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ON POSITIVE THEORIES OF REDISTRIBUTION

By

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ON POSITIVE THEORIES OF REDISTRIBUTION

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I. Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of attempts, both theoretical and empirical, to explain redistribution. One line of argument, stemming from the seminal paper of Harold Hochman and James Rodgers [1969] has concentrated on explaining the extent of charitable transfers, public and private. A second line has focused on the efforts by individuals to use the governmental apparatus and the consequences of these efforts. Our concern in this paper will be with the second line of argument. Since an increasing amount of research effort is now being channeled into redistribution issues, it is useful to pause and reflect on the conceptual complexity involved in theorizing about redistribution and marshalling evidence for those theories.

The basic hypothesis of these positive redistribution theories is that people will use their stock of resources (including the voting franchise) to influence the government and as a result of that influence we will observe certain redistributive outcomes. There are two basic variants on this. The first is concerned with the total effects of the usage of government for a given time period. The second is concerned with the partial effects within a specific arena; the arena can be defined in terms of subject matter (land use, pollution, farm policy, social security, or

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cash transfers), or it can be defined as a certain subset of political institutions (legislatures, committee systems, state assemblies, zoning boards, and so forth).

If these are the hypotheses to be investigated, then redistribution should be defined as the resultant change over a period of time in the distribution stemming from the particular use (or uses) of government. That is not, however, the definition usually employed. Indeed, there usually is no explicit definition because it is assumed that everyone knows what is meant by redistribution. As a result, an implicit definition has arisen by a process of benign neglect. This lack of care in defining redistribution has resulted in a mismatch between the theories proffered and the evidence adduced in their behalf.

To focus the analysis, we will concentrate our attention on two recent, oft-cited papers by George Stigler [1970] and Gordon Tullock [1971].¹ Both papers are concerned with the "total effects"² problem and the two come to roughly similar conclusions. Stigler offers "Director's Law" [1970, p. 1]:

Public expenditures are made for the primary benefit of the middle classes, and financed with taxes which are borne in considerable part by the poor and rich.

Government has coercive power, which allows it to engage in acts (above all, the taking of resources) which could not be performed by voluntary agreement of the members of a society. Any portion of the society which can secure control of the state's machinery will employ the machinery to improve its own position. Under [certain]. . . conditions. . . , this dominant group will be the middle income classes.

Tullock states [1971, pp. 384-5]:

[W]e would anticipate that in democracy there would be some transfer of money away from the wealthy, but there is no obvious reason that this transfer would go to the poor. If we look at the real world, we do find this pattern. This pattern is, however, a relatively minor part of the redistribution of income as seen in the modern state. . . . [M]assive redistributions of income do occur by way of the political process. These redistributions, however, are not in the main transfers of funds from the wealthy to the poor, but transfers of funds among the middle-class.

While both Stigler and Tullock are engaged in positive analyses, there is an implicit normative moral: since the poor are hurt by governmental action to redistribute income, we should cut back on governmental activity.³ The analysis here suggests that the premise is unproven and, even if it were correct, the conclusion would not follow.

II. Redistribution with A Well Defined Status Quo

While most studies, including Stigler's and Tullock's, refer to the distribution of income, the relevant concern is the distribution of wealth, broadly defined.⁴ That is, at a given moment each individual has a stock of "rights" or "entitlements"⁵ which, along with the idiosyncratic characteristics of the individual, determine his future stream of income. The individual's wealth at that point in time is the sum of the present values of the streams of income associated with all his entitlements. Clearly this definition is not operational, but it does focus attention on a crucial point. Political effort will be expended to influence future benefit streams and focusing attention on a single year's income would be unreasonably narrow. We will assume at this juncture that we can define an initial distribution of wealth with redistribution then being defined

as the change in wealth from this initial distribution. (We will see below that this seemingly straight-forward definition runs into some subtle conceptual difficulties, but this is getting ahead of ourselves.)

The individual's entitlements are established by the law. Thus, his wealth will differ under alternative legal regimes.⁶ Alternative rules for determining liability in automobile accidents, for determining the racial mix of a neighborhood (restrictive covenants, large lot zoning), or for determining the creditor's right to use certain information in evaluating credit risks all lead to different distributions of entitlements and, therefore, wealth. Alternative budgets for public enforcement of patent protection or anti-shoplifting laws will also yield different distributions. So too will alternative systems of taxation or social insurance (e.g. Social Security).

