

What's Immoral for the Private Goose Is Moral for the Government Gander?

Written by Robert Higgs for Independent.org.

Why do so many people consider certain actions to be immoral if taken by private persons, but not immoral—perhaps even morally praiseworthy—if taken by government officials?

One possibility is that people have become accustomed to government officials' taking certain actions (e.g., getting income by insisting that people either hand over their money or suffer punishment) over long periods, sometimes from time immemorial, and they no longer evaluate the morality of these actions at all, but simply consider them to be part of the state of nature—"how things are"—somewhat as people do not regard destructive floods or hurricanes as immoral.

Another possibility is that people view government officials' taking certain actions, which are regarded as immoral if carried out by private persons, as cleansed by virtue of the government's having been established and maintained by democratic means. We might call this possibility "morality by virtue of (electoral) majority." Of course, if we posed a *reductio ad absurdum* (e.g., is it okay to kill all the redheads if a majority votes to do so?), they may admit the inadequacy of this justification. Yet, in most workaday instances, many people seem to regard a majority vote not simply as a way of deciding who will occupy public offices or which policies will be implemented, but as a way of establishing the "rightness" or "legitimacy" of government officials' actions.

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