

The moral obligation for the rich to help the poor

Psychology, Behaviorism



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The Declaration of Independence and the Moral Obligation for the Rich to Help the Poor

“ It’s not fair!” The American colonists stated this to King George in the Declaration of Independence (US 1776). This document ended the relationship between the American colonists and Great Britain, establishing the United States of America. Within this declaration is an appeal to the moral value that “...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (US 1776).

When the right to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness were infringed upon by England, the colonies of America determined the people have the right to abolish that government, or any that became tyrannical, to establish a new one. “ Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness...” (US 1776). The Declaration of Independence determined that the American government would allow the citizens to place people in power to safeguard these basic rights. Those unalienable rights were a foundational value of this newly established American government which established individual rights and the right to revolution. To protect the three inherent rights, the Founding Fathers shaped a three-part system with a capitalistic economy. This free-market economy enables American Dream.

Morals are standards of right and wrong, good and evil, that guide a person’s choices. “ Individual’s morals may derive from society and government,

religion or self” (Moral Values 2002). The American Revolution challenged the morals of the British system. In England, citizens did not have the opportunity to change stations in life. If a person was an aristocrat, they remained in the aristocracy through no effort of their own. If born a peasant, one would die a peasant, without rank or station. Equal dignity and worth were not values and were not considered attainable. The Declaration of Independence challenged this, primarily, establishing the equality of all men, which is the moral value of people being equal before the law (Messmore 2018).

Before one can answer the question of whether the financially wealthy have the moral responsibility to give and receive help, one must clarify, how people are equal. Human rights are based on a principle that every individual has value. It’s the “ fundamental assumption that each person is a moral and rational being who deserves to be treated with dignity. They are called human rights because they are universal” (What Are Human Rights 2018).

In considering the Declaration of Independence, the intent of the founders is imperative. Economic equality was never the goal. The founders intended to create a three-part system of government and its free enterprise economy granting essential freedoms. The colonist’s believed England trampled these unalienable rights, so they rebelled and created a different government.

Each branch of the government protects and promotes this freedom in its own way. If it is understood that all human life is equal, and the natural rights belong equally to all, then equal treatment before the law, meaning equal access to the unalienable rights, is required.

Who decides the answer to a moral question? This is a philosophical question. Different philosophers have put forth many different theories of how to answer moral issues. Do the wealthy have a moral obligation to help the poor? One must eliminate the ambiguity of terms. What is meant by help? Help to a Marxist may mean redistributing wealth. In a theocracy, such help may be mandated. Is help defined by percentages of tithe of money, time and/or resources given, items restricted? What if helping has unintended consequences and ends up hurting? Is the help voluntary, mandated only by conscience? Philosophy can become a never-ending circle of answering a question with a question. In this case, the newly established government of the United States removes the question by creating a democratic republic with checks and balances. The three branches of government protect the unalienable rights of the American from tyranny and establishes capitalism as an opportunity for all citizens without wealth to create wealth and for those with wealth to keep it.

Is the concept of the rich having a moral obligation to help the poor compatible with the rights laid out in the Declaration of Independence? The answer is no. All United States Citizen's may pursue economic prosperity. The government does not interfere with the free market economy by telling people how to spend their profits

Because of the Declaration of Independence, the rich do not have a personal moral obligation to help the poor because everyone has a voice to make changes. The three-branches of government gives citizens a voice against tyranny. The American government grants anyone who sees suffering, a

voice to change it. Lives may be difficult because of circumstance of birth, gender, race, health, socio-economic status. Disparities exist because everyone is uniquely created. This does not change the fact that all are created equal. Within this equality, each citizen makes choices that may remove poverty, suffering and level inequities. “ Fighting for liberty and justice can happen at a local, national or world level. Those who fight for freedom prove that all people should be treated equally. When it isn’t happening they inspire others to make change happen” (Turner 2014).

Here’s an example. The Executive branch enforces the law. It does not do this as an officer. Instead, if the Legislature proposes a bill, the President may sign that into law. The people elect a President, who then appoints cabinet leaders to positions such as: Housing and Urban Development, Department of Education, Health and Human Services. These people work to affect changes the voters wish to see. The President also encourages citizens to take personal responsibility to protect their privileges through, voting, volunteerism and military service. The Legislative branch, which makes the laws, is selected by the people to represent their choices in protecting people’s rights. They set the budget, decide when to go to war, and write bills that support such freedoms as freedom of speech and freedom the press. The government gives each person a voice to affect the lives of the poor through voting, or through personal decisions.

Forcing people to distribute their wealth to the less fortunate infringes on the freedoms established by the Declaration of Independence. Socialist government’s efforts to “ level” all incomes have resulted in “ the stagnation

of the economy, little innovation, and an increase in poverty” (Philanthropy). When individuals succeed and prosper, inequality of income is not the problem. Philanthropy is not allocating the money of others, whether through taxes or government programs, to the less fortunate in society. Philanthropy is an action of one individual or one family giving to help others (Philanthropy). A prosperous person may choose to be philanthropic but may not be compelled to do so.

In the three-branch system of government, the legislative branch is the politics that make the laws that protect our freedoms. Judicial branch interprets if the Legislative and Executive branches are acting unconstitutionally. An example of protecting our right to life is that we have the right to self-defense. The Miranda rights, and trial by jury, and a speedy trial protects our right to liberty. When a person has liberty, they are free to create wealth. The government protects our right to the pursuit of happiness by decisions that protect our rights such as freedom of worship. Spiritual people are free to give to others. “ Philanthropy may be defined as the desire to promote the welfare of society by giving your own money to good causes” (Philanthropy). While a person may see helping others as a personal privilege, compelling anyone to do so would infringe on their rights.

