WITNESSES TO WELFARE

5.1 WAYS OF LABELING THE POOR

Herbert J. Gans

Labels with which to stigmatize the poor have probably existed since the emergence of hierarchical societies, but it suffices to look back to the end of the medieval era to understand the historical context of today's labels. Since then, the poor have regularly been dichotomized, at least by critics of the poor and formulators of laws about poverty, into two groups. The first encompassed the sick and old, as well as the working poor, and was considered good or worthy of help, while the second, able-bodied nonworking poor people, have been deemed unworthy.

America has inherited much of its labeling tradition from England, which seems to have invented the modern version. The first users of the distinction between worthy and unworthy poor people have never been identified, but it began to be applied regularly when responsibility for the English poor was given over from the centralized church to locally governed parishes starting in about the fourteenth century. The words 'deserving' and 'undeserving' were actually invented much later, again in England, in connection with discussions concerning the 1834 Poor Law.

Not surprisingly, labels for the various kinds of deserving poor are virtually nonexistent, although at this writing 'working poor' is becoming an increasingly positive label in mainstream American culture. Conversely, the supply of labels for the undeserving poor, as of that for stigmatized racial and ethnic groups, is plentiful.

My historical survey of the labels for the undeserving poor is cursory and meant to be merely illustrative. The label with the greatest longevity

may be 'pauper', although over the years it underwent several changes in meaning. In the fourteenth century it was used to describe the mobile poor. Then it became a synonym for deserving poor women; later the women became undeserving, but in the nineteenth century the word was also used to label the impoverished men and women who would, in today's medical vocabulary, be considered depressed, and in the punitive vocabulary lazy or shiftless.

I will list here only some of the other prominently used labels of the past, with the help of a nineteenth-century classificatory scheme for the undeserving poor: 'defective, dependent, and delinquent'. The trichotomy is not mutually exclusive, for some of the labels that classified the poor as culturally, morally, and biologically defective also treated them as criminal (or delinquent) and vice versa.

Despite the hostility the better-off classes have long felt toward poor people who were not supporting themselves, there are not many words for those solely or primarily dependent; in rough historical order, these include 'paupers', 'hard-core poor' (although people with this label are also viewed as stubbornly, almost delinquently poor), and (today) 'welfare dependent' and 'illegal immigrant'. The latter is a good example of a term that has become a label.

The largest number of labels seems to have been invented for the various kinds of poor people deemed defective. These include, again in approximate historical order: paupers (as shiftless); debauched, hopeless classes; 'ne'er-do-wells'; dregs; residue; residuum; feebleminded; morons; white trash; school dropouts; cultural deprived or disadvantaged; and poor in the culture of poverty. To this list must be added the class of labels that view the defective poor as dangers to public health, referring to their ragged and dirty state, their living in slums, and the like. This set of labels was particularly important before and during the nineteenth century, although some overtones of past labels survive in today's AIDS victims and needle-using substance-users.

The delinquents include the politically threatening: the dangerous classes, *Lumpenproletariat,* and sometimes, rabble and mob. Charles Loring Brace used the term 'dangerous class' in America for homeless chil-dren, also called street urchins or street arabs, because he feared what they would do politically when they were adults. The remainder of the labels for delinquents mainly describe street people, criminal and otherwise, although this informal survey found few older words for this label. Today's are all familiar, and include 'bums', 'substance abusers' (including the earlier 'dissolute' and 'debauched'), 'gang members', 'muggers', 'beggars', and 'panhandlers' - although some of these also double as descriptive terms. In the 1980s, 'babies having babies' became popular, and in the 1990s, 'illegitimacy' was revived to call particular attention to the poor single-parent family.

Two further types of labels deserve separate attention. The *mobile* or

transient poor have been considered delinquent since at least medieval times, on the assumption that, being mobile, they were free from local social control, and thus expected to turn to crime, mostly economic but also sexual and political, during their wanderings. The list includes 'vagabonds', 'vagrants', 'bums' once more, 'street urchins' or 'street arabs', 'tramps', 'shiftless', 'lodgers', 'hobos', 'drifters', 'loiterers' and, more recently, 'the homeless'. The mobile poor were particularly threatening in the centuries before the invention of the police, and most European languages include labels for them.

