

the  
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Ideas on Liberty

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**A Lesson in  
Socialism**

## Thoughts on "Being Our Brother's Keeper"

"We are our brother's keeper!"

Those who argue for individual liberty and economic freedom are often met with this phrase. Frequently it is used to justify government intervention in the economic or personal lives of others, and the taxation that supports such intervention. The list of programs inspired by this concept is almost endless: welfare, social security, victimless crime laws, various trade restrictions, and so forth.

One can attack such programs from a utilitarian standpoint quite effectively. With some research, and a solid grasp of basic free market economics, one can demonstrate convincingly that government anti-poverty and income redistribution

schemes are mostly useless, ineffective, and destructive; and that social reforms effected through the political process inevitably end up encouraging and exacerbating the very problems they are meant to solve.

However, to the ardent and well-intentioned advocate of these programs, a solely utilitarian argument against them simply will not wash. The programs are ineffective? Then even stronger, more drastic programs are needed. The public resists the programs? Then stricter controls on human behavior are called for. Such advocates, after all, are arguing from a *moral* position. They are aware of often very legitimate concerns, and wish to do something to correct what they perceive as intolerable and unnecessary wrongs. Convinced of the moral

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rightness of their cause, they are willing to pay—and make others pay—a high price for their attempts. “We are our brother’s keeper,” they reason, “and it is only just to use our political system to correct injustice and help the unfortunate.”

Utilitarian arguments alone, then, cannot effectively combat such reasoning. Instead, a rationally presented *moral* argument against the principles behind this kind of thinking must be put forth. One powerful step in this direction is to show the complexity of the phrase “we are our brother’s keeper,” and to demonstrate the traps that an unthinking or unaware use of this concept can lead to.

Many who so readily use this concept to justify their actions fail to realize that there are actually *three distinct ways* of assuming the role of “our brother’s keeper.” Each of these three ways may seem superficially similar, at first glance. Yet ultimately the differences between them are profound.

### Voluntarism vs. Compulsion

The first way of “being our brother’s keeper” is to offer voluntary donations of aid, service, advice, money, goods, and so on to those who are in need. This is the classic definition of charity: voluntary giving. Exhortations to aid the needy and unfortunate in this manner are found in the

teachings of all the great religions of the world, and in the writings of many of the great humane philosophers. Such giving may be motivated by sincere personal concern, by social pressure, by a desire for recognition, or by other factors. But whatever the motivation, the key distinction here is that the giving is *voluntary*.

A second method is to *compel others* to “be their brother’s keepers.” This can be done in our society in several ways, all enforced by government through the political process. People may be taxed, and the resulting money used to fund various welfare programs deemed proper by the government. Some individuals may be compelled to follow various standards in their personal and economic relations with others: they may be forced to pay a minimum wage, to hire someone they don’t wish to hire, or to make business concessions in the “public interest.” Sometimes even more direct compulsion may be used: some may be forced to serve in the military, or (as many have proposed) to spend a few years of their lives in some form of compulsory “public service.” All of these actions and concepts have a common denominator: the use of *force*, through the political process, to compel some members of society to look after others, regardless of their wishes or beliefs.

The third way in which some em-

brace the idea of “being our brother’s keeper” is to demand that *they* (or those who share their viewpoint) be given the power to interfere in the lives of others, “for their own good” or for “the good of all.” Again, in our society this is generally done through the political process. We may be taxed, so that our money can be spent by politicians and bureaucrats “in our own best interests.” We may be prevented from purchasing some items considered harmful to ourselves, such as certain medicines, drugs, books, tools, and so on. Various kinds of peaceful human relations, religious practices, political beliefs, and the like may be prohibited, to “protect us from ourselves.” Endless other examples could be culled from our present society. Like the examples in the previous paragraph, the common denominator linking these and similar acts is the use of *force*, through the political process, to thrust the ideas and will of some members of society upon others.

