"Adoption and Altruism: Those With Whom I Want to Share a Dream"

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Adoption and Altruism:
Those with Whom I Want to Share a Dream

Paul G. Schervish

This article reviews findings from a study on philanthropy among the wealthy, with a special emphasis on adoption philanthropy. Attempts to define altruism from deductive philosophical or theoretical reasoning are destined to disappoint, and a positive understanding of altruism must be gleaned from an inductive examination of adoption philanthropy. Recent considerations on altruism have shifted the debate from the rational dismissal of altruism to an exploration of its existence as part of human nature (Piliavin and Charng, 1990). This change in analytic perspective implies that the study of altruism can now be moved further into the sociological arena by constructing it in terms of emotion, taste, moral sentiment, and normative orientation. That is, altruism can be viewed not just as a part of human nature (asanthropology and sociobiology have indicated) but as part of moral biography and identity.

The analysis of altruism as related to adoption is set in the context of three findings from the study on Wealth and Philanthropy conducted at Boston College under my direction and sponsored by the T. B. Murphy Foundation Charitable Trust: a relational definition of philanthropy, the distinctive empowerment that the wealthy bring to their philanthropy, and the value of addressing the issue of motives by examining strategies of giving rather than the presence or absence of altruism.

Note: I am grateful to the T. B. Murphy Foundation Charitable Trust for supporting the research reported here; to Andrew Herman, with whom I developed a number of the ideas in the paper; and to Ethan Lewis, who graciously and competently assisted in the preparation of this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the section on altruism at the 1991 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, August 1991.
The Study on Wealth and Philanthropy

In the course of the study, we interviewed 130 millionaires distributed throughout ten metropolitan areas. The sample was obtained by a branching method whereby members of the study’s advisory board and those whom we interviewed recommended friends and family members for further interviews. The interviews were loosely structured, and interviewers were instructed to follow up in detail on any line of questioning that seemed unique or particularly instructive. In virtually every case, we learned the major outlines of what we refer to as the financial and spiritual autobiographies of the respondents.

Of the 130 respondents, 44 were women. The respondents were evenly divided between self-made and inherited wealth. With the exception of a few respondents who had not yet received their full inheritances, respondents possessed a net worth well in excess of $1 million, with the vast majority located between $1 and $10 million of wealth. Although our goal was to learn about the stories of what Joseph Heller calls the “common millionaire,” we did interview approximately twenty individuals from well-known families and businesses.

Philanthropy as a Social Relation

In a previous paper (Ostrander and Schervish, 1990), Susan Ostrander and I conceptualized philanthropy as a social relation organized around the response of donors to recipients who express their needs through noncoercive moral signals. In commercial relations, consumers express needs through the medium of dollars that cannot, in the long run, be ignored by producers. In electoral relations, constituents express their needs through votes and campaign contributions: two media that elected officials cannot ignore. Ultimately, commercial and electoral relations are demand led in that they reflect countervailing mechanisms of consumer sovereignty.

In philanthropy, needs are not expressed through a material medium on which donors rely for their livelihood. Rather, needs are expressed directly as worthy of attention. If a medium is introduced, it is the medium of moral signals in the form of words, sufferings, and aspirations. As such, philanthropy tends to be donor or supply led in contrast to commercial and electoral relations, which tend to be more regularly consumer or demand led.

In philanthropy, recipients must depend on the moral sensibilities of donors for the initiation and maintenance of a philanthropic relation. In the words of Ludwig Feuerbach (1841/1957, p. 125) the needs of recipients are expressed in the language of “entreaty” rather than of “command.”33 Philanthropy thus recognizes and responds to affective rather than effective demand. In philanthropy, demand is made efficacious when the giver begins to attend primarily to the needs expressed rather than to the medium by which they are expressed. What constitutes philanthropy as a relation is not that it is tax-deductible or housed within a nonprofit organization. Rather it is that it is a social relation mobilized not just on the basis of a moral claim—commercial and political relations are also—but on how that claim is communicated.

Thus, ideally philanthropy is mobilized in response to the direct expression of a need rather than in response to a desire to accumulate or benefit from the medium through which the need is expressed. Despite all this, however, we find that in the actual practice of philanthropy, the material balance of power does not always remain so firmly established on the side of the giver. It is not necessarily the case that philanthropy is governed by the availability of resources rather than by the existence of needs.

My research and observation have uncovered any number of instances in which philanthropy does indeed move toward being a reciprocal relation and, in some extreme cases, even demand led. At least one element of altruistic behavior, then, is the extent to which donors allow the supply-side structural tendencies of philanthropy to ensure a more fully reciprocal moral relation between donor and recipient.

Wealth and Empowerment

A second finding of my research on the philanthropy of the rich is that the wealthy manifest the great expectation to make a difference in the lives of others and harbor the economic wherewithal to do so. The disposition of empowerment that surfaces in philanthropy derives from a way of thinking and a worldly efficaciousness expressed in virtually all spheres of their lives. This is the psychological, temporal, and spatial empowerment of hyperagency—the ability to construct rather than merely live (even well) within one’s social environment.

A corollary finding about the hyperagency of the wealthy is that they are able to choose from among many different ways as to how they will make a difference. In regard to their philanthropy, I have identified sixteen strategies by which the wealthy carry out their philanthropy (Schervish and Herman, 1988; Schervish, in press). These range from adoption philanthropy, in which donors attend personally to recipient needs in an ongoing and multifaceted relationship, to consumption philanthropy, in which donors materially benefit from the organizations to which they contribute:

Personal engagement strategies. Direct personal contact and exchange of information between donors and beneficiaries with priority given to recipient needs
1. **Consumption.** Donors materially benefit from the organizations to which they contribute.

