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# The Voluntaryist

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*"If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself"*

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## Auberon Herbert

by Wendy McElroy

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In his periodical *Liberty* (May 23, 1885), the quintessential American individualist-anarchist Benjamin Tucker wrote of his British counterpart, Auberon Herbert, "I know of no more inspiring spectacle in England than that of this man of exceptionally high social position doing battle almost single-handed with the giant monster, government, and showing in it a mental rigor and vigor and a wealth of moral fervor rarely equaled in any cause."

Auberon Edward William Molyneux Herbert (1838–1906) was born into the ruling class. As the son of the 3rd Earl of Carnarvon and brother to the 4th earl, Herbert attended both Eton College, which has traditionally been called "the chief nurse of England's statesmen" and St. John's College, Oxford. He ran unsuccessfully for Parliament as a Conservative and later served as a Liberal in the House of Commons for Nottingham in the early 1870s. There, his sympathy for working people was evident through the support he rendered to fellow-politician Joseph Arch in the goal of forming the National Agricultural Labourers' Union. Upon meeting the individualist philosopher Herbert Spencer in 1873, however, Herbert became cemented in his decision not to seek re-election. In an essay posthumously published in his book *The Voluntaryist Creed* (Oxford University Press, 1908), Herbert explained Spencer's impact upon him:

As I read and thought over what he taught, a new window was opened in my mind. I lost my faith in the great machine [government]; I saw that thinking and acting for others had always hindered not helped the real progress; that all forms of compulsion deadened the living forces in a nation; that every evil violently stamped out still persisted, almost always in a worse form, when driven out of sight, and festered under the surface. I no longer believed that the handful of us however well-intentioned we might be spending our nights in the House, could manufacture the life of a nation, could endow it out of hand with happiness, wisdom and prosperity, and clothe it in all the virtues.

Herbert fully embraced the radical individualism Spencer expressed in his brief work *The Man versus the*

*State* (1884). In the *Illustrated London News* (February 15, 1936) English author G.K. Chesterton wrote,

Herbert Spencer really went as far as he could in the direction of Individualism... He left only the gallant and eccentric Auberon Herbert to go one step further; and practically propose that we should abolish the police; and merely insure ourselves against thieves and assassins, as against fire and accident.

Herbert also began to argue vigorously against the privileges of his own class. His book *A Politician in Trouble about his Soul* (1884), issued by the prestigious Chapman and Hall, who also published Charles Dickens, was dedicated to "The Workmen of Nottingham." In the dedication, he wrote,

May the day come, for us and for every other nation, when the politician, as we know him at present, shall be numbered amongst the fossils of the past, when we shall cease to desire to rule each other either by force or by trick, when we shall dread for the sake of our own selves the possession of power, when we shall recognize that there are such things as universal rights....

Published by mainstream periodicals such as *Nineteenth Century*, *The Humanitarian*, and *Fortnightly Review*, Herbert became the most influential British libertarian of his time. Today, however, he is perhaps best remembered for popularizing Voluntaryism - a political tradition maintaining that all human interaction should be voluntary - rejects the initiation of force. The only justification for force is self-defense, including the defense of property.

### The role of government

To the extent there is debate about Herbert's beliefs, the focus is generally upon whether he was an anarchist. He consistently rejected the label. He wrote,

My charge against Anarchism is that it sees many forms of crime existing in the world, and it refuses to come to any settled opinion as to what it will do in the matter. If it says it will do nothing, then we must live under the reign of the murderer...; if it says it will have some form of local jury, then we are back into government again at once.

By contrast, "[in] voluntaryism the state employs force only to repel force — to protect the person and the property of the individual against force and fraud; under

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# The Voluntaryist

Editor: Carl Watner

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## Taxation Is Theft

By Chris R. Tame

If a thug were to accost you in the street and demand your wallet or purse, you wouldn't hesitate in knowing what to call it - theft!

If a group of thugs were to demand at least one third of your income every month and threaten dire consequences if you didn't accept their offer of "protection", you wouldn't hesitate in knowing what to call it - theft!

Yet you are robbed every day. Every month at least one third of your income *is* taken from you forcibly, without your consent. It is taken by the government. And yes, even if only a few realise it, that too is theft!

