

Kant on Giving to Beggars Lucy Allais

Kant has a number of harsh-sounding things to say about beggars and giving to beggars. He describes begging as “closely akin to robbery” (6:326), and says that it exhibits self-contempt. In this paper I argue that in the context of his political philosophy (on one interpretation of this) his worries about giving to beggars can be seen as part of a concern with social justice. Further, I argue that his account makes sense of some troubling aspects of the phenomenology of being confronted with beggars.

In general, when considering whether we ought to give in response to need (say in response to a hurricane), whether or not we think it is obligatory, it seems straightforwardly a good thing to do, and at the very least permissible. But when it comes to giving to beggars, where most of us are most directly and personally confronted with need, many of us find it less clear, and people sometimes think that it is actually impermissible. In her (2006) paper ‘Begging,’ Christine Sypnowich says:

Being asked for money is unsettling. It brings forth clear evidence of inequality, of the lopsidedness of advantage and luck. Yet we are unlikely to welcome the invitation to remedy inequality in these confrontations. When a beggar approaches us, the usual expectations of distance and respect among strangers are flouted. We are compelled to witness hardship and suffering and to become complicit in relations of servility and degradation. The experience can prompt pity, irritation, anguish and discomfort. We are uncertain where our moral duties lie (Sypnowich 2006:177-8)

I argue that Kant’s analysis give us an explanation of why our duties seem unclear when we are confronted with beggars, and of the discomfort we feel.

In talking about beggars, my concern is specifically with people presenting themselves as being in abject need and asking for money, through speaking, gestures or holding a sign.¹ I am writing this in a developing country in which there is wide-spread, extreme poverty, extremely high unemployment, and almost no welfare provided by the state; there are in fact many people who are in extreme need.

An obvious reason for giving to beggars is provided by the existence of need. Peter Singer (1972) famously appeals to the following thoughts in order to elicit our moral intuitions about giving in response to need: suppose you walk past a child drowning in a pond; if you can reach out and save the child, it is clear, as clear as anything is in morality, that you ought to do so. And if saving the child from drowning means ruining your new shoes, it is still indisputable that you ought to save the child, despite there being some cost to you. Further, reaching out and saving the child does not seem to be merely permissible, or even to be merely something it would be good to do, it seems to be *obligatory*; not saving the child would be severely reprehensible. And the obligation is not based on your having had anything to do with the child’s being in need. It is simply the existence of the need, and your ability to meet it at low cost to yourself, which creates the obligation.²

¹ There may be differences of degree between this and some forms of busking, or delivering marginally useful, unasked for services, and there will of course be borderline cases, but there is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, a person presenting themselves as in need and asking for money and, on the other, a pavement trader selling fruit or wire craft, and it seems to me that the word ‘beggar’ is appropriate for the former case. Performing marginally useful, unasked for services seems to be a way in which beggars present themselves as not being beggars: as attempting to work.

² Singer famously argues that we ought to give away a high proportion of our income to organisations that work with poverty relief. The debates surrounding Singer’s work include the question of how much we ought to give, and related questions about whether giving rather than spending on luxuries

An equally obvious problem with the beggar's request is the lack of information we have in confrontations with beggars: we don't know whether the person asking is genuinely in need, and genuinely has no other options. And there are questions about whether giving targets need accurately and meets need efficiently. Giving to a beggar does not address any of the structural causes of poverty, doesn't create jobs, doesn't help the person stop being in poverty or stop being a beggar. And it is reasonable to think that the state should be in a better position to accurately target and efficiently meet need, and that giving to individuals who you happen to confront meets need in ways which are ad hoc, inconsistent, arbitrary, and unreliable. The state should be in a position to identify where need is greatest, and to address it systematically. Of course, the state might not be doing this. And even if it is, so long as there is need that is still not met, there is still reason to give. As Sypnowich argues, thinking that we need systemic change, and showing that redistribution should not be left solely to "the vicissitudes of private charity" does "not show that socialized redistribution can never be 'topped up' by private charity" (Sypnowich 2006 181). Yet one could top up through donations to appropriate charities without giving to beggars. It may be that giving money to a serious organised charity would target need more accurately, and relieve it more effectively. Thus, there are clearly problems of judgment involved in confrontations with beggars, which not only help to explain why our duties may seem unclear, but also explain some of what makes the encounter uncomfortable: when a beggar asks you for money you are called on to make an assessment of the plausibility and worthiness of the request of a stranger, which you aren't really in a position to make, and in the uncomfortable position of turning down a direct request which you are not in a position to evaluate properly.

