

## Praxeology, Ethics, and Libertarianism

Praxeology and ethics are both concerned with acts of choice. The former investigates aspects of intentional behavior that are universal<sup>1</sup> and objective.<sup>2</sup> The latter analyzes how individuals ought to behave relative to subjective values.<sup>3</sup> Praxeology is a value-free science and cannot recommend specific behaviors, while ethics focuses entirely on such recommendations.<sup>4</sup> Despite this divide, praxeology can provide useful tools that inform the analysis of both ethical problems and ethical systems.<sup>5</sup>

The tools that praxeology provides are concepts that can be used to classify human action. For example, the distinction between action in isolation and interaction can be defined praxeologically and then used in ethical analysis. These and other concepts can also be used in the development and study of ethical rules and systems. If an ethical system can be completely built on such concepts, then that ethical system is purely praxeological. This paper argues that libertarianism is such a system.

The first three sections describe praxeological concepts that are useful to ethics. The fourth section explores how these concepts can be used to define libertarianism and bring it into the realm of praxeology. Finally, the fifth section analyzes the benefits that come from taking a praxeological approach to libertarian ethics.

### I. Conflict: a Praxeological Classification of Action

Starting with the praxeological concept of human action, it is possible to define another concept called conflict. First, consider that when a man engages in purposeful behavior, he must be in one of two states: either he is living in isolation, or he is interacting with other individuals in some way. In a state of isolation, he has no effect on others and others have no effect on him. If he is interacting with others, then he can find himself in two further states. First, his intentional behavior might be compatible with the human action of others, allowing them to live in harmony. This state can be called cooperation. It might be active cooperation, like being part of a construction crew or passive cooperation, like following right-of-way norms while walking around. When people interact in this way, it is possible for every person to lead their lives without interference from others. Thus, both cooperation and action in isolation can be called peaceful.

The second state of interaction is when an individual's purposeful behavior is not compatible with the human action of others. For example, if a man is trying to mambo, but his wife is trying to sleep, then at least one of them will not be able to do what they are trying to do. This state can be called

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1 von Mises, Ludwig. *Human Action*. Chapter 1, Section 2. "Praxeology is indifferent to the ultimate goals of action. Its findings are valid for all kinds of action irrespective of the ends aimed at."

2 Rothbard, Murray N. "Praxeology, Value Judgments, and Public Policy." *The Foundations of Modern Austrian Economics* (1976): 89-114. "[P]raxeology is not grounded on any value judgments of the praxeologist, since what he is doing is analyzing the fact that people in general have values rather than inserting any value judgments of his own."

3 Ibid. "Ethics is the discipline, or what is called in classical philosophy the "science," of what goals men should or should not pursue. All men have values and place positive or negative value judgments on goods, people, and events. Ethics is the discipline that provides standards for a moral critique of these value judgments."

4 Rothbard, Murray N. "Praxeology: The methodology of Austrian economics." *The Foundations of Modern Austrian Economics* (1976): 19-39. "Let us note that praxeology does not assume that a person's choice of values or goals is wise or proper or that he has chosen the technologically correct method of reaching them. All that praxeology asserts is that the individual actor adopts goals and believes, whether erroneously or correctly, that he can arrive at them by the employment of certain means."

5 Ibid. "Praxeology has the same methodological status as the other sciences and the same relation to ethics."

conflict.<sup>6</sup>

The distinction between peaceful interaction and conflict is praxeological because it is constructed using only praxeological concepts. The definition of conflict needs only the idea of human action and the assumption that it is possible for two or more actors to engage in mutually exclusive behavior. *A priori*, an individual can grasp the idea of mutually exclusive action because each action requires one to forgo any alternative action.<sup>7</sup> That the action of two individuals can be incompatible is not true *a priori*. One could imagine a world where scarcity exists on an individual basis, but the actions of one person do not have an effect on the serviceability of resources for others. Nevertheless, the assumption of rivalrous resources does not force one to leave the realm of praxeology.

Due to its praxeological nature, the concept of conflict is universal and value-free. It is universal because there are no assumptions about the qualities of the action involved, so it applies to any set of human behavior.<sup>8</sup> If one understands what any two people are doing, one can decide if their behaviors are in conflict or not. Furthermore, it does not matter how many individuals are considered together at one time.

The concept of conflict is value-free because it does not depend on the subjective values of the outside observer.<sup>9</sup> Conflict can be identified merely by considering the facts of any particular situation. It should be noted that these facts include the subjective values of the individuals involved, but these values are encapsulated in the volitional action being analyzed. Conflict merely describes the factual state of affairs for a given situation. Accurately labeling human interaction as conflict or cooperation does not depend on any particular set of values.