The other label type might be called *class failures,* for some labels, including a few already listed above, treat the undeserving poor as being below, or having fallen out of, the class structure. Among these are 'residue', 'residuum', 'dregs' and 'lower-lower class'; but the label that banishes the poor from the class hierarchy most literally is 'the underclass'.

All of the labeled are inevitably charged with the failure to adhere to one or more mainstream values by their behavior, but this is why they are considered undeserving in the first place. The labels lend themselves to many other kinds of analyses and distinctions, for example whether they pertain to individuals, such as school dropouts, or to collectivities, like a mob.

A more significant distinction that deserves systematic study is the extent to which labels are either race-blind or racially pejorative. Although most labels for the poor are literally neutral with respect to ethnicity and race, they have actually been meant mainly for immigrants and dark-skinned people in the United States and elsewhere, even if most of those fitting the labels probably came, and still come, from the majority population. In the nineteenth century, a high proportion of those labeled in England were Irish, while the Americans who were labeled were immigrants, many initially also Irish. Later in the century the labels were transferred to Southern European Catholics and Eastern European Jews, who were typically described as 'swarthy races', while Italian immigrants were also called 'guineas' because of their dark skin. Even before these immigrants had been administered the intelligence tests that were newly invented to stigmatize and exclude them, many were deemed of low intelligence or even feeble-minded by the eugenicists, who were almost all white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). But WASPs were not the only ones to conduct racial labeling; a nineteenth-century American magazine intended for German-Jewish readers described the newly arriving Eastern European Jewish immigrants as 'miserable *darkened* Hebrews'.

Although some labels have cut across gender, criminal and mobile ones have been mostly, if not completely, reserved for men, while women have been labeled with economic, familial, and sexual failings. Mothers have to be supported with tax funds as paupers or welfare recipients, but despite the existence of home relief for men, poor men are rarely thought to be

welfare dependents. There is not even a regularly used label for their inability to be stable breadwinners, probably because the better-off fear them mainly as potentially violent street criminals. Conversely, although the young men are periodically blamed for failing to pay child support, they are rarely labeled for being unmarried parents, perhaps because of the traditional sexual double standard. Those men who impregnate several adolescent women are sometimes labeled 'studs', but the women involved have always borne the brunt of exclusively pejorative labeling.

5.2 AN END TO WELFARE RIGHTS

David G. Green

Annual income £20, annual expenditure £19 19s 6d, result happiness.
Annual income £20, annual expenditure £20 0s 6d, result misery.

When Dickens put these words into the mouth of Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* he reminded us of the obvious but easily forgotten truth that, whether people are poor or not, depends on their expenditure as much as their income and that some expenditure is discretionary. It has become common to treat individuals as if they were the victims of circumstance and the policies of the Blair Government continue to reflect this view. But just how much responsibility can individuals be expected to assume and at what point and in what manner should the community step in? The first step in devising a new welfare system is to define what we can reasonably expect of each other.

Perhaps who wish to be free and responsible members of a community require a lifetime plan of action to allow them to be self-sufficient and thus able to make a positive contribution to the wealth and well-being of the society. People who have decided to take command of their own affairs would reasonably expect to make provision for the normal expenses of living, and for periods when expenditure will be high - most notably when children come along - or when income is lower, especially during retirement. Provision also needs to be made against misfortunes such as the early death of a partner, or illness, which may both reduce income and increase expenditure.

If a person plans to have children, then the lifetime plan will need to include a partner to allow for the children to be both cared for and supported financially. Theories which assume that people are largely, or to a

significant extent, victims of circumstance, or at the mercy of 'barriers', tend to take 'income' as a given fact not under the control of the individual and to accept that a household is poor if income does not match expenses. However, it may be useful to state the obvious: that at any one stage of life, whether people have enough to live on will depend on four main considerations: their income; their expenditure; their earlier decisions about how best to organise their household; and their earlier provision against contingencies and lifecycle events.

