



Welcome to the March 2025 newsletter

Ahoy there philanthropoids,

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I can't quite believe it is April already. This year seems to be going quicker than any previous year I can remember, and I have to say that the recurrent shock of finding that things that I thought were Safely A Long Way Off In The Future are actually Things That Need Doing This Week is getting slightly wearing at this point. It is also making this newsletter harder to do each month, as the available time for pulling it together seems to be shrinking alarmingly!

The other problem I am finding is that the news is generally so dismal right now that when I do actually get round curating it, the whole process can end up being quite depressing. A bit like sifting through a gigantic river of slurry in the hope finding of a selection of interesting or visually appealing rocks to bring to show and tell. (If that's not overstating things).

Even if it is quite hard work, however, it is important to keep up to speed with what is going on. And luckily there are still plenty of good people out there doing good and interesting things, so it's not all bad by any means. With that in mind, I have put on my information-galoshes once more and waded through the internet in order to find the most

interesting nuggets from the philanthro-sphere over the past month. Let's do this.

Rhodri

PHILANTHROPY IN THE NEWS

UK giving in decline?

The past couple of newsletters have (understandably) been dominated by news about what is going on in the US right now. There's still plenty more to be said about that (unfortunately), but I thought we'd kick this newsletter off with some news about giving in the UK.



This month saw the release of the [latest annual UK Giving report from Charities Aid Foundation \(CAF\)](#). The [big story seems to be further evidence of declining levels of participation in giving](#) - with only 55% of people saying that they had donated to charity in the previous 12 months, either directly or through sponsorship, which is down from 58% in 2024 (and down from 65% in 2019!) Despite that, the overall level of giving has actually gone up quite significantly – from £13.9 billion in

2023 to an estimated £15.4 billion in 2024 (although CAF explains that this rise is primarily due to a change in research methodology that has resulted in higher estimates of monthly giving). Even if that change in methodology makes direct comparisons of this year's total figure with previous year's somewhat difficult, what is clear is that the trend towards UK charities becoming increasingly reliant on a smaller number of donors giving more seems to be accelerating, and that is a concern.

The UK Giving 2025 report also found a sharp decline in younger donors, with only 36% of 16-24-year-olds saying that they had donated or sponsored in 2024, compared to 42% in 2023 (and 52% in 2019). Interestingly, another report on UK charitable giving out this month – [this time from the giving and fundraising platform JustGiving, to mark its 25th anniversary](#) – found pretty much the opposite, [reporting that younger donors from the Gen Z and Millennial generations give far more and are more engaged than their counterparts among Gen X or the Baby Boomers](#). This is a useful reminder of the challenges when it comes to identifying and measuring trends in charitable giving, since differences in sample or approach can have a big impact when using survey methodologies. (The JustGiving research, for instance, asked people about giving over the past year, whereas the CAF report is based on responses about giving over the past month, which may account for some of the differences – although it is still slightly unusual for two reports to find diametrically opposite things!)

(NB: if you want some historical background on [why we have struggled for a long time to measure levels of charitable giving, check out this WPM article](#)).

Biggest Donors in the US

At the other end of the scale, [the Chronicle of Philanthropy published its annual list of the 50 biggest US donors this month](#). Top of the pile by some distance was Michael Bloomberg, but there were also a few notable absences, such as Elon Musk and Mackenzie Scott.



This demonstrates another of the challenges when it comes to measuring giving at the very top level: often you are reliant on the information that wealthy donors choose to share or make public, and that may not be enough to determine an accurate figure. (In both Scott and Musk's cases that is the ostensible reason they were not included in the list; although the difference is that whilst it seems fair in Scott's case to assume that she would have comfortably made it in had she chosen to divulge the relevant information, that is far less certain in Musk's case, given his underwhelming track record of philanthropy...)

If you want some interesting discussion of what the findings in the new COP top 50 list say about the current landscape of US philanthropy, then I also recommend [checking out this piece in the Conversation](#).

Empathy: for the weak?

