

## **Conclusion**

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*Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good*

It seems that one thing we need for our task is a certain courage, a courage in following out the course of our thoughts where it leads us, a mental courage, about which common experience allows us to say definitely that it is infinitely less widely diffused than physical courage is.

*Gabriel Marcel*

The Mystery of Being

## **Philanthropy in Education**

Private voluntary giving will not increase unless there is better and firmer understanding of its importance to our society and the people in it. That understanding is not the product of a how-to course; it is not the result of rote learning from a textbook; it will not follow directly from classroom exhortation or from unreflective experience. I hope that the philanthropic tradition might come to be thought of as a familiar topic of the formal education of Americans, tied in some cases to the out-of-classroom student experience of giving and raising money and volunteering and becoming involved in the tradition as a dynamic process.

Such an education should deal with fund raising and giving as part of a single process. More of us might then better understand the psychological quirks that make that relationship so difficult at times. The linkage of research, teaching, practice, and experience has not yet been achieved for most people—including those of us who are paid to be involved in it.

Public education will not advance until professional education does. Professional education will not advance until philanthropy begins to permeate the undergraduate curriculum—especially those basic courses known as general education. While research proceeds in its plodding, unorganized way, philanthropy must earn its place in the discussions among students and faculty members. It has to be talked about on the campus as a continuing and pervasive influence in the society, contending for attention with other unresolved issues: nuclear weapons, homosexuality, ethnic conflict, Marxism in the Third World, deconstruction in literary criticism, the place of religion in American politics, and so on.

Conversation interacts with learning in the classroom and research in the library; it doesn't always lead to action, but it should always seek understanding. More not-for-profit organizations with an established base on the campus should seek to become more directly involved in the campus dialogue about philanthropy. There is a natural link between courses in sociology and psychology as well as politics and economics and the activities of the philanthropic organizations. Many of these organizations play an important role in providing forums for debate of all sorts of issues; most of them have close ties with faculty members in those fields and in other departments; all of them have a continuing interest in engaging students as volunteers.

- The first responsibility is to help professionals in philanthropy to become better educated in their own tradition.
- The second responsibility is to encourage research and the dissemination of the results of that research.
- A third responsibility—and all these have to go on concurrently—is to encourage the publication of teaching materials: more histories like Robert

Bremner's *American Philanthropy*, more anthologies like Brian O'Connell's *America's Voluntary Spirit*, and more analysis like James Douglas's *Why Charity?*

Knowing that some views of society are unsympathetic or even hostile to the philanthropic tradition, we need to know what those arguments are. Independent Sector's task of advancing the tradition must go beyond cheering it on.

None of this noble work will proceed without money—or at least, no widespread effort will occur. The surprising fact is that the independent sector has failed to invest in the study of itself. Scholars are likely to work in fields where resources are available to support their work. Marginal journals and esoteric articles require subsidy. These facts are known to all of us in the field, yet few of us invest in advancing the understanding of the philanthropic tradition.

We are our own bottleneck.

### **The Future of the Tradition**

His whole life was scented by the memory of those fruitful beliefs of which it was possible to sacrifice the letter without giving up the spirit. You have benefitted from this inner struggle of your father: you were able to observe in him that wonderful hour of psychological development when one can still feel the moral sap of the old beliefs without being constrained by its chains upon science. Without realizing we owe whatever is left of our worth. We live by a shadow, sir, by the lingering scent of an empty perfume jar. After us,

people will live by the shadow of a shadow; I fear sometimes that it may prove somewhat ephemeral. (Ernest Renan, giving the welcoming reply for the Academic française to M. Cherbuliez upon the latter's installation in that body in 1882, speaking of the new member's intellectual indebtedness to his father and his father's world.\*)

\*The quotation was first drawn to my attention in an interview with Will Durant for *Newsday*; my colleague John Marcus, professor of history at Hofstra University, tracked down the text and citation above.

Renan was speaking of the fading power of religion, especially among intellectuals, in the Europe of his day. The trend has continued. The religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity have lost their power to inspire and challenge the sophisticated humanists of western Europe. Until about a decade ago, the religious tradition was replaced by a new Marxist tradition; it too is being abandoned, along with existentialism. Utopian visions (and even Dystopian ones) succeeding themselves in an endless and frustrated search for social perfection.

Nietzsche noisily announced the death of God, but the death of the religious tradition in Europe came, as Eliot predicted, "not with a bang, but a whimper." Traditions attenuate: They wilt, fade, weaken, diminish. They are not overthrown in revolution; they are abandoned.

The philanthropic tradition is deeply rooted in religion in America. Religion is the most powerful motive force behind individual charity. Religion indirectly influences corporations and foundations just as it more openly and directly influences political parties.

