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Charitable London:  
F(o)unding the First Philanthropic Societies in the Metropolis

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**Abstract**

As this article is less about charity *per se* than it is about the relationships between place and institutional policies of benevolence, my intention is to look at how practices and laws of public charity operated in a city whose economic and social geography was changing after 1700, when the streets were populated with vulnerable people driven into poverty and when the subjects of pauperism and poor laws “engaged the attention of the legislature with increasing frequency” (Purdy 287). This article looks at the *modus operandi* of private and public philanthropic societies in eighteenth-century London in order to observe how both religious- and secular-driven charitable societies were motivated by the same goal of social reform, whether prompted by the Enlightenment or religious values. While the notion of *Pietas Londinensis* indicated the existence of various operating charities and casual philanthropic acts in the London area, charitable institutions had not been set up until the eighteenth century. In late Stuart and Georgian Britain charitable, London was shaped both by economic forces and by the various cultural meanings people attached to its space, and this new paradigm transferred all matters concerning the poor from parochial obligation to civic responsibility. The article will focus on the mechanisms which made this transfer possible while considering acts of public charity and philanthropic societies that emerged in the long eighteenth century, from hospitals and infirmaries to almshouses and charity schools, with a view to observing the changes in English mentality as a result of charitable activity.

**Keywords:** eighteenth-century London, charity, the poor’s rate, public benevolence, demographic growth, economic expansion, pauperism, insurance societies, almshouses

## Introduction

Since the creation of the *polis* in ancient Greece marked the rise and formation of classical civilisation, classical cities have become models for the paradigmatic cities of modernity. Possessing the monumentality and the wide open spaces of classical cities, eighteenth-century London was creating a new urban way of life, but its streets were stained with open wounds which needed healing. Apart from being a historical and cultural city, London as a charitable community grew into a paradigmatic city by setting the example of piety. According to Anthony Highmore, of all the nations of Europe, the English are “the most devoted to sympathy and commiseration, most tenderly alive to the softest impressions of every affection, most given to those emotions which flow from disinterested pity and concern, and most absorbed in the amiable intercourse of domestic life” (xx). In a true Christian spirit, Highmore highlighted the growth of evangelicalism and the intensification of the spirit of benevolence which characterised the English as a nation and were also crucial in accomplishing the task of educating the English poor. In other words, unless religious factions and voluntary associations got involved in establishing a system of education, the poor would not have the proper means of instruction and assistance.

One of the touchstones for the essential shifts that marked the early eighteenth-century transition of London from an urban mass into a civilised community was public benevolence. The city initiated acts of charity as a response to the fractures that divided London from Westminster, for instance, churchmen from dissenters, or Catholics from Protestants. In a period of rapid transformation like the second half of the eighteenth century, the endemic problem of poverty arose from the asynchronicity between population growth and economic expansion, since the former progressively outpaced the latter in a way that was typical of many developing European economies. Due to poverty, social divisions and tensions between members of the same family frequently resulted in acts of verbal and physical violence, which caused distress and required strengthening the bonds of social union. These eighteenth-century

complex issues which dominated both domestic and public spheres gave way to a greater awareness of the interdependence between social policies and demography and called for effective strategy implementation and tactics for reform. Since the elderly and other underprivileged groups required supplementary support as they had no kin or their family could not cope, the parish community, which played an active role in the administration of the city, assumed the responsibility to provide for the poor.

The purpose of this article is to examine attitudes to the poor in late Stuart and Georgian Britain, starting with a brief historical overview of the first philanthropic institutions established in London, followed by a review of eighteenth-century charity projects for a social reform – with a focus on insurance societies – and a reflection of the mechanisms of civic responsibility in the fiction and essays of the age.

### Charity, Christianity and the Poor's Rate: A Historical Overview

In order to gain a clear understanding of charity as a social phenomenon and of the way in which it was addressed in the eighteenth century in Britain, it seems crucial to start with a historical overview of the institutional fundamentals on which the concept of charity was based, which in the present case overlapped with acts and laws that the Tudors passed to provide relief for the poor. When the Tudor poor law emerged at the end of the sixteenth century, it shifted the focus from the traditional family structure that supported the sick, the elderly and the poor to a statutorily-defined system which required all parishes to raise a rate or local tax for the relief of the poor. I argue that the development of the concept of charity between the sixteenth century and mid-eighteenth century was influenced by three major factors: the legislation, which represented the triumph of the systematic regulation of poor relief over previous incoherent forms of aid; the role of the parish as the basic institution for assisting the poor; the relations between the rich and the poor which were influenced by demographic growth and economic development.

