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The moral arguments for leaner social programs

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Commentary

Moral imperatives usually trump economic arguments. Our charitable impulse to help the poor, for example, arises from a moral imperative.

Those two facts help explain why it's so hard to fix, scale back or replace government social programs — even when the programs are indisputably inefficient, unaffordable or downright harmful to those they are intended to help.

This difficulty endlessly frustrates Americans whose first worry is about excess government spending. But these folks, unlike their neighbors whose first concern is social values, are more accustomed to making economic arguments than moral arguments.

Thrift-conscious citizens, however, should make the moral case for downsizing the welfare state and letting civil society have some room to breathe. Welfare is not just a fiscal issue. It is a decidedly moral one as well.

Consider the history of "social service." The term was unknown to the American colonists and those of the Founders' generation. In those days, what came closest was "charity" — privately funded and usually religious. Charities tended to couple aid with close monitoring, accountability and a relationship between recipient and giver. Helping the needy wasn't considered a service of government, but rather the job of voluntary institutions in what came to be known as "civil society."

In the 1800s, though, some charities arose that dispensed aid while de-emphasizing spiritual matters and religious motivations. Many made few demands of recipients, or required little follow-up. Recipients naturally gravitated to charities that offered the most aid with the fewest strings attached. This response helped legitimize nonsectarian government involvement in aid programs.

Government aid slowly became part of public policy and political agendas, and eventually became divorced from private, moral and religious contexts that had nurtured it.

The new philosophy, dominated by government, tended to crowd out charities that connected aid to spiritual matters, accountability and relationship.

Yet poverty persisted. The underclass grew. This invited skepticism.

In his 1984 book, "Losing Ground," Charles Murray demonstrated that welfare programs hurt many who needed help the most. Marvin Olasky later argued, in 1992's "The Tragedy of American Compassion," that government could not match the success of private programs with their spiritual and relational components.

In 1995, Robert Rector and William Lauber of The Heritage Foundation estimated the cumulative cost of the three-decade "War on Poverty" at \$5.4 trillion — more than the U.S. spent fighting World War II. The next year, Congress and President Clinton responded to these findings by placing work requirements and time limits on welfare recipients. This was a step in the right direction, but only a step.

The moral argument for welfare reform doesn't focus first on how much is spent, how much is saved or how efficient a policy is. Rather, it seeks to answer this question: What policy will, in the long run, best help those in need?

When Americans believed more money was the key to helping the needy more, they supported government involvement and taxpayer funding. Decades later, after evidence mounted that such aid harmed those it was supposed to help, policymakers modified the programs by adding some of what was missing. They made economic arguments for changes, but ones that augmented the moral imperative of how best to help the

needy.

Now, budget-conscious Americans ought to harness moral arguments to shift welfare policy closer to the ideal where private charity, greatly expanded, reduces poverty so much that little justification remains for government programs.

If we can accomplish more voluntarily rather than coercively, surely we ought to prefer volunteerism. The moral burden of proof should rest squarely on those who seek to rely on redistributive coercion, not on those who prefer volunteerism.

Americans who had political or economic reasons for seeking to abolish slavery and expand civil rights were successful because they cooperated with those who had moral, often religious, reasons.

We won't achieve durable change in welfare policy by economic analysis alone. That's like bringing a slide rule to a gunfight.

To win the day, champions of pocketbook issues and advocates of character issues must unite and pitch our tents on moral grounds.

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