

The Moral Imagination: History and the Power of Language

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May 6, 2004

“The young savage wanderers in the haunts of vice, or...the dark burrows of poverty in our crowded cities; these will not convert to Christianity the heathens in our own land, nor even loosen the fetters of dense ignorance which chain the intellects of these children of misery.”¹

One topic that has been consistent in the recent papers of this series is the theme of language and its use as a tool with both positive and negative consequences. We have learned how language, as part of our moral imagination, can be understood as appropriate, inclusive and enlightening. For example, Margot Nelson suggested that even the small things can make a difference and stated that hospital personnel no longer use the initials S.O.B. on a patients’ chart. While “shortness of breath” is an important problem to note regarding any patient’s condition, she argued that due to the alternative meaning of such shorthand, a different reference is more appropriate if not more respectful. Glenda Sehested proposed that when thinking about the language of morality, the use of the masculine pronoun as a way to generalize about all human beings remains an exclusive practice that we should seek to consistently avoid in an effort to continue to promote equality between men and women. Jim Johnson enlightened us about music as language and questioned whether music can be used for immoral means. To add to this

¹Mary Carpenter, "The Duty of Government to Aid the Education of Children of the Perishing and Neglected Classes," *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* (1864), p. 437. Here, Mary Carpenter argued that education and charity alone would not civilize poor children, and she advocated that those children who had fallen into sin be placed in a reformatory. Reformatories, she proposed, acted as moral hospitals that could save children from the “dens of filth” where they lived “in a manner more degraded than the brutes.” Mary Carpenter, *On the Supplementary Measures Needed for Reformatories for the Diminution of Juvenile Crime* (London: Emily Faithfull and Co. 1861), p. 8.

theme, I would like to offer historical perspective on the power of language and then, query “how then shall we live?” This paper is developed out of my own research, and as such, this discussion will have the characteristics of a case study that, I hope, has broader implications.

What I would like to focus upon is the ideology behind the nineteenth-century philanthropic agenda and how the use of language within charitable records reinforced the charitable giver’s position of power. This paper looks at philanthropic networks from the nineteenth-century and suggests that in their records we can find understanding of how western society has dealt with its poor. In conclusion, I will propose that we should not become too confident in our belief that we have actually moved beyond some of the unenlightened presumptions that our ancestors made about the indigent.

My focus narrows to Dublin Ireland where, in relation to poverty, philanthropists adopted the same attitude regarding race, class and religion as their counterparts in Western Europe and North America. During the nineteenth-century, Britain’s Parliament sought to tackle the issue of poverty for the whole of the United Kingdom. Westminster’s decisions were very much guided by an acceptance of the economic models laid down by the political economists of the day. Adam Smith’s theory of laissez faire economics led the way. Smith proposed that an invisible hand regulated the market and, when it came to the activities of that market, the government should seek to interfere as little as possible. As Smith’s ideas gained acceptance, others used his model to argue that the government must complement their non-intervention in the nation’s economic life with a similar strategy towards the nation’s social needs. Hence, increasingly, Britain’s leaders believed that an unregulated economy would provide jobs for all and, ultimately,

extensive governmental relief of poverty was counter-productive and any additional charity should be left in the hands of private organizations.²

A variety of factors contributed to how the upper classes understood poverty. These included both the ideals of liberalism that promoted individualism and as such individual responsibility for one's circumstances as well as age old ideas that suggested that there was a causal relationship between sin and poverty. Yet, during the nineteenth century, the British upper classes gradually accepted some of the newly evolving scientific theories of racial superiority. The new sciences of ethnography and anthropology proposed that the races were not only physically but also intellectually different. Seeing themselves at the top of the evolutionary pyramid, Britain's middle and upper classes became convinced that as the Crown's influence around the globe proliferated, they were bringing civilization to savages and then turning them into loyal subjects.³ Thus, they became confident that their innate superiority justified their maintenance of authority both at home and abroad.

