

# BOSTON COLLEGE CENTER ON WEALTH AND PHILANTHROPY

**"The Sound of One Hand Clapping:  
The Case For and Against Anonymous Giving"**

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## *The sound of one hand clapping: the case for and against anonymous giving\**

### **Abstract**

The paper draws on intensive interviews with 130 millionaires to explore the case for and against anonymous giving, to indicate a number of key findings about anonymous giving among the wealthy, and to describe the potential of anonymous giving to raise both the level of care *and* control in philanthropic relationships. The first two sections of the paper set out the case for and against anonymous giving, emphasising the instrumental and moral rationale by which the wealthy frame both sides of the issue. The third section discusses the tendencies inherent in anonymous giving toward enhancing moral stewardship and manipulation. In the conclusion, I discuss some conceptual distinctions derived from the analysis and speculate about the value of encouraging the non-wealthy to consider at least some measure of anonymous giving.

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At Christmas time, for example, we've provided funds for families without their knowing where it came from, and done it through charities so that their letters of thanks for what they did with it go back to the charity and we aren't known at all for this (Marta Stempek<sup>1</sup>).

What is the sound of one hand clapping? (Zen koan)

Anonymous giving of money may be the most under-researched topic in philanthropic studies. To my knowledge, Smith and Johnson (1991) have provided the only systematic review of the philosophical, literary, scriptural and theological literature on the long-standing tradition of anonymous giving, while Cicerchi and Weserna (1991) are the only researchers to have carried out an empirical study of contemporary anonymous giving.

This dearth of research on anonymous giving is in stark contrast to the abundant material on other aspects of fund-raising and giving. This literature examines the central variables that induce giving (Hodgkinson et al., 1992a,b; Mixer, 1993); the issues of identity, purpose and satisfactions of giving (Lawson, 1991; Burlingame, 1992; Marcus with Hall, 1992; Schervish et al., 1993); the wealthy as a distinct class of givers (Schervish and Herman, 1988; Joseph, 1989; Odendahl, 1990; Rabinowitz, 1990; Moigil et al., 1992); and the biographical accounts of wealthy philanthropists (for instance, Lenzner, 1985; Bingham, 1989; Shrock, 1989; Mellon with Baskett, 1992; Stern, 1992). There also are several compendia of bibliographies on giving, including *Philanthropy and Voluntarism: An Annotated Bibliography* (Layton, 1987); the Foundation Center's four volumes on *The Literature of the Nonprofit Sector* (1989, 1990, 1991, 1992) and the Center on Philanthropy's *Philanthropic Studies Index* (1992, 1993).

In none of these publications is there a single index or bibliographic entry referencing anonymous giving. Moreover, a search of books and periodical literature in the databases at Boston College and the Center on Philanthropy yielded only a few entries on abstract modelling of economic decision-making under conditions of anonymity and one article on altruism and anonymity in an experimental social-psychological setting.<sup>2</sup>

As I indicated, the only empirical study of anonymous giving is the recent survey by Cicerchi and Weserna (1991). But, even here, the data are derived from interviews with 563 development professionals in the US and Canada rather than with anonymous donors. The survey reveals that less than 1 per cent of money contributed is anonymous, that most anonymous gifts are under \$100, and that 1.3 per cent of gifts of \$1 million or more are anonymous.<sup>3</sup> Individuals are by far the most frequent category of contributors requesting anonymity, but corporations, foundations and associations also do so on occasion. Donors are rarely totally anonymous. Few either make all their gifts anonymously or shield their identity from everyone involved in the transaction. The authors readily point out several methodological limitations, the most important being that the study derives its information about donor motivations from what the professionals report and not from interviews with anonymous givers themselves. According to fund-raising professionals, the most frequently cited motivation for anonymity is the donor's desire to 'to minimise solicitations from other organisations'. Nearly 51 per cent of respondents are said to make this their most important motivation, while only 5.3 per cent are said to be motivated by a 'deeply felt religious conviction' and 4.6 per cent by a 'sense of privacy, humility, [or] modesty' (Cicerchi and Weserna, 1991, pp.9-10). The authors speculate that most anony-

mous givers probably have a complex array of reasons for secrecy and that moral and religious motivations would probably receive more emphasis if donors were allowed to speak for themselves. 'The statistical analysis of our findings about donor motivations provides important clues to understanding behavior in a population,' the authors write, 'while it is the anecdotal information [provided by donors] that best conveys the richness of human motives and values' (p.9).

In this paper, I take up where Cicerchi and Weserna leave off. Whereas their survey documents the motivations for anonymous giving attributed to donors by fund-raising professionals, my research explores the motives and values that anonymous donors themselves cited in the course of intensive interviews. These interviews were conducted with 130 millionaires in conjunction with The Study on Wealth and Philanthropy, funded at Boston College from 1984-1989 by the T.B. Murphy Foundation Charitable Trust. Of the 130 respondents, approximately 35 had something substantial to say about anonymous giving.<sup>4</sup> Even though our findings are technically anecdotal, the fact that so many respondents expressed relatively convergent views persuades me that we have uncovered a good portion of what the wealthy have to say about anonymous giving.<sup>5</sup>

In the following analysis I draw on these interviews to explore two propositions about anonymous giving. The first proposition is that donors rarely view anonymous giving as an unequivocally superior strategy. Donors intelligently recognise the cases both for and against anonymous giving, and explain their approach to anonymity with reference to pragmatic and moral arguments. The second proposition is that anonymous giving is indeterminate in regard to its effects. While donors invariably express moral intentions, the actual outcomes of anonymous giving may sometimes be less than ideal. By its very nature, anonymity simultaneously increases the potential for both magnanimity and manipulation. In the conclusion, I discuss some conceptual distinctions derived from the analysis and speculate about the value of encouraging the non-wealthy to consider at least some measure of anonymous giving.

### **The case for anonymous giving**

The case for anonymous giving enunciated by wealthy donors revolves around both instrumental and ethical arguments. Naturally, respondents do not conveniently segregate their comments into those two analytical categories. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, I first explore the pragmatic reasons donors marshal for being anonymous and then discuss their moral rationale.

