Common Error No. 14 [1]

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14. "The state is right to protect people from themselves."

People? That means you. Would you like to be protected from yourself? In the first case this means that the state has to take the decisions about what we do or do not need to be protected from. One step down this road and you are lost. The state might decide you need to be protected from smoking. If its scientists tell it that refined white sugar and salt are bad for people's health, it might protect people from those too. Maybe saturated fats, such as butter, as well. Maybe it should protect people from the physical inactivity which might harm them?

After deciding what it considers injurious to us, the state then takes the decision to protect us. It does this by preventing us from doing what we would otherwise have done. It can only do this by force, sanction, or the threat of the same. So the state takes away our freedom to do what we decide to do, and then uses force to make us do what it wants us to.

John Stuart Mill thought that only if someone causes or seriously risks physical harm to others should the state stop them. Should it prevent them using a dangerous bridge? No, he said. It can provide them with information, put up a sign and even urge them not to cross. But it is up to people themselves to assess the risks and take the decision. Some claim that the state knows better than we do. Unlikely, since there is no shortage of media sources telling us about what dangers we face.

And what about non-physical harm? People might be deeply distressed by your non-attendance at prayers, but that does not give them the right to constrain you into worship. The only safe rule is listen to advice, but make your own decisions and take the consequences.

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