

CHAPTER 5

Poor Choice: The American Hatred of Paupers

The native American poor never lose their delicacy or pride; hence, though unreduced to the physical degradation of the European pauper, they yet suffer more in mind than the poor of any other people in the world. Those peculiar social sensibilities nourished by our own peculiar political principles, while they enhance the true dignity of the prosperous American, do but minister to the added wretchedness of the unfortunate; first, by prohibiting their acceptance of what little random relief charity may offer; and, second, by furnishing them with the keenest appreciation of the smarting distinction between their ideal of universal equality and their grindstone experience of the practical misery and infamy of poverty—a misery and infamy which is, ever has been, and ever will be, precisely the same in India, England, and America.

—Herman Melville, *Poor Man's Pudding*

There is no possible definition of "a poor man." A pauper is a person who cannot earn his living; whose producing powers have fallen positively below his necessary consumption; who cannot, therefore, pay his way. A human society needs the active co-operation and productive energy of every person in it. A man who is present as a consumer, yet who does not contribute either by land, labor, or capital to the work of society, is a burden. On no sound political theory ought such a person to share in the political power of the State. He drops out of the ranks of workers and producers. Society must support him. It accepts the burden, but he must be cancelled from the ranks of the rulers likewise. So much for the pauper. About him no more need be

said. But he is not the "poor man." The "poor man" is an elastic term, under which any number of social fallacies may be hidden. . . . Under the [name] of the poor . . . the negligent, shiftless, inefficient, silly, and imprudent are fastened upon the industrious and prudent as a responsibility and a duty. On the one side, the terms are extended to cover the idle, intemperate, and vicious, who, by the combination, gain credit which they do not deserve, and which they could not get if they stood alone. On the other hand, the terms are extended to include wage-receivers of the humblest rank, who are degraded by the combination. The reader who desires to guard himself against fallacies should always scrutinize the [term] "poor" as used, so as to see which or how many of these classes they are made to cover.

—William Graham Sumner,
What Social Classes Owe to Each Other

As evidenced by Melville and Sumner above, the pauper is a unique creature in the American moral imagination. First, the pauper is commonly believed capable of doing more than he currently is doing in the promotion of his own well-being. To the extent that the pauper realizes his own power but neglects it, and instead seeks satisfaction through dependence upon others, his pauperism is *voluntary*. Second, the pauper who grows accustomed to economic dependence may not just neglect his own power but may lose sight of its very existence; that is, he may come to believe that his sole means of getting along is through charity. To the extent the pauper is convinced that his station is beyond his control, although false, his pauperism is *involuntary*, not in the popular sense of lacking willfulness or physical control, but in one legal sense of being not fully intentional or premeditated (but see the discussion of Kant and the vices below). Whereas the involuntary pauper is a moral tragedy, the voluntary pauper is a moral anathema.

As I have defined the terms, both voluntary and involuntary paupers are equivalent to Sumner's "poor men"—economically negligent, shiftless, inefficient, silly, imprudent, idle, intemperate, and vicious

men. I believe the terms voluntary and involuntary paupers are better (and certainly less pejorative) descriptions of such persons, if only because the distinction accounts for nuanced psychological varieties of experience at play with persons dependent on public assistance. Also, as I use the term, "poor" refers to certain levels of economic deprivation rather than to any underlying causes of the same. On this usage, the class "the [economic] poor" is morally divisible into voluntary and involuntary paupers, but also *non-voluntary* paupers, people who suffer economic deprivation due to unaffordability with labor that meets established labor expectations.

Earlier, in considering "the effect on the people of securing them a decent life," Sumner claimed that the inevitable result was pauperism, "that is, to take away all hope that they can ever win such an existence for themselves." Recall that I have a different view of the government's primary role in ensuring the availability of items of decency. But if it were true that the primary cause of pauperism in America was social welfare, Americans would rightly not support it. But is it true? Have we a reliable standard to judge?

The American culture of responsibility comprises one such standard of evaluation, according to which the facilitation of pauperism is a clear risk of social welfare, but social welfare is not an independent cause of pauperism. For Americans, moreover, the risks of promoting pauperism do not outweigh the benefits of maintaining a welfare state, and it is believed these risks are capable of being minimized by properly safeguarding the programs.

