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# 5 Critiquing the Critics

## A Theoretical Exploration of Philanthropy Criticism

*Beth Breeze*

### 1 Introduction

One of the most misunderstood phrases in academia is “critical thinking.” When scholars talk about “being critical,” those words are not being used with their everyday meaning: “to form or express a harsh or unfavorable opinion of a person or thing, to find fault, to be censorious” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Rather, “being critical” in academic terms means evaluating and assessing the quality of what is being said instead of taking it at face value. A critical stance can conclude that the evidence or argument is weak or faulty, but it can also conclude that it is robust and persuasive. The point is to reach a reasoned conclusion justified by the evidence rather than simply regurgitating what others have said.

In recent years, however, taking a critical approach to philanthropy has often been indistinguishable from the everyday sense of the word: taking a presumptively negative stance (especially toward big givers) rather than being open to what the evidence shows, and finding fault rather than judging carefully. Concerns about philanthropy are long-standing, but the steady stream of books, keynote talks, and thought leaders offering a critical (censorious) take, especially on those giving large sums of money, had escalated by the end of the 2010s (Buchanan, 2019b, p. 50). This, coupled with an analysis of over 50,000 newspaper items from 1840 to 2023 that found the level of criticism in media coverage of philanthropy and philanthropists is higher now than ever before (Meier, 2024), has piqued my curiosity, especially concerning academic critiques. Why are so many different kinds of scholars trying to outdo each other in the severity of their takedowns of philanthropy? The book which, in my view, began this trend, had the relatively polite title “No Such Thing as a Free Gift: The Gates Foundation and the Price of Philanthropy” (McGoey, 2015). The pejorative dial was turned up for the title of the next critical bestseller: “Just Giving: Why Philanthropy is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better” (Reich, 2018), which in turn was outgunned by “Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World” (Giridharadas, 2018). The charge of philanthropy being a “charade” was then eclipsed by the charge of cruel and oppressive behavior in the title:

“The Tyranny of Generosity: Why Philanthropy Corrupts Our Politics and How We Can Fix It” (Lechterman, 2022). The arguments of these books, encapsulated in their provocative titles, resonate with a public that has become increasingly suspicious of the motivations and actions of elites – with little or no differentiation in terms of the antagonism felt toward the giving and the non-giving rich.

### *1.1 Structure of this Chapter*

This chapter begins by describing three types of critiques of philanthropy before demonstrating that there is nothing especially new about any of them. The main body of the chapter then offers reasons why attacks on philanthropy and philanthropists land well and persist, and how we might use theory to understand the drivers behind the disparagement of seemingly socially useful behavior. In the spirit of applied research that seeks real-world impact, the chapter ends with suggestions for responding to censorious criticism and concludes by affirming the usefulness of critical scholarship when it advances knowledge and makes philanthropy more effective, while highlighting the dangers of hyper-criticism and generalized cynicism that risk eroding cultural norms about helping others and creating a perverse incentive to hoard rather than share wealth.

First, though, as this chapter involves questioning the motives of those who choose to criticize philanthropy, I will share my motivation for offering a critique of the critics.

## **2 Why Critique the Critics?**

Like many people, I have benefited from the philanthropy of others throughout my life, worked in philanthropically funded organizations that positively impact the world, and studied philanthropy for decades. My personal and professional encounters with major donors do not tally with critics’ blanket depictions of big givers. Like any group, philanthropists include people with varying life experiences, personalities, and outlooks – the only thing they have in common is voluntarily giving away substantial amounts of money. I became increasingly concerned by the absence of empirical evidence to support sweeping statements such as philanthropy being more concerned with control than compassion and by the deployment of “killer quotes” and anecdotal evidence to support these assertions. As an applied academic, I became exasperated by the focus on analysis over solutions, and I was perplexed as to why critics presented their arguments as novel when there is little to be said, either in favor or against philanthropy, that has not already been said many times before. For example, a social history of philanthropy in America written in 1960 noted the existence of contradictory attitudes about philanthropy:

The word philanthropy and the idea it carries with it arouses mixed emotions... We expect rich men [sic] to be generous with their wealth and criticize them when they are not; but when they make benefaction, we question their motives, deplore the methods by which they obtained their abundance and wonder whether their gifts will not do more harm than good.

