

Four Traditions of Philanthropy*

Elizabeth Lynn
and
Susan Wisely

Central to the history of philanthropy in the United States is a vision of human connectedness. As Ellen Condliffe Lagemann has written, American philanthropy represents a long history of “efforts to establish the values, shape the beliefs, and define the behaviors that would join people to one another.”

Yet though philanthropists have sought to cultivate connection among the members of American society, they have not always understood this task in the same way. In the brief history of this nation, we have seen three distinctive philanthropic traditions: Relief, Improvement, and Social Reform. Within each of these traditions, the principles and purposes of philanthropy have been defined differently. Philanthropy understood as *relief* operates on the principle of compassion and seeks to alleviate human suffering. Philanthropy understood as *improvement* operates on the principle of progress and seeks to maximize individual human potential. Philanthropy understood as *reform* operates on the principle of justice and seeks to solve social problems. Let’s briefly explore each of these traditions.

Philanthropy as Relief

Give a man a fish, feed him for a day.

Anon.

The tradition of philanthropy as relief represents the most ancient form of philanthropy—what is sometimes called “charity.” Animated by the principle of compassion, this kind of philanthropy is mainly concerned with *alleviating human suffering*.

Of all of the traditions contributing to the contemporary practice of philanthropy, the tradition of benevolence is most obviously rooted in a religious worldview. Charity, from the Latin term *caritas*, means other-regarding love, prompted without regard for status or merit, as in God’s love for humanity. The benevolent impulse proceeds from the recognition that we are all connected to one another as part of God’s creation. Even our accumulated wealth is God’s gift, not our own achievement, and therefore is to be shared freely with God’s other creatures.

In “On Christian Charity,” a now famous sermon delivered to his fellow Puritans while sailing to America in 1630, John Winthrop gave these principles exemplary expression. Because we are “knit . . . together in the bond of brotherly affection,” he said, “it appears plainly that no man is made more honorable than another or more wealthy, etc., out of any particular and singular respect to himself, but for the glory of his creator and the common good of the creature, man.” We are therefore commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. As “members of the same body,” he concluded, “we must delight in each other, make others’ conditions as our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together.”

The tradition of charity has been an important part of American philanthropy from Winthrop’s day forward, and it continues today to animate philanthropies large and small,

* from the *The Civically Engaged Reader*, ed. A. Davis and E. Lynn, Great Books Foundation, 2006.

organized and individual, modest and lavish. When a foundation commits funds for the needy, it participates in the tradition of relief. Likewise, when we as individuals make a donation to the Red Cross, provide goods to a food pantry, shovel out an elderly neighbor or carry food to a fire victim, we too are participating in the tradition of relief.

The tradition of relief has many strengths (imagine a world without it!). It allows us to express love or empathy for others, without regard for status or merit. It highlights our personal obligation to respond to others. It meets clear and pressing needs. And, precisely because it is an act of compassion, a matter of “feeling with” others, charitable philanthropy is responsive to those it serves, rather than actively trying to shape or lead them.

At its worst, however, this tradition of benevolence can waste precious resources by failing to address the causes of suffering. It can also cultivate passivity toward “the way things are” by inviting us to respond to pressing needs rather than change the conditions that created them. Winthrop expressed this attitude of acquiescence to “the order of things” in the opening words of his sermon, when he declared that “God Almighty . . . hath so disposed of the condition of mankind as in all times some must be rich, some poor; some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean in subjection.” For better or worse, charity is a tradition resigned to the inevitability of social inequality. “The poor you will always have with you” might well be its motto.

Philanthropy as Improvement

Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.

Anon.

The second great tradition of American philanthropy developed at least partly in response to the perceived futility of relief. Questioning the wisdom and effectiveness of “almsgiving,” philanthropists like Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Carnegie sought instead to *maximize human potential*. Their distinctive style of giving established a great American tradition of providing opportunities for individual and civic improvement. To this day, many of us choose to give by underwriting scholarships for talented individuals, sponsoring cultural and artistic activities, or supporting educational and other “improving” organizations.

Andrew Carnegie provides an especially interesting example of philanthropy as improvement. In establishing one of the first modern foundations, he consciously rejected the old tradition of charity. Like those who practice benevolence, Carnegie hoped his philanthropy would foster human connectedness. His essay “The Gospel of Wealth” begins: “The problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship.” But he believed that the revolutionary changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization in the last third of the nineteenth century called for a fundamentally new approach to philanthropy.

For Carnegie, as for a number of Victorian philanthropists, the traditional forms of charity and almsgiving perpetuated the very ills they sought to alleviate. Far better, he believed, were charitable efforts that aim at improvement:

In bestowing charity, the main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves; to provide part of the means by which those who desire to

improve may do so; to give those who desire to rise the aids by which they may rise; to assist, but rarely or never to do all. Neither the individual nor the race is improved by almsgiving. . . . [T]he best means of benefiting the community is to place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise—parks, and means of recreation, by which men are helped in body and mind; works of art, certain to give pleasure and improve the public taste, and public institutions of various kinds, which will improve the general condition of the people.

