
On the road to May Day

A non-report-back from Denver 2017

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Figure 1. “Diogenes Asking for Alms” by Jean-Bernard Restout (1767). Here Diogenes is begging from a statue, which he did to practice being rejected.



1. A spectrum of beggars

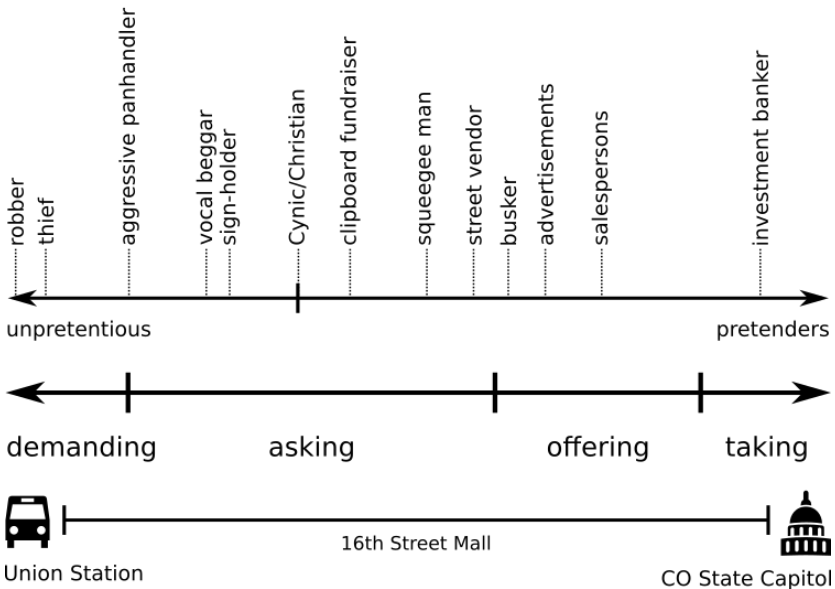
Being asked why people give to beggars but not to philosophers, Diogenes said, “Because they think they may one day be lame or blind, but never expect that they will turn to philosophy.”

Every other day of the year I’m dismissive toward churches, parties, unions, and holy days; but on May 1st, I’m somehow always hopeful that a large number of radicals will turn out

and cause trouble. It's been a few years since I've written a post complaining about the tameness of [May Day](#) in Denver. That's because I realized that I'm too shy to contribute to or get much out of protests and stopped attending them. This year, however, with good weather, the drama around Trump, and the centennial of the 1917 revolutions, I thought the demonstrations could be big. I searched online and saw that the Democratic Socialists of America and some other groups planned a "May Day Against Trumpism" at the capitol building. Wanting to not miss out, I took the bus to the city.

Between Union Station and Denver's capitol building is a mile of pedestrian shopping called 16th Street Mall. Recounting one's walk down 16th Street Mall is often to sketch a continuum-forming typology of beggars:

Figure 2. A print-quality diagram depicting the perfectly sensible multi-dimensional typology of begging. I'm not at all embarrassed of the concept or drawing. The bus icon is by [Naomi Atkinson](#); the capitol icon is by [Loren Klein \(CC-BY-3.0\)](#). The lines were drawn by me: ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Click image for SVG version.



Almost as soon as I stepped outside of the bus station a woman approached me and asked if I had “a dollar or something to help with food.” I remembered that I had grabbed some extra change with my bus fare and handed her the two dimes. She cheerfully assured me that every little bit helps. This is the unpretentious beggar: she offers nothing in exchange for taking money except to live and beg another day. Every other beggar I’d meet on my way to the capitol would present their

case as an *exchange*; they'd tell me that either I or an even more helpless third party somewhere would benefit from my donation.

A girl with a clipboard standing at the nearby intersection who witnessed my twenty-cent donation caught my eyes and asked, "Do you want to save a child with me today?" From what I gathered before the crossing light changed, the plan was for her to get paid to solicit donations for some sponsor-a-child charity scheme and for me to give her my money. I couldn't even think of a sensible response to that offer of teamwork and just awkwardly shook my head before crossing the street. Later down the mall I met some more clipboard beggars, and I did much better. One girl got my attention with a friendly greeting and then explained that with Trump in office it is very important that I give to the ACLU. I told her I didn't have any money. She was understanding and told me that I could donate online whenever I do have money.