In addition, seeking to preserve their position at the pinnacle of power, Britain's elite adopted theories of class hierarchy that were not dissimilar to those of race, and

²For Irish poor relief, it seems that the government also relied on scientific arguments regarding the inherent inferiority of the poor combined with English racial stereotyping of the Irish to create a system that would be as punitive as possible so that they would not rely upon the state but instead find employment elsewhere. Peter Gray, "The Triumph of Dogma Ideology and Famine Relief" *History Ireland* Vol. 3, 2 (Summer, 1995), p. 33 and "Punch and the Great Famine" *History Ireland* Vol. 1, 2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 26-32.

³See Perry L. Curtis, *Apes and Angels the Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997); Kavita Philip, "Race, Class and Imperial Politics of Ethnography in India, Ireland and London, 1850-1910" *Irish Studies Review* 10, 3 (2002), pp. 289-302; Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Manners into Morals: What the Victorians Knew," *The American Scholar* 57 (Spring, 1988), pp. 223-32 and Richard N. Lebow, *White Britain and Black Ireland; The Influence of Stereotypes on Colonial Policy* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976).

descriptions of the classes took on essentialist qualities.⁴ Hence, when debating the theoretical roots of nineteenth-century charity, discussion of race and class cannot be taken individually but must be considered together because, increasingly, they became fused and confused. For example, *The First Report of the Philanthropic Society* (1788) noted that the laboring poor were the "basis on which all the higher gradations rest."⁵ As a result, the nineteenth-century class power structure became almost fixed and, just as race could not be changed, class status remained effectively permanent.⁶ Thus, the charitable agenda was not about changing the poor's class status, but instead upper-class philanthropists sought to improve their circumstances in an effort to make the poor contributing subjects of the state.

As the industrial revolution contributed to demographic change, increasingly the poor made their way into Britain's towns and cities where generally the unskilled found poorly paid and often-unreliable employment in local factories. Here, in the expanding urban slums, where the need was greatest, charity played an important role as volunteers sought to enlighten the poor in their own homes. The following examples contain common themes that can be found within the publications of many nineteenth-century

⁴Gertrude Himmelfarb proposes that nineteenth-century anthropologist Henry Mayhew's study of the London poor, "contributed to an image of poverty that made the poor a race apart, uncivilized, unsocialized, less than human." Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Mayhew's Poor: A Problem of Identity," *Victorian Studies* (March, 1971), p. 320. See also, Woodcock, George. "Henry Mayhew and the Undiscovered Country of the Poor," *The Sewanee Review* 92 (Fall, 1984), pp. 556-57 and Richard Maxwell, "Henry Mayhew and the Life of the Streets," *Journal of British Studies* XVII, 2 (Spring, 1978), pp. 87-105.

⁵Anonymous, *The First Report of the Philanthropic Society* (1788), pp. 13-14. As Stedman Jones notes, "Class [was] a life sentence, as final as any caste system." Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900; Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1974), p. 493.

⁶Nevertheless, as one charity suggested, upper-class persons could possibly adopt the "habits" of the poor. The Female Orphan House noted that by training a young, once wealthy girl to become a nanny or governess, she could be saved from adopting the "manners and ideas...of those of the lower classes." *Report of the Female Orphan House* (1875), p. 9.

charities: poverty was intrinsic; the poor were dirty and diseased; their inherently sinful nature contributed to their plight; the most to be hoped for with the working classes was minimal training or emigration; and, hardened sinners and persistent beggars could not be saved.

One example of the inherency of poverty was revealed in the records of children's charities. Philanthropists believed poor children to be a reflection of their parents' degradation. Philanthropist Isabella Tod warned ladies of the difficulties that they would encounter while aiding Dublin's poor children, because these children "will have to face discouragements arising not only from the ordinary difficulties of life, but from the tendencies of disease, drink, vice, and insanity, which many...inherit."⁷ Or, for example, the First Report of the Philanthropic Society described poor children as malignant crops that when they "grow to maturity... perpetuate the baneful vegetation."⁸ Hence, reformers suggested that, like Mendel's peas, the poor were genetically designed and it would take years of evolution to eliminate their malignant characteristics.

However, at the same time, philanthropists particularly sought to save poor children because they believed them to be more easily reformed than hardened, adult sinners. The St. Joseph's Reformatory School for Catholic Girls noted that if young, poor girls could be separated from older ones, they would be saved from being contaminated by them.⁹ Mary Carpenter held out hope for children when she wrote that she wanted to

⁷Miss Isabella Tod, "Boarding-out of Pauper Children," *Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* VII, 5 (August, 1878), p. 299.