For just how does government differ from a mugger? Why is the state's "protection" racket different from that of any other gangster? Both conform to my dictionary's definition of theft - the seizure of individuals' property without their consent. The only difference is that the government is less honest than its private competitors in crime. At least a thief doesn't claim to be committing his crime for your own good, to be performing a desirable social service in "the public interest."

### Is Taxation Necessary?

But is taxation necessary, as most people believe? Do we need to pay taxes to enjoy such services as medical care, roads, postal deliveries, railways, police protection, and so on?

Imagine a local tradesman driving all his competitors out of town at gunpoint. He then regularly robs his neighbours but, "in return", does deliver some groceries (of very low quality) and performs a few tasks (very badly) like mowing their lawns. His "customers" would feel sceptical about the value of the services the tradesman was so graciously providing and which at the same time he was preventing anyone else from supplying.

So it is with government. Why can't we be allowed to keep our money, and purchase whatever goods and services we desire from those who offer to supply them? What has the government got to be afraid of if it feels that it alone can provide these numerous services it currently monopolises? Competition would show up what a rotten deal state services were, and destroy the myth that there are "public" goods which can be provided only

by state monopoly.

Red tape, inefficiency, featherbedding, sky-rocketing prices and plunging quality - these are the characteristics of all state services, from the Post Office and railways to the police and law courts.

A free market can provide all those services which have for so long been seen as the province of the state. Among the many facts you *won't* have been taught by the state education system is that throughout history there are numerous instances of private enterprise supplying everything from roads, schools and hospitals, to currency, police protection and law courts.

Yet repeatedly the state, to erect and preserve its own bungling monopolies, has crushed by force any successful and efficient competitors who have truly served the public.

### What About The Needy?

But what about those in need? Isn't taxation justified to help the poor, the aged, the sick, and all those who can't help themselves? Most people would feel sceptical if the thief who was robbing them claimed he was performing a moral act because he needed the money. Would you feel morally obliged to co-operate with his forced re-distribution of wealth? What is the difference when the government does this on a massive scale, when it hands out your hard-earned money to anyone who it proclaims in need?

No, even those who truly can't help themselves do not have a right to help themselves to the contents of your pocket by virtue of their need. For how can you be considered free if you have no right to all the fruits of your labour, to distribute as you wish-if everyone "in need" has the right to be supported by you, whether you consent or not? Helping others at your expense is a choice which should be made by you alone. And such a choice is made by millions of people every day, without being forced into it by the state.

No one has the right to point a gun at you and demand your help, your money, whether it be an individual or a government. There would be far fewer needy people if the government allowed us to keep our money and make our own provision for sickness and old age; if it ceased to devalue our money and our savings by inflating the currency; if it stopped making us pay through the nose for its services and allowed us free choice, and if it no longer stifled prosperity and economic growth by its perpetual meddling and bestowing of privileges such as subsidies and protective tariffs.

The so-called welfare state is a con-trick. It perpetuates the poverty which the free market would ultimately eradicate. The few who really can't help themselves would be assisted by the many voluntary charities resulting from the natural co-operation and benevolence which abound in a society based on production, not predation.

### Who Profits?

But although it is important to reject resolutely the

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morality of coercive altruism invoked to justify taxation, it is equally important to realise that this morality constitutes an ideological disguise for certain fundamental economic and political interests. It is not the needy who do the taxing; it is the state. And it is the state and the powerful groups which support it who profit from taxation, not the ordinary people. One's suspicions ought to be aroused by the fact that if aiding the poor were really the motivation for taxation, giving them cash directly would seem the obvious form of help. Forcing everyone, rich and poor, to receive a standardised state-monopolised product, is really cumbersome. A system of cash payments to the poor is favoured by liberals like Milton Friedman and the Institute of Economic Affairs. Yet socialists and public sector unions recoil in horror!

State monopoly provision of welfare and social services provides politicians and bureaucrats with power over the mass of people. In some cases it enables them to practice other direct invasions of freedom. The reluctance of any government to denationalise the Post Office has not a little to do with its enormous machinery of letter-opening and phonetapping.

State education in schools and universities also enables the state to instill a common ideology into the population, an impossible task if private schools run by individuals and groups with differing viewpoints competed for customers. Likewise the state ensures mass loyalty to itself by giving the impression to people that it is "their" state, one which looks after its citizens by providing free services (the "social wage" as some Labourites like to put it) they would otherwise not receive.

