

# GIVING AND HUMAN EXCELLENCE

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## THE PARADIGM OF LIBERAL PHILANTHROPY

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It is more blessed to give than to receive.

*Acts of the Apostles 20:35*

Many of us are operating with an incomplete paradigm of philanthropy. The prevailing view today neglects what is ultimately philanthropy's most important mission: enabling as many people as possible to participate in philanthropic activity. It places unnecessary limits on what both donors and recipients are able to derive from philanthropic activity, and it undermines the achievement of philanthropy's full potential. To remedy this situation and develop a more complete philanthropic paradigm, we must examine our most deeply held convictions concerning what philanthropy is and what it aims to accomplish.

In the incomplete paradigms with which many of us are operating, philanthropy's ultimate mission is to do away with the need for philanthropy. In the more complete paradigm to be developed here, by contrast, philanthropy's ultimate mission is to expand philanthropic activity, which it does by enhancing the ordinary person's sense of philanthropic efficacy. In this more complete view, philanthropists should aim not to put themselves out of business, but to replicate themselves. The ideal community is not one where enlightened social policies have eliminated the need for philanthropy, but one in which as many people as possible are philanthropically engaged.

This argument for a more complete paradigm of philanthropy has two parts. The first part examines two incomplete paradigms. The first of these, charitable philanthropy, manifests great strengths, but it is not without important weaknesses. A more recent paradigm, scientific philanthropy, has addressed some of these weaknesses, but it manifests others of its own. Each of these paradigms provides important objectives for philanthropic activity and has produced laudable results. Yet each fails to encompass philanthropy's highest aspirations. The second part of the argument outlines

a more complete paradigm of philanthropy, called liberal philanthropy. This paradigm builds on the strengths of the other paradigms while adding additional strengths of its own.

### ***Incomplete Paradigms***

One of the oldest paradigms of philanthropy, charitable philanthropy, focuses on meeting immediate human needs. If someone comes to you in extreme hunger, you provide them food. If they need protection from the elements, you provide them shelter. If they are sick, you provide them care. If they are ignorant, you provide them advice and education. One of the great strengths of the paradigm of charitable philanthropy is its accessibility. Most people have the means to help another person in need, because doing so does not require vast wealth, special expertise, or a complex organization. When people see need, they can take steps to meet it here and now.

One of the greatest weaknesses of the paradigm of charitable philanthropy, however, is its tendency to foster dependency. When people realize that they have need but request aid to receive it, they may come to depend on handouts, rather than attempting to provide for themselves. For example, a beggar used to bring his coins to a local shop in order to exchange them for paper currency. When employees of the shop began to track his receipts, they discovered that his income exceeded \$100 per day. This enterprising person had become so prosperous soliciting donations that he no longer gave any thought to obtaining gainful employment. The problem illustrated here is that philanthropy, by fostering dependency, undermines the realization of human potential.

Another weakness of the paradigm of charitable philanthropy is its tendency to undermine the self-respect of recipients. Although some needy individuals have no qualms about receiving aid, others may resent the fact that their subsistence depends on the goodwill of others. Some people are ashamed of their inability to provide for themselves. Others feel indignant toward the welfare system they depend upon. The very acceptance of aid seems to some a painful admission of inadequacy. Of course, no one is truly independent or self-sufficient, and it is vital that we recognize our mutual interdependence. On the other hand, philanthropic activities that unnecessarily promote dependency are liable to damage the psyches of the very people they are intended to help.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the paradigm of charitable philanthropy was partially supplanted by another. This more

recent paradigm of scientific philanthropy is encapsulated in a well-known saying of Lao-Tse: "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." The paradigm of scientific philanthropy aims to move beyond treating the symptoms of need and to focus instead on the root causes.

With this approach, no longer would philanthropy aim merely to feed the hungry, shelter the naked, and heal the sick. Instead, it would systematically attack the etiologies of human deprivation. Instead of merely treating malaria, it would also eradicate the breeding grounds of mosquitoes. Instead of merely providing handouts to the poor, it would develop job training and day care programs, which would enable the poor to begin to provide for themselves.

