

11-2015

Public Choice Economics Consistent with a Biblical Worldview

Jeffrey E. Haymond

Cedarville University, jhaymond@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/business_administration_presentations



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Economics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Haymond, Jeffrey E., "Public Choice Economics Consistent with a Biblical Worldview" (2015). *Business Administration Faculty Presentations*. 53.

https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/business_administration_presentations/53

This Conference Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Business Administration Faculty Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

Public Choice and Christianity: Conflict or Consonance?

Jeffrey E. Haymond
Associate Professor of Economics
Cedarville University
251 N Main Street
Cedarville, OH 45314
jhaymond@cedarville.edu

Abstract

Public choice economics is often criticized by its critics not primarily for its lack of empirical content, but more often from its incomplete view of human nature; i.e., its “cynicism.” Even supporters seem to implicitly accept the critics’ view of public choice as only allowing a view of government from a selfish perspective. In this article, I will examine the biblical basis for the fundamental assumption of public choice: that individuals act according to their self-interest, whether in the public or the private sector. I will argue that a true view of human nature will include the biblical view of humankind as both created in the image of God and yet fallen. There is nothing inherent in a public choice framework that prevents a correct inclusion of both of these characteristics.

JEL Codes: Z12, H11, D72

Keywords: Public Choice, Christianity, Anthropology

Public Choice and Christianity: Conflict or Consonance?

Introduction

For almost anyone vaguely familiar with the “sausage making” process of creating public policy (legislation and regulation), it is almost impossible to deny the applicability of Public Choice economic analysis, at least to some degree. Yet its very predictive success generates opposition, since many don’t want to believe that our collective action is driven by base motives. Public Choice economics really only begins with one fundamental assumption: that individuals act according to their self-interest in both market and non-market settings. For economists to deny this assumption, they must believe people are somehow nobler when acting in public service than in the private sector. Surely agents act to optimize some objective function in their actions, however broad or narrow that function may be; to do otherwise would suggest irrational behavior.

Yet critics of public choice are troubled by the implications. One Christian author XXXX calls public choice economics “an exercise in cynicism.” Law professor Cynthia Farina (2000, pp. 109-110) declares,

“In the genesis stories of the administrative state, public choice theory is to the nature of regulation what original sin doctrine is to the nature of humanity....In contrast to actual sin...original sin is inbred, the evil tendency inevitable in human nature and irredeemable by mere human efforts. The theory of public choice posits the innate depravity or corruption in all regulatory programs. Regulation is conceived in the selfish interest of narrowly focused interest groups, born in the logrolling of legislative politics, and nurtured in the bosom of the third member of the iron triangle, captive agencies. At best, it is theft (the resources of some are redistributed to the pockets of others, at worst, inefficient (the costs imposed on the many

outweigh the benefits of the few). As creation myths go, this is a pretty unpleasant one.”

Even supporters of Public Choice are somewhat embarrassed, often conflating the fundamental behavioral assumption of self-interest with selfishness. Often implicit, but sometimes explicit as in Levmore’s (2002, p. 378) attempt at endorsing public choice methodology, “...much of the charm of public choice lies in its ability to find good news, or at least interesting news, despite a simplifying assumption of selfishness.”

Christian economist P.J. Hill (1999) summarized the implications of public choice scholarship and its consistency with Christian thinking, and serves as an outstanding baseline for thinking about this topic. Yet as I will show below, Hill concedes too much to public choice critics, and does not provide detailed exegesis to defend the fundamental assumption of public choice that rational actors maximize their individual welfare whether in the public or the private sector. In this paper, I will provide a biblical analysis of many of the issues surrounding public choice.

