How Philanthropy Works

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To study the philanthropic tradition is to trace the "social history of the moral imagination." The word trace suggests a thin but discernible line winding its way through time. From what? To what? Presumably, the search would find evidence of earlier and simpler forms of philanthropy in a distant past, and would enable us to see the evolution of philanthropic principles and values across generations, cultures, ages.

To say that the process reveals the "moral imagination" of humanity at work implies that we will find evidence of innovation, extension, reconsideration. If societies like ours can be described in terms of the weights they assign to self-help, mutual aid, government assistance, and philanthropy, then defining characteristics of philanthropy should also appear in the work that takes place under its name (or its many aliases).

John Henry Newman provided a way of thinking about the religious history of the moral imagination in his book, An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine. He sought the essence of the idea of Christianity and then attempted to show the stages of its development over time. The fullness of the idea of Christianity has been only gradually revealed or discovered, even though it was present in all its fullness at the moment of its first revelation to humanity. That is, at least for a Christian of different training, Newman seems to be saying that the struggle of humanity has been through a Slough of Despond where ignorance, doubt, and fear have obscured purpose as well as direction. Newman's arguments were put forward in the context of a struggle over the role of the Church in this process: a dissenting Protestant view held that all of God's truth is revealed in the Bible; the Roman Catholic view held that God's truth is revealed gradually with the help of the Church as teacher.

I am intrigued by the Kantian possibility that there is One Truth of philanthropy, one great law of philanthropy, one great categorical imperative from which we can and must derive all forms of philanthropic practice. Unless philanthropy reveals this defining, essential -- no, quintessential -- truth, it is a heresy of some sort. The stewards of the philanthropic tradition, self-installed as a priesthood, tell us what is or what is not philanthropic, and justify their judgments on the basis of history.

To borrow from still another religious thinker, John Wesley, we have four points from which to identify our place in the tradition and our future course: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

For example, one can plausibly point to a New Testament in a society in which 85% identify themselves as Christian (or perhaps, more accurately, a society in which 85% identify themselves as roughly 45% Christian, using church attendance as a measure of faith). One of the most familiar passages of the New Testament is chapter 25, verses 35-37 in the gospel of Matthew:

".... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

The story of the Good Samaritan is another example of philanthropic literacy that has reached far beyond its origins. There is a scripture of philanthropy that is indeed evident in the scriptures or texts or rituals or images of all other societies, cultures, and religions that I know. Wesley's justifications for Christianity grounded themselves also in tradition, by which he meant the survival of practices and values. Experience as a source of Christian apologetics contends that ordinary

humans can find Jesus in their lives. Reason says that the mind of humans is equal to the challenge of modes of thought that are compatible with revealed, divine truth.

Such a check list is worth applying to one's notion of "philanthropy" as an idea.

If philanthropy is an idea, like Christianity is an idea, Newman contended that it "developed" over time. What the idea of Christianity meant to Christians, say, of the third century after the birth of Christ, was not the same thing it meant to Christians of the time of Thomas Aquinas.

How could one know whether an idea developed from one stage to a higher stage? Newman identified seven criteria: ....

Is it useful -- that is, does it help us to see something otherwise obscured to us -- to apply some analogous tests to the development of the idea of philanthropy? Would evolution provide a more fruitful metaphor? Are notions of "heresy" and "mutation" analogous? Can we infer from the past, as best we can interpret it, a course of development of philanthropy that would persuade us that one path is better, say, more enlightened than another?

These are very slippery tools in the hands of the most skilled craftsman; they are downright dangerous when used by unskilled carpenters like me. I am also reminded of a lovely adage: "Words are tools that break in the hand." The same can be said of ideas, or of systems of explanation: "Systems of explanation illuminate up to a point, then falsify."

How do we decide what is "true" philanthropy and what is "false" philanthropy? The answers to those questions are to be found both in the integrity of the tradition -- integrity meaning here a consistency of practice and values over time -- and in rational critique. Whatever the philanthropic value or practice, it is, history tells us, susceptible to a critique that is itself an exercise of the moral imagination. In the example of the overseer instructing the workers in the fields to leave the gleanings to the refugees, a principle of charity is established: give out of one's surplus to those who

are in need and have no way to turn (in this case, where self-help, mutual aid, and government assistance are absent or inadequate).

The philanthropic flaw in gleaning, it began to be pointed out very soon after it began, was dependency. A higher form of charity, Maimonides would argue -- indeed, the highest -- would be to take those persons into one's business, put them on their feet, help them help themselves.

Along the way, the moral imagination had begun to realize that dependency and dignity were related. Humans who can sustain themselves somehow have greater dignity than those who are dependent in vital ways on the efforts of others. To achieve maturity is to achieve autonomy; to be denied autonomy is to be trapped in the role of a child.

