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AUTONOMY, INDEPENDENCE, AND POVERTY-RELATED WELFARE POLICIES

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The radical restructuring of the welfare state in the U.S. raises complex philosophical and political questions about the justification of poverty relief programs in particular and welfare state structures more generally. The motivating idea behind U.S. reform proposals is that restructured programs should provide incentives for moving poor recipients off of welfare roles and into privately paid employment as quickly as possible. This position takes the form of time limits for assistance mandated by federal guidelines and included in all state-level programs. An assumption behind these ideas is that "independence" is achieved when a person enters the paid labor market and generates an income from private employment. Indeed, the language of "dependence" and "independence" pervades all levels of discussion of this issue—in the legislative debates, in the rhetoric of political discussion, as well as in the discourse of the social science investigations of welfare programs and the poor. Being a recipient of welfare assistance is simply labelled "dependence" in all these contexts. Such changes in policy invite philosophical analysis about the key concepts involved as well as raise normative questions about the state's larger commitment to social and economic justice embodied in welfare-state structures.

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze these issues along the following lines: Although the language of "independence" is often used imprecisely in public debates over welfare policy, current discussions which presuppose that the aim of such policy is to provide independence for the poor can be seen as resting on an underlying commitment to the value of *autonomy* for citizens; indeed I will argue that a normative commitment to autonomy underlies state policies which support the existence and operation of economic markets to distribute goods. I will claim that to view the outcomes of market interactions as optimal, it must be presupposed that the choices made by those participating in

those markets—the inputs in the system—are authentic choices made by autonomously reflecting individuals. Poverty has detrimental effects on the capacity for people to make reflective and informed choices—to be autonomous relative to those choices. Therefore, a particularly powerful justification of welfare institutions emerges when we acknowledge the role these institutions can play in supplementing the market in the distribution of those resources necessary for the basic autonomy of citizens (whose life circumstances leave them without such resources). Supported by these claims, I will argue that the basic element of the new U.S. welfare system—the threat of the withdrawal of welfare support as an incentive for recipients to find paid employment without guaranteeing that recipients make such choices authentically and autonomously—conflicts with the justifying principles of such programs.

Before proceeding, it must be noted that although the purpose of this discussion is general and philosophical, any treatment of the issue of poverty and welfare must be framed in a way that directly responds to the social reality of late twentieth century poverty in industrialized nations such as the U.S., in particular with regard to the division of labor, family structure, and gender roles. In the U.S., poverty is increasingly a phenomenon which involves women in a fundamentally different way from men. Indeed, the primary recipients of poverty related welfare benefits are women with children. The conditions of autonomy—and the degree to which welfare benefits are able to secure those conditions for citizens—will very much depend on the personal domestic conditions of the people in question. So although I speak of "individuals" as the focus of attention here, it is crucial to see the object of analysis as people, mostly women, embedded in a network of personal and social roles, including those of feeding children and managing a household. Similarly, the activities of laboring and leisure must be analyzed in a way sensitive to the manner that women, for example, tend to organize their various obligations and life activities.

I will construct the argument in pieces. I begin with a discussion of autonomy, and I suggest that the value of autonomy lies at the heart of discussions of "independence" which dominate debates over welfare policy in the U.S. I then defend what I hope is a modest claim about the value of autonomy for societies which rely on markets for the distribution of resources and opportunities for citizens. I will then briefly survey literature on the general effects of poverty on personal and environmental factors related to the capacity for autonomy and, in closing, will bring the strands of the argument together in order to mount a critique of the restructured welfare apparatus now in place in the U.S.

I. Independence and Autonomy

The catch-all term which describes the goal of poverty-related welfare programs in the U.S. has been "independence," at least as that goal has been articulated in recent decades. Indeed in social scientific analyses as well as policy discussions, the state of being in poverty is often simply referred to as "dependency."[1] It has not, however, always been so: not only have such programs had differing aims and rationales in the years since their inception, the notion of "independence" has itself evolved both as explicated in theoretical discourse as well as discussed in public policy debates.[2] Such shifting usage invites more careful conceptual analysis.

To be independent is to be independent "of" something. To be self-sufficient, then, one must be free of certain sorts of hindrances and to have capacities to conduct one's life with the use of a certain normal range of powers, however "normal" is defined. The range of factors relative to which an individual functions in order to be labelled independent or self-sufficient varies widely across contexts. But without reference to the particular factors from which one is to be free to be "independent" the concept remains vacuous.[3]

No person, then, is *simply* independent. We all engage constantly in dependent interactions with other persons, institutions, groups, norms, technologies, and the like. We exist in a crowded collection of interdependent dynamics which enable us to perform everyday tasks as well as define who we are. In most contexts, dependence is not only a positive aspect of one's life but a defining feature of one's psychology and well being. For example, one might be deeply dependent on a spouse or partner: for emotional support, for material well being, and, at a deeper level, for the purposes of defining one's values and sources of fulfillment. Similarly, we all involve ourselves in deep dependencies in other sorts of interactions—jobs, financial arrangements, business exchanges—which enable us to conduct the everyday tasks of living and thriving. Many of these interactions are conceived in purely volunteerist and instrumental terms—as an exchange with a separately defined person or factor for a private purpose. But some interactions are so constant and unavoidable and so deeply involved in our deliberations, value constructions, motives, and the like that they quite literally become a part of who we are. A person's relation to a tradition, ideology or institution (such as a church) may take on this character, such that the person's perspective and values are so caught up with aspects of that external phenomenon that the person's personality can only be fully described with reference to them.[4]

With regard to all such interactions, there is no coherence to the idea that a personal ideal should or could be "independence" *simpliciter*. Indeed, if an interaction partially defines our identity and perspective, then independence from that interaction may not be possible, much less desirable. Dependence *as such* cannot be thought of as an evil to be avoided and so independence *as such* cannot be a principal goal of social policy. Therefore, reliance on the rhetoric of independence in justifying welfare cutbacks suppresses more particular value commitments underlying such policies. Among the concealed assumptions in this case is the view that those who rely on a guaranteed minimum income from state programs have a greater (or at least unacceptable) degree of reliance on those factors for survival as compared to say, those who rely (just as intensely) on a business or firm from which they receive a wage.

