
IMAGINING PHILANTHROPY

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Introduction

What is our image of philanthropy? It is a question worth pondering, because our philanthropic practice is powerfully informed by our philanthropic aspirations. A rich image can open up possibilities for philanthropic excellence, enhancing the lives of both givers and recipients. Defective images, by contrast, tend to produce poor philanthropic strategies—strategies that, far from enriching human lives, may actually impoverish them. Of course, no one pretends that the perfect image of philanthropy ever lies ready to hand. Philanthropy must grow, develop, and adapt along with the changing human context in which it is embedded. Yet bringing it to its fullest fruition in our own place and time is an essential mission for each generation.

What kind of philanthropy can we imagine? The answer depends in part on what we understand philanthropy to be. The very meaning of the term is open to question. Consider the following:

- Does philanthropy refer strictly to large transfers of wealth? Or may other forms of giving, such as gifts of time and talent, be equally legitimate?
- Who does it? Is philanthropy strictly the province of nonprofit foundations and their agents? Or is it also accessible to nonprofessionals?
- Who are its targets? Is philanthropy always directed to the public good? Or can it focus on private individuals as well?
- Does motive matter? Can we use taxes or shame to compel giving? Or must we give spontaneously of our own free will?
- Who benefits? Should philanthropic activity be devoted solely to the interests of the beneficiary? Or is there an opportunity to consider the welfare of the donor?
- How do we measure philanthropic performance? Is the ultimate criterion the monetary value of each bequest? Or do important aspects of philanthropy resist appraisal in dollars and cents?

By addressing these questions, this essay aims to challenge and stimulate the imagination of philanthropists.

Context

How we answer such defining philanthropic questions hinges on the contexts in which we pose them. In philanthropy as in every field of life, context always exerts an immense influence on the meaning of ideas. Consider the following riddles:

- I live above a star, and yet never burn;
I have eleven neighbors, and yet none of them turn;
I am visited in sequence, first, last, or in between;
PRS are my initials, now tell me what I mean.
- A beggar's brother died, but the man who died had no brother. How can this be?
- What English word is most frequently pronounced incorrectly?

Each of these verbal puzzles represents an instance of what perceptual psychologists call a figure-ground problem. Our visual assessment of a figure's size, hue, shape, and motion depend in large part on the background against which it is projected. Simply by changing the background, we can make the large appear small, the dark appear light, the straight appear curved, and the static appear to be moving.

Before we can solve such puzzles, we need to examine carefully the mental back-drops against which we project them. Recognizing the biases and limitations of our initial assumptions is key, because they often lead us astray. To find a solution, we must try out different backgrounds or relational frameworks until we find one that puts all the pieces together in a coherent and often unexpected way. Consider the examples given above. The star that never burns is the asterisk on a telephone keypad. The man who died had no brother because the beggar was a woman. And the word that is most frequently pronounced incorrectly is *incorrectly*. As these solutions suggest, context may not be everything, but it counts for a great deal.

Similar psychological principles are at work in our philanthropic understanding. In defining the challenges and opportunities facing philanthropy, it is natural that our perspectives vary, depending on the backdrops against which we perceive it. What works well in one context may fail in another. Systems designed to meet basic needs for food and shelter, for example, may not perform well at delivering education, and systems designed to deliver education may not perform well at meeting needs for food and shelter. No matter how badly we want to help, any failure to grasp the meaning of fundamental philanthropic concepts is

likely to undermine our efforts. If, for example, we misconceive the needs and aspirations of givers and receivers, even our best philanthropic intentions will often go awry.

The growth of the state welfare system during the last century brought to light new challenges associated with one-way transfers or grants. Consider the example of the Clinton-era federal policy that imposed lifetime limits on welfare benefits eligibility. What were we attempting to accomplish? Was our aim to promote the dignity of welfare recipients by encouraging them to become more self-sufficient? Did we seek to discourage sloth by preventing capable people from subsisting on the dole? Or did we simply intend to reduce the tax burden borne by working people, without reference to the welfare of recipients? In this case as in every other, our results reflect our rationale. Did we succeed at challenging dependent people to begin supporting themselves? Did we consign mentally and physically disabled people to homelessness and perhaps even starvation? Or did we do both.

