

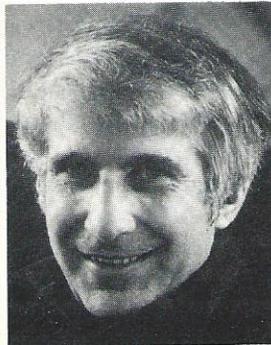
A Libertarian Psychology

Self-Ownership—A Condition for Happiness

Peter R. Breggin

Whenever I get to know a person well, I find that he or she values personal freedom. This desire for freedom may be expressed consciously or it may be hidden and requires only a little encouragement to come out. I have seen this love of freedom both among relatively happy and successful people and in the most unhappy and unsuccessful people.

EARL C. DUDLEY, JR.



Peter R. Breggin is a psychiatrist in the private practice of psychotherapy, a novelist, and the executive director of the Center for the Study of Psychiatry, in Bethesda, Maryland.

Greater self-determination in our lives appeals to all of us, but we hesitate, out of guilt, shame, anxiety, and genuine uncertainty. We wonder what necessary limitations must be placed upon each individual's freedom. We lack the courage to stand up to those who have oppressed us in the past, and we are afraid to confront our own potential for success or failure. We are also unsure of how to apply the ideal of liberty to our everyday lives.

Ultimately each person must find the courage to stand up for his or her own freedom. But it also helps to have a rational plan—a set of principles or applied ethics for living a freer and more independent life.

Libertarian Ethics and Psychology

For some time now Thomas Szasz has been examining the role played by ethics and politics in the theory and practice of psychiatry and psychotherapy. Building in part upon his insights, I have been exploring these same issues. More recently I have taken on the specific

task of developing a libertarian psychology—an analysis of human conduct consistent with the principles of maximum personal freedom.

Libertarianism as a philosophy has its roots in the work of John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. In modern times Szasz has spearheaded libertarianism within psychiatry, while Murray Rothbard and John Hospers have led the way within the disciplines of economics and philosophy.

Most dictionary definitions of libertarianism cite two basic principles: a belief in free will and a dedication to personal freedom. The natural rights theory, developed by Spencer and carried on by Hospers and Rothbard, states that human beings have the capacity to make decisions and to reason in their own best interest, and that therefore they ought to have the *right* to exercise this capacity as fully and freely as possible. At times complex and subtle debate has taken place concerning the limits of this freedom, but one axiom has gained considerable agreement among libertarians: each individual has the right to pursue self-interest without restraint, provided he or she does not use force or fraud except in self-defense. While interpretations of this axiom may vary, it is safe to assume that libertarians in general are more committed to individual freedom and to individualism as a philosophy than the vast majority of their colleagues working within the fields of psychology, philosophy, economics, or politics.

In libertarian economics the term “voluntary exchange” sums up the positive aspects of the libertarian view of life. Libertarians believe in a world in which individuals can relate to each other as they choose. Once force and deceit are forsworn, the individual is then free to act as he or she wishes with the purpose of gaining as much as possible from his or her relationships. This concept of voluntary exchange has become the fundamental principle in my own psychology, which I call the psychology of self-determination.

Voluntary Exchange in Personal Relationships

Any successful, happy personal relationship must be voluntary. It must be freely chosen. The relationship must not be coerced—it must be free of force or the threat of force. It must also be *honest*—free of fraud, deceit, covert manipulation, and all the other indirect methods of getting something from someone who would not willingly or knowingly consent to giving it. To be honest, it must be above-board: it must contain no hidden agendas or unstated principles calculated to mislead, seduce, or entrap.

The application of the concept of voluntary exchange to psychological or interpersonal experiences requires that we define “psychological coercion.” In libertarian politics, it is acknowledged that threats or intimidation constitute a form of force. But no consideration is given to self-intimidation, or to the individual’s tendency to make himself submit to unsatisfying relationships be-

cause of guilt, shame, and anxiety. In earlier writings I have discussed the question of why people suppress themselves. Here I want only to make it clear that interpersonal relationships will be considered “involuntary” when the individual imposes them upon himself or herself out of guilt, shame, or anxiety.

Most people fail to live by the principle of voluntary exchange in their private lives. These individuals accept coercion and intimidation from parents, spouses, and children; and similarly, they bully and deceive their closest associates. Guilt, shame, and anxiety, rather than choice, cement most human relationships. The cement is created by those who attempt to instill these feelings in others, as well as by those who submit to these feelings.