There is a strong connection between Christianity, charity, and the poor rate.<sup>i</sup> The term “charity” comes from the *caritas* of the Latin Bible and from the Old French *charité*, which encompasses Christian love, including the way people should relate to their neighbours. During medieval times, not only did pious causes involve gifts for supporting the Church and its religious practices, but also gifts for the relief of the afflicted poor: “in the medieval will are to be found bequests for the poor, the maimed and suffering, and the upkeep and repair of hospitals, bridges, roads, and dykes” (G. Jones 4). It seems that from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the end of Thomas More’s Chancellorship in 1532 less than one hundred bills which enforced charitable contributions were registered (G. Jones 9). After the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, charity for the poor took the form of a compulsory tax administered by the parishes in London. It stipulated that prosperous citizens should pay a compulsory tax on property and this tax was collected by the overseers in all London parishes for the Relief of the Poor. In the sixteenth century, parishes in England and Wales had substantial budgets, which were used “in the administration of poor relief and highway maintenance” (Innes and Rogers 533). There is a striking difference between the numbers of charitable institutions in London around 1650 and the numbers they reached by 1800. Donna T. Andrew identifies a change in practice and attitude toward charity occurring around 1740, with the advent of the Foundling Hospital (4), which can be explained by the rising scientific interest in the birth process in addition to “the great advances that had been and were being made in obstetrical theory and practice” (65).

Before the Reformation, pious acts proceeded from strong religious beliefs and included gifts for the saying of masses, for candles and incense and for the maintenance of religious houses. Chantry foundations played an important role in the English Church and testators would donate to religious foundations in order to commission a chantry<sup>ii</sup> for the benefit of their soul. An ethical tradition dictated the primacy of charity, which started to play an important, though controversial, role in the medieval economy of salvation. It was believed that pious acts will procure pardon for a multitude of sins: “The state of charity, meaning social integration, was the principal end of the Christian life” (Bossy 57). Charity involved

people's relatives, it was an act of sociability and it promised salvation to those committed to it. After the Reformation, the dissolution of the chantries and the decline of the authority of the Catholic Church resulted in a more secular approach to the issue of philanthropy, as "the majority of Englishmen reflected less on the fate of their souls and became more concerned with the worldly needs of their fellow men" (G. Jones 10). In other words, religious preoccupations turned into secular generosity in the shape of institutional benefactions.

During the seventeenth century the parish in England became both the most important religious nucleus of a community and the basic civil unit assuming the role of offering assistance to the poor. Martin Daunton explains this by the fact that in England, the Privy Council and Parliament "laid down the basic framework which was coordinated by the local Justices of the Peace to secure a degree of uniformity" (4). The situation was different in Scotland, for instance, where the Privy Council was less powerful than in England before the Reformation. Besides, the paupers in Scotland were far less numerous than in England, a consequence of the economic and social changes ushered in by demographic growth. Due to the fact that the Scottish poor laws did not provide relief for the able-bodied poor and that there was no parish-based system of benevolence, rates of relief in Scotland were extremely low as compared to England.

The history of poor relief mirrored the relationship between the prosperous and the impoverished. Seventeenth-century London was the largest city in Europe, even exceeding Paris by 1700 (Boulton 316; Schwarz 642), and due to the fact that the city was divided by a great disparity of wealth, richer city parishes would make poor relief payments to the less fortunate living on the outskirts. In early modern Britain, it was common for historiography to look at acts of charity in dichotomous terms, dividing the two parties involved in this system into "the charitable donor" (whether a philanthropic individual or the state) and "the recipient" (Barry and Jones 1; C. Jones 38). One can sense in this relationship based on power and reciprocity the Enlightenment belief that people's lives could be remodelled in accordance with a particular environment. While the poor ("the recipients") were concentrated in the suburbs to the north and east (Whitechapel and Shoreditch) "and along

riverside parishes on both banks of the Thames” (Boulton 328), the well-to-do (“the charitable donors”) lived “in those (would-be) socially exclusive areas in the West End such as Covent Garden, St Andrew Holborn or parts of St Martin-in-the-Fields” (Boulton 328). Seventeenth-century London registered a particular demographic growth in the western suburbs of the metropolis and this expansion was visible in some of the parishes in the West End. Since the diseases which plagued London resulted in a high mortality rate, migration to the metropolis was essential to sustain the demographic boom. Until 1665, London was ravaged by bubonic plague as poor sanitation and overcrowding became the major factors in the prevalence and the spread of infectious diseases. To support the view that there was a strong interdependence of all members of the city, Robert James Merrett argues that during the plague the generous spirit of charity prevailed, the government promoted principles of devotion and numerous acts of piety and collective harmony triumphed in the city (186). Poverty and the diseases that befell the capital were the forces that lay behind remarkable changes in the ties between the rich and the poor. The following subchapter will look at how disease- and poverty-related problems were responsible for people’s change in attitude toward poverty since projects for the establishment of institutions of poor relief emerged in early eighteenth-century London.

