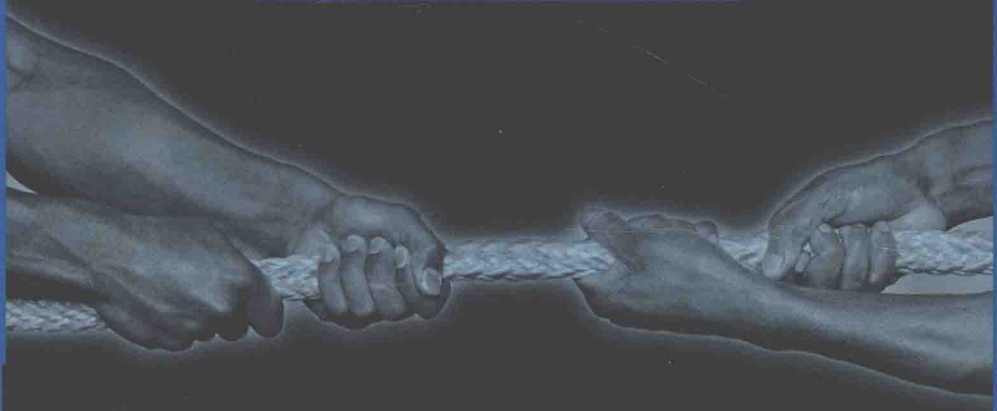
Social Welfare and Individual Responsibility

FOR AND AGAINST



David Schmidtz and Robert E. Goodin

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 1RP, UK http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA http://www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1998

Printed in the United States of America

Typeset in Meridien 10.5/14 pt. in LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Schmidtz, David.
Social welfare and individual responsibility / David Schmidtz, Robert E. Goodin.
p. cm. – (For and against)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-521-56416-6 (hardback). – ISBN 0-521-56461-1 (paperback)
1. Social justice. 2. Responsibility. 3. Social policy – Moral and ethical aspects. 4. Public welfare – Moral and ethical aspects. 5. Welfare state – Moral and ethical aspects. I. Goodin, Robert E. II. Title. III. Series: For and against (Cambridge, England)
HM216.S296 1998
361.6'1 – dc21 97-52782
CIP

ISBN 0-521-56416-6 hardback
ISBN 0-521-56461-1 paperback

Series Editor's Introduction

SINCE the mid-1960s, the application of ethical theory to moral, social, political, and legal issues has formed a growing part of public life and of the philosophical curriculum. Except perhaps during the 1950s and the flowering of ordinary language philosophy, moral philosophers have always to some extent been concerned with the practical application of their theories. On the whole, however, they did little more than sketch implications or draw provisional conclusions with regard to practical issues based upon some distant familiarity with a few empirical facts. Today, the opposite is the case: they have come to immerse themselves in the subject matter of the issues with which they are normatively concerned, whether these come from law, medicine, business, or the affairs of social and political life. As a result, they have come to apply their theories in a much broader and deeper understanding of the factual setting within which the issues in question arise and have become of public concern.

Courses in applied ethics now figure throughout the philosophical curriculum, including, increasingly, within philosophy components of professional education. More and more periodicals – philosophical, professional, popular – devote space to medical and business ethics, to environmental and animal rights issues, to discussions of suicide, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide, to surrogate motherhood and the rights of children, to the ethics of war and the moral case for and against assisting famine victims, and so on. Indeed, new periodicals have arisen devoted entirely to applied issues, from numerous environmental quarterlies to

the vast number of journals in medical ethics that today feature a compendium of philosophical, medical, and sometimes popular authors, writing on a diverse array of issues ultimately concerned with life, quality of life, and death.

What is striking about the *best* philosophical writing in all these areas (I concede that there is much chaff amongst the wheat) is that it is factually informed and methodologically situated in the subject areas under discussion, to a degree that enables specialists in those areas, be they doctors, lawyers, environmentalists, or the like, to see the material as both engaging and relevant. Yet, the writing is pitched at the level of the educated person, comparatively free of technicalities and jargon, and devoted to matters of public concern. Much of it, whether by philosophers or others, such as economists and political and social scientists, is known outside the academy and has had the effect, as it were, of taking philosophy into the public arena.

Interest in applied ethics will continue to grow, increasingly as a result of technological/scientific developments, enacted social policies, and political/economic decisions. For example, genetic engineering raises a number of important moral issues, from those that concern human cloning, illnesses, and treatments to those that center around alteration in animal species and the "creation" of new animals. Fetal tissue research holds out the promise of help for diabetics and those with Parkinson's disease, but even using the tissue, quite apart from how we acquire it, is a controversial affair. Equally contentious is the bringing to term of severely deformed fetuses who will die almost at once, in order to use their organs for transplant. But, so, too, is xenograph, or cross-species transplantation, in which animals are treated as repositories of organs for humans.

