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Reform or Repeal? **by Jacob G. Hornberger**

The great methodological debate within the libertarian movement involves reform versus repeal. Libertarians are virtually unanimous in their opposition to such socialist welfare-state programs as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and public schooling, but the split occurs in how to confront programs such as these. Should libertarians call for their reform or their repeal?

As long-time readers of *Freedom Daily* and supporters of The Future of Freedom Foundation know, ever since our inception in 1990 we have steadfastly focused on advocating the repeal, not the reform, of socialistic welfare-state programs. There are two reasons for this. First, we remain unconvinced that reform gradually leads to repeal, as many advocates of reform claim. Second, and more important, we continue to maintain that it is only repeal, not reform, that is consistent with fundamental moral principles.

Consider, for example, public (i.e., government) schooling, one of the best examples of socialism one could find, which is why it is not a coincidence that the Cuban communist dictator, Fidel Castro, considers public schooling in Cuba one of his proudest achievements.

With public schooling, the state centrally plans, in a top-down, command-and-control manner, the educational decisions of multitudes of children. Attendance is mandatory as a result of state compulsory-attendance laws. Through school taxes, money is taken from everyone, even those who don't have children, to fund the schooling of those who do.

How can any of this be reconciled with basic moral principles? Isn't it moral that families decide the particular education they desire for each of their children? Or, to put it another way, how can it be considered moral for the state to mandate, on pain of fine and imprisonment, that parents send their children to state-approved institutions to receive state-approved education from state-approved schoolteachers using state-approved textbooks? Isn't it moral that parents have the right to raise their children in their own way?

One could easily make the argument that religious education is much more important, for purposes of both this world and the next one, than secular education. Yet we don't permit the state to force parents to send their children to church or even to inculcate them with basic

religious principles. Most Americans would recoil at the suggestion that the state should mandate a basic religious education for all the children in the nation. It is moral to leave that matter under the control of the family, even if each family's decisions are different from those of every other family.

That is to say, it is moral that people be free to make peaceful choices even if the choices they end up making are considered immoral by others. Conversely, it is immoral to force someone to make a certain peaceful choice, even if the choice is considered moral by most people. Thus, the concept of morality is inextricably linked with the concept of freedom.

Voucher reform plans

The most popular public-schooling reform plan involves vouchers. Under this plan, the state distributes a voucher to parents who wish to send their children to a private school. The parents use the voucher to pay the tuition or other expenses at the private school.

Voucher proponents claim that their plan is beneficial for two primary reasons: One, it enables many parents to take their children out of the public schools and put them in better schools and, two, it is a step toward ultimately getting rid of public schools.

However, even if we accept the validity of these two arguments, the adoption of a voucher program still leaves a fundamentally immoral program in place. That is, the day after the voucher program is implemented, the state is still taking money from one person and giving it to another person. Moreover, the state is still in overall charge of children's education, even those who are being educated in government-approved ways outside of public schools.

So even if it is true that a child is better off in a private school than in a public school, the voucher proponent is faced with an immoral outcome because the process by which the change is funded — i.e., taxing someone without children and giving the money to someone who does have children — remains fundamentally immoral.

Of course, there is also something perverse about a person's celebrating the return to him of a portion of the money that was taxed from him in the first place, especially when he doesn't challenge why it was taken from him in the first place. That is, rather than taxing people and giving them a refund through vouchers, why not simply leave people free to keep their money and decide for themselves how best to utilize it? For those who suggest that parents can't be trusted with such responsibility, I ask, Why aren't they sufficiently responsible to make such decisions — aren't most of them graduates of public schools?

It's not really clear that voucher plans will lead to a demise of government control over education. For one thing, schools that decide to accept vouchers will have a competitive advantage over those that don't, possibly causing some of those who don't accept vouchers to go out of business.

Moreover, ask yourself an important question: What are the chances that a school accepting vouchers is ever going to call for an end to the voucher program, especially when its budget, including hiring and building expenses, is based on continuing to receive the government vouchers?

