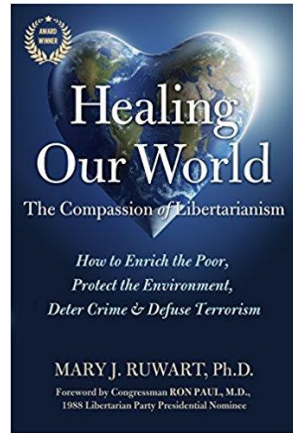


**Mary J. Ruwart. *Healing Our World: The Compassion of Libertarianism*. Kalamazoo: Sunstar Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 453. ISBN 978-0963233677. Paperback \$30.**

Now in its fourth edition, *Healing Our World* has become a new standard for one-volume introductions to rigorous libertarian thought. With a foreword by Ron Paul, the retired biophysicist and medical researcher Mary Ruwart unfolds, chapter by chapter, the countless harms that inevitably occur when non-aggression (or “the good neighbor principle”) is systematically compromised. At the same time, in comparison to similar works, Ruwart takes a different approach than Paul in



*The Revolution* (framed by American politics) and Rothbard in *For a New Liberty* (framed primarily by rational discourse). Her underlying thesis is that freedom from aggression is the means to *human flourishing*. As the cover subtitle puts it: “How to Enrich the Poor, Protect the Environment, Deter Crime, and Defuse Terrorism.” So the trajectory of the work is not so much a call to liberty or even the presentation of an alternative political perspective. Rather, *Healing Our World* is a roadmap on how to achieve the basic goals that everyone wants—peace, prosperity, and a life of fulfilling human relationships. This course is chartered by an uncompromising application of the principle of non-aggression.

The bigger distinction of the book, however, is its meticulously empirical orientation. Ruwart’s background as a research scientist becomes more than apparent—especially in chapters related to her field(s) (e.g., pharmaceuticals). With over a thousand citations and numerous charts and graphs, it was not enough to simply establish the internal coherence of libertarianism and let others put the pieces together. No, virtually every assertion is backed by a real-life case study. She doesn’t

say “aggression-through-government has caused most of the war and poverty that we see in the modern world” (p. 378) until this has been thoroughly *demonstrated*. In this way, the book may be a bit exhausting for those who already agree with her perspective, but acutely challenging for those who think libertarianism is more theory than fact. Similarly, those who are tired of the axioms and logical corollaries characteristic of philosophical libertarianism will find where “the rubber meets the road.”

In this daunting undertaking, no stone goes unturned. Readers will learn with acuity and practicality how and why aggression is unethical, how it manifests itself and how it can be avoided, how wealth is created (and why it is *created* and not limited), how wage and licensing laws actually destroy jobs and discriminate against lower classes of society (in addition to stifling innovation and lowering product quality), how “consumer protection” and other regulations actually harm (physically and psychologically) consumers, the devastating effects of monopoly proper (government-privileged monopoly), how private property effectively protects the environment (in contrast to public lands), the fraudulent system of fractional reserve banking and the boom-bust cycle it creates, the economic harms of fiat currency, myths about consumer-spending “stimulating the economy,” the (short and long-term) educational and psychological harms done through government-mandated schools, “how welfare traps minorities” (p. 176), the kinds of generosity that help or harm, how to deal with aggression through restitution procedures, how centralized bureaucracies increase worldwide pollution, the mechanics and harms of the drug war, the shocking realities of “gun control,” how those who live by peace instead of aggression live longer, more enjoyable lives, the numerous harms achieved through government foreign-aid, the growing police state and the ambiguity about who is perpetrating “terror,” the madness of war and efficiency and benefits (especially for the poor) of private defense, and many more topics. When one combines all of these matters with dozens of quotations from various scholars, authors, religious figures, economists,

and classic literature, it really becomes apparent that this 450-page *tour de force* is the work of a lifetime.

Thankfully, each chapter ends with a one-page summary of what was covered plus a (humorous) cartoon illustrating these realities in no uncertain terms. Most chapters also include a subsection entitled “The Rich Get Richer...With Our Help!,” which highlights how renowned social injustices occur through public complicity and/or complacency. Even more helpful is the prose itself – which is anything but an exercise of cloistered academic sterility. The cadence is well-paced, the chapter and paragraph structure is logically coherent, and few sentences are ever too long to instigate confusion. This balance between the evidential side of things and communicating for a popular audience is a difficult dance few authors can master, but Ruwart generally pulls it off.

