CONVERSATIONS ON PHILANTHROPY

Emerging Questions on Liberality and Social Thought

Volume VII
Re-imagining Philanthropy: Myths and Opportunities

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Aims and Scope

*Conversations on Philanthropy: Emerging Questions on Liberality and Social Thought* is a journal of original articles, essays, and book reviews on the role of philanthropy in a free society. Our aim is to promote inquiry and reflection on the importance of liberality—in the dual sense of generosity and of the character befitting free individuals—for the flourishing of local communities, political societies, and humanity in general. As such we seek to open new perspectives on the roles, theories, and practices of philanthropic activities ranging from charitable giving, the actions of eleemosynary organizations, trusts, foundations, voluntary associations, and fraternal societies to volunteerism, mutual aid, social entrepreneurship and other forms of social action with beneficent intention (whether or not also combined with commercial and/or political purposes). To facilitate conversations among traditional academic disciplines, *Conversations on Philanthropy* will include papers from a number of fields, including history, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, philanthropic studies, religious studies, belles lettres, law, and the physical sciences, as well as from philanthropic practitioners. Published comments on feature essays are a means of providing a transparent peer-review process to enhance interdisciplinary understanding.

Editorial Correspondence

*Conversations on Philanthropy* typically features “Conversations” (a lead article with several comments) or “Symposia” (several essays on a single topic with or without commentary). Miscellaneous items, including essays, poetry, book reviews and commentaries may also be published on approval of the Editorial Board. Material published in *Conversations on Philanthropy* is typically solicited by the Editors. Authors who would like to submit material for consideration should first submit a brief abstract to Lenore T. Ealy, Ph.D., 1415 Ironwood Dr., Carmel, IN 46033; E-mail: editor@conversationsonphilanthropy.org. For detailed instructions concerning the submission of manuscripts, please contact the Editor.

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INTRODUCTION

HERE BE DRAGONS. Marking *terra incognita* as well as invoking human imagination, the dragon is a universal motif in human literature. As William Jackson observes in this volume, dragons present us a powerful and universal archetype that “carry associations of transcendent energy, wealth, wisdom and awe,” such associations that some might also make when regarding philanthropists. Here we seek not to make philanthropists out to be such dragons, but rather to encourage those who practice and study philanthropy to attend to the many species of dragon that surround the art. As J.R.R. Tolkien put it in *The Hobbit*, “[i]t does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him” (1937, 229).

The cartography of this volume of *Conversations on Philanthropy* seeks both to invite and to caution the reader. The myths that surround philanthropy are many, but they are not tame. Our dragon is fiery, endowed perhaps with the fire of Prometheus to which several of our contributors refer, a fire that can at once enlighten and consume. How do our beliefs about wealth creation and preservation, our beliefs about reciprocity in exchange, our beliefs about generosity and gratitude, our beliefs about the possibility or impossibility of pure altruism inform our philanthropy? What are the myths, creative and destructive, that shape these beliefs and open or foreclose to us various forms of philanthropic action?

Our contributors take us on an intriguing tour through time and space and mind to search out some of the myths of philanthropy and to imagine its opportunities. Richard Gunderman frames our examination of myth around Aristotelian-inspired categories that establish the breadth and importance of the inquiry. Steven Crosby guides our vision to Athens and Jerusalem (and Bethlehem and Rome); while William Jackson introduces us to more oriental frames of reference for examining similar questions. George McCully takes up a redefinition of the philanthropic terrain as it has evolved in the United States, invoking as a backdrop the American founders’ perception of their Constitution-making as an act of philanthropy. Rob Garnett engages us as well with eighteenth-century paradigms in order to help us navigate the challenges of modern commercial society. By taking us back to Adam Smith he helps us map an alternate route than that followed by modernist
economics. Heather Wood Ion offers a concluding reflection on these essays that urges us to consider whether our philanthropic efforts are always noble and good or whether a form of moral greed often tied closely to the act of giving can actually diminish the inspiring, empowering, and efficacious aspects of philanthropy.

The forms philanthropy has taken in the past century require us to keep an eye on the dragons explored in these essays as well as to re-consider what we believe about the relationships of philanthropy and justice. In *The Dragons of Expectation*, Robert Conquest proposes that one of the persistent “brain blindfolds” of the present age is “the notion that for all problems there is a ‘solution,’ and that when found this can be put into effect by the state (or its opponents)” (2005, 12-13). Modern philanthropy has largely taken up the side of the state in this battle against social problems, linking its fate with the attainment of “social justice.” The elevation of philanthropy out of the realm of charity into the territory of justice has not gone undisputed. F. A. Hayek, for one, called social justice a “mirage” and believed that the concept would ultimately work to the demise of the rule of law.

Perhaps most importantly for our discussion of myths is the challenging fact that this expansion of philanthropy into the broader realm of “humanitarianism” has itself not resolved the dilemmas that surround our beliefs about the appropriate relationships between wealth and poverty in the global commercial economy. The “haves” often feel impelled—whether by a sense of justice, an imperative of religious charity, or a moral sympathy—to assist the “have nots,” but modern humanitarian aid has been fraught with unintended consequences, often shoring up criminal regimes and doing little to ameliorate conditions of hunger and violence affecting millions of lives. The challenges of humanitarianism draw us right back to the ironies of Promethian philanthropy, described by our contributors variously as an act of compassion for humanity, an act endowing men with generative creativity, and an act of vindication against the tyranny of Zeus, who proposed to destroy humanity and design a new race of creatures to replace these flawed creatures of clay.

In the end, the examination of myths we propose here is essential. In literature, dragons often are depicted as hoarders of wealth. In attributing dragon-like characteristics to the self-renewing myths surrounding producing
and consuming, giving and receiving, we seek to promote awareness of the often unexamined beliefs that shape what we can imagine and do. It is easy to imagine the dragon we are describing from various perspectives, much as the blind men in the room with the elephant, as the symbolic Ouroboros, the dragon depicted consuming its own tail. Our intent is not to paralyze philanthropy in circular musings, but we do hope that through our examination we may discover understanding and tools needed to cohabit the landscape with and perhaps even somewhat tame these dragons, thus harnessing their power in support of our own reflexivity and re-creation and improving our chances of avoiding the unbidden destruction that can come from playing with fire.

—Lenore T. Ealy
Editor
SYMPOSIUM

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COMMENT

The Myths of Philanthropy: A Reflection
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Richard Gunderman majored in biology and philosophy at Wabash College, then received his PhD (from the Committee on Social Thought) and MD as a member of the Medical Scientist Training Program at the University of Chicago. He is currently Professor of Radiology, Pediatrics, Medical Education, Philosophy, Liberal Arts, Philanthropy, and in the Honors College at Indiana University, where he is also Vice Chair of Radiology. The recipient of a record number of Trustees Teaching Awards at Indiana University and numerous prizes for scholarship and writing, he is the author of eight books and over 275 scholarly articles. Dr. Gunderman is a contributing editor to *Conversations on Philanthropy*.

Heather Wood Ion is a chief executive and cultural anthropologist who specializes in turning around troubled organizations. Her doctoral research on social and cultural recovery from disasters has been applied to assist communities and corporations all over the world. She has turned around communities locked in adversarial paralysis, social service agencies, corporations that have lost their mission, and start-ups unable to cope with growth. For the last seven years of his life, Jonas Salk, MD, relied on Heather Ion as his editor, sounding board and collaborator on issues of international
health policy, and in establishing the science of hope. Dr. Ion’s book, *Third-class Ticket*, has been translated into Italian, Hindi, Japanese, and Chinese, and is currently being made into a feature film. Another book, with Saul Levine MD, *Against Terrible Odds*, applies her knowledge of social and cultural recovery to the profound issues of individual resilience. Dr. Ion has served on numerous boards and national initiatives, including The Valeo Initiative, in collaboration with the Center for Healthcare Improvement and the Veterans’ Health Administration. She currently serves with Athena Charitable Trust, is founder of the nonprofit Epidemic of Health and is a contributing editor to *Conversations on Philanthropy*.

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**GEORGE McCULLY** served for twenty years as professor of European intellectual and cultural history, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, and for twenty-five years as a professional philanthropist—fundraiser, strategic planner, executive director, trustee, and advisor to charities, foundations, families and individual donors. In 1997 he created the highly respected and influential Massachusetts *Catalogue for Philanthropy*, to promote charitable giving and strengthen the culture of philanthropy through donor-education. His book, *Philanthropy Reconsidered* (2008), presents a comprehensive overview of the "vocabulary, conceptualization, and rhetoric" of philanthropy from the ancient coinage of the term in *Prometheus Bound*, to its essential role informing the American Revolution and Constitution, to the paradigm-shift transforming philanthropy today. His latest work is the *Massachusetts Philanthropic Directory*—an on-line, systematically taxonomized, analytical, *Directory* to all the philanthropic charities of (initially) Massachusetts, which comprise only 1/7th of the state’s "nonprofits". This dramatically innovative *Directory* system will be extended nationwide over the next two years. He is also a contributing editor to *Conversations on Philanthropy*. 
PHILANTHROPY’S MYTHIC DIMENSION

Richard Gunderman

Just as there are many different ways to slice a loaf of bread, there are many different disciplinary lenses through which to examine philanthropy. We can choose between, among others, the perspectives of economics, politics, history, religion, ethics, and rhetoric. In each case, the particular perspective from which we examine philanthropy helps to clarify some of its features but obscures others. Economics, for example, illuminates philanthropic activity as transfers of wealth, examining the parties between whom such transfers take place, the financial media employed, and the effect of various financial incentives and disincentives on the amount of giving that takes place. However, as Kenneth Boulding has pointed out, a purely economic approach draws attention away from other forms of giving, such as voluntary service, that do not involve wealth transfers and may prove difficult or impossible to value in monetary terms (1973). By contrast, a rhetorical lens sheds light on the types and relative effectiveness of different appeals for aid, while offering little or no insight on their economic implications. Analogous observations apply to other disciplinary perspectives.

We should be wary of the temptation to suppose that academic disciplines are the only lenses through which to examine philanthropy. If we restrict our exploration of philanthropy to the perspectives of individual disciplines, questions that do not arise naturally from any one of them may never get posed, despite the fact that some of these questions merit our close attention. For example, what sorts of assumptions do we harbor about the fundamental content and boundaries of the field of philanthropic studies? How do we tell the difference between philanthropic and non-philanthropic organizations, or who counts as a philanthropist? In addition, adopting a purely disciplinary approach may cause us to devote insufficient attention to questions that only arise when we look at philanthropy from multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary perspectives. For example, when we combine legal, economic, and ethical perspectives, we may be inclined to question the prevalent notion that “nonprofit
organizations” as defined by the tax code are necessarily philanthropic (McCully 2008). A particularly powerful extra-disciplinary lens through which to examine philanthropy is myth or mythology. Disciplines such as anthropology, literature, history, and religion each stake claims to expertise in the realm of myth, but myth in its profoundest sense transcends each of them. Myth concerns the foundations of our worldview, and thus cannot be encompassed by any particular discipline. In fact, myth is so fundamental that representatives of some disciplines have tended to regard it as a subject unsuitable for serious intellectual inquiry. After all, the origin of many myths is shrouded in mystery, and myths by their very nature cannot be subjected to empirical validation or falsification. Moreover, they are often linked with the realms of fantasy and superstition. In some cases, myths have been employed as tools of outright deception. Debaters feel they have refuted their opponents’ claims if they can characterize them as myths. Yet myths at their best are more than mere superstitions, and there is much to be learned by examining philanthropy through the lens of myth.

Myth

In the best sense of the term, to call an account mythic does not necessarily imply that it is true or false in the narrow sense. That the seasons of the year pass from one to the next, that the living world is filled with a plethora of species, and that human beings are born and die are matters of fact, but whether the best accounts of these phenomena lie in the gods of Olympus, the deity of the Book of Genesis, or extrapolation from the contemporary natural sciences is open to question. Some partisans of modern science maintain that only scientific answers are legitimate, but such explanations by their very nature lack ultimacy. They tell us something about what happens and how, but relatively little or nothing about why. We can explain some biological features in terms of a drive to survive and reproduce, but on the question of why anyone should prefer survival and reproduction to their counterparts, modern science has little to offer. The thoroughgoing scientist can go no further than to say, “That’s just the way things are.” Whether to pursue such questions further is not a matter on which natural science itself can offer much guidance, and it is in this sense that the meaning-making of myth is all but inevitable.

The word myth derives from the Greek mythos, meaning authoritative speech or story. In more recent usage, myth refers to a traditional story that defines a
group of people, particularly in terms of their understandings of the world and themselves, and the relationship between the two. In literature, myths may be divided into different types. Divine myths are stories in which at least some of the actors are supernatural. This type of myth often explains how some aspect of the world came to be as it is. Legends are stories about the human past, populated by heroes. Folktales, by contrast, are stories about ordinary human beings or even animals. In fields such as philanthropy, a fourth kind of myth is at work, often couched less in the language of narrative than in the jargon of social science and policy, appealing not to deities or heroes but such concepts as fairness and utility. In each type of myth, the content of the discourse often tells us more about the tellers and hearers of such accounts than the particular phenomena they discuss.

One of the most widely known recent scholars of myth was Joseph Campbell. A professor at Sarah Lawrence College who died in 1987, Campbell is perhaps best known to popular audiences for his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), as well as a television series and book called *The Power of Myth* (Campbell and Moyers 1988). Campbell helpfully identified four functions of myth, which can help to guide our investigation of myth and the role it plays in philanthropy. The first is the metaphysical function of myth. This outlines the nature of reality itself, including the answer to the question, why is there something instead of nothing? The second, the cosmological function, addresses the way the world is put together, including its significance and our role in it. Third, the social function, concerns the structure of society, as well as the ethical codes we believe we should live by and teach to our children. Finally, myth’s psychological function addresses our ability to find meaning in life, either by adopting the ethical perspectives of others or developing our own.

Let us consider philanthropy from each of these functional perspectives. It is not possible to present here a complete account of the mythic dimension of philanthropy, or even to consider any particular mythic perspective exhaustively. We can, however, glimpse certain key perspectives in each mythic category and thereby offer suggestive, albeit incomplete, accounts of the advantages of exploring philanthropy through a mythic lens. In so doing, we consider both philanthropic myths that are problematic as well as others that prove especially revealing and in some cases even beautiful. It is worth reiterating that calling these perspectives mythic need not in any way presume a final judgment concerning their truth or falsity. Some accounts may appear fanciful to the point
of absurdity, while others may seize us as sublime. In either case, the opportunity to view philanthropy from the perspective of myth enhances our ability to identify unrecognized assumptions and open up new pathways by which we can better understand giving and its role in our lives.

**The Metaphysical Function**

We begin with the metaphysical function. Why does philanthropy exist? This question is so fundamental that many scholars and practitioners have not posed it, at least not explicitly. Some may avoid it as impractical, as much so as a physicist asking why matter exists, or a biologist seeking an explanation for the existence of life. Yet knowing why something exists often shines considerable light on what it is. For example, we do not really understand the structure of the heart unless we first appreciate the fact that it pumps blood. Likewise, knowing what ancient cultures had in mind when they buried their dead would shed considerable light on the particular burial techniques they employed. If we never pause to ask such questions, we may consign ourselves to an unnecessarily superficial understanding of the subject at hand, in this case philanthropy. At the very least, our understanding and practice of giving are profoundly shaped by our response to the why question, however implicit or even inchoate. The inquiry into origins—not only the sequence of historical events but the associated intentions and aspirations—can reveal a great deal about current attitudes that we might otherwise fail to understand or even notice.

