

The Rational and the Moral Go Hand-in-Hand

by
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But a certain man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God." (Acts 5:1-4)

Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

These two passages from the Bible point out some basic moral principles that I believe to be sound and logical. First, an individual has control over the fruits of his labor to dispose of as he sees fit. Second, a person should not be compelled by physical force to give his property away. It is even questionable for someone to lay a guilt trip on someone else if this leads to the latter giving grudgingly. Every individual has the right and the responsibility to evaluate the organization or person to which he is contemplating donating his time or property and make a rational decision about how much, if any, he will contribute. Questions such as "How much can I afford?", "What is the potential outcome of my contribution?", "How interested am I in the person or cause?", "How will my family be affected?", and so on should be considered before the contribution is made. Also, the amount of time or money given should not be so little nor so large that the giver is not happy about his decision. Once the decision has been made, the giver has no reason to be apologetic, and he need not lie to others about the decision in order to look good. He has purposed in his heart, meaning that he has made a rational decision, to give a particular amount based on his beliefs, interests, and assets, and has done so cheerfully. He has thus given of himself in a moral manner.

In light of these moral principles, I have had a growing concern about the direction of our country. It seems that the need for coercion in the realm of wealth transfer continues to increase. This can be seen in product liability lawsuits where a jury awards large sums of money to a person who has obviously misused a non-defective product. The jury is more concerned about the unfortunate person who suffered an injury through his own actions than they are with justice. "After all," some will say, "the company has deep pockets and if it were a decent company, it would voluntarily help the accident victim." Since the company does not volunteer, the jury decides to force it to help through the legal system. I wonder what the verdict would be if the assistance were to be taken from the pockets of the jurors.

Coercion can also be seen in the ever increasing welfare state where our leaders take money by force, via taxation, from people who have earned it and give it to others who have not earned it. The most recent example is the relentless pursuit of a national health care plan, where

the healthy will be forced to help the ill. Where will it end? Now, more than ever, people need to be informed about the proper and moral means of wealth transfer.

Suppose Sue wants Joe to donate money to some cause. There are two basic approaches she can use: persuasion or coercion. Persuasion would consist of Sue making a rational case for her cause, showing Joe how it is in his own interest to give to this cause, and then allowing him to make his own decision. This method allows both Sue and Joe to emerge as moral characters. Sue has not initiated force against Joe. Neither has she laid a guilt trip on him. She has simply tried to convince Joe that her cause should also be his cause. Joe can then decide, using the criteria mentioned earlier, how much he can cheerfully give to the cause. Sue has used moral means to convince Joe to give. Joe has used moral means to make his decision.

Coercion would consist of Sue using some form of force against Joe to obtain money for her cause. She might put a gun to his head, break his legs, or threaten his family. Under these circumstances, Sue emerges an immoral character, and Joe emerges, at best, an amoral character. Sue's initiation of force is an obvious breach of morality. Joe's "giving" shows nothing about his moral character since he is simply responding to an irrational act of force. In addition, it could be that the money that was forcefully taken from him was money that Joe had previously earmarked for another cause he had made a moral decision to support. After Sue purloins the money, Joe will no longer be able to take action on his moral decision.

Sue could have used a milder form of coercion or, if you prefer, a stronger form of persuasion that I like to call "excessive persuasion" or "laying on a guilt trip." This involves pleading, whining, and other emotional outpourings that result in a person giving his time or money grudgingly due to excessive guilt or simply to get the whiner to shut up. The contribution is not made after reasoned thought, but is made emotionally. Admittedly, this is a gray area since physical force is not being used, but it is a gray area that is best avoided. Why? Because there are enough causes in the world eliciting our emotional response to bankrupt us. We could give all our wealth and all of our time to these causes, and there would still be more left unattended. That is why a rational approach to giving must be used rather than an emotional approach. The rational approach allows for how our giving will affect our own lives and those of our family, what our own priorities are, and what is important to us as individuals.

To sum up, let us always strive to be moral when dealing with others and their property. If we are sitting on a jury, let us never be influenced by the sorrowful victim and the company with deep pockets, but rather let us ensure that justice prevails. If we have the opportunity to influence the law, let us not stand for taking money from some people simply because they have it and giving it to others simply because they do not. If we have the choice between a political candidate who supports the use of force to transfer wealth and one who does not, let us choose the latter. Let us always take the moral approach of persuasion to convince others to give of their property. And finally, may we never, in our pursuit to get others to do good, find ourselves doing evil.