

The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only object of good government.

—Thomas Jefferson



THE NECESSITY OF GOVERNMENT

Mortimer Adler

PART II

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We have learned three things from our limited model. (1) Acknowledging and submitting to an authority for making rules and decisions concerning the actions to be taken by a group of men associated for a common purpose is the only alternative to retaining and exercising complete autonomy. (2) Since the retention of complete autonomy is tantamount to making unanimity the condition for adopting any rule or decision, its retention will probably frustrate concerted action for a common purpose, because the matters about which rules or decisions must be made are matters about which reasonable men can disagree. Their disagreement about such matters being highly probable, individuals associated for a common purpose must surrender their complete autonomy and substitute for it an authority that they themselves set up and acknowledge. They must do this if they wish to succeed in acting together harmoniously and effectively for whatever is their common purpose. (3) Government is necessary only as a means—a means of achieving concerted action for the good commonly aimed at by a group of associated men. The necessity of government answers to the need for a commonly acknowledged

authority to make rules or decisions concerning actions that affect the achievement of a common purpose.

The points just made all relate to one function of government—one reason why it is necessary as a means. But that is not the only function of government, or the only reason for its necessity. Another is the indispensability of government for the maintenance of peace. To understand this, we must go beyond the simple model we have been considering, consisting of three men alike in character and purpose. Let us now contemplate a much larger community of equals, involving individuals differing in a multitude of respects. This type of community, much larger than a single family, we usually call a civil society—a community of men living together under civil government.

The reason why our three scientists found it necessary to institute government, the authority of which they freely acknowledged by their unanimous consent, will apply without qualification and, perhaps, with even greater force in the case of civil society: the common good for which men associate in the larger community cannot be achieved if each of them insists upon retaining his complete autonomy. Some portion of it must be surrendered to establish an authority for making rules and reaching decisions binding on all by their free consent. But in the case of the more populous and humanly heterogeneous community of a civil society, there is an additional reason for government, namely, its indispensability as a means to civil peace.

In any populous community comprising men of divergent interests, conflicts or disagreements will probably arise about matters of either private or public concern. The parties to such conflicts may either be private individuals or they may be private individuals arraigned against public officials. Confronted with the probability of such conflicts or disputes, what alternatives are available for settling them? Only two: one is whatever power is at the disposal of the parties in conflict; the other is the authority of government to adjudicate disputes and to enforce its judgments. Let us consider each in turn.

In the absence of government, each of the parties to a dispute, being autonomous, must operate as judge in his own case and, in defense of his *ex parte* judgment, must try to persuade his opponent or, failing in that, exercise such *de facto* force as he can bring to bear. Disputes can, of course, be settled in this way, but not peacefully, since persuasion is likely to fail and recourse to violence will be necessitated. Hence if men who live together and interact in all

the affairs of their daily lives retain their complete autonomy, there is no way of excluding recourse to violence as a way of settling the disputes that are likely to arise. It follows, therefore, that government with the authority to adjudicate disputes and with authorized force to implement the judgment of its tribunals is indispensable to the peace of a civil society, in which men are associated for their common good.

Peace is essential to the very existence of a community as a community; and so, if communal life is a means to the common good of those who are associated in order to live well as human beings, then the maintenance of peace among men living together is indispensable to their achieving good lives for themselves.

The peace of a community may also be breached or marred by acts of criminal violence, as well as by the violence that would arise if the parties to a dispute could not submit their differences to an authorized tribunal for adjudication or arbitration. In the absence of government, each individual would have to defend himself against aggression by others with whatever power is at his disposal. The probability is high that wholesale violence would ensue. For this reason, as well as for the reason that, without authorized tribunals to settle disputes, the settlement of them would probably involve recourse to violence, the absence of government is a state of war rather than one of peace.

The preceding discussion of government as necessary for the maintenance of civil peace has introduced the notion of authorized force and the distinction between such force and violence. In our simple model of the three scientists in the jungle, the institution of an acknowledged authority sufficed for the operation of government; but in the more complicated case of civil society, naked authority is not enough. It must be clothed with and implemented by authorized force. The reason for this rests on the probability of disobedience together with the probability that persuasion will not always succeed in winning compliance from those who tend to be recalcitrant.

The probability of disobedience is generated by the fact of human freedom. Even those who freely acknowledge the authority of government always remain free to obey or disobey its rules of law, its administrative edicts, and its judicial decisions. In a populous community, comprising men of every stripe, good and bad, the probability of disobedience is not negligible. The disobedience may or may not be justified in the particular case. Let us for the moment table the problem of justified disobedience; I will return later to the conditions under which there is a right to disobey. For the present

let us consider only the likelihood of disobedience that is *not* justified.

One way in which the constituted authority of civil government can deal with such disobedience is to attempt to persuade the recalcitrants. Since persuasion can fail and since, furthermore, it is likely to fail in a certain number of cases, some other device must be available if the authority of government is not to be rendered ineffective for the purpose for which it is instituted.

