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Commentary

The Central Question of Political Science

By Michael R. Winther

The central question in the study of government and politics is this:

“What is the proper role of government?”

What should government do about the poor? Should government ban abortion, or should government protect the practice? What should government do about health care? What should be done with the environment? How should this or that parcel of land be zoned? Should we have a military draft? The answer to each of these questions depends on our view of the proper role of government. Virtually every political issue—past, present, and future—contains this critical question.

Of course, this question assumes that there is such a thing as a proper role for government. Please allow me to make the case that a definable “proper role of government” *must* exist.

Logically, there can be only three possible scenarios:

- 1) Nothing is proper, and therefore government should not exist. This would be the anarchist position.
- 2) Everything is proper; therefore we should place absolutely no limits on government. This is the totalitarian position.
- 3) Some actions are proper and some actions are improper.

If there is a proper role for government *and* if there are some limits on legitimate government action, then it follows that there must be both proper and improper roles for government. Unless we adopt anarchy or totalitarianism as our governmental philosophy, we cannot escape this conclusion. The acceptance of either premise (that there are proper roles or that there are improper roles) necessitates the existence of the other.

At this point, we should deal with this word, “proper”. This word understates the gravity of the question. When I speak of improper government action, I mean to refer to those actions that are unethical—actions that are inherently wrong. The improper use of the salad fork at a formal banquet may violate rules of etiquette, but the consequences are far from catastrophic. It would be hard to argue that this etiquette blunder constitutes a breach of ethics or an inherent evil. The improper exercise of power by a government, on the other hand, cannot be benign. Because governments exist with the power to use force, impropriety in a government is infinitely more dangerous than the improprieties of any individual or group not given the power of the sword. The extension of government power outside of its “proper authority” will, at a minimum, result in the loss of important individual rights and, in the extreme, will produce holocausts of unimaginable proportions. History consistently and mercilessly proves this conclusion. Improper government actions do in fact breach ethical standards and are inherently evil—no matter how insignificant they may seem.

Based on history, we know that governments become the agents of death, destruction and tyranny if their actions cross over certain lines. The principle concern of America's founding fathers was to place boundaries around their new government so that it would not become tyrannical. The single purpose of the constitution was to define the allowed powers of the new federal government and by logical extension to set limits that should not be breached.

If we accept the conclusion that there are some powers that are morally and ethically wrong for government to exercise (and I think we must), then how can we ignore the importance of making proper determinations about what we allow government to do?

Bright-line

The term "bright-line" is an important concept in the study of government. A bright-line is a clear point of separation between two things or ideas. The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines a bright-line as, "providing an unambiguous criterion or guideline especially in law". In matters of government and public policy, it is important to develop and maintain a bright-line between acceptable and unacceptable government actions. As an example, the accusation of murder is a serious criminal charge with very serious consequences. For this reason, the law should have (and generally does have) very specific definitions of what constitutes murder. These specific, and sometimes technical, definitions form a bright-line that separates the act of murder from other actions that are not murder.

Since governments are capable of a broad array of improper and dangerous actions (including murder), we must work to develop bright-lines that help us to separate the proper activities from the improper activities of our governments.

Some might argue that we can't attempt to define a proper role for government because a nation's citizens don't or won't agree on what that role should be. But any disagreement about where to place the bright-line does not deny its existence. And if a bright-line exists, we

have a moral obligation to work diligently to find it and enforce it.

As a college student majoring in Political Science, I took a great number of political science courses from numerous professors on three college campuses. Not once did any of these professors ask or even address the question of the proper role of government. The concept is just as foreign to modern academia as it is to our media, but it must be addressed and ultimately decided by any society that wants to limit government.