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Common Error No. 64 [1]

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64. "Freedom is all very well for the strong, but the poor and the weak come off worse without the state services."

In fact the poor and weak usually get the short end of the stick within the state services. With limited resources and many claims on them, the best of the state service tends to go to the articulate and self-confident middle classes who know how to use the system. Under a system which allows these people the freedom to provide for themselves, the state can concentrate its scarce resources on those who really do need them. Universal services and benefits have to spread their resources thinly to everyone.

It is not just the "strong" who benefit from freedom. Most people benefit by giving effect to preferences and having competitors struggling to supply them. Everyone benefits by the improvement which innovations and new types of service bring when the service is private. It might be the strong who take the lead in demanding better services, but the improvements made as a result usually spread down to benefit others. It is the discriminating customers who improve the product, but everyone gains from the improvement. Even those who know nothing about electronics have their products improved by the actions of those who do.

There is good reason to suppose that if the poor and weak were given the same type of choices that others have, they would get better services than those doled out to them under universal state provision. Choice of schools, as in Sweden, leads to improvement in education and in parental satisfaction. Choice in healthcare would achieve similar improvement.

The weak can receive more support if resources are not dissipated among those who could do without it. It might be better simply to allocate money directly to the poor to enable them to command adequate services. The freedom to choose is as valuable to those in the lower economic strata as it is to the strong, for it gives them access to the better services they need.

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