

Special Essay

Am I my brother's keeper?¹

by Zygmunt Bauman

I

The proper task of social work ought to be, we are told, getting rid of unemployed, handicapped, invalid and other indolent people who for one reason or another cannot eke out their own living and depend on social help and care for their survival: and this evidently is not happening. As social work, we are told, ought to be judged like any other human action by its cost-and-effects balance sheet, it does not, in its present form, 'make economic sense'. It could only justify its continued existence if it made dependent people independent and made the lame people walk on their own feet. The tacit, rarely spelled-out assumption is that for not-independent people, such people as do not join the game of selling and buying, there is no room in the society of players. 'Dependence' has become a dirty word: it refers to something which decent people should be ashamed of.

When God asked Cain where Abel was, Cain replied, angrily, with another question: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' The greatest ethical philosopher of our century, Emmanuel Levinas, commented: from that angry Cain's question all immorality began. Of course I am my brother's keeper; and I am and remain a moral person as long as I do not ask for a special reason to be one. Whether I admit it or not, I am my brother's keeper because my brother's well-being depends on what I do or refrain from doing. And I am a moral person because I recognize that dependence and accept the responsibility that follows. The moment I question that dependence and demand—like Cain did—to be given reasons why I should care, I renounce my responsibility and am no more a moral self. My brother's dependence is what makes me an ethical being. Dependence and ethics stand together and together they fall.

To think of it, Levinas's blunt verdict is not news.

It but reiterates in somewhat different terms what was, for millennia, the hard core of Judeo-Christian teachings which gestated and weaned our common understanding of humanity and civilised being. What Levinas spelled out made the need of the other, and the responsibility for meeting that need, into the cornerstone of morality—and the acceptance of that responsibility into the birth-act of the moral person. But if Levinas's verdict is not news, then the decision and contempt for dependence and the stigma attached to it must be news; perhaps even the most profound and radical of novelties which the Judeo-Christian civilization has confronted in its long history. It is worth our while to give some thought to that novelty and its causes when we celebrate the anniversary of the daring initiative which today, a hundred years later, is pressed to apologize for its results.

If Cain's question is today asked in various updated forms all over Europe and if the welfare state comes everywhere under attack, it is because the unique combination of factors which led to its establishment and made it look and feel like the natural state of modern society, has now fallen apart. We may say at its birth the welfare state was 'overdetermined'. But now it is the resentment towards welfare state institutions, and their gradual dismantling, which are similarly 'overdetermined'.

It has been said by some people that the emergence of the welfare state was the triumph of ethical intentions: their recasting in the constitutive principles of modern civilized society. It has been said by some others that the introduction of the welfare state was the result of a prolonged struggle waged by trade unions and labour parties demanding collective and state-endorsed insurance of livelihood—threatened by the uneven and erratic capitalist development. Some other analysts yet emphasized the

wish of the political establishment to defuse dissent and avert the possible rebellion against that threat. All these explanations ring credible, but each one captures but a part of truth. None of the factors identified would have been able to carry the weight of the welfare state on its own; it was, rather, their coincidence that paved the way to the creation of the welfare state and assured a nearly universal support for its provisions and a similarly universal readiness to share its costs.

But even the combination of factors could have proven insufficient, were it not for that buckle which holds them together: the need to keep both capital and labour in a 'market-ready' state, and the responsibilities in this direction that had fallen upon the state. For the capitalist economy to function, capital had to be able to buy labour and labour had to be in an attractive enough condition to appear to its prospective buyers as a desirable commodity. Under the circumstances, the major task of the state and the key to proper fulfilment of all its other functions was the 'commodification of capital-labour relations'; seeing to it that the transaction of buying and selling labour could go on unhindered.

