

A Fatal Tendency of Mankind

Here's what the Library of Economics and Liberty has to say about Frederic Bastiat (1801-1850):

"Joseph Schumpeter described Bastiat nearly a century after his death as 'the most brilliant economic journalist who ever lived.' Orphaned at the age of nine, Bastiat tried his hand at commerce, farming, and insurance sales. In 1825, after he inherited his grandfather's estate, he quit working, established a discussion group, and read widely in economics.

Bastiat made no original contribution to economics, if we use 'contribution' the way most economists use it. That is, we cannot associate one law, theorem, or pathbreaking empirical study with his name. But in a broader sense Bastiat made a big contribution: his fresh and witty expressions of economic truths made them so understandable and compelling that the truths became hard to ignore."

Easily his most famous book is *The Law*, a rather short treatise on law, economics, and human nature. It's a great book, available [here](#), filled with many poignant observations. One such is his description of what he calls, "a fatal tendency of mankind".

Here's how he describes it:

"Self-preservation and self-development are common aspirations among all people. And if everyone enjoyed the unrestricted use of his faculties and the free disposition of the fruits of his labor, social progress would be ceaseless, uninterrupted, and unfailing.

But there is also another tendency that is common among people. When they can, they wish to live and prosper at the expense of others. This is no rash accusation. Nor

does it come from a gloomy and uncharitable spirit. The annals of history bear witness to the truth of it: the incessant wars, mass migrations, religious persecutions, universal slavery, dishonesty in commerce, and monopolies. This fatal desire has its origin in the very nature of man – in that primitive, universal, and insuppressible instinct that impels him to satisfy his desires with the least possible pain.”

Truly, how many of man’s problems are rooted in the dark side of our nature? And if that is our nature, then any dream of utopia or curing all of our problems will be impossible. Better, it seems, to acknowledge human nature and to find ways to harness the bad for good, then to create systems and structures that enable the bad.