While the language of "independence" in public policy debates is beset by vagueness and obfuscation, we can nevertheless search for a basic political value, one consistent with the other value structures of liberal capitalist welfare states, which can serve as a more defensible justification for state policies toward the poor. Indeed, I would claim that the deeper value at stake in discussions of independence and self-sufficiency is "autonomy." To be autonomous is to be an authentic, competent self, not to be independent *per se* but to be independent of those factors and influences which would disrupt or destroy one's ability to function as a unique person.[5] The attribution of autonomy does not presuppose a detached, disconnected individual with no social ties or personal dependencies. Dependence is ubiquitous; but dependence conflicts with autonomy only when those dependencies stultify or distort our authentic selves; if the factors upon which we depended crush or impair our abilities to formulate and act on our settled sense of self then our true independence is denied. (I return to this issue below.)

In various discussions of government programs for distributing resources, the idea of independence often masks a particular (and biased) vision of a free and self-governing life. That is, it presupposes that a life of dependence on wage labor and paid employment is, in some sense, more self-sufficient than receiving (particular kinds of) support from the state. This is a controversial position, a controversy which the language of independence and self-sufficiency serves to suppress. "Autonomy," however, does not refer to any particular kind of life plan or pattern of interconnection with others and therefore does not reflect those particular biases (though it certainly may reflect others). My suggestion, therefore, is to frame this discussion in terms of autonomy rather than independence.

But to claim that autonomy can be seen as the basic value behind reference to independence in discussions of welfare programs is not to claim that autonomy is a free-standing value (though it is also not inconsistent with that claim). I only suggest that unless some more general ideal, such as autonomy, is the aim of policies of this sort, reference to independence *simpliciter* lacks credible force. I will argue later, however, that *further* reasons can be proffered for why securing autonomy for citizens ought to be a basic requirement for the economic policies of capitalist welfare states.

First, however, let us be more precise in our understanding of the concept of autonomy. The guiding intuitive element in the concept is that of "self-government": the autonomous person is one who acts, chooses, and judges for herself (however complex, embedded and interconnected with others that self turns out to be). To be self-governing, then, implies that one's choices are in this way "authentic."

Philosophers have done much to refine the key concepts being utilized here. One of the most commonly cited components of autonomy, for example, is critical competence. The autonomous person, it is claimed, must be minimally able to make rational and competent decisions. Such a person cannot lack crucial information or be unable to process, in some basic way, information bearing on decisions. A confused, non-rational, or manipulated person does not act autonomously. We can assume, for example, that she will later regret and/or disavow decisions made under such circumstances when or if the situation is improved. Hence, those choices made without basic critical competence are not truly her own in the way required for autonomy.

A second condition considered relevant to autonomy is the capacity for self-reflection. An authentic choice is made from preferences, values, and dispositions that would withstand critical self-scrutiny. This scrutiny takes many forms in various models. I would argue, in fact that such reflection must include as its object the personal-historical conditions of value development (as well as connections with the environment and other people) that bear on the person's changing character.[6] However, the autonomous person need not have *actually* reflected on every value or disposition that moves her to action. A minimally described *hypothetical* condition of reflection may be all that is necessary for autonomy: *were* one to turn one's attention to it, one could reflect upon the values, preferences, or personality traits that move one to action and, in so doing, not become deeply alienated from those traits.[7]

Thirdly, the autonomous person is free from various forms of self-deception, neurosis, or mental disability. These can all be seen as

extensions of the condition of competence noted above. The person who makes decisions compulsively, as an expression of an obsession or addiction, or because of an identifiable mental disorder, is not choosing for herself in the relevant way.

Another condition that some have claimed is necessary for autonomy is an adequate range of opportunities from which to make decisions. Joseph Raz, for example, claims that those with a severely limited opportunity range, or with a range of choices which all have intolerable costs, do not enjoy autonomy. That is, although a person may be a competent and independent decision maker, if her choices are only between highly unpalatable options or between one acceptable outcome and a range of highly unacceptable ones, she does not choose truly for herself.[8]

There are also areas of personality, however, that have not been sufficiently discussed by those analyzing the concept of autonomy, but which are, I would argue, necessary for authentic choice. These concern the affective and emotional capacities of persons. There is an identifiably cognitive bias in philosophical models of autonomy in that autonomy is often seen as expressed by detached, intellectual, and emotionally disengaged judgment. But it is certainly clear that many, if not most, of life's decisions are made authentically only when they involve an appropriate degree of affect and emotion, where "appropriateness" is fixed by the context and other aspects of the person's personality. Such a condition of proper affect can be violated in various ways, in that a person can be overly emotional or he or she can lack the requisite emotional "skills" that certain situations and decisions demand. Such dispositions will be seen as required by the situation (and by the person him or herself), so that an inability to call up or control one's emotions will alienate one from one's own acts and choices. Hence, under such conditions autonomy is compromised.

Now autonomy is often seen as a "threshold" concept, one which obtains all at once or not at all when the conditions necessary for it are in evidence. *Basic* autonomy can certainly be seen this way: unless particular conditions are met at adequate levels, the person is not autonomous or is not acting autonomously. *Ideal* autonomy is more a matter of degree: to the extent that individuals enjoy the characteristics described, they will be ideally autonomous and their decisions will be ideally authentic. Basic autonomy, however, is the focus of analysis here.

