

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!



Issue #15, 3 (December 2018)
Compiled & Edited by *Philosophy
Without Borders*

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines! is delivered online in (occasionally discontinuous) weekly installments, month by month.

Its aim is to inspire critical, reflective, synoptic thinking and discussion about contemporary issues--in short, *public philosophizing* in the broadest possible, everyday sense.

Every installment contains (1) excerpts from one or more articles, or one or more complete articles, that recently appeared in online public media, (2) some follow-up thoughts for further reflection or discussion, and (3) a link or links for supplementary reading.

1. “What a Border-Wall GoFundMe Campaign Says About America”

By Amanda Mull

The Atlantic, 22 DECEMBER 2018

Full article available at URL = <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/12/border-wall-crowdfunding/578884/>



A fence at the United States border with Mexico in Tijuana Mario Tama / Getty

The federal government has partially [shut down](#), and Donald Trump still doesn't have money for a border wall. Earlier this week, the president rejected a funding bill that would keep nine federal departments operational, and Congress scrambled to find a fix by a deadline of midnight on Friday—but to no avail. The rejected bill didn't include a desired \$5 billion for Trump's long-promised wall along America's southern border.

With control of the House of Representatives set to switch to the Democrats in the new year, the odds that Trump will secure money for the wall in the near future have been dwindling. In an effort to fill that gap, several [crowdfunding campaigns](#) have popped up to collect money for the wall directly from Trump supporters online, with the purported intent of passing that money to the White House or the Department of Homeland Security. The most successful one, a GoFundMe [started by an Iraq War veteran](#) with a background in [Facebook accounts that trafficked in conspiracy theories](#), has raised more than \$14 million. It aims to raise at least \$1 billion.

Even though 10 figures in raised funds would be a new frontier, it's the logical extreme toward which online crowdfunding has been headed. What started less than a decade ago with Kickstarter campaigns to raise money for new businesses has become a way for people to pay down medical debt or avoid eviction. During the midterms, crowdfunding allowed people to [find and directly support candidates](#) in the most contentious races across the country.

Individuals start or contribute to crowdfunding campaigns for their own reasons, but on a collective scale, Americans' willingness to pitch in 20 bucks to a stranger online is among the defining phenomena of 2018. Its popularity is made possible by two intersecting realizations: Some of the vital structural underpinnings of life in the U.S. don't work very well, and the ideas that end up mattering most are often those with money behind them.

Medical debt in particular helped online crowdfunding [turn the corner](#) from being mainly a project of personal desire to something both darker and more political. Debilitating health-care costs manifest as an individual problem, but they're generally the result of [flawed systems](#) far beyond the control of the people who receive those bills. Even for those with insurance, [bills can be overwhelming](#). And many people's savings are running dry in general: A [2017 Federal Reserve study](#) found that 44 percent of American adults don't have even \$400 in cash on hand in case of an emergency. That exposes a growing number of people to the sort of precariousness that can make crowdfunding attractive.

People often think of the practical issues associated with medical problems as primarily affecting Americans who are older and, as a result, may be in worse health. But medical debt [disproportionately impacts Millennials](#), at least in part because young people get kicked off their parents' insurance at age 26. Young people are also [more likely to be classified as independent contractors at work](#), and contractors rarely have access to employer-subsidized insurance. What Millennials do have, though, is a generally strong grasp of social media's dynamics and uses, which means the best way for them to deal with the structural failures of American medical care may indeed be to leverage their online connections and cobble together the needed funds piece by piece.

Identifying who has money, who needs it, and how it can be redistributed to help the most people is also a primary project of socialism, a political ideology that has [gained significant ground among young liberals](#) in recent years. Crowdfunding, in a way, serves as a person-to-person shortcut to live those ideals in a time when structural power opposes them: People with a little extra money can give it directly to those who need a little extra, without the services of an unreliable third party.

