

REJOINDER TO HOLCOMBE ON THE INEVITABILITY OF GOVERNMENT

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HOLCOMBE (2004) ARGUED THAT government was inevitable. In Block (2005) I maintained that this institution was not unavoidable. Holcombe (2007) takes issue with that response of mine to his earlier paper, and the present essay is, in turn, a response to his latest missive in this conversation.¹ In section I, I deal with what I can consider an anomaly in Holcombe's argument. Section II is devoted to a consideration of his dismissal of my paper on grounds of "fallacy of composition." The burden of section III is to consider Holcombe's supposed refutation of my views on the basis of his comments about the price ceiling; in section IV, I comment on the examples offered by this author, and in section V, I examine his claim that he is not actually supporting government. I conclude in section VI.

I. ANOMALY

Holcombe (2007) starts off on what can only be called a strange foot. He states (p. 41): "Block (2005) argues that the arguments I make fall short of logically proving that government is inevitable. On that point I completely agree with Block." But this, splutter, splutter, pretty much gives away the entire game. What I ask, are we debating about, if he "completely agree[s]" with me? We really are not arguing about anything other than what he has just conceded to me:

According to Holcombe (2004) government is inevitable. That being the case, it behooves us the men of good will to set one up for ourselves, in attempt to ward off a worse one which is sure to come about if we do not. The present article criticizes this view on two

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¹All citations to Holcombe will be, unless otherwise noted, to Holcombe (2007).

grounds. First, it calls into question this author's claim of inevitability. Secondly, it maintains that *even if* government is unavoidable, we are still required as moral agents to do what we can to squelch this necessarily evil institution.²

But this author will not allow the fact that we disagree on the central aspect of his thesis. As it happens, he is entirely correct to do so, for, contrary to his statement above, we really do *not* at all agree on these matters.

II. FALLACY OF COMPOSITION

Before getting into the gist of his argument against me, Holcombe wishes to dispose of what he considers as a side order issue:

But first, some of the arguments that Block uses to attack my logic are logically flawed themselves. For example, in several places Block (2005, pp. 71–72, 77–78, 80), argues that if my claim that government is inevitable is true, my line of reasoning also implies that a single world government is inevitable. Because we never have had world government, it is apparent that world government is not inevitable; therefore, national governments also are not inevitable. Block's argument commits the logical fallacy of composition. He argues that what is true for a subset (e.g., an individual state) is also true for the whole (e.g., the entire world). Block employs a logical fallacy to try to show that my argument is logically flawed. (Holcombe 2007, pp. 41–42)

I find fault with this criticism on several grounds. First of all, Holcombe (2004) never, ever, not even once, limits his thesis to *national* government. For him, at least in this publication, it is *government*, *any* kind of government, that is inevitable. As far as I am concerned, this includes world government, state government, city

²Nor is this an aberration, dismissed, perhaps, as a slip of the pen, or, rather, keyboard. Later on in his paper, he again explicitly agrees with me that his thesis is incorrect:

Block is correct that as a matter of simple logic, I have not proven that government is inevitable, because people do have free will, and as a matter of simple logic, I cannot prove that people would not choose to eliminate government. Social science is not like physics. Objects always obey physical laws, but people can choose their own actions. (Holcombe 2007, pp. 42–43)

And again (p. 43): "I am not arguing, then, that as a matter of simple logic, it can be proven that government is inevitable." Perhaps Holcombe does not know the meaning of the word "inevitable."

government, town government, country government; there are simply *no* exceptions in his claim.³ He may well have had only national government in mind, but it is still problematic for him to object to my testing his thesis to any kind of government I wish, given that he did not specifically rule this out.

Second, I am not at all guilty of the fallacy of composition. This line of argument generalizes from the individual to the group. Block (2005), however, argued in exactly the *opposite* direction, from the group to the individual, or from the whole to the parts. I maintained that since world government is not inevitable,⁴ neither is national government. But, surely, the world is the entire group, while each nation is but one part of this larger entity. If I am guilty of anything, it is the *reverse*, or *inverse* of this fallacy, not the fallacy itself.

Third, this author is himself in error regarding the fallacy of composition. Even were I guilty of employing the form of compositional argument with which he charges me (from the individual to the group), it still would not be fallacious.

To be sure, upon occasion it is invalid to ascribe what is true of the parts to the whole. But there are exceptions. *Sometimes* this constitutes a valid argument. In order to show this, I take the liberty of quoting extensively from a discussion of the fallacy of composition on that matter:

The fallacy of Composition is committed when a conclusion is drawn about a whole based on the features of its constituents when, in fact, no justification is provided for the inference. There are actually two types of this fallacy, both of which are known by the same name (because of the high degree of similarity).

