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Standing Up for Charity

By *JEFFREY M. JONES*

When *Who Really Cares* was first released in late 2006 the political right greeted it as a bombshell exposing the widely-held, yet fraudulent, belief that liberals are more compassionate than conservatives. As Arthur C. Brooks states early on, “The data tell us that the conventional wisdom is dead wrong. In most ways, political conservatives are not personally less charitable than political liberals—they are more so.”

This “surprising truth” was good for headlines and good for the conservative soul—a long overdue response to bleeding-heart liberals who caricatured those on the right as greedy, uncaring, and callous to the needs of the poor.

Unfortunately, in their zeal to publicize the hypocrisy of the left, conservative reviewers often downplayed the most important findings of the book, the “Why It Matters” stuff. I believe Brooks when, at the end of his introduction, he writes, “This book does not seek to bash all liberals...rather, the purpose here is to make the point that charity matters, and that we need to understand better what stimulates it.”

Putting aside partisan politics, let’s find out what makes charity—personal voluntary sacrifice for the good of another person—tick.

Giving Rightly Understood

To answer the question, “What stimulates charity?” Brooks, a RAND educated economist and professor of public administration at Syracuse University, has gone to great lengths compiling, sifting, and analyzing information from 10 survey-based

datasets. His forthright conclusion is that certain beliefs and behaviors positively affect how often and how much people give. The four forces he identifies are religion, skepticism about the government’s role in economic life, personal entrepreneurship, and strong families. The antithesis is equally true: “Secularism, forced income redistribution, welfare, and family breakdown are all phenomena implicated in depressing the levels of money charity, volunteering, and informal acts of generosity.” The data are compelling.

“Religious people,” defined as those who regularly attend a house of worship, are 25 percentage points more likely to give than secularists (91 to 66 percent). They also give more money as a portion of their income, are more likely to volunteer (67 to 44 percent), and volunteer more often. This may not come as a surprise given that religiously-motivated individuals make a habit of supporting their churches, synagogues, and mosques. But Brooks found that religious people are also more charitable in non-religious ways. They are “10 points more likely than secularists to give money to non-religious charities, and 21 points more likely to volunteer for completely secular causes.” The evidence is clear: people of faith take seriously the virtue of charity.

People who favor government redistribution of income are less charitable than skeptics of these policies. In one survey, Americans who disagreed with the statement, “The government has a responsibility to reduce income inequality,” were more likely to give money to charity and gave four times as much per year than those who agreed. A personal inclination towards redis-

tribution suppresses private giving, and in the same way “government spending on charitable causes leads people to give less to charity.” This phenomenon, Brooks points out, is well known to economists as the “public goods crowding out effect.” As an example, his research suggests that if a state were to increase its spending on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) by 10 percent, it would likely see a decrease in charitable giving of 3 percent.

Personal entrepreneurship is the third force identified as stimulating charity. The findings here are two-fold. First, people who work hard and earn more money—those with higher incomes—tend to give more money to charity. “Households with total wealth exceeding \$1 million (about 7 percent of the American population) give about half of all charitable donations.” The drive to earn a living appears to drive up giving. Second, being poor doesn’t mean you can’t be generous. In fact, as a percentage of their income the poor give more than both the middle class *and* the rich. This too is related to entrepreneurship because some poor people are more charitable than others. Holding income constant, among families that make \$14,000 annually, “the working poor family gives more than three times as much money to charity as the welfare family.” Earned income, as opposed to unearned or redistributed income, makes giving easier.

Finally, charity, it turns out, is a natural family value. As many married couples and parents can attest, strong families are the byproduct of sacrifice and love. When charity is practiced in the home its benefits are experienced firsthand and likely influence behavior outside the home. “In 2002, 85 percent of married parents donated money to charity, compared with 76 percent of divorced parents, and 56 percent of single parents. Volunteering showed even greater disparities.” Generous parents are role models to their children; kids who see their parents volunteering are 18 points more likely to volunteer as an adult than kids whose parents did not volunteer. And American society as a whole, studies show, receives large and posi-

tive benefits from childbearing, which is why birth rates are such an important indicator of national wellbeing.

You Get What You Give

If the above mentioned forces are valid, then public policies that help strengthen families, encourage work, discourage notions of redistribution, and acknowledge the importance of religion, will be on the right side of standing up for charity. Of course, this implies that charity is a value worth promoting in our society. With hints and tips along the way, Brooks offers a compelling case for the good that can come of charity.

To begin with, many scholars, philosophers, and theologians argue that “charity is a crucial factor in the prosperity—financial and nonfinancial—of the givers themselves, not just the recipients of their charity.” Charitable acts may increase industriousness and strengthen social networks in such a way that the giver gets back more than they put in. Brooks takes it a step further using statistical methodology to show that “charity pushes up income—but income increases charity as well. Money giving and prosperity exist in positive feedback to each other—a virtuous cycle, you might say.”

More readily apparent is the notion that giving and volunteerism are correlated with happiness and good health. “People who give money charitably are 43 percent more likely to say they are “very happy” than non-givers, [and] volunteers are 42 percent more likely than nonvolunteers to say they are very happy.” Brooks also cites psychiatrist Victor E. Frankl’s classic work *Man’s Search for Meaning* to show how charity can bring purpose into a person’s life and improve mental health. Research studies consistently affirm that acts of charity and volunteering can counter depression, lower blood pressure, and improve the immune system, among many other benefits.

“Evidence suggests that charity is also a crucial element in our ability to gov-

ern ourselves as free people.” Here Brooks is articulating what Alexis de Toqueville and countless other political theorists have put forth as one of the key strengths of American democracy—our civic engagement. Whether one is referring to mediating structures, social networks, or voluntary associations, an active citizenry can hold government in check and ensure a freer, more democratic society. And how are these civic groups sustained? “In no small part, through charity. Private gifts of money and time provide the primary support for American churches, community organizations, and many nonprofits.”

Knowing what stimulates charity and why it matters allows us to evaluate

public policy measures in a new light—one focused on improving life for us all. We must be willing to have our assumptions challenged and follow the data wherever they lead. And if that proves too difficult, start volunteering and giving money away. The resulting prosperity, health, and happiness in your own life may lead you to support public policies consistent with the call of charity.

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Who Really Cares

The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism:

America’s Charity Divide—Who Gives, Who Doesn’t, and Why It Matters

by Arthur C. Brooks

Basic Books, 256 pp., \$26