THE PARADOX OF POSTERITY: QUESTIONS FOR HERE AND NOW

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In this essay I reflect on some ideas that have emerged over the years in this journal and some of its associated colloquia. These reflections concern four main thoughts: why one acts philanthropically; posterity versus the present in the calculation of giving; issues of moral hazard raised by Hardin, Rand, Machan and Kass, among others; and the myth of "sustainability." I begin with an observation from the surroundings of my study which may act as a metaphorical bonding agent for the reflections that follow.

Kissidougou

Kissidougou, as I call her, reclines on the corner of my desk, where she now keeps receipts from Walmart, Texaco, and my latest golf outing from disassembling themselves into my other papers. She has been with me, although not always so visibly displayed, since I acquired her in Basse Casamance (Senegal) more than four decades ago from an antiquities peddler.

Carved from stone, dark and mute, she would sit in contemplative attitude if she could, but she was not made to sit. Rather, she was created to lay at rest, a gift or supplication to the Omnipotent Spirit whose benefaction would make fertile the fields from which the community would be nourished. How many years she lay in the West African soil I don't know, nor do I know whether this offering to the Almighty was moved by fear for the next harvest or devotion to posterity. Some possibilities come to mind.

To carve an effigy from stone involves some cost, at least more than a wood carving or a straw or fabric confection. Therefore, its offering is sufficiently important not to have been the act of shifting cultivators who moved their huts from year to year. Instead, she was the product of a village community whose radiating *tranches* of fields, while subject to a regular orbital rotation, were nevertheless a part of the community for generations. Hope attended her presence

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in the fields of this section that food would be yielded in the present and again in a generation when the cultivator's clockwise movement would cycle round. Kissidougou had sisters placed around the compass of the village.

But what was the temporal horizon of the villagers for the putative powers of Kissidougou? Was it eternity? A generation or two? Or just "going forward," to use the indescribably deceptive and intentionally vague term of our day that feigns foreknowledge but fears conjecture? We cannot know for sure, but even though an indefinite "always" may have accompanied village prayers as Kissidougou was laid to rest the real issue was the generational struggle to survive the punishing meteorlogic uncertainty of the Intertropical Convergence Zone and the precipitation it might or might not deliver to the crops.

Hindsight affords us something that foresight could not give the villagers: the facts. Broadly speaking, and in a material sense, Kissidougou was a failure as an insurance policy. People have persisted in the region, but they have not prospered. Unspeakable atrocities have been committed as the slave trade came and went and as fields have been drenched in the blood of child-soldiers in wars fought over minerals unknown as resources at the "birth" of Kissidougou. The effigy is now displaced in time and space, alienated to a different world where strangers wonder about her meaning.

Questions well up from this narrative that relate to how future generations might best be aided by our actions. What does "benefited" mean? And on whose terms? One must honestly ask who actually cares how far into the future our philanthropic acts should be projected.

Conversations

The bounteous tableau of readings and conversations on philanthropy provided over the past few years by the Project for New Philanthropy Studies has been a treasure of ideas that challenge my quite general ignorance. A review of my notes of past meetings has rewarded me with the memory of participants' insightful remarks and written words.

Stephen Grosby's elaboration of Greek myth (2010, *passim*) captured beautifully our understanding that philanthropy cannot be coerced. Richard Gunderman's deeply spiritual observation that the selfish misuse of "treasure, time, and talent betrays our calling as human beings" and annuls our "role as stewards of the divine legacy" (2010, 4) provides its own thoughtful challenge, to

which I will return. Along with Gunderman, Dick Cornuelle, Heather Ion and Fred Turner have warned that true philanthropy involves knowing what not to do, and they are not the only ones concerned with the impact of the unintended consequences of good works. These are but a few of the important contributions to our thought; to go further with this reverie would be easy but essentially interminable, so I narrow my focus to a few comments about the Boulding sessions of 2007 (*Conversations on Philanthropy, IV*) to provide background to my later remarks.

Our discussions of Boulding's observations on philanthropy, introduced by Lenore Ealy (2007, v-ix) exposed a profound question of Time and how the future might be shaped through philanthropy. Ealy quotes Boulding, that "making sacrifices for a distant posterity is clearly the purest form of a grants economy that can be imagined, for there can be no vestige of exchange in it" (viii). Both Garnett and Gunderman elucidated Boulding's arguments, particularly with respect to economic postulates, but what I may have missed is how Boulding could hold that "When we make a true gift, it is because we identify ourselves with the recipient" (Garnett 2007, 18) and have that square with his previously quoted statement. How can one identify with recipients yet to be, especially those of a "distant posterity," without admitting an egoistic vision of the future and a self-satisfying instinct that whispers "exchange," or worse, "moral greed"? I resist the temptation to quote Shelley quoting Ozymandias.