Policy makers often speak of 'low pay' as if it were something entirely outside the influence of individuals. It is true that income is partly dependent on competition in the labour market, but we are not powerless. The rate of pay depends in part on skills acquired and willingness to move jobs or to change locality in order to command a higher wage. And the number of hours worked can be increased either through overtime or a second job, or another household member taking a job. The vast majority of people who escape poverty do so because they work hard and use their freedom to make the most of the conditions they find themselves in. One of the chief defects of many welfare benefits is that paying them can reduce work effort, a tendency to which family credit and working families tax credit are especially prone.

A certain amount of household expenditure is inevitable for simple survival, but some is discretionary, as earlier researchers like Rowntree recognised. The squalid conditions in which some people live are often the result of unwise expenditure. According to deterministic theories, however, to say as much is to 'blame the victim'. Household structure may also be the cause of low income and it, too, may be outside individual control, for example, when a partner is widowed or deserted. But often lone parenthood is a choice made by one or both parents, without proper consideration of the consequences for the children. Finally, we have become accustomed to relying on the state to provide against contingencies such as the death of the breadwinner or disability, and for lifecycle events such as the reduction of income during old age. However, income during retirement above the basic state pension has long been a personal responsibility with significant consequences for the standard of living.

With due allowance for factors beyond individual control, is it reasonable to expect individuals to take personal responsibility for improving their income, controlling their expenses, selecting an economically and socially viable family structure, and providing against both misfortunes and lifecycle events?

The welfare state was built on the assumption that it was not reasonable to expect anything like that degree of personal responsibility. Indeed it was built on very low, paternalistic, expectations and, step by step, it took responsibility for decisions that would have been better left to individuals. Provision against sick pay, the cost of primary medical care, and unemployment (for some) ceased to be voluntary in 1911. From 1920

most people had unemployment 'insurance', which was not insurance in the strict sense. Pensions followed under the 1925 Act.

During the 1920s and 30s it became possible to be better off out of work than in, though the impact was mitigated by the wage stop, which was introduced by the Unemployment Assistance Board in 1934 and not abolished until 1975.

From 1948 large families were subsidised, when people who could only afford a couple of children would have been better served by limiting their family. Personal responsibility for housing expenditure was diminished, at first by subsidising council rents and later by paying cash benefits. In 1967 a national scheme of rate rebates was introduced followed by a national scheme of rent rebates and allowances in 1972. In 1983 rent rebates and allowances became housing benefit.

In the 1940s and 1950s it was taken for granted that most men would work, and that couples who planned to raise children would get married in order to be self-sufficient as a family unit. However, it became possible during the 1970s to have a child outside marriage and to have enough to live on. Planning ahead in the sense of marrying a partner suitable to be a good father or mother and saving (the bottom drawer) became less important.

5.3 AN UNEMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE INVESTIGATOR IN THE 1930s

Gladys Gibson

Source: Gray, N., *The Worst of Times: an Oral History of the Great Depression in Britain,* Wildwood House, London, 1985, pp. 60-1.

When I went to the Unemployment Assistance Board my position was difficult. My colleagues, one woman and a number of men, all came in from the suburbs. They thought I was mad to live in Stepney. I was not happy in the atmosphere at the office, where there was not much sympathy for the unemployed. The constant cry was 'Don't forget it's public money these people are getting.' Some people we visited were resentful of our right of entry into their homes, but most took it as a matter of course. One man told me to fill up my bloody form in the street but it did him no good. He had to go to the office to be ticked off.

I suppose the investigators were the lowest in the hierarchy in our office. The area officer once said to me, 'You surely don't want to be a common investigator all your life?' The porter, an Irishman, had been an N.C.O. in the British Army and when he had nothing to do he whistled a

martial air and went through his drill, an imaginary musket on his shoulder. It was his job to see to the men in the waiting room, some called up for interview, some to report a change in their circumstances. He was anti-semitic, believing, against all the evidence, that no Jew ever fought in a war. One day he came with blazing eyes to tell me that one of my men, Jewish of course, was trying to get out of having me call by pitching a yarn about a visit to hospital. 'A nasty type. Cheeky. Know the feller? He drags a leg.' As he limped across the room to show me, I looked at the yellow card without which an unemployed man would be lost. 'It's an honourable limp,' I said. 'He draws a disability pension for it.' 'What! That cock sparrer? Who's the girl he's after seeing?' 'His daughter, in a sanatorium. His wife died of T.B. Please return his card, say I'll make another appointment and give him my best wishes.' I doubt whether the man got my good wishes but he caught his bus.