#### Eighteenth-Century Projects for a Progressive City

In comparison with medieval facilities for handling poverty, the English Poor Law provided a uniform and effective organism which extended across Britain and grew into a systematic account of the legislative acts on the subject of the poor. Charitable acts took a wide range of forms and functions, and this range became more complex with the passage of time. In order to describe the fluent chronology of various projects intended to protect all poverty categories, this subsection examines benefit and insurance societies, arguing that diseases and poverty were the main factors which moulded the development of insurance societies in eighteenth-century London.

People's attitudes concerning the problems of poverty, misery, and ignorance determined the construction of benefit societies and insurance offices in London as early as 1700. An approximate number of 2,000 members of voluntary associations were registered in London in 1700. The expansion of these societies in the eighteenth century was substantial and "they even existed to buy men out of their militia obligation" (Price 195). The American-born topographer James Peller Malcolm mentions the emergence of the first benevolent society in London in 1708, "Taylor's Friendly Society," founded for the purpose of "insuring the lives of Adults and Children male and female" (5).

In a list of life insurance societies, "Taylor's Friendly Society" appears to have operated since 1709 (Clark 204), but life insurance companies can be dated to the year 1696, when the "Hand in Hand Fire and Life Insurance Society" was founded at Tom's Coffee House in St. Martin's Lane in London, as a consequence of the disaster brought about by the Great Fire of 1666.<sup>iii</sup> Life insurance appeared in England a century earlier than in any other European country and various reasons have been identified as an explanation for this premature emergence. Geoffrey Clark, for instance, explains the setting-up of first insurance company through the lens of Protestant England. The reasons are not exactly theological, but rather domestic and personal. Unlike his Roman Catholic bachelor counterpart across the Channel, an English clergyman was concerned with the financial situation of his family after he passed away and wanted to make sure that his wife and children received assistance when left without his support. The widowed persons were a common category of the poor in need of assistance mentioned in poor reform treatises throughout the eighteenth-century.

It was in 1696 that the insurance scheme called "The Friendly Society for Widows: Being a Proposal for Supplying the Defects of Joyntures and Securing Women from Falling into Poverty and Distress at the Death of Their Husbands"<sup>iv</sup> was set up in London as a contributorship type of systematic organisation. Charles Hardwick mentions other societies of the same kind, such as "The Watchmakers' Society," located at the Crown Tavern, Clerkenwell Green, "The Norman Society," founded in 1703, held at the Pitt's Head, Tysson Grove, Bethnal Green, and "The

Friendly Society of Shoemakers,” at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, established in 1719 (16).

On the one hand, these societies were more successful in England, where Protestant religion and English common law generally embraced the idea that “Providence helps he who helps himself,” whereas in Roman Catholic countries providential law was held responsible for a man’s family after his disappearance. The disagreement started over the passage in the Bible, which read “Leave thy fatherless children, I will preserve them alive; and let thy widows trust in me” (Jer. 49.11, *King James Bible*). In fact, the controversial issue related to life insurance reflected the old argument on the subject of Providential doctrines and their role in public affairs.<sup>v</sup> On the other hand, life insurance enjoyed a primary place among the first British institutions on the grounds that the emergence of “the middle sort of people” showed great potential for capitalist development. In addition, unlike the rest of Europe, which outlawed life insurance on the grounds that, in association with gambling, it incited to crime and fraud, England had a legal institutional system that prevented the insurance companies from being suppressed: “until the second half of the seventeenth century London lagged behind foreign exchanges as a centre of trade and contract resolution, so that the international code known as the Law Merchant, which prohibited insurance on lives, was never incorporated wholesale into English law” (Clark 19).

Life insurance offices proliferated in London during the thriving period from 1695 to 1720 and they became functional in case of illness or poverty. Thus, according to Malcolm, people subscribed to “Taylor’s Friendly Society” 5s. per month, “including policies, stamps, entrance, and first claim; and continued their payments three years” (5). If they grew ill or went bankrupt, the subscribers were entitled to relief and, after their death their executors would receive 200*l.* There was another society, “Amicable Society,” which paid 120*l.* after the death of the subscriber. Other societies bore similar names, which suggested that insurance was a form of gambling – “The Fortunate Office” and “The Lucky Seventy, or the longest livers take all.” The latter’s office was at Haberdashers Hall in Maiden Lane, where the old hall had been destroyed by the Great Fire. In 1710, Theobald’s Road was another location for the opening of a new

office, which “promised great benefit to the lower classes of the community” and which was supported by the clergy, physicians, surgeons, and counsellors at law (Malcolm 6).

