THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY: BRAIN NEEDS

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The perennial question of philanthropy is: What do people need? And to look into the future, we must ask: What will people need?

As the wealth of the world increases exponentially (at around 5 percent per annum, doubling every fifteen years), and as transportation and communications improve, creating more opportunities for the wealth to spread, poverty will consist rather of a lack of informational goods than of the material needs of the human animal. Already the traditional pattern of fat, rich people and thin, poor people has reversed in many countries, and increased life expectancy is often more dependent upon what we wisely do not consume than on what we unwisely do consume.

The New Poverty

The deprivation of basic human physical needs today is and should be, of course, a scandal in the world, and the world press reports it when it occurs. There are huge political and even economic incentives—to say nothing of moral imperatives—that already drive immediate and massive public and private responses to such problems, as witness Hurricane Katrina, the tsunamis, and Haiti. There is no reason to believe that such efforts will cease or that they will not be made much more effective by further work on public-private cooperation, the use of electronic media, computer modeling, etc.

But as this trend continues, we can expect that the greatest hunger and need will not be for food, shelter, and clothing but for information, especially for the higher forms of information. Information comes in a hierarchy: data, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Poverty will be starvation of these kinds of goods, especially the higher kinds. Most crippling will be deprivation of the psychological technologies by which a certain mysterious internal feedback process is created— that which enables the human brain to ascend the ladder of informational goods and accumulate the critical mass of information at each rung that is required to ascend to the next.

In a crude sense, initiating that lifelong feedback process in the young brain is the purpose of education. But much education does the opposite, blocking the process rather than opening it up. If the process is stymied, either by lack of education or by bad education, a human being experiences the blockage (correctly) as a restraint upon his agency, his power of action and his freedom, and the trapped feeling that results leads in turn to rage. Instead of remaining inchoate and unbearably indefinable, that rage often takes the shape of an ideology that demonizes those he feels and knows are not constrained as he is, blaming them (usually incorrectly) for his predicament and interpreting the situation as the result of a conspiracy.

One consequence of this pathology, especially when telecommunications make it impossible for people to remain isolated with others no less handicapped than themselves, has been the phenomenon of pogroms against those groups and cultures that foster the onset of the learning feedback process—ethnic groups such as the Jews, Chinese, Ibos, Tutsis, and Armenians, or against socio-economic groups such as the professional classes or the urban, property-owning bourgeoisie. There is even a sort of traditional caricature of such groups, nicely imaged in the dwarves of Wagner's *Nibelungs* or the Ferengi in the *Star Trek* series, with hunched little bodies, bulging craniums, long, grasping hands, and crafty, hooded eyes.

New Philanthropy, New Media

Starvation of informational goods, and lack of access to the autocatalytic process by which data condenses into knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, and in which information leads to the acquisition of more information, is not only grievous but deadly. As the world becomes wealthier in material goods, this other starvation will become more acute. So we can expect that the priorities of philanthropy will shift in the next hundred years, and that in the next ten years the dialog within philanthropy will turn to preparation for this shift. In other words, if philanthropy is basically gift-giving, the truly welcome gifts are going to be of information, especially in its higher forms of real knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Huge volumes of raw data such as pour out of the media and the Internet may do more harm than good when falling upon unprepared minds and unaccompanied by the sorting devices—aesthetic taste, knowledge of probabilities, basic science, logic, historical context, competing theories, the basic myths and stories of humankind, etc.—that turn data into knowledge and knowledge into understanding.

So how are these gifts going to be made available to those who need them? Obviously there are tried and true philanthropic projects that already respond to this question. Many were proposed by Rockefeller himself in the nineteenth century—the endowing of universities, libraries, and laboratories, for instance. And Rockefeller was only following the ancient practice of kings, lords, and bishops, with adjustments for a democratic regime. More recently we have seen the emergence of the open-source movement, the cooperative and unpaid service of those who created Linux, the building of the internet with its millions of free content sites, the establishment of Wikipedia, various medical information sites, and Steven Wolfram's computational engine. The blogosphere is largely not-for-profit. And though such hugely valuable sources as Google maps, Ngram, Amazon's bibliographical services, and online news are paid for by advertising, there is an unmistakable element of idealism in their creators, a gift of creative imagination at least, that is philanthropic in part. Indeed, one might well argue that such mixed motives—profit and benefit—may in practice yield the best results in human terms. The two motives can by their mutual criticism—the test of practicability and popularity on one side and insistence on the long-term good of all stakeholders on the other—keep an enterprise alive and innovative.

Another kind of informational good is the service provided by the social media, in which the information supplied is not the expertise of specialists or the inherited wisdom of the ages, but the thoughts and observations of our contemporaries. Again, profit is definitely a motive—the makers of Facebook and Twitter have become rich. But here too there was a strong element of visionary public benefaction in the creation and especially in the use of these sites. And as Tahrir Square and the current democratic revolution all over the Muslim world have shown, this kind of brain food may in the short run be the most potent of all. It is no coincidence that the leading voice in the Egyptian revolution, Gonim Yuslam, worked for Google and communicated on Facebook.