Since I have already failed in my attempts not to mention Elon Musk in this edition of the newsletter, I might as well get another story concerning him out of the way at this point. Musk attracted headlines and comment this month following another one of his interminable

podcast conversations with Joe Rogan, in which [he made the assertion that “empathy is the fundamental weakness of western civilization”](#). (Presumably just before explaining to James Bond his plans to hold the earth to ransom using a space laser).



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

Whilst I realise that half the point of statements like this is to antagonise people like me, I couldn't stop myself rising to the bait, so I wrote [a piece for the WPM website on the intellectual lineage of this idea and why it is so problematic](#). Having spent nearly 6,000 words discussing this already,

I won't get into it too much here – suffice it to say that I think he is deeply wrong, and in a way that is potentially quite dangerous.

Civil society freedoms under fire in US and UK

Anyone who values the rights to free speech and protest that are fundamental to a healthy civil society (and therefore, I would strongly argue, to a healthy democracy) will have been dismayed this week by two stories highlighting the extent to which these freedoms are now under threat.



In the US, [a jury in North Dakota ruled that the environmental group Greenpeace must at least 660 million dollars to the pipeline company Energy Transfer](#), after the nonprofit was found guilty of 'defamation' and 'incitement' through a 'misinformation campaign' for its role in orchestrating protests over the Dakota Access pipeline in 2016 and 2017.

There had been concerns about the potential outcome of this trial from the outset, after it emerged that [the majority of the selected jurors had ties to the fossil fuel industry and had openly negative views about environmental campaigning](#). Greenpeace has said that it will fight the

decision, but whether it wins that appeal or not, the cost in terms of time and financial resources is going to be significant. (Which Energy Transfer know perfectly well, and which is they and other well-resourced companies are pursuing similar tactics to go after civil society groups).

If anyone reading this in the UK was feeling relieved that we aren't seeing similar attacks on civil society freedoms here yet, then I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. It was reported this month that [more than 20 uniformed officers from the Metropolitan Police \(some armed with tasers\) forced their way into a Quaker meeting house in London and arrested six people](#) attending a meeting of the protest group Youth Demand. Quaker leaders reacted angrily (or as angrily as Quakers allow themselves to get, given that they are generally very nice people in my experience), condemning the "aggressive violation of their place of worship" and pointing out that "no-one has been arrested in a Quaker meeting house in living memory." The Met responded with a statement that the people in question had been arrested on "suspicion of conspiracy to cause a nuisance", based on intelligence that they were planning a series of direct action protests in London in the coming months.

The whole question of direct action is a tricky one, as public support for this kind of protest is a lot lower than many activists would like to think (as highlighted in [the recent More in Common report on "progressive activists"](#)). It's quite likely, therefore, that plenty of people wouldn't necessarily have approved of the protests that Youth Demand were planning. But even if you have reservations or concerns about direct action as a tactic, you might well have greater concerns about the democratic implications of allowing police to pre-emptively arrest people based on the *suspicion that they are going to engage in direct action*. And if you throw into the mix the terrible optics of breaking down the door of a Quaker meeting house, given the Quakers longstanding support for peaceful protest, this definitely adds up to a story that I, for one, find pretty unsettling.

Ddyled o ddiolchgarwch: Debt of gratitude?

In far less dystopian news, there was an interesting interview in the *Guardian* this month with [the Welsh actor Michael Sheen, who is using £100K of his own money to buy up – and then cancel - £1m pounds worth of debt owed by people in South Wales](#). This is the latest in a long line of philanthropic projects from Sheen, many of them focussed on his home town of Port Talbot, but the focus on unaffordable debt as an issue is new for him.



[image by Rhododendrites, CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

The article notes that this was initially sparked by watching [a segment on *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, where they used \\$60K to buy up \\$15 million of medical debt](#); but the idea of debt cancellation as a radical form of justice-based philanthropy has a history going back much

further. The Jewish faith, for instance has a historic tradition of debt cancellation on a 7-year cycle, which can also be found as a Biblical injunction in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 15: 1&2 “15 At the end of every seven years thou shalt make a release. And this is the manner of the release: Every creditor that lendeth ought unto his neighbour shall release it; he shall not exact it of his neighbour, or of his brother; because it is called the Lord's release”).

Apart from the approach that Sheen is taking in this new project, the interview is also really interesting in terms of what motivates him and his thought on some wider issues about how philanthropy relates to state provision or to demands for justice, so it is definitely worth a read.

