

PHILANTHROPY AS A CONCEPT

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Philanthropy is an "essentially contested concept."

The idea was introduced by the British philosopher W. B. Gallie in an influential essay thirty years ago. According to Gallie, essentially contested concepts "essentially involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users." As William E. Connolly writes in The Terms of Political Discourse:

According to Gallie, "democracy" is such a concept, at least as it is used in western industrial societies. It is an achievement valued by most. Commonly accepted criteria of its application are weighted differently by opposing parties, and certain criteria viewed as central by one party are rejected as inappropriate or marginal by others. Finally, arguments about its proper use turn on fundamental issues about which reasoned argument is possible but full and definitive resolution often unlikely. Thus, for some the central criterion of a democracy is the power of citizens to choose their government through competitive elections; for others this factor is less important than the equality of opportunity for all citizens in attaining positions of political leadership; for still others both of these criteria pale in significance if the continuous participation of citizens at various levels of political life is not attained. These disagreements proliferate further when we see that concepts used to express them, such as 'power', 'political', 'equality', and 'participation', require further elucidation also, a process likely to expose further disagreements among those contesting the concept of democracy

Philanthropy is an "essentially contested concept," an idea that is bent and distorted by attempts to contain within it a diversity of human phenomena that resist generalization and categorization. Philanthropy has changed in definition -- been

modified in definition -- by the deliberate intellectual effort to find a word that would identify different concepts: (a) general benevolence -the original Greek meaning of "love of mankind"; (b) the application of the social sciences to social problems -- the activity now labeled as the profession of social work; (c) the identification of social problems, their study, and the development of strategies for their solution; and (d) all of the above -philanthropy as the embracive term for voluntary action for the public good.

But our differences about the meaning of philanthropy are more important than the different things we would apply it to. Philanthropy becomes an essentially contested concept when it is seen as a struggle between mercy and justice, between relief and development, between the alleviation of suffering and the reform of social institutions. A second difference of consequence is the question of self-interest: can philanthropy be used as a means to other ends, to spin off collateral benefits? A third difference about which people disagree is the extent to which philanthropy works its way through pressure on or collusion government or business. To what extent does the reach of philanthropy extend into the other two sectors, justifying the politicization or the commercialization of philanthropic endeavor?

Philanthropy as a g concept.

Philanthropy may prove to be an idea similar to that of general intelligence, as proposed by psychologists early in this century. Tests were developed which claimed to measure intelligence as if it were a single, coherent concept. Howard Gardner summarizes the debate in his Frames of Mind:

Still, one long-standing debate within the area of intelligence testing must be briefly rehearsed here. On the one side are arrayed those individuals influenced by the British educational psychologist Charles Sparman -- in my terms, a "hedgehog" -- who believe in the existence of "g" -- a general overriding factor of intelligence which is measured by every task in an intelligence test. On the other side are supporters of the American psychometrician and "fox" L.L. Thurstone, who believe in the existence of a small set of primary mental faculties that are relatively independent of one another and are measured by different tasks.

Thurstone, in fact, nominated seven such factors -- verbal comprehension, word fluency, numerical fluency, spatial visualization, associative memory, perceptual speed, and reasoning.... (16-17)

Gardner considers himself closer to the foxes than to the hedgehogs, but has reservations about the foxes, too. Gardner's own theory is one of "multiple intelligences," which he contends can be defined as six: linguistic intelligence, musical intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, and "the personal intelligences." Gardner rejects the earlier "multifactorial" theory of Thurstone because it "does not question the existence of general horizontal abilities, like perception and memory, which may cut across different content areas." The methods of the foxes are also deficient because they are based on pen-and-pencil tests; "there is simply no way to sample an individual's competence in such areas as bodily expression, musical ability, or the forms of personal intelligence." (321)

These insights from psychology suggest that essentially contested concepts can be debates that might be resolved by agreement in time. Sustained grappling with the concepts may reveal the weaknesses or even the fallacies of argument: Gardner points out the fallacy of reification among those who would see general intelligence as a g factor. Some arguments reduce to the arbitrary; as Gardner points out: "When it comes to interpretation of intelligence testing, we are faced with an issue of taste or preference rather than one on which scientific closure is likely to be reached." (17)

Many people are dissatisfied with the notion of "philanthropy" for reasons roughly similar to the objections to "g". To impose a single term on such disparate activity and values puts apples, oranges, and kumquats as well as eggs in one basket. Yet even at that, philanthropy presumably leaves out other things that might be included. The beneficial effects of self-interest in the marketplace have been considered as different from philanthropy, but direct corporate grantmaking is included, presumably on the basis of the beneficiaries of the grants.

