

The Threat of Virtue: Why Independence and Integrity Threaten the State

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Abstract

There is a widespread desire for governments to manage all manner of social problems, a desire that is propagated by governments primarily through the co-option of intellectuals through the trafficking of awards, titles, and government positions in areas pertaining to its desired functions. The moral virtues of independence and integrity threaten this process and therefore threaten the government’s power in society. Civil institutions that advocate freedom from government power need to operate from an independent property base and work to strengthen the virtues of independence and integrity by putting forward a radical and consistent vision of a free society. In doing so, they must maintain their own integrity and refuse to compromise on the ultimate goal of a totally free society.

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I. Introduction

“Let me add, that only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.”

–Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

Benjamin Franklin penned this insightful observation in a letter written more than two hundred and twenty years ago (letter of 17 April 1787 to the Abbés Chalut and Arnaut; see Franklin, Franklin and Duane, 1834, p.640) at a time when natural law was well

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understood and writings on the link between moral virtue and political freedom were well known to any statesman worthy of the name (see remarks in Oberg and Stout, 1993, p.77). Franklin viewed moral virtue as inextricably linked to political freedom, whether for an individual or a whole society. Decades earlier, he had written “No longer virtuous no longer free, is a Maxim as true with regard to a private Person as a Common-wealth” (Franklin and Trees, 2004, p.71).

Franklin is partly right—only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. But although he expresses his sentiments in support of freedom, Franklin misstates the case when he says that vicious nations have a “need” of masters. When one observes the historical record of semi-free nations that have, over time, descended into greater and greater levels of political control and repression, it is not need that drives this process but misplaced desire. As nations become corrupt and vicious, their people have a greater *desire* for masters who will exercise control over the lives of their neighbors.

While such a small flaw is forgivable in the informal remarks of a letter, the subsequent eminence of Franklin’s statement calls for a high degree of pedantry. Like an otherwise magnificent work of art with a small blemish, Franklin’s quotation is an embodiment of great insight, marred by a small flaw that renders the message askew. Indeed, the statement that vicious nations are in need of masters is an unwitting acceptance of a quintessentially statist notion: that political power is necessary to overcome vice and misery, or at least to hold them in check in times of crisis.

One can hear this same argument playing out in parliaments around the world, from politicians who assure us of their reluctance to intervene in our lives, but cite crisis after crisis (almost always caused by them) as necessitating expansions of their power.¹

Haven’t you heard? There *are* no politicians who support bigger government. All are committed to freedom, we are told, but are grudgingly forced to intervene in our lives only to maintain a check on vicious and corrupt actions, and crises that threaten to tear apart the fabric of society at any moment (for example, see Obama, 2009).

If our political masters prohibit recreational drugs, it is only because consumption of these drugs is rampant and detrimental and an “epidemic” of the highest priority. If they regulate or nationalize

¹ The current financial crisis is a perfect example; see Woods (2009).

financial institutions and accelerate toward socialism, it is only to “save capitalism” (the same capitalism they have been busy denouncing and destroying) and prevent economic collapse resulting from unbridled “speculation” and “greed” (for example, see the speeches of former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in Lane, 2008, and Fenner, 2009).

The vision of those in power holds that it is the market that leads to corruption, vice, and crises, which force these otherwise freedom-loving souls to intervene (for discussion on the use of crises to bolster government power, see Higgs, 1989).

II. The Desire for Political Masters

But what need does one ever really have of political masters? No one ever truly needs them (see Hoppe, 2003; Rothbard, 2006; Stringham, 2007). They need them only in a superficial sense, to satisfy desires that they cannot satisfy with freedom. They need masters to give them property forcibly taken from others. They need masters to prevent others from engaging in behavior of which they disapprove, but cannot prevent in a free society. They need masters to protect them from “unbridled greed” and the supposed chaos of political freedom and the free market. They need masters because they do not want this troublesome freedom. They fear it. They have been told all their lives, by the most eminent experts and public intellectuals that the government is their protector and provider. It is not that they need their political masters; they *want* them.

This desire is manifest in mainstream public opinion on a host of political issues, particularly in matters involving aspects of the welfare state (see Caplan and Stringham, 2005, pp.91–94). On basic issues of welfare, the vast majority of people are in favor of government intervention over freedom and independence. Public polling from across the world shows widespread support for government responsibility over basic food, healthcare, and education (World Public Opinion Organization, 2008).

