
GIVING IN AMERICA: FROM CHARITY TO PHILANTHROPY

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Americans like to think of themselves as a charitable people. We take pride in the multitude of benevolent groups constantly at work to help out the needy and uplift society, both at home and abroad. Such generosity, freely given by ordinary individuals, is commonly deemed the natural expression of democratic life. In support of this happy view, we call time and again on the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, who put the voluntary association at the center of his analysis of *Democracy in America*. When he traveled throughout America in 1831, Tocqueville was astonished by the "immense assemblage of associations" in the new land:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.

This tribute to the voluntary association captures a powerful theme in American culture. As Tocqueville saw it, such organizations gave energy and purpose to citizens in a democracy. In the aristocratic Old World, the few controlled the destiny of the many; not so in the new republic across the Atlantic. Owing to their very freedom and equality, Americans could exercise power only through the combined force of numbers. Alone, a single

unit in the mass, every individual felt overwhelmed; linked to like-minded others, that same person acquired immense influence to do good.

So trenchant are Tocqueville's observations that they are often taken to state timeless truths about charity, philanthropy, and voluntarism in American life. But the institutions he depicted had played little part in colonial society. The French visitor was actually witness to a new phenomenon that was remaking life, especially in the northern states, in the wake of the American Revolution: the rise of formal, voluntary associations, organized by people in towns, counties, and states to meet an extraordinary array of social, educational, religious, and cultural needs. The period from 1790 to 1840 was, as contemporaries put it, "an Age of Benevolence," which gave a distinctive form to the charitable purposes that had motivated people from the very beginnings of English settlement. Tocqueville arrived just in time to record the transformation. *Democracy in America* captures that decisive moment when an older tradition of charity gave way before a new mode of philanthropy, with enduring consequences for how we carry on our lives today.

The split between these two traditions – charity and philanthropy – forms my central theme. As I have read through the vast scholarly literature on giving in America, picking my way through numerous monographs and histories, I have been taken by the curious character of the field. For early America, we have many studies of "charity" encompassing the ideas and practices of the colonists, notably the Puritans, and tracing the concrete ways the settlers sought to express their impulse to serve others. After the Revolution, the story turns to the rise of benevolent organizations and the crusading spirit of reform, culminating in the missionary, temperance, and antislavery movements of the antebellum era. Thereafter, the tone alters, reflecting the mood of the pragmatic, efficiency-minded men and women who took over the organizations for the care of the poor and the dependent and built the major educational and cultural institutions of their day. This later narrative recounts the history of philanthropy, *not* charity; it sets forth the organization of the great foundations by Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, traces the concurrent establishment of settlement houses by Jane Addams and others, and culminates in the establishment of the twentieth-century welfare state, where big government in tandem with the key institutions of the "non-profit sector" takes responsibility for basic social needs.

Essentially, this is a story of leaders and institutions, moving from the local to the national stage over time, with the aim of showing how "the Independent Sector" of today, the current configuration of nonprofits, came into being. It is an informative story, but along the way, I have come to feel that something essential is missing. That element is the record of "charity," the contributions of "time, talents, and treasure," to use the language of the Bible, by vast numbers of well-meaning people seeking to be of service to others and to the common good. In the movement from "charity" to "philanthropy," the contributions of America's Good Samaritans, as they were enacted in the past, disappear into the fold of large-scale, philanthropic institutions. The goal of this essay is to restore "charity" to the picture and to chart its changing relation to "philanthropy." Together, the two strains form the story of giving in America. They belong together, both in our scholarship and in everyday life.

How do I define these terms? The first in time is charity, a complex of ideas and practices rooted in Christianity, particularly in the reformed Protestantism of the English settlers; it was later reinforced by the heritage of Catholicism and Judaism brought by immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Charity expresses an impulse to personal service; it engages individuals in concrete, direct acts of compassion and connection to other people. To some, such as Robert Payton, the founder of the Center for Philanthropy at Indiana University, such action is synonymous with "philanthropy." But, historically, as Daniel Boorstin has noted, philanthropy represents a second mode of social service. Coined as a term in late seventeenth-century England, it became associated with the Enlightenment, for it sought to apply reason to the solution of social ills and needs. Philanthropy can take secular or religious forms. Either way, it aspires not so much to aid individuals as to reform society. Its object is the promotion of progress through the advance of knowledge. By eliminating the problems of society that beset particular persons, philanthropy aims to usher in a world where charity is uncommon – and perhaps unnecessary.

Such are the two traditions of American humanitarianism. As I have sketched them, charity and philanthropy stand at opposite poles: the one concrete and individual, the other abstract and institutional. But they need not be at odds. As dual impulses, they are the equivalent of the two commitments taken by physicians in the Hippocratic oath: One vow is to relieve pain and suffering, the other is to cure disease. We all hope that the

doctor can do both, and much of the time she can, though occasionally, we know, there must be a choice between the two. Similarly, in the practical world of benevolence, the two traditions of charity and philanthropy need to heal the split that opened in the early republic and unite in a common cause.

