

Life, Liberty, and Property Are Inseparable

By Tom Mullen
Published 07/02/09

“The reason why men enter into society, is the preservation of their property; and the end why they chuse and authorize a legislative, is, that there may be laws made, and rules set, as guards and fences to the properties of all the members of the society, to limit the power, and moderate the dominion, of every part and member of the society: for since it can never be supposed to be the will of the society, that the legislative should have a power to destroy that which every one designs to secure, by entering into society, and for which the people submitted themselves to legislators of their own making; whenever the legislators endeavour to take away, and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any farther obedience, and are left to the common refuge, which God hath provided for all men, against force and violence.”

* John Locke [Second Treatise of Government, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980) Pg. 111]

Life, liberty, and property were the central, inalienable rights that formed the foundation of the great experiment in self government called the United States of America. The founders of our country never broke apart this sacred triumvirate, because each one of these rights is inextricably bound to the other. No one of these three can exist without the other. Moreover, when all three are secured, it is almost impossible for injustice to exist. Wherever one does find injustice, one invariably finds a violation of one of these three basic rights at its root.

While it is certainly true that today the rights to life and liberty are grossly violated in innumerable ways, they are nevertheless at least spoken of by our politicians. However hypocritically, they at least say that they value life and liberty, even as they pervert those sacred rights as justification for their wars and plunder.

Yet, they never even hypocritically evoke the right to property. No journalist ever challenges them based upon it, and honestly, most average Americans don't talk about it either. As a principle, property has vanished from our consciousness. However, as all of the great philosophers throughout history have understood, **there is no right to life or liberty without property.** In fact, property is part and parcel of life itself.

What is property? It is that which an individual rightfully owns. **Included among every human being's property are his mind, his body, his conscience, and his actions.** Every act of mind and body undeniably belongs to the actor, including that act which he engages in more than any other: **his labor.** To deny someone's right to ownership of his mind, body, or labor is to make him a slave.

It is labor that allows each individual to sustain his existence and pursue his happiness. All consumption must be preceded by production. Production can only be achieved through human labor. In fact, there is no way for an individual to pursue any goal, whether material, intellectual, or spiritual, without exertion. Even the search for God requires an intellectual and spiritual effort -- it cannot commence without labor.

For most of us, the bulk of our labor is devoted to providing the basic necessities of life for ourselves and our children. Some portion of it also provides the extras -- the toys, the vacations, or the dining out that enriches our lives and adds to our happiness. A further portion is devoted to study, prayer, or just simple reflection -- the quest for meaning and purpose in our lives. None of these things are possible without labor; our labor provides them all. Every item in every store is the product of someone's labor. Every phone call you make is made possible by someone's labor. Healthcare is someone's labor, as is education.

However, the actual effort of mind and body is not the most precious aspect of labor. If human beings were immortal, we could afford to spend our labor and its fruits indiscriminately, consuming as much as we wished and providing anything to anyone who asked it of us. If a shoemaker were able to make shoes for the rest of eternity, then certainly there would not be a bare foot on the face of the earth. If the land developer were immortal, we would all live in a mansion.

However, we are not immortal, and it is this fact that places such a premium on our labor. Our labor is not just composed of the exertion of mind and body that is necessary to produce some good or service. That exertion happens over time, the hours or days of the laborer's life. Every hour of our labor is an hour of our life from a limited supply which cannot be replenished. Whatever we have produced with our labor now contains that portion of our life which we have sacrificed to produce it.

So, when human beings trade their goods or services with one another, they are really trading pieces of their lives. If they have exchanged their labor for money with an employer or customer, that money now contains some part of their lives -- a part that can never be reclaimed. That is why the same verb is used for both money and time -- both are **“spent”** in exchange for some benefit. Both also represent each individual's means of self determination.

Therefore, it is impossible to call a person free if he does not own his labor and all the product of his labor. It is only through his labor that he can provide better food, clothing and shelter for himself and his family, send his children to better schools, or realize the leisure time necessary to grow intellectually and spiritually. His labor is his means to determine the course of his life. **Without self determination, there is no liberty.**

Furthermore, to deny a human being ownership of his labor is also to deny his right to life itself. Since his labor is his means of sustaining his existence, once his right to ownership of his labor is denied he lives only at the arbitrary whim of whoever has claimed ownership of it. For such a person, life is now a privilege granted by someone else, rather than a right.