And there are those big and small businesses, financial and agricultural interests, who are ceaseless recipients of subsidies, grants and contracts from the state. Welfare statism is simply the mask which conceals the reality behind interventionist governments - the struggle for privileges and subsidies at the expense of consumers and taxpayers.

Since the poor as a whole pay enough in taxes to buy their "free" services, the real beneficiaries of taxation are predatory economic interests (and, of course, parasites employed by the state machine - the welfare workers, statist academics, civil servants, etc.). In the political struggle in California over Howard Jarvis's tax-cutting Proposition 13, big business and financial interests almost universally opposed the proposition.

In fact, taxation is identical to so many other state interventions in the economy allegedly designed to help the poor - it actually does the reverse. Instead of "redistributing wealth", taxation *freezes* wealth. While the wealthy might indeed lose a little, the poor proportionally lose far more. Taxation thus hinders individuals and new enterprises from accumulating wealth and capital, and hence challenging or displacing established businesses. Even where some wealth may be given to the poor immediately, taxation so distorts

the market that in the long run there is less to go round for everyone.

Businessmen rarely favour *laissez-faire*. They generally support (even initiate) interventionist economic policies traditionally considered "socialist". While the position is less clear regarding taxation, we certainly have evidence that the most sophisticated business and financial interests support income tax as a means of maintaining their own relative economic position against competition.

The rich (and most definitely the "super-rich") are able to protect substantial proportions of their wealth by complicated avoidance schemes: charitable foundations and other means. It should come as no surprise that the Rockefellers pay less income-tax than the average American worker, or that the Vestey's paid almost no tax on a large chunk of their vast wealth.

### **Who Loses?**

The idea that the rich are taxed to provide for the "poor" is a naive fallacy. That the majority can profit significantly from the expropriation of a small minority needs only a little elementary arithmetic to reveal its actuarial absurdity. Moreover, Central Statistical Office figures show that people with low-to-middle incomes receive in social benefits about as much as they actually pay in taxes, rates and social insurance. And this doesn't take into account indirect taxation and the hidden tax of inflation.

The majority of people are thus mulcted of their money, which is partly returned to them by the state in the form of "free" and increasingly shoddy services far inferior to those they could have purchased in a free market. The shoddiness of state services like the National Health Service is an inevitable consequence of the political, economic and social forces embodied in them. Once the dignity of the cash nexus is removed between buyer and seller - patient and doctor - then the former gets treated as a bothersome supplicant by the latter. This is exacerbated by the fact that in the absence of the cash nexus the middle-class doctor tends to misunderstand or be contemptuous of his "lower-class" patients. Middle-class patients are generally treated better, and have the requisite skills to manipulate the system for their own ends.

The provision of "free services" creates an unlimited demand which overloads the system. People suffer and even die unnecessarily as the queues for operations get ever longer. Rationing by waiting list replaces rationing by market price.

Who profits and who loses? The mass of ordinary working class people have everything to gain by the abolition of taxation; the economic and political parasites have everything to lose.

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## Auberon Herbert

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voluntaryism the state would defend the rights of liberty, never aggress upon them.”

In short, Herbert believed defensive force and the protection of property were legitimate roles for government or “a central agency.” The government would be financed solely by a “voluntary tax.” Payees would gain the privilege of voting; nonpayees would not have the franchise but could set up their own associations. Herbert doubted they would do so because the benefits of a “central agency” would be apparent to all. Thus, he called himself a “governmentalist” and, in 1879, once more attempted to join the House of Commons but failed.

The focus on the anarchism question loses the true importance of the man. During decades of toil for liberty, Herbert was one of the most influential anti-war voices in England; he was an eloquent and unique advocate of the working man; he acted as a foil to the emerging power of socialism; and, he argued against the worst aspects of 19th-century American libertarianism, including its rejection of capitalism, especially in the form of rent and interest. Although it is speculation, Herbert’s presence at the head of British libertarianism may have been what kept that movement on course in terms of embracing sound economic theory.

The foundation of Herbert’s political convictions was “the rights of self-ownership” which “express the limits of rightful and wrongful action.” These were the natural rights that a person had over his own body and the products thereof (property) against which no one else could properly aggress. Since they were based in man’s nature, these rights were possessed in equal measure by every man. Herbert declared, “If we are self-owners (and it is absurd, it is doing violence to reason, to suppose that we are not), neither an individual, nor a majority, nor a government can have rights of ownership in other men.”

