

Who Are The Undeserving Poor?

It was Good Friday 2009, and having slept late I decided to brunch on chicken and chips at my local diner/takeaway. As I waited in the queue a young guy with a fag in his mouth crossed the road hurriedly from his pitch outside the supermarket where he sits regularly, begging in the most stomach-churning voice, and darted into William Hill next door. I wanted to believe, hoped, he was using the toilet, but I kinda guessed he wasn't. While I waited for my meal I looked through the open door, and there he was, hurriedly putting on a bet.

This guy is a professional beggar; obviously he makes a fair living at it, and he doesn't beg only in Sydenham; I've seen him once or twice begging outside a bank at Kings Cross. I have on occasion given money to street beggars, but only very infrequently, and I haven't donated at all after an incident on March 31, 2007.

I'd spent the evening in the Internet Caff at Charing Cross Road; I won't say what I was doing there, but apart from playing music it had been a very profitable evening indeed, so when I sauntered up to Charing Cross Station around 11.30pm I was in a good mood. A very good mood. My train wasn't due for another quarter of an hour, so I went out to buy a newspaper and get something to eat. After buying the paper I passed a *Big Issue* seller who called out to me "*Big Issue, mate?*"; I hadn't bought a copy for some time, so fished in my pocket. How much is it now, I asked? One fifty, I was told, but as I took out the money my euphoria was shattered.

The guy said he had only the one copy left, and asked could I give him the money without taking the paper so that he could "make a bit". I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing, so took a good look at him; he was wearing a vendor's badge, and was obviously legit.

As I held out the money I said "Are you gonna sell me one or what?" to which he replied "I can't do that, mate."

I thought fair enough, but said nothing, and went to get a slice of pizza instead. A few minutes later as I passed him on the way back to the station he called out to me "Have a good night, mate" or something sarcastic.

I found this relatively trivial incident so disturbing that I have as I said never given money to a street beggar since, nor will I ever, and certainly I will never buy another copy of *The Big Issue*.

Okay, let's not get on our high horse about this. Begging ain't exactly uncommon, and most of the time it isn't called begging. I would define begging as soliciting money for no material reward or fair exchange. Okay, it doesn't have to be money, and I would exclude such things as a blind man asking for help to cross a road or an

old lady asking you to carry her suitcase, but begging comes in numerous forms. We are faced with it every day.

On many free websites - including this one - you will find a request for donations; technically this is begging. Many programmers offer some of their creations for free and put a note on their websites: Would you like to make a donation to help me pay server costs? You can call that begging, if you wish. I certainly have no qualms about my appeal being alluded to as such. Most such appeals are unsuccessful although I personally have found not one but two people who have sponsored a domain for idealistic reasons.

Charities beg, in recent years they have taken to sending out volunteers - at least I assume they are volunteers - to stop people in the street and solicit donations and subscriptions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, charities who work with vagrants prefer the public not to give money to their charges, but to their organisations instead, on the pretext that direct donations will be squandered on drugs and/or drink. It doesn't stop there though, turn on the TV and there will be some sort of appeal, be it for some children's charity or earthquake relief. During and after the recent crisis in Gaza - which is of course ongoing - there were appeals for humanitarian aid. Technically this is begging, but of course such appeals - which can bring in millions - are not comparable with a *Big Issue* seller who seeks a far smaller donation by artifice.

There is another, qualitative difference, too; big appeals and ongoing appeals such as charities and foundations are profitable for some, including for the lawyers and PR people. This is an unfortunate fact of life; charities have to be constituted legally, and this sort of work is expensive. Charities, including foundations, are often as not staffed by professional people, often highly qualified, medical charities employ or engage doctors, and they don't come cheap. All these people have to be paid before one cent goes to the poor, and the benefit to the poor or society as a whole (if any) is often difficult if not impossible to quantify. We can cite medical charities in this connection, but organisations involved in environmental issues for example often have charitable status, and it remains to be seen just how charitable is much political lobbying or at times dubious educational work such organisations engage in.

It might be argued that it is more noble to give money to a beggar who may just be sleeping on the street, or more likely a basic hostel than to a big organisation that will spend tens or hundreds of thousands on administration and other costs before it gives one cent to the poor or does an iota of good. It might. Certainly I wouldn't give the time of day to a lawyer in a business suit who approached me outside Charing Cross Station and asked me to pledge two pounds a month so that he and his chums at Shyster & Co can take ten percent of it, Media Frenzy Inc can take another ten percent, and its highly paid directors and managers can take another thirty or more percent. But by the same token, whatever my views on basic income, I have no intention of subsidising either the racing industry or the Exchequer, and if I put

money in a man's pocket for no better reason than I'm feeling on top of the world and haven't done my mandatory good deed for the day, I don't expect him to take the piss. However high or humble their station, people shouldn't mistake kindness for wages.