(Bremner, 1960, p. 2)

As a working scholar myself, I obviously have no quarrel with critique if it is robust and leads to new knowledge, insights, and social improvements. My point is not that philanthropy should escape critical attention, but rather that critiques should be evidence-based and nuanced, avoiding blanket generalizations and sweeping conclusions that all philanthropy is illegitimate rather than improvable, as is the case for any activity by fallible humans. A reasoned conclusion about the overall merits of philanthropy is not only needed in the interests of critical thinking in the academic sense, it is also needed when we think pragmatically about the extent of need in the world and the as-yet inadequate response to meet those needs. Three such reasons are:

First, in 2025, at the time of writing, we are only five years away from the 2030 deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), yet none of them are close to being reached. Some have become further away since 2015, when there was a unanimous commitment at the United Nations to address these global challenges. Of course, the SDGs are just one – albeit very notable and ambitious – type of work funded by voluntary donations. Private donors fund a wide range of public good activities from the Arts to Zoos and every alphabetic cause in between, with the definition of “public good” and the commensurate tax reliefs being defined by democratically elected bodies in each jurisdiction. There are 1.4 million nonprofit organizations in the U.S. (IRS, n.d.), c.3.9 million active nonprofit associations in the European Union (European Commission et al., 2023) and an estimated 9.7 million nongovernmental organizations worldwide (globalgiving.org, n.d.). Most of these organizations rely to some extent on philanthropic donations and could do more – help more people, increase their impact, solve problems faster – if they had more donated income. So, the major issue facing the world is not *too much* philanthropy; rather, the core problem is *too little* philanthropy. This seems so obvious that it is barely worth saying, especially to people who work in or rely on the philanthropically funded sector. However, many critics are, by their own admission, removed from this front line and, therefore, one of my motivations for this work is to explain how the reputation of philanthropy relates to the work of stimulating more gifts and enabling successful fundraising.

Second, free riding is a more serious problem than “undue” donor benefits. Those who do not give, or do not give much, still benefit from the generosity of others. For example, the outcomes of voluntarily funded efforts to improve the environment, fund the development of vaccines, or install a

piece of public art can all be “consumed” by a far larger group than those who made the donations. The non-excludable and non-rival nature of philanthropically funded goods and services is one well-known reason that the non-profit sector exists (Ben-Ner, 1986). However, it also creates the equally well-known free rider problem (see, for example, Weisbrod, 1988), which in turn constitutes a significant challenge for fundraisers who have to find people willing to pay for things that will also benefit non-payers.

The third spur to critiquing the critics is the evident gap between claims and reality. If the benefits of philanthropy were as significant as critics contend, for example, that individual donors gain power and great PR for themselves and can enrich themselves through philanthropic tax deductions, then one would expect far more rich people to be seriously philanthropic. Yet, to take one indicator of enthusiasm for big philanthropy, less than 10% of global billionaires have signed the Giving Pledge.<sup>1</sup> Do the other 90% lack good advice? Of course not. Financial and personal advisors would tell their clients to make large gifts to gain pecuniary and non-pecuniary advantages if they were real, just as they are trained to spot other opportunities and loopholes that serve their clients’ interests. Declines in giving (Giving U.S.A., 2023), the declining donor base (Rooney, 2019), the struggle to raise funds (Breeze, 2017; Shaker et al., 2022), the reality of under-resourced nonprofits (Buchanan, 2019a), and the problem of the nonprofit starvation cycle (Gregory & Howard, 2009) would not exist if philanthropy did serve the interests of donors to the extent that some critics contend. As such, the gap between the assumptions held by critics and the reality facing nonprofits, fundraisers, and donors creates a puzzle worth exploring.

A further gap exists between assumptions of what motivates big donors and what observers believe motivates them. A core element of my research over the past two decades has been to understand the experience of philanthropists, including their motivations. Other scholars have tackled the same question in other contexts, and the key finding that consistently emerges from these studies is that donors have mixed motives: it is entirely normal for a charitable gift to create benefits for wider society (as it must, to be compliant with legislation and receive tax breaks) and to also create benefits for the donor at the same time.

