

A Fragile Goodness: Questions on the Future of Philanthropy

In a previous paper I had touched briefly upon the fact that in the later half of the twentieth century leading into the twenty first, the rate of giving by individuals and the increase in philanthropy by some of the world's richest people and successful entrepreneurs has reached record proportions, resulting in a global outreach of aid and emergency relief that is unprecedented in human history. While it is encouraging to note this precedent and acknowledge that one of the most basic tenets of humanism continues to grow and find expression in the worlds varied cultures, it is also worth examining this new phenomenon of global philanthropy and exploring whether it will endure in the face of challenges that while not unprecedented, have become by advent of technology alone, more dangerous and unsettling than ever before.

I want to do this first by re-examining the motivations that have resulted in such generosity and the laying down of foundations that have brought about the shift in thinking of obligation from world

Governments to the private sector, and to examine if this motivation and the humanism responsible for this growth can be nourished in the future despite the challenges hinted at above. This as well as the socio-economic factors that could unravel the fragile cords woven together between philanthropists and both developing nations and struggling communities.

Our first step would be to acknowledge that philanthropy has a long history and is inextricably tied to a long standing religious tradition and the advent of secular humanism that began to be debated as far back as Rousseau and Kant, to Locke and Hume, to Taylor and Ferry in the present age.

A basic tenet of this humanism is that man, in acquiring scientific knowledge and knowledge of the self and reason, outgrows the long standing need for religious affirmation of one's own worth, and sees the future in working towards a common goal of mutual self benefit and the flourishing of humankind. as Charles Taylor succinctly phrases it,

“society is made by individuals, or at least for individuals, and their place in it should reflect the reasons why they joined it in the first place, or why God appointed this form of existence for them.

The reasons in the end come down to the good of human beings, not

qualifiers of this or that role, but just simplicity, a human good which is that of all of the equally, even if they don't achieve it in equal measure".¹

This thinking has gained great credibility in what Taylor has called "the secular age", as we have witnessed this advent of the self lead to what Taylor terms a "social imaginary" wherein we have developed a moral code that transcends the old ties to religion, and which we have continued to nourish despite war, famine, pestilence, and religious conflicts into the present age,

" a great deal of our political and moral life is focused on human ends: human welfare, human rights, human flourishing, and equality between human beings, indeed, our public life, in societies which are secular in a familiar modern sense, is exclusively concerned with human goods, and our age is certainly unique in human history in this respect"²

We are indeed in a unique age, riding what some might call the crest of humanism into the 21st century. The level of individuals giving to charity, the wealth of non-profit agencies providing services

¹ Charles Taylor- "The Secular Age pp540

² Ibid pp569

and advocating for a myriad of human rights, the efforts of world Governments to provide medical aid and catastrophic relief to other Nations are all unprecedented.

But what has lifted and sustained this tide has come under debate, and despite the claims of atheists, secular humanists and Neitzscheists, it is clear that we still hold to those core beliefs that were ushered out from religion based societies, as they still remain valid today:

“ It is clear that there are many people of faith who have helped to build and are now sustaining this modern humanist world, and are strongly committed to the mode of human well being and flourishing that has made it central ’’³

And this is particularly important in our discussion of the immediate future of philanthropy as religious organizations continue to contribute a substantial portion of global aid as well as local hands on programs that bring faithful donors to onsite locations, where they spend a week or two with native workers helping to build schools and hospitals.

It is apparent increasingly, that in our own disenchantment with the modern world, we seek as one kind of refuge an outlet for our kindness and charity, a reaffirmation of our own good that is tied

³ *ibid* pp570

emotionally to an integral part of our being.

