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AN EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION OF THE OBLIGATION FOR CHARITY

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Abstract

Charity is often praised as a virtue and sometimes demanded as a moral duty. Yet philosophers and moral theorists rarely pause to examine the deeper question: on what grounds are we justified in believing that we are morally obligated to give? This paper examines the epistemic foundation of charitable obligation by asking whether the act of giving is truly grounded in reason or merely in emotion, social conditioning, or hidden assumptions about the status of those who receive. Some philosophical and psychological reflections suggest that charity can be influenced by unconscious bias or subtle hierarchies, portraying the less privileged as objects of pity rather than as equals. In response, this paper argues that charitable obligation need not depend on condescension, emotional impulse, or status-based evaluation. Rather, it arises from a rational recognition of a shared human vulnerability and interdependence. While acknowledging that culture, religion, and environment shape how and why people give, the paper maintains that such influences do not automatically undermine the rational legitimacy of charitable action. By distinguishing between paternalistic giving and morally grounded generosity, the study defends the view that charity can be both rationally justified and socially necessary. Giving, that it is properly understood, not as an irrational act but a meaningful and reasoned response to the moral reality of human need.

Keywords: Charity, Moral obligation, Epistemic justification, Generosity, Rationality

Introduction

Giving is a practice embedded in everyday human life. From helping a neighbour in need to supporting large philanthropic foundations, acts of charity and philanthropy shape social relations and reflect deeply on held moral convictions. Yet despite the familiarity and the emotional reverberation of giving, the question of why we are morally obligated to give (if



indeed we are) is seldom examined with the rigor it deserves. Many moral philosophers treat charity as self-evidently virtuous or as an ethical duty (Kant 4:399), but such assumptions often go unchallenged. This raises a fundamental question: on what epistemic grounds can we justify the claim that giving is a moral obligation? At first glance, answering this question may seem straightforward. Most people intuitively view generosity as good and selfishness as bad. However, recent scholarly work has brought this intuition into question. Some scholars and commentators in moral psychology suggest that charitable giving can be influenced by unconscious biases, social signaling, or emotional impulses. In such cases, acts intended as benevolent may partly reflect the donor's self-image rather than a fully reasoned moral assessment of the recipient's needs.

These observations highlight an underexplored dimension of charitable practice and its epistemic structure that is, the beliefs, justifications, and cognitive conditions that inform and support the claim that giving is a moral requirement. If charity is morally obligatory, it must be grounded in reasons that are publicly accessible and rationally defensible, not merely sentimental or socially conditioned. This paper argues that charitable obligation can be epistemically justified, even when cultural, religious, and environmental factors shape how individuals understand and practice giving. Rather than reflecting merely emotional impulses or assertions of dominance, giving can emerge from a reasoned recognition of shared human vulnerability and moral mutuality (Appiah 45). Recognizing another's need is not inherently demeaning; on the contrary, it can reflect an acknowledgment of our interdependence and common moral standing. By placing epistemic justification at the center of the debate, this paper moves beyond sentimental or wholesale condemnations of giving and towards a careful, philosophically grounded understanding of why, and on what rational basis, we might be morally obliged to give.

Traditional Moral Accounts of Giving

The moral significance of giving has been a major concern of ethical thought for centuries. Across cultures and philosophical traditions, acts of charity and philanthropy have been celebrated as expressions of moral virtue, indicators of social responsibility, and obligations grounded in reason. Yet the foundations of these claims differ depending on the ethical background considered. Understanding these traditional accounts is important, because they form the baseline from which contemporary critiques emerge and against which an epistemic analysis of charitable obligation can be conducted. In classical virtue ethics, giving is primarily understood as a manifestation of character rather than as a prescriptive duty. Aristotle identifies liberality, or generosity, as a central virtue, describing it as the mean between prodigality and stinginess. In *Nicomachean Ethics* he stated that,

Let us speak next of liberality. It seems to be the mean with regard to wealth; for the liberal man is praised not in respect of military matters..., but in respect of the giving and taking of wealth, especially in respect of giving. Now by 'wealth' we mean all those things whose worth is measured by



money. Further, the states of excess and defect in regard of wealth are respectively prodigality and stinginess..."(1124b1–10).