The paradigm of scientific philanthropy addresses both weaknesses of the charity paradigm. First, it focuses on reducing dependency by enabling the needy to start meeting their own needs. Instead of encouraging aid-seeking behavior and thus perpetuating a cycle of need and dependency, it aims to enable the needy to stand on their own feet. It also addresses the problems of resentment and anger toward philanthropy. Philanthropy would no longer be represented by images of street beggars and soup kitchens, but instead by images of formerly dependent people showing off their newfound self-sufficiency. Eventually, if the scientific paradigm succeeded on all fronts, neediness itself might be purged, and philanthropy might put itself out of business.

The paradigm of scientific philanthropy contrasts starkly with the older charitable paradigm. In the scientific age, private philanthropy came to be associated with the very rich, men such as Andrew Carnegie and John Rockefeller, who possessed the means to bankroll huge projects working toward eliminating the root causes of war and eradicating infectious diseases. This paradigm also led to the rise of a class of philanthropic experts: men and women who understood the science necessary to pursue grand objectives, and whose administrative expertise made their achievement a practical possibility. The model of successful philanthropy was thus transformed from a matter of personal generosity to one of vast social programs designed to affect whole communities, nations, and even the entire globe.

However, the paradigm of scientific philanthropy has weaknesses of its own. It tends to deepen the social distinction between givers and recipients, expanding the ranks of the latter. Ordinary individuals could not hope to carry out the kinds of philanthropic projects characteristic of Carnegies and

Rockefellers. Likewise, they could not hope to develop the sophisticated level of expertise and organization that characterizes scientific philanthropy. The sheer scale of the programs lies beyond the means of ordinary individuals to organize or fund. Because they could not dream so big, they came to resemble recipients more than donors.

Thus the paradigm of scientific philanthropy threatens to replace the old dependency with a new one whose results may be no less pernicious. Comparing themselves to huge national and international philanthropic programs, communities begin to feel less competent to solve problems on their own. They come to rely increasingly on infusions of capital, expertise, and organization from outside their boundaries. Dependency of individuals is replaced by dependency of communities, who look increasingly to national and international philanthropic organizations for solutions to their problems.

The paradigm of scientific philanthropy heightens the distinction between the haves and the have-nots, but in a new way. The most exemplary philanthropists become those individuals who transfer the largest sums of wealth to philanthropic causes. The most important philanthropic organizations become the ones that boast the largest budgets. As philanthropy becomes scientific, it becomes quantitative, and the new professional class of philanthropic experts and managers develops a growing appetite for quantifiable measures of philanthropic activity.

A point that requires amplification is the effect of scientific philanthropy on the ordinary person's sense of philanthropic efficacy. When most people hear about the large sums of money being given to philanthropic organizations by wealthy individuals, they may ask themselves, "Compared to that, what difference would my contribution really make?" As a result, they may decide not to give. Likewise, when most people encounter the resources and sophistication of the best-known philanthropic organizations, they may think, "How could I possibly compete with that?" People may question whether their lack of expertise and relatively modest resources render them philanthropically irrelevant.

Thus the paradigms of charitable and scientific philanthropy are inherently limited. Even if they achieve all of their objectives, they cannot reach philanthropy's full potential. Conversely, even if their greatest dreams are never achieved, philanthropy itself can still realize its greatest mission. To understand why, it is necessary to explore a new paradigm of philanthropy.

### ***A More Complete Paradigm***

The most complete paradigm of philanthropy, liberal philanthropy, posits a different philanthropic objective. As noted earlier, the paradigm of charitable philanthropy aimed to meet immediate needs. The paradigm of scientific philanthropy criticized the charity paradigm for treating only symptoms, and instead focused on the root causes of need. The new liberal paradigm need not supplant either of these two philanthropic objectives. It remains appropriate to respond to immediate needs, as well as to help needy people become self-sufficient. However, the ultimate goal of philanthropy is not merely, or even primarily, to reduce, prevent, or eliminate need. The ultimate goal of philanthropy is to promote sharing.

The paradigm of liberal philanthropy aims above all to transform receivers into givers. When using this model, we can no longer rely on an initial needs assessment to tell us what sort of philanthropic activity a community most needs. Likewise, we cannot gauge the success of philanthropic programs by returning and conducting another needs assessment once they are completed. Merely assessing needs is not enough. If philanthropy is to succeed on the grandest and most important scale, it must aim not to put itself out of business by eliminating need, but to enhance awareness of the importance of sharing by highlighting the capacity to give. Philanthropic activity should aim to replicate itself, to transform receivers into givers, and to promote sharing throughout the community.