*Instrumental posture: 'The anonymity thing can ... increase the impact of your gift.'*

As an *instrumental posture*, anonymity is considered a means to increase the effectiveness of one's philanthropic efforts. The choice to be anonymous is a strategic decision framed within a calculus of getting things done in the most proficient manner. The instrumental rationale for anonymity includes such strategic purposes as circumventing feelings of embarrassment about being wealthy or philanthropic; augmenting one's capacity to influence the lives of others; obtaining a vantage point from which to covertly view philanthropic outcomes; empowering recipients by granting them leeway in how they may use donations; shielding the giver from subsequent requests; and fulfilling the donor's desire to lead a private life-style.

One instrumental posture for anonymous giving revolves around how anonymity *reduces the bothersome aspects* of philanthropy. 'There are millions of reasons why people don't give,' reports New Yorker Herbert Tucker who is the unnamed donor behind a prominent children's museum. In response to those who feel philanthropy is too bothersome, he declares, 'I take the position that everybody can give differently, they can give anonymously. Give without leaving home. Give without the guy knowing you did this.' The wealthy can always 'get somebody else to give' their money for them and can be 'as much or as little involved' as they wish. 'Therefore the barriers to giving aren't necessarily so great,' he concludes. 'If it hurts to write the checks, write one check per year and then have somebody else write the 50 million smaller checks out of it,' advises Tucker. As long as someone is convinced that giving is important, then anonymity is the key to keeping philanthropy from occupying too much of one's attention. The real question is to figure out 'what barriers keep a man from giving,' explains Tucker. As long as the individual 'believes that the ground deserves watering and even has the sense of maybe you can feel good about that, then we'll work on what has to be done in order to get the obstacles removed'.

A second instrumental rationale for anonymous giving is to *hide the fact that one is wealthy*. Karl and Marta Stempek are prototypical anonymous givers. They report that one of the most important reasons for giving anonymously is their desire to be known only by what someone can pick up about them from what they do publicly.

We may give [public] gifts to a thing that we are very much interested in, let's say a hundred dollars, but we may be supporting that same thing with \$25,000 or \$50,000 from the foundation and nobody ever knows that.

They do not conceal the gifts that people in their situation would be expected to contribute. But they do not want to be known as substantial givers, much less as wealthy. The result, says Karl who works as a department head at Columbia University Medical School, is that 'when people come to us for funds or anything, it's of the order of what they might ask some full-time professor in a medical school,' and not what they might ask from someone who is independently wealthy.

Related to the desire to lead a private life-style is a second rationale for anonymous giving, namely to *deflect the embarrassment of being a philanthropist*. While the Stempeks camouflage their philanthropy in order to appear ordinary, others shield their philanthropy in order to circumvent feelings of shame. Ruth Robbins, founder of the Victoria Fund in Detroit, recalls that day in 1979 when she decided to 'come out' as a public donor.

I was sort of hanging out in the Victoria Fund office and I think everybody sort of thought I was Susan's assistant or something like that. And my ego couldn't stand it any more. So I finally started becoming public as the donor. First to funders, and then the second step was to people we had given money to, which was much harder.

But what had hindered her public engagement all those years?

I was very embarrassed about [my philanthropy], it's still sort of embarrassing. I don't like to be thanked for what I am doing very much. There are still ways that I sort of don't claim that what's going on here has anything to do with me. When people come up and fuss over me and say 'thank you' and 'that's wonderful,' I get very uncomfortable.

The same is true for Gwen Phillips, who distributes her inherited money secretly through Chicago's Midway Foundation. Having discovered this vehicle for her philanthropy, 'making a decision to give money away' was no longer 'a problem for me'. This 'provided a great deal of relief to me because I didn't want to feel that I couldn't give money away while I waited to resolve my conflict' about being wealthy amidst poverty.

A fourth instrumental basis for anonymous giving is to help recipients *pursue their mission with less encumbrance*. Concealing one's identity allows recipients to concentrate on their responsibilities instead of constantly looking over their shoulder at the presumed intentions of the donor. Arnold Kaviti explains that being anonymous, or at least 'less visible,' can 'lessen the impact of your gift' as a form of constraint and 'increase the impact of your gift' as a form of empowerment.

If you're interested in an organisation that is self-determining and self-empowering and you make a \$1,000 contribution to that organisation and the organisation only has a \$100,000 budget, you are buying more than your \$1,000 should buy



in terms of power ... But if you are interested in giving them power and making them powerful [it is improper to start] taking away that power for a mere \$1,000. ... So you need to be anonymous or at least you need to be less visible to make your gift more effective. Okay? The anonymity thing can be empowering as much as anything else. It can increase the impact of your gift.

Kaviti also notes a fifth instrumental advantage of anonymity, namely, *shielding the giver from incessant requests*. Just as anonymous giving can augment the empowerment of recipients, it can release the donor from a constant onslaught of funding requests. Erecting a shield of anonymity, argues Kaviti, enables him to 'control' his giving.

If you are very open about [your giving you lose control] because you are just being flooded with requests. [If, on the other hand,] you have a process and if you have a staff person who can say no to everybody, then that is fine.

Karl Stempek concurs that one of the 'more practical points' in anonymous giving is that 'we are not hounded by people for funds'.

If we surfaced, giving the amounts of money we give, we would be hounded. People would say, 'Oh you gave so much to this, you better do something for me or for my particular cause.' It would be terribly unpleasant for somebody to say 'You gave this much money to the scholarship thing, why don't you give to my thing?' and then to be known in the community as somebody who gives. We are not known; nobody knows we give to anything.

Moreover, according to Karl, this strategy also protects their children who, because of their parents' disapproval of large inheritances, will probably not end up exceptionally well healed anyway.

For our kids [being constantly badgered for donations] would be a disaster because they don't live that kind of life where that money would be available. And this way they can do it anonymously, enjoy it, and nobody ever comes to them for a dime.

Respondents discuss a sixth benefit that accrues to them from anonymity. In addition to reiterating Kaviti's and Karl Stempek's concern about being hounded, many also emphasise that remaining unnamed permits them to *retain a simple life-style*. Karl Stempek, referring to the primary rationale for his and Marta's staunch insistence on secrecy in their philanthropy, says,

We had six children and wanted a simple life-style, as simple as possible ... and from the very start we decided that the money that we had inherited would be used for philanthropic reasons. We set up a foundation, but - this is very important - we gave the foundation an anonymous name which doesn't relate to our family. And we have used the foundation not only for providing funds but for providing anonymity and it is not known in the community that we provide funds for various things, it is not known to this day ... confidentiality

is terribly important to us [because it guarantees that] we live in a very low profile here and our children in an even lower profile.