This passage clearly shows that, for Aristotle, liberality (or generosity) lies between two vices: prodigality (excessive giving) and stinginess (deficient giving) and that virtue is defined in terms of giving appropriately, not merely giving a lot or giving nothing at all. The virtuous person gives for the right reasons, in the right measure, and at the right time, motivated not by external pressure or obligation but by a cultivated disposition to act rightly. In this context, charity is morally significant because it arises from a habit that nurtures generosity, self-discipline, and social harmony. Aristotle's perspective highlights the internal dimension of moral life; a generous person does not calculate the consequences of giving in a utilitarian sense, nor act purely out of duty, but acts in accordance with an integrated moral sensibility. Charity, in this sense, shapes both the character of the giver and the social fabric in which they live.

In contrast, the deontological tradition emphasizes rational obligation over moral character. Immanuel Kant argues that humans possess imperfect duties of beneficence, which require us to act in order to promote the happiness of others, when possible, even if we cannot do so universally. In his words;

...that this beneficence is a duty results from this: that since our self-love cannot be separated from the need to be loved by others (to obtain help from them in case of necessity), we therefore make ourselves an end for others; and this maxim can never be obligatory except by having the specific character of a universal law, and consequently by means of a will that we should also make others our ends. Hence the happiness of others is an end that is also a duty. I am only bound then to sacrifice to others a part of my welfare without hope of recompense: because it is my duty... That this beneficence is a duty results from this: that since our self-love cannot be separated from the need to be loved by others (to obtain help from them in case of necessity), we therefore make ourselves an end for others; and this maxim can never be obligatory except by having the specific character of a universal law, and consequently by means of a will that we should also make others our ends. Hence the happiness of others is an end that is also a duty. I am only bound then to sacrifice to others a part of my welfare without hope of recompense: because it is my duty...(4:399).

Charity, in the Kantian sense, is not just praiseworthy, it is morally required whenever one has the capacity to help. The moral worth of giving derives from the agent's adherence to universalizable principles rather than from sentiment or habit. This approach situates giving within a framework of rational moral law, emphasizing that moral duties can and should guide action independently of emotional impulse.



Utilitarian and consequentialist approaches, such as those advocated by Peter Singer, evaluate giving by its outcomes rather than its motivations. In “*Famine, Affluence, and Morality*,” Singer argues that traditional distinctions between duty and charity collapse when we recognize that preventing suffering matters morally regardless of distance or familiarity. As he puts it: “If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it” (231-232). From this perspective, charitable acts are morally obligatory insofar as they maximize overall well-being or reduce suffering. Effective altruism, an extension of this approach, emphasizes rational assessment of where and how charitable acts achieve the greatest impact. Unlike Aristotelian or Kantian frameworks, the ethical focus is externalized, the morality of giving is determined by measurable results rather than the character of the giver or adherence to a moral law. This perspective highlights the need for a reflective, evidence-based moral reasoning in charitable practices, a concern closely aligned with the epistemic questions explored in this paper.

Despite their differences, these classical accounts share a common assumption that giving is inherently and morally significant. Whether framed as a virtue, a duty, or as a means to positive consequences, charitable action is treated as self-evidently desirable and morally required. They generally presume that agents can recognize the moral relevance of giving and understand the moral value of assistance. In other words, these approaches assume an underlying epistemic access that the agent knows or can know what counts as good giving and who is deserving of help. However, this assumption has been increasingly questioned. However, this assumption has been increasingly questioned, not because giving itself is inherently flawed, but because human judgment can be influenced by social norms, emotions, or limited perspective. While charitable acts often aim to help others, the moral significance of giving may depend on the agent’s reflective awareness, understanding of needs, and attention to consequences. This opens the way for an epistemic analysis that examines when and how acts of giving are rationally and morally justified, rather than simply assuming that all giving is automatically virtuous or obligatory.

Epistemic Challenges in Moral Evaluation of Giving

While traditional moral accounts of giving presuppose that charitable acts are inherently virtuous or obligatory, a closer look at human cognition and social behaviour reveals that the moral evaluation of giving is often more complex. Philosophers and psychologists alike have recognized that human judgment can be influenced by factors that are not purely rational, including emotional impulses, social signaling, and implicit assumptions about the status or worthiness of recipients (Andreoni *Warm-Glow Giving* 464; Slovic et al. *The Affect Heuristic* 397). These influences do not inherently make charitable acts morally invalid, but they introduce an epistemic uncertainty: if our motivations are partly shaped by unconscious bias or social conditioning, to what extent can we claim that giving is rationally or morally justified? Researches in behavioural ethics and moral psychology highlights several ways in which giving can be unintentionally guided by cognitive or emotional factors. For example, the concept of *warm-glow giving* illustrates that



individuals often experience a personal emotional reward from donating, which may motivate generosity more than a careful assessment of recipients' needs or the consequences of aid (Andreoni 231). Similarly, Studies on compassion fade suggest that human empathy tends to diminish when responding to large numbers of victims, indicating that our moral intuitions about who deserves help can be contextually biased and sometimes inconsistent (Slovic et al. 397–420). These findings do not condemn charitable acts outright; rather, they emphasize the importance of reflective awareness in moral evaluation, where agents critically examine their own motivations and the likely outcomes of their giving.