Public Choice and Biblical Anthropology

In her criticism above, Farina correctly drills into the substance of the debate with public choice: who are we? Are we simply selfish people with no regard to others, or is there something more powerful and beautiful when we come together socially in action? Economics as a *social* science is fundamentally concerned with understanding how *individuals* make choices. Therefore economists must have some operating assumption of what humans are like—what drives them. Orthodox economics assumes people are rational, in that they expect any given action to improve their situation (maximize their utility) as compared to possible alternative

actions. To argue against this, one must assume that people will deliberately and rationally choose to make themselves worse off than they otherwise could be, as they themselves perceive it. Of course, this is where the rub comes in. What does it mean to be *better*? Must economics concern itself *only* with conditions of an increase in material well being when compared to relevant alternatives? Critics of public choice (and indeed, critics of the broader corpus of neoclassical economics) conceive of utility maximization in a rather narrow interpretation, e.g., wealth or income maximization. While these are often powerful arguments in an objective function, there is nothing in the methodology of rational choice that precludes a much richer model of optimization, as in Becker (1976). Certainly altruism or concern for others is possible within disciplines that use rational choice methodology, which includes public choice.

As in many things, a both-and perspective rather than an either-or is called for. This is certainly an outcome of understanding the nature of human choice from a Biblical perspective. A Biblical anthropology features two inseparably linked truths: that mankind is both created in the image of God, and also is fallen. To focus on only one aspect of our nature is to fail to include the richness of what it means to be fully human.

Created Imago Dei

In God's final act of creation, the very pinnacle, God created man. As it is recorded in Genesis chapter one,

²⁶ Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of

God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Theologians have long wrestled with what it means to be in the image and the likeness of God.¹ The Hebrew word for image Hebrew word for “image” (*tselem*) is best thought of as representative.² In the bible it is used to refer to idols that are “representatives” of false gods, or when God commands the Israelites to make images of their sicknesses or mice (1 Sam 6:5,11). The Hebrew word for likeness, (*děmuwth*), is to resemble, be similar to, to model. So we see this repeated in Gen 5:1-3,

¹ This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. ² He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created. ³ When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth.

Seth was not identical to his Father Adam, but he was like him; they shared attributes. Seth gained responsibilities and privileges by virtue of being Adam’s son. These two words, image and likeness, are often used interchangeably, such that Berkouwer concludes, “Because of the variable usage of the two terms in Genesis, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that it is impossible to hold that ‘tselem’ and ‘demuth’ refer to two different things.” However, given the two meanings, it seems rather to prefer these two terms as different sides of the same coin rather than thinking of them as synonyms. As Hoekema (1986, p. 13) says, “...Genesis 1 indicates that the image is also a likeness, “an image which is like us.” The two

words together tell us that man is a representation of God who is like God in certain respects.” This is similar to Berkhof (1953, p.203), who declares “by creation that which was archetypal in God became ectypal in man. God was the original of which man was made a copy...man not only bears the image of God, but is His very image.”

Being created *Imago Dei* brings humans incredible dignity and responsibility. One of the startling claims of being created in His image is that both male and female are equally created *Imago Dei*. Hoekema (1986, p. 14) details the implications of this profound reality:

From verse 27 we may infer that another aspect of the image of God is man’s having been created male and female. Since God is spirit (John 4:24), we may not conclude that the resemblance to God in this instance is found in the physical difference between men and women. Rather, the resemblance must be found in the fact that man needs the companionship of woman, that the human person is a social being, that woman complements man and that man complements woman. In this way human beings reflect God, who exists not as a solitary being but as a being in fellowship—a fellowship that is described at a later stage of divine revelation as that between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

A fundamental aspect of Biblical anthropology is thus that we are created *individually* to be in *social* relationships. The fact that we individually choose--and thus methodological individualism is an appropriate construct for economics--does not negate our individual choices operating in the context of a broader social reality. Thus to the extent we continue to image God properly, our true objective function cannot fail to include considerations beyond self.

Theilicke (1966, p. 157) echoes this from a slightly different perspective; “the divine likeness is thus a relational entity because it is manifest in man’s ruling position vis-à-vis the rest of creation, or better, because it consists in this

manifestation, in this exercise of dominion and lordship.” In this perspective, not only are we social because of the complementary relationship between the man and the woman, but also because of our assigned responsibilities—the stewardship of God’s creation, as stewardship is inherently social. Further, despite the Fall of Man (discussed below), mankind still bears the image of God, although it is marred. Indeed, the process of sanctification progressively restores mankind into the image of Christ, who is the image of God, as in Col 3:9-10:

Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him

Scripture promises that the image of God that is now marred is progressively restored if we walk in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Being “renewed” in His image allows Christians to once again walk with God “in the garden” (figuratively), that we may *know* God. Thus our true objective function must include considerations of others as we increasingly die to self and put on the “new self.” To the extent we do this, we renew the *Imago Dei*.