Similar questions confront private grant makers. This is a problem recognized by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: “To give away money is an easy matter and in any person’s power. But to decide to whom to give it, and how much, and when, and for what purpose and how, is neither in every man’s power nor an easy matter.” This is also one of the problems explored by grants economist Kenneth Boulding in his many works on the grants economy.

Resources

One of the gravest misapprehensions afoot in contemporary philanthropy, analogous to a huge optical illusion, concerns the nature of our philanthropic resources. What is the context in which we perceive the means available to philanthropists and philanthropic organizations? In many cases we tend to construe our philanthropic endowment strictly in terms of material property. We define the poor by proprietary insufficiency, the gap that separates their financial standing from an arbitrary minimum standard. We see people as poor, in other words, simply because they lack purchasing power. They cannot purchase sufficient food, clothing, and shelter. If only they had more money, we suppose, their lives would be transformed. Yet is money the whole story? Is it the philanthropic story’s most important character?

Economic accounts of philanthropy are attractive for several reasons. First, they appear to provide valid and reliable measures of philanthropic need. If we want to understand people’s life circumstances, and especially their need for

philanthropic intervention, we need only measure their income or material wealth. Moreover, we need not invest a great deal of time and effort acquainting ourselves with particular individuals, families, and communities. Instead, we can simply peruse their financial standing. Finally, when a deficiency is identified, the remedy is simple—we “top them up” to the critical threshold. When the problem is defined as a financial shortfall, the solution, naturally, is an infusion of money. What does this sort of philanthropy ask of us? Above all, that we write checks.

How reliable, however, is the link between the ease with which something can be measured and its intrinsic importance? Are the things that are easiest to quantify also the ones we most need to know? We can precisely calculate a person’s net worth, but to what extent can we render human needs and opportunities commensurable with wealth? If we suppose that our only dart is money, it is no surprise that our targets turn out to be commodities.

Yet what if human life offers important philanthropic targets that money cannot penetrate? Some people manage to live relatively full lives with limited resources, while some wealthy people find themselves continually wracked by want. Perhaps material sufficiency, even material prosperity, is no panacea. To be sure, few reasonable people would choose poverty over wealth. Yet an aversion to scarcity does not imply a devotion to excess. Plenty of people knowingly forego additional wealth for the sake of other goods they rightly esteem even more highly.

There is simply no guarantee that we can solve life’s important problems by spending more money on them. Material goods are a necessary condition for crafting a full human life, but they are not sufficient. No matter how precisely we target our gifts, for example, we cannot pay someone to care—genuinely care—for someone else. The vehicle of wealth can take us only so far along the road to human enrichment. We should begin seeking other means of conveyance long before we reach the point where material goods are no longer effective.

It is thus important to distinguish between tangible resources and intangible resources. Tangible resources can be touched with the hand, and include groceries, houses, clothing, medicines, and recreational equipment. Intangible resources are untouchable, and include knowledge, skills, relationships, and dreams. Pondering this distinction, we soon realize that the value of our intangible resources vastly exceeds that of our tangible ones.

Philanthropic organizations’ annual budgets and investments are measured in dollars. Yet philanthropic excellence requires other endowments, to which a dollar value is difficult to assign. The income of foundation program officers is relatively

easy to determine. It is considerably more difficult, perhaps even impossible, to determine the value of what those individuals know and can do. We can measure how much a foundation pays each year to provide continuing education to its employees, but it is considerably more difficult, perhaps even impossible, to place a dollar value on the quality of their learning. People who read Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* or John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* are not immediately enriched materially by the experience. Yet some gain invaluable insight into the human significance of poverty.

Knowledge

Our inventory of philanthropic assets cannot be restricted to funds, equipment, and the physical plant. We must expand our field of view to include other resources, such as our self-image. Our philanthropic potential cannot be fully encompassed in terms of what we own. We also need to take into account who we are, both individually and as members of organizations and communities. And who we are is constituted to a large degree by what we know.

