

Public Morality in Politics and Economics: Why there is so little Freedom in the World

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Introduction

Throughout history and throughout the world, ideas and laws have been introduced which have proven impractical, counterproductive, harmful, or all of the above. Yet these ideas have been thought up, promoted, passed into law, implemented, and then defended, even when the results they produced were the opposite of what was presumably intended. Sometimes the results were heinous and yet the logical precursor ideas that created the horrid results continued (and continue) to be espoused. How can this be?

I suggest that the reason for this is that the people supporting the ideas believed, and got others to believe, the ideas (and therefore themselves) to be morally superior! If the ideas are morally superior, then isn't it obvious that anyone who opposes the idea(s) is either very unenlightened or just plain *evil*? If unenlightened, they must be "made" to see the light, ignored, or shoved out of the way. But if they actively oppose the supposedly *morally superior* idea(s), there may be no form of retribution too severe for them, for by opposing the supposedly *morally superior* idea(s) they have shown themselves to be *evil*, contemptible people. I will show that these supposedly *morally superior* ideas and the people pushing them are *not* morally superior.

The Evil 'Good Idea'

Clarence Carson caught this concept in his excellent and revealing book, "The World in the Grip of an Idea." He stated the idea which has the world in its grip thus: "*To achieve human felicity on this earth by concerting all efforts toward its realization.*" Sounds good, doesn't it. Sounds almost like a MORAL imperative. Obviously, in order to increase human felicity (happiness) on this earth effort must be directed toward that goal. Most people holding this idea tend to think of themselves as on a MORAL crusade to make the world a better place. They also tend

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to think of anyone who disagrees as IMMORAL and selfish. Unfortunately, most other people simply go along with this assessment implicitly without even recognizing the idea. They think of such people as "trying to do good".

The flies in the ointment of this idea of "achieving human felicity on this earth by concerting all efforts toward its realization" are of course WHO will decide what is felicitous (for everybody) and WHO will decide HOW MUCH of WHOSE efforts will be 'concerted'. As you

have probably already guessed, the WHO are people who either implicitly or explicitly believe this idea and who consider themselves superior MORAL agents trying to improve the world in spite of the individualistic (non-conforming) tendencies of others, all of whom must be either EVIL or deluded. Obviously, force (government) must be used to get everyone in line to improve human felicity (happiness).

The Inevitable Nature of Politics and Government

The political spectrum of ideas has sometimes been divided between left and right, or liberal and conservative, or sometimes "collectivists" vs. "individualists". While the latter is helpful, I suggest that the characterization of the political spectrum should be between "coercion" on one end and "freedom" on the other. The same idea may also be expressed as between "authoritarianism" and "individualism".

When one speaks of the political realm, he is talking about government and law. All law is by its nature implemented by force and/or threat of force, and *should be*. Laws are not passed to be optional. The problem is deciding *in principle* on what should be passed into law (forced/coerced) and what should not ("freedom").

Please note the following, and this is extremely important. We are not talking here about what citizens 'should' do, by whoever's standard,

but about what citizens should be *forced* to do or not do. The political process, all government, is about—and only about—what people will be *forced* to do or not do. (Paying taxes, however they are used, is government forcing you to divert that portion of your work results—wages—to what the government wants.)

At this point we have one minor complication in the “coercion” vs. “freedom” dichotomy. If in this spectrum there is total ‘freedom’ (no law whatsoever), then we will all have to carry shotguns to protect ourselves from those relatively few individuals who are quite willing to use force or threat of force on others to directly gain what they want from us. Such people are called thieves, murderers, rapists, etc., depending on their purpose in using force. So we band together to prevent some people from individually or collectively using force on us to gain their way.

By banding together in this way to prevent some people from forcing their will on others, we essentially have formed government. Government is that agency which has been legitimized to use force. Used in this way, government actually increases our freedom. We can go around without needing to carry a shotgun. We are free to walk the streets at night. We can take a trip knowing that when we get back, someone will not have moved into the house we built without our consent. Government used in this way is essentially an extension of our individual and collective rights to self-defense.

