Case 15: Batkid

On November 15, 2013, Ed Lee, mayor of San Francisco, declared the day "Batkid day forever." On this day, Miles Scott, a 5-year old boy who was suffering from leukemia, fulfilled his dream of being Batman for a day with the help of the Make-a-Wish Foundation and the city of San Francisco. The story quickly went viral, warming the hearts of Americans; even President Barack Obama publicly congratulated Miles for "saving Gotham."[74]

Bringing Miles' dream to life, involved printing fake newspapers, staging crime scenes, closing roads, and was costly, around $105,000. Though the city of San Francisco originally footed the bill, two philanthropists reimbursed the city for its costs. While $105,000 brought happiness to a child who was experiencing a life-threatening illness, the same amount of money could have perhaps been used to much greater effect: such as buying bed nets for thousands of people in malaria-stricken regions, or preventing blindness in 100 children by providing treatment for trachoma, as Peter Singer has suggested. Given that we live in a world of limited resources, so the argument goes, shouldn't we allocate our money to produce the greatest good for the greatest number? Or, as Singer puts it, "[i]t's obvious, isn't it, that saving a child's life is better than fulfilling a child's wish to be Batkid?"[75]

Many readers did not find the answer to be obvious. Some claimed that, after going viral, the Batkid event likely resulted in hundreds of unexpected donations to the Make-a-Wish Foundation, and inspired people to donate to other charitable causes. Moreover, as the number of donors to charitable causes continues to decline, it might be misguided to criticize those who donate at all.[76] While some people, like Singer, may choose their charities based on a utilitarian calculus, most Americans give to charity as an expression of deeply held values and relationships, such as "family, neighborhood, and voluntary associations."[77]

[74] Paul Elias, "Miles Scott, AKA 'Batkid,' Fights Crime In San Francisco," November 15, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/15/batkid-san-francisco_n_4283772.html

[75] Peter Singer, "Heartwarming causes are nice, but let's give to charity with our heads" Washington Post, December 19, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/heartwarming-causes-are-nice-but-lets-give-to-charity-with-our-heads/2013/12/19/43469ae0-6731-11e3-a0b9-249bbb34602c_story.html

[76] Rob Reich, "Charitable Giving and the Great Recession" October 2012

[77] William Schambra "The Coming Showdown Between Philanthrolocalism and Effective Altruism," Philanthropy Daily, May 22, 2014, http://www.philanthropydaily.com/the-coming-showdown-between-philanthrolocalism-and-effective-altruism/