

Individualism and Empowerment

Katelyn Marak
Valparaiso University

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Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls and a quantitative change in our lives.”¹ Martin Luther King Jr.’s words inspire a community where the desire for belonging, participatory endeavors, and the interest of solidarity all succeed in finding a means of expression and fulfillment. The present condition of modernity compels a reexamination of the mechanisms that foster philanthropic engagement, but for many, the strengthening of community is mistakenly afforded through the dissolution of individualism in American culture. Contemporary society’s emphasis on individual achievements, its fast-paced setting, and concern for technological progress overshadows and presents serious challenges to philanthropy and community involvement. For two consecutive years, volunteer rates have been the lowest among millennials, averaging a mere 18% according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.² It is imperative for millennials to rise to the challenge, reverse this decline, and increase their community outreach. Therefore, within the parameters of contemporary society, the question remains: what is needed to ignite a millennial philanthropic movement as eruptive as that of Martin Luther King Jr.’s time? One approach is to refocus and align the cultural value of individualism with the Christian value of service in order to empower the millennial generation to engage in philanthropic endeavors that celebrate both individual talents and interests. We must be inspired as individuals to participate, and *then* be transformative in our collective actions.

On Philanthropy and Our Desire for the Public Good

Emerging out of John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie’s vision in the 20th century, “to promote the well-being of mankind throughout the world,”³ the concept of philanthropy has evolved from referring to the large monetary contributions of a small collection of individuals to encompassing a variety of types of involvement in advancing the public good. Philanthropy has since served as a vital source of community enrichment and collaborative action. With millions at any given time in need of assistance worldwide, the documented decrease in such efforts in recent years has increasingly led scholars, community activists and leaders, and analysts to investigate how the conditions of modernity affect the various facets of philanthropic engagement. Numerous assertions have been made with regards to the factors influencing our nation’s current state of giving, often presenting different, even contradictory conclusions. Noting these inconsistencies, sociologist and humanitarian Siobhan Daly categorizes philanthropy as an essentially contested concept, meaning the specificities surrounding its “end purpose, motivations, and precise ideology” appear trapped in an arena of deliberation and contestation.⁴ Therefore, if there are such definitional and conceptual variances, the

¹ King, Martin Luther, and James Melvin. Washington. "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom." In *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 58. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.

² "Volunteering in the United States, 2014." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. February 25, 2015. Accessed April 20, 2015. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>.

³ Musafar, Shanaz. "Past Philanthropists: How Giving Has Evolved - BBC News." BBC News. September 17, 2012. Accessed April 19, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-19272109>.

⁴ Daly, Siobhan. "Philanthropy as an Essentially Contested Concept." *Voluntas VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 23, no. 3 (2011): 535. Accessed April 19, 2015.

Bridge/Work: Action, Ideas and the Meaningful Life- Volume 1- Spring 2016

question remains: how does this impact philanthropy's influence within the prevailing conditions of modernity?

Due to its illusive nature, philanthropy has been described as “a slippery idea which none of us can seize too firmly and claim the exclusive rights.”⁵ Its impulse cannot be tied to one principle or modality, but is variously visible in the conflicting contemporary pulls of American culture, Christian service, and other humanist motivations. “The same moral drive, in other words, stands at the roots of both modern Western Christianity and modern Western secularity: this is the impulse to reform individuals so that they may apply themselves to create a better world.”⁶ Although the particularities between secular and religious drives fall outside the parameters of the present discussion, Slavica Jakelic points out that philanthropic action reconstitutes the basic needs of the soul towards performing acts that address the larger needs of humanity, also defined as humanism. “Humanism marks out the space in which the agents of these acts evolve: the space of all human beings and of them alone” in their efforts to transform the present world.⁷ Philanthropy calls attention to humanity, our collective vision of the public good as Christians, and the human contributions needed to advance such a vision. Its malleability as a concept creates an epistemological space for practices and values, such as the American value of individualism and the notion of Christian service, to converge and bestow a modern, Christian obligation to participate in humanitarian efforts. Arising out of this obligation to contribute, a Christian can also be referred to as a humanitarian, defined as “those who behave humanely towards others or who tell us that we must treat human beings decently; in short, they are philanthropists.”⁸ Thus, the variances and contestability of philanthropy compels individual action out of a desire and often divine commitment to expand the public good. The following sections discuss the dynamics of modern day individualism and philanthropic engagement within the Christian community.

A Modern Portrait of the Christian Obligation to Serve

The American ideal of individualism shapes the nation's personality. However, to understand the entirety of its character, the capacity in which individualism can be infused with vibrant communitarianism and necessitate philanthropic engagement must not be discounted. A community can be an exemplary source of encouragement in so far as it compels a genuine sense of individual self-motivation, fosters a supportive outlet for human flourishing, and demonstrates visible results to further propel volunteer efforts. Sociologist Alessio Valastro highlights the idea that this precise form of community originates from the entwinement of psychological, cultural, religious and political influences. “To serve as volunteers is a personal choice not only related to certain ethical and religious choices—which are supported and strengthened through volunteerism

⁵ Daly, Siobhan 537

⁶ Jakelic, Slavica. "Engaging Religious and Secular Humanisms." In *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life*, 305. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014.

