

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Conservatism and Individual Liberty

The terms “liberal” and “conservative” are a part of our cultural and political language. Each has taken on an ideology that is often rigid and uncompromising. Each has champions in the media and there are even two cable networks devoted to the opposing positions: Fox News represents the conservative viewpoint and MSNBC the liberal viewpoint. Neither is objective, for each presents its position on the cultural and political issues of the day as the only reasonable and possible position to hold. Depending on the program being watched, you will see intense emotion and raised voices, but little reasonable debate. It has become news-as-entertainment. Neither cable news network promotes or fosters reflection, thinking and a serious weighing of positions.

In this edition of *Issues*, I would like to explore the meaning of conservatism in the American tradition. What exactly does it mean to be conservative? Often, conservatism is associated with phrases such as “limited government,” “individual liberty,” “personal responsibility,” and “laissez faire.” Conservatives are not hostile toward government per se; conservatives instead have historically insisted that governmental power should never inhibit individual liberty, initiative or creativity. Government’s role is to promote justice and thwart evil. But as columnist Michael Gerson has recently argued, “In the traditional conservative view, individual liberty is ennobled and ordered within social institutions—families, religious communities, neighborhoods, voluntary associations, local governments and nations. The success of individuals is tied to the health of these institutions, which prepare people for the responsible exercise of freedom and the duties of citizenship. This is the limiting principle: Higher levels of government should show deference to private associations and local institutions. But this is also a guide to appropriate governmental action—needed when local and private institutions are enervated or insufficient in scale to achieve the public good.” True conservatism produces a “governing vision” that permits and advocates careful, limited, public interventions by the state for the health of civil society. This “governing vision” has two important implications: (1) Government should reinforce the values, morals and ethical standards that are conducive to civic good and the promotion of good citizenship. For example, the liberty to self-destruct through the use of hard-core drugs is unacceptable; the state has the responsibility to thwart that kind of evil. The state also has the responsibility to deal forcefully with those who destroy the lives of men and women coerced into the sex trade. As Gerson writes, such practices “not only degrade human nature but also damage and undermine families and communities and ultimately deprive the nation of competent, self-governing citizens.” Therefore, one must ask, where is responsible government in Colorado’s decision to promote “recreational marijuana” use through the sale of this drug? We really do not need to do any more studies on the effects of the use of marijuana. Does it promote educational excellence among young people? Does it promote healthy lifestyles among young adults? Does it help the state of Colorado (and eventually the entire US, for it will spread) to compete globally with the rest of the world in areas of finance and economics? It

seems obvious to me that promoting and facilitating the use of marijuana by the state degrades human beings, undermines the family and is antithetical to the promotion of good citizenship. The view of liberty that produced state-sanctioned recreational marijuana in Colorado is really liberty as self-destructive autonomy. (2) True conservatism and its “governing vision” naturally leads to the state helping individual citizens have the skills and values that will enable them to succeed in this free, global economy. Economic inequality is a real issue in the United States. But the answer is not the power of the state to wantonly redistribute wealth through increased taxation and refashioned welfare programs. It is not simply a matter of unemployment insurance or increasing the minimum wage. There are deep structural issues in the American culture that are having profound economic effects. For example, as recent editions of *Issues in Perspective* have shown, men are not pursuing educational or job opportunities to the same degree as women. In fact, deep structural unemployment is affecting men to a much greater degree than women. Further, the increasing dysfunction of the American family has a deep and profound impact on children, who will soon be adults. This is a structural problem that will not be solved by increased unemployment insurance or a higher minimum wage. Our challenges are not only financial and political; they are deeply spiritual. Conservatism’s “governing vision” helps us to ask these hard questions about the role of government in our lives and its capacity to really solve problems.

Consider Affordable Care Act (ACA) as an example. There is a health care crisis in America, but is the ACA the best way to deal with this crisis? The law certainly raises the question of the competency of government to manage 1/6th of the American economy. David Brooks posits these questions: “Can the administration get the website to work, set rules for the right insurance products, or impose efficiency measures to restrain costs?” But there is a second, even more important question besides the competency one: Is it ethically right for the state to coerce its citizens to do something they would not normally choose to do? Brooks summarizes the issue: “Obamacare, as originally envisioned, mandated that people join the system in order to redistribute money from the healthy and young to the sicker and older. It coerces some people to do something they might not want to do, and which, in fact, may not be in their short-term interest to do. . . More telling, the administration hasn’t even made a moral argument for the mandates. It hasn’t even tried to make the case that coercing some people to participate in collective action is necessary for the common good.” Perhaps, the fundamental issue in the matter of the ACA is whether the US government has the legitimacy to coerce its people to do something they would probably not do. In addition, the administration has not demonstrated how the ACA enhances the social institutions (e.g., the family, religious communities, voluntary associations), which in turn ennoble individual liberty. In fact, the ACA seems to actually undermine these very social institutions that enhance personal liberty.

I believe that the Affordable Care Act is a veritable disaster, bringing into question the very competency of government. Obamacare has certainly not emboldened confidence in the ability of the state to manage and implement complex laws and systems. But even more importantly, the ACA undermines personal liberty. It creates a greater dependency on the state and it undermines the religious and ethical values of many, if not most of its citizens.

See Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (6 January 2014) and David Brooks in the *New York Times* (24 December 2013).