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2 Need, greed and Mark Twain's cat

A.J. Culyer

The juxtaposition of 'greed' and 'need' suggests a false antithesis, as though feeding one implied not being able to meet the other, or perhaps a moral assessment that the feeding of the one must be inherently less worthy than the meeting of the other. In academic circles the latter distinction has, in some instances, come dangerously near to being accepted as the distinguishing hallmark of a social science discipline, even its very definition. I have in mind Richard Titmuss's famous notion of 'commitment' (Titmuss, 1968) or his even more famous attempt to lay the moral foundations of social policy in Titmuss (1970). It takes, however, small reflection to realise that the apparent conflict between need and greed is far from self-evident. What moral status, for example, would one ascribe to the meeting of the needs of the greedy? Or what if one is greedy for more for others? Or is it really true, even if the greed of some means that the needs of others are left unmet, that the resultant distribution of resources is bound to be a maldistribution? Or, if it *is* so judged, is it the case that the maldistribution is sufficiently serious to justify the pains involved in putting it right?

It seems to me that questions of this sort cannot be resolved without adding some prepositions. We need to ask: *greed for what*; and, possibly, *greed of whom for what*; and *need for what*; and *need of whom for what*? In answering such questions it seems at least possible (indeed likely) that the apparent tension between 'need' and 'greed' will evaporate, becoming on closer examination a species of unhelpful rhetoric whose object is to do down

the social priorities of one set of protagonists while simultaneously casting those of another in the most favourable light possible. The unhelpfulness lies particularly in the way that this kind of rhetoric actually suppresses key elements of social choice, confusing, rather than clarifying through analysis, the tradeoffs that have to be made and the philosophical frameworks in which they can be made.

A popular conviction amongst social scientists is that the welfare state in Britain is facing a serious threat, that the social services are seriously underfunded and that distributive concerns occupy a low priority in the thinking of our current political masters (mistresses). There is a danger that the 'commitment' school of social policy analysis sees this current culture as one to which the only possible response is a call to arms. There are several possible battle areas: in direct party political activity; in the battle between the grand ideologies for the intellectual high ground; in the moral battle for the hearts and minds of ordinary people whose basic traditional decency is being corrupted by the new Samuel Smilesianism of the age; in the production of research results that demonstrate through logic and empiricism the social evils of rampant radical libertarianism.

The danger is that the analytical and empirical strengths of the social sciences will become banished to the backseat and, even worse, get a contaminated reputation by virtue of association with a particular form of anti-Conservative commitment. The techniques of academic social scientists then come to be seen as *theirs* and not *the others'*, while at the same time they jettison what is their only strength and justification for being social scientists. See how corrupting it is – which academics, for example, might seriously entertain the speculation that the universities are overfunded or that their own teaching and research practices might be more open to external scrutiny? Is it not an insidious form of self-censorship that makes them not ask the questions this way round, or even avoid such dangerous terrain altogether, lest the answers prove embarrassing or provide dangerous hostages to fortune? Yet putting the questions the other way about surely does not change the method of analysis, nor should it change the conclusions. The answer to the question whether the universities are underfunded should not yield a substantively different answer. Either way of putting the question invites, perhaps, bias and the possibly unconscious pretence that what is truthfully only greed is a need. So perhaps it is better to ask how one might set about telling whether universities were under- or overfunded, what the principles are that should determine expenditure in this field, and how one might set about making practical assessments of the reality in the light of those principles.

Whether the aim is to be a good social scientist or a good moral philosopher, a first requirement is to separate and distance the rational self from the passions such thoughts provoke. Sharing ideas with others from

different backgrounds offers one opportunity to attempt this. It is often only as one writes or talks that the mind begins to engage with issues in a way that is impossible through mere silent meditation or talk with likeminded members of a safe coterie sharing the same values – safe, that is, from the threat that the consensus may be shattered, or cherished values might be shown to be merely the product of lazy (or at least cosy) thought. Social scientists must not be like Mark Twain's cat who sat on the hot stove lid. She wouldn't sit on a hot stove lid again – but then she wouldn't sit again on a cold one either. Analysis, which must be social scientists' forte, depends on making careful distinctions; like the difference between hot and cold stove lids and the suitability of one (and only one) for sitting. Passion is too undifferentiating in its effects and is thus destructive of analysis. It is therefore also destructive of social science. The more social scientists seek to appear to be on the side of the angels, the more their birthright is sold for a mess of pottage.

