



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on July 23, 2009

Mom Arrested for Having Fat Son

While America may not have anything resembling Saudi Arabia's religious police, called "The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice," we do have our own strange version of vice squads. Only, the trespasses they root out today are less likely to involve heroin and harlots than Twinkies and trans-fats. And their latest move is the arrest of a mother and the seizure of her child. Her crime? Her son is too fat.



Tracy Miller at the *Daily News* reports on the story, [writing](#), "A 555-pound teenager in South Carolina is at the center of the latest legal case to consider whether child obesity is a form of child abuse."

"Alexander Draper, 14, was placed into foster care after his mother, Jerri Gray, was arrested and charged with criminal neglect in June. The state's Department of Social Services sought custody of the boy because of information from health care providers that he was at risk of serious harm because his mother was not meeting his medical needs."

I wonder, is there an exemption for the parents of aspiring sumo wrestlers?

All joking aside, this action by the government raises serious questions. For starters, as Gray's lawyer pointed out, her conviction would reinforce a terrible precedent, paving the way for government to bring charges against parents of other overweight children.

Of course, many have no problem with this, as "fatism" is now a fashionable prejudice. This is why we've seen measures such as a Mississippi [proposal](#) to prohibit restaurants from serving overweight people (something tells me we need an N.A.A.F.P.). Yet there are things supporters of such intervention fail to consider.

Let's take the micro. Gray says she was complying with Social Services nutritional guidelines but that she cannot control what her teenager consumes while at school or while she works the late-night shift at her job. Now, many won't tolerate excuses, given the morbid obesity of young Draper. Yet what does his physical state tell us? Obviously, you don't reach 555 pounds simply because you like to eat or your mother is a bit too liberal with late-night snacks. This boy has either a physical condition that causes him to gain weight or a psychological one that compels him to eat. In either case, simply giving his mother nutritional guidelines won't remedy anything.

Yet the details aren't even the issue, as there is a bigger picture here. What goes around comes around; if we empower government to punish the Grays of the world, why should we think its intervention would be limited to trespasses against the waistline?

The mistake people make is that they assess these matters divorced from the larger implications. The real issue doesn't concern just targeting parents of the portly; it's an issue of lowering the threshold for



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government intrusion into the family to a point where it *can* target parents of the portly. Once that is accomplished, everything above that threshold is also fair game. Thus, before supporting social services in the Gray case, it behooves us to figure out what that "everything" is.

You should also realize that while you may figure it out, *you* won't be decreeing what that "everything" is. And do you really trust the bureaucrats who will be making these judgments? Remember that we live in a topsy-turvy, through-the-looking-glass world today. Customary spanking may be considered abuse, while putting your child on psychogenic drugs is thought treatment. As to this skewed judgment, Sweden gave the world its first anti-spanking law in 1979, yet that nation has no problem with [parents](#) who won't reveal their child's sex and raise him androgynously because they believe "gender is a social construction." Then there are those who would say that [choosing](#) your children's religion for them — or even just exposing them to religion — is wrong. Yes, there are 8 million versions of abuse in the naked city. And do you really want to bet that the bureaucrats will adopt your version?

There also is the issue of authority and responsibility. While there are many complaints today about parents' failure to take the latter, we increasingly rob them of the former. For example, many want to address juvenile crime by arresting the parents of youthful criminals, and these elders are deserving of ire. Yet, if we don't want children to break civil law, we must allow their parents to enforce the "law" at home. That is to say, how are parents supposed to control their children's behavior, eating habits, etc., if they're handcuffed with anti-spanking laws and self-esteem-oriented, feel-good prescriptions? Believe it or not, there isn't one example of a society that complimented its children to civility.

To expand on this, it's important to enunciate the relationship between authority and responsibility. With authority inevitably comes responsibility, and with responsibility must come authority. As to the latter, would you want to accept responsibility for a group of children without the authority to control them so they don't fall into harm's way? To do so would be a recipe for a lawsuit.

This brings us to a more ominous, and quite topical, matter. In light of the above principle, what do you think will happen once the government has responsibility for our healthcare? Since its bureaucrats will pay the piper and call the tune, do you really trust them to have authority over healthcare decisions concerning your body? How about your child's body?

And we can imagine how intrusive government can become. Quite a few years back there were a couple of college professors (who else?) who proposed taxing high-fat foods to the hilt to discourage their consumption. More recently, in England, councils (local governments) were trying to cajole fish-and-chips restaurants into switching to salt shakers with fewer holes to reduce patrons' sodium intake. This, despite the fact that, contrary to popular belief, [studies](#) have shown that reducing salt consumption can actually *increase* health risk. And if that isn't bad enough, there is more lunacy from across the pond. Taking fatism to a new extreme, English bureaucrats are threatening to [punish](#) owners of overweight pets with heavy fines and, even, *jail time*. But be careful how you exercise Fido, too, because the government is also warning against walking dogs when it's hot out. It much reminds me of a great G.K. Chesterton quotation, "The free man owns himself. He can damage himself with either eating or drinking; he can ruin himself with gambling. If he does he is certainly a damn fool, and he might possibly be a damned soul; but if he may not, he is not a free man any more than a dog." So what would the portly Englishman say about his countrymen today? They're not even free to have fat dogs.

The above examples should surprise no one. Once the health police have responsibility over your life, there is simply no limit to the authority they will exercise. Why should you or your children be allowed to ingest more than the recommended daily allowance of fat? How about salt and sugar? Hey, how



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much cake, cookies, and ice cream are you buying at the grocery store, huh? There must be accountability.

This is why it's so dangerous when we adopt the rationale, "Well, 'these people' (e.g., smokers) drain money from the healthcare system, so we have a right to regulate their actions." It so easily passes our lips when at issue is a behavior we dislike, doesn't it? Yet, know that this reasoning can be used to justify any of the aforementioned trespasses against legitimate liberty. Thus, our response to this rationale should always be the same: that isn't a problem of the free market.

It's a problem of socialism.

It arises when you hold people *responsible* for the consequences of the decisions of others.

Responsibility begets authority — there is no way around it. This is why the one group that has little responsibility also doesn't enjoy the rights of the rest of the population. That group is children. And if we want to control ours — or our healthcare or anything else — we can't empower government to become the parent.



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