Coercion and Christianity:
A Biblical Critique of Rothbardian Anarcho-Capitalism

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On the subject of defense, Murray Rothbard outlines a political theory that holds at its core a few simple tenants that, when taken to their logical conclusions, seem strongly to imply no need of government or governing authority to ensure the welfare of a community, and in fact rather declaim such authority as detrimental to the welfare of the people. The singularity of this claim in Western Society is worth noting. Even in the past century, when the greatest number of anarchist movements began, never has such a proposal of the abolition of governments or the disestablishment of the entire foundations of the western world been so lightly proposed. Rothbard, whose theory was called Anarcho-Capitalism, was by no means a revolutionary. Those who followed him were in general seemingly honest men, rather influenced by classical liberalism’s ethics than any insurgent propaganda.

As a political theory, Archo-Capitalism is truly said to begin with Murray Rothbard. His books *Man, Economy and State* and *Power and Market[[1]](#footnote-1)* both meld classically liberal principles and Austrian economics to derive his anarchist theory. (Rothbard, 1962 and 1970) Immediately, in the latter book, he begins with the idea that seems to first suggest the fault in the notion of a government. He writes that it is wrongly supposed that the free market, existing only in a situation where the rights of private property are enforced, thus depends upon an authority to enforce these property rights that is not constrained by them. For example, in order to operate at all, a government in the business of protecting the property rights of individuals, must extract from them revenues to cover its costs. These extractions being inherently violations of private property, the axiom that supposes private property rights for all is thus muddied. He declares this spoiling of the axiom unnecessary and by various examples, thought experiments, and instance of economic analysis, he provides the theoretical framework showing how a system, without the inherent contradiction of a government, can yet still create a society where private property, and the auxiliaries and derivative of that right, are enforced in their proper measure.

Considering how exactly such a society may be set up, as Rothbard does in various places in his works, is not the concern of this paper. Rather, we look to consider the end itself and several of the more important premises. First, we logically follow the argument. Then, we critique it through logic, if there are any logical critiques to be made. Thirdly, we consider it within the framework of the Christian worldview, which holds the Bible to be perfect prescription for life on this earth. The question is an important one for it is an outworking of the classically liberal ethical and principled system. The libertarian philosophy, which word Rothbard himself coined, is seen by many modern philosophers and laypeople to be at least perfectly compatible with the Christian worldview. Some even view it as the natural outworking of Christian principles and that the best source of support for libertarian philosophy comes from the Bible.

The actual tenants of this libertarian philosophy, to which we made passing reference before, may be with great ease found in the works of John Locke, and enlightenment thinker known to be father of Classical Liberalism. Without beginning too far back in philosophy so as to be considered metaphysics, we may take the founding principle of libertarianism to be the right all mankind has to his own property. Locke conveniently defines property thusly:

“Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.” (Locke, 1689)

Locke continued after this definition to further lay down how objects might become property and once they were, what rights man had to his own property.

“It being by him removed from the common state nature hath placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other men: for this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.”

Locke himself quotes scripture in addition to claiming these truths to be self-evident by reflection into human nature.

From this understanding of private property, the other tenants of libertarianism flow. Private property being a necessary condition for human action, all the derivatives of that theory can be said to depend upon private property. To act against the natural law of private property is given the name coercion and held to be inherently wrong. On this supposition is based the ethical argument against governments. Upon human action is based the economic arguments against governments. We will take up both these arguments in brief.

Ethically speaking, the argument is simple. If coercion is wrong because it violates natural law, then there can be no basis for excusing anyone for coercing anyone else, because all mankind must be subject to natural law. Therefore, there cannot exist an entity free to coerce any human lawfully. Yet, government is by its very definition a coercive power. A state subject to the natural law of private property bears no characteristic to separate it from any other organization or individual under the same law. Therefore we come to only two possible conclusions: either the natural law of private property is correct and the existence of a State violates it or the existence of a State is valid and there is no natural law of private property, at least as classical liberalism defines it. Murray Rothard would certainly agree with this assertion.

The economic argument is certainly more complex. Since we are here mainly concerned with the ethics of government, we will not treat it to the full analysis that may be found in other works whose purpose is more expressly along these lines. The main economic argument against the state is as follows: if we hold that humans allocated their private property is precisely the way they think will best satisfy their ends, which they know best for themselves, then there can be no possible way to more efficiently allocate these private means more efficiently then by allowing mankind to fulfill their ends in every way that they see fit, so long as that too is in keeping with the natural law. A government, in taking away the private property of the individual, can therefore only decrease the total benefit received by society given the application of the means to desired ends. There is no expression or data that a government can use to properly allocate goods according to where they would be the most benefit. Given a free market and the ability to act and trade, individuals however can and will act and trade so as to maximize each of their own utilities, and thereby the total utility of the entire society.

