



Welcome to the April 2025 newsletter

Hey there philanthropoids,

I hope you are all well. Things are still seeming pretty up and down in the world of global philanthropy and civil society right now, but at least the sun is shining as I write this. So that's nice.

I have been around and about the UK for various events over the past few weeks, so lot of this month's newsletter has been written on the train. If at any point the tone goes slightly weird, please bear that in mind. (I have to say that I find working on the train amazingly productive - in fact, in a radical new turn of events, I am just about to send this edition of the newsletter *from the train* thanks to some unusually reliable Avanti wifi. Maybe I should accept the inevitable and just live on a train from now on?)

Right, that's more than enough waffling. Even by my usual standards this is an absurdly long edition of the newsletter, so we really had better get on with things.

Rhodri

PHILANTHROPY IN THE NEWS

Tax Attacks: Trump threatens nonprofit exemptions

I have been trying to keep coverage of the various pronouncements and actions of the Trump administration to a level of manageable awfulness in this newsletter since the start of the year. (For the sake of my own mental health and wellbeing, as well as yours). Unfortunately, however, given that the administration increasingly appears to be waging a deliberate and outright war on nonprofits and civil society - which could have profound consequences in the US and beyond - we can't really afford to look away right now. So, with a suitably heavy heart, let's begin the newsletter once again with a roundup of the latest developments in the US.



This month saw Harvard University become a new focal point of Trump's ire, for supposedly "pushing political, ideological, and terrorist inspired/supporting "Sickness"". The accusation stems from earlier criticisms that Harvard (and other US universities) had been guilty of failing to clamp down more forcefully on purported 'antisemitism' among students and staff linked to protests over the ongoing situation in Palestine. However, as many commentators have noted, there are plenty of people in Trump's orbit (including Vice President J.D. Vance)

whose antipathy towards higher education institutions and their perceived 'liberal bias' goes back much further than this, so it is likely that they would have found another hook for their criticisms if it hadn't been this one.

At first, the Trump administration used the same approach it has used in previous attacks on nonprofits this far: threatening to withdraw (or actually withdrawing) government support. In this case, [freezing \\$2 billion in federal grants and \\$60 million in contracts that Harvard was due to receive](#), which the government says it will only release if the university complies with a list of demands that includes 'reporting students to the federal government who are "hostile" to American values' and 'ensuring each academic department is "viewpoint diverse"'.

But then the administration pivoted to a new line of attack; threatening to strip Harvard of its tax-exempt status in addition to cutting off direct government funding. This immediately prompted wider fears that the administration might undertake a wider policy of challenging the tax status of nonprofits that it doesn't like; fears that seemed well-founded [when rumours began to emerge of plans to strip environmental nonprofits of their tax-exempt status](#) as part of the Trump administration's efforts to delegitimise climate change initiatives. [Administration officials have subsequently denied that they have any such plans](#), but many in the nonprofit world are wary of taking these denials at face value and [fear that challenges to the tax status of nonprofits that the government doesn't like may well come back again in the future](#).

The key question, then, is could the Trump administration actually do what they say, and strip nonprofits of their tax-exempt status? [There was an interesting piece in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* considering precisely this question](#). The consensus from experts seems to be that in normal circumstances the answer would almost certainly be 'no', because the President doesn't have the power to strip an organisation's tax exemptions arbitrarily; but at the same time we should be wary of assuming that this will necessarily hold true under Trump's presidency, when it looks increasingly likely that at some point he will test his power by simply refusing to accept constraints imposed by the law.

The argument used by Trump is that tax exemption is a 'privilege' granted by government (i.e. him) to nonprofits that 'serve the public interest', and that in his view since Harvard is failing to serve the public interest, it can therefore be stripped of its tax-exempt status (by him). Now, as someone who has an unusual level of interest in the history and theory of how tax reliefs for philanthropy are justified (because, as previously discussed, I Am Cool), to me this begs a whole heap of important questions. (If you want a deep dive on that history and theory, by the way, you can check out [this episode of the Philanthropisms podcast](#) or read [this excerpt from my 2016 book "Public Good by Private Means"](#)). The assertion that tax exemption is a privilege, for instance, was directly contradicted by Benjamin Disraeli during a House of Commons debate in 1863, where he argued that "exemption is not a privilege – it is a right". Which is not to say that Disraeli was right (in fact, in this instance, I don't think he was), but does show that there is prior work to be done to establish as claim either way. The odd thing to me is that there is actually a certain kernel of truth in Trump's argument (almost certainly accidentally), in that in a sense tax exemption for nonprofits *is* a privilege (IMHO) - reflecting a subsidy given by government in the form of tax foregone (both on the nonprofit's own finances and on donations to it). However, where I very much part company from Trump is in maintaining that this is a privilege granted through laws and regulations that are agreed by democratic means - which determine the causes areas and types of activities that can be deemed to be in the public interest and therefore meet the eligibility requirements for tax exemption - and not a privilege that can be bestowed or taken away by an individual politician like some sort of evil wizard.

One of the problems here, as far as I see it, is that this whole question of the underlying rationale for the tax-exempt status of charities and nonprofits (and for tax breaks on donations to them) has, throughout history, too often been left unexplored. It has been assumed to be obvious, rather than proactively explained or argued for. And when the subject has come up, it has tended to result in a confusing mishmash of people talking past each other on the basis of prior assumptions and confident assertions, rather than leading to further clarity. That has left

the question of tax exemption as a soft underbelly, through which nonprofits remain vulnerable to political attacks of the kind now been mounted by Trump.

For a bit of international perspective, the situation may be slightly better in somewhere like the UK where there is a separate charity regulator, since the question of public benefit and charitable status is separated to some extent from the question of tax status. (And is not determined or policed directly by the tax authority). However, in case any UK readers were feeling smug, I still don't think we should be complacent about similar debates brewing here in future. There is a clear cyclical history of the tax status of charities and donations coming up for debate in this country, and in an age of culture war politics where even the most seemingly technical and abstruse issues can become highly-contested battlefields, there is every chance of it happening again.