If the poor needed counselling on matters concerning medical assistance or legal advice, the specialists offered them prescriptions and recommendations in exchange for “one shilling on delivering a case and one other shilling at receiving the answer” (Malcolm 6), explaining that these sums were used for the expenses of the office. Being so successful, these offices grew in number and consequently, “almost every street in London abounded with Insurance offices, where policies for infants three months old might be obtained for short periods” (Malcolm 6). Malcolm affirms, however, that these insurance offices were short-lived, since there was no sign or trace of them in 1712. Some people were suspicious of the honesty of the office holders and doubted their benevolence. Consequently, these offices decreased in number and were strictly monitored by the law: “We have at length reduced these schemes to a few honourable Insurance-offices for Lives and Property; and Benefit Societies have been sanctioned by the Legislature” (Malcolm 10). And the law was represented by the newly-formed professional group, the lawyer class.

That eighteenth-century London was the core of national wealth and the cradle of the professions cannot be denied: “The largest concentration of aristocracy, the wealthiest bankers and merchants, the wealthiest capitalists and the largest concentration of taxpayers were all to be found there” (Schwarz 649). Along with these professional categories, there were also lawyers, solicitors, attorneys, barristers, surgeons, physicians and apothecaries. The social structure changed and within this permanent renegotiation of social connections, lawyers played a vital role as mediators between the landed classes and urban entrepreneurs. This fabulous network explains the emergence of charitable institutions in London, which became the hub and the host of philanthropic associations supported by voluntary contribution or by individual donation. There was a powerful relationship between the proliferation of charitable organisations and the growth and development of the professional classes from 1700 to 1850 when economic conditions and liberal thinking

favoured reform in formulating and implementing policies towards the poor. A wealthy city, London acquired a growing number of professional people. Yet, rapid population growth led to an increase of pauperism, which alarmed authorities and resulted in a number of attempts to institute workhouses, where the adult poor might find employment. These were not as efficient as it was thought, and so other types of institutional care were considered. Professional men initiated all kinds of associations, among which life insurance offices, charity schools and other benevolent organisations. At the same time, the new professions overpopulated the city, which made *The Spectator* react to the over-crowding of the learned occupations: “I am sometimes very much troubled when I reflect upon the three great professions of divinity, law, and physic: how they are each of them overburdened with practitioners, and filled with multitudes of ingenious gentlemen that starve one another” (Addison, *The Spectator* 87).

Mr Spectator made a long list of the newly-created professions that overflowed the city, and, to avoid starvation, many professional people resorted to the world of print. The next subchapter introduces the reader to some professional writers who were initially trained as attorneys or lawyers, but never practised these legal professions and turned their hand to writing philanthropic proposals instead.

### Literary Echoes of Benevolence

Structures for the relief of poverty were essential in attempting to find a solution for the universal problem of poverty. In eighteenth-century England, both the problem and the possible solutions in the form of charitable acts were reflected in the writings of the age. This subsection will look at how the fiction and periodicals of the age mirror the mechanisms of civic responsibility previously analysed in this article.

Poverty was a serious issue in England and, in order to deal with it as a civic responsibility, most eighteenth-century writers who had other occupations renounced these financially insecure positions to embrace the literary world. Oliver Goldsmith studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, but the printing world seemed more profitable to him, which

convinced him to give up his work as a physician. Tobias Smollett, after studying medicine at Glasgow University and professing as a surgeon in Downing Street, turned author several years later. Daniel Defoe was a merchant and trader before turning to a writer career. Henry Fielding turned to the law and became a member of the Middle Temple in 1737, practising advocacy and magistracy before becoming a writer of fiction. Fielding's encounters with the law throughout his life, for instance, are reflected in *Joseph Andrews*, where he mentions the English Poor Rate in order to discuss the importance of institutional benevolence in a context dominated by controversies surrounding public institutional charities.