Marred by the Fall

Gen 2 ¹⁵ Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. ¹⁶ The Lord God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

Gen 3 ⁶ When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

Gen 3 ¹⁷ Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. ¹⁸ “Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.”

The incredible dignity of being made *Imago Dei* makes its loss all the more tragic. When Adam and Eve rejected the sovereignty and trustworthiness of God, they effectively said that they would be God. In so doing, they lost the intimate communion they had had with God; being *Imago Dei* was what allowed them to have intimate relationships with a holy and righteous God, and their image was marred. The image was not completely lost, as evidenced by Gen 9:6, yet it is so weakened that only in Christ can it begin to be renewed. What theologians refer to as the Fall of Man is the necessary subtraction of those characteristics of being made in God’s image.

Herman Bavinck (2004, p. 551.), speaking of the Reformer’s view of the fall, says

They used this term to maintain the conviction that the image of God, that is, original righteousness, was inseparable from the idea of man as such and that it referred to the normal state, the harmony, the health of a human being; that without it a human cannot be true, complete, or normal. When man loses that image of God, he does not simply lose a substance while still remaining fully human. Rather, he becomes an abnormal, a sick, as spiritually dead human being, a sinner. He then lacks something that belonged to his nature, just as a blind man loses his sight, a deaf man his hearing, and a sick man his health.

As being in the image of God is to be in relationship with others and a steward of creation, so the loss of that image is to be in isolation with a self-focus. Interestingly, the first recorded action of Adam and Eve after the Fall is to hide themselves.

Gen 3 ⁸ They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"¹⁰ He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself."

Notice that Adam now has two characteristics: a focus on self as well as fear. Even though he hid *with* Eve, his answer to God reflected his self-focus (I heard...I was afraid...I was naked), not his role in relationship with the "bone of his bones." Before they were "naked and unashamed (Gen 2:25)," but with their eyes opened to good and evil, their focus came to self, and the fear that comes from being in isolation from God and others.

The Fall affected man comprehensively; all of his being is now subject to a self-focus. While there is debate about precisely what of the image remains and what has been lost, John Calvin (2007, p.XX) helpfully points out (concurring with Augustine) "The natural attributes were corrupted in man by sin, but the supernatural ones were removed." Without getting into the debates of what is included in the image of God and what is not, we can nevertheless see the reformed view of man: we are totally depraved in that while humans can do many objectively good things, there is no part of our being that has not been corrupted by sin, by the Fall of Man. As Bavinck (2004, p. 553) concludes,

Man lost none of his substance as a result of sin. In that sense humans are fully human even after the fall. But when man lost his original righteousness,

he lost the harmony and health of his nature and became a sinner through and through. His nature in the sense of substance or essence remained, but the moral qualities naturally belonging to his nature were lost.

The effects of the fall, with our fleshly self-focus, therefore affects all interpersonal relationships, but it is not limited to that. Bavinck (2004, 560) also argues that mankind's dominion over the earth is likewise part of being *Imago Dei*. No longer do we think of our human activities as being in stewardship of another's resources in service to others, but now we see activities as a way to serve ourselves. Instead of private stewardship responsibilities, we claim private property rights.

Implications of Biblical Anthropology for Public Choice

If a Biblical anthropology is correct, we would expect that the driving force of human behavior to be pursuit of our own self-interest, however defined. To the extent that an individual is not being renewed in the knowledge of God (Col 3:10), we would expect them to act in more narrowly selfish ways. This does not necessarily even preclude people from doing "good deeds." As the Biblical prophet Isaiah argues, we can do these deeds in our own strength, and for our own glory, but God will see them as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). To the extent that individuals are increasingly and correctly imaging God, we would expect them to choose in ways that consider others. As the apostle Paul encourages the Philippian (2:4) believers, "do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Imaging God is thus inherently social.