The existing rules determine the distribution of entitlements and the distribution of entitlements determines the distribution of wealth. The existing tax system, for example, defines a portion of the individual's entitlements and these are on a par with his other entitlements. Smith's expectations of benefits from a specific tax loophole are just as real as Jones' expectations of benefits from ownership of a stock certificate, or Brown's expectation of benefits from the existence of compulsory military service.

Redistribution concerns the change in entitlements that occurs over a given period of time (no matter how benign or obnoxious the initial distribution might appear). Freeing the slaves entailed redistribution. Initiating Social Security entailed redistribution, but its continuation does not. Elimination of Social Security would now entail redistribution.⁷

The point is crucial. While we might on normative grounds feel that some entitlements are more legitimate than others, there is no justification for such a presumption for positive analyses.

With this background, let us turn to Stigler and Tullock. Neither explicitly defines redistribution and the implicit definition employed is seriously flawed on two counts. First, they partition the existing set of rules into two categories: those rules determining distribution and those determining redistribution. That is, redistribution is not considered to be the result of a change in the rules, but rather, it is the result of an aberration--a divergence from some norm. The norm (that is, the entitlements that taken together make up the "distribution") is not defined by either author; however, they both present examples of what they consider to be redistribution. Their lists are remarkably similar. Both proffer welfare payments, Social Security, Urban Renewal, the farm program, and public education, to which list Stigler adds tax exemptions for certain institutions (e.g., churches) and minimum wage laws. But if these are redistributive, what then of enforcement of private contracts, right-to-work laws, restrictions on class action suits, or the common law protection of private property?

The partitioning is completely arbitrary. A distinction along the lines implied by Stigler and Tullock would be meaningful only if there were some set of "fundamental natural rights" that together determine the natural distribution of wealth. Perhaps the implicit norm is to be defined by the marginal productivity theory of distribution. But this is a dead end. Even if factors of production are paid their marginal product, this

tells us nothing about how income (or wealth) will be distributed among individuals. Payments go to the owners of the factors--those with the entitlement to receive compensation for the use of the factors. If Jones is Smith's slave, Smith would receive the compensation for Jones' work. If Brown is a wage earner and pays a proportional tax of 20 percent, then he and the State are joint owners of his compensation--he owns 80 percent of the earnings, and the State owns 20 percent, but the combined owners still receive the marginal product.⁸ Thus, the marginal productivity theory of distribution is consistent with any initial distribution, so long as the assignment of entitlements is left open.⁹

The Stigler-Tullock evidence concerns a theory of deviations from a standard--a standard determined by some (undefined) normative model. The proffered evidence suggests that they have a similar normative model in mind (and that they feel their audience of professional economists will find that model congenial),¹⁰ but even if we could achieve overwhelming consensus on the normative model the evidence fails to support the theories. The evidence concerns deviations from a normative standard; the model is supposed to explain changes from an initial, historical distribution. Unless it can be demonstrated that the initial, historical distribution approximated the normative standard,¹¹ there is no reason to expect that a model to explain the one is appropriate for explaining the other.

Their second problem is one of timing. Their model is concerned with changes in the distribution of entitlements over a period of time that result from the exercise of political power over that same period. However, their evidence concerns the levels of expenditures rather than changes in the levels. That is, rather than identifying the change in net benefits in the social security system, public education, or the farm program over a

given period of time, they give us the total magnitudes of these programs. But what does this imply? Are we to believe that voters in the nineteenth century accurately projected the future stream of benefits from introducing public education and that this stream of benefits should be related to the distribution of political power in the mid-nineteenth century? Or should we treat the public education system as a variable whose continuance has to be voted upon (implicitly) every year? One would be hard-pressed to define the status quo distribution of entitlements other than as including the expectation that most of the public education system would continue, and therefore that most of the expenditure on public education would not be redistribution explainable by current expenditure of political resources.

Would any expenditures on public education properly be included as current redistribution? If so, which? More generally, are there principles with which we can determine the initial existing distribution and thereby identify the redistribution resulting from the exercise of political power over a specified period of time? It turns out that conceptually it is impossible to identify redistribution without making some strong (and quite arbitrary) assumptions concerning the information and expectations of society. The reasons for this rather surprising statement are explored in the next section.

