Book review of: *Who Really Cares? The Surprising Truth about Compassionate Conservatism,* by Arthur C. Brooks, New York: Basic Books (250 pages).

Arthur Brooks, professor of public administration at Syracuse University, is a rare scholar. Besides being incredibly prolific, his research topics are of broad interest in social science, public policy, and philosophy. Moreover, he is exceptionally intellectually honest: while he is inclined towards modern liberalism, he will tell you what his data tell him.

In *Who Really Cares*, he surveys the data on American charitable giving, and has much to report—much, he admits, that surprised him, going against his own cultural prejudices. The facts show that the common myths about charitable giving are all exactly opposite of reality.

Take the perception that Americans are generally indifferent to suffering around the world—a view Saint Jimmy Carter once trumpeted. The reality is that around 75% of all American families give to charity annually, to the tune of an average of 3.5% of their household income. Only a third of this largess goes to churches, while the rest goes to secular charities. This adds up to $250 billion a year in private giving, a figure which exceeds the GDP of Sweden or Denmark. And more than half of American families give of their time as well as money. This is, please note, over and above the copious amounts of aid (such as foreign aid) the government gives at all levels.

But, Brooks notes, there is a major difference between the charitable and the non-charitable. The majority of Americans, the charitable, who give time and money, give a lot, and also give in other ways, such as donating blood. Moreover, the donors are three times more likely to help strangers than are non-donors, and less likely to hold negative prejudices towards various groups. The non-charitable are just the reverse.

By charity, Brooks quite rightly means giving that is consensual, rather than coerced, on both the giving and receiving end. As he puts it, (p. 7), taxing people to pay for public services and jailing the criminally insane may be good policy, but is in neither case charity.

Among those who give to charity, the most common reason cited is a sense of duty (80%), and the least common is the tax deduction (only 20%). Among those who don’t give, the main reason cited is that they don’t have the money (roughly 66%). That this is most likely an excuse is indicated by the fact that the working poor give more of their income to charity than do the middle class.

While race and ethnicity are not predictors of charity in isolation from the other factors, age and gender are. Older women are more likely to give to charity than the general population, while young males are less likely.

But Brooks urges that by far and away the biggest predictors of charitableness are religious belief, skepticism about powerful government, strength of family, and personal entrepreneurism. The bulk of his book is devoted to an exhaustive analysis of the data demonstrating this. Along the way, he refutes some of his own most deeply prior prejudices—that the rich want tax cuts because they lack charity, that Americans are less charitable than Europeans, and that American liberals are more compassionate than are conservatives. Further, he found that charity is productive of wealth, happiness, and even health, so that “…the policies, politics and cultural forces that compromise the willingness and ability of people to give charitably induce a personal flaw into citizens that impoverishes them, stunts their opportunities, and has negative repercussions for our communities…” (p. 13). He strikes here a note of virtue economics: that the virtue of charity is tied to other virtues conducive to human flourishing.

In the first chapter, he debunks the common (and comfortable) myth that people who are politically “progressive” are more charitable, a myth endlessly promoted by the left. The data show that at every income level, self-identified conservatives donate more than do self-identified liberals, despite the fact that liberals average 6% more income. (The difference remains even if we look at registered party affiliation, rather than self-identification). And this difference holds for non-monetary donation, such as the donation of blood.

Again, the data explode another stereotype, viz., that younger people are more generous. Young liberals are among the least generous groups. Liberals younger than 30 belonged to roughly a third fewer community organizations, gave about a third less blood, and donated over a tenth less to charity, than did young conservatives.

Bluntly put, Red state America is more charitable than Blue state America. States that voted for Bush by 60% or better gave an average of 3.5% of household income to charity, compared to only 1.9% in states that voted for Kerry by 60% or more. The top five Bush states were more than half again as likely to volunteer to help others, and twice as likely to volunteer to help the poor, than were the top five Kerry states.

Brooks then looks at the statistics on charity and religion. In theory, being religious might increase charitableness (because all major faiths enjoin the faithful to be charitable), or it might decrease it (by encouraging tribal animosity towards those of differing faiths). But the facts speak unequivocally: religious people are more giving, even to people outside the faith, no matter how you characterize “religious.”

