



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Philanthropy as Spiritual Exercise: Soul, Relationships and Community

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*In conversation with **Erik Owens**, Associate Director at
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OWENS: In your experience in research on giving, how do people who give understand what they're doing? How do they view giving and charity?

SCHERVISH: I would say there are six billion ways, and then there's one way. Many people try to find a set of categories between one and six billion.

There's a difference between a trigger and a background interest. A trigger may be a visit to your financial advisor. In discussion, you learn that there are some tax savings and maybe some potential for happiness by doing something in your lifetime. We know empirically that when somebody is financially secure, they're going to give more to philanthropy. When the financially secure know it's permanent and growing, the difference between their resources and their projected expenses means they will have more to give.

That applies to the layer where people are no longer making trade-offs between material utilities and intrinsic ones, or emotional ones, or spiritual ones. We do find that their trade-offs become not a boat versus charity. It's not even children versus charity at that point. However, the question remains, why is charity among one of the qualitative utilities or preferences that they may have? Why not

reinvestment? Why not do some other good things, like start another business? Why not maybe go into politics, use your money to get elected. Why not do nothing for a while?

I think the answer to this is that one of the most enjoyable things people can do from the time that they are in their families through their friendships, all the way into a very formal world of philanthropy, is to experience the joy of simply being able to meet the need of another person, just because they're a person in need.

If I were to say to you, here's \$6 million, you can't touch it, you have to live off it. Now here's another \$6 million and you have to give away. I know there are burdens with figuring it out, but that could bring you great joy. You finally can do the things you've dreamt of doings. Where does it all start? Parent-child. Because of this great fulfillment that comes from being able to do the great privilege in an extensive way, to simply respond to people in need, without having to pay attention to the commercial medium of money.

What spurs that along and reinforces it is identification and gratitude. The purpose is helping people who the giver understands and recognizes as similar to him or herself in some way. The second one is gratitude, often expressed as "I want to give back." But go beneath that and you'll hear, "Because I'm grateful." Why? Because they have been blessed. That's the generative part of all this: identification in a way that is dramatically fulfilling as a human being.

OWENS: Do you find that adults and people who don't have the sense of the blessings of life are less likely to give in a meaningful sense than others?

SCHERVISH: These hurt people may just go out and shovel their neighbor's walk, we don't know. Being hurt doesn't make them less generous, it makes them hurt. We have to stop reinforcing that that person is a grouchy neighbor. We must take the energy out of our response. Now that person may be grouchy, but so much of this is working on self, and so much assistance to other people isn't telling them what to do, but rather asking them the questions. It is truly wanting to learn the connections in their biography. So maybe some people need to receive more, rather than give.

None of this is good and evil. Philanthropy is such a hot button issue because it involves so much money, so many wealthy people, and now so many organizations that can lie, cheat, and steal. Many

campaigns are irregular with small amounts going to the group. In the Haiti contributions, for example, they found several phony groups that had made up a good name.

OWENS: We live in a new gilded age in many ways. In some sense, there are reflections of Andrew Carnegie in Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and such. Yet there's also a very different and broader affluence in America than there was at that point, in the way that people understand what's enough. Could you speak a bit about that?

SCHERVISH: I am increasingly including that group, not as financially secure but as having discretionary resources for carrying out informal, personal philanthropy or formal giving. We have leeway not to go out to dinner. We have leeway, when our bank accounts have only a certain amount of money, to be able to say, "I'll buy one sweater instead of two and I will have that money to give". Or it may be the other way around: "I gave this money and I realize that I'd better not do these other things for a while."

The great thing that money brings you is choice and that is freedom. You don't have to have an infinite amount of choice with being financially transcendent. You can, however, have resources that enable you to carry out a wider array of choices. Then you decide on the quality of those choices.

Then again, even in dire poverty, you have the range of choice about your time. We all have 24 hours times 60 minutes times 60 seconds of choice. You don't have to be wealthy to have that quantity of choice that exists. The material realm is not only realm of choice we're talking about, quantitatively.

In the material realm, the more affluent, and certainly the wealthier you are, offers a quantity of choice that's more than just with your time to affect other people, either positively or negatively, and then the question is the quality. For the rest of us, it may be less material, but we do have a quality of choice.

OWENS: From our perspective at the Boisi Center for Religion in American Public Life, I want to ask you about the affiliation people feel towards religious traditions or against those traditions, and the way that they understand themselves as part of a broader civitas and a broader society. Can you comment on the differences or similarities among religious and nonreligious people in regards to your studies?

SCHERVISH:

I am less concerned about religion and different denominations and distinctions of church or membership organizations than I am with certain spiritual and religious experiences. A spiritual person is one who averts to their ultimate origin, their ultimate destiny, and their ultimate depth in their thinking, feeling, and acting. Lately, I've also been including their ultimate incorporation, that is, with whom are they ultimately implicated? It might be the entire universe. Those who tend to avert to this in practice in regard to this do so for spiritual purposes.

A religious person is one who is defined the same way, but understands that this incorporation involves worship. The death of life involves worship. The ultimate destiny involves worship, and the ultimate origin. So you bow your head in one way or another to a force or a being. Having a regard for it in a special way makes you a religious person, in my mind. Certain people include Jesus, or Jesus Christ, or Mohammad, or Joseph Smith and others.

If they attend church, they always give more. Church is one of the big places. However, the higher you go in wealth, a lower amount of your overall giving goes to your local congregation because you're still supporting a congregation with other people. Now if they're building a brand new church, you might be the \$2 million donor. Usually when you say religious giving, however, the formal definition is giving to your congregation, to a missionary group, or to a religious order. The tendency on a year-to-year average among wealthier individuals is to give more to education and healthcare, as well as to some social services and youth services.

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