However, Kant's objection to begging seems to target a different concern: the idea that begging involves self-humiliation.³ This would be an objection even if begging were reliable, effective and efficient. He says:

By begging a man displays the highest degree of contempt for himself, and so long as people still have some feeling, it tends also to be the last step that they take. It is a man's obligation to exert himself to the utmost to remain a free and independent being in relation to others, but as a beggar he depends upon the whims of others, and sacrifices his self-sufficiency (27:605, my emphasis).

A poor man who begs is constantly *depreciating his personhood* and abasing himself; he makes his existence dependent on other people, and accustoms others, by the sight of him, to the means whereby we neglect our own worth. The state must therefore restrict open begging as much as possible (27:605, my emphasis).

It is better to be conscientious in all our actions, and better still to help the needy by our conduct, and not merely by giving away the surplus. Alms-giving is a form of kindness associated with pride and costing no trouble, and a beneficence calling for no reflection. *Men are demeaned by it*. It would be better to think out some other way of assisting such poverty, so that men are not brought so low as to accept alms (27:455, my emphasis).

might have detrimental effects on the economy and thereby on poor people. My question is not with how much of your income you are obliged to give up to meet need, but with whether you should give to beggars at all: whether you should give five rand (just under a dollar) to the people you encounter daily on street corners. Long before we get into issues of how much we are obliged to give and the point at which giving becomes too much to reasonably expect, there seem to be doubts about whether we should give to beggars. In relation to this question there will of course also be questions about how much to give and at what point to stop, but for most people considering whether to give to beggars these questions are far away: they are thinking about giving a few rands, a bit of loose change.

³ See also Sypnowich 2006:185; 187. Hershkoff and Cohen argue that begging can be a form of self-assertion in the face of the humility of poverty.

Contempt is an extremely high degree (perhaps the highest) of lack of self-respect. Sypnowich argues that begging involves self-humiliation because beggars frequently “make their supplications in a posture of self-degradation” (Sypnowich 2006:185). One of the beggars at an intersection near where I live, paints his face white and wears a clown hat, and sometimes begs on his knees. These seem to me to be humiliating postures. Sypnowich argues that this counts against giving to beggars: “The fact that the practice of begging involves self-denigration thus emerges as a reason for refusing to accede to the beggar’s requests” (Sypnowich 2006:186).⁴

On Kant’s view, the humiliation is not just (or even primarily) a result of asking for money in degrading ways (dressing like a clown), but being in a position to have to ask strangers to choose to help you meet your basic needs⁵ (there is nothing degrading about charity organisers asking for donations dressed as clowns). And although he strongly objects to the humiliation and servility he thinks are involved in begging, he does not clearly take this to show that we should *not* give to beggars. A person who is in the humiliating position of surviving by asking for money, and who asks for money in a way that is further demeaning, is not treated more respectfully by having his request refused.⁶ I argue that Kant’s on analysis being confronted with a beggar implicates you in relations of servility and humiliation from which you do not escape by not giving, or by giving. Explaining this requires seeing why, on his account, it is wrong for people to get basic needs met through charity rather than under justice.