The first type of fallacy of Composition arises when a person reasons from the characteristics of individual members of a class or group to a conclusion regarding the characteristics of the entire class or group (taken as a whole). More formally, the “reasoning” would look something like this.

1. Individual F things have characteristics A, B, C, etc.
2. Therefore, the (whole) class of F things has characteristics A, B, C, etc.

³What about student government at a university? This, too, is included, provided it is a public or publicly subsidized institution of higher learning. For then this type of government, too, would have an element of coercion in common with all its other statist counterparts.

⁴How could it be? It does not exist.

This line of reasoning is fallacious because the mere fact that individuals have certain characteristics does not, in itself, guarantee that the class (taken as a whole) has those characteristics.

It is important to note that drawing an inference about the characteristics of a class based on the characteristics of its individual members is not always fallacious. In some cases, sufficient justification can be provided to warrant the conclusion. For example, it is true that an individual rich person has more wealth than an individual poor person. In some nations (such as the US) it is true that the class of wealthy people has more wealth as a whole than does the class of poor people. In this case, the evidence used would warrant the inference and the fallacy of Composition would not be committed.

The second type of fallacy of Composition is committed when it is concluded that what is true of the parts of a whole must be true of the whole without there being adequate justification for the claim. More formally, the line of “reasoning” would be as follows:

1. The parts of the whole X have characteristics A, B, C, etc.
2. Therefore the whole X must have characteristics A, B, C.

That this sort of reasoning is fallacious because it cannot be inferred that simply because the parts of a complex whole have (or lack) certain properties that the whole that they are parts of has those properties. This is especially clear in math: The numbers 1 and 3 are both odd. 1 and 3 are parts of 4. Therefore, the number 4 is odd.

It must be noted that reasoning from the properties of the parts to the properties of the whole is not always fallacious. If there is justification for the inference from parts to whole, then the reasoning is not fallacious. For example, if every part of the human body is made of matter, then it would not be an error in reasoning to conclude that the whole human body is made of matter. Similarly, if every part of a structure is made of brick, there is no fallacy committed when one concludes that the whole structure is made of brick.

Examples of Composition

1. A main battle tank uses more fuel than a car. Therefore, the main battle tanks use up more of the available fuel in the world than do all the cars.
2. A tiger eats more food than a human being. Therefore, tigers, as a group, eat more food than do all the humans on the earth.
3. Atoms are colorless. Cats are made of atoms, so cats are colorless.

4. “Every player on the team is a superstar and a great player, so the team is a great team.” This is fallacious since the superstars might not be able to play together very well and hence they could be a lousy team.

5. “Each part of the show, from the special effects to the acting is a masterpiece. So, the whole show is a masterpiece.” This is fallacious since a show could have great acting, great special effects and such, yet still fail to “come together” to make a masterpiece.

6. “Come on, you like beef, potatoes, and green beans, so you will like this beef, potato, and green been casserole.” This is fallacious for the same reason that the following is fallacious: “You like eggs, ice cream, pizza, cake, fish, jello, chicken, taco sauce, soda, oranges, milk, egg rolls, and yogurt so you must like this yummy dish made out of all of them.”

7. Sodium and Chloride are both dangerous to humans. Therefore any combination of sodium and chloride will be dangerous to humans.⁵

Suppose, then, that Block (2005) had argued in the way Holcombe (2007) claims, namely, from the individual to the group, from the part to the whole. Still, it is by no means obvious that to do so would have been an error. Holcombe’s charge of “fallacy of composition” against me has to be interpreted in a nuanced way. Is my generalization from the individual to the group, from the part to the whole,⁶ fallacious or not? It all depends if this argument would have been of the form: “The numbers 1 and 3 are both odd. 1 and 3 are parts of 4. Therefore, the number 4 is odd,” or of the form: “if every part of the human body is made of matter, then . . . the whole human body is made of matter.” There is a relevant difference between odd and even numbers. There is no such distinction to be drawn between matter in the entire human body or in any part of it; it all consists of matter. So, the relevant question is, Is there any relevant difference between a world government and a national government? If Holcombe wishes to show that this argument (that Block, 2005 did *not* make) is fallacious he is logically compelled to show a relevant difference between national and world government. Holcombe (2007) did not even *try* to do so. He did not so much as recognize the need to do so. Let us do so for him. Is there a relevant difference between the two levels of government? No. For relevance, here, is

⁵<http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/composition.html>.