2. **Empowerment.** Donors seek simultaneously to enhance their own sense of self-empowerment and to give over some active organizational control to beneficiaries.

3. **Adoptive.** Donors attend personally to recipient needs in an ongoing and multifaceted relationship.

**Mediated engagement strategies.** Contact between donors and recipients mediated by organizations or other individuals, although knowledge and concern for recipient needs may be high

4. **Contributory.** Donor gives to a cause with no direct contact with recipient.

5. **Brokering.** Donors solicit other key donors in their own network.

6. **Catalytic.** Organizers donate time to mobilize large number of other donors in a mass appeal.

**Donor-oriented strategies.** Donors governed and mobilized by their own circumstances rather than by those of recipients

7. **Exchange.** Giving is propelled by mutual obligation within a network of donors.

8. **Derivative.** Giving is based on obligations associated with job expectations or family responsibilities.

9. **Noblesse oblige.** Philanthropy grows out of the decision to designate part of family money for social involvement.

**Organizational strategies.** Donors focus on using or improving the organizational aspects of philanthropy

10. **Managerial.** Efforts focus on improving the organizational effectiveness of philanthropic groups.

11. **Investment.** Philanthropy is viewed as raising and applying economic and human capital to achieve discernible outcomes.

12. **Entrepreneurial.** Hands-on efforts apply innovative approaches to fulfilling needs.

13. **Productive.** Above-market business relations with employees, suppliers, or consumers are viewed as philanthropy.

**Outpost strategies.** Philanthropy as a personal extension of the donor's family or ideology

14. **Memorial.** Philanthropic endeavors create outposts or enduring presences of one's self or others.

15. **Programmatic.** Conscious effort unites giving activities in order to achieve a coherent program of outcomes.

16. **Missionary.** Active educational efforts aim to achieve social change through individual transformation.

My focus here is on the dynamics of adoption philanthropy as a prototype for elaborating a nonreductionistic understanding of altruism.

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**Adoption and Altruism**

**Strategies Rather Than Motivation**

**Problems with the Search for Altruism.** Studies on philanthropy among the wealthy often devote much attention to uncovering the ultimate motivations that undergird giving behavior (Odendahl, 1990). Such a task is questionable for a number of reasons, the most important of which is that there is a more fruitful way to handle such aspects of subjective consciousness concerning philanthropy. It is, I contend, far more appropriate to enter the discussion from the Weberian and Durkheimian framework of subjective normative orientations of meaning and duty than from the philosophical debates over selfishness and selflessness—more appropriate, that is, to study normative motive than ultimate ethical motivation.

The actual moral discourse of philanthropy and charity enunciated by the rich in the interviews reveals five reasons why framing the issues of meaning and morality in terms of altruism is problematic at best.

**Methodological.** Even if we could resolve the problems of defining and operationalizing altruism, we would not be able to substantiate any claims about the relative prominence or relative distribution of motives without conducting a random survey of both the wealthy and the nonwealthy. As things stand, we know neither the relative propensity of altruism among the wealthy nor how this compares to the propensity among the nonwealthy.

**Hermeneutical.** The major interpretive problem of all self-reported life history is that all the respondents tend to present their lives as moral in the sense of offering a discourse of justification in which adherence to duty or subjection to fate is given as the paramount motive for action (Schervish, n.d.). Of course, we do hear descriptions of molestation, transgression, and sin. But such accounts are almost always portrayed either as vices of the past that have now been overcome or as the trespasses of others. There is, I have learned, simply no way to discern virtue from vice in autobiographical narratives.

**Empirical.** From the point of view of gaining what Weber (1968, pp. 11–12) calls a "subjectively adequate" explanation of the motivation of social action, we can explain more by identifying the strategic consciousness of actors than by embarking on a quest to discern how self-seeking someone may be. By *strategic consciousness*, I mean the array of emotion, sentiment, belief, and duty that comprises the cultural logic of how things work and how things come about in a society. As Giddens (1979, 1984) might express it, cultural logic is the array of memory traces that comprise social structure and chart the ordering principles for individual agency.

**Philosophical.** The most fundamental argument against the treatment of motive as altruism revolves around the familiar issues of reductionism.
Philosophically, it turns out that it is virtually impossible to locate any sentiment or value that is not ultimately self-interested in some important manner. Once the issue of motive has been introduced under the rubric of altruism, we are forced into an ever receding task of locating some non-self-interested disposition precisely in the arenas in which people are most emotionally and spiritually engaged.3

Theoretical. The most important problem with theories of altruism is that the moral issues around which discussions of altruism are introduced are invariably matters of moral identity. Philanthropy, along with the entire range of financial engagements, is for the wealthy inextricably linked to the dynamics of self-construction. Whatever can be said theoretically about altruism cannot, it seems, be fruitfully pursued from the starting point of selflessness. Instead of working to define altruism and its opposite, I argue that it is more useful to investigate the variety of moral careers and moral identities that individuals construct to induce and explain their strategic practices.

Philanthropy as Strategy. Given these problems with the question of altruism, I suggest approaching philanthropy and other so-called pro-social behavior as part of a larger framework of subjective consciousness rather than as an issue of the presence or absence of altruism. It is a matter of setting out etiology and teleology—the background forces, goals, and purposes that mobilize behavior in a certain direction. In this way, the cultural consciousness surrounding philanthropy is part of a philanthropic strategy.