The first point is that in a state in which people cannot meet their basic needs without begging, and which other people are in a position to give, there is something unjust. He says:

Having the resources to practice such beneficence as depends on the goods of fortune is, for the most part, a result of certain human beings being favoured through the injustice of government, which introduces an inequality of wealth that makes others need their beneficence. Under such circumstances, does a rich man’s help to the needy, on which he so readily prides himself as something meritorious, really deserve to be called beneficence at all? (6:454).

Next, he thinks that when it comes to meeting basic needs, it does not matter just that they are met, but how they are met. He says:

Many people take pleasure in doing good actions but consequently do not want to stand under obligations toward others. If one only comes to them submissively, they will do everything: they do not want to subject themselves to the rights of people, but to view them simply as objects of magnanimity. It is not all one under what title I get something. *What properly belongs to me must not be accorded to me merely as something I beg for* (19:145, my emphasis).

⁴ She says “those who believe in the importance of a ‘decent society’ might, on the one hand, exhibit sympathy and generosity to beggars in order to mitigate the humiliation of poverty; but the humiliation thesis suggests they might, on the other hand, just as reasonably refuse to participate in the humiliation of begging” (Sypnowich 2006:188).

⁵ Along similar lines, Margalit argues that poverty is itself a kind of humiliation; this provides reason to see begging as humiliating (see Margalit 1996).

⁶ Considering a similar point, Jerry Cohen says: “Another rationale for not giving away what one has in excess of what equality would allow, a rationale that is popular with persons influenced by Marxism, is that such giving does not touch the *fundamental* injustice, which is the structured inequality of power between rich and poor. A rich person’s charity does nothing to eliminate unequal power. It is but a particular use of the unequal income that reflects unequal power” (Cohen 2000:166). But as he points out, this can hardly be a reason not to give to someone in need: “it would be grotesque for him to say to those who lose from the unjust power division: ‘I won’t succour you, since what I deplore is, at root, not your poverty but the system that makes you poor’” (Cohen 2000:166).

If something is mine as a matter of entitlement, there is something wrong in my being given it back from you as a gift. Consider a case in which, knowingly, you are living on stolen goods, and then give back to the destitute person from whom you have stolen a little bit of what you stole; you certainly should not congratulate yourself on your generosity, and you are not doing anything meritorious. You are simply inadequately undoing a small amount of a wrong you have done: “If we have taken something away from a person, and then do him a kindness when in need, that is not generosity, but a poor recompense for what has been taken from him” (27:432). Of course, a situation in which I give back to you some of what I have taken from you is better than a situation in which I keep it all. But it is still a situation which is fundamentally wrong. Kant seems to see charitable giving as a way of meeting basic need as a bit like this. The fundamental problem is not that charitable giving is unreliable, uneven or inefficient, but that it is the wrong way for a person to get their basic needs met. Seeing why this is so in more detail will also explain why he thinks it is fundamentally demeaning.

Kant thinks that for a state to be legitimate, its monopoly on the means of coercion must be reconciled with each subjects’ right to freedom (Varden 2008). The idea is that no one’s freedom must be subjected to the choices of others, but only to universal law, which means that the state must ensure “that the total system of laws provides conditions under which any private person’s freedom is subject to universal law and not to another private person’s arbitrary choices” (Varden 2008). What is relevant to our question here is that without absolute poverty relief, poor people’s freedom is subject to the arbitrary choices of those who have means. This means that the state is not guaranteeing and enabling their freedom. As Ripstein explains, for Kant, “the problem of poverty is that “the poor are completely subject to the choices of those in more fortunate circumstances” (Ripstein 2009:274). The poor person’s purposiveness depends on the grace of others, like a slave or a serf, two of the most archetypally unfree conditions (Ripstein 2009:281). Obviously there will be questions about what constitutes absolute poverty, and how much relief is required. My concern here is not with resolving these complications, but simply with the idea that exercising basic human agency requires means: one cannot have and pursue purposes without any means. On Kant’s view, a person’s innate freedom is undermined if the basic conditions of their agency depend on another person’s arbitrary choice—another person’s choosing to give or not to give. The justification of the legitimacy of the state depends on the state reconciling its monopoly on the means of coercion with each individual’s innate right to freedom. Avoidable absolute poverty is not compatible with individual’s innate right to freedom. So in a legitimate state, public structures must ensure that there is unconditional poverty relief. Further, it is significant that, on Kant’s view, a legitimate state is required for there to be rightful ownership of property. There is no conclusive ownership of property in a state of nature: you have control of what you can grab and what you can defend, which generates a presumptive right, but it doesn’t follow that you have anything with respect to which the state is obliged to defend your ownership. To have the full-fledged institution of property, it needs to be the case that the state has an obligation to defend your holdings. Rightful ownership of property requires a state with a monopoly on coercion (so that possession of property can be defended), and it requires that the defense of property can be reconciled with everyone’s freedom. Otherwise the state is simply an organisation of powerful groups defending their interests, as opposed to a legitimate state, which enables and defends everyone’s freedom. Making property rights enforceable is one of the functions of the state, and it

