

COMMENT ON GUNDERMAN

Amy A. Kass

Everyone engaged in philanthropy today—whether as a donor, trustee, foundation leader, or program officer—is concerned about philanthropy’s status and future. Where is it headed? How effective is it? To whom and for what should philanthropists be accountable? Recent revelations of abuses in philanthropic foundations have eroded public confidence. Renewed congressional scrutiny has put philanthropic leaders on notice. Few seem to realize, however, that the answers to such questions ultimately depend on more basic matters, such as “Why give?” “To what ends?” “In what spirit?” Richard Gunderman is to be praised for taking us back to such basics. By developing a new paradigm for philanthropy—“liberal philanthropy”—which he claims is more complete than the two extant alternatives—“charitable philanthropy” and “scientific philanthropy”—Gunderman invites us to think afresh about what philanthropy is and what it aims to accomplish.

In offering his new portrait, however, Gunderman uses a brush that moves too quickly, and he makes strokes that paint too broadly. By aiming to transform needy receivers into generous givers, he obscures the respect in which givers and receivers both need one another and are equally worthy. To be sure, blessed are the givers, as Gunderman emphasizes. But blessed, too, are the receivers—arguably, even more so.

Gunderman readily acknowledges the importance of the venerable paradigm of “charitable philanthropy,” which aims at relieving the immediate needs of suffering humanity. He also appreciates the more recent “scientific philanthropy” which moves past the relief of immediate symptoms to focus instead on getting at “root causes” and aiming at full self-sufficiency. But, Gunderman argues, however well-intentioned and even necessary they are as paradigms for philanthropy, both approaches come up short. Because each paradigm takes its bearings from need, he argues, each necessarily breeds dependency (in individuals in the first case, in whole communities in the second), divisiveness (between haves and have-nots based on wealth and, in the case of scientific philanthropy, based also on know-how or expertise), and

lingering resentment, fueled by a sense of inadequacy or ineptitude. And, perhaps worse, in the long run, should their mission be fulfilled and the need to which they respond thus be eliminated, each would render itself irrelevant. Neither paradigm, in short, can engage everyone in the philanthropic enterprise, sustain its activity over time, or fulfill “philanthropy’s highest aspiration.”

Gunderman’s paradigm of “liberal philanthropy,” by contrast, promises to be more enabling and more ennobling—“more complete,” he says. Predicated (albeit tacitly) on the assumption that all human beings are capable of philanthropy, it takes its bearings not from human neediness but from human generosity, and it concerns itself not with transfers of wealth or other tangible gifts, but with qualities or virtues of character, both of givers and receivers. It seeks to transform all receivers into givers, or more precisely, “sharers”; that is, “to turn people in need into people who believe they have something important to share, and who want to share it.” It aspires to enable all “people, individually and collectively, to achieve the excellence of liberality [which is, according to Gunderman, the “essential excellence of philanthropy”], and thereby to align their lives with the highest goods human beings are capable of pursuing.” Gunderman emphatically distinguishes liberal philanthropy from “serial reciprocity” or “paying it forward.” It is not, he insists, about “repayment of debts. Nor is it about keeping philanthropic capital in motion,” as in, for example, children repaying their parents by investing in their own children. Indeed, he dubs his paradigm “liberal philanthropy” precisely because it liberates human beings from the tyranny of such close calculations, as well as from greed and selfishness; it frees us to lead fuller, richer, nobler lives.

The Roots of Philanthropy

By emphasizing the character and nobility of the giver, rather than the neediness of the recipient, Gunderman takes us back to ancient territory. His “new” paradigm harkens back to the roots of “philanthropy” and its first known coinage, in Aeschylus’ play, *Prometheus Bound*. Aeschylus used the term not as a noun but as an adjective—philanthropic—to describe not the wonderful gifts that Prometheus gave to needy human beings but instead the attitude, disposition, or character that informed the giver. Prometheus is said to have a *philanthropos tropos*, literally, to have a human-loving disposition or character, that is, the disposition to promote the happiness and well-being of human beings. Attaining such a philanthropic disposition in all of us,

Gunderman argues, is the true goal of philanthropy.

No one can deny the inspiration that Gunderman's paradigm could provide for leaders of philanthropic enterprises. Nor could anyone object to the goals it promulgates. But one must wonder whether, as articulated, his salutary vision is either feasible or sustainable. If philanthropy as philanthropy seeks to educate the human soul, and especially, as Gunderman would have it, to inculcate the virtue of liberality or generosity, is it sufficient to transform receivers into givers? Can philanthropy afford to set aside its roots in the recognition of human neediness? Can there be givers if there are none who are ready to receive their gifts? Can philanthropy do without gratitude, the sentiment behind practices like "serial reciprocity" and "paying it forward"? I think not.

For all his concern about achieving philanthropy's highest ends, Gunderman seems to forget that the practice of philanthropy—*philanthropia*, literally, the love or care for human beings—necessarily involves a relation between givers and receivers. The correlative of giving is not, as Gunderman would have it, sharing. The disposition to give requires, as its corollary, the capacity to receive. Gunderman seems to overlook the fact that receivers, by receiving, may in fact be bestowing gifts as important as those they receive. He seems, in short, to overlook the "neediness" of givers.

Gunderman rightly recognizes that generous individuals are capable of giving the "appropriate thing in the appropriate way to the appropriate person at the appropriate time and for the appropriate reason." But he seems to forget that their ability to do what is appropriate requires more than "ampleness, richness, or fertility of spirit." Even more important, he seems to forget that it is those that have intimately known necessity—be it poverty, hunger, disease, or oppression—that may know best what is appropriate and even be more inclined to give, precisely because their lives were not always noble and free but sometimes needy and burdened. Suffering through harsh necessity is oftentimes the best teacher of philanthropy, disposing us to give better and more, especially because suffering makes us mindful of how blessed it is to receive. Receiving evokes gratitude, and with gratitude comes the grace of feeling graciousness toward others.