In fact, government intervention is so ingrained in society that most people have no conception of what a real free market economy actually is. A free market economy is quite literally one in which the market economy is free from government intervention—where private property rights are respected and people are free to use and trade their property without intervention by government. However, mainstream public opinion shows that most people have virtually no

conception of such a system. Public polling from across the world shows that substantial numbers of people support the “free market economy” when presented to them as an abstraction, but most of these same people believe that this “free market” works best when accompanied by “strong government controls,” an oxymoron if ever there was one (see GlobeScan, 2008).

That so many people can speak sincerely of the notion of a free market with strong government controls shows that their notion of the free market is little more than a floating abstraction. Indeed, it is so entirely disconnected from concrete political issues that people are prone to describing highly interventionist mixed economies as free markets.² The conjunction of polling on support for the “free market” with polling on specific questions about government responsibilities, welfare, and intervention also suggests that many people hold the free market as an abstraction that has virtually no resemblance to its actual meaning.

This phenomenon is hardly new. In 1840, historian Alexis de Tocqueville noted that people “...are constantly excited by two conflicting passions: they want to be led, and they wish to remain free...” (Boaz, 1998, p.23) He foresaw in democratic government an infantilizing process, with an “immense and tutelary power,” saying that “[i]t would be like the authority of a parent, if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks on the contrary to keep them in perpetual childhood” (p.22).

In a psychological examination of welfare statism, psychiatrist Lyle Rositter echoed this view, suggesting that the widespread demand for governments to take care of their citizens and manage their lives is a manifestation of pathological dependency, rooted in a desire among adults for a second childhood (Rositter, 2006, pp.237–52; see also Rositter, 2008). In discussing the welfare statist agenda of modern “liberals,” he notes that their perversion of the proper functions of government:

...results in massive violations of [property] rights while permitting government officials to act out their own and their constituents’ psychopathology. The [agenda of welfare

²The fact that developed countries such as the United States, Britain, Australia, and other mixed economies are often described as having free markets are cases in point. See Riesman (2008) for discussion of the alleged “free market” status of the U.S. economy.

statism] gratifies various types of pathological dependency; augments primitive feelings of envy and inferiority; reinforces paranoid perceptions of victimization; implements manic delusions of grandeur; exploits government authority for power, domination and revenge; and satisfies infantile claims to entitlement, indulgence and compensation (pp.87–88).

Whether or not support for the welfare state stems from a psychological impairment in any particular individual, it is clear that dependency and envy are at the root of the system. Schoeck (1987) rigorously examines the role of envy in shaping western political ideas and has forcefully argued that envy is the primary motive force behind redistributionist policies that are the bedrock of the modern welfare state. Rand (1971) characterizes the current age as the “Age of Envy,” saying that the dominant philosophical value in the culture is “hatred of the good for being the good.”

Again, whether these indictments apply to any specific individual or not, it is certainly clear that the widespread desire for political masters and government control is largely a response to feelings of dependency, inferiority, entitlement, and envy, emotions that are indeed indicative of corruption and vice.

It is this sense of dependency on others and longing for authority that is the primary vice responsible for the support of government intervention over freedom. It is both a consequence and a reinforcing cause of the expansion of government. Those afflicted by this vice do not *want* freedom from the coercion of government. It is not that they genuinely *need* political masters; they want them, they crave them. They want the security and reassurance of a second childhood, with the government as benevolent parent, and all those other adults as playground bullies, who must be held in check and forced to share their toys.

III. Independence and Integrity

Because the desire for freedom is suppressed primarily by dependence on others (both intellectual and material dependence), it is the virtues of independence and integrity that are most important not only to *achieve* freedom, but even to *desire* it. The desire for freedom requires that one reject feelings of dependency, inferiority, entitlement, and envy, which are manifestations of judgment oriented primarily to other people, rather than to reality.

According to Rand (1964), the virtue of independence involves “...one’s acceptance of the responsibility of forming one’s own judgments and of living by the work of one’s own mind” (p.28). The independent man stands in stark contrast with the “second-hander” who makes his decisions on the basis of the views of others (this is illustrated at length in Rand, 1943). Smith (2006) explains the situation as follows:

In every issue that human beings encounter, a person can distinguish between what people say about the issue and what reality says, what is actually so. Given the number of people who share certain views and the apparent strength of their convictions, the temptation to treat others’ views as gospel is often powerful. The independent person resists it, however. He recognizes that other people’s beliefs do not mold metaphysical reality any more than his own beliefs do and, consequently, that adhering to other people’s standards is not the path to acquiring knowledge and achieving objective values. ... The independent person charts his own course by his own judgment of reality (p.108).