**“The way of force and strife”**

Herbert argued with particular vigor against the idea of majority rule, saying that “what one man cannot morally do, a million men cannot morally do, and government, representing many millions of men, cannot do.” Regarding the phrase “the good of the greatest number,” Herbert exclaimed,

There never was invented a more specious and misleading phrase. The Devil was in his most subtle and ingenious mood when he slipped this phrase into the brains of men.... It assumes that there are two opposed “goods,” and that the one good is to be sacrificed to the other good — but ... liberty is the one good, open to all, and requiring no sacrifice of others; this false opposition (where no real opposition exists) of two different goods means perpetual war between men — the larger number being forever incited to

trample on the smaller number. I can only ask: Why are 2 men to be sacrificed to 3 men? We all agree that the 3 men are not to be sacrificed to the 2 men; but why — as a matter of moral right — are we to do what is almost as bad and immoral and shortsighted — sacrifice the 2 men to the 3 men?... [Liberty] does away with all necessity of sacrifice.” (*Free Life*, July 1898)

Herbert expressed his rejection of majority rule and “tribalism” through his active opposition to war. In the introduction to the 1978 edition of *The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State*, the philosopher Eric Mack observed,

Following Spencer’s distinction between industrial and militant societies, Herbert continually emphasized the differences between two basic modes of interpersonal coordination. There is the “way of peace and cooperation” founded upon respect for self-ownership and the demand for only voluntary association. And there is the “way of force and strife” founded upon either the belief in the ownership of some by others or the simple reverence of brute force.

War was the pure expression of “the way of force and strife.” Herbert’s anti-war sentiments had a long history. Like many British aristocrats, he had held commissions in the army and served in India; in letters home, he criticized the British occupation.

During the Prusso-Danish war (1864), he spent time observing action near the front line and was subsequently decorated by the Danish government for rendering aid to the wounded. He also directly observed the American Civil War (1861–1865), of which he wrote, “I am very glad that slavery is done away with, but I think the manner is very bad and wrong.”

In the 1870s, “jingoism” swept England in reaction to the Russo-Turkish War. Jingoism is extreme patriotism coupled with an aggressive foreign policy. The term came from the chorus of a popular pub song: “We don’t want to fight but by Jingo if we do/We’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, we’ve got the money too/We’ve fought the Bear before, and while we’re Britons true/The Russians shall not have Constantinople.”

When the jingoists organized anti-Russia rallies in Hyde Park, Herbert became a driving force in organizing anti-jingoist ones. His anti-war stance was not only visceral from having witnessed the savagery of war, but also ideological. Mack explained,

Herbert repeatedly took anti-imperialist stands. He consistently called for Irish self-determination. In the early 1880s, he opposed British intervention in Egypt as a use of the power of the nation to guarantee the results of particular speculations. And, later, he opposed the Boer War.

Herbert was also cognizant that wars benefited the ruling class at the expense of common men, who were overwhelmingly the ones to fight and die.

### **Herbert and the working man**

On other issues, Auberon Herbert predictably sided with working people. In 1869, he acted as one of the presidents of the first national Co-operative Congress. As its name suggests, the Co-operative movement focused on establishing cooperative societies and arrangements, such as mutual insurance agencies.

When Herbert's *Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State* first appeared, Benjamin Tucker reviewed it in *Liberty* (May 23, 1885). The book, he explained, "consists of a series of papers written for Joseph Cowen's paper, the Newcastle *Chronicle*, supplemented by a letter to the London *Times* on the English factory acts. Dedicated to Mr. Cowen's constituents, 'The Workmen of Tyneside,' it appeals with equal force to workmen the world over, and their welfare and their children's will depend upon the readiness with which they accept and the bravery with which they adhere to its all-important counsel."

#### **"Man Cannot Escape Choice"**

Choice cannot be avoided. I choose when I fail to choose or when I refuse to choose. Failure or refusal to choose constitutes a deliberate and voluntary decision as much as a preference for rosebuds over carnations or an election between euthanasia and life. Man cannot escape choice, nor can he avoid its consequences. Choice pervades life and one cannot elude his responsibility by the affirmation that the decision represents the product of some group, committee, or state. If I commit theft by taking value created by my neighbor by force or duress, I must bear the consequences of that conduct; I cannot hide behind the alibi that the majority of voters somehow sanctioned this looting. No association or committee need answer for its conduct; only individuals incur that burden. Which is to say that every act of choosing incurs moral consequences for which the individual is responsible.