According to Carnegie, proper philanthropy sets out ladders for those who have initiative and climbing skill. Individuals are then responsible for taking advantage of the ladders set before them. The libraries funded by Carnegie are an excellent example of this kind of giving. As is often the case in improvement philanthropy, they were inspired by Carnegie’s own boyhood experiences of using a library.

More than a hundred years after Carnegie published “The Gospel of Wealth,” the improvement tradition remains a vital part of American philanthropy, practiced especially by individual givers who want to make opportunities of the sort they experienced available to others. This kind of philanthropy has many inviting qualities that insure its continued vitality. It allows us to express gratitude for special opportunities we have received by extending the same opportunities to others. It emphasizes individual responsibility and encourages individual initiative.

Yet the tradition of improvement, like the tradition of relief, has weaknesses. In the latter half of the twentieth century, American philanthropy increasingly confronted a society in which its improving efforts seemed chiefly to benefit the well-situated and highly motivated members of the community. (Ladders, after all, are useful only to those with climbing skills, and fishing lessons only help those with access to the pond.) The concept of “individual opportunities” is of diminished value if entire groups are effectively blocked—for social, legal, and economic reasons—from taking advantage of such opportunities.

Philanthropy as Social Reform

A Catalyst for Change.
(MacArthur Foundation slogan)

Carnegie reacted to the flaws in the relief tradition—and philanthropists who came after Carnegie reacted in turn to the flaws in the improvement tradition. A retrospective published in 1981 by the Carnegie Corporation (Carnegie’s own foundation) noted that during the 1960s the staff and board had become “painfully aware of the urgent problems of race, poverty, and equality that were besetting the nation.” Looking back on a tradition of encouraging educational opportunities, they concluded that “it was not reasonable to expect that schooling alone could create equality of opportunity when equality did not exist in the world of jobs, of social relations, or of politics.” Like the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the Carnegie Corporation shifted its grantmaking strategies in a new direction: it began to attack perceived underlying circumstances of inequality. Many of America’s largest foundations now dedicated themselves not to charity or improvement but to social reform.

This third great tradition in American philanthropy—the tradition of reform—has roots in America's past: recall the abolitionists of the 1800s, for instance, or the muckrakers of the progressive era. Yet the goal of social reform has achieved special prominence in recent years, to the point where it characterizes the self-understanding of most large foundations and of many smaller and more traditional charitable organizations as well.

Philanthropy as social reform is, above all, dedicated to encouraging social change. Its practitioners believe that societal circumstances are often more powerful in shaping human destiny than the actions of individuals themselves; hence, they argue, philanthropy must strive to change the circumstances. Indeed, its motto might well be that of the MacArthur Foundation in the late twentieth century: “A Catalyst for Change.”

As this motto suggests, the philanthropic tradition of social reform takes a proactive, even directive role in public life. Rather than responding to the requests of others, it actively attempts to identify and solve public problems, often through experimentation and the innovative use of venture capital. According to proponents of this approach, a foundation has unique resources, freedom and expertise necessary to experiment on social problems. It should therefore seek innovative solutions that other groups might not be able to discover, but from which the larger society will benefit.

Exemplary expressions of this tradition can be found in the writings of national commissions established in the early 1970s to study the public role of foundations. Consider, for instance, the following statement from the Peterson Commission in 1970: “Our society . . . is in obvious need of philanthropic institutions standing outside the frame of government but in support of the public interest,” it declared. “[J]ust as scouts move in advance of a body of troops to probe what lies ahead,” so too philanthropic institutions “can spot emergent problems, diagnose them, and test alternative ways to deal with them.”

The tradition of social reform has great strengths. It acknowledges the power of societal circumstances and seeks to change them. It intentionally experiments with alternative solutions to social problems and seeks to learn from those solutions. But social experimentation has brought with it some difficulties. Modern foundations have naturally been tempted to see themselves as a kind of “shadow government,” not just as supporters of experiments that might inspire further thinking but as the very makers of future social policy. Paul Ylvisaker indicates this tendency in *The Handbook on Private Foundations*, when he writes that modern philanthropy has been dedicated “to finding systemic solutions to underlying causes of poverty and other social ills, and over time has become a recognized social process, in effect *a set of private legislatures* defining public problems, setting goals and priorities, and allocating resources toward general solutions” (emphasis added). The result can be a kind of arrogance in advocating for social change “on behalf of” the public, and a failure to listen carefully to that public.

Toward a Fourth Philanthropic Response

. . . *Only Connect.*
E.M. Forster

The three types of philanthropy outlined above are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, most philanthropic organizations participate to some degree in all three traditions. Yet, on the whole,

organized American philanthropy has in recent decades moved increasingly in the direction of social reform, relying on individual givers to fund opportunities for self-improvement and relegating the traditionally charitable work of relief to governmental and religious bodies.

