

Charity: the Damoclean Sword of Deception

Thank you David for your kind introduction.

For those who don't know me, my name is Craig Coulson. I have been a Board member on a number of Charitable organisations, both local focus and overseas aid and development. What I am going to talk about tonight comes from my own thoughts and follows a line of thinking that asks questions about the value and veracity of charitable giving and of charity itself.

Tonight we are going to look at some of the understandings and misunderstandings of charity. In doing so, we will be looking at what it means to give and receive, and how we interpret these actions. After this we will look at aspects of giving and receiving, what motives us and how we act and react to gift giving and charity. Then we will quickly look at large scale philanthropy and what that means, then some arguments against charity, and we will finish with some thoughts about charity in general.

Throughout this talk, I will rely heavily on two books, Marcel Mauss', "The Gift", and Jacques Godbout and Alain Caille' "The World of the Gift" and I am appreciative of their insights on this issue.

Firstly though, am going to tell the story of Damocles

Dionysius (II) was a fourth century BCE tyrant of Syracuse, a city in Magna Graecia, the Greek area of southern Italy. To all appearances Dionysius was very rich and comfortable, with all the luxuries money could buy, tasteful clothing and jewelry, and delectable food. He even had court flatterers (*adventatores*) to inflate his ego. One of these ingratulators was the court sycophant, Damocles. Damocles used to make comments to the king about his wealth and luxurious life. One day when Damocles complimented the tyrant on his abundance and power, Dionysius turned to Damocles and said, "If you think I'm so lucky, how would you like to try out my life?"

Damocles readily agreed, and so Dionysius ordered everything to be prepared for Damocles to experience what life as Dionysius was like. Damocles was enjoying himself immensely... until he noticed a sharp sword hovering over his head, which was suspended from the ceiling by a horse hair. This, the tyrant explained to Damocles, was what life as ruler was really like.

Damocles, alarmed, quickly revised his idea of what made up a good life, and asked to be excused. He then eagerly returned to his poorer, but safer life.¹

¹ <http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/ciceroworkslatin/f/DamoclesSword.htm> accessed 7/10/2011 (with minor grammatical and language alterations which are mine)

The Sword of Damocles, is used to describe a sense of foreboding and might translate into English idiom as not judge someone or their position in life "unto you have walked a mile in their shoes." I would also suggest that what the other person experiences is not what you may think they have or want. In this essay, the sword of Damocles, is the unexpected or unwanted result of thinking you are doing the right thing, but find that it is not necessarily experienced by the "other".

Let's start off with some words and meanings that play an important role in this essay.

Charity – Mauss says charity is meant to be a free gift, a voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources. Another definition is "giving in a place of need"² and the Macquarie Dictionary³ defines charity as (1) almsgiving; the private or public relief of unfortunate or needy persons, (2) a charitable fund, foundation, or institution, (3) benevolent feeling especially towards those in need.

Charity needs to be understood in the much broader framework of overseas aid, development and disaster relief, national disaster relief, tax deductible charitable service organisations and non-deductable programs, and local support and relief projects. Using the word charity does not give an organisation or relief effort tax status, but defines a parameter within which the organisation or group of concerned people operate and how they expect to raise funds to operate.

So, for something to be charity, there needs a giver known as the donor; something to give, the gift or donation; a receiver, a donee or an "unfortunate or needy person" according to the Macquarie Dictionary, and possibly a reason to give.

Donation – a donation is that which is given, be it cash, material goods like food or furniture or unwanted or no longer needed items, or a service provided "pro bono" to groups or organisations that may be able to use, or distribute such items. Is a Supermarket that gives "out of date" stock to a relief agency making a donation or saving the cost of dumping it? Does our attitude make any difference in donating?

Gift - Macquarie Dictionary⁴ definition, (1) something given, a present, (2) the act of giving, (3) the power or right of giving, I would also suggest something like a talent or ability we have that we can share with others.

