

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beneficence Beyond Charity: Earning as Giving

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Abstract

Duties of beneficence are general, impersonal obligations to promote the welfare and meet the needs of strangers. Many laypeople and philosophers presume that duties of beneficence are primarily met through volunteering or donating to various causes. More recently, some business ethicists and activists in the effective altruist camp have argued that social enterprise can be a way to exercise beneficence. This essay argues that most of us exercise beneficence, and discharge many or perhaps all of our duties of beneficence, by holding normal jobs and doing normal productive work.

Keywords: beneficence; effective altruism; personal sacrifice; social enterprise; business ethics

Introduction

People tend to assume beneficence is about charity, volunteering, or acts of heroism. Beyond that, they think the available ways to exercise beneficence are limited.

Today, some entrepreneurs and theorists defend so-called social enterprise or social business as an alternative to charity. Social businesses aim to use for-profit market mechanisms to supply the goods or services traditionally supplied by charity or government. In some cases, the argument goes, charities and governments suffer from information or organizational problems that a social business can overcome. If one finds this argument persuasive, one might concede that running or working for a social business can qualify as beneficence.

Some effective altruists also argue that people should *earn to give*, that is, take a high-paying job to ensure they have extra income to donate. A Bain Capital executive who donates a third of her income to Against Malaria can have a greater marginal social impact than someone who works directly for Against Malaria. It is more effective to fund three field workers than to work the field.

These are all reasons to broaden the range of activities we label beneficent. In this essay, I argue that we should broaden the range even further. I will argue

that the typical person, working the typical job at the typical employer, already acts beneficently by *doing that job*. They already discharge some or perhaps all of their obligations of beneficence. While earning to give can be noble, most of us already give by earning. Most of us do far more good through our work than through charity not merely because we are bad at selecting effective charities or because we give too little to charity, but because regular work does far more good for others than we realize.

This issue is not merely philosophical; it also has a practical upshot. It bears on whether normal people should feel guilt or pride over how we live our lives and whether we should feel resentment or gratitude toward how others live theirs. It bears on how we plan our careers. It bears on whether we applaud sacrifice for its own sake or recognize that sacrifice has to have a point beyond itself. It bears on whether we have the wrong heroes. It does not *settle* these questions—other issues remain—but it helps answer them.

The basic concept of beneficence

We tend to associate various principles and virtues with archetypical examples. Courage evokes the battlefield. Gratitude evokes returning a favor. Civic virtue evokes voting.¹ But we recognize that these moral virtues and principles are expansive rather than narrow. We can exercise courage in the delivery room, express gratitude to a mentor by excelling in one's tasks, or exercise civic virtue by volunteering at a school.

The same holds for beneficence. The duty of beneficence is a general obligation to help others.² To act beneficently is to aid others, improve their welfare, and meet their needs. The duty of beneficence is an obligation to provide aid or work to the benefit of strangers and people at large.

This point—that beneficence is a general obligation—distinguishes it from duties of civic virtue, which are putative obligations to work for the public good of one's community or polity.³ This also distinguishes beneficence from reciprocity. Reciprocity concerns returning favors; it is about the “character of a relationship”⁴ and repaying a metaphorical “debt” to specific others. Obligations of beneficence generally concern duties to help strangers or others simply to be kind or because they need it rather than to repay a debt or because they are fellow members of a political community.

Beneficence can also be distinguished from the kindness and care we show inside special or fiduciary relationships. I owe my children food, shelter, and love, but this obligation results from the fiduciary relationship I have as their father. Some might want to call my care “beneficent,” but that seems like a

¹ For a critique of this archetypical example, see Jason Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jason Brennan, “For-Profit Business as Civic Virtue,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 106, no. 3 (2012): 313–24.

² W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (1930; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.

³ Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 127.

⁴ David Schmidtz, *Elements of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 14.

stretch. Stereotypically, beneficence is about helping others outside of special or fiduciary relationships.

Philosophers debate just how *demanding* duties of beneficence are, for instance, asking whether we must work nearly full-time or donate nearly all our extra income to help others in need.⁵ I take no stance here on that issue. Instead, my concern is how we can discharge those duties or exercise beneficence, regardless of how demanding they are.

People sometimes describe beneficent action as action *motivated* by the desire to help. For instance, Tom Beauchamp says:

The term *beneficence* connotes acts or personal qualities of mercy, kindness, generosity, and charity. It is suggestive of altruism, love, humanity, and promoting the good of others. In ordinary language, the notion is broad, but it is understood even more broadly in ethical theory to include effectively all norms, dispositions, and actions with the goal of benefiting or promoting the good of other persons... . Whereas *beneficence* refers to actions or rules aimed at benefiting others, *benevolence* refers to the morally valuable character trait—or virtue—of being disposed to act to benefit others.⁶

Taken literally, Beauchamp's account of beneficence includes any action motivated by the desire to help others, that is, an action motivated by benevolence. Take literally, this means the action need not actually help; the actor must merely want to help.

Beauchamp is correct that many people, including philosophers, use the word "beneficence" this way. However, for the sake of clarity and for understanding what is really at stake, we should disambiguate some issues. In particular, we should avoid conflating a person's *motivations* when performing an action with what the action can reasonably be expected to accomplish.

Consider some examples:

- A. Bob donates \$1,000 to a charity that even cursory research would reveal does little good. He did not do the research. Still, he wants to help.
- B. Bob donates \$1,000 to a charity that even cursory research would reveal causes significant harm. He did not do the research. Still, he wants to help.
- C. Bob donates \$1,000 to a charity that he justifiably and correctly believes does lots of good. He does so not because he wants to help, but because he wants to impress Susie.

⁵ Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–43; Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); David Schmitz, "Islands in a Sea of Obligation: Limits of the Duty to Rescue," *Law and Philosophy* 19, no. 6 (2000): 683–705; Jason Brennan, *Why It's OK to Want to Be Rich* (New York: Routledge Press, 2020).