One of the most pervasive myths about philanthropy is the view that it arises in response to failure. On this view, the impulse to give arises from unmet need. If only nature weren’t such a harsh parent and provided adequately for human needs, leaving no one hungry, naked, and sick, philanthropy would be unnecessary. If only human communities were appropriately organized, human deprivation would be unknown, or at least considerably less prevalent. However, neither nature nor society provides adequately for all. In every culture, some people have more than others, while some lack basic necessities such as food and shelter. On this account, want is the genesis of philanthropy, and ensuring that everyone has a sufficient amount of whatever goods are necessary for life is philanthropy’s principal mission. If such a distribution of resources were ever achieved, presumably, philanthropy could put itself out of business, and this is precisely what proponents of the myth of philanthropy’s failure origin believe that it should always strive to accomplish.
Another account of philanthropy’s origins, also premised on the distinction between the haves and have-nots, focuses on the remorse of those who have. On this account, people who accumulate considerable wealth tend to feel guilty and even ashamed of it. This sentiment can arise from one of two sources. The first is the sheer imbalance of resources between the wealthy and the poor, which may offend the wealthy individual’s sense of fairness. “Is it right that I have so much when so many others have nothing?” they may ask themselves. Wealthy individuals may experience a similar twinge of guilt about the routes they followed to amass their wealth. Such means may range from ruthless but legal business practices to frank deception or coercion that blatantly oversteps legal bounds. For example, some of Mother Teresa’s major benefactors were individuals who acquired their wealth by questionable means (Spink 1998). In this setting, some expressions of philanthropy may be regarded as a form of expiation or atonement, the effort to find inner peace or forgiveness for past transgressions.

A final origin myth concerning philanthropy is grounded not in scarcity but in abundance, and not in expiation for past wrongs but in the pursuit of excellence. On this account, philanthropy takes root less in the fact that some people do not have enough than in every person’s innate desire to contribute to others. See, for example, Aristotle’s account of the excellence of generosity in book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he suggests that opportunities to express generosity are a necessary ingredient in the recipe for a full human life (2000). Contributions may take the form of monetary gifts, but generosity may manifest itself in other ways as well, such as acceptance, advice, education, praise, compassion, and encouragement. The most important thing is not the particular form that giving takes, but the fact that it arises out of a spirit of true generosity, informed by a clear understanding of another person’s needs and aspirations, and genuinely seeking to contribute to a better life. Some people assay their lives’ meaningfulness and worthiness largely according to the difference they make in the lives of others, and to them philanthropy may rank as one of the most important means of doing so.

**The Cosmological Function**

The cosmological function of myth concerns our sense of how the world is put together and our place in its larger structure. In recent times, one of the most pervasive myths about philanthropy sees it as a sector, sometimes called the third sector or independent sector, alongside business and government (Cornuelle 1993 [1965]). The assumption here is that the activities of every person, every
organization, and every initiative can be fitted into one of these three sectors, and we cannot adequately understand them until we have plotted their coordinates on this map. If philanthropy aligns itself too closely with either of the other two sectors—say, by simply co-opting the knowledge base or methods of business or government—then it ceases to be philanthropy. The non-business, non-government sector must preserve its own purity and scrupulously avoid allowing itself to be sullied by the business world’s profit motive and the threat of coercion manifest in the government’s power to tax.

A related myth concerning philanthropy’s position in the larger sphere of human affairs defines it primarily in terms of what it is not. As we have seen, a common but questionable synonym for philanthropy is nonprofit. The term nonprofit, in turn, is generally understood in relation to the tax code, and in particular the conditions that organizations must fulfill to establish and maintain their tax-exempt status. For example, philanthropies must not have owners to whom they distribute financial surpluses, and they cannot focus their efforts outside the realm of certain religious, charitable, scientific, and educational purposes. Such a negative definition can create problems for philanthropy, at least insofar as there is no necessary correlation between an organization’s tax-exemption and the worthiness of its philanthropic contribution to the community and the world. The nonprofit concept per se takes no account of philanthropic effectiveness, and the imperative of conforming to the strictures of the tax code may invite undue governmental influence over philanthropic organizations.

A mythic perspective already alluded to, that philanthropy is a primarily economic phenomenon, deserves further consideration from a cosmological perspective. On this account, to understand philanthropy, we need to attend primarily to wealth and transfers of wealth. How strong was philanthropy last year? To answer this question, we need access to income tax returns, the annual statements of charitable organizations, and news reports. With these in hand, we can simply add up the total number of dollars donated, and we have a complete description of philanthropic activity during this time period. How has philanthropy changed over the past decade or century? Compare the amounts and trajectories of donations between the two time periods, and we have our answer. The answer to the question, “Who are the most important philanthropists?” is simple: Who wrote the largest checks? This perspective seeks to quantify giving and receiving in monetary terms. But only if all giving and voluntary service can be rendered in dollars can this approach provide a comprehensive description of philanthropic activity.
The Social Function

Applied to philanthropy, the social function of myth concerns the structure and ethical content of our society. One pervasive myth in this category concerns the relationship between egoism and altruism. It is commonly supposed that, when it comes to deciding what to do with our resources, financial and otherwise, all human beings stand at a fork in the road. On the one hand, we can choose to use what we have to get more for ourselves. On the other hand, we can put it to use for the benefit of others. More broadly, we can lead lives devoted to acquisition or to donation. This point of view leads us to equate philanthropy with self-sacrifice. However, it is not necessarily the case that we always face mutually exclusive alternatives of self-interest and self-sacrifice. In some cases, there may be opportunities to enrich ourselves and others simultaneously; for example, by investing in friendships, families, and communities.

Another myth concerns the capacities of those in need. The very fact of neediness is often regarded as implicit evidence of disability, and this disability is linked in turn with a kind of disrepute. If poor people were capable of taking care of themselves and lifting themselves out of poverty, they would have done so. The fact that they have not constitutes de facto evidence that they cannot. The mission of philanthropy, therefore, is to do for such people what they are incapable of doing for themselves; namely, provide them with food, shelter, healthcare, and so on. This perspective fosters a presumption that philanthropy is done for people, and can even lead to rhetoric that suggests that philanthropy is done to people. If, however, the poor are capable of playing an active role in their own rehabilitation, this point of view may sell them short. If they positively need to play such a role, then a patronizing mentality may do them a profound disservice.

A related mythic perspective concerns the size of philanthropic endeavors. Inspired in part by 20th century scientific philanthropy, which delivered on its promise to reduce and even eradicate a number of infectious diseases that had long been scourges of humanity, some observers of philanthropy suppose that the only truly effective philanthropy is large-scale philanthropy (Bremner 1988). Put food in someone’s mouth today, and you merely postpone the ravages of hunger until tomorrow. But develop well-financed, large-scale, expert-run programs that teach people to produce their own food, and you eradicate hunger for good. Are the most important problems confronting philanthropy today solvable only by experts working through large, well-funded organizations? Or is there still a role for philanthropy at the grassroots level, involving individual donors and recipients, and focused on the building of long-term relationships within communities (Schambra 2008, 18)?
The Psychological Function

The psychological function of myth, which concerns the inner dimension of meaning, is very much at work in philanthropy. One such myth concerns the relationship between philanthropic activity and duty. In some minds, giving is not an activity toward which our passions naturally incline us. Based on the presumption that our instincts and desires nudge us toward self-interest, thinkers such as Kant (1963) have concluded that the only possible justification for giving is to be found in duty or responsibility. If we take pleasure in giving, it is a sign that we must have some ulterior, self-interested motive for doing so, which means that we are not really giving for the right reason of serving the recipient. Others, among them Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2000), have posited another motivation for giving; namely, that it can be both pleasurable and good to give. In fact, when we refer to generous people, we envision those who delight in giving well. The better their giving, the more they delight in it. Is giving against our natural inclinations or one of their highest forms of expression?

Another psychological myth of philanthropy concerns the relationship between generosity and justice. Should we think of giving as purely gratuitous, something that potential donors are at liberty to do or refrain from doing based strictly on their own discretion, as a kind of supererogation? Or should we see giving as grounded in justice, the idea that when we see someone in need, we have a duty to provide aid? Those who want to make giving primarily a matter of justice tend to see the reduction or eradication of inequality as a moral imperative. They would chide people for failing to give, and offer no praise for those who do give, since they are merely paying a debt. Regarding giving as a matter of justice may lead to a greater readiness to rely on government to ensure that needs are met. By contrast, those who see giving as purely discretionary stress that charity means giving more than is owed. We praise people for their generosity precisely because they have gone above and beyond what is required, something they would not do if they were carrying out a duty.

The psychological dimension of myth is also manifest in the role of trust. Many discussions of philanthropy focus on the trustworthiness of philanthropic organizations and their workers, but the issue of how and where we place our trust is equally important. Can we trust ourselves to do what we know the situation calls for, or do we need to put rules in place to compel ourselves? Can we trust the people our philanthropic initiatives are intended to help, or do we
need to limit their discretion to ensure that they put our donated resources to the uses we intend? Must philanthropic individuals and organizations seeking our support earn our trust before we can rely on them to do what is needed, or must we first invest our trust in them and allow them to live up to it? To an important extent, trust may be one of our most important philanthropic resources, and our capacity to make the most of our giving may hinge on both the liberality and wisdom with which we place in others our trust.

**Conclusion**

A truly comprehensive discussion of the mythic dimension of philanthropy would extend far beyond this introductory essay. There is more left to be said than has been said. Yet there is value in pointing philanthropic inquiry in this relatively neglected direction. Before drawing this discussion to a close, one final point about the role of myth in philanthropy deserves explicit consideration. In every case, myths constrain us. In directing our eyes and energies in one direction, they draw us away from others, erecting barriers in our imagination that tend to prevent us from moving in other directions that might be more fruitful. Yet in every case, myths also liberate and inspire us, opening up possibilities that would otherwise remain hidden. The question is whether serious investigation of the mythic dimension of philanthropy can enable us, where it counts the most, to enhance the potential for liberation and diminish the potential for constraint. In attempting to do so, we need to be mindful that treating cherished myths as objects of intellectual analysis may leech away some of their power to transform our lives.
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THE MYTH OF THE MAN-LOVING PROMETHEUS:
REFLECTIONS ON PHILANTHROPY, FORETHOUGHT, AND RELIGION

Steven Grosby

The mildest and at the same time most widespread form of betrayal (as a form of existence) was not to do anything bad directly, but just not to notice the doomed person next to one, not to help him, to turn away one’s face, to shrink back.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago

Introduction

There are widely-held beliefs about human conduct and organization that unfortunately inhibit our ability to imagine new forms of personal and social well-being. Some of these beliefs are well known, for example, the view that because of the size and complexity of modern society, only the state is able to marshal the resources required to address any number of perceived deficiencies. Putting aside both the epistemological problem of how any centralized authority could obtain sufficient knowledge to address enormously complex problems and the wealth of evidence of inefficient bureaucratism when it attempts to do so, the practical consequences of this belief can only be to undermine individual initiative. When individual initiative is, at best, discouraged as a consequence of such a belief, the character of the individual is warped by enervating the willingness of the individual to undertake action that concretely expresses his or her sympathy for another. Furthermore, to render individual initiative inactive can only undermine what Richard Cornuelle (1993 [1965]) designated the “independent sector” that is so necessary for the civil engagement of a society of free individuals. Thus, different, usually unpredictable possibilities for self-organization with new, often emerging aims are foreclosed.

The persistence of such views, despite the evidence of inefficient bureaucratism and the enervation of individual initiative, allows us to characterize them as mythical; and, in this case, they are “negative” myths because of how they not only contribute to warping the character of the individual but also frustrate conceiving of new, beneficial ways of human conduct and organization. While these kinds of myths may service one (problematic) conception of justice, they may in fact undermine philanthropy.

There are, however, forms of human action that are sustained by myths of individual initiative, generosity, and beneficence. I shall designate such philanthropic—man-loving—myths as “positive”, and will examine briefly one of them, the well-known myth of Prometheus. One further terminological clarification is required. By the term “myth” I mean an empirically unverifiable proposition, for example, “all human beings are created equal.” Positive myths are necessary for human conduct. Thus, the term “myth” is, despite current prejudice, not to be understood as being in any way derogatory because it is supposedly conceptually primitive or entirely fanciful. I will not defend here the necessity of myth—empirically unverifiable propositions—for all periods of human activity, as I have done so elsewhere (Grosby 2008).

Our understanding of philanthropy and voluntary action in general will be modestly advanced if we put aside or at least qualify a negative myth that is less obvious than the above example but which also impoverishes our understanding of human action. It is often argued that human conduct consists entirely of the individual acting out of consideration for his or her own gratification. It is further argued that when the individual does so, he or she chooses the means to maximize that gratification by calculating the costs and benefits of different situations and then arranging his or her actions so that the benefits accruing to the individual are maximized while minimizing the costs—so, the myth of economic behavior and the theory of rational choice.

If the purpose of all human action is understood as the maximization of the gratification (or utility) of the actor, then philanthropy can only be merely another vehicle for the reciprocity of the exchange of benefits, even though that reciprocity may be obscured by the form of the gift. And, in fact, this was the mistaken view of philanthropy of Marcel Mauss in his work *The Gift*. While there is clearly merit to this understanding of human action, it nonetheless views the human mind as if it were hermetically sealed by the individual’s pursuit of only his or her own
advantage, itself narrowly conceived, thus having no place for sympathy or even conceptions of what is right or good as motivations for action. It therefore needs to be supplemented; for it appears to have no place for one fact of human behavior: our capacity to have an interest in acting disinterestedly, where one’s actions confer benefits to others even when imposing incommensurable costs on the acting individual (Grosby 2009).

Now, this latter fact of human behavior—the possibility of philanthropic action, where benefits or gifts may be freely given with no guarantee or even expectation of return to the giver, that is, a voluntary and essentially non-reciprocal act—has occasionally been equated with an ideal of pure altruism. This view of an unalloyed altruism holds philanthropic action wholly apart from economic behavior by asserting that philanthropy, *qua* philanthropy, must be purged of *any* quality of self-interest. Altruism, understood in this sense, may also be considered a negative myth, as it impoverishes our understanding of human action by essentially bifurcating and over-simplifying the character of moral action.

In the end, neither the economic nor the altruistic account of human action sufficiently enhances and extends our understanding of philanthropy. Both accounts view human action too simplistically, as if it were only homogeneous. On these accounts, philanthropy must either be dissolved into a rational, if strange, calculation of self-interest, narrowly understood to be where the benefits of any action accrue directly to the actor, or it must be elevated to a categorical abnegation of any self-interest whatsoever, a moral ideal which we approach only asymptotically.

**Philanthropy and the Gods**

There are other accounts of philanthropy. Many of them are found within the myths constitutive of religious beliefs. It is likely that part of the difficulty today in reaching a proper understanding of philanthropy is a consequence of the currently fashionable skepticism toward religious belief. If so, then what is ultimately required to achieve a proper appreciation of philanthropy is not only to turn to an examination of the myths of religion, for example and of obvious relevance to philanthropy, that of *agape*, but also to raise, once again, the question of the very character of religion. An examination of both the distinctiveness of religion and why myths of philanthropy are a part of that distinctiveness is clearly too ambitious in scope for this paper; however, a few preliminary observations about the philanthropic myths of religion are long overdue.
As early as the Babylonian account of the flood, the *Atrahasis*, we begin to see what might be described as a philanthropic model for human action. It may be that in the *Atrahasis* the god Enki’s rescue of the ark-building Atrahasis, in opposition to the god Enlil, who wished to destroy noisome humanity so that he could finally get a good night’s sleep, was done out of Enki’s love for humanity. Nevertheless, the motivation for Enki’s action is not explicitly described this way, as the Babylonian account of the flood is little interested in conveying motivations. It is instead overly aetiological in intention, for example, to provide an account for infant mortality as a means to control over-population. Thus, one cannot point to the Babylonian account of the flood as a myth that has promoted philanthropy. Enki’s apparent sympathy for humanity is not portrayed in such a way that it serves as an example for human conduct. After all, in the Babylonian account of the flood (as well as the Babylonian account of creation, the *Enuma Elish*), humanity was only created to relieve the burden of some of the gods by performing toilsome labor that had previously been done by them.

In contrast to the Babylonian’s Enki, the motivations of the Greek god Prometheus are repeatedly and explicitly described as being man-loving, at least in Aeschylus’s version of the myth, *Prometheus Bound*. Aeschylus’s description of Prometheus’s act of giving humanity not only fire but also “every art” (lines 110, 256, 506) is in accord with the above understanding of philanthropy as but one expression of a complex spectrum of action; for it was evidently a gift given disinterestedly, that is, freely given with no expectation of reciprocal advantage. One concludes that it was so from two exchanges in *Prometheus Bound*. Early in the play (line 83), the tyrannical Zeus’s henchman, the appropriately named “Might,” taunts Prometheus, chained to the high craggy rocks of desolate Scythia, with the question, surely rhetorical, “what drop of your sufferings can mortals spare you?” Prometheus does not answer Might’s question directly, but the implied answer is “none.” A little later in the play we learn from Prometheus that he has acted on behalf of others (humans) even though by doing so he has incurred considerable costs to himself, when he responds to the question of the Chorus, the daughters of Oceanos, “on what charges Zeus has laid on you and tortures you so cruelly?”