To the founders of the United States of America, all of this was self evident. When one reads the writings of Samuel and John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, or Locke, one finds one word that is used many times more often even than liberty: **property**. Recognizing property as nothing more than the individual's labor and/or the product of his labor, the founders placed the protection of property as the very highest priority of government. In fact, they often stated that it was the only priority of government. While no high school history book or Hollywood biopic even hints at this fact, merely reading the words of the founders for oneself puts any debate on this point to rest.

Let us apply this concept to a contemporary issue. The unambiguous statements in the Declaration of Independence that all human beings have *unalienable rights* and that government's sole purpose is to secure them should absolutely beg at least one timely question from most Americans today. ***Why did the founders not provide for the right to health care? Why did they not establish Medicare or Medicaid? Given a whole system of government whose purpose was to secure individual rights, why was this right so glaringly overlooked?***

Of course, the answer to that question is that the founders recognized that health care was not a right. Health care, like every other good or service, is someone's labor. No one but the laborer can have a right to it. To say that people have a right to health care is really to deny the health care provider a right to his own life, for it is impossible for both he and his patient to have a right to ownership of his labor. It is no less a crime to forcefully rob the health care provider's fee from a third party (the taxpayer), for that simply denies the taxpayer's right to his own life. In either case -- whether the health care provider is forced to treat the patient for free or a third party is forced to pay the bill -- someone's labor, some part of someone's life, is being stolen from him. This is the specific crime that government exists to defend its citizens against. By instead committing this crime, government becomes the most grotesque absurdity imaginable.

This is not to imply that we are at some sort of crossroads because President Obama and his pet Congress are closing in on expanding government healthcare. We came to that crossroads decades ago and quite undeniably took the wrong road. Until our philosophy changes and we recognize that retirement benefits, health care, research grants, corporate subsidies, investment in alternative energy -- all money, goods, and services -- are really pieces of someone's life that cannot be seized from them without their consent (**not even by majority vote**), we will never restore the liberty that we have lost. Instead, we will continue to be the most pitiable form of slave, not bound to one master, but to everyone.

When a fellow human being offers to buy your product or hire you for your services, he has paid you the highest compliment imaginable. That person has offered a piece of his life to you in exchange for something that you have to offer, which is itself a piece of your own life. He is saying that you have value and that what you offer is worth hours or days of his life that he can never reclaim. This ***consensual interaction*** between free people is the most beautiful aspect of civil society and has been responsible for every improvement in the quality of human life that has ever occurred throughout history.

Conversely, when a fellow human being points a gun at you and demands that you provide him with some good or service, he commits the most egregious crime imaginable, short of pulling the trigger and ending your life at that moment. For in reality, he is really stealing a piece of your life that you can likewise never reclaim. He may be committing this crime because he wishes to increase his wealth without earning it, or he may desperately need whatever he takes from you, but it is the same crime nonetheless. This interaction is the most evil aspect of civil society and has been responsible for every war and human misery that has ever occurred throughout history.

Government can only be organized to fulfill one of two purposes: to protect your property or to take it from you - for whatever purpose government or its constituents deem fit. There is no third choice. To organize society around competing groups stealing from one another is to create a society whose citizens exist in a perpetual state of war with one another -- **for the use of force to obtain another's property without his consent is the definition of the state of war.**

Such a society cannot endure indefinitely. Ours has come to the beginning of its inevitable end. Countless empires throughout history -- some much more preeminent in their worlds than we are in ours -- have disintegrated for exactly the same reason. We can still choose justice over injustice but our philosophy must change. **We must again institute a government that secures our rights, rather than annihilates them in the attempt to provide us with the property of others.**

This will not happen by any act of government itself. Whether we elect a liberal or a conservative, we will never achieve different results by continually electing different people or parties but asking them to do the same thing -- provide us with the property of others. It must be the people who change their philosophy and then demand that government assume its appropriate role according to that philosophy. Our government ultimately gives us what we ask for. For the past century, we have increasingly asked it to make us slaves, seduced by the siren's song of comfort and security without responsibility. This can only be provided to each of us at another's expense and can only be provided to others at ours. **Once we reject the idea that we can claim a right to another human being's life, the chains that bind us will be broken. Then, it will matter not who makes our laws.**