The first tradition – charity – governed the practice of benevolence from the beginnings of English settlement in the seventeenth century down through the Revolution and Constitution. Although it was carried on in every colony, the tradition is epitomized by the New England Puritans. John Winthrop gave the best statement of that ideal in the lay sermon he preached on the eve of departure for Massachusetts Bay in 1630. Now known as “A Model of Christian Charity,” the document has become a classic in American history, for it is here that Winthrop declares the purpose of the Puritan colony to be the establishment of a “City upon a Hill.” That image, taken from Matthew 5:14, conjured up not a physical place but rather a spiritual ideal. It embodied a godly community, overflowing in “charity.” In Winthrop’s evangelical view, the Puritans would not only love and assist one another, but also do so for the right reasons. They would rise above the petty calculations and narrow self-interest that so often drive human cooperation. Even the divine command to do unto others as you would have them do unto you was insufficient motivation. In Winthrop’s vision, the faithful were inspired by divine grace. Imbued with gospel love, all the participants in the Bay Colony – the investors in England, the settlers about to embark on the *Arbella*, the advance party already established on Cape Ann – would regard one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. They were to “delight in eache other, make others Condicions our owne reioyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together, allwayes haveing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body. . . .” This is a spirit of mutual sacrifice in the name of Christ: “wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brother Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities. . . .” In this perspective, charity was not restricted to giving alms to the poor. Having spurned the mercenary sale of indulgences by the Church of Rome, the Puritans revived the larger meanings of *caritas* or Christian love. It could take many forms and inspire diverse sorts. It could be simply a gift of “good advice, a kind word, or an exhortation to piety,” offered by anybody to a neighbor in need. A poor man could be just as charitable as a rich one.

Such Christian charity had the potential to be a revolutionary force for equality, and some sects in the Reformation tried to take it in that direction – not the Puritans. Winthrop’s vision of charity was premised on the existence of inequality; differences and distinctions among men were immutable parts of the divine order. Indeed, such diversity was essential to God’s benevolent design: it simultaneously expressed the plenitude of His power as Creator and drove the creatures of His making to depend on one another. As Winthrop put it, “God almightie in his most holy and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicion of mankinde, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subieccion.” In that condition, they must work together to get by.

That was the utopian ideal, against which any group of people – even the Puritans – was destined to fall short. Even so, in its model of interdependence, the Puritan social ethic articulated an outlook with deep roots in the medieval worldview and immediate relevance to the practice of charity in the Anglo-American world. Winthrop’s generation transplanted the localist traditions of Tudor–Stuart England to the “wilderness.” Every community established in the Bay Colony was obligated to take care of its own legal inhabitants. When individuals or families fell in need, they could make a rightful claim on the collectivity for relief. In New England, that entity was the town, an innovative institution of local self-governance devised by the Puritans in the New World. Elsewhere, as in New York or Virginia, it took the customary form of the parish vestry.

Whatever the aegis, aid to the needy was direct, personal, concrete. Upon hearing about an individual or family in distress, local authorities, usually called “overseers” of the poor, visited the persons, inspected their circumstances, searched for relatives or employers to help out, and – if nobody else could be found – supplied the assistance required. There were no general allotments of money to be spent as indigents desired. Instead, the poor were given appropriate quantities of food and drink – so many pounds of beef or pecks of corn, drams of rum and ounces of tea – and equivalent supplies of clothing, firewood, and other goods. This was a distribution that followed the Marxist formula quite literally: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. Nor was there any separation between the needy and the rest of the community. In most places, there were no formal institutions – no poorhouses, hospitals, or asylums – in which to control and to segregate the dependent and the deviant. Normally, people were cared for in families, either their own or

the households of others. As with foster care today, neighbors took in the aged, the sick, the orphaned, the indigent, and the helpless, and supplied their necessities at town expense. They also imposed discipline on the unruly: it was not uncommon for towns to subject village drunkards and even common criminals to the constraints of family. That was charity, too, provided for the individual's own good. The caretakers, we may surmise, had a need for the income and for the labor such inmates provided; they were seldom far removed in social position from the unfortunates they assisted.

New Englanders did worry that generous aid to the poor might actually encourage dependence and idleness. That was, in fact, an important item in the brief English Protestants drew up against the Catholic Church. "The poor ye shall always have with ye": Jesus' dictum had been woven into the fabric of Christianity for centuries. In that faith, medieval churchmen regarded the poor as instruments of providence: their misery ordained to stir feelings of compassion, their sufferings acts of charity. To fulfill this design, the rich were enjoined to give freely to the beggar at their door. Such good works would win renown in this world and credit in the next. The trouble was that alms were bestowed indiscriminately on the virtuous and vicious alike. To the Puritans, "beggars commit sacrilege who abuse the name of Christ, and make their poverty a cloak to keep them idle." It was thus imperative to separate the worthy from the unworthy poor. The former – the aged, the widow, the orphan, the disabled – were victims of circumstances beyond their control; anyone, at any time, could suffer their fate, and they deserved the aid of the community. By contrast, the second class had brought on its plight by idleness and intemperance; it was unworthy of public support. This moral distinction, built into the English Poor Law, was carried over to Massachusetts Bay. In practice, it mattered little. For more than a century after settlement, poverty was a minor problem, handled easily among rural neighbors. Even in Boston, where the ranks of the poor swelled in a stagnant economy and it proved necessary to erect an almshouse, little effort was made to screen applicants for aid and determine the "truly needy." Ministers discouraged such inquiries on the grounds that "as riches are not evidences of God's love, so neither is poverty of his anger or hatred." Indeed, to stifle the impulse to charity was to pass up the opportunity of stewardship. The Reverend Samuel Seabury urged the Boston Episcopal Charity Society in 1788 to assist "every one who is suffering for want. And no matter how their suffering comes on them, whether by accident, by idleness, by vice – while they suffer, they are entitled to relief."

Another minister thundered at the hypocrisy of those who dared to make judgments on the poor. "What if God were to refuse His mercy to those of us who do not deserve it. . . . We deserve nothing but hell; and shall we refuse to supply the poor with a little portion of God's property in our hands of which He has made us the stewards?"