Another dimension of this epistemic challenge comes from a cultural and social conditioning. Different societies cultivate distinct expectations about charity, generosity, and moral duty. Religious traditions, for instance, repeatedly frame giving as a divinely sanctioned obligation, while secular norms may valorize philanthropy as a socially esteemed virtue. Such influences shape how agents perceive both the moral significance of giving and the deservingness of recipients (Appiah 45). Here, too, the epistemic concern arises: if moral evaluation is partially conditioned by social norms or inherited beliefs, how can agents ensure that their acts of giving are rationally justified rather than been viewed as merely conventional or habitual? Importantly, recognizing these epistemic challenges does not lead to skepticism about charity itself. Instead, it foregrounds the need for reasoned reflection in giving. Moral agents can mitigate biases by focusing on factors that are publicly accessible and ethically relevant, such as the actual needs of recipients, the impact of aid, and the fairness of distribution (Singer 232). By critically engaging with these considerations, giving can move beyond unconscious impulses or status-based evaluations to become a genuinely rational and morally grounded practice. In this sense, the epistemic challenges are not obstacles to charitable obligation but rather opportunities to strengthen the moral legitimacy of generosity through reflective awareness and practical reasoning.

Epistemic Reconstruction of Charitable Obligation

Having examined the cognitive, emotional, and social factors that can complicate moral evaluation of giving, we now turn to the question of how charitable obligation can be epistemically reconstructed. That is, how can we justify giving as a moral duty or virtue in a way that is rationally grounded, rather than dependent on unconscious biases, emotional impulses, or socially inherited norms? Epistemic reconstruction seeks to identify the conditions under which acts of charity are both morally and rationally justified, integrating philosophical reasoning with an awareness of human cognitive limitations. A fundamental constituent to this reconstruction is the idea that giving can be reasoned through recognition of shared human vulnerability and interdependence. From a moral standpoint, human beings are not isolated moral agents but participants in a social world where needs, suffering, and well-being are interconnected. Aristotle emphasized the virtue of liberality, describing it as a balanced disposition that seeks to give appropriately without excess or deficiency: "Let us speak next of liberality. It seems to be the mean with regard to wealth; for the liberal man is praised... especially in respect of giving and taking of



wealth” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1124b1–10). This recognition of moderation reflects a rational awareness of the moral significance of giving within a broader framework of human flourishing.

Kant complements this perspective by framing charitable giving as an imperfect duty of beneficence, which obliges agents to promote the happiness of others when possible: “Hence the happiness of others is an end that is also a duty. I am only bound then to sacrifice to others a part of my welfare without hope of recompense: because it is my duty” (4:399). For Kant, moral obligation arises not from emotional sentiment but from the rational recognition that others have intrinsic value and that their well-being is morally relevant, even when we cannot universally enforce such actions. A consequentialist dimension further strengthens the epistemic foundation of charitable giving. Singer’s argument emphasizes the moral relevance of outcomes, asserting that if we can prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we are morally obliged to do so: “If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it” (Singer 232). This principle shifts the attention from motives alone to the practical consequences of our actions, highlighting that rational moral evaluation must consider the actual impact of giving. Building on these classical accounts, epistemic reconstruction requires agents to engage in reflective moral reasoning. Rather than giving as a reflexive act shaped by warm-glow impulses, social pressure, or paternalistic assumptions, rational giving involves:

- ✓ Assessment of need: Evaluating objectively who requires assistance and the potential benefits of aid.
- ✓ Evaluation of consequences: Considering how resources can be used most effectively to reduce suffering or improve well-being.
- ✓ Self-awareness of motives: Recognizing and mitigating emotional or social biases that might distort moral judgment.
- ✓ Respect for recipients’ dignity: Ensuring that giving acknowledges the agency and intrinsic value of those helped, rather than treating them as objects of pity or instruments of self-image.

Epistemically justified giving, therefore, is not simply voluntary or emotionally motivated; it is an act grounded in reasoned moral awareness, informed by reflection, ethical principles, and awareness of human interconnectedness. This approach reconciles the insight that cultural, religious, and environmental factors shape giving with the possibility that charitable acts can be morally rational and socially meaningful. A person can, for instance, follow religious or cultural norms while still critically evaluating how their giving promotes actual well-being and respects the dignity of others.

