

CHAPTER V

THE CRUELTY OF CHARITY

Fostering the good for nothing at the expense of the good is an extreme cruelty. It is a deliberate storing up of miseries for future generations. There is no greater curse to posterity than that of bequeathing them an increasing population of imbeciles.

Herbert Spencer

THE last century has witnessed the rise and development of philanthropy and organized charity. Coincident with the all conquering power of machinery and capitalistic control, with the unprecedented growth of great cities and industrial centers and the creation of great proletarian populations, modern civilization has been confronted to a degree hitherto unknown in human history with the complex problem of sustaining human life in surroundings and under conditions flagrantly dysgenic.

The program, as I believe all competent

authorities in contemporary philanthropy and organized charity would agree has been altered in aim and purpose. It was first the outgrowth of humanitarian and altruistic idealism, perhaps not devoid of a strain of sentimentalism of an idealism that was aroused by a desperate picture of human misery intensified by the industrial revolution. It has developed in later years into a program not so much aiming to succor the unfortunate victims of circumstances as to effect what we may term social sanitation. Primarily, it is a program of self protection. Contemporary philanthropy, I believe, recognizes that extreme poverty and overcrowded slums are veritable breeding grounds of epidemics, disease, delinquency and dependency. Its aim, therefore, is to prevent the individual family from sinking to that abject condition in which it will become a much heavier burden upon society.

There is no need here to criticize the obvious limitations of organized charities in meeting the desperate problem of destitution. We are all familiar with these criticisms, the common indictment of inefficiency so often

brought against public and privately endowed agencies. The charges include the high cost of administration, the pauperization of deserving poor, and the encouragement and fostering of the undeserving, the progressive destruction of self respect and self reliance by the paternalistic interference of social agencies, the impossibility of keeping pace with the ever increasing multiplication of factors and influences responsible for the perpetuation of human misery, the misdirection and misappropriation of endowments, the absence of inter-organization and coordination of the various agencies of church, state, and privately endowed institutions, the crimes of charity that are occasionally exposed in newspaper scandals. These and similar strictures we may ignore as irrelevant to our present purpose, as inevitable but not incurable faults that have been and are being eliminated in the slow but certain growth of a beneficent power in modern civilization. In reply to such criticisms, the protagonist of modern philanthropy might justly point to the honest and sincere workers and disinterested scientists it has mobilized, to the self sacrificing and

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hard working executives who have awakened public attention to the evils of poverty and the menace to the race engendered by misery and filth

Even if we accept organized charity at its own valuation and grant that it does the best it can it is exposed to a more profound criticism. It reveals a fundamental and irremediable defect. Its very success, its very efficiency, its very necessity to the social order, are themselves the most unanswerable indictment. Organized charity itself is the symptom of a malignant social disease.

Those vast complex interrelated organizations aiming to control and to diminish the spread of misery and destitution and all the menacing evils that spring out of this sinisterly fertile soil are the surest sign that our civilization has bred is breeding and is perpetuating constantly increasing numbers of defectives, delinquents and dependents. My criticism, therefore is not directed at the failure of philanthropy, but rather at its success.

These dangers inherent in the very idea of humanitarianism and altruism dangers which

have to-day produced their full harvest of human waste, of inequality and inefficiency, were fully recognized in the last century at the moment when such ideas were first put into practice. Readers of Huxley's attack on the Salvation Army will recall his penetrating and stimulating condemnation of the debauch of sentimentalism which expressed itself in so uncontrolled a fashion in the Victorian era. One of the most penetrating of American thinkers Henry James Sr. sixty or seventy years ago wrote: "I have been so long accustomed to see the most arrant devilry transact itself in the name of benevolence that the moment I hear a profession of good will from almost any quarter I instinctively look around for a constable or place my hand within reach of a bell rope. My ideal of human intercourse would be a state of things in which no man will ever stand in need of any other man's help but will derive all his satisfaction from the great social tides which own no individual names. I am sure no man can be put in a position of dependence upon another, without the other's very soon becoming—if he accepts the duties of the relation—utterly