This orientation to reality is crucial to the virtue of independence. Mere rejection of the views of others on the basis of one’s own subjective whims is not independence. An independent person is concerned with “what reality says”—in other words, they are concerned with the *truth*.

There is a common type of second-hander whose lack of independence leads him to uncritical acceptance of the prevailing moral and social values propagated in the society around him. According to Smith (2006), there are “...countless people who hold jobs and pay their bills but surrender their souls by unreflectively deferring to the standards of others” (p.111). These are the people on which government relies for its power. They are the people who accept the prevailing norms and institutions of their society as metaphysically given, and seek to mold their lives to be “respectable citizens”—respectable, that is, to those like themselves, who have uncritically adopted the same moral and social norms.

Whether this conformity consists of uncritical respect for tradition, selfless service to the community, aggressive nationalistic pride, blind support for “progressive” ideas, or some other uncritical

deference to prevailing social norms, it is at root a manifestation of dependence on the opinions of others.³ Political scientist Michael Oakeshott describes this kind of person as the “mass man”:

His is not necessarily “poor,” nor is he envious only of “riches”; he is not necessarily “ignorant,” often he is a member of the so-called *intelligentsia*...He is specified primarily by a moral, not an intellectual, inadequacy. He wants “salvation”; and in the end will be satisfied only with release from the burden of having to make choices for himself. He is dangerous, not on account of his opinions or desires, for he has none: but on account of his submissiveness. His disposition is to endow government with power and authority such as it has never before enjoyed: he is utterly unable to distinguish a “ruler” from a “leader” (quoted in Templeton Jr., 1979, p.337).

Notwithstanding the lack of moral virtue it displays, it is not hard to see why many people conform uncritically to the prevailing moral and social norms around them. To hold one’s own independent views on matters where many others disagree, and to act on this consistently, requires not only independence but also integrity to one’s own rational principles in the face of very real pressures. Smith (2006) notes that:

...abiding by one’s principles is not always easy. People commonly face countervailing pressures, primarily social and emotional (which are not mutually exclusive). We are often diverted from acting on our principles by fear of others’ reactions—fear of losing favor, a friend, of disrupting social tranquility....Each temptation to violate integrity offers some apparent value, which is why it is attractive. Yet its appeal rests on dropping the larger context. A fuller consideration of

³Of course, just as independence is incompatible with mindless conformity, neither does it require non-conformity. One’s own judgment of reality may lead to agreement or disagreement with others, and if objective judgment of reality leads one to agree with others, then this is still independence. Indeed, non-conformity for its own sake is also an example of second-handedness, because it is a decision made on the basis of the beliefs of others (albeit, in opposition to others) rather than an independent assessment of reality.

how the contemplated action stands to affect the agent's long-term well-being would correct the impression that it offers any genuine benefits (p.179).

In the context of assessing the value of freedom against dependence on government power, the appeal of dropping one's own independent judgment and conforming to the prevailing welfare statist agenda is affected by many incentives and disincentives. Many acquiesce to the welfare state because to do otherwise would invoke the wrath of others who would brand them as "greedy" and "heartless." Others acquiesce to make sure that they do not miss out on the gravy train of government benefits (for discussion, see Rand, 1990, pp.40–45; Rothbard, 2003, p.175). Others acquiesce because the most eminent experts, intellectuals and technical specialists seem to agree that government is the solution to their problems. Others simply never think to critically consider views that are so widespread.

One particularly insidious breach of integrity is the desire to "compromise" on one's own principles, in the sense of surrendering the principle itself for the sake of some concrete concession in a particular situation. While it is not a breach of integrity to work for some compromised outcome that is an improvement on one's current situation (as a step toward a further ultimate goal), this is only the case if one does not promote this mixed outcome as superior to the ultimate goal or principle. This kind of opportunism is self-defeating and has been widely condemned among advocates for liberty (for example, see Rand, 1964, pp.79–81; Rothbard, 2006, pp.375–86; Smith, 2006, pp.188–92).

The requirement for independent judgment and integrity go hand in hand in the desire for and achievement of freedom. McFall (1987) notes the connection between these two virtues when she says that a person of integrity must "speak in the first person" (p.6; see also Smith, 2006, pp.183–92). Both virtues are required to avoid the dependency (both intellectual and material) on which statism survives and expands.

