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## **Philanthropy as Moral Discourse**

Robert L. Payton

*Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good*

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**This essay explores the making of the philanthropic agenda and some of the ways voluntary initiatives influence public policy as well as social values.**

If thought makes free, so does the moral sentiment. The mixtures of spiritual chemistry refuse to be analyzed. Yet we can see that with the perception of truth is joined the desire that it shall prevail. That affection is essential to will. Moreover, when a strong will appears, it usually results from a certain unity of organization, as if the whole energy of the body and mind flowed in one direction.... Whoever has had experience of the moral sentiment cannot choose but believe in its unlimited power....

But insight is not will, nor is affection will. Perception is cold, and goodness dies in wishes; as Voltaire said, 'tis the misfortune of worthy people that they are cowards; "un des plus grands malheurs des honnêtes gens c'est qu'ils sont des lâches." There must be a fusion of these two to generate the energy of will....

The one serious and formidable thing in nature is a will. Society is servile from want of will, and therefore the world wants saviors and religions. One way is right to go: the hero sees it, and moves on that aim, and has the world under him

for root and support. He is to others as the world. His appropriation is honor; his dissent, infamy. The glance of his eye has the force of sunbeams. A personal influence towers up in memory only worthy, and we gladly forget numbers, money, climate, gravitation, and the rest of Fate.<sup>1</sup>

Emerson understood that benevolence is not enough. For kindly feeling to become beneficent, for good will to become action, requires a coalescence of insight and affection—of recognition of a problem and a concern for those affected—fused "to generate the energy of will." Emerson argues that ordinary people are immobilized by cowardice: they are brought to action by persons of will and purpose. Those of strong will are the catalyst of the spiritual chemistry that makes up the moral sentiment. Without leaders, without direction and focused purpose, most of us would remain stuck in our doubt and confusion in the face of the great moral demands of life.

The organization of efforts to make things better, or to make them less bad, is philanthropy. It begins with perception: someone has to *see* suffering and to recognize it for what it is. That requires imagination—not simply the sensitivity of the observing novelist or anthropologist, but imagination linked to moral sentiment, moral sentiment linked to action. To these is added organization. The Good Samaritan, coming to the aid of a stranger in need at some risk to himself, is acting as an individual. It is the transformation of moral sentiment and imagination into collective action that has shaped the core of the philanthropic tradition.

The thesis of this essay is that it is within the philanthropic tradition that the moral agenda of society is put forward. Philanthropy's contribution to

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<sup>1</sup> "Fate" in *The Conduct of Life*, in *Emerson: Essays and Letters*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 956-57.

moral discourse is as critic of the other institutions of society—even, on occasion, as critic of itself.

Robert H. Walker, in *Reform in America*, describes a cycle of reform. The first phase is a time of discovery, of recognition that something is wrong, marked by competing definitions of what the problem is. A second phase is completed by competing proposals for change. The first cycle takes place as voluntary initiatives of private citizens; the second is marked by movement of those new insights into public policy. To cite one of Walker's paradigm cases: slavery becomes an indigestible knot in the stomach, and abolition brings temporary relief; the negative achievement of abolition eventually inspires hope that there is a fuller pattern of citizenship not yet achieved; legislation begins to redefine the qualifications of citizenship. Voluntary initiatives lead eventually to reform of the law.<sup>2</sup>

The moral sentiment is not, of course, confined to the philanthropic sector. Politicians and government officials sometimes interpret their roles and responsibilities in order to enhance the social consequences of their actions—as happened so often during the 18th and 19th centuries, when merchants aligned themselves with religious leaders to create communities, to build schools and hospitals, churches and markets.

Notions of enlightened and humane government are based on empirical evidence as well as on theory; notions of socially responsible business corporations are supported by fact as well as by ideology. But the case has been well made by James Douglas in *Why Charity?* that the operations of the marketplace are theoretically indifferent to public goods and that the acts of government must be categorical rather than responsive to individual needs. These inherent constraints on the first two sectors create

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<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Walker, *Reform in America: The Continuing Frontier* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), introd. and part 2.

opportunities for the third—indeed, require the third.<sup>3</sup> The rhetorical role of philanthropy is to point out the deficiencies of social institutions—whether those deficiencies occur by design or by default. What is different about the philanthropic tradition of the West, then, most extensively manifest in the United States, is that the genius of organization has amplified the sporadic actions of individuals into a loose system, a tradition of moral sentiment in action, a moral sector parallel to that of the political and economic. Law protects these private initiatives for the public good; tax policy encourages them.

