Backgrounder

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My Neighbor's Keeper? Rethinking Responsibility and the Role of Government

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When a neighbor is in need, who bears responsibility to help? Increasingly in America, responsibility for taking care of others is placed at the foot of government. In a culture that speaks about desires in terms of needs, needs in terms of rights, and rights in terms of entitlements, government is considered obligated to provide citizens more and more. When people need assistance, therefore, the first place many think to turn is Washington, D.C.[1]

This does not necessarily mean that people are less generous or willing to help others than they once were. Rather, it suggests that a cultural shift has taken place concerning where responsibility for others is seen to lie. Today, if neighbors or local congregations reach out to those in need, they are thought to act out of the voluntary kindness of their hearts. It is assumed that government takes care of the needy out of the obligation of responsibility.

This lopsided conception of government responsibility is morally problematic, socially debilitating, and financially unsustainable. Government is not solely—or even primarily—responsible for taking care of our neighbors. That responsibility belongs to each one of us as participants in a variety of relationships and overlapping communities.

What Is Responsibility?

The word *responsibility* implies an *ability to respond* to someone or something that makes a claim on us. Bosses make claims upon the time and the area of focus of their employees, and children represent

Talking Points

- Increasingly in America, responsibility for taking care of others is placed at the foot of government. When people need assistance, the first place many think to turn is Washington, D.C.
- But government does not have a monopoly on responsibility for meeting people's needs. Responsibility lies in a variety of social relationships and overlapping communities, including families and religious congregations.
- When popular debate highlights a problem and turns immediately to calling for federal or state government remedy, it overlooks these primary relationships and personal forms of responsibility.
- It is only when local communities based on personal interaction fail to provide for people's needs that government responsibility comes into play. Even in such cases, policy should acknowledge the responsibility that such institutions as families, neighborhoods, and churches have for their members and remove barriers and disincentives for them to act in personal ways to solve problems.

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claims upon the attention and resources of their parents. To be responsible is to be answerable for action; when we recognize a valid or authoritative call to do something, we have a duty to respond—that is, we have a responsibility.[2]

Responsibility hinges not only on a legitimate call for action, but also on the ability or capacity of the responsible agent to satisfy that call. Generally, people can be held responsible only for actions that they are able to perform or for circumstances that are under their control. Employees are usually given responsibility for tasks they are deemed capable of performing—i.e., that lie within their skill set. Similarly, parents bear responsibility for their children, in part because their natural love and affinity for their offspring generally enable parents to provide better care than a stranger could provide.[3]

Determining responsibility for a person in need therefore requires asking at least two questions: "To whom can he or she make a valid call for help?" and "Who is best able to meet his or her needs?" Responsibility usually does not lie in one single institution or one set of relationships. A family certainly bears responsibility to care for one of its members, but so also do friends, fellow church members, and neighbors. These are relationships in which people represent moral claims on—or call forth legitimate action from—each other.

Community Membership and Moral Obligations

We recognize another person's moral claim on us as we understand him or her to be a member of a community to which we also belong. We are bound to fellow members by the common purpose around which our community unites, and we rely on each other to achieve shared goals and goods. That is, we make claims upon each other as we work together to fulfill the goal our community exists to achieve. This is as true for communities that we join voluntarily as for those we do not, for sports teams and service organizations as for families and nations of origin.

Insofar as my young neighbor and I happen to belong to several of the same communities, I am obligated to help her on more than one basis. In addition to our shared humanity, I am a resident in her neighborhood and a citizen in the same town, state, and nation. I may also be a member of her church, and my son may be in her class at school. When popular debate highlights a problem and turns immediately to calling for federal or state government remedy, it overlooks these primary relationships and forms of responsibility.

Where Does Responsibility Lie?

The different communities in which we participate bind us, in different ways and to different degrees, to other members. How should these various communities be ordered or ranked in terms of levels of responsibility? When a child is in need, to which community or set of relationships should we turn first for assistance?

Responsibility begins closest to home—that is, among those who know children the best, care for them daily, and are bound to them through natural ties (i.e., their families). But what if families can't meet those needs on their own?

Consider the real-life case in Prince George's County, Maryland, of a young boy named Deamonte Driver. Deamonte was 12 years old when he developed an abscessed tooth in early 2007. Deamonte's low-income single mother was eligible for Medicaid, but some sort of "bureaucratic foul-up"[4] prevented access to it. Instead, Deamonte was taken to the emergency room, where he was medicated for pain and sinusitis and sent home.

1. Coincidentally, federal spending has increased 2000 percent in the past 40 years, while inflation has risen a comparatively modest 500 percent. Less than half of the increase in federal spending is due to defense and homeland security spending. Entitlement spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid alone consumes 8.4 percent of today's GDP, and that figure is expected to double in about 40 years. See Alison Acosta Fraser, Rea S. Hederman, Jr., and Michelle Muccio, "Federal Revenue and Spending: A Book of Charts," 2007, at *www.heritage.org/research/features/BudgetChartBook/charts_P/p9.cfm.*
2. See Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), Chapter 6.
3. This is not the only reason parents are responsible for their children, but the ability to offer the best care becomes very relevant when considering parental versus government responsibility.