IV. Statist Intellectuals and the "Vision of the Anointed"

It is easy to understand in the abstract why independence and integrity are required for freedom. But their importance becomes far clearer when we examine how governments maintain and expand their power. How is it that they are able to foster the widespread

desire for government control that exists in a corrupt and vicious nation? How has the public become so thoroughly convinced that governments should be responsible for providing for its needs (and therefore empowered to interfere with their property rights)? How has the public been convinced to see its government as beneficial and to obey its edicts?

On the face of it, this seems an implausible idea. As Nock (1996) put it, “State power has an unbroken record of inability to do anything efficiently, economically, disinterestedly or honestly; yet when the slightest dissatisfaction arises over any exercise of social power, the aid of the agent least qualified to give aid is immediately called for” (p.138). However, Rothbard (2006) provides an answer to this curiosity with a historical examination of the relationship between intellectuals and government (pp.55–86):

The answer is that, since the early origins of the State, its rulers have always turned, as a necessary bolster to their rule, to an alliance with society’s class of intellectuals....The alliance is based on a *quid pro quo*: on the one hand, the intellectuals spread among the masses the idea that the State and its rulers are wise, good, sometimes divine, and at the very least inevitable and better than any conceivable alternatives. In return for this panoply of ideology, the State incorporates the intellectuals as part of the ruling elite, granting them power, status, prestige, and material security. Furthermore, intellectuals are needed to staff the bureaucracy and to “plan” the economy and society (p.67).

This alliance between the government and intellectuals leads to a prevailing vision of society that is skewed toward the acceptance and celebration of top-down planning and coercive intervention, as well as support for any philosophical ideas that underpin these policies (for discussion on conflicting visions and the ideological basis of the visions of political elites, see Sowell, 1984, 1995; for discussion of intellectual bias against the free market, see Hayek, 1984, and von Mises, 2004).

Sowell (1995) has called this “the vision of the anointed,” a vision which consists of a stew of moral and cultural relativism, egalitarian collectivism, and technocratic central planning and intervention. These values are promoted by anointed public intellectuals as well as

in the curriculum of government schools. Indeed, Rothbard (1999) notes that progressive education in government schools destroys independent thought, teaches reverence for the group, and seeks to educate the “whole child” in all phases of life, thereby arrogating the functions of parents to the government (pp.28–29).

Given that government intervention is at odds with natural law (see Spooner, 1992), it should come as no surprise that the vision of the anointed is radically at odds with reality and remarkably resilient to empirical evidence showing the failures of past government interventions. Sowell examines several government policies in which the vision of the anointed has been forced on the public (see Sowell, 1995, especially pp.6–30). In each case he finds a similar pattern, whereby the anointed experts identify some alleged crisis and formulate a government response, deriding the concerns of critics who predict detrimental consequences, and flattering their own moral standing in comparison with these critics. When the programs result in exactly those outcomes predicted by the critics, outcomes that are contrary to the previously stated intentions and predictions of supporters, the programs are redefined as successes according to some new standard (usually either so minimal or so vague as to ensure success), and opponents who predicted the outcomes are again dismissed.⁴

Sowell notes that the prevailing vision underlying interventionist policies is inextricably intertwined with the egos of those who believe it, such that it “...is not simply a vision of the world and its functioning in a causal sense, but is also a vision of themselves and of their moral role in that world” (Sowell, 1995, p.5). In short, the vision of the anointed is not about reality but about demonstrating one’s moral credentials to oneself and others. This is a manifestation of intellectual dependence, allowing considerations of one’s perceived moral standing to trump consideration of reality.

Because the vision of the anointed is primarily a means of self-congratulation rather than a useful explanatory theory of reality, opponents of the prevailing intellectual vision must be prepared to encounter a level of hostility, scorn, and ridicule that cannot be explained merely by a differing account of causal relations in reality

⁴ The same pattern of this vision can be seen playing out in the current financial crisis, with those who correctly predicted the crash (mainly Austrian school economists) being derided and ignored in the government’s policy formulation.

(for some examples, see Sowell, 1995, pp.1–6, 26, 109–24, 251–53; see also Revel, 1991, pp.142, 192). Opponents of the prevailing vision of the anointed threaten not only the power of the political elite but also their moral standing and sense of self-worth.

Opposition to this vision is not an easy task. Sowell explains how statist intellectuals take their vision of the world as axiomatic and immune to empirical evidence:

The prevailing vision of our time—the vision of the anointed—has an extraordinary ability to defy evidence. Characteristic patterns have developed among the anointed for dealing with the repeated failures of policies based on their vision. Other patterns have developed for seizing upon statistics in such a way as to buttress the assumptions of the vision, even when the same set of statistics contains numbers that contradict the vision. Finally, there is the phenomenon of honored prophets among the anointed, who continue to be honored as their predictions fail by vast margins, time and again (Sowell, 1995, pp.7–8).

