Why Community Service Sucks

You are all probably sitting there mouths agape, hands trembling, wondering whether this girl is actually going to deliver a paper about why community service sucks. Let me put your nerves at ease—yes, yes I am. Let me first say that I do not have a soul made of stone and I swear I only got coal in my stocking one year. I regularly tear up when I see the commercials for the SPCA with Sarah McLachlan singing, and I even donated my guest meals to the homeless dinner freshman and sophomore year. So what is it about community service that really ruffles my feathers? My answer to this question is twofold. First, I personally do not enjoy doing most of the tasks that would best serve the community. I absolutely hate cleaning, I find most children annoying, and I speak too quickly for old people to hear or understand me. Second, I hate how much hype giving back to the community has attached to it. Community service is commonly believed to be a good or morally right thing to do, but as it currently functions it is neither good nor moral. Furthermore, people who in engage in community service are always categorized as nice, caring, and self-less people when this is not always the case. To be clear, I am not against community service being done and this paper is not my personal saga about how I am still a good person despite the fact that I don’t do community service. I truly believe it to be an integral part of a healthy fully functioning society, I just wish it didn’t get the kind of praise that it consistently seems to receive. I believe that humans are inherently selfish agents and never do anything without receiving some form of personal gain. When it comes to community service, people so often do it for reasons such as: it looks good on
applications, it makes other people think highly of them, they think it is self-enriching to
learn through helping, or my personal favorite because it makes them feel good to help
others. Let’s face it- we help others because it helps us to do so. We genuinely want to
help others, of course, but community service is hardly ever a completely altruistic act.
But wouldn’t it be great if we could take the ‘me’ out of community service and put the
‘unity’ back in? In this paper, I will first delineate my reasons for why community service
is not a moral act and then I will propose a solution for how to get people involved in
morally correct community service.

Before I continue, let me first define what I mean by community service. Wikipedia says that community service is “an act by a person that benefits the local
community”. I would like to add to this already stellar definition by noting that
community service is planned sustained involvement in an activity that benefits or will
benefit the local community. It means freely volunteering one’s time to either do unpaid
work or raise money for the community. Community service is not helping someone on
the street in an emergency or out of instinct and it is not sitting in your living room
writing a check to a local charity (although I fully support both of these).

To explain why I believe community service cannot be considered a moral act, I
will refer to Immanuel Kant’s theory of the ‘good will’ in the first section of his book
*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. In discussing the ‘good will’ Kant states that
only the good will can be regarded as good without qualification. He notes, “a good will
is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain
some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself” (I, 394).
When the good will is characterized in this way, we come to understand that it is to be
esteemed much higher than any other quality because its goodness comes from itself and not from any other source. Other talents or qualities such as intelligence, judgment, and courage are good, but they can become bad if the will behind them is a bad will. Just take intelligence as an example. If it is given to a villain, he becomes even more dangerous than his dopey sidekick. Kant continues by pointing out that while a good will is not the sole and complete good, it must be the highest good and act as a condition for all the rest. Because reason was given to us as a practical faculty, it has influence on the will and works to make the will good in itself. As a result, the good will becomes the highest good.

In developing his notion of a will that his good without any regard to ends or outcomes, Kant takes up the concept of duty, which “includes that of a good will, though with certain subjective restrictions and hindrances, which far from hiding a good will or rendering it unrecognizable, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth more brightly” (396). In explaining exactly what he means about duty in accordance with the good will, Kant dismisses cases in which the actions are already understood to be opposing duty, along with cases in which the actions are quite obviously committed out of duty. Instead, he moves to the cases in which the action coincides with duty but the subject also has an inclination to do the action. He offers the example of the merchant who has a duty to offer fair prices to his customers so as not to deceive inexperienced purchasers. We are not to believe, however, that the merchant offers such reasonable prices simply for his love of his customers and his respect for excellent customer service, but because it is to his own advantage to offer fair prices if he would like to stay in
business. As a result, as Kant reveals, “the action was done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination, but merely for a selfish purpose” (397).

Now let us turn to community service to further elucidate the connection between duty and the good will. Kant points out that those people, who without any motive of vanity, find an inner pleasure to spread joy around them and enjoy seeing their work make a difference in the lives of others, while commendable, have no true moral value in their actions. This type of person has an immediate inclination to help others just as the merchant has an immediate inclination to offer fair prices so he can be an effective competitor in his business. In this way, the person who engages in community service because he loves seeing the faces of gratitude after his work and being proud that he caused this gratitude, is not moral in this regard because the action was done from inclination instead of from duty. In giving an example of community service that is purely done out of duty and can therefore be considered moral, Kant gives the following scenario, which I must quote in its entirety. He states,

Suppose then the mind of this friend of mankind to be clouded over with his own sorrow so that all sympathy with the lot of other is extinguished, and suppose him still to have the power to benefit others in distress, even though he is not touched by their trouble because he is sufficiently absorbed with his own; and now suppose that, even though no inclination moves him any longer, he nevertheless tears himself from his deadly insensibility and performs the action without any inclination at all, but solely from duty—then for the first time his action has genuine moral worth (398).
From this scenario, we see that only when the person has no prior inclinations or tendencies to want to help others or participate in community service, can the act of participating in community service be considered a moral act.

