

Egalitarianism and the Undeserving Poor

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Recently in the US a near-consensus has formed around the idea that it would be desirable to “end welfare as we know it,” in the words of President Bill Clinton.¹ In this context, the term “welfare” does not refer to the entire panoply of welfare state provision including government-sponsored old age pensions, government-provided medical care for the elderly, unemployment benefits for workers who have lost their jobs without being fired for cause, or aid to the disabled. “Welfare” in contemporary debates means “cash, food, or housing assistance to healthy non-aged persons with low incomes.”² In the US, the main policy that qualifies as welfare in this sense is Aid to Families with Dependent Children.³ Although contemporary attacks on welfare are identified with conservative policy analysts such as Charles Murray, in fact dissatisfaction with the policies Murray targets for criticism is widespread among liberal intellectuals. For example, in a sharply critical review essay on Murray’s book *Losing Ground*, Christopher Jencks worries that “the social policies that prevailed from 1964 to 1980 often seemed to reward vice” instead of rewarding virtuous conduct by the poor. The problem as Jencks, following Murray, views it is not easy to repair, because “if you set out to help people who are in trouble, you almost always find that most of them are to some extent responsible for their present troubles. Few victims are completely innocent. Helping those who are not doing their best to help themselves poses extraordinarily difficult moral and

¹This near-consensus includes two ideas: (1) Income assistance to able-bodied adults should be short-term. No able-bodied person should gain subsistence from welfare for a long duration, and no one should gain subsistence from welfare at intervals that over the course of one’s life amount to considerable dependency. (2) Aid to the able-bodied should be given only in exchange for work, for sincere efforts to secure paid employment, or for training efforts that are set so as to promote the self-sufficiency of the recipient. For skeptical observations on the feasibility of centering antipoverty policy on the attempt to increase employment among low-income individuals, see Rebecca Blank, “The employment strategy: public policies to increase work and earnings,” *Confronting Poverty: Prescriptions for Change*, ed. Sheldon Danziger, Gary Sandefur and Daniel Weinberg (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 168–204.

²David Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 5.

³One might suppose that the primary aim of AFDC is to help children. But we could, if we chose, give a lot of aid to children in ways that would not aid their parents (except in so far as parents have a strong interest in their children’s well-being).

political problems.”⁴ David T. Ellwood writes that Murray “is almost certainly correct in stating that welfare does not reflect or reinforce our most basic values. He is also correct in stating that no amount of tinkering with benefit levels or work rules will change that.”⁵

An especially interesting feature of these contemporary debates about the welfare state and how it might be reformed is the emergence of conservative cultural themes in the writings of liberal policy intellectuals. The new consensus proclaims that our policies should be designed to reward the deserving and punish the undeserving. This sort of rhetoric is reminiscent of what liberals formerly were wont to call “blaming the victim.” The question arises whether this switch in the tone of liberal rhetoric is theoretically well motivated. Do plausible theories of distributive justice provide a significant role for notions of individual responsibility and deservingness? In a recent essay Samuel Scheffler has speculated that the theories of justice of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin—flagships in the fleet of philosophical liberalism—might be politically vulnerable insofar as neither theory includes as a fundamental norm of justice the principle that individuals ought to get what they deserve (according to some intuitively plausible conception of desert).⁶ Scheffler’s suggestion is that these liberal theories of justice, lacking any commitment to desert as morally important in its own right rather than just as a possible means to the achievement of other moral goals, thereby render themselves unattractive to the commonsense of ordinary citizens and unlikely to gain their allegiance. If Scheffler is right, the philosophical liberalism of Rawls and Dworkin is deeply at odds with the contemporary efforts by policy advisors to rethink the line between individual and social responsibility in the area of poverty policy.

The message of this essay is that any plausible theory of justice should be hospitable to norms of individual responsibility and deservingness. To claim that “it is economic circumstances rather than individual failure which explains the

⁴Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty, and the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 88. In the passage quoted Jencks is summarizing Charles Murray’s argument rather than speaking in his own voice. But Jencks makes it plain that he thinks that Murray’s moral critique of welfare raises the right issue in the right terms; at most, Jencks quibbles that Murray and other conservative critics exaggerate the character-sapping causal effects of the welfare policies they hate. In the final sentence of his review, Jencks asserts accusingly that the liberal coalition that controlled US social policy from 1964 to 1980 “often rewarded folly and vice, and it never had enough confidence in its own norms of behavior to assert that those who violated these norms deserved whatever sorrows followed.” In this same connection see chapter 6 of *Rethinking Social Policy*. For the locus classicus of contemporary conservative thinking on welfare, see Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). See also Lawrence Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Free Press, 1995); also Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁵Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family*, p. 6. See also Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood, *Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); see esp. chap. 5, “Reducing poverty by replacing welfare.”

⁶Samuel Scheffler, “Responsibility, reactive attitudes, and liberalism in philosophy and politics,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 21 (1992), 299–323. On John Rawls, see *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), ch. 5. On Ronald Dworkin, see “What is equality? Part 2: equality of resources,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 10 (1981), 283–345.

difficulty citizens encounter in finding employment” perpetuates an unrealistic dichotomy.⁷ If there is a conflict between philosophical liberalism and current efforts to improve welfare state policies, this conflict only afflicts versions of philosophical liberalism that have not properly come to grips with this issue.⁸

Moreover, when we think carefully about individual responsibility, we see that the incorporation of this norm into a theory of justice need have no tendency to cause the theory to generate stingy policy prescriptions. This essay concentrates on normative political theory and does not address any issues of policy in detail, but even at this level of abstraction it will become manifest that egalitarianism and responsibility are comrades, not adversaries. Three considerations drive this result: (1) morality and prudence do not dictate that all able-bodied persons should strive to be economically self-supporting, (2) since we are only responsible for doing as well as can reasonably be expected given circumstances beyond our control, even if morality and prudence do dictate that we should strive to be self-supporting, those who fail to satisfy this norm are not likely to be, on average, less deserving than anyone else, and (3) the information available to policy planners precludes tailoring policy to fine-grained assessments of individual deservingness. This essay also discusses whether the rebuttal of the deservingness objection to redistributive transfers provides a paternalistic case for providing transfers in the form of employment opportunities rather than cash.

I. THE DESERVINGNESS OBJECTION TO TRANSFERS

Consider a stylized decision problem. An individual is badly off, and could be helped by redistributive transfer organized coercively by the state. The state could tax better off individuals and redistribute the money to the badly off individual in some form. Aid would help the individual and might affect his behavior in the future for better or worse. The form in which the aid is given may affect the extent to which the individual is aided now and the impact of the aid on his incentives to behave in the future in ways society deems appropriate. Finally, we may imagine that the individual may have become badly off either due to circumstances beyond his power to control or due to contingencies that were influenceable by choices he could have made. To simplify, suppose that the individual might have engaged in an imprudent act in the past, and if he did engage in this act, he suffered a risk of misfortune that reasonably prudent choice on his part could have avoided. (Notice that such imprudent conduct might be either virtuous or nonvirtuous. Virtuous imprudence would consist of imprudent

⁷Desmond King, *Actively Seeking Work? The Politics of Unemployment and Welfare Policy in the United States and Great Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). King is paraphrasing an op-ed piece by M. Abramovitz and F. Piven.

