

The Concept of Government



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"The Self Owner" is an original weekly column appearing every Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Spencer W. Morgan. Spencer is a husband and father, and has studied History and Philosophy at the University of Utah. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Last week we began examining the uniquely human capacity of forming concepts. We examined the proper role of the conceptual capacity as enabling man to deal more effectively with reality by forming abstractions and principles. We also discussed the dangers of the conceptual capacity when it becomes detached from reality.

One example of this is the concept we know as government, or the state. When we actually ask the question "what is government?" the typical answers refer entirely to the conceptual realm. In other words, there is no *actual* manifestation of government in reality (by "government" I mean the ruling entities of the world, not the larger notion of "governing" in general). It is merely an idea or an abstraction. Government is a conceptual label applied to the actions of certain individual humans. If I were to ask for evidence of the existence of government itself, not the individuals or buildings that we associate with that label, there is none.

Since government is merely a group of humans, what is it that our conceptual label holds about these particular human beings? What makes them special?

Here comes the tricky part. We have to separate the actual, definitive conceptual idea upon which almost all of society is operating when applying that label, from all of the jingoism, nationalistic rhetoric, mythology, etc.

There is a lot of variation in society about what the conceptual purpose, or proper role (if any) of government should be. One person might believe its purpose is to maintain equality, while another may see it as a protector of property. Others still, might see its primary purpose as a neutral arbiter to resolve disputes between individuals. The variations in purpose behind government are as numerous as the variations of things that it is involved in undertaking.

There is, however, a core notion at the heart of the idea of government upon which all who

see that label as operative share. It is the unique capacity upon which all of those more detailed “purposes” for any given government depend. Government is a group of humans who enjoy an expectation and a unique privilege to commit aggression. For some the validity of that label is so strong, that they would actually refuse to accept the characterization of many acts by individuals labeled government as being aggression, even when the literal facts of a situation would indicate such. However, this is the defining expectation and presumption of privilege that is conveyed by the label, and the ever-looming threat that all compliance with government presupposes.

Admittedly, this characterization of *any* act as “aggression” depends on another concept which have addressed previously, rights. Before an act that overrides my use of my person or property with physical force, or threats thereof, can be seen as “aggressive,” I must hold the concept that I own, or are entitled to exclusive usership of them. Is government a good concept? Is it one that attempts to deny and subordinate reality or is it one that is in harmony with reality? I would argue for the former, for one key reason which I will discuss at length next week.