V. Government and Its Technicians

As Sowell observes, despite treating their vision as axiomatic, the anointed attempt to buttress their views using selective empirical findings to explain away repeated policy failures. In the modern welfare state, with its long regulatory tentacles, those most responsible for providing this intellectual firepower are technical “experts” who clothe the advocacy of government intervention in highly technical arguments, usually involving scientific, mathematical, and economic analysis that is inaccessible to the layman.

These experts are often highly educated and technically adept people with impressive skills and qualifications in the social and physical sciences. They serve to reassure the benighted public that those responsible for assessing social problems and prescribing their solutions are the “best and brightest.” Rothbard (2006) notes that:

In former times, the [argument that government rulers are especially great men] took the form of rule by “divine right” or by the “divine ruler” himself, or by an “aristocracy” of men. In modern times...this argument stresses not so much divine approval as rule by a wise guild of “scientific experts”

especially endowed in knowledge of statesmanship and the arcane facts of the world. The increasing use of scientific jargon, especially in the social sciences, has permitted intellectuals to weave apologia for State rule which rival the ancient priestcraft in obscurantism. (pp.72–73)

The obscurantism inherent in technical work of this kind is part and parcel of a wider effort to fortify the fields of government intervention from outsiders. Technical experts use their specialized knowledge and access to government data to ensure that the benighted public must defer to their superior expertise (for discussion of the dynamics of rule by technical experts, see Centeno, 1993).

Even a subject that is well within the common experience of the public is treated by the anointed as the proper domain of a small group of experts. For example, in their support of sex education programs in public schools and opposition to parental responsibility, Hottois and Milner (1975) argue that “sex and sexuality have become far too complex and technical to leave to the typical parent, who is either uninformed or too bashful to share useful sexual information with his child” (p.6). The notion that sexually active adults are incapable of explaining sex to their own children, despite generations of this very procedure, is only one consequence of the mindset that treats all issues related to government policy as too “technical” and “complex” for the benighted public to understand, regardless of past practice.⁵

The offering of technical arguments in support of the vision of the anointed may seem to contradict the notion that this is an axiomatic worldview that is immune to empirical evidence. However, the reality is that the technical arguments for intervention offered by scientific experts are usually mere *rationalizations* of an existing vision, rather than a genuine attempt to derive sound policy principles from all available possibilities (including no intervention at all).

Of course, technical analysis may involve a genuine comparison of different policies *within the prevailing vision* (such as attempts to determine the “optimal” means of taxation from competing tax

⁵ It is also worth observing that, in the assertion by Hottois and Milner, sex is not said to “be” too complex, but is instead said to have somehow “become” too complex, a subtlety that ensures that past evidence about previous generations is immaterial.

policies or find a means of correcting some alleged “market failure”) and therefore involve some attempt at efficiency within those constraints. However, such analysis invariably preempts the issue of the efficacy of government intervention with hidden value judgments that are not a proper part of the scientific analysis. These value judgments are smuggled into applications of otherwise “value-free” sciences as an unstated and unproven primary. In particular, hidden assumptions about coercive intervention versus freedom, which is the proper domain of political philosophy, are routinely smuggled in to so-called scientific analysis of government interventions.

The standard *modus operandi* in these interventionist arguments is to use technical scientific analysis to demonstrate the existence of some social problem or suboptimal situation allegedly in need of a government mandated “solution,” while smuggling in false assumptions about the efficacy of government intervention. This occurs often in interventionist arguments based on “public goods theory” in which free rider arguments are taken as sufficient evidence to justify coercive government intervention (see Pasour Jr., 1981; Hoppe, 1989; Foldvary, 1994).

Such arguments routinely ignore any question of freedom versus coercion, and take for granted that any problem identified necessitates government intervention. Although the analysis may indeed identify an actual problem (though even this is frequently exaggerated or invented), the technical complexity of the analysis serves to hide the fact that government intervention is merely *assumed*—but not demonstrated—to improve the outcome. Because of the complicated technical analysis involved, this kind of *non sequitur* argument can appear to the layman to be a scientific demonstration that government intervention is beneficial, when, in fact, no such question has been asked.