III. Capitalization and Redistribution

The value of each entitlement has built into it some expectation that the entitlement will be lost or, at least, depreciated.¹² For example, if Smith sells Jones a table, but Smith reserves the right to reclaim the table

if he sees fit, then the final sales price will take into account the expectations of both Smith and Jones that the reclaim clause will be used.¹³ Presumably Smith would be willing to sell the table for less than he otherwise would and Jones would be willing to pay less. The difference between their agreed upon price and the price sans reclaim clause reflects the expectations of the two parties that Smith will reclaim.

Suppose now that the contract stated that some third party, Brown, had the right to reclaim the table if he (Brown) saw fit. In principle, there is no difference between this and the preceding case. Both Smith and Jones must again form expectations concerning the likelihood that the reclaim privilege will be exercised.

Nor should there be a difference if we substitute a Government for Brown.¹⁴ This brings us to the crux of the argument. If the government does engage in a taking, is this redistribution? If Jones buys land knowing that the land will be rezoned downward in six months, is the rezoning redistributive? If he buys land and twenty years later the government takes it "out of the blue" and gives no compensation, is that redistributive? It seems reasonable to conclude that the former case would not entail redistribution whereas the latter would. Whether or not one concurs with this assessment, the important point is this: The value of an entitlement at a point in time depends on guesses as to future governmental actions; conversely, the impact of current governmental activities on wealth are recorded in entitlement revaluations spread over the past.

It is useful to view this paradoxical situation from a somewhat different angle. Assume that individuals attempt to use the political system to

enhance their position and that individuals accurately perceive the benefits flowing from their actions. Suppose that at a point in time Smith attains rule change 1 which will alter the distribution of wealth in his favor. Smith's ability to make this gain, however, depended on the rules that had been agreed to before. That is, at some prior time rule 2 had been attained and among the stream of benefits of that change were the expected benefits to all parties of rule change 1. Rule 2, in turn, was nested in rule 3, attained at some earlier time. In other words, the terms on which Smith can use government are entitlements which influence his overall wealth and these terms are nested in the prior rules.¹⁵ If there is perfect information, the existing rules can be traced back to some initial set of primitive rules that together dictate the future pattern of rules. In such a world, this primitive set of rules establishes the distribution of wealth on a once-and-for-all basis. There can be no redistribution.

The absurdity of this result stems from the assumption of perfect information. The assumption of perfect ignorance leads to an absurdity of a different sort. Any change in the rules is redistributive (since there was no capitalization of the possibility of that change taking place). However, since for each actor the expected value of all changes is zero, it is not possible to characterize the decision as part of a rational choice process. We can identify redistribution only if we give up on explaining it.

So, for example, when Social Security legislation was enacted, how much of the gain should be attributed to previous changes in the rules which made it possible for the legislature and the courts to approve social security? How much of the future benefits, including broadened eligibility and increased benefits should be attributed to initial enactment? To

measure the benefits (and costs) for specific individuals or groups, the analyst must truncate the benefit stream in both directions.

The task can be made even more unmanageable if we realize that political actors can make other deep investments. Rather than investing directly in changing the rules, groups can attempt to influence public attitudes and enhance the legitimacy of their goals, existence, or current entitlements.¹⁶ Such investments, if successful, will lower the cost of attaining desirable outcomes. Thus, by concentrating only on how actors allocate resources toward changing the rules we are perhaps neglecting the most important activity--deep investments to influence legitimacy. Not only does legitimacy influence the rules, but the rules also influence legitimacy. Smith will try to attain rule change A in part because that will facilitate his propagandizing which increases the relative legitimacy of his entitlements (and that, in turn, might facilitate the passage of rule change B, and so on).¹⁷

Thus, to measure redistribution the status quo must be defined and that definition will depend on the observer's judgment as to where one could reasonably break into the chain of evolving legal change. While the judgment can perhaps be exercised for individual cases (e.g., the passage of social security), it seems difficult to believe that such judgments can be made over a sufficiently wide range of issues to give any content at all to global measures of redistribution. In the next section we will, therefore, concern ourselves only with partial theories of redistribution.