Whereas New England towns readily came to the aid of inhabitants, they were quick to discriminate between neighbors and strangers. If you had not been born and raised in town or married an inhabitant, you had no automatic right to a legal settlement – the qualification for public relief. And if you arrived as a newcomer or passed through as a transient, you were likely to be "warned out" – that is, given official notice that the town considered itself free of obligation in case you fell in need. Often people stayed for a while, even the rest of their lives; as long as they remained off the poor rolls, there was no problem. On other occasions, potential paupers were forcibly ejected from the town, whipped from place to place back to their origin. Warnings out were relatively uncommon in the seventeenth century; however, as population grew, settlement spread, and trade quickened by the mid-eighteenth century, more and more people moved about the countryside, without land or resources of their own. Towns began to cast an ever-more suspicious eye on newcomers and hastened to warn out one and all.

We have a wonderful example of how the arrangements for poor relief worked and how they broke down in the experience of John Adams, future Revolutionary and President of the United States. In March 1767, he was serving as selectman and overseer of poor for the town of Braintree and, in the course of his duties, he was summoned to look after an unfortunate man named Robert Peacock and "his poor distressed Family." There, in the final cold, raw month of the Massachusetts winter, "We found them, in one Chamber, which serves them for Kitchen, Cellar, Dining Room, Parlour, and Bedchamber. Two Beds, in one of which lay Peacock, where he told us he had lain for 7 Weeks, without going out of it farther than the Fire. He had a little Child in his Arms. Another Bed stood on one side of the Chamber where lay 3 other Children. The Mother only was up, by a fire, made of a few Chips, not larger than my Hand. The Chamber excessive cold and dirty." In the face of this misery, Adams felt the anguish of a fellow human and the stirring of compassion. "These are the Conveniences and ornaments of a Life of Poverty," he exclaimed. "These the Comforts of the Poor. This is Want. This is Poverty! These the Comforts of the needy. The Bliss of the Necessitous." But did the overseer of the poor actually

do anything to assist the unhappy Peacocks? Not at all. Learning that the father and three of his children had a legal settlement in Boston, Adams hurried to the capital and informed the selectmen that Peacock was the responsibility of Boston, not Braintree. "We must be excused from any Expence for their Support."

Despite this niggardliness, Adams congratulated himself on his sensitive response to the Peacocks' plight: "When I was in that Chamber of Distress," he recorded in his diary, "I felt the Meltings of Commiseration. This Office of Overseer of the Poor leads a Man into scenes of Distress, and is a continual Exercise of the benevolent Principles in his Mind. His Compassion is constantly excited, and his Benevolence increased." The entry encapsulates the New England tradition, as it had absorbed the legacy of Christian thought: charity was as important to the giver as to the recipient; it was central to expressing one's humanity and religious faith. But Adams's remark also reveals the incursions of change. By the mid-eighteenth century, many scions of New England, especially in the merchant class, no longer quickened with the piety of the Puritan fathers – not for them the vision of brotherly love at the heart of Winthrop's model of Christian charity. In the rising commercial ethos, charity was reduced to almsgiving. To that narrow duty the privileged were called by appeals to secular as well as religious motives. They opened their purses not only to show gratitude to God, but also to display their social station. "Gentile-deeds maketh the Gentleman," advised the Reverend Cotton Mather; the "true Lady is one who feeds the poor." Such acts afforded emotional gratification; "a Ravishing Satisfaction" lay in "relieving the Distresses of a Poor, Mean, Miserable Neighbor." John Adams even enjoyed good feelings from passing the buck.

Shorn of utopian striving, New England came to resemble the Middle Colonies and the South in its culture of charity. The characteristic gesture – aid to the poor – was a public responsibility, overseen by local authorities and financed by taxes. Inhabitants cared for the sick, the dependent, and the deviant under official supervision. Voluntary contributions played a minor part. There were, to be sure, a few charitable endowments – a fund for the purchase of Communion Silver here, a legacy for the "Silent Poor" there. Certainly, churches passed the collection plate on the Sabbath and used the donations to supplement town funds. Seldom in the eighteenth century did charity flow out of town, though many communities did send help to Boston after the great fire of 1760 and in the Revolutionary crisis of 1774–1775. As with aid to the poor, so it was with other social needs, such as education. In New England, these were public matters. Harvard

and Yale Colleges, chartered by their respective colonies, received legislative grants. Every town was expected to support its own schools from taxes. Such public commitment to education was distinctive to New England; elsewhere, churches and private tutors supplied instruction. Even so, the vast complex of cultural institutions so characteristic of the region today was unknown. Outside a few large towns, private enterprise had yet to emerge as a driving cultural force.

It was in Philadelphia, the vibrant entrepôt of North American trade and the fourth largest city of the British Empire, with some 23,000 inhabitants in 1774, that the second tradition of benevolence – philanthropy – took shape. Originally connoting "love toward mankind" and, hence, synonymous with charity, philanthropy acquired a distinctive meaning in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Then civic-minded individuals in London seized on the institutional innovation of England's commercial revolution – the joint-stock company – and put it to benevolent ends. Pooling their funds, they came together to form voluntary associations, whose purposes were defined in formal constitutions and whose officers were chosen in annual elections. The motivation was traditional, the philosophy and methods unprecedented. The organizers of London's Foundling Hospital, launched in 1739, felt an urgent need to save the lives of abandoned and illegitimate children, but not merely for the sake of charity. To raise and educate the forlorn was, without question, a worthy deed. Even more, it advanced the well-being of the nation. England's growth required an expanding population of "useful Hands" and "good and faithful Servants," insisted the "political arithmeticians" of the day. What better supply than the "poor and miserable cast-off Children" of unwed mothers, rescued from early graves? Preserving those unhappy souls would be a valuable service to public policy. So conceived, the hospital advanced the novel notion of "philanthropy": a voluntary enterprise of private persons, moved by "an Inclination to promote Publick Good." In the ensuing decades, the purposes of such ventures would alter in tune with changing ideas about public needs. By the end of the century, as the Industrial Revolution unfolded, a new breed of experts – the "political economists" – repudiated the faith in a growing population and urged a redirection of charity to produce a sober, industrious, self-reliant working class. A new set of organizations, such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice (1802), arose to promote that creed.