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It is much easier for all of us to see principles in the abstract than to apply them in our own lives from moment to moment. When we try to live by an ideal of freedom, painful confrontations are inevitable. Consider the example of an individual who finally determines that he or she will never again accept aggressive behavior or dishonesty from parents or a spouse. The individual who takes this position may be abandoned by parents or the spouse, or he or she may feel compelled to solve the conflict by abandoning them. This can activate the individual’s overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety about hurting other people and about advancing self-interest as a free person. Similarly, those who decide not to mistreat a husband or wife, friends, or children, soon discover their personal history of unethical conduct and harm done to others. A person who seeks to live by voluntary exchange faces a legacy of a past full of errors and a future full of uncertainty.

The Twin Principles of Voluntary Exchange

Jefferson’s promotion of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is my favorite statement of libertarian ideals. Philosophers who have tried to break this ideal down into basic components often come up with two separate principles: the *right* to be free of coercion and the corresponding *obligation* not to coerce anyone else, except in self-defense. Their application leads to voluntary exchange in everyday life.

These principles apply to both personal sovereignty and personal freedom. Personal sovereignty, or individual conscience, is the *right* to think and feel as one pleases and to make decisions and judgments within the sanctity of one’s mind. It is subjective or internal freedom. It is privacy. The individual has the right to withdraw from or to fend off attempts to disrupt his or her sovereignty.

Conversely, the individual has the *obligation* to respect the sovereignty of others. Personal freedom is the more obvious *right* to be free of restraint within the external world.

You must be willing and able to fight for your own personal sovereignty and personal freedom. You also have an *obligation* not to compromise the freedom and sovereignty of others.

The Unconditional Right to Self-Defense

Voluntary exchange is only possible when individuals have the right to protect themselves from assault upon their freedom and dignity. The amount of force used in defense should be no more than what is necessary to protect oneself, otherwise self-defense becomes aggression. You do not kill someone when a single punch might do the trick; you do not humiliate someone in public when a private warning might do. Similarly, you may not use extreme force even if it is required to stop minor aggression. Let's suppose someone insults you at a party and refuses to stop. It makes little sense to escalate the conflict into physical assault when little is to be gained from it. But in casual relations, and especially in close personal relations, an individual has the right to protect himself from all harmful actions, even those committed by friends and family. Indeed, since those nearest and dearest to us are most able to harm us, it is most important to defend ourselves in those relationships.

This right to self-defense is unconditional in several aspects. First, it does not depend upon whether or not the aggressor has good intentions or protests his or her love for you. You need to determine whether or not the effect on you is good or bad. You have the right to defend yourself against bad effects regardless of the perpetrator's intent. Second, the right to self-defense does not depend upon your prior conduct toward that person. If you insult someone, it does not justify his insulting you; it justifies only his defending himself against your insults. The quickest way to destroy a relationship is to let your guilt over past misdeeds justify your acceptance of aggressive behavior. Insist that others treat you well, regardless of their excuses or justifications for abusing you. But remember, this means you must treat them well, too, regardless of your real or imagined hurts at their hands. Devotion to the unconditional right of self-defense is the best way to prevent a spiraling of hostility in close relationships.

This does not mean that you cannot hurt other people. You can, especially by voluntarily withdrawing from a relationship. Except for your children who are minors, whom you have brought into the world as helpless dependents, you are free to leave any personal relationship for any subjective reason of your own, regardless of the wishes or needs of the other person. Otherwise you are the other person's prisoner. While this may seem like a callous idea, the failure to live by it is the most common source of involuntary relationships and personal misery.

Indeed, anyone who loves you should not want to keep you in a relationship you do not desire.

Love and Freedom

There is so much confusion and misery in the lives of many people that they equate love with an unfree relationship. Love is both an excuse to give up one's own rights and a justification for controlling the allegedly loved spouse or friend.

I have concluded, on the basis of experience, intuition, reason, and the collected wisdom of others whom I respect, that a loving attitude toward people is essential to personal happiness. But I am equally convinced that love can flourish only to the degree that relationships are voluntary. This holds for children as well as adults. Your child's love for you and your love for your child prosper only to the extent that you, as the parent, observe the principles of voluntary exchange. Any time you use force or the threat of force upon a person you risk losing that love. At best, you vastly retard any hope for the expression and fulfillment of that love.

Many people wonder if they can love. They even wonder what love is. The prevalence of psychological involuntariness is so strong in our society that love has little reality for many people. But no one should worry about

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this in his or her life. I believe that if you have your ethics and politics straightened out in your more intimate exchanges with people—by making these exchanges voluntary—you will discover within yourself a natural and spontaneous love for others and for life. By resisting attempts of others to push you around and your own temptations to push others around, you will discover whom you love and who loves you. Love flourishes in an environment of freedom; it dies in an environment of coercion.