The outworking of these two arguments leaves us with no reason nor justification for the existence generally of a government. Furthermore, the ethics of the various specific functions governments take to themselves can be easily examined through these general arguments. Defense, that which even many classical liberals will concede as the natural justification of government cannot be excused from the economic inefficiencies of any government program. When it comes to ethics, the paradox we have earlier described shows the problems with an organization defending a right while at the same time ignoring it. So also falls wealth distribution programs, being obviously inconsistent with private property as well as partaking of the inefficiency of de-incentivizing productive activity and removing efficiency of means allocation. You may go down the list of supposed requirements for the government and knock off them all, as Rothbard does, with both these two arguments, or whichever is the argument most persuasive to the reader. One can imagine a cold-nosed economist being the more influenced by the economic argument. As Christians, however, it is our part to consider first the ethical question. Whether the economic argument be right or no, examining the ethics ought to come first.

In order to claim any proper examination of the topic in light of scripture, we must begin out analysis of the relevant passages without presupposition or bias. We will start at the conclusions of the previous argument and move to its core. Therefore, we will begin by considering what the Bible has to say concerning the existence of a government. Another important thing to consider is the interpretation of scripture. A literal interpretation may be well for the Gospels or the Epistles but to take every word in Leviticus as law would be detrimental to the true Christianity. Therefore, what we find ought to be weighed not merely for what is says on the surface but also for what it means to Christians of the New Testament Church.

There are certainly a number of obvious verses that spring to mind when considering the Christian view of government. The oft quoted Romans 13: 1-7:

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to [execute] wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore [ye] must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute [is due]; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.”

The church fathers and theologians as far back as church tradition goes took similar views of this passage. We here seem to have almost an unequivocal answer to the question concerning the Biblical validity of the state. Not only does this passage discourage active disobedience or rebellion to the current state, something Rothbard never included in his political philosophy, but also discourages even a passive reaction to the state. The passage does not merely say “the state exists therefore so long as the state exists we ought obey it” but rather affirms not only the authority of the state but the clearly says that such authority comes only of God. Reformer Martin Luther was fierce in his defense of the state as being the sword-bearer of God, proscribing a very few legitimate causes for civil disobedience, none of which can libertarianism invoke. John Calvin was perhaps a bit more temperate in speech when he wrote:

“The reason why we ought to be subject to magistrates is, because they are constituted by God’s ordination. For since it pleases God thus to govern the world, he who attempts to invert the order of God, and thus to resist God himself, despises his power; since to despise the providence of him who is the founder of civil power, is to carry on war with him. Understand further, that powers are from God, not as pestilence, and famine, and wars, and other visitations for sin, are said to be from him; but because he has appointed them for the legitimate and just government of the world. For though tyrannies and unjust exercise of power, as they are full of disorder, are not an ordained government; yet the right of government is ordained by God for the wellbeing of mankind. As it is lawful to repel wars and to seek remedies for other evils, hence the Apostle commands us willingly and cheerfully to respect and honor the right and authority of magistrates, as useful to men: for the punishment which God inflicts on men for their sins, we cannot properly call ordinations, but they are the means which he designedly appoints for the preservation of legitimate order.” (Calvin, 1540)

and he continues:

“It is another part of the office of magistrates, that they ought forcibly to repress the waywardness of evil men, who do not willingly suffer themselves to be governed by laws, and to inflict such punishment on their offenses as God’s judgment requires; for he expressly declares, that they are armed with the sword, not for an empty show, but that they may smite evil-doers.”

Here Calvin certainly supports the right of state-sanctioned coercion. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any other meaning of the term “bearing the sword” than one that considers it a God given gift to coerce mankind on earth. We shall consider that question in more depth later.

Other New Testament references worth considering include Titus 3:1 which reads

“Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work”.

