

The Ethicist

After a passer-by handed over a half-used pack of cigarettes to a homeless man on a Melbourne street, the man asked me to buy him more cigarettes. 36-1, he explained, he would be able to spend the small sums he received on food. My offer to buy him sandwiches instead was vehemently refused. The homeless man accused me of being miserly. He said that I was clearly not as generous as my benevolent predecessor. I subsequently refused his request for money in the belief that it would be wasted on cigarettes.

I believe my predecessor set a thoughtless precedent by giving a homeless smoker a health-harming product that the giver was happy to be rid of. What are your thoughts on the matter? Joseph, Brisbane, Australia

Answer by ethicist Kwame Anthony Appiah:

First, you weren't obliged to give this man anything, and the terms of a gift respectfully given are up to the donor. Second, the argument he made was reversible. If giving him cigarettes freed up money for food, giving him food would have freed up money for cigarettes. What's more, his need for cigarettes wasn't as great as his need for food, and providing people something they need is a greater service than giving them something they don't. His reproach was unmerited.

36-2, a one-time intervention in the life of a stranger isn't going to change anything. A small reduction in the number of cigarettes someone smokes in a lifetime has no discernible effect on the likelihood of getting a smoking-related disease, so giving this man a few cigarettes won't make him worse off. Giving away useful things you don't want or need is still an act of commendable charity. 36-3, your reproach towards your predecessor is also unmerited.

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