By neutralising the inhibitions of embarrassment, anonymity can also have the net effect of *increasing a donor's concrete effectiveness*. Marta Stempek recounts how she had been talked into becoming the volunteer administrator of the public service organisation, Women's Lives, 'so they wouldn't have to pay somebody'. It was 'just at the time when government support started to be cut, and it was slashed so drastically we were on the verge of total annihilation'. As part of her fund-raising efforts she initiated a matching grant programme which she arranged by covertly obtaining the matching funds from her own foundation. She told her co-workers only that she had applied to a foundation 'for a matching grant up to \$10,000 for all individual contributions,' and that the foundation had agreed. This strategy worked; she secured the needed funding while preserving her behind-the-scenes identity.

An eighth incentive for donors to conceal their identity is to secure an unobstructed view from which to *accurately view their philanthropic interventions*. As I will discuss below, occupying what in many ways amounts to a 'hunting blind' cuts two ways. While it provides a vantage point for improved observation, it also allows the donor to become an undetected protagonist, a sort of deist demigod. But as an ingredient in the case for anonymous giving, donors emphasise the first aspect. Having a concealed vantage point allows philanthropists to gather more reliable information about the effects of their beneficence. Karl Stempek recalls an example that is similar to Marta's matching grant for Women's Lives. This is their series of contributions to student loan funds, particularly at medical schools. Here he and Marta 'were again withdrawn,' says Karl, invoking a telling spatial metaphor. One anonymous grant of their foundation was a gift of \$25,000 a year for five years to be used at Columbia University for student loans - 'only if it could be matched by contributions from the students and their parents and the University'. The programme is now in its fourth year and has been matched every year. University officials, however, 'don't know it is coming from us at all and we have enjoyed that thoroughly'. Although they are 'withdrawn' as philanthropists, the Stempeks are not unobservant. Karl Stempek recounts,

Fifteen years ago when Columbia University needed encouragement to take on black students, minority students, the foundation gave large sums of money to provide scholarships to be used only for minority students.



Once the programme was established, however, Karl could in his capacity as a member of the admissions committee put his contribution to work in a covert way.

I could be on the admissions committee and be a part of that and choose the students. And nobody would ever know that we were doing this. So you see the satisfaction we get is from doing things behind the scenes without anybody knowing it is us. And our joy comes from observing these things directly. And incidentally, our children have done the same thing in each of their communities – have given money anonymously through the foundation for things that have been terribly exciting for them to see without anybody ever knowing.

*Ethical posture: 'I didn't want no publicity over it ... That's not good for you to do.'*

In making the case for anonymous giving, wealthy donors seldom if ever focus simply on instrumental objectives. Because being anonymous symbolically encapsulates so much about their character, anonymous givers almost always complement their instrumental rationale with an array of ethical considerations. As an *ethical posture*, anonymous giving derives from an appreciation of the moral or spiritual value of anonymity as an end in itself. What matters is the effect of anonymity on the character of the donor rather than the effect on the workings of philanthropy. As such, anonymous philanthropy is a form of moral identity in addition to a mode of practical action. For instance, one ethical rationale is to view anonymity as a way to transcend corrupting influences upon giving, such as publicity, self-aggrandisement and control; reduce obligations of gratitude; de-emphasise the importance of recognition and other rewards; promote anonymity as a preferred philanthropic model, and express one's religious or spiritual commitment.

The first tenet of the ethical posture is that remaining hidden helps donors *transcend the corrupting lures of wealth and philanthropy*. Howard Berger, the retired founder of a hotel chain, summarises the moral challenge of anonymous giving.

Many times people give because of some plaque that gives them credit for it ... The most difficult gift to give is the anonymous gift where it goes into a pot and there isn't any plaque on the wall. There isn't a name or anything.

For donors who couch their anonymity in moral terms, it is crucial that their giving be done in a way that advances a personal asceticism. Despite the instrumental advantages of 'going public' with their contributions, many respondents agree with Lisa and Daniel Rayburn that anonymity curtails the proclivity to highlight the giver rather than the gift. They stipulate, for example, that the exercise cycle they

contributed to an inner-city YMCA have no plaque affixed to it saying 'This is the Rayburn cycle.' The same is true for their gifts 'earmarked' for their temple or other specific purposes. Although much of the Rayburns' giving is public, they are particularly concerned that their gifts serve others rather than themselves.

A second moral rationale is that anonymity *advances one's psychological health*. David Stephanov, reflecting on his own financial ascent as one who became 'swift rich', says that turning to giving and, in particular, to anonymous giving is an important antidote to the egoistic 'in-securities' associated with becoming wealthy.

When a swift rich starts to accumulate money and he's got enough, he recognises that one of his ways to overcome some of his insecurities is to become a little bit benevolent.

Stephanov describes the sequence of events by which he expanded his anonymous giving in remembrance of his fatherless childhood:

What I did is I put a lot of kids through school. I set up a little trust and put through school any boy or girl who was without mother or father. Then I finally put doctors through med school – any boy or girl as long as they were missing one parent. I used to have Congregational ministers find them for me. Then I started giving to various schools, we have a chair at the University of Michigan, this is confidential. We just gave the university about three-quarters of a million dollars about five years ago. We didn't want anything. No publicity and no applause. We just gave it.

'I didn't want no publicity over it. I didn't want to attend any of the ceremonies or functions. That's not good for you to do,' concludes Stephanov without further comment. Asked why it is not good to do, Stephanov explains that while 'it's okay' to 'take a little publicity when you're older,' it is not good 'when you're younger'. The reason: 'money's a bad thing, money's a terrible burden,' especially if 'you want recognition'.

A third moral objective of anonymity is to *promote an ethic of selflessness* in oneself and in others. Not only does anonymity counter the lures of prestige, it also cultivates the virtue of benevolence. Stephanov, for example, anonymously helped a black inner-city student, whose school dropped its football programme, but who still needed to play out his senior year in order to prove himself to college recruiters. Stephanov paid the \$2,400 tuition for the inner-city player to attend his son's high school, even though Stephanov's son played the same position. It turned out that the inner-city player was 'my son's greatest threat' and 'beat my kid out'. Yet for Stephanov, it was 'more important' that the black kid 'managed to get a scholarship and is finishing at State' than it was to preserve the scholarship

chances of his own son, who would be heading to college fully supported anyway. Investment Banker Gerald Sasser explains how he was inspired by someone else's anonymous gift. Although never having given anonymously himself, he has been involved in charities 'where we received anonymous gifts'. Anonymous gifts are great, Sasser says, But I think if you give anonymously you're giving a lot of money, something around \$500,000. I've seen a \$550,000 gift to one of the hospitals I'm involved in, with a statement that if you check who gave this money or give us any publicity we won't give to the hospital. Now that's one of the greatest gifts I've ever seen.

