

Introduction

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Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good

When the day of judgement comes we shall be examined about what we have done, not what we have read; whether we have lived conscientiously, not whether we have learned fine phrases.

Thomas a Kempis,
The Imitation of Christ

One purpose of this essay is to provide some common themes for discussion, both in terms of concrete issues and problems and in terms of abiding questions that are sometimes vexatious and at other times illuminating.

Because one person was commissioned to write it, the essay will reflect one person's wanderings, ruminations, and opinions. What is said is personal, not institutional or collective: It does not present the views of Independent Sector, Exxon Education Foundation, the Independent Sector Research Committee, the Columbia University Seminar on Philanthropy, Catholic Relief Services, or of the Garden City Community Church Theology and Track Club; nor does it claim to represent the views of Brian O'Connell, Richard Lyman, John Gardner, Virginia Hodgkinson, or of those quoted herein—all of which and whom have some current influence on what I think about these matters.

"These matters" are labeled "Major Challenges to Philanthropy" in the announcements for the annual members' meeting of Independent Sector for which this essay was written. That usage solves one problem of terminology. In this text the word *philanthropy* will be used in two ways:

first, as a comprehensive term that includes voluntary giving, voluntary service, and voluntary association, primarily for the benefit of others; and second as the prudent sister of charity, philanthropy and charity being intertwined threads throughout most of the 3,500 years of the philanthropic tradition in Western civilization.

The most difficult assumptions to examine are your own, especially when they are beneath the surface of consciousness. A second purpose of this essay is to bring some assumptions about philanthropy to the surface for examination and discussion.

There are many areas of disagreement among us, and many unresolved problems. Yet beyond our domestic quarrels are enemies and critics whose points of view are not compatible with ours. Critics and enemies can almost always claim some validity for what they say; it is incumbent on us, if we are to contend with them, to be able to answer the legitimate charges. This essay may be as good a place as any to try to bring out some of the arguments against what we claim to do (there always being some gap between our words and our deeds, in any event).

This will be an exercise in which we examine our own assumptions and those of others who come to different conclusions. It will involve two different kinds of source material: gleanings from reports published by people within the sector and from newspapers, magazines, and journals; it will also draw on the literature and language of the tradition. I find it enlightening, somehow, to alternate between thinking about almsgiving in Jeremy Taylor's *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living* from 1650 and a guidebook to modern fund raising; to compare the language of a corporation's report on its 1983 contributions with that of Charles Loch's summary of the principles of charity in 1895.

Philanthropy is not a firmly fixed and settled compendium of values and practices. The most common observation about the independent sector and the philanthropic tradition is that generalizations about them are almost always wrong. The quickest way to sense that is to do as I did shortly after I agreed to write this paper: I looked through the alphabetical list of the member organizations of Independent Sector. (Try "O"—Older Women's League, Olin Corporation, Open Space Institute, Opera America, Organization of Chinese Women, etc.)

The main purpose of the essay, then, is to consider whether there is a common set of themes that we might discuss—beyond being tax exempt and not-for-profit.

But Aristotle warns us not to impose greater order on a subject than the subject permits; the philanthropic tradition is just such a subject. Its origins are as complex as the words *compassion* and *community*, and if I impose order on them it is to help me reduce great complexity to some manageable simplicity—the test, for both of us is to remember that that's what I've done.

Another way to delimit the field is to turn to the statements of Independent Sector itself. The Organizing Committee Report reflects a point of view:

On the most basic level the central task of this new organization will be to strengthen the nation's traditions of giving, volunteering, and not-for-profit initiative.

In thinking it through, the Committee came to the now familiar list of five tasks:

- Public education,
- Communication,

- Relationships with government,
- Research, and
- Effective sector management.

The board and membership of the new Independent Sector then added a sixth task:

- Measurable growth in giving and volunteering.

The Organizing Committee Report also concluded that Independent Sector should foster certain values:

- Commitment beyond self,
- Worth and dignity of the individual,
- Individual responsibility,
- Tolerance,
- Freedom,
- Justice, and
- Responsibilities of citizenship.

