

6. Public and Private Charity

The United States maintains five major entitlement programs including Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, Unemployment, and 13 additional Welfare programs.¹ These Welfare programs include such initiatives as SNAP, Pell Grants, Head Start, WIC, TANF, Housing Assistance, and Job Training Programs. In 2016, the US spent approximately 1.1 trillion dollars on entitlement programs.² Supporters of entitlements argue that they provide essential services to vulnerable populations, whereas critics argue that they interfere with the value of limited government and individual autonomy.

On one hand, supporters of entitlements argue that the majority of beneficiaries paid for their benefits, and many are elderly and disabled.³ They say that entitlement programs protect the elderly, the sick, and the defenseless when no other help is available. This in turn benefits society at large by reducing the number of suffering and at-risk citizens. Many supporters of entitlements also argue that people have “positive rights,” or rights that require others to assist them, such as the right to education.⁴ Funding programs that provide this assistance is therefore the right thing to do.

On the other hand, critics of entitlements argue that the United States is over 19 trillion dollars in debt and is not capable of spending on every desired program.⁵ They also argue that each individual should be free to choose how much money they donate to charity, and to which charities they donate. Charitable donation is not moral if it is coerced. Furthermore, critics argue that mandated charity shifts responsibility for people from individuals to the government, incentivizes dependence through guaranteed public assistance, and disincentivizes informed personal sacrifice.

A related debate surrounds the effectiveness of public charity in the form of entitlement programs versus private charity. Some say that public charity is more effective than private charity because it can address social problems in a comprehensive, coordinated manner. Many individuals either do not donate money at all or donate only to pet causes, and only in amounts that do not inconvenience them. Others say that private charity is more effective because it does not require as much administrative overhead, thereby allowing private actors to work in a more efficient and transparent manner.

Study Questions:

1. In addition to having negative rights, i.e. rights not to be harmed, do people also have positive rights, i.e. rights to be helped in some situations? Why or why not?
2. If people do have positive rights, should each individual be fully in control over how they help others, or should the state play a role in determining how we help each other?
3. How, if at all, does helping people through taxes or donations affect our moral development? And how, if at all, does receiving help from others through public or private charity affect our moral development?

1. <http://federalsafetynet.com/entitlement-programs.html>
2. http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/us_welfare_spending_40.html
3. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2011/12/16/10767/the-facts-about-americans-who-receive-public-benefits/>
4. <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/rights/>
5. <http://www.usdebtclock.org/>