

A Moral Case Against Big Government: How Government Shapes the Character, Vision, and Virtue of Citizens

Ryan Messmore

INTRODUCTION

To advocate *good* government is to recognize the indispensable role that political authority plays in a healthy community. To advocate *limited* government is to understand that not everything necessary for a community to be healthy is the responsibility of government. A good but limited government is one that serves its citizens by exercising well its particular task and refraining from other tasks. Essential to government's particular task is ensuring that other social institutions are free to exercise their own particular tasks.

Identifying the proper tasks and limits of various social institutions is bound up with a society's understanding of the good life and the good community—its moral vision of its defining goods and purposes. The case for good, limited government is therefore incomplete if it proceeds only in terms of the effects upon individual freedom or the fiscal implications of expanded government programs. Governing is a moral task, and the size and scope of government have moral implications for society, including its members' ability to fulfill their ethical obligations to one another.

The primary task of government is administering judgment according to standards of justice. Because law by its very nature concerns moral judgments, a government that stands under the rule of law presupposes the existence of a moral order, expresses the social concept of that order, and in turn encour-

ages the fundamental moral principles of a society, particularly regarding justice. Citizens' assumptions and expectations of government therefore shape not only their national character, but also their approach to issues like poverty and economic justice. Moreover, our assumptions about government influence the formation of the social bonds required to cultivate virtue, and thus sustain freedom, as well as the way citizens think about and relate to neighbors in need.

Sustaining limited government and freedom turns on the question of how virtue is cultivated and which communities and institutions are most appropriate for this task. Local forms of association, especially the family and religious congregations, generate the thick, personal bonds that unite and motivate individuals toward the good for themselves and others. The proper exercise of political authority articulates a society's understanding of good through law and enacts judgment upon those who violate it through certain acts of wrongdoing. Citizens thus render a proper level of trust and appreciation for the crucial role that good government plays in a healthy society.

As government assumes greater political authority, however, it is more able to shape the terms of public discourse and draw to itself expectations and levels of trust beyond those appropriate to good government, often at the expense of smaller institutions of civil society. Such a shift in the public's attitude toward expan-

sive government can weaken democracy, given that diversification of authority among local associations is a strong check against government tyranny. Moreover, not only does unhealthy reliance upon government social programs discourage genuine compassion and personal relations between wealthy and poor citizens, but the cost of funding such programs actually threatens future generations with unsustainable debt. A good but limited government will thus acknowledge that other social institutions are better able to cultivate virtuous citizens, care for those in need, and further true democratic freedom while exercising its own crucial responsibility to protect its citizens and social institutions from injustice.

VIRTUE AS THE FOUNDATION OF FREEDOM

All political communities, including nation-states, are held together by civic bonds or “ties that bind.” As the motto of the United States—*e pluribus unum*, or “out of many, one”—implies, the kinds of obligations that unite its many members into one people are of critical importance. These bonds often take the form of moral obligations that we owe one another as members of the same community.¹ To fulfill such obligations, citizens require certain *virtues*. A virtuous citizen is one whose habits and skills enable him or her to fulfill the responsibilities necessary for securing the community’s goods.

As Americans, we tend to place high value on the goods of freedom, prosperity, and security. The habits needed to achieve these goods include trust, cooperation, self-sacrifice, hard work, and a sense of responsibility for others. Francis Fukuyama has demonstrated how healthy communities depend upon the acquisition of “social capital” in the form of trust, loyalty,

¹ Such bonds can be implicit or explicit; can take various forms (including formal contracts or covenants, stated or unstated laws, shared beliefs or language, blood relationships, geographical proximity, etc.); and can be generated and sustained by various motives (including trust, compassion, a sense of moral duty, fear of punishment, etc.).

honesty, and dependability.² These are key virtues for people in their capacity as members of the American community, and they are, as the Founders understood, a necessary support for ordered liberty.

“Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom,” declared Benjamin Franklin, who echoed James Madison when he wrote, “To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.”³ Moreover, in his Farewell Address, George Washington asserted that “virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free Government.”⁴

The question of both securing freedom and sustaining limited government thus turns on how virtue is cultivated and which communities and institutions are most appropriate for this task.

THE CULTIVATION OF VIRTUE

America’s Founders recognized that the fundamental institutions of family and religion as well as local associations were best suited to foster virtuous citizens who fulfill moral obligations toward each other and thus sustain ordered liberty. Family and religious congregations are best suited for character formation because they are able to:

- Exercise the authority and discipline necessary for pursuing good,
- Motivate members to seek the good for its own sake,
- Offer the personal goods generally considered most worthy of pursuit, and
- Involve people directly with one another for an intrinsically communal purpose.