At that stage of the capitalist development (now by and large over) the rate of growth and profits was proportionate to the volume of labour engaged in the productive process. The working of the capitalist market was notorious for its ups and downs, for periods of boom followed by protracted depressions; not all potentially available labour resources could therefore be employed at all time. But those currently idle were the active labour force of tomorrow; at present, but only temporarily, they were unemployed, people in an abnormal but also transient and rectifiable condition. They were the 'reserve army of labour' — their status was defined by what they were not at the moment but should have been ready to become when the time came. As every general will tell you, the care for the military strength of the nation requires that the reservists are well nourished and kept in good health, so to be ready to face the strains of army life when called into active service. And since that was the era of massive labour and mass conscript armies, the nation could be confident of its strength only if everyone could be,

should the need arise, drawn into the ranks of industrial labour or the army. The working and fighting capacity of its citizens was the *conditio sine qua non* of state sovereignty and of the well-being of the state's subjects. That the task to keep the poor and handicapped, the impoverished and indolent, ready to rejoin the ranks at any moment is the duty of society as a whole and a matter of well-understood interests of the nation as a whole, was fully and truly an issue 'beyond left and right'. No one needed much convincing that the money spent on welfare provisions was money well spent.

II

The era of mass-employment industry is now over, at least in our part of the world, and also the mass conscript army belongs to the past. Modern weapons mean few professional soldiers, and technological progress in goods production consists nowadays in cutting down the need for employment investment. This means fewer, not more, jobs, and the stock exchanges all over the world promptly reward the 'slimming down' and 'downsizing' companies and react nervously to the news of a falling unemployment rate.

Let us be clear about it: people traditionally called 'un-employed' are no more the 'reserve army of labour', just like the adult Dutch- or Englishman is no longer the army reservist about to rejoin the troops in case of military need. We are fooling ourselves if we expect industry to recall the people it made redundant. Such an eventuality would go against the grain of everything relevant to the present-day economic prosperity: the principles of flexibility, competitiveness, and productivity measured by falling labour costs. And let us face the truth—that even if the new rules of the market game promise a rise in the total wealth of the nation, they also, inevitably, make virtually inescapable the widening gap between those in the game and the rest who are left out.

This is not the end of the story, though. People left out of the game are also left without a function which by any stretch of imagination could be seen

as 'useful', let alone indispensable, for the smooth and profitable running of the economy. They are not needed as the would-be producers; but in the society in which the consumers, not the producers, are cast as the driving force of economic prosperity (it is the 'consumer-led' recovery that we expect to take us out of economic troubles), the poor are also worthless as consumers: they will not be tempted by market blandishments, they carry no credit cards nor can they count on bank overdrafts, and the commodities they most need bring little or no profit to the traders. No wonder they are being re-classified as an 'underclass'—no more a temporary abnormality waiting to be rectified and brought back in line, but a class outside the classes, a category cast permanently off-limits by the 'social system', a category without which the rest of us would be better off and more comfortable than we are now.

A few months ago Ulrich Beck, the insightful and perspicacious German sociologist, published a book under the title *Schöne neue Arbeitswelt* ('Nice new world of work'). The major thesis of this thoughtful book is that in ten years or so only one in two work-capable Europeans will be boasting a full-time, regular form of employment, though even this half would hardly enjoy the degree of long-term security which union-protected jobs still entailed a quarter of a century ago. (As the noted Sorbonne economist Daniel Cohen pointed out, whoever joined the Ford or Renault factory could count on staying there until the end of their working life, while people who get their lucrative jobs in Bill Gates's enterprises have not the slightest idea where they will be next year.) The rest of us will make our living 'Brazilian style': through occasional, short-term, casual work, with no contractual guarantees and no pension or compensation rights, though with the distinct possibility of being terminated shortly and at the employer's whim. If Ulrich Beck is right (and his predictions carry widespread support from facts and learned opinion), then the recently popular 'welfare to workfare' ('welfare to work') schemes, which were meant to make the welfare state redundant, are not measures aimed at improving the lot of the poor and disadvantaged, but a statistical exercise meant to wipe them off the register of social, and indeed ethical,

problems through the simple trick of re-classification.

III

The preachers of the so-called 'third way' may be right when they proclaim the dismantling of the 'welfare state as we know it' to be an issue 'beyond left and right', like once upon a time the creation of the welfare state used to be. (Let us remark in passing that the term 'the third way' is likely to be used solely by such writers and politicians who have renounced the hopes of taming the uncouth, often savage forces of the market, but are not ready fully to admit their capitulation; the spokesmen for the 'first', the dominant capitalist-market way, now free from the 'second', the socialist alternative would hardly need to resort to the term, since they would not see much difference between what is being proposed under the 'third way' rubric and what they had been saying all along). Indeed, governments of the left and right alike can hardly curry favour with the electorate except than by cajoling the global, extra-territorial, and free-floating capital and finance to come in and stay. From the point of view of the latter, keeping the local poor in a decent human condition, that principal objective of the welfare state, is utterly devoid of 'economic sense'.

