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Rights & Duties, Left & Right

by Tibor R. Machan

It is interesting that both the Right and the Left complain about the American (Lockean) political tradition because it emphasizes individual rights and not responsibilities or duties. The complaint is ill founded, however.

First, a regime of individual rights does directly imply legal responsibilities or duties, albeit of a limited sort. If all human beings have a right to their lives, liberties, etc., this implies that everyone has the legally enforceable duty to abstain from violating these rights.

If violations do occur, sanctions may be applied. And in a complex society those responsibilities are quite complicated, though they involve mostly not doing things to people rather than doing things for them.

Yet, implicit in a regime of individual rights is also the idea that citizens have innumerable familial, fraternal, professional, and related responsibilities. These, however, are either ethical and thus not subject to legal enforcement, or contractual, in which case whether one assumes them is itself a free choice of a citizen.

What critics fail to heed is that duties that are carried out because the legal authorities threaten averse repercussions if they aren't are of no moral significance at all. If citizens provide support for their fellows because if they do not, they will go to jail, this does not improve anyone's moral character and does not add to the moral quality of the society. Quite the opposite—a totalitarian approach to conduct sets in whereby citizens do not have to cultivate their virtues but merely obey authorities. It is difficult to imagine that anyone, Right or Left, interested in improving the ethics of a society's population would find satisfaction with such a result.

So the complaint about the idea underlying the Lockean regime of individual rights not making room for responsibilities in our lives is entirely off base. If there is any political system that makes room for our innumerable moral responsibilities in life, it is the Lockean individualist kind because only in such a system are citizens free to make the choice to do the right thing. Of course, this also means they are free to choose badly, but that is part of the human condition. We have free will and to exercise it involves the risk that we may not do so properly.

But to substitute the government, whether representative or dictatorial, for the citizen's own moral conscience or lack thereof is antithetical to a civilized human community.

Here is where both Left and Right are so much alike. Both want people to behave right and differ mostly on which areas of life they want to ethically micromanage. The Left wants us all to be generous and charitable toward those in need, those less fortunate than others, those who may through their own fault or without fault fall behind in life or have never gotten ahead in the first place. Generosity, charity, philanthropy, compassion, and such are what the Left wants from us all and if it isn't forthcoming in sufficient abundance, the Left will readily send out the bureaucrats and the police to make sure we all do the right thing by their lights.

The Right is no different from this except in where lies its priority.

Piety, humility, spirituality, prudence, religiosity, honor, valor, and similar virtues stand at the forefront of what the Right demands of us all and if we do not deliver, the Right is just as willing to regiment us to fall in line with its vision of propriety as the Left. And they are willing to call in the bureaucracy and police just as readily as the Left to make sure the citizenry complies.

Censoring, banning, and regimenting are exactly what both Left and Right advocate and, of course, the Lockean individualist regime stands in their way. Why? Because the Lockean tradition leaves morality to individual choice. Not what is moral but whether individuals will do what is moral.

That is the nature of freedom. That is what a free society ensures for its citizenry. And that is what neither Left nor Right has any patience for—they both distrust persuasion, education, proselytization, peer pressure, and other peaceful means of inducing their fellows to do the right thing. They distrust us fundamentally, yet somehow trust themselves to be wise and virtuous in the midst of all this human imperfection.

That is one reason one finds both the Left and the Right so fond of utopian visions, since they commonly promise to set everything aright from above. As if those "above" were superhuman. But, of course, they are not and so the power they gain quickly corrupts them and the result is that human community life turns out to be a disaster, nothing like the glorious vision Left and Right wishes to bring to fruition.

Let's trust the Lockean tradition, even if its promise is modest. It can actually be fulfilled and come off as quite civilized and just, contrary to its critics' contentions.

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