I mentioned earlier in discussing the concept of independence that people should be seen as deeply embedded in, if not constituted by, social and interpersonal relations. Autonomy as I conceive it here is consistent with the idea that persons are deeply connected with others and that they often make judgments, including moral ones, with regard

to particular contexts and concrete situations. I assume, in fact, that persons *are* relational, fluid, embedded in an environment that shapes them, and that they construct meaning for themselves according to an ongoing and multi-faceted narrative. It must be the case, however, that the autonomous person could, at least in a piecemeal manner, subject various aspects of herself—including her deep connections with others and the conditions and value commitments of her own development—to critical reflection without eliciting self-alienation. Now for those that hold that we are so deeply constituted by our relations to others, by the conditions of our development, or the power dynamics of our social history, that we cannot even turn our *attention* to such things from a perspective free of them, then one will not accept that autonomy of the sort I describe is at all desirable, if even possible. I don't take the time to argue against such a view here, and proceed simply by noting my disagreement with it.[9]

In sum: autonomy demands that a person enjoys critical competence in his or her decisions, a capacity for competent self-reflection, emotional stability, and freedom from neurosis and mental disability. These are general characteristics of the autonomous person. In any particular choice situation, the person must also be faced with a minimally adequate range of palatable options and must be able to choose outcomes from which she or he will not be deeply alienated (especially in light of the conditions that gave rise to their being chosen).

II. The Value of Autonomy for Choice-Based Institutions

One could advance a number of reasons why autonomy is a basic value, as well as reasons why it isn't. I have suggested so far that the language of independence in debates about social welfare policy should be understood in terms of autonomy. It can further be argued, however, that autonomy *ought to be* valued for certain kinds of societies, in particular those societies that utilize social arrangements under which mechanisms of collective choice are used to aggregate individual interests (mechanisms such as economic markets and democratic institutions). For the outcomes of these systems to have value, the choices that participants make as inputs must be reflective, competent, and authentic. The abilities necessary to make choices of this character amount to what I am calling basic autonomy.

In liberal (welfare state) capitalist states, no central conception of well being is adopted toward which citizens are specifically directed by state policy.[10] Economic markets are allowed to operate so that individuals and groups can pursue their own conceptions of well being in

coordination (and competition) with other co-citizens. Markets, then, can be seen as a mechanism for aggregating the well being (as personally conceived) of individuals. Such a mechanism of producing social outcomes is considered optimal when participants reach a point where no further exchanges will improve their condition (in labor markets, for example, when there is full employment).[11] However, such an outcome is valuable only if the choices of participants are made from a condition which truly reflects an authentic, non-distorted appraisal of their interests (or the interests of those with whom or on whose behalf they are acting). Otherwise, social outcomes will reflect those distortions and that lack of authenticity. Basic autonomy, as I conceive it here, represents the capacity for making such authentic choice. (That is not to say, of course, that even for non-autonomous persons, anyone *else* knows better than the person herself what her good is, only that the outcomes of the market interaction will fail to adequately reflect that good when the person is not able to act according to settled and authentic wishes.)

When a person chooses to take a job or buy a product, that choice reflects an appraisal of tradeoffs between that job or product and other opportunities. Markets, even heavily regulated markets, allow individual buyers and sellers to set the rates of exchange for such goods, within the constraints of local economic policy. The collective outcome of such actions can be regarded as optimal only if the participants are acting from motives which are related to the competent promotion of interests they care about. This is so only when participants act authentically and reflectively. For this reason, participants in markets must be minimally autonomous for the results of those market mechanisms to be optimal.[12]

The philosophical inference I make here, then, is that insofar as the state relies on the optimality of markets as a social choice mechanism it is obligated to secure conditions necessary for that optimality. If accepted principles of social justice demand or allow the use of some mechanism whose value depends on some background conditions being secured, the state is, in turn, obligated to at least promote, if not guarantee, the development of those background conditions. In this case the mechanism is economic markets and the background conditions are those relating to autonomy. Unless the latter are provided then the use of those market mechanisms lack sufficient justification, at best, and are markedly unfair at worst.

This claim about the value of autonomy is not meant to preclude more robust views about the fundamental value of autonomy (as necessary for personhood, as *the* fundamental moral value, as required by justice, or the like). Nor is it meant to be incompatible with views which eschew autonomy as a foundational value. My claim here is merely that insofar

as states rely on mechanisms such as economic markets to distribute goods and regulate citizen well being, and given the dependence of the optimality of those markets on the autonomy of their participants, then such states are attributing at least derivative value to the autonomy of those citizens. As I will argue below, this connects directly with the obligation to provide autonomy-ensuring conditions—through poverty-related welfare programs—for those citizens who do not enjoy such conditions by way of those economic markets themselves (that is, the unemployed poor).

III. Autonomy and Material Deprivation

Autonomy requires that an individual has developed a certain repertoire of mental skills and emotional dispositions. A person's material circumstances can have a direct effect on the development of those skills and hence on her or his autonomy. At the most basic level, certain material resources are clearly necessary for the competence required for autonomy, since lack of basic goods such as health care and nutrition can cause premature mortality and morbidity. Health care services in particular are necessary for persons to avoid disease and impaired functioning. Therefore, it is straightforward that extreme deficits in basic material resources result in the inability of individuals to develop and grow autonomously.

