

The Question of Political Action

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(This version is a transcription from the original,
with minor spelling and grammatical fixes.)

1. The Background

Libertarianism is based upon—or has a characteristic premise—the proposition that it is immoral to initiate force or fraud. The consistent adherence to this proposition makes a person a Libertarian, at least in deed, if not also in declaration. And people who profess to be Libertarians are people who, it is hoped, also act according to their professing.

But a general prescription, such as “Do not initiate force or fraud,” is not always easily followed in the complex nitty-gritty of life in a world which so often violates that principle. It is difficult because it is not always clear whether a given action, particularly a given response to an immoral action, is or is not a case of the initiation of force or fraud.

The main thrust of Libertarianism, in any of its slightly differing forms, is against coercive government interference into the lives of peaceful people. It is not solely an anti-government doctrine, of course; its characteristic principle by itself names no particular person or organization which initiates force or fraud. Moreover, Libertarianism does not necessarily condemn all possible governments, but only those which do not have the consent of all their subjects. Nevertheless, since modern man finds it difficult to avoid the activities of coercive governments, which pervade nearly every aspect of a person’s life, Libertarianism is pre-eminently anti-government.

Sometimes, once the nature of coercive government has been exposed, it is a straightforward matter to identify which of its actions are immoral; yet it is not so easy to determine the appropriate moral responses to those activities. What, generally, are the types of responses Libertarians may make? There are at least four types which have been proposed. I shall give them these names: (1) confrontation, (2) education, (3) retreat, and (4) infiltration.

The State may be challenged, and such a challenge may be either peaceful or violent. By peaceful means the State may sometimes be confounded by its own logic, trapped by its own rules, foiled by its own courts. The State may to a certain extent be boycotted, although some boycotts are penalized.¹ By violent means some governments may be slaughtered wholesale or threatened into exile. Political assassinations are not out of the question. By planning and cunning the State is often defrauded of its booty. But the risks of confrontation are often extremely high. Governments do not like to be embarrassed.

On the other hand, the State, it is often thought, is much too powerful, both in its ability to act, and in its hold on the minds and habits of its subjects, to succumb either to change from within or to attack from without. Even if Libertarians were to lobby for change, attempt to gain positions of political power, or even to attempt acts of harassment, sabotage or assassination, the regenerative powers of the State would not be weakened: one political figure is ousted, but thousands more remain. Each time one is removed, a new one appears to fill the vacancy. Each time one bureau, one committee, one agency is disbanded, another is born. There is a type of spontaneous generation by which, it seems, rulers emerge from the muck of the subjects. But no state can long exist without the acquiescence of the people. Change the beliefs of the slaves, and the master race will atrophy. Education, however, may be a slow, protracted affair, even the

¹ Readers may know of Karl Hess, for example, who refused to pay income tax, and who was penalized by not being allowed to own anything. Hess has since claimed to have valued his resulting life-style. For my own part, although it is just barely possible that I might come to enjoy life in a hospital bed, I confess that if I were now confronted with a thief with a gun, I would not spit in his face.

minimal successes of which may be hard-won, especially wherever the State already has an effective means of compulsory indoctrination of the young people of the society.

Alternatively, instead of spending one's life fighting a very powerful and well-entrenched enemy, for the purposes of instituting at long last a reign of freedom in which one could live one's life the way one really wanted to, one could attempt to live one's desired life to the extent now possible even under the rules of a government. This is made all the more the practical thing to do if one is convinced that the war against the enemy will be only insignificantly successful. A person might be able to strike an attitude which would encourage the discovery of ways and means of either avoiding still other government coercions, or else of taking advantage of those actions in order to bring about some personal profit, even in spite of the spate of rules and regulations which attempt to take that profit away. But whatever successes may in this way be had, the fact remains that one lives to a certain extent as a slave. There is little to guarantee that one will be able to adjust to the next round of harassment the State might invent.

Finally, if the State carries on its activities behind the veil of law and authority, then one might subvert those coercive activities by becoming one of these authorities, in order to restrain, or even do away with those laws which are inconsistent with peaceful society. If enough Libertarians become lawmakers, perhaps only good laws will be made—or even no laws at all. The State, suffering malnutrition, will begin to wither away.

All four types of responses have been proposed as suitably Libertarian, and all four have been or are being used, separately or in combination, except that there has been an apparent dearth of violent confrontations by Libertarians. Of course, Libertarians, contemplating acts of anti-government violence, would probably decide that prudence required considerable secrecy, so that even were a violent confrontation successful, the identities and ideologies of the perpetrators might not become generally known. Who is Ragnar Danneskjöld?

