

# The Road to Liberty: Persuasion and Aggression

by Gene Callahan

I would like to highlight two diametrically opposed ideas that I believe can help clarify our notion of liberty. Any specific human action can be located somewhere on a scale between the extremes of *pure persuasion* and *pure aggression*. I am not contending that this is the *only* way we can evaluate human action, merely that it is a useful way.

What do I mean by persuasion? Basically, this: When engaging in persuasion, I attempt to convince you that your situation will be better, in your own eyes, if we do interact than if we do not. (To clearly differentiate that from fraud, I will note that I am using the word “persuasion” here to mean *honest* persuasion.)

For example, suppose that you and I each live on our own isolated islands, with the other person’s island the only land within sight. Further, imagine that neither of us can get to the other’s island due to the shark-infested waters in the area. It is quite possible that each of us might go about his business undisturbed by the existence of the other.

However, we happen to meet one day when each of us is at the shore of his own

island closest to the other person’s. While we chat, I mention that there are many coconut trees on my island, but that I’m getting sick of eating coconuts. You respond that on your island there are many mango trees and that you are fed up with eating mangoes. After some negotiation we agree that every day we will meet at the same place. I’ll bring a few coconuts, and you will bring some mangoes. We will trade by tossing them to each other across the water. It seems obvious that each of us prefers interacting with the other to not doing so, since it is trivially easy for either of us completely to avoid the other. I am perfectly willing to leave you alone if you are uninterested in what I can offer you, and vice versa.

By contrast, if I am engaged in aggression I will attempt to force interaction on you without your consent. I will try to convince you that I have the power and will to *make your life worse* if you refuse to interact with me on the terms I propose. Again, imagine our island meeting. But now, when I discover you have mangoes on your island, I *demand* that you throw me five per day. If you do not, I tell you, I will lay in wait and kill you the next time I see you, perhaps by running you through with a spear.

There certainly is an element of persuasion in such a threat: I must persuade you that I really intend to kill you if you don’t acquiesce, and that I have the ability to act on that intention. Yet the difference between our

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two examples is immense. In the case of the mango-coconut exchange, I am quite willing to leave you alone to go about your business, as if we had never met, should my argument for exchange fail to persuade you. In the mangoes-or-death case, I am *demanding* that we interact. If you will not do so on the terms I set, I intend to interact with you by making your situation significantly worse than if you had never laid eyes on me. I don't try to convince you that you would be better off than you are now if you give me mangoes, but rather that if you *don't* give me mangoes I can make you much *worse off* than you are now.

More relevant to the world in which most of us actually live, consider two approaches I might take when trying to get my neighbor to come hear my next lecture. On the one hand, I may attempt to persuade her that she would like it. I can try to convince her that I have her interests at heart, that the talk will be scintillating, or that she will learn to understand economics better if she comes. (Of course, if I know these things are false I am engaged in fraud.)

As long as I am willing to leave her alone when she says, "Buzz off, loser," I am engaged in persuasion. I don't intend to make her life worse if she ignores me, but to make it better if she goes along with my suggestion.

On the other hand, I could tell her that if she doesn't come, I will have her killed. Then I am not suggesting to her that her life will be better if she interacts with me; I am saying that she has no choice *but* to interact with me, and that coming to the talk will be the least unpleasant interaction she can choose.

What could be clearer than the enormous difference between these two ways of relating to others? Persuasion and aggression imply fundamentally different conceptions of other people: When I engage in persuasion I regard the other person as a free, intelligent actor, much as I regard myself. When employing aggression I regard the other as merely a means I might manipulate to achieve to my ends, much as I would regard a stick or a rock.

## The Forms of Aggression

I conceive of three basic forms of aggression: stealth, fraud, and committing or threatening violence.

I could aggress against you using stealth, for example, by sneaking into your house while you were sleeping and stealing your food. Rather than persuading you to interact with me, I would be hiding the fact that we did interact. You would not be able to decide whether or not to interact with me, because if I have my way you never will know that we *did* interact.

This is different from the case where we interact in some sense, but our interaction is so slight that you don't notice it. For example, if I barbecue in my yard, a few molecules of smoke might blow into your yard and be inhaled by you without your ever being aware that it happened. It is also distinct from a case where I interact with you anonymously but to your benefit, as when I finance a college scholarship while withholding my name.

I fraudulently aggress against you if I hide my real intention while persuading you to interact with me. Fraud certainly involves persuasion. But rather than persuading you that A will be to your benefit, then delivering A, I persuade you that you'd like A while secretly planning to deliver B.