Within the third sector are two kinds of activity: initiatives that respond to recognition that things have gone wrong and people are suffering, and initiatives that propose opportunities to enhance the quality of life. The definition of philanthropy that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries links the two: it defines the purposes of philanthropy as those of identifying the causes of human suffering and social misery and developing strategies to eliminate them. Philanthropy as moral discourse has since deferred somewhat to the demands of social science. Moral claims are validated or rejected by survey research, on the one hand, or reduced to echoes of ideology by analysis, on the other. Skepticism has been brought to bear systematically on the claims and methods of beneficence.

The case against philanthropy is not necessarily misanthropic, but it often exhibits harshness. Emerson himself, in "Self-Reliance," complained

... do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I begrudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong ... your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of

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<sup>3</sup> James Douglass, *Why Charity? The Case for a Third Sector* (Sage Publications, 1983).

fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies;-though I confess with shame that I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.<sup>4</sup>

There is a widely held point of view that true social betterment on a large scale cannot come about by voluntary action. "Charity must be coerced," as economist Barbara Bergmann once put it. Voluntary action must be superseded by the obligations of citizenship. Benevolence requires beneficence to have meaning; privileges dependent on voluntary action must be followed by rights, by enforceable claims.

Voluntary action is too often undermined by free riders; free riders will contribute their share only when compelled to do so. This point of view also contends that in a democracy the resources for social good should be gathered by the state through taxation and allocated through established processes by representatives and agents of the commonweal.

Recent political developments in the United States, however, have given weight to contrary arguments. It is complained that dependence on public solutions to social problems-as reflected in the programs of the New Deal and the Great Society-leads to state interventions that imperil freedom and drain a diminished treasury. Western European welfare states have begun to back away from social commitments taken for granted in the recent past. The competition of the new international marketplace has encouraged philosophies of public welfare that identify enlightened charity with job creation. As Maimonides declared 750 years ago, the highest form of charity is to help a person become self-supporting. It is still a beguiling notion: public welfare drains the treasury; job creation fills it up. Welfare increases taxes; job creation increases profits. George Gilder has even

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<sup>4</sup> Emerson. "Self-Reliance," pp. 262-63.

argued that it is altruism that inspires the marketplace: those who take economic risks do so not out of self-interest only, but out of an understanding that their actions will benefit others as well.

In the wake of welfare state's decline, there are also increasing signs that western Europe and Japan are encouraging a larger and more active private philanthropic practice to make up for some of the reductions in public spending for social goods. These nations now borrow eagerly from the American experience. The Japanese are busily establishing foundations and organizing corporate philanthropy; British and French universities are turning to business corporations and even to alumni for financial support.

Although attracted by the possibility of offsetting public expenditures by private giving, these countries have not yet discovered that it is in the voluntary and nonprofit third sector that the moral agenda of government is given form. Emerson's four elements of insight, affection, will, and leadership, empowered by organization, assert the claims, even though Emerson himself opposed them:

If an angry bigot assumes the bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, "Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest; have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off."<sup>5</sup>

It is out of the competing rhetoric that the moral vision of some people becomes the moral standard of the nation as a whole. Nor does the process end there: it is the function of philanthropy as moral discourse to point out the gaps between the ideal and the actual-whether it be in terms of civil

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<sup>5</sup> Emerson. "Self-Reliance," p. 263.

rights, the claims of the poor and defenseless, or the protection of the natural environment.

The high aspiration of philanthropy is inseparable from low technique. Egoism is on the same scale as altruism, and cannot be wholly removed from it. The sublime in the philanthropic tradition is often deflated by the mundane. Giving money is inseparably linked to raising money. Raising money often requires appeals to emotion rather than clean, objective, logical demonstration. As scholars and artists find to their dismay, merit is not always self-evident to prospective patrons. There is a widespread inability to remain inspired to do good while using guile and pressure to make doing good possible.

The evidence for my thesis is to be found in particular cases, and they lie conveniently at hand. It is helpful to imagine what it would mean to have to deal with these cases *without* a third sector, leaving them exclusively to the agencies of government and marketplace. What would America be, in theory, without its philanthropic tradition?

