

Virtue and Its Consequences

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Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good

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By most criteria, philanthropy is a virtue. Or charity is surely a virtue—or at least most of the time. This essay argues that the study of virtue will enrich our understanding of philanthropy and of the problematic of beneficence.

This is an exercise in exploratory discourse. It comes at a time when the social and political environment is rich with references to the Constitution and its history. It also comes, for me personally, not long after I had the privilege to lecture at Monticello. Being here in this place in the company of the members of the American Philosophical Society thus links me in some sense with Jefferson, Franklin, and the makers of the Constitution.

Their mode of discourse was also exploratory. They had to be open to ideas if they were to bring unity from their diversity. Others, less exploratory in their approach to discourse, would have failed. Only ideologues, such as those whom Eric Hoffer labeled true believers, would enter upon the shaping of a constitution knowing all the answers beforehand. And so I enter upon this modest discussion of virtue with exploratory intent, hoping that my own understanding will be improved, and that others might wish to share in a joint venture of inquiry.

Among other things, exploratory discourse reflects our awareness that the consequences of our actions, including our best-intentioned actions, are often problematic. That is what is implied in the title of these remarks: that

the consequences of acts of benevolence toward others may or may not result in benefit to them. It is perhaps the human condition. As the German ethologist Wolfgang Winckler wrote 15 years ago, "Man is a creature whose will is greater than his ability and whose ability is greater than his sense of duty."¹ Given the resulting uncertainties, it is not surprising that so much attention through the ages has been given to the formation of the moral values of the young. The young human animal must be tamed and domesticated, like any other exuberant creature, but then also civilized—capable of self-restraint, capable of political judgment, capable of public discourse.

Thus, presidents and other notable public figures are held up as exemplars of the good life. They are usually assumed to be exemplars of private morality as well as public virtue. Even when the gap is widest between those two dimensions of the life of a political leader's behavior we still do not argue in favor of a life that deliberately and systematically indulges personal vice while cultivating an image of public virtue. Instead, we cultivate a sophisticated tolerance of lapses from virtue—which implies that we know what virtue is, what vice is, and what it is reasonable to expect as a norm of human social behavior in our culture. A recent *Washington Post* study concluded that middle Americans normally thought of as "conservative, patriotic and Republican" had become disillusioned. When asked about the qualities they sought in a president, about half emphasized competence: qualities of intelligence and experience; and the other half virtue: qualities of character.² In a recent lecture at Monticello, presidential adviser Brent Scowcroft listed three aspects of presidential character: courage—the willingness to stick with decisions once made; the ability to pick good people, and "to know when to listen to them"; and judgment, a

¹ Wolfgang Wickler, *The Biology of the Ten Commandments*, McGraw-Hill, 1972, p. 1.

² "GOP Stronghold Reflects Voters' Growing Disillusionment," *The Washington Post*, April 22, 1987.

quality Scowcroft considers more important in a president than great intelligence.³

In the Years since presidents' tax returns have been made public, People have had reason to mock the modest charitable donations of some recent incumbents. One attribute we expect to find in presidents—as character models—is generosity.

My present interests range over philanthropy, political and social thought, and the American presidency, but virtue and vice appear everywhere in our culture, and this discussion could draw on phenomena from other areas of modern life. Given today's ethical realities, what should we attempt to teach young people today about virtue, about vice as well as virtue, or—to put it in less burdened language—what should be attempt to convey to them about the good life? We seem to say that we want young people to be people of good character; that being of good character implies, among other things, being benevolent and generous-actively involved in initiatives for the public good. Our focus, however, is most often on the benefits to young people, and we take for granted that our voluntary efforts will be beneficial to the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, and the homeless. We fail to point out that it is difficult to do good.

Bertrand Russell's *Education and the Good Life* appeared in May 1926; by the end of that year it had been reprinted severi tinles. The book was an optimistic report of the *effectiveness* of new insights from psychology in shaping character, "Think what it would mean," he wrote: "health, freedom, happiness, kindness, intelligence, all nearly universal. In one generation, if we chose, we could bring the millenium.[sic]"⁴

³ Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, April 14, 1987.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Good Life*, Boni and Liveright, 1926, p. 316.

