

# AGAINST SHARING EQUALLY

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE by Sarah Lawrence

TCS (Taking Children Seriously) is a libertarian educational philosophy. Its most distinctive feature is the idea that it is possible and desirable to bring up children entirely without doing things to them against their will, or making them do things against their will, and that they are entitled to the same rights, respect and control over their lives as adults. TCS is part of the rationalist tradition, holding that it is possible for human beings, through conjecture, reason and criticism, to come to know (tentatively) and understand truths about the world. It is part of the fallibilist tradition, holding that human beings make mistakes, and that this has important implications for parenting and education. It highlights the importance of consent in human relationships, and explains how coercion impairs creativity, which is the ability to think, learn and solve problems in the widest sense. TCS represents a profound criticism of prevailing theories of education and parenting, and provides a positive alternative. We publish a journal, *Taking Children Seriously*, and operate internet lists associated with these ideas. For further information, see our web site at [www.TCS.ac](http://www.TCS.ac) or write to [info@TCS.ac](mailto:info@TCS.ac) or TCS, 46 Latimer Grange, Latimer Road, Oxford OX3 7PH, UK, or telephone 01865 761817 (UK) or 416 947 6351 (USA).

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If you had the choice between spending fifty pounds on a new piece of software for a bright happy child of yours who owns three computers and lots of toys, and who is bubbling with ideas and wishes, *or* spending the same amount on saving the lives of ten Ethiopian orphans of the same age but whose lives are bleak, full of suffering and devoid of creativity, which would you do?

Any suggestion that the former option is the right thing to do, shocks and disgusts many people. They are disturbed to learn

that TCS opposes 'sharing equally' and 'fairness', both within families and even more so in the world at large. They are appalled by the idea that we believe in *unequal* sharing, even when that means letting other people starve. They think that the right thing to do is to share equally with those in need: I am my brother's keeper.

Yet every minute of every day they themselves fail to do what they advocate. They opt not to sell their possessions and distribute the money equally among the world's starving. They opt instead to buy consumer goods for themselves and their own families. Why? Why is it that so many people do what they believe is the *wrong* thing every day? If they want to share, why don't they? Is it because they are bad?

## ADVOCATING SHARING BUT ACTING OTHERWISE

Some say they believe in sharing a *proportion* of their resources with those in need; but if needs confer rights, and fairness and equality are the applicable moral criteria, as they contend, then why do they not share *all* their resources? What *exactly* is the moral theory governing their behaviour?

Could it be that the right thing to do is simply to *advocate* sharing and equality, but to act otherwise? That appears to be the morality that most people are in practice following. People who really do think that needs confer rights end up going to Calcutta or Ethiopia or wherever to live on the same income as the people there. That lifestyle is open to anyone who wants to adopt it. Most people don't.

But it isn't actually *right* anyway. Our critics are *right* not to do it. The morality they are advocating is a self-sacrificing one — a coercive one. (In TCS usage, a person is under coercion if they are enacting one idea or impulse while a contrary one is still active in their mind — in other words, if they are literally acting against their own will. Being in such a state of mind is psychologically harmful.) While one could have particular knowledge in particular cases that would make things different, in general more good comes of making a happy person even happier than of making an unhappy person happy.

In the film *City of Joy* an American and an Irishwoman go to Calcutta to live among the abject poor, and nevertheless find joy. The ethos such individuals are following is not necessarily self-sacrificing, but I think it is still wrong in most cases, because sharing equally is just a mechanical criterion, so it is most unlikely to result in the optimum distribution of goods — optimum morally, or economically, or optimum by any other criterion that might be taken to be important, apart from equality itself (but note that the state of mind of Westerners choosing to live in the Calcutta slums is by no means equal to that of the people who are born there. It is much easier to see how a Western misfit could find happiness living there voluntarily than the people themselves who have no choice.)

A better position to take if one were that kind of person would be to swap places with someone in Calcutta, to give them one's own lifestyle and to take up theirs. That would at least take some account of the supposed beneficiary's ideas as a human being rather than just of his medical state or whatever.

That kind of sharing is not *inherently* self-sacrificing, but the kind of sharing which says it is moral to *say* that the money should be given to Ethiopian orphans, but in fact to spend it on consumer goods, *is* inherently self-sacrificing, because the only content of that theory is to make one guilty about one's lifestyle, and that guilt won't go away. It is not helping anybody. It is *only* doing harm. It is not subject to any criticism, for if you hold such a theory, there is no way you can find out that you were mistaken. If you spend your money in ways that you expect to make you happy, and then it doesn't, then you have learnt something. But if you spend your money in ways that you expect to make you miserable and guilty, and it does, then you have learnt nothing. Given the lack of openness to criticism, there is no reason why people with this point of view should not go on amassing money and possessions — and un-

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happiness and guilt — for the rest of their lives, which is of course what many do.

Those who think that one should give only *part* of one's wealth to Ethiopian orphans either believe, as I do, that inequality is justified, or they are acting against their own values. For they must have a theory for determining what proportion to give and to whom, and such theories can only be discriminatory. I agree that one should give a proportion of one's wealth to other people, but the question is, *what* other people? On what criterion? There is no avoiding making moral judgements about how much it is best to give and to whom. Why orphans? Why not the dying? Or the disabled? Or scientific research? Or impoverished artists? Or one's own children?

