

# The Age of Philanthropy

by Gertrude Himmelfarb

Civil society” has become the rallying cry of liberals and conservatives alike, especially in the wake of the recent reform of the welfare system. The devolution of welfare to the states suggests a further devolution to local authorities, and a still further one to the unofficial but powerful institutions of civil society—families, neighborhood groups, churches, private social-work agencies, philanthropies—all those “voluntary associations” that Alexis de Tocqueville took to be the genius of American democracy.

It is surely presumptuous to quarrel with Tocqueville, yet in one small respect I venture to do so. Tocqueville presented those associations as a unique feature of American society. Although the Americans, he observed in the second volume of *Democracy in America* (1840), “took some of their laws and many of their customs” from the English, his own travels suggested to him that “the principle of association was not used nearly so constantly or so adroitly” in England as in America.

Tocqueville had visited England in 1833, just before writing the first volume of *Democracy in America*, and again in 1835, after the publication of that volume and before writing the second. But long before then, indeed almost a century before then, largely under the impetus of the Wesleyan revival, a multitude of associations (“societies,” they were often called) had sprung up in England for every conceivable purpose: to establish and endow schools, hospitals, orphanages, and almshouses, and to serve a myriad of other charitable and social functions. In the course of the 19th century many more such societies were founded, suggesting that the English used that “principle of association” at least as “constantly” and “adroitly” as did the Americans. And if the concept of civil society is extended (as surely it must be) to include the family, here too the English must take pride of place, for not even the Americans could be more reverent of the family, or of the other institutions of civil society, than the Victorians were.

Tocqueville might have contributed to one of the hoarier myths about Victorian society: that it was ruthlessly materialistic, acquisitive, and self-centered. The myth starts with the image of the hard-headed, hard-nosed Victorian employer who regarded his workers as instruments of production rather than as human beings, and who exploited them under the cloak of principle, invoking the natural, even divine, laws of

political economy. The sole function of government in this laissez-faire system is said to have been the preservation of law and order, which in practice meant keeping the potentially lawless and disorderly lower classes in a state of docility and subjugation. Those who professed a concern for the poor are dismissed as eccentric do-gooders, condescending Lady Bountifuls, or officious philanthropists who pretended to help the poor for their own self-serving motives.

Part of this myth is easily disproved. Neither in principle nor in practice was political economy as rigidly laissez faire as this picture suggests. The first of the factory acts limiting the hours of work for children was passed in 1833; within a decade it was followed by laws limiting the hours of women, and somewhat later, the hours of men. In the course of the century, Parliament enacted scores of other reforms concerning health, sanitation, housing, education, transportation, even holidays, while the municipalities assumed responsibility for the water supply, sewage, public baths, street lighting, street cleaning, libraries, and parks. All of these reforms coincided with a period of rapid economic growth, so that by the last quarter of the century the standard of living of the working classes had risen considerably, thus belying the Marxist theory of “immiseration”: the idea that capitalism inevitably results in the growing misery and poverty of the proletariat.

**E**ven more remarkable than the improvement in the conditions of the working classes was the enormous surge of social consciousness and philanthropic activity on the part of the middle and upper classes. This is not to say that there had been no such consciousness and activity in the previous century. When John Wesley propounded the trinity, “Gain all you can. . . . Save all you can. . . . Give all you can,” he gave practical effect to it by taking up collections following the sermon and distributing the money to the poor, setting up loan funds and work projects, and instructing his followers to pay “visitations” to the sick and to prisoners in jail. It is not surprising to find Methodists and Evangelicals prominent in the founding of orphanages, schools, hospitals, friendly societies, and charitable enterprises of every kind. By the late 18th century, the principle of “philanthropy” (still car-



*The mark of Victorian philanthropy was direct and personal involvement in the day-to-day lives of the poor.*

rying with it its original meaning of “love of mankind”) had given rise to full-time philanthropists such as John Howard, who successfully agitated for the reform of the prison system, and Jonas Hanway, who devised the “boarding out” system to remove infants from the poorhouses. Hannah More, preferring moral reformation to philanthropy, characterized this period, not altogether in praise, as “the Age of Benevolence.” A London magistrate, deploring the corruption of “virtue” into “good affections,” complained, “We live in an age when humanity is in fashion.”

