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Tizard Learning Disability F

Commentary on "Making the world a better place: achieving impact through innovation and an entrepreneurial ethos"

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Commentary on "Making the world a better place: achieving impact through innovation and an entrepreneurial ethos"

Like, I suspect, many others, I have sometimes fantasised about winning the lottery and what I would do with the money. The starting point to these fantasies is usually an arbitrary amount of winnings that might be informed by something I've seen on the news about the latest jackpot. In the course of my meditation I will usually consider the possibility of giving some of the money away. Say I won £100 million, perhaps I could give away half…overnight I would become a philanthropist! This leads on to the interesting question of how I might do it and to which organisations or individuals I would give the money. It wouldn't of course be entirely arbitrary, I would certainly be thinking about the things I cared about, about organisations I supported, about their capacity to make good use of any money that I might give them. It seems likely that, at the very least, I would talk to those organisations and get an idea about how they might propose to spend the money. I might well want to test the water, to give some money away and see how well it was used, before going any further. Perhaps, like Dame Stephanie Shirley, I would establish a Foundation to more formally consider requests or applications and to monitor the extent to which the money was put to good use.

In the course of this fantasy it is easy to see some of both the joys and the dangers of philanthropy. I would love to be able to give game-changing amounts of money to certain organisations. Undoubtedly, however, my views of which organisations should receive the money would be heavily influenced by my own values and experiences. These would inevitably be biased and others' choices would probably be very different. There is a degree of arbitrariness, here then, that seems the more problematic the more money we are talking about. When the Gates Foundation chooses to invest millions to support the global eradication of Polio (https://www.gatesfoundation.org/our-work/programs/global-development/polio) I am happy to cheer. When it invests in charter schools in the USA (https://www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/media-center/press-releases/2008/04/foundations-pledge-$19-million-to-strengthen-newark-public-charter-schools) I am not alone, however, in being concerned that this seems to be a political choice. There is also an issue about where the money has come from. Some museums and universities are now rejecting funding from the Sackler Trust given what is known about the marketing of opioid medication by the pharmaceutical company owned by members of the Sackler family (Dyer, 2020). But why is Bill Gates' money less tainted than the Sacklers'? Some would certainly argue that the Gates money now doing so much good has come from excessive profits and successful tax avoidance over decades. From the perspective of gambling charities my lottery winnings may be equally tainted and rejected if they were on my possible donation list.

There seem to be two central problems here. First, is it fair that some individuals should be able to accumulate so much wealth that their giving some or all of it away can make such a big difference? Second, should those same individuals be able to decide who benefits? These are big questions and I will clearly not be able to address them fully here. In the context of John Pepin's article, however, it seems worth considering both broader views about philanthropy and the extent to which it has or could influence life for autistic people, people with learning disabilities and their families.

Perspectives on philanthropy

A recent radio programme on philanthropy (BBC, 2021) helpfully presented a range of perspectives that I will briefly, and perhaps crudely, summarise here. From one angle, philanthropy is nothing but a good thing. It means that at least some of the money held by the richest individuals in society is

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put towards the public good. This process can happen (as nicely illustrated in John Pepin's article) in a relatively quick, flexible manner that leads to initiatives being funded that might otherwise struggle. Philanthropy can, from this perspective, be seen as a form of social investment. It may not always pay off but at least the people taking the risks can afford it and, when it does pay off, the social benefits can be substantial. A good recent example is the $1 million gift made by the singer Dolly Parton to Vanderbilt University to support research on Covid-19, some of which was used to help develop the Moderna vacccine (Jackson *et al.*, 2020).

At the other end of the spectrum, philanthropy may be seen as little more than rich men (and it usually is men) salvaging their reputations by giving huge amounts of money of dubious origins to pet projects of their own preferences that may or may not be the kinds of projects likely to bring society-wide benefits and, at the very least, the choice of which should be subject to more democratic control. From this perspective, the projects supported may help individuals but their latent purpose is to ensure no fundamental change to a global system that allows huge social inequalities to be maintained (Giridharadas, 2018).

Can there be a middle way? Much philanthropy does produce good outcomes or support causes that most would support. Vaccination programmes, reduction in child poverty and illness, the fight against global warming are activities that are largely democratically supported as well as often partly funded through large, philanthropic donations. This kind of public-private partnership may mean that some of the disadvantages of each can be avoided. The bureaucracy associated with some government funding can be overcome by the focus on speed and outcomes associated with private investment. The involvement of government can provide a degree of democratic accountability. From this perspective the task is less to condemn or praise philanthropy but to understand it and work out how it can be best leveraged to tackle the issues of greatest need, where there is the greatest capacity to benefit.

Learning disability, autism and philanthropy

There are many examples of significant philanthropic contributions in the areas of learning disability and autism. Perhaps one of the best known is the contribution made, in the USA and internationally, by the Kennedy Foundation, particularly as led in the latter decades of the 20th Century by Eunice Kennedy Shriver (Braddock, 2010). In the 1950s, 1960s and beyond the Foundation's funding was highly significant in supporting the development of the then nascent, now highly extensive, network of University Centers of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education and Research in the USA. Notably this funding paralleled national policy development and investment in intellectual disability with Shriver playing a major role in the establishment and actions arising from President Kennedy's Panel on Mental Retardation. Alongside these developments the Foundation also advocated for and provided funding for the development of the Special Olympics, in a climate at the time where the participation of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in exercise and sporting activities was seen as inappropriate and even harmful.

In the UK philanthropy has played, and is likely to continue to play, a significant role in the support especially of research, service development and the charity sector around autism and learning disability. The Shirley Foundation's work is some of the most noteworthy but many small, medium or large charities will be aware of the range of philanthropic support that may be available or can be bid for. I was for some years the treasurer of a small, national charity for whom such grants were an essential part of its ability to survive and fulfil its mission. Like, I imagine, most charities in this

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position we had to wrestle with some of the issues discussed above such as how to ensure that the charity's reputation would not suffer by association with particular kinds of donor. This sometimes led to turning down donations or proposed relationships that seemed tainted in some way.

There remain great needs internationally for better funding of supports for autistic people, people with learning disabilities and their families. In many cases this additional funding can only appropriately come from governments. In some cases, however, philanthropy has a clear role to play, especially perhaps in partnership with government and in co-production with recipients. Such philanthropy might be thought of as a form of investment in which the returns, while uncertain, are social and public benefits rather than financial gains. From this perspective an important question remains how we can encourage more philanthropy, bearing in mind that, by some estimates, more than 90% of the world's billionaires have not committed to giving away significant amounts of their wealth (BBC, 2021).

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