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# PHILANTHROPY'S MYTHIC DIMENSION

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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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