THE AMERICAN CULTURE OF RESPONSIBILITY

The project of administering rules of responsibility is the same in all nations that have embraced the reality of human freedom. The first order of business is never to impose responsibility where freedom is lacking. The second order of business is to always impose responsibility where

freedom is present. Free nations are identical in this respect. However, our imperfect natures make the administration of responsibility likewise imperfect, mandating choices about whether it is best to err on the side of too much or too little responsibility enforcement.

No matter what rules of responsibility a nation adopts, they will inevitably sweep too broadly at times—imposing responsibility for states of affair beyond the control of persons—and sweep too narrowly at other times—withholding responsibility for states of affair within the control of persons. For example, historical assumptions about the inability of women to control their emotions contributed to their legally mandated relief from participating in politics and the workplace, denying them the ability both to earn a living for themselves and to equally advocate for their political beliefs. This is an example of attributing too little responsibility to a particular group. As another example, for much of America's history, genuine mental disability was not, or was only inadequately, recognized as an excuse from liability for conduct that would otherwise constitute crimes under the law. This is an example of attributing too much responsibility to a particular group. Nations correct these errors only as they become convinced of their mistakes, and will inevitably commit more mistakes than they ever catch.

Any nation will deal with both situations many times throughout its history. Through the rules of responsibility it settles upon, however, each nation ensures that much more of one and much less of the other kind of error comes to pass. Each nation must choose for itself which kind of error is the more palatable one, the least offensive to its sense of economic justice. As a result, some nations are quite lax about economic responsibility, making state aid available independent of economic hardship or of whether one has made a good-faith effort at self-sufficiency. Meanwhile, other nations view economic responsibility as among their highest priorities, placing substantial social and moral taxes upon the receipt of state aid.

I submit that the United States is distinctive in its desire to enforce economic responsibility at virtually all costs. Earlier chapters offered

some explanation for the rigid American stance on economic responsibility. The core of the American self-conception is that Americans are freestanding individuals, able to make their own ways against all odds. According to that view, individuals unable to advance this ideal are by definition less American: insufficiently industrious, prideful, committed, or capable of the American program of freedom. The United States has bred a people quite comfortable with imposing far greater economic responsibility upon individuals than could be within their scope, because the alternative is too distressing.



Nations also part ways over the ease with which individuals should be spared the consequences of their economic choices. The unflinching enforcement of the harshest rule of economic responsibility may be quite attractive where complemented by a generous policy for helping citizens who have made poor choices. Similarly, the lukewarm enforcement of a moderate rule of economic responsibility may seem tyrannical when accompanied by an unforgiving attitude toward people who have made poor choices. As others have observed, the former kind of regime assigns heavy social stigma to the act of requesting aid, because, in this view, it is necessary to motivate individuals to act responsibly. In nations with harsh rules of responsibility but generous policies for aid, social stigma is the price of the help. Conversely, the latter kind of regime enforces economic responsibility by allowing poor choosers to suffer the greater brunt of their economic mistakes. Such regimes will not judge broken men as harshly but will readily permit them to starve.

Again, I submit there is no question that the United States is the kind of regime that attaches social stigma of aid to promote economic responsibility. If the motto for the other kind of regime is that “it is better not to give,” the motto of the United States is that “to give and resent is better than not to have given at all.” The resulting culture of responsibility is one in which the request for governmental aid is a serious public act inviting the full scrutiny of the society. Americans

understand that they must pay a price—in social respect—for needing public assistance.

At first glance, the idea that a people could prefer a system of economic responsibility that stigmatizes the need for help seems incredible and cruel. People regularly require economic assistance not through any fault of their own but due mainly to poor luck or poor justice. Americans understand this as well as any other people. The preference for taxing the request for assistance is, for Americans, the lesser of two evils. They would rather stigmatize requests for assistance than force citizens absolutely to live or die by their economic choices. Their public gripes notwithstanding, Americans prefer the welfare state to what they perceive as a more hardhearted alternative.