⁶I am still stipulating that I engaged in this train of thought, even though, as I maintain above, I did not.

concerned, solely, with the question of whether coercion occurs or not. And, it is clear to see that it does at the national and would at the world level.

Perhaps the most famous argument over the fallacy of composition in economics is between the Keynesians who claim that when all individuals in a society raise their rate of saving, the group as a whole will not succeed, and the Austrians who deny this. Holcombe to the contrary notwithstanding, this debate cannot be settled by merely resorting to the “fallacy of composition.” Rather, it takes a more nuanced approach. It turns on issues such as which model is a more accurate depiction of reality, the Keynesian or the Austrian.

III. THE PRICE CEILING AND *CETERIS PARIBUS*

Nor can I see my way clear to agreeing with yet another interpretation. He states:

For example, economists will argue that if a price ceiling is placed on a good that holds its price below the market equilibrium price, a shortage will result. Does this mean that a shortage is a logical implication of the price ceiling? Following Block’s argument quoted above: No. People could choose to consume less after the price control is put into place; suppliers could choose to supply more. Conceivably, news about the price control could cause consumers to want to avoid purchasing the price-controlled good. Block (2005, p. 60) would argue that to say that a shortage “is inevitable is to denigrate free will.” The quotation of Block here is completely within the context of the argument he makes. My argument that government is inevitable is made in the same way that an economist would argue that a price ceiling holding a price below the market equilibrium price will inevitably lead to a shortage. It is based upon widely-accepted assumptions about human behavior, but they are assumptions, and they are simplified depictions of more complex human action. (Holcombe 2007, p. 43)

Where Holcombe sees analogy, I see disanalogy. A price ceiling *necessarily* causes a shortage because we are implicitly assuming *ceteris paribus* conditions when we make analyses of this sort. This has nothing at all to do with free will. In sharp contrast, free will does indeed obviate the *necessity* that there always be a government to (mis)rule over us. The “free will” argument can only take one so far; it is fine for questions such as whether or not we will always be exploited by government, but can have no effect on matters of praxeology. Take another case: I claim it as a synthetic *a priori* statement that whenever voluntary trade occurs, both parties gain, and gain necessarily, at least in the *ex ante* sense. All the free will in the world

cannot gainsay that claim. Holcombe is guilty of a category mistake in this regard. His statement (2007, p. 44): “The point is that following Block’s own argument about free will—that I agree with—no outcome that turns on human behavior is logically inevitable” is thus erroneous.

IV. EXAMPLES

Before we consider the examples Holcombe employs, let us take a moment to consider precisely what kind of entity is government. In my view the state necessarily initiates violence against nonaggressors. It does so in at least one of two ways, and in all real-world situations, both. One aspect is that it levies coercive taxes on people who have not first agreed to pay.⁷ Another is that it declares a monopoly of coercive force against all other institutions such as private courts, defense forces, etc. (Rothbard 1982), that attempt to operate in “its” claimed geographical area. That is, it will initiate violence against those it sees as competitors. But the same can be said for every two-bit rapist, murderer, robber, carjacker, kidnapper, thief, etc., whether operating on his own or as part of a small gang. Wherein, then, lies the difference between denizens of this ilk and government? In a word, legitimacy. If large numbers of people see the gang as legitimate, then it is a government. If none or only a few do so, then it is an ordinary criminal organization (Rothbard 1961). There is no continuum between coercion and noncoercion; an act is either one of initiatory violence, or it is not.⁸ However, matters are different with regard to legitimacy. Given that this characteristic turns upon how many people in a given society view a criminal robber band as somehow legitimate, then there can be almost an infinitesimal gradation between gang and government. For example, the criminals now running countries such as the U.S., Canada, France, Japan, are certainly governments. Jack the Ripper and the Son of Sam were undoubtedly nongovernmental criminals. No one thought they had even a shred of

⁷Schumpeter (1942, p. 198) states: “The theory which construes taxes on the analogy of club dues or of the purchase of the services of, say, a doctor only proves how far removed this part of the social science is from scientific habits of mind.”

⁸There are of course grey areas lying between these extremes in the sense that there are libertarians, even eminent ones, who debate either side of the issue of whether abortion or immigration restrictions, for example, are instances of violations of the proper legal code. But this is a completely different matter.

legitimacy. But what are we to say of Hamas, the Mafia, the Crips, the Bloods, Al Qaeda? All of these groups promote some version of law and order, give food to the poor on a regularized basis, etc. It cannot be denied that at least *some* people view these organizations as “legitimate.” In my view, these groups fall into a continuum which has at one end government, and at the other, ordinary criminals.

