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The Dilemma of the Public Restroom

— A Microcosm of Social Policy

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Sounds like good public health policy: Give people a place to do their excretory business so they don't have to do it in the street. In civilized societies, there are public restrooms in train stations, highway rest stops, shopping malls, restaurants, etc. Unfortunately, the condition of them is often deplorable. Without active and expensive maintenance throughout the day, things go bad very quickly.

Why? Because people abuse public restrooms horribly! They fail to flush the toilet. They urinate and defecate on the seats and don't clean it up. Drug addicts use the stalls to shoot up. Homeless people bathe there. Obsessive-compulsives and germaphobes use far more toilet paper than they need, layering the seat or clogging the toilet and leaving their mess behind.

The chief dilemma of the public restroom is that most people who use it have no stake in its cleanliness. It isn't "their" restroom but someone else's. They probably won't be back, so they won't have to suffer any direct consequences. Security cameras aren't allowed, so everyone is anonymous and no one can be held accountable.

It's nice to say we should all work together for the common good, respecting public spaces and cleaning up after ourselves. Most people probably behave this way, but it takes only a few dysfunctionals to ruin it for everyone else. Their behavior draws down the standards for everyone else, until even the good people stop caring.

The end result is that no organization is eager to provide restrooms to the public unless they are required to by

law or profit. Business owners put up signs saying, "Restrooms for Patrons Only." They simply have no choice.

You could say that this problem illustrates conservative principles: If you give people something for free, they are bound to abuse it. The solution, the conservatives might say, is to not provide these public services. If you make people fend for themselves, they'll feel more responsible for their actions. (Unfortunately, it also means they'll start pooping in stairwells.)

But at another level, it could also illustrate liberal theories. If you give a corporation unrestricted access to a "public restroom"—that is, publically shared resources—then the corporation will abuse the privilege just like individuals do. If there is profit in it and only shared consequences, no self-serving entity would refrain from polluting the river that all of us drink from. Government has to set boundaries.

Both views are valid. Public restrooms have to exist and be actively regulated (liberal), but access can't be too easy (conservative). There are reasons it's hard to find a restroom in Manhattan. The natural restroom shortage provides "pushback" that encourages people use private facilities whenever possible. Public facilities in train and bus stations may *have* to be nasty to drive patrons to other options.

In a broader sense, whenever you provide a public service, it has to be costly for those who use it to discourage overuse. For example, if you impose long lines on people to obtain welfare payments or food stamps, a good portion

will give up and get jobs instead. You can't make public services seem too easy or attractive, or people will take them for granted and start abusing them.

There is no technological solution to the restroom dilemma. Automatic pay toilets in New York were a failure because addicts and prostitutes treated them as rental units. Automatic toilet flushers seem like a good idea until you realize their long-term effects: training people not to flush toilets and making them even more detached from their own bodily processes.

The best of all possible worlds is probably what we have now. Public restrooms have to be unpleasant! They have to exist (to prevent disintegration of public health) but they can't be too available. There have to be regulations in place to prevent wide-scale abuse, and the police have to come by occasionally and sweep out the human garbage.

There is only one business with reliably pristine restrooms: casinos! Turns out, the obsessives, impulsives and socially irresponsibles—i.e. the cretins who mess up public restrooms—are the same irrational people who keep the gaming industry going! Along with buffets and flashing lights, ultra-clean toilet facilities apparently help draw them in.

So now you know where to go for a nice restroom!

—G.C.

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