



Liberal Read

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Does the state have the right to coerce?

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Huemer

*The Problem of Political Authority:
An Examination of the Right to
Coerce and the Duty to Obey*

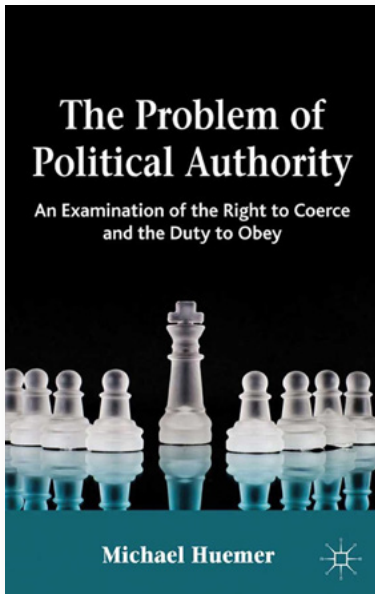
Palgrave Macmillan, 2013

By Adam Mazik

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

Does the state have the right to coerce?



What is political authority? Why is the state allowed to do certain things that no person or organisation can? Is there a logical explanation for this? And if not: what then?

Huemer starts his argumentation with a parable.¹ He makes you imagine living in a village with a crime problem – a group steals, loots, and commits violence without anyone's intervention. At some point, one villager decides to stop the madness and, armed with a gun, sets out to catch the criminals in order to imprison them in his basement for a couple of years. After some time, he goes to his neighbour and demands payment for his services in bringing down the level of crime in the village. Seeing the consternation on the neighbour's face, he adds that if they refuse to pay the fee, he will treat them as a criminal, and will use his gun to imprison them alongside the looters.

Huemer points out that the protagonist in this example acts like a rudimentary government. Yet, while most would deny him any right to the other villagers' money, they seem to accept the same thing from the government.²

This example is the 'Problem of Political Authority'. Why are a government's actions perceived as legitimate, while the vigilante is seen as an extortionist?³ And why do we have to obey?

According to Huemer, there are two ways to explain the different perception. One is that the government's actions are different; the other is that the agent, the government, is for some reason different and therefore has the right to act differently.⁴

The philosopher rejects the first possibility quickly, going through multiple modifications of the parable.⁵ For example, the situation would not change if the vigilante granted the criminals a fair procedure, like most modern governments do today, or if the vigilante created a publicly known set of rules that he would enact. His actions would still be seen as unjust and be widely rejected. Therefore, why are we treating the state differently than any other individual or entity?

1 Huemer, pp. 3–4.

2 Ibid., pp. 4–5.

3 Ibid., p. 5.

4 Ibid., pp. 7–8.

5 Ibid. pp. 7–8.

Theories legitimising political authority

The traditional social contract theory

There are two main versions of the traditional social contract theory, the explicit and implicit social contract. The traditional social contract theories assume that at some point in the past, people agreed to a contract giving away some of their sovereignty to the state and therefore political authority was created through a real agreement. Huemer rejects the theory quickly by pointing out that no government has ever been created in this way.⁶ The more realistic version is the implicit social contract. Proponents of these theories do not claim that there ever was a real contract, but assert that an agreement is reached via implicit, conclusive behaviour.⁷

According to Huemer, however, none of their arguments can legitimise it, because the general conceptions governing agreements in the society aren't met.⁸ For one, there is no way to opt out. A contract is not valid if there is no way of refusing to agree to it. Additionally, explicit dissent is not recognised. Even if an individual explicitly states that they do not consent to the agreement, they still have to obey the government. The laws and rules of the government will be imposed, whether the individual objects or not.

Apart from that, many governments, including the US government, do not recognise a mutual obligation – while citizens have certain duties, such as paying taxes, the government does not have a duty to protect individual citizens.

