

Enlightened Altruism

by *Richard W. Fulmer*

Libertarians are awfully irritating. They keep talking about “enlightened self-interest,” which is, both literally and figuratively, a self-centered phrase. Why don’t they talk about “enlightened altruism,” that is, doing the most good for the most people?

After all, there’s a lot of need in the world. People need food, clothing, shelter, medicine—all the necessities of life. Why aren’t libertarians talking about supplying those things to others instead of concentrating on themselves? Just take clothing, for instance. Why don’t they talk about providing clothes to the poor rather than trying to profit from others’ need to protect themselves from the elements?

I mean, I could give all my clothes away; that would help people. Well, okay, that wouldn’t be very enlightened since if I didn’t have any clothes, I couldn’t go to work. No big deal, I’ll just keep a few clothes for myself.

Well, if I gave only my clothes away, that would help only those people who are about my size and shape. And I don’t really have that many clothes to begin with, so I couldn’t help too many. Okay then, I could work to buy clothes of all shapes and sizes and give them away. Of course, I wouldn’t really know how much of which type of clothes

people need most. Also, I’d be buying clothes from profit-making companies, which would mean that I’d be paying too much for them. If I could get them cheaper, I could purchase more and help even more people.

I know! I’ll make the clothes myself, and sell them at no profit. I’ll just sell them for what it costs me to make them. Well, of course if I spend all my time making clothes, I’ll have to quit my regular job. How am I going to feed, clothe, and shelter myself while I do all this good work? I’ll have to sell the clothes for enough to live on. But that can’t be very much, can it?

Let’s see, I could get a cheap apartment for three hundred a month. Then there’s food—probably another two hundred per month. Phone and utilities—maybe another hundred or so. Then I’d need a vehicle so that I can go and buy materials, deliver the clothes that I make, and all that. That’s another two hundred a month in car payments. Need to add another hundred for car insurance. Finally, I’d have to buy a sewing machine, of course, and all the materials.

Wait a minute, zoning laws wouldn’t allow me to run a business out of my apartment. Darn it! Maybe the libertarians are on to something when they oppose zoning laws. Okay, no problem; I can rent some cheap office/warehouse space for another three hundred a month. And throw in another hundred for utilities at the shop. Let’s see, all that comes to about \$1,500 a month.

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I wonder how many clothes I can make in a day. Well, if I decided to make blue jeans, then maybe a pair a day. I'd have to sell them for \$50 a pair just to break even, and that's only if I worked every day of the month. Of course, I'd have to pay taxes too, so they'd probably cost more like \$60 or even \$70 a pair. That's more than even those money-grubbing factories charge for their jeans!

Factories. Hmm. Why not? I could build a factory. Then I could make my blue jeans very cheaply. And I could make lots of them, and help even more people. Not only that, but I'd be creating jobs at the same time. Great idea!

Let's see. I'll need to borrow a lot of money to build the factory—probably millions of dollars. I suppose I could get it from a bank, but then I'd have to pay all that interest. Not only that, but I'd be paying the interest to a big financial institution. Worse, they could sell my loan to some multinational corporation, and those guys are really evil, right? That's no good. Hey, what if I sold stock in the factory? That'd be good. Of course, I'd probably have to give the stockholders some sort of return on their investment, otherwise they wouldn't lend me the money. Okay, I could do that.

Paying Wages

You know, I just thought of something. I'd have to pay the workers in my factory enough for them to live on. If I built the factory here in the States, that means that they'd have to get at least \$20,000 a year. Actually, I'd want to pay them more than the national average, which is about \$29,000 a year. After all, I don't want to exploit anyone. Of course, Social Security, workers' compensation, health insurance, and all that stuff would probably make my cost per worker almost \$40,000 a year.

That's really going to drive up the price of my jeans, which means that fewer poor people will be able to afford them. I could build the factory somewhere overseas where the cost of living is a lot lower. That way, my jeans would be really affordable.

Wait a minute, this is crazy! I'd be acting just like one of those evil, multinational, profit-making corporations if I did all that! How can that be? I'd start out trying to do the most good for the most people—you know, enlightened altruism—and I'd end up acting just like someone would if they were only self-interested. That can't be right, can it?

Well, my motives would be different from theirs. That's important. I'd be acting out of concern for others, while they'd be acting out of concern for themselves. And they'd be competing with me, who only wants to do good, and nobody could tell the difference between us. There ought to be a law that only people with the right motives should be allowed to do business.

Well, that's no good. I mean, if people who want to make a profit act in the same way as someone who only wants to help others, then how would the police tell which is which? Also, you'd have to use force to keep people with the wrong motives from starting a business, and that's wrong.

Anyway, even if their motives aren't as pure as mine, they're still making clothes that people need, aren't they? Helping people is good. Isn't helping people still good if you do it for the wrong reasons? I guess so. Demanding that people all act out of the same motives as mine is pretty self-centered anyway, and that's what I've been complaining about all this time.

Funny, though. How could someone acting out of enlightened altruism end up doing the same things as someone acting out of enlightened self-interest? I think I'd better think this out again. □