IS GIVING AND DOING ENOUGH TO MAKE CHARITY MORAL?

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The great joy of charity is that everyone doing charitable work or giving money to the pursuit of charitable aims does so voluntarily. They do it because they want to; because they want to make the world a better place in some way or other.

This feels like the very essence of a morally good act: selfless, often to improve the lot of others, and certainly not primarily for personal gain.

The trouble is, this allows the assumption to take hold that giving time or money to a good cause automatically means you are a decent moral person. And people have exploited this: if someone gets a 'free pass' from criticism the moment they mention charity, then apparently generous gestures become a useful shield against legitimate scrutiny.

We saw this in action this week. No sooner did comedian Dapper Laughs hit trouble over his treatment of women, than he talked up just how much money could be raised by his upcoming charity album. Question his behaviour, he implied, and the charity will suffer.

Giving money to a worthy cause can become a useful smokescreen when the going gets tough.

Yet, as we seem to be slipping—at least for a time—into a world where civil society is becoming relatively more important as the state retreats, it is surely valid to query any blanket seal of approval for all charitable works.

At one level, a lot that goes on in the charity world is, in reality, a bit more self serving than we often like to admit. Doing good in the charity sector can get you a place in the House of Lords, immortalise your name on a new wing of an art gallery or university, or help you recover your reputation after a scandal or prison sentence. It is part of every self-respecting celebrity's portfolio, and keeps the rich happy with something to do that makes them look good while having a reason to meet with their peers at charity dinners and events. In the US version of the political drama House of Cards, the ever ambitious Frank Underwood's even more ruthless wife Claire uses her charity, the 'Clean Water Initiative', in this very cynical way. Lucky it's just fiction. Equally, many young people know that having voluntary work on their CV is virtually compulsory to secure that crucial job interview.

Good may come out of all this, but if the motivation is not entirely selfless, then the question of morality can at least be raised.

At a lesser level, all the fuss about the ice-bucket challenge or the 'no make up selfie' feels like consumer and fun-driven activity, with charity a side-line feature.

We also know that giving and doing voluntary work is a positive contributor to well being, so it benefits the doer or giver as much as anyone else. Similarly, many smaller charities and community groups are about improving the local neighbourhood and a sense of community spirit and well-being, putting on arts events locally or helping the local lonely. So there is some self interest here too.

But I want to focus on five other aspects of the issue of morality in our mission-driven sector, touching on: impact; cause; alleviation versus prevention; public services and equity; and plurality.

The first is about the leitmotif of much of what NPC does: **impact**. Putting it at its most simple, are you morally OK if your giving and doing achieves nothing beyond enhancing your reputation and making you feel good?

I would claim that in almost all cases, a charity is set up to try and achieve something; indeed that is its public purpose. Sometimes it is something that is simple to talk about, to define and to measure; sometimes it is not. So we might agree that it would be pretty immoral to spend a lot of time and effort on a project, to give money or help raise it, to use volunteer time, and so on, if in fact the project or organisation does nothing for its cause—or even makes things worse. And yes, there are examples of this, with the Scared Straight approach to putting young people off crime being one of the most notorious and persistent.

But I think we can push this further. If you could use your resources to do more good than you are currently achieving, then are you not at least putting into question the morality of your use of resources? If you don't even try to think about whether you could do more, then are you not failing morally?

It is this line of thinking that leads to beliefs in the need for theories of change to explain what you are trying to achieve; measurement frameworks to get some handle on what is going on; and data collection and evaluations to establish what is working.

Exactly where the line is drawn between doing enough to pass the morality test, and going so over board that you miss the wood for the trees, is a moot point. But in most charitable activity, and despite great steps, we are a long way from that tipping point where we have gone measurement mad. Our survey of impact practice among charities, *Making an impact*, shows that 25% of organisations measure nothing at all and that very few use planning models (like theory of change) to help them measure the right things. And while our *Funding impact* report shows that many funders have clambered aboard the band wagon, few actually use the data to make funding decisions.

An aspect of this, I would argue it verges on the immoral to set up a charity or give to a charity without doing a wee bit of homework first. If you set up a new charity you might be taking away work from another charity down the road that is in fact better than you, or duplicating back offices unnecessarily. Surely you have a duty to check out at least a little where the need is, what is already happening, and to be sure that you have some degree of confidence that your new charity will be effective? And if you give to a charity without some due diligence, you might be helping the beneficiary group you claim to care about less than if your money had gone elsewhere.

Of course, measuring impact raises a whole set of issues in itself. One is ensuring that your measurement efforts are geared towards meeting the needs of your beneficiaries or cause; not just your funders or indeed your fundraising team. The issue of how much weight you give to the subjective feelings of your beneficiaries is a tricky one. Some methods give considerable credence; others look for harder outcomes on jobs, income, recidivism or even areas like well-being.

In another camp, there are people who say that the conception of what the sector should do, lying behind my comments, is profoundly instrumental and misses out the emotional power of altruism and of caring, in some way, for something or someone, other than oneself—impact or not. It is clear from recent polling we conducted with Ipsos MORI that a large segment of the population would probably go along with this.

In any case, am I really saying it is less moral to give or volunteer badly than not to give at all?

The second and related point I want to make concerns whether there can be anything immoral about the **cause** you choose. Of course, personal preference comes into it. One person may fund what another person believes totally beyond the pale—like pro choice or a woman's right to choose or anti-capital punishment campaigns. But it

feels wrong to me to decide that someone is behaving in an immoral way in terms of their charitable activity just because I disagree with their cause.

But what about the idea that to ignore major social problems in favour of something 'less' important is not really moral? Is it OK to meander through and over the homeless sleeping around the Strand or Tottenham Court Road and then give your philanthropy to the Royal Opera House?