⁶ Tom Beauchamp, "The Principle of Beneficence in Applied Ethics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, February 11, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/principle-beneficence/#ConcBeneBene>.

In A and B, Bob has benevolent motives. But it seems odd to call his actions *beneficent* even though he means well. It seems more accurate to say that despite his benevolent motives, his action in A is useless and wasteful, while his action in B is harmful or unintentionally maleficent. In case C, I stipulated that Bob has self-interested motives or, at least, social motives other than benevolence. Still, he performs an action that in fact helps others a great deal. Here, it seems more helpful to describe his actions as *beneficent* though his motives are not strictly benevolent.

Benevolence and beneficence can come apart. Imagine a character named Betty Benevolence. Betty wants to help others. But poor Betty has absurd beliefs about how things work and is too irrational to revise her beliefs. When she sees a toddler drowning, she pours water on his face; she mistakenly thinks it helps him float. When she sees a man on fire, she pours gasoline on him; she believes this will douse the flames. And so on. Here, Betty's motives are pure and benevolent, but her actions are not beneficent.

Similarly, suppose the superhero Captain Hammer only cares about himself.⁷ He spends his days saving others because this gets him fame, fortune, and sex. To be clear, he indeed *aims* to help others, but helping others is a mere instrument to help himself. Hammer is beneficent but not benevolent.

W. D. Ross argues we have a duty of beneficence, not benevolence.⁸ He claims that the point is to *help* people, not to possess or express a motive. What motivates a person bears on their moral character and virtue, but it does not determine the rightness or wrongness of their actions per se. I could pull you from a burning building because I love you, because duty demands it, because I enjoy physical challenges, because I hope you will reward me, or because I want fame. In each case I act rightly and the moral valence of my action is the same, but the moral valence of my motivation is different in each case. To enhance clarity and avoid confusion, Ross thinks we should evaluate these separately. A benevolent person means well and wants good things for others. A beneficent action helps. A benevolent person can fail to be beneficent. A beneficent actor might be motivated by something other than benevolence.

Ross would likely agree that when assessing whether an action is beneficent, we should evaluate something like the *expected* results (given what the agent knows) rather than the actual results. To illustrate, consider two new cases:

- D. Bob wants to murder someone for fun. He fires a bullet into a crowd. By pure good luck, he happens to shoot a would-be mass shooter who was just about to start killing others. Bob thus kills someone who could justifiably be killed and saves dozens of lives.⁹
- E. Bob spends his entire fortune buying food for the starving. He rigorously screens the food using the best scientific methods and only purchases it from the best sources. By pure bad luck, the food contains a hitherto unknown, undetectable pathogen. It kills half of those he feeds.

⁷ Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog, directed by Joss Whedon (Mutant Energy Productions, 2008).

⁸ Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 43.

⁹ Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

In case D, Bob performs an action that would reasonably be expected to cause harm and violate others' rights, but by good luck turns out to help others a great deal. In case E, he performs an action that can reasonably be expected to save many, but by bad luck turns out to kill them. In defining "beneficence," we might want to refer to something like the reasonably expected results of an action rather than its actual results—or we might not. I flag this topic, but it should not bear much on the argument.

To summarize, beneficence should be distinguished from reciprocity, civic virtue, and duties of special obligation. It is about acting in ways that (can reasonably be expected to) help others. Beneficence and benevolence are distinct. Beneficent actions should be evaluated on their reasonably expected results rather than actual results. All this leaves open *how* one helps.

Still, debates about beneficence tend to focus on *charity* and charity-like activities.¹⁰ Archetypical examples of beneficence include saving the drowning child, being a Good Samaritan who rescues an injured stranger, donating to a charity, or working for a soup kitchen. Many people regard so-called "care" professions, such as nursing or teaching, as beneficent because they presume such professionals regularly aid others in their normal activities. (It is possible this presumption is wrong. Maybe we exaggerate the good they do.¹¹) But in ordinary thought, people tend to stop here. They do not tend to regard the motorcycle mechanic, plumber, or Wall Street banker as beneficent.

An expansive conception of beneficence

Imagine a friendly genie offers you three choices:

- A. He donates \$100 to charity. The charity does \$120 of good for others.
- B. He volunteers for one hour at a charity. His work does \$120 of good.
- C. He works for one hour at a factory. His work does \$150 of good for others.

Here, imagine that the genie is able to measure the good he does on a cardinal scale, according to the correct value theory, whatever that is. (Even if you mistakenly think that not all values can be commensurated this way, imagine he limits himself to things that can be commensurated.) Imagine all you care about is helping others and you want to help as much as possible. If these are your only choices, you should choose C. Otherwise, you would fetishize how you help over how much you help.

In the film *Other People's Money*, the character Larry the Liquidator appeals to his fellow stockholders:

¹⁰ Brandon Warmke, "Saving the World Starts at Home," *Georgetown Journal of Law and Public Policy* 21 (2024): 769–85, is an excellent counterexample to this, which argues that *being a good parent* is a form of effective altruism.

¹¹ Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson, *The Elephant in the Brain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

I'm making you money. And lest we forget, that's the only reason any of you became stockholders in the first place. You want to make money! You don't care if they manufacture wire and cable, fried chicken, or grow tangerines! You want to make money!¹²

The claim here is that investors just want to make money. Within certain ethical limits, they do not care *how* they make it. That might not strictly speaking be true—probably most capitalists have preferences about how they make their money—but there is some truth here. That same point applies to beneficent agents. They want to help. They do not fetishize the delivery mechanism by which they help. If I want to help people, I do not care whether that is through malaria nets or deworming pills, so long as it helps. And all things being equal, I would prefer more helping over less.

Now consider a variant of C:

C'. The genie works for one hour at a factory. His work does \$150 of good for others. He also gets paid \$140, which he gives to you. (You may do as you like with it.)

Things have changed. The genie not only helps others but also helps you.