Government Overreach: DOGE & the Vera Institute

Another noteworthy story this month which falls under the heading of “Trump Administration awfulness towards nonprofits” was the news that [Elon Musk’s DOGE department sought to embed a team of officials in the offices of a nonprofit organisation \(the Vera Institute of Justice\)](#), on the grounds that it received a large amount of federal funding.



[Image by Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

In the end, the Vera Institute was able to push back by pointing out that all of its federal funding had in fact been cancelled a week earlier, so it no longer received any money from government, and the DOGE officials withdrew their demands. It may well be that in this instance DOGE's actions were driven partly by lack of knowledge and understanding – as has been pointed out in many places, a lot of their staff are extremely young men from a tech background who have almost zero knowledge of anything outside their own narrow sphere of interest, so it wouldn't be that surprising if they simply didn't understand the fundamental

difference between a governmental department or body (of the kind that they have already embedded teams in) and an independent nonprofit that happens to receive government funding in the form of grants or contracts. (And according to reports, the DOGE officials didn't know that Vera's existing funding had been cut, so they weren't exactly all over the details).

However, it is also possible that the DOGE team understood the distinction between government bodies and nonprofits receiving government funding perfectly well, but were explicitly trying to elide it in order to expand their own power. If that is the case, it will be a real source of concern for other nonprofits that still receive government funding, and might now fear that DOGE will make similar demands to embed teams in their organisations.

This story highlights the fact that the relationship between government and nonprofits can be complex and contested. It is particularly important to distinguish between those cases where nonprofits are doing work that overlaps to some extent with the remit of the state, but are funding it themselves through donations; and the cases in which nonprofits are delivering outcomes *on behalf of the state* through grants or contracts to deliver services. In many places, including the UK and the US, there is a long tradition of using both approaches to deliver a "mixed economy" of provision, but there is a clear difference between the two as well. Where nonprofits are doing things that fit in with the state's priorities, but are doing so without state funding, they are clearly independent in a genuine sense. However, when they are receiving funding from government, this is less clear. It is nice to assume that you can do both - to accept government money and still maintain full independence - but can you really? If an organisation become dependent on government funding, what is the likelihood that over time it will direct its activities towards those things that fit in most clearly with government priorities? Likewise, will it think twice about engaging in advocacy or campaigning work that is critical of government if this runs the risk of putting future funding in jeopardy? And that is before you consider examples where the government has *overtly* tried to put pressure on nonprofit organisations it is funding, as is the case with various charities in the UK that have been made subject to "advocacy

clauses” which make government grant funding contingent on agreeing to refrain from engaging in campaigning work that is critical of government policy. (Even if that work is not itself funded by government money).

There is definitely existing reason, therefore, to have concerns about the effect that government funding can have on nonprofit independence. So maybe this attempted move by DOGE is just the latest, and most blatant yet, example of a longer term trend?

US Philanthropy Fighting Back?

The stories outlined above are clearly very worrying. But there is also cause for hope that a fightback against the Trump Administration’s war on civil society might be gaining momentum.



At the start of the month, the *New York Times* published an editorial offering “a playbook for standing up to President Trump”, in which it argued that:

“In his attacks on law firms, universities and other American institutions, President Trump is relying on an illusion. The illusion is that the institutions

are powerless to fight back and that they face a choice between principle and survival.

These institutions do not have to capitulate to Mr. Trump. They have a realistic path to defeating his intimidation. Some law firms and others have begun to fight. In doing so, they have provided the beginnings of a playbook for standing up to his attempts to weaken core tenets of American democracy, including due process, free speech and the constitutional system of checks and balances.”

On an individual level, Harvard University provided an example of this by [immediately launching a lawsuit against the Trump administration](#), suing them over the withdrawal of \$2.3 billion highlighted above. We are also starting to see a greater number of philanthropic funders start to speak up. [John Palfrey, President of the MacArthur Foundation, for instance issued a call this month](#) for foundations to “stand together on a series of very important bedrock principles, and do so with linked arms, and do so in such a way that allows us to serve every community in America in a way that will ensure a strong republic for years to come”. This was accompanied by the launch of [a new initiative convened by the Council on Foundations](#), bringing together more than 500 philanthropic foundations that have signed up to a joint public statement in support of the basic right of philanthropic organisations to fund and operate freely. In an article explaining their support for the initiative, John Palfrey (along with Tonya Allen from the McKnight Foundation and Deepak Bhargava from the Freedom Foundation) argue that foundations should [“prepare for what’s coming, but don’t obey in advance”](#).

Antisocial Media: Meta, Pinterest & tainted donations

Regular readers will know that one of my favourite topics is the recurrent spectre of “tainted donations” (i.e. money from sources about which we have reason to have moral concerns), and the complex ethical and practical questions they raise. This month there was a particularly interesting example, when it was revealed by the BBC that [both Meta and Pinterest had made undisclosed and “significant” donations to the Molly Rose Foundation](#), a charity set up in the name of teenager Molly

Russell, who took her own life in 2017 after being exposed to suicide and self-harm content on the internet (with Facebook and Pinterest being singled out for particular culpability).



One of the key questions when it comes to tainted donations is always whether the donor is getting any sort of reputational benefit from their gift. Examples where this is clearly the aim understandably give rise to ongoing concerns about the potential for 'reputation laundering' – when overt public acts of generosity are used to deflect attention from criticism of the donor or to counterbalance concerns about how they have made their money. But even if the donor's intentions are genuine, and they not deliberately trying to garner good PR with their giving, the concern is that they might gain a reputational benefit anyway, so the charity they are giving to will still end up being used in a way that they might not be comfortable with.

