

Spirals of Progress

A blog about science, progress, and the pursuit of goodness

Why shouldn't you give money to homeless people?

Singer asks if you should save a drowning child. Obviously yes! And what if you were wearing a nice suit which could get ruined in the pond? Does not matter, you still have to jump in.

And what if, on your way to work every morning, you pass by a homeless man who is cold, hungry and in need of help? What then?

Growing up, my dad gave me some version of this answer: They will just spend the money on drugs. He explained this to me in a nice way, as in "it's too bad, and we would like to help, but unfortunately..."

Even as a child this justification did not feel sufficient. Sometimes I would see homeless people who had families, or signs that explained that they had fallen on tough times, or who just appeared particularly sympathetic and not prone to drug abuse.

On one occasion, a homeless man asked my dad for money, and my dad offered him our boxed leftovers from the restaurant we were exiting. The homeless man gave a grunt and walked away. I did wonder if he had taken offense at being offered half-eaten food, but mostly I took this as evidence that my dad was right, and the homeless man was just asking for money to spend on drugs.

Still, I continued to feel that this could not always be the case. Surely there were at least some people we could help? Periodically I would stand at a corner, listen to a homeless musician who seemed genuinely talented and find myself wondering what he could do if given the right opportunity.

At a philosophical level, one resolution is to protest that while Singer is talking about saving a life, I am merely talking about the opportunity to momentarily defer discomfort. But the

basic intuition still applies. For some trivial amount of money, I can provide a substantial benefit to another human being. In fact, were the cost of a meal to go missing from my bank account overnight, it's likely I literally would not notice. How could there possibly not be an obligation here?

As I got older, gained more independence and started walking around alone, I would occasionally take the initiative and offer a homeless man food unprovoked. I bought a man a meal from the McDonalds nearby that he seemed genuinely thankful for. On another occasion I bought a man a coffee, he pulled some cheese out of his pocket and added it to the paper cup. Sometimes, like my dad, I would get grunts.

Still, the results were encouraging enough that as a teenager, I had the great idea of asking everyone I knew for money, and then using it to feed the homeless at greater scale. Up until that point I had been relying on my meager allowance, and had always suspected that adults were far wealthier than they let on.

I spent some time online trying to learn about starting this kind of organization, and was shocked to learn that in fact, many well funded organizations dedicated to this exact mission already existed. The money I had hoped to raise paled in comparison to the budgets I saw online. I was confused and wanted answers.

At my next opportunity, I left home early and walked a few miles to the nearest soup kitchen. They weren't taking volunteers that day, so I stood across the street just watching, somewhat incredulous that this service existed. Partially wowed by the generosity, and partially dismayed that the low hanging fruit I imagined did not exist, and that the openhanded giving of free food was not enough to resolve society's ills.

I stopped trying to help the homeless for a few years after that. Once I was older, I started reading about the difficulties of running a shelter, why some homeless people choose to remain unsheltered, and the needs homeless people have beyond access to basic necessities. I looked for answers and found many.

When I walk past a homeless person now, I no longer think "he'll use the money to buy drugs", but I also don't think "I should do something to help". Instead there is some complex explanation spanning local politics, mental health, economics and ethics that provides a rough conceptual framework, within which I can explain my lack of immediate obligations. A piece of that explanation is that the money won't help long-term. Another is

that my time and money is better spent elsewhere. But mostly this has become just a kind of automatic response that has gotten much less specific over time.

I built this explanation for myself in an explicit way. Most people don't, and don't have to. The pre-built narratives society provides are sufficient to suppress their human instinct to help others in need. Some of these narratives are cruel and rely on racist stereotypes or accusations of laziness. Others are sympathetic, even empathetic, but the upshot is the same.

I sometimes worry about the second order consequence of suppressing empathy this way. That regularly seeing someone in need and choosing not to help, has primed us for refusing aid in other situations where we have no real justification. But I also can't endorse subjecting yourself to the mental load of thinking through, on each occasion, reasons you could do more but choose not to.

The type of lame shorthand explanations we offer our children in this scenario and so many others are not just a way of simplifying matters for young minds. They are a way of simplifying matters for ourselves. This is lazy, but also a necessary act born from the complexity of life and relative simplicity of our cognitive abilities.

In some ways, I do feel a sense of superiority. That I cared enough to think hard about this. But the sense is short lived. It doesn't matter to the person suffering if my reasons are better thought out. I still do nothing. I still coddle myself with half-truths.

And I still have no idea what I'll tell my own children when the time comes.

 karlafaulks / November 4, 2024

6 thoughts on “Why shouldn't you give money to homeless people?”



Gary Moore

November 5, 2024 at 9:51 am

sounds like a lot of mental masturbation to simply justify your selfishness and unwillingness to occasionally do a kind thing for someone less fortunate than you. At least you feel a sense of superiority – short lived though it is.

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 **m.c.**

November 5, 2024 at 10:00 am

when therapy talk is used to justify being an asshole, it's really amazing—like, “But I also can't endorse subjecting yourself to the mental load...” therapy language repurposed to justify self-centeredness, dressing up selfish behavior as a form of “self-care” or boundary setting really feels like a hallmark of our era.

it would be much easier to say, “i am a bad person, and i don't care,” and own it. that would help develop a less hypocritical vision of ethics and the functioning of society. confronting the banality of our own evil would humanize the evil in others.

probably even better than offering food, which is the most patronizing and offensive move (just offer money, always, please—and if they use it for drugs or alcohol, good for them). If people ask money, give money please. don't be an ass.

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JZ

November 5, 2024 at 11:00 am

Unconditional cash transfers reduce homelessness:

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2222103120>

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Avery

November 5, 2024 at 3:01 pm

Well reasoned article. I think it's better to buy food than give money – you know what your money has been used for. Most of us can do SOMETHING from time to time, without making it a crusade (most people's lives are complicated enough without adding a burden for which we are not directly responsible). Our own families should get priority anyway.

Having said that, there are other ways of helping to consider such as voluntary work in food kitchens, Citizens Advice, hospitals and so on. Unfortunately this is not so easy these days with all the bureaucracy and distrust. Organisations insist on being blameless if anything goes wrong and they shield themselves by vigorously checking helpers with invasive checking and armies of lawyers. This is not your fault, Karla and it would be a waste of your time and energy to indulge in an existential guilty complex. Just do what you can, when you can.

And stay safe while you are doing it – because why you are buying food the bad guys may well be watching and try to steal your cellphone while you are distracted. It's a wicked world and you, yourself should be your number one priority.

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Derek Visch

November 7, 2024 at 12:04 pm

More details about what you found in your research would be interesting for those of us who haven't dove in. Specifically do homeless generally know the soup kitchens are down the street? Do they know there's housing available?

I've wanted to put together a "gift bag" for those in need that would have all the information regarding those local resources with maps and some useful clothing, etc but it's hard to know what would be good in a general gift bag without understanding the general need

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GlobalReader

November 24, 2024 at 10:00 am

I recommend reading Jay Caspian Kang's article in various locations: LA Times, New Yorker, etc. He looks at what works and what doesn't.

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