*I. International human rights.* A popular singer named Paul Simon performed at a benefit concert in Zimbabwe recently with a group of South African musicians. Simon has also recorded a new album, "Graceland," described by him in *U.S. News and World Report* as rooted in "black music on the other side of the Atlantic." Simon says that "I knew 'Graceland' had political implications and just hoped that the music would be interpreted as a positive statement insofar as the black peoples of South Africa were concerned."<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the commercial recording and concert, the so-called benefit—at which those in attendance share in entertainment contributed by

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<sup>6</sup> "A Songwriter's South African Odyssey" (conversation with Alvin P. Sarnoff), *U.S. News and World Report*, March 2, 1987, p. 74.

performers—or other social gatherings where the excess of income over expense is donated to charity, is designed to raise funds for the cause and at the same time to call broader public attention.

These two concerts were part of an international philanthropic endeavor, a kind of secular missionary activity. Popular culture exploits its appeal to recruit new followers to the cause of human rights. There is also an appeal to an ill-defined sense of solidarity, a joining of hands across borders and across racial and ethnic lines to give participants a sense of strength and momentum. Beneficent interventions of this kind—to help the poor of the world, to bring down the racist government of South Africa—are often applauded by those who find other forms of cultural imperialism unacceptable.

The antiapartheid movement in the United States has been sustained almost entirely by philanthropic effort. It is unusual in not being primarily dependent on ethnic ties, as is the effort to relieve the oppression of Jews in the Soviet Union or to support rebellion in Northern Ireland, to cite two more typical examples. The American opposition to apartheid gathers its support in this country from those who are most strongly committed to the advancement of civil rights.

Certain styles of moral discourse seem to be effective and appealing to some groups. Common patterns of behavior and perceived analogies appear over time among diverse and previously unrelated causes. These sometimes lead to the formation of coalitions along ideological lines. The emergence of social movements out of this process is only dimly understood and is too little studied by philanthropic practitioners.

Those engaged in philanthropic practice give little evidence of being concerned about philanthropic theory. The function of philanthropy as moral discourse remains hidden. For example, one moral issue that is

seldom publicly faced by supporters of rebellion in Northern Ireland or resistance to apartheid in South Africa is that of offering money and moral support without sharing directly in the mortal risks entailed.

A major failure of much Philanthropic activity intended as moral action is that it thus often appears to be empty symbolism, obscuring rather than sharpening the moral issues. The search for rhetorical impact requires suppression of detail and complexity. In the heat of the struggle there is little time or sympathy for structured moral discourse, especially among those whose philanthropic role may mask political ambitions or the search for financial gain.

Moral discourse in philanthropy should be-but seldom is-candid about its own persuasive devices. The ethics of rhetoric is given less attention than are the moral objectives to be won by rhetorical means. Ends are thus commonly and uncritically used to justify means. Action overwhelms reflection. (And Emerson asks, "If malice and vanity wear the coat of philanthropy, shall that pass?")

Because philanthropic intervention in behalf of others has its greatest consequences for those helped rather than for those helping, the ethic of responsibility is also weak. Those whose philanthropy is based on moral absolutes find themselves mired in inconsistency in a world where good and evil are so haphazardly distributed and so difficult to disentangle.

- A small child from the Philippines is brought to Washington for surgery to correct severe congenital deformities of the hands and feet. The surgery is performed by professional medical staff members who have volunteered their services, and performed in a religiously affiliated hospital that donated its facilities. This act of mercy is the work of the Washington chapter of an

organization called Operation Smile, "founded in 1982 to improve medical treatment of children of other countries."<sup>7</sup>

Religion accounts for almost half of the private giving in America, and churches and other religiously inspired organizations enlist the efforts of tens of millions of volunteers. Religious organization is behind large numbers of day-care centers and homes for the elderly and infirm, and religious denominations founded many, if not most, hospitals and colleges. Religious values based directly on biblical injunctions continue to color philanthropic activity.

It is a common American practice, originating in Christian universalism and made possible by the nation's relative affluence, to make its medical resources available to citizens of other countries, as in the case of Operation Smile. This practice calls us to rise above the commonplace that "charity begins at home," at least while absorbing substantial costs in the treatment of a child from a foreign country, despite the fact that very large numbers of American children lack medical care for which their need is presumably as great as that of the child from the Philippines.

Operation Smile and other organizations argue for a universal beneficence, sustained most generously by Americans until such time as other, less advantaged nations acquire medical resources of equal quality. Yet, "Thy love afar is spite at home," Emerson argued. Many would still agree.