As Luc Ferry describes in his introduction to “Man Made God ”

“ the modern citizen is frustrated. Without being drawn to the extremes of religious or mystical motifs (as secularism requires), he has the feeling that he is not on earth only to purchase automobiles or ever better stereo systems. Money, fame, power, seduction, of course, do seem like values to him, but relative ones. He would happily exchange them for others, thought to be more profound, such as love or friendship. It is not that the former are to be condemned, but even if we are aware of humanity’s final destination – even more so if we think the question is outdated – they don’t seem able to constitute an ultimate end ”⁴

Some purist humanists scoff at these sentiments, presumed to be merely left over from the centuries of religiously bound societies , that they are tied to emotions that no longer need to exist within the secular frame. Both Taylor and Ferry have tried to acclimate these into the framework, and have advocated for those of us caught in this current. The most extreme of those who percolate this view would be some humanists and certainly Neitzscheists who see Christians and others who

⁴ Ferry, Luc “ Man Made God: The Meaning Of Life “ pp8

advocate an ethic of good works as

“ ... struggling (sic) for the good, with no guarantee of success, indeed, even with a certainty of ultimate failure; not only in the sense that the indifferent universe will ultimately do away with the works of humankind, but also because one will accept no transcendent hope beyond history, that works of good will be taken up into eternity”.⁵

These extreme humanists, at first glance seem to be winning out: churches across Europe and the western world are empty. Many in Europe have become museums, and Catholic churches in old world neighborhoods across the United States have aged and dwindling parishioners. Even with 164 charitable organizations world wide, the Catholic charities have come to represent an increasingly smaller role in global giving with the sudden rise in prominence of secular foundations, corporate giving, and the increase in private philanthropy.

Ferry acknowledges that

“ the present, marked by the secularization of ethics, is a time of the “ twilight of duty”

and a recent report published by a leading corporate foundation

⁵ *ibid*, pp 586

suggested that “ the role of the volunteer had become limited ”

thereby further dividing the secular role of charitable aid from those

“ remnants” of the old code and seeking to depreciate ordinary

individuals who seek a connection to the ongoing struggle for human

rights and the end of poverty. To find an outlet for this basic need, an

expression of one’s commitment to human flourishing; and many

defend these expressions, citing the importance of these

“ emotions...that are more reliable in deliberation than detached intellectual judgements, since emotions embody some of our most deeply rooted views about what has importance, views that could easily be lost from sight during sophisticated intellectual reasoning.”⁶

And Luc Ferry asserts the importance of this “ transcendence “ when he declares that

“ Without disappearing, the contents of Christian theology no longer come before ethics, to ground it’s truth, but come after it, to give it a meaning. Human beings therefore no longer have to appeal to God in order to understand that they should respect others, should treat them as ends and not just means. atheism and morality can in this way be reconciled. But the reference to the divine, to that idea of a God whom Levinas, remaining

⁶ Nussbaum, “Love and Knowledge ” pp 42

faithful to the tradition of the enlightenment, will say “comes to mind “ still does not vanish.”⁷

Perhaps we can agree that the roots of philanthropy grew from these religious chords and persist in certain cultures into the present day, even that these have laid the foundation of modern western charitable giving.

On top of this foundation we may add the secular efforts of private philanthropy (though historically until the present age linked to mostly national charity rather than global efforts), and above this, the now long standing efforts of world governments through UNESCO and the United Nations programs. This will allow us to move on and examine the more present phenomena of philanthropy: those that include entertainment stars and movie moguls, dot-com magnates and other entrepreneurs who have expressed their disenchantment with the secular model. These new philanthropists have chosen to create private foundations or to elevate funding for a chosen foundation or cause, or even personally to oversee a private effort in an specific location.

Doubtless there is a depth of sincerity to these individual efforts, Brad Pitt for instance, helping to rebuild New Orleans neighborhoods

⁷ Ferry, Luc “Man Made God “ pp 31

after Katrina, or the collective efforts of musicians reaching back to George Harrison's Bangladesh concert. More to the present, Bob Geldof's Live Aid shows and U2's Bono pressing world leaders for African debt relief.

We see that these efforts made some difference in response to present world crises, and perhaps equally important, that these efforts have influenced the more extensive and successful phenomena of recent private philanthropy among the wealthy of the western world.

Let's go back for a moment and reflect on those efforts by rock stars to garner relief and publicity for individual crises in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, or other African nations that have suffered recurring famines, the ravages of war, AIDS, and other outbreaks of disease and ethnic cleansing during our lifetimes.

