

Voluntary subordination

Josiah Warren

1860

Natural liberty or individual sovereignty calls for freedom of choice in all cases, under all circumstances, and at all times. By freedom of choice I mean exemption from the control of other persons in distinction from the natural and irresistible control of circumstances.

All social arrangements should admit of this freedom of choice of every individual and all subordination should be voluntary. For instance, in the performance of a piece of music at a private party each one who takes a part subordinates himself voluntarily to the lead of one person. The necessity of this is so obvious that it controls choice, but it is not persons that compel this subordination. It is between the control or force of circumstances or necessity, each person being the judge of it, and the control or force of persons or authority that we must draw the great broad line which is to distinguish voluntary from involuntary subordination. The one is in perfect accordance with natural personal liberty which constitutes the chief element of the happiness of human beings and the other violates it and is the chief cause of the Bedlam-like confusion which pervades all ranks and conditions of mankind.

The false step is in laying down any verbal processes which embrace any conditions or applications not distinctly seen and understood beforehand by the entering parties.

Thus in the attempts to organize society men have laid down general rules and indefinite propositions in words as the basis of the social compact which the entering party construed according to his own views, and he is therefore said to exercise his free choice regarding the conditions. But no sooner has he passed the entrance than he has found these verbal rules and laws to contain conditions he knew not of and to be subject to different applications by almost every member of the body. The vote of the majority is the next resort which acts as a power to compel those who differ into involuntary subordination. This is a violation of liberty which appears inevitable under the circumstances. But the circumstances are wrong, are false. The false step is in laying down any verbal processes which embrace conditions or applications not distinctly seen and understood by the entering parties.

In this subtle and unseen mistake has originated those melancholy defeats which have, so far, prevented much improvement in the social condition. But may we not hope that when natural individualities shall be fairly developed, the incapacity of language to express these individualities shall be subject to investigation? Our object is happiness, and there is no one element so indispensable to this as conscious liberty, and there is no one source of tyranny in all shapes and

degrees so prolific as that of verbal rules, laws, regulations, dogmas, creeds — religious, political, and moral — which embrace conditions not contemplated by the parties who subscribe to them.

When individual rights shall be clearly appreciated, all rules of social arrangement will be definite; they will express all their conditions and all their applications, or if unavoidably some new application becomes necessary, the subscribing party cannot rightly be bound to sanction or conform to it contrary to his own free choice.

The blind and brutal subordination obtained through fear of punishment in the army of a despot whose use of it is the extension of his power, is involuntary or coerced subordination and works nothing but degradation to the subordinates and an insane self-importance in those who command, and destruction, disorder, confusion wherever that army is employed. The corrective is voluntary subordination. Every soldier should claim and exercise his free choice in every case in which he was required to act and should refuse to move in every cause but that of the defense of person and property.

The people of Paris, in the “three glorious days of July,” all impelled by one interest, by common suffering and common sympathy, rushed into the streets to put down their oppressors. But it was immediately evident to all that while each was left to doubt or to pursue different courses, without any particular course being marked distinctly out by some individual mind and some particular direction, their power could not be brought to bear to any effect.

This was so self-evident that they all with one voice on the first suggestion threw themselves under the direction of the youths of the Polytechnic School, and this they did the more safely as they did not pledge themselves to obey any order which their own views and wishes did not sanction. For they were at liberty at any moment even to disobey any orders of the commanders or directors which they might perceive to clash with their objects. But what was the result? It was a straightforward attainment of their object as if by miracle. And they exhibited such an example of rigid self-government from all excesses, and such ready co-operation in the measures and movements announced by their leaders, that it must stand as an everlasting monument in refutation of the false and interested doctrine in favor of coercive subordination.

Words will not embrace the wide range of destruction, desolation, of terror and suffering brought about by rulers by the means of coercive subordination which they pretend is so necessary for the preservation of order. But it is the principal source of disorder throughout the world: from the annihilation of whole nations at once down to the petty little jars on the domestic hearth.

It has often been asked what would become of the great interests of society if they were not looked after by rulers or law makers. Let the answer be derived from the real condition of all these great interests at the present time, compared with the amount of blood and treasure and suffering which their management has cost the world, and let us ask whether any plan could possibly lead to more injustice, or more confusion, uncertainty and insecurity of person and property, than we, supervising all society. But there is nothing in voluntary subordination that violates the natural liberty of the individual, and the fear that natural liberty would uproot all order is as groundless and as futile as the idea that coercive subordination has benefited mankind.

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The message contained in this text is very clear: all subordination should be voluntary, on the basis of the free choice of the individual. Otherwise we are in the presence of imposition and exploitation, and this is not acceptable in any civilized society and association.

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