

Doing Pretty Good: The Limits of Ideology— A Commentary

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A FEW YEARS AGO four "humanists" held a conference to discuss what humanists and current policy-makers might teach each other. A book entitled *Doing Good: The Limits of Benevolence*¹ is the result. It consists of an introduction by David Rothman, a historian specializing in American social history, and four essays: one each by Rothman; Willard Gaylin, a psychoanalyst; Steven Marcus, a historian specializing in English social history; and Ira Glasser, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union. The work received praise from James V. Schall in the spring 1979 issue of *Modern Age* because, in Schall's words, it argues "that what we are most in need of protection from is precisely the social services provided by a compassionate government," a proposition that both radicals and conservatives have come to agree on. (pp. 159-60) In fact, only a few radicals and hardly any liberals agree, and the radicals' solution to the problem is socialism. For reasons that I shall explain later, I hope that Schall's judgment will not prove typical of conservatives' responses to *Doing Good*.

Gaylin's chapter is an interesting exploration of the sociological and psychological sources of humans' urge to care for dependents and has little to do with the issue of the unintended consequences of benevolence. Marcus' splendid essay recounts the "calamitous" effects of well-intended laws in late-seventeenth-century England that mandated government subsidies to laborers' wages, keyed to the price of bread. Among the effects were that wages paid directly by employers fell below the subsistence level, the productivity of laborers declined to that of pauper labor, widespread demoralization ensued, parents no longer needed to provide for their children, and children no longer depended on their parents. Yet the measure was enormously popular, even as it "led to the human degradation that is historically inseparable from the English experience of early capitalism in both town and country." (p. 48) Then Marcus recounts the equally damaging consequences of coerced institutionalization of the poor in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. He concludes

“that the most important consequences of any intervention almost always turn out to be those consequences that were not intended. . . . Dependents . . . deserve more than others to be protected from the unintended consequences of our benevolence and the incalculable consequences of our social good will.” (p. 66)

Glasser’s essay, “Prisoners of Benevolence: Power versus Liberty in the Welfare State,” promises, by its subtitle, to be equally enlightening to his fellow liberals who are chronically blind to the opposition it refers to. So does Rothman’s on “The State as Parent: Social Policy in the Progressive Era.” Both, however, reveal more about the limitations of non-conservatives’ thinking than about the limits of benevolence.

Glasser begins with an unexceptionable discussion of the Founding Fathers’ fear of power, even—or perhaps especially—in the hands of benevolent men, and hence their writing institutional checks on government power into the Constitution. In the twentieth century, those checks were overridden by policies that placed the government in the role of parent *vis-à-vis* dependent adults, until in the 1960’s the poor rebelled and demanded the “right” to administer government welfare funds themselves. The second half of Glasser’s article does not, however, build on these insights; rather, it describes the shocking oppression of inmates in nursing homes and mental institutions, and proposes that henceforth policy-makers guide themselves by “the policy of least harm.” That is, instead of asking themselves which measures would do the most good for their clients, they should ask which would do the least harm. Glasser seems at that point to have forgotten the message of the first part of his own essay: that, as the Founding Fathers knew, it was the *possession* of power that poses the danger, whatever the motives of its possessors. To ask well-funded social engineers to consider the harm that their schemes might do is like

asking the Clamshell Alliance to consider the impact that the abolition of nuclear power might have on the energy shortage.

Rothman’s chapter demonstrates even more clearly the inability of left ideologues to question their own basic assumptions. Unlike Glasser’s essay, Rothman’s deals with reformers who “do good” to people who are physically and mentally able to take care of themselves. Rothman first discusses the Progressive reformers early in this century. He contends that they were the first to be outraged by the wretched conditions of the poor and with much good will but little understanding worked hard to improve them, leaving us today with lessons that the Progressives could not have drawn. A basic contention of his essay is that, whereas until recently reformers assumed a community of interests between benevolent power-wielders and these clients, it is now clear that their interests diverge. Hence he is glad that welfare clients took the offensive in the ’60’s, although neither he nor Glasser, who also rejoices at this development, comments on the implication of able-bodied clients’ militancy in demanding the “right” to set the terms of their own dependence on others’ taxes. Rothman’s main lesson is that the “state as parent” model ought to give way to the “liberty” model based on the concept of “us” versus “them.” The “us” includes feminists, blacks, youth, and other inaugurators of “liberation” movements, against the “them” who have money and power; the “us” must take that money and use it as they see fit. This is, however, paternalism in a new guise: the “children” are demanding not just the right to spend “their” allowance without supervision, but the right to determine the amount—and demanding that the taxpayers, through the government, be their perpetual parents. The “rights” rhetoric of course obscures this inescapable implication.