An especially common manifestation of this method in an economic context is the assertion of some alleged “market failure” consisting of a departure from some idealized mathematical or economic model (almost always predicated on assumptions that do not hold in reality). The fact that free markets do not result in outcomes predicted by the chosen model is then taken as a “failure” that government must correct through its own interventions, which are *assumed* to be preferable. Here the complexity of the economic model and accompanying mathematics serves to hide the fact that the “failure” is actually just a failure of the assumed model, not the

market, and the “solution” of government intervention is merely *assumed* to improve the outcome (for a general critique of market failure arguments, see Toumanoff, 1984, and Booth, 2008).

The same style of *non sequitur* argument, obscured by impenetrable technical analysis, appears in many other contexts. In public safety and healthcare policy, technical experts bombard us with analysis showing the prevalence or “social cost” of this or that disease or affliction. In social welfare policy, technical experts can produce reams of statistics on the correlations between demographic factors and socioeconomic outcomes. In labor policy, technical experts cite statistical models of employment levels, participation rates, and demographic outcomes. In each case the complexity of the technical analysis distracts from the flawed logical structure of the interventionist argument.

Of course, this is not to say that there is anything wrong with science, mathematics, and economics—quite the contrary. Rather, these disciplines are perverted into crude advocacy tools in the hands of bureaucrats and policy intellectuals.

VI. “Expert” Opinion and the Epistemology of Deference

Because government actions often span many disciplines, specialized knowledge in several fields is often used in the technical analysis of government policies. This makes it difficult for any single person to master all the technical skills required to analyze each part of the government’s operations. Government housing policy may involve issues of economics, sociology, and criminology as well as technical analysis using mathematical and statistical models. Similarly, government healthcare may involve issues of medical science, economics, and other disciplines.

In all of these fields, the government relies on the epistemological principle that its fields are so complex that only a small few are “qualified” to speak intelligently on the issues. In practice, this means that virtually anyone can be dismissed as “unqualified” if their views conflict with the prevailing vision. Even the most highly educated and technically proficient people will lack some specific training in some specific area related to the government’s intervention. Thus, economists who criticize public healthcare can be dismissed as “unqualified” on the issue because they lack the medical knowledge to properly evaluate what doctors are doing. Medical doctors who criticize public healthcare can be dismissed as “unqualified” on the

issue because they lack the economic knowledge to properly contrast the public and private systems. Even rare individuals with expert training in both areas can be dismissed as “unqualified” if their specialties do not encompass the full spectrum of areas in which analysis could possibly be undertaken. Only the bureaucracies themselves with their cadres of various technical experts are allowed to escape this indictment, regardless of their actual historical performance.

This situation creates an epistemological difficulty for the public. There is no doubting that government interventions often pertain to areas involving specialized knowledge, and people must make *some* choice as to what they believe in these areas. In this case, titles, qualifications, and honors tell the public who has expertise on the issues under consideration and whose opinion on technical matters is the most credible. But as we have seen, it is precisely the trafficking of these titles, qualifications, and honoraria that gives the government its grip over the intellectuals. It is agencies of the government, or associated groups subject to government privilege or control (such as universities and professional academies), that, for the most part, award these titles and honoraria and determine who is an esteemed expert. Moreover, it is the government that appoints people to its august central planning positions in which they are hailed by the media as top experts in their field. It is therefore the *government* that, directly or indirectly, has the greatest influence on determining who the “experts” are.

Even when the anointed experts cause disaster through their own policies, or repeatedly make highly inaccurate predictions in areas of their alleged expertise, they are still recognized as experts because of their titles, honoraria, or high position in the central planning apparatus. Sowell refers to such experts as “Teflon prophets” and notes that “...the utter certainty of their predictions has been matched by the utter failure of the real world to cooperate—and by the utter invulnerability of their reputations” (Sowell, 1995, p.64).

This invulnerability of reputation was clear in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when top officials of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank and Treasury stepped in to reassure the public that they would steer the world through the economic troubles. These top officials and other anointed experts had for years assured the public that the economy and monetary system were sound and had denied warnings by Austrian school economists and others of an impending

crash, which was caused by their own loose monetary policies (Woods, 2009, pp.37–38). Yet, in the aftermath of the crash, it was those who had failed to see the crisis coming and had failed to see the causes who were called upon by the president and the media to comment on the issues involved (Woods, 2009, pp.3–4, 154–56).