Finally, the Report listed eight problems:

1. Relative decline in giving,
2. Encroachments on the freedom of citizens to organize,
3. Negative impact of changes in tax policy,
4. Greater dependence on government funding by independent institutions,
5. Governmental influence on the agenda of the independent sector,
6. The limitations of some of the organizations in the sector,
7. Limited public understanding of the sector, and
8. Inadequate recognition of the importance of having alternatives and multiple sources of

giving.

It isn't really possible to keep such an array of themes, topics, and issues in mind; you may find it useful, as I have, to return to them from time to time. It is also helpful to rank and order them or re-order them according to your own understanding of what makes the most sense. I tend to approach this subject from the perspective of ideas: *Ideas Have Consequences*, as Richard Weaver put it. Behind or beneath tax policy or giving levels and organizational dependency are more fundamental questions. Philanthropy is one of three sectors; it does not stand alone. (It may even be, as someone suggested the other day, not really a "sector" at all, but merely the frazzled edges of the other two.)

"Public education" would come first on my list, probably because of my professional background. But before education is possible in the sense of teaching someone something, it is necessary to know and understand, even to master the underlying principles and methods of the subject. Prior to "public education," then, there is "professional education"—even though I don't believe most of us can claim the right to call ourselves professionals. (Perhaps, as you'll discover later, you may not want to.)

We should set about educating ourselves about the reasons why there is a philanthropic tradition, and whether it should be encouraged or is instead merely the artifact of an earlier and less enlightened level of social development. The practice of private giving for public purposes appears to be in good shape in this country: Our own research indicates that the level continues to rise steadily—and \$90 billion is a lot of money. The practice of voluntary service also appears to be vigorous: The estimates indicate as many as 90 million volunteers. The condition of an estimated 870,000 voluntary associations seems to resist all efforts to suppress them or even to dampen their creation and expansion.

Who can find evidence for concern in such statistics?

Let me report a few of the kinds of statements we've all heard that could give us cause for concern:

- The relative decline in giving may reflect a weakening of the habit of giving and a weakening of the binding force of religion.
- We may be victims of our own initiatives: The emphasis on tax incentives may leave us without stronger reasons for our generosity.
- The public commitment to the philanthropic tradition grows weaker each generation.
- The experience of other developed and democratic societies proves that a third sector isn't really necessary. Fund raising is turning away from face-to-face contact and relying increasingly on direct mail and even television.
- Paid staff are becoming more expert in the growing complexity of large-scale philanthropy. The unhappy fact of life is that there is no longer a useful place for the volunteer.
- Fund raising is becoming prohibitively expensive, especially given the scale of needs to be met.
- Responsible stewardship argues for vastly increased government funding (even if through voluntary agencies) and a sharp reduction in the number of voluntary organizations. Let only the well-managed survive.
- The sector cannot be relied on to police itself; if we do expect it to police itself, we must insist on fuller accountability.
- Corporations are turning inward; they are less and less interested in the causes they support and more interested in turning their grants into sources of profit.

That is another kind of list. It absorbs and restates some of the "problems" identified by the Organizing Committee five years ago. The purpose it is supposed to serve at this point is to suggest something less than unanimity about the sector, in spite of its apparent health and vitality.

Someone asked me a few weeks ago, after listening to me go on through lunch about the importance of philanthropy as a theme of general education, what it is that makes me give this subject so much importance. One answer might be cast in terms of my self-interest—the way we usually assess other people's motives. My job depends on it. If the sector thrives, I will. I will benefit economically. I will also benefit in terms of self-esteem and self-importance if philanthropy becomes a positive and constant image in the public mind. The subject is presumably of some intellectual interest to me, also, and in this way I am able to enjoy the pleasures of research and be paid for it. I am able to participate in meetings such as the annual meeting of Independent Sector, and that brings me into personal contact with others who share my interests and my prejudices. I have a good job, that is, and my personal interests fit closely and comfortably with my professional interests.

The self-interest of each of us is catalogued something like that: It is both revealing and distorting of what makes us tick. There is an assumption of something beyond self-interest; it shapes our lives and guides our careers. It also encourages us to believe that there is something beyond self-interest in most people, and that we can appeal to it in them as it provides motivation for us.