

The Ethics of Giving: Lessons from the Ship and the City

As a midshipman at a federal service academy, it is required that each student spend nearly a full year at sea in order to gain a Coast Guard license upon graduation. Aboard my first ship, I made two voyages to the Middle East for a total of 129 days at sea visiting ports in Spain, Egypt, Djibouti, UAE, Sri Lanka, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Due to the assignment, I was awarded the United States Merchant Marine Expeditionary Medal for contributions supporting American and International coalition military forces in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom which afforded me a great sense of pride giving my service to country. But when working with different nationalities in each port, it seemed as if almost every day I was faced with an ethical decision to be made. Consequently, two specific instances of giving had a profound impact on my life. During both dilemmas, I felt disoriented when placed in situation where I was unsure how or why to give to a complete stranger. But from further academic study, self-reflection, and practice in ethical giving over the past the two years, I have learned that in order to be an ethical human being, one must be willing to give without any moral reservations, seek no repayment, and develop generosity as a habitual trait. If an individual is not willing to give to others freely, subordinates or strangers, he or she may slip into not giving at all.

In Djibouti, Africa two harbor pilots came aboard the ship and upon completion of their job asked the Captain if they may have some food as they were starving. The Captain instructed me, the ship's deck cadet, to give them the left-overs sitting in the galley. Upon seeing the food, I noticed there was only one large bowl of shrimp-alfredo sitting out. I motioned to get another plate so the two men could share, but the leader of the two said that would not be necessary and ate the entire dinner leaving his companion to starve. Confused by the lack of humanity, I

watched helplessly and didn't say anything in defense of the other man. To this day, I wonder if as a person in a position to make an ethical decision to give, I should have said something more, intervened, or gave more than what was asked of me.

On the other hand, in Egypt a Suez pilot asked if he may have additional ice cream bars to give to his laborers on the pilot boat. And although I had been tricked by this before, I followed his request and watched as he climbed down the pilot ladder and dispersed the dessert amongst his men. In disbelief and joy, I watched the line-handlers smile and show great thanks for the simple gift. From infancy, I've been raised how to give and receive on personal incentives, but I wanted to further investigate what it means to give for the sake of good ethics. Winston Churchill noted, "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give." Everyone has to make a living by working to receive something, but the true characters of virtue know from experience and study when, how, where, to whom, and why to give.

I realized that before diving into the specifics of giving, one has to look at what defines our actions as human beings and how to categorize those choices made. Aristotle determines that "Actions are voluntary, involuntary, or non-voluntary."¹ A voluntary action is made when a person has a choice to make and after weighing all options freely decides which path to take. Conversely, involuntary actions are categorized as those which are made when an outside force is binding a person to choose only one option without any freedom of choice or evaluations of alternatives. For example, if a bank robber holds a gun to a banker's head and demands money or face being killed, the giving of money would be an involuntary action. However, non-voluntary

¹ Aristotle, J. A. K. Thomson, and Hugh Tredennick. *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. Print. 111.

is a unique category when an ignorant decision to give is made and no serious pain; physical, emotional, or monetarily, is inflicted upon the giver. If a beggar on the street approaches an individual and asks for a few dollars, the person now feels compelled to give due to an external force that alters his or her ability to weigh the plausible alternatives. Although the monetary value of the gift may not pain the giver, Aristotle would have noted that the gift was ignorant in nature, because the option to either walk past, give in another form, or help a better suited recipient wasn't even considered.

Of the three actions mentioned above, Aristotle determines that only gifts that are given voluntarily are a practice of good ethics and decision making that is virtuous. He states, "Acts that are incidentally virtuous distinguished from those that are done knowingly, of choice, and from a virtuous disposition."² To help define what a voluntary action consists of, Aristotle developed three steps to determine if an action is done freely and holds value. 1) "He knows what he is doing": Every decision a person makes should be within his or her comprehension and understands the importance, justification, and outcomes of making that specific action. Giving just cash to the beggar doesn't allow the giver to know what the money is going to achieve: is it buying food or drugs? 2) "If he chooses it, and chooses it for its own sake": An individual should choose to give because he or she felt it to be the correct decision without the influence of others. When the recipient determines the gift, then the giver has failed to show an authoritative stance and make a virtuous action, which coincides with the old saying "beggars can't be choosers." 3) "If he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition": A giving individual must understand that once something is given, he or she cannot simply take back that decision. For example, if a CEO

² Aristotle, J. A. K. Thomson, and Hugh Tredennick. *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. Print. 97.

voluntarily gives his employee a bonus check in recognition of his hard work, he cannot return later and ask for the employee to repay the money. By understanding how a voluntary action is defined as virtuous from the three steps, the simple giver has to then further investigate his or her lasting impact on others and internally from the act of giving.