A philanthropic strategy is an internally coherent approach to philanthropy in which strategic meanings and strategic practices are combined in the pursuit of an identifiable set of goals. By focusing on philanthropic strategies, we are able to characterize philanthropic relations not just by degrees of donor altruism, the size of gifts, or the specific cause or purpose of a gift. As important as each of these focuses may be, none really helps us comprehend the mode of participation of givers or recipients in the philanthropic relation. To speak of strategies of philanthropy as modes of consciousness and modes of engagement is to highlight the different ways in which people actually come to think about and carry out philanthropy and hence the way in which they construct their moral identity.

As a social logic, each mode of philanthropy varies according to the complex goal or teleology composed of the array of intended outcomes for the philanthropist, the cause supported, and society in general; the strategic meaning or consciousness constituting the philanthropist's understanding of the way the world works, the way it ought to be, and the way to transform it; and the strategic practice that sets in motion a causal trajectory to execute the strategic consciousness and achieve the intended goal—a way of carrying it out.

Sixteen Strategies. In the course of the research, my colleagues and I uncovered sixteen strategies of philanthropy. We do not claim that this list is exhaustive or that it is the only way to categorize types of philanthropy. We found that most of our respondents engaged in a number of strategies, although it is usually the case that one particular logic tends to dominate an individual's approach to philanthropy. Therefore, although the sixteen strategies primarily characterize modes of philanthropy, it is possible to speak about types of philanthropists as well.

It turns out that one major expression of empowerment among the wealthy is their ability to take up whatever strategy or combination of strategies they like or find necessary at any particular time and to frame an overall picture of philanthropy by pursuing the complement of strategies that they deem most appealing. It is not just that our respondents can choose to do something about a wide range of interests. They can choose to do so through a wide array of approaches or modes of engagement. Once again, philanthropy, like all other practices among the wealthy, is a domain in which self-construction and world building occur in a mutually satisfying and enriching manner.

Adoption Philanthropy

Anne Walton-May took up adoption philanthropy in response to her daughter's persistent questioning. It was during the early stages of the woman's movement, Walton-May explains, and "the stuff that my daughter was asking me" spurred the mother to look more deeply into how she viewed things. After all, she concludes, "you think when you have money you don't have to form opinions. You never push yourself because you don't have to." Animated by this realization, Walton-May took time out from her "committee tables" and fundraising to embark on a journey in search of a new identity: "Got a van. Painted it. Drove around the country. And the next year went off to Europe with my daughter and some friends and faced a lot of hard stuff."

This "set me in different directions," she declares, including her approach to philanthropy. She did more than shift to new projects or increase her giving. She refashioned her identity, "learning about myself in caring," as she puts it. In the course of adopting a new self-understanding, she came to adopt a group of women writers she had learned to view as soul mates. She established a country retreat for them, explaining that "creating a spot of land that is very peaceful for me, I think, may be peaceful for other people. And if that can nurture their talents or nurture their soul, that's what I'm trying to achieve."

Finding a way to nurture the souls of her associates and to create the opportunity for them to fulfill their dreams leads Walton-May to view her philanthropy in a new light:
The change has been that I'm giving very little to organizations and most of it to people. So I said, to heck with the deduction. That doesn't make any difference to me. And the people targets, the people are those with whom I want to share a dream. Or maybe it isn't as much a dream, but it's just they have a need. So that runs into a situation which has led to me to the thirty-acre farm. Part of what I'm going to do on the farm is to operate a retreat for women writers. No charge. So here's a group of women who obviously have dreams for their own abilities and what they want to say and are attracted to working outdoors a few months.

From this example, we find that the dominant characteristic of the adoption strategy is a personal and often unmediated relation between philanthropists and the individual or collective beneficiaries of their assistance. Although many logics are structured around a strong affective orientation of the philanthropist toward a particular organization, cause, or issue, adoptive philanthropy is unique in the immediacy of the link between donor and recipient.

The strategic consciousness of the adoption logic focuses on the specific needs of identifiable individuals rather than on large-scale or abstract causes. What characterizes the strategic consciousness of an adoptive philanthropist is a sensitivity to the needs and problems of specific people for whom the philanthropist has a personal concern. In this sense, it is possible to understand adoptive philanthropy as a philantrophy of the ordinary aimed at making a discernible contribution to solving problems precisely as they occur in the everyday lives of individuals. The strategic concern with the mundane, everyday reality of those in need is articulated quite nicely by Chicago heiress Sharon Bennett: "I can't enjoy myself unless other people are enjoying themselves and can meet their car payments and so on," she says. "I've got a peculiar compulsion to be my brother's keeper in a very small sphere, if I can. All I can do is be as nice as I can within my own small sphere of influence."

Adoptive philanthropists look to make a difference in people's lives but wish to do so without the mediation of organizations that may separate them from those whom they wish to help. They want to address needs and problems directly, as experienced and defined by the recipients. The pleasures of adoptive philanthropy come, according to our respondents, not from devoting themselves to a grand cause or worthwhile institution—although this almost always remains important in some way—but from being efficacious in altering a small but important aspect of the beneficiary's life. As one such giver explains, "I prefer small, personal, individualized gifts that really do something directive—like somebody who needs a computer."

Like all ideal adoptive relations, adoption in philanthropy is guided by a desire to provide an environment of sustenance, encouragement, and guidance. As New Yorker Laura Madison told us, her aim is to give "human beings the opportunity to be human." The logic of adoptive philanthropy is usually—but not always—informed by a desire to enable recipients to enhance their individuality on their own terms rather than to change their lives by imposing a regime of reformation. The theme of nurturing is a motif that occurs repeatedly in the discourse of adoptive philanthropists. It gets formulated in words similar to those of Walton-May, who uses the metaphor of gardening to describe her mission:

When you care for somebody, it begins to work toward loving somebody, which respects your individuality, my individuality. And it's that kind of subtle growth that I think I'm making. And nurturing is very much a part of what I have to do. Well, I know I love to do that. I love to make gardens grow, flowers grow. I'm not very good at that, but I like that. The out-of-doors can be the nurturing agent for people, too.

