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The Philanthropy Machine: Neuroethics and Empathy

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ABSTRACT

Imagine the Philanthropy Machine: mathematically complex and capable of making perfectly logical evaluations while using all available information to aid in decision-making processes. The Philanthropy Machine is so powerful that the humanitarian efforts of both agencies and individuals worldwide utilize it for maximizing the efficacy of their giving. It is high-powered enough to immediately identify the greatest human need and allocate the funds necessary. The Philanthropy Machine would presumably eliminate the "Identifiable Victim Effect" (I.V.E.), which refers to the tendency of humans to donate to a specific and identifiable person as opposed to a large group in need. But, what may be lost when a direct link is removed between donor and cause? Neuroethicists have taken up these questions of empathy and rationality when applied to the I.V.E., and whether empathy prevents logical philanthropic decisions. In this paper I will argue that, in the field of neuroethics, moral sentimentalism should be taken more seriously. Moral sentimentalist philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith provided careful work on the analysis of empathy (what they called "sympathy"). Empathy, as they conceived it, would involve an attempt to understand the emotional and logical rationale behind every decision.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine an incredible machine: mathematically complex and capable of making perfectly logical evaluations while simultaneously using all available information to aid in decision-making processes. Let's call this machine the Philanthropy Machine. The Philanthropy Machine is so powerful that the humanitarian efforts of both agencies and individuals worldwide utilize it for maximizing the efficacy of their giving. It is high-powered enough to immediately identify the greatest human need and allocate the funds necessary to alleviate that need. With powerful algorithms that allow for near-instantaneous machine learning, the Philanthropy Machine might allocate funds to an emergency surgery in Africa, hurricane relief in India, or a nutritious meal to combat a child's hunger in America. It would be a step beyond utilitarian calculus, because the purpose would not chiefly be to help the greatest number, but rather anyone at all with the greatest need. The Philanthropy Machine will perfectly eliminate the bias inherent in charitable giving, bias that has the potential to disproportionately allocate resources. The question is then, if the Philanthropy Machine existed what may be lost when a direct link is removed between donor and cause? [1]

In this paper, we aim to assess what may be lost if something like the Philanthropy Machine was adopted as the primary method of allocating monetary donations. In so doing, we will draw on work of neuroscientists on the associated questions of empathy and rationality when applied to philanthropy, assessing whether empathy prevents logical philanthropic decisions. To this end, we will argue that, in the field of neuroethics, moral sentimentalism should be taken more seriously. Moral sentimentalist philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith provided careful work on the analysis of empathy (what they called "sympathy"). Empathy, as they conceived it, would involve an attempt to understand the emotional and logical rationale behind every decision.

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1. We offer a big thanks to the participants of the 2015 Michigan Undergraduate Philosophy Conference who provided their valuable insight, assessment, and reactions to this concept of the Philanthropy Machine. While there is much this imaginary machine cannot yet do (like account for donations of time, as one commentator pointed out), their conversation convinced me that there is much to be gained through a theoretical discussion, which can help us talk about and philosophically assess the value of philanthropy and empathy.

THE IDENTIFIABLE VICTIM EFFECT

It will first be useful to establish that there actually is an inherent bias in charitable giving. We need to look no further than the Identifiable Victim Effect, a phenomenon first classified by psychologists that demonstrates our tendency to give more to specific individuals in need rather than large groups, even if the need is much less severe in the case of the individual. It can lead to donors giving funds disproportionately to one cause over an equally and often times more pressing need. The most popular illustration of the Identifiable Victim Effect is the 1987 case of the 18-month-old child, Jessica McClure, who spent 58 hours trapped in a well. In addition to the remarkable rescue effort, in the months that followed, the McClures received over $700,000 in donations in a spectacular outpouring of support from the nation. By comparison at the time, these same resources could have been used on preventable health care to save hundreds of children's lives (Jenni, Loewenstein, 1997). Cases like this depict the power of human empathy to address societal problems, but they also raise worrisome questions about the negative effects empathy may have on the efficacy of our charitable giving.