The quest for greater *efficiency* is also evidently a major political flavour of the age. This too provokes a hostility that is usually misplaced. Again we need some propositions: efficiency at doing what, for whom? It can scarcely be objected that efficiency in the pursuit of a moral objective is objectionable. So, again, as with need and greed, it all depends on what one is talking about. If the objective is appalling, then efficiency in its pursuit may be likewise appalling. But if the objective is good, then being inefficient at being good must imply that one is doing less good than one could or should do. In this case it is inefficiency, not efficiency, that is objectionable. Efficiency, of course, is associated with male sexist overtones – it is 'hard' and 'dry' rather than 'soft' and 'wet' and is again under threat from some current strands in our culture. Again we have got to be careful not to let emotional reactions prejudice or destroy our genuine and sustainable pretensions as social scientists.

For better or worse, then, I propose to challenge what may seem to some to be irrefragable taboos.

Need

Here is a useful slogan:

Only the end can justify the means.

You will recognize at once that the slogan is consequentialist, though not necessarily utilitarian. I find theories of need cast in consequentialist terms more attractive – and conjecture them to be more widely appealing to others – than deontological theories derived, say, from ideas about the nature of the duty each of us has towards our neighbours. This seems particularly so when

such ideas come from an authoritarian source such as God (whom not all will recognize as an authority), and also when such ideas tend towards absolutism, so that needs have an absolute priority over other claims on resources. It seems to be extremely difficult in a deontological context to discuss important theoretical and practical matters such as the extent to which needs may be graduated in terms of their urgency of being met, or how responsible decision makers are to choose morally, for example in a Third World context, when the resources available are simply insufficient to meet all the needs that are asserted to exist.

The opening assertion does not imply that every or even any means can be justified by *some* end. There are some means that no end could possibly justify. There are some ends that justify no means. Nor indeed does it imply that there is only one end or that, if there is more than one, they cannot be in mutual conflict. It may therefore be that a means which is conducive towards one end may not be conducive to another and is thus ruled out. What, however, the slogan does uncompromisingly assert is that if a means is to be justified at all it can be justified only in terms of the ends sought.

This leads immediately to a contingent and instrumental interpretation of need. In considering the allocation or redistribution of resources, then resources are needed *for* the more ultimate purposes of policy. There may be more than one means available that passes this test (*viz.* that it serves a relevant purpose) in which case the entities said to be needed will not be uniquely determined and further criteria for choice may be required – of which one may be that of efficiency. One asks whether one acceptable means is more efficient than some other no less acceptable means. For example, if the end is the avoidance of starvation, and the need is for food, we have some choice as to what sorts of food may be most appropriate and, in this sense, therefore most needed. Or if the end is the avoidance of the kinds of circumstance out of which starvation may result, then an appropriate means may be to ensure that individuals in the relevant population are endowed with adequate 'entitlements', to use Sen's term in Sen (1981). Though precisely which entitlements are the most appropriate would be subject to further choice according to circumstance. For example, entitlements might be those that ensure that each has sufficient tradeable wealth to enable sufficient food to be purchased, or those that ensure that each has sufficient self-dependency via own-grown food, or those that ensure sufficient price stability to guarantee the adequacy of the purchasing power of non-food forms of wealth.

It is possible, of course, to talk about the need for particular ends. For example, if one were to take 'better community health' as a possible moral end for whose realisation particular resources (such as food and housing, and even health care) may be needed, one could also push the level of discourse back (or up) a stage by talking about the need for better health (warranted,

perhaps, if individuals are to flourish as full human beings, and hence still instrumental). In this way, one is likely to be driven to some ultimate good, not itself instrumental for anything. However, when one deals with needs in social policy, one is normally (I conjecture invariably) dealing at the level of resources, and at this level one is well within the stages at which instrumentality and consequentialism are dominant factors.