The office was usually crowded with people reporting changed circumstances or simply asking for more money. Occasionally a man twirled a razor blade on a string or clung to the legs of a table or chair. Most of the cases of threatening behaviour took place in the registry, a large room where there were several desks and a table for interview. I don't think I actually saw any violence though 1 heard scuffling and shouting when an offender was being hustled out by the porter. 1 came back one afternoon to write up my reports and found a broken window and some ruffled tempers. I was told that the porter was not to be found at the time. 'Where were you when the affray took place?' the area officer asked him. 'Sure I was like the Bobby when there's a bit of trouble. I was just around the corner.'

The morning the men barricaded themselves into the waiting room was exciting. They came in a body when the office opened, handed their yellow cards to the porter, hustled out the few men not involved and barred the door. We in our room heard singing, mostly music hall songs such as *Lily of Laguna.* There was consternation among the officers because our book of rules gave no instructions that met the case. The porter could hardly be restrained from battering in the door. The area office rang up a higher authority for instructions. The men inside wanted to send out a delegation of three to discuss their demands and the porter was delighted to bawl a refusal through the door. We had to go on our way but we heard later how the door had been lifted off its hinges and the contingent bundled out, laughing.

One of my colleagues was a plump, lugubrious little man whose parrot cry was 'Roll on Friday'. He said he was paid for only half the week. He had sailed the China seas selling whisky, but all good things come to an end. Most of the people were terrified of him. He said to me, speaking of a man I knew well, 'Why doesn't that young chap get himself a job?' 'He has a duodenal ulcer. Last time he was doing his stint on the Borough he collapsed.' 'They all say that,' he grumbled.

An older, well educated man who had been a geologist was very popular. The people liked him for his courtesy and his even temper. They referred to him as a nice old gent, a proper gentleman. He regarded himself as a cut above his colleagues and, when asked to go on an office outing, he replied, 'I wouldn't be seen dead among such people.' These words, often quoted, caused no resentment.

5.4 DISABLED PEOPLE AND DISINCENTIVES TO WORK

Cliff Prior

Karen hears voices and suffers from panic attacks in public places. The voices feed the panic, terrifying Karen who is forced to retreat to the safety of her one-bedroom council flat in Bournemouth. She insists that she would never go out unless she had the safety net of enough money in her pocket to get a taxi home when the panic attacks strike.

'I would have to stay indoors,' she says. 'Knowing that 1 have enough money to get home means that I can combat the voices and stave off the panic attacks. The money is a must for me - it is part and parcel of maintaining and improving my mental health.'

Karen heard on the radio that the government was cutting benefits to disabled people and feared that she would be forced to retreat from the world and back into her small flat. She receives Incapacity Benefit and lower rate Disability Living Allowance to help with her care and mobility. In fact, Karen's benefits are safe. But only as long as she remains unemployed.

It is a deep irony that the government has built into its welfare-to-work plans a disincentive for people like Karen to seek work. Backbench rebellions and loud protestations from disability pressure groups forced the government to retreat from plans to cut Incapacity Benefit for all new claimants. People like Karen will be able to reclaim benefits at their old levels if a new job fails in the first twelve months. But, after that, if their job folds or their mental health worsens, they can be put on a lower rate of benefits. It is a real problem for people with a severe mental illness who may have successfully controlled their illness with the help of health and social support for many years.

