

[Common Error No. 42](#) [1]

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42. "A truly compassionate society would devote a much larger share of its wealth to the less fortunate."

Individuals show compassion, not societies. If individuals wish to give away a larger share of their wealth to the poor, this might be compassionate. It is not compassionate, however, to force others to do this.

Giving them a larger share of wealth is not necessarily the best way of improving the lot of the poor, because that wealth is not a fixed amount. Poor people might do better if the rich are permitted to get even richer, thereby increasing the total wealth available. It might be that a growing economy is a surer way of giving the poor access to betterment than any attempt to give them a larger share of a smaller pie. This would not please the poverty lobby, who try to define 'poverty' in terms of incomes below 60 percent of the average. This is inequality, not poverty, and can mean describing as 'poor' people who have cars and take holidays.

Many of us do not want to live in a society which tolerates deprivation, or is complacent about those who don't get adequate nutrition, healthcare, or education for their children. But having a sufficiency of such things is not about equality; it is about removing the causes of suffering and trying to redress the circumstances of inadequate provision.

The less fortunate might do better if society provides chances and opportunities for them to improve their lot, rather than turning poverty into pauperism by making them depend permanently on state handouts. A safety net to guarantee a minimum living standard is one thing. To redistribute more wealth from the successful to the less fortunate is another. It might not be the best way of helping them, and it might, in the process of trying, undermine the incentives by which people better themselves and their society.

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