

Joseph Fels on Philanthropists and Charity

Joseph Fels received a request to be placed in the gallery of philanthropists of the National Memorial of the United States. He declined. His reasons, as given in a letter to the Secretary, R. E. Dean, were as follows --

I have made no philanthropic gifts. I give nothing to charity. When I have any money to give away I give it to justice.

I do not think it would be fair to the "philanthropists" or to the cause with which I am identified that my picture should be in your gallery.

The men usually called "philanthropists," as a rule, uphold existing injustice, but give money to relieve victims of the wrongs they uphold. One conspicuous example is a man who has given enormous sums to found libraries and to abolish war. I do not wish to be understood as questioning his sincerity, but it is nevertheless true that he is doing all that one man of influence can do to perpetuate the evils he is endeavouring to relieve. He has been, and still is, a staunch upholder of the form of robbery called "protective tariff." He has written, spoken, and given money in behalf of this iniquity. However good his intentions, the fact remains that in supporting international tariffs and in opposing free trade, he is doing more to perpetuate national hatred and jealousies than all his contributions to peace funds can begin to destroy. Besides the tariff, he upholds other predatory institutions, which impoverish the people and debar them from opportunities for education, which none of his libraries can supply.

This man is typical of all so-called "philanthropists." The most prominent supporters of charitable institutions in our cities are men who bitterly oppose abolition of wrongs that create poverty. There are philanthropists who denounce employers of labour for paying low wages; who point accusingly at owners of department stores, blaming them for white slavery; who denounce owners of unsanitary tenements, who rave about political corruption and demand legislation forbidding every evil under the sun, but who will not lift a finger to help remove the fundamental cause of these evils.

While denouncing employers who pay low wages, they shut their eyes to the fact that they themselves uphold conditions which force labourers to choose between low wages or none at all. While denouncing tenement owners, they refuse to consider that taxation of industry and legal encouragement of land speculation make tenement evils inevitable. While denouncing political corruption and demanding futile prohibitory laws, they uphold the wrongs which create poverty and drive men to get a living from corruption or other evils in preference to starvation or beggary.

These philanthropists may well be described as men who give money to repair a little of the harm they have themselves helped to do, or, as Tolstoy has well stated: "men willing to do anything to help the poor except to get off their backs."

Identified as I am with the great movement to remove the cause of poverty, it would be a mistake to classify me with those opposing our efforts, and who would apparently prefer that all they desire should exist for ever rather than that the cause of them should be disturbed.

Replying to a letter to Mr. Joseph Fels from a sanatorium for consumptives at Philadelphia, for contributions, the Fels Fund Commission of the United States made the following characteristic reply:--

Mr. Fels contributes no money to charity. He knows that neither your charity nor any other can do more than temporarily relieve a few individual cases of distress. He knows that what the poor need most is not alms, but a change in social conditions which will make alms-giving unnecessary. It is to help in bringing about such a change that he is giving that he is giving whatever he can spare to the abrogation of monopoly and special privilege.

In the case of your own special charity, you are trying to keep up an institution for the care of indigent diseased people. You certainly must know that the conditions under which the poor live and work inevitably breed both consumption and poverty.

You must know that a social system which so restricts opportunities for employment that thousands gladly accept a chance to work amidst the most unhealthy surroundings, under the most harmful conditions, inevitably produces consumptives by the thousands. You must know that a system which places a premium on the withholding of valuable land from use must bring about the overcrowding of millions into disease-breeding tenements. You know this, and yet imagine that, when you announce your readiness to care for fifty victims of this outrageous system, your duty is done.

It does not seem to occur to you that the cause of this evil should be removed, so that the further wholesale production of consumptives may be stopped, and existing consumptives and their near relatives enabled to become self-supporting, so as not to need the aid of institutions like yours.