### MRS KEEPER AND DR DOGOOD

Suppose Mrs Keeper decides to give a starving orphan ten per cent of her income, in order to get him out of poverty. Why him? Why ten per cent? After the orphan has attained what degree of nutrition will she stop giving him money and start giving it to someone else? Will she play cat and mouse with him? Will she give him money until he is in a better situation and then give it to another orphan until the first one is back to starving again? When making these decisions, does Mrs Keeper use moral criteria or dice or what?

A decision about giving something to someone is just one of many classes of decision in life. Sometimes it is the right thing to do to give something to someone. But there is no *formula* for what is right. We have ethical theories, including theories about obligations and the nature of relationships and the nature of the human condition, which tell us who deserves to receive what when, and sometimes we find that these ideas conflict with one another, so we have to think about what would be a consistent resolution of the problem.

Mrs Keeper's idea of poverty for the orphan is very different from her idea of poverty for herself. Rather than treating him as a human being, she is just using the orphan as a token in her game of talking about giving and sharing. Her action has nothing to do with sharing. She is enacting a highly developed self-sacrificing theory that is very much tied in with our culture and the way that that culture has impinged upon her personally. Like most people in our culture, as a child, Mrs Keeper was made to feel guilty about Christian morality, 'fairness', 'sharing', 'equality', and all those other terrible things. In our society, this guilt has been channelled into a stereotyped double-think behaviour where one advocates one thing and does another. So Mrs Keeper spends ninety per cent of her income on things that she feels guilty about, and only ten per cent on things she doesn't feel guilty about. Those ten per cent can't make up for the ninety per cent. If Mrs Keeper thinks one should share one's resources, why doesn't she apply the same theory to her remaining resources? After all, they still amount to more than the overwhelming majority of people in the world have.

Mrs Keeper says that she believes that if someone needs something, the right thing to do is to give it to him. But deep down she must know that this is wrong, otherwise she would do it. She is in an irrational state in which she feels compelled to say one thing and do the opposite. And what is much worse, she is passing this guilt-ridden conflict on to her children.

In contrast, Dr Dogood is genuinely happy and conflict-free about his life in the slums of Calcutta. His thought processes are different from those of someone who is simply following a mechanical rule. When asked, he doesn't say, for instance, that the reason he is giving the slum-dwellers his money is that they *need* it — because then the question would be: well there are people in Africa who are much worse off than Calcutta slum people, so why don't you give your money to them instead? He says: "This is a wonderful community, and there are some great people here, and here is somewhere I can really feel I am making a difference to people's lives in a way I never could in LA." Moreover he has relationships with particular individuals in Cal-

cutta, and he helps those people much more than others. All those things are signs of acting rationally.

### SHARING CAUSES POVERTY

Human progress is caused by creative thought, which is in short supply at the moment. Suppose there are a million people in the world who are going to be responsible for most of the progress in the next decade. What happens to them is important for the future of the world. These are the individuals who were going to discover the cures for diseases (including diseases of Ethiopian orphans), the new philosophies, new theories in pure science — things which would make people's lives better in the future. Suppose, in accordance with the 'sharing' theory, you were to sabotage those people's lives by reducing them to the standard of living of the average person throughout the world. Suppose you were to say to the young medical researcher: "Er, sorry, but you can't do your expensive experiment because we need the money for starving Ethiopians. We must all make sacrifices to save lives." Suppose you were to take away the books and the toys and the television that would lead a child into thinking about ideas that would eventually bear fruit in a new and better philosophy. Suppose you were to take the particle accelerator away from the physicist and sell it to provide food for starving Ethiopians. And suppose you were to spend all the money that you gained that way on making hundreds of millions of people less hungry. Then the world at the end of that operation would be objectively a much worse place. And if you kept doing that, the world would be destroyed. This sharing theory is a *cause* of poverty and starvation and misery, not a cure for them.

It is not our wealth that the poor people of the world are primarily in need of: it is our morality — our real morality, that is, not the fake one we are taught to spout. Suppose your child could grow up to persuade third world governments that free markets are more efficient, so that those governments would stop starving their people. Should *that* child's creativity be sabotaged by your well-meaning theory that the best thing to do is to share your resources equally with those in need?

### THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS ...

It is not an accident that left-wing ('I am my brother's keeper') economics produces starvation. Those who hold the theory *need* the starving. The starving play a vital role in their fake morality. This morality actually starves people by feeding them only on condition that they are starving, and by feeding them by methods which, through political repression and control of the economy, prevent the growth of the knowledge that could feed people. Many charities give money to governments which use it to keep their existing central-planning regimes in power. These regimes cause starvation by disrupting the economy, and they do that because they want transactions in the economy to follow this very theory I am talking about — the theory of equality and sharing.

If you really want to make the world a better place, think about the *cause* of mass starvation and solve *that* problem. Remember that *every* solution to a problem, including the problem of mass starvation, is arrived at through creativity and reason, and that coercion (which is the state a person is in when he is enacting one theory while still retaining an active competing theory, as in believing that the right thing to do would be to share but then not in fact doing so) is inimical to solving problems. Think about what that means. Think about what it means to put children in this guilt-ridden state of mind. Think about this 'sharing' theory in the light of how actually enacting it would affect creativity. Think about the fact that the knowledge that one has in any human relationship enormously amplifies one's opportunities to help people, and that acting on that knowledge requires one to help some people overwhelmingly more than others.

And if you are a parent don't, through a misguided theory of 'sharing and equality' sabotage the lives of the very children who might otherwise grow up to solve major problems in the world and thus really do some good, the children whose happiness you are after all genuinely and primarily responsible for.