

### Module

# 11

## What is the moral ground to view poverty?

Many of the myths that we have been examining throughout these modules are connected to the prevailing tendency to perceive poverty as individual failure and inadequacy. If one believes that poverty is the result of a lack of effort and individual failing, then the poor have no one to blame but themselves. In the United States, poverty is typically seen as the fault of the individual, that individuals are largely to blame for their situation, and consequently, the rest of society bears little responsibility for their plight. The result is a general acceptance of the status quo of high poverty, and a lack of initiative to address it. In other words, it is somebody else's problem and responsibility, not mine.

One of the pernicious results of this myth is that it provides a comfortable justification for doing nothing to address poverty. If poverty is the result of individual inadequacies, and if the blame for poverty falls squarely on the shoulders of the poor, then we may actually harm the poor by attempting to help them. Such as been the logic of policy makers on the right who have claimed that government is not the solution, government is the problem.

The myth of understanding poverty through the lens of individual blame is therefore one that is both pervasive and powerful. It is the lynchpin that much of our social policy towards the poor has rested upon.

### Poverty As a Grievous Injustice

In sharp contrast to the perspective of blame, we argue that poverty represents an injustice of a substantial magnitude. Severe deprivation and hardship have been documented in countless studies—not to mention millions of human lives. And as argued in earlier modules, a large portion of this poverty is the result of failings at the structural rather than the individual level, which places much of the responsibility for poverty beyond that of the individual.

However, what makes poverty particularly grievous, is the stark contrast between the wealth, abundance, and resources of America on the one hand, and its levels of destitution on the other. Something is seriously wrong when we find that in a country with the most abundant resources in the world, there are children without enough to eat, families who can not afford health care, and people who are sleeping on the streets for lack of shelter.

It should also be noted that the gap between extreme prosperity and economic vulnerability has never been wider. The venerable economist, Paul Samuelson, writing in the first edition of his introductory economics textbook in 1948, observed that if we were to make an income pyramid out of a child's play blocks, with each layer representing \$1,000 of income, the peak would be somewhat higher than the Eiffel Tower, but almost all of us would be within a yard or so of the ground. By the time of Samuelson's 2001 edition of the textbook, most of us would still be within a yard or two of the ground, but the Eiffel Tower would now have to be replaced with Mount Everest to represent those at the top.

Or take what has happened with respect to the distance between the average worker's salary and the average CEO's salary. In 1980, the average CEO of a major corporation

earned 42 times that of the average worker's pay. Today it is well over 350 times. Adding insult to injury, during the past 40 years, an increasing number of companies have demanded concessions from their workers, including pay cuts and the elimination of health benefits in order to keep their labor costs down, while those at the top have prospered beyond any sense of decency.

Patterns of wealth accumulation have become even more skewed. Today in America, we find that the top one percent of the U.S. population currently own 46 percent of the entire financial wealth in the country, while the bottom 60 percent of Americans are in possession of less than 1 percent of the country's financial wealth. And while all of these trends have been happening, our social policies have continued to give more to the well to do and less to the economically vulnerable, with the argument that these policies have been helping all Americans.

A new way of thinking recognizes this as a moral outrage. Injustice, rather than blame, becomes the moral compass on which to view poverty amidst abundance. This type of injustice constitutes a strong impetus for change. It signals that a wrong is being committed that cries out for a remedy. A shift in thinking recognizes this and is premised upon the idea that social change is essential in addressing the injustices of poverty.

This is in sharp contrast with the old way of thinking, in which the moral focus is upon individual blame. This has had the effect of simply reinforcing the status quo of doing little, resulting in continued rates of elevated poverty. The perspective of injustice allows us to actively engage and confront poverty, rather than comfortably settling for the status quo of widespread impoverishment.

Martin Luther King summed this up well with the following passage from his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* He wrote,

A true revolution of value will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.

Such a revolution of values must begin with a fundamental shift in how American society understands, and ultimately acts toward the issue of poverty. ★