A fourth moral rationale is to *shield the recipient from embarrassment*. This intention governs the procedures of the secret philanthropic club brought together by former NFL halfback Raymond Wendt from among his extensive sports contacts.

I'd say this is a charity which was designated by a bunch of guys I hang around with downtown called 'The Backfield'. It came out one day that I used to play with a man who died of cancer and his wife had real bills and couldn't get enough money to take care of that bill.

So Wendt's group quietly raised the money and offered it to his friend's widow through an intermediary.

Each year from then on, The Backfield has sponsored a sports banquet or golf tourney that raises about \$25,000 for their causes. Members of the group are told to keep an eye out for 'things that are important or people in need that could be helped by us in a timely way'. There's a lot of red tape [in the formal philanthropic and welfare sector] and a lot of things happen that fall between the cracks. [The goal is to] find out about these people through our membership and make sure people get a check.

The Backfield has 'stepped in quickly' with gifts of \$500 to \$1500 to help the family of a firefighter who died, someone in need of a wheelchair, or a family behind in its heating bill – any worthy cause that may be passed up by the formal welfare system or needs assistance before the formal system can mobilise itself to help.

If a woman's husband is a policeman and he is shot in the line of duty and she needs money for payments or whatever, we give her money.

To avoid any embarrassment for the recipient, most of The Backfield's contributions are bilaterally anonymous. The check arrives from The Backfield, but the names of the individual members are never revealed, nor for the most part do Backfield members learn the identity of recipients.

Even our members, the guys, don't know where it's going to go. We [on the board] tell them we donate X amount of dollars every year to certain charities,

we don't mention names. We might tell them who it is in general, 'so-and-so had a house burn down,' 'so-and-so needs an operation, a kidney operation'. We do certain things like that and we get letters from our constituents and they say, 'We know this guy, that guy, blah, blah, blah,' and so we investigate it, look at it and if it's good we help.

Closely connected to forestalling embarrassment for the recipient is the desire to *counter any feelings of superiority by the donor*. As I have just noted, The Backfield gives anonymously in order to eradicate as much as possible any social stigma for the recipient associated with receiving a gift. But by concealing names of recipients from its membership it takes the further step of warding off feelings of *noblesse oblige* among its membership. Without the context of anonymity, says Marta Stempek, she and her husband would never have been comfortable with the secret arrangement to have their foundation provide the matching gifts for Marta's service organisation, Women's Lives. 'We couldn't have done that if they knew that [the foundation] was mine, I couldn't have faced them,' reports Marta accentuating the depth of her chagrin at being put on a pedestal. Without the cloak of anonymity, adds Karl, they would have had to endure the workers' and clients' 'being grateful to us for giving them \$10,000'. In the end, says Karl, he and Marta simply find it more morally wholesome to remain outside the seductive circle of giving and gratitude.

A sixth moral posture, *decreasing the public status differential between donors and recipients*, is a prominent consideration, especially for many inherited wealthy who are particularly sensitive to their unmerited advantages. Karl Stempek expresses this as the desire to ensure that the workers and clients of Women's Lives 'participate' in the life of the organisation and not be reduced to passive beneficiaries. Hillary Blake, the Detroit heir and founder of the Forest Grove Women's Foundation, exemplifies the use of anonymous giving to express her solidarity with those she helps. Blake sits on the board of Oak Hill Hospital and makes it her business to improve the working conditions for the nursing staff as a way of emphasising her solidarity with working women.

Blake recounts,

I care a lot about the nurses and have actually been real instrumental in getting day care for them and I actually anonymously support that. The director of nursing whom I'm friends with and work closely with knows, but the nurses that I work with who know me as being a board member don't in fact know that I give \$5,000 a year to that. And that's one of the few things that I do anonymously.

When asked why this gift is anonymous, Blake explains that it enables her to 'hang in there' with the nurses:

It matters to me that I work as a board member representing women's issues and that I've earned the trust and the respect of the nurses that I work with because I hang in there with them. When they have weekly meetings, I attend regularly. And I do my homework just like they do. I go to the library and research this stuff, just like they do. I don't act like a prima donna. And I don't want to accentuate or emphasise any more than it is already the very obvious status difference.

A final moral stance is to *promote anonymity as a preferred philanthropic model*. According to Marta Stempek, anonymous giving is not only a positive but a superior approach. She is suspicious of the motives of those who are not anonymous. For most givers, she laments, giving publicly 'is terribly important to them. I think it satisfies some deep ego feeling. They want someone to come and say "thank you". Nobody feels the way we do, this is very rare,' says Marta. Adds Karl, 'most people want credit for what they do'. The Stempeks, who have quietly participated in a project to encourage others to give anonymously, would be pleased by the route taken by Gwen Phillips. The young heir explains that she has chosen to give most of her gifts anonymously through Chicago's Midway Foundation because public philanthropy 'interfered with my sense of myself'. It would also disrupt her 'political work' where it is important not 'to be thought of as being really different' from others.

The ethical posture of anonymous giving is, in the end, related for many to their spiritual posture toward life and giving in general. Detroit's Rebecca Jacobs gives publicly and anonymously, locating both within a broader religious framework in which helping others yields life's fullest happiness. Jacobs says,

I believe in God. There is a God that watches over all of us whatever religion you are. I think, you know, sometimes we all just practice different traditions. We put different names to different things. But I think there is a God out there who watches all of us. And I think that what you have to do in order to make a contribution and have a happy life is to help others. And that makes you happier. Maybe that's selfish, but it does. It makes me happier. That is why I am able to help somebody. Directly, indirectly, whether they know about it or don't know about it. And I think those that aren't as charitable don't get as much out of life.