If the philanthropic sector focuses all of its attention on the needs of recipients, it takes away from its vital role in the lives of givers. If it aims to make itself bigger and stronger by accumulating more resources and increasing the scope of its programs, it diminishes the possibilities for individuals and communities to participate in philanthropic activities, and thereby damages the very people it means to serve. In a sense, it ends up behaving selfishly by arrogating to itself the philanthropic prerogative. The very notion of a philanthropic sector is essentially self-defeating, if it aims to remove opportunities for giving from ordinary people and place them in the hands of a class of well-funded experts. In the final analysis, people need less to receive than to give.

The essential excellence of philanthropy is not the objectivity and precision of its scientific methods, the rationality and efficiency of its social organization, or even the ever-increasing amounts of money it can accumulate. Programs intended to harm people, such as military campaigns

and tyrannies, may manifest these very same excellences. Instead, the essential excellence of philanthropy is liberality. Liberality comes from a Latin root, *liber*, meaning “free.” The goal of a liberal program is not primarily to give people what they need, but to free them, to release them, to liberate them to lead fuller and richer lives. The essential excellence of philanthropy lies not in filling empty stomachs or healing broken bodies, but in liberating the human aspiration to give.

Another term for liberality is generosity. A generous human being is someone who gives freely, and who takes pleasure in doing so. Generous people are the opposite of selfish people, who are inclined to take, and to take more than they should. The root of generous, the Latin *generare*, means “to beget” or “to produce.” The generous person, the liberal person, is not only attuned to the needs of other people, and thus able to give the appropriate thing in the appropriate way to the appropriate person at the appropriate time and for the appropriate reason, but is also characterized by a certain ampleness, richness, or fertility of spirit. To act generously is to act in the way of a full or complete person, someone who possesses a superabundance that invites sharing with others.

To appreciate the full significance of the paradigm of liberal philanthropy, it is necessary to think anthropologically. If we do not thoroughly understand human nature and the possibilities inherent in it, we have little hope of promoting its fullness. Human beings have many aspirations, which can be arranged in a somewhat hierarchical fashion from basic physical needs for food and shelter to higher needs involving full activation of character and the intellect. A philanthropy that ignores the most basic human needs may undermine all other pursuits, because people may be left too hungry or too sick to do anything else. On the other hand, a philanthropy that attends only to bodily needs neglects some of the most important things about what it means to be human.

One of liberal philanthropy’s highest objectives is to enable human beings to develop their full human potential. Lives not marred by hunger, disease, poverty, violence, and ignorance are certainly worthy objectives, but these conditions do not go far enough. For by focusing solely on the most basic human needs, philanthropy may unintentionally stunt the development of higher human powers. Merely throwing food or medicine at people is not the ideal. Philanthropy must also care about the development of character—

the character of individuals, families, and communities. In some ways, hunger and disease are not the worst fates in human life. The corruption of character involved in selfishness, duplicity, or cruelty wreaks far greater harm on the distinctively human part of a person.

Consider, for example, the condition of selfishness. Greedy people are not free, but enslaved. Where material goods are concerned, they are enslaved to money and the things money can buy. They believe that the route to the security, power, pleasure, and honor they desire is through personal acquisition of money, and so they devote themselves to amassing more and more of it, hoarding as much as they can to themselves. If they give, they do so from a vantage point of self-interest, as a means of deflecting criticism, building good will, or achieving some other material advantage that can be exploited for further gain. They think that by expanding their buying power, they are freeing themselves from the constraints of want, but what they are in fact doing is allowing themselves to become ever more deeply ensnared in a web of avarice.

Generous people, by contrast, are liberated from the trap of selfishness. Each egoist thinks that he or she is the most important thing in the universe, that his or her own satisfaction is the ultimate moral standard by which to guide his or her conduct. Liberal people, however, recognize that there are ends in human life greater than they, to which they rejoice in devoting their lives. Hence, if philanthropy is to achieve its highest mission, it must aim to reduce egoism and enhance liberality, thereby enabling people to lead richer and more complete lives, freed from the tyranny of selfishness. To do so, however, it must structure giving in a way that promotes not only receiving, but more giving. Thus the aim of philanthropic activity should be to transform people in need into people who believe they have something important to share, and who want to share it.