The Really Rewilding Show?

Sticking with UK philanthropy, there was an intriguing story this month about [an anonymous £17.5 million donation received by the Scottish Wildlife Trust \(SWT\) to assist it with the purchase of the 7,618 hectare Inverbroom Trust](#), which it plans to turn into a “rewilding showcase”.



Now, there's a lot to like in this story: it's definitely a big donation (one of the largest ever given to a conservation charity in the UK), and at a time when biodiversity is in crisis in the UK (and pretty much everywhere else around the world), the more land that can be rewilded and made

healthy for nature the better IMHO. I will also hold my hand up and say that I like Wildlife Trusts a lot and I don't like hunting and shooting – for all sorts of reasons, but primarily for the vast quantities of land that they use up in the UK and thereby make inaccessible whilst dramatically reducing biodiversity – so the fact that the SWT are planning to create an oasis of shooting-free land in amongst the existing vast patchwork of Scottish estates seems like a good thing to me. (I know there are plenty of people who would disagree with me on that, but I'm afraid I am firmly on the “Right to Roam/not killing animals for fun” side of this particular argument, and I am not likely to shift anytime soon).

On the other hand, however, the article highlights the fact that this is a fairly unusual purchase for the SWT, which mostly manages far smaller nature reserves. They are also taking on the running of the Victorian-era estate house, which will be turned into a luxury hotel with the aim of generating profits that can be put back into the management of the estate; a potentially neat form of social enterprise, but a risky one too. There are potential question marks, too, about whether SWT's plans to ban deer hunting will be sustainable in the long term, given that many rewilding conservationists see overgrazing by deer as one of the major causes of traditional habitat degradation in Scotland. (In the article SWT does address this, making it clear that they may well engage in controlled culling of deer, or might even issue limited hunting licenses to local people in the future, but it is likely to be a point of contention from the outset).

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.

Philanthropy and Empathy

I published a new long read on the WPM website this month, prompted by Elon Musk's claim that "empathy is the fundamental weakness of western civilization". The piece explores what this claim means, where it comes from historically, and why it can potentially lead to very problematic consequences.



[Read the article](#)

On the Philanthropisms Podcast:

We had two more great guests on the podcast this month. We had Farai Chideya, on philanthropy's role in building a pluralistic multi-racial democracy and some of the challenges for philanthropic funders under the current Trump administration. We also had Marina Jones, talking about the history of fundraising and why there is so much more to learn about it.



Philanthropisms

Farai Chideya: Philanthropy,
Democracy & Multiracial Pluralism





Philanthropisms

Marina Jones: The history of fundraising



Listen to the episode with Farai

Listen to the episode with Marina

UPCOMING:

I've got a few events coming up over the next couple of months that may be of interest.



On Thursday 3rd April I am doing a free webinar for the Benefact Group and DSC, on AI and charities. You can sign up [HERE](#) if you're interested.



On Friday 25th April I will be speaking at the annual Understanding Philanthropy conference with my University of Kent Centre for Philanthropy hat on. I think the event is fully booked, but if you are already going see you there! (And if not, [there is a waitlist just in case](#)).



Bit further ahead, but on 22nd May I will be speaking about AI (again!) at the Jewish Leadership Council's Jewish Community Professionals' conference. More info [HERE](#).

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.

Six Reasons Liberal Philanthropy Is Losing the Battle for America's Future:

Amidst all of the damage currently being wrought on the US nonprofit sector by the Trump administration, there is an increasing amount of analysis of how things got to where they are and how philanthropy can and should respond. One of the best pieces in this vein that I read this month was [by David Callahan in *Inside Philanthropy*](#) (who is pretty much almost worth reading). He identifies what he sees as six reasons that liberal philanthropy has failed to counter the rise of right-wing populism (and, at times, perhaps even contributed to it), and offers some thoughts on what could be done differently. It isn't necessarily the whole picture (as there are other things that could also be said), but it is IMHO a really important read.



