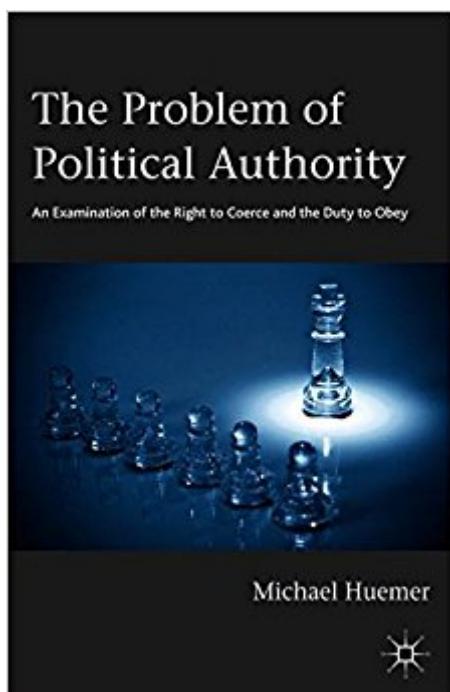


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The Problem Of Political Authority: An Examination Of The Right To Coerce And The Duty To Obey



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

'Huemer has produced not just a brilliant work of political philosophy, but a gripping page-turner. With an engaging style and sharp wit, Huemer demolishes two entrenched dogmas: that we have a duty to obey the law, and the state has the right to force us to obey. Huemer's conclusions may be controversial, but he makes them seem like commonsense.' - Jason Brennan, Georgetown University, USA 'Michael Huemer is my favorite philosopher. The Problem of Political Authority is his best book yet. Using moral premises you probably already accept, and clear but subtle arguments, Huemer leads you step-by-step to a radical yet compelling conclusion: government as we know it is an unnecessary evil. If you're tired of political books that merely preach to the choir, prepare to be amazed.' - Bryan Caplan, George Mason University, USA

MICHAEL HUEMER received his BA from UC Berkeley in 1992 and his PhD from Rutgers University in 1998. He is presently professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He is the author of more than 50 academic articles in ethics, epistemology, political philosophy, and metaphysics, as well as three brilliant and fascinating books that everyone should buy: *Skepticism*

and the Veil of Perception (2001), Ethical Intuitionism (2005), and The Problem of Political Authority (2013).

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 — 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 — 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. Huemer takes an entirely different approach. He does not assume that we all agree on a single universal moral framework. He only assumes that most of us generally share similar moral intuitions about certain sorts of situations in the average case. (The strongest sort of assumption he demands is that his reader agree that beating people up without provocation is usually bad.) Because he demands that the reader agree with him on so few things and so weakly, Huemer's argument gains enormous strength, since there is no need to accept an all-encompassing ethical theory to believe the rest of his arguments. On the basis of very pedestrian ethical assumptions, Huemer manages to build a case against any moral justification for political authority whatsoever. He engages, attacks and destroys arguments of all sorts with panache. Even John Rawls famous "Theory of Justice" (perhaps the most cited work written in philosophy in the last century) is mercilessly examined under bright lights and staked through the heart. One of the book's greatest strengths is the simplicity and lucidity of his prose. Unlike many of his academic peers, Huemer's writing is crystal clear and (nearly) jargon free. A

bright ten year old would have no difficulty with the language. He does not seek to conceal weakness beneath an avalanche of polysyllabic words and mile long sentences. Instead, he makes his arguments so straightforward to understand that there is little or no room to disagree with him. I am uncertain as to whether Huemer will persuade many people. As Swift once observed, “It is useless to attempt to reason a man out of a thing he was never reasoned into.” Most people hold their political positions not as a result of rational contemplation but because they were exposed to a set of ideas at an early age and have an emotional attachment to them that is not easily altered. The fact that Huemer is arguing for unfamiliar idea that goes against most conventional wisdom is probably more important to the average reader than the razor sharp edge to which he has honed his arguments. Never the less, in a hypothetical world in which all chose their views on the basis of rational consideration, Huemer would be changing hearts and minds by the trainload.

Finally something that deals with the major thorny issues of political authority, particularly the social contract. The book is incredibly well balanced and deals honestly and directly with opposing theories. It also doesn't pre-suppose some grand theory that anarchists and libertarians usually assert (as you'd guess by the author of Ethical Intuitionism). For people already "sold" on anarcho-capitalism, the second half of the book (which proposes an alternative solution) is very cursory, but at the same time, the approach from the beginning of the book -- of using common sense examples and intuitions to reason about moral and probable solutions and outcomes -- is very enlightening. Overall, this is a great book for on-the-fence libertarians, it's also a great book for non-libertarians since it is so balanced (in considering opposing views), and even for anarcho-capitalists for dealing with major philosophical issues without simple flippant assumptions or remarks. I'd like to see Dr. Huemer create a webpage which lists all the questions he gets after this book and his responses.

This book is awesome. The thing I like most about Huemer is how he takes a difficult subject for most people--anarchy, and philosophy in general--and explains it in professional terms, and then uses multiple, very basic analogies to communicate it to a mass audience. He straightforwardly hammers his points home. The major flaw of the book, in my opinion, is in the implementation of his principles in a hypothetical anarchist society. He will say there should be a police force paid for by private groups, but doesn't get into much detail--what do poor people opt for, how do you handle those that may be under the jurisdiction of your force but have opted out of it, healthcare, school,

etc. Anarchism is just about the most difficult philosophical/social construct I can think of to implement, and this book doesn't satisfy in that regard, in my opinion.

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