

Charity and beneficence as pillars of the community

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Abstract

The human community enables the flourishing of all its members. “No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members is poor and miserable”, Adam Smith famously wrote. However, not all human beings are able to adequately provide for their needs themselves. Thus, redistribution is required to provide all members with a satisfactory standard of living.

The modern capitalist economy has organized redistribution through the welfare state. However, the welfare state is under pressure from population ageing in all of the Western world. Birth rates are falling, and a growing part of the population is aged and unable to actively contribute to the economy. Moreover, parts of the working population are not participating in the welfare system, such as migrant labourers and a growing number of self-employed. For those who require its assistance, both size and eligibility of the benefits are reduced. In general, the welfare state is retracting, and it is expected that this retraction will continue.

This retraction does not imply the absence of the need for redistribution. Rather, it puts the responsibility for redistribution from the state back to different, communal forms of society. The presence of the welfare state has however eroded other forms of communal redistribution and assistance. It can therefore be useful to look back to other forms of redistribution, antedating the build-up of the welfare state. Among these, charity and beneficence are promising candidates as traditional modes of redistribution. Older theologians have extensively commented on these modes of redistribution.

An interesting case is the Dutch Reformed minister Godefridus Udemans (1581-1649), who wrote extensively on economic ethics. He dedicated three works to seafaring and trade and was strongly engaged with the contemporary economy. Udemans lived in the Dutch Republic during its Golden Age, as it was at a peak of its wealth – but many people were still poor. Redistribution took place through state, church and in the community.

Udemans emphasizes the need for communal redistribution as a personal responsibility of every merchant and Christian. He argues that the virtues of piety, justice and temperance are required in the economic sphere. Justice regards the relationship to one's neighbour, and a large part of it consists of redistributing one's

superfluous wealth. Udemans distinguishes between beneficence and charity. Beneficence concerns reciprocal relationships, and is to be exercised towards those people and organizations who have helped someone in the past. These are the commonwealth, one's parents, one's teachers, one's servants, and so on. Charity, on the other hand, extends to the needy and the weak, without the expectation of reward. Charity also requires the protection of the weak, who cannot defend themselves against the encroachment of others on their rights. These forms of redistribution have priority to government support, Udemans argues.

On the topic of redistribution, economics and theology may provide a complementary perspective. On the one hand, economists can take the lead in analysing the effectiveness and efficiency of the different forms of redistribution. On the other hand, theologians can contribute in the moral considerations regarding the size and scope of redistribution. Together, they can provide a comprehensive analysis on the topic of redistribution.

Key bibliographic sources

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