WELFARE AS A MORAL PROBLEM

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There has been much talk lately about the welfare crisis. There is no welfare crisis. There is, however, a moral crisis. The United States is a rich country and a compassionate country. We can afford to sustain a large welfare population if we think it necessary and desirable. What we cannot afford is a large demoralized population, a population that exhibits all the symptoms of the "social pathology"—or "moral pathology," as I would prefer to call it—associated with chronic welfare dependency: violence, crime, illegitimacy, illiteracy, drug addiction, alcoholism, and dysfunctional families.

More than a century and a half ago, Alexis de Tocqueville reflected upon the anomaly that the poorest countries in Europe had the fewest paupers, and the richest country, England, had the most paupers. His explanation was simple. The richest country had the highest standard of living and thus also the highest standard of needs; and because it was at a higher stage of civilization, it aspired to meet that standard for all of its citizens. This combination of affluence and compassion produced the most generous system of poor relief and the largest population of paupers.[1]

Although Tocqueville admired the spirit behind the English poor law (the old poor law, before the reform of 1834) he deplored its consequences. Public relief as a legal right, he explained, is more demoralizing than private charity. It is demoralizing not only because the assurance of subsistence undermines the incentive to work, thus making paupers out of the poor, but also because it is a legal, public testimony to the individual's dependency: "a notarized manifestation of misery, of weakness, of

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1. Alexis de Tocqueville, "Memoir on Pauperism," *reprinted in* TOCQUEVILLE AND BEAUMONT ON SOCIAL REFORM 1, 1-2 (Seymour Drescher ed., 1968).

misconduct."[2] And the more prolonged the exercise of this right, the more degrading it became.

Charity, on the other hand, Tocqueville said, being private, involves no such acknowledgment of inferiority. Because it is personal and voluntary, it establishes a moral tie between the donor and the recipient, unlike public relief which is impersonal and compulsory and therefore vitiates any sense of morality. In the case of public relief, the donor (that is, the taxpayer) resents his involuntary contribution, and the recipient feels no gratitude for what he receives as a matter of right and which in any case he feels to be insufficient.[3]

On this subject, as on so many others, Tocqueville is a prophet for our time. When we think about the American underclass, we should recall his prediction that a state system of relief would inevitably produce a pauper class in which "[t]he number of illegitimate children and criminals grows rapidly and continuously, the indigent population is limitless, the spirit of foresight and of saving becomes more and more alien to the poor."[4] If we cannot heed the good counsel of Tocqueville, we may be more responsive to someone closer to our own time. It was Franklin Roosevelt, the father of our system of relief, who described it as "a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit."[5]

Welfare dependency is not the only cause of demoralization, but it is an important factor in it. Society has been demoralized for a variety of reasons, for reasons of affluence as much as of poverty—an affluence that encourages permissiveness, self-indulgence, immediate gratification, and immersion in a popular culture that is degraded and degrading. The rich can tolerate a fair amount of demoralization without becoming a critical social problem. The Murphy Browns of this world (the real world, not the world of TV) have their own woes; rich fatherless children and rich husbandless mothers are hardly paragons of well-being. But they do not constitute an urgent problem requiring society's intervention, in part because they are relatively few in number and in part because they can afford to cope with their miseries in private. They do become a problem, however, when

2. *See id.* at 17.

3. *See id.* at 18.

4. *Id.* at 19.

5. Michael Prowse, *Read Clinton's lips: No more welfare: America*, FIN. TIMES, Aug. 31, 1993, at 32.

they appear as role models for the rest of society, as the fictional Murphy Brown does, but that is another issue.

Poor welfare mothers, on the other hand, are indeed a social problem because they are numerous and without resources. These women literally are society's dependents. The welfare system has helped make them that and society is bearing the cost—the cost not only of welfare itself but of all its accompanying ills.

The monetary costs are substantial enough. Estimates differ, but one widely-accepted figure shows that welfare spending has increased more than sevenfold in the last three decades, with little or no relationship to the poverty rate.[6] The most ominous statistic, however, does not revolve around financial costs. Currently in the United States, one in seven children is on welfare.[7] In New York City, one in every seven *persons* is on welfare.[8]

These statistics correlate with others that are equally dire. During the last three decades, the illegitimacy rate increased sixfold, from five percent to over thirty percent. This increase is not confined to blacks, as popular misconception has it. The illegitimacy rate among whites in this period rose from two percent to twenty-two percent; among blacks it rose from twenty-two percent to sixty-eight percent.[9] Moreover, a disproportionate number of children born out of wedlock are on welfare. For teenagers, the correlation between illegitimacy and welfare is even more striking. Half of unwed teenage mothers receive welfare within one year of the birth of the child, and more than three-quarters within five years.[10]

The moral implications of these statistics are obvious. Indeed, the very word "dependency" is suggestive. The work ethic is more than an ethic that makes a virtue of work. It is an ethic that makes a virtue of independence. This virtue, in turn, implies others, such as responsibility, prudence, temperance, self-discipline, and self-control. Dependency is inimical to all these virtues because it transfers responsibility from the individual and the family to the state. Welfare, originally conceived as a tempo-

6. *See* WHERE YOUR MONEY GOES: THE 1994-95 GREEN BOOK (1995).