This relates to what some have argued are basic needs for normal human functioning. Norman Daniels, for example, defines basic health needs as "those things we need in order to maintain, restore, or provide . . . normal species functioning."[13] Such needs include, on Daniels' account: adequate nutrition, shelter, sanitary, safe, unpolluted living and working conditions, exercise, rest, and other features of healthy lifestyles; preventive, curative, and rehabilitative personal medical services; and non-medical personal (and social) support services.[14]

Amartya Sen has also done much to focus on similar ideas. Sen insists that it is the basic capability to choose among valuable functionings that is the central component of well being, as that is defined for the purposes of justice. A person's various "functionings" include any of the various "doings" or "beings" valued by an agent. Capabilities represent the person's ability to choose among that array of functionings and is the best representation of the person's actually achieved freedom.[15] Poverty can be defined, Sen claims, as "the failure of basic capabilities to reach certain minimally acceptable levels. The functionings relevant to this . . . can vary from such elementary physical ones as being well-nourished, being adequately clothed and sheltered, avoiding preventable

morbidity, etc., to more complex social achievements such as taking part in the life of the community, being able to appear in public without shame, and so on."[16]

In the context of the present argument, I want to draw a connection between material conditions associated with basic human functioning and the requirements for basic autonomy. There is ample empirical evidence (albeit not all uncontroversial) to support the view that severe deprivation of nutrition, housing, and education, lack of a stable living environment, and other poverty-related conditions have direct detrimental effects on cognitive development.[17] There is evidence, for example, that low birth weight and incidence of mental retardation tend to covary with poor nutrition.[18] Starvation in infancy is also associated with poor learning abilities, especially those involving short-term memory and attention span.[19] It is claimed that in the U.S., for example, "nutritional status . . . correlates closely with borderline and deficient cognitive and behavioral development".[20] Other factors which are directly or indirectly the result of poverty have also been shown to be associated with various medical and psychological disfunctioning such as depression (especially among women). [21]

What this evidence shows is that material deprivation can negatively affect those aspects of individual development that bear directly on cognitive capabilities. These difficulties, in turn, relate to potential inhibition of a person's capacity for self-reflection. If a person is malnourished, under constant threat of violence (either at home or in the immediate environment), or living in substandard housing (which might lack adequate heating or cooling facilities, or even be painted with high lead-content material[22]), then the capacity for general self-appraisal and self-reflection will tend to be compromised.[23] Or if such reflection takes place, it is likely that aspects of a person's personality that such circumstances induce—including perhaps increased aggression, depression or listlessness—will be characteristics from which the person is likely to be deeply alienated.

Also, the tremendous stress involved in coping with a threatening and unstable environment, substandard housing, the constant pressure to find paid employment while caring for children, and the like, can clearly be seen to produce, in some, a range of emotional difficulties. It has been reported, for example, that the incidence of clinical depression is significantly greater among low-income women. In addition, poor women with young children are three times more likely than the general population to experience stressful life events.[24]

In analyses of the effects of such structural factors on those in poverty, various deficits of motivational capacity have also been noted. Persistent

poverty, even when combined with minimal levels of state support, have been strongly associated with losses in a sense of control and personal sense of effectiveness ("effectance"). After such conditions have developed, new opportunities for work or social participation will sometimes go unexploited due to lack of motivation and sense of effective choice.[25]

It is important, of course, to distinguish the particular generations being discussed here. Although the effects of poverty on adult abilities to maintain autonomy are well noted, such effects are more pronounced in poor children. Low birth-weight associated from maternal nutritional deprivation, as well as inadequate pre-natal care, is strongly associated with higher incidence of mental retardation, motivational deficiencies, and (relatively) poor learning abilities.[26] Further, inadequate housing, education, and health resources contribute tremendously to later difficulties in adulthood which may severely inhibit the development of both the cognitive and emotional capacities associated with autonomy.

One of the most important public resources provided to growing children for the development of their autonomy is, of course, education. Adequate public education through the teenage years (and perhaps beyond) is necessary for all of the basic competencies and skills related to autonomy. Many children who attend publicly supported schools, however, may bring with them problems and disabilities which are themselves related to poverty that reduce the chances that such educational resources will be fully effective.[27] Furthermore, inadequate supporting income for books, transportation, clothing and the like will often detract from educational benefits in the classroom.

I mentioned also the necessity for adequate choice: insofar as materially deprived environments do not provide sufficiently varied and palatable life choices—in particular employment opportunities, social avenues, and lifestyle options—persons in such environments may well suffer inhibition of autonomy.[28] I will return to this point below.

I should stress that I am not claiming that the difficulties and disfunctions I describe are unique to the poor or that they pervade the lives of all poor people, nor do I contend that all and only poor people lack autonomy. Additionally, I do not subscribe to the model of a "culture of poverty" in explaining the lives of the impoverished.[29] Rather, I am arguing that severe deprivation of basic material goods have a significant negative *impact* on the conditions necessary for autonomy. This does not imply that those individuals suffering from those deprivations are making decisions that should be ignored or not fully respected. I only claim that the outcomes of the markets that we all participate in are compromised when some of us are forced to make decisions which, as a

result of poverty and material deficiencies, are not reflective of our authentic judgments and settled values.

IV. Poverty and Welfare Programs

Welfare programs of various sorts are intended, of course, to alleviate or at least lessen the effects of the conditions I just described.[30] Before recent restructuring, U.S. programs had taken various forms, including direct cash payments to families (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and to individuals (Supplemental Security Income), food stamps, school lunch subsidies, special training for young people before entering elementary school (Head Start), housing subsidies, health insurance (Medicaid), and supplemental health and food benefits for pregnant women (the Women, Infants and Children Program). These programs provide goods and services that otherwise might be provided as part of a wage package or private income, that is, through the market. But since such benefits are means-tested, it is assumed that market participation has not adequately provided such basic provisions. Most programs require, for example, that the recipients are unemployed.