No wonder that the welfare state has received a 'bad press'. One can hardly read and hear nowadays of those hundreds or thousands of human beings whom caring social workers have drawn back from the brink of ultimate despair or collapse; or of those millions for whom welfare provisions made all the difference between wretched poverty and decent life; or of those tens of millions whom the awareness that help will come if needed allowed to face the risks of life with courage and determination without which successful, let alone dignified, life is unthinkable. But one reads and hears quite a lot about those hundreds or thousands who sponge and cheat and abuse the patience and benevolence of public authorities; or of those hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions whom 'life on the dole' transformed into inept and lazy idlers not just unable, but unwilling to take

up work when it comes their way and preferring to live at the hard-working taxpayer's expenses. In the popular American definitions of the members of the 'underclass', the poverty-stricken people, single mothers, school-dropouts, drug addicts, and criminals on parole stand shoulder to shoulder and are no more easily set apart. What unites them and justifies piling them together is that all of them, for whatever reason, are a 'burden on society'. We would all be better off and happier if they somehow, miraculously, disappeared.

There is one more, and powerful, reason, for the contemporary poor—the 'social services clients'—to turn from being the objects of pity and compassion into objects of resentment and anger. We all, to a greater or lesser degree, experience the world we inhabit as full of risks, uncertain and insecure. Our social standing, our jobs, the market value of our skills, our partnerships, our neighbourhoods and the networks of friends we can rely on, are all unstable and vulnerable—unsafe harbours for anchoring our trust. The life of constant consumer choice is not tranquil either: what about the anxiety over the wisdom of the choices we are daily bound to make; what about objects of desire which are fast losing their attractions, and the objects of pride turning overnight into the stigma of shame; what about the identity we all desperately seek, which has the nasty habit of falling out of fashion and esteem well before we achieve it? Indeed, life is full of anxiety and fear, and few people would say that they would change nothing in it if given the chance. Our *Risikogesellschaft* (risk society) faces an awesome task when it comes to reconciling its members to the hazards and dreads of daily life. It is this task that the poor, once presented as an underclass of outcasts, make a little easier. If their kind of life is the sole alternative to 'staying in the game', then the risks and horrors of the flexible world and life-long uncertainty seem a little less repulsive and unendurable: that is, they feel better than all other thinkable options could. One may say, a bit cynically, that our peace of mind, our reconciliation with life, and whatever happiness we may derive from a life to which we have reconciled ourselves, all depend psychologically on the wretchedness and the misery of the outcast poor.

IV

And so making the lot of the poor worse still than it is makes the fate of all the rest of us look better. This is bad news for the prospects of solidarity with the poor—that solidarity which came easily and naturally at the time when the major oppression the bulk of the population suffered was the grinding routine of daily work and the relentless chores of the daily struggle for survival. Between the plight of the employed and that of the unemployed poor there was a close and intimate kinship, and the insight into the situation of the people out-of-work did not present those in-work with any difficulty. If the first and the second were both miserable, both were miserable for essentially similar reasons and the difference in their suffering was a matter of degree, not kind. Today, on the contrary, the empathy with 'people on the dole' does not come easy to the rest of us. They, like us, may be unhappy, but obviously we are unhappy for different reasons—our miseries have distinctly different shapes and do not readily translate.

The fears which haunt most of us daily arise from too little security of our well-being; they, the poor, are by contrast much too secure in their misery. If we suffer, it is because of the flexibility and instability of our livelihood; but instability is the last thing which people condemned to a life of poverty would complain about. They suffer because of the scarcity of their chances in the world which boasts of offering unprecedented opportunities to anyone else; we, however, tend to view their lack of chances as freedom from the risks which torment us, and deep in our hearts may well envy their lot which does not seem to be unpleasant at all. Their income may be meagre, but it is, at least, secure; the welfare cheques come regularly, whatever happens, and so 'those people' do not need to prove themselves daily in order to be sure of their tomorrows. Doing nothing at all, they obtain and enjoy that certainty which we bend over backwards, but in vain, to achieve. This is why the 'from welfare to workfare' schemes may count on the outspoken, or at least a tacit, support from the majority of the 'flexibly employed': let them, like us, be buffeted by the shifting waves of

the labour market, let them be haunted by the same uncertainty we are all tormented by.