From my time at sea, I learned the influence I had as the lowest ranking member aboard ship on those around me could be drastically different from that of the captain, or company, or local government. But when it comes to giving, Aristotle determines that all great ethical people are expected to give wealth, information, orders, awards, etc. but differ in proportionality of what resources they have available. He defines people as “liberality, prodigality, illiberality, and magnificence”³ when it comes to giving. The liberal man has a good end in sight and knows to whom he will give, how much, at the right time, and understands all other factors associated in giving for a final good. Although the liberal man may not have a lot of resources, what he does have to give is sufficient, proportional, and effective in achieving a final good no matter how large or small. Unlike the liberal man or woman, a prodigal leader is someone who gives everything thing away without thought and no matter the sum of money, honor, or tangible items, the gifts are considered wasteful. For example, if a multimillionaire walks into a bar and buys everyone there free drinks, for that night he would be the undoubted leader of the room with everyone there as subordinates looking to him for gifts. However, his giving is foolish and the gifts of money and tangible items are useless because in the morning everyone will leave the bar and only remember him for his wasteful spending.

³ Aristotle, J. A. K. Thomson, and Hugh Tredennick. *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. Print. 143.

On the other hand, the illiberal man is the opposite of the prodigal giving mentality as he does not give at all. A human placed in a desperate situation that does not give at all, no matter how large or small, is considered the most heinous crime according to Aristotle. He emphasizes that the illiberal mentality is nearly “incurable” once it has festered within the character of a person. Finally, the “magnanimous man” is that of great wealth and position of high power that doesn’t care about the cost, but solely strives for the greatest outcome by giving whatever it takes. Aristotle emphasizes that a magnanimous person’s motivation lies in his or her honor, respect, and love of the people that brings self-actualization. Consequently, these greatest leaders who can give and take so much should not become overjoyed in times of good nor become depressed in times of great loss.

From these classifications, it became clear to me that people must be either liberal or magnificent in terms of giving in order to achieve a higher level of ethical virtue and decision making. Moreover, the magnanimous leader’s actions will continue to trickle down the ranks in proper proportionality so that those influenced are liberal in terms of giving and ready to advance as a character of good ethics and virtue by better understanding the simple act of giving and humanity that comes with it.

Although Aristotle’s teachings hit very close to home with modern western culture and leadership, I needed to further understand how other cultures view the act of giving and develop an ability to adapt when presented with unique foreign situations. Because of my experience in Africa, the primary motivation for this essay, I needed to better understand how to prepare for my next encounter overseas when placed in a leadership position through the power of giving. For example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu addresses the difference in the African values towards giving by saying, “I lay great stress on humaneness and being truly human. In our African

understanding, part of Ubuntu – being human – is the rare gift of sharing...Blacks are beginning to lose to this wonderful attribute, because we are being inveigled by the excessive individualism of the west.”⁴ The Archbishop claims that giving is a natural trait of human beings, but the impoverishment caused by the colonization has hardened the African people’s hearts and created resentment towards foreigners and at times, each other. By understanding the unique cultural disposition, I now have a greater insight on why the elder man ate the entire bowl of food while leaving his companion to starve, and it wasn’t because of simple greed or traditional culture, but something much deeper woven in the fabric of his upbringing. I realized from what these African philosophers proclaimed, the man’s lack of ethical giving was a product of people who looked like me, came on ships from across the sea, were clueless towards ethical giving, given an order, became disoriented, and didn’t do anything to help those most in need.

