

The Problem of Poverty and Distributive Justice

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Poverty, however it is defined, has been and continues to be a significant issue on the current political scene and, equally important, in the Christian church. No one would argue that poverty, properly defined, ought to be reduced, at the least, and eliminated if possible. No one would deny that resources are at least morally obligated to be devoted to some sort of solution. One of the major points of disagreement however concerns the nature of proposed solutions. Is the appropriate or permissible solution found in government action or is it confined mainly to private or church benevolence? In turn this question raises another more fundamental issue of the ethics of redistribution, or, to put it another way, the question of distributive or social justice. Christians do not agree on either the definition of distributive or social justice or its application to the problem of poverty. Jim Wallis has asserted that though the church is an appropriate venue for “benevolence,” the state is also an appropriate and even necessary institutional arrangement for dealing with poverty. Olasky on the other hand is a bit more suspicious of government, but nevertheless supports governmental funding for “faith-based” organizations as part of his program of “compassionate conservatism.” One can see that these two leaders represent two orientations along the political-economic spectrum between Left and Right. This paper will briefly outline the definition of the terms, introduce the poverty problem and suggest a solution that differs from both Jim Wallis and from Marvin Olasky with regard to their views of the proper (ethical) role of government in redistributing resources to address poverty.¹

What is Poverty?

¹ Both Wallis and Olasky have written on the issue of government and poverty. See Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*. Harper, 2005, among others. Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. Regnery, 1992. Note also that Wallis has been editor for years of *Sojourners*, a magazine which has consistently advocated politically liberal social policy. Olasky was an important influence on President George W. Bush's social policy agenda.

Poverty, defined objectively, is a state of material need which leaves an individual or family relatively incapable of obtaining minimum levels of food, clothing or shelter. Defined this way, we avoid subjective assessments to a large extent. Of course needs will vary within and across national boundaries. Generally, a poor person as defined by the United States government is not poor compared to a poor citizen say, of an African nation, in absolute monetary terms. But if both are unable, due to costs, to obtain basic needs, then both would be defined as poor. Moreover the term “need” will inevitably run up against the subjectivity problem—who determines whether something is a need and how? The definition of poverty has made many assumptions and begged a few questions, but we will use it for the sake of the argument.²

Causes of Poverty

There is no single, universal cause of poverty. Causal factors may in addition be joint for even a single person. Causes range from one’s own moral demerit to the oppression and corruption of foreign governments. The particular cause or causes must, from the Christian perspective, make a difference in the response. It could not be argued that a person unwilling to work ought to receive help solely by virtue of his resultant material deprivation.³ At any rate, we are not centrally concerned with this issue.

Poverty and Social Justice

The terms “social justice,” economic justice” and “distributive justice” all denote a formal concept in political and economic thought which has to do with a transfer or realignment of resources or rights (leading themselves to resources) from one group to another by a government.⁴ We are not including

² For example, is it fair to include education and health care as basic needs? I have excluded them from explicit mention, but their addition would not affect the argument.

³ The Bible mentions several possible causes of poverty, each of which relate to the demerit of the poor persons, See Proverbs 6: 10-11; 10: 4; 21: 5; 23: 21.

⁴ The specific term “social justice” can be traced no further than the 1840s to the work of the Italian papal advisor d’Azeglio, *La Costituzione Civile Secondo la Giustizia Sociale* (1848).

here the notion of private, whether church or individual, benevolence, since by definition it is not a matter of state coercion.⁵ Social justice is but one kind of justice, but one much in the headlines today. We will define social or distributive justice as that which “gives to each person what is due to each.”⁶ This broad definition, while technically correct, covers too much since it fails to define what each one is due and how we would determine that. Fortunately, Fleischacker clarifies a bit when he writes that what is due in the modern use of the term has no connection to merit or demerit of the person, but the mere existence of a human being in the state of poverty.⁷

To sum up the modern idea of distributive or social justice, we may say there are five premises that underlay it:⁸

1. Each individual has a good that demands respect, and individuals are due rights in order that they may pursue those goods (a crucial premise for modern liberalism).
2. Some share of *material* goods makes up the rights due.
3. The fact that everyone deserves this can be justified rationally, and in secular terms.⁹
4. The distribution of this share of goods is possible or practicable, not merely utopian.
5. The state, not only private persons or organizations, ought to guarantee the distribution.

The Bible and Distributive or Social Justice

The Bible does not use either the term distributive justice or social justice, but it does use the term “justice” a good many times in different contexts. A thorough survey of these various texts will indicate that the term is never used in the modern sense of social justice, requiring government to redistribute

⁵ Coercion is one defining characteristic of any state. See John Hoffman and Paul Graham, *Introduction to Political Concepts*. Pearson Longman, 2006, 14-26.

⁶ See Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice*. Harvard University Press, 2004, 1-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ I am indebted to *Ibid.*, 7 for this list. For premise 1, see T. H. Green, *Principles of Political Obligation* (1879-80).

