

PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCES



Reading 19

JOHN STUART MILL ON THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The single largest economic institution in the United States is the government, so the role the government plays is of special interest to the economist. But what is the proper role of government? Nineteenth-century economist John Stuart Mill tackled this question in his classic work, Principles of Political Economy. As you read the excerpt from it below, consider how this century-old discussion is relevant today. Then answer the questions that follow.

One of the most disputed questions both in political science and in practical statesmanship . . . relates to the proper limits of the functions and agencies of government. On the one hand, impatient reformers, thinking it easier and shorter to get possession of the government than of the intellects and dispositions of the public are under a constant temptation to stretch the province of government beyond due bonds: while, on the other [hand], mankind have been so much accustomed by their rulers to interference for purposes other than the public good that there has grown up a spirit of resistance to the interference of government, merely as such, and a disposition to restrict its sphere of action within the narrowest bonds. . . .

In attempting to enumerate [list] the necessary functions of government, we find them to be considerably more multifarious [diverse] than most people are at first aware of, and not capable of being circumscribed by those very definite lines of demarcation, which it is often attempted to draw round them. We sometimes, for example, hear it said that governments ought to confine themselves to affording protection against force and fraud: that, these two things apart, people should be free agents. . . . But why should people be protected by their government . . . against violence and fraud, and not against other evils, except that the expediency [appropriateness and benefit] is more obvious?

Nor is the function of the law in defining property itself so simple a thing as may be supposed. It may be imagined, perhaps, that the law has only to declare and protect the right of everyone to what he has himself produced, or acquired by the voluntary consent, fairly obtained of those who produced it. But is there nothing recognized as property except what has been produced? Is there not the earth itself, its forests, and waters, and all other natural riches above and below the surface? . . . What rights, and under what conditions, a person shall be allowed to exercise over any portion of this common inheritance, cannot be left undecided.

Again, the legitimacy [of the government] is conceded of repressing violence or treachery; but under which of these heads are we to place the obligations imposed on people to perform their contracts? Governments do not limit their concerns to simple enforcement. They take upon themselves to determine what contracts are fit to be enforced. . . . But when once it is admitted that there are any engagements which for reasons of expediency the law ought not to enforce, the same question is necessarily opened with respect to all engagements. Whether, for example, the law should enforce a contract to labour [work], when the wages are too low, or the hours of work too severe. . . . Every question which can possibly arise as to the policy of contracts and the relations which they establish among human beings, is a question for the [government]; and one which [it] cannot escape considering, and in some way or other deciding. . . .

There is a multitude of cases in which governments, with general approbation [approval], assume powers and execute functions for which no reason can be assigned except the simple one, that they conduce [contribute] to general convenience.

Not only does [government] undertake to decide disputes, it takes precautions beforehand that disputes may not arise. The laws of most countries lay down rules for determining many things. . . . In doing these things, it has

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never been alleged that government oversteps the proper limits of its functions.

Again, however wide a scope we may allow to the doctrine that individuals are the proper guardians of their own interests . . . the doctrine can never be applicable to any persons but those who are capable of acting in their own behalf. The individual may be an infant or a lunatic, or fallen into imbecility. The law surely must look after the interest of such persons. . . .

There is a multitude of cases in which governments, with general approbation [approval], assume powers and execute functions for which no reason can be assigned except the simple one, that they conduce [contribute] to general convenience. We may take as an example, the

function . . . of coining money. Prescribing a set of standard weights and measures is another instance. Paving, lighting, and cleansing the streets and thoroughfares is another. . . .

Examples might be indefinitely multiplied without intruding on any disputed ground. But enough has been said to show that the admitted functions of government embrace a much wider field than can easily be included within . . . any restrictive definition, and that it is hardly possible to find any ground for justification common to them all, except the comprehensive one of general expediency.

Mill, John Stuart. *Principles of Political Economy*.
New York: Longmans, Green & Co., Inc., 1892

ANALYZING THE READING

1. What is Mill's basic point?

2. What functions of government does Mill identify?

3. Reread the final paragraph. What common justification for the various activities of government does Mill detect?

4. Why do you think economists must consider the role of government when doing their work?

5. How does the language of the passage indicate that it is a historical work?