In one context, the essential value is the voluntary dimension; in another context, it is the private character of the source; in still a third context it is the requirement of serving the public good.

Is there a g factor? Or is the notion of philanthropy an abstraction from a cluster of values analogous to Gardner's multiple intelligence? If so, how many different fundamental forms of philanthropy are there?

Philanthropy as ideology.

Thinking of philanthropy in the light of the debates in psychology about the concept of general intelligence brings out the importance of cultural influence. The critics of intelligence testing have faulted it for its exclusive emphasis on scientific reasoning and its neglect of other important factors. Scientists with a particular set of intellectual values -- their own -- tried to develop tests which would equate those intellectual values with a desired quality called intelligence. The scientists themselves may have been unaware of their own bias. More recently, the charges against tests have included racial and ethnic bias as well. There is reason to believe that some of the most distressing failures of philanthropy have been the result of cultural bias, that philanthropy can become an "ideology." At least, that is what is at issue in the allegations that the United Way is biased in favor of Establishment causes and concerns and neglects or ignores the needs and organizations of minorities. The charge also appears in the relative lack of attention to research and treatment of "minority diseases" -- sickle cell anemia, Tay-Sachs disease, and AIDS.

One need only read the literature urging the development of corporate philanthropy to recognize that its more powerful appeal to some people was that it appeared to be an alternative to government, a way of slowing the growth of public welfare services and the intrusion of government influence into fields such as the arts and humanities. The impassioned defense of philanthropy as an instrument of freedom is common among those of us who see corporate philanthropy as an alternative funding source to government. The comparative cost-benefit analysis of welfare services provided by private giving, by the marketplace, or by government agencies would not be ideological in the same way.

Consider this recent textbook definition of ideology (from Roy C. Macridis in Contemporary Political Ideologies):

Ideology has been defined as "a set of closely related beliefs or ideas, or even attitudes, characteristic of a group or community"....

What separated theory or philosophy from ideology is that while the first two involve contemplation, organization of ideas, and wherever possible, demonstration, ideology incites people to action. It shapes beliefs that move people into action. Men and women organize in order to impose certain philosophies or theories and to realize them in a given society. Ideology thus involves action and collective effort. Even when they originate (as they often do) in philosophy or theory, ideologies are inevitably highly simplified, and even distorted, versions of the original doctrines. It is always interesting to know the philosophy or theory from which an ideology originates. But it is at least as important to understand ideology as a distinct and separate entity to be studied in terms of its own logic and dynamics, rather than in terms of the theory from which it stems or the closeness of its resemblance to it.

Philanthropy is likely to be no more than ideological as long as it remains at an unexamined level and does not reveal the structure of ideas which hold it together and give it energy. Apart from the theory or philosophy, then, Macridis recommends that we return to the first ethical question and ask of philanthropy, what is going on?

The search for the core.

Unpacking the idea of philanthropy uncovers a set of assumptions based on more fundamental fields of knowledge and society and humanity: society, nation, state, government, law, property, morality -- essentially contested concepts, every one. Even alluding to such concepts is an intimidating reminder that we routinely take for granted vast areas of knowledge about which we know very little -- and what we know, we know imperfectly. Most of us do not walk around with a developed philosophy of human nature which we would be prepared to defend before an academic committee.

We work with fragments and tacit knowledge: "we can know more than we can tell," as Michael Polanyi put it in his Terry Lectures at Yale in 1962 (published in 1966 under the title The Tacit Dimension). At times, however, we know a good deal less than we claim to know, when our thought is frozen ideologically. Polanyi describes a meeting with Mikhail Bukharin, the Communist Party theoretician, in Moscow in 1935:

When I asked him.... about the pursuit of pure science in Soviet Russia, he said that pure science was a morbid symptom of a class society; under socialism the conception of science pursued for its own sake would disappear, for the interests of scientists would spontaneously turn to problems of the current Five Year Plan.