It is usually futile to discuss with a client whether or not the client feels fondness, respect, or love for the people with whom he or she is in conflict, whether these people are parents, children, friends, or a spouse. If a relationship is not voluntary, it is impossible to know whether or not love exists beneath the surface. If love does exist, it will become apparent only to the degree that the relationship becomes voluntary. The way to unravel a marriage or any personal relationship that has grown wretched with mutual deprivations of liberty is to encourage one or both members to insist upon their rights.

Many people coerce each other to avoid facing a lack of love; other people lose their love for each other be-

cause they fail to live together voluntarily. This is the greatest challenge in any love or friendship: to grant the other total freedom. Once an individual grants freedom to the other, love will grow. But it takes courage, including the recognition that freely given love may also be freely withdrawn. Thus people make slaves of each other in order to preserve the appearance of love, while love dwindles in the attempts to preserve it by force.

Self-Ownership and Self-Interest

The concept of self-ownership epitomizes the correspondence between psychological and political concepts. Self-ownership in one's life plays the same role as private ownership in a free-market economy. Indeed, self-ownership is the cornerstone of both economic and personal freedom. It is also inseparable from voluntary exchange and the unconditional right to self-defense, without which ownership of self becomes meaningless.

I try to conduct myself in my relationships with friends, as if they are the sole owners of themselves. Neither I nor anyone else has a right to any part of their mind or body, except by voluntary exchange. Similarly, I try to think of myself in the same way. I have the right to use, enjoy, or dispose of myself as I see fit.

I fail at times to live by these ideals; and every failure is marked by personal anguish. This anguish is compounded by the pain or discomfort I cause to those involved with me wittingly or unwittingly through my failure. But when I am feeling good about myself and others, self-ownership is the possession of a treasure—myself! When I share this treasure with others, or when they share themselves with me, I experience some of my finest moments.

Self-ownership and self-interest go together. In his writings Nathaniel Branden has dealt with the concept of self-interest as the rightful and natural human motivation. I only wish to remind you that love for others means dedication to their self-interest as well as to your own. Friends and lovers are people who treasure each other and whose self-interests are mutual, even at times identical.

The Evolution of a Voluntary Relationship

Whether you are participating in a professional therapy relationship or getting acquainted with a new friend, you have a right to know the other person's intentions and philosophy. In therapy I make my philosophy explicit so that my client or customer knows what he or she is dealing with early in the encounter. This helps guarantee that the client is a voluntary participant. It also communicates my conviction that life involves applied ethics and politics. Nonprofessional relationships need to evolve from an awareness of relevant ethical principles. The most successful passionate love relationships are based upon consciously shared ideals.

A client may start out expressing frustration over what

he or she perceives as praiseworthy attempts to control the life of a spouse, parent, or child. A mother may complain about how she cannot get her son to do his homework, to go out with the right friends, to wear the proper clothes, or to go to bed on time. A husband may recite a wife's failure to meet his real or imagined needs, despite his most strenuous efforts to convince her. These same people will also self-righteously describe their own submissiveness to their spouses, children, or parents. They use self-sacrifice to justify renewed demands which they make in return: "I have sacrificed for you; you must sacrifice for me."

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Similarly, most unhappy, dissatisfied people begin personal relationships by attempting to control them. They attempt to impose restraints upon other persons through threats or manipulations. In return they offer to submit to equally oppressive practices at the hands of their loved ones.

In psychotherapy or in a relationship which you want to maintain and improve, you need to confront yourself and the other person with any and all such threats against voluntary exchange. You can point out to a parent that much more time and energy will be available for a loving, happy experience with the child when the parent ceases to control any of the child's conduct, except in self-defense.

A client will often light up with enthusiasm when hearing these principles of voluntary exchange. Then the doubts will come. The parent will insist: "My child will never study if he isn't pushed. He will grow up without ambition and lacking in concern for others if I don't discipline him." The lover may declare: "I can't bear to see her hurt herself; I have to control her," when, actually, he is afraid of losing her if she becomes independent.

When individuals recognize these apprehensions and oppressive intentions, they can begin rooting out their origins in past experiences with oppressive parents, friends, and teachers; individuals should learn how they inflict damaging ideals onto those dear to them.

People who give up involuntary exchanges will discover how the tendency to abuse and to accept abuse is a cover-up for extreme fears about becoming an independent, loving human being. If you cannot control your lover or your children, and if they cannot control you in return, you are left with "nothing except yourself." You are then faced with the challenge of converting this apparent "nothingness" into a rich and prospering sense of self. You are also faced with the challenge of loving someone whose response you cannot control, except through the quality of what you have to offer. ●