Here, alarm bells might go off. If you choose C' over C, B, or A, your choice may not seem so pure. After all, a sociopath would choose C'! But, again, I have specified in this thought experiment that you only care about helping others as much as possible. Given that utility curve, you should at worst be indifferent between C' or C—or, indeed, you still choose C' over C. After all, C' directly helps others as much as C, but also puts you in a position to help others even more afterward.

Suppose we allow self-interest to break the tie. It is not like your welfare is insignificant from a moral point of view. After all, if it would be nice for *others* to help *you*, then it would be nice for the genie to help you, too. Consider a different set of options:

1. If we wave a magic wand, everyone in the world becomes \$1,000 richer, except you. You lose \$50.
2. If we wave a second magic wand, everyone in the world becomes \$1,000 richer, except you. You neither gain nor lose.
3. If we wave a third magic wand, everyone in the world becomes \$1,000 richer, including you.

A beneficent third party would want to wave the third wand, not the first or second. If a beneficent third party would prefer 3, then you should, too.

Now suppose that before the genie returns to his bottle, he offers to give you his magic powers. Like the genie, you can now help others by donating to a charity, volunteering at a charity, doing productive work (at places other than charities) for free, or doing productive work for money.

¹² *Other People's Money*, directed by Norman Jewison (Warner Bros., 1991).

After receiving these magic powers, you would have no reason *a priori* to select charity over the other options. The amount of good that you do through these activities will vary, depending on which charity you support or what kind of work you do.

You may have noticed that when the genie gives you his magic, nothing has changed. We already live in a world where the genie's magic is real.

One might argue here that it would be *even more beneficent* if in case C' or 3, once you receive money from the genie or the magic wand, you then give it away to some effective charity rather than spend it on luxury goods for yourself. Indeed, perhaps it would. But showing that one option is more beneficent than a second option is not the same as showing that the second option is not beneficent. Donating \$200 to Martha's Table (a charity in Washington, DC) is less beneficent than donating to Against Malaria or Sightsavers, but that does not render it *nonbeneficent*. By that same logic, helping others while helping yourself is not rendered nonbeneficent just because there are even more beneficent options. Indeed, there almost always are more beneficent options. If something qualifies as beneficent only if it is the most beneficent thing one can do, then perhaps no one has yet acted beneficently in human history.

Charity, social business, and traditional business

A charity is a not-for-profit venture, usually dependent upon donations from external sources for funding, which seeks to promote various social, public, or religious causes, including tending to others' desperate or unmet needs. That is what charities *seek* to do. What they succeed in doing might be different.

The effective altruist movement, whatever its flaws, has helped to demonstrate that many charities are not all they claim to be. Effective altruism applies rigorous scientific and microeconomic methods to assess the quality of charities and the marginal impact of charitable giving. The central motto of effective altruism could be that it is not the thought that counts, but the helping. Many philanthropic projects, such as the PlayPump water-supply system or the Scared Straight program, turn out to be ineffective or downright harmful.¹³ Furthermore, while some charities do a lot of good overall, they have little "room for funding." They are so high on their diminishing marginal returns curve that additional funding will do little additional good. Sometimes donating to a smaller charity or neglected cause often helps more than donating to a larger charity or a popular cause.¹⁴

Note that the effective altruist movement, through 80,000 Hours and similar organizations, has also called attention to how career choice is one's "best

¹³ On PlayPump, see William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–5. On Scared Straight, see William MacAskill, Benjamin Todd, and Robert Wiblin, "Can You Guess Which Government Programs Work? Most People Can't," *Vox*, August 17, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/13/9148123/quiz-which-programs-work>; Steve Aos et al., *Benefits and Costs of Prevention and Early Intervention Programs for Youth* (Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2004).

¹⁴ MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*.

opportunity to have a positive impact on the world.”¹⁵ Still, much of the guidance it offers concerns how to maximize one’s impact by earning to give, spreading good ideas, doing basic research that can save lives, or building nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social enterprises.

NGOs and charities face two central problems. First, what I call the central philosophical problem of charity is that, in the absence of a profit-loss accounting mechanism, it is difficult to judge whether a given charity is creating or destroying value. There is often no clear or easy mechanism to commensurate the value of their outputs with the cost of their inputs. Suppose a charity spends \$18 million a year providing fellowships to graduate students, maintaining a Twitter account, running small conferences, and paying undistinguished mid-career scholars to write blog posts about politics. Does this charity *add* value or consume more value than it creates? Is it worth more than the \$18 million it cost? It is not easy to judge. Tallying up a list of all the charity’s activities does not yet answer that question. We need to know how to measure the value of its outputs.

Contrast that with business. In a market, the price of goods and services is determined by the forces of supply and demand. In turn, these forces emerge from all market participants’ individual knowledge and desires. In a competitive, free, and unsubsidized market free of significant externalities, for a company to make a profit, they must transform inputs that people value at one level into outputs people value at a higher level. Profit is possible only when they create value for other people. Businesses thus have less trouble judging whether they created or destroyed value because the market mechanism commensurates inputs and outputs for them. This is not to say all markets are perfect or that there are no exceptions to this rule, but that’s the rule.

Second, what I call the central management problem of charity is that a charity’s customers—the people who pay for the goods and services—are not their intended beneficiaries—the people who receive the goods and services. The charity’s “customer” is the donor. It stays in business by pleasing donors. But donors might be wrong about what works or what is really good for the beneficiaries. NGO managers will thus often face perverse incentives to please the donors rather than what best achieves the charity’s mission. Consider, for instance, a hypothetical university that builds a new building rather than fixes its mold and rat problems.

In a free market, a business stays in business by making customers happy. Chipotle survives only when enough people are willing to pay for their burritos. This forces Chipotle to serve their customers. It profits only if its customers profit. The people who consume its goods and services are the people who pay for them.

