A Literary Approach to the Philosophy of Philanthropy

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Poverty 423: Capstone
Beckley, Winter 2009

I had the good fortune to grow up in San Francisco, a generally progressive city which attracts a generally progressive person, one who might refuse bottled water, bike to work, and donate to Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and the neighborhood soup kitchen. Not surprisingly, San Francisco has an extraordinary, even absurd, number of nonprofit organizations — a recent study released by University of San Francisco's Institute for Nonprofit Organizational Management counted 7,093, or one for every 183 inhabitants.[1] There are countless problems with the fundamental inefficiencies produced by this number, but the current economic crisis has added another: decline in revenue from donations ad foundations, causing nonprofits to decrease their services and operate under the constant threat of closing. The city, which has come to rely on these nonprofits to provide certain social services, is itself in the midst of budget cuts and financially unable to take over or subsidize these services. Simultaneously, more people are in need of the help that these nonprofits provide — due to the same financial crisis that has stressed the nonprofits.

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The problem stems from the basic way in which nonprofits are funded: because they rely on philanthropic donations, input fluctuates with the economy. Idealistically, there should be an inverse relationship between the economy and the amount of money donated to charitable organizations: during an economic downturn when more people are in need, these organizations should be able to provide more services. The current state of the economy and its direct relationship to nonprofits nationwide, however, shows the real picture. In the breakdown between model and reality, the fundamental elements must be explored; in this case, it is philanthropic giving and the central intent behind it.

[1] Nevius, C.W.. "Winnowing of 7,093 S.F. nonprofits needed?." San Francisco Chronicle 2 Apr. 2009, sec. B: 1.

My interest in the intent behind philanthropy developed throughout the second half of my college career. During a Victorian gothic literature course junior year, we explored the concept of benevolence and the role it played both in Victorian society and in the literature of the time. Among others, we read Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As an English major, I was fascinated by Dickens's characterization of the self-serving philanthropist and the expectation of reciprocity, as well as Wilde's allegorical representation of the negative self-serving aspects of philanthropy within society, which I will analyze as part of this capstone.

Coming off from this nontraditional view of philanthropy, I spent the next summer as a Shepherd Alliance intern at Baltimore's Learning Inc., an alternative middle school that is run as a nonprofit. I was able to experience firsthand the positive and negative effects of philanthropy on the population that Learning Inc. serves. The Washington and Lee University organization has a Board of Directors, all of whom have high socio-economic status and many of whom live outside Baltimore City limits. Coming from a completely different background than the Learning Inc. students, the members are removed from the poverty-related issues that affect the students on a daily basis. This distance influences the Board's decisions regarding the projected path Learning Inc. takes, over which it has considerable power. From my limited time and interaction with the board, I observed that there was a tendency to approach Learning Inc. as a business: for example, one board member insisted that the organization pay off a loan before purchasing furniture for the newly-expanded building. Undoubtedly a sound business suggestion, but possibly not the most beneficial for the students who would then have no desks or chairs in their new classrooms. The new building itself is a point of contention within the organization: the

final architectural design was voted on by the Board of Directors, many of whom donated a considerable amount of money for the project. The design, however, is not the most practical (for example, there are no doors to the classrooms, which increases noise and introduces a distraction whenever anyone walks by). Members of administration and faculty told me that although they had reservations for the building design, they felt as though they either couldn't voice them or that any attempt would be ignored because of the Board's power. This caused me to ponder the philanthropic intent behind the members' involvement with Learning Inc. — how much was pure altruism and how much was self-serving? What form of reciprocity or acknowledgment did they deem necessary or appropriate for their volunteer roles? Does this corrupt the original philanthropic intent?

This capstone is a philosophical and literary exploration of the motivations behind philanthropy in the context of Robert Goodin's philosophy on the matter. It is not intended as an empirical rejection of the institution; I do not dispute the evidence that philanthropic people and organizations have done and continue to do good for those in need. Instead, I argue that while philanthropy is sound in theory, the actual implementation of the institution is flawed on a number of points.

