

Left-handed generosity

By [David Heim](#)

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"When you give alms," says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." The poet W. H. Auden seems to have taken Jesus' instructions to heart.

Auden was a generous man, but inclined to be generous in secret, [writes Edward Mendelson](#) in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Acutely aware of the sinfulness in his own motives and deeds, he kept his generosity secret, "because he would have been ashamed to have been praised for it."

According to Mendelson, [who wrote a biography of Auden](#), the poet sometimes even "went out of his way to seem selfish while doing something selfless." For example, he once stormed into a producer's office demanding to be paid immediately for the libretto he was working on instead of on the date specified in his contract. He made himself unpleasant until a check was delivered. From Mendelson's article:

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Underlying this behavior was Auden's deeply Christian sense that good and evil are intertwined in human life, and that this insight should make us humble rather than cynical. As [he wrote in one poem](#):

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