

Generosity: Virtue in Civil Society

by Tibor Machan

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For THE OBJECTIVE AMERICAN

GENEROSITY plays a major role in our society. Religion upholds it as a virtue, so much so that it is given the status of a duty. Charities depend upon our generosity for their existence. To top it off, the government forces us to be generous through welfare programs and entices us to give voluntarily by granting us a tax break for every dollar we donate.

The political Left has adopted generosity as its cause, while depicting the political Right as encouraging selfishness and downplaying giving, especially by the government. This perception is supported by the lack of literature on generosity by writers on the Right. The Right in general, and libertarians in particular, marshal all kinds of rhetorical and polemical weapons to defend our right to keep what we have, but relegate voluntary giving to a minor role as an alternative to forced giving.

That has changed with Tibor Machan's *Generosity: Virtue in Civil Society*. Machan is a professor on leave from Auburn University and a libertarian influenced by Ayn Rand and Aristotle. He argues that generosity "cannot flourish in a welfare state or in any sort of command economy, because to be generous is to *voluntarily* help others in certain ways."

Machan does not challenge just the notion that generosity should be legislated. He also starts with a different conception. Instead of tying generosity to altruism — acting with no expectation or motivation of receiving a benefit — Machan bases his version on Aristotle's depiction of man as a social animal.

Machan concludes: "To be generous means to extend goodwill toward others because one's own happiness is thereby enhanced, because one lives a fully human life if, among other things, one lives generously." This ties the motive of generosity back to man's own benefit: by sharing the values he has created, he expresses his social nature.

Machan argues that generosity is what is due to others, not because they have the right to our values, but because of our commitment to developing and expressing our capacities as social creatures. The importance of generosity results from integrating our internal needs with the demands of

the outer world. When we give we are engaging in self-expression, not self-sacrifice.

After establishing the role of generosity as a virtue with roots in self-realization, Machan explores the political implications. He criticizes proponents of welfare statism, the policy of government enforced giving. "Morally virtuous conduct, including generosity, is an option only for those who have their personal moral agency and sovereignty respected."

In other words, enforced generosity is an oxymoron. For this reason, he says, generosity does not thrive in collectivist regimes: "If one has the right to be provided with help from others, then others are again obligated to provide that help and may be forced to do so. [This win] destroy the foundation of those moral virtues, by changing them from virtues into enforceable duties."

Of course, welfare state advocates could argue that people who are unable to support themselves deserve the minimum necessary requirements for living, and that people would still want to give even with a "safety net" in place. These advocates still need to address the fact that people who are taxed to support welfare have less money available to donate voluntarily.

While Machan deserves credit for trying to expand the scope of self-interest to include generosity, there are other non-altruist roads to the same destination. For instance, one could claim generosity represents the exuberant outpouring of being grateful for being alive in a free country. Rather than seeing life as a grim dog-cat-dog competition of winners vs. losers, we could act on a win-win philosophy. When we are generous we win by expressing the values of reason, life and purpose. Those around us win by receiving part of our "profit" in life.

The main thrust of *Generosity* deals with giving away our material goods or money. But generosity can manifest itself in other ways, such as by giving other people the benefit of doubt when interpreting their words and actions. We can also donate our time to our favorite causes or to helping others.

Machan's book should be considered the first word on the subject not the last. Speaking of words, readers of this book should expect to work in absorbing this book. *Generosity* is written in a somewhat academic style. Given its content the investment in digesting Machan's message will pay generous dividends.