Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism—America's Charity Divide, Who Gives, Who Doesn't, and Why It Matters

Arthur C. Brooks. 2006. New York: Basic Books. ISBN: 13–978–0–465–00821–6, $26.00.

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All of us are aware of the public discussion of personal generosity and charity that was generated when the public learned that Vice President Al Gore's charitable giving in 1997 was only $353. Because of politics, we also know that Senator John Kerry, presidential candidate in 2004, gave *nothing* to charity in more than one year when he was a U.S. Senator. Before his marriage to Teresa Heinz (whose reported fortune was half a billion dollars), Kerry's 1991–1995 charitable contributions were ($0, $820, $175, $2039, $0), less than one-half of one percent of his income for the period. In contrast, private citizen George W. Bush gave ($28,236, $31,914, $31,292) in 1991–1993. His highest giving was 15.7 percent of income and his average 9.1 percent. As Texas governor he gave $27,000 (6.5 percent of income) and $9,178 (2.3 percent) in the next two years, after which his giving returned to higher levels.

What makes this information fascinating, other than the prominence of the individuals involved, is that most of us would say that Vice President Gore and Senator Kerry were more associated with American liberalism and the position of political verbal advocacy of providing help to the needy. Therefore, according to this thinking, they should have given more than the American average of 3.5 percent of income and more than political conservative George Bush. The obvious question that the surprising tax return information prompts us to wonder is whether there is anything *systematically* different about the way American liberals and conservatives support their words with personal giving.

The economics department at Baylor University is probably similar to many others with respect to the choice of economics and affairs of the day that its members discuss over coffee or lunch. The hypothesis that American conservatives might be more generous as a group than American liberals did appear on our radar screens and rise to the level of comment. I ventured that it would take an enormous amount of effort to document, however, and probably would not make the documenter very popular if, in fact, it turned out to be true. One faculty member later emailed a smattering of papers and writings from an internet search that seemed, on the surface, to say that it was not possible to distinguish the level of conservative giving from liberal, partly because there are many extremely rich liberals (think of Hollywood icons, George Soros and others) who give large sums out of even larger incomes. An unscientific impression was that conservative giving was wider spread, however, but the gifts tended to come in smaller amounts from smaller incomes because the givers were ordinary Americans. Going further seemed interesting research, but all had other projects and we put the issue aside.

Thus, it was with great interest that I learned in 2006 that Arthur Brooks has researched and written *Who Really Cares?* I read in very few sittings his 183 pages of text summarizing and drawing fresh conclusions from study of ten datasets such as the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (University of Michigan Survey Research Center), the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (collaborative of American universities with Roper Center for Public Opinion Research), America Gives (Center on Philanthropy of Indiana University), and seven others. It is fascinating stuff.

Presuming careful research, we generally thank scholars for two things: The labor and yeoman service they perform for us on topics that we recognize are important, and the significance of the conclusions they reach. On the first point, there is no question that *Who Really Cares?* breaks new ground in dealing with a vital topic and needed to be written. Because the research presented finds that American liberals are more selfish than American conservatives when measured by the share of their income given in charity and the amount of volunteering they do, it probably had to be written by a liberal or an individual at least sympathetic to and understanding of the liberal political viewpoint, much as it took an Englishman to write the book contrasting Norwegian Roald Amundsen's Antarctic planning with that of Britain's Robert Falcon Scott (Huntford 1985). Arthur Brooks, who "grew up in an intact, religious, politically liberal family where giving was important" (p. 12), seems not to be interested in bashing American liberals, though that is how his conclusions will inevitably be seen by some. I also give him high marks on the meaningfulness of his conclusions.

Who Really Cares? has four main messages: (1) The four forces in American life primarily responsible for making people charitable are "religion, skepticism about the government in economic life, strong families, and personal entrepreneurism" (p. 11). (2) "Conservative principles are most congenial to the four forces of charity" (p. 12). (3) "Liberals, who often claim to care more about others than conservatives do, are personally less charitable" (p. 70). With respect to the first point, for example, it is not true that those with higher incomes tend to give higher percentages (liberals earn slightly more as a group, but give less). I found the fourth point to be the most novel, most important, and the one that I hope will be taken further by Brooks and others in future work: (4) Policies that displace (crowd out) personal charity are harmful to the nation because charity is good for the giver.

The book has a large agenda. Brooks begins by discussing and dismissing the implicit notion that you are "more or less compassionate simply because [you] support taxing wealthy people" or are "dissatisfied with the adequacy of government social programs" (p. 25). He defines observable personal charity and volunteering as the variables of interest, regardless of intent. That is, actions are what counts. "Looking for motives leads to the nonsensical argument that someone who gives nothing but supports the idea of helping others is more generous than a person who donates to charities and causes but who has no apparent great love for mankind" (p. 27). He does note that "For many people, the desire to donate other people's money displaces the act of giving one's own" (p. 55).

The next three chapters ("Faith and Charity," "Other People's Money," and "Income, Welfare, and Charity") develop elements of the research findings. Did you know, for example, that "The average South Dakotan family gives away 75 percent more of its household income each year than the average family in San Francisco" (p. 32) even though the average San Franciscan family "enjoys 78 percent more personal income"? Brooks makes the case that these and similar differences across the nation have to do with religious observance (e.g. 50 percent of South Dakotans attend their house of worship every week, while only 10 percent never do. The figures are reversed for San Francisco, 10 percent, 49 percent). Moreover, Brooks finds that the differences are *not* explained by giving to churches. Theoretically, "it is possible that religion could discourage charity—particularly toward groups or programs that fall outside a particular community of faith" (p. 33), but this is not the case. "Religious people do not outperform secularists in charity simply because of their gifts to houses of worship. Religious people are, inarguably, more charitable in *every measurable way*" (emphasis in original, p. 40), and the reason is due to religion. "In 2004, self-described liberals younger than thirty belonged to one-third fewer organizations in their communities than young conservatives. In 2002, they were 12 percent less likely to give money to charities, and one-third less likely to give blood." Brooks goes on to make the case that ideology about government income redistribution leads liberals to substitute political ideology for actual giving.