Representative examples of adoptive philanthropy practiced by various respondents include buying Bach Stradivarius trumpets and loaning them to promising young musicians; financing professional tennis lessons for and personally counseling a talented young athlete from a poor neighborhood who otherwise would not be able to pursue the sport as a possible career; and sponsoring a class of poor urban school children by providing them with educational counseling throughout high school, paying for their college education, and giving them access to cultural activities outside their neighborhood. In all these cases, the philanthropist not only gives money but is personally present and responsive to the recipients on a regular basis. We find that the practice of adoptive philanthropy often exhibits a level of personal involvement by the philanthropist with individual recipients that exceeds that shown in any other logic. This raises a final crucial point.

The fact that adoption philanthropy often entails gifts of money in addition to gifts of time directly to specific individuals rather than through existing charitable organizations means that much adoption philanthropy is not legally defined as charity. As Edna Simpson, a New York heiress, puts it, "We have our own little charities that have nothing to do with anyone else's." Again we see the importance of defining philanthropy as a social relation of care between donor and recipient, especially when the transfers of adoptive philanthropy occur between friends or relatives. Although I do not have much to report about such transfers—mainly because the respondents did not talk about them at any length—the comments of Seattle investor Hugh Pierce about his intrafamily transfers as a form of philanthropy demonstrate why it is reasonable to define certain personal transfers between individuals as philanthropy:
My father is reaching retirement. He has enough to live on but doesn’t have enough to live what we would perceive should be the quality. When he gives up his job, his standard of living could suffer as much as 50 percent. We don’t want that to happen. So that’s very critical to us. So first priorities are the loved ones—not from an inheritance standpoint; it’s just current needs. Our son-in-law and daughter wanted to go back to college, so we didn’t want them to have to give up their standard of living, so we took care of that.

Similarly, hardware entrepreneur Ralph Pellegrino regards assistance of his children as akin more to philanthropy than to inheritance. When his son graduated, Pellegrino told him, “You can do anything you want. If you’d like to teach school, because your father will take care of you financially, you can afford that luxury to be a schoolteacher. Or if you want to be an artist or write a book, you can afford that luxury because you got somebody who’s going to take care of you.” In this sense, his children are the beneficiaries of a permanent adoptive relation. “Even though my kids are grown up, they’re all dependent. I believe in nepotism, too. The apple don’t fall too far from the tree.”

Given such adoptive sensitivities toward their families, it is not surprising to find some respondents approaching the line at which family philanthropy crosses over into inheritance. This is the case for Detroit real estate and insurance magnate David Stephanov, who refers to his kids as “my cause.” His words are replete with family imagery, beginning with his explanation that his singular care for his children is “cause I didn’t have a dad”:

I sort of decided that I want to see my kids when I’m alive with good money—you know, substantial incomes for their academic use. But also I just didn’t want for them to have to wait till I die to get it. So I started setting up family partnerships seven or eight years ago with no names. So I have more fun. Like right now I’m building this company, and the question everybody’s wondering about is: Is he going to give it to his family? The kids own a lot of my land and a lot of my estate. And when is there enough for them? I don’t know.

Of course, neither Stephanov’s gifts to his children or the gifts of Pierce and Pellegrino are legally classified as charity and cannot be declared as charitable deductions. But they are, for all practical purposes, emotionally defined as philanthropy by those making the gifts. I realize that legal and conceptual reasons may make it difficult for some to endorse a definition of philanthropy that includes such transactions. Nevertheless, as we can see, the donors functionally define such gifts as charity, and in my view they deserve to be so considered, provided they derive from the kind of positive attention to moral signals that I have discussed. Ultimately, it is not necessary to decide this question in a final way here. What is important is to recognize that the familial relationship of care that Pierce, Pellegrino, and Stephanov direct toward their own children is extended by them and other adoption philanthropists to unrelated individuals whom they “adopt” into such familial care.

Elements of Adoption Philanthropy

One prototype of adoption philanthropy is Eugene Lang’s “I Have a Dream” program. Lang was not one of our respondents, but we did interview Margaret Brimley, who in addition to providing information about Lang epitomizes the adoption strategy. Brimley is a Chicago advertising entrepreneur who is now one of numerous wealthy individuals who have followed in Lang’s footsteps by becoming a sponsor of a junior high school class “in an underprivileged area,” as she puts it. Brimley’s intention is to support them financially and personally through a college education:

I have sixty-one kids who graduated from sixth grade in June, and we each adopted our class at that time. And the idea is that we will mentor these kids, see that they each get tutoring, see that they get all kinds of other advantages we can figure out for them. And if they’ll graduate from high school, we’ll pay for college tuition. So it’s a whole lot more than giving money. It’s really a lot of involvement. We each hire a project coordinator who works with the kids on a full-time basis; that’s their job. And we spend a lot of time and a lot of energy thinking about this. The project coordinator works out of a community-based organization, which we have found in each of the communities. She has done home visits to all of the homes, and I talk with her twice a week on the phone.