IV. Partial Theories of Redistribution

The first task in developing a partial theory of redistribution is to define the status quo and the changes therefrom. The issues of information

and legitimacy raised in the previous section are still relevant here, although the narrower the subject matter to be explained the more manageable they are. One further problem of defining outcomes remains: How do we treat efforts to protect entitlements from being taken through the political process? Suppose that group X attempts to use the political process to achieve outcome A and group Y attempts to forestall that change.¹⁸ Should Y's benefits of maintaining the status quo be treated as redistribution to Y? Thus, if the poor (X) attempt to close a tax loophole benefiting some wealthy group (Y) and Y successfully opposes it, has there been a redistribution towards Y? Or if there is a marketing innovation which will harm Mom-and-Pop stores (X) and benefit others (Y) and X fails to block the innovation, has there been a redistribution towards Y?¹⁹ In both instances, if X's victory would have been defined as redistribution towards X, then it would be difficult to define Y's victory other than as redistribution towards Y. But for Y's political activity, X would have won²⁰ and Y's wealth would have been diminished. Thus, the redistribution toward Y resulting from its successful use of the political system would be the difference in wealth between the actual outcome and the alternative had Y lost.

Assuming that we have successfully passed over the hurdle of defining outcomes, we are then faced with the further task of relating inputs to outcomes. This task is complicated by the fact that there are really two different kinds of questions in which we are interested. The first is of the form: Given the initial allocation, the rules of the game, intensity of preferences and so on, who will win (or what will be the relative shares)? The second is of the form: If we want X to do well in a particular environment, what strategy ought we recommend to him? These are two very different

sets of questions, and models or empirical tests designed to answer one need shed little light on the other. The Stigler and Tullock analyses, to the extent that they can be treated as partial theories of redistribution,²¹ are formulated in terms of the first question, yet their implicit moral--if you want to help the poor, use less government--is of the second form.

The first type of question focuses on the distribution of resources which the actors might potentially bring to bear on the issue: dollars, bodies (votes), information, and so forth. How successful will X (the rich, big business, shoe manufacturers) be in attaining A (tax loopholes, anti-union legislation, tariffs)? Such questions must be posed very carefully, lest their answers be wildly misleading. The rich, for example, would probably fare very well if they used their political resources (power)²² only for influencing federal expenditure policy. But this might well be an unwise strategy--they could do better investing elsewhere (that is, the opportunity cost is too high). Hence groups that are in fact gaining large rewards for their political resources might appear to be doing very badly if our observations are confined to political arenas in which they do not have a comparative advantage. The separation of the redistributive activity to be analyzed from the rest of the economic actor's choice set can give dangerously misleading results. The problems are analogous to those that arise when demand curves are estimated without taking into account important substitutes and complements. If X allocated only a small portion of his resources to A because other arenas are relatively more attractive, then the measured output per unit of input would understate the actual.

While in some instances there would be no harm in assuming that the particular arena can be properly isolated for analysis (just as it is often useful to estimate demand curves on the assumption that all cross elasticities are zero), this will not in general be true. The cross relationships are much more complex in this context than they typically are for demand curves. Thus, a group²³ can allocate its resources toward preserving its initial entitlements, an important but difficult to observe use of its scarce resources. It can also attempt to influence the deep rules and societal attitudes, as discussed above. It can seek capital gains by, for example, influencing the location of a new highway. More subtly, but no less important, the group could invest in attaining information on what the government is likely to do and then adjust its behavior to take advantage of this information concerning future policy. A gross example of this would be a firm building up an inventory of liquor in anticipation of the repeal of prohibition; a second example would be the designing of a new plant anticipating future changes in pollution and occupational safety laws.²⁴ In general, individuals acting by themselves or in groups have a very wide choice set in political activity and specification of this choice set is extremely difficult. The more the analyst attempts to include in the choice set, the more effort he will have to put into defining the status quo; indeed, the choice set does not have to get very large before the issues raised in the previous section present insurmountable difficulties.

These considerations suggest also that generalizations from partial redistribution analyses will be of dubious merit.²⁵ That X did very well (or very badly) in arena A gives us little ground for suggesting that it

would do well (or badly) in B, C, and D. Such a backdoor approach to the total redistribution question suffers from the infirmities discussed above and there is little need for running through them again.

