

The Contradiction of Protective 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 branched out of our discussion on concepts, and began examining government (or the state) as a concept. We determined that its defining conceptual characteristic is the expectation and presumed legitimacy to undertake aggressive actions. “Aggressive” here would be a characterization that builds on the other systematic concept we have examined, which is “rights.” Rights are the line that defines an act as aggressive or non-aggressive, because they are a barrier that defines the limits and implications of an individual’s self-ownership.

This week I’d like to lay out the case for why government is deeply flawed at the *conceptual* level, and not just merely in current practice or historical implementations.

Throughout history, the ruling class has taken various structural forms and various justifications for their power. We don’t know for certain the circumstances of its first application as a concept, but we can see throughout history that its implementation has tended to precede its justifications. In other words, all of the sanction of deities and complex philosophical arguments have come as an afterthought. They were an exercise in justifying what already existed, usually in the face of advances in the rational approach to government that caused old justifications to lose credibility.

After the old justifications for rulers, like the “divine right of kings,” had faded out of popularity, European philosophers like Hobbes and Locke started filling that deficiency with my more sophisticated philosophical arguments. At the root of all of these was the idea that people either did, or hypothetically would, participate in a contract to empower a ruler or ruling class, in order to better protect their rights. The presumption is that a condition of an absence of a single ruling entity in a geographic area creates a condition within which the typical individual is less safe, and less able to defend himself.

Government as Protector

It's hard to dispute that in many times and places in history, this would have been a correct assessment. An association with an aggressive gang, or that gang's eventual takeover to the exclusion of others, can indeed result in a more favorable condition for individuals when contrasted with a situation of gang warfare. A lot of theorizing and analysis on this question has been done by some very talented minds about how and why, especially in a modern world, a society without a state could operate, and be better and safer than a ruled society. For more detail I would refer the reader to Jeffrey Tucker's *It's a Jetsons World* or the Tannehill's *The Market for Liberty*. My intent here is merely to examine the *concept* of government and measure it by the great standard to which *all* of our concepts and assessments of reality must be held: non-contradiction.

Since the state *must* fund itself by extracting, at threat of aggression, a portion of earnings from its "citizens," it operates by the very violation of what it supposedly exists to protect. Admittedly this is not integrally conceptual to the state. Some thinkers have postulated voluntarily-funded governments, however the viability of even those still depends on another form of aggression. The state is presumed to be the singular market provider of its services. Therefore it must maintain its position by excluding other providers of those same services (protection and adjudication of law). Were it not to do this, other "governments" or private associations offering those services would enter the market. Because the state is a *conceptual monopoly* in a given locale, it conceptually presupposes the use or threats of aggressive force to prevent competition. In this way at the very least, government must violate the barriers (rights) that its conceptual justifications require it to protect. Self-ownership implies both my right to organize and sell (voluntarily) protective services to customers, as well as my right (being that customer) to choose not only *which* provider from whom to buy, but whether to buy those services at all.

Therefore the very idea of *rights* as a concept, implicitly negates government in all practical applications and at the conceptual level. No matter how much we may be convinced that in the "net analysis" government improves a practical situation, the idea of protecting a person's self-ownership by institutionalizing and legitimizing its violation, will always be a contradiction. This contradiction will only become more glaring as improvements in technology and cooperation take us further and further away from the brutal ages of history during which circumstances might have made it appealing.