The rich in America do not have a moral obligation to help the poor because economic prosperity is available to all. The government protects a person’s ability to increase their wealth through laws and regulations. For example, it sets a federal interest rate and offers educational loans at reduced interest rates. The Securities and Exchange Commission is an agency that protects

people from fraud and corruption. Banks are regulated. Monopolies and Ponzi schemes are outlawed. Mostly, citizens create their own wealth by the choices they make. Spending less, earning more, avoiding consumer debt, investing in an education all increase opportunities for creating wealth.

When people pursue their freedoms, it promotes economic prosperity. The government does not interfere with the free market economy by telling people to buy this or that; work here or there; vacation someplace else. If people like certain things more than others, and that thing is difficult to acquire, the value increases. The government might pay farmers not to grow certain crops, which increases the demand. In turn, it increases the value and the opportunity for making a profit. People have choices. They can earn more, save, or refrain from purchasing. The means for achieving economic prosperity is left up to individuals. The right to succeed, achieve, accomplish, be educated, hoard, waste, share, create, gain, buy, sell, own, if it does not infringe on others' rights.

The means for achieving this goal is up to the people—not the government. The issue of whether or not one should help the poor is an individual moral issue, not an issue that can be mandated by a bureaucratic government. It would be helpful for the government to help stop the poor from suffering; however, it is not something that can be forced upon the people, unless one is living under an oppressive government. A person has the personal decision to act on their moral obligation to help the poor (Reed 2014).

“ Consider that, to grow the economy and create jobs — including better jobs for the poor — business owners and investors must feel relatively confident

that they will reap the fruits of their endeavors” (Messmore 2018). There is no duty for the wealthy to help the poor because anyone can create wealth.

Some would argue that the equality of opportunity created by such a system, increases inequalities. Because there are inequalities, the rich exploit the poor. Therefore, they should be obligated to help the poor. They believe that because people are created equal things will be fair and just. Kantian Moral Theory believes “ moral duty is determined through a comparison of the action done with an ideal: namely with what a perfectly rational free agent would have done in better the situation” (Sagustad, 1994). Utilitarian’s believe the goal of morality is to make life better by increasing things like pleasure and decreasing negative things, like suffering (Nathanson).

Others believe the rich should be obligated to help the poor because capitalism and compassion are mutually exclusive. “ It’s not personal, it’s just business.” They take the position that, capitalism, the bottom line, profit, consumerism is motivated by self-interest and cold ambition. The things that are required to create financial success ease out compassion and empathy. They believe the rich should be obligated to help the poor because financial success compromises a person’s empathy, honor, mutual respect and sense of community.

In a market economy underwritten by the rule of law, the gap between rich and poor is not itself the source of injustice. The real problems have to do with underlying factors that impede success, stifle opportunity, and foster unhealthy dependence on government. If our goal is to help people in need, we can better achieve it by identifying and targeting the sources of true

material deprivation. In cases of real injustice — for example, where students are trapped in failing schools or corrupt officials misuse public resources — we should focus public attention on finding effective remedies (Messmore).

Economic equality is not supported by the Constitution, the legislation, and is not inferred by the Declaration of Independence. “ There’s no law in America that guarantees its citizens a job, a roof over their heads, or a meal to eat” (Semuels 2016). “... at no point in the founding literature do the founding fathers identify what constitutes general welfare, or how nation should be upholding it” (Semuels 2016).

“ However, a society that puts freedom first will, as a happy by-product, end up with both greater freedom and greater equality. Though a by-product of freedom, greater equality is not an accident. A free society releases the energies and abilities of people to pursue their own objectives. It prevents some people from arbitrarily suppressing others” (Friedman 2018).

A society that puts equality ahead of freedom does not really have either one. When freedom is championed, the virtue of charity within individual citizens and private organizations is inspired. “[The Founders] saw no role for government in the area of philanthropy” (Philanthropy). The Founders left a legacy of personal charity. They started libraries, hospitals, orphanages, poor houses, fire departments, schools, giving as they were compelled by their personal private, or spiritual values.

A free market economy benefits the poor. The free market allows the ordinary guy to attain a quality of life not permitted in other systems. “

Nowhere is the gap between rich and poor wider, nowhere are the rich richer and the poor poorer, than in those societies that do not permit the free market to operate” (Friedman 2018). American economy continues to promote upward absolute mobility” (Ups and Downs 2009). Surprisingly, capitalistic traits of self-interest and competition serve the economy well. “ Self-interest is the catalyst of economic activity. Competition is the regulator of economic activity. Together they form what Adam Smith called “ The Invisible Hand”” (Hunt). Smith believes that capitalist economies achieve the most for all. They are “ the most productive and beneficial to their societies” guiding self-interest by an “ invisible hand” (Smith 2014).

Capitalism and compassion are not mutually exclusive. The incentive of personal financial wealth, benefits everyone. It results in people investing in innovation. Whereas, the use of force eliminates freedom, and increases the likelihood of corruption. Many understand it is a privilege to share their resources. Our system of government has a responsibility to provide essential resources, but this is not to the exclusion of charitable hearts. The government is notoriously bad at administering help. Because of this, “ Civil-society institutions like families, churches, and community groups, in turn, are better equipped to fulfill mutual obligations and enable people to care for one another” (Messmore 2018).

The Declaration of Independence outlines how the Creator gave unalienable rights to every person. The American government is a shared power, three-part (Legislative, Executive and Judicial) decentralized system and free market economy. The government is created to ensure its citizens have

access to these rights. The separate branches divide powers so the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are promoted. The government and the free-market system promote prosperity and the American Dream. Because the established government exists to serve its citizens, it is not necessary for the rich to help the poor out of an external pressure.