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Aid to the Poor: Two Historical Viewpoints

by Kevin Bracker

A continual debate takes place in both the economic and political arenas over the policy of public support for the poor. This issue has been argued on intellectual, moral, and emotional grounds. Despite this debate, there seems to be no conclusive answer. Should it be a policy of government to provide support to those in need? Should these people support themselves through their own work? Or should it be up to private charities? This essay will attempt to analyze these questions by looking at two historical figures who stood on opposite sides of the spectrum.¹

Thomas Malthus, an English economist and clergyman of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was perhaps the most famous opponent of public support for the poor. It is primarily due to his influence that an amendment to limit the generosity of England's Poor Law was passed in 1834. His counterpart, Richard Woodward, who eventually became the Bishop of Cloyne in 1781, was responsible for many of the ideas leading to the passing of Ireland's Poor Law in 1838.

Each of these men argued their cases on the grounds of both policy and justice. Public policy arguments will be defined in this essay as those based on pragmatic criteria. These arguments are directed toward justifying aid to the poor (or the lack thereof) on the ability of this aid to improve the social condition. On the other hand, justice arguments are those based on moral criteria. They are concerned with whether or not aid to the poor is the morally correct or incorrect choice.

Malthus on Public Aid to the Poor

Malthus's primary argument centered on public policy. He believed aid to the poor was futile due to the differing growth rates of the population and the food supply. His assumptions were that the population grows geometrically, while the food supply grows only arithmetically. From this he concluded that the food supply limits the population and thus it is "natural" for people to be poor. Any effort to provide aid to those in need is useless.

This argument appears logical at first glance. However, it is important to note that Malthus offered little evidence to suggest that his ideas about relative growth rates were more than just assumptions. The very basis of his argument, that the population will outgrow the food supply, is not strongly supported by facts.

Malthus assumed that both the population and food supply would continue to grow at the same rates in the future as they had in the past. However, many factors have caused the relationship between the two growth rates to change. Malthus reasoned that it was unlikely that the population growth would slow down until checked by the food supply due to the "passion between the sexes" (Hartman 1984, p. 18). However, since the eighteenth century there have been many advances in birth control which allow for this passion while limiting child birth. Also, major technological advances in agriculture have paved the way for growth rates in the food supply that are much greater than Malthus expected.

Another of Malthus's arguments dealing with policy was that aid to the poor shifts "the distribution of money and consumption from the more worthy members of society . . . to the less worthy" (Gilbert 1988, p. 50). This argument is based on the belief that productivity and/or wealth determine "worth." This is an argument similar to one that became popular in the early 1900s, that of the Social Darwinists. Formulated by Herbert Spencer, this theory asserts that the successful are genetically superior to the unsuccessful (i.e. the poor). Thus, providing assistance to the poor merely slows down the inevitable evolutionary process through which the least fit are weeded out. The similarity between Malthus's beliefs and those of the Social Darwinists is quite apparent: both equate economic and social position with "worth."

This argument also has serious drawbacks. If a baby is born to a poor family, the odds of that child growing up to be a "worthy" member of society, without some assistance, are low. The poor family may lack the resources to provide the intellectual and physical development necessary to enable the child to grow into a productive member of society. However, contrary to the ideas of Malthus and the Social Darwinists, a person's development is not based purely on genetics. If support is given to the family, the child has a much greater chance of obtaining the tools necessary to become productive. In the first instance, without support, if the child is able to survive and have children, the chain of poverty is likely to continue. In the second case, with support, the child has a much greater chance of developing into a productive adult and will be able to provide properly for his/her children, thus breaking the chain of poverty.

On the justice side of this debate, Malthus argued that support for the poor results in a moral decline in society. He believed that support would encourage the poor to be careless with their money. He believed there would be a greater tendency for these people to use their money on vice as opposed to subsistence.

Malthus's argument, which permeates public debate even today, lacks merit. If a person cannot afford food, in most cases that person will do whatever is necessary to obtain food. The instinct to survive becomes stronger than the norms of society. This view is supported by psychologist Abraham Maslow and his theory of the hierarchy of needs. In his analysis, Maslow finds that physiological needs, food and shelter, are more important than other needs. Thus, the need for food and shelter will override the need to conform to society's ideas of right and wrong. On the other hand, once a person obtains the necessary food and shelter to survive, that person is much more likely to attend to matters of right and wrong. Thus, in reality, failure to aid the poor is more likely to lead to a moral decline than would providing the aid.

Also, there is reason to question Malthus's own morality. In general, contemporary society does not view the acceptance of human starvation while others have excess food and money as particularly moral. Yet Malthus offered the following justification for allowing children to starve: "The infant is, comparatively speaking, of little value to the society, as others will immediately supply its place" (Hartman 1984, p. 24). In his defense, the deaths of children were far more common in the eighteenth than in the twentieth century due to poor sanitary conditions and limited medical technology; thus they were more easily accepted. However, there is a drastic difference between accepting the death of someone when it can not be prevented and accepting deaths which can be prevented. One who places such little value on human life appears from a twentieth century perspective to be poorly qualified to make judgments about morality.

