

Philanthropy, Philosophy and Doing Good

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If philanthropists want to make a dent in social problems, they first need to understand themselves.

If we want to understand the obligations of wealthy Brits, we should start with the long shadow cast over UK philanthropy by John Jarndyce. The fact that he's a fictional character from the last-century-but-one only makes this more depressing.

Jarndyce is the ultra-modest hero of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852). He exemplifies how a wealthy Victorian 'man of conscience' ought to behave: personally kind, generous to the needy and the deprived, quietly thoughtful towards those less fortunate than himself. And the idea of any *fuss* around his generosity is unbearable to him, with the threshold for such fuss set extremely low. When his orphaned wards want to thank him for taking them in, he threatens to run away rather than hear a word of gratitude. A casual word of appreciation for his good work is immediately deflected onto a different conversation (generally, this being a great English novel, an observation about the weather).

The way we give may have changed dramatically in the succeeding 160 years – it is as easy to help causes overseas as those on our doorstep; we are a Twitter-click away from sharing ten quid with a project which inspires our generosity – but the philosophy that gave birth to a character like Jarndyce still exercises a dominant influence.

The belief remains that British philanthropy is best done quietly. It's a view neatly illustrated a year ago by the *Evening Standard's* influential columnist Anne McElvoy. McElvoy welcomed the boom in philanthropy which had accompanied the new wealth flooding into London, but designated a new social class to avoid: the capital's 'philanthrobos', big givers 'who can speak of nothing else but their pet projects'. Much better

the donor who 'keeps a low profile', she argued, and maintains 'an unfussy spirit'. Much better a Jarndyce.

Look across the Atlantic and you can see a different story unfolding (and a far from boring one). Philanthropy is often a matter of pride, and many of the nation's big givers want to make noise about the good they do. The expectation that the very wealthy give funds to their old universities, for example, is much stronger, and attracts little embarrassment from either donor or recipient. At the extreme end – not merely the wealthy but the mega-rich – you get initiatives like the *Giving Pledge*, with many US billionaires united in a promise to give away large chunks of their fortunes.

The benefit of bringing so many of the rich together to fund effective solutions for the deprived is pretty obvious, but it's the knock-on effect of the pledge that makes the UK contrast so stark. One goal of the pledge, according to its website, is to 'talk about giving in a more open way and create an atmosphere that can draw more people into philanthropy'. This isn't exactly subtle: if you're a member of the American super-rich, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett et al want to know why you aren't yet a public philanthropist. These are difficult voices to ignore.

While there are also UK philanthropists out there who set a public example for people who may follow and learn from them (*NPC* works with impressive advocates like the *Stone Foundation* and *John Armitage Charitable Trust*), they are rare. And although publications like the *Sunday Times Rich List* and *Giving List* make the connection between wealth and philanthropy – one appears the week after the other – it's no secret that some of the UK's biggest givers are acutely uncomfortable about the attention (and scrutiny) this brings with it.

Which brings us on to the question about personal wealth and the obligation to relieve deprivation. This question is already one step ahead where we are. Even people who do fund charitable work, sometimes to the tune of millions, have an aversion to anyone knowing.



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The first obligation we need to nurture among philanthropists, then, is a willingness to out themselves as philanthropists. Before they can understand and negotiate their place in society, they need to understand themselves.

If we accept that obligation is at the heart of a culture of philanthropy, and that an obligation to be visible in one's giving may be central to efforts to build that culture, we might turn to moral philosophy to ask what it has to say about obligation, and what light this sheds on the whole issue.

Moral philosophy, or ethics, speak about how we should live our lives – an area of study that we owe to the Ancient Greeks. And it's also the great Greek philosophers and playwrights who gave us the origins of philanthropy – first coined by Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound*. In the tradition of the Ancient Greeks, philanthropy was inseparable from moral philosophy: good works for the benefit of others were the ultimate expression of civilization. The Greeks didn't beat around the bush on this: they would tell us not only that it is our obligation to give what we can for the good of others, but that it is pretty much the whole point of being human.

Over the centuries, moral philosophy has developed into two schools, divided by whether an action is morally right because of the nature of the action itself or the character of the person taking it (deontology), or right because of the consequences of that action (consequentialism). Of course we simplify hugely here – moral philosophy has many variations and nuances, which defy any attempt to boil them down too neatly. But it's an extremely useful way to approach philanthropy. What does it mean to give away money, what are the results when we do; and how do the two relate to one another?

A deontological view of philanthropy tells us that giving itself is morally right, and that by being a philanthropist someone expresses their moral character. In contrast, a consequentialist view of philanthropy would be that what is most important is not the act of giving or character of the donor, but the results of the gift.

So if I give £10 to a homeless woman in response to her request, the first view says my gift is a moral act, reflecting my moral character. But the consequentialist view says that my gift is only a moral act if it is used to create positive consequences, so it depends on how the woman spends it. If it gets her a hostel bed for the night, my gift was morally right. If it is spent getting drunk on Special Brew, it was not.

Coming back to the subject of obligation, can moral philosophy inform how we nurture a culture of philanthropy? Deontology tells us that philanthropy

is an obligation of individuals within a moral society, and therefore that those who give should be applauded for their moral behaviour (and perhaps that those who don't should be scorned).

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NPC, is definitely consequentialist in this regard. *NPC* was founded nearly fifteen years ago to focus on the impact of philanthropy, which necessarily brings us into questions about the morality behind choosing to fund charities. As our Chief Executive Dan Corry told an audience at the *Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy* last year: "I would argue it verges on the immoral just to set up a charity or give to a charity without doing a wee bit of homework".

In other words, effective philanthropy is an obligation. The gift itself does not constitute a moral act, only its results. Therefore it is our duty to understand what the results of our philanthropy will be *before* we give, and those who give *effectively* should be applauded for their moral behaviour. Furthermore, if philanthropists inspire others by being visible in their actions, consequentialism says they should be celebrated – it is morally right to give (as long as the gift is effective) and morally right to do so visibly to encourage others to do so. In other words, consequentialism says not only should you give (effectively), you should also shout about it too. On the flip side, it also says you shouldn't celebrate your philanthropy unless you know its results were positive.

Those without a taste for philosophical musings will have stopped reading long ago. For those who have persevered, and are consequentialists, perhaps we have something important to say to those like McElvoy about the dreaded philanthrobos. If people won't stop going on about their giving but don't talk about what it achieves, tell them to shut up because they're immoral. If they talk about the result of this giving, write about them, tell others about them, give them a column.

And if you come across a donor who prefers to keep a low profile, a modern-day Jarndyce, tell them to start celebrating the impact of their philanthropy. They have a moral duty to pass the message on.

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