And so, the welfare state's falling out of favour is overdetermined. The rich and powerful see it as a bad investment and money wasted, while the less rich and powerless feel no solidarity with the 'welfare clients' and no longer see in their predicament a mirror-image of their own troubles. The welfare state is on the defensive. It must apologize and argue daily, over and over again, its *raison d'être*. And while arguing, it can hardly use the most popular language of our times, that of interest and profitability. More can be said in fact: no rational arguments can be raised in favour of the continuing existence of the welfare state. The care for the well-being of the 'reserve army of labour' could be presented as a rational step to take, indeed as a command of reason. Keeping the 'underclass' alive and well defies all rationality and serves no visible purpose.

And so we are back to square one. After a century or so of the happy marital cohabitation between ethics and rational-instrumental reason, the second partner opted out of the marriage and ethics remained alone in charge of the once shared household. And when alone, ethics is vulnerable and does not find it easy to stand its ground on its own.

The question 'Am I my brother's keeper?', which not long ago was thought to be answered once for all and so was seldom heard, is asked again, more vociferously and belligerently by the day. And people wishing for a 'yes' answer try desperately, yet with no evident success, to make it sound convincing in the cool and businesslike language of interests. What they should do instead is to reassert, boldly and explicitly, the ethical reason for the welfare state—the only reason the welfare state needs to justify its presence in a humane and civilized society. There is no guarantee, whatsoever that the ethical argument will cut much ice in a society in which competitiveness, cost-and-effect calculations, profitability, and other free-market commandments rule supreme and join forces in what, according to Pierre Bourdieu, is fast becoming our *pensée unique*, the belief beyond all questioning. But the issue of guarantee is neither here nor there, since the ethical argu-

ment is the welfare state's only remaining line of defence.

One measures the carrying capacity of a bridge by the strength of its weakest pillar. The human quality of a society ought to be measured by the quality of life of its weakest members. And since the essence of all morality is the responsibility which people take for the humanity of the others, this is also the measure of a society's ethical standard. This is, I propose, the only measure a welfare state can afford, but also the only one it needs. This measure may prove insufficient to endear the welfare state to all of us on whose support its fate depends—but this is also the sole measure which resolutely and unambiguously speaks in the welfare state's favour.

The much needed return to ethical foundations is likely to encounter other obstacles in addition to the obvious one, which is its lack of resonance with the dominant discourse of the time. These other obstacles are internal to social work; they stem from the long bureaucratization of social work which for many years could proceed unabated precisely because the ethical substance of welfare work, having been taken for granted, could be relegated to the seldom explored background of its daily practices. Geert van der Laan puts his finger on the most invidious and vexing of such self-inflicted difficulties when he points out that in welfare practice 'moral assessment has been replaced by the procedural execution of rules'. This, perhaps, was unavoidable, given the large and constantly rising number of cases with which social workers needed to deal and the necessity of comparing and finding 'common denominators' for human sufferings whose uniqueness defied comparison and neat classification. The tendency could have its good reasons, its results, however, made the daily practice of social work ever more distant from its original ethical impulse; the objects of care turned more and more into the specimens of legal categories and the process of 'effacing the face', endemic to all bureaucracy, was set in motion.

No wonder that social workers, in the Netherlands as much as in other countries, have been trained to believe that the secret of success over defeat in their work should be sought and could be found in the letter of procedural rules and in the proper inter-

pretation of their spirit. When 'procedural execution' takes over from 'moral assessment' as the guide to job-performance, one of the most conspicuous and seminal consequences is the urge to make the rules more precise and less ambiguous than they are, to taper the range of their possible interpretations, to make the decisions in each case fully determined and predictable 'by the book'; and the expectation that all this can be done, and that if it has not been done it is the sloppiness, neglect, or short-sightedness of the social workers and their bosses which are to blame. Such beliefs prompt social workers to be inward-looking and seek the explanation of the rising tide of anti-welfare-state criticism in their own failings. They come to believe that whatever type of critic could be placated, if only we, the social workers, could design and write down in the statute books a clear inventory of the clients' entitlements and an *eindeutig* (unambiguous) code of our conduct.

