

Advocating for Freedom in a Complex World: The Efficacy of Strongly-Held Convictions

*Peter Lewin*¹

Introduction

Doing Bad by Doing Good (Coyne 2013) is a worthy follow-up to and extension of Christopher Coyne's powerful *After War* (2008). It emerges from the realization that all forms of government-sponsored intervention, whether overtly coercive or not, share certain inescapable dangers and limitations. These are very well articulated by Coyne in both books, and together they provide formidable ammunition for the point of view he is championing.

But my goal is neither to praise - nor to criticize. I share Coyne's convictions and I believe his arguments in support of them. I would like rather to explore the challenges that all such arguments face. We are not dealing with mathematical theorems or simple experiments. We are dealing with policy espousal in a complex world where there are no decisive proofs and the "evidence" is problematic. This means that any victory for strongly-held convictions will be hard won and will come from an appeal to both facts and values.

Types of disagreement

In the field of policy-making there are two kinds of disagreements – those that are based on a "conflict of visions," and those that are based more narrowly on a disagreement about the "facts" which include disagreements about what is likely to happen – I will call these *pragmatic disagreements*. They involve very different kinds of discussions.

A conflict of visions. As Coyne explains, drawing on Adam Smith, the man of the (humanitarian) system harbors grand designs and sees no

constraints that cannot be overcome in working for their achievement. He is a linear-thinker rather than a systems-thinker. And in reality his program is almost always high jacked by the political process to serve the interests of the bureaucrats rather than the public.

Coyne's analysis is admirably directed against this kind of thinking. In effect, he invites the policy-makers to change their position on what constitutes the default. Where many policymakers think that "all who can should" he cautions a much more thorough examination of the "can." Realizing that social systems are complex adaptive systems means that there will always be unintended consequences, that sometimes (frequently) these will work against the aim of the humanitarian policy, that encountering problems will result in further interventions, that the complexity involved will invite mission creep to tackle the unending list of challenges, and so on. He counsels humility, caution, and much more reliance on private initiatives. Varying slightly a familiar refrain, we may ask of the planners, "If you are so smart how come there still so many people who are still so poor?"

On the question of conflicts of vision, Coyne provides a seemingly exhaustible set of reasons for deciding in principle against the man of the humanitarian system. Seemingly exhaustible and, frankly, mind-numbingly exhausting. Though he strives valiantly before closing to snatch some optimism from the jaws of despair, the reader cannot help but feel somewhat dispirited by the inescapable conclusion, that frequently doing nothing is better than doing anything. This is a conclusion that very few, from the most sophisticated philosopher to the common laborer, can accept with equanimity. There appears to be a very powerful human impulse to "do something" in the face of ongoing brutality, disaster and suffering. And by "doing something", is meant doing something coordinated, top-down-directed, transparently connected to the particular events in question, in other words something at the level of government.

The call to arms and to arms is all but impossible to resist given the current political realities in wealthy representative democracies, especially when faced with Katrinas, 9/11s and Libyas (and who knows when in Syria?). Coyne's arguments are compelling, but they are unlikely, by themselves, to compel. To be compelled, or more accurately, constrained, is what we need, however. The only possible way to win this conflict of visions would appear to be by the construction of impenetrable constitutional barriers to intervention and involvement in foreign affairs. As Coyne clearly points out, the on-going and increased dysfunctionality of humanitarian aid of various types is in large part a result of the growth of government in general and the inevitable knowledge and incentive problems that come with it. By implication, a firm constitutional barrier to the size of government, or preferably to the type of

expenditure government can undertake, is the only thing, it appears to me, that will truly overcome this all-to-natural of human impulses. The demagogues with their “don’t you care” exhortations need to be neutralized by tying the hands of those who disburse the funds. Of course for this to happen, a strong popular support would have to be behind it and I suppose that is what this type of research is all about. How to connect the kind of scholarship that Coyne and others are increasing providing, to a significant fiscal retreat in practice in no easy task. Perhaps it cannot be done. But that does not mean we should not try.

In the meantime, we should redouble our efforts to shift the focus to the fundamentals of removing “the barriers to freedom”, as Coyne would have it. The kind of analysis he provides for allowing freer movement of labor, capital and goods and services, specifically in a humanitarian context, is invaluable in the struggle to regain the moral high ground. And if I may, following Coyne, attempt to snatch some optimism from the abyss, note that as the world economy and freedom hopefully continue to grow, despite the formidable political obstacles, the success of private humanitarian initiatives and the incidental humanitarian effects of for-profit initiatives (like Walmart during Katrina), will strengthen the moral case against relying on government.