The Identifiable Victim Effect has been well documented, but we wish to turn the focus not to its existence but rather to considering such instances where our own empathy may be a hindrance as we reason through our charitable giving. We will explore how the Philanthropy Machine could factor in to these instances. For conceptual ease, let us consider the role of empathy in philanthropy as being located in two chronologically distinct stages: Stage 1 is the first moment of contact with a cause or charity and involves recognizing a need; Stage 2 is the decision to donate, which involves determining the amount of money to be given. Studies have shown it is in Stage 2 that empathy becomes an issue, as is demonstrated by the Identifiable Victim Effect. In one such study, investigators challenged the rational decision-making of their subjects by presenting them with certain scenarios that would invoke this Identifiable Victim Effect by varying the singularity of the victims. Subjects were presented with a single victim versus a group of eight individuals and were asked to give money to either over the course of several trials. Researchers found that when both groups remained unidentified, the subjects gave nearly equally to each, but when the single victim was identified by variables like age, picture, and name, this individual elicited much more contribution than an unidentified individual and group of eight. This same

identifying information, however, did not increase the monetary amount awarded to the group of eight. The subjects also reported that they felt much more distress when the individual victim was identified than in any other trial (Kogut, Ritov, 2005). Because the money could go further in helping the eight victims as opposed to the one, it would appear the more rational decision to give money to the eight. It is true that subjects still donated *some* money to both groups and we would argue that this is because the Stage 1 of empathy in philanthropic giving was activated—the subjects recognized the need of both groups. We propose that the discrepancy occurs in Stage 2, because empathy seems to have interfered with what could otherwise be a calculated decision regarding which group needed more money.

We also have some growing evidence of what happens in the brain when faced with decisions to donate. In one study from 2013, researchers looked at the neurological response as subjects were presented with a series of options for donation. In the first trials, subjects were only shown silhouettes chosen to represent potential donees and researchers tracked the neurological response. Researchers compared this with the response to that same group as represented by photographs and found an increased positive arousal in the brain. They also found that they could predict increased donations by tracking these neural correlates when subjects look at the photographs of potential donees (Genevsky, et. al.). Together these studies and others like them show the powerful affective response we have towards identified victims. It also indicates a difficulty in that statistical victims of misfortune can fail to bring about the same level of response as an identified victim—even if the larger group requires more assistance.

Given all of the research that has gone into the Identifiable Victim Effect, one may propose that this difficulty could assuaged by educating a wider audience in order to encourage people to think more rationally about their philanthropic decisions. Another study was conducted with this very idea in mind, but it showed that even when subjects are informed about the Identifiable Victim Effect, it does nothing to increase the amount of money given to the statistical majority. Distressingly, however, it does drastically decrease the amount given to the identified victim (Small, Loewenstein, Slovic, 2007). The study also found that activating rational analysis can actually decrease donations in general. The experiment "primed" research subjects by having them complete simple arithmetic calculations and then decide how much to donate. It seems as though

exercising the rational brain can repress the intuitive moral feelings that arise which compel us to help one another.

These apparent irrationalities of our brains can cause large problems. There is disconnect that happens between our intentions and the decision-making process that leads to the final resting place of our philanthropic efforts. But, this raises the question of whether or not emotional responses should be removed from decision-making processes all together. We aim to assess what may be lost if something like the Philanthropy Machine was to be adopted as the primary method of allocating charitable donations.

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY APPROACH TO NEUROETHICS

Neuroethicists have taken up these questions of empathy and rationality more recently, but connection between neuroscience and philosophy has typically been dominated by philosophy of mind and questions of free will. We argue that in the field of neuroethics, moral sentimentalism should be taken more seriously as it can provide a way to frame further inquiry into the role of empathy within philanthropy. We will explore moral sentamentalism through the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, as philosophers like Adam Smith and David Hume were among the first moral sentimentalists. These writers considered what they did to be "moral science", which is demonstrated by the fact that they focused intensely on what the human was and did rather than what he or she should be. The tradition's interest revolved around people: what motivated them, what brought them together, and what made society fairer. These questions were so all-encompassing that it would be difficult to house under any distinct discipline today, but this serves as a foremost example of the line of inquiry that suitably struggles with the ethical complexity of societal issues. The Scottish Enlightenment tradition had its own brand of scholarship, distinct from the larger concurrent Enlightenment tradition and provides a nuanced exploration of "empathy" and its role in fields ranging from economics to astronomy.

Though the roots of moral sentimentalism in ethical theory dates back to the early eighteenth century, it has largely been neglected in the field of ethics because it is now often regarded as in the realm of social science. But this "moral science" was more than an empirical exercise. We will focus specifically on Adam Smith and his work on "sympathy" (what we can most nearly translate as modern

day conceptions of "empathy")2 and how it affected ethical and economic decision-making. It will examine Smith's thoughts on globalization and his worries over a weak sort of benevolence toward those unknown to us that can occur over long distances. We believe that these moral philosophers and more specifically Adam Smith's work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* provide the framework to delve deeper into the role of empathy in philanthropy.

