

HOW TO KEEP SELFISHNESS FROM GUMMING UP A DECENT SOCIETY

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We Can't Outlaw Selfishness

We can't, we shouldn't try, it may not even be good for society if there was no selfishness. American capitalism is built on it, world Communism capitalizes on it, all religions count on it, everyone seems to need it. But (for want of a better word) "constructive" selfishness is one thing and destructive selfishness can also become an even more worrisome disease. So we must think about how much self-interest a decent society should tolerate, but also how big a price it should be willing to pay to keep it under control. These are the questions I hope will engage your interest.

The Case of Ralph Nader

Ralph Nader may be more hated and derogated by America's big business than even Karl Marx, or Franklin Delano Roosevelt--and he's alive, still capable of yet more "mischief." In the New York Times, Irving Kristol asks,

Should a corporation give money to a university whose president or faculty is evidently unfriendly to the business community? Should a corporation in a city like New York get involved in a job-training program for high-school dropouts even if the risk-reward and cost-benefit ratio are dubious at best? It's not hard for a corporation to decide not to give money to Ralph Nader. But what about Jesse Jackson, or the Sierra Club? (Section 3, p. 2, Oct. 17, 1982)

While Kristol sees the dilemma of big business when it is faced with ever-increasing pressure to engage in corporate philanthropy, there is no dilemma in his mind

concerning the ease with which corporations choose not to give money to the likes of Ralph Nader. If one knows Irving Kristol's philosophical orientation, it's not impossible to be sanguine about his comments. If one knows of the work of Ralph Nader, it's not a chore to understand such comments. But, as Irving Kristol himself would admit, Ralph Nader is neither one-dimensional nor uncomplicated. Even to sympathizers when they think about Nader's work and influences, he presents certain characteristics of a mixed blessing.

Ralph Nader provided a great service to Western culture if for no other reason than by reminding us that, if Charles Darwin was right about the "survival of the fittest," by definition there are times when even the most altruistic survivors must behave selfishly. If "advocacy" is when you work on another person's behalf as if you were working on your own behalf, then "survival" requires you to work (at least from time to time) on your own behalf as if you come first. This is not to say that people can't rise above their selfish motives and behavior. Our history is replete with great acts of heroism, of sacrifice, and even martyrdom. But if people weren't characteristically selfish, or at least self-interested, then there would not be a need for such words as "sacrifice" and "martyrdom."

What Ralph Nader did was to call attention to the selfish interests of our various industries and government agencies. He reified a well-known lesson, one which is the basis for most of our laws and practices. For example, we don't ask the trucking industry to set the toll rate on the turnpike, and we don't ask the telephone company to set its own rates. We don't permit the university student to determine when he deserves a degree (although, in the recent past, universities came perilously close to that wrongheaded policy). And we don't permit the university to determine whether or not it deserves accreditation. Nader

called attention to certain aspects of our business and government communities which were not sufficiently regulated. Bravo! He deserves prizes and gratitude for blowing those whistles.

Notwithstanding, the "disease" which Nader sought to cure--unregulated power--if too vigorously "treated" spreads another "disease"--unnecessary bureaucracy. In our work, the problem becomes most acute when we bureaucratize values. We see it everywhere--in the paperwork which doctors must now attend to in order for society to control their avariciousness (or that of their patients), to the Individual Educational Programs (IEP's) which teachers of the disabled must now attend to in order for society to control our slothfulness and promote our professionalism and philosophy of mainstreaming. Once, institutions for the disabled were unregulated. Today we have various accreditation commissions, but their standards seem to be preoccupied with square footage allotted for each bed, or with the fire resistant qualities of materials used in dormitories--important to be sure, but there is more to an environment than what can be measured and counted. And the time it takes to fill out these forms, count the inches, and write the reports could have been spent on such questions as: "Why does this child puzzle us so much?", or "Do we need this institution?"

So, a very serious question must always be asked about the Naders of the world and their minions: Does the plethora of paper and standards salve or exacerbate our worries in the disability fields?

A Proposal

Despite the problems attendant with the bureaucratization of values, I cannot suggest that people such as Ralph Nader were either unnecessary once or no longer necessary today. It remains a fact that automobile manufacturers pay

more attention to style than safety--and would pay even less attention to safety if not for Ralph Nader. And the institution can never be trusted to prohibit everyone from residing who--even on its criteria--doesn't belong there. And teachers and superintendents do need laws to remind them what's right and wrong, what the society will stand behind and what it won't stand for. After all, self-justification is the twin of self-interest, and all human beings possess large quantities of both.

What's the answer? Safer cars and better schools and institutions, of course. But there must always be the continuously voiced question: At what price? Ralph Nader is important and necessary. But so are the libertarians, those who will fight to keep government from intruding unnecessarily into other people's lives, that too is the point--and the suggestion. We need Ralph Nader. We need Tom Szasz and Irving Kristol.

Reference

Kristol, I. Charity and business shouldn't mix. New York Times, Oct. 17, 1982,
Sec. 3, p. 2.