An episode recounted in Homer's *Odyssey* provides a luminous example. It takes place in Phaiakia, the last stop Odysseus is compelled to make on his long and terrible journey home. It focuses on the meeting of Odysseus and Nausikaa, the daughter of Phaiakia's King Alkinoos, a young maiden on the

brink of womanhood and marriage, a “virgin unwedded” (Homer, 1977, p. 105).

Odysseus swims ashore after battling monsters of the deep for twenty days. Utterly alone and absolutely exhausted, he falls into a deep sleep, only to be awakened by the cries of young maidens at play. Though he feels despair, his “belly is urgent upon him” (Homer, 1977, p. 105), so he rallies himself to go and face the young women, the first human beings he will have encountered in seven years. Looking monstrous, “like some hill-kept lion” (Homer, 1977, p. 105), all crusted over with dry sea spray, he approaches the girls carefully and cautiously. All but one flee. Young, stout-hearted Nausikaa stands her ground and faces him.

Keeping a respectful distance, Odysseus begins his supplication with words of blandishment: “I am at your knees, O queen. But are you mortal or goddess? If indeed you are one of the gods who hold wide heaven, then I must find in you the nearest likeness to Artemis. . . . I have never with these eyes seen anything like you, neither man nor woman” (Homer, 1977, p. 106). But suddenly, Odysseus stops himself. Gazing at beautiful, young Nausikaa, he recalls a time, long ago, when he visited Delos and beheld a “young palm shooting up.” Just as he admired the fresh sapling back then, “so now, lady” he says, “I admire you and wonder” (Homer, 1977, p. 106).

But then, just as suddenly, Odysseus’ tone shifts once more, and he beseeches young Nausikaa to take pity on him and to help him. Yet, even as he appears to become more self-regarding, he now clearly sees, as well, what is uppermost in the young maiden’s mind. With tact and grace, he addresses her need, by offering a most valued gift—a blessing: “[M]ay the gods give you everything that your heart longs for; may they grant you a husband and a house and sweet agreement in all things, for nothing is better than this, more steadfast than when two people, a man and his wife, keep a harmonious household; a thing that brings much distress to the people who hate them and pleasure to their well-wishers, and for them the best reputation” (Homer, 1977, p. 107).

Clearly, Odysseus has hit the mark. Speaking now for the first time, Nausikaa addresses the monstrous-looking man as “my friend,” and remarks, “you seem not like a thoughtless man, nor a mean one” (Homer, 1977, p. 107). Evidently smitten, she commands her handmaidens to feed, bathe, and clothe the weary traveler, after which she guides him to the palace of her parents, those best suited to ensure his passage home.

Several days and much hospitality later, shortly before Odysseus takes his leave, he meets Nausikaa a second and last time. From Homer's report of their brief exchange on this occasion, we learn the precise nature of the gift Nausikaa had earlier bestowed: "Then Nausikaa, with the gods' loveliness on her, stood beside the pillar . . . and gazed upon Odysseus with all her eyes and admired him, and spoke to him aloud and addressed him in winged words, saying: 'Goodbye, stranger, and think of me sometimes when you are back at home, how I was the first you owed your life (*zoë*) to.' . . . Odysseus spoke in turn and answered her: 'Nausikaa, daughter of great-hearted Alkinoos, even so may Zeus, high-thundering husband of Hera, grant me to reach my house and see my day of homecoming. So even when I am there I will pray to you, as to a goddess, all the days of my life. For, maiden, my life (*bios*) was your gift" (Homer, 1977, p. 133; emphasis added). Nausikaa asks to be remembered for giving Odysseus the stuff of life (in Greek, *zoë*)— food, clothing, shelter. Odysseus, however, says he will remember her for giving him back his human life (in Greek, *bios*), literally, for en-humaning him. What is responsible for this?

The Blessedness of Receiving

Two things strike me as central: first is Odysseus' responsiveness to Nausikaa. Beholding Nausikaa's invincible sweetness and innocence reminds Odysseus of sweet and innocent possibilities seen long ago but now almost forgotten as a result of years of violence, loneliness, and despair. Odysseus becomes aware again that his heart was once capable, and can be so again, of responding to the appearance of lovely and innocent things. Aware of his own responsiveness, Odysseus gratefully realizes that his spirit has not been crushed. He is still human.

But, second, and arguably even more important, is Nausikaa's response to Odysseus' responsiveness. Nausikaa's acceptance of Odysseus' gift shows the weary traveler that he still has something to give, something that can and will be received by another person. Yes, Nausikaa has enacted liberal philanthropy's highest hopes: she transforms the needy suppliant—the receiver—into a generous giver. But Odysseus responds in kind: he transforms the generous giver into a ready recipient. And it is especially his discovery that he too can still give what is fitting, I suspect, that fills his heart—now and forever—with prayerful gratitude, awakening not only his desire to give but also his confidence that he can be effective in his giving.

Gunderman’s “liberal philanthropy” would rightly focus on the characters of givers and receivers. But only by remembering the innumerable ways in which we are all, and always, needy receivers, can the desire to give be sustained over the long haul. It may be better to give than to receive, but the disposition to give and to give well requires the reciprocal virtues of receivers and reception that allow givers to do so.

Stories of greed and corruption in philanthropic foundations or elsewhere should come as no surprise. Human beings are not now and never will be without self-interest. We are not angels. But philanthropic giving can certainly shore up our better nature; it can put us in touch with what is better, richer, and nobler; it can help us live better lives. To do so, however, may well require us to experience the grace implicit in gratitude, which is part and parcel of the blessedness of receiving.

REFERENCES

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