

COMMENT

THE MYTHS OF PHILANTHROPY: A REFLECTION

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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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