The spirit of philanthropy quickly crossed the Atlantic and settled in the rising centers of commerce. Nowhere was it welcomed more warmly

than in Philadelphia, the adopted home of Benjamin Franklin – the secular son of the Puritans who ran away from his post as a printer's apprentice in Boston and made a fresh start in the tolerant and expansive Quaker City. There he became, in the words of Boorstin, "the patron saint of American philanthropy." Faithful to his Puritan origins, Franklin affirmed that "the most acceptable service of God is doing good to man." But he departed from tradition by embracing a secular end: practical improvement in the human condition.

Picking up on developments in London, Franklin took the lead in forming societies for the general welfare. But whereas the earliest English philanthropies were initiated from the top down by gentlemen and merchants with schemes for the lower orders, the self-made printer had a more democratic approach. He initiated a club among enterprising young mechanics and tradesmen like himself for the sake of self-improvement. The Junto, as he named it, was a multipurpose institution: a combination of debating society, reading circle, support group, and youthful chamber of commerce. It was the Rotary Club of its day, an organization with an ingenious design.

In the eighteenth century, most young men starting out in the world of crafts or trade depended for advance on the patronage and power of their betters. They were obliged to seek notice and favor from the privileged, to apply to them for access to books, information, contacts, and credit in the wider world. To the proud, ambitious Franklin, this dependence on great men – the aristocrats who were the prime forces in the society of Tocqueville's France – was a personal affront. He forged the Junto as a middle-class alternative to the elite world of patronage and power. The club would offer the means of mobility through the pursuit of knowledge, science, and the rational application of virtue to human affairs. It epitomized an Enlightened blueprint for progress.

To call such activity philanthropy may seem surprising. Were not the founders of the Junto themselves the beneficiaries? Unquestionably, but to Franklin, that posed no problem. In his sunny view, rational self-interest went hand in hand with the general good. It was thus a short step from "self-reform through voluntary mutual-benefit associations" to "voluntary associations directed to public benefit." Was Philadelphia endangered by the outbreak of fire? Franklin founded the first volunteer fire company in America. Did young men want an alternative to the paucity of reading matter and the necessity of borrowing books from the cultivated few? He launched the first subscription library on the continent, still in operation

as the Library Company of Philadelphia. Such ventures were followed by his promotion of our first learned institution, the American Philosophical Society, and his sponsorship of an academy and free school for poor children that eventually grew into the University of Pennsylvania. On the eve of the Revolution, Philadelphia stood in the forefront of modern philanthropy, unmatched in its "charitable public foundations," as even John Adams had to concede.

Franklin took an equally rational, progressive approach to the poor. Unwilling to accept poverty as an immutable condition, he eschewed the spiritual satisfactions of charity and took up the challenge of philanthropy. His object was the elimination of poverty: He would help the poor to help themselves. To illustrate his plan, Franklin drew on a commonplace experience of everyday life in the eighteenth century:

Human felicity is produc'd not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen, as by little advantages that occur every day. Thus, if you teach a poor young man to shave himself, and keep his razor in order, you may contribute more to the happiness of his life than in giving him a thousand guineas. The money may be soon spent, the regret only remaining of having foolishly consumed it; but in the other case, he escapes the frequent vexation of waiting for barbers, and of their sometimes dirty fingers, offensive breaths, and dull razors; he shaves when most convenient to him, and enjoys daily the pleasure of its being done with a good instrument.

This is the approach of the modern philanthropist: inspire the poor with new hope and give them the means of self-support; through such aid, they could raise themselves to respectability. To Franklin, traditional charity – alms – was self-defeating; the money would be here today and gone tomorrow, and the poor would be as dependent as ever. By contrast, philanthropy removed the conditions it addressed; in its successful wake, charity would go out of business.

In the eighteenth century, the contest between charity and philanthropy existed only in theory. Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia – although a fluid, commercial city – was still a small-scale, personal world, where rich and poor lived in the same neighborhoods, workers and servants ate and drank with their employers, and the recipients of charity knew their benefactors. If Franklin promoted a philanthropic goal, he could infuse it with the spirit of charity. Teaching a man how to employ and repair a razor, Franklin could enjoy an immediate relation to the object of his aid and derive direct satisfaction from the results. The practice of philanthropy was not yet an impersonal act. For Franklin's generation, charity and philanthropy could still work together in a common cause.