is important to enabling all of our freedom. But making property rights enforceable makes it the case that those in absolute poverty, where there are no jobs, have no ways of meeting their needs. This is a consequence of the defence of property: in a state of nature they could try to take what they need, but a state which defends property forbids them from doing this. Thus, creating property rights in a way which is compatible with everyone's freedom requires public provision against absolute poverty. As Ripstein says, "the only way that property rights can be made enforceable is if the system that makes them so contains a provision for protecting against private dependence" (Ripstein 2009:228). Thus, ensuring absolute poverty relief is a requirement of anyone rightfully owning property. For Kant, it is crucial that absolute poverty relief is provided by *public* means:

For reasons of state the government is therefore authorised to constrain the wealthy to provide the means of systemance to those who are unable to provide for even their most necessary natural needs. It will do this by way of coercion...by public taxation, not merely by *voluntary* contributions (3:326).

As Ripstein explains,

The problem of private dependence on charity is institutional, because it is a consequence of the creation of enforceable property rights. So any solution to it must be institutional, in order to make enforceable rights consistent with all citizens sharing an omnilateral will (Ripstein 2009:282).

It follows from this that whatever distribution is necessary for absolute poverty relief does not involve taking away from anyone property to which they have a right,⁷ and people who are in abject poverty are missing something to which they have a basic right. Rich people who give to charity to meet the basic needs of others are not giving away property which they have a right to own; it is more like returning a few stolen goods.

This is why Kant says that "It is not all one under what title I get something. What properly belongs to me must not be accorded to me merely as something I beg for" (19:145). The point is that it does not matter simply *whether* poor people have their needs met, but *how* they are met. His worry about charitable giving as way of meeting basic need is not just that it is unreliable, partial and uneven. He thinks that even if charitable giving were a *reliable* way of meeting basic needs—if everyone regularly chose to give generously—the needs would be met in the wrong way. The person whose basic needs are met through someone else's giving is having their needs met as a result of a choice of another person. This means that their basic agency is subject to the other person's arbitrary choices, and this (according to this reading of Kant) is not compatible with respecting their freedom. This is why it is demeaning.

A person who has no legitimate means of meeting their basic needs has been wronged; the state has treated them unjustly. Curiously, on this analysis, it seems to turn out that there is a sense in which giving money to beggars may involve wronging them further. On Kant's account, people who are in abject poverty that they can do nothing to get out of (in a state in which it is possible to distribute some surplus wealth to change this) have been wronged, and are entitled as a matter of *right* to some redistribution. When an individual chooses to give to someone in this condition, there is a sense in which there is a further wrong. Giving someone *as a*

⁷ The wealth of the wealthy "consists entirely in their entitlement to exclude others from their goods, which in turn is consistent with equal freedom only when consistent with the formal conditions of the general will" (Ripstein 2009:283). Varden argues that it follows from this "that political freedom does not exist in societies in which some persons have no means and their access to means is limited to charity or other persons' private decisions to provide employment" (Varden 2008).

gift—something optional—a small part of what is in fact theirs is also wronging them. When a very poor person is given the means to survive by someone who has means choosing to give, they are only being given back what is rightfully theirs, and moreover, they are being given it in the wrong way, somewhat like the victim of theft to whom the thief decides to make a ‘gift’ of some of what has been taken.