⁸This is also the message of John Roemer, *Theories of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

actions reasonably undertaken from moral motives, including altruism, devotion to a worthy cause, or scrupulous unwillingness to violate one's moral principles.)

Many theories of justice would converge on the judgment that in the generic situation just described, there is good reason, though not necessarily conclusive reason, to favor a policy that calls for a redistributive transfer of resources from better off individuals to the worse off. This will be true of utilitarianism, close relatives of utilitarianism such as weighted utilitarian theories that give priority to achieving gains and avoiding losses of utility for those who are badly off in this respect, resourcist doctrines such as Rawls's injunction to maximin the level of primary social goods, egalitarian theories that hold that it is morally desirable that individuals be equally well off, and others. Details aside, many conceptions of justice will agree that an important aim of justice is to improve the condition of the needy simply in virtue of their neediness.

The contrary response is that being in need does not suffice to render it morally obligatory that your fellow community members should lend you a helping hand.

Here is Thomas Malthus on the personal responsibilities of the indigent:

When the wages of labour are hardly sufficient to maintain two children, a man marries and has five or six; he of course finds himself miserably distressed. He accuses the insufficiency of the price of labour to maintain a family. He accuses his parish for their tardy and sparing fulfillment of their obligation to assist him. He accuses the avarice of the rich, who suffer him to want what they can so well spare. He accuses the partial and unjust institutions of society, which have awarded him an inadequate share of the produce of the earth. He accuses perhaps the dispensations of providence, which have assigned him a place in society so beset with unavoidable distress and dependence. In searching for objects of accusation, he never adverts to the quarter from which his misfortunes originate. The last person that he would think of accusing is himself, on whom in fact the principal blame lies, except so far as he has been deceived by the higher classes of society.⁹

Malthus observes that individuals who are badly off may have become so through their own undeserving conduct. That an individual is blameworthy for his plight does not foreclose the possibility that society is under a duty of humanity to alleviate his condition. But the issue is at least open; some argument is needed. A distributive justice argument for an enforced transfer of resources can be countered by the assertion that the proposed beneficiary of the transfer is at fault.

This appeal to undeservingness can be purely instrumental in character or it can invoke a moral ideal deemed to be valuable for its own sake. For example, in a utilitarian framework, undeserving conduct is understood as conduct whose nature is such that blaming its perpetrator maximizes utility and declining to compensate individuals for the bad consequences that this conduct brings upon

⁹Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on Population*, as cited in Theodore Marmor, Jerry Mashaw and Philip Harvey, *America's Misunderstood Welfare State: Persistent Myths, Enduring Realities* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 24.

themselves maximizes utility. On this view, the notions of deserving and undeserving and the practices of holding (1) individuals to be blameworthy or not for their conduct, and (2) the condition that results from their conduct to be compensable or not are instruments to be manipulated so as to maximize utility.

In contrast, deservingness matters for its own sake if helping the undeserving (and failing to help the deserving) is deemed intrinsically unfair quite apart from its further consequences.

Murray explicitly appeals to deservingness for its own sake, not merely as a tool to achieve other ends. He imagines a choice between two healthy non-aged individuals who might be candidates for transfer aid. One is a worker who has been working steadily for many years and is now out of work on account of a plant closing. He is unlucky, we might say, to explain our sympathy for the plight of this laid-off worker and our willingness to help him out via a mechanism such as unemployment benefits. In contrast, “a second man, healthy and in the prime of life, refuses to work. I offer him a job, and he still refuses to work.”¹⁰ Of the choice to aid the drone (Murray’s term) or the laid-off worker, Murray observes that even if funds were available to aid both, it would be wrong to confer a similar level of benefits on the less deserving and on the more deserving individuals. Indeed, even if lavishing benefits on the less deserving individual somehow does not lessen the amount that can be made available to the more deserving even in the long run, still, fair is fair. Murray offers the opinion that “it is not humane to the laid-off worker to treat him the same as the drone. It is not just to accord the drone the respect the laid-off worker has earned.”¹¹

II. FINE-GRAINED DESERVINGNESS

Murray is making up an example to illustrate a point, so he is free to stipulate that the person he calls the “drone” is less deserving than the laid-off worker. But it should be noted that the information he gives is insufficient for this judgment. Any theory of deservingness includes two aspects. One is a standard of conduct, an account of what we morally and prudently ought to do. The second aspect is an account of responsibility. This account specifies to what extent one is properly subject to praise or blame, reward or punishment, for conforming to the given standard or failing to do so. Taking it as given that Murray’s laid-off worker fulfills the relevant standard of conduct and the drone does not, we do not yet know enough to know who is more deserving. For all that we have been told, the laid-off worker might be blessed by circumstances that make it easy for him to conform to the norm, whereas the drone’s circumstances make conformity

¹⁰Murray, *Losing Ground*, p. 197.

¹¹*ibid.*, p. 198. Murray acknowledges that at the level of policy formation, it may be unfeasible to devise practices that will discriminate the truly deserving from the undeserving among those who are potential recipients of government transfers. But, in principle, Murray supposes we can all agree, we ought to vary our treatment of people according to what they deserve.

difficult. We might on balance judge that Murray's drone is the more deserving of the pair, even if we were to agree with Murray that being self-supporting is a paramount moral requirement.¹²

The degree to which one can reasonably hold someone truly responsible for conforming to a given standard of conduct depends on the difficulty and personal cost of conformity. We reasonably hold people responsible at most for doing the best they can with the cards that fate has dealt them. I say "at most" because the circumstances of an individual's life that are set beyond her power to control may be so discouraging as to render failure to make a steady good effort excusable.

Favorable or unfavorable genetic inheritance and early childhood socialization experiences crucially affect any adult individual's ability to make sensible choices and implement them. But these matters of genetic and social inheritance are entirely beyond one's power to control, and hence not matters for which one could be held personally responsible. This means that responsibility for voluntary choices and actions and individual values and goals is problematic. Even if we have freedom of the will, empirical helps and hindrances to exercising it virtuously fall randomly in different amounts on different persons. Discovering good values, making sensible choices, and putting one's choices into action will be variably easy and costly for individuals depending on their choice-making and choice-following abilities as fixed by genetic and social inheritance. Given a valid standard of conduct that applies to a group of persons, the degree to which each should be held accountable for failure to comply and given credit for successful conformity to the standard varies from person to person.

Let us say that a coarse-grained measure of deservingness posits a standard of conduct for everyone and rates each person as more or less deserving depending on the degree to which each conforms to the standard. A fine-grained measure of deservingness adjusts individual's performance scores according to the circumstances and abilities of each individual that render it more or less difficult and costly to perform well. But once the distinction between fine-grained and coarse-grained measures is before the mind, it is clear that the coarse-grained account cannot be the proper measure of the true deservingness of an individual that is invoked when it is proposed that proportioning good fortune to deservingness would be morally desirable for its own sake, not just as a means to some further morally desirable goals.

