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The Demise of Conscience, Part 1

by Jacob G. Hornberger

As libertarians have long pointed out, both the welfare state and the warfare state have brought immeasurable damage to our country.

With its various programs of confiscatory taxation of income and capital to accomplish its coercive redistribution of wealth, the welfare state has brought standards of living lower than otherwise would have been the case. This is especially true for those at the bottom of the economic ladder, who oftentimes spend large portions of their lives as dependent wards of the state rather than as productive, self-reliant people in society.

The damage from the warfare state has been even greater: terrorist blowback, torture, rendition, suspension of habeas corpus and civil liberties, disregard of constitutional constraints on power, wars of aggression and foreign occupations, governmental secrecy, assaults on privacy, and, of course, an ever-growing military-industrial complex.

Together, the welfare state and the warfare state have produced out-of-control federal spending, which has resulted in an endless cycle of financial, monetary, and economic crises, most recently demonstrated by the home-mortgage crisis and the 50 percent drop in the value of the dollar during the past five years alone.

Another adverse consequence — perhaps the most important — has been the demise of individual conscience among the American people, which has accompanied the rise of the welfare-warfare state.

To understand how the welfare state has contributed to this phenomenon, it is necessary to understand how the welfare state operates. Under the welfare state, the government takes money from some people, generally the wealthy and middle class, in order to distribute it to others. The recipients are generally supposed to be people in economic need — the “poor” — but massive amounts of tax money also find their way into the pockets of corporations and wealthy and middle-class individuals and families as well as local, state, and foreign governments.

Most Americans have come to accept the legitimacy and inevitability of the welfare state as part of their everyday lives. One of the main reasons for this is undoubtedly that they have been born and raised under a welfare state and cannot imagine life without it.

More important, except for libertarians most Americans give nary a thought to the fundamental immorality of the welfare state itself. It's almost as if people have elevated the federal government to the level of a deity, one whose welfare-state operations are moral per se and immune to challenge.

Suppose I were to rob a bank of \$100,000. Suppose also that the money was taken only from the accounts of millionaires. I don't use the money for myself but instead distribute it in various proportions to impoverished inner-city youth, struggling schools, a poor person needing a heart transplant, homeless people, and penniless couples in their 80s.

I'm a good person, right? Selfless, saintly, caring, and compassionate, right? After all, I didn't spend one dime of the money on myself. I gave it all to the poor and the needy.

Most people can easily see the flaw in that reasoning. "It wasn't your money that you were distributing," they would exclaim. "It's money that you stole from others."

Suppose I responded, "So what? The money came from millionaires, who didn't need it as badly as the people to whom I gave it. And I didn't use any of it for myself."

Again, most people would recognize the fundamental immorality in what I had done. They would say, "You are nothing but a thief. Your actions deserve condemnation and even punishment, not praise or commendation. That money belonged to those millionaires, not to you and not to the people to whom you gave it. You could have asked the millionaires to donate their money to the poor but you had no moral or legal right to steal it from them, despite what you did with the money."

Yet as soon as the process is elevated to the ranks of the federal government, the moral compass of most Americans (libertarians being an exception) is thrown entirely out of kilter. The standard mindset is: If the federal government is doing it, then it must be morally right.

Suppose the majority of elected representatives in Congress vote to impose a tax on all millionaires. The IRS collects the money, on pain of fine, imprisonment, and levies and liens for anyone who refuses to pay. Federal welfare agencies distribute the money (or actually what's left of it after paying governmental expenses associated with collecting and distributing it) to the poor, the needy, the disadvantaged, and the elderly.

What's the response of the average American? "What a caring and compassionate person I am. How fortunate that I belong to a society where my government taxes the rich and gives to the poor. We are all good people — politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens alike."

What about all the moral principles that applied to me, the person who did the same thing that the federal government did? In the mind of the average American, all that disappears as soon

as the welfare state enters the picture. The exercise of conscience doesn't even enter the picture because of the supreme deference given to the federal government and its welfare state.

Conscience and choice

Consider also the effect that the welfare state has on an individual person's exercise of conscience — that is, in deciding what to do with his income and savings. Suppose we live in a society in which there is no income tax (i.e., the kind of society our American ancestors lived in). Let's say that after paying off all your expenses, you have \$10,000 left over. You have a range of choices for disposing of that money. Should you donate it to your church or to some fund-raising drive for the poor? Should you use it to help out your ailing parents? How about a new motorcycle? Vacation? Save it for a rainy day?