[Read the article](#)

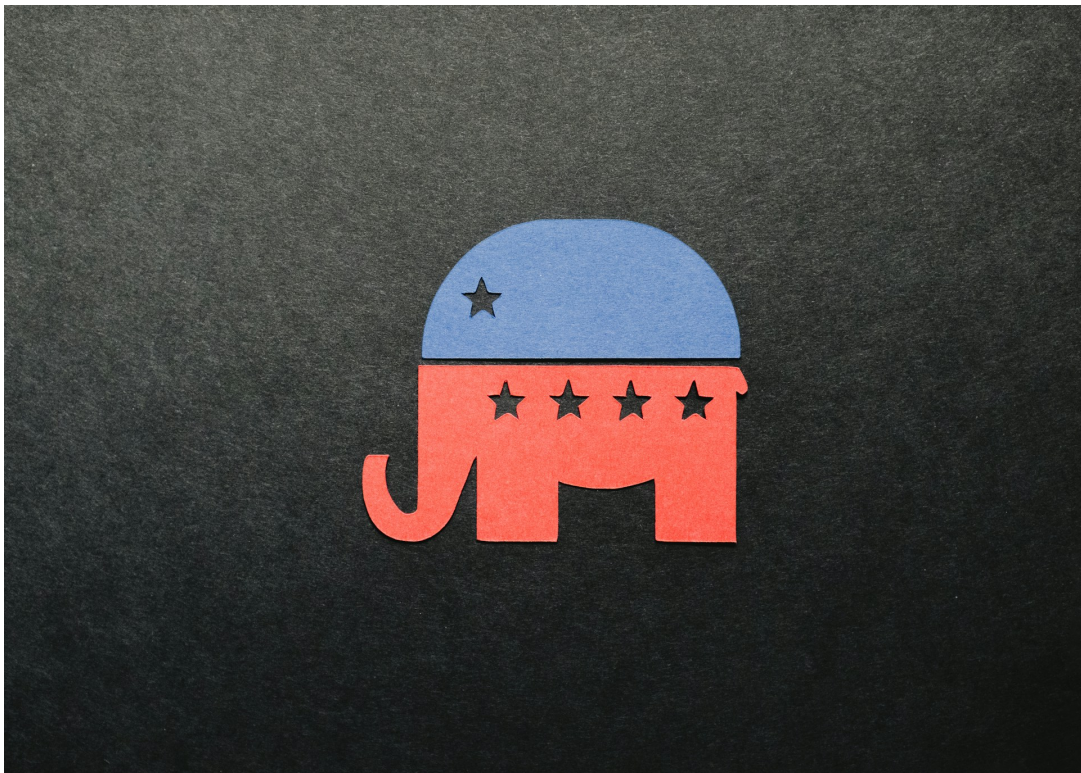
On Unprecedentedness & a Conservative View of the Current Moment:

Another article that was definitely worth reading this month came at many of the same points from a different political perspective. [The conservative philanthropy commentator Bill Schambra wrote a piece in the *Giving Review* taking aim at the idea that what is currently happening is somehow “unprecedented” and suggesting that progressives within philanthropy only feel like this because they have failed for a long time to identify or understand many of the clear pointers that this was the direction in which things were heading.](#)

[Schambra also co-authored another really interesting piece with Michael Hartmann for *Histphil*, looking at the growth of the populist right over the last 40 years or so and how its thinking about civil society has evolved.](#) I think the argument they make in the piece that there is room for quite a lot of agreement between certain parts of the conservative right - who value local charities and voluntarism from a Tocquevillian point of view, and also see them as a preferable alternative to big

government (or, indeed, Big Philanthropy) - and the communitarian left, who value many of the same community-based organisations and participatory approaches, and may also be suspicious of institutional philanthropy (albeit for quite different reasons).

For my money Schambra and Hartmann don't go far enough in acknowledging what seems to me like a clear discontinuity between previous iterations of US conservatism - which do genuinely seem to have valued some aspects of the nonprofit sector, and had a coherent narrative about why - and the version of it being espoused by the current administration, which seems very keen on dismantling the parts of the nonprofit sector it doesn't like but doesn't appear to have much of a positive narrative about the other parts (and seems relatively sanguine about those being collateral damage in its destructive efforts). But even if you don't agree with some (or indeed all) of Schambra and Hartmann's arguments, as conservative voices who are willing to engage in this debate in a constructive way, I think it is really important to hear what they have to say.