With this introduction, let us consider Holcombe’s views on the issue:

In Holcombe (2004, p. 333) I cite Bosnia, Somalia, and Afghanistan in the 1990s as the best real-world examples of places without a **central** government, but I note that despite the absence of government they fell short of the ideals of anarcho-capitalism. Block (2005, p. 85) says, “But these are *not* cases in point. Here, there most certainly were bands of thugs and warlords on the loose. Are these not governments? Anyone who denies this must show a relevant difference between these marauders and the *governments* of such worthies as Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, and their ilk.” If one accepts Block’s argument that these are governments, this appears to be evidence for my argument, not his. For in all cases, a **central** government was displaced and the vacuum of power was rapidly filled by new bands of thugs that established themselves as what Block refers to as governments. At least as I argued it, these were places of anarchy, where there was still a chance that anarcho-capitalism could displace Hobbesian anarchy. As Block sees these examples, the extinguishing of one government rapidly leads thugs to replace it with another, just as the article he objects to argues would happen. (2007, p. 44, bold emphasis added)

There are problems here. First of all, note the equivocation between “government” and “**central** government.” In Holcombe (2004, p. 333, fn. 3) he talks about plain old vanilla “government,” with no modifier at all. But, now, in Holcombe (2007, p. 44) he mistakenly quotes, or better, paraphrases, his own previous (2004) work as referring to “**central** government.” Now, it is one thing to misquote or mischaracterize someone else’s publication. But to do so with regard to your own work? Nor is this to be construed as the mere slip of the tongue, a minor error that has no substantive implication. On the contrary, our dispute on this matter turns to an important degree on this one word. Yes, I readily admit that, at one time, Bosnia, Somalia, and Afghanistan had **central** governments, and no longer do so; instead, they have decentralized governments, warlord thugs. For Holcombe (2004), in contrast, once the **central** government is gone, there is anarchy. That is, he considers the thuggish war lord scenario to be what I am advocating, and does not much like it. Well, neither do I. It would take us too far afield to compare the two situations, war lord governments with **central** governments; but, suffice it to say, I

do not consider either of them exactly the model of the anarcho-capitalism I advocate.

Second, my assertion that the various war lords of Bosnia, Somalia, and Afghanistan constitute governments is hardly evidence for his argument, not mine, as he claims. Remember, he is asserting the *inevitability* of government. The fact that there are still governments—of whatever type or variety—in these places does not at all show they are inevitable.

Third, I see problems with his “the extinguishing of one government rapidly leads thugs to replace it with another.” This way of putting matters deemphasizes the role of free will in human affairs. It comes awkwardly from an eminent Austrian economist such as Holcombe. Surely, a better way to characterize the phenomenon under discussion would be: “in Bosnia, Somalia, and Afghanistan in the 1990s, decisions were made by such and such people so that a central government was replaced by a more decentralized governmental system.” Further, Holcombe concedes my point when he correctly refers to the replacement institutions as “government.” According to his own views, he ought to have said, instead, “the extinguishing of one government rapidly leads thugs to replace it, not with another government, but rather with anarchism.”

Holcombe then denies my (2005, p. 84) claim that the “foul breath of the state hardly exists at all” in places such as “the oceans and Antarctica.” He does so on the grounds that there are agreements between nations, such as the Law of the Sea Treaty. But, I did not say that statism totally did not exist on the high seas and at the poles of the planet. There are, after all, governmental navies, submarines, battle cruisers, etc., floating around all over the place. But statist power is certainly greatly attenuated in places like this, plus some vast deserts, compared to what prevails on most of the land mass. And happily so.

V. ARGUMENT FOR GOVERNMENT?

Holcombe (2007, p. 45) begins this section as follows: “To argue that government is inevitable is not an argument in support of government.” Fair enough. After all, the first is a positive claim and the second a normative one, and never the twain shall meet. But from this premise he invalidly argues that he does not favor government. He is, in effect, an anarchist, he would have us believe. I find this hard to reconcile with what he has written.