So when government is limited only to protecting all of us equally from predation and fraud from others of us, we have the maximum of freedom. This maximum

freedom is the “freedom” end of the “coercion” vs. “freedom” spectrum. When I speak here of the “freedom” end of the spectrum, I include just enough force (government) to keep some people from individually forcing others to do their bidding. My right to swing my arms any way I wish stops at your nose.

The Nasty Basic Political Problem

The fundamental political problem here and in the rest of the world is that we have not adequately differentiated the idea of ‘doing good’ from the idea of *forcing* others to do good. Even those who at a basic level understood this crucial difference seldom articulated it in this form. What

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people, including you, *should* do and what they should be *forced* to do are quite different concepts. Let’s look at some of our social institutions in this light to see how they function and should be used.

The Unique Roles of Institutions

Because different institutions in society perform different functions and operate in different ways, the various types of institutions in society usually cannot perform each other’s functions well, if at all.

Businesses exist to serve customers, whether they want alcohol or Bibles, and in a free society they exist only so long as, in

their *customers’* view, the customers’ needs are met.

Families exist for, among other things, the benefit of children. However the ‘customer’ children do not get to make the final decisions as do the customers of business.

Churches (and secular charitable groups), among other things, usually engage in using the resources of their members to aid others. The churches and groups decide based on their criteria who they will help and how, sometimes helping only the ‘deserving’ and sometimes the ‘non-deserving’ as well. Such help is optional from the church’s members and usually appreciated by the recipients.

Government, by its nature as the repository of enough force to usually prevent other individuals and institutions from initiating force on their own, *always* carries out its functions by force or threat of force—that is its nature. Laws are not passed to be optional. The phrase ‘force of law’ says it well.

Families can not be run as businesses where the ‘customer’ children have the ultimate decision on how the family operates. Businesses who try to act as the ‘family’ to customers (“Father knows best”) tend to fail. Government giving ‘customers’ (citizens) whatever they want, like a business does, becomes a disaster because the customer ‘wanting’ and the citizen ‘paying’ are seldom the same.

Churches do good precisely because they are voluntary organizations. No one would consider them good organizations if they ran around looting unwilling citizens to obtain the funds for their ‘good’ works.

In the same way, government trying to serve in the capacity of

any of these other institutions is a sick joke. Because a government 'business' doesn't *have* to make a profit, customers' wishes be damned. Later I will demonstrate how government 'overseeing' business, other than the important function of preventing force and fraud, is inappropriate to the nature of both business and government and shows a pathetic lack of economic understanding. As a family institution, government simply cannot exhibit the *individual* love for children which directs the way most families are run. As a church-like charitable organization, government, because it extracts its operating funds by force, has no discipline to 'guide' to whom its 'charity' is offered and on what reasonable terms.

In short, none of these institutions, because of their makeup, relationships, and operating modes can substitute well for each other. Specifically, government is suited to doing one thing well: using force to see to it that no one else does so without its permission (e.g., self defense—where the government wasn't able to get there first). Because government is by nature force or threat of force, government trying to do "good" is dangerous.

Would you give a pastor a gun and tell him to take as much money as he thought necessary from whoever he wished and go give it to the homeless or orphans or whatever? Would you give one father a gun and tell him to write and enforce a rule book telling exactly how *all* parents are to act toward their children in every situation? Would you give a businessman a gun and tell him to decide exactly how everyone in his industry is to act and interact with their customers and suppliers—but

don't stack the deck in his favor? Of course not. The billy club and the gun are not the proper way to operate in these areas.

However, would you give the government a gun so it can threaten retribution (prison) if any people harm, threaten, or defraud others? Of course you would. That's why the institution 'government' needs the ability to threaten the use of force and back it up with the gun if necessary. That's just what government does. That is why it is suited for this limited role and is not suited for the other tasks.