But it isn't just young people and the political left who have dwindling confidence in the structures that have long animated American life. The border wall, a central policy goal of Trump and his supporters, couldn't get funded during the two years that Republicans controlled both the executive and legislative branches of the federal government. To circumvent congressional gridlock, supporters have turned to nongovernment funding alternatives, a choice that gives them potential access to a privilege previously [accessible only to the very wealthy](#): treating large-scale government projects that will affect millions of people like personal hobbies. That's true even if raising a significant portion of Trump's desired \$5 billion seems unlikely. (The people running the two largest border-wall crowdfunding campaigns didn't immediately return requests for comment.)

Whether or not raising money directly from Trump supporters can fund the entire wall misses the point, though. The goals of politically motivated crowdfunding go beyond practicality. Access to funding is access to power in America, and [as that access becomes increasingly unequal](#), demonstrating an idea's popularity via visible, public fund-raising can be a tool of consolidating that power.

The border wall is the most recent example of this idea writ large, but a few months ago, a GoFundMe to support Christine Blasey Ford's personal-security needs in the lead-up to Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings [raised nearly \\$650,000](#), more than four times its goal. Money is one of the few ways to do or say anything with impact in America, and acknowledging that may be one of the most nonpartisan ideas we have left.

2. "Privatizing Morality"

By Luke Savage

Jacobin, 23 DECEMBER 2018

Full article available at URL = <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/12/privatizing-morality-charity-altruism-tax-deduction>



A Salvation Army building in St Louis. Thomas Hawk / Flickr

Charitable donations in the United States tend to peak during the holidays. As Meagan Day [has observed](#), this tradition of seasonal giving expresses something of a paradox: a temporary suspension of the wider attitude, so prevalent among the wealthy, that poverty results from personal or moral failing. For a fleeting few weeks every year, it seems, there is implicit acknowledgment in the more privileged ranks of American society that wealth is distributed unfairly and that the poor, by extension, do in fact deserve better.

In their giving this holiday season (and throughout the year), wealthy donors will be aided by the federal charitable tax deduction. Supposedly designed to incentivize charity (particularly among the rich — the measure was [introduced in 1917](#) following a big increase in the top income tax rate) the deduction enables anyone who gives to deduct the amount from their stated income for tax purposes.

Institutionalizing and encouraging generosity as public policy — on the face of it, who could possibly object? But whatever its official purpose in theory, the deduction looks less irreproachable in practice.

For one thing, it costs the public purse a whole lot. According to the Internal Revenue Service [over \\$60 billion](#) in prospective federal tax money is forgone every year, courtesy of a measure supposedly designed to boost worthy causes and mitigate suffering. It's not hard to imagine much better uses such a vast sum of money could be put to; it's already [eight times more](#), for example, than is currently spent on the Head Start program, which provides a range of services to low-income children.

For another, its principal beneficiaries are the well-off. Data from the [Tax Policy Center](#) shows that some 74 percent of those who make use of the charitable tax deduction have incomes in the top 20 percent. Moreover, its regressive nature means that those in lower-income brackets who do make use of the deduction end up receiving a much lesser benefit: after all, the higher the income bracket a taxpayer is in, the bigger the reduction in their taxes from any given donation. As a result, those making \$100,000 or more a year receive some 76 percent of the benefits accrued from deduction.

There's also the not insignificant issue of how broadly we define charity. True, for plenty of people, charitable giving implies donations to food banks, soup kitchens, or other worthy initiatives. But look more deeply at some would-be charitable enterprises and you often find a kind of giving that is less munificent and more obviously self-interested — think of [huge donations to Ivy League universities](#) or other elite institutions. It would be hard to argue in good faith that this kind of blatant privilege replication should enjoy the same tax incentives as, say, donations to give poor children a healthy breakfast or to help victims of domestic violence.

In some cases, charitable giving as defined by the American tax code borders on absurdity, amounting to little more than plutocratic vanity underwritten by the public purse. Some years ago, for example, billionaire [Mitchell Rales](#) landed a big deduction by donating his expensive collection of modern art to a [private museum constructed next door](#) to his own home. Of course, charitable donations can represent expressions of compassion — particularly when they involve genuine personal sacrifice. And taken as a portion of their total incomes, the charitable impulse seems to be stronger among low and middle earners [than it is among the rich](#).

But the ultimate problem with Big Charity is that the greatest beneficiaries of America's deeply hierarchical society are rewarded for occasional efforts to mitigate some of the very problems they are actively involved in perpetuating.

