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Faulty Phrases: “Good Things Come To Those Who Wait”

Jake Bates, Editor

“Good things come to those who wait” has become such a staple of English-speaking culture that it has been used in Guinness and Heinz ad campaigns. Just as Heinz encouraged ketchup consumers to endure the bottle’s slow trickle, people use the words in a variety of contexts to encourage patience. A friend or parent may console a student anxious to receive essay results by declaring “good things come to those who wait.” In honestly analyzing each of the words and the possible meanings interpreted from their interaction, without endowing any white-washed meaning,¹ it should be easily observed that “good things come to those who wait” may be a severely detrimental bromide by which to live.

The words “good things” alone should not be difficult to interpret. Because each person’s value judgment declaring what makes a thing good is naturally dependent on their values, and certainly not everybody assigns value in the same way, it seems “good things” may be different to two different people. Waiting is the same action regardless of who performs it, but the rewards expected for waiting will not always be similar. Determining more exactly what should be valued as good will be done later in the article. Regardless of the exact form they take, these good things must “come.” “Things” valued as “good” are the subject of the sentence and are performing the action of “coming” to the direct object of “those who wait.” As if an infinite number of good things performing an unprompted action does not already seem implausible, the phrase makes clear that the recipients perform no action themselves. While “wait” is often followed by “for” or “until” specifying an expected happening, this phrase leaves us to infer that “those who wait” are only waiting for “good things.” “To wait” is “to remain inactive or in a state of repose, as until something expected happens.”² Taking the phrase straight, for what it *does* say and mean, we would expect “good things” to perform the only action mentioned in the phrase—that is, to come—to those who remain inactive, to those who do nothing, to those who simply wait. As merely waiting is to remain still and engage in

1 That is, any illiteral meaning.

2 *Random House Dictionary*, 2012.

no action, nothing may be reasonably expected. When waiting at the bus stop, the bus schedule gives us reason to expect the bus's arrival at a specific time. When waiting on good things, there is no action performed and no evidence provided which would explain how and why they will arrive.

Unable to articulate the idea better myself, I will invoke the words of Ayn Rand's essay "The Objectivist Ethics" in explaining the horror of expecting consumption without production. She wrote, "In a fundamental sense, stillness is the antithesis of life. Life can be kept in existence only by a constant process of self-sustaining action. The goal of that action, the ultimate value which, to be kept, must be gained through its every moment, is the organism's life."³ Assuming life as the supreme value of a living goal-directed organism, it is evident that "good things" must be good according to the standard of life. "Good things" are those which help to sustain life; and action must be taken constantly in order to sustain life. Action, then, is the only way in which good things are created. Consider the anxious student mentioned in the introduction. If she receives a positive result on her essay, which has made it possible: the action, following thought, of writing the essay or the recommended inaction? It was obviously her action which produced the desirable outcome, just as all men must act in order to maintain desires like reliable shelter and consistent supplies of food and clothing. Unlike wild animals, nature does not grant man his means of survival; man creates them. Not only do societies seeking "return to nature" remain unproductive, but they generally rely on past achievements of civilization, such as medicine, and still debase rapidly. With life as the ultimate value, "good things" must be created and produced before being received and consumed. To value anything as superior to a man's own life is ultimately to value death, at which point mere waiting may become an option.

If "good things come to those who wait" was accepted as global truth and all people were to wait, hoping to consume without producing, there would be no productive action—no valuable action—taken. Every individual would be left reduced to a Buddha-like life, where action is subordinated to thought, as if the two are mutually exclusive. Each person who chooses to remain inactive becomes dependent on the good which others produce. They can only hope that the producers temporarily sustaining their inactivity do not likewise cease action. To live as if valuable things will

3 *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 17.

arrive on the doorstep is an enormous contradiction to the essence of life. It enables only thought without action and action without thought, where there can be no dichotomy. Reason tells men how and why they should preserve their life, and “to wait” is to pursue no end at all. “To wait” is to ignore and reject thought and action, which are necessary to living a valuable life. “To wait” is to rightfully expect no good thing.