

STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Blog : Why Do People Give to Charity?

As an investment advisor, I regularly consult with wealthy individuals about how to maximize the financial resources at their disposal. I specialize in working with philanthropic families, and that work often lays bare the seeming conflict between maximizing resources and giving them away. If humans want to maximize the resources available to them, why do they take such joy in giving these resources away?

I believe that giving is motivated by humans' deeply held need to find meaning in life. For most people, meaning is deeply intertwined with community connections (defining community as narrowly as family and as broadly as the full community of life). Humans want to feel a sense of connection and a sense of purpose to life. Giving (time, money, and energy) is a central way that we strive to find meaning.

Much has been made of selfish motivations behind giving. No doubt, some giving is motivated by selfishness. However, if we look to **Maslow's hierarchy of needs** (a central theory of what drives human behavior) we find that while humans are driven by items that benefit them, once these needs (food, sleep, security, etc.) are met, they are driven by the desire for self-actualization. Maslow describes self-actualizing people:

- They embrace the facts and realities of the world (including themselves) rather than denying or avoiding them.
- They are spontaneous in their ideas and actions.
- They are creative.
- They are interested in solving problems; this often includes the problems of others. Solving these problems is often a key focus in their lives.
- They feel a closeness to other people, and generally appreciate life.
- They have a system of morality that is fully internalized and independent of external authority.
- They have discernment and are able to view all things in an objective manner.

To me, this is a wonderful description of the very best philanthropists.

Because what is good for our community is good for each of us (in that individuals in thriving, happy communities are generally happier themselves), there is a way in which giving comes back to benefit the giver. This feedback loop is wonderful, but I believe that humans' motivation to give is rooted in their desire to find meaning through community, not the hope that doing so will benefit them.

Recently, much research has focused on how our brains are hardwired to chemically reward us for acts of giving. To some, the idea that giving would trigger this sort of response implies a level of selfishness behind the act of charity. But this logic implicitly suggests that breathing, eating, and falling in love are all "selfish" as well, since our brain chemistry rewards us in similar ways for these actions. Rather than suggesting that giving is selfish, I think the research shows that giving is a central need/desire for humans. This is actually quite remarkable, since logic would dictate that giving is something we do for others, and that we must lose something for others to gain. Instead, the research suggests that giving is a motivation much like eating and breathing. It is something we must do to survive and thrive.

The motivations of each individual giver are of course unique. But just as we eat to satisfy our desire to live, we give to satisfy our desire for meaning.

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