Moreover, even though many factors determine the distribution of poverty, on the average we would expect that impoverished members of society tend to be cursed with choice-making and choice-following deficits, so even if their degree of conformity to accepted standards of conduct is less than average, one cannot infer that their deservingness, all things considered, is less than average.

The proponent and the critic of redistribution may disagree about the empirical issue to what extent individuals should register as deserving or

¹²Rawls makes a similar observation in *A Theory of Justice*, p. 312.

undeserving on a fine-grained approach, and these empirical issues may for practical purposes be intractable, given the difficulty of disentangling the factors in the causation of the pertinent behavior. Disagreement about what are the standards of conduct, conformity to which renders persons variously deserving, is ubiquitous, but for the most part unlikely to be a significant element in disagreements concerning the morality of redistribution. This is so because in the context of proposals to aid the needy, all sides to controversies about redistribution tend to agree that the relevant standard of conduct that is in question is prudence (within the limits of the law). An important exception is the idea that there is a moral obligation to be self-supporting if one can, which the poor are alleged to violate. If this particular moralism can be rebutted, it turns out that controversy about deservingness and responsibility becomes peripheral to debates about redistribution. After all, if the disagreement comes down to disagreement over facts, and available evidence does not enable us to settle these issues, then we should all become agnostic about these factual matters, which is to say, we should all agree. Of course fundamental normative principles may lead to conflicting conclusions about redistribution. Conservatives may embrace libertarian theories of rights and entitlements which liberals and radicals reject. But these issues are not properly posed as a debate about the role of conceptions of individual responsibility and deservingness within conflicting theories of justice. The moral differences lie elsewhere.¹³

III. FAIR WELFARE MAXIMIZING

To focus discussion I will set forth a plain and simple set of principles of distributive justice that would tend to favor redistributive transfers in the generic situation and that are also responsive to considerations of deservingness. These principles assess policies and actions according to their consequences. The consequentialism I shall assume is welfarist, egalitarian, and responsive to deservingness. Welfarist consequentialism holds that the goal that morality bids us to pursue is the maximization of some function of individual human welfare or well-being. Individual human well-being is the good, and the aim set by morality

¹³A qualification must be added. Murray's position might be construed as holding not merely that it is better, other things being equal, to gain benefits for the more rather than the less deserving, but that it is bad to gain benefits for people above the level that they deserve. The Fair Welfare Maximizing norm described below does not support the latter, noncomparative principle of rewarding the deserving.

is the maximization of some function of human good. Egalitarianism holds that the moral value of achieving a one-unit gain of well-being for an individual is greater, the lower the individual's well-being level is prior to gaining this increment.¹⁴ Desert responsiveness holds that the moral value of achieving a one-unit gain of well-being is greater, the greater the individual's level of deservingness.¹⁵ This version of consequentialism then instructs us to maximize a function of human welfare that gives priority to well-being gains for the badly off and the deserving. We are to maximize human well-being weighted by consideration for egalitarianism and deservingness. (Prior to the assignment of precise weights, only a family of views, not a determinate principle, has been specified.) Identifying these as fairness norms, I call this version of consequentialism Fair Welfare Maximizing.

The statement of Fair Welfare Maximizing assumes that, in principle, one can make cardinal interpersonal comparisons of well-being and deservingness. Even if this assumption is granted, in practice the information required for well-being and deservingness measurement will often be unavailable, or obtainable only at excessive cost in terms of Fair Welfare Maximizing values. The policies we ought to choose will usually be designed to achieve increases in some measureable proxies for the goals, progress towards which we cannot directly measure. If the best proxy measures are too unreliable and uncertain, their use can become counterproductive, and what morality requires is uncertain. Deservingness may be especially liable to shift to an epistemic status that renders it irrelevant to policy formation. If we cannot know whether people are deserving we cannot reasonably reward them for it.

“Well-being” and “deservingness” are place-holders for whatever conceptions of these values prove most acceptable. Regarding well-being, few would disagree that the question which of the available means to one's goals would most effectively advance their fulfillment has a correct answer which is independent of people's opinions on this matter. I shall take it for granted that an individual's choice of basic goals can also be correct or incorrect. Theories of well-being give various accounts of how this is so.¹⁶ My own inclination is toward a mixed view, according to which a person's life goes better the more her important basic

¹⁴Nothing in Fair Welfare Maximizing limits the scope of morally desirable redistribution within national boundaries. This means that strictly speaking, in a world in which poor people in rich societies are not poor relative to the entire population of the earth, the focus on the moral merits of redistribution within a single rich nation is misplaced. When policy choices pose conflicts of interest among various levels of better and worse off individuals across the globe, egalitarian theories of justice will tilt in favor of the globally worse off.

¹⁵The desert responsiveness view stated in the text is too crude. If Smith is more deserving than Jones, but the ratio of Smith's deservingness level to her well-being (good fortune) level is higher than Jones's, it will be more urgent on grounds of deservingness to achieve gains of welfare for Jones than for Smith. I will not try to state a more accurate view here; this is a topic for another occasion.

¹⁶For an “Objective List” account of human welfare, see Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and for a rational informed desire account, see Richard Brandt, *The Theory of the Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); also Peter Railton, “Facts and values,” *Philosophical Topics*, 14 (1986), 5–31.

preferences are satisfied, the value of the satisfaction of a preference varying with the extent to which it could withstand ideally extended rational deliberation with full information. A preference for a thing is basic when it is preferred for its own sake, rather than as a means to further goals. To say that an individual prefers X over Y is to say that she desires X over Y when confronted with a choice between them and that she judges X to be more valuable for her than Y. The view is mixed in that the notion of a preference combines desire and judgment. In what follows I make use only of the idea that in the domain of well-being, thinking does not make it so: An individual's judgment, even her considered judgment, of her own good might be incorrect.

IV. REAGAN AND MILL ON PERVERSE INCENTIVES

A popular suspicion is that to help the needy by institutional measures on which the needy can rely is counterproductive, because in the long run the assurance of aid will cause the numbers of the needy to increase. President Ronald Reagan gave voice to this concern in his characteristically simple and persuasive style: "In 1964 the famous War on Poverty was declared and a funny thing happened. Poverty, as measured by dependency, stopped shrinking and then actually began to grow worse. I guess you could say poverty won the war."¹⁷ Writing a century and a half ago, J. S. Mill worries in a similar spirit about "cases in which the tender of help perpetuates the state of things which renders help necessary." Mill continues: "[I]n all cases of helping, there are two sets of consequences to be considered; the consequences of the assistance, and the consequences of relying on the assistance. The former are generally beneficial, but the latter, for the most part, injurious; so much so, in many cases, as greatly to outweigh the value of the benefit."¹⁸ If Smith lacks the means of subsistence, providing them helps Smith now, which is good, but may encourage Smith to be imprudent in the future, in the confident expectation that his subsistence is secure in any case. Moreover, helping Smith in this way may encourage other observing individuals to take less prudent care for their future well-being than they would otherwise take if the state did not supply a guarantee of subsistence to the destitute. In fact, the standing offer of aid by the state should affect individuals' calculations as to what level of risk it is prudent to bear, and may increase the incidence of prudent conduct that leads to a condition of poverty and a reliance by the individual on state-supplied subsistence. The considerations that Mill is raising are relevant to other areas of state policy besides welfare provision—for example, bankruptcy law. As Mill recognizes, whether or not the relationship that troubles him

¹⁷A 1986 radio address by President Ronald Reagan, cited in King, *Actively Seeking Work*, p. 183. By "dependency" Reagan appears to be referring to the number of people who fall below the poverty line if the calculation subtracts government transfers from their income.