**T**hat magistrate would have had more to complain of in the 19th century, when the fashion for humanity expressed itself in a score of legislative and administrative reforms as well as a renewed burst of philanthropies and social activities. So far from supplanting private, voluntary efforts, as many people had feared, the government seemed to inspire them to greater exertions. To the French historian and critic Hippolyte Taine, this was yet another of the peculiarities of the English. Citing an article in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1861, he noted that of the £13 million spent on public education in the preceding 21 years, only £4 million was contributed by the state; the rest came from private subscriptions. (Even after the institution of compulsory, publicly supported education in 1870, church-endowed and private schools continued to play a large part in the educational system.) And education was only one of the causes that drew upon private funds:

There are swarms of societies engaged in good works: societies for saving the life of drowning persons, for the conversion of the Jews, for the propagation of the Bible, for the advancement of science, for the protection of animals, for the suppression of vice, for the abolition of tithes, for helping working people to own their own houses, for building good houses for the working-class, for setting up a basic fund to provide the workers with savings banks, for emigration, for the propagation of economic and social knowledge, for Sabbath-day observance, against drunkenness, for founding schools to train girls as schoolteachers, etc., etc.

What was even more remarkable, Taine observed, was that an Englishman regarded this kind of “public business” as “*his* business,” feeling obligated to contribute to the “common good” and bringing to it the same conscientious attention a Frenchman brought to his private business affairs.

Two decades later Taine would have had more societies to add to his roster and more reason for astonishment. The 1880s saw a veritable explosion of social concerns and activities. In 1884, the journal of the leading philanthropic association, the Charity Organisation Society, reported: “Books on the poor, poverty, social questions, slums and the like subjects, rush fast and furious from the press. The titles of some of them sound like sentimental novels.” That same year, Beatrice Potter (better known as Beatrice Webb, the Fabian) wrote in

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her diary: "Social questions are the vital questions of today: they take the place of religion."

**T**here was, in fact, a religious, almost revivalist tone in this accession of social consciousness. Webb has left a memorable description of what she called the "Time-Spirit" of this period. The spirit was a compound of two elements: the first, a religious dedication to the service of others, inspired not by orthodox religion or a belief in God but by a secular religion, the "Religion of Humanity"; the second, the faith in science, the idea that the welfare of society could best be promoted by scientific, rational, organized means.

To one degree or another, these elements manifested themselves in the multitude of philanthropic enterprises, reform movements, humanitarian societies, research projects, publications, and journalistic exposés that flourished in the last quarter of the century. Some were overtly religious, such as the Salvation Army and the Christian Social Union. But many more exhibited the kind of sublimated, secularized "religion" described by Beatrice Webb. In this respect, the time-spirit of late-Victorian England was in notable contrast to that of earlier periods. Most of the reformers earlier in the century, such as the Evangelicals, who led the movement for the abolition of the slave trade, had been inspired by a firm religious creed; they were reformers, one might say, because they were devout Christians. Many of the later reformers were less devout but no less ardent in pursuing worthy causes. Just as they redoubled their moral zeal to compensate for their loss of religious faith, so they redoubled their humanitarian zeal as well. Humanitarianism became, in effect, a surrogate religion. This quasi-religious spirit was evident even in the socialist organizations such as the Fabian Society, which was professedly secular, or the Social Democratic Federation, which was ostensibly Marxist.

**T**he scientific aspect of the time-spirit also took many forms. For socialists (in the Fabian Society, Social Democratic Federation, and Socialist League), science meant the rational, planned organization of the economy and society. For social workers (in the Charity Organisation Society), it meant the rational, planned organization of charity and relief. For settlement-house workers (in Toynbee Hall), it meant the education and edification of the working classes. For social researchers (such as Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree), it meant the systematic investigation and analysis of the different classes of the poor, their material and moral conditions, their problems and prospects of improvement.

It was this combination of religiosity and rationality that informed the social consciousness of the late Victorians. Critics at the time complained that the Religion of Humanity had the effect of diluting and distorting religion, replacing the old stern Puritanism with "a vapid philanthropic sentiment . . . a creed of maudlin benevolence." In fact, the new humanitarianism was neither vapid nor maudlin. The God of Humanity proved to be as stern a taskmaster as the God of Christianity. The Charity Organisation

Society instructed its social workers that “scientific” charity should not be “indiscriminate” or “promiscuous,” distributed without regard to need or worth, lest it contribute to the very evil it was designed to remedy, the pauperization and demoralization of the poor. True humanitarianism was an exercise in doing good, not feeling good—doing good to others, even if it meant curbing one’s own spontaneous, benevolent impulses.

**T**he dispensers of charity, no less than the recipients, were held to high standards. They were expected to give generously of their time and resources and to have a sustained personal involvement in their work. This was not “checkbook philanthropy,” satisfied merely by the contribution of money (although such contributions were expected, in small amounts as well as large, since the organizations were entirely dependent on private funds). Nor was it the kind of “telescopic” philanthropy satirized by Charles Dickens in the character of Mrs. Jellyby, in *Bleak House*, who was so preoccupied with the natives of Borrioboola-Gha that she neglected her own children. Nor was it professional philanthropy in the current sense, where everyone from the director of the charity to fund raisers, social workers, and clerks is a salaried employee, paid to do a job quite like any other.