Charities, just like for-profit firms, also face principal-agent problems. The charity might nominally aim at some external good, but the individual workers might aim at their private good at the charity’s expense. A new president of the charity might surround herself with yes-people rather than competent workers, and then use the charity to toot her own horn and as a stepping stone to a better

¹⁵ See 80,000 Hours, <https://80000hours.org/>.

job. Different administrative units might try to maximize their discretionary budget by hiring low marginal value staff or add programs of low marginal value. An organization can entrust workers with resources and power in hopes the workers will further the organization's mission, but the workers might use it for their private ends.

Social entrepreneurship intends to offer a solution to these problems. Social businesses aim to help the worst-off or those suffering from injustice and deprivation. More generally, social businesses seek to perform the functions and provide the goods and services we normally expect from charities and governments. Social businesses use market mechanisms to help identify, test, and ensure that they add more value than they consume. While a charity tries to solve a problem by making people in need *beneficiaries*, a social business tries to solve a problem by making those people *customers*. While a charity must convince *donors* that its charitable actions are worth the price the donors pay, a social business must instead ensure that the business's actions create profit for the very people it tries to help. For instance, suppose poor kids cannot afford laptops. A charity would try to solve this problem by collecting donations to give the kids free laptops. A social business would try to build laptops the kids want at a price they can afford to pay.

Defenders of social business claim that these mechanisms help to ensure social businesses create value and serve their intended beneficiaries rather than doing what well-motivated but possibly mistaken funders might want. Operating on a market basis means that social businesses survive only when their outputs are higher value than their inputs. This gives social business an epistemic advantage over charity: the fact that they make a profit is evidence they create value for others.

Furthermore, market competition tends to be harsher and more rigorous than competition for charitable giving. People are more careful when spending their money on themselves than when giving money away to others.¹⁶ So, the theory goes, social businesses are less likely to suffer from administrative bloat, mission creep, or other principal-agent problems.

These are abstract points about tendencies or built-in advantages and disadvantages. I am not saying that all social businesses are good, that social businesses always outperform charities, or that all charities stink. Whether any particular social business outperforms any particular charity or government agency is an open question.

My philosophical point is that social business is just as eligible an avenue for beneficence as charity and volunteering are. A beneficent person might choose to run, work for, or invest in a social business instead of a charity because a social business could do what a charity does, but better. If so, we should agree that running, working for, or investing in a social business can be just as much an exercise of charity as running, working for, or donating to a charity is.

Still, notice that social businesses, like charities, are demarcated by what they *aim* to do and how they aim to do it, not by what they *accomplish*. A charity that

¹⁶ Simler and Hanson, *The Elephant in the Brain*.

makes the world worse is still a charity. A social business that tries but fails to promote a social mission is still a social business. To say a social business aims to promote various “social” causes through business activity leaves open whether it in fact outperforms any given charitable or governmental alternative. That is an empirical question.

But it is also an empirical question whether any given social business outperforms a *regular* business providing the same goods and services. A social business might aim to feed the underserved, but a regular for-profit business might better succeed at that very goal.

There are all sorts of reasons why social businesses might perform worse. Sometimes, people better achieve certain values when they put them out of their mind. The painter who just wants to paint might make better political art than someone who sets out to make great political art. Athletes who aim at winning might make the game more fun to watch than athletes who aim to make the game fun to watch. (Compare the Los Angeles Lakers to the Harlem Globetrotters.) Sometimes, aiming at good ends gives people a subconscious excuse to underperform. Sometimes, the problem is that social business, despite aiming to make a profit, might face epistemic problems similar to those charities face. Many social businesses aim to make a profit *and* accomplish other tasks. They might sometimes prioritize those tasks over profit. But they will often not know how to measure the value of those other tasks and thus not know how to make proper trade-offs between profit and those other goals.

My point here is not that these problems always or often obtain. Rather, my point is that a social business is defined by aims, not accomplishments. We cannot assume social businesses achieve those aims better than regular businesses, even when those regular businesses do not share those aims. For any given outcome, whether a charity, government agency, social business, or regular for-profit business best delivers that outcome is an open empirical question rather than something settled from the armchair. It is not settled by assessing people’s motives.

I am also not saying that traditional businesses aim only to make profits. I suspect that most regular businesses and regular businesspeople have a mix of motives. They want profit and also want to leave the world better than they found it. They want a paycheck and to be proud of their jobs. They might fool themselves with the comforting thought that they are doing well by doing good, but that is also true of government agents, NGO administrators, and college professors. In the real world, most of the things we label “traditional” businesses are probably partly “social” by the definition above.

The social good of traditional business

Most people have strong opinions about economics but know less than nothing about it. They subscribe to a zero-sum view of trade; they assume one person’s gain must be another’s loss. They presume that something done *for profit* must be harmful and something done *not for profit* must be good. Many people also say

they know better than this, but then immediately revert to saying that the rich get richer only if the poor get poorer.

You may know about experiments where people rate otherwise identical résumés as lower if they have a “black-sounding” name instead of a “white-sounding” name.¹⁷ Amit Bhattacharjee, Jason Dana, and Jonathan Baron show that something similar occurs with profit.¹⁸ They give experimental subjects otherwise identical descriptions of hypothetical firms and ask subjects to estimate how much good or harm the firm does. It turns out that subjects presume that the more profit the firm makes, the more harm it causes and less social good it does; they also presume that nonprofit firms do lots of good. In another experiment, Bhattacharjee, Dana, and Baron provide experimental subjects the rates of profit from real firms. Subjects once again assume that more profit means more harm and worse ethical behavior. In fact, *pace* the subjects, the more profitable firms also tended to have higher ratings on things like the Domini Social Index, which attempts to measure the ethics and social impact of various firms.

Laypeople are wrong. Trade is normally a positive-sum game. Usually, both parties to a trade make profit. I value my Revv Generator 120 amplifier more than the \$2,700 I paid for it; Revv values my \$2,700 more than the amplifier. When we trade, we both say thank you and walk away happy. There are exceptions to this rule, but that’s the rule.