In recent years, a few radical historians in several fields have discovered a

number of facts that conservatives have known all along. Since they are evidently unwilling to read conservatives' writings, they proclaim these discoveries as startling innovations in thought. Rothman's essay is an example: he says that the Progressives' assumptions "are *now* controversial"; that "the underlying assumptions of the Progressive stance *no longer* seem valid"; that "The bridge between the Progressive ideology and this *new* sense of things may well be the civil rights movement"; and that "We can *no longer* entertain the simple hope that interests can be reconciled, that public interest and self-interest will necessarily coincide." (pp. 77, 82, 88, 91; all italics added) Who are the "we" to whom these ideas are new? Rothman interprets a small step toward realism among left ideologues as if it were an objective lesson of experience hitherto unavailable to anyone. But evidence of the consequences of the English poor laws has been available long enough to have furnished the "lessons" that Rothman has just now learned. If some scholars could not learn them till now, it was not because the evidence was unavailable but because their ideology blinded them to it. That ideology blinded them to the common features between the late-medieval English "ruling class," who feared the poor, and the American New Class, who ostensibly love them. Therefore the English experience was "irrelevant." And the American Progressives of seventy years ago, unlike the social engineers today, never had the power to force their benevolence upon the poor—and the tax levies to pay for it upon everyone else—via the federal government. In short, left ideologues had to be bludgeoned by massive failures in practice before some of them began to doubt their theory. But one function of social theory is to predict likely consequences of actions; the better the predictions turn out to have been, the more likely it is that the theorists had perceived their society accurately. Conservatives have been pre-

dicting these bad consequences for decades. The first most revealing fact about Rothman's essay, therefore, is that he drew the lessons not from history—although he is a professional historian—but from the by-now-unignorable failure of the social-engineering schemes in the immediate past.

The second most revealing fact is implied in Rothman's warning that "a focus on rights may well give a new legitimacy to neglect, allowing conservatives to join in the chorus for rights, not for the sake of maximizing choice but for reducing tax-based expenditures." (p. 94) Observe the logic: a historian on the left now discovers a few of the truths that have long been reiterated in the writings of conservative social theorists. He does not ask himself whether the fact that they had predicted more accurately than the left means that conservative beliefs and values deserve his respectful study. Instead, he assumes that conservatives' opposition to the "state as parent" is due solely to selfishness and callousness toward the poor. In short, conservatives' analysis of government paternalism is dismissed by an *ad hominem* imputation of bad intentions. But Rothman has previously argued that paternalism had damaging effects despite the reformers' good intentions. If the good intentions were dangerous in the absence of adequate understanding of the nature of man and society, then could it not be that those greedy and callous conservatives predicted accurately because they possessed a theoretical perspective that the left lacked, and that some perhaps had good intentions too? After all, the assumption that conservatives' intentions are bad comes out of the same ideology that contained the false predictions. Rothman's argument is therefore circular. The charge that conservatives are callous toward the poor has always been based solely on their opposition to the paternalist programs that the left assumed were the logical implementation of good will. If the "proof" of

conservatives' selfishness was their opposition to government paternalism, the revelation that the latter has been damaging disproves the "proof." With the conservatives' motives now removed from the syllogism, what remains is their correct analysis. Yet, people on the right, who (Rothman notwithstanding) have been at least as concerned about suffering as the left, and generally more philanthropic, and who predicted what a few on the left are coming belatedly to realize after the evidence has become so mountainous that even they can no longer ignore it, should not be "allowed" to participate in the correction of social policy. The left must not only be credited for an insight that has long been available to the right, but have sole custody of the new-improved programs.

There is other evidence in this book of both the equation of leftists' new discoveries with hitherto unknown facts and the refusal to take conservative thought seriously. For example, the bibliography appended to Rothman's essay lists thirteen books, most of which are liberal or radical in orientation. But the only one that he identifies by orientation is Edward Banfield's *The Unheavenly City* (conservative). Presumably Clarke Chambers' *Seedtime for Reform* is not liberal, and Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven's *Regulating the Poor* is not radical, but both are simply works of objective scholarship. Aside from one use of the word "conservative" in an unideological context (p. 81), the concept appears only once more in the entire book: on p. 163 Glasser says that the excessive power of government that should be bridled by the Bill of Rights "has been the battle cry of political conservatives, who seemed always to set themselves against humane public programs" (evidently the same humane programs that have had inhumane consequences). Perhaps we should be grateful for that "seemed."

The automatic exclusion of conservatives from the "dialogue" leaves only two

alternatives open to "humanists," other than merely advising social engineers to do the least harm they can: grasp for even fuller control over their clients' lives, or advocate the revolutionizing of our society so that the poor will possess direct power. The history of all socialist states, of course, shows that the latter alternative results in the former.

