

GOVERNMENT AND WELFARE

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Editor's Note: During February and March, Professor Thorndike, noted psychologist from Columbia University, gave three public lectures at the Institute on "The Psychology of Welfare." We print here the bill of specifications for the welfare of a human individual which was presented at the first lecture, and the closing portions of the lecture on "Government and Welfare."

The possession and use of power tends to justify itself to the possessor, and to progress toward tyranny, benevolent or otherwise. This is still true if power is held as a representative, or as a trustee, or as an anointed servant of God. It is still true if it is held by a group or a party, or a government. The relation of ruler to ruled is easily confused in the ruler's mind with the relation of owner to owned. The ruler thus taxes his subjects to pay for his personal pleasures, or rents them out as the Hessians were rented out to George the Third, or kills them to gratify his aims of conquest. "I can spend 70,000 men in this campaign," said Napoleon. These and other facts support the contention that no man is good enough to rule other men. But somebody must.

There is a wide range of reputable opinion concerning the proper scope of government. At one extreme are those who would confine government to its primary historic function of protecting the group against attacks from without and from the acts of bad men within, plus extensions to protection against pestilences and other preventable diseases, bad money, extreme ignorance, and misfortune. At the other extreme are those who would have government control education, recreation, transportation, communication, the instruments of production, the planting of crops, the distribution of commodities, customs, creeds and even many details of personal life.

The last always claim that their extensions of the scope of government are in the interest of welfare. But the evidence that the actual consequences of any given extension are better for welfare than what private enterprise and private philanthropy would have done with the tax money is not convincing. We may say roughly that welfare in Europe in 1850 was not much greater than in 1450, but increased very rapidly till about 1910. Real wages, for example, came to be about twice as high. This period from 1850 to 1910 was a period of social legislation and extension of government control, but it was also a period of extraordinary advance in science and technology. The rise in welfare may have been caused by the latter much more than by the former.

Various principles have been proposed for deciding what activities should be turned over to local, sectional, and national governments. But none of them are absolutely sound. And few of them are important in comparison with the question of the intrinsic merit of the activity. It is important to get iodine into the diet of the mountain states, and to do it cheaply. But whether it is done by federal legislation, state legislation, a combination of grocers or private philanthropy seems secondary.

A Bill Of Specifications Of A Good Life For Man

1. Maintenance of the inner causes of the joy of living at or above their present average.
2. Food when hungry, and drink when thirsty.
3. A diet that is physiologically adequate.
4. Protection against pain-causing animals.
5. Protection against disease-causing organisms, poisons, and other causes of disease.
6. Protection or insurance against accidents and disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, wars, for which the person in question is not responsible.
7. Protection against extreme shocks, fear, and strains.
8. Some room or place where he can rest undisturbed, protected from the elements and from bad or uncongenial men.
9. Enjoyable bodily activity, especially when young.
10. Enjoyable mental activity, including esthetic pleasures.
11. Opportunity for human society.
12. Opportunity for courtship, love, and life with one's mate.
13. Opportunity to care for children and to be kind to human beings and animals.
14. The approval of one's community, or at least the absence of scorn or contempt.
15. The approval of one's self, self respect, the absence of shame and remorse.
16. Opportunity to have friends and affection, if deserving of them.
17. Opportunity to be a friend and give affection.
- 18a. Opportunity to exercise power over some persons, animals, things, or ideas, making them do one's will.
- 18b. Opportunity to serve a worthy master.
19. Membership in organized groups, and the right to participate in activities or ceremonies which are (or at least are thought to be) important.
20. Opportunity to compete with one's peers winning in about 50 per cent of the trials.
21. Opportunity to compete with one's own past record, and, if deserving, to have the pleasures of achievement and success.
22. Occasional opportunities for adventure, risk, and danger.
23. Something to be angry at and attack.
24. Protection by society (via customs, laws, and government) in what is regarded by the existing moral code as a good life.
25. Freedom to discover and publish verifiable truth.

Recent investigations in psychology strengthen the arguments for control by business enterprise rather than government, in so far as business relies on stimulation by rewards and government relies on coercion by punishments. The investigations in question find that punishment is very weak as a means of preventing bad habits. The bad habit often gains more strength by its occurrence than it loses by being punished. The golden rule in managing men is to get them to do the right thing, and reward them therefor. That is one main reason why free labor is better than slave labor, and free enterprise is better than forced production.

