

There Is No Charity in Bureaucracy

Compassion, it seems to me, is better as a retail than as a wholesale virtue. No doubt there are exceptional individuals who are able to feel genuine compassion toward vast populations or categories of humans, but I think they are few. The more widely a person's compassion is cast, the thinner it tends to be spread, until we begin to suspect that it is not genuine compassion at all, but a pose or an exhibition of virtue—in short, mere humbug, at best an aspiration, at worst a career move.

How we think of individuals is necessarily different from how we think of whole categories of individuals. For example, the other day I was walking through the streets of Sydney, a rich and prosperous city where there is nearly full employment. On the corner of a busy street kneeled a young man, shabbily dressed but far from being in rags, holding out before him an upturned paper cup from Hungry Jack's, a local franchise of Burger King, in an appeal for alms. He looked down at the ground as if in some kind of penance; there was a humility in his posture that I found not so much appealing as distressing.

I gave him a coin and he looked up toward me, giving me a pleasant, fleeting smile, though his gaunt face was that of a young man who had not lived wisely or well. I smiled back at him. I should have judged him intelligent and perhaps even educated, but this was hardly the moment to ask him his life's history as I wanted to do. My guess is that it would have contained many episodes of self-destruction, more frequently indulged in but perhaps of the same kind that practically all of us indulge in at some time or other in our lives.

The reason I gave him a coin was because, at the moment I saw him, I saw only a young man who was suffering. It cannot be

much fun kneeling on a street corner with thousands of pairs of legs pounding by. A miniscule donation and a smile must give him a moment's relief, though they could hardly be a solution to his problems, whatever they were. I was only too aware that the money he collected was likely to be spent unwisely, perhaps on the very substances that had brought him to this humiliating pass in the first place.

I could hear all the Gradgrindian arguments in my mind's ear as I stopped for this young man. He will misspend that coin; you are encouraging him in mendicancy; he has reaped what he has sown; he is able-bodied and could find work if he wanted. Your actions, on whose compassion you pride yourself, are actually self-indulgent; they do harm rather than good, but they gratify your vanity.

Doctor Johnson knew all the arguments against rewarding idleness, yet never failed to give a penny to any beggar whom he passed in the street. Of course, in his time, people really did go hungry and cold, have no shelter, and starve to death in the gutter. There was no economic level below which people could not fall, as there is in modern societies. Still, the principle was the same then as now: if you reward people for behaving in a certain way, some of them will behave in it.

There was no graceful opportunity, as I said, to find out about this man's situation, but at any rate he did not look like the chronic schizophrenics who now camp out in Paris *Métro* stations, for example, such stations being, for a few patients, the new long-stay wards of the old asylums. A sane but improvident man, I would have said, whose bad choices played a large part in reducing him to public begging.

One of the purposes of public policy must be to discourage, though of course it cannot altogether prevent, people from making such choices. Discouragement requires policies directed at making people take the consequences of their bad choices.

The most important criticism to be made of the welfare state is that it protects people from the consequences of their bad choices and therefore fosters and encourages those very choices, which generally follow the line of least resistance or favor instant gratification over longer-term desiderata. The welfare state undermines the taking of individual responsibility, especially where the economic difference between taking it and not taking it tends to be rather small, at least in the short-term.

Moreover, charity given as of right, for that is what the welfare state does, favors the undeserving more than the deserving, in so far as the undeserving have a capacity and even talent for generating more neediness than the deserving. (They also tend to be more vocal in their demands.)

The welfare state in fact dissolves the very notion of desert, because there is no requirement that a beneficiary prove he deserves what he is legally entitled to. And where what is given is given as of right, not only will a recipient feel no gratitude for it, but it must be given without compassion—that is, without regard to any individual's actual situation. In the welfare state, the notion of a specially deserving case is prohibited, for it implies a distinction between the deserving and the undeserving. In my career, I was many times startled by the unfeelingness of welfare bureaucrats in the face of the most appalling, and non-self-inflicted, suffering.

Does private charity operate differently? My tiny act of charity toward the beggar in the street, and the tiny acts of charity of others towards him, which presumably gave him some kind of living or at any rate a greater scale of living, were not based upon his desert or lack of it, either. I didn't know him, nor, I assume, did anyone else who put money in his paper cup. Furthermore, our feelings of sympathy toward him ought not to have been lessened if we did know him and the foolish things he had done. Let him who is without foolishness be the first to starve.

The difference between public and private charity, then, is not that the former does not consider personal desert while the latter does; Christian charity, in particular, does not require that its recipients be guiltless of their predicament. It is, rather, the spirit in which the charity is given that is different. And that is why large charities so closely resemble government departments: you cannot expect a bureaucracy to be charitable in spirit.

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