¹⁸John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), bk V, ch. 11, sec. 13, at p. 960.

actually holds is an empirical question. It could after all be the case that the state provision of a generous safety net encourages economic agents to be bolder and more adventurous in their economic plans, and to make career and investment decisions that on the average improve the productivity of the economy and the flourishing of the individuals within it, even though some agents fall into the safety net.¹⁹ For example, individuals might be more willing to move to a distant region of the country where their skills are reported to be in demand, if they know that if the expected jobs fail to materialize, they will not become destitute. In this case the general reliance by economic agents on the security net would be socially advantageous, all things considered. Mill's empirical hunch is that a generous safety net will act as a magnet, drawing too many agents to itself over time. Hence he proposes this norm: "if assistance is given in such a manner that the condition of the person helped is as desirable as that of the person who succeeds in doing the same thing without help, the assistance, if capable of being previously counted on, is mischievous: but if, while available to everybody, it leaves to every one a strong motive to do without it if he can, it is then for the most part beneficial."²⁰

Let us call this norm the Lesser Eligibility Principle. It holds that welfare provision should be set so that for each person, the condition she reaches when taking state relief is less attractive to her than the least attractive paid employment or self-employment opportunity that is available to her, so that she has no incentive to choose a condition of dependency on state aid over a condition of self-sufficiency. Mill supposes that this principle is that of the Poor Law of 1834, which was deliberately punitive and stingy in the provision of aid to the needy able-bodied. But in fact Mill's Lesser Eligibility is compatible with a generous provision of cash to the able-bodied working-aged unemployed impoverished members of society. To satisfy Lesser Eligibility when welfare relief is generous and the least attractive private sector jobs pay little and offer bleak working conditions, what is required is that the cash subsidy given to the unemployed should be supplemented by cash subsidies to the working poor, the system of subsidies being set so that the state aid gradually tapers off as the individual's income from wages increases. On its face, then, the Lesser Eligibility Principle proposed by Mill does not set an obvious upper bound on aid to the unemployed able-bodied poor.

Like Reagan, Mill supposes that self-sufficiency is desirable and being dependent on the help of others for one's well-being should be avoided. What ethical judgments and empirical hunches underlie this assumption?

¹⁹A. B. Atkinson, *The Economics of the Welfare State* (Memphis: P. K. Seidman Foundation, 1995), p. 3.

²⁰Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, p. 961.

V. THE ALLEGED MORAL OBLIGATION TO BE SELF-SUPPORTING

Why might spurning paid activity be immoral or render one undeserving? Perhaps the simplest answer would be that each able-bodied non-aged adult is morally obligated to be economically self-supporting (without violating the law). If one lacks the ability or opportunity to fulfill this obligation, one's nonfulfillment is excused. If such an obligation can be shown to exist, this immediately would explain why assistance to the able-bodied non-aged poor should be offered only in the form of opportunities to work (or engage in paying self-employment) and never in the form of cash income supplements or the equivalent. The explanation would be that if each is obligated to be self-supporting (provided that she can be), the society should adapt its aid to helping the poor individual to satisfy this obligation. Or at least, this would be so if one holds that if one is under an obligation he is unable to meet, it is better to help the individual to fulfill the obligation rather than merely to provide the individual a good excuse for nonfulfillment. (Another way to make this point would be to say that if individuals lack opportunities to work and the government gives them an income instead of providing opportunities to work, some of those aided by cash might be disposed not to take work opportunities if they were offered. But if there is an obligation to earn one's livelihood if one can, this disposition to spurn work would render these individuals morally undeserving of aid. The quality of their will as imagined is deficient.) At the same time, if one accepts that each individual is under an obligation to be self-supporting, then if individuals are able to support themselves but choose not to do so, society's obligation to fill in the breach by providing support may diminish or disappear altogether.

The moral norm that one should be self-supporting can be interpreted in two quite different ways. To see the two interpretations, consider a person who never works but gains his livelihood from interest payments generated by his inherited wealth or a person who never works but gets his livelihood in the form of steady cash gifts from his generous and affluent grandmother. Does the coupon-clipper or the sponger violate the norm of self-sufficiency? One might interpret the norm as the injunction against gaining one's livelihood by becoming impoverished and begging from strangers or private associations or by accepting transfers from the state. According to the alternative construal, the norm requires that one must earn one's own livelihood by paid labor or active self-employment. (John Stuart Mill accepts the primacy of labor version of the norm of economic self-sufficiency when he writes, "I do not accept as either just or salutary, a state of society in which there is any 'class' which is not labouring.")²¹ Once the two versions of self-sufficiency are distinguished, it seems to me that neither version sounds very plausible, not at least if construed as a fundamental moral principle.

²¹ibid., bk IV, ch. 7, sec. 1, p. 758.

One possible argument in favor of self-sufficiency construed as the obligation not to become destitute and throw oneself on the mercy of strangers is that willfully becoming destitute harms the strangers, at least if they will be bound by morality or by law to make sacrifices so as to eliminate the destitution. If a social safety net is in place, and one either willfully throws oneself on the net or negligently or recklessly engages in conduct that unreasonably risks a fall into the net, one is thereby wrongfully harming the taxpayers who pay for the maintenance of the net.

But an individual who chooses unemployment may be making the best of a set of bad options in a situation in which society has the obligation to improve his option set, his set of life prospects. If the individual's labor market options are sufficiently bleak, and the person's unemployment options include any that are by comparison attractive, a prudent choice of unemployment would not gainsay the obligation of society to ease the individual's plight. (To anticipate the terminology of a later section of this essay, the willfully unemployed person might be a needy bohemian.)

According to an egalitarian doctrine such as Fair Welfare Maximizing, if all of the able-bodied are among the better off members of society, then they might well have obligations to aid the less well off, all of whom would be non-able-bodied. Failure to support oneself by work when one can would appear to be a gross violation of one's duty to help the worse off non-able-bodied. But if the non-able-bodied are few in number, as seems likely, then some able-bodied persons will fall within the class of badly off persons who will constitute the appropriate beneficiaries of transfer policies. To make further progress with this issue, it would be necessary to clarify this notion of the "able-bodied." So long as the able-bodied include some of the badly off members of society, the self-sufficiency norm appears to be unacceptable.