The energy behind the book is difficult to overstate. Each paragraph drips with passion. It reminds one of Rose Wilder’s fast-paced treatise, *The Discovery of Freedom*. Consequently, readers may find Ruwart’s regular use of exclamatory marks off-putting, but that’s just her style. Conceptually, the book strongly maintains the sharpness and consistency of the anarcho-capitalist tradition (e.g., taxation is identified as theft literally in the first chapter), but never loses sight of immediate personal experience in day-to-day life. This realistic hopefulness and team-building attitude is particularly refreshing against the backdrop of a world saturated by violence.

The great wealth that Good Neighbors [those who uphold non-aggression] enjoy is a product of honoring our neighbor’s choice. In other words, tolerance and respect for others and their property comes first and the wealth follows. Peaceful relations promote prosperity, not vice versa.

When we can’t force people to do our will, we can only persuade them. Successful persuasion requires that we understand others’ needs and wants so that we can best make our appeal. When we understand others, we are more likely to feel compassion for their plight, and less likely to

respond with prejudice. Becoming Good Neighbors won't make us perfect, nor will a nonaggressive world be perfect. However, honoring our neighbor's choice and righting our wrongs moves us closer towards that ideal. The path of aggression takes us in the opposite direction. (p. 376-77)

Incisive psychological observations like these are scattered throughout. This helps identify personal concessions that have to be made before aggression can occur, thus providing indirect insight to the more complicated matters of racism, sexism, and other kinds of prejudice.

Before we can deceive people, steal from them, or assault them, we must first separate ourselves from them internally. We feel justified in bending them to our will because we consider ourselves wiser, nobler, or stronger. In other words, we feel that we are somehow better than they are; we are different, separate, apart. *Aggression is the physical manifestation of our judgement of others and our internal separation from them...in using aggression as our means, we have destroyed the connectedness (goodwill toward all) that appears to be a necessary precondition of the happiness we seek.* In using aggression as our means, we sabotage our ends. (p. 276)

Thus, as Rothbard maintained, even things like taxation presumes a kind of social conflict like that mentioned above: "the very existence of taxation and the State necessarily sets up a class division between the exploiting rulers and the exploited ruled."<sup>1</sup> Thus, "class warfare" and basic inequalities incarnated in society are more the result of ancient statism than late capitalism.

To cap things off, Ruwart concludes by clarifying what exactly the overarching goals of "Good Neighbors" (i.e., libertarians) are:

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Rothbard, *For a New Liberty* (Auburn: Von Mises Institute, 1973, 2006), 30.

Instead of maintaining *centralization* of power through guns of government, we promoted *decentralization*. Instead of providing services through regulated government monopolies, we keep the marketplace free from aggression, letting small businesses flourish. We reject the idea of forcibly taking our neighbor's hard-earned wealth as taxes for government-run programs. We choose voluntary, private services, which lower costs and improve quality. We do away with subsidies and encourage private ownership of land and animals to stop special interest groups from exploiting the public domain...We stop aggression before it starts and deter crime through restitution instead of punishment. In doing so, we set the stage for healing both the victim and the attacker. (p. 377)

Because it is neither an atheist nor a Christian case for libertarianism, *Healing Our World* has the potential for an even larger reading audience—one that makes appeals to age-old intuitions of human experience. (Who wants to starve? Die in war?) Even so, the connection between Christian ethics and libertarianism is evident enough that it need not even be mentioned; Ruwart's citations of Jesus, biblical texts, and other religious figures and scriptures point in the same direction of her arguments.

*Healing Our World: The Compassion of Libertarianism* may be the single most persuasive volume that makes a case for libertarianism "from the ground up." It is readable and practical enough for a wide audience, but integrated enough with scholarship and research to function with some degree of sophistication—and even as a reference work for others. Ruwart's own insight into the devastating effects of medical and drug regulations is worth the price of the book alone. It will likely not satisfy the specific sensitivities of an academic audience, but it was never meant to. Given the format and wide variety of subject areas, the book may even serve as a textbook or in a classroom setting.

All in all, Ruwart has provided a tremendous service to those who want to see a better world take shape—and take shape through peace and

not violence, because that is the only way to achieve a better world anyway. Highly recommended.

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