That was surely the expectation of the generation that succeeded Benjamin Franklin. In 1776, Thomas Paine summoned colonists to the cause of independence with the fervent declaration that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again." In the new republic, Americans of all classes moved to realize that promise. Having broken with the past and established free governments upon popular consent, they cherished the power of human agency – individual and collective – to improve self and society. Key to such change was the principle of voluntary association. "Two are better than one," announced the founders of the Concord, Massachusetts, Charitable Library Society in 1795, "and a threefold cord is not easily broken." Although that insight was not new – it had inspired the formation of diverse clubs in eighteenth-century Britain and their imitation in colonial cities – it was now regarded as an article of republican faith. The new nation thus saw the full flowering of the Age of Benevolence; voluntary associations proliferated across the landscape. Many were organized for the sheer sake of sociability, like Boston's Wednesday Evening Club. Others offered concrete benefits to participants, such as life insurance from "mutual societies" and borrowing privileges in social libraries. Although they served mainly the interests of members, such groups often professed the goal of improving society at large. The greatest wave of associations promoted charity and philanthropy together, and could be found in every substantial town, north and south – especially in New England, which overcame Philadelphia's early lead. By 1820, some two thousand benevolent institutions of all types dotted the region, from Rhode Island to Vermont: "marine societies, mechanic associations, masonic lodges, humane organizations, a dispensary, a hospital, a school for the deaf, several orphans' asylums, missionary societies, tract societies, Bible societies, Sunday schools, temperance associations, Sabbatarian groups, peace societies, and many more." An "immense assemblage of associations" occupied the social landscape well before Tocqueville arrived. Philanthropy was actually what drew the Frenchman to these shores. Commissioned by the French government, he was on a fact-finding tour of American prisons.

Two features distinguished benevolence in the early republic from its colonial antecedents. The first was the leading part played by religious groups and, in particular, evangelicals; the second, closely connected, was the active participation of women. Churches had, of course, been the major medium of charity in Christendom for centuries. In early America, their generosity was confined to the parish; Anglican vestrymen, Congregational

deacons, Quaker monthly meetings all took care of their own. By contrast, the first philanthropic associations in colonial Philadelphia and its sister cities had a secular thrust. However, that was a passing stage; in the new nation, religious activists made the voluntary principle their own. Philadelphia soon had its own Bible Society to disseminate the gospel, Missionary Society to seek souls, and First Day Society to run Sunday schools. The poor were the special object of female benevolence; in 1795, Philadelphia became the home of America's first female charitable society. Launched by a group of Quaker women, the Female Society for the Relief of the Distressed offered aid to "suffering Fellow Creatures," particularly widows and orphans, of any faith, "without distinction of Nation or Colour." Funded by members' subscriptions, the group supplemented municipal relief. Participants engaged directly in charitable work, visiting the needy in their "solitary Dwellings," determining their wants, and returning with whatever was required in the way of food, clothing, firewood, bedding, or medicine. That approach was widely imitated. Evangelical Presbyterians created a Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in 1800, combining material aid – including a "Soup House" – with spiritual blessings designed to "rouse" the poor out of "apathy and indolence" to efforts on their own behalf. Self-help was closely monitored. If a woman wanted support from the New York Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, she better not be found begging or selling liquor, no matter how hungry her children. Only respectable measures were allowed. Aid was restricted to mothers who sent their young to school and put out the older ones to "sober virtuous families." New-model philanthropy proved a flexible vehicle for old-fashioned charity.

These various societies, made up of private individuals, had a quasipublic character. Leading philanthropists were key figures in the governing class of their communities; like New York's De Witt Clinton, who served simultaneously as city mayor and president of the Free School Society, they moved easily between official duty and charitable service. Their wives were the founders and managers of humanitarian agencies from Boston's Fatherless and Widows' Society to Petersburg, Virginia's, Female Orphan Asylum. Confident of its right to rule, the benevolent elite sought and won public money for its philanthropic ends. The New York Free School Society was funded by the city to run schools for the poor; the state legislature awarded \$750 to the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children in recognition of its "great and essential services" in sparing so many needy from "the necessity of taking refuge in the Alms House."

Charities won other public favors, such as the authority to hold fund-raising lotteries and, most important, the right to incorporate. In the early republic, that privilege was restricted to groups with a public mission, be it economic (banks, turnpikes, and canal companies), municipal (cities), or religious (churches). For charities, corporate charters proved indispensable, enabling the organizations to own real estate, make contracts, and conduct business in perpetuity, even as individual members came and went, free from liability for group debts. Unlike ordinary citizens, these eleemosynary enterprises were normally exempt from taxes. In a society built on individual property holdings – notably, farms and shops – that changed hands ceaselessly from generation to generation, incorporation was a special privilege, jealously guarded by state legislatures and carefully circumscribed, lest the beneficiaries grow into dangerous concentrations of wealth and power. Not surprisingly, it took political clout – connections and influence – and not just a worthy purpose to win that favor. Men like De Witt Clinton, whose public service included terms as mayor, governor, senator, and Vice President of the United States, were accustomed to getting their way. Their wives, too, maneuvered skillfully to win over politicians. Although women were denied the right to vote, the “benevolent fair” exploited their elite status and lobbied “male friends” in high places, even as they made their requests with modesty and deference, portraying charitable activity as a duty of their sex. In short, the philanthropies of the early republic were not the private entities born of the spontaneous cooperation of citizens that Tocqueville portrayed. Integrated into local governance, they constituted successful assertions of political will.

