

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Good intent, or just good content? Assessing MrBeast's philanthropy

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Email: r.davies-461@kent.ac.uk**Abstract**

MrBeast is the world's most successful individual YouTube content creator. Having made his name with videos of high-concept challenges and stunts, he has subsequently produced a series of viral videos centring on acts of philanthropy – drawing both praise and criticism in the process. This paper attempts to place MrBeast's approach in the context of wider historical and current debates about the nature and role of philanthropy, in order to ascertain what (if anything) is genuinely novel about it, and how we should understand it in relation to models of philanthropy that have gone before. The paper considers “Beast Philanthropy” through a range of lenses – aesthetic, ethical, economic and political – and what these can tell us about the key questions we should be asking and whether, on balance, we should view this phenomenon positively or not.

KEYWORDS

attention economy, ethics, influencers, philanthropy

Practitioner Points**What is currently known about this subject**

- MrBeast is already an important figure in philanthropy. Whilst the amounts of money he has given are relatively modest in comparison to the largest philanthropic foundations or individual donors, they are still sizeable. But even more significant is the reach and influence he has as a result of his huge audience, many of whom are children and young people.
- Awareness of “Beast Philanthropy” among mainstream practitioners is still limited, and there is little understanding of how it may differ from traditional approaches to philanthropy.
- Critical discussion of MrBeast's philanthropy has so far been largely confined to news media, commentary outlets and social media. There has been little consideration of his approach, or the wider phenomenon of influencer philanthropy from an academic perspective to date.
- As a result, understanding of how MrBeast's approach to philanthropy – and the response it has generated – fits into the wider context of existing debates about the nature and role of philanthropy, is limited.

What your paper adds to this

- This paper outlines the key features of MrBeast's approach to philanthropy, and how these compare to traditional approaches.

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- It also looks at various critical arguments levelled at MrBeast – placing them in the context of existing debates about the nature and role of philanthropy and assessing the extent to which they are justified.
- The paper then considers, in light of these critical arguments, which (if any) aspects of MrBeast's approach to philanthropy we should view positively and which we should view more critically.

The implications of this study and findings for practitioners

- By highlighting the distinctive features of MrBeast's approach to philanthropy and exploring its potential impact, this paper will foster better understanding among existing practitioners (including fundraisers, advisers and nonprofit leaders) of an important, but so far under-studied, phenomenon that potentially has significant implications for their field of practice.
- Relating MrBeast's approach to relevant precedents will help practitioners to take a more informed view of claims that influencer philanthropy is entirely new in nature and poses unprecedented challenges or opportunities.
- The paper places critical arguments levelled at MrBeast's approach to giving in the context of existing debates about the nature and role of philanthropy and attempts to offer a balanced assessment of the extent to which these critical arguments are justified. This will help to inform a more nuanced understanding among practitioners of the potential pros and cons of influencer philanthropy.
- Understanding what is potentially innovative about MrBeast's approach and what is potentially problematic will enable practitioners to think through whether there are implications for their own work in the future.

1 | WHO IS MrBeast?

MrBeast (aka Jimmy Donaldson) is the world's most successful YouTube content creator. His “MrBeast” channel has over 240 million subscribers, making it the most subscribed-to individual user channel on the platform and the second most subscribed-to channel overall (Suggitt, 2022). Across all his channels, his videos have been viewed over 45 billion times. As a result, he has amassed – at the age of only 25 – an estimated net worth of \$500 million (Sorvino, 2022). He has also become known for his charitable giving and in particular for his brand of “Beast Philanthropy.” This harnesses the aesthetics and economics of social media by producing highly viral videos in which MrBeast performs grandiose (and often outlandish) charitable stunts, and the money generated from these videos through YouTube's AdSense advertising algorithm – as well as through brand sponsorship deals with specific companies – is then used to provide financial resources for further Beast Philanthropy projects (Alexander, 2022; Barker & Cameron, 2023; Miller & Hogg, 2023).

MrBeast's rise to fame and fortune has been meteoric, and many have welcomed the fact he has branched out into philanthropy at such an early age. However, in doing so he has also attracted criticism. The most notable example to date was in early 2023, when a video he posted entitled “1000 Blind People See For the First Time” generated huge controversy – with many deriding it as exploitative “poverty porn” and claiming that MrBeast's purported philanthropy is merely a self-interested attempt to drive clicks and likes rather than genuine altruism (Benton, 2023; Robinson, 2023; Wade, 2023). A similar video

entitled “1000 Deaf People Hear For the First time,” posted in May 2023, brought further controversy. Some, however, have rushed to MrBeast's defence, claiming that the criticisms of him are unfair, and that we should celebrate the work he is doing rather than lambasting him – particularly when many wealthy people continue to give very little at all (Darby, 2023; Sharma, 2023).

So which is it? Is MrBeast a shining example of a wealthy young person recognising a responsibility to give back and using his skills to shake up existing models of philanthropy? Or is he a performative narcissist, who exploits people suffering from poverty or illness under the guise of being charitable to produce highly lucrative content for his burgeoning social media empire? This article will attempt to unpick the various criticisms that have been made of MrBeast; and by exploring the aesthetic, ethical, economic and political issues raised by his model of giving will seek to clarify what we need to understand if we are to make a measured assessment of him as a philanthropist.