Further, the dual nature of a Biblical anthropology suggests a tension for every person—not just Christians. Every person is created *Imago Dei* and every person is fallen, which means that everyone will feel the internal tension as God gives all a

conscience (Romans 2:14-15). This internal tension suggests that people will often go to great lengths to rationalize their behavior if they want to succumb to their fleshly nature. In collective choice issues, this rationalization comes in the form of asserting that what is good for an individual is good for the collective. Thus we would expect individuals to argue for policies on behalf of the broader good, while failing to note the private gain they would receive. If they can convince themselves of this--and we should never underestimate fallen humankind's ability to rationalize--they will be powerful advocates of a cause that benefits them personally. As Benjamin Franklin said warning against bureaucracy³,

There are two passions which have a powerful influence in the affairs of men. These are ambition and avarice; the love of power and the love of money. Separately, each of these has great force in prompting men to action; but when united in view of the same object, they have in many minds the most violent effects. Place before the eyes of such men a post of honor that shall at the same be a place of profit, and they will move heaven and earth to obtain it.

A biblical anthropology leads to the conclusion that every person's objective function includes arguments for self and others, and to the extent a person correctly images God it will have more of the latter relative to the former. But any economic model that does not include both arguments is going to model someone as less than fully human, since we are created *Imago Dei* and yet fallen.

Does Public Choice Economics lead to Unbiblical Thinking?

An interesting portion of Hill's 1999 article on Christianity is the exploration of whether a public choice view of the political process somehow creates a "cynicism" that is uncharacteristic of Biblical thinking. Hill quotes several scholars, both

supportive and critical of public choice, and asks this fundamental question (1999, 5):

Does the assumption that human behavior can be best understood by thinking about it in self-interest terms actually change people's beliefs? This is an important issue for the Christian since our theology implies that the self-interest model is too narrow a perspective on human nature. It is true that we do have a fallen nature but it is also the case that we can overcome our self-interest and act in altruistic ways.

Firstly, we should note that Hill implicitly accepts the narrow conception of self-interest of the critic that we rejected above. Self-interest need not be equal with selfishness, nor is altruism necessarily at the expense of individual interest. As perhaps the most extreme example of altruism, the Apostle Paul (Romans 9:1-5) suggested that he would like to sacrifice himself to an eternity in hell on behalf of his fellow Israelites, so great was his anguish at their separation from God, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh," yet this is not possible. Indeed, "altruistic" sacrifices for others are the logical reaction to the promises of God: any cost/benefit analysis or utility maximization will choose the joys of an eternity in heaven over any short term costs. Thus the author of the letter to the Hebrews could summarize:

32 And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; ³⁶ and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in

sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ³⁸ (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹ And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

Any short-term (i.e., in this life) cost pales in comparison to that which awaits us (Romans 8:18). Indeed, recognition of the joy that is both present and awaits Christians inspires John Piper to call for a philosophy of “Christian Hedonism.”⁴

Secondly, we must take issue with Hill’s changing of “beliefs.” Certainly any analytical framework is likely to change some of our understandings, conclusions, etc. But typically, the term “beliefs” in the context of Christianity refers to our understanding of Biblical truths. If Hill means that a focus on Public Choice, with its reinforcement of the fallen nature of man, precludes us from remembering that we are also created *Imago Dei*, the correct answer is to remember the *Imago Dei*, not forget that we are fallen. Yet there is a sense in which Hill and those he cites is correct; there is a reason why we are commanded to think about things that are noble, pure and lovely (Phil 4:8). We also know that “with much knowledge comes much sorrow (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

There are at least two related ways that understanding public choice is the best framework to understanding collective choice issues. First, if, contra Hill, we find that it is not our beliefs about ultimate reality that change, but rather our expectations of what is likely to happen given the institutional constraints that are ever-present in the collective choice problem, then we find the emergence of a positive role for the public choice economist. We should not use the economic

methodology of public choice to, in effect, say “government doesn’t work.” Rather, the social contribution of public choice is to say, given the inherent limitations within the collective choice problem, which set of institutional arrangements are more likely to lead to human flourishing? Thus there is a positive role in a public choice analytical framework—to suggest ideal voting rules based on a given constitutional framework and indeed, to more broadly suggest alternative constitutional frameworks. We can see this as analogous to Jesus’ condemnations of the Pharisees. Jesus proclamation of woes against the Pharisees in Matthew 23 wasn’t just to cynically say “don’t trust religious leadership,” but rather it was a deliberate pointing to a failed method in order to show that something better was needed. Some things are worthy of condemning, if they result in injustice. In this light, the very conclusions against government action in a particular area that some label as “cynical,” thus lead to yet another answer: the collective choice problem can be solved with a variety of private sector agencies (e.g., Elinor Olstrom’s “polycentric” approach to managing the commons) rather than reliance on government. This leads to a second conclusion for a Christian who studies public choice: perhaps public choice analysis that suggests government doesn’t work well in some areas is reflective of a government asserting to itself roles that God doesn’t intend?