The future direction of American philanthropy is less clear. Events of recent years have put new pressure upon foundations to rethink their fundamental strategies for serving the American public. Effective solutions to social problems have proven more elusive than had been hoped. Despite the social reform efforts of both government and philanthropy, ours is more than ever a society divided into rich and poor, a society still very much challenged to alleviate human suffering and to maximize human potential by providing significant opportunities for all its members.

Nor is it clear, in the new century, just *who* should be proposing solutions. We hear calls for different voices in public life—not just the voice of the successful, not just the voice of the expert, but the voice of the citizen. And yet, with the increased complexity and ambitions of the philanthropic enterprise, philanthropy's relation to its public--its capacity to hear and learn from the public-- has, if anything, diminished. The philanthropist who funds libraries or experiments with social policy stands at a far greater remove from those served than the relief worker who ladles soup in a soup kitchen.

In response, foundations and other philanthropic organizations have begun to turn toward a fourth philanthropic way, which some people refer to as *civic engagement*. They are investing resources in strengthening relationships and nurturing conversations among citizens, in order to build, as the President of the Public Education Network, Wendy Puriefoy, put it, “more reflective and resourceful local communities.” Study circles, neighborhood associations, and the forums sponsored by the Kettering Foundation are examples of this fourth philanthropic response, as is the more ambitious recent initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation to “partner” with communities in cultivating local resources for addressing poverty. Ultimately, the goal of these investments may be to relieve, improve, or reform the communities they serve. Yet the focus of the work, and the standard of its success, is building up connections among ordinary citizens.

American interest in civic engagement is not new. In 1889, the same year Andrew Carnegie published his reflections on wealth, Jane Addams started Hull House in Chicago. Taking inspiration from London's Toynbee Hall, Addams established this settlement house with the conviction that we must connect with one another in order to help one another. In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, published in 1902, she cautions against the indiscriminate giving of relief and the stern policy of justice, and points the reader toward another way:

‘To love mercy’ and at the same time ‘to do justly’ is the difficult task; to fulfill the first requirement alone is to fall into the error of indiscriminate giving with all its disastrous results; to fulfill the second solely is to obtain the stern policy of withholding, and it results in such a dreary lack of sympathy and understanding that the establishment of justice is impossible. It may be that the combination of the two can never be attained save as we fulfill the third requirement—‘to walk humbly with God,’ which may mean to walk for many dreary miles beside the lowliest of His creatures.

The help Hull House offered its neighbors took many forms—sometimes relief from pain, sometimes improved individual opportunity, sometimes advocacy for social change. But its first and final value, for Addams, lay in building relationships among citizens so that they could better understand and assist one another. Addams did not call this work philanthropy, much less

civic engagement. Yet in her writings and practices one can find many echoes of our contemporary need to build up meaningful connections among citizens.

As Addams would have been the first to acknowledge, civic engagement suffers from the perennial frustrations of democracy. It can be slow, contentious, prone to more talk than action, and difficult to render into measurable outcomes. But it can also empower those who might not otherwise participate in public life. It encourages attention to local needs and, in the language of our own time, recognizes local assets. And it builds community by engaging its citizens with one another and enabling them to work together on their shared concerns.

In Conclusion

Each of the first three philanthropic traditions outlined earlier has made significant contributions to the well-being of the American public. But each, if taken alone, also displays weaknesses. The tradition of relief can encourage a philanthropy that is passive, reacting to pressing needs rather than trying to change the conditions that create those needs. The tradition of improvement can encourage philanthropy that benefits only selected members of the community. The tradition of social reform can lead foundation workers or other donors into unilateral decision-making “on behalf of” the public, without much openness to the wisdom or will of that public.

As we enter a new century, when new wisdom is needed, civic engagement may be an especially important philanthropic response. Citizens have untapped wisdom and resources for public service in their own practical experience which, for a variety of reasons, they have not been able to discover or recover. To put it simply, people need opportunities to learn from themselves and about themselves, from others and about others. A foundation can help those whom it would serve to tap these deep veins of wisdom, thereby discerning more clearly appropriate directions for public service in their own particular places and in their own particular ways.

One timely contribution foundations as well as individual donors can make, then, is to promote civic engagement and encourage public moral discourse, by cultivating hospitable spaces for reflection and by bringing diverse people and perspectives into conversation. Rather than trying to force a specific vision of the future (which could turn out to be an unexamined extension of the past), we can create the conditions for conversation, in the hope that new vision and fresh action will eventually emerge. In doing so, we are not forcing our own experimental answers or simply repeating the predictable answers a little louder for all to hear. Instead, we will be furthering public deliberation and promoting discovery of new ways of seeing.

Philanthropy as Relief

*

Operates on Principle of Compassion

*

alleviates human suffering

Philanthropy as Improvement

*

Operates on Principle of Progress

*

maximizes human potential

Philanthropy as Social Reform

*

Operates on Principle of Justice

*

solves social problems

Philanthropy as Civic Engagement

*

Operates on Principle of Participation

*

builds community