⁹ It is highly unlikely that a Christian would accept this premise, though it could be modified.

resources or rights.¹⁰ The significance of this conclusion is that it negates the argument from Christians for governmental intervention. One might still assert that though Scripture does not require governmental intervention, it permits it. But such an assertion overlooks the ethical problems associated with coercively extracting resources from some in order to fulfill the ideal of “love” by redistributing those resources to others. Moreover, it begs the question of whether an argument from silence can legitimately be made from Scripture.¹¹

The Case Against Modern Distributive Justice

The case against a modern state-driven idea of social justice is not a case against benevolence or human compassion. Rather it’s opposition is based on an understanding of the ethical problems raised by state coercion of redistribution, the absence of Biblical warrant, and the problems raised by the institutional pathologies of governmental action. One of the foremost problems in advocating state action in poverty alleviation is the confusion of love and benevolence with justice. By definition (see Romans 13: 1-7) the state is established to address external issues related to justice, what one is due, and this justice is rooted in merit or demerit. Under law, one “gets” what one deserves either because he or she has merited something positively or has deserved punishment negatively.¹² The state accomplishes its objectives through coercion. Moreover, if the state is to achieve justice it must operate impersonally (at least on the surface)—treating equals equally and unequals unequally in the relevant subject of justice.¹³ Love by definition must be given voluntarily and love always discriminates, that is, it is personal and directed to specific individuals.¹⁴ In addition, love willingly goes beyond legal

¹⁰ No doubt the criticism will be that the texts were not properly interpreted. I can only reply that I have applied the most accepted methods in order to reach my hermeneutical conclusions.

¹¹ This is not only a hermeneutical issue but one of logic.

¹² This distinction between merit-based justice and non-merit-based justice has been historic, with merit-based ideas predominating until the eighteenth century. See Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice*, op. cit., 13-15.

¹³ See Ronald Nash, *Freedom, Justice and the State*. University Press of America, 1980, 74-77.

¹⁴ Ibid., 74.

requirements. Under these conditions, it is clear the state cannot show or express love, not the least reason which is that it is not even a personal being. If we then shift our belief about justice to a non-merit-based foundation to a need-based one, and implicate the state in the provision of this kind of justice, it violates any idea of what the state is for.¹⁵

In addition, when the state begins to implement need-based ideas of justice using coercion, it begins to “crowd out” private benevolence, which has at its root—ideally—love. The state effectively eliminates love from the equation of poverty.

A third problem associated with state poverty redistribution is an significant, but overlooked, ethical issue. When the state coerces individuals to give up resources in order to redistribute them to the poor, whether through taxation policy or some other means, it ignores the fact that these resources have been given up by many unwillingly. If there is no otherwise acceptable ethical reason to take from some to give to others simply because of need, then an ethical violation has occurred. If we use the language of Immanuel Kant, for example, he asks us to suppose that “there were something *the existence of which in itself* has an absolute worth, something which *as an end in itself* could be a ground of determinate laws....”¹⁶ The “something” Kant has in mind is every human being, whom, he says, “is an end in itself, not merely a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion...[and] must...be regarded ...as an end.”¹⁷ Kant’s proposition that humans ought always to be treated as end and never as means seems to fit quite well with Christian ethical ideas. To use some who have more (allegedly) resources as means to fulfill the needs (alleged) of others therefore appears *prima facie* to be unethical, unless one can show that there is some overriding principle that would reinterpret what appears to be the case.

¹⁵ Contra John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press, 1971, the modern authority for most.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), edited by Mary Gregor, Introduction by Christine M. Korsgaard. Cambridge University Press, 1998, 4: 428, page 36 in this edition.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

Finally, on pragmatic grounds governmental poverty policy is generally associated with bureaucratic institutions. The pathologies of such arrangements, because of their insulation from scrutiny, the perverse incentive structures, their monopoly status, the difficulties of responding to differing situations, and other problems, should give us pause that the state is even able to engage in such redistribution efficiently even if it ought to.¹⁸ Even if the state ought to provide such services ethically, there is a strong argument that they should be decentralized, not just administratively, but jurisdictionally.

Conclusion and a Program for the Future

The first and most important line of attack on the problem of poverty is not the state or even state-funded non-profit organizations, but with individuals and the church. The reasons opposing state action have been articulated above. But I go farther to argue that on ethical grounds, no individual should be coerced by the state to redistribute resources to address poverty.¹⁹ Thus, not even “faith-based” organizations should receive federal funds for the simple reason that this still involves coercion and redistribution of resources.²⁰ Instead the “old-fashioned” word benevolence should be resurrected—and used. The state can provide incentives for this activity with tax policy (and would not be redistributing resources). Individuals must be given back their capacity to love, which has been either reduced by state tax policy or been gradually “psychologically” eroded. The church must also be a part of this solution, but never without the essential component of the Gospel.²¹

¹⁸ On problems with bureaucratic arrangements, the prevailing organizational form in government, see Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*. Little Brown, 1967. Much more has been written and the subject deserves even more attention.

¹⁹ Exceptions do include public goods of various kinds, of which poverty policy is not one.

²⁰ I realize a legal-constitutional argument can be made that the states can engage in such policies, but that does not change the ethical argument.

²¹ To be sure, if one wants the Gospel propagated at all, then the state is not the mechanism to accomplish this, as attested by modern church-state relations.