When Abraham Adams accused an aggressive Parson Trulliber – a clergyman on Sundays and a hog seller on the other six days of the week – of disbelieving the Scriptures, since he was not willing to relieve his distress by giving him some money on loan, and of knowing nothing of what charity meant, Trulliber's wife cried in support of her husband's hypocrisy that the poor's rate obliged them to give "so much charity." At this, Trulliber mocked his wife and told her to hold her tongue, for she was a fool to mention the poor's rate. After an impolite exchange, Mr. Trulliber clenched his fists to prove his true Christianity, which prompted Adams to depart "without farther ceremony" (*Joseph Andrews* 127). Adams is an advocate of charitable acts and when Mr. Peter Pounce says that, to him, charity is not a word to be used in the vicinity of a gentleman, but "a mean parson-like quality," Adams contends that his own definition of charity is "a generous disposition to relieve the distressed" (*Joseph Andrews* 216).

The English Poor Rate that Trulliber's wife mentioned was a local tax instituted in England and Wales during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Fielding mentions charity several times in his novel, making one of his witty characters state that charity begins at home (*Joseph Andrews* 31) while associating charity with national pride and Christian behaviour, which proves that Stuart and Georgian Britain, experiencing full social and economic changes, were concerned with attitudes and responses to charitable relief. Fielding even echoed the common characterisation of the eighteenth century as "the age of benevolence," as Hannah More labelled it (331), and reassured his readers that religious teaching greatly

contributed to its proliferation. Both Fielding and More viewed charity as a religious feature, a virtue.<sup>vi</sup> More considered it “the reigning Virtue, but not exclusively the Virtue of the present Age” (331), whereas Fielding crowned it as the very chronotope of Christianity: “Charity is in fact the very Characteristic of this Nation at this Time. – I believe we may challenge the whole World to parallel the Examples which we have of late given of this sensible, this noble, this Christian virtue” (“The Covent-Garden Journal” 136). The Christian tradition turned charity into the paradigm of Western society: “there is no Command more express, no Duty more frequently enjoined than Charity. Whoever therefore is void of charity, I make no scruple of pronouncing that he is no Christian” (Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* 127). Fielding stressed that all forms of charity were driven by Christianity and in doing that, he reflected the ideology of his age, which eventually led to the institutional birth of the English Poor Law.

All previous attempts at designing a proposal for an organisation in the spirit of charity had reflected a similar innovative prospect. 1697 was the year when Defoe published his first volume entitled *An Essay upon Projects*, in which he campaigned for a scheme that should radically improve the social environment and encourage the emergence of friendly societies, which he considered a branch of insurance by contribution, that is, “in short, a number of people entering into a mutual compact to help one another in case any disaster or distress fall upon them” (118). John Richetti describes Defoe’s proposals as “practical, rather than utopian” (32), since they put forward the construction of a new road system in England, the organisation of pension and insurance schemes for the poor and the wretched, the foundation of an institution for those born with mental defects, the creation of a college for the education of women, the improvement of the laws concerning bankruptcy, and the establishment of two academies: one for training officers, and the other for monitoring the advancement of the English language. Also, Defoe proposed the establishment of a society for the “support of destitute widows” and another for the assistance of seamen (Hardwick 16). This sounded challenging and daring, adventuresome and utilitarian, dynamic and progressive, especially coming from a man recovering from his

bankruptcy. Nevertheless, these projects were nothing but remedies for healing common social ills, and Defoe revealed the absurdity of a system which threw debtors into prison, where they could not find any means of earning the money they owed to their creditors.

A similar proposal came out in 1728, *Augusta Triumphans: Or, the Way to Make London the Most Flourishing City in the Universe*, where Defoe (under the pseudonym Andrew Moreton)<sup>vii</sup> supported his previously mentioned project for a progressive city, requiring the implementation of certain “schemes” considered necessary to secure people against street robberies, prevent murder by establishing a Hospital for Foundlings, protect education in England and avoid the import of foreign specialists, especially musicians “by forming an Academy of our own.” As a man concerned with the public good, Defoe desired all these schemes that he designed to be soon implemented, since he was deeply affected by “the present decay of Learning among us, and the manifest Corruption of Education” (4). The author complained that young gentlemen were sent to the Universities “not to study, but to drink; not for Furniture for the Head, but a Feather for the Cap” (4). Why should London youngsters go so far as Oxford and Cambridge instead of studying in London? “Why should such a Metropolis as London be without a University?” (5). His suggestions for reform are sometimes utopian. The author proposed that, since London is such an extensive city, its forward-looking University should consist of many colleges, for instance, “one at Westminster, one at St. James’s, one near Ormond Street; (that part of town abounding in Gentry); one in the Centre of the Inns of Court; another near the Royal Exchange; and more if Occasion and Encouragement permit” (7).