Gerard was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 18 and managed to carve out a successful career in spinal injury nursing for nearly twenty years before a 'young psychiatric registrar decided that I was too well to be

a true schizophrenic'. His medication was stopped. 'I became mentally-very ill because of the deleterious effects of this and was hospitalised for a period of two years.' Gerard is just the kind of person who, after two years hospitalisation, moves back to the community only to discover that he will be confined to the new lower rate Incapacity Benefit, despite two decades of national insurance contributions. The government says that Incapacity benefit was abused by the last Tory government who turned it into an early retirement scheme to massage the unemployment figures. That is not the way Gerard sees it. 'I felt that 1 had to stop work after several attempts at resuming my job.' He is incapacitated and wants the government to recognise the fact.

Maureen had stayed out of hospital for seventeen years before a change in medication led to a breakdown. 'People I thought were my friends ignore me in the street and now my life is lonely,' she says. 'I am not well enough to hold down a job but 1 am doing some voluntary work and trying to learn something about computers.' She does not want the pressure of compulsory interviews and the threat of benefit cuts when she knows that she is not well enough to hold down a full time job.

Pressure and schizophrenia do not mix. People may feel well enough to work only to discover that the stress of holding down a job throws progress into reverse. Gerard says that while he was working as a nurse 'I was accepted, supported and treated as a normal person.' Unfortunately, Gerard's experience is far from the norm.

Annabelle has been in and out of work over the years and insists 'there is a block against people like us with a disability. I want to work, be accepted in society and pay my way. But, because of my illness, I have suffered verbal abuse at work and this caused me considerable distress and financial loss.' A recent ruling that schizophrenia is a disability for the purposes of disability discrimination legislation opens the way to greater employment protection, but there is nothing in the government's Welfare Reform Bill to match it for benefits protection.

People with a severe mental illness should not be confined to a life on benefits. However generous, they are no substitute for the financial and social rewards that can flow from paid employment. But, with unemployment rates approaching 90 per cent for people diagnosed with schizophrenia, identifying suitable work, getting over the catch-all mental health questions on the application form and convincing a prospective employer that you can cope is a huge task.

Experience from the National Schizophrenia Fellowship's 52 employment and training projects around the country tells us that the government's New Deal initiative for disabled people will create opportunities for people with a severe mental illness who have previously been prevented from working. The NFS has been awarded £170,000 of New Deal money to help people with a severe mental illness into sustained employment in the London and Essex areas.

NSF is serious about helping people get back to paid employment and other meaningful occupations. Employment lifts the social isolation experienced by many people with a severe mental illness and it puts money in their pockets. However, ministers have misunderstood the nature of severe mental illness in drawing up separate rules that will force disabled people to negotiate an obstacle course of employment and benefits interviews before being able to claim financial assistance if their work plans fail. [...]

5.5 WHO ARE SOCIAL SERVICES FOR?

Peter Beresford and Suzy Croft

[The authors are a partnership who have personal experience of being welfare recipients. They have become leading spokespersons, as academics and activists, for people who use services. The book from which this extract comes draws together evidence from people in one area of Brighton and, when it was published, was important on at least two counts. It investigated the reality of the localisation of public services following the turn to the more generic social work practice recommended in the Barclay Report of l982. But perhaps more significantly it demonstrated it is essential to talk to those who are the recipients of can-services. J

But other ideas and assumptions about social services held by members of the sample raise much more complicated issues. Some clearly saw social services as provided for particular groups, or people with particular problems.

> *You always think of social services helping the old and the poor, but not the average person, 1 suppose.*

> *They are some sort of use, I suppose up the rougher areas of Brighton where you have families breaking up.*

> *I think really it is mostly the older people who do need social services. I may need them as I get older as well.*

> *1 understand they are to provide a service of support and assistance for those who can't help themselves for a variety of reasons.*

As well as the fourteen who made such explicit comments there were a few more ambiguous observations along the lines of 'Presumably they're good for the people who need them', where it was not clear whether people had in mind a particular kind or class of people for whom social services were intended, or circumstances or problems that might befall anyone.

A much larger number of people (34 out of a sample of 100) over-lapping these, expressed the same attitude in a different way, saying or implying they did not see social services as being for people like them (19) or themselves as having any needs for social services (17). Again the two overlapped.

I have no needs relating to social services.

It doesn't affect me.

My idea of social services in my own life is nil.

I haven't any problems they'd want to cope with.