In this approach to need, it seems that the social scientist's contribution is twofold. The first consists in discussing with policy makers what the objectives or ends are and whether the ends initially specified are really those they care about; in suggesting some that may have been overlooked; in finding out whether the ends are mutually inconsistent; in determining what degree of explicitness about ends is desirable (and possible); in eliciting the kind of priority attaching to each end; in working out ways in which 'success' in achieving the ends is to be assessed, and so on. The policy making customers of social scientific advice are not necessarily government ministers or opposition shadows; they may be select committees, professional or industrial pressure groups, senior managers in national public or private agencies, or local authorities of various kinds, including managers and decision takers at relatively lowly levels.

The role of social scientists in this phase of policy analysis (at whatever level it may be) is to elicit the policy values of policy makers by trying to make explicit what is often only implicit and to clarify the policy issues at stake. It is not to insist upon their (*viz.* social scientists') own values. In general there is no reason to suppose that the policy value judgements of social scientists are better than those of policy makers. Indeed there is one good reason for supposing that the policy value judgements of policy makers are better than those of social scientists – namely that they are being made by people who have been assigned the task of making them by some legitimate social and political process. If policy makers are not, in this procedural sense, legitimate, then it may not be proper for social scientists to work with them at all. Moreover, even if the policy makers are there through some legitimate process, a social scientist who does not share their (legitimate) policy values does not have to work with them. In any event, however, social science researchers have clearly not themselves been granted such a status of political legitimacy (unless, of course, they happen also to be legitimate policy makers themselves).

An objection to this might be that not all policy research is directly provided for policy making research customers, and in such cases there is little else to be done than for the researcher to supply her own policy values and then proceed with more detailed analysis. That is clearly so. What is required of the researcher in such cases is, first, that she be frank and open about the value judgements being made and, secondly, that no claim should be made or implied that society (as, for example, represented by policy

makers) ought to share such judgements. When one offers, say, a philosophical discussion of the ethics of policy, one is, in effect, offering a hypothesis about what may be 'socially' acceptable, whose test is whether or not the values, and the analysis built upon them, are actually accepted by 'society'. That seems appropriately humble. The alternative is to be a missionary in the space of values and, as suggested before, to risk prejudicing social science itself, which is particularly dangerous if the missionary activity might be clearly perceived as scholarship trapped out in party politician's garb.

The second contribution of social scientists is as expert assessors of alternate means. The task here is to identify what is needed (and by whom) if the ends elicited by the preceding procedures are to be realized. This includes analysis of the 'in principle' consistency of alternative policy instruments with the objectives sought, and various empirical assessments of the practical (cost) effectiveness of the instruments. It is inherent in this instrumental view of need that the ends sought are not so much 'needed' as desired (perhaps on moral grounds), and that they can be traded off against other policy objectives. The need is for the means (rather than the end) and – since I find it hard to conceive of a need for an ineffective means – the need also has to be only for effective means.

Greed

Greed is the insatiable appetite for more, usually for more wealth or food. Perhaps it is natural to think of greed as being a desire for more for oneself. But is it not possible to speak of a greed (viz. an insatiable desire for more) for others? Was not St. Francis greedy in this sense? I suppose it is also natural to think of greed as being a desire for things unnecessary, or surplus to requirements (whatever these may be and however they may be determined).

Economists are accustomed to the proposition that more is desired. Indeed the whole edifice of their subject is erected upon this very foundation, which is the tail of the coin having scarcity on its head. Economists are also accustomed to dealing with the idea of externality: for example that one may want more for others as well as, or even instead of, for oneself. They even draw indifference curves for such cases!

We have, however, to be wary of assigning moral status to greed – even a noble one of the sort described – on the same grounds as I have just adduced in connection with the selection of policy objectives: namely that there is nothing in the disciplinary backgrounds of social scientists that entitles them to take on the role of moral evaluators of the worthiness or unworthiness of the desires of others. That role may legitimately belong to

some, but it does not belong to those who play the role of social scientists.