That is why there is actually a pretty strong argument in these kinds of cases for donors who are well-intentioned to give anonymously (despite the fact that we often take transparency and openness to be unquestionable goods); because that way they remove any question of them getting a reputational benefit. Although, as I often point out to charities who are grappling with these kinds of questions, whilst it is true that keeping donations from a contentious source anonymous might help solve some of these problems, that does rely on the

information remaining confidential. If the donation subsequently becomes public knowledge, however, the danger is that criticism will end up being significantly worse because concerns about the source of the money will be compounded by criticism of efforts to keep it a secret.

The interesting thing in the story that came out this month is this is precisely what has happened. Meta and Facebook *did* initially make their donations anonymously, and it only subsequently came to light. I obviously don't know what was behind the decision to keep the donations secret (and neither company has commented), but it is certainly possible that it was driven in part by a desire to avoid looking like they were seeking a PR benefit. Or it might have been a more self-interested calculation, with both companies feeling as though they were more likely to receive criticism rather than praise for their donations. Either way, now that the donations are public, it will be interesting to see what happens next. Will Meta and Pinterest get a delayed reputational benefit now that this is public? (With the added bonus of looking like they weren't seeking one?) Or does this whole thing just bring public attention back to the role of social media in causing harms to young people in a way that is more likely to lead to further criticism? Thus far the jury is out, but my guess would be that it is more of the latter than the former.

One of the other big questions that always comes up in relation to tainted donations is whether the charity should take the money. The legal bar for saying no is pretty high (as the Charity Commission have been at pains to reiterate in recent years), so the trustees of the Molly Rose Foundation may have felt that it was their fiduciary responsibility to accept the donation (with the decision perhaps made easier by the fact that it was anonymous, for the reasons outlined above). For my money, the trustees have probably done the right thing to take the money in this case: I'm not sure the tech companies will gain much from this story coming out, and I would rather the charity had the resources than Meta or Pinterest. However, based on my experience I would imagine that the decision was not an easy one, since the underlying ethical question of whether it is better to take 'bad money' and put it to good uses, or to refuse it in an effort to keep your hands clean, is an

extremely thorny one that has taxed people and organisations throughout history. (And I'm sure will continue to do so).

Just Stop, Just Stop Oil?

It was reported this month that [the environmental campaign group Just Stop Oil is to disband after a “last day of action” in London](#). The group had become famous over recent years for its high-profile protest activities – including road blockages and acts of vandalism against works of art including Van Gogh's sunflowers. In the eyes of some, Just Stop Oil were a highly effective campaigning group, which had successfully used shock tactics and disruption to bringing greater urgency to climate issues and the need to move away from fossil fuels. Others, however, felt that Just Stop Oil's tactics went too far, and were counterproductive because they alienated and annoyed many members of public and undermined the group's messages.



[Image by Alisdare Hickson, CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

Just Stop Oil has tried to spin the decision to end its activities as a sign of success in having achieved its main aim of convincing the UK government not to issue any new licenses to drill oil. An [in-depth analysis piece by the BBC, however, suggested that it has also been driven by the introduction of new legislation](#) (the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act in 2022) which had made the environment for protest much more difficult, as a result of the police now having the power to arrest people for 'conspiracy to intentionally cause public

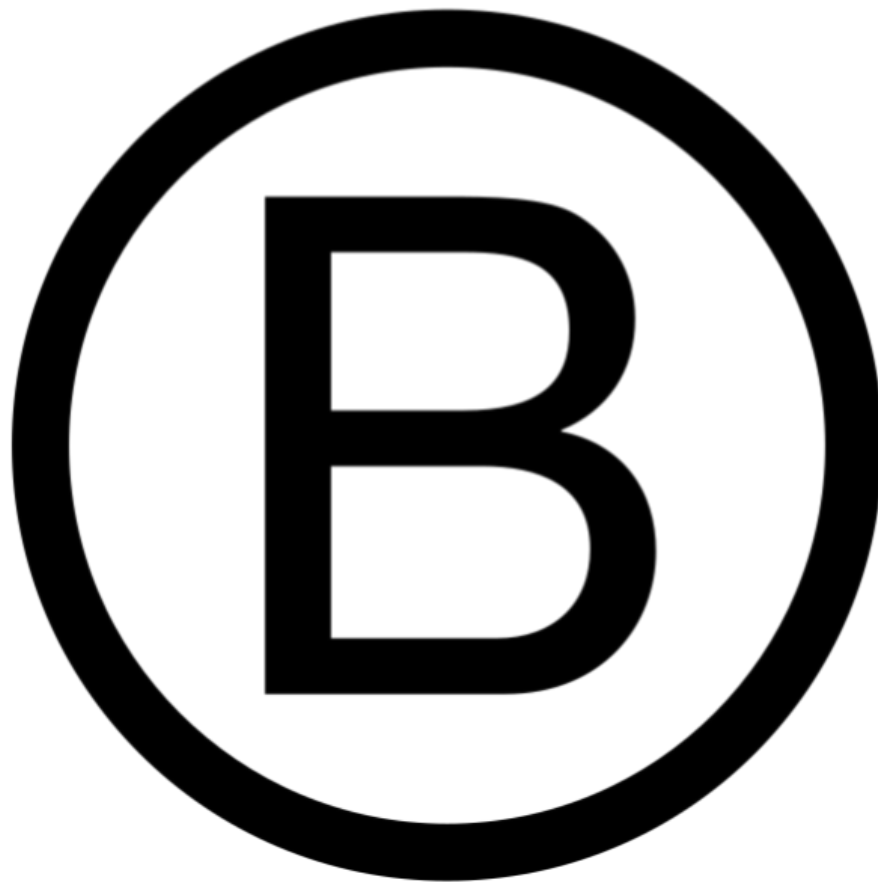
nuisance'. This has been compounded by the law courts having decided not to take into account claims that protestors have a "lawful excuse" if their actions are motivated by clear beliefs about the severity of the climate crisis. So anyone engaging in, or even just planning, these kinds of disruptive protests now faces being arrested before they ever get a chance to put their plans into action, as happened recently when [a group of youth activists was arrested during a planning meeting at a Quaker Meeting House in London](#)).

