

Can enough giving ever really be enough?

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Charity is one of the most strongly embraced principles of ethical systems, whether religious or non-religious. My most generous friend contributes to approximately eighty registered charities annually. The range of individual contributions is between thirty-five and one hundred twenty dollars for each charity. In addition to this financial commitment, my friend spends time answering the telephone and responding to pleas from people who market charities. There is also the matter of keeping records of donations, writing and mailing cheques, authorizing increases in bank account and credit card contributions, checking charitable work achieved, and staying knowledgeable about new requests as they arise.

Because this generous person spends so much time on charitable responses, I occasionally ask, “When is enough, enough?” or I ask whether she would consider giving to fewer charities, especially when the aims of some are similar. For example, it may be possible to give to only one or two main charities such as health, or the environment. But this donator has done research carefully enough to know the objectives of each charity. As she correctly points out, topics like health care are multifaceted. Research money is important whether for cancer, Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis, heart problems, or osteoporosis. So selecting the charity to which one wishes to contribute is not an easy task for this conscientious giver.

Similarly, charities concerned with environmental protection branch out broadly. There is the matter of clean air, and pure water. There is also concern about global warming, and protection of the thin layer of topsoil that allows Canada to have valuable crops. Environmentalists also raise concerns about our forest and fishing industries, diminishing supplies of natural resources such as oil, coal, and minerals. Naturalists, on their part, promote the preservation of wild life. These are but a small part of the total environmental picture.

So I say to my friend, “There are many needs and many worthwhile charities, but you can’t save the whole world. You will need to arrive at a place where you can be content in the knowledge that you have done enough.” Still, my friend focuses upon what is left undone. What is undone may often be in areas where charities are losing the battle. Oceans are not purer than in past years. Natural resources, which have taken thousands of years for nature to produce, will take thousands of years to develop again, even if we were to stop using coal, gasoline, precious minerals, and

top soil. Sadly, this is true even if we stop using these resources today, and for the next three hundred or even three thousand years.

So I say, “You can’t save the world by yourself.” My friend responds that I am correct, “but individually we can do something to improve the world, and what we can do, we ought to do”. Then I ask, “But is it practical to be so involved in something that you know can’t succeed?” She replies, “Yes, what we do now can make life better for our grandchildren, if not for ourselves.”

Next, I question whether we can be certain that charities use donations appropriately, and she agrees that there are few things we can be absolutely sure of. Yet charities report annually to Revenue Canada, and auditors have to be assured that money is spent for the purposes for which charities are registered. My friend points out, “The probability that charities spend wisely is more likely than is putting money in the bank and then hoping it is invested wisely.

Again, I return to the question of how this generous contributor decides when enough is enough. The reply is that she feels fortunate and happy, has enough to eat, a comfortable home, and good health. Finally, my friend responds directly to my question of when is enough, enough. “It will be enough when I am no longer able to be charitable, when the needs of others are no longer greater than my own, and when I’m convinced that what I am doing is no longer filling a need.

Finally to my readers, I ask, “Is there a close relationship between charity and ethical behaviour?” In my view there is.