In recalling her path to adoption philanthropy and describing its personal significance, Margaret Brimley touches on all the important elements that distinguish this form of philanthropy as a distinctive strategy. In the following sections, I examine six elements of adoption philanthropy that are contained, in whole or in part, in what Brimley and other respondents have told us. It should be remembered, of course, that these elements are separable only in an analytical sense and that in actual practice they coexist and overlap. These are the six elements of adoption philanthropy:

- A decision to move beyond or complement previous philanthropic approaches in search of a more vital and personalized strategy
- A concern to assist individuals or groups of people who are personally known by name
- Direct personal contact with the recipients, often in the form of surrogate or foster family relationships
An effort to transform the overall quality of the recipients' lives by influencing a number of aspects of their reality

A tendency to empathize with recipients, often related to seeing in them a recapitulation of the donor's own personal history

A sense of satisfaction, derived from making a difference in the lives of recipients, that engenders a potential for simultaneous relations of care and relations of control.

The Quest for a More Vital Philanthropy

Those who take up adoption philanthropy, like their counterparts who become involved in empowerment, catalytic, and entrepreneurial strategies, are usually already involved in some form of philanthropy and choose this new approach in an explicit effort to enliven and enrich their giving activity. "The art museums—I've thought about giving to them," confides Walter Adams, a Boston entrepreneur. But because galleries are "snotty" and museums are "a bit of an aloof group," Adams would "rather support an artist than support the art museums." Thus, Adams and his wife have tracked down and now support a "remarkably talented" artist whose work his wife "liked" and who, on a personal level, Adams feels, is a "really good guy we just like." Because moving to adoption philanthropy requires a substantial increase in the commitment of time and often an increase in financial gifts as well, the decision is made for positive reasons revolving around a tendency, practically a yearning, for a special personal involvement. Recall the sentiment of Sharon Bennett quoted earlier. She goes out of her way to locate and assist budding musicians as well as members of her household staff: "I can't enjoy myself unless other people are enjoying themselves. . . . I've got a peculiar compulsion to be my brother's keeper in a small sphere if I can." Eugene Lang and Margaret Brimley also moved to adoption philanthropy from their more conventional contributory efforts in which they expressed their concern for particular causes mainly by donating money. For Lang, the transformation was direct and immediate. As he came face to face with the sixth graders, he recognized the hollowness of his prepared text and moved on the spot to make a more effective commitment, one that bolstered his own participation as he worked to improve the fortune of others. For Brimley, her embarking on an adoption strategy occurred over a period of time once her business had "come together" and she had "both time and money" for a more extensive involvement with the recipients of her largesse.

Knowing the Recipient by Name

Perhaps the simplest way to discern whether a particular type of philanthropy may be adoptive is to see if a donor knows the name of the recipient. Knowing the name of the recipient turns out not to be a sufficient criterion for defining philanthropy as adoptive—those engaging in entrepreneurial and empowerment philanthropy often know the names of their recipients, too. But it is a necessary condition in the sense that adoption philanthropists seek to assist identifiable individuals and groups rather than causes or groups in general. Again, this does not mean that adoption philanthropy is necessarily more ethical or entails greater dedication. After all, very great sums of money are contributed by individuals for what they consider to be very important causes without the personal association found in adoption philanthropy. I will later argue that it is ethically beneficial—and even commendable—for such generous contributors to complement their contributory philanthropy with a moderate adoptive initiative. They could, for instance, make an effort to get to know at least a segment of the larger and necessarily anonymous population of hospital patients or university students who comprise the majority of the beneficiaries of any substantial gift. Nevertheless, the fact remains that adoption philanthropy by its nature tends to be limited to relatively smaller endeavors and for that reason is usually only one of a number of strategies carried out by adoption philanthropists.

Boston entrepreneur Ethan Wright practices adoption philanthropy in a unique way by serving essentially as an adoption broker. He locates and buys illustrious musical instruments, which he makes available to eminent virtuosos. At first, Wright pretty much pursued the kinds of adoption strategies we have already identified, intermingling them at times with the less involved approaches of contributory philanthropy. "I would say my giving was pretty much Jewish organizations, the state of Israel was the primary one, the synagogue secondarily, but not a tremendous amount. And then to individuals, to the kids, friends, people like that." But as time went on, he explains, his philanthropy "began broadening into music very much, both in terms of organizations and individuals."

Here, I am interested in his adoptive relation with individuals. The following extensive quotation requires only a brief comment to point out a unique aspect of Wright's approach. We learn that Wright combs the world for both precious instruments and worthy musicians, seeking to link specifically named individuals—"the greats," as he calls them—with specifically named instruments. One way to characterize his efforts is to say that he adopts people through the intermediary of instruments. But it may be more accurate to consider him an adoption broker serving as a one-man adoption agency bringing together named musicians and named musical instruments. As he puts it, his adoptive efforts make it possible for selected virtuosos to "get into the ownership ranks," in effect enabling them to join him as adoptive agents by taking particular instruments into their care:

It just happens that I happen to be friendly with the greats. They weren't great then, they were young kids twenty years ago. . . . Through the
Surrogate Family Relations

The third distinguishing characteristic of adoption philanthropy is the personal contact between donor and recipient that is expressed in the imagery of surrogate family relations. This relationship is sometimes mediated so that the contact takes the form of letters and pictures. But in all cases, the relational issues remain at center stage both as an incentive for new or increased giving and, as will be discussed in a subsequent section, as a source of satisfaction. This sentiment is summarized by San Francisco philanthropist Elizabeth Murray, who recalls from her childhood the aphorism posted by her great-grandfather “above almost every bed” at her family’s summer home: “Do something for the country, the city, the community, the family in which you live.” The key to understanding adoption philanthropists is to note how they emotionally transpose heretofore anonymous citizens of their country, city, and community into members of their family.