Taking “religious” to mean those who attend services nearly weekly (roughly 30% of the population), and secular to mean those who profess no religion or attend services twice yearly or less (again, roughly 30% of the population), we see a major difference. Religious people are much more likely to contribute money than are secularists (91% to 66%), and much more likely to volunteer (67% to 44%). In the year 2000, the religious people had the same average income as the secularists, but gave away three and a half times more money annually, and volunteered more than twice as frequently.

Again, if you take the concept of “religious” to mean those who pray daily, and “secular” to mean those who never pray, the difference remains—83% of the former contribute to charity, compared to only 53% of the latter. Change the definition again to characterize “religious” as those who simply belong to a congregation (actively or not), and “secular” as those who don’t, and the gap remains (88% to 56%).

Even if we take out of the comparison donations made to religious causes, the “charity gap” remains. The religious are more likely to give to *nonreligious* charities (like the United Way) than are the secular (71% to 61%), more likely to volunteer (60% to 39%), and give 14% more money. They are also more likely to give to family and friends, and give in much higher amounts (46% higher). When asked, secularists are more likely to give implausible excuses for their meanness (“I gave at the office,” “I was never asked,” or “I can’t afford it.”)

Brooks then looks at differences in charitableness as it relates to ideology. Specifically, he raises the question whether people who favor the forced redistribution of income by government (“redistributionists,” estimated by one large 1996 survey at 33%) give more to charity than those who oppose government redistribution (“non-redistributionists,” about 43% in the same survey). The answer is—drum roll, please!—Hell, no!

Non-redistributionists are in fact much more likely to give to charity, and gave away four times more money yearly, than redistributionists. And again, this gap holds even when you look at donations to nonreligious charities—non-redistributionists give three and a half times more to such charities than do redistributionists. The gap remains even if you use a more favorable definition of “redistributionist” (as did a 2001 survey).

The gap still remains even if you correct for the fact that redistributionists earn about 13% less than non-redistributionists. Indeed, if you hold income as well as age, ethnicity, religion, gender, marital status and political affiliation constant, you find that the redistributionists are generally less charitable: less likely to give to charity, to volunteer, to give directions to someone on the street, to return extra change to a cashier, and to donate blood. (In fact, if everyone in the general population gave blood at the same rate redistributionists do, the national supply of blood would DROP by 30%!!)

Brooks goes on to ask whether the reason for this disparity between redistributionists and non-redistributionists is due to what economists call “the public goods crowding out effect,” which means that when the government spends for a public good, private citizens cut back their own spending on it. Many studies suggest that two dollars spent by government for a given public good results in up to a dollar less in private giving. But while his studies empirically confirm that public spending for eleemosynary purposes does indeed crowd out private charity, in fact, holding that constant, it is still the case that merely having the leftist redistributionist mentality itself discourages charitableness.

In that vein, he notes that in the first two years of the Bush presidency, when would expect the far left to increase their giving (in the face of a President perceived by them to be insensitive to the poor), while charitable giving by the general public was *up* by 5%, giving by the left *dropped* 10%.

Here he makes the point that the leftist mindset seems to view charity as unnecessary at best in a just society (i.e., one with lots of income distribution), and positively evil at worst. He quotes John Steinbeck to the effect that charity makes the giver feel superior, and reinforces social hierarchy, and notes that the Marxist standard line is that charity is actually intended to hurt the poor.

Brooks then looks at the relationship between work and charity. He notes that while wealthier givers give more to charity in absolute terms, surprisingly, the poor actually give a higher proportion of their income (4% to 5%) than do the rich (3% to 4%), and both the rich and the poor give more to charity than does the middle class.

But it is more complex than that. The poor are divided into the givers and the non-givers. That is, while some poor are very charitable, some give virtually nothing. Among families earning under $20,000 in 2000, those that donated to charity gave at twice the rate those that did not. Among the poor, those that donated to charity gave 7% of their income. But the poor are also four times more likely to not give than are the rich.

The difference between the charitable poor and the uncharitable poor lies in the origins of their incomes. People who have earned their money tend to be more generous with it than are those who got their money through welfare. The working poor give three times as much money to charity than do welfare recipients at the same income level, and are twice as likely to give and to volunteer.

The reasons for this seem clear, and Brooks explores them at some length. But in essence, welfare tends to make people less self-sufficient and responsible, and creates communities where people have no role-models of hard working people striving to improve their lives. In short, welfare programs impede virtue in both the person and the community.