Those of us influenced by the radical subjectivism of economists such as Shackle, Hayek, and Wiseman and physical scientists like Prigogine who are concerned with chaotic dynamic systems and emergent orders must agree that the future is created from the interplay of contending conjectures, chance, and the material that makes up the universe—but it is unknown until it happens. Unknown, too, are those who will populate the future and, within them, their capacity to use their endowment for purposes that are not inimical to our gift. Reflecting on Boulding, if the "purest" gift is given to the unknown and unknowable without interest in its use, that is whimsical at best, whereas the "truest" gift, in his view, requires projection of one's self into those who are yet to be—which clearly establishes a contradiction in his philanthropic thought. In truth, actual identification with a real recipient requires contemplation, and unapologetic self-interest in the use of one's gift reveals a greater act of love than does theoretical disinterest.

Other Voices

These questions arouse my thoughts, particularly when I consider some thinkers whose contributions have not yet been explored in *Conversations* but which we might consider with profit. I cannot do justice here to Garrett Hardin's, *The Limits of Altruism: An Ecologist's View of Survival* (1977) or his many and varied related writings, although I have challenged some of them elsewhere (Sommer 1982). I will try to summarize Ayn Rand's pithy remarks in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1961) in which she presents her unapologetic view of the authentic origins of the philanthropic urge. And, I think Tibor Machan's exposition on *Generosity: Virtue in Civil Society* (1998) is a valuable addition to our considerations.

Garrett Hardin's neo-Malthusian outlook may have colored the policy positions he advocated, but that does not diminish the tough questions he asks in *The Limits to Altruism* (1977) nor in his elaboration of the tragedy of the commons narrative for which he is duly famous. In *Limits* Hardin gets right to the point when he asks, "Are the egoistic and altruistic positions no more than waterproof hypotheses" (therefore invincible to scientific refutation)? He illustrates his point as follows: "If I am a clever egoist I can profit by encouraging you to be altruistic. I will be happy to be an "other" for you to serve. But I won't tell you this because, you, as a doctrinaire altruist, may be unwilling to encourage egoists. So as a selfish, Machiavellian egoist it is against my interest to let you in on my secret. For me to reveal the egoist's secret would be to act altruistically" (2).

And he goes on to ask, "Must an egoist, then, be forever silent about his motives? Worse: must he be a hypocrite and praise altruism? Among all who praise altruism how am I to distinguish truth-tellers from hypocrites" (2)?

In our current time this might be termed the "Warren Buffett Conundrum."

Although he admits to *kin altruism*, or *reciprocal altruism* when one gives up one's life for another (Hardin 1977, 12), I think Paul Schervish's comment on Grosby describing this act as "self-identification" is a term of art that would have been acceptable to Hardin, perhaps preferred (2009, 33-44). Yet, when confronted with questions of posterity, Hardin asserts that "only in wealthy countries, and then only through institutions can posterity be served," whatever that means (1977, 80-81). He recognizes the fabricated nature of this "altruism" but believes that a special, privileged authority is required to get from here to posterity. I can agree with him that "The problem of posterity is rich in puzzles!" (83), but his solution for getting there avoids the question of where "there" is or why we would

sacrifice the here-and-now for the indeterminate "then," not to mention who should be ceded this "'privileged authority.'"

Hardin is consistent in developing his rational-choice arguments through examples and metaphors. He extends his egoist/altruist discussion by identifying the problem of a "double-bind" in human action, and in support of his general solution to the commons issue, that is, "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon," in *Exploring New Ethics for Survival*: *The Voyage of the Spaceship Beagle:*

> If we ask a man who is exploiting a commons to desist "in the name of conscience," what are we saying to him? What does he hear—not only at the moment but also in the wee small hours of the night when, half asleep, he remembers not merely the words we used but also the nonverbal communication we gave him unawares? Sooner or later, consciously or subconsciously, he senses that he has received two communications, and they are contradictory: 1. (Intended communication) "If you don't do as we ask we will openly condemn you for not acting like a responsible citizen." 2. (The unintended communication) "If you do behave as we ask, we will secretly condemn you for a schlemiel, a sucker, a sap, who can be shamed into standing aside while the rest of us exploit the commons" (Hardin 1973 [1968] 130-131).
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> How shall we respond?