² See Francis Fukuyama, *Trust* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

³ James Madison, speech to the Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 20, 1788, as quoted in *The Founders’ Almanac*, ed. Matthew Spalding (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2002), p. 208.

⁴ George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796, as quoted in *The Founders’ Almanac*, p. 207.

In particular, the Founders stressed the important role of religious institutions in moral formation. The belief in a “God All Powerful wise and good,” claimed Madison, is “essential to the moral order of the world.”⁵ The Founders believed not only that freedom depends upon virtue, but also that virtue is encouraged and cultivated by religious commitments. Washington declared in his Farewell Address that “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”⁶

The Latin root of *religion* is *religio*, meaning “to bind.” Religious communities bind people vertically to God and horizontally to one another in personal ways. These social bonds not only depend upon, but actually help to generate trust, cooperation, submission to proper authority, self-sacrifice, and a shared pursuit of and participation in the good. Consequently, such faith communities have a significant capacity for shaping virtuous character.

Religious congregations provide a helpful example of how the four criteria mentioned above function in the cultivation of virtue.

First, faith communities can exercise the authority and positive discipline needed to achieve the good. Discipline is pressure that spurs one on toward a goal when he might otherwise not be inclined toward it. Discipline in the hands of a knowledgeable and caring authority is a form of care. Such discipline as care can be exercised hierarchically (e.g., by a pastor or priest) or through egalitarian relationships (e.g., by a small “accountability group” or partner). It can take the form of a word or action behind us pushing us ahead when we would tend to turn aside from the pursuit of the right objects—a loving hand on our backs that compels us forward when distraction, laziness, ignorance, error, or inordinate passions tempt us off course.

⁵ James Madison, letter to Frederick Beasley, November 20, 1825, as quoted in *The Founders’ Almanac*, pp. 155–156.

⁶ Washington, Farewell Address, as quoted in *The Founders’ Almanac*, pp. 191–192.

Second, communities of faith are able to cultivate within members a personal desire to do what is right rather than acting only out of submission to authority or fear of punishment. In particular, churches aim to cultivate proper desires through worship, which is the practice of assigning and expressing ultimate value to what is most worthy of attention and sacrifice. Religious worship focuses a congregation’s attention and desire upon a transcendent God who is the source of goodness and virtue. Ideally, focusing one’s moral vision upon God will motivate him or her to desire the things God desires and to pursue them even when nobody is watching or commanding it. This means that an apprentice in virtue will be not only pushed in the proper direction from behind, but also drawn forward by desire for the proper ends.

Third, a local congregation can offer personal, substantial goods, including fellowship, emotional and spiritual support, physical and financial assistance in times of need, and a sense of meaningful membership or participation in a transcendent purpose. Such goods are among the objects that many believe to be the most worth pursuing in life. Churches and religious communities thus have the ability to evoke tremendous energy, effort, desire, determination, and sacrifice among their members in pursuit of the goods they offer.

Fourth, because these particular goods are social in nature, people pursue and enjoy them together with others. Such goods are communal at their heart—they imply relationship with another. Involvement with others is not just a means to securing them, but the very mode of their experience and enjoyment. They are not usually pursued for entirely self-centered reasons, but reveal joint concern for others who also share in the good. Congregations thus have the ability to bind members together in horizontal relationships in pursuit of common goals.

In addition to religious congregations, the institution of the family is crucial in the cultivation of virtue and moral sense. Here individuals experience direct, continual character training in the context of several

persons acting as a single unit in which moral authority, at its best, is exercised by those who love and desire the best for each member.

But religious congregations and families are not alone. Sports teams, orchestras, schools, professional guilds, neighborhoods, acting troupes, and other voluntary associations can function as local moral communities in similar ways.⁷ A basketball team, for example, can train members in virtue through the discipline of a wise coach, the positive motivation of the love of sport, and the necessity of working together with teammates toward a common goal of victory in competition. Through such activity, players learn what it means to trust others, work together, train hard, submit to authority, identify and coordinate different personal skills, accommodate the errors of others—and rely on accommodation of their own errors by others—and seek the good of the group above oneself. Moreover, because every position is important, sports teams enable individual members to make particular contributions which they can recognize as significant. According to sociologist Robert Nisbet, small, purposive communities are thereby able to exact effort, allegiance, and sacrifice from individuals with “evocative intensity.”⁸

Because they bind their members in personal, cooperative ways in pursuit of common goods, family, religious congregations, and other institutions of civil society cultivate the indispensable virtues of a healthy democracy. Government therefore not only fulfills an important aspect of its task of justice, but also indirectly supports the cultivation of virtuous citizens by respecting the authority of local civil society institutions and protecting them from unjust interference.