But you have asked on what particular charge he now tortures me: this I will tell you. As soon as he ascended to the throne that was his father’s, straightway he assigned to the several Gods their several privileges and portioned out the
power, but to the unhappy breed of mankind he gave no heed, intending to blot
the race out and create a new. Against these plans none stood save I: I dared. I
rescued men from shattering destruction that would have carried them to Hades’
house; and therefore I am tortured on this rock, a bitterness to suffer, and a pain
to pitiful eyes. *I gave to mortal man precedence over myself in pity.* (Aeschylus
1956, lines 228-41, my emphasis)

From these two exchanges (and Prometheus’s previous self-characterization,
“you see me a wretched God in chains, the enemy of Zeus, hated of all the Gods
that enter Zeus’s palace hall, because of my excessive love for man,” lines 120-22),
one concludes that integral to Aeschylus’s description of the myth of Prometheus’s
beneficence toward humanity was that the god’s act was freely undertaken on
behalf of humanity with no evident return expected by him. He was presumably
motivated by sympathy for “man’s tribulation” (line 442), resulting in “the
goodwill of my (his) gifts” (line 446). Thus, Prometheus has acted to realize the
gratification of the ends of others as the right end of his own action, even to the
point of where doing so can be characterized as being selfless—such is the
implication of his statement, “I gave to mortal man precedence over myself in pity.”

Now, as we shall see, there are complications to this conclusion in both
Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* and Hesiod’s earlier version of the myth in the
*Theogony*; for Prometheus has acted with an “interest,” but it is an interest
involving a conception of a right state of affairs rather than one of gratification,
narrowly understood, accruing to him. He accepted seemingly an eternity of
suffering for the sake of an end: ostensibly to further the well-being of others, but,
as we shall see, to further an additional and related end as well. Those
complications aside for the time being, Aeschylus’s description of Prometheus’s
motivation is that it was truly philanthropic, and rightly so. The description
conveys an optimistic, hopeful perspective, as it provides an example of the
possibility of individual initiative in the service of promoting the goodwill of
others. In contrast, Enki’s rescue of Atrahasis (and thereby humanity) offers no
such hope; it only reinforces a pessimistic perspective by merely re-establishing
the previous state of the harshness of life.

It may be that this evaluation of Prometheus’s action as being truly
philanthropic is a surprising one to reach in the world of polytheistic religion,
albeit refracted here through the artistry of Greek tragedy; for we are accustomed
not to expect such a philanthropic perspective in this fate-determined world. To be
sure, there was generosity (for example, responsibilities to the guest); but it was with the expectation of an obligatory reciprocity or exchange of benefits. In the conceptual world of religion, this expectation of reciprocal benefit is expressed in the ritual of sacrifice by the phrase *do ut des*: “I give (to you) so that you will give (to me).” Thus, I sacrifice to the god of rain (Baal or Hadad in the ancient Near East) so that the god will give to me crop-nourishing rain. Even with that rational development of religion in the Hebrew Bible that we designate as monotheism, the covenant retains the form of *do ut des*: I will worship YHWH and obey his commandments so that YHWH will give to me and my descendants life in the land. For example, Deuteronomy 11:13-15 states, “If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul—then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for livestock, and you will eat your fill.” (The often ignored Jeremiah 44 also clearly conveys the expectation of the reciprocal benefit of *do ut des*.)

To be sure, there are profound complications of *do ut des* in the Hebrew Bible, for example, in Job and Ecclesiastes. Furthermore, while sacrifice of the first animal of one’s flock or the first crops of one’s harvest to God as the religious vehicle of *do ut des* continues, one also finds sacrifice of the self as conveyed by the obvious metaphor (and certainly also an example of the Bible critically commentating on itself) of “circumcision of the foreskin of the heart” (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4). This metaphor is clearly a call for faith as a necessary component of the obedience to the commandments, thereby conveying the perspective of not merely obedience but also—as is repeatedly stated in Deuteronomy—loving YHWH. The idea of the sacrifice of the self opens up the perspective of an action undertaken where incomparable burdens are accepted by the individual for an end, the benefits of which may accrue not to that individual but rather to another, for example, Moses suffering expiation for the sins of the Israelites as described in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

In such a case, the introduction of a philanthropic perspective—an interest in acting disinterestedly, where the benefits of one’s actions accrue to another—pushes the conceptual framework of the covenantal exchange of benefits to its limit. The classic representations of such action in the Hebrew Bible are the four “suffering servant songs” in Deutero-Isaiah. Correspondingly, this philanthropic perspective is also conveyed in the description of YHWH as being not only a god jealous of his
“interests,” thereby punishing iniquity from one generation to the next, but also a compassionate, loving god. Thus, at times it appears that the gift of life is freely given by the man-loving YHWH, so “it is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that YHWH set his heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it is because YHWH loves you” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

We have in these instances of self-sacrifice and freely-given love accounts of philanthropic action that serve as examples for future conduct. Nevertheless, even here, this philanthropy remains situated within the context of the covenant, that is, the obligatory reciprocity of do ut des. Thus, while the philanthropic perspective is presented and while there are numerous examples of charity, generosity, and personal and necessarily social well-being in the Hebrew Bible given its manifest, this-worldly orientation, at first glance it does not appear that one can say that one finds a clear, consistent expression of philanthropy there, at least as I have chosen to define philanthropy, because of the covenantal framework of the reciprocal exchange of do ut des.

I leave aside here for the time being the further, important, and immediately relevant complication and theological conundrum as to what benefit might accrue to YHWH from man’s faithful obedience to his commandments. It is sufficient for our purposes here to note the reciprocal obligation of the covenant. Still, upon reconsideration, is it possible and perhaps more accurate to understand the Hebrew Bible’s covenantal formulations and the sacrifice that it entails as depicting not merely a reciprocal exchange of benefits as with do ut des, but rather, a fidelity to a proper order which, as such, is necessary for one’s well-being? This appears to be the perspective as conveyed, for example, in Deuteronomy 10:12-13:

So now, O Israel, what does the LORD require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being (my emphasis).

Here, the perspective is one where the commandments were given to Israel by YHWH not so that the deity might receive an ostensible benefit in return, but so that Israel itself might, through its own actions, accrue the benefit of its own well-being from this gift. Thus, depicted here is, as van der Leeuw (1963 [1933], 354) observed, the philanthropic perspective of do ut possis dare, “I give so that you may be able to give (to another).” The covenant with YHWH and its commandments were indeed understood as the proper, moral vehicle for well-
being, for the generation and sustenance of life (see Deuteronomy 30, especially verses 19-20). Needless to say, a relation of “I give so that you may be able to give (to another)” is of particular relevance for a proper understanding of philanthropy, formulated here as philanthropy being necessary for the sustenance of life. Let us maintain this possibility for how to understand the implication of the Hebrew Bible’s covenantal formulations, and thus as a positive philanthropic myth. And it is this understanding that accords with the gift of Prometheus, with possibly one modification: “I (Prometheus) give so that you (humanity) may be able to create.”

As is well known, it is usually argued that it is with the new covenant of the Gospels where one appears to find the gift of life, albeit the myth of eternal life, freely given. It is there where one finds consistently expressed the philanthropic perspective of “I give so that you may be able to give (to another),” where the gift of God is done out of unrequited love, as Paul expresses in Ephesians 2:4-8. The classic formulation in the Gospels of the selfless gift is, of course, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son”—a love that is, in turn, expected to be extended in the relation of one human to another, thus John 15:12-13, “Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” Here, now, we have the quintessential philanthropic perspective, initially conveyed through, if you will, myth. Allow me to emphasize one implication of what has just been stated: God’s love was to be extended to relations between humans; that is, it is a call to action. Thus, the myth here not only allows us to imagine new forms of action and well-being, but also calls upon us to realize them.

However, complications are to be found here as well. First, the context remains covenantal, or if one prefers, “testamental”; that is, even here this context contains a reciprocal expectation. Those who are familiar with the New Testament will know that the quotation above from John 3 was incomplete. The full verse is, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The latter half of the verse affirms the expected return of the covenantal framework of do ut des: you will achieve eternal life by giving to God your faithful obedience. Even so, there is proposed here a new form of well-being, as the faithful obedience that humanity gives to God entails an expansion of humanity through the compassionate kindness of love in imitation of God’s love of humanity, so John 15:12-13. Up to this point, the love of one’s fellow human as a consequence of one’s understanding of God or even in imitation of God’s act could be understood as
following the call to action of the Hebrew Bible, thus Leviticus 19:2, 18, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy ... you shall love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD.” Nonetheless, there is likely a difference here between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, as the implicit referent of “fellow” in Leviticus 19:18 may be “countryman,” that is, “fellow Israelite” and not all of humanity. Be that as it may, the covenantal framework is maintained; that is, there is an expected reward for the acting individual, in this case, eternal life in heaven. Can we say that such action is “disinterested?”

At first glance, the New Testament leads us to an affirmative answer. For example, one may point to verses such as Acts 20:35, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” However, to reach this conclusion may be to import a foreign conception into the New Testament. It is certainly the case that we are told “when you give to the needy . . . do not announce it with trumpets . . . to be honored by men” (Matthew 6:2); for to announce one’s giving is to act as if the generosity were indeed in accord with the theory of rational choice as the announcement is to seek a reward of some kind (honor). And again, “when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret” (Matthew 6:3-4). It appears here that the human act of giving to another is to be truly disinterested, hence philanthropic. However, the verse concludes with “then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Thus, the seemingly selfless gift of the human actor is, in fact, tied to the expectation of a benefit, albeit from God. Nevertheless, it does seem that both *do ut des* and *do ut possis dare* are operating; both conceptions and the call to action they convey are found in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

We conclude that for the human actor, the covenantal framework, while maintained, is stretched to its conceptual limit by *do ut possis dare*, and especially so when the giving to another is described as self-sacrificing conduct. It is also stretched to its conceptual limit in another way: the reward for the actor’s giving is expected not from the human recipient of the gift but from God and in the future. Here, we come upon another complication. The reward for one’s action is from God, hence, its mythical character. This mythical character is underscored by how the reception of the reward is presented: in the future, whether in “this world” as in the Hebrew Bible, or in the “other world” as in the New Testament. The crucial question that arises is whether or not the temporal perspective of futurity, in the Hebrew Bible’s turn to history or the New Testament’s turn to heaven, is a necessary component of the hope that is constitutive of philanthropy.
The myth of the covenants of both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels is, as was observed, a call to action: not only “I give so that you will give (to me)” but also “I give so that you may give (to another).” It is an optimistic, philanthropic perspective of furthering life. The prospering of life—even though understood differently in the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels—is an end of action posited as a good in and of itself. Turning again to the myth of Prometheus may help us clarify the complications involved in the biblical conceptions of the covenant and their bearing on philanthropy.

**Prometheus’s Call to Action**

The authorial intention of both Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* is brilliant but obvious. From his rightly famous “invocation,” Hesiod explicitly tells us that his gift to his readers is to bestow upon us a song that will help us to forget our heartache—a song that may contain not only truth but also believable lies. (If we add *necessarily* to believable lies, does the addition of “necessary” indicate that we may have “positive myths”?) And so Hesiod sings about how Prometheus outwitted Zeus, just as one would expect from a god named “forethought,” by stealing fire from Zeus and giving it to humans. We are not told by Hesiod why Prometheus tricked Zeus, other than the implied, aetiological purpose of the myth to account for the forethought required for the development of civilized life made possible through the control of fire. However, we are told by Aeschylus why Prometheus rebelled against Zeus; and herein exists the intention of Aeschylus’s account: to serve as a polemic against tyranny.

Aeschylus describes Zeus’s rule as “new and harsh” (1956, line 34); a rule where “the new customs have no law to them, but what was great before is brought to nothingness” (lines 150-51); and where there are laws, they are “private” (line 403). It is, thus, a rule where, as even Might acknowledges, “only Zeus is free” (line 50), as all must bend to the arbitrary will of Zeus. Endemic to this kind of rule is a “haughtiness of temper toward the gods that were old” (line 405); for, as Aeschylus insightfully observes, the “sickness rooted and inherent in the nature of tyranny” is “that he that holds it does not trust his friends” (line 227). We may rightly extend Aeschylus’s observation on the nature of tyranny by adding that the tyrant not only does not trust his friends, but also cannot allow for others to have friends. For others to have friends is for bonds of affection to exist distinct from the tyrant. The existence of such bonds implies attachments separate from the authority of the tyrant, thus serving potentially as a locus of opposition.
to the tyrant. It also implies initiative of action undertaken by others instead of only by the tyrant. Thus, the only kind of philanthropy that the tyrant can permit is that which has its origin in his action; for all must be dependent upon, hence be fearful of, the tyrant—a philanthropy that is, of course, no philanthropy at all.

We conclude from both the description of Zeus’s rule and Prometheus’s opposition to it that Aeschylus has recognized that philanthropy, distinct from the “welfare program” of the ruler, is a challenge to tyranny. In this regard, it is surely significant that at the end of *Prometheus Bound* the chorus, despite the threats of Zeus’s messenger Hermes, proclaims its sympathy for Prometheus. In doing so, the chorus states, “we will bear along with him (Prometheus) what we must bear” (1956, line 1068). It is as if the chorus has now realized that Prometheus’s gift to humans also has relevance to them; for the sympathy that he showed to humans was an example, and, as such, a call for the chorus to act to express their sympathy with others, in this case Prometheus. The chorus refuses, to use Solzhenitsyn’s phrase quoted above, “to turn away, to shrink back,” even when threatened by Zeus’s lightning bolts (lines 1061, 1071-79).

One may argue that Prometheus’s philanthropy was because he, as the god of forethought, knew that a human (Heracles, according to Hesiod’s version of the myth, *Theogony*, lines 529-36) was necessary to free him from his chains. If so, then the motivation for his initial act of beneficence was mixed with the expectation of a return, that is, the benefit of his action would directly accrue to him. However, this explanation does not adequately account for Prometheus’s initial decision to confer benefits on humanity; because, according to Aeschylus’s version and as we have observed, the two decisive reasons for Prometheus’s philanthropy were (1) his sympathy for the plight of humanity, and (2) his fidelity to what is right, requiring his opposition to Zeus’s tyranny. Furthermore, one ought not overlook Aeschylus’s subtle insertion into the myth of the significance of speech and persuasion for human action. Throughout the play, Prometheus time and again hints at Zeus’s eventual downfall, so much so that Oceanos warns Prometheus to be careful because “soon Zeus will hear you” (line 314). Evidently, Prometheus expected Zeus to eavesdrop, as tyrants are wont to do and, in fact, must do. After Prometheus tells the wandering Io, the mortal woman who is the object of Zeus’s lust, that her descendant will free him, Hermes proclaims to Prometheus that Zeus “has commanded you to say what marriage of his is this you brag about that shall drive him from power” (lines 949-50). There is a subtle ambiguity here; for whether or not Prometheus’s prophecy of his human liberator is
(or will be) true, the very act of Prometheus’s speech has persuaded Zeus that it is true. Prometheus knows well what Zeus does not know: to rule successfully requires more than “overmastering force”; it also requires “guile” (line 217) that forethought provides. And it is through the guile made possible by speech that Prometheus will set into motion a series of events. Be that as it may, what is central to this discussion of philanthropy and religious myth is that Prometheus has now enlisted humanity, through his exchanges with Io, in his opposition to Zeus’s tyranny.

