

Try This On Your Friends

Written by F. A. Harper, as published in The Voluntaryist, February 1991.

The elections are over and the campaign dirt has settled a bit.

Do you enjoy riddles? This one challenges many students of liberty. Once we see the problem, lack of a solution will bedevil us until we can solve it logically to the satisfaction of our own conscience.

We want to answer this question: To what extent should politicians be enthroned to rule affairs in our daily lives? What should be the proper domain of political rulership—that is, government?

It would seem at first glance that the principle by which many answer is simple and easy to grasp: “People should be ruled only to the extent they are evil.” That is, they say, only evil acts should be restrained; good acts should be unrestrained, for men should be free to engage in all that is good. Seemingly easy, isn’t it?

But we should ask the next logical question: What precisely is good and what is evil? Only after we answer that will the political domain have been staked out with markers we can really see, should we accept the above seemingly simple guide. But that is not the question I want to pose here. I want, instead, to focus attention on a political paradox in the preceding question, for which an answer seemed so simple.

The Riddle

To see the paradox clearly, let us look at good and evil in their pure forms, as a chemist deals with elements before he deals with complex compounds. Let us first look at a society that is wholly good, and then at one that is wholly evil.

A society of wholly good men calls for no political rulership whatsoever. For there surely is no need of ruling men who are made in the complete image of God, as all of these would be. Political rulership has no tenure of office in Heaven. Since evil acts wouldn’t exist in such a society, control by government is neither called for nor proper, no man should control any other man to any extent. All would enjoy complete freedom, unrestrained. Only in another society where evil has entered the scene is any government deemed necessary, by this simple theory that government is a necessary evil to cope with the evil in man.

Where, How, and Why?

Now consider as the other extreme a society in which every man is wholly evil. Still using

the same principle that political rulership should be employed to the extent of the evil in man, we would then have a society in which complete political rulership of all the affairs of everybody would be called for — a totalitarian dictatorship in the extreme. One man would rule all. But who would serve as the dictator? However he were to be selected and affixed to the political throne, he would surely be a totally evil person since all men are evil. And this society would then be ruled by a totally evil dictator possessed of unlimited political power. And how, in the name of logic, could anything short of total evil be its consequence? How could it be any better than having no political rulership at all in that society?

Here we see the political paradox I would pose: When society is viewed in terms of the two pure patterns in a moral sense—good and evil—we find that political rulership becomes either totally unnecessary or totally ineffective.

As people in society progress toward “good,” government becomes less and less necessary. As people in society progress toward “evil,” government becomes less and less effective.

Then at what point does government become most necessary and most effective? Why at this point and no other?

Does it make sense to say that when good and evil are compounded in society, political rulership comes to attain a virtue denied to it otherwise? Can one man make another man good by force at some precise point of a mixture of good and evil? At what precise point? How and why?