

A Brief Note on the State and Society's Moral Ecology

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Samuel Gregg briefly responds to a previous article by Daniel Finn that incorrectly asserts that a piece written by Gregg does not affirm a positive role by the state in shaping the moral ecology or culture of a given society. Gregg refers to a quotation by Finn (which was misattributed to Philip Booth) and the original context in which the quotation occurs.

As Philip Booth observes in his response to Daniel Finn, Professor Finn attributes a citation to him that is actually to be found in a paper written by me, entitled “Catholicism and the Case for Limited Government.”¹ The citation is as follows: “the state should not attempt to protect or alter a society’s moral ecology in ways that seek to force people to acquire virtuous dispositions.” Finn then proceeds to state that such a statement suggests that its author would therefore oppose laws relating to slavery, wife beating, and racial discrimination.

Leaving aside the fact that this statement was incorrectly attributed to Professor Booth (for which Finn has apologized), it is worth seeing the correct context in which it originally appeared. This makes it abundantly clear that I do believe that the state has a significant role in shaping the moral culture of a given society.

The fact that children are best raised by their families does not rule out, in principle, any possibility of state intervention in particular circumstances. Examples might be when the police are summoned to stop an incident of spousal abuse. The urgent need to protect the goods of life and health in such cases make it imprudent to wait for other family members or other intermediate groups to intervene. Normally, however, direct state intervention in family matters is

unwise because it involves the application of political wisdom—and power—to a sphere where domestic wisdom and authority ought to prevail. The state's responsibility to maintain an order of justice will nevertheless occasionally necessitate such intervention, precisely because failure to act coercively against spousal abuse may contribute to a deterioration of the public order essential for a political community's common good. Though it is impossible for the state to prevent all cases of, for instance, stealing and intentional killing, such actions should always be prohibited by state authority. Unless such practices face the ultimate sanction of state punishment, a fundamental condition that assists all to fulfil themselves will not prevail.

This principle is central to Catholic teaching concerning, for example, the subject of intentional abortion. The Catholic Church teaches that it is neither possible nor desirable for the state to forbid all evil acts. The Church's teaching in favour of legally prohibiting intentional abortion is, however, partly derived from its awareness that the common good is directly damaged by the removal of any protection from lethal force from innocent human beings who, though *in vitro*, enjoy—as science and reason demonstrate—the same fundamental characteristics of being human as all other members of the human species.

This suggests that, in principle, state institutions may act in ways that contribute to the moral-cultural dimension of a society's common good. Yet the same common good demands that the state should not attempt to protect or alter a society's moral ecology in ways that seek to force people to acquire virtuous dispositions. This point is well-explained by the Catholic theologian Germain Grisez. Though recognizing that a political community will not be well-ordered unless most of its members are encouraged to freely choose acts that contribute to human flourishing, Grisez insists that it is not the state's direct responsibility to demand virtue in general:

even though a political society cannot flourish without virtuous citizens, it plainly cannot be government's proper end *directly* to promote virtue in general ... both the limits of political society's common good and its instrumentality in relation to the good of citizens as individuals and non-political communities set analogous limits on the extent to which government can rightly concern itself with other aspects of morality, especially insofar as they concern the interior acts and affections of heart rather than the outward behaviour which directly affects other people. (Grisez, 1993: 850)

The important word in Grisez's reflection is *directly*. This indicates that the state's legitimate concern for public order is not limited to upholding the law and procedurally adjudicating disputes. Rather it is a question of state institutions indirectly supporting the efforts of individuals to choose the good freely.²

Careful readers will note that the extract above actually cites the example of spousal abuse as clear grounds for direct and immediate state intervention, not least because of the grave violation of *justice* and damage to the common good that occurs in such a direct attack on human life, health, and bodily integrity. The same criteria would obviously require the state to act against slavery and cases of racial discrimination.

So how does this *indirect* shaping of the moral culture beyond the state's direct responsibilities concerning justice occur? Earlier in the article, I explain this point in the following way:

The use of state coercion against, for instance, thieves and murderers is rooted in society's need for an institution to be charged with realizing restorative and retributive justice. But the deterrent effect of these powers is such that they help people to understand the moral evil involved in such acts and discourages them from choosing these actions. To this extent, the state's coercive powers help people to choose good rather than evil acts. In other words, Catholic teaching holds that even the coercive powers associated with the state are grounded in the state's responsibility to assist people to pursue perfection. Nevertheless the Church recognizes that these considerations need to be balanced against the fact that people can only assimilate the good if they can freely choose the good for themselves.³

There are numerous other statements in the same article (and plenty of my other writings) that demonstrate that my position on the state's role concerning a society's moral ecology is rather different than what might be supposed from the original statement that was quoted out of its surrounding context and attributed to a different author. I trust, however, that this brief note is sufficient to make that point.

Notes

1. See Samuel Gregg, “Catholicism and the Case for Limited Government,” in *Catholic Social Teaching and the Market Economy*, ed. Philip Booth (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2007), 254–73. For Finn’s initial quotation in the context of a series of controversy essays, see Daniel K. Finn, “Nine Libertarian Heresies Tempting Neoconservative Catholics to Stray from Catholic Social Thought,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 489. For Booth’s published response to Finn’s essay, see Philip Booth, “Catholic Social Teaching and the Market Economy: A Reply to Daniel Finn,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 11–20.
2. Gregg, “Catholicism and the Case for Limited Government,” 268–69. The quote in the original is from Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 850, with emphasis added.
3. Gregg, “Catholicism and the Case for Limited Government,” 262.