Pragmatic disagreements. A very different kind of discussion is involved when examining policy on a case by case basis. Even sharing broadly the same kind of vision, inclined against top-down government sponsored big initiatives, one may encounter very difficult decisions. On a case by case basis there is an almost irresistible urge to “do the math.” Standing on broad principle will not always work. This is the kind of disagreement I would like to examine in more detail.

We are here in the world of the second-best (or clearly much lower down than that, but you know what I mean). The men of the humanitarian system have created for us a world of incredibly imperfect alternatives. But facing a particular decision, we are where we are at a particular point in time, regardless of the numerous blunders and corruptions that brought us to it. How are we to respond, for example, facing an impending genocide, to the call to protect? As Coyne has taught us, it is likely that the unknowable indirect effects of any such intervention will not be good – we will clearly be doing some bad by doing some good. There is the obvious moral hazard problem, the peacekeeper corruption problem, and much more. So, does that mean we should back off and watch the carnage from afar? Or even knowing what we do, even being principled people, can we strive for a limited short-term action to save the lives of those in immediate danger? How are we to both project the likely effects and to weigh them against one another in order to decide what to do? I confess I do not know the answer to this question, and I hope never to be put in the position of the one who has to decide.²

Clearly, the visible objective of preventing genocide (compare Kosovo and Bosnia), or of relieving famine, will seem compelling and will trump the unseen hazards of mission creep, corruption, long-term involvement, etc. And, of course, the political case is a no-brainer. Perhaps the best and the most we can say of a general nature, is that every such initiative ought to be short-lived with a clear and binding exit plan. The more successfully the presumptions of the man of the (humanitarian) system are debunked the less these types of situations are likely to occur in the long-term. But they will never go away completely, and they will always present us with these seemingly intractable and uncomfortable decisions.

The times in which we live

The subtitle of the book is “why humanitarian action fails.” And, clearly, Coyne provides a powerful answer to this “puzzle.” But, in the process, he provides much more. This book will be useful for those who share his vision and need no persuading, simply by virtue of the wealth of factual material he presents on the growing size and nature of humanitarian efforts and the insidious domination by governments of these efforts. The veritable explosion of so-called NGOs, the similar explosion in UN humanitarian and peacekeeping missions is sobering. The extent of the problem is not widely appreciated, even by the educated and this is a problem.

These developments are fueled in part by the trend in business and in academia toward “ethical” missions, for example, the adoption by businesses of caveats to excuse their search for profits, and the setting up of non-profit adjuncts to their business for beneficial PR. The liberal establishment has mounted a mighty assault against profits. Walmart, Apple, Microsoft, all pioneers responsible for the creation of uncountable global benefits have been cast in the role of villains, their profits fodder for the predation of career-minded politicians. Hayek (1949) and Mises (1956) would not be surprised, but they might be disappointed that the same-old bogey men are still with us with barely diminished power and influence. The recent trends in the humanitarian industry are surely related to, and to some extent are, a spin-off from, this prevailing environment. Is it too much to hope that when the tide turns, and profits are once again embraced as part of the process of economic growth and innovation, the role of government in humanitarianism may diminish, and with it the bad that comes from doing good?

Conclusion

It is not from the benevolence of the developed nations that the yet-to-develop nations will develop, but from the latter's attention to their self-reliance and hidden inner-strengths. The developing nations can help enormously to this end in two ways, as Coyne so admirably demonstrates. First, the developing nations can open their markets and borders to peaceful trade in products and resources. This alone would probably do more to foster economic development than all of the aid packages now in place put together. Secondly, and much more difficult, the humanitarians of the developed nations should (with apologies to St. Francis) have the courage to accept those things they cannot change, the humility to avoid assuming they *can* change them, and the wisdom to know which are those rare occasions when they must act.

Notes

¹ University of Texas at Dallas

² I have been plagued my whole life by the assertion that the allies should have bombed the concentration camps in Europe during the Holocaust, thus killing their inhabitants but arguably preventing the deaths of the millions who would otherwise have followed them to the gas chambers. This is particularly stark example of the kind of calculus one cannot avoid in extreme situations. In the event they bombed Dresden and other populous areas with known terrible effects.

References

Coyne, Christopher J. 2008 . *After War: The Political Economy of Exploiting Democracy*. Stanford:

Stanford University Press.

Coyne, Christopher J. 2013 . *Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails*.

Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hayek, Friedrich A. 1949. "The Intellectuals and Socialism," *The University of Chicago Law*

Review Spring: 417-433.

Mises, Ludwig v. 1956 . *The Anti-Capitalist Mentality*. Princeton: D. Van Nostrand.