

The Challenging Art of Giving

To give away money is an easy matter, and in anyone's power. But to decide to whom to give it, and how large and when, and for what purpose and how, is neither in everyone's power -- nor an easy matter. Hence it is that such excellence is rare, praiseworthy and noble. -- Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics

It is more blessed to give than to receive. -- attributed to Jesus, Acts 20:35

I take both of these statements to be true. Giving is a good thing, as Jesus' reportedly taught. It should be encouraged in all kinds of ways.

But the giving of money is a rather difficult matter, as observed by Aristotle. Although Aristotle was focused chiefly on interpersonal dimensions of giving, his words also seem applicable to that form of giving we call philanthropy.

In a just world, one in which the accepted structures and practices insured that everyone's basic needs were met and everyone had full opportunity to flourish and contribute, philanthropy would be almost unheard of, because virtually unnecessary. We obviously do not live in such a world, but it remains one to which we should aspire.

Meanwhile, how are we to give wisely, or excellently, as Aristotle would have had it?

The H-T recently reported that giving was up among Americans in 2013. Wealthy donors were giving substantially more to universities, hospitals, and arts institutions. However, giving to social service groups, more dependent on middle class donors, stayed flat, while giving to religious organizations actually decreased.

It's no surprise that people who give tend to give to those sorts of institutions they are most likely to patronize. Seldom is giving an entirely selfless act. It is nonetheless lamentable that more giving is being directed by the wealthy to institutions that benefit the wealthy, while most institutions that serve the rest of us, including some of those most in need, are getting less.

One cheer to those who give money to institutions from which they have benefitted. Two cheers to those who give to groups for causes in keeping with their own particular interests. Three cheers to those who give to groups and institutions for causes that address the greatest individual and social needs unmet by our existing social structures and practices.

How to give excellently? Seek not to exacerbate but to ameliorate and transform the social conditions of disadvantage and injustice that prevail this side of fundamental social reformation.

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