Jeremy Beer


The methodological point of departure for _The Philanthropic Revolution_ is history, but the primary claim made by Jeremy Beer is simultaneously political, vocational, philosophical, and theological. In contrast to the enthusiasm surrounding systematized approaches to philanthropy in recent years, Beer argues that humanitarians should be careful to protect the communitarian, personalized, local, and whimsical aspects of giving. Historically, this idea has been called “charity.”

In Beer’s narrative, the very notion of philanthropy arose as a corrective to the supposedly unproductive work of charity. In charity, individual donors supported the poor in their communities without concern for a quantifiable return on their investment. They gave out of a sense of “grave religious duty” (9), cultivated by a longstanding theological tradition that began in Judaism and Christianity. For the technologically attuned humanitarians of modernity, the American uptake of individual charity did not bring the poor out of poverty; it kept them mired in destructive vices, such as idleness, drunkenness, and the general abuse of goodwill. Wealthy Americans attracted to more “productive” modes of measurement decried charity’s relative inefficiency and aimed to create systematized and quantifiable approaches to humanitarian efforts.

But this tendency was problematic. Driving its universalizing ambitions was a disrespect for, if not outright rejection of, religion, personalist metaphysics, locality, and individuality, all of which were central to the historic approach to charity. As philanthropists aimed to remove the very conditions they addressed, they searched for systematized ways of measuring progress: number of mouths fed, number of poor converted, number of lives changed. For Beer, this transition is indicative of a much bigger problem: the prioritizing of secular and technocratic reasoning over religious and theological reasoning and the consequent depersonalization of dialogue.

If this point sounds familiar, it is because Beer is indebted to social commentators such as William T. Cavanaugh, Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and Wendell Berry, among others (p. 114). For these authors, not often referenced in studies on fundraising, the rise of secularism coincided with a disappearing morality drawn from the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. Representing more typical philanthropic fare for Beer are resources from conservative social commentator William Schambra and historian
Benjamin Soskis. Schambra has written and edited numerous works arguing that America, at its best, is not merely a national community but a nation of many communities; while Soskis has argued that the turn away from charity in the late 19th century was essentially a social maneuver among America's most wealthy philanthropists (“The problem of charity in industrial America, 1873–1915” Columbia University Dissertation, 2010).

The “halfway-tongue-in-cheek term” Beer uses to label his own alternative is “philanthrolocalism,” which he calls a “charity-inflected form of philanthropy” (viii). He contrasts his point of view to that of the “Whigs,” who associate the rise of philanthropy with “unadulterated progress and unquestionable goodwill”; the “leftish scholars” who see philanthropy as a “system of social control intended to maintain class boundaries”; and “liberal scholars” who “view the rise of ‘scientific charity’ and philanthropy as leading, happily, to the achievement of the American welfare state” (10–11). Philanthrolocalists look after what belongs to them “by reason of birth and propinquity,” giving to their own communities and thus repairing the societal fragmentation that has occurred in the wake of an increasingly industrial and global society (100–101). Philanthrolocalism is based on the assumption that there is no such thing as a ‘self-made man.’ ” We are the products of the work of others, and, in general, we “naturally wish to give back.” Philanthrolocalists thus help reclaim the lost religious and personal metaphysic that once founded discussions of charity.

In critique of Beer’s courageous undertaking, one must ask if he has chosen the best methodology for his primary argument. Although the book claims to be a history and tells a historical narrative, the point Beer makes is indeed theological and would thus be well served with a more robustly theological evaluation. By using history, Beer is able (opportunistically?) to construct a link between contemporary philanthropy and the eugenics movement in early twentieth century America. Such civic heroes as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, considered pioneers of the modern philanthropic movement, argued that social good could be achieved by manipulating human propagation. Although this portion of Beer’s work only takes up a few pages (69–77), it is a central aspect of his argument as a whole: philanthropy reduces the individual to a cog in a social wheel, climaxing in an absurd willingness to manipulate the productive processes of humans; therefore, we must be careful not to adopt contemporary forms of philanthropy at the sacrifice of what was great about charity.

But with any historical narrative, the crux of the argument rests in the manner in which one connects the dots. Beer jumps rather quickly from ancient Christian history to the Reformation to Modern America, though this only of secondary concern here. The more substantial problems are observed in