"Mauss [...] in his famous exploration of the gift in "primitive" and archaic societies showed that the essential aspect of the exchange of presents involved the establishment of a social tie that bound the parties together above and beyond any

² Quote from Bronwyn Coulson, teacher 18/10/2011

³ Macquarie Dictionary, p 215

⁴ Macquarie Dictionary, p 514

material value of the objects exchanged. He argued that these intangible mutual “debts” constituted the social fabric.”⁵

That is, they are an integral action in society that helps bind community and individuals together. It is far more prevalent in some societies than others.

Reciprocity – again, the Macquarie Dictionary⁶ definition, (1) reciprocal state or relation, (2) reciprocation; mutual exchange. This is the perceived need or desire to respond to a gift received.

“Reciprocation is a dilemma associated with all gifts. Ultimately, this dilemma is a question of whether there is a perfect gift – a gift without strings attached, which is a genuine gift without someone’s hidden agenda of investment and return, even if reciprocal expectation is most implicit. Little wonder that in some cultures, the word for “gift” also means “poison” (Mauss)”⁷

(In the Germanic languages the same word signifies both gift and poison and in Greek we derive dose, as in lethal dose)⁸

Alms - the Macquarie Dictionary⁹ definition, that which is given to the poor or needy; anything given as charity.

Introduction

These definitions present to us, here in Australia, one of the most affluent nations in the world, with a number of problems. Firstly, how are we going to understand “charity”? Using the Macquarie dictionary definition we are required to define who or what “unfortunate or needy persons” are. Any way we define these words requires a judgment call, usually using ourselves as a benchmark. I am not poor, unfortunate or needy according to what; is it community standards, world standards or how much I have in the bank or invested in property or shares. Any way we attempt to define the “other” is always judgmental.

If we can’t define who we are giving charity to, then maybe we need to define “charity”.

Mauss, in his book writes, “Charity is meant to be a free gift, a voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources. Though we laud charity as a Christian virtue we know that it wounds. I worked for some years in a charitable foundation that annually was required to give away large sums as the condition of tax exemption. Newcomers to

⁵ Godbout & Caille, *The World of the Gift*, p i

⁶ Macquarie Dictionary, p 1030

⁷ Curkpatrick, “Economy”, p 1

⁸ Godbout & Caille, p 8, (my paraphrasing)

⁹ Macquarie Dictionary, p 29

the office quickly learnt that the recipient does not like the giver, however cheerful he be.”¹⁰

I don't know if any of you have experienced this, from either side. Many years ago, my wife and I and our four children then, struggled to pay our accounts; my pay did not cover our expenses. The feeling was not nice. We were on the receiving end of some well-intentioned, but unnecessary “charity”. We felt it placed us in an awkward position of dealing with some things we did not need or even want.

Another true story from some time ago, a Faith Congregation in America had a mission drive and raised a substantial amount of money for the “poor unfortunates” in Africa. So they decided to send over sewing machines. Having sourced them at a very good price, they filled a container and sent them to a mission in Kenya (if my memory serves me correctly). They expected to hear back how grateful the “poor unfortunates” were for this magnanimous gift but were sorely disappointed. These wonderful sewing machines were useless as the mission, and indeed the entire area, had no electricity. They found a use for the container, but the machines were thrown away.

A waste of time, resources and effort on the part of that Faith Community that could so easily been avoided by simply asking the mission what it needed.

Gertrude Himmelfarb in her paper, "Welfare and Charity: Lessons from Victorian England."¹¹ quotes Beatrice Webb, who in the 1860's wrote, “Charity is, or should be, the exercise of “a thoughtful benevolence.” Not benevolence alone but a thoughtful benevolence — a reasoned, prudent, discriminating, even skeptical benevolence — a benevolence that is acutely aware of the often unintended consequences of goodwill, that knows that it is more important to do good than to feel good, that is morally and spiritually satisfying for the giver, and morally as well as materially beneficial to the receiver. It is this kind of charity that promotes welfare in the proper sense of that word — the well-being of the citizenry.”

I think Beatrice Webb might be a better person to give this talk!