degraded out of his just human proportions
 No man can play the Deity to his fellow man
 with impunity—I mean spiritual impunity,
 of course For see if I am at all satisfied
 with that relation if it contents me to be in a
 position of generosity towards others I must
 be remarkably indifferent at bottom to the
 gross social inequality which permits that
 position, and, instead of resenting the enforced
 humiliation of my fellow man to myself in the
 interests of humanity I acquiesce in it for the
 sake of the profit it yields to my own self
 complacency I do hope the reign of benev-
 olence is over, until that event occurs, I am
 sure the reign of God will be impossible

To day, we may measure the evil effects of
 benevolence of this type, not merely upon
 those who have indulged in it, but upon the
 community at large These effects have been
 reduced to statistics and we cannot, if we
 would, escape their significance Look, for
 instance (since they are close at hand and
 fairly representative of conditions elsewhere)
 at the total annual expenditures of public and
 private charities and corrections for the
 State of New York For the year ending

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June 30 1919, the expenditures of public institutions and agencies amounted to \$33,936,205 88 The expenditures of privately supported and endowed institutions for the same year amount to \$58,100,530 98 This makes a total, for public and private charities and corrections of \$92,036 736 86 A conservative estimate of the increase for the year (1920 1921) brings this figure approximately to one hundred and twenty five millions These figures take on an eloquent significance if we compare them to the comparatively small amounts spent upon education conservation of health and other constructive efforts Thus, while the City of New York spent \$7 35 per capita on public education in the year 1918, it spent on public charities no less than \$2 66 Add to this last figure an even larger amount dispensed by private agencies and we may derive some definite sense of the heavy burden of dependency pauperism and delinquency upon the normal and healthy sections of the community

Statistics now available also inform us that more than a million dollars are spent annually to support the public and private institutions

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in the state of New York for the segregation of the feeble minded and the epileptic A million and a half is spent for the up keep of state prisons, those homes of the defective delinquent Insanity, which, we should remember is to a great extent hereditary, annually drains from the state treasury no less than \$11 985,695 55, and from private sources and endowments another twenty millions When we learn further that the total number of inmates in public and private institutions in the State of New York—in alms houses reformatories schools for the blind, deaf and mute in insane asylums in homes for the feeble minded and epileptic—amounts practically to less than sixty five thousand an insignificant number compared to the total population our eyes should be opened to the terrific cost to the community of this dead weight of human waste

The United States Public Health Survey of the State of Oregon recently published, shows that even a young community rich in natural resources, and unusually progressive in legislative measures, is no less subject to this burden Out of a total population of 783,000

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it is estimated that more than 75,000 men, women and children are dependents feeble minded or delinquents Thus about 10 per cent of the population is a constant drain on the finances health, and future of that community These figures represent a more definite and precise survey than the rough one indicated by the statistics of charities and correction for the State of New York The figures yielded by this Oregon survey are also considerably lower than the average shown by the draft examination, a fact which indicates that they are not higher than might be obtained from other States

Organized charity is thus confronted with the problem of feeble mindedness and mental defect But just as the State has so far neglected the problem of mental defect until this takes the form of criminal delinquency, so the tendency of our philanthropic and charitable agencies has been to pay no attention to the problem until it has expressed itself in terms of pauperism and delinquency Such benevolence is not merely ineffectual it is positively injurious to the community and the future of the race

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But there is a special type of philanthropy or benevolence, now widely advertised and advocated both as a federal program and as worthy of private endowment which strikes me as being more insidiously injurious than any other. This concerns itself directly with the function of maternity, and aims to supply *gratis* medical and nursing facilities to slum mothers. Such women are to be visited by nurses and to receive instruction in the hygiene of pregnancy, to be guided in making arrangements for confinements, to be invited to come to the doctor's clinics for examination and supervision. They are, we are informed, to receive adequate care during pregnancy at confinement and for one month afterward. Thus are mothers and babies to be saved.