- Ridgway K. Foley, Jr., "Choice or Chains,"  
THE FREEMAN, April 1974, p. 203.

In 1877, as an outward manifestation of his support of labor, Herbert founded the Personal Rights and Self-Help Association that opposed the increasingly popular socialist "solution" to labor. Whereas the socialists called for more laws, especially factory legislation, the Personal Rights Association advocated the repeal of laws and called for free trade as the way to empower labor. The "Self-Help" aspect of the Association referred to the working man's need to protect himself through voluntary association rather than authority. In advocating free trade, Herbert went so far as

to defend sweatshop owners (sweaters), who were almost universally reviled by the co-operative movement. He wrote,

The sweater may or may not be a very evil person, but he has no power to compel those he employs to accept his terms. He is not a user of force. You have therefore no moral right to employ force against him.... But apart from the moral argument, it is stupid in such a case to use force.... [It] is the circumstances that compel those in the sweater's employment to accept the hard conditions. Is there not then something very left-handed in employing force against the sweater himself, who, as is confessed, is not the cause of the evil? The cause of the evil is in the circumstances, and it is in the circumstances that a remedy must be found. (*Free Life*, July 1898)

At podiums across England and in prominent publications, Herbert argued against other core ideas of socialism. For example, he dissected the concept of the state or society as being an independent organism in which individuals functioned as limbs or muscle; in essence, the socialists were denying the independent existence of individuals. In an early expression of methodological individualism, Herbert claimed the opposite was true.

The State is created by the individuals. It is fashioned and re-fashioned by them at their own will and pleasure ... for their use and service, and when it does not satisfy their requirements, they pull it to pieces and reconstruct it. Men throughout their lives are included in many wholes.... Schools, colleges, clubs, associations, joint stock companies, co-operative companies, political parties, village or town organisations, and then lastly comes national organisation or the State; but in all these cases, the organisation is created by the individuals themselves.... [How] is it possible for any constructed and reconstructed thing to be greater than those who construct it and reconstruct it? To indulge in any such imagination is to imitate the carver of idols, who, when with his own hands he has fashioned the log of wood, falls on his knees before it and calls it his god. (*Free Life*, July 1898)

### **Objections to Herbert**

Prominent socialists struck back. The economist and democratic socialist J.A. Hobson wrote a harsh critique of Herbert in the *Humanitarian*, entitled "A Rich Man's Anarchism," echoing the accusation of anarchism and attacking Herbert's defense of private property as a ploy to enslave the poor to the rich. During the 1890s, both Hobson and the socialist E. Belfort Bax engaged in lengthy published debates with Herbert, returning again and again to attacks based on Herbert's advocacy of private

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property and to ad hominem accusing him of anarchism.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Tucker agreed with the “accusation” of anarchism but praised Herbert for it. The matter on which he took Herbert to task was his embrace of laissez-faire capitalism. Along with most other 19th-century American libertarians, Tucker accepted the labor theory of value, which claims that the value of a good results solely from the labor and the basic costs required to produce it. If a capitalist subsequently takes the good and sells it for twice what he pays the laborer, then the resulting profit is a form of theft. Tucker also considered charging interest on money to be usury. He believed the remedy was free banking and the elimination of all state support for business, including monopoly privileges. He opposed the charging of rent on the grounds that people did not rightfully own property they did not occupy.

To Herbert, selling goods for profit and charging interest on money were naturally occurring market phenomena that would exist whether or not the state did. The practice of collecting rent was an extension of ownership, which did not require constant use or occupation to be legitimate. Interestingly enough, although Herbert was baited repeatedly on that issue within *Liberty*, especially by the periodical’s sometimes co-editor Victor Yarros, Herbert — usually an ardent debater — chose not to respond.

After a fire destroyed Tucker’s offices in 1907, he left for Europe, and an era of America libertarianism ended. The same can be said of British libertarianism with the death of Herbert in 1906.

Shortly before his death, Herbert declared, “I venture to prophesy that there lies before us a bitter and an evil time.” He spoke not merely of the rapid rise of socialism. An avid observer of military matters, Herbert undoubtedly saw the early stirrings of World War I, which would erupt in 1914. It would sweep away the last remnants of classical liberalism in England and devastate a generation of young men. Herbert’s focus on the terrible impact that violence has upon those who commit it meant there could be no victors emerging from such a conflict.