Russell believed that science had achieved a level of understanding of human behavior sufficient to shape the human personality into civilized forms. The insights of psychology would make "the education of character" possible. Russell's confidence has disturbing overtones 60 years later. Much has happened to make us think that the consequences in practice of such social and educational benevolence are often questionable at best. The worst extremes of modern totalitarianism were yet to be revealed when Russell wrote that book; George Orwell's 1984 was yet to be written. Mass education to shape human character according to a predetermined image of what constitutes virtue and the good life has come to represent the most evil distortions of utopian thought rather than the culmination of human wisdom. Konrad Lorenz, another German ethologist, expressed a commonplace when he said that "Knowledge is power and man has achieved great power over his environment. He has not, however, gained the same power over himself and his own behavior. This has resulted in a very dangerous state of affairs."⁵ Whether we like it or not, we seem to be faced with the education of vast numbers of young people, and their education requires education of character as well as instruction in knowledge.

An example of the problem is education in the philanthropic tradition-education in the values of voluntary public service, voluntary association for public rather than private ends, education in altruistic values intended to balance education in egoistic ones. It is a tradition in which most Americans take great pride. It is the virtue of individual Americans that has become the most distinctive virtue of American society as a whole. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the need for education for voluntary action for the public good organized philanthropy. The question is whether thinking about philanthropy in terms of the ethics of virtue provides an effective educational framework.

⁵ Wickler, loc. cit.

It is useful to remember that the origins of the term *virtue* are closely akin to words meaning custom or *usage*. Yet, as Walter Lippmann wrote in *A Preface to Morals*, virtuous actions are "those actions men cannot be expected to do."⁶ That is, virtue can stand for no more than what a particular society accepts as the norm of behavior, unless one adds the moral dimension of conscience, as Lippmann does: "For virtue is that kind of conduct esteemed by God, or public opinion, or that less immediate part of a man's personality which he calls his conscience."⁷

Philanthropy is usually thought to be a moral virtue, to fall within a definition such as that offered by David Hume in *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (175 1): "The epithets *sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent*, or their equivalents, are known in all languages, and universally express the highest merit which human nature is capable of attaining."⁸

Virtue has other characteristics: as John Dewey pointed out, virtuous action must also reveal "wholeheartedness, persistence, and sincerity."⁹

The philanthropic tradition develops in two main streams: that of charity-acts of mercy to relieve the suffering of the innocent and helpless; and that of philanthropy-acts of community to improve the quality of life. The idea of charity is essentially religious; the idea of philanthropy is essentially secular.

The history of the idea of virtue may also be said to develop in two main streams of thought: the classical and religious tradition of moral behavior,

⁶ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, Macmillan, 1929, p. 222.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Bobbs-Merrill, 1957, p. 9.

⁹ John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics*, Henry Holt, 1909, pp.403-405.

and the Renaissance and Enlightenment traditions of virtue as excellence, as "manliness." The former stream is the one that would see charity as a moral virtue; the latter might look upon philanthropy as the display of wealth appropriate to a person of high social standing.¹⁰ The Enlightenment view tends to look upon virtue as rational self-interest, to the point that Rousseau could argue that virtue "was no more than love of self." However, virtue takes on a third dimension, in addition to morality and self-esteem: that of "a defiant political slogan."¹¹

"[T]he principle of all virtue," Lippmann declared, "is to transcend the immediacy of desire and to live for ends which are transpersonal."¹² In the tradition of voluntary giving, almsgiving has long been criticized as "throwing money at the problem," as responding impulsively but not thoughtfully. Modern philanthropy, in contrast, is characterized by some scholars as the systematic effort to uncover the root causes of social problems and to devise strategies for their solution. Philanthropy in this form is then above "the immediacy of desire" and beyond the self-interested claims of the self to the transpersonal.

The three streams of philanthropy as moral virtue, personal excellence, and political protest continue to be mixed in our tradition. They do not mix well. For example, grand philanthropic gestures of mercy toward the poor cause uncomfortable feelings in many people who think that one should follow the Lord's instruction and do one's giving in secret. The very idea of doing good in order to enhance one's social standing seems egoistic rather than altruistic and thus contrary to the essential nature of beneficence. The motivation as well as the outcome is judged. To what extent, one must ask,

¹⁰ Jerrold E. Seigel, "Virtue in and Since the Renaissance, 11 in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Scribners, 1973, vol. 4, pp. 476-486.

¹¹ Carol Blum, "Virtue," in *Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment*, Blackwell (forthcoming).