That's where the exercise of conscience comes in. That mental process of deciding whether to do this or that is what causes the conscience to strengthen. Conversely, when government suppresses such choices, the exercise of conscience diminishes. A wide range of choices in society with respect to what people do with their own money inevitably nudges morality to higher levels.

But suppose that the federal government doesn't feel that people can be trusted to do the right thing with their money. It imposes a \$10,000 tax on you and others to help fund the poor and needy. That leaves you without that \$10,000 that prompted you to make choices. You just write out a \$10,000 check to the IRS and you are thereby relieved of any further struggle over what to do with that money. No more anguishing over whether to give the money to your church, your parents, or the poor or whether to spend it on yourself. Now you can just automatically consider yourself a good, caring, compassionate person because Caesar — the organized means of coercion and compulsion in society — has confiscated your money and given it to the poor and needy (and others, such as foreign regimes) on your behalf.

Free will and the welfare state

Perhaps the best example of the demise of conscience among the American people is how they think about Social Security. This welfare-state program is one of the best manifestations of how people have effectively raised the federal government to the level of a deity, one that they think is working in partnership with God in such areas as helping the poor and honoring one's mother and father.

There is a fundamental problem with that way of thinking, especially for Christians, however. God's system relies on freedom and free will while Caesar's system depends on the use of force.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, Social Security is a direct and mandatory transfer program. There is no fund in which people have placed their money. Instead, the state uses its

monopoly of force to take money from one group of people (the young and productive) in order to give it to another group of people (the elderly).

The difference between a person's voluntarily helping out his parents or other elderly people with his own money and the state's forcible taking of money from one person and giving it to another person is the difference between day and night, especially from a religious or moral standpoint.

After all, can an immoral act be converted into a moral act simply by having the government do it? If stealing is wrong on a private basis, even when the money is used to help others, how is that same act converted into a moral deed when the state is doing it?

Moreover, from the Christian perspective the second-greatest gift that God has given to mankind (the first being the birth and death of Jesus Christ) is free will. What that means is that God will not impose his will on anyone. He leaves it to each person to make his own choices as he progresses from birth to death, including choices dealing with what a person should do with money that comes into his possession.

For example, when the young rich man approached Jesus and asked him what he needed to do to be saved, Jesus told him to keep God's commandments. Then he suggested that the young man sell everything he had and give it to the poor. The young man, being wedded to his wealth, could not answer that call and walked away dejected.

Whether one believes that Jesus was simply causing the young man to confront an impediment to his following God or whether he really meant for the young man to do what he suggested, one thing is clear: when the young man rejected the suggestion, Jesus did not call on any of his disciples to take the young man's money in order to give it to the poor. By the same token, Jesus did not call on Roman officials to tax the man so that the money could be distributed to the poor. Instead, understanding that free will entails the right to say "No," Jesus respected the man's choice by not forcibly interfering with it.

Compare Jesus' response to that of the federal government and its Social Security scheme. The idea is that it's the moral duty of children to take care of their parents, but Americans cannot be trusted to voluntarily fulfill this particular commandment. Therefore, they must be forced to do so through the tax mandates of the welfare state. Every person is required to send a portion of his income to the Social Security Administration, which then distributes the money to the elderly. Everyone in the nation, especially the politicians, bureaucrats, and taxpayers, is then considered a good, caring, and compassionate person for living in a country where the welfare state provides for the elderly. The fact that the money being distributed and received is stolen, morally speaking, from others fails to rise to the conscious level of most people, including the Christians.

Where is free will in this particular process? It's gone. Everyone is required to send his money to the Social Security Administration. If he refuses to do so, the government imprisons

and fines him. A person cannot simply say, “It is my right under principles of free will to walk away from my parents. I choose to say ‘No.’” The Social Security Administration makes sure that everyone fulfills God’s commandment, especially those who would choose to not give any money to their elderly parents.

Once again, the wider the range of choices with which people are faced with respect to the use of their money, the more their conscience will be exercised. “Should I honor my mother and father or not?” “Should I provide for them or not?” With Social Security, those questions seldom have to be asked. The welfare state, and specifically the Social Security scheme, oftentimes relieves people of the responsibility (or opportunity) of dealing with such issues.

Why do Americans continue to embrace the welfare state despite its manifest immorality, damage, and destructiveness? My hunch is that they have lost faith in themselves, a loss that they have replaced with faith in government. They want to be relieved as much as possible of the difficult choices and decisions that life presents them. By delegating the responsibility of making peaceful choices about what they do with their money to the welfare state, they have rendered unto Caesar the things that belong to God, including the exercise of free will. The result has been a demise of conscience.

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This article was originally published in the March 2008 edition of *Freedom Daily*.