Hypothetical social contract theory

Besides the traditional social contract theories, there are also different forms of hypothetical social contract theories. The basis of such arguments is that while empirically there was never an agreement, explicit or implicit, a hypothetical agreement based on different kinds of assumptions is binding. Huemer points out that, usually, a hypothetical agreement can only be efficacious under extremely narrow conditions, such as if a patient in need of surgery is unconscious and therefore cannot agree to the procedure.⁹ However the same cannot apply to a conscious patient, or to an unconscious patient who has told their doctor that they reject the surgery for religious reasons.

Therefore, according to Huemer, there are generally two conditions for a hypothetical agreement to come into effect: actual consent must be impossible to obtain, and additionally the parties' assumed consent must be consistent with their philosophical beliefs – a hypothetical alteration of their beliefs is impermissible.¹⁰

Nevertheless, many theorists still argue for the validity of the agreement. One line of argumentation is to base the validity on the reasonableness of the agreement. Huemer

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷ The first such theory is that one agrees to the social contract by passive consent, i.e., by voluntarily not objecting to something. The second is that one accesses benefits that are attached to the government's existence (consent through acceptance of benefits). The third possible form of agreement is agreement through mere presence. The last is consent by voluntarily participating in the practice of government.

⁸ Huemer, pp. 27–35.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 37–38.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 38–37.

He argues that a supposed fairness, or freedom from arbitrariness, does not make a hypothetical agreement obligatory and that it does not entitle one party to enforce the contract against the other.

rejects those theories, arguing that there is no guarantee that even reasonable people will reach an agreement.¹¹ Additionally, Huemer argues that the mere fact of reasonability does not make the enforcement of a certain agreement permissible.¹² He compares the social contract to a job offer: an employer might offer a contract with reasonable, fair, and attractive terms. That alone does not make it permissible for them to force potential employees to enter the contract. Reasonableness alone does not establish political authority.

The theory that Huemer subjects to the most detailed analysis is the hypothetical contract of John Rawls, who devises certain principles of justice from a hypothetical agreement.¹³ In Rawls' theory of justice¹⁴, the contract is reached under a veil of ignorance: the negotiating parties do not know anything about

their social stand; they do not know their race, sex, religion, and so on. It is a hypothetical situation in which this knowledge has been removed. This group of people would come up with certain principles of justice, which according to Rawls should be adopted, because they are the result of a fair agreement, without the influence of morally arbitrary aspects. Huemer asks whether the same line of argumentation could be used for political legitimacy. Once again he demonstrates that an agreement is unlikely to be reached.¹⁵ According to him, Rawls' mistake lies in a wrong diagnosis of intellectual disagreement – not all of them derive from ignorance and irrationality, and therefore they cannot be avoided through the elimination of certain obstacles.¹⁶ Not all disagreements result from the knowledge taken away from the agents under the veil of ignorance. Additionally, he argues that a supposed fairness, or freedom from arbitrariness, does not make a hypothetical agreement obligatory and that it does not entitle one party to enforce the contract against the other,¹⁷ just as with the reasonableness argument.

Huemer also attacks the second line of argumentation, the appeal to constraints on reasoning: the condition of being free of morally arbitrary aspects leading to reliable moral reasoning. Huemer states that Rawls' argument can be understood in two ways: either the constraints on moral reasoning (in Rawls' case the veil of ignorance) are a sufficient condition for reliable moral reasoning, or at least a necessary condition.¹⁸ In the stronger case of the sufficient condition, Huemer argues that when it comes to collectively sufficient conditions, the constraints would need to include a condition of complete and correct values on the part of the negotiating parties, which would make Rawls' theory unusable.¹⁹ If the conditions are only collectively necessary, Rawls would

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 40–43.

¹² Ibid., pp. 43–45.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 46–56.

¹⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, cit. from Huemer *ibid.*

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.49.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 52–56.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 52–55.

have to prove that all other political theories do not satisfy those constraints on moral reasoning.²⁰ In simple words: Rawls would have to prove that all but one philosopher are unreasonable.