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I. Philanthropy in the context of Goodin

The Oxford English Dictionary defines philanthropy as:

1. **a.** Love of mankind; the disposition or active effort to promote the happiness and well-being of others; practical benevolence, now esp. as expressed by the generous donation of money to good causes.[2]

In Robert Goodin's 1988 *Reasons for Welfare*,[3] he explores the political theory behind not only the welfare state, but the human condition that would or would not support a welfare state or alternatives to it. While he notes that altruism is the closest in politics that one can come to the concept of love,[4] he extends the definition past what the OED offers to include voluntary action as part of philanthropy. Goodin emphasizes the importance of noting that private, voluntary, charitable provisions are

> not part of the welfare state because their activities are voluntary—and doubly so. There is no compulsion, moral suasion apart, for donors to contribute to these charities. Nor is there any restriction upon who can (or who must) benefit from such charitable activities. Anyone can be included and anyone excluded from benefits, just as benefactors please.[5]

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This introduces the first schism between the definition of philanthropy and its reality. The OED definition does not provide provisions for those promoting happiness to chose whose happiness they are promoting. Following the definition, if one were to donate a sum of money to an organization which helps the homeless find employment, for example, the fundamental concept of charity would allow any and every unemployed homeless person to benefit from the philanthropist's money; he or she would not have the authority to decide who benefits. Likewise, the center would not be able to turn anyone

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[2] "philanthropy, *n.*" The Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press.
[3] Goodin, Robert E. *Reasons for Welfare*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
[4] Goodin, 77
[5] Goodin, 11

away, so long as there are resources to help those people. All homeless people would be able to depend on that center for potential help, knowing that they would not be turned away on the any premise, for example, drug use. This service would become an entitlement, something that currently only the federal government can offer (as states' block grants under welfare reform provided them with the same discretionary powers as philanthropists posses).

In reality, due to limited resources, a donor may request, or a center or state may insist, that those helped with donated funds conform to certain guidelines (such as, they must be drug-free). When arguing for a specific form of welfare, Goodin takes issue with this "discretionary power":

> from their arbitrariness there necessarily flows *uncertainty, unpredictability, and insecurity.* … On this account, what is wrong with the charity-based approach to welfare is that charitable contributions are discretionary, and being discretionary they are (from the point of view of the recipient) utterly unreliable. There is no particular reason for any particular individual to be favored by such benefices in the first place. Neither is there any particular reason to expect that such benefices will continue, once they have started. Such is the way of discretion.[6]

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This discretion may be on the part of the state, the welfare office, the non-profit organization, or the individual philanthropist, one of the fundamental flaws of the system. The relationship can become exploitative, with the beneficiary constantly at the mercy of the benefactor and therefore dependent; or the resources can end due to an unrelated and unforeseeable external factor — such as the current economic crisis, which had stopped

[6] Goodin, 200-202

monetary flow to numerous charities. Thus, philanthropy is a flawed form of social welfare, not one that can be relied upon beyond its theory.

Goodin argues that the possibility of discretion is heightened when the benefactor knows the potential beneficiary — thus creating a personal relationship between the agents. While this may be necessary to establish community (discussed later), Goodin discusses potential anonymity as a factor in the gift-giving relationship. He introduces Titmuss, who

> celebrates the impersonality, and indeed anonymity, of the 'gift relationship' embodied in blood donations:…donors do not know who is to receive their blood; recipients do not know who gave it. Yes, curiously, such impersonality is the antithesis of gift-giving as it is ordinarily understood. Gift relationships, and the duty of gratitude to which they give rise, are highly personalized relationships, linking particular benefactors and particular beneficiaries. Morally, we owe (and sociologically, we feel we owe) some return kindness to those who have sacrificed what we night benefit, over and above what we might owe to people in general.[7]

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The dilemma behind this exchange is that of indebtedness. One can argue that a starving child is entitled to food in a way comparable to a shooting victim being entitled to a blood transfusion: neither is responsible for his vulnerable state. Is it necessary for the beneficiaries in either circumstance to feel indebted? Goodin cites two psychological studies that

> show that aid which is given anonymously, which protects the anonymity of the recipient, and which allows him opportunities to reciprocate all have positive

[7] Goodin, 115

> rather than negative effects on the recipient—among them, encouraging subsequent attempts at self-help on his part.[8]

Because I chose to look at philanthropy from a loosely philosophical perspective, I did not research the psychological effects; however, this finding is rather interesting. First, the recipient himself is not labeled as dependent; this lack of negative designation could potentially foster self-reliance. Second, the philanthropist is anonymous, both keeping the recipient from knowing to whom he is indebted and removing the threat of self-interest from the philanthropist's intent (according to Goodin, "a gift is truly a gift only if given freely, as a token of affection").

In Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*[9] Mr. Brownlow plays the role of the philanthropist, adopting the orphan boy Oliver even before the book's final twist reveals their actual kinship. Dickens describes him as having a heart "large enough for six

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ordinary old gentlemen of human disposition."[10] He can easily be dismissed as a savior; however, his actions suggest that he is indeed a self-serving philanthropist. This representation presents one of the above-mentioned problems with a potential motive of philanthropy: reciprocity. When Mr. Brownlow takes on Oliver, he expects two things in return: gratitude and obedience. When Oliver expresses gratitude for Mr. Brownlow's "goodness," he is called a "'good boy.'"[11] When he observes the books in Mr. Brownlow's library, he is told that he "'shall read them, if you behave well.'"[12] While it originally seems reasonable to expect these things from a child taken on as a ward, upon further analysis it becomes rather cruel that Oliver's standard of living at Mr.

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[8] Goodin, 356, citing Fisher, DePaulo, and Nadler, 1981; Fisher, Nadler, and Whitcher-Alanga 1982.
[9] Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist,* ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).
[10] Dickens, 89
[11] Dickens, 90
[12] Dickens, 103

Brownlow's house is dependent upon his awareness of his indebtedness. This emphasizes Mr. Brownlow's traits as a philanthropist who expects something in return for his alleged altruism, which is exposed once again near the end of the novel during his secret meeting with Nancy, the novel's prostitute. When she has told him all he needs, and only then, he offers her patronage: "'…you have given us most valuable assistance, young woman, and I wish you to be the better for it. What can I do to serve you?'"[13] Nancy has to prove herself worthy of Mr. Brownlow's help: she must be a whore with a heart of gold, and not just a whore. At this point, however, it is too late for Nancy to be helped, and she dies soon after, demonstrating a negative result that an unequal philanthropic relationship can have upon the poor.

This concept of inequality leads into Goodin's section on community, and the role that people play in each other's lives, especially when a member of a community is vulnerable. Goodin notes that in the theories of community, there can be found a "distinctive analysis of what motivates members of such communities to assist one another in times of need. It is altruism in the deepest sense: an internalization of others' pains and pleasures, as if they were your own." This emphatic identification theoretically leads to "mutual aid" and "reciprocal altruism." Goodin cites Hobsbawm's quotation that "'each member can expect the unlimited help of every other when in need'" and the communitarian belief that "what motivates members of a *true* community to render assistance to a neighbor in distress… is not any expectation of future return on their investment but rather a genuine, emphatic concern for the plight of the needy neighbor."[14]

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[13] Dickens, 375
[14] Goodin, 76-78

The fundamental flaw with this rather utopian community is that for philanthropy to occur on the truest level of empathy, it must consist of social and economic equals. Goodin later notes that "the more people see and interact—socially, economically, and especially politically—with one another within a group, the stronger a sense of community they will have to that group"[15] — simply put, social interaction leads to an emphatic community. That establishment of community fosters the type of relationship that leads to "mutual aid" or "reciprocal altruism." Consider this: Community Member A lives cheque to cheque, falls ill, and cannot work for a week. The loss of wages means that he cannot afford an adequate amount of food. Community Member B, through his sense of altruism that the sense of neighborly community has established within him, helps out Community Member A, who is fed, gets better, and returns to work. Now Community Member B falls ill and cannot work for a week. Luckily, he has a savings

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and can afford to feed himself without the help of his fellow community members. But he also knows that if he were to need help, Community Member A is not in a financial position to help him. Therefore, the two are not equals; Community Member B can act as a philanthropist, but Community Member A cannot unless he is on sound financial ground comparable to Community Member B. Goodin writes, "empathy in the strict sense is only possible where you can know who the others are and how they will be suffering: only then will you be able to conjure up a sufficiently rich image of their circumstances to put yourself mentally in their place."[16] Empathy does not require equality (Member B can emphasize with Member A despite their economic discrepancy), but purely altruistic giving does require equality to prevent indebtedness. It is only if

[15] Goodin, 100
[16] Goodin, 114

Community Members A and B are both living cheque to cheque, or both have a savings, that they can practice “mutual aid.” This equality must extend to the rest of the community in order for the communitarian theory of social welfare to work; however, nothing short of a socialist society can theoretically maintain such stability. It is of course possible to care for another person and want to fulfill his needs despite an economic inequality between the two parties. This situation, however, potentially lends itself to negative factors of philanthropy: indebtedness and dependency.

