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### The Intelligent Yet Flawed Jonah Goldberg

I have to admit it: I like Jonah Goldberg. Where most conservatives base their positions, it so often appears, on emotion rather than reason (just like their socialist brethren), Mr. Goldberg is at least intelligent. Where most conservatives I encounter counter libertarianism from a position of blissful ignorance, Mr. Goldberg is familiar with the history of the movement.

Nevertheless, he *is* a conservative, and thus is flawed.

I recently came across an article Mr. Goldberg wrote over seven years ago. Yeah, seven years—but, eh, it's never too late to comment on an article. So here goes.

Commenting on young libertarians Mr. Goldberg encountered at a discussion/debate between libertarianism and conservatism, he states, "But, in a very serious way, many of these libertoids were every bit as closed-minded, zealous, and ideologically blinkered as the religious conservatives whom so many of them dislike."<sup>1</sup>

An earth-shattering question comes to me, and I just must ask it. Here goes: "So what?"

That's right. "So what?"

I, for one, don't claim to be open-minded, except on a few subjects where I still haven't formulated an opinion. I have heard all the arguments in the world for and against abortion; I have heard all the arguments in the world for and against the re-legalisation of drugs; quite frankly, I find myself rarely swayed. I adopt the position that seems most sound, and until some *new* argument comes along that is more rational than the arguments I have already heard thousands of times, I see no point in backing away from my positions. That, to me, is what it means to be closed-minded.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonah Goldberg, "The Libertarian Lobe: Libertarianism tells kids everything they want to be told," *National Review Online*, 22 June 2001, <http://tiny.cc/KnwkJ> (accessed 8 July 2008), ¶ 8.

So, let's see. "Closed-minded"? Check! "Zealous"? Hell yeah I'm zealous. So, check!

"Ideologically blinkered"? Well, can't say I know what that means, but...sure, why not. I'm serious about this whole freedom thing, so you could in a sense say I have an ideology (depending upon how you define the term).

In regards to the state being, as Dr. Murray N. Rothbard put it, a criminal band, Mr. Goldberg says to us,

But so what? Is this really so astounding an observation? Of course the state uses violence. The fact is states have always used violence and, for the foreseeable future, they always will. Libertarians — again, of a certain ilk — seem to think that this insight should settle the argument about government. The fact is that it begins the argument about government. The relevant question is, "Did the people on the receiving end deserve force?" Or, "Was the government right to use it?" That is the meaty stuff in a democracy.<sup>2</sup>

I must be of the "certain ilk" that Mr. Goldberg mentioned. After all, I do not condone *any* (true) crime.

I must say I'm disappointed with Mr. Goldberg here. He's being intellectually dishonest, *and* he's smart enough to *know* it. The problem, after all, is not "force," but rather "aggression."

You see, libertarians have no problem with defensive force. Force used to exact restitution from aggressors for the aggressed is perfectly just, as it constitutes defensive force. Force used to kill the man who is trying to murder your wife is perfectly just, as it constitutes defensive force.

Most people, including the vast majority of libertarians, have no problem with force *per se*. What libertarians condemn is aggression, otherwise known as the *initiation* of force against the innocent. We as libertarians view this *initiation* of force as constituting crime.

If an entity calling itself the government went around only employing defensive force and never employing aggression, no libertarian—not even anarchist libertarians—

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 13.

could muster an ethical argument against it. But this is not what the state does. *The state* does not merely employ force, but more importantly employs aggression.

Let's look at Mr. Goldberg's question. "Did the people on the receiving end deserve force?" If they were aggressors, then certainly they did deserve force. Such force would be defensive, and thus would not find opposition from libertarians—not even anarchist libertarians. However, if the people on the receiving end were not aggressors, then they did not deserve the force. When the state initiates force against non-aggressors, not only are the non-aggressors victims who do not deserve what is happening to them, but more importantly the state is engaging in natural crime against said victims.

But that's precisely what the state does. It does not merely employ force, but employs aggression. It steals from, harasses, and incarcerates innocent victims. It tells them how to run their businesses, how to teach their kids, how to run their lives, while all along depriving them of things that are rightly theirs.

Mr. Goldberg is trying to play fast and loose. He knows that there are people against whom it is just to employ force. But, there is no one against whom it is just to aggress, to *initiate* force. Further, he knows the distinction libertarians make between force *per se* and initiatory force.

Let us ask Mr. Goldberg's question in a different light, then. Since the state is an aggressor, do the people on the receiving end deserve aggression? Since aggression by definition is undeserved, the answer is clearly "no."

