

Money and Control

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“I never give money to those people,” she said. “They’re only going to spend it on drugs, anyway.” And what’s so wrong with that?, I wondered. I can see why one might want to discourage Harvard students from spending all their time getting stoned (although, I have to say, I don’t see anyone doing that), but if your life is spent sitting outside, hungry, cold, and miserable, drugs seem like a pretty decent use of the money.

But, more importantly, since when is that your call to make? That you live in a nice house with a bulging wallet and he lives on the street is due to an enormous number of random factors that could just as easily have been reversed. And even if you’re arrogant enough to believe you’re a better person in some way — smarter, harder-working, more ambitious — since when does being better give you the right to tell other people how to live their lives? Is Tiger Woods allowed to just come along and take the chocolate out of *your* shopping cart at the supermarket?

It is a sad fact of reality that you have money and he has none and that, as a result, he needs the money to buy material goods. But no *moral* consequences can be derived from this. Just because history has given you the *power* to choose whether this person can acquire certain material goods doesn’t give you the *right* to make that call.

Now it’s true, you don’t have to give him money at all. Most don’t. But if you feel that other people deserve to live a life without privation, at least let them choose how to live that life.

Perhaps an example closer to home will help. Remember when your father offered to help you buy a house if only you went back to school? That was the same thing — trying to use the fact that he had money and you didn’t in order to get you to do what he wanted. For years, he’d been trying to get you to go back to school; and you didn’t, because it was your decision and you didn’t want to. But then he realized he could use the money to control you. Remember how that chafed?

At the time you brushed it off as “his money, his call”. But don’t you see how that’s not true? Whether you go to school or not was never his call. And while it’s certainly within his rights to help you buy a house, using that to try to and control you was wrong. You deserve to make your own choices about your life — we all do.

Including that man there.