Finally, this epistemic reconstruction highlights that charitable obligation is both rationally defensible and socially necessary. It moves beyond the critiques that attribute charity to emotional whim or hierarchical bias and instead situates giving within a framework of moral reasoning that recognizes human interdependence. By integrating virtue ethics,



deontological duty, and consequentialist consideration, agents can give in a way that is morally grounded, epistemically justified, and aligned with the practical realities of human society. As such, charitable obligation emerges not from sentiment alone, but from reflective awareness of moral responsibility, human vulnerability, and the rational evaluation of how best to alleviate suffering. This epistemically grounded framework provides a robust defense of giving as a moral requirement, bridging traditional philosophical insights with contemporary concerns about bias, social conditioning, and rational moral evaluation.

Cultural, Religious, and Environmental Mediations of Giving

While charitable obligation can be epistemically justified through reflective moral reasoning, the context in which giving occurs significantly shapes how it is understood, practiced, and evaluated. Culture, religion, and environmental conditions influence not only the motives for giving but also the norms surrounding recipients, the forms of charity considered appropriate, and the moral weight attributed to different kinds of generosity. These factors, however, need not undermine the rational and moral legitimacy of charitable action; rather, they provide the context within which epistemically grounded giving can be realized. Cultural norms play a particularly important role in shaping one's expectations about giving. In some societies, philanthropy is deeply embedded in communal life, with individuals expected to contribute to social welfare as a matter of civic virtue or honour. In other contexts, giving is more individualized and voluntary, often framed as a personal moral choice rather than a social obligation (Appiah 45). These differing norms affect what people perceive as morally salient in charitable acts, including who is deserving of the aid and what forms of support are most appropriate. Recognizing these influences is essential for understanding why individuals give, but it does not automatically imply that their actions are epistemically or morally deficient. On the contrary, agents can critically reflect on cultural expectations, aligning them with reasoned moral principles to ensure that giving respects both the needs and dignity of recipients.

Religious teachings similarly mediate giving by establishing moral frameworks, ritual obligations, and ethical ideals. Many religious traditions emphasize charity as a moral duty and a spiritual practice, such as *tzedakah* in Judaism, *zakat* in Islam, or almsgiving in Christianity and Buddhism. These practices encourage generosity, reinforce social cohesion, and promote the well-being of less privileged members of society. While religious motivations can sometimes involve ritualized or symbolic giving, epistemic reflection enables agents to interpret these obligations thoughtfully, ensuring that charitable acts genuinely address human need rather than functioning solely as displays of piety or social conformity.

Environmental factors also shape charitable behaviour, often in ways that reflect both opportunity and necessity. Societies facing widespread poverty, natural disasters, or systemic inequities may cultivate a strong ethic of mutual aid, where giving is a practical response to shared vulnerability. Conversely, in resource-rich environments, giving may be



more discretionary, influenced by social prestige or personal fulfillment. These differences highlight the ways context influences how generosity is expressed, but they do not negate the possibility of reasoned moral justification. Reflective agents can evaluate the impact of their giving within environmental constraints, weighing practical outcomes alongside ethical considerations to act responsibly and effectively (Andreoni 231).

Importantly, epistemic analysis allows for a nuanced integration of these contextual influences. Rather than viewing cultural, religious, or environmental factors as sources of irrationality or bias, they can be understood as mediators that shape the reasoning and moral awareness of agents. For example, an individual motivated by religious duty may still employ rational assessment of the recipients' needs and the consequences of the aid, ensuring that their charitable actions are both morally and epistemically sound. Similarly, culturally conditioned expectations can guide socially sensitive forms of giving without compromising reflective ethical reasoning. Therefore, acknowledging the mediation of culture, religion, and environment enriches our understanding of charitable obligation. It demonstrates that moral and epistemic justification of giving is not divorced from context, but rather occurs within it. By critically engaging with these influences, agents can ensure that their acts of charity are not merely habitual, socially enforced, or emotionally driven, but instead reasoned, morally grounded, and responsive to actual human need. This perspective reinforces the argument that charitable giving is both an ethical and epistemically defensible practice, capable of sustaining moral obligations in diverse social and environmental contexts.