Adam Smith supposed that an operational system of morals was partially based on its capacity to account for a good theory of fellow-feeling. He used the term "fellow-feeling" interchangeably with "sympathy", but empathy is probably the closest equivalent to what we now think of as the mechanism fulfilling this function. The key for Smith was the imaginary place changing that one does in order to feel sympathy. His theory of the impartial spectator used the role of individual imagination, enabling a person to enter into the imagined situation of another (Smith, 1790). So, according to his theory, one does not merely consider how it would feel be a beggar on the streets, she truly envisions how it is to be that person. She imagines actually switching persons and characters, and to Smith, the emotions that arise from this place switching are not in the least bit selfish (Smith, 1790).

This place changing through the impartial spectator would ideally result in a nearly full switch with the other person, and so you would actually feel what it is like to be that other person in pain, thereby coming to a better understanding of how it affects them. To illustrate this, consider watching a child and an adult walk into the dentist to get a filling. Both are overtly experiencing the same phenomena, but were we to attempt to put ourselves in the place of the child, we might realize that any pain felt is also mixed with fear of the unknown and perhaps even doubt in the beneficial outcome of the action taking place. Through this place changing, we have come to feel via empathy for both the adult and the child, but might only be compelled to take action and comfort the child. Likewise, perhaps we find out that the adult had some traumatic experience early on with a dentist that makes every subsequent trip into a lived nightmare. It is not until we learn more through switching places as much as possible that we can respond in a way that might be the most appropriate.

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2.   While it is not within the scope of this paper to explain this move from "sympathy" to "empathy", see Lou Agosta's longer and more nuanced treatment of this in his book Empathy in the Context of Philosophy.

Smithian sympathy first involves comprehending one's own feelings in order to extend this emotional data to someone else. For Smith, sympathy is what also enables us to come to an understanding of what another feels like at a certain time or in a certain situation. It is not, strictly, "feeling bad" for a person because one can also experience feelings of happiness via sympathy for someone in a good situation. Smith explicitly distinguishes between sympathy and compassion, but he acknowledges a traditional overlap between the two noting, however, the generalization of sympathy:

> Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others, sympathy, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever (1759).

Smith's account of sympathy takes in human circumstances. His emphasis on sympathy leads Smith to say that the impartial spectator can sympathize without having the same feeling as the agent, which he illustrates with two particularly outstanding examples: one in which the agent is dead and the other, the agent is mentally ill. Presumably, we would feel sad or upset via sympathy when we switch places, even if these two agents do not at the time. For Smith, sympathy is not some separate reactive effect that occurs when witnessing the pain and suffering of another individual.

Smith was also careful to emphasize the need to put oneself in the situation of another in order to most fully achieve the change of situation that gives rise to our sympathy. He is worth quoting at length here:

> In all such cases, that there *may be some correspondence of sentiments* between the spectator and the person principally concerned, the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded (Smith, 1759, emphasis my own).

The goal that Smith points out is to achieve some correspondence of sentiments—to actually feel what the other is feeling as derived from their own experience. For Smith, sympathy was not a motive for moral action (and not selfish at all), and he was clear about this.

Smith was very skeptical of our ability to match good intentions with good effects. In a recent book by Fonna Forman-Barzilai, she offers an analysis of Smith's circles of sympathy—a metaphor taken from the Stoic philosopher Hierocles to describe the natural phenomena of coming to care for someone else. Forman applies Smith's theory to the idea of cosmopolitanism and his analysis of sympathy vis-à-vis space (Forman-Barzilai, 2010). Smith was clear that the farther we are from someone, the more difficult it becomes to change places with him or her using the impartial spectator. Though we can presumably come to closer understandings of those we love and even those within our community, it becomes difficult when attempting to know what it is like to be someone living on the opposite side of the world. Smith had in his sights here examples like Britain's attempts at charity in colonial India. He was outspoken against the East India Company as well as the concurrent attempts to colonize the lands. Smith pointed out that it is more likely that our good intentions would be distorted at such a distances.