Indeed, what are the chances that libertarian voucher proponents themselves will soon call for an end to their program in order to finally rid society of state involvement in the educational process? After the adoption of a voucher program, wouldn't they have a vested interest in making it succeed, at least in the short run? Wouldn't people wonder why they're calling for an end to state involvement in education, including the termination of the voucher system, soon after persuading people to adopt it?

In fact, oftentimes what happens to voucher proponents is that they become so scared that people are going to accuse them of trying to destroy public schooling that their arguments begin to gradually shift toward the suggestion that vouchers will actually improve and strengthen the public-school system.

Furthermore, the arguments in favor of a voucher plan are quite different from those for repeal. With vouchers, the proponent inevitably spends his time showing how a voucher will improve the life of the voucher recipient by removing him from the public-school system and placing him in the private-school system.

Calling for repeal, on the other hand, entails placing an entirely different set of arguments into a person's mind, such as: Why should the state have any more role in education than it has in religion? Why shouldn't families have the same control over raising their children in secular education that they have in religious education? How can forcing people to fund the education of other people's children be reconciled with basic principles of morality?

In other words, calling for repeal causes people to confront the moral issues directly. Calling for reform allows them to avoid doing so.

Social Security reform plans

The analysis is no different with respect to Social Security, arguably the crown jewel of the socialistic welfare state. Would the various Social Security reform plans that have been submitted make people's lives better off? Perhaps, just as IRAs and 401Ks have made people comparatively better off by enabling them to save more money than they would have been able to save in the absence of such tax-relief programs. But what's important to keep in mind is that what is left after these types of reforms have been enacted (i.e., an income-tax system in which the amount retained depends on the benevolence of government officials) is not freedom and cannot be reconciled with principles of morality.

After the adoption of a Social Security reform plan, isn't the state still in overall charge of people's income and retirement? What's moral about that? Doesn't morality entail the right to make one's own decisions about his own income and expenditures?

In other words, doesn't morality entail earning your own money and then deciding what to do with it, even if your decisions conflict with those of other people? Doesn't morality entail the right to make the choice?

As most everyone is now discovering, Social Security tax revenues were never put into a "lockbox" or a fund but instead have been spent by the government upon receipt. From the very beginning, Social Security has been nothing more than a welfare program, just like food stamps, farm subsidies, and foreign aid, programs whereby government officials forcibly take money from one person and give it to another person. What's moral about that?

Yet most Social Security reform plans leave that immoral tax-and-welfare principle in place. Such plans also implicitly endorse the very notion that the government has a legitimate role to play in managing people's retirement. How can that be reconciled with morality? Indeed, how can it be reconciled with freedom?

In fact, doesn't freedom entail the right to be irresponsible, so long as it doesn't involve the infliction of force on another person? For example, consider a person who has become a millionaire in the marketplace. His parents get sick and ask their son for assistance, and he turns his back on them. While we might criticize the man for doing that, isn't that what free will and free choice are all about? That is, doesn't freedom entail the right to say "No, I will not honor my mother and my father"? How can forcing a person to do "the right thing" be reconciled with basic principles of morality and freedom?

Furthermore, as we see with voucher plans, calling for Social Security reform inevitably entails a different set of arguments than calling for repeal of Social Security entails. Advocates of reform will inevitably center their arguments around how their plan will make people's lives better off compared to the status quo and sometimes they'll even argue that their reform will actually save Social Security.

Thus, a person who listens to arguments for reform will tend to focus on how his retirement situation can be improved under a different type of state management. A person who listens to arguments for repeal will go home asking why government should be controlling people's income and retirement in the first place.

While reform plans can indeed improve the lives of certain people who are suffering the consequences of socialist programs, the plans should not be confused with either morality or freedom. They are simply ways to make socialism more palatable for people but they remain nothing more than reforms of socialism. In order to achieve a society based on morality and freedom, repeal is necessary.

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