Prices are a function of supply and demand. The price of, say, copper emerges from everyone’s desires, goals, trade-offs, local knowledge, and so on. It reflects how, overall, other people value the ounce of copper and what they would be willing to trade for it and trade it for on the margins. That applies to everything else I buy or use in production, including my own labor and time.

Because of this, profit is not a measure of exploitation. It is a measure of value added. Suppose I smash up fifty MacBooks and spend fifty hours sculpting the scraps into a bust of Steve Jobs. If I can sell that bust for more than it cost me (including the cost of my time), that means I transformed something the world values at one level to something they value more. I get to keep part of that as profit. If I cannot sell it or if I can only sell it for less than the cost, that means I transformed something the world values at one level to something they value less. I take that as a loss. (Recall that this is one argument for social business. Profit-seeking can help social businesses overcome the central philosophical problem of charity.)

Of course, there is such a thing as profiting from ill-gotten gains. There are cases where thanks to externalities, consumer and producer profits do not reflect the real costs. There are collective action problems where individual profiting leads to social losses.¹⁹ There are valuable things that happen outside markets and that are not measured by the profit system. (Recall, above, that this

¹⁷ Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal?” *American Economic Review* 94, no. 4 (2004): 991–1013.

¹⁸ Amit Bhattacharjee, Jason Dana, and Jonathan Baron, “Anti-Profit Beliefs,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 5 (2017): 671–96.

¹⁹ E.g., Bryan Caplan, *The Case Against Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

was the central philosophical problem of government and nonprofits; in the absence of market conditions, it is difficult to assess their value-added or lost. But charities are indeed adding and destroying value.) There are cases where, thanks to differences in effective demand, something that makes a higher profit might do less good for others than something that makes a lower profit. (Think of selling a hamburger for 10 cents profit to a starving person versus selling a gourmet burger for ten dollars profit to a rich, well-fed person.) Profit is not the final or only word on doing good for others—but is a word. Yet most of us misunderstand its meaning.

On this point, comparing a company's rate of profit to something like the Domini Index or some other popular measure of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors is not the final word either. If a company has a high rate of profit but scores low on the Domini Index, that might be a problem with the Index, not the firm. We need not take things like the Domini Index or some popular ESG index at face value. Any such "social" index will rely upon a controversial and likely undefended account of what is valuable, what trade-offs should be made among those values, and what weights ought to be attached to this or that value.

Such indices face the same problem as, say, college rankings. The *U.S. News and World Reports* ranks universities from best to worst. In one recent year, it assigned class size 8 percent of the weight, faculty salaries 7 percent, student selectivity 7 percent, and so on.²⁰ Maybe the people who designed that index somehow determined these weights really do approximate the truth about what makes colleges better or worse. I doubt it, though. They probably reflect largely arbitrary and undefended value judgments we need not and perhaps should not share. I really doubt that the quality of college is 7 percent a function of faculty salary and 7 percent a function of student selectivity. Maybe some of these are bad measures we should reject.

In short, prices *emerge* from the trade-offs people actually make in light of their actual values and knowledge. Social indices are *scripted* by particular partisans with particular ideologies and values.

And even if the social indices somehow get the weights of this and that value right, actually measuring real-world institutions to see how well they fit the index is difficult. Consider, for instance, various indices that purport to measure how democratic a country is. Even if we knew for sure that, say, the competitiveness of elections is worth exactly 35 percent of the total score, it is difficult to know how to measure competitiveness in a reliable or valid way.

I am defending business here, but I am not yet being fair to it. Merely looking at the microeconomics of trade understates the good business and trade do. The systematic effect of business trade is to create background conditions of wealth, opportunity, and cultural progress. We each benefit from the positive externalities created by the market's extended system of social cooperation. We are engaged in networks of mutual benefit and we benefit from other people being

²⁰ Robert Morse and Eric Brooks, "How U.S. News Calculated the 2025 Best Colleges Rankings," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 23, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-us-news-calculated-the-rankings>.

engaged in these networks. When we work in business, we help create, sustain, and improve these networks of mutual benefit.

The overall effect of business activity, especially over the past few hundred years, is to make the overwhelming majority of people vastly wealthier than they otherwise would have been. Being wealthier does not just let us buy more trinkets and baubles. It makes it easier for us to realize our disparate conceptions of the good life. It expands the options available to us. We live longer and better.²¹

I am not saying that markets and trade are perfect. I am not making any claim here about how free markets should be or whether government should sometimes intervene to correct market failures. Furthermore, I will happily admit that, on the margin, many instances of charity (such as donations to Against Malaria) will do far more good than many instances of trade.

Still, notice that we do not usually reserve the word “beneficent” only for actions that maximize the good done for others. A donation to the local food pantry does far less good than an equivalent cash donation to Evidence Action or Sightsavers, but both actions are beneficent. By extension, buying an Indonesian-made guitar might do less good overall than curing someone of blindness through Sightsavers, but both actions are beneficent.

All this applies just as well to the productive labor we do. As David Schmidtz says, “any decent car mechanic does more for society by fixing cars than by paying taxes.”²² He is not speaking metaphorically. Effective altruists argue that earning to give often does more good than working directly for some charity. Fair enough. They should not overlook that most of us are already *giving* a great deal through earning. If a person makes, say, \$2 million over their lifetime through productive work, it is not as though that person simply took \$2 million from others and incurred a debt to be repaid. The person gets \$2 million because they already did more than \$2 million worth of good for others. It seems crass and cruel—and innumerate—to say to that person, sure, you worked a lifetime providing valuable services for others, services that make all of us better off, but what have you done for us?

Furthermore, the cash the worker receives is nothing more than a claim to goods and services from others. Money is not wealth. Wealth is the goods and services the money can buy. This means, in a way, that at the moment the worker gets paid, he has not really been *repaid*. His work—and the good it does for others—is done, but until he *consumes*, he has not yet claimed goods and services back in turn. Oddly, in effect, cash is like an uncashed check.