⁸Anonymous, *The First Report of the Philanthropic Society* (1788), pp. 13-14. It began by suggesting that children were "a tract of land, not indeed waste and barren, but as productive of noxious herbs and generating poisonous reptiles."

⁹Philanthropists could save them from "the contamination too often springing from association with those

civilize and teach them "and to let them know practically that they were not regarded as the offscourings of the earth, the refuse of society—that there were those who cared for their souls."¹⁰ Yet, while poor children had greater potential for becoming law-abiding subjects, philanthropists suggested that they could never escape the class into which they were born.

Philanthropists also set their sights on saving poor females. While charities reinforced their understanding of the inherent deficiencies of poor women by describing them as other, another hurdle for poor females was the common assumption that women were more moral and, if a woman sinned, society believed that she sank much lower in depravity than a man because she had so much further to fall. That is, a woman had acted in direct contradiction of her instincts.¹¹ The Dublin Female Penitentiary alleged that such women could be found "herding among the lowest orders of profligate and abandoned characters."¹² Similarly, the House of Protection, which trained needy women at the laundry in the hope of attaining for them future employment, aspired to limit the numbers of "unhappy women who infest our streets and infect society."¹³ The Dublin Female Penitentiary characterized poor Irish women as the lowest on the ladder and called them "hardened, unworthy, outcast, degraded, rejected and despised."¹⁴ While one

older in years." *General and First Annual Report of St. Joseph's Reformatory School* (1862), n.p.

¹⁰Mary Carpenter, "The Duty of Government," p. 438.

¹¹See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer, 1966), p. 152 and Mrs. Kate Charlotte Maberly, "The Present State of Ireland," (N.P., 1847), p. 28.

¹²*Report [first] of the Committee of the Dublin Female Penitentiary* (1813), p. 11. It hoped "to teach the unhappy and guilty female to remember what she was."

¹³*House of Protection*, (Dublin, n.d.) one page. One author argued that poor women were "insolent ungovernable subjects...[who display] untamable audacity and unconquerable obstinacy," and, like many, charities expressed the hope that penitents could become "gentle and docile [and] take instruction gratefully." Anonymous, "Begin at the Beginning," *Irish Quarterly Review* 8 (January, 1859), p. 1188.

¹⁴*Dublin Female Penitentiary* (1814) p. 10 and (1815), p. 9.

author advocated for poor Irish females to be educated she nevertheless characterized them as “but one degree removed from a savage state. Ferocious, idle, drunken and revengeful, they are the chief instigation of every outrage...taking an active part in the disturbance.”¹⁵ Ultimately, while charities sought to aid poor women, they suggested that there could bring about minimal improvement for them.¹⁶

Charities did, however, suggest that if caught early, the young woman was "redeemable"--unlike the experienced sinner for whom philanthropists felt there was little hope.¹⁷ The House of Refuge for Industrious and Distressed Females of Good Character tried to save young women who were from that extensive "class of misery" and hoped to train them in washing, mangling,* plain-work and "other branches of Female Industry."¹⁸ The Discharged Female Roman Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society adopted the theme that it only wanted to help those persons it deemed "saveable" from the sinful path upon which they had begun to walk. The Society noted that it did not help those whose reformation appeared to be "humanly speaking, hopeless, but principally with those prisoners who

¹⁵Kate Charlotte Maberly, "The Present State of Ireland," (London: James Ridgway, 1847), p. 28.

¹⁶Caesar Lombroso, a late nineteenth-century criminal anthropologist, reinforced this attitude when he suggested that the poor British female's "moral sense is deficient; that they are revengeful, jealous, and inclined to vengeance of a refined cruelty." He further argued that criminal women were "big children; their evil tendencies are more numerous and more varied than men's but generally remain latent. When these are awakened and excited they produce results proportionally greater...[T]he criminal woman is consequently a monster." Caesar L. Lombroso, *The Female Offender* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895), p. 151. According to J.J. Tobias, Caesar Lombroso was a leading criminologist during the nineteenth century. J.J. Tobias, *Crime and Industrial Society in the 19th Century* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1967), p. 93.

