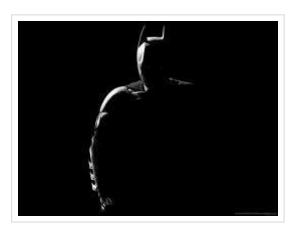# Hang Together

"We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." Benjamin Franklin

## Not So Fast Riddler

Posted on **February 20, 2013** by **Daniel Kelly**



Thanks Riddler, your questions bring the matter into sharper focus.

*"If it's really involuntary, why does everyone vote to continue it?"*

Who's to say they're voting for it?  To the extent they are cognizant of the wealth transfer programs, they know them only by way of who is on the receiving end.  We don't address the source of the wealth being given to them, or how it was created in the first place.  So our current debate is not whether we ought to compel people to work for the benefit of others, it is whether population "X" is a worthy recipient of a quantum of wealth whose source and genesis is unknown.  Our conversation, centered as it is on whether the target population "needs" the program benefits, is sufficiently stilted that we never even identify the other components of those programs.  That's why there are campaign ads showing Paul Ryan shoving Granny over the cliff in a wheelchair, but none showing the IRS agent raiding some poor schmuck's paycheck to give it to Archer Daniels Midland.  We are a long, long way away from anyone casting a single vote on whether to preserve the institution of involuntary servitude.

And we know, instinctively, that this is involuntary, don't we?  Let's do a little thought experiment. Let's say that tomorrow Congress and the President agreed to (a) make wealth transfer programs voluntary, (b) reduce the amount of taxes withheld by the cost of the programs, and (c) finance the programs only through funds derived when individuals check a box on their income tax returns agreeing to restore their tax burden to what it was before the cut.  How much money would be available for these programs?  That's right, none.  But if this process *did* raise any funds, at least at that point the wealth transfer would no longer be the consequence of involuntary servitude.  It would be a charitable donation.

*"Locke said it was a contradiction in terms to say people consent to be ruled by an absolute authority, because it amounted to saying you consented to be ruled against your will. Isn't your claim liable to a similar charge? Isn't it the point of HT that governance by moral consensus is the alternative to involuntary servitude?"*

No, governance by moral consensus is not the alternative to involuntary servitude.  That's mixing apples and oranges.  There are two discrete questions we must ask in evaluating governmental action.  First, does the government have the authority to act in the proposed manner?  Second, is it prudential (that is, does it promote human flourishing).  If the answer to the first question isn't "yes," you never get to the second question.

Governance by moral consensus relates to the second question.  Look at it this way – we may, at some point, come to a moral consensus that vegetarianism is a preferable diet, but that doesn't mean the government may prevent you from eating meat.  And that's because the answer to the first question is "no":  The government does not have the authority to tell you what you may or may not eat.

Locke, at his best, explained the divide between proper and improper subjects for government intervention in terms of delegability.  That is to say, if you have a natural right to something, you may delegate the protection or prosecution of that right to society's representatives.  So, for example, the reason the state may punish and remedy theft is because I delegated my pre-existing right to do so to the state.  On the other hand, I do not have a pre-existing right to take the fruit of someone else's labor by force.  Consequently, there is nothing to delegate to the state, and so the answer to the first question is "no."  The only way the state may establish involuntary servitude is if I *do* have the right to take the fruit of other's labor against their will.

*"If we are broadly Lockean and/or Jeffersonian in our political philosophy, does your position imply the U.S. government is a tyranny?"*

Yes, to the extent the government is engaged in establishing and maintaining involuntary servitude, it acts tyrannically.  How could it be otherwise?  Now, for my trigger-happy friends, that doesn't mean it's time for a revolution.  Our Declaration contains these wise words:  "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are

accustomed." That's a neat paraphrase of Locke on the subject of revolutions, which he counseled were proper only in the most extreme circumstances.

*"Bonus question: Suppose Social Security was converted to a mandatory private savings program, where everyone is required to save a government-determined amount of money until old age, but you still own your own money. Would it still be involuntary servitude?"*

No, a privatized Social Security System in the form you described would not constitute involuntary servitude. And the reason it wouldn't is that the fruit of your labor is not going to someone else, so one of the components of such a system is missing. But that program would still suffer a jurisdictional problem. Going back to the Lockean analysis, the question is whether I may properly force someone else to save his money. I can't think of any of my rights that such an action would vindicate (but maybe that's just a failure of imagination), so I have nothing to delegate to the government. Consequently, unless government can create its own authority, compelling me to save against my will is an exercise of power, not authority.

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ONE THOUGHT ON "NOT SO FAST RIDDLER"

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