However, the notion of greed does have an important role to play in the kind of activity I described earlier as clearly lying within their competence: the eliciting of objectives from policy makers and the assessment of alternative means. In particular, the idea of greed as a characteristic of *maximising* behaviour is extremely insightful in discussions of the expected outcomes of alternative means. For example, maximising behaviour by insurance agencies in a competitive environment can be shown to imply premium setting by experience rating, which is in turn highly likely to offend against a wide variety of equity objectives, especially in insurance against unemployment or ill-health. Moreover, it is frequently possible to make quantitative estimates of the size of behavioural responses to various institutional frameworks which may be crucial determinants in the eventual choice of policy instruments and the design of systems of finance. Almost all of economists' understanding of the workings of capitalism is based upon one or another form of maximising (the maximand is not invariably profit) as is the most widely used approach to individual behaviour (viz. utility theory), and so is the usual approach to value laden questions in welfare economics in which a social welfare function is posited and which is to be maximised.

The postulate of greed thus lies at the heart of much of *positive* social science (especially in economics): the basis on which we explain what has happened, what is, and predict what may be expected to happen. That it is not usual to describe economics as the science of greed – quite apt though this may in truth be – may be attributed to the false hares the term is likely to set running and, in particular, the fear that an analysis which has serious pretensions as a positive exercise would be seen as passing itself off as a set of moral judgements.

But greed – in the sense of an insatiable appetite for more – also, as indicated above, underlies *normative* social science, especially, again, economics. And this brings me to my next topic: efficiency.

Efficiency

The 'injection' of the 'hard' notion of efficiency into the 'soft' notion of social policy seems offensive. I want to argue, on the contrary, that it is necessary if there is to be any morally acceptable social policy. Let us begin with some clear definitions:

Technical efficiency means not using more resources than are necessary to achieve a particular objective.

Cost effectiveness means not incurring a greater cost than is necessary to achieve a particular objective (or, symmetrically, maximising outcome in terms of the fullness with which an objective is achieved for a given cost).

Full efficiency means selecting the ideal balance of achievement across a variety of objectives in a variety of programmes, each of which is fully cost effective.

These definitions are evidently clearly related to the ends-means approach described earlier and are, hence, inextricably interwoven into the business of specifying and meeting needs.

The first, technical efficiency, enjoins us not to waste resources in the most obvious sense of 'waste'. This is necessarily a moral pursuit if the objective served is itself a moral objective, for to use more resources than are necessary to achieve an end means that either more of that same moral end could be achieved by some suitable redeployment of resources or that more of some other moral ends could be achieved than is being achieved. The limitation of this notion of efficiency in policy analysis is that there is usually more than one technically efficient way of delivering a policy objective. For example, it may be possible to alter the balance of institutional and community care, or that of doctors and nurses, or that of subsidies to home owners and home renters, in appropriate ways such as to leave the outcome sought unchanged.

The question then becomes one of cost effectiveness: which of the various technically efficient resource combinations is the least cost combination? This really highlights the moral issue, for cost is the best of the forgone desired alternative outcomes. Using resources in one way denies their use in another. The least cost way of using them to achieve a given objective ensures that the value of what is forgone is minimised. The conclusion seems inescapable: failure to be efficient in the second sense must be immoral to the extent that it fails to maximise the degree to which other moral ends are achieved. Needs are left unmet that ought to be met, and could have been, out of the general quantity of resources at the policy maker's disposal.

Failure to achieve full efficiency must likewise be judged a moral failure for, even if whatever is achieved is achieved with technical efficiency and, of the various technically efficient means available only those that are cost effective are used, then, unless we also ensure that the rate and scale of each activity are balanced correctly, it must follow that some needs are being met that, at the margin, are less urgent – or at least have a lower priority – than some which are not being met.

Needs should therefore be met efficiently for, if the meeting of needs is morally right, then failure to meet them as fully as is feasible must be

morally wrong. As I said before, it is not for social scientists to determine the moral ends of social policy. But, once these have been identified (and in this process I have tried to explain that social scientists still have an important role), the evaluation of the means and the inferred identification of the need for resources must embody the moral worth – whatever it may be – of the objectives. Hence the exercise of what may superficially appear to be 'mere' technical skills is inescapably a moral pursuit. It is neither more nor less moral than the objectives are themselves.

