

Review of What is Philanthropy?

by Salvatore Alaimo

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<https://whatisphilanthropy.wordpress.com/>

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I have had the privilege of teaching courses on nonprofit organizations at multiple institutions over the last eight years. In my experience, students often take my classes because they want to “change the world” or “make a difference.” Whether they are liberal, conservative, or apolitical, they view the nonprofit sector as the best place to be a change agent (Nickels, Rowland, & Fadase, 2011). Many of my students are already active in their respective communities as volunteers, social activists, and sometimes charitable donors. But when I ask them at the beginning of the semester whether they are philanthropists, there is typically a resounding “no.” When asked to define philanthropy, my students often conjure up the image of a wealthy donor, maybe Rockefeller, Carnegie, Buffett, or Zuckerberg, giving large sums of money to a cause. Many of my students have a hard time pronouncing the term, let alone adequately defining it.

This is where the new documentary film *What Is Philanthropy?* is helpful. The brainchild of executive producer and associate professor of public and nonprofit administration at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, Salvatore “Sal” Alaimo, the film “seeks to enhance our

understanding of philanthropy and its role in American culture and society” (Alaimo, 2014) by offering a more complex definition of philanthropy. Instead of a narrow focus on donating money, the film argues that philanthropy is best conceptualized as private action that promotes the betterment of society for “love of mankind.” Yet, if philanthropy is the giving of one’s time, talent, or treasure for the betterment of society, Alaimo pushes the limits of what that means.

In the 86-minute film, Alaimo addresses a plethora of perspectives on the value and practice of philanthropy, ranging from religious teachings on charity and giving to the legacy and impact of family foundations. The documentary addresses the broad spectrum of ways that people give of their time and talent, from corporate volunteer programs to women’s sewing groups to social enterprises. But the film pushes even further, including social action, advocacy, and civil disobedience in the definition of philanthropy. In some ways, social activism is the most significant form of giving; as one of the interviewees notes in the film, speaking out against injustice may mean risking (giving) your life.

This broader, more inclusive definition of philanthropy encourages us to look beyond theories of giving to explain philanthropy, to political and sociological explanations for why people form social networks, mobilize, and organize. It also, in the words of one of my students, makes philanthropy more accessible: “I like thinking that I can be a philanthropist, even if I am not wealthy.” On the flip side, another of my students asked, “If philanthropy is conflated with charity and volunteering, doesn’t it render the concept meaningless?” (echoing Sartori, 1970).

What Is Philanthropy? not only attempts to redefine philanthropy for its audience, it also interrogates the darker side of philanthropy by examining the unequal allocation of charitable donations, the nature of pathological altruism, and the unethical use of nonprofit status or charitable gifts. As such, the film invites viewers into discussions about the ethics of philanthropy. For example, one might pair the film with readings from Ivan Illich (1968) on the potential negative impacts of volunteering and the paternalism of being a “do-gooder,” or Andrea Smith’s (2009) critique of foundations funding grassroots social activism, or Erica Kohl-Arenas’s (2015) provocative book on how philanthro-capitalism perpetuates systemic inequality. In my class, we used the film as a jumping-off point for in-class debate on the value of philanthropy: examining the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Potential adopters of the film should be aware, however, of some of its shortcomings. First, the film is too long for use in the traditional university classroom. My classes, for example, typically run 55–80 minutes. To use the 86-minute film as a teaching tool means cutting it up into parts. Fortunately, the film is organized into 15 “chapters” for ease of navigation. My students offered the harshest critique: they could do without the long musical montages, which would effectively cut at least 5 minutes from the film. The film is professional but not polished. For students and faculty alike who are accustomed to classroom use of documentaries

from PBS’s *Frontline*, for example, they will be underwhelmed by the film.

It is evident from the documentary’s associated website that Alaimo has taken great pride in compiling a comprehensive, academically informed yet accessible film. *What Is Philanthropy?* has been shown around the country at film festivals, including the Asheville Cinema Festival, Bare Bones International Film and Music Festival, and Kingston Film Festival. Alaimo has also screened the film at universities and in high school classrooms across the country. The documentary is available in Blu-ray and DVD formats for individual purchase through Indiana University Press.

What Is Philanthropy? would be a great addition to courses on or related to nonprofits, civic engagement, or service learning. It is best suited for introductory courses for undergraduate students. For students in nonprofit classes, the film provides an opportunity to redefine philanthropy, making it more accessible. For me as the instructor, the film is a useful and entertaining means of addressing the value and ethics of philanthropy and how nonprofits, as vehicles for philanthropic action, must work to promote what is good about philanthropy and mediate and correct what is bad and ugly.

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