A man begging on behalf of [Save The Children](#), an organization currently helping victims of the Syrian civil war, asked if he could talk to me about their work. I told him I don't have any money, and he politely asked if he could give me his spiel anyway. So I listened. When he got back to asking for a donation I wished him luck and walked on. It turns out that while he's trying to extract money from unemployed anarchists on the mall, the President and CEO of Save the Children, Carolyn Miles (whose background is in marketing, specifically in selling American Express cards to college students), is paid [\\$455,000 per year](#).

Further down the mall I looked down and walked fast to avoid interacting with a pair of clipboard-holders wearing Green-peace shirts.

But I've gotten ahead of myself. When I crossed to the other side of 16th Street, on the first block of the mall, there was a man playing the flute along to some kind of electronic jazz mu-

sic playing from a loudspeaker while also talking to passers-by trying to get them to dance. It was a tough crowd, but he was a skilled performer and there were several dollars in the wooden box on the ground in front of him.

Unlike most beggars, buskers are generally not only tolerated but desired by downtown business improvement districts because they provide some cultural authenticity which makes shopping a less sterile experience. People often give to buskers because they genuinely enjoyed the performance rather than out of pity, in which cases street performing is a commercial art rather than begging proper. While I've not witnessed them in Denver, other cases in which unsolicited services are pre-rendered with the expectation of payment, such as squeegee beggars who clean windshields at stoplights for donations, probably rarely make that transition (and so precede busking in the spectrum).

The claim that donations are actually payment for a service is a rhetorical game Diogenes played when he said people should pay him "not for alms, but for repayment of his due" (presumably for being such a great philosopher). And like some guilt-tripping clipboard beggars, he also tried leaning on potential donors' sense of fairness and morality to reason them into giving to him: "If you have already given to anyone else, give to me also; if not, begin with me."

Jesus, the founder of the other ancient tradition of begging which has been gnawing the foundations of Western civilization for over 2,000 years, also gave some rather cynical advice on how to handle beggars. Included in his Sermon on the Mount are three of his most characteristic pronouncements. The first, "Do not resist an evildoer," is followed by three examples of enduring more abuse than one's day-to-day abusers expect (if someone slaps your face, turn turn the other cheek; if someone sues you for the literal shirt off your back, give them your cloak too; if you are conscripted to walk a mile, walk *two* miles). The third is "Love your enemies," after which

Jesus points out that even tax collectors — the very agents of exploitation — are nice to their friends, so that should be, like, the absolute minimum standard of behavior.

Perhaps less famous (though not less vexing) than those two paradoxical sayings is found right between them: “Give to everyone who begs from you.”

Jesus’s first followers were propertyless peasants who had left even their homes, were used to putting up with abuse at the hands of their social betters, to going without sufficient clothing, to walking more than even soldiers, were more often beggars than givers, and who nevertheless treated everybody well. Whatever the deeper and more general applications of these sayings, then, on their surface they not only presented the lifestyle of the early Christians (that which potential followers would be expected to adopt), they also seem to be lightheartedly self-serving in the same style of the Cynics who taught that it was virtuous to give to homeless philosophers.

The co-optation of Christianity by the rich and powerful not long after Jesus was executed imbued these sayings with even greater difficulty for their future audiences, especially “give to everyone who begs from you” which cannot be so easily philosophized away as a paradox. As an example, consider the case of a 19th-century Russian aristocrat named Leo Tolstoy who after a legendary career as a novelist attempted to take the sayings of Jesus seriously. His struggles with “do not resist an evildoer” produced several works which had profound influences on social justice movements around the world and are still read by pacifists and anarchists today. But it wasn’t until he was quite old that he finally got the courage (if sneaking away from one’s wife in the middle of the night counts as courageous) to leave all of his possessions by setting out on train with nothing but the clothes of a standard Russian peasant. He developed pneumonia and died within days of leaving home.

The pretensions of the cynical beggar are ironic in that the audience is aware of the rhetorical game, but like in the case of

the street performer, it is the decision of those who give as to whether they are giving out of pity or gratitude. Beyond that, the type of beggar represented by the Cynic and the Christian are *honest* both in the sense that they present neither sob stories nor pretended friendliness, but even more so in that they invite their listeners to throw off their own pretensions about the society they are living in and reproducing. That is, to the Cynic and the Christian, giving to beggars is not in tension with more systematic solutions to poverty, it is the systematic solution to poverty. The clipboard-holding fundraiser, in contrast, who has perfected the sob story, the salesman-like friendliness, and who claims salvation is found in non-profit organizations, is perhaps the paragon of the dishonest beggar.