I put it to you that the beliefs and expectations in question are illusions; and that just how illusory they are becomes clear the moment we recall that social work, whatever else it may be, is also the ethical gesture of taking responsibility for our ineradicable responsibility for the fate and the well-being of the Other; and that the weaker and less able to demand, to litigate and to sue the Other is, the greater is our responsibility. We are all our brothers' keepers; but what that means is far from clear and can hardly be made transparent and *eindeutig*. Clarity and unambiguity may be the ideal of the world in which 'procedural execution' is the rule. For the ethical world, however, ambivalence and uncertainty are its daily bread and cannot be stamped out without destroying the moral substance of responsibility, the foundation on which that world rests.

The uncertainty which haunts social work is nothing more nor nothing less than the uncertainty endemic to moral responsibility. It is there to stay forever; it may be neutralized only together with the ethical conscience. As another great moral philosopher of our times, the Aarhus theologian Knud Logstrup, put it—when it comes to what he calls the 'unspoken command' to care, 'conflict is always possible'. We are doomed to steer uneasily between two extremes, each spelling a danger of its own. On

the one hand, Logstrup warns, 'the situation may be such that I am challenged to oppose the very thing which the other person expects and wishes me to do for him or her, because this alone will serve his or her best interest'. On the other hand, though, 'if it were merely a matter of fulfilling the other person's expectations and granting his or her wishes, our association would mean nothing less than—irresponsibly—making oneself the tool of another person'.

'Simply trying to please one another while always dodging the issue' is one tempting and common distortion of moral relationship; having 'definite opinions about how to do things and how others ought to be', and wishing 'that we not be distracted by too much understanding of those who are to be changed' is another. Both distortions are morbid and we should do all we can to avoid them. The point is, however, that the possibility of slipping into one or the other of the traps will be always with us: the dangers are endemic to all moral relationship—our responsibility is firmly placed in the frame fixed by these two dangers. If the demand for responsibility and care 'could be spelled out in detail', as—tired of perpetual uncertainty—we so often dream, 'the demand would be purely an external matter', 'without any responsibility on our part, without any investment of our own humanity, imagination, or insight'. 'Absolute certainty', concludes Logstrup, 'is the same as absolute irresponsibility'. 'No one is more thoughtless than he who makes a point of applying and realising once-delivered directives'.

V

All this is bad news for the seekers of peace and tranquillity. Being one's brother's keeper is a life-sentence of hard labour and moral anxiety, which no amount of trying would ever put to rest. But this is good news for the moral person: it is precisely in the situations social workers are daily in, in the situations of difficult choices, of choices without guarantee and without the authoritative reassurance of propriety, that the responsibility for the Other, that foundation of all morality, comes into its own.

Let me sum up the message which, I think, needs

to be pondered when we commemorate the pioneers of social work in the Netherlands. The future of social work and, more generally, of the welfare state, does not depend on classifications, on procedures, nor on reducing the variety and complexity of human needs and problems. It depends, instead, on the ethical standards of the society we all inhabit. It is those ethical standards which, much more than the rationality and diligence of social workers, are today in crisis and under threat.

The future of the welfare state, one of the greatest gains of humanity and the foremost achievement of civilized society, lies on the frontline of an ethical crusade. That crusade might be lost—all wars involve the risk of defeat. Without it, however, no effort stands a chance of success. Rational arguments will not help; there is, let us be frank, no 'good reason' why we should be our brothers' keeper, why we should care, why we should be moral—and in the utility-oriented society the function-less poor and indolent cannot count on rational proofs of their

right to happiness. Yes, let us admit—there is nothing 'reasonable' about taking responsibility, about caring and being moral. Morality has only itself to support it: it is better to care than to wash one's hands, better to be in solidarity with the unhappiness of the other than indifferent, and altogether better to be moral, even if this does not make people wealthier and the companies more profitable.

It is a hundred-years-old decision to take responsibility for our responsibility, the decision to measure the quality of society by the quality of its ethical standards, that we celebrate today.

Note

- 1 This paper is based on a speech given on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Amsterdam School of Social Work.

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