¹² *Ibid.*

are such attitudes simply the reflection of cultural norms and to what extent are they the product of universal values? One persistent thread of almsgiving throughout history insists on protecting the dignity of the recipient. It recognizes that the philanthropic relationship is asymmetric, a relationship of dominance and dependence. In a society that places a high value on individual autonomy, to be dependent on the voluntary generosity of another is to be put in a demeaning position. So strongly is this felt that some argue against philanthropy as a virtue: Philanthropy is instead an artifact of a culture that has failed to meet basic human needs. This recent quotation is typical of this point of view when cast in religious terms:

The logic of Jesus' Golden Rule and of Moses' and Jesus' commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself admit of no other conclusion, for private and church charity have proven, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that they are incapable of preventing the suffering and death of innocent travelers along life's highway. Only government, funded by our taxes, *whether relinquished willingly or unwillingly*, can do the job. That's the reality.¹³ (Emphasis added.)

Views of human nature emerge that imply that we can be expected to do good spontaneously, without self-interest, or that contend that we will not do good unless our self-interest is also advanced in the process. The focus of attention in all this, of course, is on the giver rather than on the recipient. But philanthropy-especially in that form of it called charity-is usually thought of as a virtue, as a habit of doing good. To assert that someone "does good" for others presumably means that those others are better off. The doer of good is also thought to be better off after the fact for having done good in the first place, even though the end result may be measured by increased happiness offsetting decreased resources.

¹³ John C. Cort, "Christ and Neighbor," *New Oxford Review*, May 1987, p. 21.

To speak of virtue and its consequences is also intended to imply that the consequences are problematic. We do not know when we set out to do good to or for another whether that will in fact be the result of our action. To act voluntarily for the good of another is to enter the realm of unintended harmful consequences as well as intended benevolent ones. The virtue of prudence, according to theologian Josef Pieper, is "the ability [the determination?] to see what is truly there"—presumably the philanthropic virtue of highest priority.¹⁴

With Russell, our society seems to believe that young people should be nourished in the tradition of voluntary action for the public good. This morning's *Philadelphia Inquirer* has a feature article about Haverford College's honor code: "A college where trust is the rule."¹⁵ The University of Virginia also has an honor code, and students charged by other students with violations are in turn judged by their peers. Two points are implied in such reports: that trust is essential to healthy community life, and trust in contemporary society is less evident than it should be. The economic importance of trust was pointed out some years ago by Kenneth Arrow¹⁶; the political importance of trust is forced upon us whenever there are allegations that trust has been violated in or near the White House.

Voluntary action for the public good takes many forms. We usually think of "philanthropy" only in the dimension of voluntary giving, and give too little weight to philanthropy as moral discourse. For example, Amy Carter, daughter of the former president, was arrested and tried (and later acquitted) of action at the University of Massachusetts to prevent recruitment

¹⁴ Gilbert Leilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 22.

¹⁵ Huntly Collins, "A college where trust is the rule," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 25, 1987.

¹⁶ Kenneth Arrow, *The Limits of Organization*, Norton, 1974.

efforts by the Central Intelligence Agency. Students at the University of Virginia disrupted a meeting of the Board of Visitors to protest University investments in corporations doing business in South Africa.

Civil disobedience and even revolution have thus often been thought to be a virtue—the virtue of political courage—whether directed against public policy or private interest. Philanthropic activity—voluntary initiative for the public good—is the mechanism by which many Americans use their First Amendment rights to reform American society. Such efforts often require demonstration of the virtues of courage and charity, hope and justice. The much-debated virtue of prudence—practice of the virtue of knowing the truth of the consequences of one's acts before committing them—may be lacking. Hence the problematic nature of philanthropy, a qualified virtue as all of them are.

The study of virtue is useful, it seems to me. It is even unavoidable if we are to be concerned about the moral as well as the political and economic heritage we pass on. There has been much talk about "the need for values" in education, a notion as simplistic as Russell's 60 years ago, assuming that there is agreement about what constitutes the good life and the good society. There has been increasing talk about character, also a useful notion if we go back to Aristotle and see that character is not the simple summing of individual virtues. The idea of philanthropy as a virtue helps us to see that no single virtue is sufficient, although it may have claim to being the virtue that best expresses our humanity.

The study of virtue is undermined by its conceptual ambiguity, which is one reason why scholars have largely abandoned it in recent years. Virtue is also difficult to talk about because it carries with it 19th Century notions of oppressive perfectionism and original sin.

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The study of virtue also reveals that it is problematic. Its outcomes are uncertain. Philanthropy is an example of a virtue that is judged not only in terms of its motivations, but of its consequences.