

Open Letter on Philanthropic Values

Robert L. Payton

This letter appears in its original letter form. It is brief discussion of the core concepts and terms of philanthropy: social change, welfare, and reciprocity. The letter was written 2 June 2000.

Dear Carol:

You asked me about philanthropic values and I didn't give you a satisfactory answer. Let me try again.

Over the years I've talked about philanthropy as being "moral at its core." I like the distinction H. W. Fowler made between "morals" as being about behavior, and "ethics" as being thought about that behavior. Whether we think about it (think ethically) or not, our interventions in other people's lives for their benefit is moral action. So the core value of philanthropy is morality.

The other night I may have used the phrase, "the capacity to respond to others in need is a defining characteristic of being human," so that humans are beings capable of moral judgment and action, although not all humans are equal in these matters or any other. Another caution: As with so many values we often lose touch with their deeper meaning, just as we often fail to act according to the values we proclaim. The Greeks fretted a lot over "weakness of will," knowing the right thing to do but not doing it.

Another way to express the idea of philanthropic values is to distinguish among government, the market, and philanthropy by identifying the "essential defining term" of each one. An essential defining term is one which, if removed, causes the concept itself to collapse. Hence, I argue that the essential defining term (the core value, if you will) of government is *power* (the legitimate right to use coercion; without that no concept of

government can be sustained); the essential defining term of the market is *wealth* (the right to acquire, use, or dispose of property as we choose); and the essential defining term of philanthropy is morality (the “right” to help others in need or to act voluntarily to improve the quality of life).

I’m getting ahead of myself. Your question has prompted me to review the way I’ve taught and written about philanthropic values in recent years. You may get more about this subject than you bargained for.

Two dictionary definitions, one from a dictionary of philosophy and the other from a dictionary of psychology, both recent: the philosopher makes two distinctions, the first dealing with purpose and process, the other dealing with extrinsic and intrinsic values. Purpose (teleology) is about ends, what one authority refers to as terminal values; process (deontology or duty) is about means, or instrumental values. Something has extrinsic value if it leads to an end (e.g., exercise), and intrinsic value if it is valued for itself alone (e.g., health).

The psychologist comes closer to what you had in mind with his second definition: “An abstract and general principle concerning the patterns of behavior within a particular culture or society which, through the process of socialization, the members of that society hold in high regard. These *social values*, as they are often called, form central principles around which individual and societal goals can become integrated. Classic examples are freedom, justice, education, etc.” – and philanthropy. (I’ll send you the sources of these things if you want them.)

The Latin words *benevolence* and *beneficence* bring out an important point: philanthropy implies action rather than (merely) feeling. Kant once wrote that “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*.” Philanthropy would not make so large a claim about itself, but

if there is such a thing as “true” philanthropy, it is concern for others (benevolence) expressed in acts of good will (beneficence).

The notion of value and values these days is murkier than ever.

This (Saturday) morning’s *Indianapolis Star-News* carries a section of “Faith and Values,” presumably meaning religious values – including charity -- that influence or shape social values. The Business section doesn’t carry such a label, but it could be called “Market Values,” celebrating self-interest, nor does the general news section identify itself as focusing on “Political Values,” celebrating the exercise of power. (As far as I know, there is still no daily newspaper that carries a regular section devoted to philanthropy, although there has been a steady increase in press attention to philanthropy over the past twenty years.)

Several decades ago the idea of “values clarification” was introduced in education, a desirable goal no doubt, but also very controversial: *whose* values are to be taught? These are the values I have discerned in philanthropy when philanthropy is true to itself:

Compassion: responding to others in need when things go wrong; acts of charity, mercy, relief.

Community: responding to opportunities to improve the quality of life because things can always be better; acts of benevolence, justice, development.

Both of these are based on the fundamental value of *altruism*, regard for others, self-and-others.

Voluntary action: Philanthropy is voluntary rather than coerced. A philanthropic gift is different from taxes paid. Helping another person without receiving anything material in return is the difference between

voluntary service and service in the marketplace. A physician who is serious about his oath makes a commitment to service but it is difficult to distinguish between service out of a sense of duty and service out of an expectation of reward. The marketplace is also an arena of voluntary action.

Reciprocity: Here the philanthropic value is *serial reciprocity*, repaying the good things done for us by the good things we do for others in turn. What a sociologist called “the norm of reciprocity” – *quid pro quo* – governs the first two sectors but not the third.

Stewardship: another philanthropic value with economic roots. The original idea of the steward identified someone charged with caring for the property of someone else. Religious tradition made God the “someone else.” That’s at the high end; at the low end, stewardship has been degraded to mean the annual fund drive of the church.

Social change/reform: Philanthropy as an organized charitable activity has tried to identify itself with “the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor,” with the down-and-out, the oppressed, the victim. Philanthropy also has a reformist side, usually toward social reform in behalf of the most vulnerable. *In my opinion, philanthropy is largely identified in the American tradition with liberal social causes, but it must also be identified with support for elitist institutions: universities, libraries, museums, concert halls.* (Cf. Carnegie in “The Gospel of Wealth.”) The fastest-growing part of American philanthropy the past two or three decades has been the category of “advocacy” organizations.

Welfare: The value one might call welfare is another term for the large category of concerns for the economic and material well-being of the most vulnerable; social and political issues are usually thought of as part of the category I’ve labeled *social change/reform*.

Finally, Chester Barnard alerted me (in his book The Functions of the Executive, first published in 1938) to the difference between *effectiveness* in achieving a goal and *efficiency* in the use of resources. When we become engaged with the well-being of children or protection of the environment (where neither has a voice of its own), we may lose some of our commitment to the terminal goal of effectiveness by attending too carefully to the instrumental goal of efficiency. The most common example of this is the loss of mission that many organizations suffer over time. The survival or well-being of the organization becomes an end in itself, supplanting concern for the cause that brought it into being in the first place. The instrument becomes the end. An ethicist named Kenneth Goodpaster coined the word *teleopathy* (“sickness of purpose,” if you will) to identify that failure.

If football is basically about blocking and tackling, as Vince Lombardi said, philanthropy is about ethics and values.

Bruce tells me copies of my book have surfaced and many of these things are discussed there.

All the best,

2 June 2000