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SHORT COMMUNICATION

IS HELPING OTHERS AN OBLIGATION?

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Abstract

Is helping others an obligation to us as citizens or as moral people? We may wonder. Am I really obligated to help that person, or do I just do it out of a sense of morality? As I'm standing by the roadside, about to cross the road, I see an elderly woman who seems to be hesitating at the curb. I decided to walk up to her and assist her in crossing the road. She smiles her brightest and walks away, thanking me. Now, as I'm on the other side of the road, I brood: What would have happened if I hadn't helped her, let her be by herself, or just crossed the road by myself? She would've hesitated while crossing the road or would have received help from another person. But what would that have made me? A twat? Aloof? Austere?

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Introduction:-

Well, from what I know as of now, an obligation we humans have is not to hurt people or harm them in any means. That's an obligation law has enforced upon us. But then, is everything that's "legal" moral? Does becoming an obedient citizen make me less of a moral person? So if law is the floor of behavior, is morality the ceiling? Does it detach me from my morals? If I were to just stick to laws and abide by them as a citizen, I could just ignore a person in woe, and that would still make me a just citizen, but at what cost? I'd rather be an unjust citizen than celebrate having done something pyrrhic, no?

Now, after I've crossed the road, I stop at a café, order a drink, and reflect on the previous situation. Just as I was pondering, I spotted an orphan. His hair, dusted with gray, fell on his malnourished shoulders as he woke up from his slumber. As a waiter from the eatery across from the café disposed of the leftovers, the boy took them to the disposal bin, salvaged some scraps for himself, and gave the rest to a stray dog by the road. As this scene took place, I was only reminded of my previous question. That poverty-stricken child wasn't obliged to offer food to the pariah dog but still chose to.

This brings to mind George H. Smith's article "Do We have a Moral Obligation to Help Other People?" He states that helping someone in need or protecting them by any means isn't an obligation but a choice, and that choosing not to help someone doesn't necessarily make you a bad person. He continues that just because a deed or a gesture is good, it doesn't become a "duty." Furthermore, the only way a deed or a gesture becomes an obligation is when you have strings such as promises, contracts, or agreements attached. Lastly, he states that if he ever helps someone, he would only do it out of benevolence and not because he is obliged to.

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But then if we as a society strip away all obligations placed on us except those to which we have attached strings, would we lose the very thing that made us a community? A community isn't one that's built on contracts or agreements but on expectations. If I had helped the woman to feel good about myself, that'd be only out of pure gratification. However, if I had helped her because that's what is done where I live, that would be culture. Without unspoken gestures, mannerisms, and duties, we become nothing less than strangers, and that's what brings us farther from being a community.



As for obligations, they aren't always a weight that brings us down, but something that brings us together. If I didn't owe you a thing or if you didn't owe me a thing, we wouldn't care for each other. A contract is a written statement, but a community is a commitment that we as citizens make. When we reduce our morals to what's legally enforced upon us, we turn our society into a place where acts of kindness need to have a reason or an obligation to them.

As I watched that boy share his scraps with the dog, it hit me that the boy didn't have to read George H. Smith to know that kindness doesn't require obligations. If we were to wait for an obligation to be put upon us to show kindness, we would have lost the very thing that made us humans.

If we were to follow Smith's logic end to end, we would end up with a society of "just citizens," each perfectly free and profoundly alone. If being a just citizen means sitting idly while a person struggles just because no obligation was imposed, then I'd rather be an unjust citizen. I'd rather be a twat in the eyes of the law than a stranger to my own race. I'd rather hit my head on the ceiling than stare at the floor for my entire life. A society that forces people to be 'kind' isn't a moral society; it's a compliant one.