Now, this enlistment returns us to a consideration of a theological, if you will, conundrum. We know that Prometheus was philanthropic, and the same may be said, notwithstanding complications, of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible and certainly God of the New Testament. But why should Prometheus be described as being philanthropic at all? His opposition to Zeus’s tyranny need not have entailed benefits being bestowed upon humanity. Likewise, why should the God of the Bible have an “interest” in our well-being? It is not clear what God receives from humanity. Presumably, God receives no benefit, thus the twists and turns of theological reflection on why God is philanthropic, for example, as stated in Ephesians 2:7-8, “so that in the ages to come he (God) might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” There are two possible responses to this conundrum.

In Prometheus Bound, Aeschylus describes a parallel between the god Prometheus and the human Io. Both suffer; both are the victims of Zeus (1956, lines 576-81); and herein exists one response to our theological conundrum. Each is dependent upon the other: Io for information from Prometheus (and by extension, humanity for Prometheus’s gifts), Prometheus on the liberating descendant of Io (lines 773-74). Thus, for Aeschylus, the fate of humanity and the fate of the gods are intertwined. Our monotheistic understanding of God does not have a difficulty with the dependency of humanity on the creator; however, it does make difficult a description of God and the fate of humankind being intertwined, as such a description would imply some kind of dependency of the deity upon humanity.

From the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the dependency of humanity upon God is obvious. Nevertheless, can it be that lurking within the covenantal framework, even with its wide variations as alluded to above, there is a relation of mutual dependency of some kind between God and humanity? Even though it may be difficult for us, as monotheists suffering under the influence of Greek
philosophy, to imagine a reciprocal dependency, such as the one portrayed in *Prometheus Bound*, perhaps Aeschylus’s play provides a suggestion to what may be implied by the covenantal framework and, thus, to our conundrum.

Let us entertain the possibility that there is implied in the covenantal framework, a recognition of a dependency of God upon humanity in the Judeo-Christian tradition. If so, it surely cannot be one where God receives some benefit as posited in the theory of rational choice or the ideal of economic behavior. Perhaps one can say that God has an “interest” in the very existence of life. Certainly this possibility is central to the biblical myth. (There are putatively “naturalistic” versions of this interest, as in, for example, the philosophical biology of Hans Jonas.) Moreover, one can further say that God is described as having an “interest” in the proper—legal and moral—ordering of life because such an ordering is necessary to sustaining the divine, philanthropic gift of life. The biblical narrative also suggests this possibility, for example, the reasons for the flood as described in Genesis 6-9 with the ensuing, life-protecting covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:6). However, the realization of this ordering is dependent upon human action, thereby implying a relation between the human and the divine.

What if, similar to the relation between Prometheus and Io in *Prometheus Bound*, the biblical formulation of the covenant implies the necessity of partnership in the work of creation between God and humanity? As theologically odd as this may sound, such a possibility was already explicitly entertained in antiquity, for example, in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 10a).

R. Hisda and Rabbath son of R. Huna were sitting all day engaged in judgments (over lawsuits), and their hearts grew faint, when R. Hiyya b. Rab of Difti recited to them, “and the people stood about Moses from the morning to the evening” (Exodus 18:13). Now can you really think that Moses sat and judged all day? When was his learning done? But it is to teach you, every judge who judges with complete fairness even for a single hour, the Writ gives him credit as though he had become a partner of the Holy One, blessed be He, in the creation. For here it is written, “and the people stood around Moses from the morning to the evening,” while elsewhere it is written, “and there was morning, and there was evening, one day” (Genesis 1:5).

Thus, for humanity to establish proper, legal order is understood as continuing the acts of God; we are, as it were, co-creators with God. This possibility of partnership between the human and the divine has an odd ring to it, because it cannot avoid implying some kind of dependency of God upon humanity for the realization of God’s interest in life. Still, it is a partnership infused with the
philanthropic perspective: each freely gives (even when doing so requires self-sacrifice, i.e., “and their hearts grew faint”) so that another may be able to give with the admitted goal (surely, an adventure) of furthering life.

Still left unanswered is how to account for God’s interest in life. Doing so may address the oddness of the partnership just discussed. Of course, one need not attempt to account for the interest at all, as in the apophatic tradition, the so-called “negative theology,” where one is not entitled to describe what God is. However, according to the Hebrew Bible, God’s interest in life appears to be inseparable from his holiness, the latter perhaps to be understood as an attribute, so, for example, Leviticus 19. And, as is well known, there is the long tradition in Christianity of describing God as inseparable from agape. In fact, while only a minor current within the Christian tradition, it has even been proposed that the crucifixion was neither a ransom nor an atonement, but the means by which the divine gift of life is fulfilled, so Rupert of Deutz. Now, these kinds of theological speculations about the previously raised conundra may appear to some to be conceptually barren distractions from the task of understanding the character of philanthropy. However, if we recall the crucial question posed earlier, the possibility must be considered that these kinds of speculations are central to philanthropy; for it may very well be that these myths are the necessary grounding for imagining new forms of personal and social well-being. They certainly have been resilient; and one ought to think long and hard about why this is so.

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My professional training in the history of religion/comparative study of religion has conditioned me to associate the English word “myth” with the Greek word “mythos,” used to describe sacred stories of origins, archetypes, not wrongheaded misconceptions. But in considering the themes of philanthropy it is interesting to use the term “myth” as it is used colloquially—to mean “an error needing to be debunked,” even if at times it may lead to starker contrasts than I usually arrive at. So in this article I will suspend my usual attempts to get people to think of myths as profoundly true symbolic stories. Instead, for once in my life, I will join the large majority of people who use the word colloquially and pejoratively, to see where it takes me. The seven questionable issues I will discuss in this paper have struck me in recent years as especially fruitful to explore.

Myth 1: America faces the same basic money issues as the rest of the world because human nature is the same everywhere.

It is commonly held that it is not permissible to speak as if American culture is imbued with Christian values and ideas, even if the majority was Christian for a long time. In this view, even if the heyday of America’s taken-for-granted Christian background ran up until the 1960s, and even if it is still a strong presence today, we must not broach this topic because it is politically incorrect and stirs animosity. Psychologist James Hillman’s (1983) observations about money and Christian values might be useful in helping us think about specifically American-style spending and American-style philanthropy. To explore the deep archetypal attitudes of our American views of money in relation to soul, Hillman begins by noting that American culture has historically embodied mainstream attitudes with a Christian framework. This formative background includes the story of Jesus casting out the moneylenders from the temple, calling their workspace a den of
thieves, (literally “coin clippers”), as if they were turning the temple into a clip joint. It also includes comparing a rich man’s likelihood of getting to heaven with the difficulties a camel would face getting through a needle’s eye—a dramatically graphic image of extreme unlikelihood. And it involves stories of taxes, especially the one where Jesus responds to a question about paying tribute to Caesar by advising followers to keep worldly and spiritual realms separate: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” (Mark 12:17).

Hillman (1983) notes that in these examples of Christian teachings money seems to split human concerns rather too neatly into the spiritual on one hand, and the worldly on the other, asserting that poverty is always better, from a religious view. If one stores up worldly wealth, moths and thieves will get it; it will be corrupted (or corrupt you); and “you can’t take it with you” into the realm of heaven which is supremely important as one’s eternal home.

Hillman observes that money in human experience, being a protean psychic reality, is ambivalent, and gives rise to polar opposites—just as forces such as love, religion, work, and death do. So, money will always be multivalent and complex, troublesome and “devilishly divine.” Hillman argues that money as a deep psychic reality can never be contained in a simple box of depreciation by Christianity, “and so Christianity time and again in its history has had to come to terms with the return of the repressed—from the wealth of the churches and the luxury of the priests, the selling of indulgences, the rise of capitalism with Protestantism, usury and projections on the Jews, the Christian roots of Marxism and so on” (1983, 38). The “projections on the Jews” referred to would presumably include accusing Jews of being overly smart about finances and obsessed with making money, and non-Jews having feelings of superiority because of their naïveté/innocence regarding money.

Hillman asserts that a belief system which has a built-in devaluing of money inevitably will threaten “the soul with value distortions” (1983, 39). Psychologically speaking, we cannot have soul or money one without the other. If we think of them as mutually exclusive we are making a mistake. Hillman thinks the “moneychangers” should be kept in view in the “temple” of our “pious aspirations.” Thus Hillman analyzes and criticizes the old Christian ethos regarding money as too one-sided. If a rich man can’t get to the highest goal any more than a camel can expect to get through a needle’s eye, that’s a pretty disabled rich man. It also sets up bleak prospects for the ones who pursue the American
Dream and succeed. Few in the modern age will renounce money, and those who do will be ridiculed by many people. It would improve matters to find a synthesis, to receive the grace that comes from integrating the two sides. A spiritual sense of disinterested detachment (a goal of religious poverty in earlier ages) joined with a balanced and healthy life in the world might make living with money and doing good things with money more possible. Therefore, that seems the most desirable path today. Being worldly wise and spiritually wise would seem to be a productive combination, promising the ideal of mature fulfillment.

“Doing well and doing good” is a theme we hear fairly often in today’s thinking about philanthropy. Being more at ease with money and being more at ease with a spirituality that can use money well and wisely seems a helpful ideal. It affirms that practicality and spirituality can be complementary. In fact, it can be argued that it takes a wise soul to use money well.

The afflictions of money troubles bring out humility, tragedy and comedy, humanity and inhumanity. Money involves us in turmoil of conscience, aspirations, hopes, fears, and secrets.

A lot of secrecy and unspoken words surround money like an aura of mystical formulas and complicated charms, perhaps to try to prevent things considered valuable and powerful from causing panics and stampedes, tsunamis of greed. We have secret passwords, secret account numbers, hidden stashes for a rainy day, money under lock and key or in a shoebox or under the mattress for emergencies, like a getaway car. Talk about our own personal money, like talk about sex, politics and religion, is chancy and often makes people nervous. It is a private matter, with secrets to keep safe. Talk about money is sometimes a conversational taboo. Is it because we unconsciously intuit that decisive forces are at play in knowledge about our comparative economic statuses? Is it that by not talking we better preserve our semblance of equality—affirming that our financial worth is not our sole standard of value? Is it that if we speak of money and our income we might tip the measure of our identities onto the side of the material, and that not speaking of it keeps us more on the spiritual side of invisible values? Not speaking of personal wealth seems more democratic. Is our reluctance to talk about it an unspoken affirmation that equality comes from our individual soul’s dignity, reason, conscience and other spiritual resources, not from our tax bracket?

Taboos like this one may sometimes play a positive role of enabling stability, “maintaining the status quo of established social patterns” (Wuthnow 1996, 140).
And our conscience’s response to money questions may determine our soul’s condition—just what will we and what won’t we do for money? How penny-wise and pound-foolish are we? What would we betray for thirty pieces of silver? “What would it profit us to gain the world but lose our soul?” is a stark question from Mark (8:36) about spirit and matter. To show the ultimatum rivalry between worldly and celestial, the ultimate is depicted in terms of precious valuables. Consider, for example, the imagery of “the good treasure of the heart” as source of human becoming and destiny, “the pearl of great price.”

What else can conjure up value, even transcendence, but a material wealth image—like a pearl with perfect beauty so fine, small but worth selling all else to gain. It is not by chance that the Latin word caritas and the Greek charis originally carried the meanings of dearness, high price, being precious in value. In time they came to connote experiences of grace, gratitude, goodwill, fellow-feeling for others beyond one’s kin, and compassionate love. Other Christian teachings use the language of treasure as well, for example, in depicting one’s inner resources: “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Luke 6:45).

In Carl G. Jung’s understanding, “Money-making, social existence, family, and posterity are nothing but plain nature—not culture. Culture lies beyond the purpose of nature” (1953, 131). Culture is something more universal; it involves an expansion of our sympathy’s horizons and our ultimate identity. Under some circumstances, philanthropy becomes culture, reaching beyond self-interest, ulterior motive, and clan consciousness. Isn’t the goal of philanthropy to “do unto others” without one hand knowing what the other hand is doing, as the Christian teaching says? Maimonides also taught that that was the highest form of giving. Poet Allen Ginsberg’s terse line, “Must give for no return” sums it up (1996, 39-40). But dealing with money is a learning process. We learn as we go, and the instructional messages are often mixed. Bumper stickers today smirk: “He who dies with the most toys wins.” Andrew Carnegie said, “The man who dies rich dies disgraced.” To live well and give well are activities requiring genius, or at least intelligent care. They, like all true arts, don’t just happen by mere chance. Christian values inevitably are a factor in the ongoing attitudes about giving in America, no matter how unconscious we may be of their roots.
Myth 2. We learned everything we need to know about giving from kindergarten, etc.

We often labor under false assumptions when we attempt to understand situations and formulate solutions to problems, because we strive to avoid complexity. Because we like simple answers, we are likely to accept erroneous preconceived notions. We find simple answers comforting, easier to absorb, requiring less effort than more complicated and nuanced ones. We often accept the convenient one-sided and linear concepts when complexity and multiplicity more accurately grasp the actual traits of the case at hand.

Take for example the mystery of gratitude: it can inspire cascades of generosity, and to give gratitude is to be the richer, not the poorer, for the giving.

Sometimes a paradox—a dynamic, seemingly contradictory union of opposites—enables thinkers to avoid speaking half-truths. Often “either/or” formulations are ultimately less accurate in grasping actuality, and not as useful in giving us a reading of actual situations as “both/and” formulations. There are birds and serpents, but the dragon archetype is a more dynamic image to help us think about the mysterious nature of existence. The Chinese use of dragon imagery to depict dynamic concepts about energy is an example of this. Cosmologist and universe story popularizer Brian Swimme’s work is another example (1984, 25). He calls the universe “a green dragon” to remind us that the cosmos is mysteriously deep, beyond description in language, awe-inspiring, imagination boggling, fierce and benign, creative and full of wisdom. Any enormity which is challenging to deal with can be cartooned as a dragon being fought. Dragons in various cultures carry associations of transcendent energy, wealth, wisdom and awe.

Today the pragmatic need to solve actual problems in a practical way drives us toward embracing both sides (or multiple sides) of approaches—to be more encompassing and comprehensive of actualities. In times of great polarization, extreme partisanship and oversimplification, we tend to lose the art of creative synthesis. Stress makes us seek short cuts and we lose the ability to listen to other approaches, and forego the attempt to harmonize and reconcile multiple stances. We lose the talents of being both winged and serpentine, as it were.

In our attempt to understand better the kind of world we live in at this transitional time we need to explore and understand the scale of things and appreciate the multiplicity of new and old approaches to social problems. The international nature of modern commerce, and the way business, government and
nonprofits are not separate, as well as the way old dichotomies, like socialist or capitalist, charity or entrepreneurship, require a larger compass to be comprehended. It is useful to call to mind concepts and examples of comprehensive mutualities. Through such images and complex concepts in writings we learn about and remember needed values and outlooks. The various sciences and arts of our time are making available new analyses and understandings, and we cannot be complacent with paradigms of the past. We need to keep learning from new research to face adequately the new challenges.

**Myth 3. We are inevitably partisan creatures and we should strive to be fierce adversaries, going at it hammer and tong. Competitive strife, not cooperation, is our salvation.**

The world is not always stable—tsunamis, pirates, and con men may not be daily threats, but various destabilizing forces are always there. To endure a long time a system has to have a recognizable form, a viable structure with limits, regulations, ongoing procedures, and it also must be dynamic, adaptable, alive to new changes in conditions, rising to challenges and renovating itself. India’s civilization has survived a long time. Some Indian concepts can give us ideas, showing us how one large sector of humanity has answered perennial questions. *Yogakshema* is a deep concept—meaning “keeping and getting” or “sustaining and progressing.” This involves a pattern which I would say holds true for communities, and also scientific and artistic disciplines: conserving what is attained, and developing new applications and adaptations which work.

