

A Reader's Guide

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Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good

This guide is not an executive summary; it merely highlights some of the points and questions that arise in Part I of this book. Its purpose is to help the reader keep in mind some of the common themes Part I lays out and discusses.

And this section is a discussion. It asks questions, offers some opinions, but gives few answers.

My starting point was the establishment of Independent Sector¹ itself: why there should be such an organization, and who should belong to it. The months of discussion and debate that led up to the creation of Independent Sector were summarized in a very useful essay prepared by the Organizing Committee. It is now almost five years later. It is timely to reflect on some of the original understandings and assumptions.

Format

My own first and most fundamental question is one of definition: When we talk about the independent sector, about philanthropy, volunteering, pluralism, and related terms, to what do we refer? Is there any agreement among us about what is included and what is excluded? This is not simply a matter of a taxonomy of organizations. It also raises questions of values.

The Introduction to Part I explains that it is a search for common themes and values and ideas, with an effort to bring to the surface some of the problems such a search reveals.

¹ Founded a decade ago, Independent Sector is the umbrella organization of the field: its 600 members include nonprofit organizations (50%); foundations (25%), and corporations (25%).

The chapter entitled "The Varieties of Philanthropic Experience" is an effort to identify the major elements of the field. Early in that chapter, there is an outline I devised headed "The Philanthropic Tradition." The chapter is a commentary on that outline, with one major exception: the professional dimension of our work, and the relations between professionals and volunteers and among the people served by them, are the subjects of a separate chapter, "Philanthropy as a Vocation."

There is also a separate chapter on some of the problems that come to mind in thinking at length about the independent sector. That is entitled "Philanthropy and Its Discontents."

Approach

At the center of the whole discussion is the tension that exists in almost every aspect of the field. The first law of philanthropy, like the first law of medicine, is *Do no harm*. That poses a question, then, that must precede any action.

It isn't an easy question. Nor are others. A friend just called who is a trustee of a not-for-profit organization that is in the midst of a severe financial crisis. She wants to help it survive.

Should it survive? Is it the responsibility of this funding source to see to it that it has a chance to survive?

Every decision like that has an opportunity cost. One decision will preclude another, and the second choice may be "more important"—what do I mean by that?—than the first.

A provocative challenge was made by one reader to the talk about "compassion" in the essay. "Charity is the enemy of philanthropy," he said. The purpose of philanthropy, by his argument, is "strategic capital investment in economic betterment." Diverting scarce resources to emergencies simply prevents the development of solutions that will prevent similar emergencies in the future.

Item 5 of the "philanthropic tradition" outline identifies some of the dialectical aspects of our work. The commentary argues, among other things, that acts of mercy and acts of justice are often in conflict. Another example that turns up time and again, on the theme of poverty and welfare, is the conflict between what is received (or denied) by voluntary action, and what can be claimed as a right.

At several different points the political dimension of philanthropy comes up. How independent is the independent sector, for example. How independent can organizations be, asked one reader of this paper, that depend on the government for practically all of their income?

The ancient books of the Jews are filled with "and on the other hand" kinds of comments. St. Thomas Aquinas organized his vast theological system around arguments for and against.

This essay is an unsystematic effort to do the same thing. Chris Argyris of Yale, a specialist in organizational behavior and development, wrote somewhere about "optimal fuzziness." That's what this emphasis on tension, contradiction, paradox—the dialectical quality—is intended to achieve.

There are no final, fixed, certain answers. There are some unavoidable questions.

Why Bother?

Why should we go to all this trouble? Why should we carve out several hours of valuable meeting time at the annual meeting that could better be given to the hard problems facing us?

My assumption is that most of the people in the country who ought to know about and understand these issues will be involved in the work of Independent Sector, and that you will be among them. You and I are among the few thousand professionals who share the principal burden of defending the philanthropic tradition.

That was John Gardner's pregnant insight: Some of the people within the sector must come together and act in behalf of the system as a whole.

There are probably other fields where the general level of shared knowledge and values is lower than in this sector, but I can't call any to mind offhand. There are few fields of such vast magnitude that have stimulated so little curiosity among scholars ...

But I digress again, chasing off after things that come up in the chapter on "Discontents."

Professionals have a moral obligation to understand what they do and why they do it, as well as how they might do it better and—at some point—even how they might better their own condition in the process.

That's why I wrote this essay, and that's why I hope you'll read it.