The authority of democracy

Deliberative democracy

Another way of justifying political authority and obligations is through democracy. Huemer first addresses the more naive thinking of majoritarianism.²¹ He offers the parable: You are a professor, and you invite your students to an evening at a bar to discuss philosophy, network, and have a good time. As you finish up, the group deliberates on how to split the bill. One person suggests dividing the bill equally. You recommend that everyone simply pay for whatever they had. A graduate student says that you should pay for the drinks, but you decline. The student continues to argue and suggests taking a vote. You unanimously lose the vote. Do you have an obligation to pay?

Democracy theorists, of course, do not resort to this kind of naive reasoning. A theory that Huemer analyses, identifies 'deliberation' as the basis of political legitimacy. It stems from the philosopher Joshua Cohen²². Deliberative democracy is a hypothetical concept:²³

1. The participants believe that their deliberation determines the outcomes, without the constraint of any prior norms.
2. The arguments are based on reasoning, with the expectation that reasoning will determine the outcomes.
3. Every participant has an equal voice.
4. The goal is a consensus. If none can be reached, a vote follows.

Huemer criticises this view on many levels. For one, no modern democracy has the features worked out by Joshua Cohen.²⁴ Regarding the first condition, there are people with very different philosophical and ethical views. It cannot be assumed that everyone will agree that they are only bound by the results of the deliberation. Regarding the meritocratic argument, political discussion is not based solely on rational and evidence-based arguments. Manipulation, biases, and groupthink influence actors' positions.

It is also untrue that everyone has an equal voice in our societies. Politicians, journalists, experts, influencers, celebrities, and others have a much larger impact on the political discussion than most.

Cohen's last condition too is far from reality. Very often, political discussion is not aimed at consensus – often political parties and commentators argue in order to gain political capital, express their emotions, and articulate their own opinions.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

²¹ Ibid., p. 59.

²² Joshua Cohen, 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy', pp.87-106 in *Democracy*, ed. David Estlund. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002, cit. from Huemer, p.60.

²³ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 61–64.

Moreover, these conditions also do not explain why, even in such a theoretically ideal democracy, the use of coercion would be justified – the same would not be justified with private agents²⁵.

Equality

Huemer thoroughly analyses the arguments of Thomas Christiano,²⁶ whose main premise is that we have an obligation to treat others as equals. To do that we need to obey democratic decisions.²⁷ The disobedience of democratic laws means that we place our judgement over that of others, and therefore treat them as inferiors.²⁸

Apart from that, in order to treat others as equals, we also need to support the equal advancement of their interests.²⁹ Democracy is crucial to the equal advancement of persons' interests.³⁰ Therefore, one must support democratic laws by obeying them, in order to treat others as equals.³¹ According to Christiano, individuals' interests can only truly be advanced equally if citizens are *able to see for themselves that they are being treated equally and that democratic decision-making satisfies this 'publicity principle'*.³²

Huemer argues that if the obligation to support others' equal advancement is interpreted restrictively, it leads to an unreasonably strict theory of justice that theorists like Christiano would not support.³³ Huemer uses the example of a person who has \$50. They can spend it on themselves, thereby placing their interests over those of others. In order to promote others' interests, they would need to spend the money on something that benefits everyone.³⁴

This, according to Huemer, could be avoided by limiting the argument to the obligation of creating social institutions that equally promote others' interests. However, Huemer argues, this 'restriction' contradicts the premises of Christiano.³⁵

Huemer suggests that perhaps the obligation can be "overridden by countervailing reasons, including prudential reasons".³⁶ This however does not apply to the government, because the government as an institution does not have real prudential reasons. According to Huemer, this leaves a lot of speculation about the extent of the political obligations of individuals. He illustrates it with an example.