V. Raghavan’s (1976) classical Hindu tradition-based concept of *yogakshema* helps us understand the complementarity of convention and invention in Hinduism. *Kshema* involves keeping the valuable cultural attainment already won, while fresh accession of new creativity is *yoga*, because one of the meanings of yoga is “gaining.” There is an ebb and flow of tradition and innovation in humanity’s evolving history. Thus the ongoing cycles of life and art are dynamic with retaining and expanding, holding and advancing. *Yogakshema*, as the secure preservation and ongoing acquisition of life’s necessities is often translated as “well-being,” and the conventional meaning, Raghavan says, implies that welfare and progress are dynamically balanced with dual aspects: direction and control, accelerator and brakes, freedom and discipline. Nonconformist innovations have been absorbed and consolidated by selectively-receptive, gradually-changing traditions throughout Indian history.
All communities need ways of allowing creativity into the traditional, adapting new points carefully to stay in continuity with time-proven patterns. Raghavan pictures a constant cultural process of creativity in which new elements are initiated or domesticated into a style and ethos of the long-abiding tradition, and what is not assimilated struggles on the fringes and dies. “Such is Non-conformism, such is Tradition, always vibrant, assimilating its correct material of enrichment and growing in its puissance” (1976, 189). In other words, improvisation enhances the tried and true, keeps it alive and extends it. Canon and commentary, authority and extension, fixed order and the transcending of fixed order in freedom, are all like Gregory Bateson’s view of dual dynamics of nature and biological evolution which involve the interplay of structure and freedom, or “rigor and imagination” in Bateson’s words. Cognition and evolution, consciousness and tradition are flip sides of the same coin, constants in the processes which nature and culture go through in time. There is a place for orderly reason, and for dreamlike imagination in freedom, because they dynamically work together. Accepting limitations and overcoming impasses with creativity are basic to life.

How do we carry tradition forward by maintaining a limited scope for allowable innovation, sometimes called reform or rediscovery? The needed strength is depth and endurance in time; the danger is sameness, approved acts repeated by rote, stagnant and irrelevant. Yogakshema pictures a complementary balance of stability and flexibility with features both conservative and liberal contributing to the whole. We need the stability of time-honored structure with values from the past, but also fresh originality, improvisational energy, to keep things relevant. The Founding Fathers of America, writing the Constitution, devising the modern democratic form of government, answered the same need that Yogakshema addresses—stable enduring structure allowing for change, revival and innovation. This gives a conscious awareness to an ongoing process able to adapt to new times and needs, safeguarded by checks and balances. Coming to new times, we’ve been unconsciously living on our inheritance. What can we learn from past forms of self-governance and social welfare, and what other paradigms can help us deal with “unprecedented” current crises creatively, enabling our holding-together and advancing, our need to encompass conserving and progressing without too much animosity? The greatest musicians know the possibilities “backwards and forwards,” able to play the scripted time-honored way, and to improvise. The point of this discussion is to envision a way to rediscover cooperation and not be stuck, mired in animosity. It points to the need for conserving what is good and innovating. Relating it to philanthropy, the concept suggests a balance of time-tested modes of giving, and improvising new ways, too.
Myth 4. The natural state of man is ‘All against all,’ so, people must be forced to do good.

Feeling proud of our actions brings self-esteem. Who would want to claim credit for ungenerous behavior, meanness, violence and the results of recklessness? The classical Taoist view from China is an example of a view which focuses on inborn traits, a personal deep sense of sympathy/solidarity. This nature wisdom values the sympathy in our innate structure, which today scientists would say includes “mirror neurons,” and is nurtured by family, friends, and tradition, or ruined by abuse and bad company. Born with “mirror neurons,” humans soon develop sympathy for others. Research on “mirror neurons” opens new understandings of the processes of empathy (Iacoboni et al. 2005). Researchers are beginning to understand empathy better at the neuron level in the brain. Empathy involves interiorizing and truly reflecting on others’ plights. This ability is normally exercised early in life, usually in interacting with the mother. (Hrdy 2009).

A recent example of spontaneous generosity concerns Johntel Franklin, a DeKalb (Illinois) high school basketball player whose mother died of cancer after five years of struggling with the disease. Later the same day, Johntel went to a basketball game and wanted to play. His name was not on the roster, and the rules say that the team of anyone who plays without being on the roster must accept the penalty of a technical foul—the opposing team gets two free throws. The other team took them, but elected to not try to hit the basket—they refused to profit from a penalty that seemed to punish the other team for a grieving player just wanting to play. Spectators cheered and a coach said, “We knew we’d done the right thing, teaching kids the right thing to do” (Associated Press 2009).

This act of generosity, sympathy, and solidarity acknowledges something more important than winning—embracing the larger truth of being part of humanity. This sense of humanity, beyond team spirit, showed what it’s like to “win the game of life,” as one of the coaches put it. A small gesture, it had life in it which grew. Both teams were invited to a Milwaukee Bucks and Washington Wizards game. There, the high school teams were honored publicly, and donations were collected to help Johntel’s family. Friendship developed beyond short-term gains; love prevailed. The wellbeing of the larger whole emerged. Mandatory safeguards are needed, but discovering love within has a genius all its own. Just as “two heads are better than one,” so too, two teams celebrating are better than one, because of a bonus of added experiential richness.
The heartwarming effects of giving are famous. Deriving scant joy from fellow-feeling, one gets used to the stinging effect of stinginess, and anesthetizes oneself to it with self-centered obsessions. Instead of expanded compassion, if we are “close” (a synonym for “cheap”) when charitable sharing is needed, we forego knowing our larger potential self of magnanimity and fulfillment. As Eric Hoffer observed, “A soul that is reluctant to share does not as a rule have much of its own. Miserliness is here a symptom of meagerness” (1954, 76).

**Myth 5. Modern people are fact-oriented, concerned primarily with hard data and statistics, which demand serious respect. Therefore, fiction and art do not motivate acts of giving.**

Works of art can be psychologically true. A song can convey a believable emotion, a story can portray an authentic example powerfully. Stories can help us see the humanity we share, imagine the plight of others and our own mortal condition. To extend ourselves in our understanding and sympathetic imagination, arts are invaluable. Sometimes a story can have a great impact. Consider Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which contributed to ending slavery in America. Or how *The Jungle*, a novel by Upton Sinclair published in 1906, stirred public awareness and caused reform in the meatpacking industry. The poem “Over the Hill to the Poorhouse” written by Will Carleton in 1872 caused many American families to change their attitudes, developing more sensitivity toward the plight of poor elderly people in their midst. As Franz Kafka famously observed, literature is an ax we wield against the frozen sea within us. Often, statistics do not reach that far into the depths of our psyches.

Consider the great impact of a story about ghosts and a miser—Charles Dickens’ 1843 novel, *A Christmas Carol*. That story has inspired generosity for generations. It has been retold in many forms—school plays, TV shows, movies, cartoons. When Ted Turner saw it performed, he decided to give a billion dollars of his personal wealth to the U.N. Others followed suit.

Arts can expand our horizons, increase our powers of empathy. Author Antonya Nelson wrote,

> Reading has taught me to see myself in other people, even if they are fictional counterparts, to engage wholly in my imagination, to exercise it regularly; it occurs to me that the greatest problem most people face is a lack of imagination—they cannot think like others, cannot understand
deep differences of interpretation, cannot project likely results of particular actions. It is the problem of the obnoxious playground bully; it is the problem of the arrogant entitled political leader (2005, 35).

Literary imagination can help people tune in to the lives of fellow humans. “Art humanizes because the artist must grope and feel his way, and he never ceases to learn,” as Eric Hoffer wrote (1973, 5). Arts can throw individuals back on themselves, giving them access to their inner resources. From thinking about basic human experiences portrayed in stories we find in ourselves experiences of distress, our thankfulness at good fortune, and bonds shared with the less fortunate. Stories are focal points for reflective exercises.

As Oscar Wilde said, “…Art, even the art of fullest scope and widest vision, can never really show us the external world. All that it shows is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance… It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves.” (Danson 1997, 112). Thus, arts enrich our psyches. To do better as citizens and fellow human beings in our communities, we need to imagine with empathy the plight of others and how we are implicated in the whole situation. (See de Waal 2009; Hrdy 2009). If all imagination is exclusively taken up by emotions like fear, anxiety, anger and panic, with nothing of human feelings like compassion, friendship, trust, and love of the common good, there is not much hope for the fulfillment of human potential. We cancel the possibilities of whatever we cannot imagine.

Imagination is the hidden treasure needed to inspire us to bring out and share some of our goods with generosity. One way to nurture this is through writing about one’s experiences of going through difficulties, traumas, needing help, and relating that to the troubles others are going through. Also, reflecting on experiences of expanding understanding helps us grow. The crucial importance of imagination in the processes of participating in uplift is indeed great. As Gary Snyder reminds us, “Failures of charity and compassion are failures of imagination” (1995, 61). Statistics can tally significant amounts in the logical mind and figure greatly in calculative descriptions, but stories and images can be counted on to touch the soul; they move and inspire us.

**Myth 6. We must be true to our western segment of humanity, relying only on the Abrahamic traditions—it is unnecessary to learn anything from other cultures about giving.**

We are all composite beings inextricably linked in a network of multiple existences, a postmodern medley, if you will. Our unity is expressed in community
Psychiatrist Karl Menninger, when someone asked him what to do if one is about to have a nervous breakdown, advised, “Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need, and do something for them.” Self-centeredness does not bring happiness. Cooperating with others, reaching out to others, being of service to the community of life, we learn from experience and expand our knowledge and options.

Encountering other perspectives we may come to realize that we are heirs to wisdom worldwide. Some species of wisdom may be useful when others grow ineffective. We are realizing “Mundus est unus,” as the old Latin phrase goes. The modern rediscovery that “the world is one in more ways than one” (as William James observed) is valuable for a number of reasons. The visions of many traditions, when they agree on experiential concepts (such as life’s unity in the great chain of being, the tree of life, the greatness of loving-kindness and goodhearted generosity), form a kind of enduring consensus. We hamstring ourselves when we reduce ourselves to learning from our own clan only. With only a narrow spectrum, we lack a full human potential. Forgetting wholeness, or taking a part as all-important, is an issue involved in a number of the myths I have been discussing. Troubles of forgetting the whole—whole community, long-term cycles, whole humanity—exist because getting a sense of wholes is often difficult. Short-term self-interest is a convenient, natural myopia. Understanding a larger whole gives more accurate grasps of reality, and hope.

The motivation for ethical conduct and reaching out to help others may derive from a variety of sources. Jainism has its reasons for ethical conduct, and Taoism has its reasons for cultivating a motherly love toward others. The sources of human sympathy, compassion, and service are multiple, and are shaped in large part by varied conceptions of self and cosmos.

Darwin’s discovery of evolution involved a growing realization that all life is interrelated; the discovery of DNA also confirms this. This fact of interrelatedness has implications for human wellbeing. Buddhism’s teaching of interrelatedness is conveyed in the image of “Indra’s Net,” which suggests existence as a network of interdependent, inter-reflective co-existence. The Avatamsaka Sutra describes this image as an infinite net of star-like jewels, each of which, when examined, is seen to reflect all the other jewels, the idea of infinite interrelatedness. “Indra’s Net” provides an archetypal image of the interconnectedness of conscious beings in the universe which resonates well in our scientific age of systems theory and the
worldwide web. It dovetails with ecology, and with other ancient intuitions about unity—including shamanism, Taoism, Vedanta, and the idea of tawhid in Islam. If we unpack what this interpenetrating, inextricable oneness means in terms of how we treat others we may be surprised. Implications of oneness in a network or web of life include “self-interest rightly understood” because we find that others are inseparable from us. “Indra’s Net” is a profound reminder of functional unity in a world of distinct names and individual rights. A literature of useful books, documentary films, and other explorations of our actual intricate interrelatedness is helping a new generation expand their understandings and vocabularies of interconnectedness (Loy 1993; Suzuki 2002).

“Indra’s Net” helps us visualize the mystery of our actual interconnectedness. In conflict with the profit imperative, the reality that everything is interconnected can suffer when the cash nexus becomes the only connection recognized between man and nature. Then the person with a fortune has to go outside that profit system, and add philanthropy to his activities. We can be helpful to others in a more integral way, for deep reasons, Buddhism suggests. We can help because the other’s well-being is not separate from our own wellbeing.

Ideas about the whole are also found in popular culture sometimes—if one is looking for them. The perennial understanding is pictured, for example, in the film “Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire” (2005) by these words: “Though we may come from different places and speak in different tongues our hearts beat as one.” In actuality our oneness is too deep to be denied or confined; reflections of it surface here, there, and everywhere, in many dialects and metaphors. Survival and well-being depend on awareness of the whole situation we are part of, altogether.

The perennial issue in discussions of human nature regarding reciprocity (quid pro quo motivations) versus acting disinterestedly (helping others without thought of reward) raises questions, such as, how possible is selfless service, and how inevitable is self-interest? Some thinkers argue, “Don’t even bother trying to be selfless, all there can be is enlightened self-interest,” as if self-serving is basic to all human existence. At another end of the spectrum are people more like Mother Theresa, or self-sacrificing monks, and the selfless acts of many parents for their children. It does seem that as long as a human being is alive there will be some ego, some self-interest or benefit—including getting some enjoyment at seeing others happier. But it is also true that in some cultures there is more of a faith that it is possible to rid oneself of a sense of doer-ship, to forget oneself in a
process of acting for the welfare of others and giving up the “fruits of one’s actions”—an ideal of karma yoga, a practice in which one dedicates work in a consciously undertaken process of wearing away the ego.

In Buddhism, where the doctrine of “selflessness” is basic and an important part of the analysis of the human condition, it is said that no one has an enduring self (anatta), and the ultimate is shunyata, “emptiness.” Because such traditions believe in working toward more selflessness, and expanding a sense of self so that it includes all the others’ selves, it may be more possible to experience selflessness there than in traditions where it is not seen as possible. In Hinduism and Buddhism there are techniques for practicing selflessness, just as in mainstream Christianity there is the concept of self-emptying (kenosis) and the ideal of self-abnegation common in medieval times. The small self or ego is seen as a temporary series of changes in the Asian traditions. The person was traditionally seen as part of a family, a caste, or other community, while more often the separate individual is something built up as real in Western traditions. (D.T. Suzuki thought the Western image of the crucifix showed the Western ego needed to be violently annihilated to be transcended, while the seated Buddha—the quintessential Eastern image—showed that the eastern ego can be more quietly dissolved in meditation.) So the issue here involves the old riddle of identity. Western traditions often conceptualize the self dualistically, but the self is conceptualized differently in other traditions. The generalizations made by a thinker from one tradition may not hold true for all views of the self. In Buddhism the view of selflessness is well expressed in the “Indra’s Net” image—every self’s consciousness is like a pearl in a network of pearls which all reflect the other pearls, so the reality is not the separate entity, but the whole. In such a context-sensitive vision of existence, when one helps others, one is helping one’s own larger self.

The varied understandings of the self are valuable, and have contributed different abilities to the accomplishments of humanity. Diversity, as Gregory Bateson said, is a buffer which protects human beings from obsolescence. That’s a good thing, not a weakness.

**Myth 7: There is a power in gifts that forces human behavior to respond in certain ways.**

Marcel Mauss asked, “What rule of legality and self-interest... compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What Power resides in the
object given, that causes its recipient to pay it back” (1990, 3)? I feel Mauss’s question about the mystique of the gift is misdirected; the power is not something in the gift itself, but in the bonds formed by gifting. What mysterious bond is experienced when a kind gesture melts the heart and produces more kindness, and the giver senses oneness in the mystery expressed in gift-thanks relationships—relationships which evolved because of their function? Or is it a question of the logic of the overall cultural framework. George Simmel wrote, “We serve God without thinking of a reward purely as a consequence of the logic of our relationship to the absolute” (1987, 3). Perhaps by this he is referring to the dynamics flowing from the idea that the creature is given the gift of life, and so is expected to give to others, guided by seeking heaven and not hell. A corollary in Buddhism might be something like: We serve the welfare of all sentient beings as a consequence of the logic of our relationship as a part in the interdependent whole—compassion for other parts of the whole vast “self” to which we all belong.

Are these reasons fundamentally different, or do they overlap? Is the Christian teaching “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” really so different from the Buddhist teaching of mutual interdependence? What is common to these reasons for generosity? Gratitude and the seeking of grace? Both are expressions of the need for a sense of mutuality.

We graciously respond to generosity with a self-similar act, in fact, many kindred kindnesses. We generate like results which in turn generate other like results on various scales: small, medium, and large. What we encourage will grow, like flowers watered. Good deeds can multiply, because “love is a chain of love,” as the song goes, a growing fractal, a wholeness of giving parts. Each generous act can be seen as part of an archetypal complex of offerings, sacrifice, and self-sublimation. Experiencing the happiness of others with them widens our field of awareness.