I didn't have occasion to mention it, because I have thankfully never been a witness or victim to a robbery (not that such crimes are unknown on the 16th Street Mall), but robbers also make no claim to be helping their victims and should logically precede the unpretentious beggar in our spectrum. While of course theft and robbery, being characterized by their involuntary demands, are not begging properly, even muggers sometimes couch their activity in the language of a market exchange ("your money for your life").

Julian, the fourth-century Roman emperor (a nephew of Constantine) who tried to peacefully revert the empire from Christianity back to Paganism, was annoyed with the openly atheist and crude Cynics of his day. He wanted all Cynics to be as pious and educated as he imagined Diogenes and Crates were, and argued that most Cynics were even *worse* than bandits and pirates who were at least decent enough to be ashamed of their lifestyle and live in their faraway hideouts instead of preaching at people in the streets. He also referred to Cynics as "monks," intending the association with Christians to be an insult (Christians were only one or three gods away from being atheists themselves).

At many of the intersections along the mall I saw newspaper salesmen — often older men with all of their possessions in bags on the ground at their feet — selling [the Denver VOICE](#) for a suggested \$2 per copy. Originally founded 20 years ago as “a grassroots newspaper created by homeless people for homeless people,” the *VOICE* is now written for a general audience and sold by homeless vendors (who buy the papers for \$0.50 each) as a way for them to earn some income. (The *Denver VOICE* is independent, but its operating model is influenced by similar [street newspaper](#) vending networks which operate in cities around the world.)

These charity vendors, whose sales depend at least as much on pity as on satisfying the wants of their customers, are located in the middle of the murky space where begging becomes selling (somewhere to the retail side of the children in third-world cities who sell trinkets to Western tourists).

Of course the entire mall is lined by actual retail shops and beggardly advertisements. Salespersons and advertisers (and the business owners they work for) likely imagine they are much further along the spectrum of begging than they actually are.

Downtown business associations and city councils will often commission artwork to help beautify shopping areas and, as in the case of buskers, will happily tolerate some guerrilla murals which provide a degree of authenticity to the shopping environment. But for the most part any art or graphic design which might distract from the commercial purposes of the property is forbidden. In the words of the street artist Banksy, “The people who truly deface our neighborhoods are the companies that scrawl their giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you’re never allowed to answer back.”

Banksy's observation echoes one by GK Chesterton a hundred years earlier that "It is really not so repulsive to see the poor asking for money as to see the rich asking for more money. And advertisement is the rich asking for more money":

A man would be annoyed if he found himself in a mob of millionaires, all holding out their silk hats for a penny; or all shouting with one voice, "Give me money." Yet advertisement does really assault the eye very much as such a shout would assault the ear. "Budge's Boots are the Best" simply means "Give me money"; "Use Seraphic Soap" simply means "Give me money." It is a complete mistake to suppose that common people make our towns commonplace, with unsightly things like advertisements. Most of those whose wares are thus placarded everywhere are very wealthy gentlemen with coronets and country seats, men who are probably very particular about the artistic adornment of their own homes. They disfigure their towns in order to decorate their houses.

Shop and restaurant owners on the 16th Street Mall have been known to be hostile to the more needy beggars operating on their turf and have enlisted the police to carry out revanchist actions against the most vulnerable. In 2012, [legislation](#) criminalizing the act of sleeping outside with shelter (defined as "any tent, tarpaulin, lean-to, sleeping bag, bedroll, blankets, or any form of cover or protection from the elements other than clothing") was passed on behalf of downtown business owners. Under the authority of that code, police have conducted winter [raids](#) on homeless camps to confiscate blankets. Recently three individuals accused of camping with shelter were tried by jury, [convicted](#), and sentenced to several days of forced labour.

The City of Denver in collaboration with downtown business owners has installed mechanical panhandlers — modi-

fied parking meters — which are meant to compete with live beggars. The city has promised the money collected by the machines will go toward “job training, meals and permanent housing options that help get people back on their feet,” but it has been [caught](#) spending it instead to help fund the police sweeps of homeless camps.