The norm of self-sufficiency in its primacy of labor version might still be morally acceptable, so far as my arguments are concerned, provided the norm is restricted in its application to the class of better off individuals.²² It is not to my purpose to try to settle this issue. But in its application to badly off individuals, the injunction that one is morally obligated to others to make good-faith efforts to earn one's livelihood by paid work seems perverse. If some individuals face grim life prospects, and would be even worse off if they remained steadfastly attached to the labor market, why should any liberal egalitarian doctrine require this attachment? What obligation to the better off would spurning work in these

²²Reference to the "better off" and "worse off" in this context is loose talk. For Fair Welfare Maximizing, the moral urgency of obtaining a benefit for a person does not directly depend on how well off she is as compared with others, but on how well off or badly off she is in absolute terms. For a maximin principle such as Rawls's difference principle, the badly off are those individuals who are worst off in terms of their shares of primary social goods other than basic liberties. I count as "egalitarian" any principles of distributive justice that directly or indirectly give priority to helping those—among those who are below the average level of advantage (however "advantage" is defined by the principle under review)—who are worse off than others.

circumstances plausibly be thought to violate? (Here I am assuming that the badly off are in this condition by unchosen circumstances, not by their own voluntary choice.)

VI. RECIPROCITY

Perhaps the basic moral intuition that underlies Murray's revulsion against a system of welfare-state transfers is that those who benefit as members of society but decline to make good-faith efforts to be self-supporting violate a basic norm of reciprocity. Society has lavished benefits on each individual who survives to adulthood, after all, only because older members of society have cooperated to make this possible. To work is to reciprocate the benefit. Or if one is poor and society offers some form of aid, willingness to work at paid labor in order to eliminate or reduce one's needy condition is appropriate reciprocity.

The norm of reciprocity in its simplest form holds that one should return good for good and evil for evil. One interpretation of the norm is that favors should be repaid in the same currency, at the same level of value, so if I invite you to dinner, you reciprocate by inviting me to dinner, and if I serve you fish, you serve me fish or an "equivalent." Leaving aside the problem of how to determine what counts as equivalent value in acts of reciprocity, I note that in this guise the norm of reciprocity would seem incompatible with the transfers of benefit that are at the heart of egalitarian principle. If I am badly off and society, committed to egalitarianism, offers me benefits, the thought that I must reciprocate and pay back society for these benefits would seem to defeat the point of the transfer. The point is to make me better off, and if I reciprocate, then I am no better off (in the currency in which reciprocity duties are calculated) than I was before the transfer.

The norm "Do unto others as they do unto you" might be interpreted as requiring that one should repay individuals according to the actual effects (or perhaps the reasonably expectable effects) of their behavior on one's well-being. This would mean that if each of several individuals intends to benefit one and works equally hard to this end, one should repay each individual according to the actual pay-off one gets from her behavior that impinges on one's prospects. This would imply that, other things being equal, one owes more according to the reciprocity norm to those who are talented and produce more benefit to oneself per unit of expended effort, and also more to those who are lucky and produce much benefit with little effort. This also implies that one who intends injury but generates benefit for others by mistake is owed reciprocating benefits by those others.

Clearly the requirement that the benefit one gives back is equivalent to the benefit one gets is too strong as it stands. If Smith at small cost confers a large benefit on me, and the only way I can pay Smith back is by incurring a very large cost, reciprocity plausibly construed does not demand the repayment. Perhaps the requirement is that if Smith confers a benefit on me, incurring a certain cost in

doing so, my reciprocity obligation is to confer a similar amount of benefit on Smith when I can do so at a cost to myself similar to the level of Smith's cost. But this seems implausible. Someone who confers slight benefit on me at huge cost to himself does not plausibly trigger an obligation on my part to pay him back a comparable benefit at comparable huge cost.

Perhaps a looser interpretation of reciprocity would render the norm more plausible. Perhaps I am to reciprocate favors received by returning the favor by an act that involves just as much sacrifice on my part as the sacrifice that the initial favor cost its giver. But is effortless reciprocity that is not experienced as a sacrifice nonreciprocity or rather gracious and cheerful reciprocity? Another thought is that reciprocity might be general: a passing motorist stops to help me when my car is broken down on a deserted roadway late at night; I reciprocate not by doing a favor for that Good Samaritan but by being a Good Samaritan myself when an occasion arises to benefit some other stranger in need. But suppose such occasions do not arise? A weaker notion would be dispositional reciprocity: If you do me a favor in certain circumstances, I reciprocate by disposing myself to return the favor (to you or to a generalized substitute for you) should the tables be turned and I find myself in relevantly similar circumstances in the position of the potential aid-giver. This seems to me the most appropriate form of reciprocity: In a just society we are all disposed to act in conformity to the same principles, which might imply that you should aid me continuously, or that I should aid you continuously, but no matter. We are all disposed to behave in conformity to the same appropriate principles.

But in this weak dispositional sense of reciprocity I, as able-bodied recipient of aid to the needy even though I am willfully unemployed, might be fully disposed to act in conformity with these principles of justice that determined that I should get this dole. My conformity to the reciprocity norm is determined not by what actually happens, for the norms of justice we all subscribe to might never demand my sacrificing for others, but by what I would have done in counterfactual scenarios in which I were better off and you were the needy willfully unemployed person.

This line of thought leads to the conclusion that one cannot show that principles of justice do not dictate obligations on the part of advantaged members of society to give aid to disadvantaged members of society who happen to be willfully unemployed by invoking an ideal of reciprocity which the willfully unemployed are flouting. Reciprocity is in a sense a formal notion. It does not determine what the principles of justice are, to which aid-givers and aid-recipients alike should be loyal. If justice demands no aid to the disadvantaged willfully unemployed, then it would violate reciprocity for me to demand a handout in violation of what justice demands. But this does not advance the discussion of what justice demands. The appeal to reciprocity therefore seems to me to be a red herring.

VII. WORK AND STATUS INEQUALITIES

One important and obvious determinant of the quality of a job is how it compares with other jobs. A “good” job is one that offers a more attractive sum of benefits and burdens than most other jobs, or than most other jobs in some salient comparison class. Part of the benefit a jobholder derives from a good job is the awareness that most others (in a salient comparison class) have worse jobs. If our economy were transformed so that Ivy League professors, lawyers at fancy Wall Street firms, heart surgeons and nuclear scientists became those with the least attractive and interesting jobs, their jobs would thereby become much worse, even though their work activities, pay, conditions of work and other benefits remained exactly as they are now.²³ As matters stand, these jobs confer high status and satisfy the preference to do better than others. To a large extent the status hierarchies of work are local, but local hierarchies are also connected and nested; the man who has a “good job” working the cash register at a gas station knows full well that scare quotes are needed to describe the job as “good.”

This means that those who fill the bottom rungs in status hierarchies are performing a service for the benefit of those who occupy the top rungs. Higher rungs require lower rungs; if there is a top, there is a bottom. This is not a service that those whose skills and habits place them as the least qualified members of the work force perform gladly, and for some the status inequalities of work are more galling than for others. The individual who performs a menial job may be a college student on her way to bigger and better things, or a hard-working immigrant confident that she will be able to use this job to advance in the world. To others, the menial job registers the considered judgment of the labor market on the value and promise of their labor. The job is a badge of inferiority.