Furthermore, the distinction between peaceful interaction and conflict is binary because there are only two classes, and there is no continuum or gradation. When people interact, their actions must be either compatible or not. Continuum problems might make it arbitrarily difficult to identify the presence or absence of conflict, but the true state of affairs must be one or the other.

Thus, any set of human action can be classified as compatible or not. Whether any particular action is in conflict depends on the set chosen for analysis. If two men work together to murder a third man, then looking at only the murderers would show cooperation, while looking at either murder and the victim would show conflict.

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6 Hans Hoppe describes conflict in this sense as ethical conflict as opposed to technical conflict with forces of nature. See Hoppe, Hans-Hermann. *Economics and ethics of private property*. Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1993. Chapter 12.

7 Ibid. "The fact that people act necessarily implies that the means employed are scarce in relation to the desired ends; for, if all means were not scarce but superabundant, the ends would already have been attained, and there would be no need for action. Stated another way, resources that are superabundant no longer function as means, because they are no longer objects of action. Thus, air is indispensable to life and hence to the attainment of goals; however, air being superabundant is not an object of action and therefore cannot be considered a means, but rather what Mises called a "general condition of human welfare." Where air is not superabundant, it may become an object of action, for example, where cool air is desired and warm air is transformed through air conditioning. Even with the absurdly unlikely advent of Eden (or what a few years ago was considered in some quarters to be an imminent "postscarcity" world), in which all desires could be fulfilled instantaneously, there would still be at least one scarce means: the individual's time, each unit of which if allocated to one purpose is necessarily not allocated to some other goal."

8 von Mises, Ludwig. *Human Action*. Chapter 1 Section 4. "The teachings of praxeology and economics are valid for every human action without regard to its underlying motives, causes, and goals. The ultimate judgments of value and the ultimate ends of human action are given for any kind of scientific inquiry; they are not open to any further analysis. Praxeology deals with the ways and means chosen for the attainment of such ultimate ends. Its object is means, not ends. In this sense we speak of the subjectivism of the general science of human action. It takes the ultimate ends chosen by acting man as data, it is entirely neutral with regard to them, and it refrains from passing any value judgments."

9 Rothbard, Murray N. "Praxeology: The methodology of Austrian economics." *The Foundations of Modern Austrian Economics* (1976): 19-39. "Furthermore, praxeology is not grounded on any value judgments of the praxeologist, since what he is doing is analyzing the fact that people in general have values rather than inserting any value judgments of his own."

## **II. Identifying when Conflict Occurs**

As previously described, it is possible to separate interactions into two sets: those whose actions are in conflict and those that are not. Conflict is a purely praxeological concept but, like human action itself, requires understanding in the Misesian sense to identify. One must have all of the relevant facts about an interaction in order to determine if there is conflict.

Another difficulty in identifying conflict is that human action is both a physical and mental phenomenon. Two situations might be physically identical, and yet one might be peaceful cooperation and the other conflict. For example, if two men are wrestling, it is possible that they are wrestling for fun, but it might also be that they are actually fighting. What they say or the expressions on their faces may clarify which case it is, but not necessarily. What really matters is the human action involved, meaning both the physical acts as well as the mental state of each individual.

Therefore, identifying conflict in practice is not necessarily intuitive. One might wonder what the difference between conflict and competition is, or if the concept of mutually exclusive action applies to situations where two people cannot both achieve their ends. For example, two men might both want to be the person who can run the fastest. They may train every day and compete in races. It is true that one being the fastest excludes the other from being so. Yet, even if their goals are mutually exclusive, their actions need not be. Despite having incompatible goals, they might train together, share advice, and so on, as members of the same athletic club often do.

Recreational sports are an example of competition without conflict. The whole point of a soccer match is to strive for mutually exclusive ends. Yet, the match cannot be played unless both teams cooperate and follow the rules. Another example is competition in the retail market. Two store-owners might offer the same good for sale in nearby locations, competing for the business of the local population. Each is perfectly capable of offering goods for sale, regardless of whether the other one does. Their ends may be mutually exclusive, but their actions are not.

Conflict can only be identified using understanding, or *verstehen*. Even though praxeology itself does not provide detailed rules for identifying conflict, it at least creates the mental framework within which an individual can do so.

## **III. Action that Causes Conflict**

It is a short step from the praxeological concept of conflict to a related binary classification of action, which is also purely praxeological. All human action can be classified as either action that causes conflict or action that does not.