The second point Defoe made revolved around the setting up of a Foundling Hospital. Starting by shaming all the people who committed abuses and made life in London unpleasant, the author expressed his distrust in the Parish-Nurses for taking proper care of bastards and orphans; in the name of charity and humanity and to prevent children from being murdered or dropped in parishes, Defoe put forward the need “to erect and endow a proper Hospital or House to receive them, where we may see them tenderly brought up, as so many living Monuments of our Charity” (11). And yet, it was not until 1739 that the Foundling Hospital

was established in London and not until 1836 that the University of London was founded.<sup>viii</sup>

In-between these two texts, in 1704, Defoe wrote a petition-pamphlet, *Giving Alms No Charity*, which argued against offering relief and alms to those pretending to be in want of work. Finding work for the vagrant poor should not be the concern of the government or the parishes; on the contrary, these people should “find themselves work and go about it” (542). According to Defoe,

The poverty of England does not lye among the craving beggars but among poor families, where the children are numerous, and where death or sickness has depriv'd them of the labour of the father. These are the houses that the sons and the daughters of charity, if they would order it well, should seek out and relieve; an alms ill directed may be charity to the particular person, but becomes an injury to the publick, and no charity to the nation. (542)

The author was convinced that there was more work in England than hands to do it, and he agreed there was a great need for people to be willing to do the work. He argued that charity should go to those who had been deprived of the earnings of the working mother or father, and, in support of his argument, he told the story of the beggar who turned out to be a wealthy man on his deathbed. It is not surprising that Defoe's pamphlet was intended as a warning directed at all those who wanted to do good and assumed benevolent actions in order not to be misunderstood in their intentions. Some of his contemporaries offered a similar word of caution when they drew the distinction between doing good and showing people how to do good “to the greatest advantage.”<sup>ix</sup> Although this idea was mentioned by Beilby Porteus, Bishop of London during the reign of George III,<sup>x</sup> it also featured in various devotional works and didactic tracts covering an impressive span of almost three centuries, from the Restoration to Victorian times and proving the need for a systematic organization of giving so as not to perpetuate begging or encourage idleness: *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658); *Charity Directed: Or, The Way to Give Alms: To the Greatest Advantage* (1676); *The Duty of Alms Giving* (1739); *The Rules and Measures of Alms-Giving* (1709), *The Law of Charitable Trusts* (1871); etc.

In his history of public charities, Highmore offers a classification of charitable institutions in accordance with the date of foundation and the role as well as the importance of the institution: Hospitals or Infirmaries, where the sick receive temporary assistance and medical advice; Dispensaries, where the sick “are furnished with medical and surgical skill;” colleges and almshouses, where the old and the debilitated are provided with food, pension, and sometimes clothing; School Charities, which cater for the education and clothing of the youngsters, who can also receive medical assistance; and Miscellaneous Charities, which provide various voluntary contributions for the poor (xii). The author does not include benefit clubs and friendly societies since they are not institutions of charity *de facto*; nor does he introduce workhouses and schools belonging to wards and parishes, on the grounds that they belong to local administration and provide limited benefits, according to specific qualifications of birth, residence, or parochial settlement (x-xi). His major aim in compiling and categorising the main charities of London and its surroundings was explicitly utilitarian, since by advertising these institutions, the author intended to ease communication among authorities and facilitate the admission of patients while submitting to the general public a classification of charitable institutions. He even describes his compilation as “a serviceable friend to the afflicted and unfortunate” (x), a feature which reflects the tendency to introduce manuals and handbooks as friendly models tailored for people involved in that particular area.

These manuals helped to popularise and provide instruction in the ways of the nature and history of charitable establishments. In a true pharmakon-like ambivalence, the bifurcating modern world produced both harmful and beneficial domestic and public consequences, affecting the population to various extents. After identifying the causes underlying the need for institutions of charity, Highmore argues that even if the poor and needy were in distress, the benevolence of the powerful answered these needs; even if the proportion of urban population had increased gradually during the eighteenth century, public goodwill had also increased; even if trade expanded to include foreign commerce and relations, “the diffusion of wealth has also spread consolation” (xvi). He celebrates the opening up of charitable institutions by embracing the idea of opening up the world

via encouragement of expansion overseas and domestic reception of other cultures. As such, charitableness becomes an icon of national pride while the poor and the rich alike build up a system of harmony which will hopefully secure “eternal happiness” (xviii).