Work, mutual enablement, and parenthood

Beneficence seems to be about helping others with whom one does not have a special relationship and not as a way of repaying a favor. This distinguishes it

²¹ For a comprehensive review of the empirical benefits of wealth in terms of health, culture, cooperation, and so on, see Brennan, *Why It's OK to Want to Be Rich*, chap. 2.

²² Schmidtz, *Elements of Justice*, 91.

from fiduciary duties, civic virtue, or reciprocity. If so, then, I argued, normal productive work in normal productive enterprises often qualifies as beneficent.

However, here one might worry that, say, stay-at-home parents cannot qualify as beneficent, at least not with their parenting work. After all, they are helping their kids with whom they have a special fiduciary relationship, not helping strangers or people in general.²³

But even here, I think we are giving them short shrift. Consider that we have a division of labor, including moral labor. The division of labor tends to free people to do what they are good at or, at least, to allow them to become good at doing something useful. It allows people to specialize in what has their lowest opportunity cost. This in turn allows for greater growth and economies of scale. We are all more productive, so we all get more.

What this means is that people who specialize in various kinds of work are not merely doing that work. Their contribution is more profound. They also *enable* others to specialize in their work, who enable them to specialize back in turn. The division of labor is a system of mutual enablement.

When Peter specializes in apple growing, he *enables* trading partner Quentin to specialize in fish catching. By specializing, they each create conditions that make it possible for the other to specialize and be more productive. Peter produces apples directly, but he indirectly contributes to the production of fish. Quentin produces fish directly, but he indirectly contributes to the production of apples. The reason citizens can excel at their separate tasks is that the others enable them to specialize.

If we see parents as isolated actors, we might say—without meaning to denigrate them—that while they do lots of good, they are not thereby exercising beneficence in the strict sense. But if we instead see them as actors in a system of cooperation, our evaluation might change. If one parent mostly specializes in childcare while another specializes in outside work, the result might be better childcare and better outside work. We should give them each partial credit for the other's work, just as we should give the apple producer some credit for enabling Quentin to fish.

But what if a parent doesn't enable a partner in this way? Suppose, for instance, both my wife and I stop working for pay outside the home. We use our considerable savings to raise our kids to adulthood. Suppose we stop volunteering. Does it follow that—whatever good we do—we no longer qualify as beneficent?

On the contrary, consider an analogy. Imagine I stop working outside the home right now. I invest all my cash plus considerable working time to invent and develop a machine that will, in eighteen to twenty-three years, begin producing millions of dollars of good for others. Suppose that machine is self-replicating and each replication is also self-replicating. You would probably conclude that my investing in this machine is indeed beneficent. But if you agree to that, then you should for the same reasons agree that parenting a child tends to be beneficent.

²³ This might be one of the principal objections to Warmke, "Saving the World Starts at Home."

On impure motives

If you need a meal, I help you whether I give you or sell you the meal. I help you even more if I do things that help ensure you never need charity. Giving a person a fish, selling them a fish, teaching them to fish, and creating conditions under which fish are cheap and easy to acquire are all ways of helping others. Beneficence can be exercised anywhere.

Some people might resist my account of beneficence. They might think that a person's actions count as beneficent only if they are motivated primarily or even purely by benevolence. If so, they might argue that the typical kind of productive work most of us do for our daily jobs cannot qualify as beneficent because most of us work *for profit*; we trade our labor for income and are primarily motivated to obtain that income. Sure, most of us do work that helps others, perhaps a great deal. We might be glad we help others, too. But we are mostly concerned with helping ourselves.

Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson provide a good theoretical model and ample empirical evidence that most people are much more selfish than they believe themselves to be.²⁴ When people introspect, they believe they have and are motivated primarily by noble and good motives, but in fact are more strongly motivated by self-serving or less noble motives.

On their view, self-deception is an adaptive strategy. We are often motivated by “base” desires for sex, prestige, power, money, comfort, and the like. It is useful, though, for each of us—a way to get friends, lovers, followers, business partners, and so on—if others think we have noble and kind motives. However, other people have evolved to be “mind readers”; they are adept at ascertaining our conscious intentions and desires. Our brains have thus evolved a defense mechanism against such mind reading. We often act on subconscious motivations for power, money, status, and sex, but in our conscious thoughts, we entertain thoughts of love, kindness, justice, and other nice things. When others and we ourselves read our minds, we all see nice things, but these nice things are not our primary motivations.

Note that Simler and Hanson's argument for this conclusion is not based on the kind of armchair psychological egoism that Joel Feinberg refutes.²⁵ They do not rely upon just-so stories about how seemingly nice actions could be motivated by self-interest. Rather, Simler and Hanson's basic method is to consider, one by one, every sphere of human activity. In each sphere, the institutions or activities in question purportedly aim at some noble goal and the people involved are purportedly motivated by these noble goals. Simler and Hanson then ask: If people were in fact motivated by such goals, what would this predict about their behavior? If, on the other hand, they were mostly trying to look good to others, what would this predict about their behavior? Keep in mind that they are not claiming people are *entirely* selfish. They then examine people's actual behavior in that sphere. Over and over, the “hidden selfish motives” theory

²⁴ Simler and Hanson, *Elephant in the Brain*.

²⁵ Joel Feinberg, “Psychological Egoism,” in *Reason and Responsibility*, 6th ed., ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 493–505.

better predicts how real people behave. People believe themselves to be, say, 80 percent altruistic and 20 percent selfish, but their behavior makes more sense if they are 80 percent selfish and 20 percent altruistic.