I was struck by the fact that this denial of the very existence of independent scientific thought came from a socialist theory which derived its tremendous persuasive power from its claim to scientific certainty. (3)

Polanyi thought he had found in tacit knowledge an alternative to the false science of Bukharin and to the reductionist denials of positivism, "ideologies," if you will, that are still brought to bear against philanthropy. (The Marxist says that philanthropy isn't necessary politically because the state will provide what each of us needs, and the positivist says that philanthropy isn't necessary epistemologically because self-interest is sufficient to explain our behavior.) Polanyi believed that tacit knowledge is the knowledge that helps us sense an undiscovered, emergent problem -- the knowledge process involved in the exercise of the moral imagination.

Polanyi envisioned a "society of explorers":

I have spoken to the principle of mutual control through which each scientist independently plays his part in maintaining scientific traditions over an immense domain of inquiry of which he knows virtually nothing. A society of explorers is controlled throughout by such mutually imposed authority....

In our society, ideas about morality are also actively cultivated by different circles of mutual appreciation, which are deeply divided against each other; and in politics these circles are deliberately organized as rivals....

[These professional associations] are feared more than are scientific associations, because the truth of literature and poetry, of history and political thought, of philosophy, morality, and legal principles, is more vital than the truth of science. This is why the independent cultivation of such truth has proved an intolerable menace to modern tyranny.

Philanthropy and Human Nature.

To talk about the study of philanthropy means to deal with a subject almost as grand in scope as politics or economics, two subjects that seductively imply that the principles they contain will order most of the knowledge required to be current with human life and behavior in the world. Of course, each rests on a foundation of human psychology, which rests in turn on general psychology, which rests in turn on biological sciences of great complexity. The extent to which human psychology is understood in biological or even biochemical terms does not exclude the claims of those who speak of the spiritual forces at work in the relations between parent and child or between or among siblings. There is also the unsteady intellectual bridge called "social psychology," persuaded that analysis of human behavior in small groups gives different knowledge from that gained by psychologists studying the individual in isolation and by sociologists who study society in its larger aggregations.

It is not surprising, then, that there have been countless efforts to summarize and synthesize this knowledge into theories of human nature and human society. If we are to understand philanthropy, we need some sense of what people are like in general. The following passage from J.R. Lucas's The Principles of Politics suggest how difficult that is, and why:

Human beings, as we know them, are often selfish, but sometimes unselfish; their judgement is fallible, but sometimes in the course of argument people come to hold the same view, which is, as far as we can see, reasonable and right; they are infinite in their complexity and aspirations, but finite in their capacities and achievements; they occupy the same public external world, but are each the center of a private perspective, not necessarily shareable with others; they have values, which are neither necessarily the same for all, nor actually different for each; they can help one another, and need to, but can hurt one another, and often do. (1) The Federalist comes immediately to mind: "What greater reflection on human nature than government itself?"

There are other ways of thinking about the common characteristics of humanity. The British philosopher Leslie Stephenson wrote an introductory text in 1974 in which he offered Seven Theories of Human Nature. He asked a series of philosophical questions about each of them, including this one:

Another central question of philosophy is that of the nature of moral values. Plato asserted their objectivity, in his theory of Forms. [B.F.] Skinner finds no basis for them at all, except in terms of the survival of the species. Christianity asserts that moral values are ultimately given by God; Marx, Freud, and [Konrad] Lorenz attribute them to the various pressures of society, and Sartre says we choose them for ourselves. These disagreements are fundamental, and the problems they raise are mainly philosophical. They are the special concern of moral philosophy.