At a general level, it can be claimed that welfare programs, when benefits are set at adequate levels, provide means necessary for, or at least contributory to, the development of autonomy-enhancing capacities.[31] A powerful justification for the very existence of a welfare state, then (though not the only one available), can be constructed along the lines I have been developing: insofar as markets and other collective choice mechanisms are generally used to allow for the distribution of goods and opportunities, then it must be established that participants in those mechanisms engage in autonomous decision making. However, due to market failures and inefficiencies—resulting in stable unemployment and underemployment—economic markets often fail to provide basic autonomy-enhancing goods to all citizens.[32] Hence, state sponsored programs should be instituted to guarantee that those goods necessary for citizen autonomy are provided. That is, material goods which are necessary for the development of the traits required by autonomy should not be allowed to depend on the happenstance of market competition. Shifts in market trends make reliance for one's complete livelihood on paid employment or competitive sales a risky proposition indeed, especially where basic life goods are concerned. This is especially so when one gains income from market participation indirectly, through the paid labor of one's parent or spouse, for instance. It can be claimed, in fact, that economic security, of the sort absent or threatened when no social

safety net exists to protect one against market shifts, is a requirement for autonomy.[33]

Deficits in nutrition, health resources, housing and education associated with poverty can be directly alleviated by in-kind transfer programs.[34] In addition, cash benefits allow for independence and basic materials necessary for a stable environment and settled existence from within which authentic life-choices can be made. Although most individuals gain access to such resources through their own or their relatives' market participation—employment—many others are not able to do so. Therefore, without publicly supported programs (or private charity), such individuals will likely lack basic autonomy (as well as suffer from other deprivations, of course).

Moreover, the conditions I outlined as necessary for autonomy can also be compromised by the persistent threat of the *loss* of basic goods. Severe stress due to potential job loss, instabilities of child-care arrangements, foregoing health insurance for the sake of a particular paid position, or other conditions that employed individuals face will also have detrimental effects on the development and maintenance of autonomy. And insofar as such programs as unemployment insurance, national health insurance, housing and child-care subsidies, and the like relieve those conditions, to that extent they help guarantee general autonomy.

Finally, aspects of the welfare state that provide materials necessary for the healthy development of the psychological preconditions of autonomy in children and young adults are especially fundamental to the proper functioning of social choice mechanisms. Shortages in educational and health facilities, including pre- and post-natal services, healthy social outlets for children, child-care resources, and conditions that allow for healthy parent-child relations, pointedly threaten the future autonomy of those young citizens.

So insofar as the conditions necessary for citizens to make autonomous choices should be provided by the state, and the institution of welfare programs are necessary to do this (especially insofar as poverty—which in turn inhibits autonomy—is relieved by such programs), then states have an obligation to provide (or arrange for the provision of) such resources through effective welfare programs. This follows from the dependence on markets to coordinate citizens' pursuit of well being as well as from the rhetoric of "independence" to which defenders and critics of welfare institutions seem to be committed. This leads us now to the consideration of welfare reform and the newly restructured welfare apparatus in the U.S.

V. Welfare Reform

Under the restructured U.S. welfare system, federally directed poverty-relief programs have been dismantled. Replacing them is block grants to states who must revamp their own welfare policy to provide work-incentive programs aimed at moving recipients from the "dependent" state of welfare receipt to the "independent" condition of paid employment. The key components of the new federal legislation are that the federal guarantee of cash assistance for poor families has ended. Each state will receive a lump sum to run its own programs from a fixed allocation of federal funds. Federal guidelines lay down strictures for those programs, among which are the requirement that families receiving welfare participate in "allowable work activities" within two years of first applying for welfare, where failure to do so results in the family losing benefits. Allowable work activities are defined by the state and vary depending on the age of the recipient, family structure, the availability of child care, and other factors. Lifetime benefits are limited to five years, but a state can choose to impose stricter limits (which is likely as states try to avoid appearing to be "attractive" to the poor in neighboring areas). Exemptions to the lifetime limit are possible but only for a total of 20% of welfare cases. Welfare-to-work and workfare programs are now being developed in most states, variations among which are wide but fall within the general guidelines of the federal legislation.[35]

The first observation that must be made here is that the employment opportunities that most welfare recipients face are such that the provisions necessary for basic autonomy will not be provided even if a job is found. A large, and increasing, proportion of poor people in the U.S. have full-time paid employment. But since the current minimum wage will not lift even a small family above the poverty line, and the wage packages of such jobs rarely include health insurance or housing guarantees, employment at this level often will not alleviate the conditions destructive of autonomy that I have described.

But assuming that employment does provide these minimum provisions. It is nevertheless the case, and this is my main point, that the choices that lead to participation in those modes of employment—the choices to enter the labor market in this or that sector and to develop this or that skill—are often not made under conditions that guarantee autonomy. Since the incentive structure of reform proposals are such that employment decisions are made before (or, whether or not) a person has developed or been able to maintain the capacities necessary for autonomy, the choices of employment will often not be, in the sense defined here, fully authentic. (That is not to say, to repeat, that they are

not rational or deserving of respect.) This is especially so when access to training and skill development is not provided—as is the case with many state-level programs—for recipients are then less able to develop the cognitive competence necessary to adequately judge their own capacities for various life activities. What this means is that the resultant choices/outcomes will likely be ones from which the person will be, upon critical reflection, deeply alienated; hence autonomy is not manifested in those choices.

The implication of this phenomenon is that the outcomes of the market mechanisms in question are often not reflective of authentic choices by the participants in those markets. And since labor market competition determines, in large part, the distribution of wealth and leisure, the quality of one's work activity, opportunities to develop skills, and opportunities for a predictable and stable lifestyle, much of the determinants of one's general well being are shaped by that mechanism. But if people's decisions about the manner in which they participate in that mechanism are compromised (as inauthentic), then the value of the outcomes of that mechanism is severely compromised.