With respect to family (chapter 5, "Charity Begins at Home") there is much to remind us that statistics never directly prove causality, but can often identify causality with high probability. A number of family connections apply to charity: "people who have children are more generous than people who don't. Perhaps the act of having children stimulated giving, or givers are more likely to have kids" (p. 98). There are other connections, such as "generous parents make for generous kids" (p. 99). Marriage and divorce are relevant: "Statistically it is nearly impossible to disentangle welfare, single parenting, and antisocial behavior—including selfishness" (p. 108). This result bears on information from the previous chapter that the working poor give a bigger share of their income (even more than the middle class): importantly, they give more than the poor who have the same incomes but are on assistance, who give the least.

There are so many implications of Brooks' findings that it is hard to know where to begin, or end. Americans of the twenty-first century, or at least an identifiable portion of them, have come to believe that it is not only expedient but that it is *right* for government to support the people. President Grover Cleveland is well remembered for his frequently-repeated view that "The lessons of paternalism ought to be unlearned and the better lesson taught that while the people should patriotically and cheerfully support their government, its functions do not include the support of the people…" President John Kennedy said much the same, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

Brooks discusses the downside of government support of the people, including lack of private charity and the damage that that inflicts. Martin Luther King (quoted by Brooks in the epigraph of chapter 8) said, "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the creative light of altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's persistent and most urgent question is 'What are you doing for others?'" Another well known leader quoted by Brooks said "continued dependence on [government support] induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit" (p. 85). That speaker was Franklin Roosevelt.

In the chapter "Charity Makes You Healthy, Happy and Rich" Brooks gives legs to sentiments such as Martin Luther King's and Franklin Roosevelt's. His evidence comes from many sources. One: psychiatrist Victor Frankl "noticed that prisoners who survived [Auschwitz] tended to have a purpose that they considered greater than themselves....once they dedicated themselves to a cause, a deed, or other people, they experienced higher personal effectiveness and functionality" (p. 143). Perhaps givers have more reason to earn money, and so work harder and earn more than non-givers. Perhaps they learn greater self-discipline and self-denial. For whatever reason, there is a positive association between charity and income, even when other factors are controlled for statistically.

It is the statistical links that economists will pay most attention to. When one embarks on writing a book such as Brooks', he has two choices: He can make a book that is terribly definitive, statistically precise, scientifically detailed, and ponderously complete, or he can write a book that others will read. Brooks took the latter approach, placing technical material and tables in an appendix running from page 185 to page 208. In his words, "to describe every data source and explain every statistical test that went into the analysis in this book would make for an appendix nearly as long as the book itself" (pp. 185–186). Instead, he selected "the data summaries and statistical tests that are particularly important for building the book's arguments." It is a reasonable choice, but as I read I often felt that I would have liked regression results and tables or graphs interwoven into the main text to support and summarize the arguments as they were presented. Considering the magnitude of the task undertaken by the book as a whole, however, I came to view it as a small complaint. Being a good researcher, a good expositor, and a captivating writer is a tough combination. Brooks certainly knows that his work will ultimately succeed or fail on the basis of the statistics. The following passage is from the main text (p. 146), intended for the general reader. It shows that there is science behind the conclusions without making that off-putting.

> Imagine I have two phenomena, X and Y, and they are related to each other. I want to know the part of the association between the two that runs only from X to Y—not vice versa. Say I can find a force Z that is a good predictor of X, but isn't related to Y. I use Z to make a prediction of the value of X—call it Xhat. If I find that Xhat is related to Y, it can't be because Y is pushing—it is the pure effect of X on Y. For us, X is money giving and Y is income. Z is volunteering…. Testing this way we find that *charity pushes up income*—but income pushes up charity as well (emphasis added).

Who Really Cares? has particular value for Christian economists who, in their study of the economics of religion, are attempting to learn what significance, if any, religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has on American civil society. I was told growing up that "The difference that makes no difference, is no difference." Here, however, there is a divide that evidently distinguishes Christians and Christian economists. Some in society may believe that their personal duty to charity and good works is discharged by support of government programs, but this is clearly not the case for Christians who have a Biblically-mandated personal obligation. Christianity teaches personal charity; it should not be surprising that greater devotion to generosity is evident among Christians. That this can be statistically distinguished and quantified is important.

Beyond showing that there is a difference, there is the issue of public policy and what to do about it. If faith in God without works is dead, is faith in government without works alive? The Christian economist must take the lead to answer, and it is difficult to make good policy on the basis of bad information. Christian economists, more than others, should be aware of and alert to implications that others miss. “You can take the boy out of poverty, but can you take poverty out of the boy?” Brooks’ work implicitly argues that the economically efficient way forward includes removing reliance on government programs, not for philosophical reasons, but for practical and empirical ones. True, one political position may have erred in one of its current tenets, but this is less significant than learning there is bidirectional causality between income and charity.

Thus, while I agree that “it is one of the bitterest ironies of liberal politics today that political opinions are apparently taking the place of help for others” (p. 73), it is Brooks’ initiation of the process of providing evidence for the validity of the hypothesis that selfish and political substitutionary approaches are “destructive of the national fiber” (Roosevelt) that caught my attention. One required the other, however, and we should be grateful to Brooks for his courage in staking out the advance ground.

Reference

Huntford, Roland. 1985. *The Last Place on Earth: The Complete Story of the Dramatic Race for the Pole*. London: Hodder and Stoughton General Division. ■