For some, this might be seen as a success story: the government has responded to criticisms and concerns from the police and the public about disruptive protest tactics by introducing new powers that are clearly making it harder to engage in these kinds of activities. However, for anyone who values the fundamental freedoms on which civil society rests (freedom of association, freedom of speech, the right to protest), and thinks that a bit of occasional disruption is a price worth paying to defend these freedoms, there may be a lot less to celebrate. Particularly when these freedoms are already being systematically eroded in many places around the world.

B Corps You're Worth It: changes to B Corp certification

I have been among those who have cast a slightly sceptical eye at B Corps over the last few years; not because the idea is an inherently bad one (it's not - in fact I would say that in principle it is a terrific idea), but because there seem to have been a growing number of examples of B Corps behaving badly in ways that suggest the accreditation might not be sufficiently rigorous, and as a result have left itself open to becoming a tool for "purpose washing". I was really interested, therefore, to read [a piece in the FT this month about a major overhaul of the B Corp certification](#) designed to address these kinds of concerns.

Certified



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Corporation

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As the article highlights, one of the main problems is that under the existing B Corp methodology an organisation only needs to reach a certain number of points overall – so it is possible to score extremely highly on one criterion (e.g. ‘social purpose’) whilst doing terribly on others (such as ‘environmental impact’ or ‘paying enough tax’) and still be approved as a B Corp. That is why some companies have been able to remain as B Corps despite widely publicised concerns over aspects of

the way they do business, which (I would argue) has been harmful to the overall B Corp brand. Under the new certification methodology, however, a company will have to meet a wide range of minimum standards across seven key areas. Hence, as the FT article puts it, “B Corps will no longer have the option of neglecting more difficult areas and compensating with outperformance in others”.

The article does make it clear that not everyone believes the changes are sufficient, and that there are critics who would have liked reforms of the B Corp certification system to have gone further still. The challenge for B Lab (the organisation that awards B Corp status) however, is to find the right balance between making the accreditation sufficiently rigorous that it has credibility, but not so onerous that companies which genuinely want to do better are put off from applying.

The Zeal of the Convert? Rutger Bregman on Moral Ambition

One of the things that has been filling up my various timelines towards the latter half of this month is mention of Rutger Bregman’s new book “Moral Ambition”. I first heard about the book last year, when Bregman started to talk about his ideas and his aims of establishing a new ‘school for moral ambition’ (which has now launched). As [my University of Kent colleague Beth Breeze noted at the time](#), Bregman’s new narrative about the crucial role of individuals in driving social change seemed like something of a volte-face for a man who had previously been most famous for [denouncing philanthropy as “bullshit” at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019](#).



[Image by Maartje ter Horst, CC BY 4.0](#)

The crux of Bregman's new book, [as detailed in a fairly breathless article in the Guardian](#), is a call to arms for people to demonstrate the "moral ambition" of the title, and to choose to put their talents and skills to work doing something that has societal value rather than going to work in a tech company or hedge fund. Those who are familiar with the

Effective Altruism movement will immediately recognise this as a deliberate corrective to the “Earn to Give” ethos espoused by some within the movement, which advocates that young clever people should not waste their time working directly on social issues or causes, but should instead use their talents to get the highest paying jobs they can, with the aim of earning huge wads of cash that they can give to suitably ‘effective’ organisations to do the work. There are plenty of problems with this idea – not least the fact that it appears to have played a part in allowing the disgraced crypto billionaire and EA aficionado Sam Bankman Fried to justify his own fraudulent actions to himself on the grounds that the means were justified by the ends (as covered in previous editions on this newsletter). It has also always struck me that the Earning to Give philosophy ignores the question of who actually *does* the work that will deliver social impact. The implication seems to be that this is a role for those who aren’t sufficiently smart and brilliant to get a job in finance - which seems to me to be unbelievably patronising and disparaging to the many people out there working in nonprofits who are extremely smart but just happen to have chosen to put it to work in a way that isn’t solely aimed at the accumulation of wealth. (I suppose you could say that they had some sort of “moral ambition”....)

So, in broad terms, I am very much on Bregman’s side here. I, too, think that more people should choose to spend their lives doing things that have moral worth; and that history shows us that when they do, it can have a transformative effect on society. I should also say that I haven’t yet had the chance to read the book itself, so I am entirely basing my opinions on the excerpts I have been able to read (such as [this one](#)) and on reviews (like [this one from former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams](#)). I will definitely read it in due course, but I already strongly suspect that there are things about it that I will find slightly annoying...

The first is that, as someone who has read a decent amount of philanthropy history, the idea that committed individuals who dedicate their lives to fighting for justice and pushing for social progress can make a big difference doesn’t seem particularly revolutionary. Indeed, I am quite fond of citing a quote from Friedrich Hayek which basically says exactly this:

"We cannot attempt to recount here the long story of all good causes which came to be recognized only after lonely pioneers had devoted their lives and fortunes to arousing the public conscience, of their long campaigns until they gained support for the abolition of slavery, for penal and prison reform, for the prevention of cruelty to children or animals, or for a more humane treatment of the insane. All these were for a long time the hopes of only a few idealists who strove to change the opinion of the overwhelming majority concerning certain accepted practices."