Further, Kant thinks that there is a sense in which the beggar is wronging themselves: in asking other people to meet their fundamental needs, they are acting in a way which is not properly compatible with self-respect. And on top of this, Kant also thinks that the beggar is *wronging you*, by making an illegitimate use of a public space to further private purposes. Creating and protecting public spaces, such as public roads, are a central part of the way in which the state must enable everyone’s freedom, and it is an important part of this that public spaces should not be wrongfully used by private individuals or groups to further private purposes. But this is what the beggar is doing. As Ripstein puts it, the beggar claims more of the public space than anyone is entitled to claim for themselves (Ripstein 2009:263).

This is, morally speaking, an extremely complex situation. We have a general obligation to care about the needs of others (to make their needs one of our ends), and, if beggars are as they represent themselves as being, we are encountering someone whose needs are dire. But no particular person has a private right against any other particular person to meet their needs. And the beggar is wronging you by the way the way they encroach on you in a public space. But, if the beggar genuinely is in dire need, they have no option but to do what they are doing in a public space. And, the beggar has been wronged by state which fails to provide for their needs, and has a legitimate claim to some material means. This claim is not rightly met by your giving—meeting their claim of right with a gift wrongs them. Despite this, the severity of the need still seems to provide reason to give. And giving back a bit of what you don’t rightfully have is surely better than keeping it all. This set of apparently conflicting claims might lend support to those who think that Kantian moral philosophy is not helpful in dealing with bad situations: that aiming to act on maxims which would work in a perfectly co-ordinated kingdom of ends does not tell you what maxims to act on in an imperfect world. However, I think Kant’s analysis helps us make sense of the phenomenology of being encountered with beggars—with why it can be so uncomfortable—and also gives us some insight into how we might think about what we are doing in these encounters.

You are being intruded on in a space in which you are entitled not to be intruded on. This seems to justify the resentment we feel towards the intrusion. At the same time, the person who is doing is has no option but to do this. Further, they have been wronged, and although they do not have a claim against any particular individual’s goods, you may have more goods than you would be entitled to by a just distribution which avoids absolute poverty. The beggar is wronged by the injustice of absolute poverty, from which, most likely, you wrongfully benefit. The encounter may make you feel uncomfortably aware of injustice. Further the position the beggar is in is humiliating; it is unpleasant to be relating to someone in a way which involves them humiliating themselves, and the humiliation is not avoided by your giving. On this analysis, when you are confronted with a beggar, you are implicated in relations of servility and humiliation, from which you don’t easily escape, whether or not you give. You participate in the demeaning relation of a person having their basic needs met as a result of an optional choice, and this might make giving uncomfortable. Finally, you cannot meet their claim under justice by your private act of giving: it involves trying to solve a public problem through a private interaction, and there is no

way of doing this. You are related to each other wrongfully, and, in the encounter, there is nothing you can do about this. And there is something wrong in their getting in the guise of a gift something to which they have a right under justice (having their basic needs met). Being aware that you can't meet this need rightfully might also make you uncomfortable. However, the beggar does not have a claim against any other particular private individual that they, in specific, meet their needs. You may be resentfully feeling that there is something unfair in *your* being called on to solve this problem. As highlighted in Sypnowich's quotation in the beginning, encounters with beggars make us feel uncomfortable in a number of ways; Kant's analysis gives an explanation of the complexity of this phenomenology. Recent work on the nature of emotions has paid a lot of attention to the intentional content of emotions: to the fact that emotions represent the world as being a certain way, and can be evaluated in terms of the fittingness of the way they represent the world. The argument given here suggests that extreme discomfort is an appropriate way to feel in these encounters: it involves accurately registering the nature of the situation.

