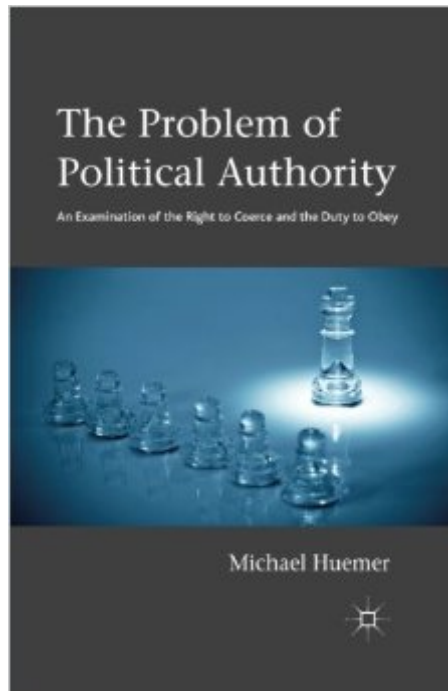


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The Problem Of Political Authority: An Examination Of The Right To Coerce And The Duty To Obey



Synopsis

The state is often ascribed a special sort of authority, one that obliges citizens to obey its commands and entitles the state to enforce those commands through threats of violence. This book argues that this notion is a moral illusion: no one has ever possessed that sort of authority.

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Customer Reviews

The book is a gem, destined to become a classic, and any serious student of the field should have it on their shelf. They should even, dare I say, read it. The topic that Huemer's astonishing tour de force concerns itself with is the moral and ethical underpinnings of state power, an area known in political philosophy as the "problem of political authority". In considering the justification for the state, a nagging question naturally arises. Most people would claim it is morally impermissible for your neighbor to force you to give money to a charity of his choice at gunpoint. However, in stark contrast, most people would claim it is permissible for the state to do essentially the same thing, that is, to extort taxes from you using the threat of force in order to spend those funds on projects other than your own. Most people appear to claim there is an important difference between these cases â otherwise, they would not believe in the legitimacy of the state. The eponymous problem of political authority is the question of what the distinction between these cases might be â on what basis, if any, might we justify this difference in treatment between the behavior we consider ethically justified from individual actors versus the power we accord to the state. Huemer systematically addresses the justifications that have been articulated for political authority over the centuries, from hypothetical

social contract theory to consequentialism and everything in between. I will give away the punchline by noting that his arguments would appear to fatally damage all of them. Political philosophers often start by attempting to construct a complete moral framework within which they justify their positions.

Michael Huemer starts his thinking in political authority in a good, but uncommon, spot: by asking whether the very idea of political authority has anything to be said for it. Most political philosophy either bypasses the entire question of whether political authority is justified (by asking what government is best), or by asking where political authority comes from (assuming that there is such thing as political authority). Huemer's question: is there any good argument for the idea that some have the right to rule over or coerce others? His answer: no good reason exists to justify the idea of political authority. Here's the question in a nutshell: is there anything government (of any kind) does that wouldn't be judged morally wrong if done by private actors? (For instance, can I decide that some of your property is mine because I decided to keep you safe, or promise to spend the money to do good for others, or because most of your community decided that way?) Huemer rehearses several commonly heard justifications of why government actors have the right to coerce (where private actors don't): namely, real social contracts, hypothetical social contracts, democratic legitimacy, and utilitarian legitimacy. The idea that government literally began as a social contract is clearly wanting: not only do we have no record of any such social contracts ever taking place (yes, even in the United States), but real contracts have no power to bind anyone but the signers. Hypothetical contracts suffer from (a) the fact that they are completely hypothetical and depict people under very ideal (and dubious) conditions, and (b) suffer from some of the problems of postulating a real social contract (was anyone ever free to opt out or not sign without very difficult consequences, etc?).

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