

REVIEW OF *BEGGARS IN SPAIN*

I appreciated this book, but really hated the experience of reading it. It's essentially an attempt to revise the philosophy of Ayn Rand to be more compassionate and cooperative, but without challenging the core assumptions of that philosophy.

In the story, genetic engineering creates a group of humans who don't need to sleep. These "sleepless" are smarter and more productive than normal humans ("sleepers"). Sleepers resent their inability to compete with the sleepless in the free market (though some adapt psychologically by coming to see a life of leisure subsidized by the government as more dignified than employment); sleepless resent paying taxes to support sleepers who supposedly can't give anything of value in return.

The sleepers, like the heroes of *Atlas Shrugged*, are able to maintain a sense of self-righteousness because they believe they've won by playing fairly. They don't use violence or coercion; they don't, in their view, *create* the problems of the sleepers. They're just minding their own business; if the sleepers can't keep up, and if inability-to-keep-up leads to misery, well, that's just a fact about reality that the sleepless bear no responsibility for.

What's infuriating about the book is that nobody really challenges that self-perception. But I think it's wrong. To see why, remember that the existence of the sleepless doesn't make the sleepers any inherently less capable of taking care of themselves than humans ever have been. If there were a chunk of uninhabited fertile land somewhere, for example, you could dump a group of sleepers onto it and they could build a prosperous society.

So why are the sleepers—like some low-skilled workers in the real world—instead faced with either poverty or a life of pure dependence? Because they don't have enough *property*. Land and natural resources are limited, and even technology is made artificially scarce through the enforcement of patents (which prevent you from using ideas if someone else called dibs on them first, even if you would have inevitably come up with them on your own eventually, or even if you actually did come up with them independently but at a later date). **Property rights are ultimately enforced by violence or the threat of violence.** Even if transfers of property between individuals are done by a totally fair and consensual process, the original distribution of property within any society was never remotely fair. Some of the factors that determined that distribution were:

- people just taking what they wanted from other people by force
- people just being the first to claim something (this imposes an opportunity cost on all other present and future people, so it's not clear why it should be treated as an unconditional moral right)

- government policy (which is often determined by corrupt systems; and even in the very best case, can only be influenced by voters alive at the time, so it's not clear why future people should respect property grants from the distant past as unconditionally valid)

My point is: the poor are unable to support themselves in part *because* the rich *forcibly prevent them from using resources that would allow them to support themselves*. Society has good reasons to grant and enforce property rights, but there is no moral justification for those rights to be absolute. When the downsides of those rights become more severe (e.g. when increasing numbers of people are shut out of the economy), it can be reasonable to expect increased compensation from the people those rights have been granted to. The sleepless should stop whining about taxes.

Aside: The title is slightly mysterious. The book has nothing to do with Spain. “Beggars in Spain” is a reference to a thought experiment one of the characters tells, but the thought experiment also has nothing to do with Spain. The thought experiment is basically just *what if there were a whole bunch of beggars, you wouldn't feel obligated to give them all money would you??* ...with the intended point being that the sleepless likewise shouldn't feel obligated to take care of the sleepers (who can no longer compete in the economy). A StackExchange answer by Shava Nerad gives the following suggestion about the reason for picking on Spain:

In the 1500s, many places in Spain passed laws trying to register “legitimate” beggars, recognizing that charity was not natural to their newly urbanizing populace (particularly after ejecting their Muslim and Jewish population, although this book doesn't make that point). These laws were the first attempt to distinguish between the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor” in western society.¹

¹Shava Nerad, “Answer to “‘Beggars in Spain’ - What Does the Title Mean?”,” *Science Fiction & Fantasy Stack Exchange*, July 2, 2016, <https://scifi.stackexchange.com/a/133551>.