## Tis better to give than to receive [1]

Written by Preston Byrne [2] | Wednesday 5 January 2011

I read an <u>intriguing story last month about Toby Ord</u> [3], a lecturer at Oxford University, who has pledged to donate £1,000,000 to charitable causes over his lifetime. Dr Ord is no millionaire? he currently earns £25,300 per year. He and his wife have pledged to give annually 10% of their income to charitable causes, and they?ve convinced others to do the same through his internet-based organization, Giving What We Can [4].

My non-libertarian acquaintances often ask how the libertarian state could work. While such discussions tend not to resolve anything, they almost always turn to the subject of public service and welfare provision. At this point, I argue that the state should be minimal, and financial contributions to it should be voluntary as far as possible. To this, a social democrat reacts with disdain, and suggests the libertarian solution is unworkable as (1) it is not in people?s nature to be altruistic and (2) such services would go unfunded unless citizens were compelled to pay for them through taxation. Thus, the argument goes, the state is right to compel them.

## [Continue reading [5]]

I find this reasoning unconvincing, but the frequency with which it is encountered merits discussion. This common view is evidence of a deep distrust of the forces of production, and an affinity for common control of them, that has been written into British and European cultural consciousness gradually over the past two hundred years. Generations of intellectuals have regarded free-market or libertarian beliefs as malicious, oppressive and delusional, bound to ?so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests? (Marx, 1848), or as simple ?selfishness? and ?one and the same thing [as animality]? (Badiou, 2010).

To be sure, under the conditions in which socialism first arose? a harsher time with pronounced class divisions, child labour, and other unpleasantness? socialist ideas may have had a stronger case. However, these conditions do not prevail today: the middle class is now dominant; the dark satanic mills have been replaced by gleaming air-conditioned edifices of glass and steel; the rich, middle-class and and poor alike consume the same products and culture; and the internet has made a virtually limitless amount of information freely available to ordinary people everywhere.

This brings us back to Toby Ord. First, his organization and its members are proof that human nature and social responsibility are not mutually exclusive, and that people are certainly able?though perhaps not predisposed?to engage in meaningful voluntary altruistic activity. Second, we should note that Giving What We Can states openly that its members commit ?to give 10% of their income to the most effective charities they can find,? as measured by the number of ?Disability-Adjusted Life Years? preserved by their donations. One wonders what our society might look like if all social welfare provision were as rational,

efficient, and accountable as this.

The argument that ?libertarianism is unworkable due to human nature? is a case of outdated cultural prejudices failing to catch up with the spirit of the age. The idea that a lumbering centralized state is necessary for the protection of the working class is the consequence of using an antiquated theory outside its proper context, of examining 21st-century problems through a 19th-century lens, and those who employ it are blinded to liberal possibilities for a fairer, freer, and more prosperous society. To be sure, though, if anything like a libertarian state is ever going to work, it will need many more people like Toby Ord.

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