



The Lover of Liberty and the 2012 Presidential Election

Many of my fellow Ron Paul supporters insist that in this year's presidential election, under no circumstances will they vote for either Mitt Romney or Barack Obama. Even if one of these two candidates can rightly be judged the lesser of two evils, an evil is still an evil, they say. And one must never will an object that conscience has declared to be an evil.

The great Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas agreed. However, he was quick to make two observations.

First, conscience, because it is nothing else than a species of reason, does indeed go wrong. Just because my conscience declares this or that to be a good or an evil doesn't make it so: Each object of the will is good or bad independently of what we happen to think of it.

Secondly, one's ignorance of the moral significance of an object may or may not be pardonable. For instance, ignorance of right and wrong — the natural law, Aquinas would say — fails as miserably as a justification for evil-doing as ignorance of the law fails as a justification in court for unlawfulness.

There are just some things of which we must be aware.

In light of this highly attenuated account of Aquinas' ethical analysis, it is safe to say that while my fellow Paul supporters are correct in their judgment that conscience forbids us from deliberately choosing evil, they are incorrect on a couple of other scores.

Liberty is a good. Paul supporters recognize this. But what is liberty? Liberty consists in a decentralization of authority and a diffusion of power. Paul supporters know this also. They know that the more centralized a government, the less free are its citizens. In desiring liberty above all, every Paul supporter seeks, then, a decentralized government.

Sadly, it has been quite some time — arguably a century-and-a-half — since America has had anything even remotely approximating a federal government of the scope and size delineated by our Constitution. So, Paul supporters know — or at least should know — that if such a lost governmental structure is ever to be restored, it is not going to happen over the next four to eight years — regardless of whether our president over this time is named Obama, Romney, or Paul.

We must judge matters from where we are at. In other words, ignorance of our reality — ignorance of the immensity of our national government, say, and ignorance of the sheer powerlessness of any one person or even group of persons to scale it back to so much as a shadow of its counterpart from the eighteenth century — is inexcusable. To make a decision regarding something as momentous as the future of our country on the basis of this sort of ignorance — even if it accords with one's conscience —





is to condemn oneself.

You should know better.

From the standpoint of liberty, I agree that Paul is a better choice than Romney. As I have already indicated, though, this is not because Paul would necessarily be able to do all that much more than Romney would be able to do in the way of freeing up the American citizen. But he would at least be willing to do more than Romney. And, at this stage in our national life, this makes him a better choice.

Paul, however, is no longer an option. Still, the same reasoning that drives the liberty lover to choose Paul over Romney should drive him to prefer Romney to Obama: Though Romney is not going to be able to dramatically reduce, or reduce at all, the size of government, he is resolved to prevent it from growing to the size that Obama desires.

There are a number of policies that Romney advocates that are less inimical to liberty than are those advanced by Obama. The latter — like ObamaCare, for example — Romney promises to repeal. Will Romney follow through? No one can foretell the future, but even if he doesn't, that he has pledged to reduce the functions of the federal government while Obama has pledged to expand them yet further should be enough to bring the lover of liberty around to his side.

Think of it this way: If your loved one, your child say, had a terminal illness and there was the slightest — just the slightest — chance that he could be either saved or maybe even kept alive longer in the hope that, in the meantime, a cure may be discovered, would you not jump at the chance to stop the Grim Reaper from claiming him then and there?

Our country is our loved one, and it is sick. It is very sick. We should attend to it with all of the care and concern, all of the sobriety, with which we would attend to our children.

But, the Paul supporter will object, even if Romney is the lesser of two evils, the lesser of two evils is still an evil, and it is always wrong to choose an evil! To meet this objection, we should again turn to Aquinas.

Aquinas articulated what has since been recognized by theologians and ethicists as the doctrine of "double effect." This doctrine asserts that since moral worth hinges primarily upon an agent's intention, it is permissible for a person to will a course of action that he foresees will have bad consequences if the consequences are unintended and the action is necessary in order to prevent a greater evil.

For example, suicide is always immoral. Even if a person is terminally ill, it is not permissible for him to intend his own death. But suppose a terminally ill person seeks not to end his life, but to administer to himself dosages of morphine sufficient to relieve his pain but equally sufficient to end his life. This would be permissible, for though death is a foreseeable consequence of his action, it is not an intended one. It is an unintended side effect of a non-suicidal act: an act intended to relieve pain — not end life.

It is indeed always and everywhere unacceptable to willingly choose what one thinks is evil. Yet even if one is convinced that Romney is the lesser of two evils, in voting for him, one need no more be guilty of choosing an evil than a terminally ill person who consumes a lethal dosage of morphine to relieve pain can be said to be guilty of having chosen evil. A liberty lover needn't be any more attracted to any of Romney's policies in order to vote for the Republican nominee than need the prospect of a fatal drug overdose appeal to the terminal patient in search of pain relief, or chemotherapy appeal to a cancer patient.

The liberty lover simply (yet reasonably) needs to believe that the only way to achieve some measure —



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on October 11, 2012

any measure — of relief for his country from Obama's liberty-eroding agenda to "fundamentally transform" it is to vote our 44th president out of office.

However, the only way to do this is to vote for Mitt Romney.



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