Benefits to wider society include meeting unmet needs (such as feeding the hungry), developing solutions to intractable problems (such as innovations to increase crop yield to prevent famine), and advocating for other sectors to take action (such as campaigning for better state-funded welfare and removing trade barriers so that people can afford to feed themselves). As these examples show, and as others have argued (see, for example, Davies, 2023; Payton & Moody, 2008), philanthropically funded work sometimes complements, sometimes co-exists with, and sometimes challenges the state and the market.

Benefits to donors include being able to implement their personal values (such as generosity, compassion, or belief in a just world); to follow their

religious convictions (all the world's major faiths advocate giving to strangers); to express gratitude to organizations from which they have benefited (such as schools, universities, hospitals, and arts organizations); to enjoy the experiences and relationships that come from being a significant donor (such as interacting with fundees who may be artists or scientists, as well as non-profit leadership and fellow donors); to express grief and maintain a connection to loved ones through *In memorium* donations; to honor a family commitment or other sense of duty to be philanthropic; to be a role model for their children on the right use of money; to express anger and frustration at the existence of unsolved social and environmental problems; to bolster their reputation and legacy as a good person; to gain tangible benefits such as a naming plaque or a public honor; to feel they have led a meaningful life. This long list is nonetheless incomplete because donors are people, and people have infinite wants, needs, and aspirations for their lives, but it can be summarized in two core findings: significant gifts occur because donors believe in the cause and that supporting it will in some way enhance their well-being (see, for example, Breeze & Lloyd (2013), Schervish (2016), Sargeant & George (2022, pp. 77–86). To over-focus on donor benefits and overlook wider social and environmental benefits is to offer an incomplete analysis of the studied phenomena, which piques my curiosity. Having set out my motives for critiquing the critics, I now summarize the content of those critiques.

### 3 Three Types of Critiques of Philanthropy

All critiques of philanthropy are not the same, but it is possible to identify three sets of fundamental criticisms as follows (Breeze, 2021):

#### 3.1 *The Academic Critique*

The first set of critiques, typically made by scholars, claims that the existence and methods (the “How” of philanthropy) entrench unequal power structures, exacerbate inequality, and undermine the democratic principle of political equality at the ballot box and subsequent law-making. I call this the Academic critique.

#### 3.2 *The Insider Critique*

The second set of critiques questions whether the causes that are chosen and prioritized by donors are the “correct” ones, the basis on which philanthropic spending should be allocated, and how “better” giving decisions can be made. This focus on the “What” of philanthropy tends to come from people within the nonprofit world, so I call this the Insider critique.

#### 3.3 *The Populist Critique*

The third set of critiques is populist denunciations of big giving. As with populism in general, these arguments provide simplistic explanations for complex

phenomena. They are almost exclusively focused on the “Why” of philanthropy – scrutinizing the motivations of donors and the benefits that may be gained, as well as making *ad hominem* attacks on individual philanthropists. I call this the populist critique.

### 3.4 *Critical versus Affirmative Attitudes to Philanthropy*

Another way of categorizing contemporary attitudes toward philanthropy is offered by Campbell et al., who describe “two broad competing views”: those who are critical and those who affirm the role of private giving (Campbell et al., 2023, pp. 137–138). The latter includes two sub-types: “Affirmative Traditional” exemplified by Andrew Carnegie, who believed that wealthy elites and markets can sometimes make better decisions than governments, and “Affirmative Reform” exemplified by those who put forward a case for the positive role and impact of philanthropy while still acknowledging tensions, trade-offs, and areas for improvement (Breeze, 2021; Buchanan, 2019b; Walker, 2019).

The next section of this chapter demonstrates that there is nothing new about pointing out problems with major individual and institutional giving, nor have the specific charges laid at philanthropy’s door evolved significantly over time. The very fact that critics believe themselves to be saying something novel is enough to arouse sociological interest in their assumptions and motivations and to ask: why do these caricatures persist, and what benefits do they generate for those who cling tightest to them?

### 3.5 *Critiques of Philanthropy are Longstanding*

Claims made by contemporary critics that philanthropists enjoy “ceaseless praise” (Reich, 2018, p. 7) are not supported by historical studies that document “continuing suspicion” of philanthropic intent and impact (Cunningham 2020, p. 141).