The adoptive relation to parents is made explicit by former N.F.L. player Robert Coretti, who is embittered by the big-business ethos of football, especially since the Players’ Association has refused to move the coverage date back in order to include unpensioned veterans. He encourages present-day players to help veterans out of a sense of family that he expresses through a profoundly felt parental analogy. “The people that helped bring the game to this stage you don’t forget,” he insists, reiterating his argument to a hypothetical audience of current members of the Players’ Association:

To me, it’d be like forgetting your parents who fed you before you went to college, fed you for the first eighteen years. Sure, they had an obligation, but let’s say they came on hard times after you graduated, got your degree, or whatever. And they’re in need. Do you forget them completely? To me, it’s the same thing in essence. I mean, you don’t cut the hand that feeds you, that helped bring you to where you are. So I think there’s definitely a moral obligation. Is it going to cramp your style, that $15 a month? Is it really going to affect you? But it could take care of some poor sucker down the road that helped bring the game in the twenties, thirties and forties to where you’re enjoying your status today. Well, you’re paying your dues. I understand that. You’re out there taking risks. So did they. They spilled a lot of blood on the same fields you’re playing on. That’s my personal opinion. Now, I’m mad, when they started this crap. It’s selfishness. It’s become a personal issue with me. They’re insulting your intelligence. They don’t want to help.

To Change a Person’s Life

The fourth constitutive element of adoption philanthropy is the effort by benefactors to improve the overall quality of those whom they support.
Consistent with the other elements of personal involvement already discussed, donors consistently recount a concern to influence or transform not one but a multiplicity of dimensions in the lives of their beneficiaries, to shape their lives as a whole and their fortunes for the future. This is the kind of relationship that exists between sponsor and student in the "I have a Dream" program. "There's a lot to learn," says Brimley, "about how to best deal with kids and what the kids need and how to get it for them." In this respect, she echoes New York philanthropist Herbert Tucker, whose participative ethos carries into the business sphere, where he has founded a children's museum at which he works when not in his Wall Street office. For Tucker, to personally touch the beneficiary is an intrinsic part of giving: "To me, giving is part of the relationship, and if someone is asking for a kiss you can just [makes kissing noise] and let it go at that, or you can really sort of explore and see what they want and what will best serve them." Arthur Merton, whose adoption philanthropy revolves around scholarship support for black students at his alma mater, states his all-encompassing concern less poetically: "I think that making a contribution so that people can get an education which hopefully will equip them to make a living and still at the same time contribute and be good citizens is a worthwhile effort, whether it's funds or whatever."

Treating specific individuals in need with the fullest human dignity is the ideal that Laura Madison holds up as the essence of philanthropy. The sixty-three-year-old New York social activist, who grew up on Long Island in what she describes as a stereotypical blue blood family, now confines almost all her gifts to advancing "what a human being's all about." Neither Biblical aphorism—"the poor are always with us"—nor the difficulty of "a rich man's getting through the eye of the needle" have anything to do with "being a human being." "Being a human being isn't dependent on being poor or rich to my mind," Madison explains. "It's dependent on being aware and caring and conscious and responding to whatever you can respond to when the need arises." For Madison, this means taking the emotional and even physical risk of putting the adoption ethic into practice on the streets of Manhattan.

For others, continues Madison, "My goal is that human beings have an opportunity to be truly human, which very few people are." For herself, providing such opportunity "basically means being totally loving."

Adoption and Altruism

For instance, on the streets here there are people begging all the time. Some of them are having emotional and mental trouble so strongly that it's kind of hard to speak to them, because they can be almost violent, and it's kind of frightening. But whenever I can, when somebody asks me for money and I feel that I can speak to them, I ask them if they are unable to find any place that can shelter them, or what's happening in their lives. And if they're young, I try to send them up to a place on Sixth Avenue where they're doing wonderful things to young people—taking them in, teaching them, educating them, giving them jobs.
today is big business. When you’re talking about a half-a-minute commercial during the Super Bowl being $500,000 or $1 million, and this poor soul is over here—and I can mention names that you remember who are in need and need help.

Making a Difference: The Satisfactions of Care and Control

We have seen that those who take up the adoption strategy as part of their philanthropy are especially devoted to the ethic of making a difference by targeting their donations of time and money in order to make a distinctive and discernible contribution to shaping the lives of others. Although the adoption strategy may in some ways appear to carry with it a positive ethical valence because it often attends to personally and empathetically to the lives of recipients, there are opportunities, as with the other strategies, for adoption philanthropy to become a mode of control. It is difficult, and unnecessary for my purposes here, to discern whether any particular adoption philanthropist is imbued more with the temptations of control than with the virtues of care. It is possible, however, to explore the distinctive ways in which the direct intervention that lies at the heart of adoption philanthropy and in which it contrasts with other approaches lends itself to extending relations of control as well as to relations of care. The very same sense of personal self-fulfillment and pride that induces donors to provide recipients with resources to meet needs and fulfill aspirations can also open up the possibility for manipulation.

Adoption philanthropy, it turns out, introduces an unanticipated opportunity into the lives of the less financially advantaged. We have seen the myriad ways in which adoption philanthropists make such interventions. Much adoption is not anonymous and entails the kind of empathic personal contact that tempts the temptation of manipulation. At the same time, however, adoption philanthropy always reflects a stark difference in economic status as evidenced by the typical focus of adoption philanthropy on the poor, minorities, women, and third-world populations. This invites the prospect that making a difference in the lives of others can result in the donor’s determining what that difference must be. Of course, all strategies of philanthropy direct some of their efforts toward assisting the poor and powerless. But the individuated attention of adoption philanthropy leaves more room for a subtle reinforcement of hierarchical distance, just as it more readily opens the philanthropic relation to the personal incorporation of recipient into the affective circle of kith and kin.

