

ENTITLEMENTS, FEEDING THE ANIMALS, AND LUDWIG VON MISES

By Nick Gier

The case was presented to the court on the theory that the child was a member of the animal kingdom and therefore entitled to the same protection from abuse that the law gave to animals.

—a New York City girl removed from her parents in 1874

“I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me.”

—Matthew 25:40 (New Living Bible)

Jesus' words are full of resentment against the rich, and the Apostles are no meeker in this respect. The Rich Man is condemned because he is rich, the Beggar praised because he is poor.

—Ludwig von Mises, Austrian economist adored by Christian conservatives

Under the headline “Isn’t It Ironic?” the following statement has been making its rounds on the internet.

“The Food Stamp Program is pleased to be distributing the greatest amount of free meals and food stamps ever. Meanwhile, the National Park Service asks us to ‘Please Do Not Feed The Animals.’ This is because the animals may grow dependent on handouts and not learn to take care of themselves.” The fact that I found this on a hunting website is especially ironic, because these outdoorsmen should know the real reasons.

Here is the warning from Bryce Canyon National Park:

“Feeding wildlife is actually a form of animal cruelty. Animals that are fed by humans learn to frequent roadsides and parking lots, dramatically increasing their chances of being run over by a careless motorist. Most animals have very specific natural diets and therefore specific kinds of digestive bacteria. Being fed human food causes the wrong type of bacteria to become dominant in their stomachs. Soon these animals are no longer able to digest their natural foods.”

While it is illegal to feed wild animals (exceptions are starving elk during harsh winters), we have a moral obligation to feed domestic animals. When neglected farm

animals cannot be taken in by neighbors, who steps in to feed and care for them? Public officials of course.

Why is it then that when the government offers assistance to help people in need, far too many Americans say that they should just tough it out? Or die, as some in a GOP debate audience yelled out when the moderator asked Ron Paul: “Should the uninsured be left to die?” It is really unnatural to depend on publicly supported health care, fire/police protection, public roads, public parks, public wildlife agencies, and public education? That sounds absurd to me.

What is really ironic is that many conservative Christians are fond of the Austrian School of Economics. Ludwig von Mises, one of the founders of this form of libertarianism, has nothing but scorn for Christianity, which he calls a religion of hatred and resentment. Von Mises also believes that Christians were the first socialists. Here is a passage from chapter 29 of his book on socialism: “Jesus' words are full of resentment against the rich, and the Apostles are no meeker in this respect. The Rich Man is condemned because he is rich, the Beggar praised because he is poor.” Perhaps von Mises was aware of the economic communism of early Christianity (Acts 2: 44-45) and Tertullian's statement 200 years later: “We Christians hold all things in common except our wives.”

One of the saddest and most ironic events in the history of European morality was when liberal members of the English Parliament used animal cruelty laws to shame their conservative colleagues to pass child labor laws. In late 19th Century America there were no laws protecting children from abuse, but there were, thanks to English influence, humane societies. Finding a 9-year-old girl suffering from malnutrition and physical injuries, a New York social worker contacted the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In 1874 a judge was forced to admit that the girl was indeed a “member of the animal kingdom,” and that she should be taken from her parents and placed in an orphanage.

Even today some Americans treat their dogs better than they want the government to treat people who cannot help themselves. Is it because they believe that the poor and disabled are somehow wild animals who should fend for themselves? Or if poverty is due to moral failure, then we should, as the Victorians did, criminalize poverty and send these reprobates to the Poor House?

These questions are not rhetorical because Newt Gingrich has criticized child labor laws, but then turns around and claims that poor children wouldn't work even if jobs were offered them. He said that “really poor children in really poor neighborhoods have no habits of working and have nobody around them who works.”

Always correcting the fact-challenged GOP, Charles Blow of *The New York Times* (12-2-11) replied that “three out of four poor working-aged adults work. Half of them have full-time jobs and a quarter work part time. Most poor children live in a household where at least one parent is employed. And even among children who live in extreme poverty a third have at least one working parent.”

Many governments believe that children are so important that they pay mothers or fathers to stay home with their infants in the early months, and then they provide a monthly allowance for all children through their school years. Partial or full salaries are paid to new mothers or fathers in 35 European countries, 24 Latin American countries, Canada, and Turkey. In Finland parents are paid 80 percent of one salary for 23 weeks, and a child allowance (\$140 per month; \$256 for four children) until age 17.

European unemployment payments are as high as 70 percent of income and in Finland last for 500 days. Generous payments do not necessarily encourage Europeans to stay home and live off the state. Even if one includes recent high rates of unemployment in Ireland and Spain—caused by bank-induced real estate busts—and Greece where the economy has crashed primarily because of corruption, the average unemployment rate for the 27-member European Union is 10.1 percent versus 8.3 for the U.S.

Those on the right spit out the words “entitlement” as if no one has ever deserved to receive a cent let alone a helping hand. The sentiment appears to be that everyone should self insure themselves against the exigencies of poor health, old age, and unemployment. Beginning with the rule of Otto von Bismarck—under pressure from the fledgling Social Democrats—Germany led Europe in the direction of collective responsibility for these most essential human needs. The German Workers Health Insurance Law came in 1883; Old Age and Invalidity Insurance in 1889; the Youth Welfare Act in 1922; and national unemployment insurance was passed in 1927. Europeans believe that they get a good return on their high taxes and that they have earned the benefits they receive.

Please note the word “insurance” in the title of these laws. The principle of mass group coverage is applied in home and car insurance and it should rule in other areas as well. Without the “individual mandate”—a concept that Republicans once supported—the pool of those covered would be smaller and premiums would be higher. Because of the patchwork of U.S. health insurance coverage and hospitals competing for customers and duplicating high cost equipment, U.S. health costs are twice as much per capita than any other nation.

The U.S. finally embraced collective responsibility under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Social Security income and unemployment benefits began to reduce the number of poor especially among the elderly. According to the AARP, Social Security income enabled 36 percent of retired Americans to live above the poverty level in 2009. While the number of senior living in poverty has gone down over the decades, the number of poor children has risen dramatically. The 2010 census revealed that only 9 percent of seniors live in poverty while 22 percent of children—the future of our nation—do.

Food stamp recipients climbed to an all-time high of 46.3 million in 2011, and, and sadly, food stamps were the only means of support for 6.2 million Americans. A recent story in *U. S. Today* (2/16/12) featured 22-year-old Jessica Stevens, a single mother with two children in North Carolina. She lives on food stamps and a monthly check of \$272 from the state. The state is financing her education at a community college, and she hopes that her children will not end up dirt poor as her family did. We should all wish her well rather than condemning her and the programs that support her.

The percentage of food stamp recipients in the 21 states that voted for John McCain in 2008 is two percent higher than the 29 states that voted for Obama. (Idaho was tied for 14th place for the highest unemployment and had the second largest increase of food stamp users from 2009 to 2010.) That percentage difference would be far greater based on the eleven states that Obama may lose in 2012. Assuming that McCain would not have saved the auto industry and would not have passed a stimulus, unemployment would be much higher. McCain would have been a great “food stamp” president, and so will be Mitt Romney if he wins in November.

Finally, if government programs do in fact generate unhealthy dependencies, why is it that in 2008 22 red states received more federal funds than they paid taxes than 10 blue states did. Oil-rich Texas was the only red state that sent more money to Uncle Sam than it received, while 16 blue states did. Why don't these GOP governors give all this money back to their rich uncle? After all it is unwise to feed animals who claim to be self-sufficient.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.