VII. Incentivized Ideas

When power, status, prestige, material security, and other inducements are available for the propagation of certain kinds of ideas, these ideas will be fostered regardless of whether they are true or not. When these inducements are secured by political power (i.e., by taking the money to finance them by force) it becomes unnecessary to convince people to support these ideas voluntarily. In this case the inducements work to reinforce the legitimacy of the political power of government.

This process occurs in the very existence of government central planning bureaus even if there is no overt attempt to influence the culture. If the government seeks to recruit economists to “manage” the economy, this will create a demand for technical skills related to central planning. Economic theories that hold that central planning can improve economic outcomes will provide a theoretical basis for these central planning skills, whereas economic theories that reject central planning will not. Those who accept the premise of central planning and become technically proficient in theories that promote this view are rewarded with prestigious careers, money, and honors; those that subscribe to opposing theories that are hostile to central planning miss out on the gravy train.

This process occurs regardless of whether theories supportive of government power are true or not. Because all government activities must be predicated on the legitimacy of its power, any ideas conflicting with this basic requirement will be weeded out by an intellectual process akin to evolutionary natural selection. It should therefore come as no surprise that flimsy economic theories such as Marxism and Keynesianism have swept the academy, the bureaucracy, and the news media despite their shoddy logic, predictive failures, and policy misadventures (for a critique of Marxian economics, see von Mises, 2006, and von Böhm-Bawerk, 1949; for a critique of Keynesianism, see Hayek and Shenoy, 1979, and Hazlitt, 2007).

In this environment, the process of disentangling good information and analysis from bad is not easy. Critically assessing policy analysis involving specialized knowledge is especially difficult. The point is not that this is an easy task, but that it is a *necessary* task for any thinker with independence and integrity. Where specialist knowledge is involved it is not enough to “take it from the experts” without their having given some explanation of the logical structure of their argument. Such an explanation can reveal even to the layman whether it is based on hidden premises or faulty reasoning.

Unfortunately, those who do not think for themselves will simply accept the reigning orthodoxy of ideas without critical assessment of those ideas. Those who lack integrity may reject these ideas but discard their own principles under the pressures and incentives to conform. Both of these approaches lead to an environment in which government intervention tramples freedom.

VIII. Why Independence and Integrity Threaten the State

It is no surprise that those who support expansions in government power would defend themselves from those who oppose it, and even seek to ridicule and demean dissenters in certain instances. However, what is more noteworthy is the fact that the anointed have systematically fostered a culture in which the virtues of independence and integrity are *themselves* derided.

This is evident in the widespread use of conceptual package deals and other “anti-concepts” created to smear independence and integrity. Independent thinkers are derided as “conspiracy theorists” or “ideologues” while those who conform to the views of others are hailed as “conciliatory” and “pragmatic”. Similarly, material independence is derided as “atomistic” and “antisocial” while the advocacy of statist systems of material dependence is whitewashed as “having a social conscience” (for discussion on the view that people are necessarily dependent and connected, see Smith, 2006, pp.128–29). Integrity is frequently derided as “extremism” or “dogmatism” while opportunism and compromise on crucial principles is hailed as “pragmatism” (for discussion, see Rand, 1967, pp.144–49, 173, 182).

This is no accident. It is not *particular* independent thinkers and people of integrity who threaten the power of our political masters. It is the virtues themselves. As Mencken (1949) put it:

The most dangerous man, to any government, is the man who is able to think things out for himself, without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane and intolerable, and so, if he is romantic, he tries to change it. And even if he is not romantic personally he is very apt to spread discontent among those who are (p.145).

The danger posed to governments by the virtues of independence and integrity should now be clear. We have seen that the primary means by which governments control their subjects and expand their power is the co-option of intellectuals and “expert” opinion through incentives to promote statist views. Independence and integrity directly threaten this process, and consequently threaten the power of government.

IX. What Can Civil Institutions Do to Promote Independence and Integrity?

People desiring freedom from government power must practice independence and integrity in their own lives. To those who are “romantic” in Mencken’s words, and wish to change their society, the propagation of these virtues is also important. But how is this best done in a society that incentivizes dependence and compromise?

Here we can again draw on Rothbard for wisdom. In discussing the co-option of intellectuals by government, he notes that:

There have been glorious exceptions, however, particularly in the history of Western civilization, where intellectuals have often been trenchant critics and opponents of State power, and have used their intellectual gifts to fashion theoretical systems which could be used in the struggle for liberation from that power. But invariably, these intellectuals have only been able to arise as a significant force when they have been able to operate from an independent power base—an independent property base—separate from the apparatus of the State. For wherever the State controls all property, wealth, and employment, everyone is economically dependent on it, and it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for such independent criticism to arise (Rothbard, 2006, p.77).