To allude to a comparison used by NPC over many years, is it OK that we give more to donkey sanctuaries than many causes like domestic violence?

On the whole, I have taken the view that you decide your cause and then the obligation on you is to put your resource to best use for that cause. (In that sense, I disagree with my predecessor at NPC.) And I like the idea sketched out in a CGAP/University of Kent paper a few years ago that is it is important to have people with different motives involved in charity. As Dr Balihar Sanghera put it:

'All contribute to the development of civil society in different and important ways. Moral conventionalists help to support families, neighbourhoods and social networks; moral individualists promote hobbies, sport and cultural activities in the community; and moral critics foster social movement and causes.'

Of course, judgements can still be made. For example, it seems questionable to me to make quirky donations and choices that are more closely linked to having a good time than helping out fellow citizens in need.

A related issue is whether it is OK for 'bad' companies—that make their profits in ways many might feel are immoral—to give to charity, or for charities to receive money from them?

This occurs at the individual level too. Some have argued that it if you care about improving the world, but are also capable of earning a lot of money in say investment banking, you would do more good to continue doing that and then give your money away, than to join the sector. The interesting philosophical comebacks on that argument include the harm you are doing while you raise the money, but also a deeper one about intent and the moral worth of personal activity over what one might call 'arms-length good'.

A third controversial area relates to **alleviation versus prevention**: is it moral to be involved in charity that tries to pick up the pieces for those dealt a bad hand by society, or who have encountered misfortune as a result of either their own mistakes or simple bad luck? In other words, is the supposedly very moral Victorian or Dickensian approach to charity—help the poor and disabled with hand-outs to alleviate the suffering—in fact a very dishonest and immoral approach if you are not prepared to do something about the causes of such destitution?

I say this for two reasons. First, if you do not attack the causes—be they troubled families, lack of parental nurture, inequality of access to digital media, inequity in world resources—then those problems will remain and we will succeed only in binding over the wounds for a bit. And second, because such traditional charity is paternalistic, the very opposite of empowering those we seek to help. It has nothing to do with enhancing the dignity and autonomy of our fellow citizens; things we might consider our moral duty to try to ensure.

This brings me to my fourth area of contention, which is to do with **public services and equity**. Charity on the whole is not concerned with the equitable distribution of services and income across the country and across communities. Nor does it have the reach and power in most places to achieve this, even if it wanted. Should we worry about the morality of a situation that sees the distribution of charitable activity as a matter of chance, with money generally flowing to and from areas and communities that already have decent funding and fewer social problems? If charity means lots of activity in Tonbridge Wells and less in Barking, with 'charity deserts' in the most deprived areas, does that matter? And does it not matter a bit more when a high proportion of this activity is funded by tax breaks, which mean the average family is paying more tax than it would otherwise?

Equally, are we being moral in the charity sector if we say that we think there was too much state in the past, crowding out voluntary activity, when the result of a pull back is that we get less equity and less accountability for that? How does fairness play into all of this?

This matters a lot if we look to the charity sector and charitable funders to do more and more in welfare, health, schools and so on, not least if—as some argue—this kind of approach not only makes up for gaps in state provision, but effectively starts to undermine the state, replacing it with values and approaches that are not under such effective democratic control. And what if charitable work in the end creates less social justice?

Another aspect of the charity sector being involved in public services arises from the increasing use of payment by results (PbR). In many ways, and if done right, PbR can make money go further; it only pays for outcomes and so focuses delivery organisations in a way that other approaches often do not. But it also means inevitably some parking and creaming, as the chase for the outcome payment implies dealing with the lower hanging fruit and not with the hardest to help. Many charities feel this is somehow immoral as every individual should be treated as of equal worth.

Here we see two concepts of morality knocking up against each other: one, the efficient use of resource; the other, the equal value of each person.

A similar conundrum applies as social or impact investment starts to emerge. People are now making financial returns from charities solving social problems. Is that morally right? You certainly won't hear much about it in the Bible, Koran or the Talmud.

While a big part of what charities do is around the delivery of services, the charity sector itself has a key role in helping shape more intangible parts of society: bringing decency and civic participation to our discourse; creating a pluralism of voices and activity that lies between the state and market sector. Here we get into another aspect of morality—my fifth and final point on **plurality**. Can the sector work if we get a 'biased' civil society? What do I mean by that? Well, if the civil society we get is in the end a creation of funding that comes through government and donors—especially well-heeled ones—and through active, 'believing' volunteers, then do we get a civil society that is twisted by the preference of these folk? If it does, then is there something wrong with the morality of the sector as a whole—not reflecting every aspect of society, tending to downplay minority and unpopular causes or indeed big them up too much?

A last thought to leave you with. For various reasons, I believe that a lot of what goes on in the name of charity does not pass a tough morality test. And moving in the direction of where morality would point—especially on impact—would be good for morality as well as for the causes and people we want to help.

But how much does morality matter in any case and should we care if charity is not in fact moral?

Some feel it does matter. In a rather old fashioned speech to the Charity Commission annual meeting this year, academic Frank Prochaska claimed that where *'Government stresses professional competence and efficiency, traditional charities stress … moral purpose'.*

But as the great philosopher Alfred P Doolittle explains in My Fair Lady, morality can be overdone, a concern only of those who have enough to worry about it. Before he had any money, Doolittle could say, *'I was happy.I was free.'* But when he inherits a bit, all his friends and relatives want him to help them and he has to start making judgements. *'Oh, I have to live for others now, not for myself'*, he says, caught by the curse of "Middle-class morality".

More prosaically, let's keep to the advice of science fiction legend Isaac Asimov:

'Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right'.