(Unemployed young teacher)

I don't need help from social services.... I've never needed it or wanted it.

(Young man who had been unemployed for 18 months and in trouble with the police)

I'd have thought they have enough without worrying about what problems I've got.

(Young woman expecting a baby)

Only that it's stupid that people in our age group (66) - we've had a tough life - don't get help. I suppose they do their best for those who require it.

It couldn't offer me very much as I'm not really the sort of person who needs social services, not at the moment anyway.

(Teacher in his 30s)

The woman part-time teacher was an exception who said 'I think of social services to be called on in moments of need'. What people seemed to be saying was 'I'm not the sort of person', or 'I haven't the kind of problem or need for social services to deal with' or perhaps, 'that I would take to them'. What was not always clear though was whether they meant they did not *at present* have needs to take to social services, but might one day, or that they could never envisage such a course of action for themselves. A couple suggested that it was something they might think about again or find out more about, when they were older. People's low expectations - their reluctance to burden social services - seemed to underlie some comments. In some cases the implication also seemed to be that people wanted or expected to keep clear of social services. Six people made explicit their desire to keep away from them, although their comments might also have meant that they were anxious to avoid the *reasons* for coming to social services' attention and not just social services themselves.

I'm glad they're there, but I don't want to have to use them.

Any experience of them? No, not if I can help it.

I don't need them, thank God.

One woman, however, at the end of her interview expressed a feeling about welfare that many people have shared from the poor law to the present:

I'm sorry I don't know much about social services. I like to get on with my life. ... I don't like people telling me what to do. I suppose some people do need them though.

The number (42) who seemed to see social services as for others and not for themselves was matched closely by the 41 who when asked, said they would not like to have closer contact with social services. They were also more likely to be included in this category than the rest of the sample. People categorised as working class were under-represented and those categorised as middle class were also over-represented among them.

While some of the people surveyed seemed to want to keep social services at arm's length, others as we have seen, appeared to think that social services were not intended, or didn't offer services for the kinds of needs they had. Some of those who said that they didn't think social services had

any understanding or interest in the kind of issues and problems that concerned them, didn't seem to expect them to, saying, for example, 'there's no need for them to', 'I don't expect that' and 'It doesn't really apply'. What is also not clear is whether people's disassociation of social services from their own needs sprang from their own choice or self-perceptions, or as many of the responses when people were asked whether they thought social services had any understanding or interest in their needs, suggested, because of their perceptions of social services' orientation and nature. Elsewhere in her interview, one woman said:

> *In my circumstances, I don't think I'd ever get any help from social services as I've no children and I tend to associate them with families. My marriage has broken up and I've been through a very traumatic period, but I don't think they would have helped.*

The question for us is whether this woman *should* have expected social services to be concerned with the kind of problems she had faced, or those facing the unemployed young teacher, or the young man who had got into trouble with the police when he was out of work. Were people like these mistaken in thinking that social services were not for them? Were others right to see them as for certain stigmatised or disadvantaged groups rather than 'for people like me'?

5.6 THE NEEDS OF STRANGERS

Michael Ignatieff

I live in a market street in north London. Every Tuesday morning there is a barrow outside my door and a cluster of old age pensioners rummage through the torn curtains, buttonless shirts, stained vests, torn jackets, frayed trousers and faded dresses that the barrow man has on offer. They make a cheerful chatter outside my door, beating down the barrow man's prices, scrabbling for bargains like crows pecking among the stubble.

They are not destitute, just respectably poor. The old men seem more neglected than the women: their faces are grey and unshaven and their necks hang loose inside yellowed shirt collars. Their old bodies must be thin and white beneath their clothes. The women seem more self-possessed, as if old age were something their mothers had prepared them

for. They also have the skills for poverty: the hems of their coats are neatly darned, their buttons are still in place.

These people give the impression of having buried their wives and husbands long ago and having watched their children decamp to the suburbs. I imagine them living alone in small dark rooms lit by the glow of electric heaters. I came upon one old man once doing his shopping alone, weighed down in a queue at a potato stall and nearly fainting from tiredness. I made him sit down in a pub while 1 did the rest of his shopping. But if he needed my help, he certainly didn't want it. He was clinging on to his life, gasping for breath, but he stared straight ahead when we talked and his fingers would not be pried from his burdens. All these old people seem like that, cut adrift from family, slipping away into the dwindling realm of their inner voices, clinging to the old barrow as if it were a raft carrying them out to sea.

