

PragerU: Capitalism is Moral Because of Voluntary Exchange (Video 67)

PragerU tweeted, “Capitalism is moral because it is premised on a voluntary exchange between independent parties.”

If we interpret this as an argument, it relies on the following assumption:

(S) Any system premised on a voluntary exchange between independent parties is moral.

But I think this premise is subject to plausible counterexamples.

Suppose you get shipwrecked on an island, and you come across some food and some wood to build a shelter. Right as you’re about to take it, people with spears show up and tell you everything on this half of the island belongs to someone named ‘Bob’, and you can use it only if you agree to be his servant and do whatever he commands.

When you protest, they tell you that the other half of the island also has food and wood, but it belongs to someone named ‘Sally’, and you’d have to be her servant. There’s plenty of food and wood on the island for everyone, but all of it’s already claimed by either Bob or Sally.

Now, I think you could make an argument that this system isn’t voluntary, at least in a strong sense. But it’s voluntary in the weak sense that people like PragerU use. You can voluntarily choose to become a servant and exchange your labor to either Bob or Sally for resources or you can starve and die.

But clearly this system isn’t moral. And what this shows is that merely being voluntary in the weak sense isn’t sufficient for being moral.