His 1974 article "Living on a Lifeboat" poses a question that challenges the limits of reciprocal altruism. He posits a lifeboat filled to capacity, surrounded by drowning people (I abbreviate his nicely constructed words): we may act following the Christian ideal of "being one's brother's keeper" or the Marxist ideal of "each according to his needs," in either case admitting our needy brothers, swamping the lifeboat, and delivering complete social justice and complete catastrophe. Or we can admit no one. The latter solution is abhorrent to many, who claim it is unjust or feel guilty about their good luck to be aboard. If these individuals of conscience respond to the invitation to get out and give their place to others who, by definition, do not share their level of altruism, the lifeboat "purifies itself of guilt" (263).

Hardin applies this troubling metaphor to the immigration issue, commenting, "It is pleasanter to talk about other matters, leaving immigration policy to wallow in the cross-currents of special interests that take no account of the good of the whole—or the interests of posterity" (273).

"Posterity" again! What can this mean other than a kind of weak

"sustainability" argument that impels the question, "To what end, in whose eyes, and what shall be foregone?"

In *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1961) Rand states that the moral purpose of life is to achieve one's own happiness, which she insists does not mean with indifference to others. Simply said, one should not subordinate one's life to the welfare of others and acts of generosity should be the exception, not a moral duty. She writes this in the context of emergencies, and she urges, much as Gunderman, Cornuelle, Ion, and Turner do above, and I quite separately (Sommer 1986)—us to weigh our philanthropy carefully before taking a moral leap. Although Hardin did not comment on selfishness per se, he did present the same conundrum as Rand. Rand insists that "selfishness" is simply concern with one's own interests—with no moral freight on board (1961, vii). On altruism she writes: "The ethics of altruism has created the image of the brute, as its answer, in order to make men accept two inhuman tenets: (a) that any concern with one's own interests is evil, regardless of what these interests might be, and (b) that the brute's activities are *in fact* to one's own interest (which altruism enjoins man to renounce for the sake of his neighbors)" (vii).

Rand goes on to state that this version of the "double-bind" we have already encountered promotes: "[Hence the] appalling immorality, the chronic injustice, the grotesque double standards, the insoluble conflicts and contradictions that have characterized human relationships and human societies throughout history, under all the variants of the altruist ethics" (viii).

One can hear the echo of these remarks in Hardin, and one can imagine Rand writhing over Boulding's urging to sacrifice for posterity. Indeed, for Rand, "'Sacrifice' is the surrender of a greater value for the sake of a lesser one or of a nonvalue. Thus, altruism gauges a man's virtue by the degree to which he surrenders, renounces or betrays his values…" (44).

Machan's book *Generosity: Virtue in a Civil Society* (1998) accords with the Randian perspective that one's purpose in life is to be as happy as one can be (x). Like Grosby's comments cited above, Machan emphatically rejects the idea that philanthropy can be coerced, asserting that "the welfare state unabashedly perverts the idea of right to private property and thus stands as an obstacle to…kindness and generosity" (x). Rand would approve; Hardin might demur.

Machan regards generosity as a "benevolent virtue," writing: "Generosity, as the Greeks saw, is not tantamount to altruism, which means putting others first. To be generous means to extend goodwill toward others because one's happiness

is thereby enhanced because one lives a fully human life if, among other things, one lives generously" (1998, x).

Further, Machan makes the following distinction between generosity and charity, both of which concern the here and now: "Generosity involves spontaneously doing good things—giving gifts, providing help or advice, showing tolerance or special consideration—for others, who may or may not be in trouble. The acts are spontaneous in that they flow from one's character, not from calculation or even deliberation.…Charity, in contrast, is benevolence arising from a sense of duty…that is morally prescribed" (1998, 1-2).

Among past colloquium readings, Leon Kass's chapter in Amy Kass's book *The Perfect Gift* most closely reflects some of the ideas of these three authors. As he writes, "Rightly understood, philanthropic deeds are not self-sacrificing but self-affirming and self-fulfilling, and a society that is generous beyond what is strictly owed must be counted amongst humanity's finest achievements" (2002, 273).

Posterity and "Sustainability"

My grandmother's admonition, "waste not, want not," is ever with me, perhaps obsessively so. It is trivial in the sense of being uncomplicated, not because it lacks *gravitas*. If this is the meaning of "sustainability," it is hard to disagree. However, in our day this word has taken on epic connotations and an increasing burden of religiosity. Whereas Grandmother admonished "use," the apostles of sustainability shout "Preservation!" Earth, in their vernacular, becomes a giant restoration project to meet their predilections and the supposed desires of future generations.