In the previous example, a person had to consider whether to spend \$50 on a donation to a highly effective charity organisation, which would use the money to reduce inequality and bring society closer to the equal advancement of all everyone's interests, or whether

25 Ibid. p.64-65.

26 Ibid., pp. 66–79, refers to Thomas Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and Its Limits*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

27 Ibid., p. 65.

28 Ibid., p. 67.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p. 68.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

to use it for their own consumption. As they already spent a lot of money on charity, they decide to spend it on themselves³⁷. In Huemer's second example, they are forced by law to pay a lot in taxes. They can either pay all their taxes or cheat and spend the \$50 on themselves (assuming that they will not suffer any negative consequences)³⁸.

Huemer asserts that there is no relevant difference between the two situations, yet almost nobody would defend the practice of cheating on taxes, even though the money would be much better spent by the charity³⁹. The impact of the \$50 in the tax example is much smaller than in the charity example.⁴⁰

Apart from that, according to Huemer, obedience to democratic laws has virtually no effect on the system itself. While he concedes that if everyone stopped obeying laws, the system would collapse, the influence of one individual is almost non-existent.⁴¹

Another line of argumentation that Huemer attacks is the publicity principle. If the obligation to support equal advancement for everyone in society exists, this will not solve the entire problem: people see equality in different ways – material equality, equality of rights, and so on.⁴² By equality, Christiano means equal influence on the political process. According to Huemer, there are two interpretations of the publicity principle: The weak interpretation is that individuals need to be able to see that they are being treated according to some conception of equality, without knowing whether that conception of equality is correct and essential to justice.⁴³ In the stronger interpretation, individuals need to be able to see that the way they are treated is actually just.⁴⁴

The weaker interpretation allows almost any concept of equality, while the stronger interpretation doesn't allow any. Even if we were to assume that democratic equality in decision-making is less controversial, a lot of questions arise: Which kind of democracy meets this requirement? Should everyone have equal opportunity to stand for office?

What does that mean?

Huemer concludes that if the publicity principle requires a lack of controversy in the application of a given conception of equality, then democratic equality doesn't meet those expectations.⁴⁵

Another point of criticism is the notion that to consider one's own judgement higher than others' is to treat others as inferior. Huemer points out that there are multiple situations in which there are legitimate reasons to think that the judgement of others is wrong. The philosopher brings up data showing the distressing lack of political knowledge among Americans. It is not wrong to assume that others, or even the whole public, is wrong on an issue. There is nothing wrong with treating unequal things unequally. 'Justice does not

³⁷ Ibid. p.69.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. pp.69-70.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 70-71.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 71-73.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 7.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.71.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

demand that we refrain from treating other persons as having some characteristic that we justifiably and correctly take them to have'.⁴⁶

Additionally, while disobeying a democratic law could be interpreted as treating others as inferior, the use of coercion in order to enforce cooperation is a much stronger violation. Huemer returns to his example of the bar tab: imagine that after you decline to pay, the others threaten to put you in a closed-in room for some time, using force if necessary. 'Who is treating whom as an inferior?'⁴⁷ It is the majority that imposes their laws with threats and coercion that treats others without respect and as inferiors. According to Huemer, the principle of treating others as equals contradicts the legitimacy of the actions of the government.⁴⁸ Therefore, it cannot legitimise political authority, as political authority needs both political obligations and political legitimacy.⁴⁹

Consequentialism and fairness

Consequentialist arguments are those that focus on the good or bad consequences of an action. They assume that the government protects certain important values and therefore the government needs to be protected⁵⁰. Disobeying the government, according to this view, is morally wrong, because it would undermine the government, which diminishes its ability to protect those values.

The main consequentialist arguments in favour of the government regard its tasks as formulated by classical liberals: the defence of individual rights and public order via the police and courts (internal security), military defence from foreign invasions (external security) and the establishment of a clear system of rules and laws for society. In this part of the book, Huemer assumes that we really do need the government to provide those services.