There is a danger that threatens philanthropy, then, if religion weakens in this country as it has in Europe. The new secular society of modern Europe has broken free of the domination of the church. In the process, they have put their faith in the state to meet the needs that had been met by religious charity. Philanthropy as a private and voluntary act of individuals and churches has been replaced by legislated programs of state agencies. Philanthropy was never a stated target of revolution; it was merely a victim along with its religious sponsor. Unlike the situation in Europe, however, there never has been a state church in this country.

In a secular society striving to preserve religion, like ours, there is a tendency to make the philanthropic dimension the exclusive preserve of the religious or the secular.

There is then the danger: that partisan politics begins to divide the religious and the secular, with private philanthropy on the former side and public altruism on the latter.

It is not simply a matter of competing claims for best representing America's most distinctive virtue. The conclusion to the essay on "Philanthropy and Its Discontents" in this book makes the point that "the independent sector is more important than we realize." The philanthropic tradition is not just acts of benevolence; it is also a powerful lever of social change. It is the voice of discontent and dissatisfaction as well as the expression of nurture and encouragement.

*It is often in the independent sector that the voices that shape social policy are first heard.* Another, more positive aspect of the independent sector was pointed out to me by John Simon (who in turn was prompted to think about it by his former colleague at Yale, George Silver). Philanthropy

surfaces needs that are met by the marketplace—new pharmaceuticals and chemicals, for example, and even new uses of technology.

The choice would appear to be between two futures. In one, philanthropy fades away along with religion, and the state becomes the dominant influence. The independent sector becomes inconsequential. The other choice is a future in which the independent sector becomes increasingly political, whether dominated by religious or secular ideology. Desire to reshape the community when it takes legislative form often overwhelms concerns of compassion; the massive scale of development sometimes drives out relief.

There is a third future that is most like the present and recent past: It accepts the complexities and contradictions of the tradition and maintains some balance between the demands of compassion and community.

Will we continue to withstand the pressures?

### **The International Dimension**

I have left out thus far the consideration of who should be included in our philanthropic activity. How wide a net do we cast? Where does our responsibility stop?

A charitable act requires more than one person; helping yourself, the ancients discovered, is not charity. (Have you noticed the proliferation of advertising based on buying products and services because we "deserve" them? That ain't charity.)

Put the question in the language of economist Morris Silver: Are we willing to include *genetic strangers*?

We work outward from our own immediate responsibilities. Individuals contribute to their local church and volunteer fire department; corporations contribute to community hospitals that serve their employees; community foundations are designed to keep their attention largely on local needs.

How have we managed to persuade ourselves to provide technical assistance to agricultural cooperatives in Ghana, or scholarships for poor Peruvians, or food relief to Thai refugees? Why have we been willing to share our resources with "genetic strangers" in remote parts of the world—strangers who threaten our peace and security far less directly than do richer and better developed countries.

Let me borrow again from St. Thomas Aquinas; as we think about international philanthropy it would be useful to bear in mind the "ten points of enquiry" into almsgiving that he set out to examine:

1. is almsgiving an act of charity?
2. the different kinds of almsgiving;
3. which are the more important, spiritual or corporal alms?
4. does corporal almsgiving have a spiritual effect?
5. is giving alms a matter of obligation?
6. do we have to give material alms even if it means depriving ourselves of what is necessary?
7. can we give as alms what has been unjustly acquired?
8. whose function is it to give?
9. to whom should they be given?
10. how should we give them? (Pp. 237-73)

There is a religious motivation of long standing and great power of serving God by helping those at a distance as well as by helping those nearer to us. A tiny fraction of our total resources is involved; it is even a tiny fraction of the small fraction that we commit to philanthropy.

That is another answer: We can afford it. Could we afford more?

A friend of mine is persuaded that Americans will expand their philanthropic horizons abroad only when they know more about the world and better understand its interdependence. The first task is one of public education; the first task of international education is therefore domestic; we must first enlighten Americans about the needs of the world and about what we might be able to do to help people cope with them.

It is wishful thinking at best and pernicious at worst to argue that there is a strong case to be made for the national political or economic interest to increase philanthropic support to the poorest countries of the world. Self-interest of the political kind will not increase food shipments to starving Ethiopian children when the Ethiopian government is pro-Soviet and anti-American as well as oppressive in its own right. And, although there may be scarce minerals yet to be discovered, still hidden someplace beneath those parched sands, most of the poorest countries remain that way because they promise neither short-term nor long-term return on investment.

The poor people of the poor countries are not a threat to us; they can command no tribute. (That is not always the case among our own poor, who are relatively much better off, much more likely to rise up in a "revolution of rising expectations.") It is better to recognize that philanthropy that seeks to help the poor will be rewarded perhaps in heaven; it won't garner many benefits here on earth.