The exercise of private morality by powerful people whose actions harden or maintain social problems isn't just an inadequate solution to those problems; it's a very real expression of them. The venture capitalist who gives money to a school district, on condition that it train his future workforce at public expense. The CEO who donates to a hospital before sending an army of blood-sucking lobbyists to Washington to fight a Medicaid expansion. The industrialist who makes a well-publicized contribution to a local food bank on Christmas Eve before ushering in the new year with a fresh round of pink slips or wage cuts. The real-estate tycoon who gives money to a homeless shelter while pricing out a neighborhood's residents to enrich investors.

To take a particularly egregious example, the Koch brothers, who've now spent several decades actively undermining measures designed to fight poverty, proudly offer alms to the poor — if they're [willing to listen](#) to sermons about the miracle of free enterprise while sipping their soup. For years, Canada's top hospital donor was the late Peter Munk — a billionaire mining magnate who [gave vast sums of money to health-related causes while simultaneously](#) pumping money into right-wing organizations working to privatize the country's healthcare system.

At its worst, this type of philanthropy isn't just hypocritical: it actively seeks to perpetuate the very injustices that the institution of charity purportedly exists to alleviate — and often rewards their architects with plaques, patronage, and public prestige in the process.

The holidays may be a time of greater individual generosity, particularly among the affluent and well-heeled. But so long as this kind of privatized morality is allowed to be a substitute for a richer collective ethos of humanity and solidarity, the spirit of giving the season supposedly represents will remain dismally poor in its practical consequences.

3. Some Follow-Up Thoughts For Further Reflection and Discussion:

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. Every human person innately possesses *dignity*—that is, absolute, nondenumerably infinite moral value, beyond all economics or merely instrumental value.
2. Therefore every human person should be treated with sufficient respect for their human dignity.
3. Human persons also have needs of various kinds.
4. *True human needs* are universal across humanity, and essentially bound up with *human dignity*. true human needs are of two different but closely-connected kinds.
5. First, some true human needs are such that their satisfaction is *a necessary condition of all human dignity*. Let us call those *the basic human needs*. For example, among the basic human needs are everyone's needs for—adequate nourishment, adequate clothing, and adequate accommodation, adequate physical and mental health, as sustained by adequate healthcare, adequate access to a healthy natural environment, both local and global, adequate scope for human movement and travel across the earth,

adequate protection from coercion by others, adequate access to human companionship and human communication, and adequate primary and secondary education.

6. Since satisfying these basic human needs is a necessary condition for human dignity, then respect for human dignity demands that everyone, everywhere should always have enough of whatever it takes to satisfy their basic human needs.
7. Second, over and above the basic human needs, all other true human needs are those whose satisfaction most fully conform to the absolute, nondenumerable, intrinsic, objective value of human dignity. The satisfaction of such needs allows people to exercise their various capacities and realize their potentiality for being individually autonomous, relationally autonomous, individually flourishing, and collectively flourishing, in ways that also are fully compatible with and fully supportive of the agential autonomy, relational autonomy, individual flourishing, and collective flourishing of everyone else. Let us call those *the humanity-realizing needs*. For example, among the humanity-realizing needs are everyone's needs for—aesthetic enjoyment of all kinds, intimate personal relationships of all kinds, for example, families, life-partners, lovers, close friends, etc., social and political solidarity of all kinds, free thought and free speech of all kinds, creative self-expression of all kinds, meaningful work of all kinds, higher education of all kinds, and spirituality of all kinds.
8. Since it is arguable that the ultimate goal, purpose, or meaning of human life is no more and no less than to pursue the satisfaction of humanity-realizing needs, then respect for human dignity demands that everyone, everywhere, should always have enough of whatever it takes for them to be able to pursue their humanity-realizing needs.
9. Sometimes, in order to sufficiently respect human dignity and to provide enough of whatever it takes for people to satisfy or pursue their true human needs, whether basic or humanity-realizing, money is required, perhaps even *lots* of money.
10. But money, in and of itself, does not necessarily yield sufficient respect for human dignity, nor does it necessarily provide whatever it takes for people to satisfy or pursue their true human needs, whether basic or humanity-realizing; this is true, e.g., of *all charitable giving*, whether private, corporate-capitalist, Utilitarian, or even socialist-collective.
11. Indeed, it is often the case that money actually *violates* respect for human dignity, and *undermines* the provision of whatever it takes for people to

satisfy or pursue their true human needs; this is true, e.g., of the current GoFundMe campaign to help build a wall along the US-Mexico Border.