2. The Question

In these days of electioneering, the tactic of infiltration has come into some prominence, and for that reason a clear appraisal of the morality of participating in the political process must be attempted. After all, a Libertarian politician is still a politician.

I have heard it argued—more with resignation than enthusiasm—that since a truly free society is not immediately obtainable, some sorts of compromises are necessary in order at least to reduce the burden of coercive government action. Such a proposal deserves serious attention. There are two sorts of compromises which might be intended: (1) We cannot hope to get rid of government entirely—at least not within the foreseeable future. So let us put all our efforts into a few specific areas, such as education or postal service, in an attempt to wrest control away from government. (2) We cannot hope to get rid of government—at least not within the foreseeable future. So let us try at least to reduce the level of government control wherever we can. Of the two compromise strategies, the first is probably consistent with Libertarian action if carried out in a certain manner: a politician may justifiably vote for no government control over specific activities. In so doing, he is refusing to be an accomplice to the initiation of force or fraud. As for the second type of compromise: is it not possible that Libertarians who obtain positions of political power could, by degrees, encourage a society less hampered by intrusions and controls? Is it not possible, for example, that Libertarian politicians, although unable to abolish taxes, would nevertheless agree to tax us only a little bit? Is not some progress better than none at all?

Come, Dear Reader, and assume the role of such a politician, and let us discuss what you are doing. Suppose your influence is great enough so that the government reduces everybody's taxes by half. Suppose your power is great enough so that the government reduces the penalty for tax evasion from hanging to sterilization. Suppose, because of your influence, the government now requires of able-bodied males only three years' military service instead of six. Suppose the vendor's license fee is reduced to \$2,000 from \$5,000 and the waiting period to six months from one year. You may think you have done well, but now you must answer these charges: Have you never-

theless not taxed me? Punished me? Conscripted me? Licensed me? And did you not all along have the alternative of minding your own business and refusing to *join in* the coercive activities of the government? One politician coerces us. A “Libertarian” politician coerces us less. *A consistent Libertarian will coerce us not at all.*

“But had I not been elected,” you reply, “your taxes would have been double what they are now; your punishments more heinous; your servitude more abject.”

Hurrah for the kindly master who whips me only twice a day! Still, if I had a gun, I would shoot him. One is still a thief who steals only a little; a fraud who cheats only a bit; a murderer who murders only a few. And who are you, anyway, who claim to act in my best interest? May I not be allowed to be the judge of what is for me and what is against me? Suppose I disagree with you: suppose you wish to reduce taxes by half, and suppose I believe that such a sudden move would bring about economic conditions so undesirable that you will be thrown out of office, and Libertarianism will be laughed at and passed off as a crackpot’s nightmare. Suppose I believe that, as a result of your good intentions, a worse hell will befall me. Before you take up the mantle of coercion, will you not ask my permission? If you do not, then you ought not to tell me that the trouble you bring upon me is for my own good, or that your intentions were noble. That is the bill of goods the other politicians have been trying to sell me for these many years.

“Very well,” you reply. “I thought I was acting in your best interests, and I still do. Nevertheless, I see now that I cannot rightfully act in your behalf if you refuse your consent. Rather, I should be acting for the good of society as a whole. We cannot instantly obtain a truly free society, but a society with fewer taxes and less slavery is better than a society with more.”

Why, you blockhead! Am I a member of this society, for which you are trying to do good, or am I not? If I tell you to leave me along and stop bullying me, do I thereby forfeit my membership in this community? Does society include everybody except me? Clearly, I am a member. And since I am, and further, since I have not given you my consent to engage in your governing actions, you cannot right-

fully act in “society’s” behalf any more than you can act in my special behalf.

“Yes, I agree,” you admit. “I understand now that I should act not for you, since I have not your consent, nor for society, since I have not all its members’ consents. Rather, I should act for myself. This is why I am now the holder of political power: so that I can tax myself less than someone else would; so that I can strengthen the currency in order to encourage a sounder business climate in which I might prosper; so that I can lessen the penalties for publishing things contrary to legislated tastes, in order to help along a climate of free expression. In short, I seek and bear political power so that I can get the government at least part way off my back.”

Now, then, my friend, what tactics you choose, in your own fight against the coercive State, are your own affair, providing you do not at the same time act against me. You may petition the powers that be; you may refuse to pay taxes; you may assassinate the King. But you may not punish *me*. You may not cheat me or rob me in your attempt to undo the cheats and robbers. You may not, as the bearer of political power, assent to any rule which taxes me, or to any rule which punishes me for minding my own business. When you agree to a tax bill which demands only half the taxes I paid last year, you are still taxing me. That you may not do. But you may do what any Libertarian may do, and ought, out of consistency, to do, namely, refuse to give your assent to any measures of taxation whatsoever. Just remember that if you are elected to be the wielder of political power, I shall have cast no vote for you. I do not give my consent. If you enter the political battlefield, you do so at your own risk, not mine.