¹⁷In 1897 the anonymous author of "The Magdalens of High Park" noted that once the Irish prostitute had taken up her occupation, "her downward progress is quick and short...[she becomes] a rock of scandal. She becomes a disgrace to her sex, a blot on society, one that must be avoided as the leper of old, because she is 'unclean.'" Anonymous, "The Magdalens of High Park," *The Irish Rosary* (April, 1897), p. 178.

*"ironing"

¹⁸*House of Refuge For Industrious and Distressed Females, of good Character* (Dublin, 1851) one page. Like many charities, it only accepted young women after they "produc[ed] unquestionable vouchers for the propriety of conduct." The charity also attempted to assist in their spiritual enlightenment and "to impress the duties of religion more deeply in their hearts."

have for a short time gone astray.”¹⁹ Many Magdalen homes noted that they would only work with a young woman after a “first fall.”²⁰ While the Dublin Female Penitentiary stated that it was not “a refuge to the *hardened and unworthy*.”²¹ The Penitentiary’s 1813 report stated that it accepted “unfortunate females plunged in sin, but, from conviction, willing to quit the paths of vice” and thereby, eventually, they would be able to legitimately earn an income.²² Once this honest subsistence was established, they would no longer be the “pests of their respective stations in society.”²³

Another message that also becomes clearly evident within the records is that charities desired to turn the poor into hard-working, compliant employees and thus lead them “from the evil ways upon which they were beginning to walk, and become good and useful members of society.”²⁴ The House of Refuge For Industrious and Distressed Females, of good Character was very proud of its work in saving destitute females and in helping the women to attain “improved habits of virtue and industry, which will render

¹⁹*Dublin Discharged Female Roman Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society*, p. 11. See also Carolyn A. Conley, “No Pedestals: Woman and Violence in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” *Journal of Social History* (Summer, 1995), pp. 801-818 and Beverly Smith, “The Irish General Prisons Board, 1877-1885: Efficient Deterrence or Bureaucratic Ineptitude?” *The Irish Jurist* 15 (1980), pp. 122-136.

²⁰It was more the case that young women were more easily “reformed” and thus reforming asylums could proclaim greater success further enabling fund-raising. Maria Luddy, “Abandoned Women and Bad Characters”, p. 497.

²¹*Report [first] of the Committee of the Dublin Female Penitentiary 1814*, p. 10. See also, Anonymous, “Report of the British Ladies Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners,” *Irish Quarterly Review* 9 (1859-60), pp. vi-viii.

²²*Report [first] of the Committee of the Dublin Female Penitentiary* (1813), p. 7. Or for example, the *Dublin Providence Home* (1841) clearly noted that it was “designed for the advantage of poor *females of good character alone*” (p. 5, their emphasis). See also Niall Ó Ciosán, “Bocoughs and God’s Poor: Deserving and Undeserving Poor in Irish Popular Culture,” *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* eds. Tadgh Foley and Seán Ryder (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), pp. 80-93.

²³*Report [first] of the Committee of the Dublin Female Penitentiary* (1813), p. 7.

²⁴*Dublin Discharged Female Roman Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society* (1884), p. 4. The Dublin Female Penitent Asylum stated that it saved young women “from being the disgrace and scourge of society” by training them in washing and mending of clothes so that they might come to be “ranked among [society’s] useful and edifying members.” *Female Penitent Asylum* (Dublin, n.d.) one page.

them more certainly useful to those who shall hereafter employ them."²⁵ By training them to be better servants, Dublin's reformers hoped to transform the city's indigent into proper, loyal and obedient subjects.²⁶ The Managing Committee of the Association for the Suppression of Mendacity in Dublin taught young women lace making not because it thought they would find employment in that field but because they wanted to train the girls in the "habits of cleanliness, neatness, dexterity, and patient diligence."²⁷ The Association stated that it believed that the young girls, upon whom the charity conferred many benefits, would more likely become "useful servants."²⁸ It wanted them to avoid anything that "might possibly unfit them for that humble and laborious station in society" which the committee hoped to "prepare them to fill with respectability."²⁹ In addition to creating good subjects in order to engender their "fidelity to the State," the Providence (Row) Night Refuge and Home noted that it was also seeking to ensure a good, if not deferential relationship between "rich and poor."³⁰ Ultimately, as a more valuable employee, she would, the charity hoped, also be more faithful to God and thus less inclined to sin. Nevertheless, wanting the poor to become respectable did not mean that charities wanted the poor to forget their station in society.

