

Foreword

Robert L. Payton

Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good, by Robert L. Payton

Is Robert Payton the guru of contemporary American philanthropy? In its original meaning in Hinduism, guru denotes a spiritual teacher. In everyday speech in this country, however, its meaning is probably correctly rendered by the American Heritage Dictionary as "a charismatic leader or guide." Bob Payton clearly qualifies, but equally clearly any such label would embarrass him greatly. For he is an unassuming man, more given to listening than to preaching, in fact. One thing that strikes one about this book is the tendency to address the reader conversationally—"You should try to bear in mind, too, as I have, that it isn't possible to design a definitive outline of a dynamic tradition. (I welcome your improvements of it.)" The whole approach is one of engaging the reader, not seeking to indoctrinate.

The last several years have seen the development, at what appears to be an accelerating pace, of interest in understanding philanthropy and its role in American society. There are a number of reasons for this. The Reagan administration, both by preaching the virtues of philanthropy and by cutting the budgets of specific philanthropies, has called attention to the phenomenon. Before that, periodic investigations such as the Filer Commission had served to raise consciousness on the subject—and just as well, since consciousness in this instance started at a very low ebb indeed; having taken philanthropy for granted for so long, Americans were startled to hear it analyzed, praised and criticized, puzzled over—much as Molière's Bourgeois Gentilhomme was amazed and gratified to discover that all his life he had been speaking prose.

Academic interest has followed along, and Payton has been prodding it, probing it, looking for ways to guide it and stimulate it. He is currently a Scholar in Residence at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. During his concluding years in New York he directed one of the famous Columbia University Seminars,

looking at the subject of philanthropy. These seminars enlist academics and interested lay persons—in this case often practitioners in philanthropy—for three-to-four-hour sessions, eight or nine times a year, at which individuals members may be called upon for papers or presentations, and out of which can come all sorts of by-products, from teaching materials for university courses to publications of general interest. Payton thinks this could provide a useful model by which to organize the study of the philanthropic sector elsewhere. It has several virtues in this context: openness and nonexclusivity; flexibility; and the capacity to bring theorists, empirical researchers and day-to-day practitioners together in a setting that is ideal for mutual enlightenment.

Would the creation of several, or several dozen, Columbia-style seminars on philanthropy lead to the creation of a field of study, to be called "philanthropics," analogous to economics or aesthetics? Payton specially likes the latter analogy, "because aesthetics fits comfortably within art history and philosophy as well as fine arts; philanthropics has even more opportunities."

Prediction is hazardous, midst the shifting sands of academic disciplines. Clearly thus far, scholars get their serious rewards from performance in their traditionally established disciplines; if a historian writes about philanthropy, she or he will win praise or encounter criticism more significantly from fellow historians than from students of philanthropics. It will be to the fellow historians that deans and others responsible for approving promotions and setting compensation levels will listen.

One has the impression that Payton cares far more about whether the fog of ignorance that envelops the subject can be lifted than he does about who does the lifting, and through what organizational or disciplinary mechanisms:

There are probably other fields where the general level of shared knowledge and values is lower than in this sector, but I can't think

of any offhand. There are few fields of such vast magnitude that have stimulated so little curiosity among scholars.

Especially lacking are serious scholarly efforts to get at the underlying philosophical questions and to probe the assumptions that people who work in philanthropy make about what they are doing and why. Payton's essays make some useful beginnings. The one entitled, "Tainted Money: The Ethics and Rhetoric of Divestment," is particularly incisive, not to say courageous, given the emotions stirred by the issue of U.S. corporate involvement in South Africa—and stirred nowhere more energetically than on the campuses where, presumably, most serious academic study of philanthropy must originate.

In "The Ethics of Corporate Grantmaking" he pursues the practical outcome of failure to examine the assumptions and value judgments that govern much decision making in philanthropy, as elsewhere in the world:

Making decisions ethically involves the process as well as the result. Almost every decision is made in the context of uncertainty about the facts and the consequences. There is a tendency to resolve the ambiguity by pretending that the matter is clearer than it is. We seek to be consistent by forcing cases into predetermined and comfortable categories; we find such comfort in certainty that we blind ourselves to the ambiguity that won't go away.

In my experience, the most common expression of that tendency is to hide behind guidelines, to make them so precise and inflexible that they make the decisions for us.

Among the many good reasons for desiring more serious attention to philanthropy is that without such attention we are left with little more than celebratory rhetoric that cannot withstand the slightest evidence that all is not well with the

philanthropic sector. In an early section called "Gleanings" (Payton clearly likes introductions, since this section might be seen as a sequel to this foreword, the author's preface that follows, and the general introduction that follows that) we have an arresting series of glimpses, into the diverse reality of the philanthropic impulse and its expressions in practice. Included are brief news items, such as the one about "the United Cancer Council (UCC), an Indiana-based charity, [which] raised more than \$5.1 million from contributions, but spent only \$20,000 on cancer research, according to the watchdog National Charities Information Bureau. Ninety-seven percent of the money went for fundraising or management expenses, the Bureau said." But downers like that are interspersed with the items having the opposite thrust: the success, year after year for over a century, of the Fresh Air Fund's work to give slum kids the chance to experience life in the country, or the ingenuity of Benjamin Eisenstadt, developer of the artificial sweetener, Sweet 'N' Low, and part-time president of the Maimonides Medical Center, in finding ways to persuade people to donate much-needed blood. Still other entries offer individual insights, offbeat ironies, examples of charitable and philanthropic behavior from the sublime to well past the ridiculous, with numerous way stations in between. Payton is certainly not out to convince us that philanthropy is an unmixed blessing.

But he is convinced, and the conviction is infectious, "that philanthropy is simply essential to the survival of this country as a free and open and democratic society." This is not because it represents necessarily the most efficient or even the most equitable way of allocating resources, but because of its "voluntary dimension":

By organizing our society so that important work depends on voluntary action, we activate the moral imagination. We employ the model of voluntary action as a means of teaching virtue: of caring for others, in its simplest and most familiar expression.

The essay entitled, "Virtue and its Consequences," begins, "This is an exercise in exploratory discourse." So, indeed, is this entire volume, including the chapter contributed by Virginia Hodgkinson that surveys the present state of research on the third sector. Bob Payton's instinct is to raise questions rather than to provide answers. He is especially wary of simple answers. No doubt new fields of study have on occasion been opened up by dogmatists who provoke reactions and so a dialectic. But it seems more appropriate to go about the business as Bob Payton does, by raising questions, reminding us of how much we do not yet know, and providing an example of restless curiosity that is nevertheless rooted in commitment. His commitment is both to public service, as his own remarkable and varied career has shown, and to the pursuit of complex and elusive truth, in an area hitherto more noted for its reliance on cliché and unexamined assumption.

These essays, then, deserve our attention both for their manner as well as their matter—and most of all for the admirable spirit in which their author conducts his explorations. May his tribe increase!

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