Giving

Mauss' contention is that when you give someone a gift, you will expect something in return. If you give someone a gift or present, do you expect something in return? Does a birthday present given to you, put you under an obligation to reciprocate with an equal or “better” present returned to the giver? What about at Christmas time, the season of giving and receiving? Local counselling centres will tell you that Christmas time places huge strains

¹⁰ Mauss M, *The Gift*, vii

¹¹ http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/social_justice/sj0022.html accessed 20/10/2011

on family values and on their finances, ending in higher probability of violence and divorce.¹²

Mauss is an anthropological sociologist and has studied a number of societies where gift giving requires reciprocation by a return gift of greater value or worth. Eventually it becomes unsustainable and ruinous to one party or the other.

Here is the big question. How do we give charity? When we give our donation or gift, how much do we expect to control that donation after we have given it? One writer, who doesn't give a name suggests,

We expect that the recipient will act grateful for our gift.

We expect that the money we give will be used wisely and in relation to the need that prompted the charity. In other words, we expect the money to be spent on food, rent, or debt rather than on a new iPhone or Xbox.

We may expect that the recipient will be willing to help *us* out should the situation ever be reversed and *we* need the charity.¹³

But are these reasonable expectations? Of course not, because once you put an expectation upon the use of the donation, it is no longer charity, which is the "unrequited surrender of resources".

At this point, I am going to bring up an issue, that of "mega-philanthropy". We have the spectre of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as one of a number of "mega-philanthropic" trusts and foundations that claim a place as a "charity". In 2012, The Gates Foundation will "give away" \$US750,000,000. I will come back to this issue later on.

Receiving

As I said previously, our family was the recipient of unwanted "charity". We were given furniture that was "past its use by date". So, how do you deal with unwanted "charity" without upsetting the giver? Last October (2011) there was an earthquake in Turkey and the Government refused international help in the devastated area. Why would they do that? People buried under collapsed buildings would accept help in getting them out, from anyone. The aim of the aid offer was to help save lives. Turkey could have specified what aid was needed but it did not.

But receiving, for many societies does place them under an obligation, even if the giving society does not require or want a return.

¹² See "For many women, tis the season of fear, not joy" Sydney Morning Herald 21/12/2010

¹³ From <http://www.gospel.com/blog/index.php/2010/10/11/do-you-give-charity-without-strings-attached/> accessed 20/10/2011

In Australia, if you need “charity” and have got to the point of no alternative, then you have to ask for it. Centrelink will not give you anything unless you sign away your soul. Is being on social welfare payments seen as “charity”? Remember Macquarie define charity as “almsgiving; the private or public relief of unfortunate or needy persons”. If you need assistance to live, Centrelink defines you as , I will ask you to fill in that space from any personal experiences you may have had with Centrelink

The Salvation Army, Uniting Church Social Services, AngliCord and the Catholic Social Services organisations, local Councils, Lions, Freemasons, and many other local relief organisations, usually can’t help unless they are asked.

To receive charity, you have to go and ask? or beg? not a nice situation, and some people would rather steal, than beg.

Mutuality

If you give and expect something in return, then my friends, it is not giving. That is called trading. A gift in response to begging letters in May/June each year, so that you can claim a tax deduction, is not a gift, it is a transaction taken in full knowledge of the expected return. Please do not stop giving because of this, just understand the implications of your actions.

I don’t suppose I really need to say it but corrupt practices occur with mutuality; I give to you what you want, and you give to me what I want. The reciprocation is absolutely necessary in corruption. Corruption occurs because money is available, and all governments are basically corrupt. They take a share of any transaction that legally occurs within the country. It’s called tax, but what did the government do to earn that payment? We do not give it as charity, because you and I who pay the taxes want, and expect something in return.

International aid and development is involved with paying “kickbacks” to senior and middle government figures and even local minor officials, to allow projects to go ahead. The trick is to manage the corruption and ensure it is only a minor component in the total project cost. (even Gov’t and quasi-gov’t agencies pay bribes, see 2007/8 Aust Wheat Board, 2010/11 RBA & its Note Printing Subsidiary) To operate in Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and many other countries (just to name a few) around the world require what we call corrupt practices, but in these countries it is considered a normal part of doing business.

