

What Is Government?

Why Is It Needed?

Al Lee

June 9, 2023

In this essay I will try to explain my understanding and reasoning regarding government, its nature, and its purpose. First, though, I must present a working definition of “society”.

Society

Human beings are largely, but not absolutely, social beings. That is to say that they have an immensely strong inclination to live among other human beings. I say not absolute because there are exceptions, hermits, lone wolves, people who prefer to live disconnected, or mostly disconnected from other humans; but they are a tiny minority of the entire population. Society is any group of humans existing among one another. A society cannot exist without some mutually agreed-upon rules of behavior. Humans simply being in proximity of one another does not constitute a society unless they share some agreement, expressed or tacit, to function cooperatively, or, at minimum, to not devour one another.

Government

Thus, a society requires rules. Rules, in turn, are meaningless without penalties for violating them; and penalties require some authority to administer them. That authority is called “government”, regardless whether the entity administering the rules is an individual, a council of some, or of all of the human beings belonging to the society.

Classes of Government

There are several classes of government.

Anarchy

Anarchy is really an absence of government. It is an extremely unstable condition in which chaos will be the norm and a jungle-like survival of the “fittest” mentality will lead to massive suffering, exploitation, and disintegration of the society (which is actually only imaginary anyway). Government is necessary in order for any society to exist.

Populism

Populism is a class of government in which all members of the society (or nearly all with some exceptions) participate in establishing and administering the rules (laws) governing all members. Decisions are made by popular vote. Direct Democracy is a variant of Populism that can have many sub-variants distinguished by the number of exceptions having no voting right. Some exceptions might be

based on age (minority vs. majority), criminal background, conflicting allegiances (being also a member of another group that is considered an enemy or opponent), and so forth.

Republicanism is a Hybrid of a Populist and a Statist (discussed below) form of government. As such it has both some of the advantages of both and some of the disadvantages of both.

Statism

Statism has many variants, all of which are distinguished by the existence of two (or more) classes of citizens or subjects. One class rules and the other is ruled. Some variants are: Communism, Fascism, Monarchy, Oligarchy, and Ecclesiocracy. Socialism is merely an intermediate step in a conversion from some other form of government to Communism.

Totalitarianism is simply the extreme form of Statism in which Government has near-total control over its population.

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy is not a form of government, but it defines a segment within every form of government. It is the agencies, bureaus, offices, and departments that do the actual work of administering and enforcing the laws. And bureaucrats are the people who staff them. Although the bureaucracy might have no legitimate governing authority itself, it functions under the authority of the legitimate government.

Because the size of the bureaucracy usually eventually expands to many times that of the body of nominal government officials, it tends to acquire inordinate de-facto powers, eventually eclipsing the legitimate powers of the government which is helpless to control it.

Thus, bureaucrats become a distinct segment of the society having real, though illegitimate, governing powers whether in a Populist, Statist, or any Hybrid class of government.

Some bureaucracy is virtually impossible to avoid. The broader the scope of the government (usually meaning the more Statist it is), the larger the bureaucracy will need to be. Because of this relationship between breadth of government authority and depth of its bureaucracy, the bureaucracy will work to increase the scope of government, regardless what type of government it is. In effect, the accretion of power to the Bureaucracy will gradually morph any form of government closer and closer to Statism and ultimately Totalitarianism.

The Nature of Governors

There are a limited number of possible types of entities who could be the government officials, or could otherwise be in control of any government.

A Benevolent Deity

A society ruled by a benevolent deity, God, would be perfect. Because it would be incorruptible, its benevolence would be permanent. However, since there is no way for us to cause that to happen, we can only hope, pray, and wait for it to come. In the meanwhile, we must exist.

A Non-Human Species

Some believe, or fear, that we are or will be ruled by some alien beings of superior intellect. This might be a good thing or a bad thing if it were to happen, we cannot know. But, we have no way to cause that to happen or to affect it, so we will say no more about this possibility.

Non-Living Machines

Many have speculated that eventually human beings will be governed, or managed, by Artificial Intelligence. This idea has the potential to be extremely beneficial or extremely harmful.

Human Beings

Throughout history governments of every class have had human beings as the rulers, or officials. I will assume that there is a high probability that human beings will be filling those roles for the foreseeable future.

The Problem with Humans as Governors

It is the nature of human beings to allow their own self-interest to heavily influence their actions. That is not to say that they never act out of altruistic motivations or from a sense of duty—many people often do. But, virtually all of us do what we think is best for ourselves at least sometimes. That means that people who hold positions of power or authority can be corrupted. Indeed, most do become a bit corrupted within their first year or two in office.

A government that is administered by corruptible people will gradually be diverted from serving its population to serving its officers and bureaucrats. This will happen to every government over time,

The Problem with Machines as Governors

The above might lead us to think that since humans are imperfect, machines (artificial intelligence) might be the answer. Technology is certainly advancing rapidly enough for us to realistically hypothecate a super intelligent, unfailing, incorruptible computer system managing our entire society flawlessly. Unfortunately, that overlooks one huge problem. Machines and their simulation of intelligence (computer algorithms) are created by humans. That means that while machines may be less faulty than people, they are still imperfect and do mal-perform eventually.

More importantly, technology is always ultimately controlled by technocrats—humans. Those humans have the same attributes in their natures as all others do. If they have the power to create and manage technology that can rule a nation, at least some, if not all, of them will distort that technology to benefit themselves. Evidence of this truth can be seen all around us. It is evident in our computers, phones, search engines, voting machines, internet browsers, and many other places.

Utopian System

Thus, the perfect, uncorruptible government is utopian—non-existent and impossible with either humans or the machines they create serving as governors.

Our highest realistic goal is to design a system of government that is less flawed than any designed before. Perfection is not within our capabilities.

Culture

Our definition of a Society needs to be expanded to note that a sustainable Society must be based upon a Culture that is commonly agreed upon, at least in its fundamentals, by the individuals who are part of that Society. It is certainly possible for a population to differ in opinions or beliefs on fringe issues; but for a Society to endure there must be consensus on the basics.

For example, if half the population believes it is acceptable for them to kill and eat the other half, that Society will not last long. But if half believes they should not eat meat on Fridays while the other half believes it is OK, but both agree they may not kill one another, they can happily coexist.

The core of any Culture is Religion, a system of beliefs that is not subject to question. Every successful Culture had a set of fundamental beliefs as its basis, whether those beliefs were based on one God, multiple gods, emperor worship, ancestor worship, or some revered philosopher's wisdom. A Society that lacks a basis on a single universally shared Culture cannot survive very long.

Government-Culture Nexus

The structure and administration of Government for a Society must be consistent with, or at least not antagonistic to, the Culture of the Society if it is to be sustainable. For example, the nature of Government in a Society having a Culture based on Shintoism (emperor worship) would properly be more authoritarian than one based on Christianity, which values individuals much more highly.

Our Challenge

In this series of essays we will endeavor to define characteristics of, or, more ambitiously to design, a form of government that improves upon all of the pre-existing forms, borrowing liberally from any and all of them as appropriate. We will invite interested contributors who might have worthwhile perspectives and ideas with the understanding that any ideas offered, including my own, are fair game to be thoughtfully challenged and deconstructed by other contributors.

Our Forum

I will post all essays on a dedicated web page or pages accessible by all, including the general public. Other contributors may also do the same on their own platforms; but agree to post all in their entirety with one exception: any contribution that is deemed to be irrelevant to the topic or profane or to be inciting violent or illegal actions may and will be suppressed.

###