As long as philanthropy was tied to community, organized benevolence stirred few complaints. However, that partnership frayed in the decades after 1820; charities ceased to be the publicly responsive institutions they had been at the start. (McGarvie’s Chapter 4 provides a possible explanation of this change rooted in law and culture.) Quakers, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and others had cooperated easily in Philadelphia’s pioneer philanthropies, dispensing Bibles and foodstuffs alike to the distressed. But infused with the religious zeal of the Second Great Awakening, evangelicals enlisted charity in the crusade for Christ. The “spiritual food” of the gospel was now the “one thing needful;” let others run soup kitchens for the poor. In that faith, devoted to saving starving souls, they served personal goals rather than public needs. Initially, they operated on the local level, seeking out the poor in their garrets and hovels, and handing out Bibles and tracts. But they soon came together in state and national organizations. The

American Bible Society (ABS) and the American Tract Society (ATS) developed into large-scale publishing enterprises, with headquarters in New York and affiliates all over the country. Employing the latest advances in printing – the stereotype plate and the steam-powered press – they turned out religious materials by the million, which were distributed by the local chapters. This was a vast undertaking, dependent on contributions both from numerous small donors and from a few very wealthy patrons. The ABS and the ATS also counted on the service of devoted volunteers to carry their publications to the far corners of the land. Eventually, such far-flung efforts demanded systematic administration. In the 1840s, the national associations rationalized the business of benevolence. They kept watch over huge sums of money through sophisticated cost-accounting; they replaced inefficient volunteers with paid agents recruited and trained for the job, and supervised them through a network of regional offices; and they relied on regular memos and reports to communicate with employees and on national magazines to publicize the cause to the public. Well in advance of the railroads, philanthropy introduced antebellum Americans to modern bureaucracy.

The formalization of benevolence was most dramatic in new arrangements for the care of the dependent and the deviant. As early as the 1780s, humanitarians pushed for an end to the harsh, humiliating punishments – whipping, branding, shaming – that early American courts inflicted on lawbreakers. Stop the barbaric abuse, they urged; confine the criminal to “penitentiaries,” where they could ponder their sins and cure their souls. Incarceration was at once philanthropy and charity: it addressed a social ill at the same time it created new opportunities for personal service. Having campaigned successfully for the creation of a penitentiary, Philadelphia’s Prison Society did not forget about the inmates. The evangelical physician and patriot Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence, visited the prisoners and sent them gifts of turkeys and watermelons, asking nothing in return “but that they should consider that God by disposing the heart of one of his creatures to shew them an act of kindness, is still their Father and Friend.”

Sympathy for the outcast waned over the decades. As a national economy took shape, propelled by the turbulent force of early industrial capitalism, communities were unsettled by social and geographical mobility. An army of transients passed through cities and towns in search of work. If the propertied classes feared these strangers, they knew their own laborers little better; masters and journeymen, no longer residing under the same roof, went separate ways. The waves of change drove some into crime and

threw others, disoriented, onto the streets; most of all, they swelled the ranks of the poor. In response, taxpayers hardened their hearts, tightened their purses, and blamed the needy. "In our highly favored country," declared Philadelphia's Female Hospitable Society in 1835, poverty was most of the time the outcome of "improvidence and vice." The only remedy was moral reform, best accomplished by taking the poor out of the community, putting them into the almshouse, and instilling habits of industry and self-discipline. A similar fate befell the insane, the illegitimate, and the unwed mothers, each consigned to a separate site for rehabilitation according to middle-class norms. That formidable task was no longer assigned primarily to "friendly visitors" like Benjamin Rush; instead, it belonged to a new class of professionals, who made careers through their expertise in dependent care. No matter that the results of their efforts soon proved disappointing—successful reform of the criminal, the insane, and the disorderly poor was limited then as it is today. Nonetheless, the new philanthropic institutions reduced charity to a token act. Now, an individual could contribute funds to a house of industry for the poor or to a refuge for unwed mothers, secure that he or she would never come into contact with any of the inmates.

Not all humanitarians abandoned the field to professionals. Some evangelicals went into the slums in hopes of saving souls, only to emerge as social reformers. Having witnessed the unsanitary neighborhoods, the miserable housing, and the exploitive conditions under which the poor labored for starvation wages ten and twelve hours a day, they called for changes in society at large. The urban environment urgently needed reform; without it, the poor would remain "filthy, reckless, and vicious" as a result of "the force of circumstance over which in most cases they have no control." This impersonal analysis was a spur to new modes of philanthropy, such as campaigns for public health and model tenement houses, from the 1840s on. However, it accentuated the eclipse of face-to-face charity. With battles to be fought in the political arena, reformers concentrated on exposing urban ills in the press and winning over municipal and state lawmakers. Reform could become a full-time job.

It was in the name of charity that critics objected to the new philanthropy. Humanitarianism, it appeared, had succumbed to the very ills of modern life it hoped to cure. It was becoming an abstract, specialized affair, at odds with the personalized ethos of the small-scale community most white Americans still claimed to value. This development did not happen everywhere or all at once. It was resisted in the slaveholding South, even in such large cities as Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans, where the urban elite

cherished traditional ideals. "The whole social system," Henry Pinckney told Charleston's Methodist Benevolent Society in 1835, was "but a chain of reciprocal dependence, the poor hanging upon the rich, and the rich upon the poor."

The duty of the one was to ease distress with "employment, counsel, or gratuity" the obligation of the other to "manifest their gratitude." In this spirit, the privileged took special care to remember favorite servants in their wills. In Petersburg, Virginia, the fortunate women who controlled their own estates went out of their way to reward loyal slaves. "It is my first desire to make some comfortable provision for my servants as a just reward for their affection and fidelity," Dorothy Mitchell began her will in 1837. This "personalism," as the historian Suzanne Lebsock calls the outlook, inspired men as well. Around the same time a wealthy Quaker in Charleston, John M. Hopkins, bequeathed \$13,000 in bank stock to the Ladies' Benevolent Society, on the condition that it give one particular free black woman \$60 a year and distribute the remaining income for "the relief of sick and infirm poor free persons of color." Visiting the poor, nursing the sick, caring for orphans: such activities remained at the heart of Southern benevolence. Indeed, through voluntary associations, the white elite could conduct patron-client relations at a cut rate. Members of the Charleston Fuel Society were entitled to recommend recipients of firewood in the winter. Orphanages admitted white children of poor, single parents, whose applications for aid were endorsed by local citizens. Preserving racial solidarity was a key function of philanthropy in the world of white masters and black slaves. As the South Carolina novelist William Gilmore Simms advised, charity must be given with open arms and a warm heart, unlike the situation in northern cities, where "the poor are made to assemble at set places, undergo examination, and be fed on soup."