Examples from past millennia include the eighth-century writings of the Venerable Bede, who noted the injustice of gifts to the poor being made from wealth that was derived from exploitation (cited in Breeze (2021), p. 41), while mockery of the self-serving motives of donors can be enjoyed as far back as the sixteenth century: “The rich are said to have left the blind and lame unhelped except it were on Sundays” (Henry Brinklow writing in 1545, cited in Gray (1905), p. 23)

When the “fathers” of modern philanthropy, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, first tried to establish their philanthropic foundations in the early twentieth century, they were dismissed by US Senator Frank Walsh as a “menace” to the welfare of the nation (cited in Reich (2018, p. 5). At the end of that century, American historian Gertrude Himmelfarb set out this devastating case against philanthropy:

The charge now is that philanthropy is all too often a self-serving exercise on the part of philanthropists at the expense of those whom they

are ostensibly helping. Philanthropy stands condemned, not only as ineffectual, but as hypocritical and self-aggrandising.

(Himmelfarb, 1995, p. 160)

The academic critique is as old as the academic study of philanthropy, which began in the U.S. in the 1970s. For example, Donald Fisher's analysis of the Rockefeller Foundation concluded that philanthropic funding sought to maintain, rather than alter, the social order by producing and reproducing cultural hegemony that preserves both the existing economic structure and the social inequalities inherent in that structure (Fisher, 1980, 1983).

The populist critique is equally well-trodden. To take two examples: the James Bond film franchise has successfully capitalized on the public's fear that philanthropists are wolves in sheep's clothing. In "Quantum of Solace," Bond's 22nd big screen outing, the baddie is disguised as an environmental philanthropist who is ultimately revealed as a villain seeking to control the water supply so that the population can be exploited and terrorized. This fictional deception reflects critiques of philanthropy as a strategy to create and sustain unjust structures that are responsible for the very harms they pretend to care about (see, for example, Giridharadas, 2018). In another example from popular culture, the 2011 movie reboot of the Muppets franchise features a scheming, archetypal baddie with a maniacal laugh pretending to have a sympathetic interest in preserving the Muppet Theatre, and yet fully intending to tear it down to drill for oil. Beloved Kermit the Frog introduces this character as: "oil baron Tex Richman, the wealthy philanthropist."

The critic's role is supposed to be "to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see" (Felski, 2015, p. 1). Once "philanthropist" has become a go-to cover story for villains, and a kind-hearted green puppet has exposed the duplicity of a self-seeking philanthropist, the assertion that philanthropy involves hidden motives is clearly already firmly established, and it is unreasonable for critics to claim they are offering a necessary critical analysis.

I turn now to why these critiques have resonated so well.

#### 4 Reasons Why Attacks on Philanthropy and Philanthropists Stick

Receptiveness to attacks on philanthropy and philanthropists can be understood by drawing on explanations from Sociology and Social Psychology, including gift-giving theory, social comparison theory, and the phenomenon of "Do-gooder derogation." These are discussed in turn after first noting three contextual factors that create conducive conditions for criticism of private giving.

The first reason that attacks on philanthropy land successfully is that they are sometimes reasonable. Thinking of the academic, insider, and populist critiques in turn, some big donors do enjoy some degree of undue power and influence, some giving is inefficient and misdirected, and some donors are



hypocritical and unlikeable. It would be astonishing for that not to be the case: to find an activity that is entirely devoid of power dynamics, run with total efficiency and effectiveness, and involves a subset of people containing no flawed characters. As the co-founder of the Beacon Collaborative, an initiative to encourage more philanthropy, says:

The reason philanthropy is fallible is because people are fallible. Private individuals have a responsibility to make the best decisions they can possibly make but sometimes they will fall short of what they, and observers, hope for in terms of choosing the right ideas to back and achieving the most successful impact. If critics fail to take account of the often-ambiguous and uncertain contexts in which philanthropists are working, they risk turning human fallibility into a conspiracy theory.

(Cath Dovey, cited in Breeze, 2021, p. 135)

The second reason that attacks on philanthropy stick is the lack of counter-arguments. To use Campbell et al.'s typology (2023), the ratio of Critical: Affirmative is firmly in the former's favor: not only are there many more books that are broadly critical of philanthropy, but these books also sell more copies than those few offering a neutral-to-positive perspective, and their authors have much larger followings on social media, resulting in a very one-sided debate. The only significant philanthropist on record questioning the validity of critiques is Melinda French Gates, who gave this rather muted response, considering the charges that she and her former husband frequently face: "I'm not sure that the attack has been on philanthropy. I think the attack has been on wealth" (cited in Ho, 2019). In the absence of substantive articulations of a more positive account of the value of philanthropy, negative framing is the only game in town.