Let me now survey more systematically the effects of the restructured welfare system on participant autonomy. The failure of this system to ensure continued autonomy will vary in character depending on the recipient's position relative to the threat of the cut-off of benefits, as well as the age of the recipient (in particular whether the person is an adult or a dependent/child). The threat to autonomy, however, is apparent at each stage:

Before Cut-Off—Adults

During the probationary period during which private employment is meant to be found, the autonomy of welfare recipients is compromised by several elements:

1. The lack of opportunity for adequate employment. Given general employment patterns, despite moderate economic expansion, there nevertheless will remain many pockets of unemployment in which a range of adequate choices among employment situations is lacking. "Adequate choice" refers to jobs that award benefit-packages sufficient to replace state-sponsored health benefits for the person and her children. Similarly, a lack of skills, and especially opportunities for skill development, will limit the choice range for employment for many poor individuals. Therefore, given that "adequate choice range" is a necessary condition of autonomy, these conditions will prevent the actual choice of paid employment from being an autonomous one for many individuals.

2. Lack of adequate benefits. Present welfare benefit levels in most U.S. states, combined with food stamps, housing subsidies and health care benefits, will often not be sufficient to lift even small families out of poverty. It has been reported, for example, that among welfare recipients, discretionary income (income for clothes, utilities, household expenses and transportation) is *negative* or less than $30 per month in 44 states.[36] Hence, insofar as the poverty line roughly indicates a threshold of resources necessary for autonomy, such inadequacy guarantees less than autonomous existence for welfare recipients.

3. Stress from Threat of Cut-Off (and other factors). As I indicated above, severe stress is often detrimental to emotional stability and normal cognitive reflection necessary for autonomous choice. The constant worry that desperately needed resources will be discontinued for oneself and one's children, along with anxieties and apprehension stemming from a poverty stricken existence, will tend to compromise autonomy for many poor individuals. The stress involved in actually procuring benefits is also extremely debilitating, since that process often involves repeated trips to understaffed benefit offices that take long periods of time to process claims.[37]

Before Cut-Off—Children

All of the factors just listed apply equally to the children of poor adults. In addition, inadequate educational opportunities for many poor children, combined with less than adequate health resources, serve to threaten the healthy development of cognitive and affective potentials necessary for the realization of autonomy.

Also, although some states are providing child-care subsidies as part of welfare-reform packages, the levels of such subsidies are quite low, ensuring that many young children will be kept in relatively low quality environments. Depending on the nature of such environments (and of course conditions vary widely) the emotional and cognitive conditions necessary for the development of autonomy will often be lacking. While non-parental child-care itself shows little sign of producing ill-effects in children, care settings where supervision, attention, and affection is minimal will much more likely do so.

After Cut-Off

If welfare benefits provided by the state are minimally necessary (when provided at adequate levels) for autonomous existence, life without these resources will, *ex hypothesi,* not be autonomous. For both adults and children, the discontinuing of minimal basic resources will perforce

result in loss of autonomy and hence will nullify the autonomy of later employment choices, should opportunities for such arise. Under present structures it is unclear what will become of the numerous individuals whose entire source of support will be discontinued after the probationary period has elapsed and private employment has not been found. Presumably, basic survival will then be in jeopardy.

VI. Conclusions

Given the reliance on economic markets to distribute goods, and given the failure of those markets to provide basic, autonomy-securing conditions adequately for all, welfare programs ought to be structured so that the conditions necessary for reflective choice are guaranteed prior to or independent of market participation. Hence reform proposals that induce market entrance without such guarantees compromise the authenticity of the choices such entrance involves. For these reasons, I conclude that such measures are, in a sense, self-defeating: to the extent that a major purpose of welfare is to supply basic autonomy-related provisions in order that social participation (social and political as well as economic) is reflective of settled and authentic decisions, then reform measures that fail to maintain the guarantee of such provisions defeat that purpose.

In closing, let me mention what I take to be the major objection to these arguments typically raised by defenders of work-related welfare reforms.[38] This argument focuses on the prediction that paid employment is the *only* secure source of autonomy for citizens. The argument is that true independence (and hence autonomy) means independence from state-supported income maintenance programs, and paid employment, in a suitably competitive economy, will most effectively provide autonomy-related resources for individuals. Indeed, the very *point* of welfare-to-work reform programs is to induce people to move into the job market so as to achieve this very autonomy.[39]

The main response to this argument is this: even if a position in private employment would always provide autonomy-related resources for people, it would nevertheless be the case that the *initial* decision of entrance into a particular job or career or lifestyle may well be made from a position where the authenticity of the decision is compromised by deprived material conditions. Under the reform proposals being developed, people in poverty would need to choose this or that paid position from a position of desperation, constraint, and time pressures. (It must be emphasized how decisions about employment severely constrain and condition all other lifestyle decisions, in that certain employment situations

limit opportunities to subsequently alter one's situation, negotiate for a more ideal mix of labor and leisure, organize one's domestic activities, and the like.) Under the presently inadequate levels of welfare provisions, as well as the conditions of low income that I have described, initial decisions to enter the job market will often be non-autonomous (even granting the highly questionable assumption that the job chosen will provide sufficient resources to secure autonomy).

As an alternative to this threat-driven welfare system, government policy should be directed at the revitalization of the labor market itself. If, indeed, adequate employment at jobs the person has chosen authentically is the best long-term source for autonomy-ensuring resources, a high government priority must be put on the expansion of the job force in those sectors that provide such resources. As long as choices among employment positions are less than adequate (as well as skill-development opportunities, if such choices are afforded), job opportunities for poor individuals must be expanded if the market choices being made are to remain authentic reflections of personal well being. Full employment is a false goal if it is achieved without the exercise of authentic choice by labor market participants. Similar conclusions can also be applied to choices about social and personal environments. Without autonomy, those choices do not necessarily manifest advances in well being.