**The case against anonymous giving: 'I might as well stand up and announce what I am for.'**

In addition to voicing reasons for giving anonymously, respondents expressed reservations. Their case against anonymous giving is sometimes expressed in absolute terms, with givers arguing why public

giving is always to be preferred. At other times, especially among those donors who give both anonymously and publicly, or who have shifted from anonymous to public giving over time, the case is less absolute. In both instances, instrumental and ethical arguments come into play – often simultaneously. For this reason, and because I have somewhat less to report about the case against anonymous giving, I will treat both postures together. It should become clear that those who eschew anonymity ground their arguments in moral discourse no less than those who embrace it.

One rationale for not giving anonymously is that hidden giving *enables the giver to hide from public scrutiny* and public accountability. Heir Nelson Lynde says,

I started out being anonymous ... I started giving the gifts anonymously, and then I thought, 'Well, that's kind of ridiculous. I might as well stand up and announce what I am for'. Even if people don't know who I am, I might as well take a stand. And so, I don't do it anonymously any more.

Ruth Robbins, the founder of the Victoria Woman's Fund in Detroit, also wanted to 'stand up there' and take responsibility for her philanthropy. Robbins 'thought a whole lot' about her identity as she pondered 'coming out of the philanthropic closet'. At first, she kept it secret that 'she was the donor and the one with all the money' behind the Victoria Fund. So that she could work comfortably alongside the foundation's staff and clientele, Robbins fabricated an ingenious explanation about the money behind the Victoria Fund. Along with her assistant, Susan, Robbins created 'this mythical woman, Victoria Schaeffer' in order to counter 'all these funny theories about who was the donor at the Victoria Fund'. The fiction was that Schaeffer 'made a lot of money or inherited a lot of money and she gave it away to women's projects and social change and was a wonderful person and that we model ourselves after her'. But eventually Robbins became 'very open' about her role in the Fund. But it was not a particularly easy transition:

I was very anxious about it at the beginning and sort of gradually worked my way through it. I took little tiny steps and became more and more public and present in the operation of the Victoria Fund.

Recognising her unique potential to help others 'process' their feelings about money, she decided that going public would enable her to help other wealthy heirs 'figure out how they can give money responsibly'. She concluded it was time to

stand up there and say, 'Look, it's ok to be this kind of person,' and 'You can do that too,' and 'If you have financial resources, you can do some good stuff

with them. Do not be – as I think I was – a passive victim instead of someone who is really doing something with your wealth.'

A second reason for being public about philanthropy is the same one given by those who advocate anonymity. Being known as the donor offers *more latitude for direct participation* in the day-to-day workings of the funded project. For some this is primarily a practical matter. Unless people know someone is the donor, it is difficult to explain why an apparent outsider is so active in the organisation. For others, being public fulfils a moral obligation to dedicate their time and not just their money to projects they deem important. Ruth Robbins is a case in point. Like many others who pursue anonymous giving in one sphere of their philanthropy, Robbins gives publicly at the same time. Her original hesitancy about being identified with the Victoria Fund contrasts with her desire from the beginning to be identified with her work on behalf of progressive political candidates and causes. She feels different about 'political funding and fund-raising' because in creating her donor network she is 'actually doing the work of organising the funding. I play a very active role in making sure the whole thing happens.' In contrast to the Victoria Fund, which she initially conducted anonymously, her political fund-raising is 'much more a reflection of me personally'. Robbins recognises that she 'should definitely get some credit' for creating the Victoria Fund; but that is still different from her political fund-raising 'where I am putting my brains and my own whatever on the line and going out and making it happen myself'. When people ask her why she just doesn't work on the Victoria Fund full-time, Robbins responds that such a limited project simply would not be engaging enough: 'I could no more get enough personal satisfaction at doing that than fly.' Entrepreneur and philanthropist Joan Halpern suggests another angle on why anonymous giving reduces the intensity of involvement. For her, anonymity would interfere with her ability to carry out hands-on innovation. She explains, Giving is the same as being an entrepreneur. An entrepreneur is usually a hands-on person. They have to touch and be involved in everything. [That's why] I don't like anonymous money.

The case against anonymous giving is perhaps most forcefully framed by those who insist that public giving *sets an example for others to be generous*. This is quite different of course from the argument that public giving grants prestige. For Seth Arvin, a Detroit chemical manufacturing entrepreneur, giving publicly fulfils both goals: he receives social honour and inspires others to be generous.

There are some people I know who say most wealthy people like to give anonymously. I never cared to give anonymously. I like to give for two reasons:



one, I like the personal prestige; and second, I set myself up as an example. Many people come up to me and say, 'Gee, you do great things. If I have the money, I'm going to do these things too.' In some religions, if you give anonymously it's a much greater thing than if you give and identify yourself. But the other effect you get is people who recognise it and say, 'Gee, I like this. I'm going to do this too.' This will happen more and more.

We have already heard how for some donors anonymity is incompatible with their hands-on involvement in the organisation they fund. For others, the case against anonymity revolves around its being at odds with the *organisational responsibilities associated with their leadership roles*. Ethan Wright, for example, gave anonymously for years – even when making large donations.

I was having such a hard time coming to terms with [my wealth] that it would have been a great burden to me to wear it on my chest.

He did not want anyone to make 'a great big thing' of the fact that 'Ethan's just given \$50,000 to the United Jewish Appeal or something'. Says Wright,

My cause was the State of Israel. I felt very passionate about it. And I started giving a lot to the Jewish National Fund. But I started giving anonymously and I kept giving more and more each year.

But as Wright took on leadership positions in the various appeals – and in the community – he needed to become public. One day, he recounts,

One of my friends became the chairman of the campaign and that was my undoing. He got a \$100,000 pledge out of me, which I paid out in a couple of years. I think I must have – I once added up the amount over the period of years – I must have given them half a million dollars, mostly to JNF [Jewish National Fund]. And I became active in the Hebrew University – that I went public on because I got a good deal of enjoyment.

Still that was only the beginning of his 'getting public'. The big change came when 'I began heading up either a committee or a dinner'. From that point on, he was increasingly thrust onto the public stage where he 'tried a lot of things – civic philanthropy, Jewish anything, activities of that nature, even a stint in politics'.

A fifth reason for rejecting anonymous giving is that public giving enables givers to be active in *ensuring that their gifts produce satisfactory results*. The contention is that by making sure one's gifts bear fruit, one is actually being more philanthropic. Daniel Segal says 'I've been reasonably public [about giving because] I like to see the results'. Stephanov put an end to his anonymous giving when those he helped did not go on to help others. 'I quit,' said Stephanov, referring to his

long-standing support of dozens of undergraduates in addition to one medical student.

