

THE PHILANTHROPIC RESPONSE

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What is it about the world that calls philanthropy into being, that causes us to respond philanthropically? That question requires us to look at the world, to come to some rough conclusions about what we think we see and why we sometimes turn to philanthropy as a response to what we see. Understanding the context in which philanthropy takes place is essential to understanding philanthropy itself.

Because philanthropy is a large and complex subject, in developing an understanding of it we make a great many important assumptions about the world in which philanthropy makes sense. What follows is, first, a summary of my own worldview- of the human condition and human nature -that helps me to understand why philanthropy exists, and then an examination of “meliorism,” the philosophy I find most congenial to the philanthropic response.

The Human Condition

The philanthropic perspective sees a world in which *things often go wrong and things could always be better*. For human beings, the world is an uncertain, sometimes hostile place. Natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, tidal waves, typhoons, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, and plagues are part of the human condition. The floods of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers in 1993 overwhelmed the best efforts of engineers and the most advanced

technologies and drove thousands of people from their homes, inundated tens of thousands of square miles of farmland, and damaged property at a financial cost of billions-with a cost in human psychic suffering beyond calculation.

Second, *things could always be better*. That is, humans can imagine ways in which life could be more agreeable, comfortable, congenial, pleasant, fruitful, productive, and profitable. Philanthropy is an exercise in imagining and implementing ways to relieve suffering and to improve the quality of human life. The “failure” of a natural system is an opportunity for philanthropic initiative. Some of our best and most honorable philanthropic work is done under the banner of humanitarian assistance when natural systems malfunction. When survivors of a flood have lost their property, perhaps have had their crops ruined and face starvation or bankruptcy, one possible response is philanthropic - voluntary action to alleviate the suffering of the victims. The Midwestern floods of 1993 revealed the limitations of the grand design of river control developed over the past half-century, but destructive flooding is no longer a way of life. The floods of 1993 will become part of the learning curve that will lessen the damage of the floods of 2003, if there are any.

Ralf Dahrendorf used the term “life chances” to talk about the varying social conditions in which individuals realize their potential.¹ Some people are disadvantaged or suffer in ways that seem unfair. Consider, for instance, the contrasting life chances of an eight-year-old female in Sarajevo in 1996 and her counterpart in Indianapolis. The life chances of an inner-city, African- American, ten-year-old daughter of a twenty-four-year-old drug-addicted and abusive mother are rather different from the life chances of the white children from stable and comfortable homes in suburbs like the one I live in. The life chances of the large majority of Americans are materially superior to those of the large majority of Rwandans, Bosnians,

Kurds, and Basques. For some people, getting enough to eat is a problem, while for others the pressing problem is whether they can afford to pay college tuition.

Philanthropy responds to a human condition in which many humans find survival difficult, growth inadequate, and development impossible. Working toward a fairer and more just society-toward the equalization of life chances-is a philanthropic response to the human condition. *Things can always be better*. That is why philanthropy exists: to respond to suffering and distress and acute need and to improve the quality of life for all.

Human Nature

I will try to ring out two thoughts about human nature: the first and very important point for understanding philanthropy is that to be human *means* to be in some way able to respond to the needs of others, to have the ability to get beyond the self. Human nature includes a capacity to love one's neighbor, to follow the Golden Rule, to emulate the Good Samaritan.

The second point is that human nature provides us with a capacity for both good and evil. If altruism is a humanizing capacity, it competes with dehumanizing and inhumane capacities. The understanding of human nature I find most helpful is summarized in the seven theological and cardinal virtues and in the seven deadly sins: faith, hope, charity, prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice; pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. We mock such devices these days, but variations on them are still enormously popular. Note William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* and Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.²

The assumption by some people that all behavior is motivated by self-interest does not provide, for me at least, an adequate explanation for the philanthropic response. I hold that *concern for others* is one of the characteristics that defines human beings; altruism as well as egoism is a part of the human character. It is common to speak of persons who seem utterly indifferent to the pain or suffering of others as “inhuman.” Whether the capacity of concern for others is the result of millions of years of evolution or the result of ethical evolution across human culture-or a gift of God-is a disputed question. Most of us make a provisional choice and decide that human nature permits altruistic behavior even though much of human behavior seems guided by self-interest.

Meliorism

Given a human environment in which things go wrong and a human nature that embraces vice and virtue, meliorism is the philosophy I find most adequate to the philanthropic response.

I first came on the word in William James’s *Pragmatism*:

“...there are unhappy men who think the salvation of the world impossible. Theirs is the doctrine known as pessimism.

“Optimism in turn would be the doctrine that thinks the world’s salvation inevitable.

“Midway between the two stands what may be called the doctrine of meliorism, tho it has hitherto figured less as a doctrine than as an attitude in human affairs...

Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility,

which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.”³

“Meliorism is the doctrine that, intermediate between optimism and pessimism, the world can be made better through rightly-directed human effort.”

That sentence largely captures what philanthropy is about for me; it captures an attitude that makes “voluntary action for the public good” a reasonable response to the world I live in. The concept of meliorism is so important to philanthropy that the definition is worth taking apart, piece by piece.

“Meliorism is the doctrine...” The word is from the Latin: *melior* means “better” and is compared with *bonus*, good, and *optimus*, best, in contrast with *malus*, bad, *peior*, worse, and *pessimus*, worst. Perhaps *meliorist* should be contrasted with *peiorist*, a person with an inclination to look on the dark side, but not convinced that doom is inevitable. “

“Meliorism is the doctrine...” I take the word “doctrine” to mean a teaching based on considered principles, not a dogma spelled out in language that is fixed and immutable. Philanthropy needs an emerging doctrine, an attitude that can provide a sense of direction.