We now know that these efforts were often mismanaged, that huge sums of money were eaten up by the sheer expense of the festival. An "outcome" that by today's corporate charity standards would induce a headache at a board meeting. But the meaning itself for those of us that followed, and the wealthy philanthropists that have emerged from that generation is the "festival" itself; the great gathering of goodwill and expression in both music and words that crystallized the gatherings into a

spiritual rite.

In these gatherings and others that have come to define our more recent secular history: the destruction of the Berlin wall, the fall of Communism in one country and Tiananmen Square in another, as well as those

“ other moments where we find ourselves together, without a program as it were. Millions of people discover for instance, that they are not alone in feeling what they do at the death of Princess Diana. They find themselves together in the actions of mourning, and these now fuse into a vast common tribute, creating a new kairotic moment, a turning point in the stories of many individuals, and in the common understandings of society”. ⁸

These kinetic moments have supplied our need for self - affirmation of a common unity in the absence of the practice of religious rites in most of our daily lives, and while Taylor warns of their being

“ capable of being taken over by a host of different moral vectors, either utopian revolutionary, or xenophobic, or wildly destructive... “

The cautionary tone Taylor uses as he describes the dangers of these

⁸ Taylor, Charles “ A Secular Age pp 715

“ cathartic events” is no doubt due to the massive Fascist and Communist rallies in the twentieth century that came to symbolize a glamorous curtain to hide some of the most repressive and brutal regimes in our collective history.

We are encouraged however by those moments which Taylor acknowledges

“ ... can crystallize on some deeply felt, commonly cherished good, like ringing the key chains in Wenceslas Square; or as in the case of the Di funeral, celebrating in an out of ordinary life the ordinary, fragile pursuit of love and happiness”.⁹

and he continues to affirm their impact upon this generation, noting

“ These can be very powerful because they can have the feel of a “ revolutionary “ moment, when some latent common ground is first discovered, and thus perhaps a new way of being together inaugurated. They feel at least for this moment, like nodal points, and this is part of their sometimes overwhelming appeal”.¹⁰

We can see therefore, how these large cathartic events could

⁹ ibid pp 715

¹⁰ ibid pp716

influence and shape the continuing culture of charitable giving in the western nations, and how this influence could also directly affect policy in the those societies who provide humanitarian aid on a global scale.

But what shift has occurred that has taken disenchantment with government sponsored programs to personal and non-profit ventures that have dominated the later decades of the twentieth century into our present age ? What other motivations have spurred private involvement in global concerns ?

Journalist David Brooks explored these themes in his celebrated book “ Bobo’s In Paradise “ and saw from the American, if not overtly, the western perspective of the shift that occurred within this generation and the challenges they face

“ Over the past thirty years.....the educated class has gone from triumph to triumph. They have crushed the old WASP elite culture, thrived in an economy that lavishly rewards their particular skills, and now sit atop many of the same institutions they once railed against. But all this has created a gnawing problem. How do they make sure they haven’t themselves become self-satisfied replicas of the WASP elite they still so forcefully denounce ?” ¹¹

¹¹ Brooks,David “Bobo’s In Paradise “ pp40

According to Brooks, these bourgeois bohemians have developed a moral code through which they can navigate the

“ shoals between their affluence and self respect. How to reconcile their success with their spirituality, their elite status with their egalitarian ideals ?”

This emerging code serves the bobo’s ideal of renouncing excessive accumulation and embracing cultivation, being conscientious and adding to community, even global consciousness. In Brook’s words, this code of financial correctness is a set of rules “ to help them convert their wealth into spiritually and intellectually uplifting experiences”¹²

But is this emerging code sustainable in an unknowable future, or is it a fragile goodness, capable of crumbling in the wake of political or economic turbulence or worse ? Even the task itself, the weight of taking on such responsibility brings some like Luc Ferry to strike a cautionary note :

¹² ibid pp 40

“ If, in principle, the extension of the duty of assistance is infinite (it extends to humanity in general and not just our close neighbors and coreligionists) and total (it may require that we sacrifice our lives), how can we reasonably hope to put it into practice?..... It surely calls for a hitherto unknown type of heroic personality, one motivated not by substantial corporeal values such as love for one’s own, one’s country, its culture or history, but by respect for pure principles.....