⁷ Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Interplay of Four Families." In *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, 30. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

⁸ Todorov, Tzvetan. 28-29

Bridge/Work: Action, Ideas and the Meaningful Life- Volume 1- Spring 2016

itself—but it is also based on inner drives orienting the individual towards an extra-individual commitment.”⁹ This precise *extra-individual* commitment ensures that philanthropic action is prosperous in its purpose towards enriching the public good. Such commitment highlights our need to view society “not as a mere sum of atomized individuals linked by the impersonal dynamics of economic exchange or legal relations, but as a group of individuals sharing emotions, values and aims.”¹⁰ This is what the Christian community inescapably provides.

In order to realize their responsibility to transform the present world, put on them by the ethics espoused in the gospel, Christians of the millennial generation must learn to think less out of self-interest, while harnessing their individual talents in ways that serve for the betterment of others. Stated differently, Christian obligations embody a compelling humanist concern: the desire for human fullness satisfied in the advancement of God’s Kingdom. This is Martin Luther King Jr.’s beloved community formed by a philanthropic framework. This is what the Christian community should strive for in modernity. We must not lose sight of this calling in the competitive spirit of individual success and notoriety perpetuated in contemporary society.

For believers, as expressed by theologian Charles Taylor, human fullness “comes as something they receive, moreover, receive in something like a personal relation, from another being capable of love and giving . . . and they are aware of being very far from the condition of full devotion and giving.”¹¹ The cultivation of such fullness relies on belief and the acknowledgement of one’s position in reference to a higher, transcendent being. Within the Christian account, it is God. Christians recognize that they are “bound to lesser things and goals, not able to open themselves and receive/give as they would at the place of fullness.”¹² Further, this fullness is achievable only through a relationship with God, in which the individual is transformed, empowered in his or her present condition, and brought out of his or her own self. The Christian gospel bestows a divine obligation to serve in the name of the Lord and transform the world in preparation of the eternal. This equivocates to an individual, wholehearted embrace of what is expressed through Christian principles: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace . . . as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.”¹³ The essence of Christian life is the recognition that the gifts received are not one’s own alone, but afforded to each person for the purpose of serving God as demonstrated in philanthropic actions towards others within the beloved Christian community. Individual prosperity is secondary to the desire to advance the vision of the public good.

⁹ Valastro, Alessio. "Volunteerism, Solidarity, and Social Capital." *Italian Sociological Review* 2.1 (2012): 25. Accessed April 16, 2015.

¹⁰Valastro 25

¹¹ Taylor, Charles. "Introduction." Introduction to *A Secular Age*, 8. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

¹² Taylor, Charles 9

¹³ Meeks, Wayne A., and Jouette M. Bassler. "1 Peter 4:8-11." In *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 2065. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993.

Bridge/Work: Action, Ideas and the Meaningful Life- Volume 1- Spring 2016

As the character of modern American society evolves, such Christian obligations have been perceived as lackluster. But these descriptions *can* maintain their relevancy, most evident in their correlation to the hopefulness and future-oriented outlook of many aspiring Americans. Despite the myriad social and economic downturns millennials have faced, they retain a sense of optimism and determination in turning their scholastic, career, and life aspirations into a reality. The vigor with which some Americans approach their personal ambitions must extend to their divine obligation as parts of a Christian community. Such can be achieved through each individual's commitment to utilize his or her individual talents and interests, grounded in hopefulness towards his or her higher purpose as a Christian—to transform the all-encompassing, present reality into a world worthy of the eternal. This is exemplified through C.S. Lewis's characterization of hope as a theological virtue. Christians' hope for the eternal parallels their hope for an improved society: "this means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but is one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is."¹⁴ An individual's blessed talents and interests, *always acknowledged* as gifts from God, are the starting point through which transformative change is made regarding inward motivations, and quantified in action.

Furthermore, the Christian community serves as an exemplary model of what Aristotle defines as a "community of practice"¹⁵ needed for the development of virtuous actions. The purpose is to create a cyclical progression of societal action in which individuals emulate each other's admirable actions, simultaneously empowering others to do the same. This serves as the basis through which the importance of living and leading by example is amplified through the Christian community, and individual contributions can encourage others to engage in collective, philanthropic efforts. The Christian way, according to C.S. Lewis, is to "make it the object of life to press on to that other country [Heaven] and to help others do the same."¹⁵ It is precisely by reflecting on the joys, beauties, and satisfactions of eternal life in the world to come that Christians are empowered to live to their fullest today.

A Philanthropically Empowered Community

The act of giving strengthens communities, creates a sense of self-worth, and serves as an outlet to put individual time, talents, and treasure to use. This is what it is to lead a Christian life. The combination of faith, hope, and the individual commitment to Christian service are seamlessly tied to philanthropic gains within the present world. As eloquently stated by C.S. Lewis, "The little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed

¹⁴ Lewis, C. S. "Hope." In *Mere Christianity: A Revised and Amplified Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books, Broadcast Talks, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality*, 134. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

¹⁵ Aristotle, and W. D. Ross. *The Nichomachean Ethics*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959

¹⁵ Lewis, C. S. 136

¹⁶ Lewis, C. S. 132

Bridge/Work: Action, Ideas and the Meaningful Life- Volume 1- Spring 2016

of.”¹⁶ Christians, humanists, millennials, and scholars alike are invigorated to *be the change* in contemporary society, enriching the beloved community as it moves towards becoming God’s kingdom with philanthropy as the foundation.

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