Or this great quote from the historian Benjamin Kirkman Gray's 1905 book [*A History of English Philanthropy: From the Dissolution of the Monasteries to the Taking of the First Census*](#)

"The work of the agitator holds beyond all question the primacy in reform, and also that in the discharge of this effort the philanthropist has proved himself preeminently successful, it will be of comparatively small importance if other functions which he has also discharged may appear to be not properly his function at all. His own contribution to the amelioration of social existence will remain a thing unique and beyond cavil. It is his to discover those larger ends of common welfare which reach beyond the moral perceptiveness of ordinary men in their ordinary moods. He is as it were an explorer in the unmapped world of the ideal life, from whence he brings back news of an unreachd good, such tidings as sound like travellers' tales in our ears, but which haunt the minds of men until they seek to verify the story by a practical policy calculated to transform the actual."

I also occasionally like to bore captive audiences by explaining at length that in the early days of what could be termed "modern philanthropy" in the UK, "philanthropist" was a term closely associated with those who engaged in campaigning and political activity aimed at social reform, (such as the prison reformer John Howard or the anti-slavery campaigner Granville Sharp), rather than the giving of large amounts of money. (This was, in fact, one of the main points made in [my 2016 book *Public Good by Private Means*](#)). I realise that Bregman is writing for a general audience who may never have thought about any of this before, so there is a need to avoid assuming any prior knowledge, but I still can't help my toes curling just a little bit whenever I read one of these books in which fairly well-worn ideas are packaged up and presented as

searing new insights. (Although it is entirely possible that this may be partly down to sour grapes on my part because I haven't yet managed to write a breakout mainstream bestseller).

The other thing that has annoyed me so far in reading about Bregman's book is that some of the framing of what constitutes a "morally ambitious" approach to life seems a bit reductive. (Again, without having read the book in full yet, I don't know if this is down to Bregman's own framing, or the way in which it has been presented by others, but either way it is annoying). Bregman clearly makes use of [David Graeber's concept of "bullshit jobs"](#) to segment different potential approaches to careers, and the *Guardian* put together a graphic which appears to suggest that there is a binary choice between having a bullshit job (which is meaningless and adds nothing to society) and doing something morally ambitious. But this seems far too simplistic to me: what about jobs such as shopworker, plumber or vet? These seem genuinely necessary in order for society to function but don't appear to meet the standards of 'moral ambition'. Also, crucially, these jobs pay – which, for most people, is a basic consideration when it comes to work. The problem with "morally ambitious" work is that it doesn't always pay (and even when it does, it doesn't often pay that well), so many people wouldn't have the luxury of considering this as their main career. Does that mean that we should all be volunteering our time for free in addition to earning a wage if we want to be "morally ambitious"? I'm certainly a fan of volunteering, and would love people to do more of it, but the idea that everyone is in a position to do large amounts of unpaid work feels unrealistic. Or do we need to rely on people who don't *need* to earn a wage for their work i.e. independently wealthy philanthropists? This was certainly what Hayek thought – his immediate follow up to the thoughts about individual social change agents outlined above was to argue that this was grounds for welcoming a strata of "the idle rich" in society:

"There must be, in other words, a tolerance for the existence of a group of idle rich - idle not in the sense that they do nothing useful but in the sense that their aims are not entirely governed by considerations of material gain. The fact that most people must earn their income does not make it less

desirable that some should not have to do so, that a few be able to pursue aims which the rest do not appreciate."

I wouldn't have thought too many people would be particularly enthusiastic about such an argument today, but Bregman's notion of moral ambition does seem as though it could lead to similar conclusions.

Anyway, that's enough harping on for now. I'm definitely going to read the book as soon as I get the chance, and even if I don't end up agreeing with it, I'm grateful to Bregman for kickstarting a mainstream debate on this topic!

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

This is the section where I update you on what we have been doing at Why Philanthropy Matters over the last month or so.

On the Philanthropisms Podcast:

We had some more great guests on the podcast this month. First up we had the ninth in our partnership series with ERNOP - this time featuring mini interviews with Mark Ørberg, Michele Fugiel Gartner and Oonagh Breen. And later in the month we also had a brilliant conversation about participatory grantmaking with Natasha Friend and Maria Ahmed.



Philanthropisms

ERNOP: Connecting Philanthropy
Academia & Practice #9





Philanthropisms

Natasha Friend and Maria Ahmed:
Participatory Grantmaking



[Listen to the ERNOP episode](#)

[Listen to the episode with Natasha & Maria](#)

Webinar on AI

I took part this month in a webinar on AI and charities for Benefact and DSC. The live event was unfortunately slightly plagued by technical difficulties which affected some people's viewing, but I re-recorded a version of my presentation for upload, which you can watch back for free.

[Watch the webinar](#)

Understanding Philanthropy Conference

This month I also took part in the annual Understanding Philanthropy conference hosted by the Centre for Philanthropy at the University of Kent (where I work part-time). It was great to see so many current and former students there, and to hear lots of interesting thoughts and insights from the stage. I was lucky enough to be in conversation with Stephen King, former CEO of Luminate, for one of the sessions, and we had a fascinating discussion about philanthropy and social change.



H/T to Marina Jones for this image- which I hope she doesn't mind me nicking off LinkedIn!

OTHER GOOD STUFF

This is the bit where I share other philanthropy-related things I have come across this month that might not quite count as news but are definitely worth checking out.

Rihanna's philanthropy:

There was [a good piece from the Associated Press this month on the evolution of Rihanna's philanthropy](#). It has been apparent for a while that Ri-Ri is a pretty good celebrity billionaire egg, and she has been doing some interesting philanthropy for a while without making too much fuss about it, but her philanthropic profile seems set to increase

over coming years as her Clara Lionel foundation crystallises its strategic focus on five key areas - including women's entrepreneurship, climate solution and health access and equity. It is also interesting to hear that the foundation has adopted a firmly trust-based approach to funding, with grantees speaking enthusiastically about their dealings with the organisation. More, please.