The third factor related to French Gate's brief defense is that critical narratives fit well with dominant concerns about wealth and inequality. The emergence and successful "landing" of hyper-criticism of philanthropy at the start of the twenty-first century needs to be placed in a wider societal context, much of it flowing from the fallout from the banking crisis in 2008: an understandable concern about growing inequality in society, widespread distrust of elites and experts, and polarized politics. These factors make the problematic framing of philanthropy seem like common sense by obscuring subtle but significant differences in the problems of wealth accumulation and wealth distribution. Philanthropists – who are simply amongst the most visible, rather than representative, members of elites – are caught in the crossfire of these broader debates, resulting in the perplexing situation where big philanthropy sparks a debate about the merits of capitalism, whereas excessive consumption, such as buying a superyacht, does not.

I turn now to three sets of theories that offer insights into the articulation and acceptance of critiques of philanthropy:

#### 4.1 *Sociological Theory: Gift-giving and the Misrecognition of Major Gifts*

The charitable acts of the rich are routinely interpreted in a more negative light than donations made by non-wealthy people, such that the former are assumed to be acting egoistically and the latter more altruistically. The theoretical roots of this position lie in gift-giving research pioneered by social anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Ethnographic studies of the North American potlatch (Boas, 1897) and Kula exchange in the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski, 1922) show how gift-giving rituals enable the expression of status and superiority. These ideas were developed by Marcel Mauss's seminal work on the gift (Mauss, 2002, first published 1950), which showed the gift economy to be a primary organizing principle in all societies, creating networks of mutual indebtedness that bind people together. Gifts, therefore, always bring both personal and societal benefits, as noted above in relation to contemporary donors.

Critiques of big philanthropy often include a "revelation" that elite donors gain some kind of benefit from their giving. The title of McGoe's book, *No Such Thing as a Free Gift* (2015) refers to the benefits gained by Bill Gates and other big donors in return for their largesse. However, the gift theory demonstrates that the "return" is an inescapable feature of all gifting practices: it has long been understood that private benefits created by gift-giving are enjoyed by all types of givers (Mauss, 1950). Most philanthropists "readily admit" and emphasize the rewarding effects of giving (Silber, 1998; Breeze & Lloyd, 2013).

Unlike big donors, those giving smaller amounts are allowed to enjoy feeling generous and can expect their donations to result in thanks and praise from recipient nonprofit organizations. They will also be given stickers, pins, and wristbands to publicly signal their generosity and encouraged to highlight their giving on social media to help raise awareness of the cause.

Insights from French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu help explain of why giving by the rich is critiqued while giving by the non-rich is celebrated (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu notes the collective decision to "misrecognise" the reality of exchange that underlies gifting practices so that we can enjoy the feeling of giving and getting gifts. No one expressing delight on their birthday would say: "Good, this cost about the same as what I got you," and few would continue to give gifts to someone who neither reciprocated nor sent expressions of thanks. Reciprocity is one of the rare universal norms: without return gifts, social relationships become irreparably damaged (Komter, 2005). Thus every gift involves an exchange, even if we largely pretend it does not. We are happy to misrecognize and celebrate smaller donations made by "ordinary" donors, overlooking the returns they receive, but we are increasingly resistant to maintaining collective silence about the "structural truth" of exchanges that involve richer donors. We choose not to misrecognize bigger gifts on the assumption that rich donors alone have a self-interested agenda. Thus, the charge of hypocrisy is selectively applied.

#### 4.2 *Social Psychology: Social Comparison Theory*

Social comparison theory shows how people evaluate themselves by comparing their attributes and achievements with those of others (Festinger, 1954; Fiske, 2011). Fiske shows how such comparisons lead to anger and bitterness at those we “envy” for being above us, adversely affecting our sense of self and damaging social cohesion. Upward social comparison in the moral domain is an especially “stinging threat” (Monin, 2007), so we punish generous individuals even when their behavior benefits the group, and even more than we punish free riders (Irwin & Horne, 2013).

