John E. Anderson
Comments on Morse

Professor Morse first defines the domain of her essay—redistributive activity by the modern democratic state. In this restriction, she is not covering the allocation or stabilization aspects of government activity, to use the Musgravian formulation of state responsibility. She is also making clear her predisposition "...that the state is a natural and necessary institution, one that is not evil in itself." Her focus is on the Catholic concept of an occasion of sin: "something not evil in itself, but which leads a person into sin so often that the person is morally required to avoid it."

In her first section of the paper, Professor Morse identifies three potential harms to recipients of redistributive programs: (a) moral hazard, (b) rent-seeking, and (c) the prisoner’s dilemma. In this regard, her essay looks like pretty standard public choice fare. These are the concepts we have come to identify with the public choice point of view.

In her section on entitlement, she notes the dangers of a moral code created by the political process and concludes that "The state is not competent to create morality..." Incompetence aside, that is exactly what the state does. We do legislate morality all the time. The very act of legislating defines a moral code. We cannot compel individuals to act in ethical ways, but we can, and do, define a set of moral expectations (or mores) with our legislation. I do not find any force in her argument that because the state is incompetent to create morality in providing for the poor, that it should not attempt to define an appropriate moral code through legislation. By default, some moral code is defined by the existence or non-existence of legislation on any given topic.

Later in the same section of the paper on entitlement, Professor Morse reflects on the nature of sin, saying:

Let us call the behavior sinful. People do through the public sector, things they would know to be wrong if done in the private sector, to people they knew.

Let me propose a slight editorial revision of that statement, and see if we can agree on the following version:

Let us call the behavior sinful. People through the public sector, things they would know to be wrong if done in the private sector, to people they knew.

If that is true, and I would maintain that it is, then what is peculiar about the propensity to sin in the public sector? Sin is pervasive. It is no respecter of private-public boundaries. In this sense, life is an occasion of sin.

But, of course, life is also an occasion for redemption.

Let me provide an existence proof for the proposition that a person can be a government official at the highest level, and not have the position be an occasion of sin.

At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent (Daniel 6:4).

Further, we should acknowledge that men judge, like God. Made in his image, humans are imitating their maker by making decisions, rendering judgments. As O. Palmer Robertson has said "In His place, they render judgments every day." The psalmist even refers to earthly judges as gods (Psalm 82:6).

Professor Morse stays true to the title of her paper until the last section which bears the subtitle “Conclusion” but should more appropriately be titled “Confessions.” It is in this part of the paper that we have a window into her heart and mind. It is this kind of open and honest personal reflection on being a disciple that I find most...
Morse goes beyond the standard public choice paradigm and introduces judgments about the moral end of humankind...I find myself in full accord.

rewarding in my affiliation with those in this Association.

There is, for those of us who notice and savor such things, a fascinating counterpoint in Jennifer’s next to last paragraph. She records that her Lord seduced her into following Him and then follows that statement with another in which she claims to have allowed it to happen. While I do not wish to fuel a debate on semi-Pelagian vs. Augustinian views, I do wish to thank Jennifer for reminding me of the joy of my salvation and the continuing delights of following Christ.

ENDNOTE


P.J. Hill

Comments on Morse

Jennifer Morse’s paper is a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate over the appropriate role of the Christian economist in the discipline of public choice. Is public choice so far removed from a Christian perspective on the world that believing economists cannot, in good conscience, use the tools of analysis? Or is it rather just a powerful tool that the Christian economist can use without reservation? Although not answering these questions explicitly, Morse does deal with them in her paper, and in a way that I find convincing.

Her analysis of the modern efforts at redistribution and her judgment that such efforts can be “an occasion of sin” is well-reasoned and convincing. However, her mode of analysis is as important as her conclusion. Morse, a prominent public choice economist, understands and uses well some of the basic tools of the field; moral hazard, rent-seeking, prisoner’s dilemma problems, and voting theory. However, she goes beyond the standard public choice paradigm and introduces into her analysis judgments about the moral end of humankind. Rather than just using public choice as a way of facilitating people achieving their own ends, whatever those might be, she explicitly evaluates those ends, and is willing to use the definitive term sin to describe certain behavior. It is at this point that I find myself, also a public choice Christian, in full accord with her form of analysis. She does not reject all of public choice because of its supposedly value-free assumptions about human choices, but rather uses the discipline’s tools to further our understanding of institutional arrangements. However, she also goes on to evaluate those arrangements by biblical standards.

I now turn to Morse’s specific arguments, namely that the state is an occasion of sin through its forced redistribution programs which can alter the character of the giver and the recipient in a pernicious way. I find her arguments to be convincing, and ones that I would hope other Christians will pay attention to. However, to identify one set of institutional structures as a source of sin does not solve the problem of appropriate policy prescription. Other institutional structures can also be occasions of sin. For instance, unbridled capitalism can produce hedonism, materialism, and other temptations that lead to the deformation of character. Morse’s work is an important contribution, but what we really need to do is comparative sin analysis. All institutions must be evaluated in terms of their contribution to the character of those they influence.

I have two more specific comments on her paper. First, she notes that “There are some powerful reasons why the agents of the state should be required to remain morally neutral in the distribution of tax dollars to the indigent.” However, I know of no way the distribution of tax dollars can be morally neutral. Any redistribution program is based upon a moral framework, and thus cannot represent neutrality. However, I do agree with the last statement of that paragraph that “the state cannot supervise the personal choices of thousands of people that qualify or might