[Read the article](#)

More on MrBeast:

Sticking with celebrity philanthropy for a moment (albeit of a more contentious variety), there were a couple of things that caught my eye this month about everyone's favourite burger-shilling Youtube almsgiver, MrBeast (aka Jimmy Donaldson). The first was a comment piece in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* about the [deleterious effect MrBeast's approach to giving might be having on the understanding and expectations Gen Z have when it comes to giving](#). This is worth a read, even if I'm not sure there is anything particularly new in it. (Although I say that as someone who has written [an entire academic journal article about MrBeast's philanthropy](#) that makes many of the same points,

which I would immodestly suggest you read as a companion piece if you're interested).

The second thing that caught my eye was a piece in *FastCompany* reporting on comments from MrBeast defending himself from precisely these kinds of criticisms. The really interesting thing to me is that to drive home his argument that he isn't just doing it for the money, he points out that amongst the last ten videos he had put out, the two that are focussed on philanthropy had the lowest number of views. Thus, as he puts it, "I would get way more views if I didn't help thousands of people". On the one hand this kind of narrative is probably helpful for MrBeast, since it makes it look more like he is making a real sacrifice and people might therefore be more inclined to view his philanthropy favourably as a result. On the other hand, the one thing that seemed genuinely novel and interesting about his approach to philanthropy (as I argued in the paper cited above) is the economic model he had developed, in which views were converted into philanthropic dollars via the magic of Youtube's AdSense advertising algorithm. In order for this to continue to work, however, people have to actually want to watch the videos, so if this kind of content is increasingly failing to garner views, does that mean the longer-term prospects for Beast Philanthropy are not so good? (Of course everything is relative, and it is important to remember that "fewer views" in the context of a MrBeast video still means "millions of views", so he's probably fine for now!)



[Image by Steven Kahn, CC BY 4.0](#)

Read the COP piece

Read the FastCompany piece

The War on Empathy?

[A piece in the *Guardian* this month picked up on Elon Musk's recent comments about empathy being "the fundamental weakness of Western civilization"](#) and highlighted that that appears to reflect a wider "war on empathy" being led by right-wing populist in partnership with the Christian Right. Now, it may seem odd that Christians are arguing against empathy and compassion (and, indeed, I know plenty of Christians who find this way of thinking to be abhorrent and thinking it represents a wilful perversion of Christian teaching). However, in a polarized world in which religious and political extremists increasingly portray those who hold differing views as not merely wrong, but evil, it is possible to argue that a willingness to accept and care for others (if they happen to be the "wrong kind" of others) is no longer something to be lauded, but a weakness to be stamped out. As I argued in [a recent WPM piece exploring the historical context and implications of Musk's recent statement](#), this is an insidious idea with a long history, that can have potentially very damaging consequences, so we need to challenge it whenever it arises.



[Read the article](#)

Sociopathic billionaires?

Abigail Disney, who has become a prominent voice at the intersection of radical philanthropy and tax reform, popped up again this month – giving an interview in which [she highlights her concerns about rampant wealth inequality and argues that “every billionaire who can’t live on \\$999 million is kind of a sociopath”](#). Discuss...



[Image by U.S. Institute of Peace, CC BY 2.0](#)

[Read the article](#)

Mackenzie Scott's main moments:

On the topic of formidable female philanthropists (mmm, alliteration), *Fortune* had a piece this month highlighting [“5 key moments in Mackenzie Scott’s life that made her the ultra philanthropist she is today”](#). I wouldn’t say it is the most incisive thing I have ever read, but there are a couple of interesting nuggets in there. I’m also never quite sure what to think about this kind of framing when it comes to elite philanthropy - I can certainly see how a glossy celeb pages focus on the individual could potentially undermine efforts to get people thinking more deeply about structural and systemic issues, but on the other

hand there is no getting away from the fact that philanthropy is (to some extent) an inherently individual act, so we are understandably fascinated by the lives of big givers and what drives them. (I had [an interesting conversation with the former philanthropy journo Teddy Schleifer \(now at the New York Times\) a few years back about this question of how to cover philanthropy](#), which is worth checking out).



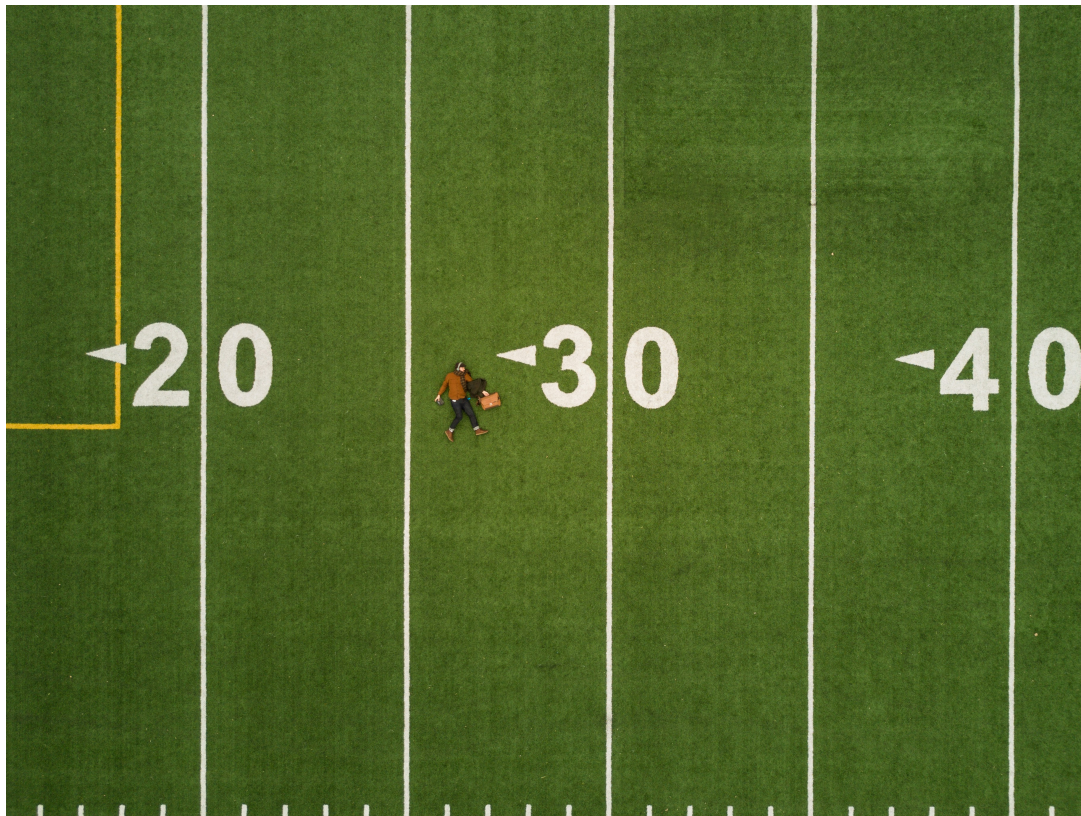
[Image by Softballweyr, CC BY 4.0](#)