Writing in the 1960s about the streetcorner society of African American males, Elliot Liebow observes that “the streetcorner man puts no lower value on the job than does the larger society around him.” He continues: The jobs available to the streetcorner man “are at the bottom of the employment ladder in every respect . . . The rest of society (whatever its ideal values regarding the dignity of labor) holds the job of the dishwasher or janitor or unskilled laborer in low esteem if not outright contempt. So does the streetcorner man. He cannot do otherwise. He cannot draw from a job those social values which other people do not put into it.”²⁴ Individuals differ in their willingness to wear the badge of inferiority that is associated with employment in a dead-end job.

Not surprisingly, aversion to bottom-of-the-barrel-employment has been interpreted in a positive light, as a mark of good character, an aversion to meritocratic status hierarchy. Michael Walzer has suggested the view that it is a

²³See Robert Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

²⁴Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), pp. 57 and 58–9 respectively.

sign of the success of a contemporary welfare state that its beneficiaries develop increased self-respect and are unwilling to take available menial jobs that are below some minimal level of dignity.²⁵ At the very least we might say that individuals with a poor endowment of job skills and traits will vary in the extent to which they experience workplace status inequality as a source of distress, and that it is excusable that individuals who are especially sensitive on this score may shun paid employment of the type they reasonably believe they can find.

The distribution of status from work is a factor that partly determines both the “work ethic” standard of conduct that should apply to badly off individuals and also any given individual’s degree of responsibility for meeting or failing to meet the standard.

VIII. FROM THE GENERIC CASE TO WELFARE

To this point this essay has defended the generic case for transfers against the objection from deservingness. The pieces of this argument may appear not to fit together smoothly, so a summary is in order. I argue:

1. An account of what people deserve includes two components, a standard of conduct and a norm that determines to what extent any given individual is rightly held responsible for meeting or failing to meet the standard.

2. In the context of considering the justification of government programs that transfer resources to the needy, the pertinent standard of conduct is prudence within the limits of the law and ordinary moral constraints. The standard of conduct in its application to the needy does not include fulfillment of the alleged moral obligation to make good-faith efforts to be economically self-supporting. There is no such obligation. In particular, no plausible norm of reciprocity entails such an obligation.

3. Although prudent conduct for most persons in market economies requires that one make good-faith efforts to be economically self-supporting, this requirement may not apply to all untalented and poor individuals whose access to paid employment is limited to extremely low-wage, low-skill jobs that confer low social status.

4. Even on the assumption that each able-bodied person is morally obligated to make good-faith efforts to be economically self-supporting, and given that some able-bodied poor persons fail to fulfill this obligation, such failure may not render them undeserving of aid in the form of government transfer programs. The issue of responsibility remains open. The same is true if it is assumed that individuals should be prudent, that it is prudent to make good-faith efforts to be economically self-supporting, and that some able-bodied poor persons fail to meet this requirement of prudence.

²⁵Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), at pp. 166–7.

5. The extent to which one is reasonably held responsible (liable to praise or blame, reward or punishment) for conforming or failing to conform to moral and prudential requirements depends on how difficult and costly it is to conform.

6. Individuals vary in their abilities to engage in complex reasoning that has a bearing on what it is most reasonable to choose and to carry through the choices that they make. Making sensible choices and putting them into action is easy for some, difficult for others, and pleasant for some, painful for others. Favorable and unfavorable external circumstances can also conspire to render making and implementing good choices easy and pleasant for some, difficult and painful for others. The extent to which it is reasonable to hold people responsible for their moral and prudential failures varies with the degree to which it would have been difficult and painful or easy and pleasant to have avoided these failures. On the whole and on the average, individuals with poor prospects for well-being over the course of their lives (the truly disadvantaged, we might say) have lesser choice-making and choice-following abilities than others. And on the whole and on the average, impoverished people have poor prospects for well-being.

7. The rebuttal of the deservingness objection against transfers boils down to these claims: The net benefits from steady efforts to seek and hold paid employment are uncertain and questionable for untalented able-bodied individuals, so the prudential case for putting forth such steady efforts is not compelling for some members of this class. Moreover, if prudence does not require such people to seek employment, morality does not require this course either. Even if prudence or morality does require efforts to be self-supporting, the extent to which one is blameworthy for failing to make the efforts depends on the difficulty and cost of doing so, and the difficulty and cost tend to be greater for impoverished and untalented persons. In short, even if some of these people are failing to conform to reasonable standards, it may well be unreasonable to blame them for failure to comply.²⁶

This line of argument does not deny that able-bodied individuals with low stocks of personal and material resources have capacities of rational agency. The argument claims that these people labor under special obstacles that render it more difficult for them to meet reasonable standards. These obstacles give rise to a general excusing condition, not a denial that the conditions necessary for responsible agency are in place. If I am severely demented, I lack the capacity to “own” my actions, so cannot be given credit for nice behavior any more than I can be blamed for nasty behavior. In contrast, if I am impoverished and

²⁶These claims echo the two-pronged argument that Kristin Luker advances to mitigate adverse judgment on poor teenaged women who have children. She argues, on the one hand, that these women may well be behaving reasonably and prudently, making the best of their grim circumstances, and on the other hand, that even if these women are to some extent behaving badly, their conduct is revealed to be excusable when one attends carefully to the obstacles that hinder them from behaving well. See Luker, *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996, chs 5–6).

untalented, these conditions are hurdles rendering good conduct harder, so if I fail to behave badly I am less to blame than someone who behaves similarly badly without facing similar hurdles and if I behave well I deserve more credit than someone who behaves the same but did not need to overcome comparable hurdles.

The situation is complicated by a pervasive and unavoidable paucity of information about who faces exactly what obstacles and hurdles. Among the class of able-bodied impoverished persons with weak labor force attachment, some are obligated by morality or prudence to make good-faith efforts to be self-supporting, and some comply with these norms and some do not, and of those that do not, some are genuinely blameworthy and the lapses of some are excusable or even, given their circumstances, constitute admirable conduct. But the subgroups are not readily distinguishable, even to close observers such as work-mates, family and friends—even the individuals themselves. Needless to say, the information that sorts individuals into these subgroups, if not available to intimate observers, is not available to bureaucrats administering state policies.

The rebuttal of the deservingness objection against transfers does not unequivocally support transfers. Suppose you say that Arneson is not to be blamed for his failure to make good-faith efforts to be self-supporting because, even though this course of action is required by prudence and morality, Arneson lacks the personal traits that make it sufficiently easy to do the right thing that doing the wrong thing reasonably elicits a blaming response. The excuse you are offering to rebut the claim that Arneson does not deserve aid because he is undeserving simultaneously undermines the positive case for aid. If Arneson lacks the skills and character traits needed for prudent conduct, why suppose that bestowing resources on him will make his life better as opposed to giving him the opportunity to be imprudent on a grander scale? If Arneson is going to spend his welfare check on beer and cigarettes, he might be better off with less money. The rebuttal of the conservatism of stinginess raises the spectre of the conservatism of paternalism. The former would deny resources to the poor because they are blameworthy and deserve a miserable life. The latter would deny resources to the poor for their own good.