7. *See id.*

8. *See New York's Obese Welfare State*, AM. ENTERPRISE, Mar.-Apr. 1995, at 13.

9. *See* U.S. DEP'T OF COMMERCE, ECONOMICS AND STATISTICS ADMIN., BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES 1995, at 77 (1995).

10. *See* CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERV., CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE REPORT FOR CONGRESS 2 (1994).

rary recourse in time of need, has become, for a considerable part of our population, a long-term means of subsistence—a way of life, a "culture of dependency" transmitted from generation to generation.

The culture of dependency is demoralizing, not only for the individual but also for the family. As the state assumes the role of chief provider, the father is reduced to the role of procreator and the husband becomes dispensable. Those who deride family values argue that what is important is not such "bourgeois values" as marriage and family, but simply love, a love that can as well be expressed outside marriage as within.

But this argument misses the point. Love alone does not provide the kind of emotional security that is conducive to emotional and moral maturity. Indeed, it can promote a narcissistic self-indulgence that is profoundly amoral, as we learned from the "flower children" of the 1960s. What is required is the kind of firm commitment and stable relationship provided by the family, which puts a premium on precisely those bourgeois values of work, responsibility, obligation, and fidelity. It is a measure of the demoralization of our society that the words "commitment" and "relationship" have become so debased as to be almost synonymous with transient relations rather than the more permanent bonds of marriage and family.

The high correlation between welfare and the one-parent family is a crude indicator of the inadequacy and dysfunctionality of that form of family. The even higher correlation between welfare and never-married (as distinct from divorced) women suggests that the family that has never been legitimized by marriage is even more dysfunctional.

The economic liabilities of the one-parent family may be the least of its problems. Arguments in favor of "alternative lifestyles," commonplace only a few years ago, have become increasingly hollow as the evidence of the emotional, social, and moral deficiencies of the fatherless family mount up—deficiencies exhibited not only in welfare dependency but in crime, violence, promiscuity, illiteracy, and other symptoms of unstable, even pathological, behavior.

The welfare system has been demoralizing, not only for those caught up in the culture of dependency, but for those working poor trying desperately to resist it, to sustain their families by their own labor at a time when welfare may be more profitable

economically and surely less onerous. The Victorians devised the principle of "less eligibility" to cope with this problem. The pauper receiving relief should be in a "less eligible"—that is, less favorable, less desirable—condition than the independent laborer. He should get less by way of relief, whether in the form of money, goods, or services, than the laborer received in wages, and his position should be less agreeable, less respectable than that of the independent laborer.

This principle of less eligibility was designed to forestall exactly our present dilemma, where the welfare recipient is often in a more eligible, more favorable condition than the poor worker. People on relief often receive more—in the form of allowances, food stamps, housing subsidies, medical benefits, and other government transfers—than workers earning a minimum or even a modest wage. Every interview with a mother on welfare reveals that, however well intentioned she might be or however much she might want to become self-supporting, she finds that she is in a financially better position on welfare than off. These mothers are, in effect, in a condition of "more eligibility." They are also more eligible because the stigma attached to welfare has eroded. The very word "relief" has been replaced by the more respectable word "welfare." Welfare recipients have become "doubly eligible," so to speak, because the moral deterrent has been eliminated at the same time that the material benefits have increased.

The effect on the working poor is obvious. Not only does the welfare recipient have no incentive to find a job and go off the dole; the poor worker has every incentive to give up his job and apply for relief. Similarly, a system that gives the unwed mother benefits it denies to the married one puts a premium on illegitimacy. So too the regulation defining drug addiction and alcoholism as disabilities, thus qualifications for welfare, has the effect of rewarding the chronic addict or alcoholic while penalizing the reformed one.

The Victorians were, in this respect, more farsighted than we. In devising their policies of relief, they did so with an eye not only to the recipients of relief but to society as a whole, and most of all to the working class. Their conscious goal was to alleviate the plight of indigents in such a way as to discourage them from lingering in a state of indigency, and at the same time, encouraging the working poor to remain independent. They thus

sought to prevent the "demoralization" of the poor—a demoralization reflected not only in the loss of morale but also in the loss of moral character and status, the character and status that came with independence.

Something of this sense of demoralization emerges from a recent poll, in which seventy-two percent of whites and fifty-two percent of blacks said that the current system of welfare does "more harm than good," and only twenty-one percent of whites and thirty-six percent of blacks thought it does "more good than harm."[11] Even more interesting are the responses of past and present recipients of welfare, fifty-seven percent of whom believed it does more harm than good and only thirty-three percent of whom held the opposite view.[12]

Recent proposals for the reform of the welfare system go part of the way toward solving the problem of demoralization. Devolution is the obvious first step, because it removes the incentive of the federal bureaucracy to expand the system and make it more costly and inefficient; states and cities tend to be less bureaucratic and profligate. The more important effect of devolution, however, would be the elimination of welfare as a federally-mandated "entitlement" or "right"—the right Tocqueville thought so damaging to those who are its ostensible beneficiaries. The abandonment of that right might be the beginning of a revitalization of civil society, a society that recognizes moral obligations as well as legal rights.

