differentiates libertarians from utopians in the pejorative sense. Libertarianism does not set out to remould human nature. One of socialism's major goals is to create, which in practice means by totalitarian methods, a New Socialist Man, an individual whose major goal will be to work diligently, and altruistically for the collective. Libertarianism is a political philosophy which says: Given any existent human nature, liberty is the only moral and the most effective political system. Obviously, libertarianism—as well as any other social system—will work better the more individuals are peaceful and the less they are criminal or aggressive. And libertarians, along with most other people, would like to attain a world where more individuals are "good" and fewer are criminals. But this is not the doctrine of libertarianism *per se*, which says that *whatever* the mix of man's nature may be at any given time, liberty is best.

Myth #6: *Libertarians believe that every person*

knows his own interests best. Just as the preceding charge holds that libertarians believe all men to be perfectly good, so this myth charges them with believing that everyone is perfectly wise. Yet, it is then maintained, this is not true of many people, and therefore the state must intervene.

But the libertarian no more assumes perfect wisdom than he postulates perfect goodness. There is a certain common sense in holding that most men are better apprised of their own needs and goals than is anyone else. But there is no assumption that everyone always knows his own interest best. Libertarianism rather asserts that everyone should have the right to pursue his own interest as he deems best. What is being asserted is the right to act with one's own person and property, and not the necessary wisdom of such action.

It is also true, however, that the free market—in contrast to government—has built-in mechanisms to enable people to turn freely to experts who can give sound advice on how to pursue one's interests best. As we have seen earlier, free individuals are not hermetically sealed from one another. For on the free market, any individual, if in doubt about what his own true interests may be, is free to hire or consult experts to give him advice based on their possibly superior knowledge. The individual may hire such experts and, on the free market, can continuously test their soundness and helpfulness. Individuals on the market, therefore, *tend* to patronize those experts whose advice will prove most successful. Good doctors, lawyers, or architects will reap rewards on the free market, while poor ones will tend to fare badly. But when government intervenes, the government expert acquires his revenue by compulsory levy upon the taxpayers. There is no market test of his success in advising people of their own true interests. He only need have ability in acquiring the political support of the state's machinery of coercion.

Thus, the privately hired expert will tend to flourish in proportion to his ability, whereas the government expert will flourish in proportion to his success in currying political favor. Moreover, the government expert will be no more virtuous than the private one; his only superiority will be in gaining the favor of those who wield political force. But a crucial difference between the two is that the privately hired expert has every pecuniary incentive to care about his clients or patients, and to do his best by them. But the government expert has no such incentive; he obtains his revenue in any case. Hence, the individual consumer will tend to fare better on the free market.

I hope that this essay has contributed to clearing away the rubble of myth and misconception about libertarianism. Conservatives and everyone else should politely be put on notice that libertarians do *not* believe—that everyone is good, nor that everyone is an all-wise expert on his own interest, nor that

every individual is an isolated and hermetically sealed atom. Libertarians are not necessarily libertines or hedonists, nor are they necessarily atheists; and libertarians emphatically *do* believe in moral principles. ...

[Reprinted by permission of John Vella, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Box 4431, Wilmington DE 19807 dated January 26, 1998. This essay first appeared in MODERN AGE, Winter 1980.]

Participation and the Lie

continued from page 8

sions that liars have been using for the past half century.

But the answer could not be simpler: decide *yourself*, as *your* conscience dictates. And for a long time this will suffice. Depending upon his horizons, his life experience and his education, each person will have his own perception of the line where the public and state lie begins: one will see it as being altogether remote from him, while another will experience it as a rope already cutting into his neck. And *there*, at the point where *you yourself* in all honesty see the borderline of the lie, is where you must refuse to submit to that lie. You must shun *that part* of the lie that is clear and obvious to you. And if you sincerely cannot see the lie anywhere at all, then go on quietly living as you did before.

What does it mean, *not to lie*? It doesn't mean going around preaching the truth at the top of your voice (perish the thought!). It doesn't even mean muttering what you think in an undertone. It simply means: *not saying what you don't think*, and that includes not whispering, not opening your mouth, not raising your hand, not casting your vote, not feigning a smile, not lending your presence, not standing up, and not cheering.

We all work in different fields and move in different walks of life. Those who work in the humanities and all who are studying find themselves much more profoundly and inextricably involved in lying and participating in the lie—they are fenced about by layer after layer of lies. In the technical sciences it can be more ingeniously avoided, but even so one cannot escape daily entering some door, attending some meeting, putting one's signature to something or undertaking some obligation which is a cowardly submission to the lie. The lie surrounds us at work, on our way to work, in our leisure pursuits—in everything we see, hear and read.

And just as varied as the forms of the lie are the forms of rejecting it. Whoever steels his heart and opens his eyes to the tentacles of the lie will in each situation, every day and every hour, realize what he must do.