2. *Domestic poverty.* A.M. Rosenthal, who wrote a book about the Kitty Genovese case in 1964 (in which a woman was attacked and murdered while 38 people watched from different vantage points without taking action to help), now sees himself as "the 39<sup>th</sup> witness."

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<sup>7</sup> "Operation Smile: Medical Help over Miles," *Washington Post*, Feb. 23, 1987, Section 4, p. 1.

"Almost every day of my life," he writes in a *New York Times* column, "I see a body sprawled on the sidewalk.... Some show signs of life; others are totally still. I assume they are all alive but I never stop to find out or even bend over to see if I could possibly be of some help."<sup>8</sup>

The familiarity in large cities in the United States of the people wrapped in cardboard," those "bag ladies shuffling in the night streets to keep warm," is acute and distressing. Rosenthal's failure to do anything about their plight leads him to classify himself among those moral cowards who failed to come to the help of Kitty Genovese. He is angry at himself and "at the cops and the hospital people for not taking them somewhere they can be taken care of."

Social history suggests that few of us are able to accept all people in distress as equally deserving of our assistance. (Recall Emerson's derisory reference to "alms for sots.")

Some people seem to be in greater need than others, to be more deserving of help.

- Howard University was recently the scene of a "mock tribunal" to "dispel the myths of the homeless." According to a report in the *Washington Post*, homeless men and women told about their experiences in shelters and how they came to be homeless in the first place.

The room fell silent as David Hamilton Jones, 47, came forward on crutches. Jones said he once worked as an electrical engineer for companies that contracted with the federal government. For him, health problems that kept him from working caused financial problems, and he found it

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<sup>8</sup> A. M. Rosenthal, "The 39th Witness," *New York Times* (Long Island ed.), Feb. 12, 1987, Section 1, p. 31.

difficult to find a place to live. He told the audience he wants to work. "I'm not looking for a handout."<sup>9</sup>

In modern societies, *needs* have come to be defined increasingly as *rights*. The moral rhetoric seeks to persuade us that rights are not only political, but economic and even cultural. A central moral issue of philanthropy, then, is the way in which we choose, establish, and affirm such rights. One approach is for philanthropic voices to bring pressure to bear on the public authorities. Roman Catholic Bishop John R. McGann, of the Diocese of Rockville Centre in New York, argues in a *New York Times* essay that "affordable housing is a basic human right."<sup>10</sup> The bishop urges an end to the curtailment of federal funds for the housing of the elderly and the handicapped, "in light of the grave moral responsibility of government to be deeply involved in such a critical need of its citizenry."

The antipoverty activist Mitch Snyder recently concluded a hunger strike that successfully preserved a public building as a shelter for the homeless in Washington. The hunger strike is by now a familiar device to win public sympathy for a cause and also to bring public pressure to bear on officials. Personal witness of this kind, in its many familiar variations in recent times, is an essential ingredient of American philanthropic discourse.

- Charles Hyder, self-identified by his sign "Fasting Physicist," had lost 160 pounds (of an original 310 at the starting point six months earlier) when he received a message from Mikhail Gorbachev:

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<sup>9</sup> "Dispelling the Myths of the Homeless," *Washington Post*, Feb. 15, 1987, p. B3.

<sup>10</sup> "Affordable Housing is a Basic Human Right," *New York Times* (Long Island Edition), January 25, 1987, Section 4, p. 25.

Your spiritual strength is needed to continue the struggle for preventing a nuclear catastrophe. For that reason, we urge you to stop your hunger strike.<sup>11</sup>

In the rhetoric of philanthropy, basic needs come before less urgent ones. Corporal alms often come before spiritual alms, as Thomas Aquinas said many centuries ago. The elderly, the handicapped, and small children presumably have a more pressing claim on philanthropic resources than does the unemployed electrical engineer. Still, the engineer's need may be more easily met and dealt with, while those other claims seem endless.

There is no national assessment of the philanthropic effort as a whole, no "National Philanthropic Policy" established by Congress. We have only a gross calculation of how much money is contributed and to which areas of concern it is directed. We have, of late, estimates of the numbers of volunteers and rough breakdowns of what they do. National philanthropic priorities change depending on media coverage, economic conditions, and prevailing ideological winds. How then do we choose among the myriad of opportunities to do good?

One quandary of philanthropy is the priority given to needs near at hand when there is suffering elsewhere. One answer is to balance them: the sponsors of the United States portion of the Live Aid concert later organized Hands across America. The former fundraising effort was aimed at the plight of starving people in Africa, the latter at the plight of those in poverty in this country.