Simler and Hanson's findings hold especially well for charity. Research overwhelmingly shows that people are insensitive to the effectiveness and scope of their charitable actions. People donate the same amount and at the same rate to a charity that claims it can save 200 birds as to a charity that claims it can save 20,000 birds. Fewer than 3 percent of people will change their patterns of giving even when shown overwhelming evidence that their preferred charities are ineffective or worse. They give more when being watched, when primed to think about sex or dating, or when pressured to do so by peers. They respond more to nonrepresentative stories, anecdotes, and pictures rather than to actual evidence of effectiveness. When charities create different "tiers" of donors—for example, platinum donor, gold donor, silver donor, bronze donor, and so on—and publish those lists, people tend to give the minimum amount to be listed in whatever tier they selected. Givers do not care about their marginal impact; they will join the bandwagon in giving to a charity that has steeply diminishing returns rather than giving to an underfunded charity with room for funding. And so on. As a whole, these behaviors make sense if people are mostly trying to look good to others; they make little sense if people are mostly trying to help.

I am arguing that normal work in normal jobs, not merely "social" jobs in charitable work or at so-called social business, can and usually does qualify as beneficent action. Suppose a reader wants to reject my argument on the grounds that people doing such work have impure motives, the wrong mix of motives, or insufficiently strong altruistic motives. I have two responses. The first is to reiterate that beneficent action is beneficent regardless of motives. It is a mistake to conflate the quality of the action and the quality of the motive. But at this point, we are supposing the objector does not accept this view. So, my second response is that this objection comes at a high cost: Empirically speaking, benevolence is a minor, secondary motive for most people even when giving to charity. The objector will then have to say not only is most work not beneficent (regardless of how much good it does), but neither is most charity.

People often consider working in certain "special" jobs as exercises of beneficence. To them, it seems obvious that medical doctors, nurses, teachers, paramedics, and others in care professions qualify as beneficent. (Simler and Hanson would object that, empirically, these professions do far less good than people credit them for; probably half of all medical spending is ineffective or worse.²⁶) Here, people recognize that many such professionals are highly paid, but they still presume—without, say, checking empirical research on motivations—that the people who hold such jobs are also motivated mostly by altruistic motives.²⁷ There is little evidence for this optimistic view of care professionals. So, once again, if someone objects that normal productive work

²⁶ Simler and Hanson, *Elephant in the Brain*.

²⁷ See W. Glannon and L. F. Ross, "Are Doctors Altruistic?" *Journal of Medical Ethics* 28, no. 2 (2002): 68–69, for a conceptual rather than empirical critique of this idea. They hold that, for the most part, medical doctors are simply fiduciaries and are not altruistic per se.

(in a for-profit firm) cannot qualify as beneficent because people lack the right kinds of motives, they should on pain of inconsistency also conclude that nurses, teachers, and doctors are not really beneficent either. However, rather than biting that bullet, it is conceptually cleaner to say their actions are beneficent but their motives may vary.

Sacrifice is not the point of beneficence

One related reason people might reject the idea that either regular or social business can be a form of beneficence is that they may think that beneficent action has to involve some degree of self-sacrifice. On this view, a beneficent person incurs some personal cost to promote the good of others. On this view, beneficence is a kind of zero-sum game, where one person has to win and another has to lose.

Imagine Sandy Self-Sacrifice wants to show others how much she cares. She collects all her money into a giant pile. She then burns it, all while singing “Love Is All You Need.” Here, Sandy indeed incurs a serious sacrifice. She might even “mean well” in some sense. But she has not fixed any cleft palates or fed any hungry people. It would not help if she upped her game by cutting off her hands or scourging her flesh. If, instead of burning the cash, she donated it to DARE, Scared Straight, or the American Communist Party, that would be even worse.

This establishes that sacrifice—even expressive self-sacrifice—is not sufficient for beneficence. But it seems unnecessary as well.

Imagine I am imbued with amazing superpowers, such that I can do amazing amounts of good for others at little cost to myself. I can end world hunger by waving a finger and then cure cancer by waving another. After a few such finger wiggles, I have then contributed more to others’ welfare than any other human has or ever will. But I have incurred almost no cost to myself. It is interesting to ask whether I should continue to do more good for others, given how low the cost is, but it seems odd to say my actions are not *beneficent*.

Now imagine that Helpful Harry enjoys helping others more than anything. Because of his odd motivations, whenever he incurs what seems like a cost to help others, he experiences so much happiness that his welfare gains outweigh his welfare losses. If he were to become destitute from donating all his income and stuck on dialysis after donating both of his kidneys, he would as a result be happier than anyone else we know. Accordingly, Harry is incapable of sacrificing to help others because he gets more utility from giving than he can lose. Nevertheless, it seems like Harry should be able to qualify as beneficent, despite his inability to sacrifice.

It is true that a benevolent person—note again the distinction between benevolent and beneficent—is disposed in some cases to incur personal costs for others’ benefits. However, sacrifice is not the point of beneficence. Beneficence is about helping, not losing. The hero takes a bullet to save the child, not to take the bullet.

A positive-sum kind of beneficence is a better kind of helping. Yes, I would give one of my kidneys to save my child, but if I could somehow through magic

perform an act that gets my kid the needed kidney and also gets me a new car, that is even better. The goal is to save the child's life, not to prove that my heart is in the right place. We might want others to love us enough that they would suffer for us, but we do not actually want them to suffer for us.

If the objector denies this, they will have to bite some big bullets. Imagine that certain religious doctrines turn out to be true. Suppose God exists and rewards everyone for their good deeds in the afterlife. Indeed, He rewards them more than they helped others, for instance, by allowing them to spend eternity in paradise. Suppose instead I create a magic wand that immediately rewards people double whatever they do to help others. If, as the present objection claims, self-sacrifice is necessary for beneficence, then knowing such a God exists or creating this magic wand would make beneficence impossible. But that seems implausible.

Is this conception vacuous?

One final objection to my argument is that it renders the concept of beneficence vacuous. If beneficence can be exercised everywhere, then it's not a distinct thing, is it?

The equivalent objection fails when applied to other virtues and moral principles. Consider courage. Homeric Greeks generally considered courage a martial virtue, a virtue exercised almost exclusively in battle and only by elite members of society.²⁸ Today we understand that courage can be exercised anywhere, in nearly any activity. Courage, like all virtues, is about appropriate responsiveness to certain kinds of reasons. Courageous people face danger in an appropriate way. No swords are needed.