Claiming the High Moral Ground

The authoritarians and coercers have been claiming the high moral ground for their numerous schemes to help the poor, the homeless, the minorities (like women who make

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up over half the population), the 'children', 'business', the 'economy', the 'country', etc., etc. They have been able to gather much support from many quarters, especially the media, because of their claim that they have "compassion" or some other moral sentiment and that those who oppose them don't. They have only been able to get away with this charade of 'superior morality' because most of us have not recognized the *extreme* difference between 'doing good' and FORCING others to do what we

think might be good. Let's examine their claim of superior morality.

When a person defends himself from another he is within his rights. If government helps him defend himself, it is doing what the individual would be allowed to do.

When one person uses force or threat of force on another to make him do, not do, or pay for something which the first person wants, he is making a slave of the other person. This is true even if what the first person wants is 'good'. (Maybe the second person wants to do some other 'good'.) Slavery is immoral. This is still true if we're talking about the minority forcing the majority or even the majority forcing the minority to do 'good' (according to the majority). The second party is still being made the slave of the first, and this is immoral.

U s i n g t h e government to do what an individual would not be allowed to do, force some to do (or pay for) some supposed 'good' that others want, is still immoral. It is still slavery. Therefore, the authoritarian coercers claim to the high moral ground is false. They are slavemasters acting immorally. (Even slavemasters will insist on slaves doing 'the right thing'—if it fits in with their plans!)

When we pass laws telling some or all of us what to do (or pay for) rather than laws simply protecting against fraud and predation, then we are working toward the "coercion" or "authoritarian" end of the spectrum where some people (legislators) tell other people (citizens) what to do or not do. In other words, some of us, who are of legal age, tell others of us, who are also equally of legal age, how to live

our lives and how our efforts are to be directed—i.e., how the money we earn is to be spent. They say this group (often taxpayers) is to do such-and-such for that group. It is their (moral) duty to do it. Some of us said so. What arrogance! And this arrogance is parading in the name of morality!!

Using force to make people do 'good' also does not work well in practice. The major evils of history have not been the individual evil muggings and murders. The major massive evils of history have been done in the name of "good". The reason is simple. It is generally much easier to get people to get excited and act (against others) in the name of "good" than of "evil". One tribe says it needs to plunder another tribe to prosper. Communism is supposed to help the downtrodden masses. Nazism was to create the greater German Aryan state. Fundamentalist Moslems wish to bring about the "good" Moslem state—and you had better agree, or else. Many so-called environmentalists claim they know what's best for everybody and want to implement it by law (force) even before they have their facts straight and often in spite of facts actually proving the opposite of their position.

There is another *extremely* serious problem with doing 'good', however you define it, by the use of government (force). The problem is that one can always find more 'good' things to do! Unfortunately, there is *no* logical stopping place when law (force) is used to do the 'good' things, *whatever* they may be. You can always do more of those 'good' things, or do more other 'good' things. The citizens' money needed to do all these 'good'

things inherently increases without limit.

When we get to 100% taxation to pay for all these 'good' things, complete with detailed regulations to make all our dealings with each other 'good', then we will have achieved total slavery! Government has no resources other than what it takes from citizens. Since government can only give what it has first taken, the 'benefits' the government is giving are the equivalent of the food, housing, and shelter given by the slave owner—necessary to keep the slaves sufficiently productive for the slave

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owner's purposes. By the way, we are currently at about 40% slavery, i.e., governments in the United States spend (decide what is produced and where it will go) about 40% of all the money we citizens earn.

The only political *good* is freedom and its protection. If a government function isn't simply protection of citizens from force and fraud, then the function is highly suspect.

If a government official wishes to use his high office as a bully pulpit to exhort citizens to help such-and-such a group, that is fine. More power to him. Have those interested form a committee, work through a service organization, or suggest that churches, or even individual citizens, work on the project. But *don't* make it a part of government. Don't make it *law*.

Restraining people from harming others is a legitimate function of government. Some of us directing the lives and resources of others of us by force of government is not. It is essential that we learn and understand the difference between the *morality* of 'doing good' and the *immorality* of *forcing* others to do 'good', usually through government.