2 | THE ORIGINS OF BEAST PHILANTHROPY

Like comic book superheroes and supervillains, philanthropists usually have origin stories. Many identify a specific incident or an element of their childhood as a starting point for why they started giving, and over time – though repetition and refinement – this becomes a carefully-honed narrative. Since self-analysis of our own motives and behaviours is not always that accurate, these stories may bear little

relation to the psychological reality of why donors *actually* give; but they can tell us a lot about their self-image and how they perceive their philanthropy.

In MrBeast's case, the standard story is that when he secured his first brand deal (with the NFT marketplace Quidd) he received \$10,000 and immediately decided to give the money to a homeless person. As the story [is told on the Beast Philanthropy website](#):

"In June 2017, when Jimmy Donaldson (AKA MrBeast) received his first YouTube sponsorship deal of \$10,000, he wondered, "how can I transform this money into something good?" Not wanting to keep the money for himself, Jimmy agreed to the sponsorship deal with one condition: he was able to give away all the money. The sponsor agreed" (Beast Philanthropy, n.d.).

This led to the twin realisations that came to underpin his whole model of "Beast Philanthropy": first, that giving money away actually feels good, and secondly that it can be hugely lucrative (if it also feels good/entertaining for those watching, and thus leads to the all-important clicks and likes). We should note that despite MrBeast's apparent enthusiasm for his initial \$10,000 gift to a homeless man, he did not go straight from that to a full embrace of philanthropy. Instead, in the short term, he focussed on giving extravagant gifts to his own family members (new cars for his brother and stepfather, \$100 K for his mother), massively oversized tips to fast food delivery drivers, and cash donations to randomly-selected Twitch streamers (MrBeast, 2018a). Generous, certainly, but not acts that neatly fit any standard definition of "philanthropy" (e.g., Payton's characterisation of it as "voluntary action for the public good" (Payton, 1988) – since these early MrBeast videos would seem to fall short of the "public good" part).

Over time, MrBeast did start to produce more videos in which he gave money and goods in ways that might be deemed more straightforwardly philanthropic, and eventually in 2020, he launched a dedicated channel for these videos ("Beast Philanthropy"), where all profits are directed to a linked 501(c)(3) non-profit organisation.

3 | THE AESTHETICS OF BEAST PHILANTHROPY

First, we should consider to what extent criticism of MrBeast is driven by distaste for how it looks and feels, rather than substantive concern about what he is doing. It is undoubtedly true, for instance, that some people will not take to the heavily-edited, fast cut style of his videos. Others may find MrBeast's languorous, high-pitched drawl grating rather than endearing. And some will feel that the gaudy, game-show stylings sit uncomfortably with efforts to sound sincere about issues like food poverty or visual impairment. It is important, however – particularly for older viewers who may not be accustomed to this kind of content – not to let generalised distaste for the aesthetics of YouTube get in the way of an even-handed assessment of MrBeast's philanthropy. It is also worth bearing in mind that these aesthetics undoubtedly *work*. You may not like the way the videos look, but MrBeast has an evident talent for knowing what his

audience wants; and it is this, combined with a relentless focus on refining his approach to maximise engagement, that has made him so phenomenally successful.

Surface-level concerns about aesthetics may also highlight more substantive issues, of course. Critics who claim that the style of the videos is tonally incongruous with genuine efforts to help people in need may argue that it betrays values that are at odds with them too. There is, for instance, a strong streak of materialism running throughout MrBeast's work, and conspicuous consumption – often to the point of deliberately absurd wastefulness – is the central point of many of his challenges and pranks (Miller & Hogg, 2023). How are we to square this with his promotion of the importance of giving, and his attempts to highlight issues of poverty? Does his donation of \$1 million to support foodbanks (MrBeast, 2020) seem less praiseworthy when we recall that he also spent vast amounts of money on filling his friend's house with 10 million Lego pieces (MrBeast, 2019)? Or is the \$3 million of aid he reportedly gave to help Ukrainians affected by war (MrBeast, 2022b) somewhat undermined by the knowledge that he also gave 3 million pennies to his 3 millionth subscriber (at a cost of \$43,000, which vastly outweighed the actual value of the gift) (MrBeast, 2018b)?

Similarly, the origins of BeastPhilanthropy in pranks and giveaways are evident in the fact that acts of generosity are presented as a thing you do to people – preferably as a surprise – rather than something that is done in partnership with them and designed to give them agency. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of what William Davies calls the "Reaction Economy" (Davies, 2023), where the way in which we react to things is now the basic commodity of the internet. In this case the reactions function on two levels, since the reaction of those receiving the gift (shock, disbelief, gratitude) becomes a crucial element of driving reactions in those watching (likes, clicks, comments). An unfortunate knock-on effect, however, is that this reinforces long-standing concerns about the power dynamics between donors and recipients (Callahan, 2017; Dunning, 2023; Saunders-Hastings, 2022; Shapely, 2000).