Also of great importance are Christ’s own commands concerning a Christian’s relationship with the government. When the Pharisees came to test him Christ famous said “Render to Caesar that which is Caesar and to God that which is God’s.” This command seems to coincide perfectly with the other scripture references we have mentioned. The state is given by God’s its own demain wherein its authority is to be recognized as set down by the decree of God. Jacques Ellul, in his paper *Anarchism and Christianity*, does not acknowledge such an interpretation of Christ’s words. (Ellul, 1980) Rather he considers Christ to be giving no commands referring to obedience to government, but rather is merely stating the fact that the minted coin belongs to Caesar. This seems a weak position to hold considering the weight and meaning the words of Christ generally carry when he speaks in the Gospel[[2]](#footnote-2). Mathew Henry, in his commentary, gives a stronger interpretation of Christ’s words. He states that the question was more than merely is it lawful to give to Caesar the taxes he imposes, but does Caesar even have a right to impose taxes? (Henry, 1811) Thus Christ’s answer is even more telling and reinforces the same point seen in Romans 13.

The church prefigured in the Old Testament too exemplifies the same idea put forth in the New. In the case of Israel, however, rather than the government being established “merely” by the providential decree of God, the actual voice of God spoke out and named the judges, prophets, and eventually Kings. It is to be doubted that direct divine ordination dispelled any of the economic effects of a coercive power. Beyond the institution of government, God also sanctioned the use of coercion by the government in a great multitude of cases where no protection of other private property was involved. Uzzah was struck dead directly by God himself for merely touching the Ark of the Covenant. Cities were captured, sacked, and plundered by the people of God in direct obedience to his will.

If this is now sufficient to now operate under the assumption that the Bible sanctions the existence of government, let us now continue to examine the more specific case of private property rights under a biblical worldview. The Bible certainly gives us examples of persons both in possession of private property and in lawfully defending their property. Whether the classically liberal claim that private property is an inherent right is justified is what we must now examine.

That private property and therefore the protection of it is provided for in the Law of Moses cannot be disputed. First and foremost, the eight commandment saying “Thou shalt not steal” must undoubtable imply the notion of private property by protecting it. When the Promised Land is divided and the laws for inheritance and the like are set down, private property is being allotted, and directly by God at that. Throughout the books of the law are provisions for the settling of disputes concerning property. The protection of private property and the punishments for the despoilment of private property are dealt with in no short manner. God, in setting forth the Law to His people, clearly does not overlook or take lightly the idea of private property, nor the disposition of man to violence and coercion. Not only is private property and it’s claims considered, but they are taken to the minutest of details in the Law. The unmuzzling of the ox as it treads out the grain may even fall under private property as the due wages of the beast. Honest wages are considered the due of the laborer. (Kaiser, 2012)

So the idea of private property seems to be supported by scripture. And yet, the idea that coercion is evil in and of itself does not seem to be. We can rationalize these two contradictory conclusions by continuing in our examination of private property in the Bible. We have easily found plenteous and good examples of private property in the Bible. However, we have not yet considered the idea of private property as an inherent human right. Libertarian philosophy, especially in a secular form, requires that private property be self-evidently a natural law or human right. Yet in searching the Bible you cannot conclude that it is. Everywhere in the Bible he find the institution of what might be called “human rights” or the rights of man, you see them in the form of a covenant made between God and man. In the covenant of works before the fall, man had communion with God. That covenant being broken by man, God instituted a new covenant of Grace. Throughout the Old and New Testaments God makes promises to man and he breaks none of them. In this occasion, we do not see God abiding by the “human right” of private property and therefore do we can conclude that he made no such promise.

It may be said then that God intended the right of private property to be only a right to be recognized among men. It may be argued that God commanded mankind to keep the law of private property that he instituted in their hearts, in the Ten Commandments, and elsewhere. However, we must not forget that God not only approved of but commissioned governments to violate property rights, as we have already seen. Thus private property cannot be a natural law written on the hearts of mankind if some of mankind in permitted to break it without consequence. We have arrived at the dilemma we saw earlier. Either the natural law of private property is correct and the existence of a State violates it or the existence of a State is valid and there is no natural law of private property. However, we now have concluded that the scripture dictates our acceptance of the latter. Not only Rothbard’s Anarcho-Capitalism, but all of Austrian economics, classical liberalism, and many of the core beliefs of western society seem to lie in shambles at our feet. However all of these, with the exception of the first of that list, can be rebuilt upon a firmer foundation.

With such ambitious goals, we begin again with the obvious cases of private property in the Bible. If there is no apparent natural law ensuring private property rights, why are there cases of private property in the Bible? Why does God enforce private property in His Law? To find the answer, we must realize that the Bible does not ever use the term “private property”. This is not in itself very important. There are many terms of great theological importance not to be found in the Bible. “Trinity” for one example. However, if we are going to understand private property and its role correctly, we must switch our term to stewardship.