Socrates' most famous philosophical maxim was "Know yourself." This principle applies no less urgently to philanthropy than to philosophy. The first order of business in helping people is not to get them more property, but to get to know them. To this formulation of the philanthropic mission Socrates might add, "And help them get to know themselves." Ultimately, poverty is not the greatest peril. Ignorance is.

We make a mistake when we pin our aspirations on handling money more efficiently. Efficiency at allocating funds is no guarantee of generating and sharing knowledge effectively. Knowledge is the key. Without knowledge, how effectively and efficiently can we allocate money? We can be financial wizards but human dolts.

Consider the remarkable transformation that knowledge can effect in even the most tangible material resources. What we have can be completely transformed by what we learn. What happened to the value of whale oil when we discovered the energy of subterranean petroleum deposits? Who could have predicted that the bark of pacific yew trees would turn out to play an important role in the treatment of breast cancer, or that grains of beach sand would one day provide the silicon backbone of artificial intelligence? "Raw materials" we trample underfoot may take on great value when catalyzed by human imagination.

Hence we need to focus less on counting what we have and more on finding what we can create. Except for the very most basic necessities of life, the things we require

are not simply given to us. They are the products of human creativity. Only by combining and recombining them in our imaginations can we discover what they are capable of becoming. This principle applies to raw materials such as oil and silicon, but even more to intangible assets such as science, language, freedom, and literature. In the realm of the intangible, calculation cannot hold a candle to imagination.

When tangible resources dominate our perspective, we tend to project philanthropy against a fixed-sum view of human affairs. In a fixed-sum system, the total extent of a desirable outcome is unalterable. A familiar analogy is that of a pie. The pie has a predetermined size, and no matter how we divide it, the total quantity of filling and crust cannot increase. To enlarge one person's slice of pie requires that we reduce someone else's.

When we see philanthropy as part of a fixed-sum system, we perceive its mission in terms of redistribution. In this account, the philanthropist is a redistributor, transferring wealth or other goods from people who have to people who do not. The essential virtue of philanthropy becomes fairness, the pursuit of a more equitable distribution of resources. From a redistributive point of view, philanthropy cannot enrich the world. It cannot augment the total amount of goods available to us. It can only help to reduce the unevenness with which goods are distributed.

There are good reasons to question the adequacy of a strictly redistributive account of philanthropy. It manifests limitations even in accounting for wealth and material goods, let alone intangible resources. A gift that enables a disadvantaged person to get an education may augment that person's slice of the pie, but at the same time it can enlarge the pie for everyone else. The same may be said even for investments in food, housing, and healthcare. A deficiency of such goods constrains the achievement of human potential.

Generation

Redistribution has a role to play in philanthropy's mission. But it does not play the most important part. More important than redistributing wealth is creating wealth. Instead of merely topping up our tanks, temporarily relieving the burden of want, philanthropy should strive to make us more productive. Lao-Tse said, "Give a man a fish; you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Such productivity could manifest itself in at least two ways. In the first and most obvious sense, philanthropy could help recipients provide for themselves and their families. Creating a job enables people to satisfy their own needs, lessening their dependence on others.

Second, by helping ourselves, we become empowered to lend a hand to others. Philanthropy should not foster dependency. It should foster giving by encouraging recipients to become philanthropists in their own right. Investing philanthropically in others engages us more deeply in our communities. It enables us to mature as both human beings and citizens. As Aristotle indicates in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, if we are to lead fully human lives, we need opportunities to activate generosity.

The distinction between distribution and generation is a telling one. The word *distribution* derives from the Latin root *tribuere*, which in turn derives from the root *tribus*, the source of our word tribute. For millennia, tribute was associated with taxation, a levy paid by one nation to another or by vassals to lords. It denoted any forced payment or contribution, including those associated with bribery and extortion. The word *generation*, by contrast, is derived from the Latin root *generare*, which means to beget or produce. The title of the Bible's Book of Genesis is derived from this source, as is our word generosity.

