

HELPING THE DOMESTIC POOR—R. GOODIN & D. SCHMIDTZ
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Suppose we have a proposal: The government should collect taxes from better off citizens and use the proceeds to benefit some badly off, needy citizens.

Should we ever implement any such proposal? If so, under what conditions?

Goodin says his approach is “frankly consequentialistic.” So, we should compare the consequences of implementing the policy, versus the consequences of implementing alternative policies including doing nothing, and see which policy would produce the best consequences. Next question: What is the proper standard for assessing consequences? On what basis do we decide that one outcome is better than another? I don’t think Goodin commits himself on this question. He clearly thinks the goodness of outcomes is closely linked to the quality of life, the well-being that people get in different outcomes.

Goodin suggests that “There are some goals that we can best pursue, and others that we can only pursue, through concerted collective action. Promoting the common good and the collective welfare is, in many respects, among them” (p. 195). Deciding together to pass laws and establish government agencies to implement and enforce the laws is one sort of collective action that Goodin has in mind. We don’t want individuals taking personal responsibility for national defense and the criminal justice system; we want collective provision. Assigning responsibilities (obligations) to individuals is one device that helps in many ways to make people as a whole better off, but it is just a means, not in itself part of the goals we seek to achieve.

A nonconsequentialist might oppose Goodin on the ground that people have rights, which should not be violated, even if such violation would produce a good outcome—even the best possible outcome. Rights trump, or sometimes trump.

Schmidtz does not oppose Goodin as a nonconsequentialist. At least, he does not commit himself on this score, so far as I can see.

He favors internalizing responsibility, and encouraging the internalization of responsibility by each adult. But on p. 95 he states, “what I really favor is whatever helps people to pursue their projects in peaceful and productive ways.” Internalization of responsibility is favored as a means to that goal. One wonders about the quoted phrase. “People’s pursuing their projects” sounds like a conception of human well-being, but why not “people’s *successfully* pursuing their projects”? People’s pursuing their projects and constantly being frustrated does not sound like the good life. For that matter, one might hold that the good life is to be identified not with people’s successfully pursuing any old projects,

however silly or bad, but with people's successfully pursuing worthwhile projects—but then, which are the worthwhile projects? What makes a project worthwhile? One also wonders about the phrase "in peaceful and productive ways." Are peacefulness and productivity helps to success in whatever projects one pursues, or is it rather that peaceful people are those who don't violate other people's rights, and productive people are the self-reliant who don't sponge off others?

I think Schmidtz would say that for his purposes he does not need to specify in fine detail what constitutes the good life. The reason this is so is that the counterproductive responsibility externalizing policies he opposes would dampen the prospects of people's leading good lives on any of a very wide range of conceptions of what good lives are.

Still, I wonder about the phrase "in peaceful and productive ways." My question is: Does Schmidtz hold that it is intrinsically morally fitting that people should be self-reliant, take responsibility for their own welfare in the sense of being disposed "to return value for value to those with whom they interact" (p. 95, footnote). Is it immoral for people to be non-self-reliant, or is being non-self-reliant in and of itself a feature having which intrinsically makes ones life worse for oneself? Or is it rather than being non-self-reliant is not good in itself but rather a very reliable means to making one's life go well for oneself?

We have the idea of a good life, a life that is good for the person who is living it. We also have the idea of a life lived rightly or justly, treating others fairly, according to moral principles. Roughly, we distinguish the good and the right. Now consider the life of a successful Mafia gangster. He violates people's rights, he doesn't live morally or justly. Might he nonetheless have a life that is good in the sense of good for himself? People tend to disagree on this. Some might think violating other people's rights intrinsically makes your life go worse for you; others think these are two separate and independent questions—whether you live in conformity with right and whether you live a life that is good for you.