But perhaps the overriding aesthetic concern is less about the specific style of the videos and more about the general point they epitomise; namely that this style of philanthropy is unavoidably showy and visible. This plays into a longstanding tension in philanthropy between visibility and anonymity (Schervish, 1994). Some donors want to keep their giving private for religious or cultural reasons, or because they are worried that visibility will open them up to criticism or make them targets for fundraising. Similarly, many throughout history have argued that circumspection in giving is a virtue: the medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides, for instance, delineated 8 "levels of giving" within the tradition of tzedakah (going from best to worst), and the top levels are ones in which neither the giver nor the recipient know each other's identity. (Bremner, 2017).

But if giving quietly is a virtue, it is not one available to MrBeast. His philanthropy is dependent on being highly visible, as it is only through garnering views and likes that his model works. Furthermore, it is not enough simply to be visible; the mode of giving itself also needs to be sufficiently ostentatious to entertain (otherwise no-one would watch).

One can make a positive case for giving more visibly: on the grounds that this brings greater transparency (and therefore, perhaps, greater legitimacy), or that in being more open about philanthropy a donor can set an example for others to follow. The latter, indeed, is the rationale behind initiatives like the Giving Pledge, which encourage the wealthy to make a public commitment to give away a significant proportion of their wealth in order to establish a new peer-led norm for philanthropic giving (The Giving Pledge, n.d.; Soskis, 2017). Although MrBeast has not made it an explicit part of his aim so far to influence others, he certainly does seem to have had some effect on encouraging his peers (i.e., other YouTubers) to act philanthropically. Of course, whether this is because he is establishing a new philanthropic norm of any kind, or simply because other YouTubers can see this is a good way to make money remains to be seen.

4 | THE ETHICS & MORALITY OF BEAST PHILANTHROPY

From an ethical standpoint, would it be better if MrBeast wasn't engaging in philanthropy at all? In order to believe so, we would need to weigh up the good done through his giving against any potential harms done (e.g., disempowering recipients, infringing their rights, undermining the impetus for structural reform). We would also need to take account of the counterfactual: if MrBeast wasn't making videos about giving what would he be doing instead? And, indeed, what would his audience be *watching* instead? This is important, because even if you are not totally enamoured with MrBeast's videos, in the wider context of content that is available on the internet – for example, the huge (and deeply worrying) popularity and influence of “manosphere” influencers like Andrew Tate among young boys – MrBeast's goofy pranks and challenges may look pretty harmless.

That being said, there are ethical concerns about MrBeast's approach that could be placed in the negative column when it comes to assessing his philanthropy. One is the question of consent: to what extent can the people who appear in his videos be said to be “willing” participants? Given that the entire model is based on capturing unguarded reactions, presumably none of the participants are informed beforehand; but are they subsequently given the option not to appear in the final video? Even if they are, there might be questions about whether any consent is genuinely informed – particularly in some of his more recent videos where participants are not necessarily subscribers to any of his channels and may not be familiar with MrBeast, or with what it means to appear in a viral video. It seems reasonable to assume, given the scale and slickness of his operation these days, that MrBeast has given some thought to this and has measures in place to ensure that consent is sought. However, when it comes to some of the other content creators on YouTube and TikTok who make viral “acts of kindness” videos, concerns have been raised that no such steps are taken (Hunt, 2023; Kumamoto, 2022).

Even for those participants who do consent, we may have reason to be concerned about the ethics of how they are *portrayed* in MrBeast's videos. The problem, in a general sense, is that his

recipients are shown as having virtually no agency: they are merely passive actors whose twofold role is to provide a means for him to perform viewer-pleasing acts of generosity, and then to offer suitably effusive and emotional displays of gratitude in response. Presumably, even those who have consented to appear in a video will have little or no say in how they are shown in the final narrative, adding an additional dimension to standard concerns about power dynamics. There is almost always a power imbalance between donors and recipients because the latter are usually competing for scarce resources and the former have the means to provide them (Saunders-Hastings, 2022); but if the donor also exerts almost total control over the medium via which the interaction is shared with a wider audience, then the level of power they hold in relation to recipients is significantly greater. For one thing, the donor can exert an enormous amount of influence over how the nature of recipients' needs is characterised: in the case of the videos in which MrBeast “cures” blindness and deafness, for instance, there is a deliberate framing of both issues as purely medical problems – which lend themselves to clear-cut interventions that can then be presented as ‘solutions’ (Aquino, 2023). The disability studies scholar Paul K. Longmore argues in his work on the history of charity telethons in the US that these fundraising models adopted a similar approach, simplifying problems with multiple complex and often systemic causes into straightforward cases of medical need that could be ‘cured’:

“Telethons made medical needs the overriding concern of people with disabilities in a system devoid of universal health care and with an unravelling safety net” (Longmore, 2015).

The same arguments apply to the presentation of poverty in MrBeast's videos, where the challenges faced are distilled down to “needing money” or “needing a car,” with little or no acknowledgement of the underlying structural issues that may be keeping someone in poverty. It is possible that this reflects an ideological choice on MrBeast's part, if he believes that the primary role of philanthropy is to provide direct relief to those in need rather than to work further upstream in order to address the underlying causes of their need – although it is far more likely that he has never stopped to think about it. In any case, his hands are tied by the medium within which he operates: it is vital for the success of his model that the philanthropy he shows on film makes for compelling viewing, and this dictates an emphasis on individual interventions and tangible solutions, rather than upstream activities like research or advocacy – which tend to be longer-term and more amorphous in nature, and therefore far less televisual.