The distinction between distribution and generation is analogous to the distinction between payment and donation. On the one hand, we pay because we must, and on the other, we give because we can, from choice. A payment implies no concern for the welfare of the person to whom it is given. A gift implies concern for the recipient. If we did not care about the beneficiary, we would not offer the gift. Genuine generosity aims not merely to gratify recipients but to help them become more fertile. Enlightened parents, for example, better serve their children's interests by providing them with a first-rate education than by hoarding every penny in hopes of someday leaving them the largest possible inheritance.

The most enlightened philanthropy aims at increasing non-fixed-sum relationships throughout a community. In other words, decreasing want is ultimately less important than increasing generativity, our capacity to contribute to our own flourishing. In this vision, philanthropy can still fill gaps, but it does so with the aim of helping us to develop into the fullest human beings we can become. It enhances both our capacity and our inclination to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

In this account, the focus of philanthropy shifts from merely filling empty bellies, covering bare heads, and mending broken limbs to building richer communities. Which is a better way to distribute food: to toss bags of food from the back of a truck, or to get us together to learn to cook each other's favorite dishes? Merely spreading food is a biologically important but humanly niggling goal. The proximate biological goal should be framed by a larger ultimate aspiration: to enhance people's capacity to use the food.

Those who receive food might be encouraged to cook for others, such as the disabled. The goal is to awaken the moral imagination—not merely to provide for basic human needs but also to help us become more responsive human beings. To live we need bread, but we also need to know that our lives amount to something. We need to know that others thrive through our existence.

Consider another example, that of vaccination. Communities around the world have an important interest in seeing children inoculated against a variety of infectious diseases, such as measles, diphtheria, and polio. A great philanthropic success story of the twentieth century was the global conquest of smallpox through a coordinated international public health campaign. Yet the simplicity of vaccination may seduce us into a largely irrelevant image of philanthropy. Its efficiency springs from the fact that it requires but one encounter between donor and recipient and asks nothing further of either. We simply tell patients to roll up their sleeves, make the injection, and send them away. This is not the appropriate backdrop against which to view the most important philanthropic opportunities before us.

The word vaccination is derived from the Latin root *vacca*, which means “cow.” The first immunization used a preparation from cowpox vesicles to immunize people against a much more virulent virus, smallpox. To vaccinate people, we hardly need to talk to them. We simply treat them as Petri dishes that generate antibodies. Yet human beings are not cows. In most public health situations, the active engagement of recipients is required. In rich countries, consider the public health challenges presented by cigarette smoking, obesity, and sexually transmitted diseases. In poor countries, consider the challenges created by the lack of adequate nutrition, clean drinking water, and sanitation. In these contexts, the image of passive inoculation leaves much to be desired. We need instead an image of philanthropy that stresses active cooperation and partnership.

Leadership

There is an important difference between tyranny and leadership. Tyrants command, believing that their word is law. They have little interest in the internal state of their subjects, so long as they do what they are told. Leaders, by contrast, seek not to coerce but to inform and persuade. Their goal is not to wrest away the power of choice but to promote better decision-making. Superficially, tyranny is more efficient, because it requires less time and effort to enact a particular decision. But that efficiency is deceptive because it is grounded in a short-term

perspective that does not respect the character of those being commanded. It treats people as mere instruments, means by which to achieve the tyrant's ends.

Leadership, by contrast, recognizes a higher form of efficiency, which is directed at quite a different end. Its goal is not merely to ensure that every order is carried out as quickly as possible, but to help us to develop our capacity to see for ourselves the appropriate course of action. The genuine leader takes democracy seriously, not because it always elects the best candidate but because it provides the best environment for citizens to develop into full human beings. Why, for example, are juries an essential part of our system of justice? It is less because jury verdicts are just than because they draw out essential excellences of citizenship among those who serve.