Finally, along the same vein, Kant points to Scripture, which commands us to love our neighbors and our enemies. He says that love as an inclination cannot be commanded, but altruism from duty, with no inclination toward it and even an aversion from it, is practical love. This love, he states, is “in the will and not in the propensities of feeling, in principles of action and not in tender sympathy; and only this practical love can be commanded” (399). With this passage, Kant reminds us that service done purely out of duty, with no inclination or desire impelling us to do it, is moral. This type of action is done out of love, practical love, and can only be commanded. Inclination cannot be commanded. In this way it appears as though Kant would like to say that those who participate in community service for religious reasons can only be considered as having done moral actions if they were not inclined to do the service but only did so out of duty to the Scripture. This idea of religious servitude is a whole can of worms, which I do not wish to open so we will use this example simply to show that practical love does not reside in feelings, principles, or sympathy, but in the will.

So to recap all of this philosophical jargon—1. the will is the highest good because it is good in itself; 2. only an action that is done out of duty can have moral worth because motives, inclinations, and ending results detract from the actual act and the agent does the action because he is impelled to do so for reasons other than mere adherence to duty; and 3. community service is only moral if you have no motivation to do it, and would even prefer not to.
It is at this point that we must wonder how anyone can be expected to do community service if they are not allowed to like it in order for it to be considered a good and moral act. In other words, if we suck the fun and joy out of doing community service, what kind of person still wants to go out there, even though they are going to hate every minute of it? To perpetuate the issue, if no one ever does any community service, our currently semi-functioning society will completely fall apart. We need to find a way to get people to participate in community service, but to do so out of duty.

The solution to this problem is to implement service-learning programs in schools. A service learning program combines doing community service work with academic schoolwork. According to the Education Commission of the States,

In a service-learning program, students first prepare for their experience by studying the ecology and environment of the area and determining a “real” community need. Teachers, other school administrators and the students develop the curriculum around the problem, determine the site and the work to be done, complete the work and develop a follow-up action plan to maintain the area. Students are assessed on their knowledge of the issue and their participation. Teachers and students take part in reflection activities to understand the importance of their work, evaluate how well they worked together and met their obligations, and discuss the importance of their civic duty and how they grew as individuals. This service activity could be tied to science, speech and/or composition curriculum and to standards adopted by the school.
My idea of a good service-learning program, while quite similar in structure to that of the Education Commission of the States, serves a slightly different purpose. First allow me to explain my ideal service-learning program.

Service-learning programs will be available in middle schools, high schools, and even universities. In all three cases, they will take the form of an elective course and will count for credit. This means that similar to chorus and art in middle school, and AP Psych and study hall in high school, the student will have the option to either take the course or not. It will not be mandatory. This is important because when community service is made mandatory, it becomes involuntary servitude and students begin to resent the obligation and are less likely to volunteer later in life. The course will be a combination of deskwork and fieldwork. The students who enroll in the class will first do a broad trace of the development of community service through history. Then they will have the chance to study their own community and determine the areas in which there is the most need for a project. The students will then collectively devise a project-plan that will effectively meet the determined need. They will then execute this project in the community. Returning back to the classroom to write papers reflecting on the work that they accomplished, the students will have the opportunity to determine how effective the project was.

In the university setting, I envision the course being very similar, but I imagine it being available in various departments. With this alteration, the projects can be made to incorporate various subject areas. For example, a course in the environmental studies department might have projects that work more outside with the land. A service-learning course in the biology department might incorporate medicine or wildlife preservation,
whereas a course in the international studies department might work with immigration services.

By incorporating community service into school curriculum, the youth of a society get an early introduction to the practice. They learn the importance of actively engaging in one’s community at an early age and are thus prepared to get involved in community service when they are older. Because the courses will be offered as electives, the students never have to feel as though they are being forced into something they do not want to do. In addition, because the course will inevitably take them out of the classroom and into the “real world” there is good incentive, if only because it provides a change in their daily routine. Another plus is that the students get credit for it, so there are direct results and benefits to enrolling in the course.

Finally, because the service-learning programs (at least under my revisions) really put the emphasis on the agent rather than on the receiver, community service becomes a non-issue in regards to morality. Put another way, the service-learning programs really make the experience important and valuable to the student rather than the community. Of course the community is inevitably benefiting, but the focus is on the development of the student. Essentially, this takes the altruistic aspect out of doing community service. It makes community service an acceptable selfish act. Community service becomes an example of a case where the action is contrary to duty so it cannot be considered under Kant’s moral theory about the ‘good will’.

How exactly does this affect how we perceive community service, you may ask? Well, because it can no longer be considered a morally right thing to do, all praise is removed from the equation. In addition, people get to say that they do it because they like
learning from it without having to feel selfish about the matter. People will no longer do it because it looks good on college applications, because colleges won’t look at it any differently than other extra-curricular activities. Furthermore, the issues of political correctness will no longer pose a problem. Currently, it seems, people do community service because it seems like the right thing to do, whether or not they actually have a desire to do it. By taking morality out, people do not have to be afraid of how it looks if they don’t do community service because there is no moral gain in doing it.

By instilling an interest in community service in our youth, that generation will grow into adults who participate in community service because it is, and always been, an aspect of their lives (whether directly or indirectly). These adults are now very comfortable with the idea of doing community service because it enriches their own lives and they know how to pick projects that are interesting and fun for them. It becomes part of their routine—almost like a duty to themselves, but not quite!

As I conclude and we move to the discussion portion of the presentation, I invite you all to think about what kind of role community service has had in your life. How do you feel about? Do you like it? I would also ask you to think critically about my proposal for service-learning projects and my analysis of the morality of community service. Can we really take altruism out of community service, and more importantly—should we? I am aware that many of you may not share my views about community service, so I ask you to share with the group, your opinion on the issue. I realize that I have chosen a provocative and possibly offensive topic, but it would be uncharacteristic of me not to try and stir the pot.
Works Cited