In the southern backcountry and out on the frontier, northern philanthropy was no more welcome, but for different reasons. Common white farmers cast a suspicious eye on the outside agitators from the Northeast, who arrived with arms full of Bibles and tracts, and palms open for donations. The Kentucky preacher John Taylor labored for a living on his farm and, like other rural Hard-Shell Baptists, tended his church part-time, receiving occasional contributions from his hardscrabble neighbors. When he spied the "Female Societies, Cent Societies, Mite Societies, Children's Societies, and even Negro Societies" drawing nigh, he smelled "the *New England Rat*." As he saw it, the missionaries who invaded his neighborhood were hirelings of a huge benevolent empire, intent on getting the

country in its grasp. "Money is the mainspring of the vast machinery," complained others. In the words of the Baptist Elder, John Leland, "the machine is propelled by steam (money), and does not sail by the wind of heaven."

The metaphor of the machine was well chosen: it captured the identification of the national benevolent societies with economic and technological revolution. For that reason, critics arose not only in the South and on the frontier, but also in the very citadels of northern capitalism. As Ralph Waldo Emerson saw it, the new philanthropy had absorbed the basic assumptions of the new order. "The revolt against the spirit of commerce, the spirit of aristocracy, and the inveterate abuses of cities, did not appear possible to individuals"; he observed about "New England Reformers" (1844), "and to do battle against numbers they armed themselves with numbers, and against concert they relied on new concert." Huge combinations of numbers and resources in pursuit of specialized ends, benevolent societies formed the exact equivalent of the business corporation and the political party, the very institutions reformers decried. Philanthropy was part of the problem, *not* part of the solution. Its achievements were purchased at an unacceptable price: the personal charity essential to any decent community. Dr. Walter Channing, a Boston physician from an elite family, with an extensive practice among the poor, was appalled by the way the so-called respectable turned their backs on the indigent. First, they blamed the impoverished individual for his miserable condition: "The pauper is forever looked to as the active, the sole agent in the production of his own misery. He is poor – he is squalid in dress and loathsome in his whole bearing. He is dependent upon others around him for that which he should obtain for himself. . . . He is in a state of willing slavery, and so he must be a degraded being." Pulling back in horror from such creatures, the privileged retreated into the comforts of their own homes. To salve their souls, they contributed to charity, but it was a cold, impersonal act, paying the bills of conscience. Gone was the true spirit of charity – Christian love. "Exclusiveness . . . is not much disposed to go to the lower places in society. If it aims to aid Pauperism, it does so by delegation."

America did not require New England intellectuals, however learned, to discern the fatal flaw of the new philanthropy. In 1803, the Massachusetts legislature granted a corporate charter to the Boston Female Asylum, which ran an orphanage in the city. That action prompted one observer, who took the pen name of "Curtius," to send an outraged letter to the *Worcester Aegis*. An unabashed traditionalist, he objected to the effrontery of the women

in going to the legislature and seeking a bill of incorporation; they had "far out step'd the modesty of [their] sex." But his complaint went beyond misogyny. What would happen to the spirit of charity? he demanded. With the growth of organized benevolence, people gained an excuse to turn away beggars from their door; they could simply direct them to the Female Asylum and its sister institutions. If those agencies refused aid, then the unfortunates could be dismissed as "unworthy." Let them fend for themselves without troubling their betters. It was a respectable ruse that Ebenezer Scrooge would come to symbolize for the Victorian age. It was born in Boston at the very dawn of the age of the asylum.

To suggest that personal charity disappeared in the early republic would be a caricature of reality. Throughout the nineteenth century, as today, a great many men and women took responsibility for aiding the indigent and helping the needy. That was true for the middle and upper classes and perhaps even more for the laboring poor, who forged ties of mutual aid among themselves for the sake of sheer survival. Giving money never eliminated direct acts of charity. But a tension arose between the two strains of benevolence – traditional charity and modern philanthropy – that runs through American history to the present. That tension is reflected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Christian reformers such as Jane Addams – appalled by the dire conditions of the industrial cities – established settlement houses, and the so-called Robber Barons Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller employed their vast wealth to create the great philanthropic foundations that carry their names. In Addams's case, the establishment of Hull House in a poor neighborhood of Chicago was no impersonal act of reform. It was for her a "subjective necessity," a means for educated young men and women to feel a connection to the vital forces of their age and to gain "an outlet for that sentiment of universal brotherhood which the best spirit of our times is forcing from an emotion into a motive."

To John D. Rockefeller, the purpose of philanthropy was just the opposite: to spare him the overwhelming burden of overseeing donations to worthy causes. A devout Baptist, Rockefeller had been accustomed to tithing himself for charity from the very outset of his business career, and he continued the practice as his fortune swelled. "The good Lord gave me the money," he declared, but it poured in so fast that he could no longer intelligently direct its use. He was obliged to hire a professional adviser in

philanthropy, a Baptist minister named Frederick T. Gates, who was perhaps the first professional consultant in the field of planned giving. Gates started work two years after Addams founded Hull House. Although the two were moved by very different impulses, the results of their labors had much in common: they gave rise to new professions – the social worker, the foundation executive, the development officer in the nonprofit sector – and institutions that have become a staple of our society and our histories.