Our increased sense of interdependence will, of course, encourage more philanthropic support of such things as international educational exchanges, especially with those countries that are prospective allies and customers. It will stimulate us to invest more of our resources in the study of foreign language and foreign cultures—we have begun to realize that we are engaged in a struggle of ideas with people we know too little about, people who really are important to our welfare and security.

The main contribution we have come to make to the countries of the Third World has been our "know-how." Missionaries as well as non-religious relief and development organizations devote their primary energies to helping people learn how to help themselves. That help ranges from technical assistance (that includes technical training so that the project can continue after the technical assistants have departed) to education in community development and even political action.

American private voluntary organizations have become a powerful presence in the developing countries of the world; in many cases they actively oppose official policy and offer (or ally themselves with) an alternative to what the host government provides. In many cases, American philanthropic organizations oppose United States policy, sometimes in alliance with local governments considered hostile or unfriendly by the White House and the State Department. They are often at loggerheads with one another on ideological grounds, and ideology is sometimes the dominant style of thought: dogmatic, simplistic, single-minded.

Consciously or not, we are spreading the threatening American doctrine of pluralism abroad, often in societies that have permitted only certain voices to be heard on issues of importance. Some governments attempt to seal themselves off from all ideas they consider alien and hence threatening. No

government that I can think of takes uninvited criticism from outsiders with very good grace.

There is growing reason to expect more defensive action against the increasingly "activist" and overtly political—but private and voluntary—organizations working abroad. To the extent that that kind of confrontation occurs and American lives are put in jeopardy and even lost, the federal government will intervene.

Another consequence of any such confrontation is that non-political relief and development activity will also be cut back or made more difficult. It is difficult enough already to negotiate a technical assistance agreement with a Central American government when the project will be funded both privately and with funds from the Agency for International Development.

The same hard choice is involved abroad that we face at home: The more influential the sector in shaping political and economic policy, the more pressure there will be to impose controls and restrictions. We should do everything we can to preserve the independence of the independent sector.

That may mean that in time some organizations will have to express themselves with greater restraint and act more discreetly.

Where you or I would be cautious, others among us might be bold. Where you or I would be aggressive, others among us might be prudent.

That is another reason we have so much to talk about.

## Assessment

The Introduction said that this essay would examine some of the assumptions about philanthropy and the independent sector. That much has been accomplished, I think. The Introduction also said that the main purpose of the paper would be to search for common themes. I am less confident that I have succeeded in bringing them out.

There is more attention to "compassion" than to "community," for example. There is an important *dialectical* tension—perhaps most poignantly illustrated when we debate the trade-offs between relief and development—that we can never finally resolve. That tension also appears in the relationship between givers and receivers, between dependency and autonomy.

One fundamental bridging idea between compassion and community—that of stewardship—isn't even discussed. Any Independent Sector statement about fostering values should include stewardship explicitly. (It is implicit in "effective sector management," but that ducks the question raised by the religious tradition of stewardship—where the idea originated.)

Stewardship suggests professional responsibility—and that should be a common theme of the continuing deliberations of Independent Sector. Reflection in and about practice, to borrow Donald Schön's language, will reveal that there are wide differences among us in the way we understand the "roles, rules, and relations" of our field. It may be that we should think in terms of several forms of professionalism rather than in terms of a single ideal.

As long as we *presume* to act in behalf of others, however, we solicit their trust and respect—and we should examine carefully whether we deserve it.

There may be some structural changes under way: still more innovations in generating fee income; closer interaction between the main business and the philanthropic giving of corporations; more "mixed economy" combinations of government, private business, and not-for-profit elements. I won't bother to speculate about the future of tax policy: That could cause short-term upheaval as well as long-term shifts of responsibility among the sectors and among corporations, foundations, and individuals.

The scale of our activity may cause qualitative changes that are inevitable and both necessary and harmful. Efficiency in generating new income may be achieved at such a cost of depersonalization and alienation that it crushes the "commitment beyond self" as well as the "worth and dignity of the individual." We would do well to reflect on the "iron laws of organization" that Kenneth Boulding formulated almost 25 years ago. (It is Boulding's recent opinion that *scale* is the most important variable in organization: Being too big or too small has more impact on the character of an organization than anything else.)

These questions do not leap out from the outline of the philanthropic tradition that appears in the Introduction. Perhaps that outline will have to be expanded. Someday it should be possible, however, to construct an encyclopedic summary of philanthropy, as Mortimer Adler has done with his "Syntopicon" and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

I mention that because the new *Britannica* overlooks philanthropy, as far as I can tell, although an earlier edition—the eleventh—dealt with it quite adequately.

That's the way it goes: One day you take it for granted, and the next day it's gone.