

## Voluntary Slavery

Voluntary Slavery BY Walter Block

There is perhaps nothing more contrary to the free market than that day in, day out exercise of initiatory violence: slavery. Even murder is only a once and for all aggressive act; the slave suffers a lifetime. I shall show, however, that without the enforcement of one type of slavery, voluntary slavery, the free market will be stripped of a most basic tenet—that each individual has a private property right in his own person.

Consider the case of Mr A who can save his wife's life only by paying \$1 million for an operation. He does not have the money, though. The only way he can get it is by selling himself into slavery to Mr B who is willing to pay \$1 million for Mr A's enslavement. Mr A, valuing his wife's life more than his own freedom, agrees. He receives the money, turns it over to the doctor, and then voluntarily signs himself into slavery. Mr A, however, soon tires of the drudgery of slavery, and runs away.

Should the enforcement agency<sup>1</sup> try to catch Mr A and return him to Mr B? I give an unequivocal "Yes" in answer.<sup>2</sup> For A is really running away with (stealing) a valuable piece of B's property—A, himself. The enforcement agency should stop this theft and return B's property to him just as they would return any other piece of property stolen from B. People can either transact with each other by force or by voluntary agreement—contract. If contracts are not enforced, they will not be entered into, and we will have to rely on force. If it were known that the voluntary slave contract would not have been enforced, A would not have been able to save his wife's life by honest contractual means because B would not have agreed to part with the \$1 million.

There are libertarians who are disposed to argue this point. Prof. Murray N. Rothbard is so disposed. He holds that contracts calling for voluntary slavery would not be enforceable in a free market. On page 142 of his "Man, Economy, and State" he gives two arguments. First, the "changing one's mind argument:

"A man may not agree to permanent bondage by contracting to work for another man for the rest of his life. He might change his mind at a later date, and then he cannot, in a free market, be compelled to continue working thereafter."

If a mere change of mind (a whim) were enough to override all contracts, the free market would be untenable. No trades would be "for keeps" because if the value of something sold went up, the seller could always change his mind and demand the thing back. It is hard

<sup>1</sup>Whoever this may/—call it the forces of justice if you will.

<sup>2</sup>My position of favoring the return of run-away voluntary slaves to their rightful owners should not be confused with a position favoring the return of captured or non-contractual slaves to their "unrightful" masters. For example, it is perfectly consistent with my voluntary slavery position, to applaud the underground railway of pre-civil war times for its heroic efforts to rescue unjustly enslaved people.



to see why the "changing one's mind" argument should not be applied to all contracts, if it is valid for voluntary slave contracts.

Second, the "inalienable" argument:

"Because a man's self-ownership over his will is inalienable, he cannot, on the unhampered market, be compelled to continue an arrangement whereby he submits his will to the orders of another, even though he might have agreed to this arrangement previously". (p.142)

And what does "inalienable will" mean? Prof. Rothbard illustrates:

"Brown might have a desired end: to gain the genuine approval of Smith. This is a particular consumer's good, ~~for what he wants is~~ which he cannot purchase with any other good, for what he wants is the genuine approval rather than a show of approval that might be purchased. In this case, the consumer's good is a property of Smith's that cannot be exchanged; it might be ~~ex~~ acquired in some way, but not by exchange. In relation to exchange, this intangible good is an inalienable property of Smith's, i.e., it cannot be given up." (p. 142)

For Prof. Rothbard, asking the enforcement agency to enforce a voluntary slavery contract is akin to asking it to draw a square circle, or to asking it to force Smith to voluntarily approve of Brown. A square circle is a contradiction in terms and so is forcing someone to voluntarily do something. If you "succeed" in forcing him, he has not done it voluntarily, and if he does do it voluntarily, you could not have forced him. If voluntary slavery is interpreted in the sense of genuine, hearty, willingness to be a slave, then Prof. Rothbard is correct: this type of voluntary ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ slavery cannot be enforced any more than can other voluntary acts such as liking Brown.

But Prof. Rothbard has purchased correctness only at the cost of irrelevancy. For no slave owner like B expects the enforcement agency to do the impossible. No advocate of the enforcement of voluntary slave contracts expects the enforcement agency to force A to willingly work as a slave. All that is expected is that the enforcement agency drag the unwilling slave, kicking and screaming if need be, back to the waiting arms of the rightful slave owner, B; this much is certainly within the realm of possibility. It was done, unfortunately, as a matter of course, in the pre-civil war south; so it is certainly possible and hence can be done.

The next question is, Should it be done? The answer is "Yes" and the best reason for this is given by Prof. Rothbard:

"Persons would be free to make any and all property contracts that they wished; and, for a free society to exist, all contracts, where the good is naturally alienable, must be enforced. Failure to fulfill contracts

Why then does Prof. Rothbard continually assert that voluntary slavery cannot be enforced in a free market? He wouldn't assert that square circles cannot be drawn in a free market, nor mock god! Square circles cannot be drawn and voluntary actions cannot be enforced not because there are free market principles in opposition, but because they are contradictions in terms.



Well, a slave's body is alienable, because it is physically possible to drag him into captivity and slavery<sup>1</sup>. It is only impossible to drag a willing slave into slavery, so only a slave's will is inalienable.

There is much merit in the saying "If you can't sell it, you don't really own it". If a person cannot voluntarily sell himself into slavery, he doesnot really own himself. The right to self ownership implies the right, among other things, to sell that right.

1. The slave, unless unusually well-guarded, can commit suicide. This proves that the slave's body is alienable: it can be "given up".

What is being sold in a voluntary slave contract is not the will, which is inalienable, but services of the body, which is not inalienable, but rather, alienable.

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