The lesser of two evils remains an evil, however. That is why the welfare state must always taste bittersweet to Americans. Its very existence disrupts Americans' self-conception as a confederation of individual islands, each preferring but not requiring the collaborative proximity of every other. At the end of the day, Americans lack the courage to erect the society that most accords with their self-ideal. They do not want a nation in which any Atlas is capable of shrugging off the whole world.¹ Such a world is as frightening to Americans as it is romantic.

The begrudging American welfare state represents a deliberate compromise on conflicting but equally important values. Americans seek a system of economic responsibility that exalts the libertarian ideal of man but also a system of economic justice that escapes the certain barbarism of the libertarian society. Viewed from the other direction, Americans seek a socially liberal system of economic justice that reflects their beliefs in communal economic obligation, but they also seek a system of economic responsibility that separates the good will of communitarianism from the perception of entitlement that liberal societies tend to cultivate.



Finally, all nations require a method or set of rules to determine when individuals are entitled to reductions in economic responsibility. The cases that direct Americans' thinking about reductions in economic responsibility are three: children, the disabled, and the elderly. A common denominator among children, some disabled, and some elderly is *incapacity*, regarded as the lack of cognitive or physical ability deemed necessary to carry out all of the duties believed to be part of the economic adulthood.

By extension, Americans who do not fit one of these categories but who still seek reductions in economic obligation must prove that they are similarly situated. Not just any incapacity will serve. Rather, the paradigm cases result in a deliberately narrow definition of incapacity. Because few working-age adult Americans suffer such diagnosed medical or developmental limitations, virtually all Americans are excluded from the definition, making them fully economically able. The hindrances associated with poor upbringing, low intelligence, less-than-adequate work opportunities, and so on, count for little.

A question: if only persons with work-affecting physical or cognitive disabilities are genuinely "incapable" of carrying full economic responsibility, why are so many others—mainly individuals of social disadvantage—the beneficiaries of existing social welfare programs?

First, many welfare beneficiaries are children, themselves incapable, and eligible by virtue of parents who for a wealth of reasons cannot support them. As incapables, children's rights to the benefits of the welfare system should not be conditioned upon the economic character of their chaperones. Second, the class of people who are welfare-eligible in America is broader than the class of people who are technically welfare-deserving. That is so because no social program can be perfectly targeted but also because states lack the wherewithal to aggressively police the boundaries of the welfare-deserving, relying instead upon thresholds. Third, Americans may quietly give credence to the view that physical and cognitive disabilities are not the only limitations that result in bona fide economic incapacity. A myriad of conditions, not medically diagnosable, can limit productive capacity as

much as, and sometimes more than, traditional disability. Domestic violence, shoddy schools, or drug cultures, for example, often limit people's life chances just as much, but just as often they do not come with a doctor's note.

Whatever Americans give through institutional charity and subconscious guilt over hypocrisy, they recoup in resentment and regular opportunities for ostracism. Recipients of social welfare, whose basis is social disadvantage rather than classic incapacity, are viewed with not-so-quiet derision. In the grand scheme of the nation, the American reception of such people is not unlike unwanted pests in a home. To ferret them out, the government places a piece of cheese in a trap then patiently waits. Soon the creatures emerge and partake; upon sight, spectators are reaffirmed of their superiority. An important difference, of course, is that with social welfare recipients the nation's object is eradication through economic rehabilitation rather than through extermination. That the national object is economic rehabilitation, however, does not preclude the interpersonal experience of class indignation and moral disgust.

On the other hand, Americans appear quite moderate or even liberal in their views about economic responsibility when contemplating the socially disadvantaged of other nations. The donation of billions of dollars to lift the citizens of poorer nations seems unattended by the resentment heaved upon the American poor. There are at least three promising explanations for this difference in attitude that are consistent with American conservatism toward economic responsibility. One explanation is that in aiding other nations, Americans are more concerned with humanitarian structural reform—uprooting oppression, promoting capitalism and democracy, stemming pandemic health issues—than with the micro-enforcement of economic responsibility. Another explanation is that, in virtue of the undemocratic and oppressive practices of many of these nations, Americans find little sense in discussing in a serious way those citizens' economic obligations. Yet a third explanation is that much of what Americans know of other countries is obtained from popular news sources, which for the most part are unconcerned with such issues.

