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The intervention reflex

A point of confusion for some libertarians – as for others with enthusiastic views about the right way to run the world – is the false dichotomy between “everything is fine” and “collective action is required”.

It is possible to hold a third position, namely that:

(a) the world is imperfect

(b) a legal framework which upholds private agreements is a good thing, because it helps to exploit the benefits of exchange

(c) major market failures may require collective action (defence is an example of a market failure; education and medicine are not)

(d) beyond providing a safety net, addressing imperfections by means of government action is to be avoided, if for no other reason than that it invariably involves some form of coercion.

There is a tremendous psychological pressure in contemporary society to jump from “something less than ideal is happening” to “the state must intervene”. In fact, it is more than a pressure, it has become an unconscious automatic connection.

Some libertarians appear to have a need to believe that viewpoint (d) above can most easily be held by downplaying (a). In other words, by trying to show the world is fine as it is. However, there is no necessary connection between

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recognising that the world is not ideal and demanding that the state do something about it. The promotion of this important principle, i.e.:

there is no necessary connection between (i) recognising that a state of affairs is less than ideal and (ii) requiring that the state do something about it

is given little or no attention in modern education – and under “education” we should include the output of media corporations such as the BBC. Whereas the opposite principle:

social problems require collective intervention

is given plenty of attention.

I am not sure what label a position of agnosticism such as the one defined by holding (a) to (d) above should have. Perhaps once it was identified with the term “conservative”. I fear, however, that this is no longer the case.