Childbearing is to be made safe. The work of the maternity centers in the various American cities in which they have already been established and in which they are supported by private contributions and endowment, it is hardly necessary to point out, is carried on among the poor and more docile sections of the city among mothers least able through poverty and ignorance, to afford the care and

attention necessary for successful maternity. Now, as the findings of Tredgold and Karl Pearson and the British Eugenists so conclusively show, and as the infant mortality reports so thoroughly substantiate, a high rate of fecundity is always associated with the direst poverty, irresponsibility, mental defect, feeble mindedness, and other transmissible taints. The effect of maternity endowments and maternity centers supported by private philanthropy would have, perhaps already have had, exactly the most dysgenic tendency. The new government program would facilitate the function of maternity among the very classes in which the absolute necessity is to discourage it.

Such benevolence is not merely superficial and near sighted. It conceals a stupid cruelty, because it is not courageous enough to face unpleasant facts. Aside from the question of the unfitness of many women to become mothers, aside from the very definite deterioration in the human stock that such programs would inevitably hasten, we may question its value even to the normal though unfortunate mother. For it is never the intention of such

philanthropy to give the poor over burdened and often undernourished mother of the slum the opportunity to make the choice herself to decide whether she wishes time after time to bring children into the world. It merely says: Increase and multiply. We are prepared to help you do this. Whereas the great majority of mothers realize the grave responsibility they face in keeping alive and rearing the children they have already brought into the world, the maternity center would teach them how to have more. The poor woman is taught how to have her seventh child when what she wants to know is how to avoid bringing into the world her eighth.

Such philanthropy as Dean Inge has so unanswerably pointed out, is kind only to be cruel and unwittingly promotes precisely the results most deprecated. It encourages the healthier and more normal sections of the world to shoulder the burden of unthinking and indiscriminate fecundity of others, which brings with it, as I think the reader must agree, a dead weight of human waste. Instead of decreasing and aiming to eliminate the stocks that are most detrimental to the future of the

race and the world, it tends to render them to a menacing degree dominant

On the other hand, the program is an indication of a suddenly awakened public recognition of the shocking conditions surrounding pregnancy maternity and infant welfare prevailing at the very heart of our boasted civilization. So terrible so unbelievable are these conditions of child bearing degraded far below the level of primitive and barbarian tribes, nay even below the plane of brutes that many high minded people confronted with such revolting and disgraceful facts lose that calmness of vision and impartiality of judgment so necessary in any serious consideration of this vital problem. Their hearts are touched they become hysterical, they demand immediate action and enthusiastically and generously they support the first superficial program that is advanced. Immediate action may sometimes be worse than no action at all. The warm heart needs the balance of the cool head. Much harm has been done in the world by those too good hearted folk who have always demanded that something be done at once

They do not stop to consider that the very first thing to be done is to subject the whole situation to the deepest and most rigorous thinking. As the late Walter Bagehot wrote in a significant but too often forgotten passage

‘The most melancholy of human reflections, perhaps, is that on the whole it is a question whether the benevolence of mankind does more good or harm. Great good, no doubt, philanthropy does; but then it also does great evil. It augments so much vice, it multiplies so much suffering, it brings to life such great populations to suffer and to be vicious, that it is open to argument whether it be or be not an evil to the world, and this is entirely because excellent people fancy they can do much by rapid action, and that they will most benefit the world when they most relieve their own feelings; that as soon as an evil is seen, something ought to be done to stay and prevent it. One may incline to hope that the balance of good over evil is in favor of benevolence; one can hardly bear to think that it is not so, but anyhow it is certain that there is a most heavy debt of evil, and that this burden might almost all have been spared us if philanthropists as

well as others had not inherited from their barbarous forefathers a wild passion for instant action

