

[A lunchtime reminder of the golden rule of liberty](#) [1]

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During lunchtime last week, I was queuing for a popular street-stall which sells kebabs to the hungry workers of Westminster. I thought the queue had managed to double back on itself enough to avoid blocking too much of the busy street. Apparently, I was wrong. A middle-aged woman (let's call her ?Mary?), who seemed to be otherwise uninterested in the kebab-stall, decided the queue needed to change shape so that it was more compact. We, in the queue, grumbled but obeyed her directions and shuffled around into the new formation. Whether this had any effect on the flow of pedestrians was unclear, but Mary seemed happy and wandered off, leaving us to discuss her sanity and lust for power.

This got me thinking: to what extent are we private citizens justified in ordering each other about? Mary had no authority over us: she wasn't a government official, company boss or even an employee of the kebab-stall. We were equals in every respect. For deciding how to act, I was glad to see everyone more or less obey the golden rule of liberty: no interference is justified except to prevent harm.

How does that apply to this situation? Mary's belief that the queue was blocking the street (and thus causing ?harm?) provided justification for her intervention. Furthermore, I believe everyone has the right to freedom of speech, so whatever the circumstances, Mary would have had the right to open her mouth. But what if we, the people in the queue, had ignored her directions? Could Mary have been justified in gently tugging sleeves to form a less disruptive queue? While this would hardly be assault, it would go beyond the right to free speech. It could be argued that people who spend their time trying to help society run more smoothly, as Mary did, should be hailed as heroes of ?the Big Society?. I certainly think that, in general, people are too passive about minor intrusions in their lives (for example, those selfish individuals who feel it necessary to share their music tastes with the rest of the bus).

But this is what happens in the *ideal* society: the citizens sorting themselves out, willing to listen to the advice of a stranger without feeling their autonomy is being violated. More important, in my opinion, are the laws that we need for society to operate to a *basic* level of satisfaction. In this case, Mary's right to exercise free speech, but not go beyond that into physical involvement. After all, the actions taken to correct an error should be in proportion to the error itself. Physical coercion seems fine when used against criminals, but over-the-top for rearranging a kebab queue. (This isn't totally accurate: the police may have the authority to physically control crowds at public events, for example.)

Still, the main point is that Mary had the right to *suggest* that we re-form the queue, but nothing more. If we had ignored her (and assuming that the queue shape was indeed causing a problem) that would have left a small imperfection affecting the flow of the street. This can be applied in a wider sense to government in general. A control-freak large state *might* iron out inefficiencies in some areas, like Mary reducing the blockage of the street by physically rearranging the kebab queue. But it is not worth giving up individual rights (and the long-term benefits of a limited state) for these small savings.

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