Wrapped up in the process of creating obedient and useful employees was the effort to create loyal subjects to the crown. It seems that loyal subjects were certainly

²⁵*House of Refuge For Industrious and Distressed Females, of good Character* (Dublin, 1851) one page.

²⁶As Foucault wrote, "individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application," Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p 98.

²⁷*Association for the Suppression of Mendacity in Dublin* (1833), p. 24.

²⁸*Association for the Suppression of Mendacity in Dublin* (1833), p. 24.

²⁹*Association for the Suppression of Mendacity in Dublin* (1833), p. 24.

³⁰"The miseries of the outcasts, and the utter degradation of the destitute, in the slums and rookeries, have at length awakened such sympathy and aroused such interest, that a Royal Commission has been appointed

those who were hard-working and law abiding and did not live off the largess of the state. As philanthropist Rosa Barrett noted “to put him in the way of earning his dinner may be a more difficult task, but surely it is the truest charity.”³¹ In this way, charities took their cue from the *Irish Poor Relief Act* of 1838, which Parliament had designed to discourage the poor’s continued reliance upon state aid. Charitable records show clear evidence that philanthropists feared fostering a class of dependents. In particular, charities emphasized the need to only help those allegedly deserving of aid.³² Organizations aspired to have the poor only rely upon assistance until such time as they found employment or other opportunities. The report for the Cottage Home for Little Children wrote that it was proud to have assisted many poor women to overcome difficult circumstances and avoid having to enter the workhouse where “ratepayers would have to support them.”³³ Those “deserving” included the elderly, children and those willing to work but had fallen on hard times.

Throughout their records, Dublin's charities used colorful descriptions for the “deserving” poor. In 1833, the Managing Committee of the Association for the Suppression of Mendacity in Dublin called them “praiseworthy [for] desir[ing] to establish a certain decency of appearance” and “well-disposed and orderly.”³⁴ As St. Mary's Industrial Institute noted, it hoped to benefit the “distressed, but truly deserving

to devise some plan, to diminish the appalling disgrace.” *Report of the Providence (Row) Night Refuge and Home* (1884), p. 1.

³¹Rosa Barrett, *Guide to Dublin Charities* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1884), p. 78.

³²Helen Burke, *The People and the Poor Law In Nineteenth Century Ireland* (London: George Philip Services, 1987), p. 22.

³³The *Cottage Home for Little Children* (Dublin: 1889), p. 11.

³⁴*Managing Committee of the Association for the Suppression of Mendacity in Dublin* (1833), p. 10; (1834), p. 14; (1835), p. 11.

portion of the community, viz., the Industrious Poor."³⁵ The Strangers Friend Society for Visiting and Relieving Distressed Strangers and the Resident Sick Poor stated that:

Its benevolent operations are still more extended embracing a most deserving class of the community. It will at once be seen that they are not the noisy importunate beggars, who impede our progress in the streets, hang about our doors, taking every opportunity to exhibit their misery—nor are those who, with begging letters, fabricated testimonials and well-concerted tales of apparently genuine distress, go about, endeavouring to impose upon the kindness and credulity of the unsuspecting charitable and humane.³⁶

While children and the deserving poor were worthy of assistance, philanthropists firmly believed that there were those who were unworthy of society's benevolence. Charities proposed that the "undeserving," such as beggars, alcoholics and adults who appeared unwilling to work, should remain unassisted and thereby left to their own means. Philanthropists and social commentators alike frowned upon indiscriminate aid provided to beggars and "wandering mendicants." The homeless were stamped with names such as "wretched class," "dangerous" or "neglected" persons. Philanthropists argued that contributions by private charities must be carefully administered because they were certain to only weaken any industrious tendencies held by the poor, causing them to become more entrenched in their status. As the Philanthropic Society noted, "charities to the poor may be compared to cordials administered to the sick: everyone knows the danger of their habitual use."³⁷ This was further emphasized by Dublin's Female Orphan House which argued that indiscriminate giving only "encourage and confirm the most degrading profligacy of a number of the worst characters in the city."³⁸ Social statistician,

³⁵Included in the Second Annual Report of the *Ladies Association of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul* (1853), p. 27.