Victorian philanthropists, social workers (“visitors,” as they were called), settlement-house residents, even researchers, were personally involved in the day-to-day lives of the poor with whom they were concerned. And while they brought to their work a spirit of professionalism, seeking to dispense charity or conduct their inquiries “scientifically,” they also brought to it the dedication of unpaid, voluntary workers giving a good deal of their time, their energy, and their money to the welfare of those less fortunate than themselves.

**P**hilanthropy was inspired by the dual motive: to serve others and to fulfill a moral need. When Beatrice Webb started work as a visitor for the Charity Organisation Society, she weighed the relative importance of the “moral facts” and “economic facts” involved in charity, “the relationship of giver and receiver,” and “the moral effect on the person who receives.” She concluded that it was “distinctly *advantageous to us* to go amongst the poor,” not only to have a better understanding of their lives and problems but because “contact with them develops on the whole our finer qualities, disgusting us with our false and worldly application of men and things and educating in us a thoughtful benevolence.” In some instances, she recognized, benevolence might take the form of “pharisaical self congratulation.” But the real philanthropist would not be guilty of this, for he would be too aware of the “mixed result” of his work (if indeed it had any result) “to feel much pride over it.”

Today, such statements are often taken as evidence of the elitist, authoritarian, self-serving nature of philanthropy. But they can as well be taken as evidence of a self-sacrificing, even self-abasing spirit, a belief that the “privileged,” no less than the poor, had spiritual needs, that they had to “give” (as Wesley said), as much as the poor had to receive, and that what they had to give was of themselves. Even the Fabian socialist Walter Besant paid tribute

to the principle of the “new philanthropy,” as he called it: “Not money, but yourselves.”

**T**wo criticisms are commonly made of Victorian philanthropy. The older, more familiar one is that even at the time such philanthropy was obsolete and irrelevant, that the social and economic problems of late-Victorian England could not be solved by private, voluntary efforts but required either substantial legislative and administrative action by the state or radical structural changes in the economy. Philanthropy was not only inadequate but counterproductive, since it distracted attention from real remedies for all-too-real problems. From the beginning, the argument goes, and certainly by the end of the 19th century, industrialism and urbanism had created social evils that were beyond the scope of individuals. Poverty, unemployment, bad housing, overcrowded slums, and unsanitary conditions were neither the result of a failure of character on the part of workers nor of a lack of good will on the part of employers and landlords. Therefore they could not be solved or even alleviated by well-disciplined workers, well-intentioned employers, or well-wishing philanthropists.

More recently, criticism has taken another turn. The gravamen of the charge now is that philanthropy is all too often a self-serving exercise on the part of philanthropists at the expense of those whom they are ostensibly helping. Philanthropy stands condemned, not only as ineffectual but as hypocritical and self-aggrandizing. In place of “the love of mankind,” philanthropy is now identified with the love of self. It is seen as an occasion for social climbing, for joining committees and attending charity balls in the company of the rich and the famous. Or as an opportunity to cultivate business and professional associations. Or as a way of enhancing one’s self-esteem and self-approbation by basking in the esteem and approbation of others. Or as a method of exercising power over those in no position to challenge it. Or as a means (a relatively painless means) of atoning for a sense of guilt, perhaps for riches unethically acquired. Or as a passport to heaven, a record of good works and virtues to offset bad works and vices. Or (the most recent addition to this bill of indictment) as a form of “voyeurism,” an unseemly, perhaps erotic interest in the private lives of the lower classes.

This kind of criticism is often advanced as a corollary to the “social control” thesis. Just as Victorian values are said to have been an instrument for the pacification of the working class, so Victorian philanthropy is described as a device for the subjugation of the even more vulnerable class of the very poor. By discriminating between the “undeserving” and the “deserving” poor, the dispensers of charity managed to keep the former in a condition of servility in the workhouse while forcing the latter into the labor market on terms set by the employers. Thus profits were secured, the status quo was maintained, discontent was suppressed, and revolution was averted.

The difficulty with the “social control” thesis is that it can be neither proved nor refuted, since any empirical fact can be interpreted in accord with it. If some philanthropists and reformers advocated a system of free, compulsory education, it can be said that they did so only because educated workers were more productive than uneducated ones; if others opposed such a system (ostensibly out of a distrust of any kind of state-controlled

education), it was to keep the poor in a state of ignorance and submission. By this mode of reasoning, any philanthropic enterprise, regardless of its nature, purpose, or effect, can be disparaged and discredited.

