

*What responsibility, if any, do governments have for the liberty, prosperity and security of individuals?*

It is a common characteristic of those who champion liberty to draw attention back to the fundamental difference between civil society and the market on one hand and the state on the other. Classical liberals and libertarians believe in the primacy of the rights of the individual and contend that the only societal arrangement that is conducive to liberty, justice, peace and prosperity is one where the power of the state is minimized to the greatest extent possible. This gives people the freedom to pursue their own goals, to unleash their creativity and apply their talents in the best way they see fit. But what, then, should the role of government be in a free society? Does government protect and promote our interests – or is it antagonistic to them? Should there even *be* a government? These are some of the most fundamental questions in political philosophy.

As the global financial crisis worsens, calls for more state intervention are becoming louder and louder. “The free market has failed,” we are told. Individuals pursuing their self interest have created a monumental disaster and the government is the only institution that can save us. It would be unimaginable and highly irresponsible for the government to do nothing – they have a *responsibility* to promote peace, prosperity and security. Yet despite all the claims to the contrary, this was *not* a failure of the market economy; rather, it was a failure of government. The rejection of free market principles created the situation we now find ourselves in. We live in a world of central banking, fiat money, legal tender laws, and tremendous amounts of regulations that all coalesced to create the incentives and environment necessary to precipitate this calamity.

But the financial system is not the only system that, if left to the unhampered market, common wisdom would regard as a reckless, short-sighted and dangerous strategy; statist ideology permeates all aspects of society. Everywhere we look we find problems and crises and the solutions that are offered, whether from the left or right, are more of the same – government intervention. Whether the issue is poverty, education, crime, pollution, discrimination or drugs, the idea that, not only can government not help, but that it will likely make things *even worse*, is indeed a minority view. By and large, the government is seen by the majority of people as an agency for good. The nature of the state and the unintended consequences of its actions are either downplayed or misunderstood entirely.

While it may be obvious to classical liberals and libertarians, there are several fundamental differences between the state and all other organizations in society. Acknowledging these differences and the unique place that states occupy in the world can illuminate key questions regarding the government and its relationship to individuals and the social order. Firstly, the government is the only organization in society that claims the right to legitimately employ violence against non-aggressors. The state is ‘legally’ permitted to violate private property rights – unlike all other individuals and organizations in society that rely upon consumers *voluntarily* parting with their money in exchange for goods and

services, the state, in contrast, obtains its revenue through coercion. The state, in other words, has the power to “tax.” Secondly, the government claims a monopoly on the provision of protective services. There is only one police force and there is only one judicial system. If we disagree with one of the state’s judgements, we have no recourse other than state police and state courts.

Immediately we can see that the state stands in opposition to the preservation and promotion of the rights of the individual. While some form of government, in particular liberal democratic government, is almost universally regarded as an institution that safeguards our liberty and our property, we can never be entirely safe in a social order that is dominated by this institution because the state, by definition, has to first violate our rights before it can do anything ‘good.’ Now it is important to emphasise that in no way does the corollary – the absence of a state – mean that our liberty and property will be any more secure. Hobbes may well be correct that, in this ‘state of nature,’ life would indeed be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Some form of government may be an essential element in creating the institutional setting necessary for society to thrive, but no one can argue *ex ante* that we will be less secure and less prosperous without a state.

The above clarifications regarding the state and its conduct have been made innumerable times by many thinkers, but where libertarianism differs from other political creeds is the emphasis that is placed on the importance of private property rights and voluntaryism as foundational elements to the alternative of coercive, government provision of goods and services. Many theorists argue that the free market can provide consumers with all goods and services that the government currently provides. Roads and judicial services, for example, have been provided by private firms in the past and are in varying degrees of operation today.

The reason private property rights are essential is because every action requires the utilisation of resources. The problem, though, is that we live in a world of scarcity. As man uses resources in an attempt to attain certain ends, conflict will naturally arise between various individuals and groups over who has the right to use those scarce resources. Rules must be formulated to forestall conflict and facilitate conflict-free relations.