As an extension, the communitarian theory of social welfare — as flawed as it may be — would eliminate the need for philanthropy as we know it today: returning to the OED definition, philanthropy is currently “expressed by the generous donation of money to good causes.” There must be an imbalance for this to occur: donators must posses “generous” amounts of money, and charities must be lacking those same “generous” amounts. Therefore, in order for philanthropy to exist, there cannot be an equal relationship: one must be wholly dependent upon the other. This dependency, as was previously expressed, is not reliable but instead fluctuates with both internal (the philanthropist’s decisions) and external (the economy) factors, fundamentally flawing the institution of purely altruistic giving. Empathy can exist, but purely altruistic giving benevolence cannot. Philanthropy itself an unreliable, flawed form of social welfare, therefore, becomes further corrupted by factors such as inequality, reciprocity, and dependency.

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II. Victorian philanthropy

One potential negative aspect of philanthropy that is largely ignored by Goodin is that of self-interest; instead, I will look to philanthropy in the late Victorian age for examples of this motive. With industrialization came a mass influx of poverty in London, and the establishment of slums filled with disease, crime, alcohol, prostitution, and a slew of other vices. With this came an "Age of Benevolence," consisting of those who wanted to save the afflicted souls in the slums. This capstone, again, is a philosophical look at philanthropy, not an empirical one. Undoubtedly, Victorian philanthropies played a crucial role in alleviating poverty: According to, Gertrude Himmelfarb's *Poverty and Compassion*,[17] the Board of Trade's chief statistician Robert Giffen found that from 1838 to 1883,

> Weekly wages for comparable work had risen by at least 20 percent, and, in most industries, by 50 to 100 percent. Hours of work had decreased by almost 20 percent, so that money return per hour had increased by as much as 70 to 120 percent. The cost of food was substantially lower… although meat was more expensive, it had also become more common as a staple in the working-class diet… and essential commodities such as clothing and shoes were cheaper and more plentiful.[18]

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Although some have argued that some figures were exaggerated, there is no denying that poverty declined significantly during the age.

Himmelfarb takes a generally positive view of the accomplishments of the era and the intent behind the philanthropists' actions:

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[17] Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*. (New York: Vintage, 1992).

[18] Himmelfarb, 23

> For the most part, philanthropists, social workers, social missionaries, and researchers pursued their activities… in the streets of the East End. And they did so not as paid professionals or functionaries of the state, but as private citizens, men and women who took it upon themselves to serve humanity in their own ways, from the promptings of their own consciences, out of their own resources, devoting their considerable talents, energies, fortunes, and, often, their entire lives to the service of others.[19]

Fellow Victorian historian Brian Harrison takes a more cynical approach in his essay "Philanthropy and the Victorians."[20] He does, however, acknowledge that

> Humanitarians defending animals and climbing boys deliberately encouraged inventions which would help to eliminate cruelty… philanthropists showed remarkable imagination in extending the bounds of citizenship—a nineteenth-century development quite as important (though less discussed) as changes in class relationships. Philanthropists brought drunkards, lunatics, orphans, prostitutes, tramps, and sweeps into the sphere of public concern.

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However, Harrison's essay shows a deep concern with the negative effect that some self-serving philanthropic activity had on the impoverished of the Victorian era.

According to Harrison, because charities were held accountable to their subscribers (much the way modern nonprofit organizations like Learning Inc. answer to their Board of Directors),

> not only did philanthropists underestimate their difficulties—they could not afford to admit their failures. In voluntary associations, 'failures must be hushed up, and

[19] Himmelfarb, 183-4

[20] Harrison, Brian. "Philanthropy and the Victorians" in *Victorian Studies,* Vol. 9, No. 4 (June, 1966), pp. 353-374.

