Understanding Mutualism 101

Miscellaneous Notes #1

Blazing Truth

June 19th, 2012

Mutualism, in a nut shell, is best understood as follows:

> Mutualism is not a specific social, political or economic system. Mutualism as such is simply the assertion that every meaningfully social relation will have the form, at base, of an anarchic encounter between unique individuals—free absolutes—no matter what layers of convention we pile on it. To the extent that our conventions, institutions and norms respect that basic premise, we can call them "mutualist." To the extent that we commit ourselves to viewing our relations through this lens, and exert ourselves in the extension of mutualistic freedom, we can call ourselves "mutualists."

From Two Gun Mutualism & The Golden Rule

Mutualist "property" (if one can call it that) is based on Proudhonian possession — e.g. occupancy and use. Proudhon arrives to this conclusion through a 'trialectical' analysis of property. In *What is Property?*, he concludes simultaneously that:

1. "Property is Theft", in the sense of property by a priori ownership, as absolute and primordial "setting aside" that gives rise to absentee ownership of land, and other rent-seeking practices which lead to "right of increase"
2. "Property is Freedom", in the sense that property by possession is proper to man's proclivity and subsistence, and
3. "Property is Impossible" in that absolute private property is founded on a contradiction.

What is this contradiction? In summary (perhaps oversimplified), that absolute private property requires consent by the community in order to be recognized as absolute and exclusive in the Lockean sense. On the other hand, in order to be absolute, consent by the community can't play a role. I've recently wrote about Rothbard's contract fetishism here.

Note that when Proudhon says "property", he is pointing at the equivocation of the two popular senses of the word and how they are often mistakenly used interchangeably. The first is property in the Lockean sense, which is the typical anarcho-capitalist notion from Locke. The second is property meaning "your possessions".

Mutualist "property" is best called simply: possession. It's not a matter between absolute private or absolute collective property, and one must break from thinking in terms of such binary oppositions in order to properly understand the mutualist stance.

> Q. Don't mutualists and anarcho-capitalists both subscribe to the homesteading principle and the illegitimate nature of property extorted through government or the use of force?

With respect to the first point, mutualists (should they 'subscribe' to the homesteading principle as a useful heuristic) would 'subscribe' to a different interpretation of the homesteading principle than normally understood. The anarcho-capitalist interpretation of the homesteading principle is that a one-time direct occupation is sufficient for exclusive right to control for the rest of eternity 'til death do you part. The mutualist interpretation is that a *continual* possession is necessary in order to retain "ownership" over the land.

The difference is best seen on the issue of squatters, and is seen as an example which presents one major distinguishing factor between capitalism and anti-capitalism: absentee ownership (one form of what allows "right of increase") which often leads to hierarchical and oppressive socio-economic arrangements.

Now, with respect to the illegitimate nature of property extorted through government and the use of force — all anarchists share this in common, not just mutualists and anarcho-capitalists but even anarcho-communists too. Yet, by affirming the importance of the admittedly social institution of private property today, is it possible anarcho-capitalists grant even more power to the State which they say they're against? Perhaps. The anarcho-capitalist ideology and movement (taken as enigmatic) is arguably self-defeating on these grounds since every advance they make against the State, they neutralize by way of private property and even implicitly reaffirm its supremacy.

The important thing to note is that there is not the kind of certainty present in mutualism as there is in anarcho-capitalism or anarcho-communism. It is very important that mutualists are not too specific in their demands, but only provide general guidelines (consider the difference between advocating "occupancy and use", as opposed to "2 year occupancy and 300 horse-power tractor usage"). The specifics would definitely be worked out in the community on a case-by-case basis.

This author would say that society would more closely consist of smaller mom-and-pop shops (minding that home-brewing is *huge* within mutualist circles) as well as larger co-operative firms where the means of production are owned in common. That said, one might be asking: This sounds very socialistic, where's the free market? Mutualists call the free market a free**d** market in order to differentiate between their understanding of free markets and the standard laissez-faire invisible hand sort of libertarian free markets. First, I will indicate the difference between the two. Then, I will provide examples of what mutualist markets may be like.

The difference between the two is the lack of absentee ownership and landlordism (and arguably this is one major aspect of the line between capitalism and anti-capitalism). The issue of land is central to mutualist analysis because it is fundamental to the concept of "right of increase" (anything that allows for coercive hierarchical power relationships to form whereby one party is "parasitical" upon another) and the subsequent problem of exploitation and wage labour.

If land is arranged according to mutualist possession, it's also true that then desirable alternatives to becoming a "wage slave" exist (e.g. self-employment, working your own land without burden of rent) since means of production are — in several more ways than before — increasingly available.

Mutualists tend to favor mutual credit and exchange systems. The best example of this is called LETS, and it has been used more and more in many areas to alleviate economic burdens (such as Greece) and hardship caused by high amounts of debt. The important economic concept for any configuration which can be called mutualistic is that "cost is the limit of price".

> Q. Justify for me, if you will, why you feel that property rights are conditional upon use and occupancy.

