Balancing Act: Government’s Role vs. Individual Rights

The question of the role of government versus individual rights is at least as old as the 17th century. The concept of individual rights arose from the view that because reason is the primary characteristic of human beings, all human beings have the right to select their own authorities and to make their own laws. A basic question, therefore, is the legitimate role and authority of government in the context of human rights.

In the Declaration of Independence, the rights of all people are declared to be life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. With regard to “life” in a world of kings, tsars and emperors, the life of the individual had belonged largely to the ruler.

In the Roman Republic and Roman Empire, the word “liberty” referred to the privileges of a citizen. The French and American revolutions asserted that what formerly had been the privileges of citizens alone were the natural rights of all people (with the exceptions, of course, of blacks, Chinese, Native Americans and others).

“The pursuit of happiness” meant the pursuit of self-fulfillment as a human being – the right to live in accordance with one’s abilities and to be secure and at ease in one’s daily pursuits.

The problem that arises in any society that professes human rights is how to resolve problems that arise when rights conflict. A widely held definition of freedom is “the right to do what I want as long as it doesn’t interfere with someone else’s right.” In one sense, it is not a bad definition. It recognizes that there are limits to one’s rights.

But when rights conflict, who is to arbitrate? Who is to decide whose right takes precedence? Unless this responsibility falls to government at some level, solutions will be based on sheer power.

The biblical writers had a healthy awareness of both the corruption of human desires and the ambiguity of human government. They assumed, on the one hand, that God had established human government to maintain a just order in a chaotic,
death-oriented world. On the other hand, they recognized that governments eventually become possessive, exalt efficiency over justice, and become tyranny – either of the iron fist or of the velvet glove.

In light of government’s tendency to overreach, the primary question of its proper role in the operation of society should not be how it can supply what is necessary to meet basic human needs, but how it can best ensure that basic human needs are met.

With regard to the debate over health care, for example, a society in which some are able to receive needed health care while others are unable to receive needed care is not a just society. Justice, however, does not necessarily require that government provide that care. It does require that government ensure that care is provided. The potential mechanisms for efficiently and economically providing that care can be open to wide debate, but from a biblical perspective, the responsibility is a given.

A major problem in debates over the proper role of government in such matters is the short-sightedness of people up and down the ideological spectrum. Most liberals recognize the responsibility of government to see that needs are met. Most conservatives recognize that individuals must assume responsibility for themselves even in the face of terrible social conditions.

But many liberals fail to recognize the tendency of government to become self-serving, to absorb power from the individuals they are supposed to serve, and to attempt to micromanage people’s lives, thereby robbing them of their freedom and initiative. And many conservatives fail to recognize that some people in severe circumstances cannot overcome those circumstances on their own, ignore the fact that greed motivates persons in positions of power, and place misguided trust in the ability of enlightened self-interest to provide a just society.

In brief, liberals tend to be more perceptive than conservatives with regard to the potential of government for good. Conservatives tend to be more perceptive than liberals with regard to the potential of government for evil. Both are myopic.

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