Like Walton-May, whom I quoted at the beginning of the article, Herbert Tucker, the founder of the children’s museum, uses a gardening analogy to emphasize the pleasures in the growth and nurturing facets of adoption, facets that he in turn associates with the legacy of care and love:

There’s enormous pleasure in watering flowers, and most people who haven’t watered flowers are afraid of holding the sprinkler can, or water too much or too little, or [don’t know] when to water, or whatever it is. But once one starts to get the hang of doing that, boy, you can just feel the gratitude and joy and everything else with pleasure. So it’s a question of whether one wants to…

“I think that it’s like love,” he explains. It is freely given, not manipulative, like “asking for a kiss,” as he puts it, and exploring what the other person wants.

Where the level of personal engagement is as great as it is in the adoptive model, we should expect the potential for less other-directed benefits to be great as well. Each of the adoptive philanthropists quoted thus far has alluded to the personal gain in one way or another as an intrinsic satisfaction derived from the benefits that accrue to others. For other philanthropists, like Ethan Wright, there are also definable extrinsic rewards, not necessarily related to manipulation and control but nonetheless moving toward the receipt of the kinds of benefits that, if made the primary motive of philanthropy, could be seen as contaminating the moral ideal of the adoption relation. Classical music had always been a passion for Wright, himself an accomplished musician. The chance to engage in an adoptive mode added a dimension to his passion that, as we have heard, “just happens” to allow him “to be friendly with the greats,” some of whom have become “very, very good friends.”

It is precisely the hands-on involvement of adoptive philanthropy that makes this strategy so appealing to advertising entrepreneur Brittle. Ironically, however, the fact that she views her “I Have a Dream” engagement as a creative extension of her entrepreneurial practice in the business sphere introduces another way for care to slide over into control. Her philanthropy, she reports, “has an entrepreneurial aspect in terms of its hands-on control, it’s not just big foundations that you give to, and you don’t know what happens. Since I’m used to dealing with business in that way, this is a comfortable way for me to take this kind of project. I can make it happen the way I want it to happen.”

Not getting what he wants leads insurance baron Stephanov to abandon his adoption efforts altogether. He is so disturbed by the failure of his adoptees to emulate his generosity that he actually reverses the usual trajectory of adoption philanthropists from less to more engaged forms of charity. They “let me down tremendously,” he complains. Having himself grown up, in effect, without the support of a father, he established a “little trust” to put “any boy or girl who is without mother or
father... through school." His only condition was "that they help somebody else." After supporting forty-two students, he says, "I quit." His reason: "Not one of the bastards helped anybody else." The last straw was the egregious ingratitude of a woman whom he put through medical school. "I felt that my system was only satisfying me, and it wasn't a good system." If he ever takes up adoption philanthropy again, he will "set it up differently": "I'd probably set it up to put kids through med school. But I'd make them pay back, 'cause I think the kinder you are, the worse you have it, and [the worse] they have it." That is, "if you don't set up good, strong rules," people will not respond properly.

One important conclusion is that transforming the destiny of others is a delicate moral enterprise, and while in most cases of adoption philanthropy there may be cause for suspicion, there is no need for cynicism. Stephanov is determined to set in motion a chain of charity. When that fails to occur, he refuses to be a link in the chain. But it remains difficult to assert that setting conditions is necessarily a violation of the adoptive relation, even though others seem content to give their beneficiaries more leeway. Note, for instance, Janet Arnold's less constricting orientation: "I wanted to enable people to grow, to achieve their potential, whatever it is, you know, at whatever level. And I don't have any illusions that everybody has to be a Picasso or a president of something." Note as well how Florida evangelical Ross Geiger intervenes directly on behalf of Haitian migrant workers in a way that appears completely sanguine: "I, too, went into the migrant camps and taught them evangelism at their black church. In fact, we would try to work through the mission to help relocate them if they were under the domination of a man who was abusing and misusing them. We get them relocated. We get them out of there." A second important conclusion, then, is that the dialectic of care and control is not merely a contrast to be drawn between one group of selfless philanthropists and another group of selfish ones but a contradictory tendency within the horizon of every philanthropist.

The close personal contact between donor and recipient as well as the specific purpose of adoption philanthropy to make a difference in the lives of selected individuals opens the potential for care to cross over to control. Walton-May's search for a loving philanthropy that "respects your individuality [and] my individuality" can easily become Merton's hope to get other blacks to follow in his footsteps, Brimley's quest to make something happen "the way I want it to happen," and—even more to the point—Stephanov's bitter abandonment of further adoption efforts when his beneficiaries fail to meet his expectations.

The affinity and frequent coexistence of these alternative orientations make it impossible to judge the ultimate motivation of any particular adoption philanthropist. However, the language of control and possession that some adoption philanthropists employ as well as the heightened potential for unobserved and uninvited intercession demonstrate that the strong personal satisfaction derived from adoption philanthropy can exist even without a mutual accountability between donor and recipient. Still, the fact remains that the adoption strategy embodies the crucial attributes that transpose philanthropy from a distanced and sometimes faceless practice of monetary contributions to an empathic social relation engaging the donor's time and effort. As such, adoption philanthropy, despite the possibility for care to slip over into control, can be considered the prototype of ethical charity. Although it would be neither practical nor advantageous for adoption philanthropy to become the only valid strategy, it would prove fruitful if its positive relational elements were to become incorporated into the various other strategies.