> successes advertised from the housetops.' Given the latent functions of so many Victorian charities, it was not even always necessary, from the managers' viewpoint, that they should succeed.[21]

This often led to conventionality rather than innovation, and a lack of compromise from organizations that were based on one principle, such as The Lord's Day Observance Society, which concentrated on prohibiting work on Sundays. Harrison suggests that the society "might have achieved far more if it had co-operated with organizations favouring only a partial reduction of Sunday work." Such a stubborn concern with just one issue within a multitude that affected the impoverished compromised the extent to which the philanthropy may have positively influenced conditions. In addition, according to Harrison, "to the mass of givers the most appealing causes in order of preference were sailors, animals, and children'… money raised for individual 'causes' often led

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philanthropists to ignore the interrelation of social ills, and prompted competition where co-operation was most desperately needed." [22] This arbitrary and unreliable discretion is one of the reasons Goodin shies away from private, voluntary charity as the means with which to end public suffering.

Goodin's notion of unreliability of voluntary charity was present at the Age of Benevolence, as well. Harrison, who refers to the "arbitrariness of nineteenth-century charity," quotes W.J. Fox from 1834:

> 'The worst of the moral sensibility of the English public, is that it is so irregularly and partially excited, that it penetrates so little below the surface, and that it so

[21] Harrison, 363
[22] Harrison, 367

> very often diverts attention and exertion from the root and trunk of national immorality to some petty branch or quivering twig.'[23]

In addition to this approach to the alleviation of superficial poverty rather than the root causes of it, the seemingly-good-intentioned charity was not always accepted with open arms and gratitude. Harrison cites Rev. J.I. Hillocks's 1889 *Hard Battles for Life and Usefulness* when he notes that "working people disliked being visited in their homes by philanthropists who often displayed great ignorance about the problems they faced."[24] This distance between benefactor and beneficiary conflicts with Goodin's notion of community, which requires empathy as an element of mutual aid and reciprocal altruism. Following Harrison, it was not philanthropy from above that constituted Goodin's sense of benevolence in the Victorian age, but rather community-based altruism. Citing multiple documentations, including Engels, Harrison relates that history often forgets

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> the working man's voluntary association – the public house. Though it may impose no formalized entry procedure, it attracts members quite as faithful as the most worthy of voluntary bodies, and provides openings for quite as much altruism. … Anyone closely acquainted with nineteenth-century poor was impressed at the extent of mutual help prevailing amongst them.[25]

This inter-working-class assistance was not, however, widely advertised, and a tension developed between the helpers and those they intended to help. In 1840, John Collins wrote:

> if there was any good thing done by any of the middle classes, it appeared in all the newspapers… but nobody heard of the kindly sympathies of the working man,

[23] Harrison, 367
[24] Harrison, 371
[25] Harrison, 368

> for his unfortunate brother…All this was done privately, and… therefore there was no idea on the part of the middle classes, that working men possessed any feeling or humanity.[26]

At one abstinence meeting in 1838, a member of the working class suggested that "some members of his own class should sit on the committee[;] he was told [that] only men of leisure could conveniently hold such posts."[27] With this dynamic, it is no wonder that were was some resentment from the working classes as they experienced the indebtedness and dependency against which Goodin warns. Harrison notes that "where relief was harshly or impersonally given," philanthropy had led to feelings of servility, as well as offended senses of "the working man's *amour propre* and self-dependence." Of the many individual accounts that Harrison includes in his essay, Henry Vincent's is especially noteworthy for the subject of indebtedness: "'I hate these canting charity fellows… when a man receives charity he is at once degraded.'"

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What, then, motivated the Victorians to exert this new abundance of benevolence? Harrison suggests a multitude of influences, including a religious shift and a concern with socialist revolution. Claiming that changing attitudes within Evangelicalism caused a growth in social conscience that concerned citizens with the souls of others, Harrison notes that

> So great was the nineteenth-century change in religious emphasis from theological orthodoxy to moral reform that in 1887 Joseph Lawson claimed 'many in Pudsey to-day are looked upon as religious men and women who even

[26] Harrison, 369
[27] Harrison, 259

> thirty years ago would have been called infidels. The thirst for souls had been a powerful influence on early Victorian charity.[28]

Harrison also suggests that the international Marxist zeal may have sparked a form of counter-revolution in England, almost a sense of appeasement for the working classes to prevent them from rebelling; philanthropy "was certainly a means of redistributing the national income without disrupting existing institutions."[29]