There may also be ethical concerns about the role that gratitude plays in MrBeast's videos. The relationship of gratitude to philanthropy is complex: on one hand it is a natural reaction to be grateful to someone when they offer us a perceived kindness; on the other hand, gratitude can be a tool to reinforce uneven power dynamics if it is expected or demanded. Throughout human history, across many cultures, gift giving has played an important role in building and

maintaining social bonds – by establishing mutual relationships of reciprocity, in which there is an understood expectation that the gift will be returned in kind at some point in the future (Hyde, 2019; Mauss, 2004). When it comes to charitable gifts, this link of direct reciprocity is broken because there is no expectation that the recipient will repay the gift in kind. Instead we need to draw on a notion of generalized reciprocity over a longer time period (i.e., the idea that we give, in part, because we suspect that 1 day we may ourselves be recipients) (Titmuss, 1970). However, gratitude can also be the basis for an alternative form of direct reciprocity: one where there is no expectation that the recipient will ever return the gift in kind, but they do need to be appropriately grateful for it. The danger here is that what would count as a sufficient quantity of gratitude is impossible to specify, so a giver who wants to wield power over a recipient can do so simply by accusing them of failing to meet their side of the bargain by “not being thankful enough.”

Concerns about the role of gratitude are also tied into a more fundamental question about the nature of philanthropy: is it a choice, or a duty (Martin, 1994; Schneewind, 1996)? In what we have said so far, we have been assuming that philanthropy is a matter of choice on the part of the donor – a voluntary decision to give their private assets away for the public good – to which the appropriate response is gratitude. However, many have argued that philanthropy should instead be seen as a matter of *duty* to at least some extent: something which donors are morally compelled to do by the demands of justice (Ashford, 2018; Cordelli, 2016; Hill, 2018; Singer, 2011). In this case, recipients are entitled to expect, or even demand, resources as a matter of rights; and we should not necessarily expect them to express gratitude (since they are now simply laying claim to something they are rightfully owed).

The challenge for MrBeast when it comes to concerns about gratitude is that he is again constrained by the medium, which makes his particular brand of philanthropy possible. Gratitude on the part of those receiving his surprise gifts is an essential part of his videos, as it helps to ensure that those *watching* the videos have the desired emotional reaction: that is, one that will lead them to like, subscribe and view other MrBeast content, thus generating further resources for future Beast Philanthropy videos. This becomes even more problematic in the case of videos where MrBeast focuses his philanthropic efforts on countries in the Global South. Here, concerns about how recipients' needs are presented and the fact that gratitude is demanded of them combine with racialized power dynamics to create a mix that is potentially deeply uncomfortable. At a time when many traditional NGOs and philanthropic funders are grappling with the challenge of how to avoid succumbing to “white saviourism” in how they understand and present their work (Bhati, 2021; Bhati & Eikenberry, 2016), MrBeast's willingness to make videos that unapologetically cast him as a white saviour handing out his largesse to groups of smiling African children may seem jarringly retrograde. This may not just be a matter of distaste either: some argue that white saviourism and the propagation of “poverty porn” by international development organisations in their fundraising constitute human rights infringements, and need to be taken more seriously (Illingworth, 2022).

In addition to these ethical issues, there is also a question of individual morality: is MrBeast a good person? In order to answer this it is useful to identify four associated questions we can ask to assess a donor's moral worth in light of their philanthropy. First, does their giving produce demonstrable social or environmental good (i.e., are the causes laudable ones, and is the funding effective)? If the answer is no, then we might argue that this person's philanthropy is irrelevant to any assessment of whether they are a good person (or, in some cases, may even count against them if we believe that their philanthropy is actively causing harm). Second, what motivates this person's acts of giving? It is not clear that philanthropy necessarily has to be motivated entirely by altruism – indeed, many scholars have noted that there is a wide range of motivating factors for philanthropic giving, including cultural, psychological and social ones (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Ostrower, 1997) – but the further away the motivations for a particular act of philanthropy seem to be from altruism, the more likely we are to devalue it as a measure of moral worth. Thirdly, how was the donor's wealth accumulated and does this raise ethical questions that undermine the moral legitimacy of their philanthropy? The idea that some wealth is “tainted” has a long history, and many have grappled with the question of whether such “bad money” can be “put to good uses” through charity, or whether it is to be avoided because the moral taint can corrupt others through the acceptance of gifts (Illingworth, 2022; Saunders-Hastings, 2021; Soskis, 2022). Finally, what is the wider context of the donor's life? Are there factors that may not pertain directly to their philanthropy but which we want to balance against it when making an overall assessment of their moral worth? For example, are they known to be an unpleasant person in their personal dealings, have they engaged in criminal activity, or do they have abhorrent views?