In light of the incentives and disincentives used by governments to co-opt intellectual opinion, it is easy to see the reasons for advocates of liberty to develop an independent property base. Such a base allows advocates of liberty to avoid the detrimental consequences of dissent that occur for those who are dependent on government privilege or government positions for their social standing and material security. Moreover, an independent property base ensures that ideas conducive to liberty and threatening to government power have greater chance of being developed and refined, a task that requires resources that are unlikely to be forthcoming from the government itself. Finally, an independent property base will generally provide at least some countervailing prestige and material security to advocates of liberty so that the “gravy train” is no longer so clear cut—young students do not need to train as Keynesian economists or government social workers in order to put bread on the table!

Most notable among those institutions that provide an independent property base for intellectual inquiry outside of government are think tanks, which have grown in number and influence in the past century (for discussion on the emergence and evolution of think tanks over the 20th century, see Rich, 2004, pp.29–73). In particular, libertarian think tanks specializing in philosophy, economics, and political economy have provided a base from which ideas hostile to government power have been pursued. Many notable libertarian think tanks exist that already foster intellectual ideas that are hostile to government power.

These institutions can foster the virtues of independence and integrity by clearly expounding their own ideas and opinions, thereby allowing the public to receive an alternate point of view to the vision of the anointed. Here think tanks must aspire to the same or greater level of expertise and analytical ability as the technical experts who are the bulwark of government power. They must not be afraid to trawl through technical analysis to determine its soundness, and expose and challenge any hidden premises that conflict with proper principles of economics and moral philosophy. They must work to grow their capacity for research and advocacy, so that for every government report, media release, or pulpit speech, they are there to critique and expose any errors.

Even among the most slothful mind, this kind of exposure to differing opinions must surely motivate some kind of independent

thought, even if only to decide who to believe. And generally the effect will be much more than that. By propagating ideas to the public that challenge prevailing assumptions, those who are naturally inquisitive are inspired to examine beliefs that they have never thought to question.

Moreover, by presenting a philosophically consistent position on issues that seem to many people to be disparate and arbitrary, advocates of freedom can appeal to their basic desire to conceptualize the way the world works in a manageable set of basic principles. The presentation of a consistent and radical view of moral and political philosophy, even if it is unconvincing, appeals to the natural integrity of those who take ideas seriously. Hence, even if they are unconvinced by the particular system presented, they may nonetheless be spurred on to try to integrate their own knowledge into a consistent whole. This has the effect of making consistency and integrity respectable against the attacks so prevalent in today's "pragmatic" culture.

To preserve their own integrity, libertarian think tanks must remain committed to the long-term goal of total freedom from government power and must not compromise on this goal for the sake of immediate political expediency. Rothbard (2006) warned of precisely this kind of danger in his analysis of libertarian strategy (pp.373–403). He argued that libertarians should support steps that move toward the goal of total freedom from government, but at the same time avoid sacrificing principles for immediate results. This same idea was put forward in the well-known remarks of Hayek (1967):

We must make the building of a free society once more an intellectual adventure, a deed of courage. What we lack is a liberal Utopia, a programme which seems neither a mere defence of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism, but a truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibility of the mighty...which is not too severely practical and which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible (p.194).

Such a truly radical liberalism (or libertarianism as it is now often called) would implicitly promote independence and integrity by holding aloft a clear and radical vision in opposition to prevailing

ideas. Of course, civil institutions can explicitly advocate the practice of these virtues when it is appropriate for them to do so, but this should be secondary to demonstrating these virtues in action. After all, showing is far better than telling.

What then, can advocates of liberty do? Many libertarian think tanks and other civil organizations are already operating in precisely this way, clearly promoting the goal of total freedom from government power and at the same time implicitly promoting the virtues of independence and integrity through their work. Here the only advice one can offer is: keep doing what you are doing!

This may seem uninspiring, even anticlimactic, because it offers no new advice to civil institutions but merely reiterates existing advice that is well known. To those who are disappointed, I can only say, too bad! There is no magic bullet to achieve liberty—its price, as Jefferson put it, is eternal vigilance. Liberty is achieved by working gradually away in opposition to government power, repetitively pushing forward the principles of freedom and applying them to new circumstances, so that they gradually come to be accepted values in the culture. Independence and integrity play a crucial role in this process and are crucial values to achieve freedom.

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