⁷ Members of certain faith communities will note that churches differ from other local communities by relying upon supernatural power to bring about change in one’s character, even though that power may be mediated through authority, discipline, personal relationships, and the common pursuit of common goods.

⁸ See Robert Nisbet, *Quest for Community* (San Francisco, Cal.: ICS Press, 1990), pp. 48–65.

WHY THE NATION-STATE CANNOT GENERATE THE TIES NEEDED TO BIND A FREE PEOPLE

The effective exercise of political authority depends upon and gives expression to a moral order of right and good among a people. It requires, to some extent, a shared understanding of the good life and the good community by its subjects. In a large, pluralistic context of differing perspectives and faiths, agreement about the common good is likely more difficult to reach than it is in smaller, voluntary associations and communities. The common goods offered by the nation-state are less capable of engendering the thick, personal bonds that unite smaller institutions like families and congregations. Instead, the state is left more dependent on fear of punishment as a means of motivation.

What has come to distinguish the modern state from other institutions and authorities in society is its monopoly on the use of legitimate physical force.⁹ The national government has the legal right to imprison those who break its laws, and this can serve as a powerful motivating force for obeying its commands (e.g., to pay taxes, to register for selective service [for males], to answer summons to court, to provide employees with a minimum wage, to refrain from murder or theft, etc.). The authority of government and the pressure it applies in appealing to force can function as forms of discipline, which can play an important role in spurring citizens to pursue the good.

Virtuous citizens, however, are motivated by a desire for the good; they are drawn forward by a love of the right objects, not merely pushed from behind by the law to fulfill certain obligations or avoid certain misdeeds. Government can undergird aspirations for political goods such as justice and equality, but it is not as equipped as other institutions to cultivate virtuous desires for many other important ends.

National governments do not, for example, attract citizens to the good of compassion with the same power

⁹ See Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 77–128, at <http://www2.pfeiffer.edu/~lridener/DSS/Weber/polvoc.html>.

as other social institutions because they bind citizens to a sovereign state, or to an impersonal law, rather than to other citizens directly. In the words of John Paul II, “one cannot give oneself...to an abstract ideal” but can only “give oneself to another person or to other persons.”¹⁰ Personal connections to and participation in other human lives have more power to inspire sacrificial acts of care and compassion than do impersonal laws. As Martin Luther King, Jr., explained, laws can restrain the heartless, but they cannot change the heart.¹¹

The modern nation-state also fails to unite citizens with the same “evocative intensity” as other institutions because of the common goods it is understood to offer. In recent decades, the political goods of liberty and justice—two hallmarks of a healthy democratic society—have been reduced to hollow, individualistic notions of autonomous choice and various rights claims. Increasingly viewed today through the lens of entitlement and right to privacy, these goods are less socially cohesive and morally binding, especially compared to the individual responsibilities and social obligations upheld by religious and other local communities. Modern, impoverished notions of freedom and rights tend to view the obligations we owe others in *negative* terms: the right *not* to be interfered with or harmed. An emphasis on individual freedom framed in negative rather than positive terms—i.e., freedom *from* others rather than freedom *for* pursuing common goals *with* others—does not, by itself, foster a healthy sense of responsibility or trust among citizens.

People are most likely to sacrifice for the good of another when they feel a *positive* sense of responsibility for that person or to some higher subject.¹² In the mod-

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1991), p. 58. For example, in times of intense battle, soldiers often make difficult decisions and perform heroic actions most immediately for the sake of others in their unit, as the needs of fellow comrades are often more concrete and visible under such circumstances than are concepts such as freedom or justice.

¹¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., Commencement Address, Antioch College, 1965, at www.antioch-college.edu/news/commencement/mlkspeech.html.

¹² The word itself is telling, for *responsibility* assumes an *ability* to *respond* to something outside of us, not to our own initiative.

ern liberal milieu of radical individualism and rights divorced from responsibilities, it is more difficult for the nation-state to unite citizens by invoking something more than the common pursuit of individual autonomy and security. The lack of a more unifying purpose tends to lead to the weakening of the ties that bind people together horizontally—the ties required to sustain true freedom.