The second form of question--that of appropriate strategies--suggests a different set of empirical questions. Rather than relating the stock of resources of the actors (group) to outcomes, we ask: Given X's actions (and Y's counteractions) what outcomes can we perceive? Suppose that our goal is to help the poor get a larger share of the federal budget.²⁶ We would then want to determine the cost and effectiveness of various strategies in influencing the budget.²⁷ A study of how well the poor had done in this arena (or others) in the past might conceivably be of use. It might, for example, show that they had systematically done badly, and if we have reason to believe that they had used their resources fairly intelligently, then we could reasonably conclude that further explorations in this arena are likely to prove to be dry holes. But, generally, studies of how well X did in arena A will not be terribly useful in informing strategy choices.

A final caution should be raised regarding studies linking behavior to outcomes. They (like those based on stocks of resources) are apt to be more successful the narrower the problem. Thus, for deeper strategies--influencing the deep rules and public attitudes which together shape tomorrow's options--we can anticipate poorer answers. This should be somewhat disheartening to those studying redistribution since there is at least the nagging suspicion that these are the areas in which most of the bodies are buried.

V. Conclusions

The foregoing considerations suggest rather pessimistic conclusions. By not bothering to define what they meant by redistribution, economists have been relatively unconstrained in their attempts to explain redistribution and to marshal evidence purportedly supporting their explanations. However, once we make a serious attempt to define redistribution, it becomes clear that the evidence produced thus far bears little relation to the hypotheses tested and, further, that it is unlikely that evidence could be produced that would confirm (or contradict) the hypotheses--at least concerning global theories of redistribution. Global theories, we would contend, are simply not worth undertaking since the robustness of the data will inevitably be swamped by the dual problems of information and legitimacy. Partial analyses, however, if their scope is suitably limited, can yield meaningful conclusions so long as the analyst takes into account the problems raised here.

FOOTNOTES

1. Some readers of an earlier draft felt that it was unnecessary and a bit unfair to focus attention on only these two papers. However, I suspect that without the concrete examples provided by these papers by eminently respectable practitioners, most readers would simply not believe that the points raised in this paper really do make a difference.
2. Actually, although both authors consider a wide range of "redistributive" activity, their analyses are concerned almost exclusively with voting coalitions; it might, therefore, be more appropriate to treat them as partial theories with a broad scope.
3. This is more explicit in Tullock's article [1971, pp. 390-1].
4. We do not need, nor do we attempt to provide, an operational definition of wealth; it is assumed for ease of exposition, that all future benefits can be monetized.
5. I prefer to use "entitlements" rather than rights because it is a less value-laden term. The entitlement concept is defined broadly enough so as to include all rules which actors might attempt to influence through political processes. So, for example, the voting franchise would be an entitlement as would a social decision rule that school bonds must be approved by two-thirds of the electorate.
6. Legal rules are merely a subset of society's devices for determining the size and distribution of output; duty, extra-legal force, trust, ethical codes are all part of the system determining the value of entitlements. While the discussion in this section treats these non-legal devices as exogenously determined background institutions, it should be clear that to at least some extent individuals (acting by themselves or in groups) have incentives to invest resources to influence these institutions also. We defer consideration of the very serious issues raised by this complication to Section III.
7. Elimination of Social Security need not entail redistribution when we take into account some further complications; see Section III.
8. Irving Kristol [1974, p. 15] notes (with some distress) that this usage is becoming popular in political discourse:

[A]ll exemptions and allowances in our tax laws [are referred to] as "tax subsidies" or even "tax expenditures." But note what happens when you make this assumption and start using such terms. You are implicitly asserting that all income covered by the general provisions of the tax laws belongs of right to the government, and that what the government decides, by exemption or qualification, not to collect in taxes constitutes a subsidy. Whereas a subsidy used to mean a governmental expenditure for a certain purpose, it now acquires quite another meaning i.e., a generous decision by government not to take your money.

* * *

What we are talking about here is no slight terminological quibble. At issue is a basic principle of social and political philosophy--the principle that used to be called "private property." The conversion of tax incentives into "tax subsidies" or "tax expenditures" means that "in effect" a substantial part of everyone's income really belongs to the government--only the government, when it generously or foolishly refrains from taxing it away, tolerates our possession and use of it. To put it another way, when you start talking glibly of some \$70 billion of legal deductions and allowances as "tax subsidies," you have already in imagination socialized that amount of personal and corporate income. (emphasis in original).