Jan Palach burned himself to death. That was an extreme sacrifice. Had it not been an isolated case it would have roused Czechoslovakia to action. As an isolated case it will simply go down in history. But not so much is demanded of everyone—of you and me. Nor do we have to go out and face the flamethrowers breaking up demonstrations. All we have to do is *breathe*. All we have to do is not lie.

And nobody need be “first,” because there are already many hundreds of “firsts,” it is only because of their quietness that we do not notice them (especially those suffering for their religion, and it is fitting that they work as cleaners and caretakers). I can point to several dozen people from the very nucleus of the intelligentsia who have been living this way for a long time, *for years!* And they are still alive. And their families haven't died out. And they still have a roof over their heads. And food on the table.

Yes, it is a terrible thought! In the beginning the holes in the filter are so narrow, so very narrow: can a person with so many needs really squeeze through such a narrow opening? Let me reassure him: it is only that way at the entrance, at the very beginning. Very soon, not far along, the holes slacken and relax their grip, and eventually cease to grip you altogether. Yes, of course! It will cost you canceled dissertations, annulled degrees, demotions, dismissals, expulsions, sometimes even deportations. But you will not be cast into flames. Or crushed by a tank. And you will still have food and shelter.

This path is the safest and most accessible of all the paths open to us for the average man in the street. But it is also the most effective! Only we, knowing our system, can imagine what will happen when thousands and tens of thousands of people take this path—how our country will be purified and transformed without shots or bloodshed.

But this path is also the most moral: we shall be commencing this liberation and purification *with our own souls*. Before we purify the country we shall have purified ourselves. And this is the only correct historical order: for what is the good of purifying our country's air if we ourselves remain dirty?

People will say: how unfair on the young! After all, if you don't utter the obligatory lie at your social science exam, you'll be failed and expelled from your institute, and your education and life will be disrupted. ...

Educational damage is not the greatest damage one can suffer in life. Damage to the soul and corruption of the soul, to which we carelessly assent from our earliest years, are far more irreparable.

Unfair on the young? But whose is the future if not theirs? Who do we expect to form the sacrificial elite? For whose sake do we agonize over the future? We are already old. If they themselves do not build an honest society, they will never see it at all.

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, FROM UNDER THE RUBBLE (1975, pp. 24-25, 274-278).

Participation and the Lie

Our present system is unique in world history, because over and above its physical and economic constraints, it demands of us total surrender of our souls, continuous and active participation in the general, conscious *lie*. To this putrefaction of the soul, this spiritual enslavement, human beings who wish to be human cannot consent. When Caesar, having exacted what is Caesar's, demands still more insistently that we render unto him what is God's—that is a sacrifice we dare not make!

The most important part of our freedom, inner freedom, is always subject to our will. If we surrender it to corruption, we do not deserve to be called human.

But let us note that if the absolutely essential task is not political liberation, but the liberation of our souls from participation in the lie forced upon us, then it requires no physical, revolutionary, social, organizational measures, no meetings, strikes, trade unions—things fearful for us even to contemplate and from which we quite naturally allow circumstances to dissuade us. No! It requires from each individual a moral step within his power—*no more than that*. And no one who voluntarily runs with the hounds of falsehood or props it up, will ever be able to justify himself to the living, or to posterity, or to his friends, or to his children.

We have no one to blame but ourselves, and there-

fore all our anonymous philippics and programs and explanations are not worth a farthing. If mud and dung cling to any of us it is of his own free will, and no man's mud is made any the less black by the mud of his neighbors. ...

**DO NOT LIE! DO NOT TAKE PART IN THE LIE!
DO NOT SUPPORT THE LIE! ...**

In our country the lie has been incorporated into the state system as the vital link holding everything together, with billions of tiny fasteners, several dozen to each man.

This is precisely why we find life so oppressive. But it is also precisely why we should find it natural to straighten up. When oppression is not accompanied by the lie, liberation demands political measures. But when the lie has fastened its claws in us, it is no longer a matter of politics! It is an invasion of man's moral world, and our straightening up and *refusing to lie* is also not political, but simply the retrieval of our human dignity.

Which is the *sacrifice*? To go for years without truly breathing, gulping down stench? Or to begin to breathe, as is the prerogative of every man on this earth? What cynic would venture to object aloud to such a policy as *nonparticipation in the lie*?

Oh, people will object at once and with ingenuity: what is a lie? Who can determine precisely where the lie ends and truth begins? In every historically concrete dialectical situation, and so on—all the eva-

continued on page 7

The Voluntaryist

P.O. Box 1275 • Gramling, South Carolina 29348



FIRST CLASS-TIME VALUE

Please renew your subscription if the number on your address label is within one digit of this issue's number.