As the title of one paper on the subject asks: “Why Hate the Good Guy?”. The authors’ answer is that punishing over-generous people “is a social strategy that low co-operators use to avoid looking bad when high co-operators escalate co-operation (Pleasant & Barclay, 2018, p. 868). A plain-speaking version of the same hypothesis was offered by Ben Whitaker after surveying the arguments for and against philanthropic foundations back in the 1970s:

Hypercriticism of philanthropy from comfortably-off armchair revolutionaries or others, can often be attempts to rationalise their own meanness.

(Whitaker, 1974)

Upward comparisons can make us feel and be hostile, but when our self-image is secure, there is no threat to our sense of self. Praise for small donations can thus occur because they constitute no threat to the observer’s self-worth: such gifts can be applauded without the potential for an unfavorable comparison or any implicit or anticipated moral reproach.

Hostility to big gifts occurs even when it is known that some members of the group have sufficient resources to give more, and even if that leveling down of generosity results in suboptimal outcomes for the group (Parks & Stone, 2010). This is because the objective benefit of a greater quantity of resources being made available for the whole group is outweighed by the subjective cost to the self of a negative comparison.

#### 4.3 *Do-Gooder Derogation as an Explanation for the Three Critiques of Philanthropy*

Do-gooder derogation is a concept developed in the psychology literature that explains when, why, and how the behavior of morally motivated people is sometimes disparaged rather than applauded (Monin, 2007; Minson & Monin, 2012). Studies show that both children and adults can find generosity off-putting and unappealing, resulting in the rejection of generous individuals (Parks & Stone, 2010; Tasimi et al., 2015, p. 5; Pleasant & Barclay, 2018). Comparative studies in multiple countries find that dislike of do-gooders is universal, though the extent to which over-contributors are viewed negatively varies in different societies (Herrmann et al., 2008).

People care a lot about being viewed as moral and are therefore sensitive to any criticism about their moral standing, even if it is implicit or anticipated rather than explicitly articulated. Individuals respond to self-threat by attacking the source of that threat (Monin et al., 2008):

This uncomfortable feeling of being morally judged motivates, even if just tacitly, [people] to take measures to protect the positive view they hold about themselves and their sense of morality. One way of doing so is derogating the source of the perceived threat to one's positive self-image.

(Dhont & Stoeber, 2020, p. 25)

How does this happen in practice? Derogation of “do-gooding” is found to follow a normative tripartite pattern of *denying* the virtue in an ostensibly moral act (e.g., claiming a vegan is motivated by vanity or fussiness), *trivializing* the efforts made by morally-motivated others (e.g., claiming one less meat-eater makes no difference), and *disliking* those morally motivated actors (e.g., claiming vegans are uptight and humorless) (Monin, 2007; Minson & Monin, 2012). Veganism and environmentalism are commonly the subjects of do-gooder derogation studies, but these three elements also reflect the content of, respectively, the academic, insider, and populist critiques of philanthropy, as follows:

- (1) **The academic critique denies virtue** by favoring alternative self-interested explanations for philanthropy, such that it is understood as being “really” about the pursuit of power, influence, and acquiring other personal benefits.
- (2) **The insider critique trivializes donors’ actions** as well-intentioned but naïve, undertaken with a lack of awareness of the realities of the “real world”, such that donors’ contributions are viewed as negligible or result in unintended negative consequences.
- (3) **The populist critique encourages dislike of donors** by describing them as annoying and worthy of scorn and derision, allowing observers (including those giving smaller amounts and non-donors) to distance themselves from big donors.

The cumulative impact of the three critiques is to portray philanthropy and philanthropists as illegitimate, ineffective, and unlikable.

## 5 The Potentially Problematic Consequence of Philanthropy Critiques

Fundraising success relies on many factors, and it is not possible to isolate or quantify the effect of attacks on philanthropy, but given the knowledge that all types of behaviors are stimulated by positive reinforcement (Skinner, 1974),

it is reasonable to conclude that negative reinforcement of big giving will reduce the incidence of big gifts.

