

Hang Together

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

The Moral Consensus That Must Not Be Mentioned

Posted on **February 19, 2013** by **Daniel Kelly**

Today is a little unusual for me. I feel like I spend much of my time around here giving the ant farm a sharp shake and then watching for anything instructive in the ensuing activity. But not today. Today I'm delighted to announce that I've discovered that most elusive of things: A moral consensus that truly unites America. Not only does it *unite* us, there's a credible argument our society could not function without it.

The depth and breadth of the consensus is so great that I must confess I feel a little sheepish in not recognizing it before. This is something that crosses the seemingly ever-present aisle that divides Democrats and Republicans, something on which the major political-philosophical schools of thought agree, and to which Christians and non-Christians subscribe with seemingly equal certainty.

That's not to say that these disparate groups all agree on the extent to which we ought to apply the principle. But we are nearly unanimous in our conviction that the principle is both inherently good and pragmatically necessary.

This consensus even survives the acid test: How closely does our money follow the principle we profess? On that metric, we score huge. At the federal level we support this principle with a full 2/3rds of our yearly government expenditures. *That's* putting your money where your mouth is. Needless to say, upon discovering the mammoth proportions of this consensus, I felt like the scientists who discovered a single *Armillaria ostoyae* mushroom colony that spans 2,200 acres under the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. I never thought I'd find something quite that big!

Like the mushroom, this principle is subterranean, but frequently breaks the surface to reach up into broad swathes of our society. It controls a significant part of our economic lives, colors our

cultural perceptions, makes government the central reality in our lives, and is arguably even responsible for nascent classes – real ones, not just income stratifications.

Now, here's the thing – I'd like to tell you what this principle is, but its name is . . . um, a little impolitic. Old-fashioned, too. It carries some unwelcome connotations from an age in which we considered this principle an obviously inappropriate restriction on one's freedom. And our Constitution forbids it in most circumstances, which makes things a bit awkward. But it's so central to how we've organized ourselves that I'm certain we would quickly ratify an amendment removing the ban if necessary to protect the principle's continued vitality.

So what is this unmentionable moral consensus? Just this: We agree that involuntary servitude is a moral imperative that should have a significant role in defining and controlling our economic relationships. Remember involuntary servitude? I know – we need to reach back into antiquity for the definition. Its essence is the requirement that, against your will, the benefit of your work goes to someone else without receiving anything in exchange.

We'll be able to see the modern expression of this type of economic relationship more clearly, I think, if we take a moment to identify the components of a typical economic transaction. All such transactions consist of four components: Producers, value, motivation, and recipients. Value is the wealth you (the producer) create through your labor. The recipients are – obviously – those who receive the wealth you create, and motivation is the rationale that moves the value from the producer to the recipient.

We normally pay attention to all four components only in the day-to-day transactions in which we personally engage. So, for instance, I go to the office and provide some legal services. Then I go to Starbucks and buy a non-fat grande cappuccino (but not in a paper cup – they change the taste too much). The "value" is the wealth I (the producer) created through the legal services I provided. Starbucks is the recipient of part of that value, which I freely give because in exchange they give me joy and well-being in a mug. That's the motivation.

We all see involuntary servitude every day, but without recognizing it for what it is. I think that's because we focus almost exclusively on the "recipient" component of the transactions. In fact, so complete is our concentration on that component that the name of the transaction changes with the identity of the recipient – even though it's always the same transaction. So it's "investment" when the recipients are corporations like General Motors, Solyndra, and Fisker. When the recipients are people who have chosen to retire without sufficient assets to support themselves, we call the transfer Social Security and Medicare. And it's welfare when the recipients are those who don't create enough to sustain themselves during their working years.

When we look at the other components to these transactions, it becomes apparent that they bear all the indicia of involuntary servitude. The thing the recipients are receiving is, of course, value. But this isn't manna from heaven we're talking about – the value came from somewhere in the physical plane. More specifically, it came from *someone*. That is to say, the welfare recipient is receiving wealth created through the hard work of a specific individual. That accounts for three of

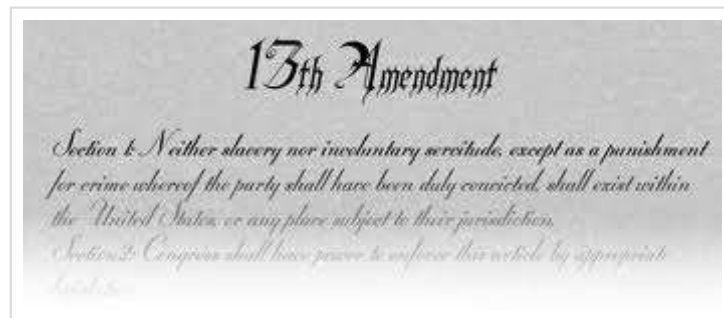
the four components of an economic transaction. We've identified the producer, the value, and the recipient. There remains only the motivation component.

This is where we encounter the heart of involuntary servitude. The producer is not freely giving value to the welfare recipient or corporation in exchange for a return benefit, so it's not like my daily sojourn to Starbucks. Nor is he freely giving value to the recipient out of the goodness of his heart without expecting anything in exchange, *i.e.*, he is not making a charitable contribution. Instead, he is being compelled (through taxation) to transfer a part of his wealth to someone else without receiving anything in return. The motivation component in this economic transaction is coercion. And that is what makes this involuntary servitude: The producer is compelled to work for the benefit of another. The fact that we implement the transaction through a tax changes precisely nothing about the nature of the transaction's components.