³⁶*Strangers Friend Society for Visiting and Relieving Distressed Strangers and the Resident Sick Poor* (1832), p. 4.

³⁷*First Report of the Philanthropic Society* (1788), pp. 8-9.

³⁸*Female Orphan House* (1851), p. 3.

Francis White, discussed indiscriminate aid to the poor Irish as the "perverted bounty of individuals [that] serves also to increase the difficulty of obtaining subscriptions for established public charities."³⁹ The Strangers' Friend Society recommended "*caution* and *careful* investigation" before providing any assistance thereby making the greatest attempt at ensuring that the "truly poor" received aid.⁴⁰

Within all of this, what the records suggest is that nineteenth-century ideologies of race and class cannot be discussed individually. Many charitable workers saw themselves at the top of a racial pyramid complicated by class and argued that the poor were destitute because of their inherent moral and intellectual mediocrity. The upper classes sought ensure that the working classes understood the distance that existed between those at the top and those at the bottom, and philanthropy was another tool that reinforced an understanding of the impenetrable nature of class.⁴¹

Through this brief look at Victorian charitable activities, naturally, we are horrified at much of the language as well as the attitude that upper-class philanthropists maintained in regards to the poor. They sought to make state aid as demeaning and as punishing as possible while private aid was clearly only to be given to the worthy.

Importantly, evidence suggests that rarely did philanthropists delve into the economic causes of poverty, more often presuming that personal failings had resulted in personal

³⁹Francis White, Esq., *Report and Observations on the State of the Poor of Dublin* (n.p., 1833), p. 22. Another Dublin charity, the Association for the Suppression of Mendacity, called indiscriminate giving a mischievous practice from which those less deserving received more, "it may be fairly assumed that in many cases the street beggar receives more than the pauper in the Mendacity Institution." *Association for the Suppression of Mendacity in Dublin* (1834), p. 14.

⁴⁰*Annual Report of the Strangers' Friend Society for Visiting and Relieving Distressed Strangers and the Resident Sick Poor, in Dublin and its Vicinity* (1836), p. 6. As Jeremiah Dowling wrote, "the demoralizing influence of out-door relief it would be impossible to estimate." Jeremiah Dowling, *The Irish Poor Laws and Poor-Houses* (Dublin: Hodges, Foster and Co., 1872), p. 26.

hardship. In looking at how the Victorians viewed charity we clearly see the liberal ideals of locating responsibility for one's circumstances upon the individual. Victorians advocated that moral norms were an important part of the public discourse and integrated the ideals of cultivating moral behavior into the poor through both state and privately funded aid. While the Victorians themselves are notorious for telling others how to behave while not practicing what they preached, in our own day and age when we increasingly talk of moral relativity, was there not some integrity in publicly expressing moral absolutes? Were the Victorians so wrong in valuing what they saw as the universal virtues of hard-work, self-respect and self reliance?⁴²

From the records of nineteenth-century charities, I suggest we can discern two particular points. First, that the Victorians were unafraid to state their moral agenda. The records reveal that philanthropists believed that through hard work, religious participation and what they understood to be moral living (i.e. the avoidance of drinking, gambling and promiscuity) the poor could be saved from their poverty and set forth on the path to reform. Second, and it must be understood, the path to reform did not lead to the door of equality with the upper classes because, as the language suggested, philanthropists believed that poverty was inherent a condition which could be improved but never overcome.

Yet, while the charitable records of the nineteenth century are full of amusing anecdotes that seemingly reassure us of how far we have come in understanding the causes of poverty, let us not be too quick to pat ourselves on the back. While I am no

⁴¹Jones, "Working-Class Culture," p. 498.

expert in the contemporary legislation of poverty, I will look to the recent example of the United States' effort to reform welfare to ponder how far we are from some of the more odious examples of Victorian theories regarding the inherency of poverty. I will again look to single females for examples—in this case, unwed mothers.