12. Therefore, it is a profound mistake to treat money as a *primary* means of addressing moral issues, no matter what the moral intentions of the users of money might be.

4. One Link For Supplementary Reading:

Giving What We Can: About Us

BACK ISSUES

ISSUE #15, 2 (December 2018):

- THE DIGNITARIAN CASE AGAINST CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue15-2 dec18](#)

ISSUE #15, 1 (December 2018):

- WHY WE SHOULD SUBVERT AND DISMANTLE SOCIAL MEDIA

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue15-1 dec18](#)

ISSUE #14, 3 (November 2018):

- WHY YOU SHOULD EXIT THE PROFESSIONAL ACADEMY

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue14-3 nov18](#)

ISSUE #14, 2 (November 2018):

- BULLETS, CORPSES, DOCTORS, & THE NRA

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ISSUE #14, 1 (November 2018):

- **CRIME-&-PUNISHMENT INC, USA**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue14-1 nov18](#)

ISSUE #13, 2 (September 2018):

- **ABOLISH ICE!, AND HUNGARY'S STARVATION TACTICS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue13-2 sept18](#)

ISSUE #13, 1 (September 2018):

- **UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME AND THE FUTURE OF POINTLESS WORK**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue13-1 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 3 (AUGUST 2018):

- **THE TRUTH ABOUT INCOME INEQUALITY, IN SIX AMAZING CHARTS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-3 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 2 (AUGUST 2018):

- **EPISTOCRACY, NOT DEMOCRACY?**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-2 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 1 (AUGUST 2018):

- **THE QUANTIFIED HEART**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-1 aug18](#)

ISSUE #11, JULY 2018:

- **RESISTING IMMIGRATION & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE), AUTHENTICITY, RECIPROCITY VS. TOLERANCE, HOMELESSNESS-&-US, & FREE SPEECH VS. JUST ACCESS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue11 july18](#)

ISSUE #10, June 2018:

- **JOBS-&-HAPPINESS, UBI IN FINLAND, THE SOCIAL VALUE OF ENVY, THE EDUCATED ELITE'S STRANGE FAILURE, & ARE WE JUST OUR BRAINS?**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue10 june18](#)

ISSUE #9, May 2018:

- **DEFENDING LECTURING, CITIZENS OF THE WORLD, HYPER-LIBERALISM, NEO-ROMANTICISM, & PHYSICS-WITHOUT-TIME?**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue9 may18](#)

ISSUE #8, APRIL 2018:

- **CONSCIOUSNESS-DENIAL, MINDS-&-SMARTPHONES, THE MORALITY OF ADDICTION, & RADICAL GUN REFORM**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue8 apr18](#)

ISSUE #7, MARCH 2018:

- **THE MEANING OF LIFE & THE MORALITY OF DEATH**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue7 mar18](#)

ISSUE #6, FEBRUARY 2018:

- **POVERTY IN THE USA, MARX REDUX, & THE SCOPE OF MINDEDNESS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue6 feb18](#)

ISSUE #5, JANUARY 2018:

- **BAKERS, BUDDHISTS, PLANT MINDS, & TOTAL WORK**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue5 jan18](#)

ISSUE #4, DECEMBER 2017:

- **US POLITICS, ANIMAL MINDS, & REFUGEES**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue4 dec17](#)

ISSUE #3, NOVEMBER 2017:

- **GUN VIOLENCE**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue3 nov17](#)

ISSUE #2, OCTOBER 2017:

- **FREE SPEECH WARS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue2 oct17](#)

ISSUE #1, SEPTEMBER 2017:

- **BORDERS AND IMMIGRATION, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, & CULTURAL CONFLICT**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue1 sept17](#)

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