OF VOLUNTARY PAUPERS

Turn now to the moral status of paupers in America. Notice that there are only two classes of person capable of provoking the full moral disgust of the American people. The first class of person is unoriginal and historically routine: violent criminals, particularly individuals guilty of sexual offenses. Criminals simultaneously offend the moral, religious, and humanitarian sensibilities, and in equal degree. The second class of person is altogether unexpected: adults who refuse to accept responsibility for their own economic well-being. Where welfare recipients are proved to be voluntary paupers, their booty is ill-gotten; it is a product of misrepresenting their ability to provide for themselves. The existence of many voluntary paupers receiving public assistance would constitute ongoing fraud of massive proportion.

But identifying and counting voluntary paupers is not easy; certainly, there is more to it than Sumner suggests.

Sumner's recommendation that Americans scrutinize the designation "the poor" is wise when interpreted as a warning not to treat the mere fact of economic hardship as proof of some degree of incapacity. I made a similar recommendation in chapter 4 with respect to looking past political designations to the reasons in favor and against particular social courses of action. Once the social designation "the poor" is discarded, however, inquirers accept responsibility for resolving when economic deprivation is the result of free choice and when it is not. Because human beings lack the scientific truth of such ultimate questions, a pragmatic solution is necessary. The pragmatic solution for Americans is to presume the full freedom of persons until presented with irresistible evidence to the contrary.

The American solution explains the sense in which voluntary paupers are free, poor choosers. This way of reaching the conclusion is less metaphysically satisfying than hoped for, though, because it is an approach taken for the sake of convenience rather than in light of the truth of things. This also should make it harder to justify the moral dis-

gust actually visited upon persons designated as voluntary paupers in the United States—though, of course, it does not.



A voluntary pauper is one who, with respect to securing some resource, has it within his power to do more but chooses not to. The most troublesome cases of voluntary pauperism involve people who lack an adequate supply of some important resource, say, food or housing, and for whom the immediate concern is securing an adequate supply. With respect to adequate supplies of food or housing, one is a voluntary pauper for whom basic nutrition and dwelling could be, but for some reason is not, obtained through one's action. These cases are so troublesome because people who lack adequate supplies of important resources often make claims upon the public for support.

It is difficult to distinguish voluntary paupers from individuals who do all they can reasonably be expected to do to fulfill their basic needs. For simplicity's sake, I will call individuals who lack an adequate supply of some important resource but who do all that they can reasonably be expected to do in its pursuit "satisficers." To satisfice is to engage in conduct that, while less than ideal, nonetheless meets a workable standard of human conduct. The term satisficing was first employed by American political scientist Herbert Simon in economic discussions of business decision making.² Academic philosophers use a similar concept to discuss practical rationality in relation to whether persons, in seeking what is best for themselves, must always aspire to maximizing or may aspire only to satisficing outcomes. The philosophical notion of satisficing is illustrated by Max Weber's account of traditionalism introduced in chapter 2, where individuals desire wealth only as needed to maintain their economic status quo although greater wealth might yield additional goods.³

My use of the concept of satisficing differs from usage in both the economic and the philosophical contexts. Here, it represents the social determination of when, for practical purposes, persons shall be

deemed to have met standing social or moral obligations for which perfect compliance is either not feasible or unreasonable. The idea of satisficing amounts of labor is to be contrasted with the virtually unregulated working conditions of an earlier America. Such examples abound but perhaps are best known through Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which described working life in the stockyards of Chicago in the early 1900s, and also from the exploitative practices of manufacturing sweatshops of the same era, which fueled the rise of unions and the enactment of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (whose purpose was to "eliminate labor conditions detrimental to the maintenance of minimum standards of living necessary for health, efficiency, and the well-being of workers.")

The idea of satisficing is not only necessary for specifying when asking individuals to work more or under less humane conditions, it is also unreasonable. Supposing the existence of adequate working conditions, the concept is also necessary for resolving when the individuals themselves can be said to have fulfilled their work obligations, including obligations they might carry while away from the job. In spite of the Golden Rule's requirement that individuals do their economic best, in an imperfect world we cannot expect individuals to be optimally efficient in their conduct. Individuals will make bad economic choices. They will make waste. Therefore, a standard is needed to evaluate individual work behavior. The notion of satisficing embodies that standard.