In 1997, Susan Thomas wrote an article about welfare reform and the maintenance of the myth that poverty was “a pathological condition” for which the poor person's circumstances were made worse by their “adherence to unhealthy or dysfunctional values and by their own inability or unwillingness to defer gratification of their immediate material or sexual desires.”⁴³ Thomas begins with welfare reform in the 1950s and discusses the consistent argument that unwed mothers were using the welfare system as a business venture—having multiple children in order to receive cash benefits. Thus, beginning in the 1950s there were efforts to discourage women on welfare from having multiple children by such methods as the denial of assistance to subsequent children or, for example, in the case of Mississippi in 1958, one state representative proposed a bill titled “An Act to Discourage Immorality of Unmarried Females by Providing Sterilization of the Unwed Mother Under Conditions of this Act: And for Related Purposes.” The particular target of this bill was the “negro woman” who was clearly making a “business of giving birth to illegitimate children.”⁴⁴ Other examples include the Governor of Arkansas who in 1960 proudly stated he had eliminated some 8,000 illegitimate children from the welfare rolls or the Texas legislature that stopped

⁴²Gertrude Himmelfarb “From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values” The American Enterprise Online: http://www.taemag.com/issues/articleID.16874/article_detail.asp

⁴³Susan L. Thomas, “Women, Welfare Reform and the Preservation of a Myth” *Social Science Journal* 34, 3, (1997), p. 4. (note: taken from Infotrac the page number of this article in print version are 351-68).

benefits to women who exposed their children to “immoral surroundings.”⁴⁵ Not unlike the Victorians, this language placed the responsibility for the moral behavior of both sexes at the feet of the poor woman suggesting that she was the one to blame for enticing the man and thus she is also to be held solely responsible for getting pregnant.

Forty years later in 1992, the first Bush administration granted then Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson the approval to enact the “Parental and Family Responsibility Initiative” that imposed a “one-child per-family cap on AFDC benefits.”⁴⁶ If a woman were to have a second child while on welfare she would only receive half the financial benefits for the second as she did for the first. As one of Wisconsin’s legislators stated, this would shut off the “welfare ‘irrigation system’ nurturing many of the defects of the poor—their laziness, debauchery [and] promiscuity—that led to poverty.”⁴⁷ Thus, with the encouragement of both the Bush and Clinton administrations, a number of states sought to cap the welfare benefits for single mothers who had children while on welfare. As when in 1992 an Assemblyman from New Jersey suggested:

It is simply stupid to pretend that poverty isn’t caused by poor folks—who have no values—having more babies than they should. The question is, why should we who live in good suburbia, who do not have children we cannot afford, continue to support folks who...don’t seem willing to make the same kinds of choices themselves? Why can’t poor folks make those same decisions? If there is an unplanned pregnancy, you have the right to go get an abortion in our state....⁴⁸

Like the 1950s where sterilization was on the table—in the 1990s, the use of contraceptives as a way to contain pregnancy in poor women was also linked to financial

⁴⁴Thomas, “Women, Welfare Reform and the Preservation of a Myth,” p. 5.

⁴⁵Thomas, “Women, Welfare Reform and the Preservation of a Myth,” p. 5.

⁴⁶Thomas, “Women, Welfare Reform and the Preservation of a Myth,” p. 6.

⁴⁷Thomas, “Women, Welfare Reform and the Preservation of a Myth,” p. 7.

⁴⁸Thomas, “Women, Welfare Reform and the Preservation of a Myth,” pp. 7 and 9. The assemblyman was Wayne Bryant.

benefits. Thus legislatures (35 states) considered (but did not necessarily pass) bills that gave women financial incentives to use Norplant. For example, the South Carolina legislature proposed the “Responsible Parenting Act” which would have required all welfare mothers to have Norplant surgically implanted or lose all financial assistance.