TIES THAT BIND: HORIZONTAL VERSUS VERTICAL

When the horizontal ties that bind citizens to each other weaken, individuals become more likely to reach for the support of vertical ties to the government. The result is a vicious cycle: As the federal government grows bigger and assumes more responsibility for fulfilling the moral obligations among citizens, it can further undermine the perceived significance and authority of smaller, local institutions. It can, in other words, weaken the institutions that foster social bonds that are strong enough to generate virtues like trust and responsibility. Excessive bureaucratic centralization thus sets in motion a dangerous cycle that precipitates not moral virtue but individualism and social decay.

The resulting atomization severs freedom and justice from the communal conception of good in relation to which they derive their particular meaning, flattening them conceptually to license and procedural adherence to the written law. That leaves society vulnerable to corruption: “Life organized legalistically has thus shown its inability to defend itself against the corrosion of evil,” asserted Alexander Solzhenitsyn, which is why “[i]t is time, in the West, to defend not so much human rights as human obligations.”¹³ Human obligations—more personal and primary than legal obligations—best pro-

¹³ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “A World Split Apart,” text of address given at Harvard Class Day, June 8, 1978, at www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/harvard1978.html. Here Solzhenitsyn discusses “human rights” in the context of a modern individualism grounded in a purely legal conception of freedom, devoid of moral criteria. This “destructive and irresponsible freedom” is not the context in which the Founders grounded their conception of rights.

vide for the meeting of true need, the achievement of real public good, the resistance to oppressive power, and thus the securing of lasting liberty.

It should therefore not come as a surprise that the strengthening of vertical ties to the federal government has coincided with a weakening in the horizontal bonds of civil society institutions. “The history of the Western State,” laments sociologist Robert Nisbet, “has been characterized by the gradual absorption of powers and responsibilities formerly resident in other associations and by an increasing directness of relation between the sovereign authority of the State and the individual citizen.”¹⁴ As centralized government has claimed responsibility for more goods and functions, it has absorbed the allegiance once placed in other institutions. As Nisbet asserts:

In any society the concrete loyalties and devotions of individuals tend to become directed toward the associations and patterns of leadership that in the long run have the greatest perceptible significance in the maintenance of life.... Family, church and local community held the allegiance of individuals in earlier times...because these groups possessed a virtually indispensable relation to the economic and political order.

As the nation-state has assumed the “determining role in our institutional systems of mutual aid, welfare, education, recreation, and economic production and distribution,” allegiance to smaller forms of association has declined.¹⁵

HOW BIG GOVERNMENT SHAPES PUBLIC IMAGINATION

Today the United States government claims responsibility to provide a vast number of goods and services, which increases its potential to influence

the attitudes and expectations—the public imagination—of its citizens.

- The national government provides all citizens with protection of basic freedoms, national security and defense, a judicial court system, federal prisons, immigration control, stable financial markets, free trade, and a national currency.
- It also aims to provide a reliable infrastructure, public schools, affordable energy, clean air and water, safe foods and medicines, innovative technologies, postal service, national parks and recreational sites, arts and humanities programs, emergency relief, space exploration, a national library, railroad corporation, archives, and botanic garden and numerous other goods.
- In addition, federal social programs supply money, food stamps, housing, prescription drugs, medical care, transportation, training, counseling, rehabilitation programs, and other forms of care to the persistently poor, the provisionally poor, the elderly, the sick, the addicted, the immobile, the unemployed, the uneducated, the undereducated, the unmarried with children, children without parents, and children who are parents.

On the other side of the equation, the government expects citizens to render due allegiance in a variety of ways. At a minimum, the government asks its citizens to pledge allegiance to its flag; to value certain concepts such as individual freedom, religious liberty, popular sovereignty, and private ownership; to obey the rule of law and the rulings of the judicial process; and to be willing to fight and die for its defense. Most Americans comply with such requests for allegiance, viewing them as both prudential and patriotic measures.

In other areas, government does not ask, but requires, certain actions. Citizens must pay taxes, meet official regulations, and obey specific laws to avoid fine or imprisonment. Most citizens also acknowledge these *kinds* of demands as necessary for a functioning

¹⁴ Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, p. 94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

nation-state (even if they disagree with specific policies and laws).