What, then, is the solution? A vast number of proposals have been offered throughout history, but the one advanced here as the “correct” one, is based upon original appropriation, or homesteading, (to use John Locke’s phrase, “mixing one’s labour” with a previously unowned resource), private property rights and voluntary exchange. Any aggression against another individual’s person or property constitutes a crime; regardless of whether an individual is a member of ‘the state’ or not. To a libertarian, the taxman is no different than a robber, only that, in today’s world, the taxman ostensibly has legitimacy.

This – private property rights and its concomitant standard of nonaggression against other persons and property, are the cornerstones of libertarianism.

If one accepts this premise, then it becomes very difficult to reconcile government as an agency that can do *anything* to promote the liberty, prosperity and security of individuals. Nonetheless, advocates of limited government argue that there *is* a legitimate role for the state, while others believe that, not only is government legitimate, it should have a far more active role in the affairs of individuals. Both would likely affirm the desirability of freedom and liberty in society, so how can they arrive at such different conclusions as to the proper role of the state? The answer predominantly lies in one's definition of the term 'liberty.' Many see liberty in its 'positive' stance, while others see it in its 'negative' stance. The way in which one interprets the concept has tremendous implications for the form of state that one comes to advocate.

Classical liberals, very close on the spectrum to libertarians (the terms are virtually interchangeable), also believe in the primacy of the rights of the individual and his justly acquired private property. Freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, etc., are all examples of rights that classical liberals hold to be essential to a free society. They view freedom in its 'negative' stance – “freedom *from*” coercion. The ideal role for the state, then, is one in which interferes as little as possible in the lives of its citizens, with the state being strictly confined to a limited set of duties, namely, protecting individuals from domestic and foreign aggressors, upholding their rights to private property and arbitrating disputes.

In contrast to the classical liberal notion of liberty, social liberals regard liberty in its 'positive' sense: “freedom *to*,” that is, being free to use certain necessary resources to attain particular ends. They treat positive liberty as an enabling condition – all individuals should be free to achieve their potential, regardless of socioeconomic status, the “positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying,” in the words of Thomas Hill Green. In today's society, it is the state, then, that facilitates this process of helping those in society who are less fortunate and providing for a base level of equality of opportunity for people. Rather than being an institution that takes a non-interventionist approach to affairs that occur in its jurisdiction à la a classical liberal state, it is instead conceived of as an institution that is essential to safeguarding and securing people their positive liberties by providing various goods and services to individuals, e.g. healthcare, food, shelter, clothing, etc. The social liberal state, predicated as it is on the notion of positive liberty, will consequentially be far more interventionist and will enact ever increasing pieces of legislation to regulate economic and social relations.

As we can see, though, the 'positive liberty' of the social liberals requires positive obligations which necessarily entail violations of the 'negative liberty' of the classical

liberals. If one has a 'right' to education or a 'right' to healthcare, then others in society must be *forced* to provide for these 'rights'. Freedom *from* and freedom *to* are mutually exclusive positions. Those who advocate 'positive liberty' are in fact referring to opportunity or ability rather than freedom in its true sense.

But it is evident that today we live in a society where the positive conception of liberty is the dominant paradigm. Yes, the market may be effective at increasing certain metrics of social progress, but it needs constant direction, control and regulation. Free markets will lead to mass inequality and will create social turmoil. However, this argument is not borne out by the facts. The empirical case for freedom and that it will lead to prosperity is supported by research carried out by, for example, the Vancouver based Fraser Institute which annually publishes an Economic Freedom of the World Report. Their research shows that there is a positive correlation between economic freedom and GDP per capita; economic growth; foreign direct investment; environmental performance; life expectancy and infant mortality; political rights and civil liberties.

Looking back at history up to the present day, the argument that constitutions and governmental checks and balances can restrain the power of the state and protect individuals and their property truly appears to be illusory. How much more evidence do we need to confirm Thomas Jefferson's claim that "the natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground"? If we value such things as freedom and liberty and the accompanying rising standards of living that they bring, then what is needed is for a wholesale re-examination of what the role of government should be in society. This cannot be left to the few, but must be taken up by all. The future of our civilization depends on it.