Unfortunately, this internal revelation came at a price, and now it pains me to know of my shortcomings when I was presented with the opportunity to right a past wrong. Now, I can no longer hide behind the comfort of my argument at the time that “it is their local culture, so who am I to infringe on their values?” Had I known that the man was only acting on the instinct to provide for the self, I would have taken another plate and split the food between the two men to show that sharing of gifts does exist in the outside world. It’s interesting to think that as outsiders looking in, we address African genocides, government corruption, warlords, piracy, and other violent conflicts because they are basic crimes against humanity, but what about the simple everyday lack of ethical giving? Moreover, we can donate enormous amounts of grain and humanitarian relief to fight basic hunger, but like the prodigal man, there is no ethical

⁴ Moore, Brooke Noel., and Kenneth Bruder. *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Pub., 1999. Print. 533.

substance or change in the local African ethical decision making. What will be effective in changing their disposition towards the fading “wonderful attribute” of giving is further educating the foreign leaders who enter these countries to become liberal men and women of virtue. In these scenarios, the largest key to liberal giving lies in knowing when to respect a culture or when it’s necessary to interfere and change something that is wrong.

When it comes to people making unethical decisions, such as not giving at all or not interfering to give, John Maxwell breaks down flawed human decision making into three reasons “1) We do what is most convenient 2) We do what we must to win 3) We rationalize our choices with Relativism.”⁵ The last reason, “rationalizing our choices with Relativism” can lure any person into not making an ethical decision or missing an important opportunity to give. Maxwell explains this relativism by stating, “making matters worse is people’s natural inclination to be easy on themselves, judging themselves according to their good intention – while holding others to a higher standard and judging them by their worst actions.”⁵ For example, when I gave the ice-cream to the Egyptian pilots and continuously watched as they kept it to themselves, I had judged them in juxtaposition to my own good intentions and self-righteousness. Therefore, an individual who is willing to give needs to reflect on his or her own flaws before passing judgment on those who may abuse the gift given. If a person feels all recipients will act in the same fashion and can only see his or her actions as good and others as inhuman, he or she can easily slip into not ever giving again.

Aside from not giving because of judging other cultures to be wrong, an individual’s use of relativism could cause him or her to never interfere because of the argument that the local

⁵ Maxwell, John C. *There's No Such Thing as Business Ethics: There's Only One Rule for Making Decisions*. New York: Warner, 2003. Print. 9.

culture is beyond his or her comprehension or understanding. During an ethical conversation I had with a commanding officer, he asked “if we were to start eating during this meeting, and I was eating like a pig, would you correct me or suggest I stop?” I thought about it and replied, “Well no” where upon he said, “Just because our separation of rank, from Midshipmen to Captain, or age, younger to older, doesn’t change the fact that I am still eating like a pig and should be corrected as such.” It took me awhile to understand that if something is inherently wrong, then it is necessary to intervene and give accordingly.

Mary Midgley tackles the cultural relativism dilemma in her short work “Trying Out One’s New Sword” by referencing the Samurai tradition of killing an innocent passer-by after receiving a new sword to see if it is sharp enough for battle. She determines that the average person placed in a situation to make an ethical decision would do nothing for fear of not respecting their local culture. This separation between different people is what she calls “moral isolationism” and builds “barriers” that are harmful to all parties involved.⁶ These barriers are what kept me from interfering to give to the other African man and would have only continued to build without the insight Mary provides. Because barriers are two sided, when an ethical person tears them down in order to give to another foreign individual, it will help to change both peoples’ entire perspective on ethical decision making practices. In terms of respect and not interfering, she continues:

People usually take it up [moral isolationism] because they think it is a respectful attitude to other cultures. In fact, however, it is not respectful. Nobody can respect what is entirely unintelligible to them. To respect someone, we have to know enough about

⁶ Midgley, Mary. *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience*. New York: St. Martin's, 1981. Print. 175.

him to make a *favorable* judgment, however general and tentative. And we do understand people in other cultures to this extent. Otherwise a great mass of our most valuable thinking would be paralyzed.⁷

In other words, when I didn't understand the local culture, it was the opportunity to apply my own values in a scenario because that is predetermined to be virtuous. By allowing the local people to continue something morally wrong without question, such as not giving, an outsider is in a way being disrespectful towards them by pretending to understand the circumstances.