What goes less noticed is the subtle influence that the government's power of enforcement wields on the public imagination. The official, explicit, first-order authority to mandate payment of taxes and to enforce laws carries informal, implicit, derivative powers. These include the power to promote certain causes, prioritize certain risks, endorse certain values and beliefs, uphold certain standards, encourage certain expectations, and define and interpret certain terms. For example, the government dictates that American taxpayers must contribute to certain retirement savings mechanisms established by the government; give financial support to value-laden programs (such as diversity training in government agencies); and bankroll supposedly secular public schools whose curricula are inevitably embedded with assumptions about the true, good, and beautiful.

Moreover, the expansion of government carries over into the power to define influential legal categories and terms—such as what counts as *discrimination*, *secular*, and *marriage*. It also shapes social expectations and outlooks among citizens—such as where to look for assistance (the welfare state); who to blame in times of crisis (FEMA, the President, the Federal Reserve); and what people are entitled to by right (privacy, cheap prescription drugs, same-sex marriage, etc.).

The central place the government occupies among serious public discussions and debates about such issues as health care or welfare testifies to its centripetal influence over the thoughts and expectations of its citizens. Public discourse often implies that the national government is the primary—if not only—institution responsible for addressing pressing issues that face us as individuals and communities.

Rather than asking *who* should take responsibility for an issue (whether, family, neighborhood, government, religious congregation, etc.), the public debate too often blithely assumes that the answer is government and instead focuses on *how* it should address the problem. For example, when the issues of health care

and welfare are raised in public discourse, they are often referenced in terms of “*the* health care debate” or “welfare reform” in general, with government as the implied referent. Seldom does public discourse acknowledge the possibility of other institutions taking an important role in addressing such issues: Seldom does it include talk of “this congregation’s health care debate” (i.e., the discussion going on among a group of religious co-congregants about how they will address the health care needs within and around their community) or “that neighborhood’s welfare reform” (i.e., the projects a community has undertaken to form a network of mutual support and interdependence for those in need). Government crowds out other institutions from the public imagination, and this is reflected and reinforced by prevailing public discourse.

In short, the powers to pass laws and collect taxes entail the power to define, to some extent, the terms of public understanding, involvement, and debate. In this way, government has power to help shape citizens’ thoughts, words, and deeds and influence where they place their trust, hope, and expectations.¹⁶

Policymakers and government officials should neither ignore the power that comes with the exercise of political authority nor pretend that government’s task can be morally neutral. A good but limited government should acknowledge that it governs according to a certain conception of good and right but has a limited role in bringing about or realizing that conception. The government’s responsibility vis-à-vis the good and right is judgment: The government judges social relationships and activities in light of a moral vision.¹⁷

¹⁶ According to Nisbet, “As Jefferson shrewdly pointed out, the State with the power to do things *for* people has the power to do things *to* them. In plain fact the latter power increases almost geometrically in proportion to the former.” See Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), Chapter 11, “The Contexts of Democracy.”

¹⁷ See Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), Part I.

This differs from a more expansive understanding of government's role—the kind that justifies the nanny state, whereby, for example, the state replaces local, non-government initiatives that actively pursue public goods with its own programs.

MISPLACED ALLEGIANCE THREATENS DEMOCRACY

Citizens' cultural allegiances to family, church, and local associations, claims Nisbet, are some of "the most powerful resources of democracy."¹⁸ The diversification of authority and allegiance among social institutions helps to prevent any one institution from becoming too powerful. In the words of 19th century French priest and political writer Felicite Robert de Lamennais, "Who says liberty, says association."¹⁹

A healthy democratic society trusts its government to exercise certain defined tasks. Citizens actually *weaken* democracy, however, by placing in the government the trust, hope, and loyalty that properly belong to local associations. Government officials encourage this erosion when they use rhetoric that implies that they can "save" people from society's most serious problems by top-down social engineering or that government programs are primarily responsible for overcoming these ills. This comes close to utopian thinking, implying that the state has omnicompetence that rivals God's.

When government exercises power outside its proper boundaries, not only does it assume responsibilities that it is not qualified to fulfill, but it also undermines its legitimate task of protecting freedom and justice. By taking over the functions of smaller institutions, rendering them less socially relevant, government weakens the check against tyranny that diversification of authorities provides. A nation-state avoids both explicit and implicit establishment of religion when it encourages citizens to give government only the amount of

trust, hope, and loyalty it deserves without diminishing their trust or allegiance in other institutions and authorities. The trust and loyalty that are appropriate to government derive from the indispensable role that it plays in promoting justice and punishing injustice in society, a function without which the social bonds and cooperative behavior that comprise healthy communities would be jeopardized.