III. Oscar Wilde and the institution of philanthropy

Harrison presents another motivation of Victorian philanthropy, one which Oscar Wilde criticizes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*[30]: philanthropy of the age as a social trend, a corruption of the already flawed concept. The novel concerns itself primarily with three characters. Basil Hallward is an artist, infatuated with and inspired by Dorian Gray, a beautiful emblem of innocent youth. Basil paints a portrait of Dorian and completes it while Lord Henry Wotton is visiting. Among many shocking and outrageous statements, Lord Henry, the morally ambiguous character of the novel, tells Dorian that it is a pity Dorian will never look as young and beautiful as he looks in the picture—a pity, because youth and beauty are the only things worth having. Easily influenced, Dorian grows hysterical and wishes that he himself could remain young while the picture grows old. The premise of the rest of the novel is exactly that: the real Dorian does not age or change physically, but becomes indulgent, arrogant, and vaguely evil. As his actions become increasingly malicious, the painted Dorian bears physical signs of his cruelty.

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[28] Harrison, 359
[29] Harrison, 368
[30] Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

With Dorian's transition in the foreground of the novel, Wilde uses minor characters' speech and actions, as well as Dorian's, as a portal through which he satirizes insincere philanthropy in Victorian society and the direct and indirect effects this insincerity has on those in need. Different characters and actions represent individual corruptions of the concept of philanthropy. Wilde criticizes this convention of benevolence because it breeds insincerity and hypocrisy. The aesthetic Wilde has Lord Henry tell Dorian Gray not to "'squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age.'"[31] Harrison suggests that the Victorian concept of aestheticism played a role in the onset of philanthropy: "[Robert] Michels' belief that philanthropists often gave away their money, or joined the socialist movement 'not so much out of genuine pity, as because the sight of pain arouses pain in themselves and shocks their aesthetic sense.'"[32] Lord Henry's character believes wholly in heightening what is beautiful and is therefore adverse to anything that would "shock [his] aesthetic sense," but, because as the orally ambiguous character who is incapable of feeling guilt, he does not partake in alleviating the suffering:

> 'I can sympathize with everything except suffering… I cannot sympathize with that. It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the color, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life's sores the better.'[33]

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While Lord Henry's character has no concern for the suffering, he maintains a jaded view of benevolence, which at first seems cynical but is in fact quite realistic when

[31] Wilde, 22
[32] Harrison, 358
[33] Wilde, 37

contrasted with other characters in the novel. Sir Thomas Burden, for example, is "a Radical member of Parliament, who followed his leader in public life, and in private followed the best cooks, dining with the Tories, and thinking with the Liberals."[34] The hypocritical Sir Thomas preaches benevolence because his constituents believe in it; he must follow convention in order to remain elected. But he is ready to join any party as long as his can maintain his income in order to afford the luxuries, like fine dining, that his supposed beneficiaries cannot. According to Harrison,

> the poor were not alone in suspecting that the subscribers and managers of nineteenth-century charities profited personally from them—not only in the financial sense, but also because philanthropic activity could be a means of attaining social mobility…. Furthermore, through the subscription list one could display one's wealth to public view, co-operate openly with the aristocracy, and thus buy a place in public life and even a seat in Parliament. … The prohibitionist United Kingdom Alliance was by no means untypical in offering a Vice-Presidency to all who gave £1000 or more to its Guarantee Fund.[35]

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The social standing of those participating in philanthropy gave rise to the trend.

Lord Henry, like his uncle "whom the outside world called selfish because it derived no particular benefit from him,"[36] believes that philanthropy is a "fad." According to Harrison, the movement even had its version of celebrity spokespeople: in 1876,

> Princess Christian unexpectedly cancelled her engagement to attend the annual [RSPCA] meeting at St. James Hall: 'Humanity is a very popular thing,' said the

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[34] Wilde, 34
[35] Harrison, 365
[36] Wilde, 29

> president… to a half-filled, disappointed hall, 'but Princesses are popular also, and still more attractive, and I have not the least doubt we should have filled the Hall at the present meeting could we have had the advantage of her attendance.' RSPCA annual reports of the 1890s carry full-page photographs of princesses and aristocrats.[37]

The orchestrated charade of self-congratulatory benevolence extended toward what is still seen today among wealthy donors:

> Even the most superficial investigation of nineteenth-century charity shows that in an area which might be expected to shed more credit on Victorian capitalism than any other, the same wastefulness and conspicuous consumption of sorely-needed capital prevailed. The numerous charity balls, philanthropic dinners and *conversaziones*, the pretentious central offices, the pages of print devoted to lists of subscriptions, the elegant membership cards — the very organization of the philanthropic world itself.. all ensured that such redistribution of the national income as did take place in the nineteenth century gave at pleasure to and even financially profited many of the not-so-poor before it finally filtered down to those in real need.[38]

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The same concept of splendor surrounds modern philanthropy: galas can charge as much at $1000 a plate at white-tie fundraisers, which donators attend in exchange for their charity — an example of Goodin's concept of reciprocity and therefore another flaw with the institution of philanthropy. It could be argued that the cost of these events, however, could be better spent on the causes themselves.