Charity as a Normative Social Necessity

Beyond an individual moral reasoning, charitable giving holds profound social significance. Human societies are structured around networks of interdependence, and acts of giving serve not only to alleviate immediate needs but also to sustain social cohesion, trust, and mutual support. From this perspective, charity is not merely an optional or personal virtue; it is a normative social necessity, a practice that enables communities to function ethically and practically. The epistemic analysis of giving suggests that rational moral agents recognize their interconnectedness with others. No individual exists in isolation: our well-being, security, and flourishing are intertwined with those of our neighbors, co-citizens, and even distant members of society. As Appiah observes, "moral responsibility is embedded within social relationships, and attention to others' needs is a recognition of shared humanity" (Appiah 45). Charity, when understood epistemically, is a conscious acknowledgment of these interdependencies. It expresses recognition that human life is mutually vulnerable and that moral obligations extend beyond immediate circles of kin or community.

From a practical standpoint, the social necessity of giving becomes evident in contexts of systemic inequality, disaster relief, and poverty alleviation. In such circumstances, failure to give is not just a moral failing; it can exacerbate suffering, destabilize communities, and undermine social trust. Reflective charitable action helps to redistribute resources in ways



that promote fairness, dignity, and social stability. It can also serve as a mechanism for reinforcing shared ethical norms, shaping future behavior, and cultivating moral awareness across generations. In other words, charity functions as both a moral and social corrective, bridging the gap between individual ethical reasoning and collective welfare. Furthermore, recognizing charity as a social necessity does not diminish the importance of epistemic reflection in moral evaluation. Rationally justified giving ensures that acts of charity are effective, respectful, and ethically coherent, rather than performative or paternalistic. Agents who integrate reasoned moral judgment with social awareness avoid the pitfalls of condescension or emotional overreaction while still fulfilling their responsibilities to others. This approach aligns with Singer's consequentialist insight that moral obligation depends on the ability to prevent significant harm without disproportionate sacrifice, but it adds an epistemic dimension: agents must know, understand, and reflect on the consequences of their giving to act responsibly (Singer 232).

Lastly, viewing charity as a normative social necessity highlights the mutual benefit of moral action. While giving primarily aims to address the needs of recipients, it also strengthens the ethical fabric of society. Communities in which members recognize and act upon their moral obligations are more resilient, cooperative, and capable of responding to collective challenges. Charity thus becomes a practice that is simultaneously individually reasoned, morally justified, and socially indispensable, demonstrating that epistemically grounded giving is both ethically required and pragmatically essential. In conclusion, charitable giving transcends the private sphere of virtue or duty. It is a normative and socially necessary practice that embodies the rational recognition of shared human vulnerability, promotes well-being, and sustains the moral and practical foundations of community life. By integrating epistemic reflection with social responsibility, giving becomes a morally robust and socially indispensable action, bridging the individual's ethical reasoning with the needs of society at large.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the epistemic justification of charitable obligation, showing that giving can be both morally required and rationally defensible. Beginning with traditional accounts of giving, we saw that Aristotle's virtue ethics frames generosity as a mean between prodigality and stinginess, Kant situates beneficence as an imperfect duty grounded in reason, and Singer emphasizes the moral significance of outcomes in determining obligation. These frameworks collectively underscore the idea that charitable acts are ethically meaningful, but they often assume that agents automatically recognize what counts as morally appropriate giving. Through an epistemic lens, however, human cognition and social context complicate this picture. Emotional impulses, unconscious bias, cultural norms, religious obligations, and environmental conditions can influence both the motivation and evaluation of giving. Recognizing these factors does not undermine charitable obligation; rather, it highlights the importance of reflective moral reasoning, in which agents critically assess their motives, evaluate the needs of recipients, and consider the consequences of their actions. Epistemic awareness ensures that giving is not merely



habitual, performative, or paternalistic, but genuinely aligned with ethical principles and the dignity of those helped.

It has been argued that giving is not only a private moral choice but also a normative social necessity. Epistemically justified charity strengthens social cohesion, promotes fairness, and recognizes the interconnectedness of human well-being. It demonstrates that moral reasoning and social responsibility are intertwined: reflective giving benefits both recipients and communities while honoring the rational, ethical, and social dimensions of moral life. In conclusion, charitable obligation emerges as a reasoned, morally justified, and socially indispensable practice. It is not grounded solely in emotion, social expectation, or hierarchical assumptions, but in the rational recognition of shared human vulnerability, mutual responsibility, and the ethical imperative to respond to need. By foregrounding epistemic reflection, this paper reaffirms that giving can be both ethically required and rationally defended, bridging classical moral theory, contemporary ethical analysis, and the practical realities of human society.

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