Woodward on Public Aid to the Poor

Richard Woodward championed the cause of public aid to the poor. His first argument with respect to public policy was that private charity was insufficient for providing the necessary aid to the poor. This argument appears to be as valid now as it was when Woodward made it. While there are many private charities which provide relief to the poor, ranging in size from the International Red Cross to the individual donor, this is still insufficient. Despite the \$48 billion that was reported for charitable deductions in the United States during

1985 (Rosen 1988, p. 363), this country's poverty rate for the same year was fourteen percent (Rosen 1988, p. 152).

Society tends to take up causes for a short time, donating large amounts of money. However, large portions of this aid go to disaster relief, environmental causes, and disease research as opposed to direct aid to the poor. Also, mass support often dissolves quickly as people start to lose interest, leaving only a fraction of the original support. With relief to the needy competing with many other causes and depending on short bursts of support (usually instigated by heavy press attention or celebrity involvement) it does not seem that private charity alone is currently sufficient to provide the level of support necessary.

Woodward also argued that support to the poor will increase the general wealth of society. This argument is based on his belief that support for the poor would be beneficial in increasing the population and the population's ability to work. Woodward asserted that supporting those who are not able to afford food and shelter will allow more of them to survive. This will increase the labor force as well as the number of consumers. Also, he argued that these people will be healthier, and therefore better able to contribute to society. Thus Woodward argued that support to those in need is "in the interest of the country as a whole" (Gilbert 1988, p. 148). This argument also seems to have merit. It appears to be true that, given the proper aid, the poor will be able to afford food and shelter and thus not as many will be lost to starvation or disease. If one disputes Malthus's population theory, then this is obvious.

However, Woodward's position is not without flaws. When people are given support without any requirements of labor or repayment, they may lack incentives to work. This was especially true in the period when Woodward was writing as wages were just at the subsistence level. Currently in the United States, wages, on average, are above the subsistence level. Thus, there is still an incentive to work in order to be able to afford more than just the bare necessities of life. However, one might argue that many people in poverty are not as likely to get jobs that pay much above subsistence levels. In order for public support to increase the industry of disadvantaged people, support must be given in exchange for some sort of service. If people were guaranteed public support in exchange for service to the state, then it would be true that public support to the poor would "secure more lives and service to the state" (Gilbert 1988, p. 149).

Woodward's argument concerning justice was that society has an absolute duty to provide aid to the poor. This idea derives from the

concept of the social contract. Before there was civilization, people were able to live off the land and take what they needed. Once society developed and private property emerged, many people were no longer able to take what they needed from the land as it was likely that the land was "owned" by others. Woodward argued that if society is just, people would choose to join society only on a voluntary basis. In order for people willingly to join society, it would seem reasonable that they would require the right to obtain at least a subsistence level of income. Therefore, according to Woodward's argument, those who benefit most from the existence of a civil society are morally obligated to insure that all members of society receive an income level that will meet basic survival needs.

Even though some might argue that society has developed to such a degree that people no longer perceive that they have given up the right to "live off of the land" in joining society, the fact remains that voluntary compliance by all members of society to its laws may require a subsistence income for everyone. If Maslow is correct in his theory of the hierarchy of human needs, one can question how long and to what degree poverty can exist before people will begin to reassert their right to "live off of the land." To the degree that poverty exists at the present time, there are pockets of society (primarily in the inner-city areas of large cities) where private property is no longer always respected. While these areas are currently the exception rather than the rule, the possibility does exist that if enough people experience poverty to a high degree, this lack of respect for private property may no longer be the exception. Thus, in addition to Woodward's moral argument for responsibility to the poor based on a "social compact," it should also be a concern on pragmatic grounds for anyone interested in private ownership (Gilbert 1988, p. 146), since society will likely revert back to the stage in which private property is not respected if the poor are not given the support they need. Thus, in order for the "rich" to maintain their private property, they must agree to help the poor.

Conclusion

A look at the ideas of Malthus and Woodward and how their ideas hold up in today's society helps provide insight into the ongoing debate over whether or not there should be public support to the poor. It seems that the ideas of Malthus do not hold up nearly as well from an intellectual and moral perspective as those of Woodward.

Nevertheless this is not a debate that will likely be decided solely on these bases, unless the intellectual and moral arguments coincide with

the emotional argument. Does one person have the right to enjoy riches while another starves to death in the streets? Alternatively, does one person have the right to be supported without working, while others must work in order to support themselves, as well others? These are the questions that will be argued well into the future. Only when there is a consensus on intellectual, moral, *and* emotional grounds will this debate come to a close. Since there is no consensus opinion at any level, the debate rages on.

Note

¹ This essay was inspired by the article by Geoffrey Gilbert cited below. I would also like to thank Dr. Kenneth J. McCormick, University of Northern Iowa associate professor of economics, for his valuable advice.

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