My encounters with them are a parable of moral relations between strangers in the welfare state. They have needs, and because they live within a welfare state, these needs confer entitlements - rights - to the resources of people like me. Their needs and their entitlements establish a silent relation between us. As we stand together in line at the post office, while they cash their pension cheques, some tiny portion of my income is transferred into their pockets through the numberless capillaries of the state. The mediated quality of our relationship seems necessary to both of us. They are dependent on the state, not upon me, and we are both glad of it. Yet I am also aware of how this mediation walls us off from each other. We are responsible for each other, but we are not responsible to each other.

My responsibilities towards them are mediated through a vast division of labour. In my name a social worker climbs the stairs to their rooms and makes sure they are as warm and as clean as they can be persuaded to be. When they get too old to go out, a volunteer will bring them a hot meal, make up their beds, and if the volunteer is a compassionate person, listen to their whispering streams of memory. When they can't go on, an ambulance will take them to the hospital, and when they die, a nurse will be there to listen to the ebbing of their breath. It is this solidarity among strangers, this transformation through the division of labour of needs into rights and rights into care that gives us whatever fragile basis we have for saying that we live in a moral community.

Modern welfare may not be generous by any standard other than a comparison with the nineteenth-century workhouse, but it does attempt to satisfy a wide range of basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, warmth and medical care. The question is whether that is all a human being needs. When we talk about needs we mean something more than just the basic necessities of human survival. We also use the word to describe what a person needs in order to live to their full potential. What we need in order to survive, and what we need in order to flourish are two different things. The aged poor on my street get just enough to survive. The question is whether they get what they need in order to live a human life.

The political arguments between right and left over the future of the welfare state which rage over these old people's heads almost always take their needs entirely for granted. Both sides assume that what they need is income, food, clothing, shelter and medical care, then debate whether they are entitled to these goods as a matter of right, and whether there are adequate resources to provide them if they are. What almost never gets asked is whether they might need something more than the means of mere survival.

There are good reasons for this silence. It is difficult enough to define human need in terms of basic necessities. These are, after all, relative and historical, and there has always been fierce controversy over the level at which basic human entitlements should be set in any society. How much more controversial must be the definition of need as the conditions for human flourishing. There is not just one good human life, but many. Who is to say what humans need to accomplish all the finest purposes they can set for themselves?

It is also notorious how self-deceiving we are about our needs. By definition, a person must know that he desires something. It is quite possible, on the other hand, to be in need of something and not know that one is. Just as we often desire what we do not need, so we often need what we do not consciously desire.

If we often deceive ourselves about what we need, we are likely to be deceived about what strangers need. There are few presumptions in human relations more dangerous than the idea that one knows what another human being needs better than they do themselves. In politics, this presumption is a warrant to ignore democratic preferences and to trample on freedom. In other realms too, the arrogation of the right by doctors to define the needs of their patients, of social workers to administer the needs of their clients, and finally of parents to decide the needs of their children is in each case a warrant for abuse.

Yet if we are often deceived about our own needs, there must be cases in which it is in our interest that someone speaks for our needs when we ourselves cannot. There are people who have had to survive on so little for so long in our society that their needs have withered away to barest necessity. Is it wrong to raise their expectations, to give them a sense of the things they have gone without? Is it wrong to argue that the strangers at my door should not be content with the scraps at the barrow? Any politics which wants to improve the conditions of their lives has to speak for needs which they themselves may not be able to articulate. That is why politics is such a dangerous business: to mobilise a majority for change you must raise expectations and create needs which leap beyond the confines of existing reality. To create needs is to create discontent, and to invite disillusionment. It is to play with lives and hopes. The only safeguard in this dangerous game is the democratic requirement of informed consent. One has no right to speak for needs which those one represents cannot intelligibly recognise as their own. [...]