Apart from glorifying the Christian temper and the powerful benevolent, there was definitely a need for private philanthropy in addition to the foundling hospitals and orphanages which already existed. There were five royal hospitals in London: St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, founded in A.D. 1102 and located near West Smithfield, is the oldest hospital in Europe, which was established with the purpose of sheltering “brethren and sisters, sick persons, and pregnant women” (Highmore 1); Bethlem Hospital, known now as Bedlam, was founded in 1247 outside the walls of the City of London, on the east side of the moor, but it moved to Moorfields in the seventeenth century (in 1547 it was intended for lunatics and nowadays it is a psychiatric hospital);<sup>xi</sup> Bridewell Hospital, formerly a palace, built on the banks of the Thames near Blackfriars (in the sixteenth century the citizens of London designed some rules of thumb for the management of this hospital, since in Highmore’s words, it was “an house of continuance for the suppression of idleness the enemy of all virtue, and the nourisher of good exercise, which is the conqueror of all vice” (31)); Christ’s Hospital, established in 1552 in Newgate Street, was in charge of the education of orphans and children of the poor – Coleridge attended this public school between the years 1782 and 1791; St. Thomas’s Hospital, situated in Southwark, played a similar role to that of St. Bartholomew, functioning as a general hospital for the sick poor, apart from accommodating venereal patients.<sup>xii</sup>

Founded in 1739 by Captain Thomas Coram, The Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury became not only a shelter for the poor orphans of London, but also a national icon which had been awaited since the reign of Queen Anne. It was then that Joseph Addison mentioned its design in other neighbouring nations, suggesting that “a piece of charity which has not been yet exerted among us” was necessary in England. The country needed “a provision for foundlings, or for those children who through want of such a provision are exposed to the barbarity of cruel and unnatural parents” (*The Guardian* 150). The London Foundling Hospital

was described as different from other foreign charities for orphans and the establishment carried a sense of national pride over the protection of the aged and the helpless, “the unoffending infant” (Bernard 13) and the abused mothers. Lisa Zunshine insists on the establishment as a configuration of time and space embodying “both the noblest philanthropic aspirations of the British Enlightenment and some of its worst fears, namely that unchecked by the stigma of illicit maternity, women would gain an unprecedented control over their reputation and reproductive behaviour” (1). Both the security of the infants and the protection of mothers were considered acts of charity while the legislature and the Church were fully culpable for disgracing women who fell victim to men’s seduction and gave birth to illegitimate children. The orphan offspring were thus first victims of the laws enacted by Parliament as well as of wrongly applied moral principles, and not of the disorderly streets of London.

Due to the fact that hospitals were not as malleable as to cope with the sick and the injured, dispensaries were established in order to supply the needs of hospitals. Hospitals lived on small budgets under the threat of closure, whereas in the late eighteenth century thirteen dispensaries were supported by voluntary citizens willing to fund and run them. In 1770, the General Dispensary was founded in London in Aldersgate Street by the physician John Coakley Lettsom, a London Quaker who believed in “the Light of Christ” and who, along with other members of the Society of Friends instituted a philanthropic project in keeping with their religious and political beliefs (Kilpatrick 261).

Other establishments of charity were colleges and alms-houses, intended to provide relief and pensions in old age for “widows of loyal and orthodox clergymen” (Highmore 443), such as Bromley College, for “the maintenance of poor aged and decayed merchants of England, whose fortunes had been ruined by the perils of the sea, and other unavoidable accidents” (Highmore 495); God’s Gift at Dulwich accommodated twelve old people and twelve scholars. Almshouses “were not only establishments according to people’s trades, they were instituted with the purpose of providing for the worthy poor: Clothworkers, Coopers, Drapers, the Dyers Company, Fishmongers, Goldsmiths, Grocers, Haberdashers, Ironmongers, Leathersellers, Mercers, Merchant Taylors,

Skinner, etc.” These almshouses functioned according to a statute which monitored the administration of the charity, required dignity on the part of the internees, and “specified the categories which distinguished between those deserving of a place, the worthy poor, and those to be excluded” (Porter 9). It was quite problematic for the trustees to make this distinction – in the seventeenth century, for instance, Thomas Sutton’s almshouse<sup>xiii</sup> accommodated 80 men and 40 scholars, and it became a common practice that the candidates were nominated by the King or the Queen for admission at Sutton’s almshouse. There was a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, which was later widened by the demographic and economic changes and included the labouring poor, those people who worked but did not earn enough to be able to support financially their families. Eventually, the shift from pure Christian philanthropy – which was both the responsibility of the Church and of the community – to a more systematic organisation of charity happened after 1700, allowing private charity to develop alongside a system of poor relief.