This analysis is corroborated by the fact hat the rate of giving among those who were on welfare in 2001 but left after 2003 (the year of the major welfare reform legislation passed by Congress) was a third higher in 2003 than those who stayed on welfare. (One reason for the difference seems again to be the role religion plays or doesn’t play in that person’s life).

The upshot is that belief in redistribution is a charity-killer, as is being a recipient of redistribution. Moreover, just as recipients of welfare are less charitable, they have higher rates of the opposite traits—such as criminality and substance abuse. Failure of character seems to be all of a piece.

Brooks also examines the interrelation between family structure and charitableness. He begins by noting that people with kids are more charitable than those without. For instance, if you hold all other relevant variables—age, gender, income level, party affiliation, etc.—the same, people with kids are more likely to give to charity than those without. This is surprising at first glance, because kids take up time and money. But then, as he nicely puts it, (p. 98), “We have already seen that charity is *not* just a by-product of income or wealth—it is not primarily a financial phenomenon at all. Charity is a unique and transcendent human virtue that thrives on human love. Charity is a natural human value.”

The main reason for this link is fairly clear: charity is something usually taught to a child by a parent. This is done by example—for instance, again, holding all other relevant factors constant, a person whose parents volunteered is 12% more likely to volunteer than one whose parents didn’t. Additionally, being raised in a religious household also increased chances of giving later in life. For example, secular adults brought up in religious households (defined as attending church weekly) were 20% more likely to give to charity than those brought up in secular households.

But surprisingly, at least to the liberals among us, another way to impart charitableness is by being charitable to one’s own children. Brooks found that inherited wealth makes people give about twice as much to charity as other forms of wealth (such as stock gains or a rise in home value). I am surprised that opponents of the estate tax don’t make more of this point.

Having shown that religion, non-redistributionist mindset, strong families and working for your income are all major causes of charitableness, Brooks then asks whether these are causal factors for charitableness in other countries, and why differences in charitableness are important at all.

Regarding other countries, Brooks examines the charitableness of Americans vis-à-vis other nations. He recalls the famous criticism by U.N. bureaucrat Jan Egeland, who called America “stingy” because it does not give 0.7% of its GDP to foreign aid—a figure dreamt up by a group of other bureaucrats called the Commission on Sustainable Development. But Egeland was simply ignorant: he didn’t count private charity. When you do, America is close already to the bureaucrats’ arbitrary goal: the combined private and governmental international aid given by Americans totals $73 billion a year, or about 0.5% of its GDP. And that $73 billion, please note, represents only 2% of all American charitable giving.

The misperception by Europeans that Americans are uncharitable is due primarily to the fact that there is very little private charity in Europe. Per person, *even after adjusting for differences in incomes*, Americans donate twice as much of their income as do Dutchmen, three times as much as do the French, five times as much as do the Germans, and ten times as much as do the Italians. This disparity remains when you look at nonmonetary charity, such as volunteering time and donating blood.

Of course, Europeans have a reply: we pay higher taxes, and those taxes fund what you Americans donate to charity to cover.

But that won’t wash. First, the average tax burden on Americans (counting federal, state and local taxes) isn’t generally lower than that on Europeans. And the underground economy in Europe is double what it is in America, meaning that much of the Europeans’ incomes are not taxed at all.

Europeans have another answer: Americans get to write their donations off their taxes. But 80% of donations are *not* written off to taxes, and if you put aside the 20% that is written off, the massive disparity between American and European giving remains. And anyway, donation of time and blood is not deductable, and the Americans show the same edge in nonmonetary as in money giving.

Brooks shows that the reason that Europeans are so incredibly uncharitable is the same that uncharitable Americans are. Compared to most Americans, Europeans are more secular, redistributionist, and have less stable family conditions. (In this regard, he points out that while the American birthrate is about 2.1 children per woman—roughly replacement level—the E.U. average is only about 1.5.

Brooks then turns to the question about how charity relates to prosperity. He argues that J. D. Rockefeller was right to view charity and prosperity as interrelated. As he puts it, (p. 139), “Without prosperity, large-scale charity is impossible. And without consistent and responsible charity, prosperity will not continue.”

That prosperity enables charity seems obvious. But why suppose that charity causes or leads to prosperity? Here Brooks cites the research done by Robert Putnam, who has detailed how “social capital” promotes health, wealth, and happiness. Charitable acts in turn promote social bonds. He also cites other reasons why this might be so. Perhaps after people give money, they feel the need to work harder to recoup the expenditure. Perhaps charity triggers industriousness. Perhaps being charitable gives a person more self-esteem, which leads to greater success. Perhaps giving charity gives people a sense of power to help improve the world, which increases happiness, in turn promoting industriousness.