As Guido Calabresi and Philip Bobbitt have pointed out, some public choices have tragic side effects.<sup>12</sup> Calabresi analyzed, for example, the

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<sup>11</sup> "Personalities," *Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 1987. Mr. Hyder's hunger strike was still under way as this was written.

<sup>12</sup> Guido Calabresi and Philip Bobbitt, *Tragic Choices* (New York: Norton, 1978).

method of allocation of kidney dialysis machines. The number of machines available was determined to be significantly smaller than the life-dependent demands on them. A first-order solution is to limit categorically those who are eligible to have access to the machines (by age group, for example). A second-order solution is to provide more machines; implicit in this second-order solution is a further reallocation that directs more medical resources to those suffering from kidney disease and less to those suffering from other diseases.

Those who cannot face the consequences of first-order choices turn to second-order choices, but discourse about the moral implications of second-order choices tends to be ignored by those whose entry into the matter is an agonizing first-order emergency. As Calabresi points out, some first order solutions are morally intolerable, even though equally tragic second-order consequences may follow if we avoid them.

Philanthropy as moral discourse is cacaphonic. Those who believe that philanthropy represents a sector (as politics and economics are sectors) often indulge the babel of claims it as if it were guided by a Smithian invisible hand. The philanthropic marketplace is a triumph of free enterprise, scarcely restrained by the gentle guidance of the IRS. Anyone captured by a moral cause can organize and seek to enlist others to serve the same cause.

- The evangelical preacher and faith healer Oral Roberts, an early exponent of the electronic church, captured national attention by announcing that he would be dead within a year if he was not successful in raising \$8 million to relieve financial pressures on the medical center he founded in Oklahoma. According to the evangelical Protestant monthly *Christianity Today*:

"I desperately need you to come into *agreement* with me concerning my life being extended beyond March," states a fund-raising letter signed by Roberts. "God said, 'I want you to use the ORU medical school to put My medical presence on earth. I want you to get this going in one year or I will call you home!'" Roberts said he received this message last March....

Calvin College communications professor Quentin Schultze, a student of Christian fund raising, criticized Roberts's latest appeal, saying it reflects poorly on Christian organizations. But he added: "You've got to see it in the context of a man who has a tremendous amount of pressure on him. He's at the top of an organization that has to bring in millions of dollars each year to keep things going. . . ."

Critics say Roberts's approach to raising funds, even if sincere, constitutes a kind of moral blackmail. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Philanthropy as moral discourse is most often couched in terms that reflect immediate personal experience:

• Sammy Davis Jr., the entertainer and motion picture actor, almost died of liver disease. According to an interview in *Newsday*, Davis now believes that because he has survived his illness he has a responsibility to help others similarly afflicted. Davis expresses the common experience of a calling to philanthropic action:

"Maybe that's one reason I have survived.... I think I was put here to do more than sing 'Bojangles' and 'Candyman.'"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Did Oral Roberts Go Too Far?" *Christianity Today*, Feb. 20, 1987, Vol. 31, pp. 43-45.

<sup>14</sup> "People," *Newsday*, June 18, 1985.

• A man named David Tilman was the subject of a recent newspaper profile in the *Daily Progress* of Charlottesville. The reporter expressed admiration for Tilman's capacity for Voluntary service to the Boy Scouts and as a member of the volunteer fire department and rescue squad while at the same, time holding down a full-time job with the telephone company. "I just figure the Boy Scout work is more important ... so I go with that. That's one reason I quit the National Guard (after 22 years of service), was because of the Boy Scouts."<sup>15</sup>

The newspaper profile was one of a series on "Piedmont People," a familiar journalistic device to lend support to philanthropic work as a community service. Our democratic populism wants us to believe that ordinary people participate in the moral discourse of philanthropy as much as powerful organizations or famous personalities.

The strong will and sense of purpose that Emerson wrote about is transformed by moral aspiration. As Emerson saw so clearly, the moral sentiment can be foolish as well as practical, fraudulent as well as self-sacrificing. We must judge them all. Our answer to the claims of the helpless and the moral arguments of those who come to their aid is a measure of our civility, our humanity, and our good sense.

## NOTES

The examples I have chosen reflect my recent parochial reading habits as a former resident of New York now resident in Virginia, but the kinds of evidence offered here will be found in the newspapers of every American community.

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<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Hardy, "Search for David Tillman Could Lead Number of Places," *Daily Progress*, Feb. 22, 1987.