Refusal

Have you ever refused a gift being offered? Have you ever invited people over for a dinner party, told them not to bring anything and they didn’t? Cadbury ran an advertisement last year, and I think it is still running, with the tag line, “what to bring when you are told not to bring anything”, of course it’s a box of Cadbury Favourites chocolates.

The idea of accepting a gift, may imply something,

“I refused the gift my employer offered me,” says a secretary. “He doesn’t deserve my accepting his present. It would imply a kind of relationship I don’t want.”¹⁴

To refuse a gift comes with its own set of possibilities. Will you alienate someone, will you give the wrong impression, and will the person presenting the gift be insulted? Have you ever refused a gift?

Free Rider Paradox

In preparing for this paper, I came across references to the “Free Rider Paradox”, which I have included here. The term comes from people who do not pay for using public transport (whether we should charge for public transport is another essay altogether). The issue is the reduced resources for the collective public good.

“In economics, collective bargaining, psychology and social science, a free rider (or freeloader) is someone who consumes a resource without paying for it, or pays less than the full cost.” (Wikipedia, accessed 23/03/2012).

This is a rather interesting aspect in a discussion on charity, as charity does not ask for payment from the recipient. So is it an issue? Yes it is a big issue; the issue is about resources being depleted by those whose situation does not require supplementing by charity. Which gets back to making a judgement call; who is to receive charity.

Free riding is a challenge to an individual’s morality. And the paradox, as far as I am concerned, is why should you pay twice to ride public transport? It is funded by taxpayer money and taxpayers are asked to pay to use it. Also if you cannot afford to pay to ride public transport, should you be allowed to ride it for nothing?

Alternatives

It is a grim picture that is being painted. Maybe we should have tried to define “honesty” instead of charity. But charity is not always bad or involved in corruption. Picking up Mauss’ definition, “charity is meant to be a free gift, a voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources”, is there such a thing as pure “charity”? The closest I can think of is an organ donation at the point of death. Let’s define what I mean; a person otherwise fit dies suddenly of an undiagnosed benign brain tumour, and their wishes were to donate any organs suitable. They are now dead, so there is no return possible to them. Their family might expect some sort of return, but they haven’t give anything, because they certainly did not give the person, that person was not theirs to give. Those harvested organs are then given by an organ transplant team to the next suitable and available person on the waiting list. The donor cannot specify who can and who can’t receive their organs. The resources, in

¹⁴ Godbout & Caille, p 9

this case, human organs, are given to anonymous recipients. In Australia you cannot sell your organs, although the late Kerry Packer's helicopter pilot makes an interesting case study. I'm sure there are other possibilities that we could explore.

Love:

One area that is conspicuous by its absence is the value of "love" as the motivational factor for giving. It asks the question, can "love" be the motivation for giving? If it is, can it be called charity? Let's follow this through; out of love, you give a gift of charity to someone else. Because it is given out of love, it is given with no expectation of return. There, of course, may be an expectation of "love" in return, but not always.

In Latin, there are many words translated into English as "love". An 'eros' love may expect a return, but an 'agape' love or a 'philia' love may not.

Random Acts of Kindness

Then there are acts of kindness, of a random nature enacted with a complete stranger. I am sure the giver does so and feels good about what has been done, especially if done anonymously. The hope, I should imagine would be that the act is accepted and passed on, as in the movie "Pay it Forward". Is it charity, in a way, as the result of the action may not be seen. But is it charity, if the receiving person doesn't need the "random act of kindness".

Arguments against charity:

Now we get to the really interesting part.

Dr Neil Levy (from University of Sydney) has argued that charity can be self-defeating if it allows the state to escape some of its responsibilities.

He suggests that large-scale philanthropy to support 'essential services' is wrong: Charity to support essential services is bad because it switches provision from government to charity, rather than increasing benefits to the needy.

...large-scale philanthropic activity carries with it a serious risk of changing the balance of funding from the public to the private sector, thereby exposing those most in need to the vicissitudes of the market. To the extent that private funding of essential services becomes the norm, the vulnerable become the recipients of (at best) uncertain aid, which is liable to fluctuations and constant reduction.¹⁵

The argument goes something like this. If the charity sector increases spending in an area also funded by government then there is a risk that government will choose to spend less in that area with the result that governments save money, and extra benefits provided by the charity spend are reduced.