This makes it clear that there are multiple ways in which we can assess whether a philanthropic donor is in fact a “good person,” and that these assessments are complex. We can imagine someone, for instance, who is known to be generally decent, has made money in a way that is not problematic, and is engaging in philanthropy for reasons of genuine altruism, but whose giving is entirely ineffective. In this case we may admit that they are a good person, but still argue that their philanthropy plays no part in making that the case. This is in fact fairly close to one of the prevalent criticisms of “do-gooders” and “indiscriminate givers” in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Humphreys, 1995; Jones, 2014). Equally, we can imagine someone whose philanthropy is having an impact, but they are doing it for the wrong reasons, or are engaging in other activities, which may cause greater harm than any good they do through giving. An extreme case of this, as detailed by Jon Dean (2023), is the former UK TV personality Jimmy Savile – who was renowned as a charity donor and fundraiser during his lifetime, but is now known to have been a horrific and prolific sexual predator who deliberately used the “good glow” of charity to mask his activities.

How does this analysis apply to MrBeast? Most people would probably accept that his giving is doing at least some good, even if it is not as strategic as they might like, so on that count we can presumably rate him broadly positively. When it comes to whether his

motivations are good, however, we will almost certainly find more dissent. It is not possible for any of us to look into someone else's heart and determine objectively what is driving their philanthropy, so we have to go on evidence of how they go about their giving and what they say about it. On that basis some may allow that MrBeast is genuinely driven by altruism and a desire to do good; but others will accuse him of “stunt philanthropy,” and of being driven only by a desire to get more likes and clicks for his content.

What about the source of MrBeast's wealth? It would not, on the face of it, seem to be “tainted” in the way that money from the Sackler family or from sanctioned Russian oligarchs is widely agreed to be. However, some might still argue that he is a significant and willing participant in an online attention economy that is increasingly understood to be detrimental to our mental health and wellbeing, and which provides perverse incentives for polarisation, division, and extreme content. Given that, perhaps in the future we will come to look on YouTube creators in the same way that we look on the Sackler family now? There is certainly no consensus of that sort at present, however, which highlights one of the key challenges of determining the tainted nature of wealth: that societal views about what is acceptable when it comes to making money are in constant flux.

Finally, what do we know about the wider context of MrBeast's life beyond his philanthropy that might inform our judgement? There don't appear to be any known factors that would provide a knock-down refutation of his character, but there are some suggestions that his affable persona might hide a darker side. Allegations, for instance, that he has treated his employees badly and created a “hostile” and “toxic” work environment (Asarch, 2021), as well as a history of making homophobic comments online (Lorenz, 2018). Whether this is enough to outweigh the positive value of MrBeast's philanthropy is a matter for debate, but it is certainly something we should take into account as we assess his moral standing.

5 | THE ECONOMICS OF BEAST PHILANTHROPY

There is a long tradition of using entertainment to raise money for charitable causes. George Friedrich Handel gave a performance of *Messiah* in 1749 to raise money for the Foundling Hospital which proved so popular that he repeated it 2 weeks later, and then every year for the rest of his life (raising around £500,000 in today's money in the process) (Classic, 2017). This set a precedent for musicians performing fundraising concerts that has continued ever since; reaching its apogee in the late 20th century with huge one-off events such as The Concert for Bangladesh (1971) and Live Aid (1985) (Lee, 2010).

There is also a well-documented wider history of celebrities using their fame to promote charitable causes and raise money – both individually and through collective efforts – such as the telethons that became commonplace in the US during the second half of the 20th century, or the annual televised fundraising events such as BBC Children in Need and Red Nose Day (in aid of Comic Relief) in the UK. An important element of these is the idea of fundraising “stunts,” that is,

eye-catching challenges undertaken by members of the public or by celebrities that are designed to entertain whilst also raising money through donations and sponsorship. More recently, the internet has enabled stunt fundraising to break out of the confines of organised events: in 2014 the Ice Bucket Challenge became a viral phenomenon which saw more than 17 million people worldwide post videos of themselves having buckets of ice emptied over their heads (and countless variations thereof) and raised over \$115 million for the ALS Association (despite not having been initiated by the organisation). There have subsequently been many other online fundraising challenges, though none have yet replicated the viral success of the Ice Bucket Challenge.

Some have argued that MrBeast merely represents a continuation of this tradition of stunt philanthropy (Lea, 2023), and in an aesthetic and ethical sense perhaps this is true. However, there are fundamental differences between the economic model employed by MrBeast and those used in previous versions of stunt philanthropy; and in this sense MrBeast's approach to giving may be genuinely unprecedented.

One key feature of Beast Philanthropy that differentiates it from traditional models of showbiz charity is that *the philanthropy is the entertainment*. In the past celebrities may have been called upon to sing, dance, and perform comedy sketches as part of a TV fundraising event, in order to provide entertainment and give viewers a reason to watch. They may also have been called upon to present awareness-raising or fundraising videos highlighting the needs being addressed or giving people information on how money raised in previous years has been used. Traditionally there would be a dividing line between these different elements; with the shift from the “entertainment” sections to the “serious charity bits” marked by clear changes of tone on the part of the presenters; to the point where these have become a well-established trope in satirical takes on celebrity fundraising (“and now let's be serious for a moment and remember why we're all here...”). There are some cases in which the lines between the “charity” and “entertainment” elements have previously been blurred, such as when celebrities take part in fundraising challenges that are then used as the basis for documentary pieces (the BBC's Sport Relief, which ran between 2002 and 2022 as an annual televised event, was heavily based on this kind of content). However, even these do not go as far as Beast Philanthropy in making the main subject matter of the video the act of distributing philanthropic resources, so that now the charity *is* the entertainment.

