

Compounded Ignorance Leads to Hubris

March 2021: I read this essay and added commentary for Episode 464 of the Everything Voluntary podcast.

A broken clock is correct twice a day, so the adage goes. I think I'm correct at least as often, possibly, hopefully, more. The other day I had an epiphany, of sorts, and shared it on Facebook. It went as follows:

*A person is mostly ignorant. People are ignorance compounded.
Government is evidence of people's hubris.*

I know I was onto something when a friend thought he should confirm whether it was a Collins Original™. I can't take full credit for the ideas conveyed, though, because they have their antecedents in other ideas I've encountered. Anyway, I thought I'd explore each idea and explain my thinking.

“A person is mostly ignorant.”

Despite the protestations of his ego, a person is mostly ignorant about the facts of reality his entire life. Persons who've studied a great deal are usually the first to say that what they've learned the most is how much more there is to know. It's as if the higher you climb on the mountain, the more realize just how big the mountain truly is, and more, that you'll *never* approach even the halfway line. But climb we do!

While I think I've studied a lot in my life, I know that it's a fraction of what humanity knows in total, itself a fraction of all there is to know at all. While I still find interest in things, and dig in, I'm not as zealous as I used to be to really dig for new ideas. (That's not to say that I never encounter new ideas. I *definitely* do. Often.) I guess realizing the size of the mountain and impossibility of reaching the top has put a bit of a damper on this area of my life. And I'm at peace with that.

“People are ignorance compounded.”

This statement was not meant to say that if we add our ignorance together, we become more ignorant. That's silly. If my 5-10% of knowledge is partially different than your 5-10% of knowledge, then putting it together boosts are knowledge to more than 5-10%. I get that. What I meant here was the idea that people as a collective are horrible decision makers. And the more people we cram together to make a decision, the worst the decision is going to be as it concerns the needs and wants of each and every individual.

As ignorant as we are, we are probably most ignorant as it concerns what other people need and want to live a happy and fulfilling life. How many of us even know what we *ourselves* need and want to live a happy and fulfilling life? Hah! And we think we can make decisions for other people concerning their needs and wants? There's only one word to best describe thinking this way: *hubris*.

“Government is evidence of people’s hubris.”

There's very little more hubristic than the belief that we can effectively and successfully make decisions for other people that concern their lives, except that this is exactly the basis for government. At the very least, government tasked solely with the protection of life and property must make all sorts of decision that involve other people.

Knowledge, calculation, and coordination are problems even for the so-called nightwatchman state. Where should we build security measures? What sorts of security measures should we build? Which crimes should we deal with, and which crimes should the people deal with themselves? How should we force everyone to pay for it all? And what are we going to do about dissent? These are one-size-fits-all questions, and one-size never truly fits all.

Now compound the number of tasks performed by government to include things like managing the money supply, controlling foreign trade, providing welfare and entitlements, regulating business activities, prohibiting nonviolent behavior, *et cetera, ad infinitum*. What do you get? Problem, after problem.

Any economist worth their salt will recognize the futility in using government to solve problems. It never turns out as intended, and never without unintended consequences to other people. And these consequences are not benign. They're terrible interruptions to everyone's goal of meeting their needs and wants to live a happy and fulfilling life.

The less ignorant I became of the consequences of government actions, the more convinced I was that government is one of the worst ways to make decisions as it concerns other people. I'm glad I learned this early on, and every year the reasons for viewing government action as folly pile up higher and higher.

It's truly *astonishing* to me how many people still believe in government.