My only condition was that they help somebody else and not one of the bastards helped anybody else. Even the doctor let me down tremendously. So I felt that my system was only satisfying me and it wasn't a good system.

Returning to more public forms of philanthropy, Stephanov now makes large contributions only where he can exert some influence in producing favourable results.

A sixth element in the case against anonymous giving is that anonymity eliminates one particularly powerful incentive for giving, namely the *opportunity for public recognition*. The importance of public acknowledgment in advancing the gift-giving process is noted both by those wealthy who beat the bushes for gifts and by those who give. Howard Berger, a former travelling salesman turned entrepreneur and now fund-raiser, says,

I believe in making a sale. If one thing or another turns on the potential donor, I say, 'Well, express it any way he wants.' If having his name on a plaque induces him to give, I say 'Give him a plaque'.

Seattle real estate developer Todd Schlesinger admits that he is 'probably as vulnerable as anybody in running the full gamut of why I give'. His giving ranges 'the entire gamut'. There are 'things that pull at my heartstrings,' 'things I see as pure need,' and things that he does out of 'a desire to pay back a little bit to the community'. At the other extreme, he admits, are causes he supports out of the motivations of 'ego, prestige and so on'. Though his 'gamut' is indeed broad, the common denominator is that acknowledgment is central to his motivation.

I've got a letter here from the president of the university I attended talking about a visit we had a few months ago. I suggested three different things that he'd like: one is a \$100,000 contribution to a study which I am somewhat involved in; another concerns donating a collection of rare books and they would set up a special wing of the library and call it the Schlesinger Collection, etc., or have it the Schlesinger Chair or Fellowship.

Schlesinger is refreshingly frank about his desire to be commemorated.

I think if you get involved in something of that nature you're looking for recognition of some sort. I think if you give a million dollars for a chair and you do it anonymously, then you are not looking for recognition. [But] if you want something to go on in perpetuity like the Schlesinger Chair, then you're doing it because you want your name memorialised in some fashion.

A final reservation about anonymous giving revolves around how without recognition donors would *neglect certain unconventional, yet*

*important charitable causes.* According to Boston condominium developer Walter Adams, the lack of public acknowledgment makes it is especially tempting to overlook the opportunities for philanthropy in one's firm. 'You know, there's a saying about charity beginning at home,' he explains, alluding to the philanthropic initiatives in their own backyards that business people often miss.

One of the things that amazes me is I've seen employers treat their people like garbage – [keeping] their wages down, holding back [benefits]. Then they write a check for \$50,000 to the United Way or something like that when [instead] they should be taking the \$50,000 and help some of their people who are in the lower end. Give them a bonus, or take \$50,000 and hire a couple of truly non-employables.

But why do business people ignore such in-house philanthropy?

Maybe it's not as appealing because it's totally anonymous and no one ever knows who it is. But I do try to treat the people [fairly], try to motivate people that are in the lower ends of the company, by bonuses and by trying to get them to achieve worth for themselves by pep talks and so forth. And that's the way I do it. It's invisible, it's anonymous. I don't know what it really returns [he begins to conclude, but immediately corrects himself]. ... I think it returns quite a bit.

Adams' employees are fortunate that he and others like him are not deterred by anonymity from pursuing such in-house philanthropy. One wonders whether an enterprising foundation might accomplish much good with a programme to encourage and recognise publicly firms that follow Adams' lead.

#### Disciple or demigod: the dialectic of care and control

Asked whether he ever encounters true altruism in the course of his fund-raising, Richard Stuart, the president and general manager of a public television station, says,

Yes, occasionally. Maybe four times a year. You can really spot it for what it is. [For instance,] a lawyer calls me and says, 'I represent an anonymous person who loves Channel 35. I can't give you her name. Her husband died a few years ago. She wants to make a gift.' This actually happened. About \$300,000 was to go to the station on the condition that we will never know her name and therefore we will never be able to contact her. Her only message was to 'keep up the good work'. That's philanthropy.

It is also anonymous philanthropy. But, unlike Stuart, I am disinclined to equate anonymous giving with altruism. Rather than resolving the issues of selflessness and selfishness, anonymity complicates them.

Since donors always make a moral case for what they do, and since we do not have any additional independent information about them, it is impossible to evaluate whether *any particular donor* should be labelled as especially caring or controlling. We can draw on the interviews, however, to generate a picture of the inherent tendency of anonymous giving to make individuals particularly humane or manipulative. I refer to this dual trajectory of anonymous giving as the *dialectic of care and control*. By this I mean that the defining characteristic of anonymous giving, namely, some greater or lesser cloaking of a donor's identity from public view, simultaneously creates two divergent vectors. The dimension of concealment introduces an added valence that accentuates the tendencies toward virtue and vice that accompany all philanthropy.

#### *The Millionaire*

Even though anonymous giving tends to enjoy a positive ethical valence, it is not necessarily a more noble strategy. That philanthropy is donor-led, and anonymous giving especially so, means that anonymous giving is particularly vulnerable to temptations of manipulation just as it is open to opportunities for humanity. As a posture designed not just to make a difference, *but to make a difference in a way that shapes both donor and recipient*, anonymous giving evinces a particular array of propitious traits and seductions. Anonymous giving offers wealthy donors the opportunity to be philanthropic disciples or demigods. This is illustrated by the long-running popular television programme, *The Millionaire*, that was aired on Wednesday nights in the US during the 1950s.

Each of the 205 episodes of *The Millionaire* followed a stock dramatic formula. Each programme began with the millionaire's secretary arriving at the door of an unsuspecting beneficiary with a tax-paid check for \$1 million. The secretary tells the recipients that he is not authorised to reveal the donor's name or background and that the recipients are prohibited (with the sanction of having to forfeit all unspent funds) from discussing how they came into their new-found wealth. Not surprisingly, the gift of \$1 million turns out to be a boon for some and a source of ruin for others.

This popular version of largesse, somewhat replicated today in the equally gratuitous MacArthur genius awards and appointments to Stanford's Center for Advanced Studies, is a form of anonymous adoption. The programme invites the home viewer to watch, presumably alongside the omniscient donor, how specific recipients respond to having wealth 'thrust upon them'. Ironically, the show ultimately reveals as much about the donor as it does about the recipient. For

the 'millionaire' referred to in the show's title can be taken to refer to the wealthy donor and not just the elected recipient. While the donor watches the recipient, we can watch the donor. This of course puts us in no position to make ultimate judgements as to motivations of the donor millionaire. But we can chart the effects of such dramatic and consequential interventions in the lives of others and track the godlike capacity of the donor to bestow both blessing and curse.

