



Pragmatic altruism

The gift relationship: from human blood to social policy

Expanded and revised edition

Richard M. Titmuss, edited by Ann Oakley and John Ashton

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Richard Titmuss's *The Gift Relationship* was first published in 1971. During the 1960s there was active campaigning for a market-based blood donation system and Titmuss, a professor of social administration at the London School of Economics, was profoundly opposed to this approach. In his 1966 Fabian lecture, "Choice and the Welfare State," he decried any consideration of medical care as a commodity to be bought and sold. In so doing he was one of the first to clearly define the battle lines that still divide those who consider health care to be a commodity and those who believe it should be considered and managed as a service. "If blood is morally sanctioned as something to be bought and sold, what ultimately is the justification for not promoting individualistic private markets in other component areas of medical care, and in education, social security, welfare services etc., etc.?" He continued: "Where are the lines to be drawn ... if human blood is to be legitimated as a consumption good? Where indeed? It is not difficult to guess where Titmuss would stand at this moment as Canadians decide whether to proceed with privatization of their health care services.

In his book Titmuss used the procurement, processing, distribution and transfusion of blood as a case study to illustrate the moral and practical superiority of giving versus selling health care services. He argued that the superiority of blood services in Britain compared to those in the US could be attributed to the contamination of the latter system by the profit motive. In the post-HIV (and possibly nvCJD) era, it should be passionately interesting to revisit Titmuss's arguments in this revised edition

of his book. Unfortunately, it is not.

Some of Titmuss's arguments seem today to be unconvincing and inconclusive, while the prose in which they are conveyed (or concealed) is somewhat turgid. Nevertheless, the importance of the principal *theoretical* issue (the social value of altruism) and of the principal *practical* issue (donated blood is better blood) are both sufficient to justify the effort required to disinter them.

Although the gift of blood is purported to be no more than a case study to illuminate the importance of altruism in general, Titmuss starts with a mystical reverence for blood that will not be shared by all. "There is a bond that links all men and women in the world so closely and intimately that every difference of colour, religious belief and cultural heritage is insignificant beside it." With this initial genuflexion Titmuss goes on to develop arguments against the practice of paying for blood donation. First, he claims, it is inefficient, wasteful, creates shortages and surpluses, and leads to excessive bureaucratization and eventually to a contaminated product. He offers no theoretical underpinning for these assertions, and, as contributors to additional chapters point out, the argument that markets in blood are always wasteful and that voluntary systems always do better has not been borne out by experience. (Justice Krever would probably agree.)

Another argument against the market is that rather than redistributing a commodity from rich to poor, paying for blood redistributes it from poor to rich. However, as Julian Le Grand observes in an afterword, this argument is incomplete. Although paid donation may result in blood and blood products flowing from poor to rich, "pre-

cisely because this is a commercial operation, this flow is matched by a flow of money the other way."

Titmuss also argues that "voluntary donation of blood represents the relationship of giving between human beings in its purest form because people give without the expectation that they will necessarily be given to in return. A system that depends on such voluntary giving effectively institutionalises altruism." By contrast, he avers, a market in blood is ultimately degrading to society, tending to drive out altruism and replace it with crude self-interest. This is an assertion of faith. Indeed, such assertions may be of far greater worth than mere evidence-based arguments. But they leave no room for debate.

Still of importance today is Titmuss's "typology of donors," of which his "Type A: The Paid Donor" is the most relevant. This is "the donor who sells his blood for what the market will bear," an act that "sanctions the making of profits." Furthermore, "as a market transaction, information that might have a bearing on the quality of blood is withheld if possible from the buyer." More succinctly, "anyone who might need money to buy food and other necessities of life is a person who cannot be trusted."

This may be going a bit far, but the warning that selling blood is dangerous because of conflict of interest is still relevant. In spite of the availability today of excellent tests for bloodborne diseases such as hepatitis and HIV, disclosure of all the donor's relevant medical and behavioural history is still vitally important. The need for money is a disincentive to honest disclosure, a disincentive whose force will increase with the strength of the need. Of all Titmuss's arguments, this one should be sufficient to convince us to retain an unpaid donor system in Canada at this time.

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