In order for the state to provide those, the consequentialists argue, we have a duty (a political obligation) to abide by the laws of the state. If too many people were to disobey, the government would break down. Huemer argues that while widespread disobedience indeed would destroy the government, individual disobedience has no influence at all⁵¹. Laws are disregarded and broken all the time. The marginal influence of one person has no influence on the ability of the government to provide security and law.

Fairness

Another centre of argumentation is fairness: people should abide by the laws of the government because disobedience would be unfair for those who generally obey. Huemer admits that there are cases in which this argument can be upheld.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ p.81.

⁵¹ P.84-85.

He presents another example here: Imagine being in a lifeboat with other people. The boat is taking in water, and others are already working on bailing it out. While their efforts are enough to keep the water out, it still seems that, from the point of view of fairness, you should help the others in bailing out the water. Huemer elaborates that there are clear conditions in which that is the case⁵²:

1. A huge benefit is produced by the others – they are saving the boat from sinking. If they did something absurd, like praying to Poseidon, there would be no obligation to help them.
2. The others have to ‘assume the cost’ for the production of the good – they work to keep out the water.
3. You receive a ‘fair share’ of the benefits – in this case, you are prevented from drowning.
4. Your ‘share’ would contribute to the cause – your help would make the job easier and more efficient.
5. The costs have to be reasonable and not much higher than the costs of others – you would do the same things as everyone else.
6. You are not prevented from doing something more important, such as saving the supplies from going bad, for example.

According to Huemer, this argument is used by its proponents to legitimise some laws, such as tax laws. If we need the state to provide the crucial services mentioned above, then, from the perspective of fairness, we will have a political obligation to pay our fair share of taxes for those services⁵³, and he himself does not deny a certain degree of plausibility in that case.

Additionally, for Huemer, the state is obligated to uphold social order. If the disobedience of laws threatens social order, then creating laws that are unnecessary to uphold the order would be counterproductive and therefore would actually threaten it.

However many things that the government does do not fulfil the conditions. There are many laws that, following this logic, would not have to be followed, such as drug laws or occupational licensure⁵⁴.

So Huemer modifies his example: Everyone discusses what to do about the water. The majority, not including you, wants Bob to find a solution. He comes up with a plan wherein passengers have to bail out water from the boat, as well as pray to Poseidon and flagellate themselves with belts ‘to prove their seriousness’. Everyone has to pay \$50 to Sally, who helped to elect Bob.⁵⁵

In that situation, you are still obliged to help with the water, but not with the other three parts of the plan. This creates a problem, as obligations are supposed to be content independent⁵⁶. The argument for fairness does not support political obligations for every kind of law, therefore the condition of content-independence doesn’t stand.

⁵² Ibid. p.87-88.

⁵³ Ibid. p.88, p.89.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.89-90.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p.90.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.91.

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Consequentialism and legitimacy

So far Huemer mainly analysed the notion of political obligations on the basis of consequentialism. What about political legitimacy? Can the state create and enforce laws on the basis of consequentialist arguments?

As a general rule, violence cannot be justified merely by the positive outcomes of the violence⁵⁸. Huemer, however, argues that it can be justified in certain emergencies, when the agent using force prevents something far worse from happening. He returns to the lifeboat scenario, with the modification that none of the others wants to bail out water and states that in such situations, the use of violence to coerce them to bail out water would be justified⁵⁹.

The logical conclusion from this argument, according to Huemer, is that the laws of the state are content dependent, and that there are only very specific situations in which the state is allowed to use force. Force can be used in order to protect citizens' rights, as well as to provide some public goods, such as police, military defence, or environmental protections⁶⁰.

However many of the laws that modern states enforce cannot be legitimised this way. Paternalistic laws like drug and substance prohibitions, laws against prostitution and other moralistic laws, any sort of rent-seeking and promotion of certain businesses over others, or laws motivated purely by emotion (like bans on gay marriage or immigration) cannot be justified⁶¹. Huemer concludes that if, factually, the state is entitled only to do a fraction of the things that it is generally thought to be entitled to do, then it does not truly have legitimate authority⁶².