[Read the article](#)

US Philanthropy 40 under 40:

To round out this mini-triptych of US big money philanthropy nuggets, *Inside Philanthropy* had its annual list of "[Philanthropy's Most Powerful People Under 40](#)" this month. Alongside the ones you've probably

already heard of (including Rihanna and MrBeast – who you have *definitely* heard of because I wrote about them about 20cm further up in this newsletter) there are lots of other less-familiar names, many of whom are scions of vast family fortunes and are likely to play a pretty big role in shaping philanthropy over the next few decades, so it is probably worth making a mental note!



[Read the article](#)

Stealth Foundations:

On the subject of philanthropic influence, another thing in *Inside Philanthropy* that caught my eye was a piece by Michael Kavate, who has been tracking the rise of “stealth foundations” over the past year or so, and here [highlights seven funders that have assets in the billions but maintain a very low profile](#). (None of them even have a website). To me, this raises a bunch of really interesting questions about the balance between transparency and anonymity in philanthropy. It is easy to assume that if donors aren’t overly forthcoming with information, it is because they have something to hide – but there are also plenty of valid

reasons why a donor might want to keep their giving relatively quiet (e.g. religious belief or concerns about opening themselves up to fundraising). In fact, as the article points out, we often have a tendency to view donors as more admirable if they are clearly not trying to put themselves at the centre of things, so in that sense anonymity is an *admirable* trait. However, this does need to be balanced against the reduced level of scrutiny and therefore accountability that also comes with doing things anonymously; and when people are giving sums of money that are big enough to have an impact on public policy and debate (and getting a tax incentive to do so), there is a pretty strong argument that society as a whole has a right to know what they are doing.



[Read the article](#)

Children and Philanthropy:

At the other end of the scale from multi-billion dollar elite philanthropy, there was an interesting article in *Nonprofit Quarterly* this month by Anna Patton (who I'm pretty sure reads this newsletter, so hello Anna!), [highlighting various programs that aim to teach children about philanthropy and social action](#). The piece notes that whilst in the past

children have often been taught about charity using notions of pity (“let’s help these poor people”), there are now efforts to think about how they could instead be taught more positive and empowering models based on ideas of solidarity and justice. Shout-out too to my former University of Kent colleague Ali Body, who is quoted in the article talking about her research on philanthropy and children (which culminated in a book, [*Children as Changemakers*](#) last year).



[Read the article](#)

Pay-To-Help?

[A piece in *The Conversation* this month highlighted an apparent new trend of “pay to help”, in which nonprofits are now charging companies to do volunteering with them.](#) This might seem counterintuitive, given that our traditional view of corporate volunteering is one in which companies run programs that enable their staff to go and give their time to support partner charities, and the charities are generally presumed to be grateful for the help. However, it makes a lot more sense when you realise that in reality managing volunteers takes time and resources, so if the companies are not making a financial contribution as well, it may well end up costing the charity more to offer corporate volunteering

opportunities than the value of the support they get. It is also fair to point out that corporate volunteering may not be entirely motivated by pure altruism on the part of the companies that offer it, since they get benefits in the form of staff satisfaction and enhanced corporate reputation. If that is the case, asking them to pay something in order to place their staff on volunteer opportunities seems fair enough to me.