It is customary I believe, to defend philanthropy and charity upon the basis of the sanctity of human life. Yet recent events in the world reveal a curious contradiction in this respect. Human life is held sacred as a general Christian principle until war is declared when humanity indulges in a universal debauch of bloodshed and barbarism inventing poison gases and every type of diabolic suggestion to facilitate killing and starvation. Blockades are enforced to weaken and starve civilian populations—women and children. This accomplished the pendulum of mob passion swings back to the opposite extreme and the compensatory emotions express themselves in hysterical fashion. Philanthropy and charity are then unleashed. We begin to hold human life sacred again. We try to save the lives of the people we formerly sought to weaken by devastation, disease and starvation. We indulge in drives in campaigns of relief, in a general orgy of international charity.

We are thus witnessing to day the inaugu-

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ation of a vast system of international charity
As in our more limited communities and cities, where self sustaining and self reliant sections of the population are forced to shoulder the burden of the reckless and irresponsible so in the great world community the more prosperous and incidentally less populous nations are asked to relieve and succor those countries which are either the victims of the wide spread havoc of war of militaristic statesmanship or of the age long tradition of reckless propagation and its consequent over population

The people of the United States have recently been called upon to exercise their traditional generosity not merely to aid the European Relief Council in its efforts to keep alive three million five hundred thousand starving children in Central Europe but in addition to contribute to that enormous fund to save the thirty million Chinese who find themselves at the verge of starvation owing to one of those recurrent famines which strike often at that densely populated and inert country, where procreative recklessness is encouraged as a matter of duty The results of this interna-

tional charity have not justified the effort nor repaid the generosity to which it appealed. In the first place, no effort was made to prevent the recurrence of the disaster in the second place philanthropy of this type attempts to sweep back the tide of miseries created by unrestricted propagation with the feeble broom of sentiment. As one of the most observant and impartial of authorities on the Far East, J O P Bland has pointed out. So long as China maintains a birth rate that is estimated at fifty five per thousand or more, the only possible alternative to these visitations would be emigration and this would have to be on such a scale as would speedily overrun and overfill the habitable globe. Neither humanitarian schemes, international charities nor philanthropies can prevent widespread disaster to a people which habitually breeds up to and beyond the maximum limits of its food supply. Upon this point it is interesting to add Mr Frank A Vanderlip has likewise pointed out the inefficacy and misdirection of this type of international charity¹

Mr Bland further points out 'The prob

¹ Birth Control Review Vol V No 4 p 7

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lem presented is one with which neither humanitarian nor religious zeal can ever cope so long as we fail to recognize and attack the fundamental cause of these calamities. As a matter of sober fact the benevolent activities of our missionary societies to reduce the death rate by the prevention of infanticide and the checking of disease actually serve in the end to aggravate the pressure of population upon its food supply and to increase the severity of the inevitably resultant catastrophe. What is needed for the prevention, or, at least, the mitigation of these scourges, is an organized educational propaganda directed first against polygamy and the marriage of minors and the unfit and, next, toward such a limitation of the birth rate as shall approximate the standard of civilized countries. But so long as Bishops and well meaning philanthropists in England and America continue to praise and encourage the glorious fertility of the East there can be but little hope of minimizing the penalties of the ruthless struggle for existence in China, and Nature's law will therefore continue to work out its own pitiless solution, weeding out every year millions of predestined weaklings '

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This rapid survey is enough I hope, to indicate the manifold inadequacies inherent in present policies of philanthropy and charity. The most serious charge that can be brought against modern benevolence is that it encourages the perpetuation of defectives, delinquents and dependents. These are the most dangerous elements in the world community, the most devastating curse on human progress and expression. Philanthropy is a gesture characteristic of modern business lavishing upon the unfit the profits extorted from the community at large. Looked at impartially, this compensatory generosity is in its final effect probably more dangerous, more dysgenic, more blighting than the initial practice of profiteering and the social injustice which makes some too rich and others too poor.