The other distinctive and novel feature of MrBeast's approach to philanthropy is what he asks of viewers; or more importantly what he *doesn't* ask. In previous examples of showbiz philanthropy, we are asked at some point to put our hands in our pockets and donate, since the economic model relies on using our engagement as viewers to turn us into donors for the cause in question. This is not the case with Beast Philanthropy, however. Now, thanks to the way that YouTube's content algorithms and monetisation systems work (Alexander, 2019), instead of a dual relationship between performer and viewer/donor there is a tripartite relationship between performer, viewer and advertiser; in which we are told that we don't necessarily need to give because as long as we watch, *they will pay*. MrBeast himself often

makes this point explicitly: In one video from 2021 he tells viewers “By literally hitting that subscribe button, you are taking 10 cents out of my pocket and giving it to people like we had in the video” (MrBeast, 2021a, 2021b) and in another he has one of his co-presenters ask in a mock-confused tone “so if they hate charity they won't watch the videos?” (MrBeast, 2022a). Miller and Hogg (2023), who have given the first detailed analysis of the economics of Beast Philanthropy, put it thus:

“Unlike previous media-based fundraising, which would ask audience members to contribute money or time to a cause, MrBeast positions his audiences as a knowing audience commodity whose viewership funds direct contributions of other people's money to good causes, merely by watching and being entertained.”

The tripartite relationship between content creator, viewer, and advertiser/sponsor forms the core of the Beast Philanthropy model. We, as viewers and “prosumers” (Miller & Hogg, 2023), are willing to donate our attention, data and engagement, and this is of longer-term value to advertisers/sponsors, who are consequently willing to pay lots of money to MrBeast (which he can then use to make more philanthropic stunt videos for us to watch) (Wade, 2023). Is this, as we are encouraged to believe, a genuine win-win-win? Has MrBeast created a philanthropic perpetual motion machine, in which everyone knows the bargain they have struck, and value is created through some kind of attention economy alchemy? Or is it in reality a battle, in which we as viewers believe we are duping companies into subsidising acts of philanthropy; those companies believe they are taking advantage of our natural attraction to altruism in order to manipulate our future spending behaviour; and meanwhile content creators like MrBeast get us to perform free “labour” in the guise of watching videos? In which case is the whole system in danger of devouring itself, like some sort of gigantic philanthrocapitalist ouroboros? Or, as the *New York Times* put it an “unstoppable flywheel of charity, spectacle and growth – a combination lottery, raffle, game show and telethon, administered by the Willy Wonka of Greenville, N.C.” (Read, 2023).

One obvious problem is that the economic model relies on people watching the videos, and since the philanthropy itself is the spectacle, the requirement to make that philanthropy compelling to the viewer is absolute and comes before anything else. Thus, even where ethical concerns of the sort outlined in this article (e.g., around the portrayal of recipients as “victims,” or around the promotion of individualistic solutions to complex social problems) are recognised, it may be impossible to respond to them if doing so would run counter to the dictates of producing viral content. This challenge may be exacerbated in the future, if MrBeast is driven to ever more outrageous/outlandish acts of “philanthropy” to keep people watching and clicking. As he himself has noted (Fridman, 2023), in the attention economy you don't necessarily need people to *like* what you do, you just need them to engage with it [and often negative content can be easier and more effective than positive content in this regard (Bellovary et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2023)].

A wider concern might be that in promoting the idea that giving can be entirely ‘cost free’, MrBeast is undermining the element of

sacrifice that some would argue is a necessary part of all true philanthropy. As an old Yiddish saying puts it, “if charity cost no money, and benevolence cost no heartache, the world would be full of philanthropists.” Of course, in one sense MrBeast himself is making a sacrifice, since he is foregoing some of the advertising revenue that he could have been making on his videos in order to reinvest that in future acts of philanthropy. However, for the viewer, engaging in this model of philanthropy requires no commitment of resources (apart from, arguably, their own attention and behaviour data understood as valuable commodities). What impact will this have on their willingness to engage in other forms of giving? If, in their mental accounting, they feel as though they have “done their bit” for charity (at least in part) by watching MrBeast's videos, then it may lead them to give less than they otherwise would have in other situations. This is similar to concerns about the impact that other forms of “low friction” engagement such as “slacktivism” or cause-related marketing might have on people's propensity for social action, although the evidence is not yet clear on what this impact actually may be (Kassirer et al., 2023; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Lee & Hsieh, 2013).