At the heart of the meaning of the term stewardship is the verse of Psalm 24 “The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.” This is the true private property. At root, Locke got his definition of private property correct. God appropriated his own work and his own knowledge and created. Thus the work of His hands is His own. This is where we must base our theory of private property. There is no such thing as unappropriated means. There is even no such thing as our own labor since we too are the work of God’s hands. If private property can indeed be called a natural law, then we have failed to realize that we are not the proprietors of property, but property ourselves.

In Genesis 2:15 we read “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” This is would read very differently if it were to say that God bequeathed to man some property to be his own. Rather, God placed man as a keeper, just as the owner of a flock of sheep might hire one to keep the sheep. Again, imagine if one hired a servant to keep and tend a garden. Would not. under the Lockian definitions of property, that which is produced by the garden be yet considered the garden owners property? How much more in this case where God himself produced the one to work and keep the garden?

God, being the owner of all things, has placed us in this garden as stewards, rather than property owners. Therefore, as the true property owner, He will not have his will gainsaid. To resist the allotment of stewardship is to resist the will of God. From this fact we can now derive the reason for God’s probation of stealing and other such crimes against property. In ordinary speech, when we say a man has stolen from another man, we mean that one man has deprived another of what was by right lawfully his. However, since no goods in reality may be rightly construed as our own but merely in our keeping due to the allocation of the father, how then can there be any wrong in taking by force another’s man’s “property”? Because when we coerce our neighbor, we are in reality violating the property rights of God. We are taking what He has placed in the care of another and claiming it for our own. For example, suppose a property owner’s gardener was working in his garden. Now suppose another man came and despoiled the garden of its fruit. The crime here is not first and foremost a crime against the gardener, but rather a crime primarily against the owner of the garden. So it is with us. When a man steals from his neighbor, he does indeed injure his neighbor. However, the greater crime is the injury done to God. Just as all sin, theft and coercion ultimately boil down to a sin against God.

Some may claim that this theory of private property is practically no different than a theory that supposed private property to be a natural law. It may be supposed that this is merely a “Christianization” of Locke’s definition. It is not, however. As we have already noted, a natural law is a law that cannot be pushed aside at convenience. This theory of property is perfectly consistent with the idea of a coercive government. There is no paradox involved. If God is the right owner of all creation, is he not free to do with it as he sees fit? If he chooses to destroy a piece of His creation, is it not consistent with natural laws of private property for Him to do so? If he chooses to give any of His creation, His property, coercive power over any other part, is this not consistent with His right as property owner? Suppose the owner of the garden were to hire a second gardener, to be lower in rank than the first. Suppose the owner commands that the second garden render up stewardship of half of his produce to the first. Could this in any way be considered unjust? It could not. God exercises perfect justice in His setting forth a government as a wielder of the sword.

Having established the main point of this paper, namely, a critique of the ethical argument supporting Libertarian Anarcho-Capitalism, we now turn, as we near the end, to briefly consider some points to be made concerning the economic argument. While it is now clear what the scripture can tell us about the ethical side of the discussion, it is less clear how the Bible can enlighten us in the economic side. A few things we will say, however, beginning with a quote from I Samuel 8:

“So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.” Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.””

It is speaking here of the effects of coercive power in the world. It looks very nearly exactly like the economic effects Rothbard claimed governments caused. Yet looking at the situation again by analogy, this time not the simple garden but the whole modern economy, can we not say that the preferences of the property owner are being satisfied? Can we not also say that in this whole vast, complicated economy of the modern world, ultimately the property owner is in complete control of the allocation of resources? Now, this line of reasoning is probably not completely satisfying. Certainly it can be accused on neither being very practical nor very novel. Christians have always known ultimately that everything will come out right. How does this allow us to choose our line of action in the present? The answer may be that it isn’t particularly helpful in that respect. However, it is always good to remember that though all the troubles prophesied as accompanying a monarchy came to Israel, yet it was God’s plan that they should have a king, for through the kingship started that day, all the world would be saved. We do not completely know why God has ordained that coercive governments should rule over us, but we do know that it will come to right in the end.

Thus we have traced the biblical argument against Rothbardian Anarcho-Capitalism. While given the initial tenets of classical liberalism and Austrian economics we cannot help but come to the non-biblical conclusion that coercive governments are wrong., through biblical teaching we have established modified tenets the can support the whole while being in perfect conformity with our faith.

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1. To name only a few of the works wherein contains his anarcho-capitalist theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We here note that while Ellul is not an anarchist in the classically liberal school, the question he is considering is relevant to any form of anarchism seeking to reconcile itself with the scripture. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)