Finally, the proposals being criticized here are motivated by a contentious conception of the motives of participants in markets, especially labor markets. A serious misconception concerning the incentive structures of poor people—a misconception many economists and policy makers share about all people—is that labor, for most people, is essentially a *disutility*. It follows from that contentious assumption that only through threats of extreme deprivation can the state induce adequate employment-pursuit among the poor. But there is much evidence that when employment choices are made authentically and under optimal conditions, work ceases to be counted as a disutility by individuals.[40] Therefore, the draconian measures that operate within the restructured welfare system in the U.S. are of dubious necessity at best and terribly cruel at worst.

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NOTES

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Advancement of Socio-Economics 8th International Conference, Geneva, Switzerland, July, 1996. I would like to thank Gerald Doppelt, Stephen White, Thomas Christiano, and Darleen Pryds for helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

1. For a critical analysis of the discourse of welfare research and policy discussion, see Sanford F. Schram, *Words of Welfare* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) and Andrew Polsky, *The Rise of the Therapeutic State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

It is curious, of course, that the term "dependence" is reserved only for *certain* recipients of government benefits. Despite the many varieties of state support of non-poor individuals and businesses in the U.S.—from tax relief for home-owners to subsidies for various industries—the notion that only the recipients of poverty-related welfare are "dependent" is of rather dubious credibility.

2. For discussion of this point, see Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs* 19, no. 2 (1994), 309–36.

3. There is a great deal of philosophical literature on the concept of "freedom" which covers this same ground. For example, see the essays in David Miller, ed., *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

4. These observations resemble claims made by communitarian, feminist, and other writers as grounds for criticism of political liberalism. I hope, however, that at the level of generality I express them, the claims in the text would be congenial to both liberal writers and their critics.

5. For philosophical discussion of the concept of autonomy see, for example, John Christman, "Constructing the Inner Citadel: Recent Work on the Concept of Autonomy," in *Ethics* 99, no. 1 (Fall, 1988), 109–24. Other discussions of the concept of note include Haworth, *Autonomy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Diana Meyers, *Self, Society and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Bernard Berofsky, *Liberation from Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Alfred Mele, *Autonomous Agents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

6. See my "Autonomy and Personal History," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (March, 1991), 1–24.

7. As an expression of this idea, many have claimed that the result of this sort of reflection must be "identification" with the values and (first-order) desires in question, as opposed to the "non-alienation" specified here. (See for example Gerald Dworkin, "The Concept of Autonomy," in John Christman, ed., *The Inner Citadel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 54–62.) This has become controversial, though, since "identification" is a very slippery notion, and none of its various construals have come out as uncontroversially necessary for autonomy. I think, however, that a minimal requirement in this regard is that the autonomous person is not, or could not come to be, deeply alienated from the values and preferences that she reflects upon for autonomy to be retained.

Also, there are those who argue that reflection of any sort is unnecessary for autonomy: see, e.g., Bernard Berofsky, *Liberation from Self.* My arguments concerning poverty and welfare, however, do not turn on the precise nature of autonomy, as long as critical competence (in the general way I go on to describe) is a necessary condition for it.

8. See Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 373–77. My own view is that while an adequate range of choice is indeed necessary for autonomy, it is only *derivatively* so: we require a certain range of choice because according to the value system we have reflectively embraced, such opportunities must be afforded. There are not universal and objective criteria for the adequacy of options; it depends on one's (authentic) values and life-plan.

9. I discuss this issue in other work: see "Individualism, Autonomy, and the Social Constitution of Selves" (unpublished ms.).

10. See Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism," in *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 181–204.

11. This is a highly simplified picture which glosses over many controversies. My argument here, however, is not about whether markets are ideal methods of producing social well being but about what value presuppositions must be granted when their use is endorsed as a matter of social policy.

12. For discussion of claims similar to this, see Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). The same points can be made about democracy: the outcomes of collective decision-making bodies are adequate reflections of the judgments of individual participants only when those participants are acting authentically (autonomously).

13. See "Health Care Needs and Distributive Justice," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10, no. 2 (Spring, 1981), 158; cf. also "Equality of What: Welfare, Resources, or Capabilities?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1, Supplement (Fall, 1990), 273–96.

14. "Health Care Needs and Distributive Justice," p. 158.

15. See *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), Chapter 7. Sen presents these claims in the context of working out a defensible principle of, and metric for measuring, equality of condition.

16. *Inequality Reexamined*, pp. 109–110.

17. For an overview of the social science literature on poverty, see, for example, Sheldon Danziger and Daniel Weinberg, eds., *Fighting Poverty: What Works and What Doesn't* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) and Sheldon Danziger et al., eds., *Confronting Poverty: Prescriptions for Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

18. See Z. A. Stein and M. W. Susser, "Prenatal Nutrition and Mental Competence," in John D. Lloyd-Still, ed., *Malnutrition and Intellectual Development* (Littleton, MA: Publishing Sciences Group, 1976). See also David E. Barrett and Deborah A. Frank, *The Effects of Undernutrition on Children's Behavior* (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1987).

19. Reported in Lloyd-Still, *Malnutrition and Intellectual Development*, p. 9.

20. This conclusion is from a study which focused on the inner city poor: see Trevor Sewell, Vivian D. Price, and Robert J. Karp, "The Ecology of Poverty," in Robert J. Karp, ed., *Malnourished Children in the United States* (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1993). Sewell, et al., cite R. Hepner and N. C. Maiden in focusing on "[g]rowth rate, nutrient intake and 'mothering' as determinants of malnutrition in disadvantaged children" (*Nutrition Reviews* 29 [1971], 219–23).