Organized philanthropy never eliminates the urge to personal service. The Peace Corps and VISTA in the 1960s; Habitat for Humanity; Doctors without Borders in transnational times: the spirit of voluntarism still inspires Americans, young and old, to help people in distress, with whatever amateur or professional skills they possess. The trouble is that such charitable acts, born of the hunger for personal connection to others, have been left out of most academic accounts. That absence, I suggest, is the result of the split between charity and philanthropy that began in the early republic, was sharpened in the age of Jackson, and was intensified over time. To perpetuate that omission is to undermine the very enterprise of helping others. When scholarship focuses mainly on the institutions of philanthropy, the ideas of leaders, and the issues of public policy, it distorts the benevolent enterprise. Helping others can knit society together or pull it apart. Without a compelling social program, charity can dissipate into transient encounters between unequals. But without direct, mutual bonds between givers and recipients, philanthropy sacrifices practical effectiveness and moral purpose.

PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES: PIONEERS OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

AMANDA PORTERFIELD

At the Indian town of Crossweeksung, in New Jersey, on August 26, 1745, the famous American missionary, David Brainerd, called together the group of Housatanic Indians he identified as “my people.” Brainerd had been living at Crossweeksung for the better part of a year, devoting himself to building this congregation of “about ninety-five persons, old and young.” To his attentive eye, most of these individuals showed clear signs of being “affected either with joy in Christ Jesus, or with utmost concern to obtain an interest in him.” Pleased with the combination of repentance for sin and hope of salvation these Christians expressed, and with evidence of the “tender, affectionate, humble, delightful melting” they showed, Brainerd announced that he was going to leave Crossweeksung to minister to Indian bands living in an even more remote region along the Susquehanna River. “I told them I wanted the Spirit of God should go with me.” To this end, Brainerd went on, “I asked them if they could not be willing to spend the remainder of the day in prayer for me that God would go with me and succeed my endeavors for the conversion of those poor souls.” According to Brainerd, the congregation “cheerfully complied with the motion, and soon after I left them (it being then about an hour and a half before sunset), they began, and continued praying all night till break of day.”

This event is a good example of philanthropy as a form of religious expression and, more specifically, as a form of missionary work. As this chapter will show, American Protestant missionary work provided the organizational and intellectual context out of which many other forms of American philanthropy have emerged. This chapter will also show that, gender has figured importantly in this history, with men’s priorities dominating – and men’s urge *to* dominate – defining missionary work until the nineteenth

CHAPTER 1: GIVING IN AMERICA: FROM CHARITY TO PHILANTHROPY

Two traditions of benevolence – charity and philanthropy – have given rise to separate traditions of scholarship. Historians of the one seldom notice the work of the other. The one exception is Daniel Boorstin, who argued long ago that the Old World heritage of charity gave way in the New World to the practice of philanthropy (*The Decline of Radicalism* [New York: Random House, 1969, Chapter 3]).

Boorstin notwithstanding, American benevolence owes its formative ideas and practices to English models, not only at the start of colonial settlement, but also through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The classic texts on the English tradition are W. K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England, 1480–1660: A Study of the Changing Pattern of English Social Aspirations* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1959); and David Owen, *English Philanthropy, 1660–1960* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press, 1964). Following the influential interpretation put forward in Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Jordan maintains that English Protestants broke dramatically with the Catholic resignation to the immutability of poverty and insisted that only the worthy poor deserved aid. That claim, endorsed by Stephen Innes in *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), is forcefully rebutted by Mordechai Feingold, "Philanthropy, Pomp, and Patronage: Historical Reflections upon the Endowment of Culture," *Daedalus* 116 (Winter 1987), 155–178. A more recent study of philanthropy in eighteenth-century England, Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), is essential to understanding the ideas and practices that shaped the first ventures of Franklin and his contemporaries in British North America.

A broad view of American philanthropy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is set forth in Peter Dobkin Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector and Other Essays on Philanthropy, Voluntarism, and Nonprofit Organizations* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Thanks in good measure to Benjamin Franklin's initiative, Philadelphia was the center of philanthropy in the eighteenth century, and it continued to support important institutions in the new republic. Chapter 1 draws on Bruce Dorsey, "City of Brotherly Love: Religious Benevolence, Gender, and Reform in Philadelphia, 1780–1844" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University,

1993); see also Sydney V. James, *A People Among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963). New England took the lead in benevolence during the generation following the American Revolution. The best study of this region is Conrad Edick Wright, *The Transformation of Charity in Pre-Revolutionary New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992). New York City has been the subject of several interesting studies, including Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York City Mission Movement, 1812–1870* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971) and M. J. Heale, "From City Fathers to Social Critics: Humanitarianism and Government in New York, 1790–1860," *Journal of American History* 63:21–41 (1976). The culture of benevolence in the South has received far less attention. Particularly useful are Jane H. and William H. Pease, *The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828–1843* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Gail S. Murray, "Charity Within the Bounds of Race and Class: Female Benevolence in the Old South," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 96:54–70 (1995).

The leading study of the almshouses, orphanages, penitentiaries, and reformatories of Jacksonian America is David J. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971). The rise of the benevolent empire is traced by David Paul Nord, "Systematic Benevolence: Religious Publishing and the Marketplace in Early Nineteenth-Century America," in Leonard I. Sweet, ed., *Communication and Change in American Religious History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 239–269. Finally, the study of women's history has produced important scholarship on both charity and philanthropy. See Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); and Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Class in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984).

CHAPTER 2: PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES: PIONEERS OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

Any study of the role of Calvinist beliefs in the formation and fragmentation of New England communities should start with the works of Perry Miller. Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630–1650* (Cambridge,