The mall ends where 16th Street dead-ends into Broadway. To the north is the financial heart of Denver’s business center. On 16th Street itself are the two Denver World Trade Center buildings and Republic Plaza (the tallest building in Denver); scattered beyond those are more high-rise office buildings and skyscrapers. These buildings exhibit almost none of the colorful and chaotic elements of the shopping mall and are instead dark, sleek, and inauspicious.

The craft of capital allocation and investment, which is practiced in many of these buildings, does not depend on demanding, begging, or offering so much as on staking ownership and simply taking interest. Like the robber on one end of our spectrum, we have financial capitalism on the other: the bandit subsumed. The full spectrum of begging plays out between these dialectical bookends of the modern capitalist economy, as it does everyday between Union Station and Broadway.

Walking a block south on Broadway brought me to the state capitol building. I could see maybe 100 demonstrators nestled up on the steps waving red and black flags. A large banner facing the street read “No War But Class War,” and another further back read “Workers & Oppressed People of the World Unite!” There were no police or pro-Trump counter-protestors in sight.

The prospect of joining them seemed both socially overwhelming and boring. Like some sort of party. So I continued walking down Broadway and spent my afternoon in the Denver Public Library. It was a good May Day.

2. Other people's May Day 2017

Of course, some people actually followed through on their plans to attend a May Day demonstration. The local Fox News affiliate was kind enough to both get the word out about various May Day protests in Denver as well as to follow up with a short video and a couple of pictures from the event at the capitol: "[May Day events taking place in Denver](#)" (Fox31, 1 May 2017). More photos can be found on [the Facebook event page](#).

A few cities [around the world](#) saw major protests, with [the riot in Paris](#) getting the most headlines because protesters responded to police tear gas with spectacular petrol bombs. Hundreds of protesters and six cops were injured during the clashes.

In the United States the most unusual thing about May Day this year was the presence of Trump-inspired right-wing counter-protesters who turned up in several cities. [Seattle was unusually quiet](#) though there was a minor [confrontation](#) with participants of a "Stand Against Communism" rally.

The most rowdy demonstrations were in Portland and Olympia. [In Portland](#) a minor riot broke out after a few protesters threw full cans of Pepsi at riot police who responded by charging into the mostly peaceful crowd of marchers. The bloc'd up [mostly-anarchist, no doubt] protesters who instigated the police response have been [criticized](#) for endangering the rest of the march.

There was also a small riot [in Olympia](#) where protesters threw rocks at police (and some counter-protesters threw rocks at marching demonstrators). In one unfortunate and embarrassing instance, a protester tried to pepper spray some taunting counter-protesters and accidentally sprayed passers-by including a dog. Most cops are not even that irresponsible with chemical weapons.

The [Red Guards Austin](#), a Maoist group which has gained some notoriety in recent months due to their open-carry demonstrations, tried to march in Austin, but they were surrounded by an alarming number of reactionary counter protesters. Apparently racists and anti-communists of the InfoWars variety are numerous in the Austin area (I didn't realize until now that Alex Jones lives in Austin and hosts his show there). Some Red Guards members were carrying rifles, and so were a few of the right-wingers. In their [public self-criticism](#) which they posted to their weblog, the Red Guards described this scary moment:

Early on in the march a fascist named William Fears physically assaulted one of the comrades who was guiding chants and for this Fears came very close to forcing our units to use lethal force. Those in attendance could see fear in his eyes as the Partisan unit moved into the ready position prepared to chamber a round.

My impression is that the Austin PD did a good job keeping the groups apart and possibly from literally killing each other. The independent journalist Kit O'Connell was present and wrote a good postmortem of the event: ["Unpacking The Fascist Rampage On May Day In Austin: What Happened, What Went Wrong."](#) I could not find a single report from a main stream news outfit.

3. Sources of quotations

The sayings of Diogenes quoted above can be found in Diogenes Laertius's [Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Book VI](#). Those of Jesus are recorded in [Matthew 5:38-48](#). Julian's thoughts on Cynics are preserved in his seventh Oration: ["To the Cynic Heracleios."](#) The Banksy quote is from his introduction to [Wall and Piece](#). GK Chesterton's opinion on advertisements can be found in his 1920 book [The New Jerusalem](#).