The moral imagination ramifies: someone saw that the dignity of the vulnerable might be protected by their anonymity. Maimonides was astute enough to recognize that the donor might be tempted to make too much of his or her generosity: there is good reason why the sin of pride ranks so high on the list of the deadly sins. If both parties were anonymous, the dignity of the recipient would be protected and the vanity of the donor would be constrained. Someone then had the practical idea to remove a stone from the wall of the synagogue and put the alms box there: the donor would put the gift in one side, the recipient would remove it from the other, and both would remain unknown to each other.

Philanthropy seen as the social history of the moral imagination reveals countless illustrations of what became summarized in the Middle Ages as "corporal alms" and "spiritual alms." Some of the things we do for other grow out of their physical and material needs: we give food because people are hungry and have no food. At other times what is needed is compassion: I am told that the gift of time and human presence at the bedside of the dying is a priceless gift. It is the essence of Mother Teresa's work. It requires some form of empathy to be alert to the psychological needs of others, some of whom may be in circumstances entirely alien to our own experience. We are asked to visit those in prison or in some other

institutional isolation. We must "imagine what it would be like" to be trapped in that wheelchair or confined to that room.

The cumulative insights of drawn from empathetic imagination are a powerful force in shaping philanthropic practice. If there is an underlying philanthropic value of, say, dignity, then there is a standard, a way of testing every philanthropic act in behalf of those in need. Because each of us has the capacity to be obtuse, often we rely on others to alert us to blunders we might make that would injure rather than comfort those we seek to help. Judith Martin, the famous Miss Manners, could devote her next book to the protocol and etiquette -- she would say the ethics of philanthropic behavior. She would point out that in some respects philanthropy is reciprocal; if we are to be concerned for the dignity of the recipient, it is incumbent on recipients to be respectful of those who have come to their aid. There are some "rights" of donors, some claims on recipients, that help to shape the culture of giving and receiving. There is, in some sense, a better way and a worse, if not a right way and a wrong.

A phenomoneologist of philanthropy might deconstruct philanthropic relations and discover a thousand subtleties. Some of them might be alterations in social status driven not at all by philanthropy but by ambition. The moral imagination is not an isolated or pure realm; the entrepreneurial imagination often comes into play to advance the narrow self-interest of the donor with the benefit to the recipient as a side effect. That is what much of what is now called "cause-marketing" seems to be about. The committee planning the social event to raise money for the Children's Museum may in fact be more creative about entertaining the guests than about advancing the cause of the Museum. After all, the final result after the party is over is often no more than sending a check for the net after expenses.

It's a judgmental business, this searching after the social history of the moral imagination. When we trace the idea of philanthropy over time and across cultures, we find much to praise and much to fault. In some cases

we are merely reflecting our insensitivity to cultural differences, denigrating any practice that seems to deviate from what we know and practice ourselves. In other cases it is because we have a standard -- the dignity of the recipient, or the idea of anonymity, for example. We can somehow identify a basic principle of philanthropy -- that is, in Newman's terms, a development of the idea -- or we can see it as a deviation from the principle -- what I intended when I mocked cause-marketing as self-promotion. In Newman's fashion, we trace one path as the true one and mark others as losing one's way.

The social history of the moral imagination is thus one place to begin the search for the philanthropic tradition. We are seeking a narrative or a story of human experience that "explains" the struggle for humans and their societies to make altruism more dependable, more sensitive, more efficacious.

The simplest and most accessible entry point is in the lives of individuals -- ordinary people who somehow become extraordinary servants of others. John Howard and Elizabeth Fry are usually credited with launching the long and still -- continuing struggle for prison reform....

Martin Luther King....

Ralph Nader....

Each of these stories, of course, is itself susceptible to further interpretation and reinterpretation. The historian Jack Hexter argued that historians are never relieved of their responsibility -- they are always vulnerable, a decade or a century or a millennium later, to another historian's new evidence or new argument. We also know, when we pause to remember it, that even the greatest hero did not act alone -- none of us can be isolated from the influences of others on our thought and action. Elizabeth Fry, as a Quaker, was influenced not only by George Fox and others in her tradition, but by the influence of these anonymous others who were beside her and perhaps spoke at meeting. The anonymous young people who rallied to Ralph Nader's cause, the anonymous marchers in

parades, even the anonymous reporters and journalists telling us what Martin Luther King was up to, all shaped what we know and think of what he said.

Biography has all sorts of limitations but it has great power; even the least imaginative of us can respond to the stories of people with whom we can "identify" in some way. We sometimes learn from anti-heroes, of course, from rebels with or without a cause, from false prophets and others who manipulate our passion and conviction and faith. Some false prophets are, after all, quite sincere.

This, then, is the way philanthropy works. If we search through the tradition of philanthropy we will find, I think, evidence that shows certain factors always present.

The first is vision,the moral imagination expressed in words and ideas, the discovery of what the rest of us may not have seen. Thoreau gave us a new vision of a life of isolation that revalued ordinary things of nature. Muir gave us a sense of how the majestic things of nature might be protected and preserved. The Nearings and others gave us a way of life that combined personal simplicity and respect for nature. The development of an idea.