¹⁵ This quote was claimed to be from Levy, Against Philanthropy, but I am unable to locate it in the article.

Whether this is true is something that can be empirically tested - it either does happen or it doesn't. I don't know, but I suspect there may be a certain amount of truth in the claim.

Dr Levy is in favour of redistributing resources from the rich towards the poor; his argument is with the method of doing this.

I do not wish this redistribution of wealth to cease. Instead, I want it to be conducted by government. Rather than have the wealthy donate to charities, income and other taxes should generate the revenue to fund the services in question.¹⁶

Another, and related, argument is that charities depend on the desires and incomes of unaccountable donors while the work of governments is subject, in many cases, to regular democratic or political review, and is thus more subject to public scrutiny and control.

In fact, in many areas of essential services in the developed world, the government is by far the biggest spender, and charity spending is a small share and so won't make a significant difference to government commitments.

Incidentally, if you go back a century or two, you'll discover that many of the essential services we now expect governments to provide were provided by charities or not at all.

Short History Lesson

(Hospitals)

In western society the idea of a hospital developed out of a need for a place where sick people could come and stay to be healed or cured. This was not a government or empire decision but came out of individual concern for the health and wellbeing of others. Despite the fairly widespread assumption that "hospitals as we know them were an innovation of Christianity", research by Dr George Parker of Bristol and published in the British Journal of Surgery (1928, xvi) found that "the earliest beginnings we know of can be traced to about the 6th century BC in places far apart, both in the West and distant East". "It is to Gautama and his followers that we owe ... the hospital idea." After the invasion of India by Alexander, the idea of hospitals developed in Persia and into Europe.

(Schools)

The modern state school system developed out of an extension of Sunday School where reading and writing was taught to children whose parents could not afford to send them to private schools. Why Sunday school? because it was the only day the children had off work.

Arguments against charity (part 2)

As the role of government increased, charities took on the role of supplementing the government spend, rather than provide the basic service.

¹⁶ Levy: Against Philanthropy, p 100

“Why think that essential services, the kind of services which are routinely provided by philanthropic organisations (emergency accommodation, food parcels, hospital services and so on) ought to be provided by government? These services, I believe, ought to be made available to all citizens of developed countries, not on an *ad hoc* basis, but as a fundamental right.¹⁷

Dr Levy’s argument, that it is best left to government to provide what is necessary does not ring true if you, like me, have been involved in ongoing battles with Centrelink just to receive what we are legally eligible for. Again, the state of the healthcare system in Victoria is chronic. It is a bottomless pit that eats money and resources without clear improvement in patient throughput or care. I also doubt that Dr Levy has waited ten years on a public housing waiting list.

Dr Levy’s argument seems to be based on a philosophical view that government is able and capable and has the desire to fund charitable activities as well as, if not better than, organisations whose aim is the provision of charitable activities to those in need. I do not share this same view, as I believe Government is incapable of ongoing rational thought as it is subjected to four yearly review and this creates cyclic spending sprees of dubious value.

Mega-philanthropy

Just a final few words on an issue I brought up before. The Gates Foundation this year is “giving away” \$750,000,000. This figure is higher than GDP of many countries in this world.

Is it charity? Here are a couple of opinions

MJ Ray is CEO of the Software Co-op in the UK: "Bill Gates made his money from anti-social protectionist hoarding of knowledge: It takes knowledge to make this technology work. People who hoard this knowledge, punishing and threatening others who try to obtain and share it, are not doing so in order to preserve it, despite what they may claim. Instead, they are preserving power for themselves at the expense of others' freedom.

Recognizing this, millions of people around the world—including entire governments—have made the commitment to use only free software on their computers. The fact that so many people are willing to make and stand by this decision in the face of cheaper and cheaper “deals” from Microsoft, Apple and other proprietary software companies proves these companies wrong—we don't need them or their fine print to make software."

