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Exposing the Unspoken Premises in Policy Debates

On Christmas Eve 2017, a property owner in Victoria had two large oak trees removed. Victorians immediately protested and sought to stop the tree removal. The *Victoria Advocate* [reported](#):

Phones at Victoria County’s Courthouse kept ringing behind locked doors Sunday as neighbors and history advocates tried to stop the destruction of what they described as historic trees that bring “intrinsic value” to Victoria.

One Victorian, Doris Santiago, said, “These oak trees are an integral part of our history. And for them to do this the morning before Christmas, it’s morally wrong.” Such moral outrage is frequently a part of the political discourse today, but why is cutting down a tree on Christmas eve morally wrong?

To answer this question, we must consider the full context. We should not assume that an expression of moral indignation is proper and just. Moral outrage is founded on the speaker’s premises, and very often those premises remain unspoken and unidentified. If we wish to consider the full context, then we must identify the standards and principles that underlie the indignation, and then evaluate those standards and principles. Only then can we determine if the moral outrage is justified, or simply a tactic designed to disarm one’s opponents.

(This applies to much more than preservation. It applies to every political issue. We should always clearly identify the moral premises that underlie any political position, whether our own or our opponent’s.)

The purpose of morality is to provide individuals with principles for guiding our choices and actions. Those principles are founded on a standard. The standard serves as the ends; principles serve as the means for achieving that standard.

Preservationists believe that historic buildings and trees have intrinsic value—that they are a value in and of themselves. If a building or tree is “sufficiently” historical, then it should be protected for its own sake. To preservationists, our “heritage”—things from the past—serves as the standard of value. Any action that threatens those things is regarded as immoral. Demolishing an old building or removing an old tree is an attack on the preservationist’s standard.

In establishing historical relics as the standard of value, preservationists ignore the present. In protecting things from the past, they trample on the desires, values, and rights of those living today. The preservationist’s desire to protect relics supersedes the owner’s desire to demolish a building or remove a tree. The value that preservationists attach to our “heritage” is to be forced upon property owners. The owner’s freedom to use his property as he chooses is to be restricted and regulated by government officials. In the eyes of preservationists, the present-day owner is an

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impediment to their desires and values. The owner's desire and freedom to flourish is an obstacle to preserving the past.

We reject historic relics as the proper standard of value. We advocate a morality that holds individual flourishing as the proper standard of value.

For an individual to flourish, he must be free to select the values that will bring him satisfaction, joy, and happiness. He must be free to take the actions that he believes will help him attain those values. This is the meaning of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We may not always agree with the choices that others make. We may not like the values they pursue or their means for attaining them. We may not like the fact that they demolish historic buildings or remove old trees. But if we want the freedom to choose and pursue the values of our choosing, then we must respect and defend the rights of others to do the same. To do otherwise is to be a hypocrite.

The moral outrage expressed by preservationists (and many others) is founded on the premise that individuals should not be free to choose and pursue their own values. It is founded on the premise that individuals should be forced to conform to the values and standards of the community. Preservationists find it immoral that some individuals refuse to bow in submission to the community's standards. They find it immoral that some individuals assert their right to live by their own judgment in the pursuit of their own values.

These are the premises that must be identified and exposed. Let the debate focus on the fundamental issues, rather than the superficial. Let us not debate about whether old buildings and trees should or should not be protected. Let us debate whether individuals should be free to live as they choose, or whether they should be subservient to the demands and dictates of their community. Let us debate whether the rights of individuals, including property rights, should be protected, or whether they should be violated whenever the community so desires.

The moral outrage expressed by preservationists (and many others) is designed to morally disarm their opponents. But that tactic can work only if we accept their unspoken premises. If we identify those premises, and expose them for what they are, we will seize the moral high ground. The preservationists and their ilk will be the ones disarmed.

Unidentified premises always work to the advantage of evil. Preservationists (and many others) are evil. They value the past more than individuals. They are willing to destroy the dreams and lives of living individuals as a morbid monument to history.

Identified premises always work to the advantage of the good. Let us proudly state our premise that each individual should be free to live as he chooses, pursuing the values that he desires. Our monument will be a community of free and flourishing individuals.



The Texas Institute for Property Rights provides analysis, training, and resources for legislators, businesses, organizations, and property owners.

Voice: 979-429-4447

Website: www.texasipr.com

Email: contact@texasipr.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/texasipr/