The other familiar argument, that philanthropy was no solution to the problem of poverty, would have been conceded by Victorians, who never made any such claim, if only because they did not believe that poverty was a “problem” that could be “solved.” At best they thought it could be alleviated, and this only for some individuals or groups, in certain circumstances, and in particular respects. The entire purpose of Charles Booth’s monumental study, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1891–1903), was to break down the category of “poor” into distinctive “classes,” analyzing each of them in terms not only of income but also of the regularity of their work and earnings, their living and working conditions, their habits and moral qualities. The effect was to distinguish the various problems that went under the umbrella term “poverty,” and thus the specific remedies—not “solutions”—appropriate to those specific problems.

This “disaggregation,” as we would now say, was typical of Victorian social reformers and philanthropists, who were perfectly aware of the special and limited nature of their enterprises. The Charity Organisation Society, which tried to coordinate the activities of the many philanthropic groups, made a great point of distinguishing between the functions of private charity and public relief. Where the Poor Law was directed to the relief of the indigent, charity should be reserved for those who were needy but not actually destitute, who were generally employed and might even have some resources such as savings or possessions but who had temporary problems that, unless alleviated, might lead to pauperism. Relief, in short, was meant for paupers; charity for the poor. And neither relief nor charity would “solve” the problem of poverty; at most they would alleviate it.

Nor did the reformer Octavia Hill have any illusions about solving the housing problem when she embarked upon her housing projects. She hoped that the principles she established for her houses—that tenants pay their rent promptly, that “rent collectors” (in effect, social workers) respect the privacy of the tenants and assist them unobtrusively, and that the houses include such “amenities” as ornaments and gardens as well as essential utilities—would be applied on a larger scale by private owners and institutions. But she also knew the limitations of her financial resources, the relatively small number of families she could accommodate, and, more important, the particular kinds of workers she wanted to accommodate. She made it clear that her houses were not meant for the artisans who could afford the “model dwellings” erected by the Peabody Trust and other building societies, nor for the vagrants who found refuge in the “common lodging houses,” but rather for the “unskilled laborers” who constituted the bulk of the “industrious, thrifty working people.”

Later-day critics, who fault the Victorians for not solving the problems of poverty and housing, use such words as “vague” and “illogical,” “ambivalent” and “ambiguous,” “transitional” and “half-way house,” to describe the ideas and projects of these philanthropists, reform-

ers, and thinkers. The implication is that Victorian England can be understood only as a prelude to the welfare state (or, as some historians would prefer, to socialism); anything short of that is regarded as naive and futile. If most Victorians objected to a large extension of state control, if they preferred small measures of reform to large ones and local laws and regulations to national ones, if they persisted in expending their energy and resources on private, voluntary efforts, it could only be, so it is supposed, because of a failure of imagination, or a weakness of will, or a commitment to an out-moded ideology or vested interest.

Although Victorian philanthropists did not believe that there were comprehensive solutions to most social problems, they did believe that some problems could be alleviated and that it was the duty of the more fortunate to do what they could to relieve the conditions of the less fortunate. This was the moral imperative that made philanthropy so important a part of Victorian life. But there was another moral imperative: that every proposal for alleviation produce moral as well as material benefits—at the very least that it not have a deleterious moral effect. This was the common denominator that linked together public relief and private charity, settlement houses and housing projects, socialist organizations and temperance societies. Whatever was done for the poor was meant to enable them to do more for themselves, to become more self-reliant and more responsible—to bring out, as Green said, their “better selves.” “Charity,” wrote the secretary of the Charity Organisation Society, “is a social regenerator. We have to use Charity to create the power of self-help.”

**T**he Victorians were avowedly, unashamedly, incorrigibly moralists. They were moralists in their own behalf—they engaged in philanthropic enterprises in part to satisfy their own moral needs. And they were moralists in behalf of the poor, whom they sought not only to assist materially but also to elevate morally, spiritually, culturally, and intellectually—and whom, moreover, they believed capable and desirous of such elevation. Just as it is demeaning to the working classes to suggest (as some historians do) that work, thrift, prudence, sobriety, and self-help were middle-class values imposed upon them from above, so it is demeaning to the philanthropists to say that they promoted these values solely for their own ulterior motives. In any case, whatever their motives (and there were surely self-serving, self-aggrandizing, self-satisfied individuals among them), the values they commended to the poor were those they cherished for themselves and for their own families. It was no small achievement that people of very different political and philosophical dispositions, engaged in very different philanthropic enterprises, should have agreed on this: that the poor had the will to aspire to these same values and the ability to realize them.