For example, in the island scenario, I might propose that we exchange coconuts and mangoes. However, rather than tossing whole coconuts to you, I tie back together the shells of coconuts from which I already have eaten the meat and drunk the milk. I persuade you to exchange coconuts for mangoes, but what we actually exchange is coconut *shells* for mangoes. The problem here is that I don't allow you to choose how to relate to me because I have deceived you about my plans.

Finally, I might aggress against you by employing violence or the threat of violence, such as my threatening to skewer you if you don't bring me mangoes.

I believe that the view of persuasion and aggression adopted here can be helpful in clarifying disputes over what types of action are inherently aggressive. For example,

socialist anarchists, who like libertarians claim to be against aggression, often contend that the ownership of capital goods and the payment of a wage for labor are inherently aggressive.

But let us consider again the island castaways. Imagine that you have built a boat that you use to go fishing. You employed your own labor and whatever materials you found on your island—something I could just as well have done on mine. On discovering this, I demand that you bring me some of your catch each day. You refuse, instead suggesting that if I bring you coconuts, you will be happy to trade fish for them or to let me use the boat for a while.

In response I protest that you are aggressing against me, using the “power” you have as an owner of a capital good (your boat) to “exploit” the labor I have expended in picking coconuts. If the view of persuasion and aggression I’m proposing is sensible, then such a claim is absurd. You are perfectly willing to leave me alone and allow me to continue my life as though we had never met. After all, if not for your existence, then there would *be* no boat. You don’t *demand* that I use your boat or attempt to force me to labor to supply you with coconuts. You only require that *if* we are to interact, it must be on terms with which we both agree.

Furthermore, if you do agree to my terms for exchanging coconuts for fish, then it is clear that you must think you will be better off exchanging with me than not doing so. After all, I left open to you the opportunity to ignore my existence. If you trade with me nevertheless, you believe your situation is improved by doing so.

Of course we can think of cases in which the ownership of capital goods and the employment of wage labor *are* involved in aggression. However, the example of the boat demonstrates that there is no *inherent* aggression in the ownership of capital goods or the employment of wage labor.

## Limits on Government Action

The distinction between persuasion and aggression sheds light on the justice of vari-

ous forms of political organization. If the purpose of government is to prevent aggression against its citizens, then it is certainly not justified in initiating aggression against them itself. Many people recognize this principle in an abstract way, but are confused as to what concrete actions it forbids the government from performing. However, the same sort of analysis applied above to individual actions can be applied to those of government agents, who are, after all, humans like the rest of us.

If the government employs or threatens violence against those who have committed acts of aggression, then it is merely fulfilling its avowed purpose. (As Stephan Kinsella’s “estoppel theory” demonstrates, someone who has committed an act of aggression against you has refused to recognize you as an individual with the freedom to make your own choice about whether to interact with him. Therefore, to the same extent, he has forfeited *his* right to claim such treatment for himself.\*)

But if the government initiates aggression against someone who simply has not been persuaded to go along with a particular project favored by others (even if those others are in the “majority”), then it violates its own charter. I believe we can persuade people of this with simple examples.

For instance, I recently was talking with a friend. When he asked me about libertarianism, I told him the following tale:

Imagine that you, Dick, Mark, and I go camping. While climbing a mountain to the campsite, you, Dick, and I decide to build a lean-to so that we have a sheltered spot to rest in on the way down.

“Come help us, Mark,” we shout to him.

“No thanks, I’ll go on ahead and set up the campsite,” he replies.

“No you won’t, Mark.”

“What do you mean, no I won’t?” he asks.

“What we mean is, you *have* to help us. We’re the majority. We voted, and we

\*N. Stephan Kinsella, “Punishment and Proportionality: The Estoppel Approach,” *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Spring 1996, [www.mises.org/journals/jls/12\\_1/12\\_1\\_3.pdf](http://www.mises.org/journals/jls/12_1/12_1_3.pdf).

decided that everyone *must* contribute to our project. And, you see, we're prepared to kill you if you don't."

"Kill me?"

"Yes, if we must. It's not that we *want* to kill you. At first, if you resist, we'll just rough you up a bit. But if you continue to be obstinate, eventually we will kill you. You see, you'd be defying the will of the people."

"Now," I asked my friend, "how is this essentially different from the government's

extracting taxes from people uninterested in football to build a stadium?"

He pondered my story for a minute, then said, "Yeah, it really isn't different, is it?" At that moment, he later told me, he became convinced of the essential soundness of libertarian political theory.

We don't have to persuade people that initiating aggression generally is not acceptable. They already know that. We only need to persuade them that it is not acceptable even when the government does it. □

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