Much about the anonymous givers in our survey is akin to what we infer about the unseen millionaire of the television series. 'Making a difference' in the lives of others can sometimes result in the imposition of what that difference must be. As *The Millionaire* suggests, the distinction between care and control is as valuable for distinguishing the contradictory tendencies in the philanthropy of a single individual as it is for distinguishing between individuals. Marta and Karl Stempek are a case in point.

#### *The Stempeks*

For the Stempeks, and presumably for the millionaire philanthropist of the television series, a distinctive consequence of anonymity is the pleasure of being able to see the handiwork of their beneficence. The secrecy of their gifts, says Karl, enables them to get close enough to observe how the recipients are affected:

We thoroughly enjoy being able to see things happen that we are responsible for, without anybody knowing it. That is the greatest pleasure – to do something and see people enjoy it without the embarrassment or the dissatisfaction that would come of having them grateful to you. At Christmas time, for example, we've provided funds for families without their knowing where it came from, and done it through charities so that their letters of thanks for what they did with it go back to the charity and we aren't known at all in this.

As pleasing as this is for the Stempeks and as liberating as this *may* be for recipients, such anonymity transposes much of their philanthropy into a non-reciprocal relation in which they can observe and know their recipients but are themselves shielded from being observed or known. The result is that the Stempeks open themselves to both branches of the dialectic of care and control. The question we, and they, face is whether their approach meets the true needs of their beneficiaries, or is instead a subtle form of social engineering in the name of knowing what is good for someone else. Is it a higher form of charity, or only a more highly sounding form of dominion?

To their credit, the Stempeks are reflective about their anonymity; but mainly about its merits rather than about its shortcomings. In addressing their motivation they enunciate two ethical convictions.

The first is that they 'can't bear' to feel superior by making others feel grateful to them. As Marta says,

I give you something, and you say thank you. You're indebted to me. I can't bear that relationship. That is a dreadful relationship to me, I don't want to be superior to you.

The second conviction, says Marta referring to her community work with women in poverty, is that 'I want to work with these people as equals.' To do this, of course, requires Marta to emphasise her intentions and underestimate her economic and educational endowments.

I don't want them to think of me as some rich person who is going to come to their rescue and give them money so they can feel grateful to me and feel that I'm bestowing my funds on them. I don't want that because I want to be friends, I want to be equals, I want to be just at their level.

Knowing her status 'would totally destroy' her counselling relationship with the women. This is crucial because a central part of the assistance they receive from Women's Lives is to participate in a seven-week, three-hour-per-day support group in which the women 'come to see that although their problems are severe they are not alone, that there are things that they can learn, that there is information they can get to help them and to make them feel good about themselves.'

Although the ethic of care prohibits the Stempeks from making someone grateful or from entering into a superordinate relationship with their beneficiaries, it does not prohibit them from changing that person's life. The transgression to which they are so sensitive is the personal offence of creating a hierarchical relationship between wealthy donor and needy recipient. They appear less concerned, however, about the dangers of control resulting from uninvited and undetected intervention. While it is 'dreadful' to make someone grateful, Marta admits she is 'delighted' when the beneficiaries of her anonymous gifts 'come to [her] and say' a gift has improved their lives. Ironically, the anonymity that the Stempeks say preserves them from elitism, provides a hidden vantage point from which they can view their 'highly secret' intercessions and avoid some of the countervailing pressures of accountability that exist when the funder is as socially exposed as the recipient. Marta's entirely positive assessment of how she and Karl underwrote a struggling artist evinces an unequivocal moral elevation of anonymous giving:

There is a young fellow who we know in San Francisco who's a talented painter. And we learned that he was having a hard time making ends meet. He has a wife and two children. We arranged through the foundation to make a gift to the University of San Francisco, and they are offering him an opportunity

to do a mural for a large sum of money. We can't wait to see the life that we know this fellow [can make for himself], because he is a friend. You know, he was just delighted to do this; he has no idea who provided the funds. The University of San Francisco said it was provided by some foundation that has offered this opportunity to him. He doesn't know how it happened or why, and we take great delight in the pleasure we know he's going to get from this money and from doing something that [he enjoys]. He isn't getting it for nothing, it's not charity. He's getting it for work, and he was commissioned to do this work because of his ability. Perhaps you could look at it that way, and this pleases us no end. He won't ever say 'thank you' to us because he doesn't know we had anything to do with it.

Such a positive reading of anonymity is understandable given that this is what enables Marta Stempek – psychologically and practically – to remain engaged as contributor, employee and administrator of the 'wonderful little' public service organisation, Women's Lives. It is also what motivates Karl's secret gift of minority scholarships for students at his medical school. If anonymous giving, as the Stempeks say, 'is exactly where we get our joy,' one may justifiably inquire about the safeguards they and others might erect to resist the lures of control such joy may obscure or even amplify. It is therefore imperative that such donors struggle with the koan, 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'

### **The sound of one hand clapping**

Although there is no evidence that the Stempeks' philanthropy crosses the boundaries from care to control, it should be clear that the close affinity between the two trajectories requires anonymous donors to scrupulously guard against that possibility. Care and control are moral neighbours. Both derive much of their energy from the augmented empowerment that accrues to donors because they are shielded from full public exposure. As such, anonymous giving is potentially the fullest occasion for exercising the kind of autonomous intervention for which philanthropy is often rightly praised or criticised. From the regal seat of anonymity, philanthropists can either construct or renounce an edifice of control.

On the one hand, the element of secrecy may lead to manipulation in a manner akin to the mischievous antics of the demigods in Greek and Roman mythology. Leaving their heavenly realm and disguised in human form, these gods enter the world from the outside to shape the fortunes of mortals. The wealthy, as exemplified by the anonymous TV millionaire, the Stempeks, Robbins and others, enjoy a similar capacity not only to make a difference in the lives of others but to



make this difference in the way they want. When shrouded in the cloak of anonymity, donors can readily fall into the temptation of offering help in a way that assuages guilt and grants a sense of efficaciousness without meeting the needs of recipients in a more profound way. For with anonymity comes at least a partial curb on the countervailing power of recipients to shape the nature of a gift and the relationships surrounding it.