Involuntary servitude, in its modern manifestation, is an episodic thing. We aren't compelled to work year-round for the benefit of others, just part of the year. Tax freedom day (the point after which we have worked enough to pay all our federal, state, and local taxes) will be sometime in mid-April this year. We know that about 2/3rds of our federal expenditures go to wealth transfer programs. If the same proportion holds for state and local taxes, our yearly period of involuntary servitude is approximately 2.3 months.

Different segments of society will argue over whether this period should be longer or shorter, but virtually no one challenges the institution of involuntary servitude itself. Conservatives, for example, want to revamp Social Security and Medicare so that they will be there for future generations, not so that they can free people from this destructive economic relationship. Churches happily support involuntary servitude because it allows them to focus their resources on something other than caring for the poor. Liberals embrace involuntary servitude with passion and look for ways of delaying the point at which you achieve your yearly economic freedom.

So involuntary servitude isn't just for punishing crimes anymore (as the 13th Amendment says). We have worked it into the basic weave of our society so thoroughly that, if we removed it all at once, we would risk losing social cohesion (sociologist-speak for violence in the streets). I challenge anyone to find another modern moral consensus this complete.



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Mark Garsombke

on **February 19, 2013 at 12:40 pm** said:

This concept of involuntary servitude is really a wickedly smart twist away from socialism propagated by the cultural elite liberals of today and endorsed by a majority of Western civilization. Extending George Orwell's Animal Farm metaphor, now all of the animals, not just the pigs, have gotten smarter. Instead of killing the farmers or kicking the farmers off the farm, the animals have the farmers working for them. Give the farmers just enough of their produce to have some incentive to keep working, but otherwise take as much as you can. Fortunately, farmers aren't stupid. Just like virtually every culture and people that was enslaved or subjected to involuntary servitude broke free from those chains, the same will happen again.



Daniel Kelly

on **February 20, 2013 at 12:07 pm** said:

Nice use of Orwell's visuals Mark!



Lisa

on **February 19, 2013 at 1:26 pm** said:

I loved the conversational sound of the piece. It made me laugh and angry at the same time. Immediately I wanted to throw the yoke of involuntary servitude back in your face. But in my outrage I realized that I know an awful lot of people that are o.k. with this concept in practice. It is like in the Declaration of Independence... "mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed"



Daniel Kelly

on **February 20, 2013 at 12:08 pm** said:

Thanks Lisa – and you are right on the mark with respect to the Declaration of Independence. I used that in my post responding to Greg Forster (above).

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Tom Kamenick

on **February 20, 2013 at 11:13 am** said:

Excellent piece, Dan! I challenge you to improve on this, though:

“Instead, he is being compelled (through taxation) to transfer a part of his wealth to someone else without receiving anything in return.” Specifically, the last clause: “without receiving anything in return.”

The most obvious answer to that is that you are wrong to characterize Medicare and Social Security as programs where “the recipients are people who have chosen to retire without sufficient assets to support themselves” – people who retire with ample assets still get both of those.

More specifically, a person’s benefit, his “something in return” is the future promise of the availability of those programs. Granted, that availability is not certain, but it is not valueless, and somebody who knows more about actuarial math than I do could actually calculate its present value. The same thing goes for welfare and investment – there is at least some return value in knowing those things are there for you.

In a more general sense, at least for the retirement programs, their availability increases the amount of money you can spend on yourself during your working years, considering the discount people naturally place on future benefits. Also look at the estate planning advice given near-universally to people nearing the necessity of a nursing home – spend down your assets on things you want so you can qualify for need-based assistance. There is some value to that.

Proponents of this large amount of involuntary servitude would also bring up vague assertions that society as a whole is improved by the provision of these services, but I’ll leave that to them.

I don’t think these points break your overall argument, which I support, but they are things to consider.



Daniel Kelly

on **February 20, 2013 at 12:02 pm** said:

Thanks Tom, good points. On the first, I elected not to address people who do have enough on which to retire as a matter of expediency. It doesn't affect whether the program is one of involuntary servitude, only whether the recipient is someone who should receive the benefits of involuntary servitude. That is, as a prudential matter it is not necessary that an independently wealthy person receive Social Security payments, but that doesn't change the fact that he is receiving the fruits of someone else's labor, against that person's will, without providing anything in return.

In a sense, you are right that someone paying Social Security taxes is receiving a promise of future support in return, and that promise has value. But let's not forget what that promise of future support is. It is a promise that the government will compel someone in the future to work for your benefit without compensation (except the promise that he, in turn, will be supported through involuntary servitude, and on and on ad infinitum). So not only is it involuntary servitude, its a pyramid scheme to boot.

Further, it is quite true that having access to other people's money for retirement purposes will always allow you to spend more of your own on pre-retirement expenses. So, yes, sometimes you are on the receiving end of the involuntary servitude system, and sometimes you are on the producing end. But that doesn't change the fact that we are practicing involuntary servitude.

And finally, I have, like you, heard all the arguments about society-wide benefits and blah blah blah. These are, at best, half-hearted feints that can be easily answered by the thought experiment I proposed in response to Greg's question in the post above mine. That is, if those society-wide benefits really are adequate compensation for what you are compelled to pay, then we would pay that amount in the absence of governmental compulsion. And we all know funds for those programs would dry up in a heartbeat if they had to rely on voluntary contributions. So no, those alleged societal benefits are not compensation for compulsory transfers of the fruit of your labor to retirees, corporations, and welfare recipients.

Thanks for your comments Tom, they are helpful.

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