

# KILROY CAFÉ

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# The Limits of Charity

By GLENN CAMPBELL

Your only real meaning on this planet lies in somehow making it a better place. The problem is how to go about it. Giving selflessly to others may seem noble, but that's not the issue. Simply giving away what you have isn't necessarily going to improve anything.

Each of us has limited resources. You have only a certain amount of time on Earth, and that's all you've got to work with. Some of this time can be turned into money, power or knowledge, but no matter how rich, connected or skilled you may become, that influence is limited, too. Even the wealthiest philanthropist can't make a dent in the world's problems if his resources are used indiscriminately.

If a beggar asks you for money, do you give it to him? Your emotions may say so. It feels good to be generous, but generosity alone doesn't guarantee a positive outcome. Is the money going to be used for drugs? Will the ease of his getting it discourage him from getting a job? In those cases, giving to the beggar may actually hurt him, not help.

An extreme response is to not give anything to anybody, but what's the point in that? So you accumulate resources all your life and then die. Your skills will be lost forever, while your money will be passed to your heirs who will either use it wisely or they won't. You're essentially dumping your own problem onto them!

The solution lies in "strategic" giving. You apply your resources in clever ways that multiply their effect. Just feeding the hungry doesn't necessarily help. You want to attack the real sources of hunger, like war or overpopulation. You want to see the problem at the highest level possible and look for solutions there.

But there is futility in trying to attack all the world's problems at once. It isn't clear that by giving to any global cause you are improving things any more than by giving to a beggar. The amount you can donate is usually trivial, and no worldwide movement is without its potential feedback flaws—i.e. the risk of unintentionally making things worse. If you place your resources in the hands of others in the blind faith that they know what to do, there is never a guarantee of the results you intend.

No matter how you intervene, there is potential for both good and bad. It isn't enough to have a theory about what works, you have to see how the object of your charity actually responds. To get the most from your resources, you have to be able to monitor the results. Then you can adjust your intervention accordingly.

This implies a balance between global and local. It is unproductive to dwell on the whole galaxy but also to devote too much attention to a single person or local cause. You want to focus on areas you understand well, viewing them from a distance but without losing your connection to real people.

Simply the fact that someone is in desperate need does not mean you should help them, because there may be other places where your resources are more effective. In almost every charitable venue, need will far exceed your resources, so you have to be cagy about how you use them. You will say "yes" in the right circumstances, but more often you will have to say "no". You have to conserve your gifts for their most productive use, and this means turning away most applications.

You also have to preserve your own ability to give. Your life is a tool, and you can give to others only to the extent that your tool is well-fueled, well-maintained

and growing in and of itself. If your selfless charity begins to intrude into your own self-maintenance, then you won't be helping anyone in the end, because your own system will collapse.

If your life is a machine to help others, you shouldn't be running it at full capacity. From time to time, you have to shut it down for scheduled maintenance. You have to upgrade the technology. You have to confirm, on a daily basis, that the machine is really doing what it is supposed to. While you attend to these matters, people may die, but the long-term productivity of your machine depends on this seemingly self-absorbed behavior.

Most importantly, you can't let people become dependent on your machine, because eventually they are going to have to live without it. Ultimately, people have to help themselves. They will have to come up with their own solutions that don't involve you. These may not be solutions you approve of, but you have to let them be.

The world is a hard and desperate place, and your hopes for changing it must be modest. You intervene where you realistically can and step aside otherwise. Much suffering will go on because you failed to help, but you can't save everyone.

In the end, you are but a visitor here. The problems of the world were here before you came and will continue after you leave. Your task is mostly an academic exercise: to see how much you can accomplish during your brief assignment here. If you apply your resources wisely, without obsession, delusion or waste, you can step away satisfied.

—G.C.

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