It is also generally believed that the state has ultimate supremacy. According to Huemer, it is unclear from which consequentialist argument this notion could be derived⁶³. Once again, he returns to the lifeboat example. In this version, two of the passengers have weapons, and the others do not want to bail out the water. If the first armed passenger, Gumby, uses coercion to force them to work, this act doesn't give him any kind of supreme authority that would prevent the second armed passenger, Pokey, from using coercion in a similar situation, or in order to prevent Gumby from doing something unjust, such as harming the others. The situation doesn't differ depending on the moment, whether Gumby already had used legitimate force, or not – the fact that Gumby first used coercion, does not give him the exclusive right to make all the decisions in the future⁶⁴.

57 Ibid. p.91.

58 Ibid. p.93-94.

59 Ibid.p.94.

60 Ibid.p.96-97.

61 Ibid. p.97.

62 Ibid. p.98.

63 Ibid. p.98.

64 Ibid. p.99.

From this, Huemer concludes that private agents in very limited situations have the right to use force against the state to prevent it from seriously breaching rights or something very bad from happening⁶⁵. However, his conditions for that are very restrictive⁶⁶. The private agents need to 'have strong justification for believing that the plan they are attempting to implement is correct',⁶⁷ that the use of force would indeed succeed and be causal for the implementation of the plan, and that there are no other alternatives that could achieve the benefits 'without at least equally serious rights violations'.

So what follows?

What are the implications of Huemer's arguments? The philosopher formulates logical conclusions of philosophical anarchism for policy, private persons, the state, and other agents. For reasons of brevity, the examples in the text cannot be explained here. However, if the listener is interested in Huemer's line of argumentation, some of the more important conclusions are summarised in the footnotes of the text version, which can be found on the website of the European Liberal Forum.

Starting with some policy implications, Huemer concludes that a great number of laws and regulations are unjust. He explicitly excludes laws that protect individual rights, such as laws against murder and theft⁶⁸. However, he considers moralistic laws, such as drug laws and laws prohibiting prostitution, unjust⁶⁹. The philosopher goes further, regarding prescription drug laws⁷⁰, grants and low-interest loans for education⁷¹, as well as the social security⁷² system as unjust. He, like Milton Friedman⁷³, also opposes licensing laws⁷⁴.

Another typical state-created phenomenon is rent-seeking, for which Huemer uses Tullock's definition: 'behaviour designed to extract wealth from others, especially through the vehicle of the state, without providing compensatory benefits in return'⁷⁵. Huemer takes this to include government subsidies for companies or private persons, laws restricting competition and forcing people into a specific service (like social security), as well as licensing laws⁷⁶.

Another area of government power that Huemer considers illegitimate is restrictions on immigration. Once again, Huemer shows that in the case of a private citizen, the enforcement of movement restrictions would be indefensible and immoral.

The philosopher also spends a considerable amount of time on taxation. Besides 'Who will build the roads?', the most common argument a libertarian hears is, 'Taxes are the

65 Ibid. p.99.

66 Ibid. p.99.

67 Ibid., p. 99.

68 Ibid. p.144-145.

69 Ibid. p.138.

70 Ibid. p.140.

71 Ibid. p.141.

72 Ibid. p.141.

73 Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, With A Foreword by Binyamin Appelbaum, The University of Chicago Press, 2020, p.164-190, first appeared in 1962.

74 Ibid. p.141.

75 Ibid. p.141, Huemer cites Gordon Tullock, *Rent Seeking*, pp.147-9 in *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics*, vol.4, ed. John Eatwell, Murray Milgate, Peter Newman. London, Macmillan, 1987.