The number of hours that a nation determines will comprise the average workweek has a cultural explanation. Assuming that number falls within the range necessary for a society to accomplish its major functions and is not so great or forcible as to constitute injustice, that number is arbitrary from a moral point of view. Once set, however, the number takes on normative significance by serving as one measure for assessing when individuals have met their labor obligations.

First, the codification in law of provisions regulating the socially established workweek, such as mandating pay at rates of time and a half for hours worked per week in excess of forty, create legal entitle-

ments that depend upon value judgments regarding what constitutes reasonable amounts of work. Second, whether reasonable or not, where the majority of people actually work the number of hours specified for the average workweek, simple equality demands that others do the same unless there is a good explanation. Thus, the number of hours a nation has determined will comprise the average workweek becomes its moral standard for satisficing amounts of work, and working full-time becomes a prerequisite for citizenship.

The American standard of satisficing explains why the unaffordable nation is defined in part by the inability of many to afford items of decency while working forty hours per week, and also why, in the United States, it is morally repugnant to suppose that individuals should have to work more than a full-time job just to afford such items, even if many must in fact.

As to the subset of Americans who lack adequate supplies of important resources, whether they are voluntary paupers or satisficers is not just crucial, it is the fundamental issue in the debate over social welfare. Satisficing is the *primary condition* for social welfare eligibility in America. To the extent that persons eligible for social welfare can be designated voluntary paupers, the provision of welfare services is both unnecessary and objectionable. Indeed, the chief dissatisfaction with welfare programs is the perception that benefits accrue mainly to voluntary paupers rather than to satisficers.

The requirement of satisficing has implications that are socially far-reaching and morally unpleasant. An immediate implication is that some people should be permitted to starve and to suffer whatever else follows the absence of economic resources, provided that the lack is attributable to the individual's failure to take reasonable steps within his power that would have averted the situation. A broader implication is that as a matter of principle, the United States could not be committed to the eradication of all social disadvantages and inequality, for that would inevitably mean subsidizing voluntary paupers.

Americans have yet to fully grasp the true nature of this public policy concern. To fill this void in moral understanding, I suspect that

many Americans gravitate toward the political parties in virtue of their real or attributed stances of social welfare or seek to judge on case-by-case basis by looking to the histories of individual welfare recipients. But neither politics nor history can answer the distinctly moral question of whether social welfare recipients are voluntary paupers or satisficers. Consider each in turn.

THE FAILURE OF POLITICS

Opponents of social welfare are not so because they are ideologically conservative. They are conservative on the issue of social welfare because they have concluded that most welfare recipients are voluntary paupers and that the public-at-large is being forced to transfer portions of their own economic welfare to improve the lives of lower-class crooks. Likewise, proponents of social welfare are not so because they are ideologically liberal. They are liberal as to social welfare because they have concluded that most welfare recipients are satisficers and that within a shared community, satisficing by the disadvantaged can generate moral obligations among the advantaged.

Rarely in the United States are objections to social welfare libertarian in character, that is, the rejection of social welfare on political principle. Instead, those with objections to social welfare lament poor administration and systemic exploitation by individuals who should be ineligible for benefit but are cheating the public-at-large. Complaints about welfare programs tend to emerge in response to conduct by recipients that, in the complainant's estimation, is economically irresponsible: failure to practice birth control or to search diligently for work; refusing to accept low-paying work or not taking education seriously; expending resources on luxurious items or otherwise living beyond their means, and so on. These are not principled objections to the practice of government helping satisficers to regain self-sufficiency. These are practical objections to perceived policy loopholes that result in subsidies to voluntary paupers.

If it were true that most welfare recipients were voluntary paupers, the vast majority of Americans, liberal and conservative, would oppose social welfare. If it were true that most welfare recipients were satisficers, the vast majority of Americans, liberal and conservative, would support social welfare to some degree. Thus, people claiming to be liberal or conservative for the sake of defending one side of the issue, in truth, are deciding the issue based on whether they believe welfare recipients to be voluntary paupers or satisficers. They have made their choice, and politics is merely a question-begging means of advocacy.