The cause of conflict is praxeological because causality is a praxeological concept. As Ludwig von Mises says:

Acting requires and presupposes the category of causality. Only a man who sees the world in the light of causality is fitted to act. In this sense we may say that causality is a category of action. The category means and ends presupposes the category cause and effect. In a world without causality and regularity of phenomena there would be no field for human reasoning and

human action.<sup>10</sup>

As a praxeological concept, the cause of conflict is both universal and value-free. It is also a binary classification, because the concept is concerned not with proximate causes or what possibly contributed to an occurrence, but with whether an action is ultimately responsible for conflict.<sup>11</sup> That said, the cause of conflict is not necessarily unique. Multiple individuals may each cause a particular conflict to occur. For example, two men might sneak onto a farm and work together to steal a bale of hay. In this case, they are both responsible for the conflict with the farmer.

One must understand many things outside of praxeology in order to identify the cause of conflict. Physical sciences will help identify what physical acts lead to conflict. However, as the example of the wrestlers shows, one must understand not only the physical acts that occur but also the human action involved.<sup>12</sup> One way to do this is to understand the communication between individuals. If two men appear to be wrestling, but one is shouting, “Stop! Help!”, it would seem that there is a conflict and the other man is responsible. Similarly, social norms are important for understanding the cause of conflict.<sup>13</sup> Walking around naked is fine on a nude beach, but potentially problematic in other social settings.

Even though many areas of knowledge are needed to identify the cause of conflict, the concept itself is still purely praxeological. It covers all human action and applies to any conflict, regardless of the specifics of any particular situation.

#### IV. Praxeology and Libertarianism

Libertarianism is an ethical system that seeks to preserve the liberty of individuals.<sup>14</sup> Liberty

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<sup>10</sup> von Mises, Ludwig. Human Action. Chapter 1, Section 5.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent analysis of causation in ethics, see Kinsella, N. Stephan, and Patrick Tinsley. "Causation and aggression." *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 7.4 (2004): 97-112. "In analyzing action through the lens of the praxeological means-ends structure to determine if it amounts to aggression, we ask if the actor employed means to achieve the end of invading the borders of another's property or body—in other words, we ask if he caused the border invasion. The means employed can be inanimate or nonhuman means governed solely by causal laws (a gun), or it can include other humans who are employed as means to achieve the illicit end desired. The latter category includes both innocent humans that one employs to cause a border invasion and culpable humans that one conspires (cooperates) with to achieve the illicit end."

<sup>12</sup> Hoppe, Hans-Hermann. "Property, causality, and liability." *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 7.4 (2004): 87-95. "People can be held liable only for their actions, whether intentional or negligent (but not for accidents involving them). Actions, however, involve both "objective" (external) and "subjective" (internal) elements. Hence, the exclusive inspection of physical events can never be considered sufficient in determining liability (there must be fault, too, and one can only speak of fault if an event is caused by an action)."

<sup>13</sup> Van Dun. 2004. "Natural Law and the Jurisprudence of Freedom." *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 18 (2): 31–54. "Moreover, while general jurisprudence is an abstract intellectual exercise, it should not lose sight of the fact that it inevitably will be applied in a more-or-less dense cultural setting. Those who apply it in real cases must take into account the relevant traditions, customs, conventions, standards, and the like, if they are to understand at all what people do and say, and why they do or say it in one way or another." and Borer, Kris. 2012. "Norms and the NAP." *Libertarian Papers*. 4 (1): 57-66. Online at: [libertarianpapers.org](http://libertarianpapers.org).

<sup>14</sup> Narveson, Jan. *The libertarian Idea*. Broadview Press, 2001. "At the outset let us say that 'Libertarianism', as the term is used in current moral and political philosophy (as distinct from a view about freedom of the will), is the doctrine that the only relevant consideration in political matters is individual liberty: that there is a delimitable sphere of action for each person, the person's 'rightful liberty,' such that one may be forced to do or refrain from what one wants to do only if what one would do or not do would violate, or at least infringe, the rightful liberty of some other person(s). No other reasons for

means that a person is able to choose how to live his own life without interference from others.<sup>15</sup> In other words, he is able to live a life without conflict.

Therefore, conflict is the opposite of liberty. Where liberty allows one to enjoy self determination, conflict prevents it. Where liberty allows one to choose the best means for improving their own life, conflict takes that choice away. Liberty is a state in which all human interaction is cooperation, as opposed to conflict.

To ensure this kind of existence, libertarianism has one primary rule.<sup>16</sup> This rule, called the non-aggression principle, prohibits anyone from causing the loss of liberty. As liberty is lost precisely when there is conflict, aggression can be defined as any action that causes conflict. Thus, the non-aggression principle becomes simply: cause no conflict.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, libertarianism can be defined as an ethical system that prohibits individuals from causing conflict. Therefore, while praxeology can be useful for the analysis of any ethical system, it is especially useful for libertarianism. This is because libertarianism can be defined in a very simple way by using praxeological concepts. Indeed, only praxeological concepts are needed to define libertarianism, which makes libertarianism a praxeological concept itself.