(Your patience, Good Reader, is admirable. Here I have allowed you to speak only the few words I have given you. But now you may be anxious to speak for yourself, and so I shall press the dialogue no further.)

3. Political Action

I have chosen to call participation in governmental affairs “infiltration” because Libertarians, generally, are not so much interested in

a career in “public service” as they are interested in disarming a difficult and well-entrenched enemy, and one way to restrain or to pervert an enemy’s capacity to do harm is to infiltrate the enemy organization in order to gain at least partial control over its activities.

But what one may do with that partial control is limited to actions not inconsistent with Libertarianism’s fundamental doctrine: Do not initiate force or fraud. The little dialogue above pointed out those general limitations, but the extent of those restrictions is more far-reaching than one might at first suspect. Even if it were possible for a politician to refrain from interfering with peaceful people, the bare fact of this membership in a coercive organization may be an implicit acceptance of some coercive government activities: if it is wrong, for example, to take money from people without their consent, a pretty good case can be made for the immorality of knowingly accepting such money from the thief who took it in the first place. Very well. Where does a politician’s salary come from?

The one unquestionably proper action which any politician may make is to resign. But supposing—for the sake of further discussion—that there may be other proper actions for politicians, a serious issue remains: May one *become* a politician in the first place? Other than by revolutionary action, a person usually comes to hold political clout either by being elected by (some of) the voters, or else by being appointed by some member of the governing organization. Apart from the moral problems associated with holding any position in government, there seem to be no special moral problems involved in being an appointed official. It is otherwise with elections.

First, a Libertarian, more than any other, ought to be well aware of the fact that, in most elections, not all people are allowed (by the government) to vote. And even of people eligible to vote, some vote, and some do not. Whoever is elected cannot rightfully claim to represent non-voters (except those non-voters—and I suppose there are some—who agree to the legitimacy of being represented by someone not of their own choosing). Moreover, there may be (and have been) both voters and non-voters who view the alternatives in voting as specious: “You may vote only for A or for B, or you may choose not to vote, but in any case, either A or B will end up as your ‘represen-

tative.’’² An elected politician, therefore, may rightfully claim to represent only those persons who agreed to the election process. And who are those persons? The existence of a secret ballot makes the identification of one’s supporters a most difficult task, for that identification is not accomplished by announcing that “51% of the voters voted for me.” In the very best of circumstances, where *all* the voters agree (but how is this determined?) that the candidate with, say, 51% of the total vote shall be the representative of 100% of the voters, the elected official may represent only the voters and not the non-voters.

Libertarians who intend to become members of a coercive government organization, therefore, ought to realize that they cannot rightfully claim to represent—and therefore cannot rightfully govern in any way—*all* the people, for there is at least one person who does not approve of the election process in the first place, namely, me. (Rest assured that there are others, but one is enough.)

Now, if a Libertarian politician is clever enough to pass laws which shall be binding on all those who approve of the election process, but which shall not be binding on all those who, like me, disapprove,³ then more power to him. (Oops! I didn’t really mean that.)

The restrictions I have briefly indicated seem to me to make not only holding political office, but also seeking political office, actions which, although their anticipated goals be noble, are nevertheless

² The rules of elections are defined by the government in such a way that elected officials officially “represent” people whom they do not really represent. And even if “None of the above” appeared on the ballot, “one of the above” would win in case “None of the above” lost, in which case anyone who did not wish to be represented at all would nevertheless be “represented.” In addition, a representative in government is apparently a person who, alone or in collusion with other representatives, has political power over you. That is, a “representative” in government is a person who may act against you, with or without your consent. Isn’t that nice?

³ Either he shall have to poll the entire population, in order to find out who is who, or else he shall have to make a presumption in favour of freedom: “These laws shall be binding on no one except those who give their express consent to be so bound.”

backed by flimsy moral credentials. And if the means to an end be suspect, no amount of attention to the end will justify the methods used to attain it. It may be that infiltration would be the most efficient means of subverting government power. But if in the process innocent people are harmed, then infiltration loses its claim to legitimacy. If, in our present society, even a conscientious Libertarian cannot be a politician without being an inconsistent Libertarian in deed, then Libertarians have no business playing the game by their enemy's standards.