Further, the analysis may have some implications for how we act. Recognising that what we are giving is something to which the other person in fact has a rights-based claim should affect what we think we are doing when we give, and even the way we give. Kant says "we shall acknowledge that we are under obligation to help someone poor; but since the favour we do implies his well-being depends on our generosity, and this humbles him, it is our duty to behave as if our help is merely what is due to him or but a slight service of love, and to spare him humiliation and maintain his respect for himself" (6:448). We may act differently in giving, and we should certainly think and feel differently in giving, when we recognise that we are merely returning property to which the person in absolute poverty has a claim under justice. We will also think differently about what response is appropriate from the recipient: if we are freely choosing to make someone a gift, gratitude is appropriate, but this is not the case if they are merely being given a small part of what is due to them under justice. In the latter case, no gratitude is owed to the giver.

The analysis enables us to distinguish between different kinds of so-called charitable giving. On one extreme, we have the kind of optional charitable giving that is involved in, for example, making a donation to the opera house, the art gallery or the local school. These seem to be clear cases of 'giving to a good cause,' where the giving is optional, reflects generosity, is something to which gratitude is an appropriate response, and is something to which none of these 'causes' have a claim against you. Another kind of giving is involved in responding to sudden disasters and emergencies. Not every case of people being in dire need of material assistance arises out of structural injustice which suggests that people's freedom has been compromised; this is not the case with natural disasters.⁸ A clear case can be made for saying that we have an obligation to give in response to emergencies and disasters (the child in the pool), and this does not involve in any sense wronging the recipients. Kant himself distinguishes between assisting those in distress where the distress is a temporary condition, and giving alms which is a response to continuous need (27:706). The latter gives us a third kind of 'charity,' which the argument above has suggested should not properly be thought of as *giving*. It involves people getting back a small amount of what they in fact have a right to. Perhaps 'returning' is a better word than 'giving' here.

⁸ It is arguable that a legitimate state should have provision for responding to these, and that it is problematic if responses to emergencies depend on individual giving.

Our daily confrontations with beggars confront us with structural injustice in which we are implicated. In this situation, there may be nothing you can do to relate to the beggar perfectly rightfully. This is one of the reasons these confrontations can be so unpleasant. This suggests that, although you do not do wrong if you do the best act available to you, the extent to which you can live a completely morally good life is not independent of the conditions of the society you live in. Living in an unjust state means you can find yourself in situations in which there is no morally unproblematic alternative. Kant says:

“One always talks so much of virtue. One must, however, abolish injustice before one can be virtuous. One must set aside comforts, luxuries and everything that oppresses others while elevating myself, so that I am not one of those who oppress their species. Without this conclusion, all virtue is impossible” (20:151).

In accordance with [benevolence], people are merciful to others and show beneficence to them after they have earlier taken from them, even though they are conscious of no injustice to anyone. But one can participate in the general injustice, even if one does no one any injustice according to civil laws and institutions. Now if one shows beneficence to a wretch, then one has not given him anything gratuitously, but has given him only what one had earlier helped to take from him through the general injustice. For if no one took more of the goods of life than another, then there would be no rich and no poor. Accordingly, even acts of generosity are acts of duty and indebtedness, which arise from the rights of others (27:416).

Part of the problem about giving to beggars is a problem of judgment: our ignorance of many of the relevant details of the lives of the people who are actually begging, as well as questions of efficacy and efficiency in targeting and meeting need. However, the problem is not just one of judgment and efficacy. If there are genuine beggars, then there is structural injustice of a sort which makes it impossible for you to relate rightfully to these individuals in individual encounters.

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