The process of devolution transfers power from the national government to the states and localities (on the principle of *subsidiarity*, the idea that higher authorities should not assume functions that can be performed by lesser authorities). It also devolves responsibility to private and voluntary agencies—charities, religious institutions, civil organizations, friends, and relatives. For too many years now, government has usurped the role traditionally played by these natural "associations," as Tocqueville called them.[13] Giving private charity a greater role (although not an exclusive one) would have the effect not only of revitalizing civil society but of remoralizing it as well, restoring

11. NBC-*Wall Street Journal* poll (Apr. 21-24, 1995), *in* THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE, June-July 1995, at 2.

12. *See id.*

13. *See* 2 ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA 106 (Henry Reeve trans., Phillips Bradley ed., 1948).

to society its traditional moral functions.

In addition to devolution, other solutions have been suggested to remedy the patent ills of the present system. Among these are variations of "workfare" proposals, which oblige welfare recipients to do work (usually on public service projects) in return for benefits, or which require them to attend job training programs and be available for work. These are worthy efforts to promote a work ethic, but they have proved to be less effective than anticipated. In fact, they are sometimes counterproductive by offering welfare recipients yet another form of relief, thus prolonging their dependency.

Other proposals, such as granting assistance to unwed teenage mothers, promise to be more effective. These mothers are placed in group homes where they live under supervision, are taught to care for their children, and perform routine household tasks in a structured and disciplined environment. It is doubtful whether these homes can be provided in sufficient numbers to accommodate a significant part of the teenage welfare population. But the very example of such a program is itself commendable, for it focuses attention upon the moral issue, the need to cultivate a sense of responsibility and self-discipline. Unfortunately, it also has the serious disadvantage of perpetuating the single parent family, because it seems to make the mother the sole person responsible for the child.

Another much-debated proposal intended to discourage the illegitimate births that constitute a growing part of the welfare problem would deprive unwed mothers of additional benefits (except perhaps food stamps and Medicaid) for children born within a year or so after the passage of the law. A combination of these and other reforms would not quite "end welfare as we know it," but it might be the beginning of the end. At the very least, it is the beginning of new ways of thinking about this problem—thinking seriously about the moral as well as the economic dimensions of welfare.

While we are thinking about welfare in moral terms, we might consider remoralizing our rhetoric as well. We might start by eliminating the euphemisms that obfuscate our thinking and distort our policies. "Welfare" itself is a euphemism for relief. It implies that relief necessarily contributes to welfare, in the sense of well-being. In fact, as we have painfully discovered, relief is by no means a warrant of well-being whether of the recipient of

relief or of society at large. The word welfare also has the disadvantage of being associated with the welfare state, as if only the state can be the instrument of the well-being of its citizens.

Other euphemisms, which we could happily do without, are "sexually active" for promiscuous, "delinquency" for juvenile criminality, "nonmarital childbearing" and "alternate mode of parenting" for illegitimacy, and a host of others designed to create a "value-free" language.

This nonjudgmental, nonmoralistic language is based on the assumption that there are no moral problems; there are only economic, racial, and political ones. Because society is presumed to be responsible for all social problems, the recipients of relief, the putative victims of society, have a moral as well as legal claim upon society. Such language also reflects the prevailing spirit of relativism, which makes it difficult to pass any moral judgments or impose any moral conditions upon anyone, including the recipients of relief. (In fact, this supposedly "neutral" language is not at all neutral. To speak of illegitimacy as an alternative mode of parenting is to legitimize illegitimacy, morally as well as legally.)

Our society is now confronting the consequences of this kind of moral relativism. Having made the most valiant attempt to objectify the problems of poverty, to see them as the product of impersonal economic and social forces, we are discovering that the economic and social aspects of these problems are inseparable from the moral and personal ones. And having made the most determined effort to devise policies that are value-free and do not stigmatize the recipients of relief or their lifestyle, we find that these policies imperil both the moral and the material well-being of their intended beneficiaries.

If we can restore the language of morality, reviving such words as illegitimacy and promiscuity, we may also be able to revive such concepts as discipline and self-discipline. Perhaps we may even be able to revive such archaic ideas as virtue and vice. And if we can remoralize social discourse, we may also begin to remoralize social policy.

We are already witnessing the first signs of such a remoralization. The cover of *Newsweek* a year ago was emblazoned with the word "Shame," and below it the subtitle, "How do we bring back

a sense of right and wrong?"[14] To find that on the cover of *Newsweek*, a mainstream publication, may be taken, even by an inveterate pessimist like myself, as the harbinger of a new dispensation.

14. Cover, NEWSWEEK, Feb. 6, 1995.