However we look at it, we are forced to acknowledge that such devotion is no longer the obligatory result of age old traditions.... for the first time perhaps in the history of humanity, it has to find its exclusive source in human beings themselves’’.¹³

Perhaps the most succinct argument to sum up what Charles Taylor would call a perpetual tug of war was written in 1949 by Charles Lamont, in discussing our reliance on reason and science:

“ Humanism believes that the greatest need our age is the application, insofar as it is possible, of the method and spirit of science to all human problems and that the acquisition of this method and spirit constitutes a training of the mind far more important than the assimilation of any number of individual facts’’.¹⁴

¹³ ibid pp 69

Lamont goes on to describe what would envision our own present reality of developed nations sharing technology, with little or no success in getting the governments of those “ underdeveloped “ nations to assume responsibility for the resources needed to sustain long term benefits.

I am reminded of the grumblings of waste and ineffectiveness in African charities observed by Paul Theroux in his later visits to his beloved adopted land. He might be further chagrined if reminded that Lamont had written fifty years before

“ the disastrous consequences of this inconsistency are revealed, above all, in the broad realm of political, social, and economic activities, as witness the unhappy ordeals of mankind during the war-torn twentieth century”.

Indeed these same failings within humanity have often offset the efforts of goodwill by governments and private charities, and despite some gains have witnessed increasing disenchantment with what remains glaringly ineffective; literally thousands of workers in organizations from the United Nations to the Peace Corp and

¹⁴ Lamont, Corliss “ The Philosophy Of Humanism “ pp 210 7th ed 1993

Doctors without Borders, as well as the innumerable private charities and foundations have spent entire careers faced with the sudden upheaval of all they have gained.

At an annual meeting of the Independent Sector, Robert L. Payton warned the collected activists that

“Corporations are turning inward; they are less and less interested in the causes they support and more interested in turning their grants into sources of profit”.¹⁵

In America, the Christian “Right” has used the gospel itself to argue for a more populist doctrine, citing Christ’s rebuke of his apostle’s at the last supper when he told them “...the poor you have with you always , but you do not always have me”.¹⁶

All this might seem a grim pall to cast over our prospects, but it would be unfair to do so without looking at what the efforts of private philanthropists have achieved, and if they can be sustainable.

Perhaps the most famous private philanthropist in the world is Bill Gates of Microsoft Inc. In 1994, He and his wife Melinda founded the Gates Foundation and offered grants to organizations worldwide to

¹⁵ Payton, Robert L. “Major Challenges To Philanthropy

¹⁶ King James Bible Matthew 26:11

assist in alleviating specifically targeted problems in the areas of health care, hunger and education. By 2007 over 33 billion dollars was being offered globally and the success of ongoing agricultural projects, the fostering of financial assistance for the poor in developing nations, and the opening of libraries worldwide to expand internet access and information has led to what many see as a ray of hope for future philanthropy.

While the Gates may hold celebrity status at least among Americans, they are not alone in wealthy individuals setting up non-profits or private foundations around the world. The number is staggering, and in the US; most of the larger donors are giving to their own foundations so that succeeding generations can continue to oversee (or not) the causes that interested them and opened their investment. The monies left to these foundations are nearly 45 billion according to Forbes calculations of the largest donations to charity in 2007.

Warren Buffet's gift of 30 billion to the Gates foundation was the largest private philanthropic donation since the generosity of John D. Rockefeller, whose scope of both income and giving was and still is like the man, an anomaly. In our present age, such a gift would have been unthinkable a decade ago, but even the 1 billion that Ted Turner gave to

the United Nations sets a new trend in how the younger philanthropist is giving. But most of these large donors world –wide, tend to be nationalistic, by that I mean set within their own nation and not concerned beyond these means with the global issue.