THE FAILURE OF HISTORY

Failing politics, perhaps the problem is one of evidence, a matter of discerning which life histories contain the types of experience American social welfare means to offset. Distinguishing voluntary paupers from satisficers in this way would appear to require historical review of individual lives: genetic or environmental precursors to economic dysfunction, a framework for settling when candidates can be attributed with having missed opportunities, what “an opportunity” will mean for policy purposes, extended choice-histories and impact trajectories, and measurement of current effort.

This information will be unavailable in most cases. Even with full historical information and unlimited administrative resources, these inferences could not be drawn with confidence. That is so because “voluntary pauper” and “satisficer” are moral designations. Historic choices and circumstances are valuable only as empirical indicators of moral status. There is no finite set of actions or combination of them that could provide a definitive checklist. And, in any case, complete individual information would reveal every person to have extensive rap sheets of both pauperish and satisficing conduct.

As in other areas of law where truth is too difficult or costly to obtain, the law of social welfare turns to presumptions. Thus, social

welfare programs police the boundaries between voluntary paupers and satisficers by conditioning the continued receipt of benefits upon satisficing, as defined by a discrete set of satisficing conduct, such as holding down a job, undergoing vocational training, using welfare benefits as the law specifies, etc. Many social welfare recipients in good standing may be able to do far more to improve their condition than the law demands of them. Provided such conditions are met, however, the law presumes recipients to be doing well enough.



Thus, voluntary paupers are first and foremost creatures of the American moral imagination, created from the necessity of finding pragmatic solutions to ultimately unanswerable questions about the contours of freedom. After that, and for policy purposes, voluntary paupers are wholly free individuals and also poor choosers, for by American lights such persons fail to do all they might to advance their own welfare. Although it should not upset the American moral practice of erring on the side of free choice—of presuming freedom wherever the truth of the matter is grey—it is worth remembering that there are few, if any, pure voluntary paupers walking this earth. Americans should therefore proceed with humility when drawing upon this damning convention in evaluating the conduct of actual human beings, who are forever an amalgam of good and bad choices, good and bad luck, and good and bad justice. Just as certainly true, when it comes to making one’s daily bread, far fewer citizens are pure satisficers than is commonly pretended.

OF INVOLUNTARY PAUPERS

Poor, impecunious creatures! The involuntary pauper is convinced that his market worth—and somehow, therefore, his moral worth—is insufficient to demand the wage necessary to afford items of decency.

The involuntary pauper is different from people whose marketable talents are so paltry as to truly make decent earning impossible. The person who seeks charity from an *accurate* perception of his inability to earn items of decency is not an involuntary pauper; he is just poor and optionless as a matter of fact.

Even the optionless poor can exaggerate their economic lack of value, however; and so they suffer the illusion that they are condemned to destitution when, in fact, their skill set could guarantee them unremarkable poverty. But this is a rather benign form of involuntary pauperism. Once items of decency are objectively out of reach, the game has been lost and all that is worth fighting over are scraps. The scourge of involuntary pauperism plagues mainly the poor with options: poor who, with guidance, character, and luck, might reverse their situations and become self-sustaining.

The American ideal of freedom, combined with the assumption that men are born *Homo economicus*, casts involuntary paupers as freaks of nature, monstrosities lacking the chromosome of dignity amid capitalism. Americans believe that desires for economic independence and self-sufficiency are innate and that they needn't be nurtured any more than parents need learn love for their newborns. If desires for economic independence and self-sufficiency are innate, something very wrong must occur in order to produce involuntary paupers. Consistent with their bipolar attitudes toward economic responsibility and social welfare, Americans offer two very different mythologies of how the innate desire for economic freedom is mutilated so as to produce involuntary paupers. One mythology is based on nurture; one mythology is based on nature.

