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Morality Requires Choice

by Scott McPherson

Welfare-state advocates like to pass moral judgments on those of us who oppose their leftist ideals of socialism, redistribution, and “economic justice.” Allegedly, we lack “compassion” and “sensitivity” and are “selfish” and “mean-spirited.” Therefore we are promoting a society without reference to basic moral principles — as defined by the political left.

Unfortunately, many of us who take a hard line against any form of government safety net tend to fall into a trap when challenged on our absolutist position against government charity. When confronted with the ethics of socialism, we counter that capitalism is a superior economic system that elevated human beings out of the muck and mire of centuries to a standard of living unprecedented in the history of the world. This is undoubtedly true. Still, it’s not the first argument we ought to be making.

Morality is ultimately a question of choice. When leftists argue that their “moral” positions regarding public schools, welfare, socialized medicine, or progressive taxation are more sound than ours, and therefore deserve to be supported by government, we should ask a simple question: What is morality? Morality, simply put, is the ethical code we each choose to guide us in our daily lives, in accordance with our respective values. Note that the root of this definition lies in the verb “choose.”

When welfare-statists talk about the alleged virtues behind their proposed system, they fail to realize that a policy of imposed ethics is anything but ethical. Ordinary people make the choice in their daily lives to give to charities, donate time and money to schools, mentor children, open businesses, or protest against animal cruelty. *These* are moral choices. However, when these same policies are promoted using the force of government, they nullify any claim to choice, and therefore morality, altogether.

Every person who hopes to function rationally in a society has to make choices every minute of the day. The sum of our choices can fairly be said to define our particular “morality.” Using the government to force others to behave in a certain way is not morality, by any stretch of the imagination. It is the antithesis of morality. It may come as a bit of a surprise to our leftist brethren, but this fact applies even when the motive is pure.

Proposing that those of us who oppose the welfare state are in any way “immoral” lacks logical credibility. Morality requires choice, which means the right to choose differently from our fellows, or even wrongly.

How, then, does such an approach to morality deal with the murderer, who may choose to kill people? Does his particular “morality” deserve respect as well? Like the use of government force, private force is a negation of choice, not an extension of it. One cannot claim to be acting in the name of morality when imposing his will by force. The purpose of government, then, is not to make people moral, but to make morality possible by discouraging the use of force in human relationships.

A natural progression from this point is to show that a society that leaves people free to make their respective moral choices unfettered by government imposition actually produces results superior to a system of coercion. The proof is in the explosion in material wealth and charitable activity that took place in 19th-century America, when government welfare and regulations were minimal.

If the leftist genuinely wishes for a moral society based on “compassion,” he has to allow for those who are not compassionate. Whatever else can be said about a welfare state, it cannot be said to be moral.

As we start this new year, let us each understand that morality begins with personal choice. That is the heart of libertarian principles: as long as my choices do not forcefully interfere with yours, we each should be left alone to find our respective paths to happiness and contentment. What could be more moral than that?

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