In this respect I say that the shift in philanthropy, with the economic impact of rock star income and wealthy non conformist artists and celebrities has sent a seismic quake within the conformed standards that the world has held for charitable work in not only standards and efficiency but accountability, long lacking in the overwrought bureaucracy that has plagued the UN run programs and a host of other long standing charities ¹⁷

That these new philanthropist think globally is no surprise for those of us who have seen the advent of world communications explode through the mediums of music and film, the arts and literature, and with the internet revolution. So much of so many countries histories and cultures suddenly became accessible.

In addition, at least in the United States as Edward Said has pointed out:

“ Universities have finally had to break with non-western societies,

¹⁷ See Paul Theroux’s *Dark Star Safari* , especially chapter 14 *Through the Outposts of the Plateau* for an especially heart rending description of these very matters.

with the literature, history and particular concerns of women, various nationalities and minorities..... in addition, a whole slew of controversial political issues like race, gender, imperialism, war and slavery have found their way into lectures and seminars”¹⁸.

As much as critics of this wave have raged, Said cites Harold Bloom, for instance, the wave has come and a kind of global imperative has taken hold, much to Said’s approval:

“ ... We should regard knowledge as something for which to risk identity , and we should think of Academic freedom as an invitation to give up on identity in the hopes of understanding and perhaps even assuming more than one.”¹⁹

This almost certainly assures that at least this new code of philanthropy will be nourished and passed along for some time to come. Among the many young people who are initiated into the expansion of academic consciousness, more will become real philanthropists themselves, or work within some cause that has caught their attention and passion, or at the very least live within a global context of conservationism and giving to like minded foundations.

¹⁸ Said, Edward “ Identity, Authority and Freedom “ from “Exiles and other Essays “ pp 387

¹⁹ ibid pp 404

This of course does not portend how events and political impact on these efforts will effect future philanthropy. If we look to history however, we see that, time and time again, charitable agencies have flourished with the benevolence of people throughout the world even in the direst of times.

Said warns that political identities will try to alter some to a nationalist thinking, to see global struggles, especially of those who to the current political ideology are seen as adversaries or undesirables; or “lost causes “ and that this political manipulation of a peoples’ thinking will effect the desired outcome, at least for a time.

In 2008, the tremors of recession throughout the global economy and our own nations five year long war in a turbulent region of the world have certainly had a political impact on our people. We now live with restrictions on travel and exchange, the real and promulgated threats of terrorism, corruption and waste that has multiplied in the shadow of limited resources and yet the rate of charitable giving has remained constant through the political tide.

Moreover, most of the challenges that exist today in the areas of health care, hunger, housing and war are almost a constant in the biblical sense, in fact the words of Christ might as easily be a

metaphor for the resulting conditions that have always co-existed with poverty. It is likely that we will be dealing with them until the end of mankind. Reasons for tribalism and nationalism, and resulting ideologies that ferment fear and hatred are all too human.

But what is also human is the depth of compassion that many of us find within ourselves both individually and collectively, whether expressed in the act of giving to a charity or giving of our own time and our own skills.

Tom Brokaw recently extolled a group of students to “ re-enlist as citizens of this country” and he spoke of having time and again been “ uplifted” by American volunteers he has met- a doctor saving a boy’s life in Somalia while mortar shells fell around the surgeon’s tent, and a young black woman who marched early for civil rights in the face of death.

Whatever way each of us gives, we give for a reason, whether from compassion or want for a more perfect world. Even with the understanding that this is unattainable, it is far from foolhardy or a wasteful effort. It is being human as Nussbaum said “ to the highest form”.

And while not a perfect blueprint, the new model cast by cooperation between corporate donors and private foundations in partnership to reach goals is by and large a positive step. But it is also one that has already caused many non-profits to turn one eye to obtaining more funding rather than necessarily utilizing the funds they have wisely.

Accountability must be maintained if we are ever to balance the ratio of funds used for actual projects with the cost of administration of those projects. In addition, when success is seen it should be acknowledged and rewarded so that these successful programs can continue to flourish rather than using resources on grant writing teams and fund raising.