Perhaps this is the place to draw attention to the understanding of man offered by the great moral philosophers. In Aristotle's Nichoachean Ethics, Hume's Treatise of Human Nature, Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, and in their modern successors, we find ethical views based on a general view of human

nature.... And although the philosophical bases of these ethical systems differ in many ways, we can perhaps discern some features in common. They can be seen as basing their prescriptions for the good life on certain general and uncontroversial facts about human nature -- that men wish to avoid pain, they need food, shelter, and the society of other men, they want to find a purpose in life, and to exercise their manifold abilities free from interference.... (123-24)

A similar approach has been taken by Tom Campbell in his more recent Seven Theories of Human Society. (Campbell teaches at Glasgow; Stephenson taught at St. Andrews.) Parallel to Stephenson's Plato, Aristotle, Christianity, Marx, Freud, Skinner, and Lorenz, Campbell proposes that we study Aristotle, Hobbes, Adam Smith, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Alfred Schutz. Campbell identifies three "perennial philosophical issues" that remain after considering the seven "competing approaches": freewill versus determinism, the nature of explanation, and the objectivity of value judgments remain to plague each approach. To single out the third of these:

There is, however, no more open question in philosophy than that of the epistemology or truth-value of moral judgements. On the one hand it is argued that moral discourse has many features similar to the forms of speech which we use to make factual statements (for instance conflicting moral judgements are assumed to contradict each other), and it remains the unshakable conviction of most people that at least some types of conduct must be accepted as good or evil by every rational human being....

On the other hand the ineradicable nature of moral disagreement between equally informed persons, the evidence of diversity of moral beliefs in different societies, classes and historical periods, and the intellectual difficulty of making clear what sort of objective reality values could have, all these combine to produce skepticism about the very idea of moral truth and falsehood. (239)

The process of inquiry has led us from consideration of whether philanthropy is an essentially contested concept, a slippery idea which none of us can seize firmly and claim exclusive rights to. Thinking about philanthropy as a definable permeating quality analogous to intelligence suggests, at least, that we might progress further if we were able to speak of multiple philanthropies the way Howard Gardner and others speak of multiple intelligences. The ability to question our underlying assumptions becomes important when we look at the characteristics of ideology (another essentially contested concept).

We are in search of a core of ideas essential to our understanding of philanthropy, but our search is inhibited by our ignorance and by the scope of our ambition. There is hope that we might find what we are looking for in the exploratory discourse of the tacit dimension, looking for problems that we are not absolutely sure exist, and for answers that may not be possible. In order to work at all we lean on assumptions about human nature and human society, ideas which present still further obstacles when we reflect on them. My own eclectic habits of mind tend to select among such sources for the things that are consistent with life in a free and open and democratic society. That is my starting point; that is also my destination.

II

To think about the talk about philanthropy, then, probably requires a rough political-economic philosophy that will permit some generalizations that others might share. Mine are these:

- A concept of human nature that allows for rational noneconomic behavior -- for one-way transfers of exchangeables -- for the public good. If altruism is not a part of the human condition but merely a refinement on the self-interested egoism of the selfish gene (a debate that others must resolve), then the notion of philanthropy is still essential to what it means to be civilized.
- A concept of the human condition which accepts human frailty and pathology as well as human competence and goodness, in a social environment that shapes and is shaped by human desires, aspirations, weaknesses, knowledge, and ignorance.

- A notion of the individual as a distinct entity -distinct from other people as well as distinct from the natural world. The concept of the individual allows for antisocial as well as prosocial behavior; it also allows for withdrawal and isolation as well as participation in community. The notion of the individual has developed to include the political and economic rights inherent in individuality, and the burdens and risks of the extremes of personal freedom. The ways in which individuals express the preferences made possible by their freedom gives us a concept of personality -- patterns of behavior that are roughly predictable. Individualism in extreme forms is possible: in the parable of the rich young man who turned his back on God and walked away. In its more radical form, the consequences of individualism are fatal.
- A political-economic system based on private property. To speak of private property requires a legal system that recognizes the use of property, the idea of profit to be gained from the use of property, and the idea of "liberality" -- the right to dispose of property for other than private and exclusive benefit.
- A political-economic system that recognizes individuals and groups as actors and agents: a system that is organized around a free and open marketplace and that is dependent on traditional values of honesty and trust in exchange, saving, investment, and commerce.

All of these values -- freedom, individualism, democracy, rights, the free marketplace of ideas as well as goods -- are the cumulative product of a social philosophy that is usually labelled "western liberalism." Among other things, western liberalism puts a high value on reason and its associated instruments of education and science. It assumes action in the face of human and social problems, rather than passive acceptance of evil conditions imposed by an inscrutable and omnipotent God. Liberalism believes that most if not all problems can be solved or alleviated by human action, informed by reason (i.e., knowing what is going on, considering the consequences of action).