Biblical Government: Scale and Scope

While the role of government in an economy from a biblical perspective is well beyond the scope of this paper, yet there are two potential issues we can at least briefly mention: the scale (size of government) as well its scope (breadth of

government). The scope of government generally falls into one of two areas for Christians.⁵ Those generally supporting free markets believe the Bible provides a limited role for government, analogous to constitutionally enumerated powers. Christians with that perspective would typically point to Romans 13 (also 1 Pet 2:13-17), defining the role of government as the “bearer of the sword” to punish evildoers. Those supporting a broad view of government would point toward passages such as Psalm 72, where the righteous King will “deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper.” In this view, biblical calls for justice are interpreted very broadly, with justice concerned not simply with an impartial process but with more equal results.

Romans 13:1-7 provides the most sustained Biblical discussion of how Christians should view government, but one must also consider the context within the broader passage beginning in Ch. 12.

¹Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. ²Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ³For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. ⁵Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath,

but also for conscience' sake. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

In verse 1, Christians are told that they must be in subjection (Hebrew transliteration *hypotassō*), to the authorities, with meanings of “put under, be subject to, submit oneself to.” The meaning could properly be thought of more as to align oneself in a right relationship (with the governing authorities). While obedience is implicit in this, Schreiner (1998, p. 687) rightly notes that there are limits to obedience to these authorities, while there are no limits to the Christian requirement to be rightly ordered to government. Vv 2-4 clearly state that government is ordained by God, a “minister” who is God’s servant. How does this minister serve God? By bearing the sword against evil. This section follows chapter 12, where individuals are told not to take their own vengeance when wronged, but rather to leave vengeance to God (12:19). Ch 13 then tells Christians how vengeance will be attained on this world—through the administrative arm of the governing authorities, giving Christians further reason to live differently than others (as called for in all of Chapters 12-15).

The Epistle to the Romans provides a very limited explicit rationale for government; its ordination as God’s servant is for a very specific purpose—to execute God’s wrath in judgment. If there is a broader role for government, it is not found in Romans (or in 1 Peter 2). The purpose of this scripture is precisely to tell believers that generally they are to obey government, even if the government is

acting in a way inconsistent with its Biblical calling (unless the government is forbidding us to do what God commands (Acts 4:19), or commanding us to do what God forbids (Daniel 3:18)). Yet in a modern democracy, where a citizen has the ability to participate in generating the rules of government, it seems clear that Christians should prefer government organization according to Biblical principles.

Other scriptures also point to a limited role for government. 1 Kings 21 relates the story of King Ahab and Naboth's vineyard where Naboth refused to sell King Ahab his vineyard. The sovereign had no "eminent domain," and the private individuals property rights were protected (the land had been given to Naboth's family by God, v3). When King Ahab took possession of the vineyard (his wife Jezebel schemed to have Naboth killed), God spoke to him through the prophet Elijah (v19), " "Have you murdered and also taken possession?.....Thus says the Lord, "In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, the dogs will lick up your blood, even yours."

For the second question on the scale of government, the Bible provides several examples that warn of government expansion. The first would be in 1 Sam 8, when Israel demanded a king to rule over them. While Israel formerly followed only God's prophets and judges, the Israelites demanded to have a king "like all the other nations (v5)." God said their request was a rejection not of his prophets, but of God himself (v7). God warns the Israelites (vv. 11-17) that this king would take the best from them, their sons & daughters for service, the choicest of their flocks (warning of a 10% tax!). Yet the Israelites did not heed this warning (v19). In Deut 17, the king is explicitly commanded not to build large armies to defend himself (v16) nor

should the king use the position to enrich himself (v17). These warnings are not against government growth *per se*, but against government growth that 1) seemingly inevitably serves to enrich the king (enrich the politically powerful by exploiting the politically powerless) and 2) encourages the people to depend on themselves and not the Lord.

