

# FREEDOM AND VIRTUE: ALLIES OR ANTAGONISTS?

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*The following is excerpted from [Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate](#).*

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Both freedom and virtue are under assault today. The attack on economic and political freedom is obvious enough. Government takes and spends roughly half of the nation's income. Regulation further extends the power of the state in virtually every area—how one can use one's property, what occupation one can enter, who one can hire, what terms one can offer to prospective employees, with which countries one can trade. Increasing numbers of important, personal decisions are ultimately up to some functionary somewhere, rather than the average citizen.

The problem only got worse during the 1980s despite the election of avowedly conservative presidents. Spending and regulation rose particularly dramatically during the Bush administration. Alas, government is likely to expand even more quickly over the next several years.

Virtue, too, seems to be losing ground daily. Promiscuity is not just a twentysomething phenomenon; even many preteens are sexually active. Illegitimacy rates continue to rise not only in the inner city but also in middle class America. Dishonesty and theft are the rage: the entire political system is geared to facilitate special interest looting of

the taxpayers. Employees as well as customers shoplift—everywhere. Some years ago a university band distinguished itself by stealing more than \$30,000 worth of merchandise while visiting Japan. Business, too, suffers from a corrupt core.

Some elements of our society have attacked both freedom and virtue. Much of the left, for instance, believes in “choice” if it means moral relativism and escape from responsibility, but abhors “choice” if it means private individuals making informed decisions about their children, kids’ educations, jobs, and other aspects of their lives.

Alas, some advocates of liberty and virtue have compounded the problem by unnecessarily setting the two against each other. A number of members of the more “libertarian” right dismiss virtue as a matter of concern, while some more traditional conservatives want the state to circumscribe individual freedom to promote “morality.” Both of these groups see freedom and virtue as frequent antagonists, if not permanent opponents. At the very least, they suggest, you cannot maximize both of them, but, instead, have to choose which to promote and which to restrict.

However, it is a mistake to assume that one must be sacrificed for the other. Freedom and virtue are related, but are complementary. That is, liberty—the right to exercise choice, free from coercive state regulation—is necessary precondition for virtue. And virtue is ultimately necessary for the survival of liberty.

Virtue cannot exist without freedom, without the right to make moral choices. By virtue I mean the dictionary definition: moral excellence, goodness, righteousness. Coerced acts of conformity with some moral norm, however good, do not represent virtue; rather, the compliance with that norm must be voluntary.

There are times, of course, when coercion is absolutely necessary—most importantly, to protect the rights of others by enforcing an *inter*-personal moral code governing the relations of one to another. The criminal law is an obvious example, as is the enforcement of contracts and property rights. But is coercion justified to promote virtue, that is, to impose a standard of *intra*-personal morality? At stake are some of the most controversial issues: drug use,

pornography, homosexuality, and the like. All of these activities have some social impact and some people argue that it is precisely this impact that justifies state intervention. More power, however, is the contrary case against intervention—that most of the ill consequences, such as drug-related crime, are primarily a product of legal prohibition rather than the activity itself. If, in fact, government regulation makes the social problems worse, then the only justification for intervention is to promote virtue.

While liberty is the highest political goal, it is not life's highest objective. Moreover, while a liberal, in the classical sense, economic and political system is the best one available, it will operate even better if nestled in a virtuous environment.

For instance, a market system will function more effectively if people are honest and voluntarily fulfill their contracts. People who believe in working hard, exercising thrift, and observing temperance will be more productive. Economic life will function more smoothly if employers treat their workers fairly. Fewer social problems will emerge if families, churches, and communities organize to forestall them in the first place. Greater personal responsibility will reduce welfare expenditures and tort litigation. And so on. A lush lawn of a compassionate, cooperative, and virtuous society will make it harder for weeds of government encroachment to flourish.

Thus, advocates of a minimal state need to be concerned about both liberty and virtue. Freedom is important both as an end in itself and as a means of allowing people to exercise virtue. Virtue, too, is critically important in its own right. It also plays a critical role in undergirding a free society. How best can we promote them together? First, government should do no harm. We need radical changes in policies that today restrict freedom and undermine morality. Second, private mediating institutions, particularly churches and community associations, need to retake their leading role in teaching virtue and meeting social problems. Third, people need to be more willing to tolerate the quirks and failings, even serious virtuous lapses, of their neighbors, so long as such actions have only limited effect on others. The punishment of most sins should be left to God.

Fourth, moral-minded citizens should turn to the state only as a last resort. The issue needs to be important enough to warrant government intervention; the activity involved also needs to have a significant impact on non-consenting parties. And *private alternatives should be clearly inadequate*. For example, religious believers should lead their children in prayer at home rather than foisting that duty onto atheist teachers in the public schools. Opponents of pornography should organize boycotts before demanding the arrest of buyers and sellers. And, perhaps more importantly, vocal supporters of the importance of virtue need to exhibit morality in their own lives before suggesting that government place cops in other people's bedrooms.

Those of us who believe in both a free and virtuous society face serious challenges in the coming years. We need to respond by finding ways to strengthen both, not play them off each other. In the end, neither is likely to survive without the other.

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*Complement with Daniel Mahoney on [the limits of democracy](#).*

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