76 Ibid. p.141-142.

price we pay for living in a civilised society'. The phrase expresses the typical consequentialist argument: taxes might not be great, but we need to pay them so that the social order doesn't collapse.

According to Huemer, that is the case only if a system of voluntary fees used to pay for basic government services proves unworkable. Therefore, taxation might be permissible – but only for the basic functions of government – police, courts, and defence from other states – and only if non-coercive options haven't worked⁷⁷.

To me, the most interesting part of the argument is Huemer's analysis of the welfare state. The philosopher concludes that even if some kind of coercive welfare programme were permissible, no current welfare programme would satisfy the requirements⁷⁸. While there are poor people in developed countries, their struggles are not comparable to those of the global poor. There is a difference between not owning a car and having to use a bus to get to the store, and dying of starvation, a struggle that many people in some parts of the world face every day. Taking into account that resources are finite, we therefore would always be obligated to help the absolutely poor, and not the relatively poor, due to the immediate emergency situation.⁷⁹

Perhaps the most controversial statements in the book are the implications for the agents state. Huemer claims that following his argumentation in this part of the book, the state has no right to commit unjust coercive acts and it cannot force those acts to be executed⁸⁰. Accordingly, therefore, the police cannot enforce unjust laws, such as drug laws; soldiers cannot fight in aggressive wars; and judges have the duty to not punish people for breaching unjust laws⁸¹.

But aren't the policemen/soldiers etc. just doing their jobs⁸²?

Huemer uses another parable here: He has hired a chauffeur who drives him around town. From time to time, he orders him to 'perform unjustified acts of coercion'. One day, seeing some children on the sidewalk he tells the chauffeur to beat up one of the children, warning him that he will be fired if he disobeys. The driver beats the child: 'I am just doing my job. I don't make the rules'. This of course is no justification – furthermore applying the same logic to the case of a policeman enforcing unjust laws, Huemer calls into doubt whether it is generally morally right to be a policeman in general⁸³.

77 Ibid. p.147-148.

78 Ibid. p.154.

79 Huemer discusses the issues of wealth redistribution by using a modified version of the 'drowning child parable' put forward by the famous ethicist Peter Singer. According to Huemer, the best argument for the redistribution of wealth is that some people cannot satisfy their most basic needs. Singer's parable asks the reader to imagine they are passing a pond, where they see a drowning child. If they can prevent the child from drowning at a slight cost to themselves, they are obligated to do so. It would be wrong not to. Huemer modifies the parable to make it more applicable to the situation of government help. In his version, the reader is for some reason not able to save the child themselves, but can use a gun to force someone else to do so. In this case, Huemer concludes, the use of coercion is justified. However, he sees a problem: It is unclear whether the social programmes of the state actually are beneficial in sum, so whether they cause more good than harm. There are many arguments from social scientists that some social programmes actually have considerable negative effects and, overall, cause more poverty than they reduce.

80 Ibid. p.161.

81 Ibid. p.161-163.

82 Ibid. p.161.

83 Ibid. p.162.

Thus, according to Huemer, government employees are not allowed to enforce unjust policies and laws.

Conclusion

Huemer's book is intellectually engaging, logical, compelling, and well-written. It is an excellent option for anyone starting their adventure into political philosophy. While the conclusions are radical and one surely doesn't have to agree with everything Huemer says, it is a good antidote for the political biases that have been surrounding us all our lives.



Reading the book is an adventure that time after time demonstrates how weak and unsubstantiated our core beliefs are. Whether the reader is a libertarian, a socialist, a conservative, or some form of moderate, Huemer's argumentation will many times cause cognitive dissonance and force them to reflect on their political and moral beliefs.

The book is easy to read and, despite its radicalism, not particularly extreme. This is because of Huemer's technique: while he appeals to rights at times, they are not the centre of his argument. The fundament comprises the beliefs and moral intuitions that almost everyone in the society already accepts. A future classic, I highly recommend this book.



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