21. See, e.g., Vivian Parker Makosky, "Sources of Stress: Events or Conditions," in Deborah Belle, ed., *Lives in Stress* (New York: Sage, 1982), 35–53.

22. A recent study, for example, has found that adolescents exposed to high amounts of lead (as measured in bone marrow tests) manifested a higher incidence of somatic anxious/depressed behavior, social problems (including delinquency), attention deficits, and aggression. See Herbert L. Needleman, et al., "Bone Lead Levels and Delinquent Behavior," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 275 (Feb. 7, 1996), 353–69.

23. For discussion of a parallel point, see Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 191–221.

24. See Vivian Parker Makosky, "Sources of Stress: Events or Conditions," 35–53. Also, the observations in this paragraph are not meant to imply that all or most poor households are filled with violence, abuse, and neglect (and certainly not that such phenomenon do not also occur in large numbers among the non-poor).

25. See, e.g., Thomas J. Kane, "Giving Back Control: Long-Term Poverty and Motivation," *Social Service Review* (Sept., 1987), 405–19; Nancy Goodban, "The Psychological Impact of Being on Welfare," *Social Service Review* (Sept., 1985), 403–22; and Gerald Gurin and Patricia Gurin, "Expectancy Theory in the Study of Poverty," *Journal of Social Issues* 26 (Spring, 1970), 83–104. The concept of "learned helplessness" is not uncontroversial, of course. See M. E. P. Seligman and Judy Garber, eds., *Human Helplessness: Theory and Applications* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

26. See Stein and Susser, "Prenatal Nutrition and Mental Competence."

27. See Richard J. Murnane, "Education and the Well-Being of the Next Generation," in Danziger, et al., eds., *Confronting Poverty*, pp. 289–307.

28. For a well-discussed study of the employment and social options facing inner city poor, see William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

29. See, e.g., Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," in Daniel P. Moynihan, ed., *On Understanding Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); for discussion, see C. Emory Burton, *The Poverty Debate: Politics and the Poor in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992). Also, pointing out how structural factors are strongly correlated with attitudinal tendencies and personality traits in no way implies that such conditions are unalterable by virtue of resource investment and institutional change. Therefore, whatever conditions exist in poor areas (urban and rural) which

constrain the lives of those individuals, nothing I say here implies that such conditions cannot and should not be alleviated directly or indirectly by external state policy.

30. As I have noted, I generally use the term "welfare" here as it is used in the U.S., referring only to poverty-related state programs and hence abstracting from the broader notion of a welfare *state*. This exemplifies the so-called "poor law" view of the welfare state. The alternative view is that government provision of material goods is a general distributive mechanism available for all citizens—a set of background guarantees to which both the (privately) employed and the unemployed poor have a right. For the distinction between these competing visions of the welfare state, see Brian Barry, "The Welfare State Versus the Relief of Poverty," in A. Ware and R. Goodin, eds., *Needs and Welfare* (London: Sage Press, 1990), 73–103. Cf. also Leslie Jacobs, *Rights and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), chapter 8.

31. It is certainly controversial to claim that welfare levels are *presently* adequate to enhance autonomy, and this is certainly not the case in the U.S. currently. I assume in this section a slightly idealized version of U.S. programs, where levels of support are set considerably higher than they now are. Even granting this, however, there are many critics of social welfare programs as they generally are structured who question their capability to achieve valued outcomes, in particular for all groups affected (women for instance). See, for example, Dorothy C. Miller, *Women and Social Welfare: A Feminist Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

32. Indeed, one could argue that through the over-commodification of life goods, pressures of competitive social relations, the equation of economic goods with human well-being, and related phenomena, market mechanisms will always compromise autonomy in various ways. However, I assume here for the sake of argument that they do not.

33. For defense of this claim, see Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, pp. 210–12.

34. I do not take up the issue here of whether cash transfers can achieve this goal and hence whether cash transfers are preferable to in-kind benefits. I would argue, however, that insofar as the resources enumerated here are requisites for authentic choice then cash transfers, whose utilization depends on individual choices, will not be preferable insofar as they themselves depend on the assumption of recipient autonomy.

35. "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996," H.R. 3734 (U.S. House of Representatives). For a summary of the law's provisions, see "Legislative Summary" in American Sociological Association Briefing "From Welfare to Work: Opportunities and Pitfalls," Congressional Briefing, March 10, 1997.

36. See Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood, *Welfare Realities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 136–42. This was the case under the old AFDC program. Given projected levels of state benefits under the new system, however, this is very unlikely to change.

37. For an account of such experiences, see Rita Henley Jensen, "Welfare," *Ms.* (July/August, 1995), 56–61.

38. There are other objections that I also do not consider: for example, whether the particular details of welfare laws in the U.S. tend to encourage continued utilization of those benefits even if paid employment is made available (for such an argument, see Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* [New York: Basic Books, 1984]). Such an argument would need to be sensitive to the manner in which the benefit delivery system in the U.S. is (or was) structured—the specific nature of the social service work force and welfare management systems used to administer benefits—as well as the various and shifting attitudes people have toward receiving welfare resources. Whatever aspects of the old welfare delivery system that may have, allegedly, encouraged individuals to avoid working at otherwise adequate jobs, I do not take such factors to be at all endemic to welfare delivery systems as a whole.

Also, one certainly could question the justification of welfare states entirely, arguing that the market supplementation approach of welfare systems should be replaced by more robust and egalitarian measures of market restructuring. Nothing I say here should be read as inconsistent with such claims (which in similar form I have defended elsewhere myself). My arguments here are developed within the context of already existing welfare state systems.

39. This argument was mentioned by Gerald Doppelt in comments on an earlier version of this paper.

40. For a defense of the claim that work is not a disutility, see Robert Lane, *The Market Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Part V.