They will depend largely on the mutualist encountered. To give an idea, there are a few responses I will mount here, and these are by no means complete. One will most likely hear one of three responses:

1. If you are more traditional mutualist (and by that I mean one who is focused with moral principles/axioms), it's an easy step from the principle of self-ownership. One could argue that anarcho-capitalists who affirm self-ownership are misapplying it with respect to land. How is this? You directly occupy and use your body not once at your birth (as would have to be the case with anarcho-capitalist interpretation), but *continually* throughout the course of your entire life. If "ownership" in land is to mirror ownership in Self, then the same guidelines should hold for both. Absentee ownership, for instance, is an absurd and impossible concept if you take a self-ownership approach. Has anyone ever heard of someone having the exclusive use (consciousness, not external control) to their body when they weren't present in it? This would be akin to a potentially forever out-of-body or ghost experience or abstracted mind which would require the anarcho-capitalist to have very, very mystical or astral beliefs about souls/spirit in addition.

2. Take the Proudhonian approach, and apply a dialectical analysis. This one is much more difficult to explain without having an understanding of Hegel's dialectics. In short, the popular reading of Hegel amounts to a triangle which looks like this , and moves in a spiral or tree-like "process of becoming" like this (although that link is Marx's application of social change vis-a-vis Hegel, called dialectical materialism). The thesis could be "exclusive right to control", the anti-thesis could be "no exclusive right to control", and the synthesis is "some exclusive right to control". Bear in mind, that while not "arbitrary", property is a social convention and so Proudhon's heuristic is simply one possible heuristic which is *in esse* normative.

3. One may take a more consequentialist approach. This is most-similar to how I originally came to mutualism, because as an anarcho-capitalist I began studying the work of Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom (highly influenced by Hayek and Buchanan, died last week or so — RIP), who outlined guidelines for "governing the commons" in a book of the same name. I had not yet understood dialectics at the time, so this approach was the most compelling for me (being somebody who finds fault with the principle of self-ownership). In

> this book, she outlines ways to handle the question of public goods. In short, absolute property rights are not effective because they allow for exclusive right to use **and** abuse. To put this in Rothbard's term, the absentee landlord becomes a "land speculator" in the pejorative sense. Mutualist possession is in many ways like Ostrom's work. Today, I personally will be more inclined to use a dialectical or deconstructive method.

> Q. (With respect to self-ownership) But what about an individual who removes his kidney, and places it 'on ice' in a friend's fridge for sale at a later date?

This is an example of being needlessly pedantic, to say the least. To answer the question more directly, it's not about owning a body and its constituent parts, but it's about owning a Self as the subjective and unique experience of being "I". The Self cannot be abstracted, removed, or transferred to another individual provided our current technology. If it is theself (which is to be thought more like identity than something physical) that is owned in the principle of self-ownership, it's not referring to the body and its organs, but instead to the body without organs (to use Deleuze's term) as a kind of self-consciousness taken as a totality.

I don't think, for instance, mutualists would necessarily — as a whole — have a problem with selling or donating organs. At least I don't think I have any immediate problem with this, of course to an extent. The point to note here is that it is *impossible* to transfer "ownership" of the Self (as understood in the above paragraph) to the Other (which is an other Self). I would argue that the principle of self-ownership, if taken in the sense as suggested, cannot lead to absolute private property and that approach would be misguided due to equivocation on what is meant by "self". It's for sake of these kind of linguistic problems that I myself do not opt for this approach.

For a better articulation of this, I'd recommend Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own*, which is a strain of broadly mutualist thought taken along these lines. It helps nonetheless to have an understanding of philosophy of self when approaching these and similar questions.

> Q. (with respect to dialectics) I… What? I think I need to do some (a lot) of reading, then come back to this one.

I would recommend understanding Hegel somehow. One doesn't necessarily need to read him directly, as his work is oftentimes long and obscure (prompting parody articles like "How to Fake Your Way through Hegel"). But, one will need to understand dialectics through him, or at least get an idea of what is his method. Luckily, there are many ways which dramatically simplify this and explain it (see: Dialectics for Kids) in ways which can be understood.

An understanding of continental philosophy may also assist in this. It may help to look at David Harvey's lectures on Das Kapital, where he explains Marx's interpretation of Hegel ("turning Hegel on his head") and applies it to the capitalist mode of production like this in a kind of dialectical chain.

> Q. (with respect to consequentialism) But my knee-jerk response is to reject consequentialism as a basis for philosophy.

And that's perfectly fine. I've personally been wary of any metaphysical or otherwise axiomatic systems for their assumptions and distinctions which often don't map to reality or dramatically over-simplify the state of affairs. This may be due to my existential influence, in reading works like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. I also don't like the way deontology lends itself to absolutism and dogma and moralizing due to the highly ideological nature.

In conclusion, mutualist anarchism includes:

1. Property on the basis of Proudhonian possession; that is, occupancy and use
2. Removal of absentee landlordism and all other rent-seeking practices.
3. Advocacy for communal systems of mutual credit and mutual exchange for trade.
4. Emphasis on self-employment, co-ops, or other labour-owned collectives which focus on the idea that "the natural wage of labor is its product".
5. Abolition of Tucker's Four Monopolies: land, money, tariff, patent (and fifth: transportation subsidies)
6. Roughly equal bargaining power for contract and federation.
7. Gradualism in transition to a stateless society

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