The public mythology—the one needed to justify the practice of social welfare—posits that involuntary paupers are the products of economic wear and tear. Overexposure to the downsides of economy can induce men to accept their lots, shifting their focus from self-improvement to distraction from deprivation. The public mythology honors the assumption that desires for economic independence and self-sufficiency are innate, and hence rarely in need of rejuvenation. It

follows from the public mythology that no person is rendered an involuntary pauper unless he or she has experienced extreme, psychologically debilitating economic hardship. On this basis, the public mythology of involuntary paupers recommends a liberal policy of social assistance. According to the public mythology, the very practice of social welfare comes with the quiet admission that economy can sometimes overwhelm people.

The private mythology—the one needed to preserve Americans' view of themselves as radically free—also assumes the innateness of desires for economic independence and self-sufficiency. Rather than name the vagaries of the marketplace as the cause of involuntary pauperism, however, the private mythology names the involuntary paupers themselves. The private mythology posits that there is something genetically wrong with involuntary paupers. Sustained economic hardship may set off the condition, but moral constitution is the true source. According to the private mythology, involuntary paupers suffer a moral birth defect, a predisposition to succumb to economic pressure more easily than commoners, much as some drunks and gamblers may be predisposed toward abusing those forms of amusement.

Like alcohol and gambling addiction, the private mythology of involuntary paupers casts the associated state of mind as vicious.⁴ The private mythology of involuntary pauperism could treat the condition as a form of social disability and make involuntary paupers eligible for social security. Americans generally reject the view that conduct can be externally vicious though not freely or fully chosen, however. Wherever confronted with this circumstance, Americans tend to smuggle in responsibility. Although the private mythology suggests that involuntary pauperism is both a vice and a disability, as a matter of public policy it is treated simply as a vice. Construed as ordinary vice, involuntary paupers are deemed ineligible for social welfare.

The soft spot in both mythologies is the assumption that desires for economic independence and self-sufficiency are innate rather than inculcated or taught by society. Those kinds of desire are of marginal import in precapitalist societies and are more likely products of capi-

talism than the other way around. Another formulation of the assumption supposes that all human beings have innate desires for *security*; it so happens that in capitalist societies, security requires economic self-sufficiency, which in turn fuels desires for economic independence. In that case, the people of capitalist societies should carry deeply ingrained desires for economic independence and self-sufficiency, because those ends are the basic means of security.

Reinterpreting the innateness of desires for economic independence and self-sufficiency in terms of security comes at a steep price, however. The reinterpretation changes the normative policy aims of social welfare programs. If the condition of involuntary pauperism is causally linked to depressed desires for security, then the provision of transitional economic resources and skills training misses the heart of the problem. In that case, the primary aim of social welfare should be to provide a rehabilitative, psychological service designed to establish or restore the basic desire for economic independence.

Desire management is too much to ask of any governmental program; too much to ask, also, of a nation whose people hold fast to beliefs in radical degrees of free choice. We do not have the resources, or very much of the know-how, to make people want what they seem not to want to strive after. Consequently, what involuntary paupers there are, shall, in the United States, suffer the same fates as others classes who suffer ordinary weakness of will. They must find their own way, or die trying, or die not trying.

NOTES

1. The reference is to Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Plume, 1999).

2. See, e.g., H. Simon, "A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 69 (1955): 99–118, and H. Simon, "Theories of Decision-making in Economics and Behavioral Science," *American Review* 1009 (1959): 253–83.

3. Here, see generally, Michael Slote, "Moderation, Rationality, and Virtue," *Tanner Lectures of Human Values* (1985); M. Byron, ed., *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theorists and Practical Reasons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and particularly, Roger Crisp, "Equality, Priority and Compassion," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 745–63, and "Egalitarianism and Compassion," *Ethics* 114 (2003): 119–26.

4. I believe Kant expresses Americans' considered judgment when he says that "A drunken man cannot be held responsible for his drunken acts; he can, however, for his drunkenness." Within the example lies an explanation of why persons who are disabled from work by vicious conduct receive little empathy. "Habit makes an action easy until it at last becomes a necessity," Kant explains. "Such necessity is a result of habit, because it fetters our will, diminishes our responsibility; yet the acts through which the habit was acquired, must be imputed to us." Practically speaking, there is probably no good method or purpose for bringing individuals to task exclusively for having risked, as opposed to causing damage from having succumbed to, addiction, but something like this is occurring when Americans revile addicts. See Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1963), pp. 62–63.