It is important to note that this does not challenge the is-ought gap. Just as praxeology explicates economics without recommending any particular economic policy, praxeology can elucidate the details of an ethical system without advocating it. Nothing in praxeology implies that one should abide by the non-aggression principle. Praxeology is merely an effective tool for describing it.

## V. The Benefits of a Praxeological Approach

It has been shown that certain concepts such as conflict, liberty, and the non-aggression principle can be defined using praxeology, but one may wonder what benefit there is to doing so. An abundance of work has already been done in libertarian theory without resorting to praxeology to define fundamental concepts. Yet, even if most of the big problems have already been solved using other methods, there are still reasons to consider the praxeological approach.

An immediate benefit is the clarity that comes from the inherent rigor of any concept derived from purely praxeological foundations. When the technical details of ideas such as liberty and the non-aggression principle can be traced back to the action axiom, there is little room for doubt about their meaning. So long as the basic praxeological concepts are clear, direct derivatives should be as well. Yet, what could be a better starting point than the action axiom, which has been described as self-evident and incontestably true?<sup>18</sup> In this way, ideas can be communicated, and concepts can be analyzed, with a greater precision than with other methods.

For example, one way to define aggression is by equating it with the initiation of violence. This

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compelling people are allowable: other actions touching on the life of that individual require his or her consent."

15 Mack, Eric, and Gerald F. Gaus. "Classical Liberalism and Libertarianism: The Liberty Tradition." *Handbook of Political Theory* (2004): 115. "to demand liberty is merely to insist that one be left alone in one's solitary activities or in one's joint activities with other consenting individuals"

16 Rothbard, Murray N. "War, Peace, and the State." *The Myth of National Defense* (1963): 65. "[The non-aggression principle is] the fundamental rule from which can be deduced the entire *corpus* of libertarian theory."

17 For an early formulation of this idea, see Borer, Kris. "Cause No Conflict," *Libertarian Papers* 2, 40 (2010). ONLINE AT: [libertarianpapers.org](http://libertarianpapers.org)

18 Hoppe, Hans-Hermann. *Economic Science and the Austrian Method. Section II: On Praxeology and the Praxeological Foundation of Epistemology*, Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1995.

definition is intuitive because many crimes involve violence, yet violence is neither necessary nor sufficient to constitute a crime. This makes the initiation of violence a mere approximation of aggression.

As an approximation, it must either erroneously include behaviors that are not aggression or exclude ones that are. Compensating for excluded behaviors can be done by appending additional behaviors in the definition, such as fraud or threats. Correcting for included behaviors can be done by adding additional conditions to the definition, such as requiring that any violence be non-consensual.

However, when starting from an approximation, continuum problems make it difficult to list out all of the exceptions to the rule. There will generally be corner cases that can be used to attack such formulations.<sup>19</sup> The same arguments apply to other non-praxeological formulations of ethical concepts, such as those based on physical boundary crossing.

The praxeological approach avoids this problem by finding precision in abstraction. It allows an ethicist to consider only the essential qualities of behavior for any particular definition and makes it easier to create definitions that apply to the intended set of behaviors. It does not over or under emphasis the changing content of action simply because it does not address it at all. Nor does it need to. As has been shown, ethical concepts can be defined precisely even if those definitions do not elaborate on the details of how they can be applied to any particular situation.

This linguistic clarity also has potential benefits for theoretical work. If an ethicist tries to solve a problem by using deduction from imprecise concepts, it is possible that even valid logic can lead to ambiguous or incorrect conclusions. On the other hand, a praxeological approach might be able to solve such problems. This is because it exposes a deeper structure of libertarianism by making explicit what is implicit in the works of Rothbard, Hoppe and other great libertarian thinkers.

## Conclusion

Praxeology and ethics both study purposeful behavior in different ways. Praxeology looks for universal truths about human action through deduction. On the other hand, ethics analyzes systems that guide the values that direct human action. To this end, praxeology can provide concepts useful for ethical analysis.

First, intentional behavior can be divided into action in isolation and interaction. Interaction can be further classified into cooperation and conflict. This allows for a praxeological definition of aggression, which is any action that causes conflict. Finally, this definition of aggression allows for a praxeological definition of libertarianism. Praxeology in no way advocates libertarianism, but libertarians can still benefit from using praxeology to expound it.

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19 Friedman, David D. The machinery of freedom: guide to a radical capitalism. Open Court Publishing Company, 1989. Chapter 41