

Lechterman, T.M. 2019. "Review of Paul Woodruff (ed.), *The Ethics of Giving: Philosophers' Perspectives on Philanthropy*." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 48, no. 5: 1110–12. DOI: [10.1177/0899764019839694](https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764019839694).

Philanthropy is a virtue, at least partially synonymous with beneficence or charity. As such, it occupies a central concern for moral and political philosophy, much of which is devoted to the proper distribution of resources and what individuals owe to one another. But philosophers working on these questions have tended to do so at the conceptual level, rarely articulating how theoretical arguments bear on actually existing social practices, i.e., organized philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. *The Ethics of Giving*, a new collection of essays edited by the philosopher Paul Woodruff, joins a number of fresh attempts to contribute the distinctive tools of philosophical analysis to increasingly important debates about whether and how individuals ought to engage in these practices.

Much of the recent philosophical discussion has been dominated by so-called *effective altruism*. According to effective altruism, individuals have demanding duties to engage in philanthropy, and to do so on the basis of where their resources can make the greatest marginal improvements in global wellbeing. But as Woodruff notes in introductory remarks, effective altruism draws mainly from a single tradition of thought: utilitarianism. Woodruff's collection aims to broaden this discussion by highlighting perspectives from rival schools of thought, namely deontology and virtue ethics. To this end, it assembles a mixture of heavyweights and rising stars, each of whom develops an original, clear, and analytically rigorous argument about the questions at hand.

Year after year, statistics reveal that most donors fail to heed the claims of need, choosing instead to support educational, cultural, and religious causes. Effective altruism, along with other perspectives especially concerned with poverty and inequality, tends to find this discretionary philanthropy morally suspect. Yet, the verdict that discretionary philanthropy may sometimes be entirely justifiable is a theme that unites several of the collection's essays.

Thomas Hill, one of the foremost scholars of Immanuel Kant, draws on Kant's deontology to construct a novel interpretation of the duty of beneficence. Kant famously treats beneficence as an "imperfect duty," one whose content cannot be specified precisely in the abstract. For Hill, the latitude that Kant grants to beneficence extends more widely than many have thought, allowing individuals some discretion to be partial to personal attachments and to promote causes that go beyond meeting basic needs. Crucially, however, this discretion narrows when a would-be benefactor possesses resources unjustly.

Working from a different angle, Christine Swanton shows how a version of virtue ethics supplies guidance on questions of philanthropy's demandingness and choosing a worthy cause. For Swanton, thinking of reasons for action in terms of rightness and wrongness or goodness and badness artificially flattens the domain of the ethical. We should be more attentive to "thick evaluative concepts," concepts like kind, callous, generous, humiliating, and manipulative, which more fully characterize ethical life and often diverge in their guidance from deontological or utilitarian prescriptions. Swanton believes this account can solve certain paradoxes in the ethics of beneficence, such as why acts of philanthropy that ignore claims of need can sometimes seem praiseworthy.

Several philosophers supportive of effective altruism have argued that while engaging in philanthropy may not necessarily be morally required, if one chooses to give, one acts wrongly by choosing to promote any outcome but the best one available. Jeff McMahan, who himself supports effective altruism, believes this argumentative strategy fails. When individuals are not morally required to give (or to give more than they have already given), McMahan claims, the amount and direction of any extra donations are rightly matters of personal discretion.

Brandon Boesch helps to show why a moral permission to engage in discretionary philanthropy can be especially valuable. Giving to the particular causes that one values, Boesch argues, can be an important way of developing or maintaining one's identity. Moreover, for many people operating under the constraints of contemporary economic life, making donations is one of the only means available for expressing the ethical commitments that help to constitute one's identity. Ethical doctrines that discourage agents from making these kinds of donations threaten us with alienation.

Even as several chapters reach conclusions that support greater discretion for donors, three others present arguments that impose greater limitations on discretionary giving. William MacAskill, Andreas Mogensen, and Toby Ord—noted champions of effective altruism—join forces to defend what they call the “Very Weak Principle of Sacrifice,” according to which, “Most middle-class members of affluent countries ought, morally, to use at least 10 percent of their income to effectively improve the lives of others.” The authors marshal empirical evidence to show that such a sacrifice exacts a smaller cost to an agent's own wellbeing than we might think while resulting in much higher benefits to the lives of others than we might realize.

Many critics have faulted effective altruism for treating obligations to the global poor exclusively as duties of charity or opportunities to do good. To critics, this stance ignores the massive injustices that lie behind global inequalities and unwittingly reestablishes objectionable power relationships between donors and recipients. Elizabeth Ashford proposes a truce between these positions, holding that effective altruism can be consistent with understanding severe poverty as a violation of human rights. In Ashford's view, we ought to regard duties to donate to effective aid agencies as “backup duties” to our duties to reform unjust institutions.

In a concluding chapter, Paul Woodruff picks up on the lurking question of how reasons of justice might motivate or constrain acts of giving. Though agreeing with Ashford that justice can direct us to donate to others as restitution for past or ongoing wrongs, Woodruff insists that such gifts will be blameworthy if the giver is motivated by beneficence or altruism. More broadly, Woodruff proposes that reciprocity, understood as an aspect of justice, plays a much larger role in the ethics of giving than many recognize. He suggests that individuals who voluntarily enjoy the benefits of cultural or educational goods made possible by the generosity of others incur a moral debt. Considerations of reciprocity might be trumped by other considerations, but they must factor into practical reasoning about philanthropy.

The volume shines in many ways, but a conspicuous limitation is its neglect of political morality. As several of the essays come to discover, the moral status of a philanthropic act crucially depends on the justice or injustice of the distribution of resources. If I am not rightly entitled to the resources I own, these resources are not mine to give away, whether to my preferred causes or to the causes recommended by effective altruism. This pushes us back to the question of what distributive justice requires, and what it demands of individuals—questions which can only be answered by political philosophy. Even as the authors recognize this challenge, they show less appreciation for the fact that acts of philanthropy, particularly when undertaken by the wealthy, constitute exercises of power that may further complicate their moral status. Missing, too, is a sensitivity to how the ethics of giving might be informed or constrained by what justice requires in taxation or between generations. Finally, though the volume's title might suggest engagement with the distinct ethical challenges facing organized philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, most of its arguments turn out to be pitched to laypersons considering whether or where to donate.

These limitations aside, *The Ethics of Giving* remains a pathbreaking collection that pushes ethical discourse on these topics forward on countless fronts. Non-philosophers will find the arguments captivating and accessible despite their sophistication.

Word count: 1,235