This expansive conception of courage does not render it vacuous. While nearly any kind of action could be a way of exercising courage, not all and, indeed, not even most actions are courageous. In expanding the range of activities that can be considered courageous, we do not rob the concept of content. Rather, we understand something that the Homeric Greeks missed. What distinguishes courage from, say, beneficence or justice is not *where* it can be exercised—all three can be exercised anywhere—but what kinds of reasons it responds to.

Anytime and anywhere a person responds appropriately to significant danger and risk, that person is courageous. Anytime and anywhere a person appropriately pays back (or pays forward) a favor in return for what others have done for them, that person is engaged in reciprocity. Anytime and anywhere a person works in ways reasonably expected to promote the public good because they care about the public good, that person exhibits civic virtue. Anytime and anywhere a person reasons appropriately about evidence, that person exhibits rationality. Anytime and anywhere a person gives others what they deserve, they act justly.

²⁸ E.g., see Harry Redner, *Ethical Life: The Past and Present of Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 77–79.

And so on. These principles and virtues are distinct from each other, but they are distinguished by something other than *place*. Beneficence is no different.

Is productive work enough? How should we react to productive workers?

In this essay, I have remained agnostic about how demanding our duties of beneficence are. Many philosophers are convinced that beneficence is the kind of principle that can and rightfully should swallow our entire lives. There is always another mouth to feed and child to save. It sure seems like everything else pales in comparison to saving lives. For instance, how dare I volunteer to play guitar for Oakton High School's musical theater productions when that time could be spent earning extra money for Against Malaria? For whatever reason, when libertarians say liberty trumps everything else or when Marxists say equality trumps everything else, they come across as ideologues, but when applied ethicists say beneficence trumps everything else, they come across as saintly or having a point.

A reader might react to my essay by admitting that I have shown that ordinary productive work does qualify as beneficent in most cases, even if workers have impure or selfish motives, but then complain this is less interesting than I claim. Perhaps those workers nevertheless continue to owe far more. Perhaps they are obligated to take far more productive jobs; for instance, perhaps philosophy professors should quit and become cardiac surgeons instead, work more and longer hours, or serve needier clientele. There is always more to do from the standpoint of beneficence.

Furthermore, the reader might complain that even if the typical worker acts beneficently through their work, this has little bearing on how we should feel about them (or ourselves). Even if these workers have a mix of selfish, altruistic, and communitarian motives, we know selfishness predominates. Why should we admire their work rather than resent their motives? Or so the objection goes.

I have two main responses to such worries, the second stronger than the first. But let's start with the first. I am not sure where to draw the line about how demanding our duties of beneficence are. Imagine Iron Man has just saved half the universe from death. If anyone has satisfied his duties of beneficence, he has. He decides to take a day off for rest, and wow, through sheer bad luck, a toddler is drowning in front of him. He could save the child with minimal effort. It admittedly seems bizarre to say that he has the prerogative to let the child die. (As Ryan Davis points out, though, we would thank him for saving the child, not shrug and say he was just doing his duty.²⁹) I can see why some philosophers think the demands of beneficence almost never run dry.

If you have this expansive conception of beneficence, of course you think productive workers are not doing enough. A genius inventor who adds trillions of

²⁹ Ryan Davis, "Limiting Beneficence," in Samuel Arnold et al., *Questioning Beneficence* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

dollars of social surplus to the economy has not done enough. Neither has Peter Singer or William MacAskill, the volunteers at Doctors without Borders, or Iron Man at the end of the film *Avengers: End Game*. On this conception of beneficence, if there is more you could do, you should do it, and because it has not been done, we should not give workers much positive accolades for what they do. But then, this is of little concern for my thesis because this view implies that we should give no positive accolades to anyone. It's a recipe for resentment and guilt; perhaps that means we shouldn't make it.

Let's turn to a second, stronger point. I have said that our reactive attitudes toward productive workers should be kinder. We should give them credit for what good they do. I said that it is cruel, crass, and innumerate to ask, "What have you done for us?" when they have already done so much, even though they could do more and even though their motives are impure. There is something oddly *unbenevolent* about thinking otherwise, about thinking ordinary productive workers deserve disdain and resentment for what they fail to do rather than praise for what they do. When we consider the most benevolent people around us, we note that they are quick to praise and slow to condemn.

For most people, productive work is the principal way they make the world a better place. That is true even if they do ordinary work rather than trying to maximize their impact. Being benevolent means caring about the positive impact one makes through one's work, but it also means caring about and applauding the positive impact others make through their work rather than demanding they prove their bona fides by engaging in self-sacrifice, complaining they *profit* from their productive work, or complaining they could have done more.³⁰ Indeed, a truly benevolent person would *prefer* to live in social environments where when we help others, we also help ourselves.

I know many people who think, "How dare anyone enjoy life when others suffer!" They are always insufferable and miserable themselves, even if they are right that there are always reasons to do more. I would not describe such reactive attitudes as exemplifying benevolence. So, one response to the question of why we should praise rather than resent productive workers is that doing so is what a *benevolent* person would do.

Conclusion

I don't know how strong our duties of beneficence are and to whom they are owed. I don't know when beneficence is required or merely supererogatory. This essay takes no stance on these issues. However, I do think we fail to give credit where credit is due.

We live in an expanded system of social cooperation where we benefit greatly from others. We do not work *harder* now than we did 100 years ago, but we get so much in return. It's probably good to feel grateful about that, but it's bad to feel

³⁰ Thanks to David Schmidtz for making this point in conversation. His phrasing was better than mine here.

resentful of others or guilty about oneself. Normal, productive work, in normal, productive enterprises usually is an exercise of beneficence. We discharge at least some—and perhaps even all—of our obligations through such work. We give by earning.

Competing interests. The author declares none.