Michael Moody’s study of the concept he calls “serial reciprocity” offers ideas helpful in understanding motivation in philanthropy as grateful responsiveness. Moody’s study is useful in helping us picture the dynamic processes of giving in space and time (1994). Moody doesn’t explicitly use the word “gratitude” but the ethos of gratitude-inspired giving, passing on the good experiences one is appreciative of, can be seen as an essential aspect of the acts of generosity he discusses. In this view gratitude is the grounding for growing the natural enjoyments of generosity. The logic of this idea is: those to whom much is given—from them much is expected. This principle is revealed upon a closer look at Jesus’s parable of the “two
talents.” The master left money with three slaves. The first and second doubled the money they were given. The third buried it. One should use well one’s talents and resources. The parable of the widow’s mite may also teach the value of spending what one has, even though it may be a small blessing. There are also sayings that teach of the outcomes of such generosity: “The only things you take with you when you die are the things you gave away,” is a poignant example. The terms of reward are starkly expressed—what you cling to avails nothing, what you release saves you. Opposite the window’s mite is the miser’s penury. American millionaire Hetty Green was called the world’s biggest miser, dying in 1916 with $100,000,000 after her health declined because she was too cheap to get medical treatment. When her son broke his leg she tried to get him into a charity hospital. When recognized as a person of wealth, she took him home and treated the leg herself. It became gangrenous and was amputated. 

To be miserly means, in a case like this, to make misery.

The recipient of hospitality and help feels fortunate and seeks to give back to the community. One who feels grateful seeks to “pay it forward” to another in need. There exists a wide variety of gifts received gratefully and ways that return giving may be accomplished, as Moody shows (1994, 21). And for believers, the pattern includes Christian generous acts of thankfulness for the ultimate gift God gave them: salvation. Bonds of generative generosity can cause a cascading loop of giving thanks by giving.

The point is not quantity as much as it is self-similarity of acts of giving generated by receiving, as we can see in examples given by Lewis Hyde in his book The Gift (1983, 47-55). Hyde offers insight into how to picture the way gifts transform us and awaken a response in our souls. “But we cannot receive the gift until we can meet it as an equal. We therefore submit ourselves to the labor of becoming like the gift. Giving a return gift is the final act in the labor of gratitude, and it is also, therefore, the true acceptance of the original gift” (51). The one who has been given goods becomes a good giver. Coming full circle with our gift of grace, growing through gratitude, we become able to gracefully give. The debt is gone when the gift is passed on. As in the proverb: “One good turn deserves another,” the cycles generate ever-new cycles.

Like Shakespeare’s King Lear meeting the homeless Tom o’ Bedlam in the storm, the privileged are put in touch with deep soulfulness: “By being present with the chronic castaways of civilization they become present to the timeless incurable aspect of soul” (Hillman 1991, 164). Serving the fallen and the
downtrodden, alleviating the pain of the suffering in society, can expand one’s sense of self and sensibility of the identity of humanity. Wound and eye are one and the same, Hillman reminds us; in our symptoms (and in society’s symptoms) we find our soul, and in our hurts we can discern deeper perceptions. To return to places of fear and loss where the abandoned child cries, where the orphan sobs, hidden and hurt, in the wilderness cave of our psyche loneliness—this brings us back to the soul. Charities founded to rescue, give hope, feed, shelter, and clothe the “poor, lowliest and lost,” offering succor and sharing blessings, enact the teaching that what you “do for the least” you do for the greatest.

Christianity, Buddhism and other great religious traditions at their most inspiring teach such ideals as these. When we are depressed, instead of reaching for numbing drugs or other distractions we might lose the blues by helping heal the hurt in the world around us. Creativity in giving involves soulful imagination, sympathy for those suffering affliction, enjoyment in knowing that fellow humans are finding relief, and skill in not merely perpetuating dependency but empowering self-sufficiency in those in need.

Myths, often taken for granted as background reality, determine much in our attitudes and activities. Because they are so influential I feel they need to be considered anew by all of us, and not just blindly accepted. In all these examples of myths there are learning opportunities. Just as discrepancies explored become gates to discovery, so too, misconceptions cleared up can offer useful views to the conditions of existence, and a better grounding for responsible actions.

REFERENCES


[For other sports stories showing generosity see “Reardon scores after cancer diagnosis” http://sports.espn.go.com/highschool/football/news/story?id=4546405 and “Softball player carried around bases by opponents” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVlKtI7yd_s].


(Also a four-part TV series on DVD).


I would propose for our discussion two myths—one that we have and should do without, the other we have lost and should now revive. Needless to say, these are two different kinds of “myths.”

The first is a “myth” defined in this assignment as a “widely-held but false notion that inhibits our imagination and pursuit of new forms of personal and social well-being.” I would propose for this the false myth that the term “nonprofit” is synonymous with, or bears any significant relation to, philanthropy.

The second is a “myth” in the dictionary sense: “a traditional story, esp. one concerning the early history of a … natural or social phenomenon.” I would propose for this the Classical Greek myth of Prometheus, as first told in Prometheus Bound, long attributed to Aeschylus, in which (line 11) the word and concept philanthropos (“philanthropic”) was apparently coined. As the archetype of authentic philanthropy down through the ages, this myth is well qualified to inspire and nourish our current and future “imagination and pursuit of new forms of personal and social well-being.” In its context, the absurdity of “nonprofit” as describing philanthropy is fully illuminated.

1. The Bad Myth, to be Extirpated

Eradicating the first myth will take extensive, though not very exhausting, work. We shall not have to dig deeply, because its roots are shallow—it was coined only recently, in the late 20th century. Nonetheless, as with many invasive-exotic (let’s face it) weeds, it has spread extremely quickly and will therefore be hard to extirpate completely. Used precisely, as its originator the IRS does, it refers to corporations that do not make taxable profits. What the IRS does is tax, and what it taxes are profits; in ordinary English, by “nonprofit” [“501(c)”] the IRS means for itself “does not matter.” To the wider world, “nonprofit” means only “tax-exempt”: institutions including such things as almost all clubs, including yacht and country clubs; trade associations, which exist to benefit their members; cemeteries, which have a “nonprofit” designation all
their own; alumnæ associations; special-interest lobbyists; and many others, none of which are ordinarily considered, or are in practice, philanthropic.

We needn’t detain ourselves with the many fallacies and disadvantages in conflating “nonprofit” and philanthropy—several of us have already published on this subject, showing in detail how and why it is ridiculous. But we haven’t succeeded in getting rid of it because you can’t fight something with nothing. Our time is better spent constructively—considering alternatives, and how we might collaborate to replace it, and then proceeding from here to accomplish that. This would be a truly “philanthropic” project on our part—a “private initiative for public good, focusing on quality of life.” It would also be timely, because computerization and the Internet now enable us to move beyond crude IRS data and terminology, and to develop for the first time an empirically accurate and far more useful knowledge and understanding of philanthropy as it actually exists, is institutionalized, and practiced.

The only way I know to clear away the underbrush in the IRS data thicket is simply to look at the evidence, the data itself—to go down the Master List of such institutions one-by-one, sorting philanthropy from the rest, and using search engines to identify those whose names are opaque (charities will soon learn to name themselves clearly, for online donor-friendliness). The Catalogue for Philanthropy has done this for Massachusetts, and we plan to do it for all other states as well over the next two years. I know of no equivalent effort elsewhere, certainly not on this scale. We brought to this task, from our previous decade of experience promoting philanthropy to donors, two necessary tools.

The first tool is a systematic taxonomy of philanthropic fields. There are innumerable lists of philanthropic fields, but we know of no other systematic, comprehensive, taxonomy—the so-called “National Taxonomy of Exempt (note the negative) Entities,” which originated with the IRS and which everyone uses, is technically not a taxonomy at all, because its fields bear no logical relations to each other. The Catalogue’s taxonomy is based on three fundamental and closely supplementary fields: Nature—charities dealing with our natural environment; Culture—charities addressing what humans make and think; and People—charities serving people. These categories, being ontologically fundamental, are extremely stable (ultimately deriving from Classical Greek philosophy: Physica, Meta-Physica, Ethica) which is a prerequisite for rigorous scholarship, and for latitudinal and longitudinal data analysis. These three categories cover all charities, and are amenable to logically connected divisions and subdivisions—
“Culture,” for example, is divisible into Education and Arts; Education is divisible into Formal and Informal, Arts into Material and Performing; and so on. We have developed our taxonomy collaboratively since 1997 with charities, donors, and fundraisers; as more and more charities were included in successive Catalogues, it was logically elaborated into about 200 distinct taxa or fields, subfields, etc. A senior research officer at a leading philanthropic data firm wrote to me, “Taxonomy is HARD!” And so it is, which is one reason (but only one) why it was not done before this. We do not claim that ours is perfect, or complete, or impossible to improve upon—in fact we welcome suggestions—and we are well aware that even the oldest taxonomies in science, while fundamentally stable, are still works in progress today.

The second tool we developed is an institutional typology appropriate to practical philanthropy. All charities are of at least four types, defined by their development trajectories and modes of operation: (a) those of internal interest, serving and being supported by their members—clubs, essentially; (b) those of local interest to a particular geographic area, serving only that locale, and being supported by its inhabitants; (c) charities of general interest, addressing broad public issues and fundraising from the general public—these are what most people think of as “philanthropy”; and (d) mega-charities (the relatively small number that have very large budgets and substantial endowments, who combine all three previous types and then have issues of their own owing to their extraordinary size. Harvard, to take an extreme example, is of internal interest to its students, alumni, faculty, administrative staff, and certain wannabees; it is of local interest to its municipalities, Cambridge and Allston; it is of general interest, not so much as Harvard itself, but for the many programs and projects within it that are of general philanthropic interest; and finally there are certain issues that accrue only to institutions with immense endowments. This typology is useful for analytical and strategic purposes, and for central institutions such as community foundations, to develop complementary strategies and programs for the local and general types.

With this typology and taxonomy we have deconstructed the IRS 990 data and organized its philanthropic subset—i.e., “private initiatives for public good, focusing on quality of life, and significantly dependent on private grants and donations.” What emerges is a new, empirically-based, portrait and dataset of “philanthropy.” To present this publicly for further refinement by the charities themselves, and to make it useful for everyone, we shall be launching online in late fall 2010, a systematic, comprehensive, analytical, Massachusetts Philanthropic
Directory (MPD). The MPD will be the prototype for a complete nationwide set of state-based Directories to all charities of general philanthropic interest. For the first time, entire philanthropic communities, together constituting the nation’s philanthropic community of charities, will be fully easily, and systematically, visible, accessible, analyzable, and even manageable, as a discrete, comprehensive, and coherent, whole.

What is the relation of this philanthropic subset to “nonprofits?” Quantitatively, it is only a small fraction of the whole—we believe less than one-sixth. This has enormous ramifications for practical philanthropy. The much smaller number, divided and subdivided into over 200 fields and many geographic regions, makes the world of philanthropy significantly more compassable, comprehensible and manageable—one can get one’s heads and arms around the whole and its parts. Fields of philanthropy, and philanthropy itself—not just individual charities—will be illuminated as subjects of inquiry, discussion, analysis, investment and strategic development.

Philanthropy is on the verge of becoming systematic. Partly because the philanthropic universe is now seen to be much smaller, and partly because it is coherently and clearly organized in donor-friendly terms, it opens up a new paradigm for relations with its various interested constituencies: donors, grant makers, philanthropic advisors, executive directors and other strategists, journalists, scholars, students, etc.

Needless to say, with the relevant evidence now readily available, using (or confusing) the terms “nonprofit” and “philanthropy” interchangeably will be blessedly passé.

That leaves, however, the matter of settling on better terminology, for which the English language is more than adequate. The biggest need is for an affirmative rhetoric. We could always refer to individual organizations as “philanthropies.” Another term that technically refers to all philanthropic institutions is “charities,” because in law and the tax code they are all “charitable corporations”—i.e., tax-exempt, and to whom contributions are tax-deductible—including both public charities and private foundations. Other terms that have been proposed are: “public benefit organizations” (PBOs), “benefactors,” “beneficial corporations,” etc. The philanthropic cohort (whether a “sector” or not is debatable) has been called the “benefit sector,” or in slang the “benefactory.” These linguistic issues will sort themselves out, once we decide to excise the egregious, negative, and mythical term, “nonprofit.”
II. The Good Myth, to be Revived

Whereas the bad myth about philanthropy needs uprooting, the good myth needs transplanting—out of the shade of the overgrown IRS and into the full sunlight of civil activities and liberal education. Philanthropy’s roots are in the well-known myth of Prometheus, as formulated probably by Aeschylus, the first great dramatist of ancient Greece, in his Prometheus Bound (ca. 460 BCE). Prometheus’s name meant “foresight” (a necessary attribute of benefactors), and he was a Titan who created mankind out of clay. His creatures, however, were at first primitive and not inspiring—they had no knowledge, nor skills of any kind, and consequently lived in caves, in darkness, in constant fear for their lives. Zeus, the tyrannical king of the gods, resented Prometheus’s enterprise and decided to destroy them. But Prometheus, out of his “philanthropos tropos”—his “humanity-loving character” [lines 11, 28]—gave to his creatures two gifts (lines 250-258): fire, symbolizing all knowledge, arts, sciences, technology and practical skills—everything that makes possible and constitutes civilization; and “blind (i.e. unknowing) hope,” or optimism. These two gifts went together, as a mutually-reinforcing pair; with “fire”, optimism is justified, and optimism motivates using “fire” to improve the human condition.

The word as originally coined could not possibly have referred to loving all humans as individuals, because Prometheus’s philanthropos tropos preceded the existence of individuality. At that mythical point in time the creatures that would become humans were living like animals, without any individuating knowledge or skills. Rather, it was their distinctively human potential that Prometheus “loved”—what those cave-dwellers and their posterity could make of themselves with fire and optimism. The whole point was that Prometheus’s “philanthropy”—his “love of what it is to be human”—completed their full creation as humans. “Humanity” or humane-ness was a value-laden term; “loving humanity” meant caring about, seeking, and nourishing, human potential, or “what it is to be human.” Prometheus’s philanthropic gifts were not just “good” for the beneficiaries, but empowering—increasing their competencies and improving their prospects as human beings. “All the arts that mortals have come from Prometheus” (line 506). This explains why both Greek words philanthropia and paedeia (meaning “education” or “culture”) were later translated into Latin as simply, humanitas.

These Classical understandings of the concept of philanthropy form the authentic tradition that is one of the most profoundly influential ideas in the history
of Western thought. After creating the Classical tradition of liberal education, it hibernated in forgotten manuscripts in medieval monastic libraries, and was recovered with the rest of Classical civilization during the Renaissance. Pico della Mirandola retold the myth in his famous “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” asserting that it is this capacity to improve our own condition that distinguishes humans from all other animals. The word entered the English language with Sir Francis Bacon’s essay *On Goodness* (1608) in which he defined “goodness” as “the affecting of the weale of men, what the Grecians call *philanthropia*.” Henry Cockeram, in his first English dictionary (1623) did a Ciceronian U-turn, making “philanthropie” a synonym of “humanitie.” English colonists brought the idea to America, as in Cotton Mather’s best-selling book *Bonifacius, or An Essay Upon Doing Good* (1710), which influenced both Benjamin Franklin and Paul Revere. When the American Revolution connected the practice of “voluntary associations” with the concept of philanthropy developed by the Scottish Enlightenment, it explicitly informed the birth of our nation. Alexander Hamilton launched the Founders’ argument for the ratification of our Constitution by noting, in his opening paragraph of the *Federalist Papers* that the American people’s creation of their own free and democratic government “adds the inducements of philanthropy to those of patriotism.” Thus the United States of America was created as a gift to mankind, squarely in the Promethean tradition. I submit that this classical view of philanthropy is therefore very well qualified to inspire our “imagination and pursuit of new forms of personal and social well-being.”
COMMERCIAL SOCIETY
AFTER MODERNISM

Robert F. Garnett, Jr.