Therefore, it is determined that doing nothing can be ethically wrong as Maxwell noted "Inaction is also a decision." The choice to do nothing, or give nothing, is an option any human being can make, but he or she needs to understand it doesn't come without any moral accountability. Maxwell uses the example of a boy who every time he did something unethical had to hammer a nail into a fence, and every time he made a good ethical decision could remove a nail from the fence. However, even if all of the nails were removed and good actions more frequent than the bad, the holes from where the past nails entered still remained. Likewise, people need to understand that if they miss even one small opportunity to give to a complete stranger, then the damage done is permanent. Consequently, the fine line between respecting a foreign culture and interference is not so difficult when an individual is educated to make that ethical decision in unknown situations involving giving. To enforce this global phenomena, Mary concludes her argument by saying, "Morally as well as physically, there is only one world, and we all have to live in it."⁷ Had I been armed with this knowledge to not hesitate and

⁷ Sommers, Christina Hoff., and Frederic Tamlor Sommers. *Vice & Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College, 1993. Print. 175-180.

interfere if an opportunity to give arises, I could have removed one more nail to help make the local population reconsider how they should actually be treating one another.

But with each gift I gave overseas and each inhumane act witnessed, it developed a new question: are some human beings naturally inclined to ethically give or is it a learned trait? Aristotle again gives clear insight on how giving and other virtuous actions become part of a person's natural character by simply stating, "Moral Virtues, like crafts, are acquired by practice and habituation."⁸ He gives an example of a musician that through practice can learn to play beautiful music or a builder can improve his technique to create more impressive structures. However, if those skills are learned in an improper way and practiced poorly, then the musician may only get worse and the builder continue to build unsafe or unappealing buildings. I found comfort in Aristotle's supporting argument that virtuous traits such as giving are developed over the course of one's lifetime or there would be no reason to have teachers if people were born to either be good or bad musicians.

In fact, two final instances of giving in New York City allowed me to fully assess my transformation into ethical decision making. Before I went to sea, a homeless man draped in torn dirty clothes was walking down the aisle of the Long Island Railroad car before departure from the station and was asking each passenger for money, but everyone denied his request. He stopped and stood next to my seat and said, "Sir, I only need two dollars and fifty cents left, please, so that I may purchase a ticket." I knew something sounded insincere about his request, but none-the-less I panicked and dug into my wallet pulling out three dollars and placed them in

⁸ Aristotle, J. A. K. Thomson, and Hugh Tredennick. *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. Print. 91.

his hands. He thanked me and proceeded to walk down the aisle until he thought he was out of my sight and went back to asking others in the railcar the same question. A man sitting next to me, who moments ago denied the homeless man's request and saw the whole scenario unfold, said "You must not be from New York." I faked a smile and replied "No." He then told me, "Yeah I thought so, you will learn soon enough not to give to the homeless here."

But after sea and developing my habitual ethical giving traits, while walking to Penn Station in Manhattan to get on the same train from the previous story, another homeless man sitting on some cardboard, paper cup extended, unkempt beard covering his face, asked if I had any spare change. Everyone else on the busy street kept on walking and didn't think twice about giving a few quarters, but I stopped and replied to him, "Are you hungry?" The homeless man was now taken back by an actual response other than a simple no or sound of coins hitting the bottom of his cup, looked up, and said "yes, very." Casually I asked him, "Well, what do you want for dinner?" Still unsure of my intentions, he shakily replied, "The smell of chicken from that stand over there smells good." So I instructed for him to get up, go place his order for whatever he wanted, and I would pay for the meal. The homeless man gets up to the register and asks the lady behind the counter for some fried chicken, a small fry, and a coke, but she motions for him to stand over to the side without ringing-up his order. Then, she pointed at me and said "next customer" and I explained that I was purchasing his order. With a look of confusion and astonishment the cashier placed the order, \$7.95 popped up on the screen, I reached into my wallet, pulled out a twenty, and paid for it. I looked over to the homeless man and said, "I would stay with you to eat, but I have a train to catch." Still in a state of confusion he looked back at me and said, "Thank you and God Bless."

In the first scenario, I was nothing more than a prodigal leader of the railcar by Aristotle's standards having given the man money for no valid reason. But no matter how foolish or small my act of giving was, it still helped to cleanse me of greed by releasing something of monetary value. In the eyes of the foreign culture, the average New York commuter sitting next to me, my act of giving was something different, but it failed to alter their perception towards ethical giving and they remained illiberal in their actions and beliefs. However, I was prepared for the next encounter with a beggar to not meet his or her demands, but rather give something of virtue that met the requirements how much, to whom, where, and why. In the second scenario, the man was able to sleep with a full stomach, the cashier glimpsed ethical giving, and I was able to practice the act of giving as an ethical quality of a human being. Therefore, I consistently challenge myself to thoroughly evaluate ethical giving while encouraging others to do the same, whether at home or abroad...on land or at sea.

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