In sum, the authority that citizens vest in government carries significant moral implications. The amount of responsibility ceded to or claimed by government can shape attitudes, motivations, expectations, and even the terms in which we debate public issues. Moreover, the government can influence the cultivation of character and the strength of social bonds by protecting virtue-forming institutions such as the family or religious congregations against unjust interference from other institutions, including the state.

Another important aspect of the government's moral influence upon society is its contribution toward a pervasive mentality that interprets the state's responsibility toward its citizens through a hyperindividualistic lens of entitlement. The case for a good but limited government should also recognize the deleterious effects of this mentality and the corresponding cost of government-funded social programs on our moral vision and the social relationships that bind us together.

THE PROBLEMATIC NOTION OF GOVERNMENT AS PROVIDER

The moral vision according to which government officials make judgments about the common good entails fundamental ideas about human nature, justice, moral obligation, and responsibility. Given the power of government to shape the attitudes and discourse of its citizenry, the particular moral notions dominant in government not only depend upon, but also contribute to and reinforce the moral vision of the larger society.

A conception of broad government responsibility to provide for those in need has exercised great influ-

¹⁸ Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, Chapter 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Lamennais was later echoed by Proudhon: "Multiply your associations and be free." See *ibid.*, p. 221.

ence since the days of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. This in turn has fed a notion of individual entitlement. "Necessitous men are not free men," said President Roosevelt in 1944, expounding a long list of goods that government should supply its citizens to ensure their freedom and security—which he called a new bill of rights—including decent housing, health care, and a good job.²⁰ Those who conceive of government responsibility and individual rights in this expansive way argue that the nation's responsibility to care for its citizens in need calls for more, not less, government power, authority, and spending. They often therefore justify ballooning federal budgets on moral grounds, assuming that corporate care and concern for other human beings must correlate with spending more on government-funded social programs.

A closer examination reveals that raising federal spending is not the only way that we can corporately address need, nor is it the most just, effective, compassionate, or responsible way to meet our moral obligations to those in need. The idea that individuals are owed an ever-increasing number of rights by the government weakens the concept of justice by approaching it only from the side of the isolated individual. Moreover, the "care" provided by government social programs—often in the form of impersonal checks—is less holistic and humanizing than that provided by smaller, more personal approaches.

Beyond being less just and compassionate, expensive government social programs can lead to additional unhealthy moral consequences, including damaging dependence on government handouts and unsustainable budget deficits for future generations. Finally, this "government as provider" mentality can foster a sense of resentment among taxpayers, sapping our propensity to give and receive gifts and misconstruing the social obligations that bind us together, thus further weakening the moral fiber of our nation.

²⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "State of the Union Message to Congress," January 11, 1944, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16518 (August 18, 2006).

THE ENTITLEMENT MENTALITY'S INCOMPLETE NOTION OF JUSTICE

Voluntary sacrifice of one's time or money to give to the poor, the sick, and the elderly is a virtue. Indeed, one could argue that healthy communities depend upon some members giving to other members who are in need. And it is certainly proper for those in need to ask for help from others. However, the notion that people are entitled to or deserve other people's time or money is not the best moral rationale for giving to those who are in need.

Among many religious traditions that emphasize charity to the poor, such as the Christian faith, the motivation is more about exercising generosity than about recognizing what another deserves. The injunctions to give to the poor, feed the hungry, care for the sick, etc. are usually identified in Christian Scripture as the proper response of those who have received from God grace that they did not deserve. Voluntary, generous giving to those in need is an essential component of biblical justice, which comes from the same Greek word often translated as "righteousness." The biblical focus is on the proper relationship of the giver to God and to those who are in need, not on the merits of the needy.

Politically speaking, the modern Western conception of rights that shaped the American founding developed in a context of reciprocal rights and duties. To identify a right was to identify one's valid claim to a share of the particular goods of a community, including protections of certain freedoms. *Rights* were not severed from the *right* relationships among a community—relationships between fellow citizens and between citizens and the common goods of their community.

Today, federal programs like Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security tend to foster a conception of rights stripped from their corresponding duties and community context, suggesting instead a notion of individual entitlement. Such an incomplete conception of rights weakens the concept of justice by approaching it only from the side of the isolated individual, abstracted

from the web of social relationships and responsibilities that should inform a fuller sense of justice.

Recovering a more complete sense of justice would provide a different grounding and justification for extending aid to those who are in need, whether through private or public means. True justice is better served by policies that articulate and encourage community responsibility and voluntary giving than it is by those that are ordered according to the logic of entitlement.