Social, political, and legal decisions always spur ethical interest. Topics such as obscenity, pornography, and censorship are of perennial interest, as are straightforwardly economic/political issues to do with capital punishment, equality, majoritarian democracy, the moral assessment of capitalism, and the provision of societal welfare. Today, some comparatively new issues have come to figure in this ethical landscape, from the place of children in

society and all manner of interest in educational policy and practice to population policy and the relation of this to the distribution of various societal resources. And it is obvious that, throughout the world, issues to do with nationalism, political and judicial sovereignty, and immigration are of massive interest to educated persons and raise all kinds of moral questions.

This new series, For and Against, aims to cover a good many of these applied issues. Collectively, the volumes will form a kind of library of applied ethics.

Philosophy is an argumentative discipline: among its best practitioners, whom this series will feature, it proceeds by the clear and careful articulation, analysis, and assessment of arguments. Clashes of arguments, ideas, principles, positions, and theories are its very lifeblood. The idea behind the series is very simple: it is to capture this clash. Two or more philosophers, in opposition on some moral, social, or political issue, will state and defend their positions on the issue in as direct and powerful a manner as they can. Theory will be involved, but the general aim is not to have two authors differ over the development or worth of a philosophical theory. Rather, it is to show the application of philosophy to practice, with each author using as much theory as necessary to state and defend a position on the topic. Educated people generally should be able to read and assess the success of the authors.

The volumes will be polemical but in the best sense: each author will dispute and defend a position on some controversial matter by means of clear and careful argument. The end, obviously, is that each volume will exhibit to the full the best case each author can muster for his or her respective side to the controversy.

The first volume in the series is the present one, *Social Welfare and Individual Responsibility*, by David Schmidtz and Robert Goodin. It makes for a splendid beginning. In a direct and careful manner, in a prose that is enormously readable and at times impassioned, Dave and Bob sift the issues that swirl around state provision of welfare. No social issue has emerged from the 1980s as more important to the definition of the kind of society we should all like to live in than that of social welfare, yet no issue

has proved more politically difficult to achieve even a moderate consensus over. What separates intelligent and thoughtful people on this issue of state provision of aid to the poor? I know of no more lucid, accessible, and compelling answers to this question than are to be found here, in Dave's discussion of internalizing responsibility for one's life and of viewpoints and institutions that foster that internalization, and in Bob's discussion of why social welfare is and must remain a collective social responsibility.

R. G. Frey

Preface

WHEN I was a child, I saw a movie in which the Soviet Union blew up the Alaska pipeline. The bombing was in response to a U.S. grain embargo that had led to widespread starvation in the Soviet Union. The president telephoned the premier to denounce him for the bombing. The premier responded that the president had fired the first shot.

Amazed, the president said, "You mean to say that when we decide not to give you our grain, you think that gives you the right to bomb our pipeline?"

The premier responded, "It's not your grain. It's the world's grain."

That scene showed me something that, as a young boy, I had not imagined possible: unresolvable disagreement about (what I took to be) a basic fact, namely who had fired the first shot. That revelation remains fresh in my mind.

Bob Goodin and I are like the characters in that movie. In some way, we are alien to each other. Nonetheless, I have come to have the highest respect for him and, indeed, to think of him as a friend. Each of us has more to say about responsibility and welfare than can be said in these few pages, of course. Interested readers would be well advised to consult Goodin's other works. They set the standard for philosophical reflection on the topic of social welfare.

I thank the Earhart Foundation for a grant in the fall of 1996 that helped me to finish on schedule, and Cambridge University Press for permission to use material from "Guarantees," *Social*

Philosophy and Policy 14 (1997), and "The Institution of Property," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11 (1994). For generous advice and comments, I thank Bob Goodin and Ray Frey, and also Scott Arnold, Paul Bloomfield, Allen Buchanan, Tom Christiano, Andrew Cohen, Dale Cooke, Tyler Cowen, Patrick Fitzgerald, Michael Hechter, Uri Henig, David Kelley, Barry Macleod-Cullinane, Tom Palmer, Terry Price, Linda Radzik, Daniel Shapiro, David Sobel, Christopher Wellman, Elizabeth Willott, and especially Steve Scalet. I thank Karl-Heinz Ladeur and Peter Köller for opportunities to discuss work in progress at, respectively, the European University of Florence and the 1996 Wittgenstein Symposium in Kirchberg. I also thank participants in my seminar in the spring of 1996 when I was just getting started, especially those who most fearlessly took issue with the positions I was trying to develop: Kristen Hessler, Scott LaBarge, Avery Kolers, Dan Russell, David Truncellito, and Mark Wunderlich.

