

1973-03-20 [INHERITANCE, General] Inheritance Overview.

Of death taxes in older times it seems to be most often true that the state is simply trying to raise revenue, and regards family wealth as a domain upon which it can poach as a case of *dira st dura necessitas*. Sometimes, perhaps, Of the wealthier are hit the hardest, it is a public form of *noblesse oblige* which the wealthy have always adopted as a form of private honor in their charitable actions. But both these cases assume the notion that wealth is basically familial, and that the principle of private succession to wealth is "natural." This being true, there is a constant effort--and a morally justifiable one in terms of the "natural law" ideal that reigns--for the private sector to resist when the case cannot be justified, and since the resisters are the most powerful ones in society and the ones most able to direct state policy, the thrust towards taxing family wealth is regularly beaten back. So, its history is one of tentatives.

To make it effective, the basic notion of what wealth is must be changed so that the individual (and so the family) recognizes his wealth as something lent him from society for a period of time, in general not to surpass his own life span, to enrich his own life and to have some say about how that wealth may be distributed when it returns to society from him. (i) He has only a very well defined and limited say about how it may go to his family and relatives; essentially, he may dedicate sums to permit his kin ways of self-development such as education beyond what the state guarantees to everyone in this regard (and exempting the state totally, thereby, from obligation to the individuals so favored) He has much greater freedom in endowing agencies of public good at large, such as medical, a educational, and cultural institutions--provided always that his kin are in no way directly profited by this. Beyond this, his wealth must inevitably return to the fisc at large, so that the state may carry on its primary function of caring for the lower echelons of society and seeing to the equal opportunity of the young.

In such a changed philosophy of the nature of wealth, the elders will lack the power to give exceptional material privilege to the young and correspondingly lack the power to coerce the young by threats of disinheritance for disobedience. Those older bonds of the family wherein it was the basic unit of society in a materialistic fashion (for the upper echelons, at least), will certainly be broken. What will remain between generations are the moral and intellectual values inculcated in the young. The poor now have only this, for in material terms they can only have shame for their inability to provide an inheritance; this shame will disappear when no one can provide a material inheritance. The rich will release much control of their young when the material link is severed, and perhaps the loss of authority will mean loss of ability to inculcate values. But, first, think of how the poor do inculcate values without having material inheritance to promise; and, second, think of how invidious the result must be, if the material carrot is necessary to induce adherence to values, in terms of class perpetuation over time.

It is better to think of the problem from the point of view of the young. Should any emerging adult want to wish that he had great expectations and not have to do anything all his life except wallow in luxury? Do we allow now that any poor-born emerging adult should have such an attitude? Clearly not, for he would be castigated as envious. Why then should the rich-born young not be automatically deprived of great expectations? Is not their clamor to have the wealth of their parents as basely envious as that of the poor-born young who might wish they were in their position? Only some notion of the natural right of inheritance of wealth can deny this. So, from the point of view of the young, who have done nothing to decide the wealth or poverty of the parents, any inheritance is a gratuitous matter and to expect and demand such wealth is as much a form of envy among the rich-born as the poor-born.

The argument over right is different from the point of view of the parents, however. Assuming for the moment no difference between the parent rich by inheritance and the parent rich by self accomplishment, but that each has rightly a sense of what is his and of which he should have a personal right to dispose; there the young are envious only if they do not accept without question what they do receive. The rich-born young are thereby not envious because of their parents' sense of private right to dispose of their wealth, and the poor-born are expected to act the same because their parents did not have the ability to transmit wealth to them. The rich-born have no reason to be envious, the poor-born have no right to be so. So, from the point of view of the parents' right to dispose of their wealth as they see fit, social mores dictate entirely different sets of life values for the young: the rich-born ones are exempted from even sensing envy; the poor-born ones, who surely must sense envy, are expected to repress it entirely.

So if from the point of view of the young we should deny that any of them should feel envy, we do in fact, under a system which allows a vast differential in expectations of inheritance, say that some will never know such a feeling inside themselves while others must know it but suppress it. This is perhaps the most invidious aspect of inheritance of wealth: it predetermines some to be free of the very feeling of envy and others to be consumed by it (and so condemned by society) or to have to live with it suppressed all their lives. What different kinds of adults those young must be, according to their place at the poles of this distribution (or where in between)! No wonder the rich-born are the more generous, the poor-born the more selfish, in their attitudes towards the rest of the world! The one who never senses envy can be open and when he wishes for general betterment of society be deemed an altruist for he has nothing to gain personally; the one who must sense it but also repress it, when he strives for the general betterment of society is deemed selfish because of the personal gain he will enjoy. Egalitarianism is generally condemned as the philosophy of the envious, not of the altruistic. This is generally true, perhaps, as far as the adult is concerned, for whom the verdict of life chance has been rendered. But from the point of view of the young person for whom any expectation should be regarded as envy (considering that all his expectations can possibly be rendered nil at any moment, in which case he would be in equal condition with the poor-born, instantly judged envious if he wanted more than he could expect) egalitarianism is neither altruistic nor envious but a fundamental fact of his life chance at the beginning of adulthood--or should be so.

It would enhance the human dignity of the emerging adult if he were made to feel throughout his life thereafter that what he had become was due largely to what he had done. That his parents had prepared his character to be able to do well should breed in him filial piety, an appreciation of spiritual inheritance. The absence of great success would not, logically, lead to a depreciation of parents for not inculcating such a preparation of character. The function of society to compensate for inability of poor parents to provide full spiritual/intellectual character for their young would exculpate those parents if their children failed. In the instance of downward mobility, the rich-born failure may be allowed to blame his parents if he wishes, but the accusation would always be at least ambiguous, considering the prima facie case that an advantaged youth who fails does so somehow despite and not because of his condition at birth. That situation society can well endure, and honorably, where it cannot accept the near inevitability that the poor-born failure never had a chance.