Liberal philanthropy should be distinguished from serial reciprocity, or “paying it forward.” The idea in paying it forward is that people discharge their sense of indebtedness through vicarious repayment. Instead of children repaying their parents for all the resources they invested in them, they repay the debt by making similar investments in their own children. Liberal philanthropy, by contrast, is not about the repayment of debts. Nor is it about keeping philanthropic capital in motion. Instead, liberal philanthropy is about enabling people, individually and collectively, to achieve the excellence

of liberality, and thereby to align their lives with the highest goods human beings are capable of pursuing.

Thus the paradigm of liberal philanthropy creates a new perspective on the problem of desert. The Victorians criticized the older, alms-giving model of charitable philanthropy for failing to distinguish between deserving and undeserving recipients of aid. They argued that people who make no effort to improve their condition, or even willfully refuse to cooperate with efforts to help them, should not enjoy the same philanthropic priority as people who make an effort to improve. Likewise, Victorian critics of their society's philanthropic efforts argued that people whose need was grounded in vice were not as deserving as victims of accidental misfortune, or people who suffered as a result of efforts to do good. Such criticisms provided some of the foundation for the development of scientific philanthropy. In liberal philanthropy, however, desert can be defined not only retrospectively but also prospectively, in terms of the recipient's desire to begin giving.

If sharing in joy is one of the highest human aims, then human beings need to discover the joy of sharing. In terms of the rational choice model that frequently dominates the social sciences, giving and sharing are difficult to fathom, and expecting people to get involved in such activities seems irrational. From the standpoint of human excellence, however, giving makes great sense, because it enables givers to create connections with other human beings and to pursue a good that is larger and higher than themselves. Real communities are nurtured not when people receive gifts from a common donor, but when people unite together to pursue some objective beyond self-enrichment. Enriching the lives of others is one of the most thoroughly engaging and joyful activities open to human beings. It is for this reason that sages regard giving as greater than receiving.

In the liberal vision of philanthropy, self-esteem need not be damaged by receiving. Everyone is in need at one time or another, and it is inevitable that some people's needs will be greater than others' needs. Seen in this light, self-esteem is damaged not by receiving, but by failing to give. Consider the cousin of a friend of mine, a woman who has been paralyzed and confined to a mechanical ventilator for over fifty years as a result of a bout of polio she suffered as a young woman. She finds herself in an extremely dependent position, much more so than most of us can imagine. Yet she is not consumed by self-pity or tortured by feelings of shame. Instead, she looks for



opportunities to enrich the lives of everyone with whom she comes into contact. Many visitors leave her room with a renewed appreciation for their blessings in life and a resolve to enrich the lives of others.

From the liberal point of view, the highest aim of philanthropy is a transformational or inspirational one. The point is to inspire people to become better than they are by devoting their lives to sharing with others. Once such inspiration takes root, people begin to realize that they have much greater philanthropic resources at their disposal than they supposed. They realize that wealth and philanthropic potential are not closely correlated, that a person does not need an advanced degree to be generous, and that daily life is replete with opportunities to act liberally. They realize that some of the most important philanthropic efforts cannot be measured in dollars, or even quantified in any meaningful way. Finally, they realize that small groups of people, and even one person, can make a great difference in the lives of others, sometimes surpassing even the difference that gargantuan philanthropic organizations with mammoth budgets are able to make.

Give a person a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a person to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. Share with a person the joy of helping others learn to fish, and you enable him to participate in a goodness that transcends any particular lifetime. Do that for people, and you help them to glimpse the philanthropic possibilities in being human. This remains the highest aim of the arts: philosophy, literature, drama, painting, music, and so on. In this sense, Socrates may have done more to benefit humanity through his inquiries into goodness, beauty, justice, and love than he could have ever accomplished by healing sick bodies or working to improve the working conditions of Athenian slaves.

### ***Conclusion***

The paradigm of liberal philanthropy aims at more than satisfying the immediate needs of the needy. It aims at more than making the needy self-sufficient and thereby ending their reliance on philanthropy. Above all, it aims, in the course of meeting and preventing needs, to turn recipients into givers, people who concern themselves more with what they can share with others than with what others can give to them. This paradigm moves philanthropy from a primary concern with social control to a primary concern with cultivation of character. It ceases to equate philanthropy with transfers

of wealth. And it avoids the pitfall of supposing that only the wealthy, intellectuals, and professional managers can be truly philanthropic. In essence, the paradigm of liberal philanthropy cultivates and celebrates the philanthropic potential of every human being.