At the same time, we have seen that anonymous giving can introduce a special reverence for the feelings and needs of the recipient, and can provide a unique spiritual opportunity for the giver. There are many respondents in our survey like Russell Spencer who are tight-lipped about their giving.

What I've said today [in this interview] is much more than I ever say to anyone. I'm not looking for any statues or plaques.

For Spencer and those like him, philanthropy is more than stewardship; it is a form of financial discipleship. In their use of wealth, they are faithful not only to the canons of productive investment, but also to the norms of service and care.

In the end, anonymous giving remains morally ambivalent. 'We love being Santa Claus,' says Marta Stempek referring to her and Karl's desire to release recipients from obligations of gratitude. As a friend once remarked, 'Santa is the only person who gives you a gift whom you do not have to thank all year.' Although not directly accountable to their recipients, the Stempeks' hold themselves accountable to a strong egalitarian ethic. Where such normative touchstones are in place, anonymity need not inevitably become an invitation to mischief. Still, we all know that Santa sometimes fails to confer the most appropriate gifts. The lack of reciprocity between giver and recipient removes a number of the countervailing forces that might otherwise forge a better match between gift and need. Since the quality of the gift relationship depends so much upon the anonymous giver's insight and sensitivity, it is imperative that donors remain vigilant about potentially negative consequences. When there is only one hand clapping, there are fewer ears listening. Where there are fewer ears listening, donors must be more discerning.

### Discussion

The foregoing analysis suggests several implications for anonymous giving and giving in general. First, as Moses Maimonides implied in ranking bilateral anonymity the highest form of philanthropy (see Smith and Johnson, 1991), there is an important difference between

anonymous *giving* and anonymous *receiving*. Anonymous *giving* is a social relation in which knowledge about the identity of the donor is restricted. In contrast, anonymous *receiving* occurs where recipients know donors but donors do not know recipients. Perhaps we might reserve the term *anonymous philanthropy* for those cases where there is some degree of bilateral anonymity. Such is the case with contributions to and disbursements from united appeals, community funds and other centralised resource transfer programmes, such as through churches, fraternal or sororal organisations, or even government tax and transfer systems.

Second, anonymous giving is rarely completely hidden from everyone on the receiving end of a contribution. For instance, Marta Stempek's gift to the high school she attended is publicly anonymous but privately known to the school administration. Stempek explains,

The school that I went to admitted blacks, and they have a marvellous community scholars programme. I just made a very big pledge to it. They [the school officials] know that the donor was me, although I said I wanted it anonymous. I don't want all my classmates to know.

There are identifiable *realms* of anonymity depending on which groups are kept in the dark about the source of a gift: recipients; the public; officials of recipient organisations; associates, friends and peers; one's family; and even oneself (when, for instance, a foundation administrator is instructed to make contributions without informing the funder). Not surprisingly, purely anonymous giving is practically difficult and conceptually rare. Minimally, givers almost always remain known to their spouses, financial and foundation assistants and some official representative of the recipient.

Third, just as it is rare to find purely anonymous giving, it is equally rare to find givers who only give anonymously. As we have seen, for Stempek and others, anonymous and non-anonymous giving tend to be complementary. Seattle real estate developers Lisa and Daniel Rayburn, for example, are usually public in their giving; but regularly act anonymously to underwrite real estate deals for non-profit organisations that need economic assistance.

Fourth, anonymous giving tends to make donors more reflective about their philanthropic engagement, both as an *identity* and a *mode of participation*. Anonymous givers are among the donors who are most concerned about making a difference in the lives of others and about doing so in the most effective way. But just as being an anonymous giver is a posture of engagement, so too, it often turns out, is not being anonymous. Those who thoughtfully reject anonymous giving, also seriously examine the purposes, amounts, motivations and the mechanisms of their philanthropy. Dealing with anonymous giving

is a question of figuring out how much donors wish to *conceal* about their identity. But it is also a question of how much they wish to *explore* about who they are, what they want to accomplish and which instrumental and ethical strategies to embrace.

Fifth, while the decision to give anonymously has special meaning for wealthy donors, there is one particular implication for less affluent donors who typically make smaller gifts. To this point, I have focused almost exclusively on anonymous giving among the wealthy. This is in line with investment banker Sasser's contention that it makes sense to talk seriously about anonymity only when 'a lot of money' is being given. Nevertheless, it might also make sense to talk about anonymity when moderate and small donations are being given. Fund-raisers and others interested in advancing the quantity and quality of philanthropic giving in the population at large might do well to encourage those making smaller contributions to at least deliberate about anonymous giving.<sup>6</sup> In view of the preceding analysis, it would be incorrect to assert that anonymous giving is necessarily more socially ethical, spiritually dedicated, or practically effective. But it would be equally incorrect to deny less affluent donors the singular opportunity (that comes from contemplating anonymity) to reflect consciously on their philanthropic identity, mode of participation and manner of affecting others. For to explore anonymity is to ponder the hallowed questions of identity, engagement, power and care at the heart of all philanthropy.

### Notes

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- \* A number of the ideas contained in this paper were first presented in Schervish (1991).
- 1 All names attributed to interview respondents are pseudonyms. In addition all other identifying information and names of institutions and organisations are changed sufficiently to ensure anonymity.
- 2 I am grateful to Ethan Lewis for conducting the literature search at Boston College and to Janet S. Huettner for carrying out the search at the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy.
- 3 Cicerchi and Weserna take this last statistic from a report by Gene Anderson in *Philanthropic Trends Digest* (no date) which states that 58 of the 4,375 gifts of \$1 million or more in the US for 1988-90 were anonymous.
- 4 Although our research failed to directly target anonymous giving, we did receive comments from 35 respondents who either gave anonymously or who seriously contemplated this option.
- 5 The interviews were obtained largely by means of a branching technique whereby respondents provided access to subsequent respondents. This sampling procedure does not allow me to estimate how many wealthy donors

pursue anonymous giving or the distribution of various donor sentiments in the population of donors. However, it does enable me to explore the strategic thinking of some wealthy donors about anonymous giving. See Schervish and Herman (1988) for a detailed description of the study's sample and research methodology.

- 6 Ironically, for the donor of small contributions remaining anonymous is more often an imposed rather than a chosen status since few non-profit organisations publicly acknowledge those who make smaller donations.

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