The most important task of government in the twentieth century is the maintenance of peace between nations. No people now gains by waging war, even if they win it. Were the French people better off in fact or in prospects after the World War than before it? Was the England of 1920 richer, happier, or nobler than the England of 1910?

Reason, common sense, and history seem to agree that the aim of a government should be not to win a war, but to stop it. And this seems as true of economic or trade wars as of military wars. But old customs are so strong that nine out of ten people do not think so.

Winning a war was a reasonable solution five thousand years ago when, after a day or two of clubbing and cutting, you killed and ate your male opponents, and took their goods and women.

But today a sane and intelligent government, acting as a wise trustee for the people of any nation, should realize that a world at peace working to produce material and spiritual goods and paid fairly for doing so would be better for that nation than a world in conflict. Indeed such a peaceful world would be better for that nation than a world entirely subjugated by it and held in slavery by force.

And what shall we say of a government that confiscates the property and lives of its citizens to destroy the property and lives of another land, leaving both gutted of all save glory, the glory of a victory for one and the glory of a valient struggle for other? The psychologist sets no great store upon glory. He sees too much of it in the patients of insane asylums, and in bullies, fanatics, cranks, and the cheap type of agitators. Glory seems to him a drug, rather than a food for the soul. He much prefers health, comfort, and achievement to glory. He prefers peace with honor to victory with glory. But many people do not.

It is not the logic or rational self-interest of a nation, or of a government acting as trustee for the nation's welfare, that makes it go to war. It must be its psychology.

Psychologists have barely begun to study the motives of nations and governments, but I may venture some suggestions concerning certain neglected psychological causes of trade wars and military wars.

SELLING WOODEN NUTMEGS

People and rulers are often moved by the passion to outwit, outsmart, get the best of a bargain. They enjoy selling another nation wooden nutmegs, so to speak. They suffer from the vices of the confusion of a feeling of personal superiority with the fact of actual long-time benefit to themselves. Business has been outgrowing this. Fifty years ago Andrew Carnegie pointed

out the folly of this caveat emptor way of doing business and laid down the rule of "Make sure that every contract was to the advantage of both parties."

Science and technology early saw its folly. They do not try to trick a plant into bearing more fruit by giving it adulterated fertilizer, or to trick water into turning mill-wheels by a painted dam. In all their labors to use nature for the welfare of man, they never try to deceive or bluff her. Should not governments make more use of the methods of science and technology?

People and rulers are also moved by the desire for bigness, the passion to magnify their nation, in population, in territory, antiquity, etc. This gives rulers a pleasing sense of greater power, and citizens a pleasing sense of greater importance. Pleasing, but largely specious and vain. A wise Roman would have felt pride, not that Rome ruled so much of the world but that she ruled it so well. We should feel our personalities exalted not by the quantity of life and action in the United States but by their quality.

In the old times of increasing population this passion for territorial expansion could at least excuse itself as a means toward making good homes for its sons and daughters, but now when hardly a nation in Europe has a large enough birth rate to maintain its population, the excuse is very weak.

People and rulers have far too much faith in coercion by punishment. They honestly think that just as reward strengthens a tendency, so punishment weakens it. They honestly expect that if we punish a nation for acting unjustly, it will surely in the future act more justly.

But recent experiments by psychologists show that such a beneficial effect of punishment is very doubtful. (Shock experiments) If you reward a child for acting fairly, or honestly, or courageously, the reward will strengthen the tendency to act so. But if you punish him for unfairness, dishonesty, or cowardice, the punishment may not weaken these tendencies one jot or tittle. Under certain conditions it may, but often it won't. Whereas rewarding good tendencies is almost universally beneficial, punishing bad ones rarely is. The case of nations is more complicated, but I can see no grounds for expecting greater efficacy of punishment.

Coercion in general has been much overvalued. Probably we cannot get along without it, but certainly we cannot do much good by it. Persuasion is better. Education is better. Attraction to the right cause by reward is better.

A psychologist's ideal of the foreign policy of a government is that it should in general adhere to Grotius' doctrine that small nations have equal rights with large and to the live and let live doctrine of liberalism, should modestly try to direct the energy of other nations into channels useful to them and to the world as a whole, should cooperate with them and reward them when they use their energy so, should refer any disputes that do arise to a court or board of arbitration, should come before such a court with clean hands, and should not evade its decisions.

Many of you will regard this as utterly impracticable; and probably you are right. But the facts which lead psychology to advocate such an ideal in place of sharp trading, the use of dishonest propaganda, and force, are worth your serious consideration.