Back to Schmidtz: He seems to be of the empirical opinion that social-welfare policies always are counterproductive—they seek to achieve goals using means that guarantee the goals can't be achieved. He might be right or wrong on this empirical claim. But suppose that some social scientist proposes a policy of government aid to teenaged mothers, or drug addicts, or the long-term unemployed, or some other category of needy persons, and suppose the social scientist produced evidence the policy would do a lot of good for the recipients of the aid. Based on your reading of Schmidtz, do you think he would respond (a) fine, let's do it, or (b), even if good for recipients, the policy will be unfair to those coerced to give the aid, or (c) in the long run, we know based on the best social science, handouts to the poor cannot make them better off without

making other people even worse off than those we are proposing to help, or (d) even if the proposed policy succeeds in getting resources in the hands of the poor, the fostering of non-self-reliance that goes with getting resources in that way inherently makes the newly resourced poor worse off, or (e) something else?

Goodin flatly denies that being dependent on other people for the assurance that one's needs will be met is inherently bad for a person or inherently immoral or unfair to others. It would be worthwhile to try to pinpoint more exactly the dispositions concerning self-reliance and reciprocity (returning value for value) that Goodin treats as neutral in themselves and sometimes good, sometimes bad in their effects and that Goodin treats as invariably and in their effects, bad in themselves, and perhaps inherently immoral. Are the dispositions and character traits they have in mind the same or different?

Another question: Do private charity and philanthropy tend according to Schmidtz to have the same bad effects on human well-being over the long run as state-run welfare schemes? Or is there something especially that acts as a dampener of well-being, according to Schmidtz, when some people are coerced, forced to help others? On the face of it, one might think that if government unemployment benefits that provide me months and months of relief when I lose my job tend to induce non-self-reliance, private charity that does the same would tend to sap the self-reliance of the aid recipients in the same way. But maybe appearances are deceiving here.

A standing offer to provide a benefit to someone who falls into a certain disadvantaged condition might do harm by acting as an incentive to people to bring it about that they exhibit the disadvantage so they can qualify for the benefit. One might then wonder if certain kinds of offers are more likely than others to do harm in this way. For example, some disadvantaged conditions, such as contracting an illness that is not much affected by one's behavior or lifestyle, or perhaps becoming old, are disadvantages that tend to fall on people in ways that are not much mediated by their voluntary choices.

In thinking through the likely effects of government policies providing aid on the character traits and future behavior of the recipients, one should consider a range of cases. Different scenarios with different features might pose different packages of risks, costs, and benefits for policy planners to take into account. Consider mountain rescues in national parks, to take one example. If one gets lost while hiking, or gets stuck or stormbound climbing a big wall, the park service might offer a rescue. (The rescue service might be accompanied by penalty, if one's behavior that triggered the need for rescue was egregiously reckless or foolish.) One might speculate about the likely effects of such policies, including their likely effects on self-reliance. Compare the circumstances in

which these policies are implemented to the history of mutual benefit societies recounted by Schmidtz.

I am not certain how Schmidtz would view government provision of national defense and police protection. Consider the latter. As matters stand, most of us do not take a great deal of responsibility for our own welfare, so far as protection from crime is concerned. Most of the hard work in this area is left to police, and in most settings, wandering about and transacting with others, most of us simply rely on the presumed fact that the police have done their work in deterring would-be criminals. Absent police, most of us could do a lot more by way of self-protection and by way of joining together with others in posses and vigilante groups to provide for our safety against crime. My guess is that Schmidtz might say these are the exceptions that prove the rule—they exhibit special features, such that internalizing responsibility for one's protection from crime is important, but not of paramount importance, such that government provision of protective services should be opposed. It would be worthwhile to explore this line of thought, and consider other responses Schmidtz might make, following his general orientation.

One possibility: We might distinguish sharply between proposed government policies that benefit all and government policies that help some and hurt some. Schmidtz appeals to the ideal of society as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage. Idealizing slightly (some people, burly types, might be better off with no criminal laws and no enforcement of criminal law norms), one might say the criminal justice system works to make everyone better off compared to the alternative in which government leaves the definition and enforcement of crime to individuals.