Ealy and Ealy detail the ways in which twentieth-century philanthropy was inspired by the Progressivist Era’s distinctive “faith in the power of reason and an equally strong faith in science and technical expertise.” One anchor of the Progressivist faith was the myth of the state as an efficient organ of social engineering, a “centralized, rationalized, professional administration of civil servants” (2006, 36). This view of the state as a machine-like system, capable of dispensing resources in a fair and efficient manner, was mirrored in the heroic self-image of large philanthropic foundations who sought to employ modern social science to cure entrenched societal problems. As governments and foundations came to be regarded as efficient alternatives to direct citizen action, energy and responsibility flowed “away from more primary, local, and voluntary institutions to those more centralized, professionalized, and tax-supported” (35).

In this essay, I explore a related myth that continues to vitiate the urgency and efficacy of philanthropic action, namely: the myth of the economy as machine-like provisioning system. I trace this myth to the high modernist period in twentieth-century economic theory, in the decades following World War II, when reified images of the economy as a clockwork system became ingrained in popular and academic discourses (Scott 1998; Mirowski 1989, 2001; Nelson 2006). I also outline a strategy for dispelling this myth and for stimulating wider conversations about the liberal ends and means of voluntary cooperation—conversations already underway across and beyond the academy, through which the humane potential for bottom-up, entrepreneurial philanthropy is increasingly finding a home in twenty-first century renderings of Adam Smith’s commercial society.

Economists’ Enduring “Adam Smith Problem”

Since the official end of the Cold War two decades ago, economists across the ideological spectrum have advanced broader visions of human behavior and social
cooperation. This diverse movement has included, among others, experimental economists (Smith 1998), behavioral economists (Meier 2006), social economists (van Staveren 2001; Davis 2003), development economists (Sen 1999), feminist economists (Folbre 2001; Nelson 2006), post-Marxist economists (Elster 1990; Gintis et al. 2005), classical liberal economists (McCloskey 2006; Storr 2008; Chamlee-Wright 2010), and historians of economic thought (Young 1997; Rothchild 2001; Fleischacker 2004; Evensky 2005). As a group, these thinkers have endeavored to re-inscribe Adam Smith’s invisible hand concept within complex analytic structures that resist standard reductions of the economy to market exchange or human behavior to narrow self-interest (Garnett et al. 2009).

Unfortunately, only a handful of these scholars (van Staveren, Nelson, and Chamlee-Wright among them) have paid serious attention to philanthropy: “voluntary giving and association that serves to promote human flourishing” (Ealy 2005, 2). To a remarkable extent, they have followed the lead of Adam Smith himself, who “did not give private benevolence associations much of a role in solving social problems” (Fleischacker 2004, 275). Even authors who emphasize the economic importance of family and community, or the “civic ethics that are consistent with the freedoms of a liberal society” (Evensky 2005, 277) make no reference to philanthropic institutions or processes per se.

The pervasive neglect of philanthropy in economic theories of commercial society is the mark of an enduring “Adam Smith Problem” (ASP). In its classical form (Oncken 1897), the ASP refers to the alleged discontinuity in Smith’s two major works (Smith 1976a [1759] and 1976b [1776]): “the hypothesis that the moral philosopher who made sympathy the basis for social behavior in the Theory of Moral Sentiments did an about-turn from altruistic to egoistic theory in the Wealth of Nations” (Raphael and Macfie 1976, 20). This classic ASP is no longer regarded as a significant problem by most Smith scholars, since many subscribe to expansive conceptions of Smithian “self-interest” whose breadth loosens or dissolves the bipolarity of self-interest and sympathy.

The ASP that endures today, what I describe as the modernist ASP, is an institutional schism: a “separate spheres” model of economic life in which commerce and philanthropy—or, more generally, impersonal Gesellschaft and face-to-face Gemeinschaft (Tönnies 1887)—are treated as separate and antithetical worlds. “The economy,” so to speak, is reduced to commerce only. Much as the original Adam Smith Problem arose from a monist view of the individual as
narrowly self-interested, so the modernist ASP presupposes a monist economy that is narrowly commercial and also bountiful, able to serve as the principal provider of wealth and well-being in society.

This line of economic thinking did not originate in the twentieth century but ascended to new heights after the Second World War. American economists emerged from World War II “covered in glory” (Morgan and Rutherford 1998, 13), having solved many wartime policy problems with their newly acquired mathematical and statistical expertise (Sent 2006, 83; Morgan and Rutherford 1998, 9-11). Inspired by the rise of national income accounting, mathematical control theory, and the economic theory of “general equilibrium,” professional economists in the 1940s and 50s promulgated a vision of the national economy as a programmable, engineerable system. This idea was grounded at the highest levels of theory in the reduction of the economic sphere to commerce (economics as the science of exchange) and the further reduction of commerce to the clean, tidy world of generic rational agents and efficient markets.

This general equilibrium model of economy was embraced by conservative and liberal economists alike. Chicago School formulations emphasized its verisimilitude to the real world, a world perceived to be populated by highly rational agents and highly competitive markets. MIT and Harvard economists used the general equilibrium ideal as a yardstick to measure the imperfections of real-world economies and to justify government interventions to correct these imperfections (Garnett and Butler 2003). Either way, the modernist economy—whether regulated or unregulated—was seen as the generative core of economic life (potent, efficient, systemic), in contrast to charity and other forms of philanthropic giving which were regarded as outmoded, inefficient, and ad hoc.

The notion of commerce and philanthropy as separate spheres seems to have been assisted by the modern separation of male and female domains (Coontz 2005, 146, 155-56; McCloskey 2006, 254-55; Nelson 2006, 33-37; Pallotta 2008, 28-30). As Stephanie Coontz argues in her history of the modern family, the eighteenth century was marked by a growing “sense that men and women lived in different spheres, with the man’s sphere divorced from domesticity and the woman’s divorced from the ‘economy’” and by a parallel segregation of motives and behaviors: commercial spaces occupied by “rational and active” men; and households occupied by “humanitarian and compassionate” women (2005, 155-56). The husband was the family’s economic motor,” Coontz writes, “and the wife its sentimental core” (146).
Even today, our common-sense view of the for-profit sector as “dominant over charity” is laced with gender-laden assumptions (Pallotta 2008, 30). These premises are embedded in familiar notions such as “charities cannot take chances,” “[charities] cannot have the same level of compensation as business,” “[charities] must be supervised and measured by their efficiency,” and “we must always be on the lookout for how [charities] spend our money” (30). Hence the economic role and status of philanthropy remains analogous to Simone de Beauvoir’s “second sex”: a separate and secondary form of economic cooperation.

**F. A. Hayek’s “Adam Smith Problem”**

The economist and philosopher F.A. Hayek holds a unique place in this discussion. Hayek was a vocal supporter of voluntary association and philanthropic giving outside the commercial sphere (Hayek 1979, 186, 51) who devoted his career to attacking and recasting the modernist presuppositions of twentieth-century economic science (Burczak 1994, 2006). Yet in important senses he too was a modernist, by virtue of his “belief in science” (Caldwell 2005, 260) and his monist, markets-only view of Adam Smith’s Great Society of Mankind (Smith 1976a [1759]). Hayek’s thinking on philanthropy was thus confounded by conflicting commitments (Garnett 2008): his admiration of voluntary and philanthropic associations as a Tocquevillian alternative to the welfare state (Hayek 1979, 50-51) vs. his devotion to a modernist notion of economy as a unified field, governed by a single self-organizing principle (Hayek 1988).

The latter prong of Hayek’s dilemma was difficult for him to soften or rethink since it was rooted in the theoretical positions he adopted as a leader of the Mont Pèlerin Society, a post-WWII movement to promote classical liberalism as a positive alternative to statism (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Chief among the Society’s priorities was the formulation of a robust and comprehensive economic theory. Socialist economists had envisioned central planning as the modern solution to humankind’s economic problem. So Hayek and his radical cohort aspired to defeat the socialists on their own terms—to set forth an economic vision that would supersede their enemy’s vision in scope, analytic rigor, and rhetorical force.

Hayek’s dogged opposition to socialism led him to take particular exception to Aristotle’s ethics and economics. Hayek saw modern socialism as a tragic misapplication of Aristotle’s concept of economy (οίκος): a face-to-face community in which order arises as “the result of deliberate organization of
individual action by an ordering mind ... and only in a place small enough for everyone to hear the herald’s cry, a place which could easily be surveyed” (Hayek 1988, 11, 45-47). He argues that the Aristotelian-cum-socialist injunction “to restrict our actions to the deliberate pursuit of known and observable beneficial ends” (80) is a tribal morality, a set of norms “which are essential to the cohesion of the small group but which are irreconcilable with the order, the productivity, and the peace of a great society of free men” (1978, 66). Hayek famously declares that “An order in which everyone treated his neighbor as himself would be one where comparatively few could be fruitful and multiply” (1988, 13). He therefore urges modern humanitarians to devote fewer resources to charity and more to commerce—to “earning a living”—since the latter will provide “a greater benefit to the community than most direct ‘altruistic’ action” (19). So even though Hayek did not set out to denigrate philanthropy, he became deeply invested in a view of the “extended order of human cooperation” (xi, 6) in which philanthropy and civil society were pushed to the margins as vestiges of pre-modernity.

To link these ideas more directly to contemporary philanthropy, consider Hayek’s indictment of corporate philanthropy—an argument that echoes Milton Friedman’s dictum that “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits” (1970). Hayek opposes “socially responsible” giving by publicly held corporations, not because he is averse to managerial beneficence but because its disconnection from shareholder oversight and from the epistemic guidance of market processes renders it ethically and economically problematic. Economically, Hayek argues that corporate managers lack the knowledge to effectively allocate resources to social endeavors “for which proven abilities to use resources efficiently in production does not necessarily confer special competence” (1967 [1960], 311). As Friedman explains:

Suppose a business wants to do charity. What is it that gives it any special ability to do charity properly? The XYZ Company, in addition to producing XYZ trucks, also wants to be socially responsible and so it does what it thinks is charity. What is its special capacity for that? It may know how to make trucks, but does it know the right way to spend charitable money (2006)?

Because philanthropy is largely unchecked by market forces, managers’ pursuits of “what they regard as socially desirable purposes” (Hayek 1967 [1960], 304) may transform corporations into “self-willed and possibly irresponsible empires, aggregates of enormous and largely uncontrollable power” (311).
In addition to knowledge problems and efficiency concerns, Hayek objects to managers’ unlawful redirection of shareholder resources to their own ends, an act he regards as tantamount to theft (301). He also registers grave concern about the potential for corporate philanthropy to pave a slippery political slope to socialism. “Their power to do good according to their own judgment is bound to be merely a transitory stage. The price they would soon have to pay for this short-lived freedom will be that they will have to take instructions from the political authority which is supposed to represent the public interest” (312).

The logical implication of the Friedman/Hayek view is that philanthropic ends are better served by the commercial machine than by individual acts of caring and sharing. To well-meaning donors or volunteers, they seem to say: “If you really want to help others, then recognize your comparative disadvantage and keep your resources to the marketplace or redirect them to philanthropic professionals.” Such a perspective may be inspiring to the preacher or student of free-market principles, but for other audiences it is likely to suppress the imagination and appetite for philanthropic action.

Hayek’s de facto commitment to a markets-only view of the Smithian Great Society imposed significant constraints on his liberal vision (cf. Dobuzinskis 2008). Had his economic philosophy been less rigidly bound by the commerce/philanthropy dualism, he might have chosen to develop a co-articulated theory of civil and commercial society. James Buchanan agrees:

To secure freedom from the collective . . . was, properly, the predominant objective for the post-Marxist classical liberal. It is not surprising that the rejection of collectivism . . . should have involved a complementary neglect of and appreciation for the communitarian elements in a well-functioning social order informed by liberal value norms (2005, 78).

**Rethinking Commercial Society: A View Beyond Modernism**

In the early 1960s, as the ideological intensity of Mont Pèlerin post-Marxism began to subside, Richard Cornuelle (1993 [1965]) revisited the communitarian lacuna in Hayekian liberalism, reasserting the role of the “independent sector” as an integral element in a well-functioning liberal order. As we sit today, just one generation removed from the ideological battlegrounds of the Cold War, many are rediscovering the wisdom of Cornuelle’s quest for “an alternative path to the good
society other than those of the doctrinaire conservatives or the dogmatic liberals of the Cold War era” (Ealy 2002; cf. Cornuelle 1993 [1965], 3-19) and are taking up Don Lavoie’s challenge to the “more liberal elements of the left and right sides of the old political spectrum to transcend the confines of these obsolete ideologies and work together to articulate a new vision of the free society” (1994, 283). New waves of thinkers are beginning to answer these challenges by interweaving classical, modern, and postmodern strands of the liberal tradition—moving beyond the dualisms of commerce/philanthropy, Smith/Aristotle, and negative liberty/positive liberty—to fashion fresh visions of commercial society as “a free society that leads to and depends upon flourishing human lives of virtue” (McCloskey 2006, 497).

Many now agree that the mythical separation of commerce and philanthropy limits our ability to understand and improve the humane ecology of commercial societies. To dispel the myth, it will be necessary to develop cogent, pluralistic conceptions of economic life, particularly the plurality of human motivations and institutional processes that characterize every real-world economy.

Though the subject for a separate paper, it would certainly be worthwhile to probe Adam Smith’s own reasons for not theorizing philanthropy as an important means of promoting human welfare in modern society. This silence is commonly seen as a side-effect of Smith’s focus on the unintended “philanthropy” of commercial relations, as suggested by his well-known ode to the butcher, brewer, and baker in chapter two of the Wealth of Nations (1976b [1776], 27). Birch (1998) argues, for example, that Smith expected the need for charity to wither away as commercial societies grew more prosperous. Others have noted the philosophical difficulty of reconciling the inherent inequality of the giver-recipient relationship with the classical liberal emphasis on abstract equality (Turner 2009). Along the same line, Morse (2003) laments the classical liberal tendency to exclude “legitimately dependent persons” from our visions of commercial society. A more thorough examination of philanthropy’s Adam Smith Problem would address these questions in tandem with the issues of philosophical modernism with which the current discussion is concerned.

Nevertheless, Smith’s ideas provide a rich starting point for our rethinking of commercial society. Smith’s commercial society, defined in chapter five of The Wealth of Nations as a social order in which “every man . . . lives by exchanging” (1976b [1776], 37) is ostensibly nothing more than a market economy. However,
if we refract Smith’s definition through his larger oeuvre, the notion of “exchanging” would have to be expanded to include multiple modes of reciprocity, market and non-market, through which individuals give and receive the means to create a flourishing life. Here too, Buchanan agrees. “The normative ideal [of classical liberalism] is not laissez-faire without qualifying adjectives,” he argues. “The normative ideal must include reciprocity” (2005, 84, original emphasis). This expanded vision of exchange and commercial society implies an equally expansive view of the Smithian invisible hand, as a metaphorical shorthand for the complex process whereby our human capacity to “treat strangers as though they were honorary relatives or friends” (Seabright 2004) gives rise to unplanned moral, economic, and social order.

Hayek opens the door to this broader economic vision. He limits his conception of economic order to commerce but takes special care to highlight the ethical face of the market process. Hayek describes the market order as a catallaxy, in part because the latter’s Greek root (katalattein or katalassein) means not only “to exchange” but “to receive into the community” and “to turn from enemy into friend” (Hayek 1988, 112). In this cosmopolitan vein, Hayek stresses the moral consequences of the invisible hand:

The morals of the market do lead us to benefit others, not by our intending to do so, but by making us act in a manner which, nonetheless, will have just that effect (81).

However, Hayek never challenged the market-centered definition of economic science that prevailed for much of the twentieth century. He was therefore unable to integrate philanthropy into his fundamental theory of the invisible hand. Like most twentieth-century economists, Hayek was faithful to Adam Smith’s nominal separation of economics from moral and social theory. Yet he failed to exploit the intellectual possibilities inherent in the overlay of Smith’s two famous books, viz., the view of many Smith scholars that the Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS) is the “motivating center” of Smith’s thought while the Wealth of Nations is but a special case of the general theory of social cooperation outlined in TMS (Evensky 2005, 20; see also Macfie 1967 and Fleischacker 2004). Had they attempted a more radical reformulation of economics as moral philosophy, they might have advocated a Smithian science of reciprocity, i.e., exchange broadly defined.

