An Ethic of Generosity

Giving Well Takes Practice

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Most professions have codes of ethics. Fundraisers do too (for example, see the Association of Fundraising Professionals). These ethical standards are essential, but can only be expected to do so much. While I’m perhaps being overly cynical, most often they live on the websites of our nonprofits, foundations, or professional organizations – and remain forgotten until we need to update proper policies and procedures or orient new employees. Of course, doing ethics is more than setting professional standards or weighing decisions as either right or wrong. Ethical reflection enables us not only to know how to “be good” but also to consider “how to live a good life.” Because it often fosters relationships, communities, and individual character, how to be a good giver is an ethical question making up a vital dimension of most good lives.

Working this semester with our doctoral students at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy on the ethical, moral, and religious aspects of philanthropy, we have read a lot of ethical theory from John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism and Immanuel Kant’s duty-bound “categorical imperative” to Peter Singer’s effective altruism and John Rawls’ theory of justice. Yet, most often we found ourselves returning to Aristotle’s ancient notion of virtue. It seemed to best fit our work on philanthropy.

As philosopher Mike Martin recounts in his classic book, Virtuous Giving, “Virtues are not private merit badges smugly gleaned from hypocritical exercises in character building. They are morally desirable ways of relating to people, practices, and communities.” As a virtue, generosity is both a character trait and a sustained practice, and rarely are the two separated from one another. So beyond establishing best practices and codes of conduct for donors and fundraisers, perhaps we should also see our ethical work as cultivating the virtue of generosity among those entrusted to our care.

In cultivating generosity, religious congregations have automatic advantages with the built-in significance of practices, tradition, and community. Aristotle understands a practice as something done continually. It is not a one-time action, and it is often sustained through tradition. Without being a slave to the past, there is much to be gained from following the path of those who have gone before, whether participating in a religious ritual, reading ancient texts, or even singing together. These practices are often social; rarely are they done alone. Even if reading in solitude, wise teachers interpreting the tradition are there along with you. In many ways, these practices are good in themselves. For example, whether you sell or display a piece of art, most would see the artistic process as virtuous in itself. And it takes practice to promote excellence. If author Malcolm Gladwell is right, it takes 10,000 hours of practice to master something. If that is true for practicing the violin, could it be true for giving as well?
Religious congregations have many of the essential raw materials necessary to develop the virtue of generosity. Along with practice, congregations emphasize community. Giving was never meant to be a solitary experience. If fundraising is all about relationships, so is giving. Whether volunteering together as a class or a family, or bonding across lines of difference between giver and recipient, we are forced to engage with one another. An ethic of generosity cannot be cultivated alone.

Viewed through an ethic of virtue, all giving is not the same. Sometimes we give with mixed motivations out of guilt or a desire for prestige, but if giving is a virtue developed through practice, done in relationship with others, the good news is that we can get better at it. In considering an ethic of giving, perhaps the issue is less how to make the right decision – whether it is better to give here or there or whether to give for this or that reason – but rather how we can help cultivate virtuous giving. While a good in itself, virtuous giving strives for excellence through sustained practice aligned with a tradition and engaged through a moral community. Such an ethic marks an individual with the virtue of generosity.

Perhaps this is where we should focus our energies. While codes of conduct have their place as ethical standards, we might have more success in instilling generosity by promoting the cultivation of generosity as a virtue. With transparency and accountability in place, we can focus on the character of fundraisers, donors, and the others connected to our communities. It matters how we speak and how we practice our giving. And sustained practice is essential. Beyond right and wrong, how do you cultivate an ethic of giving with those entrusted to your care? As the mantra states, “You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give.”