The status and reputation of philanthropy matter because fundraisers rely on private giving being generally perceived as a commendable, admired act. The body of knowledge on the drivers of philanthropy finds that people give in pursuit of a positive reputation, psychological benefits (such as feeling good about oneself), a desire to be altruistic, to implement pro-social values, a belief that gifts will make a positive difference, and a calculation that the costs of giving are outweighed by the benefits (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). Generalized attacks on philanthropy and the insistence that donors should be critiqued and never cheered undermine these drivers of philanthropic giving. The demand side of nonprofit economics is also damaged when philanthropy is viewed with suspicion because those seeking funding for good causes have little else to give supporters other than thanks and praise. Charity law forbids any substantive benefits for donors, including interference in the political process, so fundraisers must rely on the power of intangible extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, such as public recognition and cultivating the “warm glow” and “helper’s high” that drives much other-oriented behavior (Andreoni, 1990; Luks, 1988).

Unlike strategies available in other sectors, where governments are funded by compulsory tax payments and markets function because paying customers have needs and wants, charity fundraisers can only *ask* for gifts. That fundraising “ask” includes a promise – usually implicit – of social approval, enhanced reputation, and personal fulfillment from making something good happen. The critics of philanthropy call that promise into question and, therefore, make successful fundraising harder. As a major donor fundraiser (cited in Breeze (2021), p. 9) explains:

I worry that incessant criticism of big donations will affect charities’ ability to raise money. Major donor fundraising only works when it has the backing of the whole organization and when fundraisers are motivated to ask for those large gifts. When colleagues and trustees hear these criticisms and echo them internally, it makes it much more difficult for their fundraising staff to have the confidence and drive to raise the money to keep the organization going.

## 6 How to Respond to Critiques of Philanthropy

I have described three bodies of critique that collectively result in delegitimizing, demoralizing, and demeaning philanthropy. That result does not mean that every aspect of these critiques is wrong or ought not to be articulated; instead, it is their cumulative impact and the absence of any substantive pushback that is my concern. The value of critical scholarship is accepted, as is the need to root out and expose bad behavior, but there is also a need to recognize the consequences of a persistently one-sided debate in which

atypical and extreme examples of problematic philanthropy are presented as commonplace and are aggravated by psycho-social mechanisms that provoke negative reactions to the charitable acts of wealthy givers.

The known problems of philanthropy are evident, long-standing, and worth attention. However, we need to ask whether the problematic aspects of philanthropy make it an illegitimate or an improvable activity? As a scholar holding a reform-oriented affirmative position, I hold the latter view, which begs the next question of how we can more carefully draw attention to the paradoxes and problems with philanthropy in a manner that avoids harming, however unintentionally, the overall greater good. With that end in mind, I offer three suggestions to respond to, and engage with, the different types of critique:

1. **Disentangle** critiques of philanthropy from critiques of wealth and inequality.
2. **Improve** the practice of philanthropy to produce greater social and environmental benefits, and encourages more and better giving.
3. **End** ahistorical, unnuanced, and *ad hominem* attacks on philanthropists.

This three-pronged response enables a nuanced reaction to the generalized depictions of philanthropy as illegitimate and ineffective, which are conveyed in some scholarly and insider accounts while giving short shrift to populist attacks on big giving. It also offers a way forward that enables the positive potential of philanthropy to flourish.

## 7 Conclusion

Critiquing the critics and being skeptical about skepticism is perfectly compatible with welcoming scrutiny and constructive critique. Critiques of philanthropy can helpfully reveal the nature of our shared expectations for philanthropic action and the values that surround it, highlight assumptions about the “proper role” for philanthropy in contemporary society, and raise important questions about power, transparency, inclusion, and obligation (Moody & Breeze, 2016, p. 172). Useful critique is not the same as generalized cynicism: the former can make philanthropy more effective, and the latter risks eroding cultural norms about helping others and creating a perverse incentive to hoard rather than share wealth.

Given the scale of social and environmental challenges facing the world and the potential for private generosity to play some part in meeting those challenges, it is overdue time to offer an empirically based, theoretically informed critique (in the scholarly, not everyday, sense of the word) so that we can reach reasoned conclusions about the nature, role, and impact of philanthropy in contemporary society.

## Note

- 1 This is a public declaration to give away at least half of one's wealth either during their lifetime or at the point of death. By January 2025, it was signed by 244 of the c.2,800 global billionaire population. <https://givingpledge.org>

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