Thus in the 1990s it seems that such legislation continues to hold, in this case, poor women solely responsible for out of wedlock pregnancy and persists at linking immorality as an inherent characteristic of poverty. However, what is interesting to note is that there is little evidence that women on welfare are the habitual offenders that society presumes. Thomas cites evidence that “fertility rates for welfare mothers are lower than the rates for the general population, and the longer a woman remains on welfare, the less she is likely to give birth.”⁴⁹ In truth it seems that most women go on welfare after they have produced a child...not before.⁵⁰ In addition, Sharon Chanley and Nicholas Alozie tell us that welfare is not dominated by minorities—black or Hispanic, but the majority of welfare recipients are white.⁵¹ Yet, and apparently with a straight face, William Tucker in 1996 wrote that the abolition of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) would hopefully result in black fathers marrying the mothers of their children, which would then help to reduce crime because those fathers would be home to discipline their teenage boys while at the same time protecting their

⁴⁹ Thomas, “Women, Welfare Reform and the Preservation of a Myth,” p. 8.

⁵⁰ Thomas, “Women, Welfare Reform and the Preservation of a Myth,” p. 8.

⁵¹ “The typical welfare recipient has only one or two children and is likely to be enrolled for ‘less than two years, if single spells are considered, and cumulatively less than four years total.’ Sharon A. Chanley and Nicholas O. Alozie, “Policy for the ‘Deserving,’ But Politically Weak: The 1996 Welfare Reform Act and Battered Women” *Policy Studies Review* 18: 2 (Summer 2001), p. 5.

daughters from the “amorous advances of young men.”⁵² The problem with Tucker’s argument is not his suggestion that stable two-parent families improve the lives and choices of their children but that this is somehow the bastion of African Americans—never does he address the fact that, for example, impoverished neighborhoods, unemployment and poor education contribute greatly to poverty and thus the need for state aid.

Thus, at the end of the day, does the present conversation about poor assistance still fail to look at the root causes for poverty? By denying a second child welfare benefits, are we not only keeping that child in the impoverished state in which they are born thus completing the cycle that we are supposedly seeking to break? Have we really left the language of the Victorians so far behind? Does our society not still believe that immorality leads to poverty? In looking at the Tyco, Enron and Imclone (Martha Stuart) scandals, could we not suggest that, in truth, immorality is fostered by wealth? Immoral behavior is not to be owned by any one class or, as the language often continues to suggest, by non-whites.

How then shall we live? I might suggest that we consider the Victorian’s example and be more willing to integrate a discussion of moral norms into the public conversation. While we can easily dismiss the Victorians in the face of their, at times, degrading language, as Joel Schwartz tells us the moral reformers of the past “understood

⁵²William Tucker, “The Moral of the Story” *The American Spectator* v 29 (October, 1996), p. 2. (note: taken from Infotrac the page number of this article in print version are 20-2). In truth Tucker argues that Africans cultural history of polygamy contributes to their willingness to have out-of-wedlock children. But, and sounding like a good Victorian, Tucker seems to suggest that if we can only get African-Americans to behave like “us” then they will create solid two parent families and put an end to their heavy dependence upon state aid.

structural and environmental reform not just—or even principally—as an end in itself, but instead as a means to the end of improving and elevating human character.”⁵³ This conversation must include the moral responsibilities not only of each citizen, rich and poor, or the community, but the moral obligations of the government as well. A government whose responsibilities include the task of promoting “the common good [that] entails the obligation to respect the worth and the rights of each member of the community.”⁵⁴ In the end, while we might look to the Victorians to help us think about the role of moral norms in our public conversation, we should seek to rid ourselves of the Victorian’s baggage that suggests that there are essentialist characteristics to poverty.

⁵³Joel Schwartz “Moral Reform—Learning from the Past” *The Public Interest* 131 (Spring 1998), p. 11. “There is no reason to suppose that the poor are wholly constrained by social and environmental forces (so that they can do nothing to improve their condition) or that they are moral actors who are altogether free (hence completely responsible for their condition, altogether capable of improving it on their own.)” p. 12. (note: taken from Infotrac the page number of this article in print version are 71-91).

⁵⁴Fred Glennon “Blessed Be the Ties that Bind? The Challenge of Charitable Choice to Moral Obligation” *Journal of Church and State* 42, 4 (Autumn, 2000), p. 4. (note: taken from Infotrac the page number of this article in print version are 825-43).