The other important thing to note about MrBeast's economic model is that the relationship between engagement and revenue generation for future philanthropy has now been formalised to some extent with the creation of a dedicated “Beast Philanthropy” channel, where 100% of profits from videos are directed towards an affiliated nonprofit (created in 2020). This enables MrBeast to be even more explicit about the way in which our viewing behaviour funds the philanthropic works we are seeing, although it is interesting to note that not all the videos in which MrBeast performs acts of philanthropy are published on the Beast Philanthropy channel. In fact, a number of the videos that have been most watched (particularly those that have proven controversial, such as “1000 Blind People See For The First Time” and “1000 Deaf People Hear For The First Time”) were published on the main MrBeast YouTube channel. It is possible that it is just coincidental, but it may also reflect a conscious decision to get these videos, which may be felt to have a particularly high chance of going viral, out to the widest possible audience by using the main channel (which, at the time of writing, has over 240 million subscribers) rather than the Beast Philanthropy channel (which has 23 million subscribers). However, this does raise the question of whether all the revenues from these videos (which are hugely successful) are directed back towards philanthropy in the same way that they would be if they had been published on the Beast Philanthropy channel, or whether there is some extraction of value. If it is the latter that is clearly MrBeast's prerogative, but it does suggest that greater transparency about where profits are directed might be required in some cases.

6 | THE POLITICS OF BEAST PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropy is, in a sense, inherently political, since we all make choices about where and how to give which reflect our personal views about what is of public value and about how we want society to be. In the case of elite philanthropy, the political dimension is even

more apparent, since big money donors have resources at their disposal, which are of sufficient scale to raise concerns about whether their distribution in the form of donations could have a distorting effect on the direction of public debate and public policy. (Hall, 2013; Reich et al., 2016; Saunders-Hastings, 2018). Philanthropy is also criticised on the grounds that by addressing issues in society which should be dealt with by the state, big donors position their giving (either intentionally or unintentionally) as an alternative to state provision. The problem is that philanthropy is *not*, it is argued, a feasible or suitable alternative to state provision. For one thing there is a mismatch of scale: even in its most expansive guises “philanthropy is a rounding error” when set against governmental spending, as Bill Gates has pointed out. But even if, in individual instances, philanthropy could feasibly take the place of government, it is still seen as problematic for it to do so because in replacing taxation and public spending with philanthropy, we are not trading like for like: instead we replace something based on notions of duty, justice and equitable distribution of resources with something based on notions of individual choice and preferential distribution. Furthermore, by implying that philanthropy can take the place of the state, we may undermine the consensus, which democratically elected governments rely on for maintaining their legitimacy.

MrBeast's philanthropy has certainly come in for criticism along these lines. An article in the *New Republic*, for instance, acknowledged that “*it's really great when people's lives are made better,*” but cautioned that, “*mass uplift should not be subject to the goodwill or charity of a few*” (Thakker, 2023). Twitch streamer Hasan Piker, meanwhile, offered a much more visceral reaction:

“You watch this video and go, ‘Aww, how cute and how nice.’ I watch this video and I'm filled with rage that we shut off access to a ten-minute procedure because we paywalled it and decided that like some people just simply can't get it. It is so insanely frustrating that it's up to like one YouTube guy to decide to make content out of it, that people who are too poor can't just fucking see.”

(Robinson, 2023).

Part of the anger here is not really directed at MrBeast but rather at governments which have made philanthropic interventions like his possible (or perhaps even necessary), through their own failures to meet the welfare needs of citizens (Di Placido, 2023). Given that, is it fair to blame philanthropists for taking actions to address needs which clearly do exist, simply because we would rather that those needs didn't exist or were met by government? From the philanthropists' point of view they may feel as though they are damned if they do and damned if they don't: accused of failing to meet their charitable duties if they don't give, but then accused of positioning themselves as an alternative to government if they do. In reality, many donors are all too aware of this tension and try to balance their efforts between meeting the immediate needs that are often the symptoms of society's problems, and supporting more fundamental reform that can address their underlying causes. Some of the frustration with MrBeast

seems to stem from the perception that he is naïve on this front, and seems blithely unaware of these sorts of challenges. As one critical assessment put it: “*He is totally apolitical, interested in helping people without understanding (or caring about) what causes them to need help in the first place.*” The same article argues that “*MrBeast could actually have done a video on blindness that would have avoided controversy if he had demonstrated some of the anger that Hasan Piker had about how it's absurd that MrBeast even has to do this. He could have not just advocated that people in the audience give money, but encouraged them to think seriously about the fact that this problem could easily cease to exist with a few tweaks to the healthcare financing system.*” (Robinson, 2023). In fairness to MrBeast, however, he is still only 25, and although he is yet to have the Damascene conversion that would see him become a vocal campaigner for healthcare reform, he does appear to be aware of at least some of these issues. Following the release of the video in which he “cures” 1000 blind people, for instance, he tweeted:

“I don't understand why curable blindness is a thing. Why don't governments step in and help? Even if you're thinking purely from a financial standpoint it's hard to see how they don't ROI on taxes from people being able to work again.”

(MrBeast, 2023).

