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Ed Boyden's blog

Ed Boyden is an assistant professor in the MIT Media Lab. His lab broadly invents new tools to engineer brain circuits, in order to treat intractable disorders, augment cognition, and better understand the nature of existence.

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Monday, September 24, 2007

Open Philanthropy

How you can steer the future of humanity.

How can you solve the problems that really matter to you? If you're like most people, among these problems are terrifying, often fatal diseases: Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, cancer, stroke. Other problems you care about concern understanding and improving our humanity--understanding our consciousness, empowering citizens in democracies, and preserving dying languages, just to name a tiny few. One obvious way to focus resources on a problem you care about is to become rich and create or steer an institute--placing bets on specific researchers and on specific research agendas. But if you're like most people, you're not a billionaire. That means you have to be entrepreneurial about your idea, raising the funds through visionary leadership and strategic planning--a full-time job if there ever was one. Many such organizations are creatively tackling or rewarding efforts to cure diseases like [ALS](#), [cancer](#), and [multiple sclerosis](#). But wouldn't it be great if you could focus your own resources--the ones you have right now--to solve the problems that you most care about?

One possibility is that if there were an open market for philanthropy, which would connect dollars with ideas, then you might be able to find researchers working on the problems you care most about, evaluate the investigators and their approaches, and empower them directly with funding. As resources pool, naturally, the most widespread and severe problems would receive the largest sums of money, providing a sort of free market for research philanthropy. Furthermore, your pool's funding members could vote to restrict the way your pool's money is used, adding in requirements to help you optimize the process, as you see fit. For example, your pool might decide to award cash only to scientists who agree to openly share data and samples with other awardees.

Such a system would also mean that you could solve the problems you care about earlier in your life, allowing you to benefit from them directly. You wouldn't have to wait until you're old and wealthy to start funding research to solve the Big Questions. Consider the following example. About 60 million Americans currently fit the criteria for obesity, which puts them at risk for diabetes (and dozens of other medical conditions). If 5 percent of these people desired to pool their resources to study ways of tackling metabolic impairments, and thereby improve health, and each contributed just \$1.25 a month to researchers who focus exactly on the problems of most pressing

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interest, that would be \$45 million a year. While that may not seem like much, note that the American Diabetes Association gave out about the same amount--\$46.4 million--in research dollars in 2006.

What would this pooling system look like? Perhaps online microlending site [Kiva](#) could offer some inspiration. This site allows anyone browsing online to become a microlender--observing business plans of aspiring entrepreneurs around the world, evaluating the plans and gauging the risk involved, and then making loans--to specific individuals in countries from Honduras to Tajikistan. The lenders can monitor their investments over time (hopefully they return a profit), and they can provide feedback on the entrepreneurs, which modulates future investors' opinions. Individuals can lend an entrepreneur part of what he or she requests, or even distribute resources over many entrepreneurs. Perhaps it's time to start experimenting with a similar system for the channeling of funding to researchers. Research projects could be announced to the world on such a website, and anyone could donate as they see fit. By opening up the process to the world, not only would a market for philanthropy and discovery emerge, but people would take a greater interest in solving the problems they care most about. In this way, we can all start to steer the future of humanity from our own chairs, fixing the impossible and figuring out the unknowable.

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i don't understand how this is different from what the American Diabetes Association does. could you explain more?

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The theoretical perfect exchange is where all ideas are known and all capital is identified. So by having a central or several central repositories there would be better odds that the "best" solution to any given problem would survive.

The current system where the one fund gives 46+ mil per year - you have one organization with a lot of power to dictate the direction of research - which has more disadvantages than advantages.

SOME things work well with centralized control and some work better when all inputs have a chance.

I hope that helps you understand.

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[Open Philanthropy](#)

I read with interest the concluding sentences: "By opening up the process to the world, not only would a market for philanthropy and discovery emerge, but people would take a greater interest in solving the problems they care most about. In this way, we can all start to steer the future of humanity from our own chairs, fixing the impossible and figuring out the unknowable".

I think philanthropy needs self-awareness rather than marketing. It cannot be approached through a system but can be achieved if each one looks into him or herself materially and psychologically.

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I'd love to see such a system. It seems like putting it together would be a major philanthropic undertaking in itself... I'd be interested to see a dollar figure on that, actually.

I also wonder what sort of balances a "free market" philanthropy system would find on issues like what sorts of topics get funded, what type of researchers tend to get funded, what sorts of experimental/analytic approaches get funded, etc. I suspect it might be significantly different than the current government or foundation grant systems.

Finally, just to toss something out there, here's [my underfunded research idea](#).

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