I dedicate my portion of this book to my parents. We left our farm in Saskatchewan when I was eleven, partly so my younger brother and I could get an education. Dad worked as a janitor, then as a bartender. Mom was a cashier in a fabric shop. They taught me, by example, that the most important thing is not what you do but how well you do it. In the end, that was what I needed to know.

David Schmidtz
Tucson, January 1997

THIS BOOK is not the veritable "dialogue of the deaf" that it may seem. Certainly Dave Schmidtz and I do not "join issue" in all the ways that readers of a "For and Against" debate might ordinarily expect – and it is greatly to the credit of the series' editor, Ray Frey, that he did not insist that we exaggerate our differences, just for the sake of that form. But we are not literally "alien" to one another, either. What each of us is ardently "for" in this debate the other does not so much dispute as merely takes for granted. I am not against people's assuming responsibility for their

own lives, any more than Dave is against taking care of people who are unable to care for themselves. Our differences are ones of emphasis, of what we think needs be said emphatically and what ought simply be taken to be business as usual. Differences of emphasis sometimes make a big difference to policy, of course, and that is precisely what we are debating here. Beyond any more particular points each of us hopes to carry in that debate, we hope to show that you can have that debate in a sensible and spirited way without denying the obvious and important truths that the other side claims as its own.

In the process of writing this book, Dave and I have exchanged drafts and comments, and (thanks to the hospitality of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society) a fair few liters of dubious Sylvaner and one particularly memorable trout. Whether it was the force of our disputations that caused David Gauthier to shed his last baby tooth will never be known, but we are grateful to him and various other companions in those revelries for their contributions to our conversations. I have also received useful comments on my portion of the book from Brian Barry, Abram de Swaan, Claus Offe, Ray Frey, Amy Gutmann, Jennifer Hochschild, Desmond King, Eva Feder Kittay, Julian Le Grand, Andrew Levine, Jane Lewis, Mark Philp, Stein Ringen, Bo Rothstein, Alan Ryan, Cass Sunstein, and most especially Diane Gibson, whose touch on these issues is in so many ways surer than my own. Since the Research School provides me with no undergraduates of my own, I am also grateful to Daniel Shapiro and Marian Simms for letting me try out these materials on them and their students.

My immediate family history is no match for Dave's. Like him, however, I dedicated my earlier attempts to grapple with these issues to my parents. It was they who taught me the importance of "protecting the vulnerable": my father from the noblesse oblige perspective of his upper Hudson Dutch forbears, filtered through midwestern small-town aristocracy; my mother from the perspective of her own mother, who left school aged eight to tend the family when her mother died, and for whom "the poorhouse" always constituted a vivid prospect rather than merely a florid figure of speech. What turned those family teachings into a powerful

social message for me was my time doing outreach work from the office of Indianapolis Mayor Richard G. Lugar. Accordingly, it is to him that I dedicate my portion of this book. In a better world, he would have been president. In a better world still, he would not have needed to be.

Robert E. Goodin
Canberra, November 1996

Contents

1 Taking Responsibility

David Schmidtz

1.1 The Tide of Wealth

Market society is sometimes described as a tide that lifts all boats. In many ways, the metaphor is apt. It reminds us that the key to prosperity in a market society is to produce what other people value. Profits normally are not made at other people's expense. People get rich when they market the light bulb, telephone, or computer not because such inventions make people worse off but rather because they make people better off.

People tend to see human commerce as a zero-sum game – a game in which wealth is redistributed but not created. If society were a zero-sum game, though, we would be born in caves. Our teeth would fall out before we turned thirty, and we would die soon thereafter, as our ancestors did when human society was in its infancy. We fare better today because human commerce is not zero-sum. There is a tide. It is lifting boats. In principle, it could lift them all.

What I do not like about the metaphor is its suggestion that the tide lifts us all unconditionally or indiscriminately. There are tides in market society that lift virtually all boats, of course. Market society has given us telephones and light bulbs, and few of us would be better off without them. Nevertheless, as a general rule, material progress does more for some people than for others. The tide lifts the boats it touches; the rest are left behind. They are not left living in caves, but still they are left behind, at least in relative terms.

To see why the tide does not touch everyone, we first need to see why it touches anyone. If we try to force the tide to lift