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HOW NOT TO TREAT OLD PEOPLE

In almost all societies, some people have been moved to observe how strange it is that we have so little interest in the plight of older people; for since most of us will eventually be old, cold prudence itself dictates that we should set a good example for the young by showing concern for the elderly. Lately there has been a revival of interest in the problems of old people, and social policy has reflected this increased concern. But while recent social policy concerning the elderly has grown out of our compassion, shame, and heightened sensitivity, much of it has been immoral and has only made things worse for old people and young people alike. Let us see why.

1. *Reverse Discrimination against the Young.* Consider this simple example of recent social policy concerning old people: in many North American cities, including the small Canadian city in which I live, people who reach a certain age — usually sixty or sixty-five — are permitted to use public transportation at a reduced cost. A “senior citizen” in my city pays less to ride on our buses than a student who must use the buses to get to school. There are, of course, more impressive examples of this sort; for example, last year, residents of Canada who were born in 1910 or earlier were entitled to a personal tax exemption of \$1,174. But if we reflect on the case of the reduced bus fare, we can see the main weakness of most of our recent social policy concerning the elderly. For one thing, it involves “reverse discrimination” against the young. There are many thirty and forty-year-old people in my city who are poor, unemployed, handicapped, etc. and yet are required to pay the regular bus fare. On the other hand, many of the seventy-year-old people in this city are wealthy and can easily afford the regular bus fare. What, then, is the rationale behind the social policy in question here? One argument is that older people, being retired, tend to have lower incomes than people in their thirties and forties. Moreover, they have fixed incomes; adjustments in pensions rarely compensate for increases in the cost of living. But if this is the rationale for the reduced bus fare, then wealthy “senior citizens” should not be permitted to ride at the reduced fare, and poor, young and middle-aged people should not have to pay the regular fare. For it is not *age* which is the relevant

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criterion here but *ability to pay*. A sound welfare program is one which takes from the comfortable to give to the needy, not vice versa. When a program takes from the needy to give to the comfortable, it is unsound.

The proposition that older people have, as a general rule, less money than young people is a contingent one, not an *a priori* one. I suspect that in many communities — in, say, Florida or California — older people tend to be fairly affluent. But even in those communities where older people tend to be less wealthy than thirty and forty-year-olds, they do not usually constitute the poorest minority group. In Canada, for example, Canadian Indians and immigrants from Pakistan have a lower average income than people past the age of sixty-five. In my city, Italian-speaking people tend to have significantly lower incomes than Anglo-Saxons. But Canadian Indians, immigrants from Pakistan, and people who speak Italian in the home must all pay the regular bus fare, even if they have six children, have a terminal illness, and are unemployed. So defenders of the social policy in question must give us more than just an economic argument. And they can. They can point out that people in all ethnic groups get old, and so Canadian Indians will eventually benefit from the policy. There seems to be an element of “equality” involved here, but the appearance is a deceptive one. First, affluent people tend to live longer than poor people. Secondly, the Indians and immigrants from Pakistan need the money now, when they have young children to support, more than they will ever need it. Of course, politicians in our society have considerable difficulty in selling citizens on the idea of expensive welfare programs. By supporting reduced bus fares for old people while cutting back more important welfare programs, they are guilty of a deplorable “tokenism” which is rooted partly in a concern for what is politically expedient.

In the last analysis, however, the policy we have been considering is rooted more in emotions than in reasons. Most of us are worried about what will happen to us when we are old, even though we usually try to repress these worries. Many of us also feel guilty about the way in which we treated our parents and grandparents and senior colleagues. Our anxieties and guilt-feelings are to some extent mitigated by our acceptance of policies like the one we have been considering. Unfortunately, such policies often tend to degrade old people rather than to indicate to them that we have a healthy respect for them.

2. *The Other Side of the Coin.* Consider now the following case, one which seems to be the opposite case but is actually a similar one. In our society, people in their sixties are usually forced to retire. They are

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forced to retire not because of a decline in their competence but because of their age. What is the rationale behind this kind of policy? One argument that we hear is that old people tend to be less competent than younger ones. But if it is competence that is at stake here, why force out older people in those cases where they are more competent than the younger ones who are retained? Another argument we hear is that old people must give up their jobs to make way for younger people who are raising families and need the money more than elderly people. There are several reasons why this argument is unsatisfactory. One is that, as we have already seen, old people are not necessarily all that affluent and may well need the money (at least in some cases). A second is that from a utilitarian point of view, *competence* may, at least at times, outweigh *need* in importance. We cannot always afford to allow talented people to vegetate while second-rate people attempt to do their jobs. A third is that there are ways of coping with rising unemployment which do not require us to discriminate against people on the basis of age. For example, young people can be encouraged to spend more time in university, and the work-week can be shortened to twenty-five or thirty hours.

This case seems to be the opposite of the first one we considered, but it is really only the other side of the same coin, and the proper policy here is not to flip the coin but to dispose of it. Jobs should be awarded primarily on the basis of ability to perform, not age; bus fares should be based primarily on the ability to pay, not age. In both cases, decisions are being based on considerations of age when other categories are more relevant. The first case seems to reflect respect for the aged while the second reflects disrespect; but actually both reflect a disrespect for the aged. In both cases we refuse to look at all of the qualities of old people. We see their age as being a factor so important that it outweighs all other factors — from relative affluence to relative competence. And so in both cases there is an unhealthy kind of discrimination. Certainly old people tend to have certain qualities; they usually cannot run as fast, see as well, etc. But how relevant are these qualities to bus fares, tax obligations, and university lectures? Moreover, it is surely fallacious to infer from the fact that old people *tend* to have certain weaknesses that *all* old people have those weaknesses and to the same degree.

3. *The Proper Social Policy.* Enlightened people have recognized that almost all of the atrocities that have been perpetrated on the elderly have stemmed from a refusal to look beyond their age to their more important qualities. Most of us can see the cruelty of forcing them out of jobs which they are still capable of performing well; and we have also taken a closer look at nursing homes and other facilities for the elderly.

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Unfortunately, in trying to correct abuses in this area, we have acted on the basis of the very principle which has led us to mistreat old people in the first place. Rather than treating old people as our equals, we have degraded them by dispensing "charity" in the form of reduced bus fares and tax privileges — even when they neither need nor ask for such gifts. When an old person is sick or blind or senile, he requires special care; but he requires that care because he is sick or blind or senile, *not because he is old*. The same care should be made available to young people or middle-aged people who are sick or blind or mentally disturbed.

Most of our so-called "liberal" social policy concerning old people has not been based on this principle. Consequently, we have harmed needy young and middle-aged people by forcing them to support welfare programs which do not substantially benefit the elderly people that they are supposed to benefit. Such social policy can and occasionally does promote hostility to and resentment of the elderly. It harms old people by making it harder for them to assert themselves as creative, productive individuals. Now, it is also worth observing here that a similar kind of unwarranted discrimination harms those at the other end of the age-scale. For many twelve-year-olds are as capable of, say, voting intelligently, as many thirty or forty-year-olds. When they are not so capable, it is not simply because of their age but because of *specific* limitations, e.g., inability to comprehend certain issues. When we reflect on both kinds of unwarranted discrimination, we are forced to conclude that age, *in itself*, should not be regarded as a major factor in the construction of social policy.

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