We can see why Smith was skeptical that human benevolence could properly reach across distances because even today international charity attempts fall far from their intended mark and can even leave the benefactors worse off than before. This is no reason to abandon international aid—in today's global economy, that option is near impossible—and even in the eighteenth-century, Smith did not think it was impossible for us to sympathize with those across the world. For him, however, to properly sympathize involved crucial knowledge component, which entails the ability to take on as much relevant information as possible and discover what it is like to be the other. Without this knowledge component, humans were only capable of weak forms of benevolence, which means that good intentions could not meet their mark of alleviating suffering or trouble. Still, Smith believed that it is very difficult for us to know our true intentions and to understand why we are motivated to act in some cases and not others. This is why the idea of the Philanthropy Machine becomes intriguing. This machine would ensure that even if the cause of giving were less than rational, the effect would still be good. We

could still be moved to give by Stage 1 of empathy, but Stage 2 would be taken care of by this machine, ensuring that the greatest needs are well met.

THE PHILANTHROPY MACHINE RECONSIDERED

The Philanthropy Machine necessarily removes the direct ties between donor and recipient, and by doing so this changes a part of the giving equation by affecting empathy's role in Stage 2 of philanthropic giving. The machine will take nothing away from the initial (Stage 1) feelings of empathy because we can still be empathetically moved to identify with a perceived need. However, Stage 2 will not be involved because when one donates to the Philanthropy Machine, the money will be distributed in the most efficient and effective way and this will not involve any further decision-making by the donor. The donor will still be doing good (indeed, the donor is guaranteed to be doing the most good), but he is, in some sense, separated from the efficacy of his giving.

Still, though the idea of loss usually denotes something negative, perhaps this separation from the efficacy of your donation is a justifiable loss if it can ensure successful results. Perhaps, in order to ensure people still donate, clever forms of marketing can be used to elicit a response similar to the Identifiable Victim Effect in order to inspire people to donate to the Philanthropy Machine. This will only become more possible because neuroscientific discovery has and will continue to provide empirical findings vis-à-vis how the brain reacts when faced with decisions to donate. In terms of any "loss", we wish to turn back to the discussion of moral sentimentalism in order to highlight one specific aspect of Smith's impartial spectator.

The study of morality for Smith started with an exploration of human nature, adhering to naturalism and interpreting it through history. A resounding point throughout most of Adam Smith's work was in the human desire to know and imagine when we don't know. While we want to direct altruistic tendencies toward better ends, it should also force us to take a step back and consider the descriptive implications that come from exploring empathy and altruism. Humans have an immense desire to know more. Smith observed that humans are curious about one another and that there is an entirely natural bent to sympathize with another. We naturally want our feelings to resonate with those we are spectating because we are curious to know why they do what they do. The more we can endeavor to place ourselves in the situation of another, the better sense we will

have of the propriety of the actions of this person. This will also allow us to act in ways that would be more fully empathetic.

As researchers interested in philanthropy (be it in the business or non-profit realm), this aspect of human nature should not be forgotten: that we are empathetic beings. There is something—and neuroscientific research can shed further light on what, exactly, it is—that wants to align sentiment with sentiment. Whether it is curiosity inherent in human nature, an evolutionary phenomenon, or something else entirely, we want to know more about "the other." The more we find out about others, the more responsive we are, and as the Identifiable Victim Effect demonstrates, this does not always result in the greatest good for the greatest number; however, it is important not to eliminate empathy from the decision-making process even if it can lead to "irrational decisions." While we seek to design better, more sustainable methods of eradicating poverty and improving lives, the importance of empathy to this process is irreplaceable. True empathy involves an attempt to understand the emotional *and* logical rationale behind every decision, which serves as invaluable information in decision-making.

Imagining innovations like the Philanthropy Machine might provide us temporary solutions, but attempting a full account of human nature and all of its complexity may involve some patience along the way as we aim to more fully sympathize—in a Smithian sense—with the world around us. Already many businesses are interested in technology that can perform affective computing, as this allows for machine learning vis-à-vis human sentiment—presumably the usefulness of understanding human emotion is apparent to those funding such affective computing projects. While it can be used for businesses to ensure more targeted advertising, it also has enormous potential for furthering research on autism and the like. This potential also raises questions in terms of how much work can we export to machines before it will affect the way our brains works. We may have calculators to add up sums for us, but we still see it as educationally essential to understand the dynamics behind addition. In an analogous way, it seems that what could be lost when the direct link between donor and cause is removed would be an opportunity to further empathize, learn, and discover for ourselves better ways of effecting meaningful change locally and globally.

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