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REVIEW

Private virtues, public vices: Philanthropy and democratic equality

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In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that the generous person 'will give for the sake of the noble, and rightly' (1120a24–25). Emma Saunders-Hastings has provided a compelling and meaningful account of what it means to give 'nobly and rightly'. Indeed, as she argues, an important element of good philanthropy is donating with an eye towards how it can and does impact the democratic ideals of a society in which people are treated as equals. Importantly, 'philanthropy is more than a potential contributor to good outcomes; it is also an important source of power that can be exercised in undemocratic and paternalistic ways' (p. 5). Her book seeks to unveil some of those potential challenges.

What was particularly exciting about the book was the way in which Saunders-Hastings developed and explored novel insights about the potential for undemocratic influences of philanthropy. The majority of previous work on the relationship between philanthropy and democracy has focused on the distributive impact of philanthropy--what good it can do and where it might be able to meaningfully do goods otherwise out of reach of the government. One may think here of Rob Reich's (2018) arguments about the value of philanthropy to engage in the support of pluralism and the acts of discovery of novel forms of social policy which may be worth pursuing in the future. However, Saunders-Hastings expands this discussion through her exploration of the relational elements of philanthropy, especially the ways philanthropy creates unequal relationships between persons.

First, she argues, philanthropy can stand within a democratic society as an independent and unaccountable plutocratic institution. Such a judgment is not a claim that it is unable to do meaningfully good things, but rather 'to deny that there is anything democratic about the way that those benefits are brought about or that the direct benefits [of the philanthropy] always outweigh the democratic costs' (p. 72).

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The problem is not only that the super-rich wield political influence, but also that there are certain public goods, secured and enabled by their donations, which are subject to the control of those rich donors. However, this puts certain features of the public good outside public control via democratic processes. As Saunders-Hastings is quick to admit, we do not live in a perfect society, and so there are often cases in which the nondemocratic influence of elite philanthropy is acceptable as a 'countervailing force to other, more powerful undemocratic influences' (p. 83).

Philanthropy can also undermine democratic equality by paternalizing others. Here, Saunders-Hastings adopts and develops a somewhat more expansive definition of paternalism, referring to 'policies that both (1) attempt to restrict, manipulate, influence, or circumvent an agent's choices or behavior, and (2) express the judgment that the agent's ability to choose or act well on her own behalf is deficient or inferior to that of the paternalist in some relevant respect or domain' (p. 95). Her definition departs from the traditional coercive nature of paternalism--arguing that even donations which add new choices for an individual can treat that individual paternalistically. Her example (p. 105) is illustrative: a donor who offers a scholarship with certain stipulations attached (no alcohol consumption, live in a residence with curfew rules, no entertaining guests in dorms, etc.) is acting paternalistically. The paternalism remains even if students have alternative options, on her view, because paternalism is the expression of an 'insulting judgment' and 'disrespect' for the potential recipient (p. 96). The insult in the example is that the donor deems the student incapable of judging independently whether these behaviors are acceptable.

Of course, the nature of this definition (as is the case with almost all analytic definitions) does open her up to various potential counterexamples and objections. As one example, suppose there is a donor who funds a scholarship at institution A rather than institution B. Suppose, furthermore, that there are major differences in the general education curricula of institutions A and B, and the donor choses institution A because of their preference for its strong and well-developed liberal arts curriculum as opposed to institution B's half-baked and underdeveloped curriculum. Suppose also that the donor believes that the value of liberal arts education is the sort of thing which L.A. Paul (2014) calls a 'transformative experience'--meaning that an individual must first experience studying the liberal arts via a well-developed curriculum before they would be able to see and agree to its value. So, the donor wants to create opportunities for others to engage in the study of the liberal arts so that they may come to value it. Definitionally, as a transformative experience, it's the sort of thing which the donor is in position to know because they have had that experience, but the student does not yet know because they haven't. Is the donor's judgment (and let's, for the sake of argument, presume it is sincere) about the nature and value of the liberal arts in higher education count as paternalistic?

Two caveats are important here. First, Saunders-Hastings's argument is not that the philanthropist can never do anything even remotely paternalistic, but rather that 'the presumptive wrongness of paternalism gives philanthropists reason to avoid and to minimize paternalism in their giving' (p. 119). So the general education example may be a sufficiently minimized case of paternalism in her view. Second, Saunders-Hastings might even reasonably argue that there is nothing insulting about the donation in my modified example: it represents a sincere and honest presentation of a

view to the nature of the good of higher education. But, if so, then we would need to ask the same question of the original example: suppose that the donor believes the relevant features (i.e. no alcohol, no entertaining in dorm room, etc.) to be key features of a good educational experience, and suppose also that she takes them to be the sorts of things which would not be obvious to someone who has not yet been to college or chosen them (i.e. transformative experiences). It's not clear to me that this would necessarily also be an insulting judgment, especially if we are going to affirm that experience and age may yield something like practical wisdom. But, to make such an affirmation would be to admit, in some ways, to a partly inegalitarian society, since it would suggest that there may be individuals who have special insights on various questions related to pursuing and achieving the good life. Such a conversation would be a more fundamental question, far outside the scope of the issues Saunders-Hastings takes up in her book.

But, and even assuming that there could be no such ethical expertise, we might also wonder whether and when it is *ever* insulting to offer a donation with an eye towards a sincere and honest picture of the good. Isn't that simply what would result from someone who cares about things, who has values and a vision of the good? To put it in stronger terms, and as I have previously argued (Boesch, 2018), donations are actions which can and should flow from our sincerely held commitments and identities. To act without any regard to these views is to be alienated from our own actions, to disregard the fact that it is *our* life and that this fact matters, ethically speaking.

All the same (and herein lies my greatest appreciation for Saunders-Hastings' book), it seems that a good moral agent, a truly virtuous person in the private sense--someone who aims to 'give nobly and rightly', as Aristotle said--will act with an eye towards virtues in the public sense, too. Such a virtuous person would donate to promote public goods which follow democratic processes and admit of democratic control. They would act in ways which treat and respect fellow members of their society as capable and worthy of doing the hard work of identifying and pursuing a good life. But, and this is also far outside the scope of Saunders-Hastings's book, it seems that we can *modus tollens* the *modus ponens* here and argue that any consideration and identification of what is a virtue in the public sphere must also account for virtue in the private sense, as well--or to offer it in terms of a play on the book's title: 'public virtues, private vices'. But this raises all sorts of challenging and ancient questions about the role of society for making individuals good (and vice versa) and things like the unity of the virtues. But it seems to me at least--and even more so after reading Saunders-Hastings's excellent book--that this is inevitably where we will find ourselves in the complex balancing act that is pursuing a good and ethical life within a good society.

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