The Reagan–Mill argument previously mentioned proposes that even though getting transfer aid is beneficial to the poor person, coming to rely on the aid may be disadvantageous to her, and this disadvantage may outweigh the benefit. (This argument does not rely on any claim to the effect that the poor are undeserving, so it obviously is untouched by the defeat of that claim.) The twist just added is that perhaps getting transfer aid is itself disadvantageous to some poor people who predictably will not use the aid wisely. But this paternalist argument is unconvincing on its face, because in dealing with poverty a society is not confined to the choice of providing unrestricted resources to individuals or doing nothing for them. A third alternative is the provision of resources in a restricted form, which makes unwise use of the transfer aid more difficult and less likely. Under

the section below on “Job Opportunities and Quasipaternalism” this alternative is further explored.

The Reagan–Mill concern about perverse incentives challenges the advocate of transfers to design policies that achieve long-run benefits to the poor—for example, by meeting the Lesser Eligibility standard. Notice also that the extent to which this concern tells against welfare-state policies depends on the specific egalitarian goals that are being pursued, and in particular, the degree to which one believes that it is more important to achieve gains for those whose condition is extremely bad than for those whose condition is less bad. If one eliminates benefits in the hope of encouraging individuals to put forth self-supporting behavior, predictably people’s abilities to put forth effective coping behavior will vary with their condition, so that a “get-tough” policy might help the moderately disadvantaged but be disastrous for the most destitute.

The heterogeneity of the class of individuals affected by welfare state policies has further consequences. It also defeats any simple inference from the generic case for transfers to specific welfare state redistributive policies. Since policies cannot be tailored to individual characteristics, the class of people singled out for aid by a given policy will not be exactly the set of people who would most benefit from that type of aid, and may include some individuals whom we would not wish to benefit at all.

IX. THE NON-NEEDY BOHEMIAN ARGUMENT

A small cash income is not a perfectly reliable indicator that one’s life is not going well. A talented mendicant friar may report a small income, but be leading exactly the life that he most wishes to lead, one that involves the satisfaction of his most important preferences, where his preferences seem to be reasonable ones that would withstand critical scrutiny with full information. If well-being to a first approximation is flourishing in a way of life that is choiceworthy in the sense that it could withstand informed deliberative scrutiny, then income is at best only a very rough proxy indicator of well-being. Some persons with low incomes will be talented individuals leading rich and satisfying lives, who happen to have aims and values such that they need a lot of leisure and very little cash income to fulfill their most important aims. These persons are advantaged if their condition is evaluated by a sensitive measure of well-being, but they look disadvantaged according to the measure of yearly income. Call these low-income individuals, who are well off in well-being and have a strong preference for leisure over work, non-needy bohemians.

A disadvantage, from a Fair Welfare Maximizing standpoint, of a redistributive transfer program that offers cash income supplements to low-income individuals is that the recipients of these transfers will include advantaged persons—the non-needy bohemians, who should be helping the needy rather than benefitting from state policies ostensibly designed to alleviate their plight. In

contrast, offering assistance to those who are identified as needy by the rough proxy of low income in the form of opportunities for low-skill decent employment will screen the non-needy bohemians from receipt of benefits. The non-needy bohemians may not be acting badly in shunning work, but they are not genuinely poor persons, so they do not deserve the aid that should be targeted to the genuinely poor. In ideal theory, one could design transfer policies that would be sensitive to relevant personal characteristics of individuals besides lack of cash income, but in a world in which policies must be coarse-grained, and cannot discriminate finely in determining to whom benefits should be allocated, the problem of the non-needy bohemians provides a reason to favor transfer policies that offer opportunities for work rather than cash assistance.

This argument for offering aid to the able-bodied only in the form of paid employment opportunities rather than in the form of cash assistance is not exactly watertight.²⁷ After all, one must also consider the likelihood that the group of low-income persons contains some persons we might call needy bohemians—individuals who lack personal resources and talents and are leading lives of substandard quality but who nonetheless have strong preferences for leisure over work and strong aversion to paid employment. A flaw in the proposal to supply aid to the cash-poor only in the form of decent low-skill job opportunities is that needy bohemians, genuinely disadvantaged persons with strong preferences for leisure, would find this form of aid unattractive, either worth nothing to them or worth little. From this point of view, the issue becomes the likely ratio of needy to non-needy bohemians in the class of low-income unemployed persons. The more the non-needy predominate, the less desirable is the policy of cash aid to the low-income unemployed. To this extent at least one version of a liberal egalitarian theory of distributive justice can support the currently fashionable cry that we should “end welfare as we know it.”

In the abstract, one can think of reasons for either the conjecture that the numbers of needy bohemians will exceed the numbers of the non-needy or the reverse. On the one side, one might note that personal talent can complement the good of leisure even with little income to give an individual the means to achieve her personal goals, but the leisure that accrues with unemployment for a person of little personal talent tends not to be worth much. Sociological studies of the long-term unemployed report that they experience filling up time as difficult. On the other side, some of the goods that steady employment brings include goods of steady association with work-mates and praise for valued work that is well done, and these goods may be less than normally available for individuals who lack marketable personal talents from the types of employment they can secure. Dropping out of the rat-race may make more sense for individuals who see themselves as likely to be vying for last place.

²⁷See Richard Arneson, “Is work special? Justice and the distribution of employment,” *American Political Science Review* 10 (1990), 1127–47. The following paragraph partially withdraws the conclusion I tried to draw in this essay from the existence of needy and non-needy bohemians.

Hypothetical conjectures aside, we note that from an egalitarian standpoint it would seem that getting aid to each badly off person will have higher priority than setting transfer policy with the goal of excluding all persons who are not truly badly off from receiving aid. If the moral priority of the egalitarian is to help those who are badly off, then a failure of targeting that includes the non-needy seems likely to be more acceptable, other things equal, than a failure that excludes some of the needy. Only if the indirect effects of defining the class of recipients of aid too broadly bring it about that the most needy as a group are less well served than they would be if the class of recipients were set too narrowly would erring on the overinclusive side be worse. My own sense then is that the “quasi-paternalism” considerations raised in the next section must be crucial if it is to be shown that aid only in the form of provision of work opportunities is superior from an egalitarian standpoint.

X. JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND QUASI-PATERNALISM

Any liberal egalitarian theory of justice will surely be predisposed to favor redistributive transfers that aid the needy by way of cash transfers rather than any type of aid in kind. Cash is a maximally flexible asset that limits least the uses to which a recipient can put the aid she is allotted. Other things being equal, cash transfers should do better than in kind aid both on the score of providing greater freedom to beneficiaries and providing greater increases to their well-being. These considerations should powerfully recommend cash transfers over in-kind benefits. The case for cash transfers over provision of aid in the form of employment opportunities is merely a special case of this general liberal predisposition.