9. Even so perceptive an observer as Lester Thurow [1973, pp. 70-71] fails to note the distinction between a marginal productivity theory of distribution to factors and a theory of distribution to individuals. The notion that certain factors ought to be owned by certain individuals is so deeply entrenched that Thurow, and most other economists, automatically assume that such an ownership pattern is part of the natural scheme of things.
10. For an example of an analysis of redistribution beginning with a very different normative framework, see Stephan Michelson [1970].
11. Since the same forces which Stigler and Tullock argue lead to deviations from the norm today existed also in the past, it would be difficult for them to argue that those forces led to a coincidence of the historical and normatively correct distributional rules at some specific (yet unspecified) time in the past. The ambiguous parenthetical expression will be cleared up in the following paragraph in the text.
12. The loss can be due to a number of sources. The individual can be careless or incompetent. The assets can lose their value because of the competitive activity of others (e.g., the Schumpeterian gale of creative destruction). Or taste changes or other "exogenous" factors can influence the value of particular assets. Thus, we would expect that the valuation of inventories of items that are very faddish (hula hoops, Nehru jackets) would recognize the strong possibility of an end to the fad and would discount this risk accordingly.
13. This example was used in a somewhat different context in Goldberg [1974b, pp. 566-7]. To give realism to the example, we can view the table as collateral in an installment purchase. The more difficult it is for the seller to recover the collateral, the higher the initial price he must charge, and the (informed) consumer would be willing to pay.

14. There will, of course, be a difference between the expectations formed under these three regimes (reclaiming by Smith, Brown, or the government). One source of the difference will be the relative access of Smith and Jones to the decisionmaker under the three regimes.
15. This position is similar to that of Allan Schmid [1972, p. 900]: "[T]he rules of access to government, administrative procedure, bargaining within and between governments (and with the public) can be thought of as property rights. They constitute an important part of each individual's wealth holding." See also James Buchanan [1974, 1975].
16. See Alan Olmstead and Victor Goldberg [1975, pp. 197-200].
17. Legitimacy is a most complex subject which we need not probe in any detail here. While actors can directly attempt to enhance the legitimacy of their entitlements, changes in legitimacy will often be the secondary results of actions taken on other grounds. And these results can be quite counterintuitive. For example, Joseph Schumpeter [1950, pp. 131-155] argues quite persuasively for a non-rational (anti-rational?) theory of institutional change in which the continuing successes of capitalists are the root cause of the decline of legitimacy of capitalist institutions.
18. For convenience we assume there are only two outcomes--X wins or X loses.
19. This second example explicitly recognizes the fact that the status quo can be upset by private sector innovation, and that the innovation is ultimately subject to ratification by the political process.
20. What if X would have lost anyway? What if the probability of X's victory were decreased?
21. See note 2.
22. The discussion below assumes that the political resources are a depletable stock. While true for most resources, this would not be true for votes. X's use of his vote on issue A will not, typically, limit his ability to cast a vote on B, C, and D.
23. Groups can, of course, invest resources to increase the cohesiveness of their coalition and decrease that of competing coalitions; see Goldberg [1974a, pp. 474-480].
24. Lobbying activity, broadly defined, includes both influencing government decisions and attaining early information on decisions. In practice, it is difficult to draw a firm line demarcating these two activities. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to note that conceptually

lobbying entails the two different activities and that the second activity is of much greater importance than economists usually recognize. The availability of information to the economic actors is, as we have stressed throughout this paper, a fundamental element in determining relative success in using the government.

25. A generalization like increasing the required majority will favor those who gain from the maintenance of the status quo could be sustained, but such a conclusion would be fairly trivial. What would we think of a set of data that failed to yield this result? It could be argued that while theory (or common sense) predicts the sign of the relationship, empirical testing is necessary to determine the magnitude of the effect. But there is no theoretical basis for presuming that the magnitude would be the same in different arenas and, hence, generalizations concerning the magnitude would be suspect.
26. It is not necessary to frame the discussion in terms of aiding the poor. We could just as easily ask how a private consultant should advise a wealthy client seeking tax relief.
27. The stock of resources enters indirectly as a cost constraint; the effectiveness of strategies is not independent of the characteristics of the parties utilizing them. Both these factors would add to the complexity of the analysis.

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