Implications for Understanding Altruism

I have suggested a number of reasons why any attempt to define and operationalize altruism may be a fruitless quest. The foregoing analysis of adoption philanthropy demonstrates the precarious nature of altruism as a theoretical construct. We find no adoption philanthropists who speak of their philanthropy in terms related to the conventional notions of altruism. Adoption philanthropy is a highly rewarding philanthropic strategy, a mode of engagement that, if anything, intensifies rather than eliminates the self-interestedness of the wealthy donors. Of course, this does not mean that no contrast can be drawn between adoption philanthropy that is caring and that which is controlling. It does mean, however, that the issue of altruism may not be as important a starting point for analysis as is often presumed.

On the one hand, adoption philanthropy, which represents what might be considered the fullest form of altruism is imbued from start to finish with strong intrinsic and even extrinsic rewards for those who pursue it. It is in no real sense selfless and, indeed, turns out to be an important element of self-construction and identity formation in the moral biographies of the wealthy. On the other hand, adoption philanthropy, despite its rich opportunities for engagement, also provides the opportunity for more or less willful manipulation of the lives of others. In the end, adoption philanthropy is complex. It offers the chance for personal engagement in the social relation of philanthropy, careful attention to the needs of recipients, and commitments of time and energy in creative interventions. However, it also creates the potential for intrusive agendas setting for beneficiaries.

Still, if some notion of altruism is to be retained, I suggest that it be conceived primarily as a mode of agency: a manner of engagement rather than disengagement of self. Three possible directions for salvaging a less
moralistic notion of altruism can be derived from viewing altruism as a particular form of social agency. A political-economic approach would conceive of altruism as a form of social involvement by the wealthy that leads in one way or another to the elimination of the structural conditions that allow for the concentration of wealth and the superordinate status of donors in the first place. A communitarian and perhaps even sociobiological approach may also emanate from what I have said about adoption philanthropy. Here, altruism can be understood as the form of social agency that extends the scope of surrogate kinship relations beyond the immediate family. The question is how far beyond one's immediate social network of family and friends one extends the sentiments of familial self-interest. How broad and even anonymous is the group for which one feels self-regarding? A third direction is to connect the understanding of altruism to the ancient virtue of caritas or charity. This would mean defining altruism as the moral disposition that recognizes and honors the affective demand of those in need. In all three cases, altruism emerges as a strategy of agency rather than an ultimate motivation. It is, to draw on Anne Walton-Mays, a manner of sharing a dream rather than abandoning one.

Notes

1. For a detailed description of sampling procedures and research methodology, see Chapter 1 of Schervish and Herman (1988).
2. The passage from Feuerbach reads: "Speech has the same form both for entreaty and command, namely, the imperative. And the imperative of love has infinitely more power than that of despisement. Love does not command; love needs but gently to intimate its wishes to be certain of their fulfillment; the despisement must throw compulsion even into the tones of his voice in order to make other beings, in themselves uncaring for him, the executors of his wishes. The imperative of love works with electromagnetic power; that of despisements with the mechanical power of a wooden telegraph. The most intemate epithet of God in prayer is the word Father.
3. I have discussed the issue of hyperagency in other papers (Schervish, 1990, 1991; Schervish and Herman, 1991).
4. In this regard, I concur with James Olney (1978, p. 118) that "when it comes to autobiography, the truth of falsehood is a deeper and truer concern than the falsification of truth."
5. Alife Kohn (1990) draws on philosophers Milo (1973) and Midgley (1979) and sociologist Jencks (1991) to define altruism as simply the concern to "improve the welfare of another—period" (Kohn, 1990, p. 207). This definition, he asserts, leaves room for a proper self-love to remain and does not require an element of sacrifice. The problem is that Kohn's valiant attempt to salvage a positive meaning for altruism still ends up begging the question about self-engagement. Rather than resolving the problem of the self in regard to altruism, he removes it from consideration.
7. Gillissan (1959) is a good starting point for investigating the issue of charity in history, theology, and moral practice.
8. See Robert H. Frank (1988) for a discussion of moral sentiments, taste, emotion, and habit as transcending rational self-interest as the paradigm within which other-directed behavior is to be understood.

References

Uncompensated Costs and Indigent Health Care: Volunteers and a Community Services Budget

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With thirty-seven million people now without medical insurance, private insurers have argued that caring for those unable to pay for the services they need or without insurance is a public responsibility and not an overhead cost. However, tax-conscious voters have limited the ability of governments to spend more for health. An additional and sometimes overlooked possibility for dealing with uncompensated care is the responses that local communities can make. A community services budget framework that includes the inputs of volunteers makes large-scale and sophisticated responses possible through forms of collective organization outside the usual public programs. This framework, applied to one community, illustrates the responses that are possible and the policy questions that must be addressed to expand the options for dealing with the challenge of uncompensated medical care.

Numerous scholarly and popular publications have focused attention on the challenge of providing health services to individuals unable to afford the services they need (Sauer, 1985; Summers, 1985; Baldwin, 1986; Curtis, 1986; Weber, 1989). The cost of providing these services turn up on providers' balance sheets as uncompensated care, charity care, bad debt, or unreimbursed charges. The more than $12 billion in uncompensated services provided by hospitals jeopardizes the continued operation of some facilities (Mowl, 1989), and some physicians have begun to refuse service to patients who cannot pay for the full cost of services (Holthaus, 1989; Horine, 1990; Pear, 1991; Terry, 1991).

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