In any case, he marshals compelling statistical evidence that prosperity and charity are mutually reinforcing, as are charity and happiness, and as are charity and health.

Brooks concludes by drawing some conclusions. First, he makes the virtue libertarian point that despite the seductive appeal of redistributive government, big government hurts us. Welfare makes people less charitable, hurting their communities. Moreover, government subsidization of nonprofit organizations “crowds out” personal charity, reducing people’s happiness and prosperity.

Again, government can destroy charity by regulation. He offers a personal illustration: he describes the enormous amount of time required merely for document certification by New York’s state bureaucracy for the adoption of his daughter, resulting in her remaining in the orphanage for six months longer than needed. Some regulation is needed, but it should not make adoption and other family supportive practices inordinately difficult.

And he suggests that we look at ending the built-in bias in our tax system against charity by poor people. Poor folk seldom itemize deductions. He suggests perhaps giving tax credits for donations, or (better in my view) just adopting a flat income tax.

The implications of Brooks’ work are profound all around. First, conservatives and Republicans should use this data unceasingly to combat the pernicious lie that only liberals are “generous.” The Democrats have used this myth as part of their class war rhetoric for the better part of a century, and it needs to be rebutted in every campaign going forward using this arsenal of facts.

Second, this work should make it clear that those who scream loudest for liberal redistributionist policies are likely to be hypocrites. And people are sensitive to hypocrisy—it is built into us. Our evolution as an extremely social hominid species means maintenance of social norms has survival value, and we maintain those norms by detecting cheaters—hypocrites.

So the first thing that any Republican or conservative candidate should do is check the tax returns of his or her Democrat or liberal opponent for charitable donations, and hammer away if there are little or no donations. (This is just a reversal of the tactic used by Democrats and liberals, who love to examine the personal lives of their opponents for any evidence of adultery or other violations of “family values”). I was amazed watching the Palin/Biden VP debate that Palin didn’t twit Biden about the fact that while Biden loudly proclaimed that rich people should welcome being fleeced because it is the “patriotic” thing to do, he himself was as niggardly as a miser. In a decade in which he earned nearly $3 million, he gave away a lousy *three grand* to charity. Holy skinflint, Batman, how miserably cheap can you get?

Third—and this comes from a life-long agnostic—some skeptics (especially in the libertarian camp) need to start rethinking their hostility to religion. I think here of a recent Freedomfest debate between the charming uber-atheist Christopher Hitchens and the intense Christian conservative Dinesh D’Souza about whether religion is a force for evil or good. The debate was in my view shallow. Hitchens focused upon the harm caused by religious wars and pogroms, which have certainly killed many, and D’Souza rightly countered that so have atheist wars and pogroms (secular communism alone killing 100 million in the last century). But D’Souza never seemed to grasp the fact that religion’s beneficial effects are intra-tribal, not inter-tribal. Many empirical studies have indicated that religion promotes happiness, honesty, and health. Brooks has provided copious evidence that it promotes charity as well.

A modest criticism I have about Brooks’ commendable book is that while it establishes brilliantly the virtue ethical point that charitable giving improves the character of the givers—in a way that high social welfare spending by government does not—he overlooks important consequentialist reasons to favor private charity over public social welfare. One big issue is efficiency—public charities, which have to answer in a direct and immediate way to donors, and have to compete with other charities for donor support—are better able to spend the money wisely. They are closer to the ground, and free to make important distinctions (such as who can’t find a job because they need more training, versus those who simply need to get off drugs), than is government generally.

Moreover, just as pricing is an information mechanism, so is labeling. Private charity, labeled as charity and understood by the recipients as charity, tells those recipients important things. It tells them that the money comes from people entitled to keep it, so some gratitude is appropriate; that they need to address some issues in their lives; and that the resources are limited. Government redistributionist giving tends to be interpreted as a right, as a natural consequence of living in society, and that the resources are endless.

Brooks has written a clear, empirically well-grounded and intellectually honest work. It should blast smug liberals out of their self-congratulatory slumbers. It should also make some libertarians rethink the role of religion in a well-functioning society.

**Gary James Jason**

**Department of Philosophy**

**California State University, Fullerton**