THE ENTITLEMENT MENTALITY'S INEFFECTIVE COMPASSION

The word “compassion” means “suffering with,” while care implies acting in ways that provide assistance while avoiding harm. Compassionate care is the kind of aid or attention that comes alongside those who suffer and acknowledges their dignity. In contrast to government social service programs, the myriad unsung heroes who come alongside those who suffer and give of themselves voluntarily and often without compensation better express justice, responsibility, and compassion and can provide more holistic and humanizing care by fostering face-to-face interaction and relationships with those in need.

Not only does increasing the funding for government programs not generate more compassion among citizens, but it can create unhealthy dependence on government on the part of recipients. Truly effective compassionate care addresses the nature and cause of the targeted problem. Until recent welfare reforms, government anti-poverty programs primarily addressed material needs. The problems of the underclass, however, although often exacerbated by poverty, are not caused primarily by material hardship. If they were, a wealthy nation like the United States could readily solve them by simply subsidizing the poor enough to raise them above the poverty line; after four decades and \$9 trillion, the welfare state would certainly have been a success.

Rather, as Marvin Olasky argues in his book *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, the problems of the underclass are rooted in the needs of the human

spirit.²¹ That is why churches and smaller communities in generations past were effective in caring for the poor in their midst, as Olasky shows: They addressed needs of the human spirit through personal, holistic means. Whereas most federal entitlement programs provide those in need only with an impersonal check, local communities can provide personal accountability, positive role models, challenging inspiration, emotional support, and a sense of long-term hope. Thus, one of the ways the national government can facilitate the possibility that the needy will receive humanizing compassion and holistic care is to discourage dependence on impersonal handouts and create the legal and institutional space for religious ministries and other charitable social service organizations to flourish.

The very rationale of the welfare state encourages certain behaviors and discourages others in a way that may harm those who drink deeply from this well. Continued reliance upon an impersonal source of funds, requiring minimal accountability, cultivates habits that often correlate with vice or dysfunctional behavior. Without tying participation in economic goods to social expectations of initiative and industriousness, courage and creativity, patterns of illegitimacy and irresponsibility prove difficult to break.²²

THE ENTITLEMENT MENTALITY'S SHORT- SIGHTED VIEW OF SOCIAL OBLIGATION

Society has a moral obligation to help the poor, the sick, and the elderly.²³ However, government-funded programs fail to meet such obligations in the most just

²¹ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1992).

²² Since welfare reform—which added work requirements for receiving TANF aid—passed in 1996, the share of children living in single-mother families has fallen, and the share of children living in married-couple families has grown. See Robert Rector and Patrick F. Fagan, “The Continuing Good News About Welfare Reform,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1620, February 6, 2003, at www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg1620.cfm.

²³ As noted above, however, it wrongly tends to ground such obligations solely on the notion of desert of individuals abstracted from a community of right relationships and responsibilities.

or compassionate way, and the rising cost of funding these programs also ignores other moral obligations—namely, those directed to all citizens, including the needy, in future generations.

At present rates, it is projected that entitlement spending will nearly double over the next decade: Medicare is expanding by 9 percent annually, Medicaid by 8 percent annually, and Social Security by 6 percent annually. By 2050, spending on these three programs combined will come close to the same percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP) as the entire 2006 federal budget.²⁴

The resulting economic burden on future generations will be neither just nor responsible nor caring. As a concern of justice, Social Security and Medicare recipients do not receive the actual money they “invested” through taxes earlier in their lives, but rather draw from the money that present workers pay into the system. This means that these programs will essentially demand that our children and grandchildren pay for our retirements—at higher costs and with a smaller ratio of workers to retirees. By shackling future generations with unsustainable debt when alternatives and reform are possible, the national government fails to fulfill its constitutional responsibility to “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity” (emphasis added).

Rather than offering true care, continuing the present rate of spending on entitlement programs increases the likelihood that many people, including the future poor, will be much worse off. Further, if sustained deficits depress the economy generally, more people will become dependent on government programs that are unable to deliver what they promise.

THE ENTITLEMENT MENTALITY’S DISTORTION OF OUR VISION OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Government social service programs also shape the way citizens think about and relate to neighbors

²⁴Brian Riedl, “Runaway Spending: Left Unchecked, Washington’s Overspending Could Drown America in Taxes and Debt,” *Heritage Foundation Commentary*, July 3, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Press/Commentary/ed070306a.cfm.

in need. These programs encourage a vision of their recipients not as holistic persons with dignity, but as bundles of costly needs or, worse, wretched dependents. On the other hand, such programs support a view of the wealthy in impersonal, financially reductionist terms—not as responsible servants, but as revenue sources.