My assumptions limit but do not rule out the welfare state or social democracy; they do rule out centralized control and ownership of production and distribution of economic goods. My assumptions, if they are to be consistent, must also allow for a

shift in the direction of a reduced role for the state in control of the marketplace and in providing services and protections for individual citizens. All that seems to be minimally required is use and ownership of private property that includes the right to dispose as one wishes of the surplus generated by its use.

- However, my assumptions also include a notion of pluralism -- political decentralization of decision-making that extends all the way to small groups and to individuals in a process of decreasing generality. Pluralism in a democracy includes the decentralization of power within government as well as reserving the economic power of groups and individuals outside government and protecting the political power of individuals and groups against the state. The First Amendment summarizes the political power essential to philanthropy; the Constitutional protections of property rights appear to be much weaker, or at least less clear.

These characteristics of modern western liberalism make philanthropy as we know it possible; they tend to encourage its development and use as a means of alleviating suffering and introducing improvements into the social condition. They are strengthened and enhanced, and probably inspired by:

- A free and open and democratic society which permits individuals and groups to exercise voluntary initiative for change.
- A moral order shaped by religious values: concern for the needy and helpless and for the stranger.
- Stewardship of resources and some sense that wealth must be created if it is to be shared -- that is, some basis that makes self-help essential to the condition of being human.
- A variety of compacts with God which introduce the divine into the mundane relations of human beings with each other and with the natural world.
- Beyond concern for the poor and social reform to improve the material conditions of society, the political and economic system implicit in my assumptions about the philanthropic tradition include voluntary action for the maintenance, enhancement, and improvement of morals, culture, religion, and a vast array of other things making greater or lesser claims on our resources

- of time and money (e.g., sport, entertainment, pets, hobbies, memorials, and the esoteric research of humanistic scholarship.)
- The philanthropic tradition makes allowances for the beneficent actions and effects of the other two sectors: the normal functioning of government and the private economy have undeniably beneficial consequences, even though those consequences are not the stated purpose of either sector. And, if the notion of "corporate philanthropy" can make sense, then the notion of "government philanthropy" can also be defended. That is, systematic programs can be designed within the other two sectors that achieve some of the same ends as those of the philanthropic sector.
 - The most important fact of all is that the third sector cannot exist without the first two. A corollary is that democracy cannot exist without a third sector.

III

The universe of philanthropy includes the most sublime and the most ludicrous of human behavior, but the underlying theme of the philanthropic tradition is best summarized for me in the (borrowed) phrase, "the social history of the moral imagination." The word "history" reminds us that the study of philanthropy engages us in the study of a tradition, of the history of a cluster of ideas and social behavior. The word "social" emphasizes but does not exclude the political and economic, because philanthropy is in constant interaction with them, drawing and redrawing the boundaries and modifying the values of the three sectors.

The very term "moral imagination" lends a tone of praise (or self-congratulation) to what is a checkered social history. The cardinal virtues sometimes obscure the ordinary vices; virtue and vice can be evident in the same action.

It is necessary in the study of the philanthropic tradition to think -- as politically liberal writers usually do -- of the social problems and failures of social institutions that create "opportunities" to do good. In the face of social problems, steps can be taken to change behavior in ways that will change attitudes and values. If we organized society properly, people would naturally behave better.

On the other hand, it is often necessary to think -- as politically conservative writers usually do -- of the problematic nature of philanthropy, the possibility or even likelihood that harm is often done in the name of doing good. Changing behavior is risky at best, even when it works; it is better to recognize the flawed nature of man and try to make the best of it. The tension between the two perspectives is captured in Allan Bloom's observation:

If [under the old moral order] men were self-concerned, that order tried to expand the scope of self-concern to include others, rather than commanding men to cease being concerned with themselves.

Because I link the philanthropic to the civilized in an essential way I am attracted to those thinkers and actors who find meaning in notions of virtue and the Good Life. The study of philanthropy at its core is the study of an aspect of moral philosophy, but moral philosophy deeply colored by religious beliefs and practices.