I fully well recognize that there are better governments and worse governments, even though I for one oppose them all. Hoppe

(2001) did a magnificent job in demonstrating precisely that some states are vastly preferable to others. And Holcombe is to be congratulated for recognizing this crucial point. But he claims that his

argument is not that we should establish governments in places where there are none—because no such places exist—but rather that if we really want to reduce the impact of government in our lives, the best libertarian strategy is to design and promote ways to curtail the power of the governments that now exert their power over us rather than arguing the merits of anarcho-capitalism. (Holcombe 2007, p. 46)

I find fault with this statement on several grounds. There are most certainly “places” where the evil hand of government has not so far touched: the moon and Mars. These are both at least potentially inhabitable areas, at least with new technology of the sort we can anticipate over the next few decades.⁹ Space, too, is so vast, that despite a few rocket launches, government in effect rules very, very little of it. Suppose then, as a contrary to fact conditional if need be, that there are now no governments on the moon or Mars, and that there will soon be people settling in both places. It is hard to resist the notion, based on Holcombe’s writings (2004; 2007), that he would advocate that a government be set up, forthwith, a “good one” that is, in order to preclude the arrival of a later worse one. If this is his taste, well and good; *de gustibus non disputandum*, after all. But it is exceedingly difficult to reconcile this with his claim that he does not favor government. If he opposes government so much, why does he continue to advocate that this institution be set up, not merely that it is “inevitable” and that this will be done in any case? Why the sneer that I am “arguing the merits of anarcho-capitalism” while Rome is in effect burning?

VI. CONCLUSION

States Holcombe:

I am not arguing, then, that as a matter of simple logic, it can be proven that government is inevitable. Rather, I am arguing that based on commonly accepted assumptions about human behavior, if somehow an anarcho-capitalist society were to come into existence today, anarchy would erode into a society ruled by government. (2007, p. 43)

⁹Provided of course that free enterprise is allowed to play a large role in their development.

I agree entirely with both claims. Let us consider each in turn. As to the first, Holcombe (2004) can only be properly interpreted as claiming that as a matter of simple logic, it *can* be proven that government is inevitable. I am glad that he has (seemingly) changed his mind on this matter, and thus in effect renounced his 2004 publication. As to the second, again he is correct. Given that the hearts and minds of the populace are today so wedded¹⁰ to the idea of the legitimacy of government, it would be astounding if ordered anarchy could function in the modern climate.

Holcombe (2007) maintains that the

major line of reasoning libertarians have used to support anarcho-capitalism has been that government is unnecessary because market institutions can replace all of the activities undertaken by governments. This argument is insufficient to make the case for libertarian anarchy. I argued that while it is true that government is unnecessary, this falls short of making the case for libertarian anarchy because even though government is unnecessary, it still is inevitable. Block (2005) argues that there are logical flaws in my argument, but even if he is correct, this still does not show that government is not inevitable.¹¹ (p. 46)

Ordinarily, all one can do in a rejoinder is point out errors in the original paper. It is typically impossible to prove a negative. But in this case, since Holcombe's case stands in logical contradiction to human free will, which he embraces, this indeed does demonstrate that government is not and logically cannot be inevitable. However, let us proceed *arguendo*. Stipulate, then, that the state is inevitable. From this Holcombe draws the conclusion that the case for libertarian anarchy cannot be made. But if we posit that government is inevitable, then we must do so for crime, slavery, rape, murder, etc. However, this will not and should not stop us from making the case that crime, slavery, rape, murder, are illegitimate, and should be stopped.

Given the human condition, a temporary absence of crime, slavery, rape, murder, cannot be "self-sustaining" (Holcombe n.d., p. 6). So what. These activities are still illicit, and, had we the power to do so, we should stop them. I certainly agree with Hummel (2001) and Leeson and Stringham (2005) that once established, an

¹⁰Borrowing nomenclature from our friends the sociobiologists, we can say, "hard-wired."

¹¹He also complains that "Block's (2005) comment does not address the major point I was trying to make in my original article." All I can say is that if true, Holcombe is guilty of this, too.

anarcho-capitalist society would thereby be strengthened. Does that mean there will never again be any crime? No revisiting of criminal government? Not at all. The human condition will probably always rear its ugly head in such a manner. And, I reiterate my argument, Holcombe's comments regarding the fallacy of composition to the contrary notwithstanding, that the absence of a world government has demonstrated, so far in any case, that there is at least one version of government that is not "inevitable."

I certainly join with Holcombe (2007, p. 47) that apart from matters discussed in this dialogue, we "share the same libertarian agenda of reducing the scope and power of government." However, I do not at all agree that analysis of, and, yes, advocacy of anarcho-capitalism, will "distract good minds from the pursuit of a more productive libertarian agenda." Marxism did not have as good a run as it had by pulling its punches and becoming moderate. Nor is the left-wing environmental movement known for its restraint. Purely as a matter of strategy, putting forth the most principled and radical version of libertarianism will also maximize its chances of ultimate acceptance.

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