“The world can be made better” Meliorism requires an honest attempt to understand what is going on in “the world,” to respond with appropriate voluntary action. The world of the meliorist is imperfect and in flux. It is a world of limits where scarcity is an essential quality of material reality, where trade-offs must be faced and choices made.

“The world can be made better” To me, the belief that things can be made better suggests a bias toward hope, a disinclination to despair. The idea of progress assumes that the human condition is better now than it was in the past *largely because of human interventions*. The meliorist’s response to *things going wrong*, like earthquakes or riots, is

to lessen the destructiveness by building better, stronger, and more flexible structures, both architectural and political. The population of greater Los Angeles is apparently made up of meliorists; they prepare for earthquakes; optimists would presumably assume that the future will be better and might even ignore the probability of earthquakes; pessimists have already moved back East where they came from.

Philanthropy, in its melioristic aspirations, is on the side of improving and enhancing life chances. It suggests that some things may be acceptable as they are but could be improved, and that some things that are wrong-like wars and famine-could be prevented. The meliorist is hopeful in the face of adversity⁴: the quality of life, the external and internal conditions of being human, can always seek a higher and deeper expression. “Higher” extends and expands the material imagination; “deeper” goes to the underlying psychological and spiritual capacities and strengths of humans, often far greater than we realize. However, in the meliorists’ enthusiasm to find a new salvation, they may unconsciously become optimists, sure that they know the way and the truth. Meliorists need a touch of humility when engaged in philanthropy.

*“The world can be made **better**”* “Better” assumes that we can discriminate between good and bad, right and wrong, at least in the sense that we can know, on average, whether people’s life chances are improving or getting worse. Although the meliorist expects and accepts a wide range of ethical understandings, not all of which will be compatible,⁵ the meliorist constantly searches for the common ground on which individuals and communities come together-toward a fuller realization of shared ethical values, on one scale, and toward a more efficient and equitable production and distribution of the world’s resources on another. The meliorist is willing to make the comparative judgments that are implicit in the word itself:

meliorism means asserting and affirming that which *is better* for life in this world. The meliorist struggles to be openminded, but to be a meliorist carries the responsibility to come to conclusions, to judge, to make choices. The meliorist, whether engaged in philanthropy or not, will seek peace over war, negotiation and diplomacy over violence, protection of the innocent over their abuse and exploitation.

The meliorist may use baselines and guidelines and projections that sketch out patterns and estimates of what “improvement” or “human betterment” might mean. We might observe and measure the “human condition” in terms of such familiar criteria as in Maslow’s hierarchy: we might measure “survival” by reduction in rates of infant mortality; “security” by instances of conflict mediation and encouragement of reconciliation; “inclusiveness” in terms of full membership in community; “rates of achievement” by school performance, numbers of jobs and patterns of wages; “knowledge and understanding” by the results of investment in education and training, research and development; “cultural sensibility” by budgets for children’s art education.

“**Rightly-directed** *human effort*” The meliorist seeks a constantly improving sense of direction and purpose: “**rightly-directed** *human effort*” means that the meliorist is aware that human effort can be and often is *wrongly* directed; “*rightly-directed*” means purposeful rather than meandering without a compass.

There are certain “basic questions of philanthropy”⁶ that can help us develop a framework for “rightly-directed” philanthropic action. Those basic questions are:

What is going on? What is it about the world (or the society or the local community) that presents a problem or compelling issue?

What is to be done? What might be an appropriate response to that problem or issue?

Why philanthropy? Of the four resources for assistance (self-help, mutual aid, government assistance, and philanthropy) is philanthropic action the best way to respond?

What business is it of mine (ours, yours)? On what basis is philanthropic action justified?

Who benefits besides the recipient of assistance? If the donor receives a benefit, is it appropriate or not?

Why us? Are we “the right people at the right time”?

Who owns us? To whom are we accountable? To our trustees? To whom are *they* accountable?

“*Human effort*” Meliorism accepts the reality that work must be done if the world is to be made better. Defining, describing, and diagnosing the world and its problems are important but preliminary, necessary but not sufficient to the action to relieve suffering and to improve the quality of life. Meliorism finds its bearing in pragmatism; as a pragmatic philosophy, meliorism looks for the truth of philanthropy in its actions and their consequences. The meliorist’s response to savagery and barbarism is renewed commitment to take action to defend civility and community.

In summary, then, meliorism is the philosophical foundation for philanthropy and good works. Philanthropy asserts that, if the world can be made better, it *should* be made better. Meliorism gives philanthropy a point of departure and a framework for action.

¹ Adapted from Ralf Dahrendorf, *Life Chances: Approaches to Social and Political Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); see also Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict: An Essay on the Politics of Liberty* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988). Dahrendorf borrows the idea of life chances from Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

² William Bennett, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

³ William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975 [1907]), 137.

⁴ “The meliorist is...” and other phrases like it should not be taken as descriptive of reality, but as statements of aspiration—in this case, statements by one self-styled “meliorist.” As far as I know, meliorists are not organized, have no political party, are not even a 501(c)(3).

⁵ See Rushworth Kidder, *Shared Values for a Troubled World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

⁶ William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968 [1911]), 10.