### Conclusions

Issues related to charity and public or private benevolence were heatedly debated and questioned in the pamphlets written by Defoe who put forward various proposals with the purpose of healing common social ills and mobilising public opinion in favour of the poor and the wretched. It is obvious that charity performed social functions, which changed according to the circumstances, especially financial ones. Since mid-eighteenth-century charities largely depended on private funding, their existence and proliferation were supported by people’s yearly subscription. The overall image of eighteenth-century charitable London is that of a city eager to enforce philanthropic laws through more powerful mechanisms and institutions than those existing a century earlier. Despite various protests coming from sceptics and fastidious ladies against such acts of charity that might have encouraged vice, laziness, “whoredom” and “fornication” (Defoe, *Augusta* 14), legal philanthropic institutions were eventually established in London with the purpose of preventing the funds of charity

from being maladministered. The charitable London that Defoe depicts in 1728 and earlier is not the perfect image of philanthropy, due partly to the fact that legal procedures were not firmly enforced then, and partly because private charity could not cover all the social abuses that the poor of London confronted with. Unlike the rest of Europe, England boasted a parish-based, tax-funded structure of relief for the impecunious. Furthermore, an impressive number of charity societies and associations to assist groups of underprivileged individuals were founded. The London charities established both a spiritual and a social connection between the benevolent and the beneficiary, coming across as completely independent of Government aid and control.

While the present study has been concerned with observing the relationships between London and institutional schemes of benevolence, this topic has provided insights into wider social developments: the connection between Christianity and charity; people's response to problems of poverty, misery, and ignorance; the role of parishes in shaping the civil life of local communities; the relationship between public and private acts of charity; the writers' call for the formation of friendly societies and provisions for foundlings; the need for private philanthropy; the significance of the culture of association in setting up charitable societies across Britain and in London; and the singularity of England in managing charity matters and in supporting life insurance schemes. Eighteenth-century London rewrote benevolence from a moral geography of charity to a secular systematisation of philanthropic acts, which turned the metropolis into a paradigmatic model of Christian charity. Among other things, the capital city set the example of doing good either via private donations, or through the multitude of its national foundations of charities to provide relief for the poor and the diseased, the old and the young, the invalid soldiers and the pregnant women, either by voluntary contributions or perpetual revenues.

**Notes:**

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<sup>i</sup> "But there is nothing to distinguish the sons of God from the sons of the devil, save charity" (Augustine 298). Or, in Highmore's words, "[...] every individual

in England becomes a benefactor to others, and thereby is the greatest benefactor to himself” (xxiii).

<sup>ii</sup> The medieval religious landscape of England was characterised by monastic communities and orders which received donations in the form of land and properties from wealthy patrons. In return for endowments, these religious foundations committed themselves to sing perpetual masses for the souls of founders and their families. The dissolution of the chantries took place between 1545-1548.

<sup>iii</sup> However, according to T.S. Ashton, life insurance became a matter of legal concern based on statistical data only after the establishment of the Equitable Life Assurance Co. in 1762 (132). This was the oldest mutual life assurance company in Great Britain, which by 1799 had reached the number of 5,000 policies in force worth £4 million.

<sup>iv</sup> See Ottaway, 180-2. The author mentions another similar society established in London in 1794, “The Widows Constant Friend Held at the Golden Horse Aldersgate Street” in order to show that widows were among the poorest people in London in need of assistance.

<sup>v</sup> See, for this comment, Zelizer, 75-77.

<sup>vi</sup> For an analysis of charity as a social virtue, see Bossy, 140-152 *et passim*.

<sup>vii</sup> For his works on social projects and proposals, Defoe adopted the persona of Andrew Moreton, an old man who wanted to repair the social wrongs committed in the city.

<sup>viii</sup> There are ambiguities about the foundation dates of earlier institutions.

<sup>ix</sup> Sermonist Beilby Porteus is mentioned in Catherine Keohane as an example of a supporter and an adviser of directed charity. See Keohane, 41.

<sup>x</sup> Beilby Porteus reinforces the importance of religious progress in a person’s life, and he suggests that this may be assisted “by improving to the best advantage the seasons of sickness and affliction” (183).

<sup>xi</sup> “All poor lunatics who have not been disordered more than one year before admission, may be admitted at all seasons, and remain till cured, provided the same be effected within twelve months; and all such as have been longer than that time, may be admitted (at the discretion of the committee) from Lady-day to Michaelmas only, when they are to be discharged, unless there be then a prospect of cure” (Highmore 22).

<sup>xii</sup> Between the years 1715-1800 venereal patients were charged with an admission fee that was three times more than the clean patients had to pay, which made some patients hide their real reasons for applying for a place at St Thomas’s (Siena 103-5).

<sup>xiii</sup> Thomas Sutton’s almshouse was founded in 1611 in London.

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