

SHOULD WE GIVE MONEY TO BEGGARS?

Ole Martin Moen

In this paper it is argued that we should not give money to beggars. Rather than spending our welfare budget on the people whom we happen to pass by on the street, we should spend it on those who are genuinely poor and who can be helped the most with each pound that we give. A pound given to a beggar in a Western country, it is argued, is a pound spent on someone who – in a global perspective – is relatively well off. That pound, if spent better, could have rescued the life of a starving child in another part of the world.

I have sometimes given money to beggars. On cold autumn days, when a homeless man has seemed to be in need of some money to buy food or a cup of coffee, I have occasionally dropped him a few coins. Those coins, I have thought, mean much more to him than they do to me, and giving is a nice thing to do. Thinking the issue over, however, I have come to change my mind, and I have now stopped giving money to beggars. Let me explain why.

The arguments against giving money to beggars fall into two main categories.

On the one hand, there are the traditional, somewhat cynical, arguments that – in spite of their cynicism – carry some weight. First, for every penny that we give to a beggar, the more lucrative we make begging and, comparatively, the less lucrative we make working. This is bad, for we want people to work, not beg: Working is productive, begging is at best neutral and often a burden and a nuisance. Second, there is no guarantee that the beggar who receives the money will spend it in ways that increase the

quality of his life. He or she might well spend the money on alcohol or drugs, and end up financing organized crime.

These objections carry some weight, but in my view, they are not decisive. What is decisive is the fact that if you give money to beggars, you almost certainly spend your welfare budget helping the wrong people.

First, when you give money to beggars, you are likely to give the most to the beggars who already receive the most from other givers. Depending on their location, their looks, and what they say, different beggars have different degrees of success in how much money they get. Like everyone else, when you give money to a beggar, you are statistically likely to give the most money to the ones with the locations, looks, and tricks that prompt people to give.

An illustration: A while ago, I stopped and observed a beggar who looked quite a bit like Mother Theresa. She had a small picture of Jesus in front of her. When people walked past, she bowed her head, folded her hands, prayed, and made sure to mention 'Jesus Christ' in her prayer. About one in six gave her money. If the average giver gave her 20 pence, and 10–15 people passed her every minute, she got 20 to 30 pounds per hour. That is a very good income, and if you give money to beggars on impulse, chances are that you end up giving to the Mother Theresa look-alikes, and their equivalents, not to the poor men and women whose appearances have less power to elicit sympathy and guilt in passers by and who occupy less favorable spots in the city.

Even if you follow a well thought out strategy to eliminate this problem, however, you are still almost certainly giving your money to the wrong people. The reason why is that, presumably, you live in the rich and developed world – and so do the beggars that you walk past on the street.

When I was young, I remember that I was very moved by Ralph McTell's famous song 'Streets of London'. The song tells a sad story about some of London's poorest, and it follows one old man in particular. The story is heartbreaking. Not long ago, however, when I heard the song again, it

struck me that the man in McTell's song – who is meant to be representative of the poor in the developed world – does not live a horrible life at all when we see it in a global perspective. Judging from the lyrics, the man has shoes, he has access to a newspaper (albeit yesterday's), he sits in a café, and he drinks tea. In a world where thousands die of malnutrition every day, that is a pretty comfortable life.

The thousands who die of malnutrition are important to keep in mind, for every single pound that we spend on helping others can only be spent once. A pound given to a beggar is a pound not given to a starving child in Sub-Saharan Africa. And why should we prioritize the beggar in the Western world over the starving child in Africa? It is not unlikely that the beggars that we see on the street are among the world's 50 percent richest, and very likely, they have been given educational and other opportunities that millions of Africans could only dream of.

It might be harsh to claim that it is *immoral* to give money to Western beggars. After all, it seems reasonable that you can rightfully spend your money on yourself, and as such, it seems that it is your privilege to spend it as you like. True as that might be, it is also true that you waste your money if you give it to a beggar. Even if we bracket the question of what portion of our money we should spend on ourselves and what portion of our money we should spend on helping others, we should spend our money wisely. If our aim is to benefit ourselves, then giving money to beggars is suboptimal. If our aim is to benefit others, then giving money to beggars is also suboptimal. Either way, giving money to beggars is wasteful.

The morale is that in seeking to help others, we should not merely give to those who are geographically close to us and whose appearances elicit our sympathy. Rather, we should think the issue through and make sure to give to those who are the worst off, who can be helped the most with each pound that we give, and who are the least responsible for the situation that they are in. To achieve that, we should consciously decide how much of our

money we are willing to spend on helping others, find the most efficient charity, donate money to that charity, and say *no* the next time a beggar asks if we can spare some pennies.

Ole Martin Moen is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Philosophy at Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature, University of Oslo. o.m.moen@ifikk.uio.no