From the genuine leader's point of view, the discussion that precedes a decision is often more important than the decision itself. Mere rule is not democracy's overriding consideration. In some cases, a noble philosopher-king might make better decisions. Democracy is the best form of government because it places a premium on free and rich public discourse, which in turn cultivates the humanity of the citizenry. People do not exist to serve the government; the government exists to serve the people. In some cases, pursuing that mission entails constraining the role of government in the public sphere, to avoid stunting the growth of personal and civic excellence. For our communities to flourish, we need personal and civic aspirations that extend far beyond what the law can require.

It is not enough that people merely refrain from stealing one another's property. A good community is one in which individuals look out for each other, coming willingly to one another's aid in times of crisis. In the appropriate setting, we naturally form cooperative relationships for our mutual benefit. The law does its part by underwriting contracts and applying legal sanctions to those who violate commitments. Yet the law cannot effectively prescribe that we contract with one another in the first place. The law can no more wisely tell us whom to partner with than it can tell us whom to marry or how to raise our children. Where human excellence is concerned, it is vital that we enjoy the opportunity to develop and express our moral identity.

Even voluntary exchange relationships cannot develop character sufficiently. It is true that the virtues of the marketplace include fairness, honesty, reliability, and ambition. In addition, people know that they should trade fairly because an open and fair system of exchange is ultimately more productive than one that tolerates dishonesty. Likewise, we reward ambition because, within the context of

a truly free market, each person's ambition tends to benefit everyone else. Missing from this account, however, are vital human excellences without which human life is not complete. These include compassion and generosity.

There is a limit to what we can accomplish through financial incentives. We simply cannot pay people to be good parents, spouses, and citizens. Such vital human responsibilities require a different kind of commitment, one that involves not only calculations of advantage but also a readiness to make genuine sacrifices. Parents who based every choice about childrearing on personal advantage would be parents in name only. Good parents care first about what is good for their children. If we do not love our children for who they are, we are lost, no matter what financial incentives we concoct.

In commercial transactions, we can always substitute someone else for the buyer or seller without jeopardizing the transaction. By contrast, substituting one child for another, one spouse for another, or one friend for another presents a serious threat to a relationship grounded in love. In love, we matter for who we are, not the uses to which we can be put. In love, we are not interchangeable.

Love

The highest possibilities for the development of human character lie in love. Love evokes not profit but human enrichment. It cultivates the highest of human excellences. It declares that we have a purpose in life higher than ourselves, that we can participate in relationships and communities whose boundaries far exceed our own. It says that our aspirations should extend beyond getting and spending, to sharing, investing ourselves in one another's lives.

This kind of investment is not nearly as easy as writing a check. As Aristotle indicates, it requires not only that we share but also that we share with the right person in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons. Philanthropy stretches us as human beings, challenging us to become better than we are. It invites us to look beyond the distinctions of giver and receiver, and to see one another as sharers, parts cooperating for the benefit of a larger whole.

In this account, exchange ceases to be an end in itself and instead becomes a means to another end, what economist Kenneth Boulding called "integration." It provides the infrastructure of freedom and prosperity that enables us to forge deeper and more fruitful human partnerships. We are free from tyranny, but that freedom is not a mere license to indulge our every whim. It means freedom to be with and for one another. It means the freedom to complete ourselves by sharing what we are.

An old story nicely captures this image of philanthropy. In medieval Europe a man came upon a large construction site. He saw one workman fitting two stones together. “What do you do?” he asked. “I am a stone mason,” the man replied. Then he walked over to another worker, who appeared to be engaged in the same task. “What do you do?” he asked. The man replied, “We are building a cathedral.” The two men operated with very different images of their mission. One focused exclusively on the task of the moment, not looking beyond the limits of his own arm span. The other saw his immediate task in the context of a much larger calling.

How do we see our philanthropic calling? Do we think primarily in terms of fundraising? Do we measure our success in terms of revenue? If so, we have fallen into a trap—the trap of pursuing what is good for us rather than what is good for the people we serve. Wouldn’t the best philanthropists and philanthropic organizations evaluate their effectiveness against quite a different backdrop? Wouldn’t that backdrop reveal a much richer philanthropic potential? And what about us? What kind of philanthropy can we imagine?