Certainly there are threats and dangers in the new media. Al Qaeda can disseminate itself as well as Bartleby, Science Online, or Catholic Charities. But such problems as do exist in the provision of the informational goods that the world is increasingly going to need are not primarily in the populist private media but in the ivory tower that should be the final court of appeal. Postmodern "Theory"—mostly a mixture of Deconstruction with outworn post-Freudian and Marxian speculations—has decisively undermined the ancient values of the traditional liberal arts (beauty, truth, and goodness) and thus made it very difficult

to meet the legitimate demands of students for a genuine education in understanding and wisdom. It is tempting to imagine letting the ivory tower collapse under its own weight—let other institutions take over the task of disseminating the arts, humanities and social sciences, and let corporate and private organizations take over scientific and technological research (with appropriate government contracts and prizes if special investigations and technical projects are demanded by the public). But the free academy does do certain things extremely well, especially those that take the long view and the grand conspectus, that carefully test knowledge by competitive scholarship and experiment. Google is a dangerous tool to put into the hands of a young person, without some professional and competitive check on the facts, logic, sources, ethics and aesthetic integrity of its offerings. The academy needs reform, not dissolution. How might that reform be envisaged, and what role might philanthropy play in helping it along?

As the universities turned into specialist multiversities, the Dewey Decimal System fragmented the libraries into microdisciplines, and much of the electronic media turned into a chaos of incommensurate private obsessions and special interest groups. As a result, the mechanisms by which data is turned into knowledge and thence to understanding and wisdom became paradoxically harder to acquire, masked by the torrent of raw information. Debate retreated from being a contest of wisdom into being one of understanding; then from being a struggle to understand to being a parade of rival masses of knowledge; and finally, a memory test of who can spew out the most data. What is needed, then, is a renewed initiative in finding ways to spark the integrative and evaluative process that leads back to wisdom—not just for elites but also for the common people of the world.

Some philanthropic gifts, well conceived, did create institutions that tried to reverse the trend toward the decomposition of understanding into knowledge, knowledge into data. The University of Chicago's Great Books movement was one. The Liberty Fund, with its special task of turning understanding into wisdom, was another. The Philanthropic Enterprise is itself a glowing example of informational gift-giving targeted at generating the feedback system by which we ascend the informational ladder.

Poetry as Information-Integrative Gift

One example of the problems and opportunities offered by the ladder-climbing project is the history of poetry. Poetry probably began as a ritual element, part of the higher gift-exchange of ancient and primitive peoples. As

such it was an integrative informational gift, designed to generate a self-maintaining process of understanding the world, appreciating nature and humanity, and aspiring to wisdom. Later, in the hands of professional storytellers, such as Homer, Vyasa, and Kakuichi, poetry became part of a semi-formal gift-exchange system—poets could expect gifts and even a pension from their aristocratic clients. Later still, poetry became a gift again—poets such as Horace, Catullus, Sidney, and Donne circulated their poems privately in manuscript copies. With commercial printing and copyright laws came a time when poets like such as Longfellow and Tennyson could once again make a living from poetry. But as printing costs went down and the prestige of poets went up, the supply of poetry became enormous and the task of sorting the good from the bad and mediocre became overwhelming. Meanwhile, poetry abandoned its integrative and evaluative role because it no longer felt obliged, because of ideological modernist doctrines, to be connected either with a real market or a real function as a teacher of society. It forgot the ancient psychological technologies of rhyme, meter, narrative suspense, and genre.

Now, however, poetry is recovering its role as an information-integrative gift, partly through the existence of well-edited and well-curated websites that maintain poetic quality, and the ancient craft of poetry, involving meter, rhyme, trope, narrative, and logical and rhetorical structure, is making a recovery. Print periodicals such as *Trinacria*, *Light*, and *The Northwest Review* have helped revive the true pleasures and uses of poetry. Performance poetry is becoming quite popular among younger people, and a sense of the responsibility of the gift-giver to the people has returned.

Poetry has been significant as an informational gift, or to be exact, a gift of the technique of refining lower forms of information into higher ones. It has performed this role best in times when it had either wise patrons or a vital combination of market and gift support (including the self-patronage of poets themselves). Human beings do like to give their creativity to others, and the richest forms of creativity are those that help us ascend the informational ladder. I expect the debate in the philanthropic community will be increasingly over how to foster this kind of creativity; and poetry, being a very old and effective shaper of informational goods, can serve as a good space for thought-experiment.

The largest form of poetry is the epic, which for the culture that creates and sustains it acts as a royal road from data, through knowledge and understanding, to wisdom. Almost every one of the world's major cultures has at least one epic

poem, often extremely ancient and still well-known in its outlines to the general population—the *Odyssey*, the *Popol Vuh*, *Sundiata*, the book of Exodus, the *Heike*, the *Mahabharata*. Even now epic themes and motifs abound in the popular media, ill-understood but mutely loved by the public. If I—admitting to every possible kind of bias, artistic, scholarly, and spiritual—were to choose the most cost-effective intervention that a great philanthropist could make in the field of informational gift-giving, it would be to found a technologically savvy university organized around the explication, in the context of modern science and future action, of the great epic poems from all over the world.