This influences how we think about our obligations to help those in need. Government checks do not promote personal connections among citizens; no human face or direct personal request motivates the giving. As a result, paying taxes to fund government handouts often fosters a sense of resentment among taxpayers rather than a desire to help others. Instead of a compassionate “suffering *with*,” government programs more often generate among the middle class a sense of “suffering *because of*” the poor. This “suffering” is often not as much financial hardship as it is a feeling of unjust interference by the government in the disposition of one’s hard-earned wages. Mammoth spending on government programs encourages a particular social mentality that does not strengthen the moral fiber of our nation and may actually contribute to its weakening.

This mentality sets up a social relationship where one side perceives aid as a forced penalty rather than a voluntary offering and the other side views aid as a right rather than a gift. A gift creates a kind of momentum of good will that has the potential to bind both giver and receiver in a more personal relationship. The giver is motivated by the desire to help or please the receiver, who, in turn, is usually motivated to give back, at a minimum, an expression of thanks. If conditions permit, the giver often has a vested interest in seeing that the desired objective of the help is achieved (e.g., that the recipient uses the gift to purchase food instead of illegal drugs or is able to get a job after completing a job-training course). By the same token, the receiver often desires to demonstrate good stewardship of the gift (i.e., that he or she does not waste but uses the gift toward the ends for which it was given).

Federally funded social service and entitlement programs do not generate this dynamic. Government mandates that citizens pay taxes or face stiff penalties,

and the receipt of benefit checks is impersonal. Additionally, the sense that government owes people money as their legal right undercuts the motivation to feel or give gratitude for its receipt. Whereas civil society is often characterized by a dynamic of willingness and thankfulness, excessive government spending exacerbates a mentality of resentment and entitlement.

A good but limited government makes judgments about relationships of justice within a society. It is morally problematic for those judgments to be conditioned by an individualistic entitlement mentality in which we are owed more and more rights and services by the government.

Not only does excessive spending on government social programs foster resentment rather than relationships between wealthy and poor, but it is also less personal, less humanizing, less holistic, and less compassionate than most community-based approaches. In addition, this mentality of government as provider undergirds the welfare state, which oversteps the proper bounds of the national government and weakens within societal institutions the authority that belongs to them within their own realms of competency. The judgments of government should issue from a broader moral vision of society, in which rights as well as responsibilities, opportunities as well as obligations are identified according to a full-orbed conception of just relationships within a community.

CONCLUSION

The moral nature of governing and the moral implications for society of the nature, size, and scope of government are inescapable. The case for limited government will therefore inevitably need to take these moral considerations into account. A government that understands its main responsibility to be that of administering judgment in terms of justice will play an essential, and essentially limited, role in sustaining a healthy society. A good but limited government will both exercise the authority it is competent to wield—i.e., the power to use legitimate force to defend

right—and provide conditions of justice in which local associations can exercise the authority that rightly belongs to them.

The moral case for good but limited government rests on the competency of other institutions to provide for the needs of citizens and to cultivate the virtues necessary to fulfill the moral obligations that sustain a free society. Not only can the fundamental institutions of family and religious congregations, as well as other communities of civil society, provide more personal, humanizing, holistic, and compassionate care, but they can better engender the trust and responsibility required for citizens to fulfill their moral obligations to each other.

Families and churches, as well as such other institutions as schools, businesses, sports teams, community orchestras, professional organizations, neighborhood watch committees, and faith-based and other nonprofit groups, bind their members not to abstract laws, but to other people. They are premised not on individual autonomy, but on the authority of knowledgeable and competent parents, pastors, teachers, coaches, conductors, and other leaders with the power to discipline. They motivate not solely by fear but by trust, and they are united not only by their opposition to unjust interference, but also by substantial positive goals, commitments, and convictions that they share in common.

It is therefore the responsibility of a modern nation-state that desires to bind its “many” into “one” to limit its power and its purse, leaving primary responsibility for moral formation in the hands of local moral communities. Only these associations and institutions can foster true justice and compassion for those in need—a fact that makes them essential for the cultivation of virtuous citizens and the prevention of governmental tyranny.

—Ryan Messmore is William E. Simon Fellow in Religion and a Free Society in the Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation.

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