The Spread of Ideas

So how do coercive authoritarian ideas spread and gain ascendancy? "Ideas have consequences." People act according to their ideas. I believe that how quickly and forcefully an idea spreads depends on either its usefulness or its perceived "rightness".

The wheel and fire have proven useful. Useful ideas are picked up by those who find them worthwhile. Ideas like this are not a problem because no one feels compelled to 'spread' such ideas by *force*.

I submit that it is the perceived MORALITY of a philosophical or other position that fuels the emotional fervor causing people to *actively spread* ideas with *missionary zeal*. Authoritarians/Collectivists have *actively spread* their ideas to eager disciples *based on their supposed moral superiority*, when actually their ideas are those of immoral slavemasters. Authoritarianism (coercion) has been dominant throughout history. Individual freedom has seldom been allowed in the past.

As will be shown later, in the section titled 'Public Morality in Economics', people acting freely serve the interests of others in the process of pursuing their own interests. This freedom state of "live and let live" has not generally

been recognized in intellectual circles as a desirable and 'moral' condition. Therefore, up to now most emphasis and 'disciplining' in the intellectual community has been for various utopian ideas, which of course must be implemented by force through government. We must now all realize that "freedom", not various coercive schemes, is the high moral ground in the political realm.

Many people become uncomfortable when moral ideas are voiced. People realize that problems often occur when ideas are spread for their "rightness" or perceived *morality*. But the problems *only* occur when the supposedly moral ideas are to be implemented by *force* or threat of force. Many people, including me, think it is good to aid a neighbor in distress. There is no problem here. You can disagree and not help. There is a problem if I *force* you to help a neighbor I designate. The problem with moral ideas is not moral ideas themselves. The problem is the idea that it is OK to use *force* or threat of force to implement the moral ideas. (We're not talking here about laws against murder, fraud, etc. These are not passed to 'implement a moral idea' but to prevent some people from directly hurting others.)

Frederic Bastiat on this Subject

At this point I would like to interject three quotes from Frederic Bastiat's "The Law", available from the Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., Irvington-On-Hudson, NY, a short book which I consider required reading for every person who claims any education whatever. These three quotes (and the rest of the book) drive home the nature of government, the nature of those who wish to use it to do

'good', and the importance of the rest of us understanding *both* concepts. Here are the quotes. Get the book for some really great reading.

"Usually, however, these gentlemen—the reformers, the legislators, and the writers on public affairs—do not desire to impose direct despotism upon mankind. Oh no, they are too moderate and philanthropic for such direct action. Instead, they turn to the law for this despotism, this absolutism, this omnipotence. *They desire only to make the laws.*" p. 55, [italics mine]

"And just as the gardener needs axes, pruning hooks, saws, and shears to shape his trees, just so does the socialist writer need the force that he can find only in law to shape

"You who wish to reform everything! Why don't you reform yourselves? That task would be sufficient enough."

human beings. For this purpose, he devises tariff laws, tax laws, relief laws, and school laws." p. 34

"Ah, you miserable creatures! You who think that you are so great! You who judge humanity to be so small! You who wish to reform everything! Why don't you reform yourselves? That task would be sufficient enough." p. 55, footnote

Well said?

Public Morality in Economics

There is another important area where authoritarians have (erroneously) claimed the high moral ground. That is in the economic realm.

Answer the following question. Since all economic activity consists simply of trades, goods and/or services traded for money or vice versa, as a *moral* principle should both parties receive equal value in trades? Choose from the following four answers:

- Yes
- Yes with minor exceptions
- Yes with significant exceptions
- No

Authoritarians think that the answer is "Yes" and that they are morally superior because they want to regulate things (government, again) so that trades are fair (equal in value).

When you trade (buy, sell) you do not trade equal. You do not trade a pint of milk for a pint of milk. That would be equal value. You trade what *you* value less for what *you* value more. However, that is also true of the person with whom you are trading. If he values what he will be giving you more than what he will get from you, then he won't trade! Thus, in economic activity (trades), if there is no force or fraud, both parties expect to gain. Both parties are better off. There is a net increase in wealth. And the correct answer to the question posed is: "No". Trades should *not* be equal in value. *Both* parties should gain.