A vision tells us what someone sees as a way to ease suffering or to improve the quality of life, or perhaps both. The world, we're told, will either be a better or a less-worse place if we can see what he or she points out to us. The man beating his horse on the streets of New York City a century ago thought of his horse as his property, something he could use or destroy as he pleased. It was someone else's vision of that animal that gave it some rights of existence and survival that redefined "ownership." Not only that man beating the horse but all the rest of us were made to look at horses and other living creatures in a different way. To think of the suffering of a nonhuman creature is an extension of the moral imagination. It is a vision of human life in relation to other forms of life that is larger

than the vision that treats living creatures as being without moral claims on us.

It should not astonish us that some other cultures had made that discovery thousands of years earlier, and had even incorporated it into religious ritual and practice. But in the American society of the late 19th century it was a bold claim.

Not every one agreed. But there was an outpouring of agreement and support from some of the people of New York City. The early records might show us how broad or narrow was the base of support. Unrecorded would be the gift of assent: those people who heard of the action to restrain their main from beating his horse, the voice or voices who proposed that there be a stand taken in defense of the rights of dumb animals -- dumbonly in the sense that the animals couldn't speak for themselves. Had they been able to speak, they might have welcomed the sentiment of shared values.However eloquent the voice that articulates the vision, the vision is ephemeral if others don't see it, or can't. "A voice crying in the wilderness" can be a lonely voice. It becomes powerful when it engages a chorus.

There is a critical difference in the philanthropic tradition between the idea of benevolence and that of beneficence. The distinction makes us realize that it is possible simply to think well of someone or something without acting on that sentiment.

The moral sentiment that is applauded is an aspect of philanthropy, even an essential one, but it lacks force without action. The word beneficence is not about good will but about good works.

If we respond positively to a social vision, if we share the value it expresses, we still face the reality of doing something about it. In philanthropy the key is the same as it is in most of human affairs: organization. The particular organizational form of philanthropy is the voluntary association,a concept so powerful that it deserves its own separate treatment. The work of philanthropy as it is now (and here)

envisioned is enlisting people who share certain values in organizations that seek to convert social visions into social realities. In the civil rights movement, the organizational genius of the religious congregation was the fulcrum on which the movement achieved its first and most important victories. Those voluntary associations drew on the strength of other, older ones -- the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People among many others.

Vision, shared values, and organization. The process has another step. If vision without shared values is a voice crying in the wilderness, organizations withoutresources are impotent. Resources includes most importantly the work of human beings in organizations -- in the philanthropic tradition, that means the work of volunteers, people who work for the cause rather than for pecuniary reward. Even so, organizations have diverse and mundane needs -- all organizations need financial resources if they are to expand their influence. Money is not always necessary; money is not always even helpful. But in the lives of most organizations money is necessary to advance the work, like it or not. Vision, shared values, organization, and resources, then, are the indispensable elements of the social history of the moral imagination, the elements of philanthropy in action. If there is any merit to this system of explanation, it should be useful in looking at the development of the idea of philanthropy in history.

There is an inescapable dialectical tension present in this model as in the model of how our society works. In that model the tension is between concern for self and concern for others. In this model the dialectic in between "the public good" and "faction."

One of the great problems of philanthropy -- but a cause for delight among those who would deflate or denigrate it -- is that we do not "know" in some scientific sense which is true and which is false philanthropy. Such judgments often defy what William James called "the coercion of reason." We have to decide by our own behavior -- we vote with our gifts of money

and service -- that which is praiseworthy and that which should be condemned that claims to work under the rubric of the public good. By my definition, philanthropy is about the public good. But it is about whether a given act or program or organization or value is "in fact" a good.

The easy ones, for most of us, are those we can sort out by label: all racist organizations are factions, their passion would divide the society against itself, their work is adverse to the well-being of others. The Ku Klux Klan is an almost banal example. The organizations that make up the recent versions of the "militia movement" or the "patriot movement" are easily classified as factions by some of us but clearly enlist the support of otherwise decent people. Until recently, a large majority of people, whether donors or not, would say that the United Way campaigns serve a good purpose. Some would now withhold their support because a senior executive of the national organization was found guilty of criminal abuses of the organization's funds. But others would oppose the United Way because it is said to be an exclusionist tool of the Establishment, denying access to organizations that were socially or racially "marginal." Similar criticisms are brought against the Boy Scouts; a different set of criticisms is brought against the Girl Scouts; the Salvation Army, always numbered among the most trusted of charitable organizations, was charged with policies prejudicial to the rights of gays and lesbians; symphonies and museums are usually charged with being "elitist," providing tax-supported assistance to the amusements of the wealthy; foundations fund universities to support research that is either irrelevant to social needs or a corruption of teaching and the tenure process.... etc.

"The public good" is a fuzzy notion, and the idea of faction as well. Yet there is a tension between the two -- the noblest cause may have to meet the highest moral standard, and every noble cause can become a mask for evil.

The individual history of every philanthropic organization should reveal a vision, shared values, organization, and resources, and the tension between the public good and faction.