A government policy that makes some better off and some worse off might be supported on the ground that, adding up the costs and benefits to the different affected people, according to some function, the total is positive. The simplest function would be utilitarian addition: Sum the effects on a proposed policy on each affected person, compare to alternate policies, choose the policy that it utility maximizing. A utilitarian argument for policy assumes it makes sense to add benefits and burdens across different people—we can assign numbers that have the same meaning expressing my level of happiness that they have expressing yours. Utilitarianism requires cardinal interpersonal well-being comparisons. This means roughly that if a policy helps me and hurts you, in principle we can determine whether it helps me more than you are hurt and to what extent. The utilitarian assumption of cardinal interpersonal comparison is controversial. Without it, utilitarianism is not well-defined and cannot give guidance on policy choice.

Assuming cardinal interpersonal comparisons, there are alternatives to utilitarian aggregation. Consider priority. Priority says that the moral value of getting a benefit (avoiding a loss) for a person is greater, the greater the size of the benefit, and greater, the lower the person's lifetime well-being would be, without this benefit. The prioritarian principle says one ought to choose actions and policies to maximize weighted well-being—well-being weighted to give priority to achieving gains and avoiding losses for those who are badly off, and greater priority, the worse off one is.

To illustrate the difference between utilitarianism and prioritarianism, consider welfare reform as put in place in the late 1990s (phasing out or sharply limiting aid to able-bodied adults). Suppose welfare reform tends to improve the lives of the more competent individuals who are potential welfare recipients, and that the more competent tend to be better off in quality of life. Suppose welfare reform tends to worsen the lives of the less competent potential welfare recipients, and that the less competent tend to be worse off in quality of life. The more competent, with the welfare safety net removed, are better able to find jobs and cope successfully in other ways. The results then of welfare reform might look like this. We compare welfare reform to continuance of welfare state policies.

Effects of Welfare reform in a 20 person society (equal numbers of competent and incompetent)		
	Welfare Reform	Status Quo (No reform)
Well-being of more competent	10 (X 10 people)	8 (X 10 people)
Well-being of less competent	3 (X 10 people)	4 (X 10 people)
Total well-being	130	120

In this stylized example, if welfare reform and the status quo are the only alternatives, and the effects are long-run effects, utilitarianism favors welfare reform. It's easy to see priority might favor the status quo, provided the well-being of the worse off people is given sufficiently greater weight.

Of course, in practice we would not be able to say with certainty, what the consequences even in the short run of any given policy proposal would be, if the policy were adopted. Nor could we directly measure people's well-being or

quality of life. We would be seeking measurable proxies for well-being. Moreover, what in theory constitutes well-being is also controversial.

Someone might deny that even in principle it makes sense to add up gains and losses to different people in the way that the utilitarian and prioritarian types of policy evaluation envisage. What then? Some possible justifications for policies that help some and hurt others no longer are stateable. All one can say is that the policies help some and hurt others.

Schmidtz might be skeptical of interpersonal comparisons of well-being. Some passages suggest he takes this line, but the passages taken as a whole do not seem clearly to involve a commitment on this issue. The norm of his society as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage might be efficiency in the Pareto sense: a state of affairs is unsatisfactory if one can change it by improving someone's position without worsening anyone else's position. When he praises a private ownership system for a tendency to boost prosperity, he might be appealing to this norm.

Another possibility is that he favors prosperity regarded as wealth maximization. This invokes a hypothetical compensation test to determine whether a change that helps some and hurts others is on balance desirable. The hypothetical compensation test says that a change of this sort is desirable if the gainers from the change could hypothetically fully compensate all losers while still remaining gainers. (Example: Suppose a change costs you \$1 and I gain \$2; then I could hypothetically compensate you fully for your loss of a dollar and I would still remain a gainer. Hypothetical compensation then approves the change—whether or not the hypothetical compensation actually occurs.) I should say that this hypothetical compensation test is used as a rough practical policy guide but hardly anyone accepts it as stating a fundamental moral principle.