Referring to the “victory” of three men who use force against two others, Herbert wrote,

Nothing can be worse for the 3 men. To be told that for your convenience the rights of others are not to count must corrupt and make a beast of you. It is an untrue exaltation of yourself that human nature cannot withstand.... That is mere paganism — the paganism of numbers; and from it we must extricate ourselves as quickly as may be, if our people are not to live blindly worshiping force, and with as much peace and harmony in their lives as there is for two cats cruelly and

wickedly tied together by their tails. (*Free Life*, July 1898)

Today, with wars and hate-mongering rampant, Herbert’s psychological insights on the brutalizing nature of force upon all involved are particularly poignant. If we spotlight only his unique anti-war arguments, a Herbert revival is merited.

Herbert himself must bear some responsibility for his current obscurity, however. He neglected to organize his philosophy into a systematic expression. Indeed, much of his writing occurred in an ephemeral periodical entitled *Free Life*, which he published — at first weekly and then monthly — from 1890 to 1901. Although an anthology of Herbert’s work, *The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State and Other Essays*, was published in 1978, much more is needed to restore the legacy of this thinker, whom the Austrian economist Richard M. Ebeling once called “one of the most important and articulate advocates of liberty in the last 200 years.” 

“In the long run, there is no short run.”

- Darryl Robert Schoon

## You Cannot Get Even

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morally our own is a principle that is rooted in our inalienable right to our lives. It is a property right that springs from our human rights and from the right to life itself. It is the right to restoration of the fruits of our efforts and labors of which we are deprived by deceit, force or any other immoral practice. It is a specific right to recovery or compensation from those who are wronging us or have injured us in the past.

This right to restoration does not beget the right to commit the very immoral act from which we seek restoration, to imitate others in acting immorally, or to seek revenge against the trespassers or innocent bystanders. But this is precisely what the “get-even” advisors urge us to do.

In an unfortunate automobile accident we are hurt or injured, or our vehicle may be damaged, because of the negligence of another driver. This gives us the right to demand restoration and compensation from the guilty party. But it does not give us the right to seize another car parked in the neighborhood, or return to the road and injure another driver. Or, our home is burglarized and we suffer deplorable losses in personal wealth and memorabilia. This does not bestow upon us the right to do likewise to others. But the “get-even” advocates are drawing this very conclusion.

He who is desirous of “getting even” in the politics of redistribution longs to join the army of beneficiaries who are presently preying on their victims. They would like to get their “money back” from whomever they can find and victimize now.

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Like the victim of a burglary who becomes a burglar himself, they are searching for other victims. But in contrast to the new burglar who may be aware of the immorality of his actions, the “get-even” advocate openly defends his motives while he is pursuing his political craft.

We cannot get even with those individuals who deprived us of our property in the past. They may have long departed this life or may have fallen among the victims themselves. We cannot get even with them by enlisting in the standing army of redistributors. We merely perpetuate the evil by joining their forces. So we must stand immune to the temptations of evil, regardless of what others are doing to us. The redistribution must stop with us.

The redistributive society has victimized many millions of people through confiscatory taxation, inflation and regulation. Government, acting as the political agency for coercive transfer, seized income and wealth from the more productive members and then redistributed the spoils to its beneficiaries. Although many millions of victims and beneficiaries were involved, which often obscures the morality of the issue, the forced transfer took place between certain individuals. It is true, the beneficiaries, who used political force to obtain the benefits, cannot easily be recognized in the mass process of transfer. But even if we could identify them and establish a personal right to restoration, our property has been consumed long ago. A vast army of beneficiaries, together with their legions of government officials and civil servants, consumed or otherwise squandered our substance. There is nothing to retrieve from the beneficiaries who probably are poorer than ever before, having grown weak and dependent on the transfer process.

When seen in this light, the get-even argument is nothing more than a declaration of intention to join the redistribution forces. It may be born from the primitive urge for revenge against government, state or society. But it is individuals who form a government, make a state and constitute a society. By taking revenge against some of them for the injuries suffered from the hands of others, I am merely reinforcing the evil.