Again, the authoritarians do not have the moral high ground. They are meddlers who do not understand the second most basic concept of economics: trade occurs only when *both* parties expect to gain. (Again, we are talking here about free trade where there is no force or fraud.) This concept and its many important ramifications in areas such as employment, prices, wealth creation and distribution, monopoly, theories of value, and envy are covered more completely in my

booklet: "Must Trades be Equal in Value to be Moral".

What Should Caring People Do?

How then can people with good intentions accomplish their objectives if not through government? In the first place, good intentions are not enough. In fact, *good intentions have no necessary connection with good results*. This is another reason why using force (government) to accomplish 'good' ends is so dangerous. Look at the example of the little boy who cut off his dog's tail an inch at a time so his dog wouldn't hurt so much! Good intentions, wrong result. As Emerson said, "The end pre-exists in the means." Authoritarians (e.g., socialists and liberals, among other statist authoritarians) have been claiming the high moral ground in both economics and politics for a long time and they have convinced many to agree with them. However, the opposite is the case. Using force to make others accomplish your, or your friends', or your political party's 'good' ends is simply a power play and is *immoral*.

One of the things which seems to attract people toward utopian ideas, which are really authoritarian, seems to be the concept that there must be more to life than just being allowed the freedom to do what you please. There must be some higher purpose or goal(s) in life. And there is. The idea of the freedom end of the spectrum in politics is only part of really living. It is very incomplete. The really important part of living is what you *do* with the freedom you should have. The 'really living' for those of good will occurs *outside of* the realm of politics and government. Freedom simply gives you the chance to

choose the ideas and actions which define your character. One *should* have higher goals and aspirations both for himself and even for others. However, it is *immoral* to use *force* (government) to attain these. Do your thing. Encourage others to join you. Do good on your own with the *voluntary* cooperation of others.

If people aren't *forced* to do good things, won't this result in a mean-spirited, self-centered, selfish society? Only if everyone in the society is mean-spirited, self-centered, and selfish! What *should* people of good will do? They should exhibit good will in their dealings with others.

For example, how do Christians believe they should act? First, get one's own spiritual house in order. Then, how about "Love the Lord

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your God with all your heart . . . and love your neighbor as yourself" or "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Notice that Jesus did *not* say, "Love your neighbor as yourself by getting the government to force your other neighbors to do good things for him."

Christians believe they have a moral obligation to help the less fortunate. Others subscribe to this idea as well. They do *not* have a moral obligation to *force* others to join them. In fact, forcing others to join them in doing what they 'know' (think) to be good is *immoral*. However you believe, get busy doing the things *you* should do, merge your efforts with others

of like mind, and encourage, *not force*, others to do the same. You don't need a law.

What Else Should Caring People Do?

Examine our current laws, new proposals, and the rationales and hidden assumptions behind them in the light of these ideas. Quoting (paraphrased) again from Bastiat's "The Law", "Government is that fiction by which everyone expects to live at the expense of everyone else."

To change this state of affairs, the straightforward ideas discussed in this paper must be thoroughly understood by those with an interest in the nature of government. Much more importantly, they must, *and can be*, known and easily understood by the majority of citizens. Few authoritarians will change because of these ideas; they will still want to rule us (for our own good?). However, when *the rest of us* understand that even with good intentions it is *immoral* to use force (government) to do 'good', the authoritarians will lose their power to enslave us. We will no longer gradually lose our freedom from their inflicting more and more of their "glorious plans" on us. They will be laughed out of the halls of government just as if they had proposed laws based on the theory that the earth is flat.

The point is simple. *Always* differentiate between what (you think) people *should* do and what they should be *forced* to do. Because use of or threat of force is the necessary and *only* method in the political realm, used to restrain people from doing 'bad' to each other, freedom is the *only* political good.

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