

Generosity

excerpted from André Comte-Sponville, (trans. Catherine Temerson), *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, (London: William Heinemann, 2001)

Generosity is the virtue of giving. But unlike justice, which requires that we give "to every man his due," generosity entails giving the other person what is not his, but yours, which he lacks. . . . Certainly both justice and generosity concern our relations with others . . . Generosity seems to owe more to the heart or temperament, justice to the mind or reason. Generosity does not mean acting in accordance with this or that law; it means doing more than what the law requires – at least what the laws of man require – and acting in conformity with the sole requirements of love, morality, or solidarity.

To be in solidarity is to be part of a group that is in *solido*, in Latin, for the whole. Hence, in the French legal code, debtors are said to be *solidaire* when they are jointly liable for the debt. . . . solidarity is first of all the fact of cohesion, interdependence, a community of interests or a collective destiny. . .

One can't have it both ways: either the community is a genuine community that actually exists, such that in defending others, I am merely defending myself (there is certainly nothing blameworthy here, but such actions are too self-interested to be morally motivated), or else the community is illusory, abstract, or ideal, so that my fighting for others is no longer a question of solidarity (since my personal interests are not at stake) but one of justice or generosity (justice if others are being oppressed, wronged, or despoiled; generosity if they are not, but are simply weak or unhappy). In other words, solidarity is either too selfish or too illusory to be a virtue. It is either self-interest well understood or too generosity misconstrued.

Solidarity can be truly generous only if it goes beyond self-interest, even acknowledged self-interest, mutual self-interest – in other words, only if it goes beyond solidarity. If it is in our interest to help others, then we would not need to be generous, we would just do it. The fact that we do not do so, or do so in such small measure, proves that we really don't regard such actions as being in our interest and are hypocrites in pretending otherwise; it's not that we have bad eyesight or lack lucidity. We have bad hearts, for our hearts are selfish; it's generosity, much more than lucidity, that we lack.

What percentage of your income do you devote to helping those who are poorer or less fortunate than you? Don't count taxes, since they are mandatory, and leave out what you give to family and very close friends, since love alone, much more than generosity, accounts for what we do for them (which at the same time we do for ourselves, their happiness being our happiness). And can we know whether the little we do give comes from generosity or whether it merely represents the small price we pay for moral comfort, to sooth our pathetic good conscience?

As Jankélévitch wrote, "For though we can give without loving, it is almost impossible to love without giving." But is it love, then or generosity? Yet the idea that we feel generous to our children has never occurred to me. We have a duty to be generous toward them. We love our children too much, we worry about them too much; it would be deluding ourselves to see virtue here. Whatever we do for them we do for our selves as well. Why would we need virtue? Love is sufficient, and what love! As for the other kind of love, the kind that is free from the self, the love of saints or the blessed, I am not certain that generosity can tell us much about it or that it can tell us much about generosity.

Generosity, as I said, is the virtue of giving – giving money (whereby it touches on liberality) or giving of oneself (whereby it touches on magnanimity or even sacrifice).

Per Descartes: Generosity is both the awareness of one's own freedom (or of oneself as free and responsible) and the firm resolution to make good use of that freedom. Consciousness and confidence, therefore: conscience of being free and confidence in making use of this freedom. That is why generosity is productive of self-esteem. Descartes sees in generosity not only the source of all virtue but also the "supreme good for each individual," which consists, he says, "in a firm will to do well and the contentment that this produces."

True friends, Montaigne, notes, "cannot lend or give anything to each other,"... "everything being in fact common as between them."

In its own way, generosity, like most other virtues, obeys the biblical commandment. But can we really love our neighbor as ourselves? If we could, what would be the point of generosity? As what good is it to make love a commandment if we are incapable of following it? Only actions can be commanded; therefore, the commandment requires not that we love, but that we act as though we loved – that we do unto our neighbor as we would unto or loved ones, and unto strangers as we would unto ourselves. The commandment prescribes not feeling or emotions, which are not transferable, but actions, which are.

All the world's a stage, and living means acting. But the roles and the players in this human comedy are not all equally good. Shakespearean wisdom: morality might well be a question of performance, but there is no good play that is not in some sense a morality play. Is anything more serious or more real than laughing or crying? We pretend, but it's not a game: the rules we follow are not there for our amusement; they make us what we are, for better or for worse. We each play a role, but that role is uniquely our own. And in truth, it is more than a role, it is our life, our history. There's nothing arbitrary or accidental in all this. We come to be who we are through our life experience.

Generosity invites us to give in the absence of love to the very people we do not love and to give them more the more they need it or the better equipped we are to help them. Indeed when love cannot guide us because we do not feel it, let us be guided by urgency and proximity. Some call this charity, mistakenly (since true charity is love and false charity condescension or pity). It should be called generosity, because it depends on us, solely on us, because in this sense it is free, because it is – in opposition to the bondage of instincts, possessions, and fears – freedom itself, in spirit and deed. Love would be better, of course, which is why morality isn't everything or even the essential thing. But generosity is still better than selfishness and morality better than apathy.

Personal advantage is not about being more comfortable or living longer; it is about living as freely as we can, as authentically as we can. To live forever is not the point, since we cannot; **the point is to live well. And how can we without courage or generosity?**

According to Hume, if generosity were absolute and universal, we would have no need of justice; and as we have seen, such a state of affairs is indeed conceivable in the abstract. On the other hand, it is clear that justice, even when it is accomplished, cannot exempt us from **generosity, which, though less necessary to society than justice, is more precious**, it seems to me, to our humanity.

I conclude by observing that generosity, like all the other virtues, is multiple both in its content and in the names that we call it or that serve to describe it. Combined with courage, it turns out to be heroism. Joined by justice, it becomes equity. Coupled with compassion, it becomes benevolence. In league with mercy, it becomes leniency. But its most beautiful name is its secret, an open secret that everyone knows: accompanied by gentleness, it is called **kindness**.