<http://www.fsf.org/resources/what-is-fs/index.html>

Kevin Carson is a writer on mutualism in the USA: "One thing I will say about a "new capitalism": The Green, or Cognitive, or Progressive Capitalist models being pushed by people like Bill Gates, Bono, Warren Buffett, Paul Romer, etc., are very much indeed capitalistic. They all depend on enclosing new green technologies as a source of rents [...]. I don't believe such a system will be tenable. The future lies very much in technical

¹⁷ Levy: Against Philanthropy, p 100

innovation -- micromanufacturing, network organization, distributed collaborative platforms, etc. -- but they can't serve as the basis for a new capitalism. The reason is that the "intellectual property" rights needed to enclose such innovation as a source of rents are rapidly becoming unenforceable."

Darron Passlow, CEO of MatrixIP in Sydney, puts it slightly differently,

He wrote," that unless companies (or individuals) are making a profit (more in than out!), they will not be able to donate anything.

Basic requirements for food and shelter come before we help others (to any worthwhile extent).

A good example is the Aussie philanthropist Dick Smith. Like him or love him, he puts his money where his convictions are. And not just his money; he promotes a "buy Australian" approach. I love it. There should be more people like him.

Where do you think Dick's philanthropy comes from? Profits. Now he could just go away hide and spend his profits, but he is doing (good?) things with his profits and helping in a way he feels is worthwhile." (Discussion on LinkedIn: Social Innovation Australia site)

Is it charity? I think that depends entirely on your point of view about what constitutes charity. But this argument is mired in the political and social debate around "neoconservative free market economics verses true socialism", neither of which will actually work as one dismisses humanity as an asset to be exploited, and the other disregards human nature to improve oneself through self-effort. Where you stand in this debate will determine your position.

Conclusion:

As I alluded to at the beginning of this essay, charity is really a double edged sword.

For the giver, there is a sense of pride in helping those less fortunate, a warm fuzzy feeling of being a generous person, relief at being able to say "I have already given", regardless of the amount, and here in Australia, being able to claim a tax deduction. I would have to suggest, not a nice list of benefits.

For the receiver, however, (a) we see a sense of personal failure in having to accepting charity, (2) a sense of obligation requiring 'payback' to the giver, (3) having to receive unwanted, and sometimes damaged goods because that is what some people give (and if you don't believe me, just look at the junk and rubbish left outside the local Op Shop after a long weekend), and (4) the continuing and derogatory descriptives, poor, unfortunate, slum dwellers, welfare cheats etc., used in national newspapers and on radio, (5) being pitied.

I cannot see very much goodness coming out of the application of “charity” when it is described like this, and yet, this is the common perception.

Newspapers, despite their derogatory remarks, regularly run individual stories of desperate need. A family living in the car because they have been evicted from their residence, and have not been able to access appropriate housing. These people usually receive what they need, I’m sorry to say at the expense of the next person on the list who have waited a long time. In charity, there are winners and losers, those with good stories, those with sad stories and those with stories of addictions that repulse people.

Who should have control over “charity”? I don’t trust the “government”, because it cannot make a decision without criteria on which to eliminate those whom, they decide, don’t need help. Big business could provide the service of “charity”, but that would commercialise it then some areas would miss out because it is unprofitable to operate in those areas. Local community help organisations do a better job, but are dependent upon donations of goods and money to achieve adequate results. Local faith-based organisations can do it quite well, but again depend on donations to operate and provide the service. Individuals can and do help those around them, but are subject to human emotions and needs.

Is there an alternative? Apart from eliminating the need for charity in the first place, which, I would have to suggest, is impossible, I don’t see any better system than that currently in use, inadequate as it is.

Government provided payments to eligible people, but this is never enough and is currently falling further behind as it is not keeping up with inflation. The local charity and the faith-based organisations work well when they know of a needy case, but are limited by incomings. The individual providing goods and services to others is hit and miss when it comes to covering some people. And there will always be a group that falls through the cracks in Australia’s welfare system. Unfortunately, none of them are fool proof, corruption proof, efficient or effective, but it seems this is the best we can hope for in the near future.

Charity really is a double edged sword, and unless we understand the implications, it is deceptive, for both the giver and the receiver, whether an individual or a nation.

Thank you all for your time, and for listening.

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