What he actually needed was to have the abscessed tooth pulled by an oral surgeon. The cost of the procedure was reportedly estimated to be $80.[5] Because he did not receive this procedure, bacteria from the abscess spread to Deamonte's brain and he died.

Public debate surrounding this case has focused almost exclusively on how federal programs should be changed to ensure a safety net to "catch" children in Deamonte Driver's situation. But a prior question is why there were not others in this boy's life to whom his mother could turn for such basic help. As the tragic results show, the Driver family needed someone who knew them and felt responsible for acting on Deamonte's behalf for a different degree of care. A government safety net seeks to provide social justice, but it is not capable of providing personal attention, on-the-ground instincts, or the flexibility sometimes required in an emergency situation.

It would be all the more tragic if government programs or regulations actually served as a disincentive for individuals to assume responsibility for Deamonte or if the fear of lawsuits and other legal regulations inhibited doctors from operating *pro bono*. It would be a detriment to our sense of mutual responsibility for one another if the continued recourse to federal programs for remedies caused Americans to view their tax payments—which fund government social service programs—as their contribution to helping people in need. Even the knowledge that such federal programs exist, regardless of their actual effectiveness, may cause some to conclude that the ball is in somebody else's court.[6]

It is only when local communities—the kind based on personal interaction, face-to-face relationships, common action, and shared purpose—fail to provide for people's needs that government responsibility comes into play.

Individualism Leads to Increased Responsibility for Government

One of the reasons government is thought to have so much responsibility for the well-being of citizens is that, in modern Western culture, people are viewed more in terms of their isolated autonomy than in terms of their social relationships. In other words, we are prone to think of human beings as self-standing individuals rather than as persons-in-community.

But persons are not islands, and we deny a fundamental aspect of their humanity when we approach them as such. Everyone exists in some form of relationship to others; every person shares in the human community and, therefore, has basic moral obligations toward other human beings.

Ironically, a hyper-individualistic approach to autonomy actually leads to a more powerful, centralized government. The expanding state and the stand-alone individual seem to go hand in hand: Because we tend to perceive others *primarily* as isolated, autonomous selves rather than as members of families, neighborhoods, friendship circles, or religious congregations, it is easier for us to think of their claims being met by government.

Government Responsibility

The government's role is that of exercising public judgment in terms of *justice*. The government should relate to people according to its particular role, which is upholding justice, not parenting or treating illnesses. That is, the government stands in relation to its people as an institution of public justice, not as a parent or doctor or friend.

4. Bob Herbert, op-ed, "The Divide in Caring for Our Kids," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2007, at *http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F30A14FB3C5B0C718DDDAF0894DF404482*.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Syracuse University professor Arthur Brooks has found that government spending on charitable causes leads both liberals and conservatives to give less to charity. "The most likely reason for this," he suggests, "is that people tend to see government aid and private charity as substitutes." See Arthur Brooks, *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 58. Interestingly, Brooks found that those who believe the government has a responsibility to reduce income inequality are less likely to give money to charity—and usually give less of it—than those who oppose government income redistribution. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Likewise, persons stand in relation to the government as political citizens, not primarily as sons or daughters or patients. In this relationship, the kind of claim one rightfully makes on the government is one of equal standing and protection under law. The government's responsibility is not to do good whenever good can be done for somebody, but to act when *injustice* would otherwise ensue.[7]

America's founders expected various societal institutions to exercise proper authority in meeting their members' needs, beginning with forms of association that fostered "that fellow-feeling…that we generally have for those with whom we are connected and acquainted."[8] Civic government acts to remedy injustices brought about by the action or inaction of those institutions.[9] When such institutions as families, churches, schools, and neighborhood associations treat each other and their members unjustly, the government has responsibility to judge, punish, and prescribe a remedy.

Mutual responsibility is essential within a healthy society, especially a free, democratic one. The more people feel that they can trust and rely upon each other, the less they will need to turn to government for care—or to remedy injustice.

An important step in preventing future tragedies like Deamonte Driver's therefore includes working to restore a sense of personal accountability and moral obligation for others at a local, personal level. This, in turn, entails reforming policies that both discourage people from taking personal action and encourage a mindset of government as the primary responsible provider of care.

Conclusion

Government does not have a monopoly on responsibility for meeting people's needs. However, government has increasingly become the primary default setting when discussion turns to who is obligated to care for others. The result is less personal and efficient care for individuals and a weakening of our social fabric of responsibility and sense of moral obligation to one another through a variety of relationships.

Public officials can help to promote a healthy society—and government—by acknowledging the responsibility that families, neighborhoods, churches, and similar institutions have for their members. Policy should preserve and protect such institutions, and policymakers should make arguments that recognize the social and relational nature of the citizens within those institutions. Moreover, they should promote policies that remove barriers and disincentives for the members of local forms of association to act in personal ways to solve problems.

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7. See Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), Part I.
8. Samuel West, "On the Right to Rebel Against Governors," in *American Political Writing During the Founding Era: 1760–1805*, Vol. I, ed. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Press, 1983), p. 420.
9. The founders also acknowledged government's authority to organize necessary common action beyond the competence of other institutions or forms of community.