The other problem people have with philanthropy from a political standpoint is not so much with *what* is being done but with *how* it is being done. In contrast with public spending, where decisions are filtered through the mechanisms of electoral democracy, decisions about where to deploy philanthropic resources are often entirely in the hands of the donor – so we as citizens get no say in them, and there is little or no accountability. MrBeast's philanthropy tends to evoke particularly strong reactions on this front, because the nature of the choices he makes and the factors driving them seem to many so problematic. As one Twitter user put it:

“It's the never-ending cycle of content creation that makes MrBeast feel insidious. The underlying notion that if the camera wasn't on to feed the machine nothing would happen. The dystopian thought we're reliant on YouTube views instead of competent government for assistance.”

(Quoted in Weekman, 2023).

Some of it is also linked to the aesthetic concerns we have explored, since the focus on individual recipients in MrBeast's videos and the game show/prank video stylings he employs often make his decisions about where to deploy resources seem wantonly capricious. In the video where he purports to cure 1000 blind people, for example, it is not just that we might have questions about how the people in question were selected, but that as we watch, MrBeast decides to reward some of them further (with an extra \$100,000 in one case and a new Tesla car in another), and this is done seemingly at random. The

image of a “24-year-old YouTube bro who just enjoys playing Willy Wonka, showering golden tickets (blindness cures, bricks of cash, Teslas) on random people” (Robinson, 2023) offers such an exaggerated version of concerns about donors having too much power that it almost acts as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole idea that of society ever relying on philanthropy. As a result, MrBeast may inadvertently have a powerful influence on future debates about the legitimacy and appropriate role of philanthropy within a democracy.

7 | THE INFLUENCE OF BEAST PHILANTHROPY

The last thing to consider in assessing MrBeast's philanthropy is the wider influence he might have on how others engage with giving. We can think of this in relation to three distinct groups: his audience; other content creators and social media celebrities; and mainstream philanthropists and philanthropic organisations.

In terms of his own audience, which consists primarily of children and teenagers, MrBeast clearly has a huge opportunity to exert influence. We have already noted that this might be taken as a cause for concern, if we are worried about how it might shape young people's understanding of the nature of poverty and the role of charity; but equally that we might be grateful that MrBeast has chosen to use his vast platform to talk about philanthropy and generosity, when there are many far less positive messages that young people could be getting through their engagement with the internet and social media.

MrBeast's also has a great deal of power when it comes to influencing other content creators. Anyone who is keen to emulate his enormous success on YouTube (and now TikTok) may want to identify the factors that make MrBeast so good at creating viral content (which he undoubtedly is), and then look for a way of replicating them. MrBeast himself is very open in interviews and discussion about what he believes these factors are: from the amount of money spent on each video (which is huge), to the number of script iterations he goes through (which is many), right down to the highly specific format of the thumbnail image used for each video (which has been fine-tuned to maximise clicks). But the subject matter of the videos is clearly relevant too, so the fact that MrBeast has gained such huge success from videos in which he gives donations of various kinds is likely to influence others to follow suit. Indeed, this is already happening: a YouTuber named Harsha Sai, for instance, has taken the stunt philanthropy model and successfully transplanted it to the context of India – as a result he has amassed an online following of over 22 million people and been dubbed “India's MrBeast.” Sai's videos have also raised ethical concerns and attracted criticism of the same kind that has faced MrBeast (Christopher, 2023). On TikTok, meanwhile, there is a whole subgenre of “acts of kindness” videos in which content creators like Harrison Pawluk surprise strangers with gifts (some of which are monetary, but in other cases the gifts are things like flowers or hugs). These have also proven controversial, as concerns have been raised about the lack of consent on the part of the recipients in the

videos, as well as the potentially exploitative nature of the filmed interactions (Hunt, 2023; Kumamoto, 2022).

MrBeast may have a more direct influence on other content creators too, through his active efforts to engage them in philanthropy. In 2019, to celebrate his 20 millionth subscriber, MrBeast joined forces with the Arbor Day Foundation to establish the “#TeamTrees” project, with the aim of raising \$20 million to plant 20 million trees. He did this in partnership with the popular science YouTuber Mark Rober, and through getting many other creators, famous figures and viewers to donate, they were able to raise over \$24 million and garner more than a billion views (Alexander, 2019; BBC News, 2019; Purcell, 2022; Williams, 2019). The success of this initiative led MrBeast to set up “Team Seas” in 2021, this time with the aim of raising \$30 million to remove 30 million pounds of plastic from oceans and waterways.

The influence of MrBeast on mainstream philanthropy has to date been less noticeable. Despite his obvious success and the scale of his giving, there is little evidence that donors outside the world of content creation are seeking to emulate him, or that traditional philanthropic organisations are giving any thought to what his approach might tell us about potential future trends. This might be because philanthropy is often slow to adapt in the face of new societal or technological developments. Or, it might be because the model that MrBeast has developed is unique to his own skill set and mode of wealth creation, so cannot be replicated more widely. But, it might also be a reflection of underlying concerns about his approach, and perhaps a sense that we should not seek to replicate what he is doing even if we could, because of the many challenges and questions it raises. If that is the case, then it is important that we are clear about the precise nature of any concerns and what it is about his approach to giving that we find problematic. This article has attempted to outline some of the questions we need to be asking, in the hope of sparking further thinking and debate on this issue.

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