As we seek to advance this Smithian science today, a necessary first step is to undo the modernist separation of economic science from economic
anthropology—to recognize that a market-based economy is characterized by the very “pre-modern” qualities commonly ascribed to gift economies such as thick sociality, complex networks of interlocking obligations, and temporal separations of outlay and return.

Colin Danby elegantly outlines the logic and importance of this deconstructive project (2002). Danby argues that the familiar gift/commerce dichotomy presupposes a modernist, neoclassical model of market exchange. In standard versions of this model, market transactions are conceived as fleeting and impersonal, as “spot transactions in which one thing is instantaneously swapped for something else by transactors who may never meet again.” Anthropologists tacitly accept this model, Danby contends, when they define gift exchange as the mirror image of neoclassical exchange: reciprocal transactions that occur over time between parties who share an ongoing relationship (15).

Danby attacks this gift/market dichotomy at two levels. First, he situates it within a larger philosophical and historical context. He writes:

The problem with the gift/exchange dichotomy goes deeper than its notion of exchange.... It is an expression of an underlying a priori dichotomy between non-modern and modern, or non-West and West. . . The non-modern in this pairing is a shaggy periphery, a detritus category of all that does not fit the imagined modern. It represents what the modern lacks, what the modern is leaving behind, what the modern will inevitably overcome. The essential assumption . . . is that there exists an underlying modern or Western social topos (field), unified, bounded, and possessing inherent characteristics, which can be analytically separated from one or more non-modern or non-Western social topoi. This self-congratulatory idea can be expressed through space (West/East, North/South, First World/Third World), time (advanced/backward, late/early, progressive/traditional), and other pairings too numerous to list (2002, 14).

Second, Danby points to multiple traditions of economic thought which challenge the neoclassical reduction of economic life to atemporal, asocial exchange. For example, Post Keynesian, Austrian, Institutionalist, and Marxian theories all emphasize the “through-time organization of material life” (14)—the diachronic and socially embedded nature of all economic processes, including exchange. In Post Keynesian models, for instance, the typical transaction is the
“forward transaction, by virtue of which the parties involved are likely to have an institutional or embedded relationship” (15, original emphasis). Conversely, we can no longer regard “either a delayed return, or difficulty in assessing the value of that delayed return, [as] special characteristics of ‘the gift’” once we reconceptualize market exchange outside the modernist frame (32).

Danby’s deconstructive analysis is directly germane to the philanthropy/commerce dualism at issue in this essay. Danby’s view of the latter would be that economists have yet to understand philanthropy and commerce on their own terms inasmuch as we continue to see both through reductive lenses: commerce as a robust self-organizing system and philanthropy as its good-hearted but undisciplined and hence ineffectual subsidiary.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the positive possibilities of the post-colonial economic anthropology adumbrated by Danby’s analysis, its conceptual structure would be thoroughly pluralistic. No part of the economy would be conceived as inherently “commercial” or “philanthropic.” The general presumption would be that every aspect of the economy is composed of commercial and philanthropic elements. Characteristics previously ascribed to markets or philanthropy exclusively would now be seen as general features of each, e.g., calculation (Boettke and Prychitko 2004; Chamlee-Wright 2004), reciprocity (mutual giving and learning), self-interest, benevolence, large-scale cooperation via adherence to abstract rules (Lewis 2009), knowledge problems, intended and unintended consequences, integration and disintegration of individual identities and communities, and so on. Such a hybridized ontology would allow economists to produce more nuanced understandings of economic phenomena, such as “for-profit social ventures and entrepreneurial nonprofits” (Fulton and Blau 2005, 15, 28; see also Strong 2009) or the fascinating studies of human cooperation emerging from leading edges of network theory (Benkler 2006; Lessig 2008), evolutionary biology and psychology (Gintis et al. 2005), post-Maussian gift theory (Godbout 1998; Vandevelde 2000), and Hayekian social capital theory (Chamlee-Wright 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010; Lewis 2008; Lewis and Chamlee-Wright 2008; Chamlee-Wright and Myers 2008).

**Conclusion**

The nature and reach of Adam Smith’s invisible hand is better understood by economic theories that recognize philanthropy as an integral dimension of human society. By setting aside the reductive antinomies of modernism, economists are
better equipped to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of individual freedom: not just the negative freedom from coercion but the positive capacity to pursue the good life as one defines it, e.g., the freedom “to experience meaningful personal engagement in community life” (Ealy 2005, 4). They are better able to see philanthropy as an additional nexus of liberality and learning through which individuals can work together, on local and extended scales, to address “complex modern problems” (Cornuelle 1993 [1965], 62). A turn away from economic modernism is also an opportunity for economists to redefine their scientific domain in a broadly Smithian fashion, not just a commodity space but a pluralistic provisioning space comprised of multiple forms and scales of actions that enable individuals to secure “the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes” (Smith 1976b [1776], 26).

Proponents of the economy-as-commercial-machine invisible hand may fear that their free-market arguments will be weakened if philanthropy is assigned a more prominent economic role. However, the purpose of re-valuing the philanthropic dimension of economic life is not to diminish the importance of markets but merely to de-center and de-essentialize them. As Boulding wisely observes, “The greatest threat to the exchange system is the claim that it can do everything. This leads to the equally absurd claim that it can do nothing” (1968, 45). McCloskey issues a similar warning with regard to the virtue of prudential self-interest, the greatest threat to which is the “separate spheres” premise “that homely Gemeinschaft is the exclusive site of virtue and that businesslike Gesellschaft is an ethical nullity” (2006, 254). A philanthropy-infused economics would strengthen academic and public understanding of self-interested action and markets by emphasizing their “benevolent and developmental qualities” (Boulding 1968, 44) and by relieving some of the moral, economic, and political burdens that would otherwise be borne by the commercial order alone.

On a personal level, the deconstruction of the economy-as-provider myth invites us to integrate our philanthropic and commercial selves rather than holding them apart, like male from female, as separate categories of being. It also invites us to claim a greater share of responsibility for our neighbors by surrendering the illusory tidiness of economic models in which moral duties beyond the family can safely be delegated to a faceless system, in the modern hope that the system will take care of it (of them, of us).
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COMMENT

THE MYTHS OF PHILANTHROPY: A REFLECTION

Heather Wood Ion

Richard Gunderman cautions us that “Myth concerns the foundations of our worldview, and thus cannot be encompassed by any particular discipline” (2). While he and other authors explore the many taxonomies that are and can be applied to the study of philanthropy, Gunderman alone reminds us that “treating cherished myths as objects of intellectual analysis may leech away some of their power to transform our lives (9). In his examination of Joseph Campbell’s four dimensions of myth, Gunderman asks Why does Philanthropy exist? And then goes beyond Campbell’s dimensions of myth to point out that myths constrain us, liberate and inspire us, and open possibilities that might otherwise remain hidden. If, as Gunderman has written elsewhere, philanthropy is a calling, can we understand that calling without its mythic dimension?

Steven Grosby eloquently takes up that challenge by distinguishing between the negative myths which impoverish human action and undermine philanthropy and the positive or ‘man-loving’ myths which sustain and enhance ideas of individual initiative, generosity and beneficence. In his discussion of the myth of Prometheus, he carefully shows us that giving a gift of love is not purely in expectation of reciprocity, and yet, in his exploration of the reciprocal obligation of the covenant, Grosby explores the idea that philanthropy as a transcendent covenant is necessary for the sustenance of life. He explains that the idea of selfless love extended to relations between humans is a call to action: humans are summoned to realize these relations. He concludes by showing that exploring the ideas of sympathy and fidelity and what is right is a requisite aspect of philanthropy itself.

William Jackson returns us to one of the themes raised by Gunderman as he explores the mystery of generosity and the dynamics of the bonds formed by giving. He outlines several opportunities resulting from the myths we hold to be true about giving, and urges the inclusion of diverse approaches to the study of...
complex systems as well as cooperation. Jackson raises the issues of what neuroscience is now teaching us about empathy and altruism, and expands the challenge of redefining philanthropy to include a redefinition of what it means to be human. He writes passionately in praise of our capacities for imagination, and finds mythic imagination to be the key to the networks and wholeness through which we are able to realize our full potential.

George McCully also takes on positive and negative myths of philanthropy, and describes the taxonomy of philanthropic fields developed in Massachusetts, with its institutional typology of practical philanthropy. These he says help bring coherence and organization to the field. He calls for a return to the meaning of the myth of Prometheus in which the gift of loving humanity is empowering, and nourishes human potential.

Rob Garnett explores the myth of the modern economy as a machine-like provisioning system and reminds us that the supposed separation of commerce and philanthropy limits our ability to understand and improve the humane ecology of commercial societies. He carefully outlines the issues related to theories of commerce from Adam Smith to Hayek, and reminds us that economic anthropology cannot be separated from economic science. He concludes that the philanthropic dimension of economic life is an aspect of positive capacity. Such a perspective affords a greater integration of our spheres or categories of living as well as reminding us of our necessary social responsibilities. By focusing on the economic views of philanthropy, Garnett is able to expose and explore some of the constraints imposed by our acceptance of such views.

In her little book, A Short History of Myth, Karen Armstrong writes: “A myth, therefore, is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information. If, however, it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed” (2005, 10). Each of our authors is discussing some aspect of this effectiveness of the myths of philanthropy and each challenges us in our efforts to rethink philanthropy. Most striking throughout these papers is the emphasis the writers place on our imaginations, our need to be inspired, and on our bonds to transcendent and transforming values and purposes.

The challenge is clearly indicated by Richard Gunderman, that to do all that is required in exploring philanthropy we must not accept one perspective, one dimension, or even one tradition. We must embrace and explore a rich complexity if we are even to begin to comprehend the relevance and essential value of philanthropy in human lives, or in the lives we ourselves aspire to live.
There is a tension between the myth of Prometheus (and the philanthropist) as one who bestows good and Prometheus as an investor in human potential, as an interested and engaged party to a relationship. Grosby’s use of ‘covenant’ brings this immediately to mind, and it is a tension often reflected in discussions of donor intent. In the terms of Jane Jacobs in her *Systems of Survival* (1994) the one who bestows is acting within a hierarchical system, while the one who is engaged in relationship or covenant is acting within the contractual system. Public authorities such as the military or police exemplify the hierarchical system, and we label them corrupt if they simultaneously take bribes in the contractual system of relationship.

Recent philanthropic efforts seem to want to act within the contractual system, as when the investor engages with the potential of an idea or program, and works to nourish that choice in many different ways. Often in the practical world of service organizations this is resented by the workers, who often view the donor as an absentee landlord who has no business interfering in the daily work made possible by that donation.

Perhaps one of the errors leading to these misunderstandings lies in our systems of recognition which emphasize the donor as a static name (as in a brass plaque) rather than as an imaginative and engaged contributor. There is a preference in some ways for the philanthropist to be seen as one who bestows but remains unengaged, often because workers in the service or charitable fields do not accept that those who have not worked at their level can have either ideas or methods to contribute to that work.

Prometheus gives fire, or fuel, to humankind. In our world fuel is equated with money. It would seem important to explore Jackson’s ideas of imaginative fuel, or time and talent as aspects of the ‘fire.’ There is another tension here: if philanthropy must advance the public good, while charity benefits individuals, then the subjective judgment regarding public goods would extend from donations to faith-based organizations to academic endowments to the mass donations for disaster relief. If I donate funds to support a scholarship for Native American women seeking training in the health professions, does my specificity eliminate this donation from classification as a philanthropic good? If the Gates Foundation donates money to a vaccine program, do the many parents who reject the use of childhood vaccination judge that donation as not for public good?

McCully points out that the second of Prometheus’s gifts, “Blind hope” or optimism, can be seen as motivating the use of “fire” or knowledge, to improve
the human condition. We know that Prometheus is a thief, as well as the maker of the cave-dwelling men made of clay who had no skills, governed by fear. Were his gifts then rectifying his own creation, or self-serving? Does the philanthropist correctly seek through constant involvement to rectify the impact of his gift? This would imply that the contractual relationship of nurture and engagement is the appropriate mode of behavior for the philanthropist.

Here we are reminded of the two liberties of Isaiah Berlin (1969) ‘freedoms from’ and ‘freedoms for’: The gift of fire frees man from ignorance and fear, or grants freedoms from; while the gift of optimism opens the possibilities of freedoms for imagination and agency. The two kinds of liberty must exist in an asymmetrical dynamic, as they do in each individual life, and we can readily see that philanthropic donations of time, talent and treasure do contribute to the creative tensions of this dynamic in unpredictable ways. If philanthropists are investors in the future, they must be optimists acting on hope. Too often, perhaps, a donation is seen as a gift from the past, at least from past earnings or benefits, yet ‘freedoms for’ are unrealized, they are hoped for but not yet known. Berlin’s discussion reminds us that our hope motivates the ways we apply our knowledge and our other gifts.

There is danger in the idea of ‘rectification’ in our overly therapeutic climate, however, and donations determined to rectify or restore may not be intended to expand the freedoms of the recipient. Our charitable concerns to give a restorative ‘hand up’ may often be anachronistic, wanting to restore the status quo ante to the circumstances of deprivation or inequality. In multiple ways, such charities create dependence, and often learned helplessness, for the reality is there is no restoration of times past, and the recipient is condemned to a nostalgic limbo rather than empowered to seek new frontiers.

Some myths relating to both philanthropy and charity can be judged to be destructive rather than constructive, particularly the pervasive social myth of nonprofit being equivalent to philanthropy, and the myth of the suffering servant as necessary to the fulfillment of philanthropic acts. It is perhaps most useful to turn as Gunderman and Jackson urge, to other cultures in order to explore concepts in contrast to the negative myths. In the Indian tradition, while charitable and hospitable acts are urged throughout life, the exploration of ‘freedoms for’ is deemed only possible in the final stage of life after all other obligations have been fulfilled, or after ‘freedoms from’ have been achieved in some necessary and sufficient manner. This stage of both spiritual and behavioral freedom to explore potential and possibility is anticipated with joy, not only by the
individual, but by the family and community. Recognition is given not to a single philanthropic act or donation, but to the engagement in new possibilities of generosity, detachment and exploration.

Perhaps the most dangerous of the destructive myths, is the idea that philanthropy is always a good thing. (Fred Turner has written previously in this journal on this issue especially in regard to aid in Africa.) David Ellerman’s concern for the unhelpful help of world development projects is similarly important (2007, 561-577). From Dickens’s *Bleak House* onward the individual who insists on doing good ‘to’ others at the expense of personal obligations has been mocked and ridiculed, yet often employers seek just this kind of perspective in employees of service organizations. Performance awards often go to the person who stays latest, comes in on weekends, and complains about how much suffering and sacrifice is required of the job.

Further, we do not mock, nor treat with much humor, our national or global charitable efforts of relief or assistance, however absurd or culturally unaware they may be (sending ice to New Orleans or insisting that women earthquake victims in Haiti need undergarments). Consequently we do not examine the predetermined assumptions of aid which impose themselves on recipients without attention to cultural or contextual needs and values. (See *Good Intentions are not Enough*, a very useful blog about such issues.) Instead, we seem to believe the myths that not only are our philanthropic efforts always noble and good, but that we, the donors, gain in moral stature through them. This form of moral greed becomes the opposite of the inspiration and empowerment advocated as essential to philanthropy.

If we are to rethink philanthropy and expose the consequences of holding some of these myths to be fundamental to our actions, we must also explore the dynamics of philanthropic acts. When do we give and when do we not give? When and how does our giving change our other relationships and actions? How do our own philanthropic and charitable acts shape our children and their acts? Scholars frequently explore the philosophic aspects of philanthropy, and economists examine multiple aspects of the gift, but few have explored the ecologies of generosity, nor how changing philanthropies are changing the cultures in which we live.

Perhaps we could look at Prometheus as a mischief maker, and re-examine our views of the efficacy of philanthropy in terms of how much disruption to existing habits and views the philanthropic act causes? Must we remain stodgy in thinking that only measurable outcomes which are predictable serve the public good? As we rethink philanthropy and explore its many dimensions, surely there will be a place for laughter?
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