

## No more charity please, Mr Gates



There is something wrong with the way our world provides charity. It is a measure of how warped our ideas have become that countless philanthropists and NGOs provide support to so many causes.

At first glance, charity seems a good thing. Yet the organisations that provide it are a reflection of a fundamental problem. Charity is an attempt to patch the parts of the system that are not working. Mostly, these attempts are well intended. But sometimes they are driven by less enlightened motives. And in almost every case they are a poor way to make up for some of the shortfalls of modern economics. They mop up the externalities—rather than leaving them, like a puddle, for us all to see.

Charities depend on the desires and incomes of unaccountable donors. Their managers decide where and how their money should be spent. Governments are subject to regular review, as well as public scrutiny and control. The charity business is not. Because of this, the way they spend money can be subject to favouritism, waste and inefficiency. Just as when a zoo gets visitors to sponsor animals and everyone wants to donate to the tigers, leaving the vast majority of animals unsupported, charity is a way of supporting society's tigers. Donors give more freely to causes that appeal to them, rather than to causes where there may be greater need. Moreover, charities' first loyalties lie with the givers, not the receivers, because this ensures a better flow of funds.

As well as having misguided objectives, this means that charities can impose conditions on their giving. Money is frequently offered with strings attached. This might be to discourage the use of contraceptives, or to promote American values or the church. More worrying, many of the most polluting industries are also those with the most cash, and because an increasing number of NGOs are competing for a small pool of funds, some environmental charities have even been tempted to become financially dependent on the organisations that are causing many of the problems they say they want to address, weakening their moral foundations.

Charity almost always undermines the freedom of the recipient. It can be unethical, too, when it interferes in the self-determination of sovereign states. Charities working in parts of Africa and in places like Afghanistan or North Korea, for example, frequently act against the wishes of the state, claiming moral superiority. Their activities can be politically manipulative or even contrary to human rights. Because it is seen as doing good, however, these problems are frequently hidden or ignored.

Similarly, philanthropists rarely fight for social justice. Their actions are founded on an acceptance of injustice. They see their role as trying to mitigate the effects. Few of today's billionaires fight to change the system that created their unequal wealth.

Corporate social responsibility, the public relations fad that many businesses engage in to

do good, is no better. It takes money that belongs to shareholders and gives it to causes that managers think are worthy, or that might improve the company's image in the eyes of consumers and other interested parties.

Enlightenment thinkers were not motivated like this. They wanted to redesign cities, to lift the imagination and ideas of people living there. They built real and metaphorical bridges to a better world. They sought to reform social justice, to bring equal opportunity, and to uplift humankind's vision. They fought against the backward influence of religion, encouraging dialogue and openness in the arts, music, literature and the sciences. They sought to encourage the development of an enlightened populace.

Improving the world is not about offering money to seemingly worthy causes. It may be very laudable for Bill Gates and his coterie to try to improve people's lives by offering medicines and encouraging research. It is fine to do good works, providing finance to educate people in less-developed countries, or support bringing water to the poor. It may sometimes be useful for California's technology billionaires to give some of their wealth to new business start-ups.

But sitting in a comfy armchair and handing out financial alms is not what philanthropy should be about. Most of the money being spent promotes Western ideas of progress and development, often explicitly. Moreover, these individuals and their philanthropic organisations have decided alone what is worthy.

Whether the ideas of philanthropists and charities are right or wrong is not the issue. It is that the decisions are being taken by a handful of wealthy people and some business managers without them being answerable to society for what they do. Who said Mr Gates and his friends should decide what is best for the world?

Genuine need should not be dependent on handouts or the whim of the rich.

