

Billionaires need a giving philosophy

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From world hunger to global warming and the arts, there are numerous causes that individuals, foundations and NGOs choose to support. And even in an economy that has been slow to recover, billionaires are continuing to pledge significant portions of their wealth to philanthropy. But when considering what philanthropies to support, a Northeastern professor says the wealthy need to address some moral and ethical questions. In her new book, “Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy,” Patricia Illingworth, assistant professor of philosophy in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, explores these issues as they relate to giving.

What considerations should individuals make when donating money?

In making decisions about giving, people ought to consider how great the need is and the likelihood that the money donated will actually address that need. People should undertake a kind of moral due diligence in which they look at the charity to see how much of the money donated will actually be spent on addressing the need, and how much on other kinds of costs. Sometimes charitable money can actually make things worse for beneficiaries — for example, making them dependent on donor agencies. Because of this, charities are interested in sustainability.

People should also consider what kinds of “causes” deserve their support. Should they give to the people most in need, such as the global poor? Or, should they give to environmental organizations, and the

interests of future generations? Some people believe that their obligations to help are owed most strongly to those close by, such as family and community groups, while others believe that those with greatest need worldwide deserve their help. Ethics are often key in resolving many of these questions. There are even organizations that specialize in evaluating charities for donors.

What do you think are the most significant moral questions in the practice of philanthropy today? Who should give?

Should everyone give, or are only the rich under an obligation to give? Poor people living in wealthy OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries are much better off than people living in very poor countries. Do the poor in the United States have an obligation to help the poor in Burundi?

How much money should people give? Is it the same for all people or do billionaires have an obligation to give a greater percentage of their wealth than people with incomes in the middle range?

Are there any moral priorities among charities? Is poverty, for example, morally more important than the arts? Is giving a purely private question to be left to the individual, or should ethics provide guidance on priorities based on moral principles and the demands of global justice?

How do NGOs navigate the moral priorities that inform their decisions regarding their projects?

NGO's use a variety of criteria for determining what projects to support. They have obligations to both the donors who support them, and to those they are organized around serving. Whatever criteria NGOs use, they

need to be transparent about them, and ensure that donors understand the terms of their gifts. In a world in which there is so much need, it is important that charitable monies not be wasted, nor that they cause more harm than good. Therefore, NGOs need to use some kind of cost-benefit analysis in determining what projects and [people](#) to support.

Provided by Northeastern University

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