However, what holds in general may not hold for the tricky policy issues involving employment and the poor. One simple consideration is that a recipient of a cash transfer cannot use that extra income to purchase a job as one can purchase consumer goods. If the labor market functioned in a simple textbook fashion, then a poor person who desired employment and could count on some cash income assistance from the state could bid down the price of a desired job, and secure employment by undercutting the current price of that labor. More realistic models of the labor market suggest that labor markets do not always clear—that at equilibrium some individuals may be qualified to perform certain jobs and willing to perform those jobs at going rates of pay or slightly less but are unable to secure employment on those terms. Jobs may be a special benefit, such that cash transfers to the unemployed do not necessarily augment the access of these unemployed persons to employment opportunities.

Let us confine our attention to truly disadvantaged persons who are averse to paid employment and would prefer cash income assistance to comparable employment opportunities if given the choice. Why should we override the

considered choice of the person we are trying to aid as to what form of benefit that we could offer her would be most beneficial?

Stated baldly, the answer that would support the policy of offering aid to the able-bodied only in the form of paid employment opportunities is that, on the average, the disadvantaged person who shuns work is making a costly mistake that lowers her prospects of well-being, and that government transfer policy should be set to encourage labor force attachment even by the able-bodied poor person who would stay detached from the labor force if her own preferences in this matter were respected. The basis of the “paid employment only” transfer policy is the judgment that for most poor people, having a job is good for you whether you think so or not.

The policy I am recommending would be quasi-paternalistic in that policy designed to benefit an adult individual who is neither feeble-minded nor crazy would not be guided by that individual’s judgment of where her good lies. A policy that overrides the judgment of the individual about her own good when benefit to her is the aim of the policy is, let us say, quasi-paternalistic. It is not fully paternalistic in that the element of coercion with respect to the person we are trying to aid is not present. I suppose without any argument that rounding up the unemployed and forcing them to take paid employment under threat would be an unlikely means to benefit them. The policy that is envisaged is offering aid in a form that the individual would not prefer on a take it or leave it basis.

There is some reason to believe that the conditions that produce destitution and long-range prospects of low well-being also erode individuals’ sense of judgment about what is best for themselves, what life strategies make sense. There are also culture of poverty considerations. Those with weak labor force attachment tend not to keep company with those with strong labor force attachment. The marginally employable individuals of society, buffeted about by the labor market, tend to seek solace and consolation in attitudes that are adaptive for a life that does not revolve around work but nonadaptive for taking best advantage of employment opportunities.²⁸ There are also non-negligible arguments to the conclusion that assiduously seeking paid employment, taking it when it is available, and standing fast by the best job one can get even if it is from the dregs of labor market opportunities are in the self-interest of almost any individual in the long run. Paid employment gives structure to one’s life, provides opportunities for earned respect, and tends to provide opportunities for solidarity and social contact with work-mates. To be decisive, these considerations need not stretch so far as to show that every poor person who shuns work is making a mistake about how to make her life go best. Even if some able-bodied individuals

²⁸Despite all the literature that has been produced lately about the “underclass,” I find Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner* still the best account of cultural norms in grim circumstances impinging on individual lives among one segment of the persistently poor. Liebow highlights men’s stories. To gain a sense of poverty and welfare as experienced by poor women, see Jill Berrick, *Faces of Poverty: Portraits of Women and Children on Welfare* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

would be better off with a decent income offered without a work requirement, the question is what holds true on the average for the class of potential beneficiaries of transfer policies. Finally, note that even if in some future more humane and just and tolerant society, freedom from the obligation to work at paid employment (or comparable self-employment) would be desirable, it may yet be the case that in societies that are as strongly wedded to the work ethic as ours is, abiding by it rather than violating it is for most disadvantaged persons a prudent life strategy. Since many people in our society hold Charles Murrayish beliefs about the moral obligation to be self-supporting, working to earn one's livelihood is in practice needed for now in order to earn the respect of one's fellow citizens.

Although some conservatives entertain the fantasy that eliminating welfare benefits by itself suffices to offer jobs to all, on the theory that the labor market will absorb all who seek work, a more sensible policy of providing welfare benefits in the form of employment opportunities provides state sector employment. To be a benefit to their low-skill takers, state sector jobs should have low skill requirements, include opportunities for training, be decently and demandingly supervised, and involve tasks that are genuinely socially beneficial rather than makework.²⁹

Given the weakness of the other arguments against cash assistance to the able-bodied that I have surveyed, the quasi-paternalism issue becomes crucial. Even a strong "libertarian" tilt in liberal egalitarianism might well be overridden in this or that policy context by motivated worries about the quality of choices we humans are likely to make on matters that are important for our individual well-being but hard to survey and assess in a clear-headed way from the standpoint of our own best interests.

XI. CONCLUSION

The factors that make it easy or difficult, and more or less costly, for an individual to behave as she ought are densely intertwined with aspects of her circumstances for which it is sensible to hold her accountable. Sorting out these factors and deciding to what degree an individual is truly deserving can be hard, even intractable, even in a small-scale and local context that does not stretch out over time. "Judge not," says the Bible.

A society might care a great deal about bringing it about that to the greatest extent possible the good fortune that each individual enjoys is proportional to her true deservingness. Such a society could set its institutions and practices giving top priority to this aim. But this is very definitely not the society we inhabit. The major institutions that distribute good fortune are the family and the market. Neither of these institutions is responsive to individual deservingness. Market

²⁹For some elaboration of this idea, see Arneson, "Is work special?," pp. 1145–6.

prices are determined by supply and demand. The family distributes care and concern according to ties of blood and marriage; as a parent I do not try to determine which children are more deserving and help them—I try to give my own children every advantage. We could try to institute very different institutions that would attempt to establish a republic of virtue, a moralized meritocracy, in which people receive benefits according to their fine-grained deservingness. This would not be a crazy project, but it is hard to conceive what shape institutions must assume in order to make progress towards achieving it, and it is clear that any attempt to reform society in this way would leave us all far worse off in material terms than we are under current institutions.

The question then arises, given that we do not in fact care enough about deservingness to scrap the market and reshape the family in order to try to tailor individual good fortune to individual deservingness, why does this issue suddenly loom in importance when we are discussing social welfare policies that address the alleviation of poverty? We blandly tolerate such facts as that Japanese language teachers earn more than Spanish language teachers even if both are equally deserving, because there is greater demand for instruction in Japanese. If social values comparable in importance to market efficiency are at stake in choices about social welfare policy for the poor, why not forgo the attempt to create a republic of virtue in this one domain? A pincer movement is formed by two considerations: (1) the massive actual irrelevance of fine-grained desert to the working of major institutions of our society, and (2) the massive difficulty of monitoring individuals' fine-grained deservingness scores even on the assumption that we could coherently and nonarbitrarily assign weights to the various dimensions of deservingness so as to generate a single interpersonally comparable measure of individuals' overall desert. The pincers exerts pressure to forgo the attempt to make the treatment of individuals responsive to desert a major consideration in social welfare policy directed toward poverty relief. This decision to downplay deservingness results from thinking through its nature and implications rather than from ignoring it.