This is the meaty stuff in freedom.

Mr. Goldberg goes on:

So we started talking about the use of force being illegitimate and I decided to break out my tried-and-true trick question. I asked her something to the effect of: "Imagine a very close friend of yours were suicidal. She just broke up with her boyfriend, lost her job, had been drinking, and is depressed. If you knew she would feel better in the morning, would you physically restrain her to keep her from killing herself?"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 17.

Then he answers his own question, and *incorrectly* at that: “Now the correct answer, of course, is ‘Well, yes I would.’”<sup>4</sup> How is this the correct answer? Mr. Goldberg gives no explanation.

The fact is, you *only* have the authority to physically restrain her if her action would in some way aggress against someone other than herself. For example, if she were to shoot herself in *your* living room, she would end up getting blood on *your* carpet, walls, or furniture. Since she has no right to physically damage *your* property in such a manner, you have the authority to use as much force as is needed to prevent her.

In fact, since the body becomes nothing more than lifeless material after death, you could even say that overdosing on sleeping pills while on another person’s property constitutes littering, and thus constitutes a violent usurpation of said other person’s property rights. So, in short, it can be said that to kill one’s self on someone *else’s* property without the consent of the owner is an act of aggression no matter what method employed.

But, what if the close friend that Mr. Goldberg references is on her *own* property?

One could find arguments there, too. For example, if both you and her are on her property, and she plans to kill herself through explosion, *and* if such an explosion will likely kill you as well, then you *still* have the authority to use physical restraint—at least to prevent her from using that method.

So, then, what if the close friend that Mr. Goldberg references is on her *own* property, *and* plans to kill herself with sleeping pills?

Then, I am sorry, but Mr. Goldberg has absolutely no possible argument to justify his answer. It cannot possibly be just to physically restrain her from killing herself in this scenario, as such physical restraint could not be considered defensive force and would have to be considered aggressive force. Since aggression is crime, it would be an

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 18.

inherently criminal act for you to physically restrain her (regardless of what any government has to say on the matter).

And crime is crime.

This doesn't mean you couldn't use persuasion, of course. Tell her what a mistake it would be to kill herself. Tell her friends to come and cheer her up. But do not use physical restraint.

Mr. Goldberg gives no reason for why he believes it's okay to aggress against the woman in his scenario. He simply *assumes* it is. He then assumes that if it's "okay" for one person to aggress, it's "okay" for two, or ten, or a thousand. He even assumes that it's "okay" for the government to come in and aggress against the suicidal woman so as to prevent her from taking the pills on her own property.

But, alas, he is wrong, because he incorrectly assumed to start with that it was okay for the *individual* to commit this sort of aggression. It is not okay, it is crime.

At the discussion/debate, Mr. Goldberg asked his question to a young lady in the audience. Apparently, this young lady agreed with me.

Alas, this young lady refused to take the bait. Instead, she steadfastly insisted — no matter how I changed the hypothetical — that she would never use force to keep a friend or family member from committing suicide. She would try to persuade her hysterical, depressed, drunk friend, but she wouldn't dream of holding her down for a few hours.

Now, there are four obvious responses to this position. 1) She really didn't mean it, but didn't want to fall for my trap (though I don't think so, because I kept trying to let her out). 2) She is bone-crushingly stupid (again, doubtful; she seemed very bright). 3) She suffers from a mix of cowardice, evil, and apathy (certainly possible, but not likely). 4) Or, she's so blinded by the religious fervor that overtakes all extreme ideologues that she is willing to justify evil for the sake of keeping a principle pure.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, Mr. Goldberg assumes it's number four. But, I have to wonder, where does Mr. Goldberg—who is clearly trying to justify evil when he says it's okay to aggress against an innocent friend—get off accusing *this young lady* of being “willing to justify evil”?

I can think of no clearer example of projection.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 22–23.

Let us be very clear, to aggress against an innocent person is as evil an action any person can possibly take. To attempt to justify aggression, as Mr. Goldberg has done, is to attempt to *justify evil*.

To be fair to Mr. Goldberg, a person who physically restrains a suicidal friend is not acting *as* aggressively as a person who rapes or murders. But, a person who physically restrains a suicidal friend *is* acting as aggressively as a person who steals.

What the young lady to whom Mr. Goldberg was speaking was doing was stating that she would be unwilling to commit an “evil act.” This is noble, and ought to be applauded, not ridiculed.

Methinks the intelligent yet flawed Mr. Goldberg owes her an apology.