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[37] Harrison, 363
[38] Harrison, 363

Dorian Gray's main philanthropic activity in the novel demonstrates the danger of unreliable philanthropy; he is the very benefactor against which Goodin warns. Drawn into the fad by Lord Henry's socialite aunt, Lady Agatha, Dorian goes slumming and meets Sibyl Vane, Wilde's personification of the East End philanthropic cause. Sibyl is an actress, and Dorian proposes to her after falling in love with her on stage. Although she is from the East End, Sibyl is self-reliant: she has a job and supports herself. Dorian, a wealthy outside influence, enters her life and promises her a future with him. Sibyl falls in love with Dorian, and it negatively influences her acting – she loses her agency while simultaneously becoming financially dependent on Dorian (if she cannot act, she cannot support herself). Dorian, however, embarrassed at Sibyl's performance onstage, breaks off the engagement the same way that a philanthropist can stop donating to a cause (either due to his preferences or his circumstances), exercising Goodin's notion of

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unreliable discretion. Sibyl, in response to being dropped, poisons herself. With this unequal relationship between benefactor and beneficiary, Wilde warns against slumming as social entertainment, because of its artificial nature. When Dorian finds Sibyl while slumming, he sees her as his philanthropic cause, an object with no real human value: he can bestow kindness to his cause, and then cease to be a benefactor on a whim.

Lady Agatha, the novel's main proponent of slumming who introduces Dorian to the field, fits the philanthropist mold well. Victorian women had an emerging role as philanthropists, which Harrison attests to fundraising

> as a female specialty, for in this sphere women could display an audacity that which, coming from men, could only give offence. [Catherine] Gladstone once wrote to a rich friend demanding £1000 for a charity; when she received a cheque

> for only £500 she promptly returned it, pointing out that this was not the sum she had asked for. The required sum arrived by return post.[39]

Again, it is not the final result of the philanthropic action which I am considering, but the original intent behind it. Harrison refers to a document of Lady Violet Greville's where she recalls "a poor old man whom she had befriended while slumming: in his dying moments he asked that she be sent for… 'these little incidents' she wrote, 'make "slumming" a real pleasure. One can give so much happiness with so little trouble.'"[40] It is Wilde's morally ambiguous character Lord Henry who has the appropriate response to Lady Greville's sentiment: "'Philanthropic people lose all sense of humanity. It is their distinguishing characteristic.'"

Ironically, Lord Henry engages in his own form of philanthropy, although it is intellectual rather than economic. He influences Dorian Gray and most of whom he meets

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with words, a hypocritical action in its own right if he believes that "all influence is immoral," but for which he has a gift. Because Lord Henry genuinely believes in individualism to the point of egocentrism, he has no regard for the influence that he does, in fact, have over others. He sees Dorian's life as a play that he can both watch and direct, and so molds the protagonist of this play according to his own ideology. When analyzing Wilde's novel in the context of Robert Goodin's philosophy, the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian Gray fits one of exploitation: because Dorian is much indebted to Lord Henry for his newfound life philosophy as well his propelling role in society, Lord Henry can exploit his new protégé. At the end of the novel, Dorian can no longer live with the guilt of his actions and attempts to repent. The portrait, however, continues to

[39] Harrison, 360
[40] Harrison, 360

change until Dorian ultimately kills himself. Thus, another tragic end to an unequal relationship of influence and benevolence.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the same trends in Victorian philanthropy are present today. It is extremely fashionable to work for a nonprofit in San Francisco; the Board at Learning Inc. holds a lot of control over the organization. Charity galas are plentiful, even (especially?) in the current economy. Philanthropy in its own right still exists as a virtuous concept — it has not, however, become any more realistic as an encompassing answer to poverty, nor has philanthropy as an institution purified itself from self-interest, dependency, or reciprocity. Yes, it helps alleviate poverty — but are there perhaps more effective and less corrupt institutions?

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