As to the first alternative: liberal and radical historians have always been sensitive to the paternalism of conservative social workers who accompanied their benefactions to the deserving poor with instruction in middle-class values: "benevolence" has really been "social control." But nonconservative social workers have themselves always combined those motives. That some still do was shown in a special feature in a TV news program in 1977 about a big-city public-housing project. The viewers looked on as a young white social worker instructed an audience of mostly middle-aged black tenants in housecleaning techniques, nutrition, child care, and other such matters. Afterward, in an interview with a reporter, she glowingly predicted that this "involvement" of the tenants would eliminate the problems caused by their passivity. The planner clearly would not put the administration in the hands of the tenants, to allow them to develop a true community and their own leadership. All the standards, procedures, and information came from the social engineers, who nevertheless believed sincerely that the "clients" would somehow become autonomous people. It is safe to assume that if the clients did show true autonomy, the social engineers would be very discomfited. At the end of the interview this young woman implied that she and her colleagues looked forward to the time when their supervision, in hygiene, playground management, and so on, would be exercised over the tenants in privately-owned apartment houses too.

The same attitude was expressed in an interview on National Public Radio a few

days earlier, with another social worker. She was a participant in a child-care center program that had surveyed working parents' attitudes and found that most of them preferred to have their children cared for at home by friends or relatives, rather than by child-care centers. She never thought to ask what this meant; her only response was that "we" must "educate" working parents so that they would see the superiority of government-run, professionally supervised child-care centers. Obviously, these self-supporting parents were not dependent *enough*.

The second alternative referred to above found expression in the welfare-rights movement, which its advocates hoped would serve to radicalize our society. But that movement soon collapsed, the victim not only of the impossibility of permanent mobilization but also of the contradiction in radical social workers' own thinking. For if they were not to foster dependency in their clients and also strengthen the "system" by demonstrating its ability to help the poor, they must become "advocates" of their clients' interests *vis-à-vis* the government. But what if their clients defined their interests differently from the way radical social workers define them (as the aforementioned working parents did)? This is the old problem of the radical accosted by the beggar: should he hand over the dollar and reinforce the beggar's "false consciousness" or withhold it and miss the chance to relieve suffering? Compassion seems to have conservative consequences, whereas the lesson he wants to teach seems to require callousness. No wonder liberal and radical writers find it hard to conceive that conservatives' motives and social theory might be both humane and consistent, compassionate *and* true.

And of course they are. To say this is not to deny the element of "social control" and even occasional manipulativeness in past conservative philanthropy, or the selfishness that is among the motives

of the present tax-limitation movement. Yet throughout American history conservatives have also founded orphan asylums, job agencies, libraries, immigrant-aid societies, homes for working girls newly arrived from the country, playground associations, and so on. Radicals say that these people were merely returning to the poor some of what they had stolen, or else making the "system" palatable. Hence they are damned if they show compassion and damned if they do not; and hence it is the "system" that the critics are really criticizing; motives are irrelevant—as irrelevant as are the liberals' good intentions to the consequences of their policies. Conservatives' motives are a red herring, directing attention away from the real animus of the critique.

Furthermore, conservative philanthropic work in the past was generally done in the context of local community. Rothman says that "The very notion of a harmony of interests seems deceptive and mischievous." (p. 87) Yet this notion, implemented in the context of local community, is the only alternative to the "notion" of statist social engineering by ideologues who are distant from the social bonds within which true "caring"—to use Gaylin's key term—takes place. Taxing policies and centralized welfare have drained a good deal of the resources that used to fund private philanthropy, and occasional statements by Washington policy-makers imply that this result is sometimes deliberate. Conservative social theory today is therefore far more "radical" than the alternatives that are suggested in *Doing Good*. Its program of the freeing of enterprise, reduction of taxes, and dismantling of much of the wasteful bureaucracy in government and education would multiply jobs, reduce the inflation that hurts the poor most, and reduce dependency, and it is motivated as much by awareness of what the welfare state does to the poor as by the desire of taxpayers to keep more of their earnings.

Liberals and radicals, by contrast, prescribe more of the policies that caused the "need" for them in the first place.

The danger of Big Brother government and social engineering of the sort that *Doing Good* discusses is only one of a number of conservative tenets that have been validated by recent developments. They include predictions that busing would not improve either the academic achievement of black children or good feeling between the races; that the ever-higher minimum wage would increase unemployment among the unskilled and hence raise taxes for welfare; that government-owned and -operated housing projects would erode their residents' pride and turn into barracks; that excessive regulation would discourage investment and innovation; that certain experiments in teaching would cause children to become bored and unruly and would lower scholastic scores, etc., etc. As to foreign policy, conservatives could throw

the accusation of callousness back at the liberals and radicals, whose compassion is reserved for the victims of rightwing dictatorships. This selective compassion recently bore fruit in the Cambodian genocide and the Vietnamese boat people. When leftists realize that "sincerity" and "good intentions" can no longer justify policies, they do not carry the lesson far enough.

The debris from pulverized leftist tenets has piled high enough to become a major feature of the intellectual landscape—but not too high for ideologues to clamber to the top and use it as a platform from which to publicize their "discoveries" and incidentally their openmindedness, their new understanding of old historical documents, and their unrevised caricatures of conservatives.

Doing Good: The Limits of Benevolence, by Willard Gaylin, Ira Glasser, Steven Marcus, and David Rothman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), xv + 171 pp. \$2.95, paperback.