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## Paternalism and Charity in a Free Society

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A great truth is very simple; a great error is being perpetuated behind a facade of complexity. The great truth is that only a limited government free society would provide the framework and atmosphere in which human beings (free from arbitrary compulsion in all creative aspects of life) could achieve their greatest spiritual and material growth with the least opportunity for mischief.

The great error is in thinking that to achieve peace, prosperity, and justice, the interdependence, high technology, and infinite complexity of our society require that its guidance and control be vested in a technocratic state of great power and matching complexity.

In spite of its size, complexity and pretensions of equalitarianism, the authoritarian state is unable and unwilling to deal effectively with individual inequalities. Therefore it divides its subjects into special groups and attempts by legislative compulsion to satisfy the "rights" (read *demands*) of each group at the expense of all others (excepting of course the state and its cohorts). Thus it tramples on the basic principle of freedom: that when the true rights of individuals are protected, the rights of all groups are protected. Government favors to one group must be at the expense of others. The effect is to pit group against group, establishing fairly rigid classes in what was to have been a classless and mobile society.

A cherished myth of statism paints the free society as wonderful for capable, ambitious, self-reliant, self-sufficient, and wealthy persons, but unacceptably harsh toward those of lower levels of ability, motivation, and resources. The proffered solution is the welfare state. The welfare state may impose a degree of material equality, spiritual atrophy, suppressed rage, and destruction of self-respect among the governed. However, the real inequality of material benefits and power enjoyed by the elite upper echelons of the establishment contrasted with the hardships and impotence of the rest of the people is an ever-widening chasm.<sup>1</sup><sup>[1]</sup>

Those who have faith in freedom believe that within the limited-government and free society all economic and psychic factors are automatically integrated in the most harmonious arrangements possible for the essentially good, but nonetheless flawed, nature of man. The free society tends to develop virtue and discourage vice, using no compulsion except to restrain the initiation of violence and fraud. History confirms this faith. Periods of greater freedom have invariably coincided with more peace, justice, and prosperity.

### Vital Differences

The welfare state establishes a certain inescapable level of dependence and servitude for both ruled and rulers. The free society embodies a free market which offers whatever degree of independence or dependence, self-sufficiency or paternalism, solitary effort or cooperation each unique individual finds most compatible with his estate (age, health, wealth, education, personality, tastes, and character). The free market most efficiently allocates not only material goods, but also psychic, spiritual and emotional values as well. Each member of a free society has the maximum opportunity to choose that degree of independence or subservience, responsibility or submission to authority that best suits him at any given time, and to change this voluntary arrangement as he and his needs change.

Persons, groups, business and religious organizations eager to fill the role of friend, helper, healer, advisor, consultant, teacher, guardian, insurer, employer, master or guru exist today, and more would spring up as government restraints were removed. Their existence and growth in spite of the preemption of resources and assumption of responsibility by statist governments, and in spite of the social unrest and resentment

generated by government usurpations, is strong proof of man's instinct for freedom. It also reflects a natural rebelliousness to government interference.

In a free society, those in need of help would not have to seek out and importune their prospective "benefactors." Each needs the other, and from motives of material and psychic profit there would be a mutual search—a competition for clients and services just as producers and buyers of goods in a free market compete to cooperate most advantageously with each other. The same applies to charity. It is also an exchange transaction between willing parties in mutual anticipation of finely interwoven psychic and material benefits.

### **Mutual Responsibility**

Without the coercive power of the state to establish or support welfare monopolies, doers of good works must court and gain the consent of their prospective wards, clients, congregations, pupils, and the like. The recipients of charitable acts and gifts must also act to make the exchange attractive—that is, acceptable to the giver. This imposes a degree of responsibility and therefore an opportunity to retain self-respect which tends to be lacking where government favors such as guaranteed income, housing, education, and medical care are treated as "rights" to be claimed, but not necessarily deserved.

The Hebrew prophets and Jesus teach us to do charity willingly, cheerfully, and preferably, anonymously. How, except in a free society, is this possible? Under statism the establishment does its good works with other people's money. It regards redistribution, not even as charity, but as a necessary evil—a prophylactic measure to keep the masses dependent and pacified. The poor recognize the dole for what it is, and are demoralized. Those of a cynical nature push their demands to the utmost. The vicious and audacious see it as confirmation of their self-pity and justification for robbery, theft, rioting, and looting.

This malaise is compounded by the nature of "welfare" laws and social "achievements" such as restrictive child labor, minimum wage, and organized labor laws which keep the poor in enforced idleness. Simultaneously the wealthy and tax-producing members of society are deprived of the opportunity, the incentive, but most of all, the means to perform charity. State-enforced redistribution, far from being charity, is recognized by both expropriated and recipients alike as injustice institutionalized.

Private charity is very much alive in the United States, and growing to compensate for government failures and government-created hardships. The sacrifice and generosity of millions of persons supporting the panoply of recognized voluntary organizations and informal ad hoc groups, together with innumerable daily instances of person-to-person help, is preserving our sense of moral responsibility to aid one another. The total amount of private charity is vast, and cannot be measured in dollars alone. It is efficient and humane, and characteristically American. It puts the lie to "liberal" assertions that, without government redistribution, suffering and privation would sweep the land. Careful observation reveals misgovernment as the principal cause of the hardship that redistribution purports to relieve. It confirms libertarians in their faith that had people the freedom to control the fruits of their own labors, philanthropy and charity would flourish as never before.

### **How to Proceed**

All discussions of the free society eventually lead to the problem of how to get from here to there. Sadly, there is no "freedom button" to press which will instantly remove "all man-concocted restraints against the release of creative energy" together with the cumulative effects of past restraints. While we cannot learn to swim without water, neither should we push the non-swimmer into a raging torrent. Many persons, through little or no fault of their own, are now largely dependent on government dole. It would be an injustice to punish them for the sin of those who encouraged or permitted the government and the establishment to manipulate them into this dependency.

To suddenly impose severe hardship on these unfortunate persons would not advance the cause of freedom. The most recent Libertarian Party presidential candidate, Ed Clark, has said that welfare should be among the last governmental institutions to be dismantled in the move to freedom. Only when the public is prepared to follow leaders truly committed to freedom, who will irrevocably renounce man's ages-long dalliance with authoritarianism, can freedom be approached. At that point a phased withdrawal

“with all deliberate speed” from compulsory schemes of redistribution would be possible.

The free society, far from lacking compassion toward persons with physical, mental, moral, social, or economic handicaps, will prove to be both just and compassionate, not only to the disadvantaged, but to all persons and groups. It permits those who can fulfill their own responsibilities and still have human or material resources left for philanthropy, those who would be teachers, helpers, defenders, leaders, to make a myriad of voluntary arrangements with their fellows for mutual betterment and satisfaction. Compulsion can only teach compulsion, but voluntary good works are an encouraging and uplifting example. Absence of compulsion is essential to civilized progress, and is the essence of the free market, true charity, and liberty.

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1. See George Feifer, “Russian Disorders,” *Harper’s* (February, 1981), pp. 41-45.
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