In fact, the chief momentum of the sustainability movement is derived from environmentalists whose modern preservationist roots reach back through German Romanticism into antiquity, as Alston Chase (1995) has shown. Worship of nature, and the promotion of a "land ethic" *a la* author Aldo Leopold earlier (1949) and the movie *Avatar* recently, expresses a rejection of the human "use" of the earth, especially by "'conscienceless capitalists,"' on the false predicate of finite resources. The "precautionary principle," an elaborate version of another old admonition, "look before you leap," has been written into statutes effectively, one thinks, to forestall the forces of Schumpeterian creative destruction, forces that have demonstrably created resources (or freed them from less to more desirable purposes) rather than destroyed them.

I raise this point because it too illustrates the question of posterity and the unspoken assumption that the future should be no worse than the present, a belief held so fervently by some that the creative acts of others must also be held in check—for example, genetic modification of organisms, even though the present condition of humanity may be improved by their adoption. Much of Kissidougou's Africa today serves as an abject example of environmentalist malefactors blocking the planting of highly productive genetically modified crops and thereby performing a kind of human sacrifice to an unknown future. Perhaps I read too much into this and what we witness is merely a concern of "'sustainability hustlers'" to secure their own estate in the present while using a gossamer of intergenerational equity as cover. In his book *A Poverty of Reason* Beckerman comments on this point: "It is typical of the intellectual confusion in the environmentalist movement that many of its more extreme activists attack the wicked capitalists and imperialists and related globalization while simultaneously pressuring governments to implement policies that can only impoverish developing countries—simply in order to pander to the prejudices of well-meaning but ill-informed people in the rich countries or to the "power-seeking" agendas of bureaucrats" (2002, 47).

Despite a genuinely useful review of the entire sustainability movement and issues of intergenerational equity that it raises, Beckerman fails to address the possibility of rejection of contemporary values by future generations. Previous generations who fell under the spell of the Malthusian myth and forewent the use of resources explicitly to give them to the future—for example, Jevons's urgings in the nineteenth century to stockpile Britain's coal lest future generations freeze—denied their productive use, and the value of the resource disappeared as it was replaced by more efficient energy resources.

Thirty years ago I wrote an article, "Resource Depletion in the Orwellian Decade" (1980), the principal point of which was to dispel the myth of finite energy and the attendant rage to regulate energy production so that future generations would not be left out in the cold. It is common knowledge that energy resources have increased since then as creative entrepreneurship and scientific discovery have combined to make finitude a highly elastic concept. Gunderman captures this thought in his 2007 *Conversations on Philanthropy* article: "'Raw materials' we trample underfoot may take on great value when catalyzed by human imagination" (40-41).

This positive understanding of the resource-creating potential of individuals is at the core of the radical subjectivist position and admits to the unpredictability of what is to come, both in terms of what will be created and the individuals who will do the creating. What is understood is that the widespread adoption of an "evil myth" of finiteness and attendant legislation to forestall creative acts does limit our capacity to act philanthropically in the present, and if one actually prefers to project beyond three generations to a myth of posterity, I join Beckerman in recommending an insight from Jeremy Bentham: "Individual interests are the only real interests….Can it be conceived that there are men so absurd as to…prefer the man who is not, to him who is; to torment the living under presence of promoting the happiness of those who are not born, and who may never be born" (Beckerman 2002, 63)?

I am enriched by Richard Gunderman's comments on myths: "Myths not only fill the memory but inspire the imagination, making us aware of new possibilities." Or, "They [myths] powerfully shape our sense of the way the world unfolds in time and space, providing intuitions that shape everything we think, say, and do" (2010).

Recognizing the truth of his comment that "myths are the lifeblood of philanthropy," it is as important to dispel evil myths as it is to honor those that are not. Among these must be the evil myth that the future can be "'planned'" by any individual, philanthropist, or tyrant, rather than evolved by all. The paradox of posterity for the philanthropists among us is in the carefully considered choice of our dimension of action in time and space. For my part I shall recognize without gloss that my philanthropy fulfills an egoistic goal of self-satisfaction. I choose the 'palpable present' (three generations), or "'here-and-now'", with the conviction that I might expand the possible creative paths for real people. I eschew Time of the far future as the destination for my gifts in humble recognition of what I cannot know of their receipt.

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