### The Power of the Gun

So we see that the concept of “being our brother’s keeper” is much more complex than many may at first realize. The first method—voluntary giving—is non-violent, and in accord with widely recognized religious and humane teachings. The second and third methods, though, differ markedly in that they rely

upon the use of *force*, through the political process, to achieve their ends. Many who advocate political coercion to accomplish their goals fail to realize the violence inherent in their methods, or deny it altogether. Nevertheless, the violence is unmistakably there. The dictum, “All political power comes from the barrel of a gun,” is an accurate and insightful one. Its truth is easily demonstrated: attempt to go against the will of those in political power who would force you to be “your brother’s keeper,” or who would regulate your life, and you will find yourself under threat of fines or imprisonment. Backing up such threats is, finally and inevitably, the power of the gun.

Indeed, in a very real sense it is the *slavemaster* who is the ultimate embodiment of the second and third ways of being “our brother’s keeper.” It should never be forgotten that many apologists for slavery in our own country, a mere few generations ago, based their arguments upon religious and moral grounds. Biblical passages were interpreted in such a way as to justify slavery. It was claimed that the slaves were much better off in bondage, where they were fed, clothed, and cared for. Apologists maintained that the slaves were “heathen,” and benefited from the religious instruction they received from their owners; that they were incapable of looking after themselves, and therefore needed the

institution of slavery for their own protection.

In brief, the apologists for slavery argued that they had a moral and legal right to use violence against other men, for "their own good" or to "protect them from themselves"—precisely the same arguments used by many who advocate political violence today. It should be remembered, too, that this form of slavery—recognized today almost universally as being a hideous violation of the most basic human rights—was sanctioned by the federal government and many state governments, as well as by numerous religious and community leaders. In many states, those who actively fought against the institution of slavery were classified by the law as criminals—just as are those today who violate the various coercive laws that prohibit so many forms of peaceful, non-violent human behavior.

### Morality Based on Violence Is Fundamentally Flawed

At this point we have clearly shown that those who use the concept "we are our brother's keeper" to justify the use of political force are, in fact, advocating the use of violence against non-aggressive individuals. The advocate of liberty will point out that a morality based on violence is fundamentally flawed—that, no matter how valid or urgent

one's ends might be, one's means must always be moral as well, if society is to remain on a civilized basis.

To resort to the use of violence, whether political or non-political, is to resort to the tactics of the bully or tyrant, the tyranny of the strong over the weak. To sanction the use of violence against peaceful individuals to achieve one's goals must ultimately lead to a society in which the individual means nothing; in which no human rights are viewed as inherent and free from invasion; and in which violence of all kinds—both political and non-political—becomes more acceptable in the minds of many as a way of achieving one's desires.

The libertarian rejects the moral basis of those who favor the second and third methods of being "our brother's keeper." In its place, libertarians offer another ideal: the concept that everyone should be free to live as they wish, providing they harm no one. Instead of a society based upon violence and coercion, libertarians offer the vision of a society based upon peaceful relations, free exchange, and mutual aid.

Having stripped the advocates of force of their moral sanction, and having offered in its stead a principled moral vision of peace, freedom, and cooperation, we are now in a position to use the many powerful utilitarian arguments for liberty to their

best advantage. Having shown the morality of the free society, we can now demonstrate that such a society *works*—and works far more efficiently, effectively, and fairly than one based upon political violence. There is a wealth of such arguments, and they show convincingly, with facts and figures, the vast productive superiority of the free market compared to the controlled economy.

So we see that the urge to be "our brother's keeper" can manifest itself

as the highest of humanitarian ideals, or as the brutal tyranny of the brigand or slave-holder. Those who unknowingly parrot the phrase "we are our brother's keeper" in order to establish a moral legitimacy for the use of violence to achieve their pet social goals must be met with a rational, moral, principled condemnation of their methods. This, coupled with a carefully constructed utilitarian refutation of their arguments, makes a powerful and persuasive case for the free society. ☉

### Despotism in Democratic Nations

ABOVE this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications, and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent, if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks on the contrary to keep them in perpetual childhood: it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided they think of nothing but rejoicing. For their happiness such a government willingly labours, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness: it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances.

The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

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