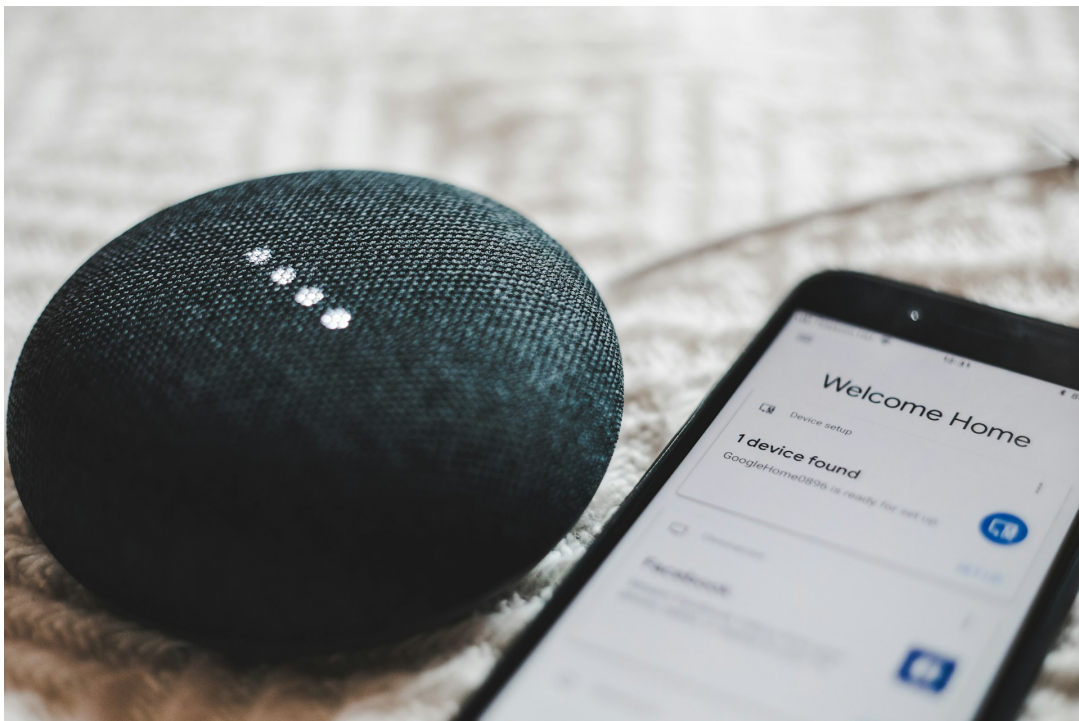


[Read the article](#)

AI and voice command giving:

There was some reporting in both [FastCompany](#) and [BusinessWire](#) this month about a new feature on the giving platform daffy.org, which allows users to make donations using a simple natural language voice command or text prompt (e.g. "make a donation of £30 to Cancer Research UK"). This veers quite close to the sort of corporate PR puff piece that I would normally steer well clear of, but on the other hand I have a particular interest in the role that algorithms are likely to play in shaping philanthropic giving choices in coming years (as per [my chapter in the Routledge Handbook of Artificial Intelligence and Philanthropy](#)), so I thought this was worth flagging up.

I have thought for a while that giving via voice commands is potentially a major growth area, but that doesn't quite seem to have happened yet. Now that we are on the cusp of widespread mainstream adoption of smart glasses, however, that might be about to change, since the combination of augmented reality and conversational interface could open up a whole range of new possibilities for donations that are both low friction (i.e. don't take a lot of effort) and which can be driven by reactions to an individual's environment (i.e. you read an article about biodiversity loss and immediately ask your smart glasses to make a donation to an environmental NGO it mentions; or you see a homeless person when walking around town and make an impromptu donation to a local homelessness charity). As with most things to do with AI, I think there are both some great opportunities here and some real risks, but it is good to see people experimenting with using the technology to improve giving.



[Read the FastCompany article](#)

[Read the BusinessWire article](#)

Give a little, get a little?

A [new study published in *Psychological Science* has found that giving a small amount in donations every day \(as little as one Chinese cent\) can reduce depressive symptoms and boost wellbeing](#). As with any of these scientific papers testing theories about giving based on relatively small sample sizes, it is probably best to take this with a pinch of salt – particularly in terms of how applicable the findings are to real-world scenarios. However, what I found interesting about this particular study is that the researchers had apparently been prompted to look at the role of cash donations because they were concerned that many previous studies on the positive mental health and wellbeing benefits of social action tend to focus on volunteering or other activities requiring social interaction, and that can be difficult for those suffering from depressive symptoms. The aim, therefore, was to find out whether making small monetary donations, which has far lower barriers to entry and may be more appealing to someone suffering from depressive symptoms, would also confer benefits. The conclusion seems to be that it will, which may be interesting to those trying to get people to make small regular donations.



[Read the article](#)

Musicians and Philanthropy:

There was [a piece in the music and arts magazine *Far Out* this month asking the intriguing question “Do artists owe us philanthropy?”](#) Unfortunately, I’m not sure the article got very far in answering this question, but it is a decent read – and I did discover that Ezra Collective have set up their own foundation and will be running internships for young black women to help them get into the music industry. Which is not something I knew before! (NB that if you fancy more on music and philanthropy, you can check out [this episode of the Philanthropisms podcast](#)).



[Image by Squelle, CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

[Read the article](#)

AND FINALLY: Wader Go, Dude?

My favourite story this month was about a man from Yorkshire named Matt Trevelyan, [who is walking 53 miles along the Nidderdale Way dressed in a giant homemade curlew costume](#) in order to raise money and awareness about the threat posed to these birds by habitat loss and climate change. There were three things that particularly appealed to me about this story:

- I really like curlews, and walking. In addition to my nerdery about all things philanthropy, there are a couple of other subjects I'm pretty enthusiastic about – and that happens to include hiking and birding. (If he'd also managed to have the curlew playing the guitar and talking about sci fi, that really would have ticked a lot of boxes...) I have a particular fondness for curlews too, as I often see and hear them on walks near the Mersey Estuary, or when hiking on upland moors, and their lovely bubbling calls always evoke a sense of pleasant loneliness to me.
- The costume is AMAZING. It would be easy to assume from the phrase "homemade curlew costume" that we are talking about some dude wearing a feathery jacket and a papier mâché bill, but turns out that the man in question is a former puppeteer so his curlew costume is actually a beautiful creation made of bamboo and polystyrene. Seriously, check out the photo in the story - I defy you not to want one of these for yourself. I certainly do.
- I really enjoyed this quote from the story: "Those who know me well know I was eventually going to build a giant curlew." I just love the implied sense of inevitability this contains, which almost gives this whole thing the air of a Greek Tragedy. ("Of course, it was clear from the beginning that his fatal flaw was his burning desire to create a giant curlew costume"...) Top stuff.



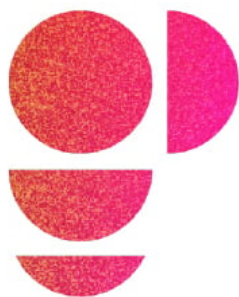
[Read the article](#)

Right. That's it for April. It was undoubtedly a long one, but we got there together, didn't we?

I'll be back at the end of May for another update, but until then stay well.

Best,

Rhodri



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