Revenge is a common passion that enslaves man’s mind and clouds his vision. To the savage it is a noble aspiration that makes him even with his enemies. In a civilized society that is seeking peace and harmony it is a destructive force which law seeks to suppress. But when the law itself becomes an instrument of transfer, the primitive urge for revenge may burst forth as a demand for more redistribution. It becomes a primary force that gives rise to new demands or, at least, reinforces the popular demands for economic transfer. The common passion for revenge, no matter how well concealed, undoubtedly is an important motive power of social policy that leads a free society to its own destruction.

No wealth in the world and no political distribution of this wealth can purchase the peace and harmony so essential to human existence. Peace and harmony can be found only in moral elevation that reaches into every aspect of human life. A free society is the offspring of morality that guides the actions and policies of its members. To effect a rebirth of such a society is to revive the moral principles that gave it birth in the beginning. It is individual rebirth and rededication to the inexorable principles of morality that are the power and the might. The example of great individuals is useful to lead us on the way, for nothing is more contagious for greatness than the power of a great example.

To spearhead a rebirth of our free society let us rededicate ourselves to a new covenant of redemption, which is a simple restatement of public morality. In the setting of our age of economic redistribution and social conflict it may be stated as follows:

No matter how the transfer state may victimize me, I shall seek no transfer payments or accept any.

I shall seek no government grants, loans or other redistributive favors or accept any.

I shall seek no government orders on behalf of redistribution or accept any.

I shall seek no employment, or accept any, in the government apparatus of redistribution.

I shall seek no favors, or accept any, from the regulatory agencies of government.

I shall seek no protection from tariff barriers or any other institutional restrictions of trade and commerce.

I shall seek no services from, or lend support to, collective institutions that are creatures of redistribution.

I shall seek no support from, or give support to, associations that advocate or practice coercion and restraint.

We do not know whether our great republic will survive this century. If it can be saved, great men of conviction must lead the way—men who with religious fervor and unbounded courage resist all transfer temptations. The heroes of liberty are no less remarkable for what they suffer than for what they achieve. ▣

"[The] institution of the home is the one anarchist institution. ... [I]t is older than law, and stands outside the State."

- G. K. Chesterton, WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD (1910) in COLLECTED WORKS: FAMILY, SOCIETY, POLITICS (San Francisco; Ignatius Press, 1978, pp. 67, 72, and 257)

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## You Cannot Get Even

By Hans F. Sennholz

*[Editor's Note: Dr. Sennholz (1922-2007) taught economics at Grove City College, 1956-1992. After he retired, he became president of the Foundation for Economic Education, 1992-1997. This article appeared in THE FREEMAN, June 1978.]*

Government affects individual incomes by virtually every decision it makes. Agricultural programs, veterans' benefits, health and labor and welfare expenditures, housing and community development, federal expenditures on education, social insurance, medicare and medicaid programs, and last but not least, numerous regulations and controls affect the economic conditions of every citizen. In fact, modern government has become a universal transfer agency that utilizes the political process for distributing vast measures of economic income and wealth. It preys on millions of victims in order to allocate valuable goods and services to its beneficiaries. With the latter, transfer programs are so popular that few public officials and politicians dare oppose them.

The motive powers that drive the transfer order are as varied as human design itself. Surely, the true motives are often concealed, and a hollow pretext is pompously placed in the front for show. And yet, man is more accountable for his motives than for anything else. A good motive may exculpate a poor action, but a bad motive vitiates even the finest action. Conscience is merely

our own judgment of the right and wrong of our action, and therefore can never be a safe guide unless it is enlightened by a thorough understanding of the implications and consequences of our actions. Without an enlightened conscience we may do evil thoroughly and heartily.

An important spring of action for the transfer society is the desire by most people to get even in the redistribution struggle. "I have been victimized in the past by taxation, inflation, regulation, or other devices," so the argument goes, "therefore I am entitled to partake in this particular benefit." Or the time sequence may be reversed: "I'll be victimized later in life," pleads the college student, "and therefore I want state aid and subsidy now."

This argument is probably the most powerful pacifier of conscience. It dulls our perception and discernment of what is evil and makes us slow to shun it. After all, we are merely getting back "what is rightfully our own." With a curious twist of specious deduction the modern welfare state, which continually seizes and redistributes private property by force, is defended by the friends of individual liberty and private property. "Man is entitled to the fruits of his labor," they argue, "we are merely getting back that which is rightfully and morally our own." They borrow the arguments for the private property order to sustain the political transfer order.

Surely getting back that which is rightfully and

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