The only other device is the employment of coercive force. It is strictly an emergency measure in the sense that its use is justified *only* by the failure of efforts at persuasion. Nevertheless, the high probability that persuasion will not be effective to overcome unjustified disobedience in *every* case makes it necessary to implement the authority of government with the right to employ coercive force.

The force that is used to compel obedience or compliance may either be authorized or unauthorized. It is authorized only if it is instituted to implement the authority of civil government. Only such force as is thus instituted and employed to implement the regulations and decisions that government itself has the authority to make is, strictly speaking, authorized force or force exercised *de jure*—rightfully or by right. All other force is purely *de facto* or without right, and all such unauthorized force is violence. Violence may be committed by a government as well as by the members of a society. A government commits violence when it exceeds its authorization to use force—when it uses force that it is not authorized to use, or uses it to enforce compliance with rules or decisions that it is not authorized to make.

Since authorized force belongs by right to civil government and to civil government alone, government should have a *monopoly* of authorized force. This does not mean that it necessarily does have a preponderance of the force available in the community. The *de facto* force that can be marshaled by a revolutionary party or movement may surpass and overpower the authorized force of government. Again I am postponing for the time being the question of the right of revolution, which is related to the question about the conditions under which revolutionary violence is justified.

The only point that I wish to stress here is that authorized force—force used to implement authority—is, by its very nature, the exclusive property of a civil government that is duly constituted; in other words, a government that is itself *de jure* and not *de*

facto. The force exercised by a *de facto* government is as unauthorized as that government itself is, and so, being *de facto* force, is a manifestation of violence.

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I can sum up what we have learned so far in a single, though somewhat complex proposition: government, with the authority to make laws, to adjudicate disputes, and to issue administrative decisions, and with a monopoly of authorized force to coerce where it fails to persuade, is an indispensable means, *proximately*, to the peace of communal life; and, *ultimately*, to the happiness of its individual members, to whatever extent a good human life for each of them depends on their being able to live together, work cooperatively for their common good, and interact peacefully with one another. Those who concede that government is necessary for the reasons just indicated may still wish to ask whether, being necessary, it is also a necessary evil. Or, in addition to being necessary, is it intrinsically good?

What is being asked is not whether there can be bad government. Government can obviously be bad in a variety of ways: through exceeding its authority or its right to use coercive force, through the imperfection of its institutions, through the injustice of its acts, and so on. Since no one can deny the abuses, imperfections, or injustices that everyone knows can afflict government, the question should be not whether government *can* be bad, but whether it *must* be. For if it must be bad and, in spite of that, is necessary, then and only then would it be correct to regard it as a necessary evil.


I submit that there is nothing about the nature of government that makes it impossible for it to be free from abuses, imperfections, or injustices. This remains true even if one were to add that, government being what it is and men being what they are, any government instituted and carried on by men will always reflect to a certain extent the weaknesses and imperfections of its human constituents and agents. Nevertheless, the institutions of government can be so perfected and its operations so safeguarded that they can be rendered innocuous, in spite of the ever present human proclivities to the contrary. Government is, therefore, not necessarily or intrinsically evil.

The only reason that might be given for thinking the contrary would be the view that complete autonomy on the part of every individual is an absolute good; for if this were the case, then government, by taking autonomy away from the individual in certain

matters, while leaving it intact in others, would necessarily be evil. This line of argument can readily be shown to be self-defeating. To be a necessary evil, government has to be necessary, in the first place. But why is government necessary? Because, as we have seen, complete autonomy on the part of individuals is incompatible with their effective cooperation for a common purpose and with their peaceful interaction in communal life. Hence if the effectiveness and peace of communal life is itself something good—good as a means to the good life of human beings—then complete autonomy, not government, is to be judged intrinsically evil.

In short, the goodness of government as well as its necessity rests on the fact that human beings, in order to engage effectively in the pursuit of happiness, must associate and cooperate with their fellowmen to obtain the goods of communal life, among which peace is a principal component, and they cannot do so unless the authority and authorized force of government replace autonomy with regard to all matters affecting communal and common goods.

Before I turn to the question about the nature and origin of the state, I would like to remind the reader of matters that have been postponed for later consideration or questions that have been raised but not answered. They include such considerations of critical importance as the conditions under which resistance to government is justified and the conditions that justify recourse to revolutionary violence. They also include basic questions about the limits of a government's authority and coercive force, questions about the perfection of its institutions, and questions about the justice of its acts.

My reason for postponing the consideration of these matters is twofold. First, our concern with them is mainly in the sphere of civil society and, therefore, in the sphere of civil governments. Hence we will be in a better position to deal with these matters after we understand the state or civil society as distinct from all other communities or forms of association, and understand it as having only one mode of government that is distinctively appropriate to itself. Second these considerations are consequent upon, not antecedent to, the question about the necessity of government and its goodness. Hence no matter what resolution we are subsequently able to achieve of the difficult problems concerning dissent and revolutionary violence or concerning the abuses or injustices of government, it should in no way detract from the soundness of the conclusion that we have so far reached concerning the necessity and intrinsic goodness of government. 

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