If a program has shown to have made progress, an extended grant should be its reward. I would say that 5-7 years of a set income would be sufficient for most non- profits to set up a successful solution with the promise of long term sustainability. Of course, as we mentioned above, there are a myriad of crises which can undermine any effort, but barring these, I believe any agency dependent upon both private and government sponsorship would welcome such a change from the yearly efforts to garner enough income for even the most needed services.

Some of the new philanthropy may indeed be a fad, or dry up in the

wake of economic uncertainty or another of the previously mentioned crises, but at least a good number of private foundations are certain to remain, and the movement has made its mark.

In turning away from dependence on governments intervening in crises, and becoming as humans more self-reliant, we have rejected the politicization of suffering worldwide, we have rejected the posturing of leaders in withholding aid, and we have rejected the unenlightened notion of a “lost cause”. As Theodor Adorno pointed out, such a narrow, unimaginative, and cynical view forgets “..... the intransigence of the individual thinker whose power of expression however modest and circumscribed in it’s capacity for action...that enacts a movement of vitality, a gesture of defiance, a statement of hope”.²⁰

I confess to a concern for what I view sometimes as a loss of connectedness, or the “community” among us. If you sit down at any café or coffee shop in the western world you will see a crowd of people staring silently into the screens of their laptops. Even ten years ago these were places filled with people engaged in discussions or reading papers, talking idle gossip amongst themselves; there was a connectedness that lent such a place a purpose beyond the cup of espresso or latte. Now that seems

²⁰ Adorno, Theodor “On Lost Causes. pp 552-553

reduced to a room of willed isolation, “ hot spots “ to log onto the internet and peruse the news bytes of the day or chat online with someone who could be as close as a few blocks away.

Will these young people continue our long history of philanthropy?

Will the expurgated stories of famine, medical crises, or social needs move individuals to act with compassion, or will media saturation blur events from half a world away and soon be forgotten ? And what of the needs in their own communities ?

Such are my concerns in an increasingly technologically dependent and de-humanized world. But we have been there before, or at least expressed similar fears and history has shown us that they were unfounded.

As far back as the eighteenth century when Thomas Jefferson introduced the Argand lamp to help offset the long winter nights, there were those who decried the loss of the long held ritual of stimulating conversation by candlelight, abandoned it seems when those learned individuals took to their rooms to read.²¹

So perhaps we are over cautious when we attempt to see the future in a crystal ball clouded by doubts and uncertainties. Even with the Latin

²¹ Brooks, Van Wyk “ The Flowering of New England “.

proverb in mind:

*“Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia, quam rara sunt”*²² **we should bear in mind that the ideal is far from insurmountable. As Rob Reiman has pointed out in his elegant book “Nobility Of Spirit”, we can look to Spinoza for the last word and read it still as a beacon of hope:**

“The essence of freedom... is nothing more than dignity itself. Only those who know how to comply with the call to be human, only those who won’t allow themselves to be possessed by desire, wealth, power or fear but instead manage to make their own that which is lasting and truly good and allow freedom and truth to guide them- only they know the true meaning of freedom”.²³

I believe that this echo of hope from seemingly so long ago, this striving to find *that which is lasting and truly good* is poised at the core of our being and has found expression in many ways and through many minds through the ages. The fact that the world now possesses an economy which can effectively sustain the global population means that such a society can sustain it’s philanthropic needs and still flourish.

On a deeper, more philosophical level I believe that this core, as

²² But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.

²³ Rieman “Nobility Of Spirit”

though a beacon of light even in the bleakest of times is intrinsically tied to what is perhaps our last, bond with nature. This is the affirmation we seek when we gaze upward at the moon or over the ocean, or even when we lift our face to the sun.

That this core “ connection” is what gives us the potential, like the natural presences for eternal life. Thus our sense of ourselves, as Taylor would say, is within these intimate moments, still with nature; however muted that has become. ²⁴ The “ connection” is still there, with a wonder that in the most enlightened and prosperous of times still questions with awe, our possibilities.

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Robert A. Geake
2008

²⁴ I once witnessed a line of cars aside the beach at Watch Hill. Each driver lifting dunkin donuts coffee cups nearly simultaneously as they watched the sun set over the Atlantic ocean.