Conclusion

Skeptical views of government are not limited to modern public choice economists. Augustine, in his *The City of God*, has this extended passage that criticizes sovereigns:

Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies? For what are robberies themselves, but little kingdoms? The band itself is made up of men; it is ruled by the authority of a prince, it is knit together by the pact of the confederacy; the booty is divided by the law agreed on. **If, by the admittance of abandoned men, this evil increases to such a degree that it holds places, fixes abodes, takes possession of cities, and subdues peoples, it assumes the more plainly the name of a kingdom, because the reality is now manifestly conferred on it, not by the removal of covetousness, but by the addition of impunity.** Indeed, that was an apt and true reply which was given to Alexander the Great by a pirate who had been seized. For when that king had asked the man what he meant by keeping hostile possession of the sea, he answered with bold pride, "What thou meanest by seizing the whole earth; but because I do it with a petty ship, I am called a robber, whilst thou who dost it with a great fleet art styled emperor." (emphasis added)

In this passage, Augustine clearly anticipated Mancur Olsen's idea (1993) of government by "stationary bandits." Augustine also explicitly rejects the alternative to a public choice view--the public interest view of maximizing social welfare—with his comment that the robbers become a state "not by a removal of covetousness," but by the addition of impunity. We don't become angels simply by entering government service. Public choice recommendations to limit governments power to

act with impunity, from identifying the failures of democracy to produce efficient outcomes to proposing alternative constitutional rules, are thus ways to help minimize governments ability to act “with impunity.”

Hill and others are to be commended with admonishing us all to beware of excessive distrust of government that an incomplete Christian worldview could lead to—we are not simply fallen creatures but are also truly *Imago Dei*. But in this world, we are fallen, and thus consideration of public choice recommendations can lead to the design of institutional arrangements that lead to human flourishing despite our inherent limitations.

References

- Bavinck, Herman.** (2004) *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Becker, Gary S.** (1976). *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berkhof, Louis.** (1996). *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Berkouwer, G. C.** (1962). *Man: The Image of God*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Calvin, John.** (2008). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Farina, Cynthia R.** (2000). Faith, Hope and Rationality or Public Choice and the Perils of Occam's Razor, *Florida State University Law Review*, Vol 28:109.
- Hill, P.J.** (1999). Public Choice: A Review. *Journal of Faith and Economics*, Vol 34:1-10.
- Hoekema, Anthony A.** (1986). *Created in God's Image*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans.
- Levmore, Saul.** (2002). From Cynicism to Positive Theory in Public Choice, *Cornell Law Review*, Vol 87:375.
- Olson, Mancur.** (1993). Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Sep., 1993), pp. 567-576
- Piper, John.** (1971). The Image of God. *Studia Biblica et Theologica*, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-image-of-god>
- Schreiner, Thomas R.** (1998), Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Theilicke, Helmut.** (1966). *Theological Ethics*, ed. Wm.H. Lazareth, Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

¹ As John Piper relates, “All theologians have encountered the ambiguity of the Genesis teaching about the *imago Dei*; and traditionally a method other than straight exegesis has been employed for determining the content of the *imago*. This method, I believe, also underlies the efforts of many theologians who stick most closely to the Genesis texts. Stated simply, the method is this: First, determine from Scripture as many attributes of God as you can; second, determine all the attributes of man that distinguish him from the rest of the animals; third, determine which of these attributes are found in both lists, and in just these ways is man to be considered the image of God.

² All references to the original Hebrew or Greek language in the Bible are taken from the Strong’s Concordance feature of Blue Letter Bible, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/>, likewise comparison of Biblical usage of each word.

³ See the text of Mr. Franklin’s speech here, <http://www.bartleby.com/268/8/12.html>

⁴ Christian hedonism as a stand-alone term must be rejected, but a full consideration of Piper’s meaning will show it a valuable way to think about our walk with God. See <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/christian-hedonism>

⁵ Importantly, virtually all Christians assert that God does ordain government functions; support for Christian anarchy is limited.