The social scientist as moral philosopher

I guess that many will agree that our world is very much lacking in efficiency as I have described it. It seems – though this may smack of a utilitarianism that I do not want to commit myself to – that a small minority of the world's population is able to (and chooses to) meet relatively trivial needs while the bulk of the human race lacks the means to satisfy the most elementary needs and, in particular, those that are fundamental to mere existence, let alone anything else that, culture for culture, might be needed for real life as a human being. I have put in the qualifying phrase because I am not as confident as Rawls (1972) that it is possible to identify a culture-free concept of justice. You may prefer to see this distributional issue as one that transcends the utilitarian view of redistribution (I do myself). But at least I hope to have convinced you that efficiency, even in distributional concerns, is an essential component of any policy having pretensions to morality.

I do not pretend to be a moral philosopher, having neither relevant skills nor any pretension to having those skills. Indeed there is much to be said for leaving moral philosophy to the professionals. However, there are many questions of a moral kind with which social scientists cannot avoid becoming embroiled. As I have tried to show, while social scientists have no legitimacy to settle such questions on behalf of society, they can often shed light on them to the benefit of those who wrestle with such matters as a practical part of their own legitimate professional life.

I conjecture that it is ambivalence about their own morality that causes some social scientists to take on the missionary role that I have argued they should deny themselves. I also conjecture that it is the perceived personal morality of other social scientists that is often the immediate spur to academic debate. In both cases, if they succumb, they are succumbing to a lamentable inability to behave as professionals, in which behaviour both their personal moral adequacy and that of their academic enemies ought to be an irrelevance. This is just as well, as there are lots of ways in which I know myself (to take someone whom I know reasonably well) to be a moral

both in having failed to figure out what I ought to be doing and, even when I have figured that out in some particular, failing through sins of omission and commission to live up to it.

Here, as a case in point, is an incomplete list of my personal moral failures. I do not know what is one's moral duty, mine or anyone else's, (to use the word 'duty' already assumes too much) in response to the maldistribution (granted for the sake of argument that it is a maldistribution) of the world's, or my country's resources. (But I do think I know my duty as regards any maldistribution of, say, my health authority's or my family's resources, even if I do not always act in the way in which my duty requires.) I do not know, starting from where we are, how far I may morally sacrifice the meeting of my children's needs for the sake of other people's children's needs, particularly if I do not know them personally, and they are far away, and there is the possibility that the others would feel no general duty towards my own children. I do not know what weight, if any, to attach to the fact (if it turned out to be a fact) that others, were our respective fortunes to be reversed, may be willing to sacrifice little for me or my children. I do not know what weight to put upon the merit or deserts of the needy. Are they needy because they were dissolute, or 'less eligible', or voted for the wrong government, or failed to mount the successful revolution that would have destroyed the political system that locally helped create their plight, replacing it with another that would have relieved it? I do not know what weight to place upon the difficult-to-predict second round consequences of redistributions which may be undesired. I do not know whether I am being unconscionably greedy to live by the rules of the capitalist society I inhabit, which affords me simultaneously the opportunity to be both richer than I choose to be and the opportunity to give more of that greater wealth away than I am prepared to give of that lesser wealth I actually have. Should not (moral) I maximise my wealth (in moral ways of course) in order to give more away to those in need? Should not you too? But I enjoy other things too much to maximise my wealth, even in moral ways, and I select priorities for the use of that wealth in which the really needy do not, in all conscience, figure particularly prominently. And so do you!

I have put these questions as matters of personal morality but each, of course, has a collective and policy correspondent. For example, to what extent should the State enforce personal morality or act on our moral behalves in matters of judging need and the desired redistribution?. I have also made it pretty clear that I suffer from both personal moral confusion and personal moral turpitude.

Fortunately, I do not think that these incompetences in me as a moral philosopher/moral person are an impediment to the exercise of my professional role in policy analysis. The reason will be clear. It is not the business of social scientists when giving (or selling) help to policy makers

to *make* these kinds of moral judgement, but rather to help the policy makers to make them better, that is, more consistently with what they truly aspire to – meeting needs efficiently and fairly, where the needs are those of people whose personal morality (like that of social scientists) will be rather average and whose greed is whatever it is. In that task, the role of the social scientist is not to be on the side of the angels or to be approved (by, of course, the right people). Their appropriate morality is a professional morality which consists, chiefly, in humility – by offering no more (but this is already quite a lot) to the process of policy making than they are professionally competent to offer: the elucidation of ends, the analysis of means, and the unpacking within explicit systems of thought of difficult and polysemic ideas, like 'need'.

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