[Read the Giving Review piece](#)

Read the HistPhil piece

A Wave Forming?

In terms of how philanthropic funders are actually responding to the challenges presented by the second Trump era, the [Center for Effective Philanthropy had a useful blog highlighting some of the actions and announcements taken so far](#) – including examples of foundation leaders speaking out against Presidential Executive Orders and organisations increasing their grantmaking. Given that the sense among nonprofits in the first couple of weeks after the inauguration, when the assault on civil society began, was that funders weren't really doing much of anything, this is encouraging to see. (Although there is clearly still room for a lot more!)



Read the article

Climate Change and Public Parks:

I spotted [an interesting piece in Grist this month, arguing that at a time when climate has become and increasingly polarised issue environmental organisations could think about pivoting to support for public parks](#) – which tends to enjoy far more bipartisan support. Some

might rankle at this suggestion, on the basis that it amounts to capitulation in the face of climate denial and vested interests, but the article's argument was that this sort of approach is not only pragmatic but can actually contribute towards many of the goals that climate activists want to see anyway (albeit without explicitly framing them in those terms). I thought it was an interesting idea that could work for some organisations, but there is also no getting round the fact that governments – and, indeed, all of us – need to face up to the reality of what is needed if we are to address the climate crisis, and that will take more than public parks.

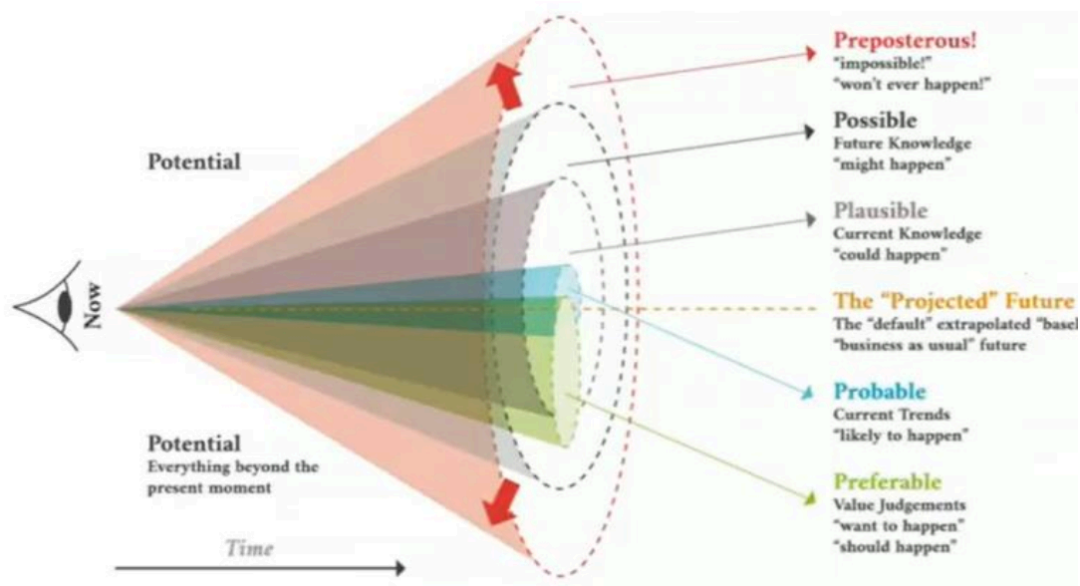


[Read the article](#)

Philanthropy, AI and Just Futures:

There was [a piece in Tech Policy Press this month exploring how philanthropic funders can “use the AI moment” to help build more just futures](#). There is definitely a lexicon in the world of digital civil society and justice-focused philanthropy these days (often a *lot* of horticultural metaphors, for one thing...) and this article does veer slightly towards too much of it for my taste, but there is definitely some interesting stuff in there about the role of philanthropy in “working back from the future”

to the present and thereby maintain a sufficiently imaginative view of what is possible.



[Read the article](#)

A Trifecta of Stories about Global Philanthropy:

I spotted three interesting nuggets this month about philanthropy in various parts of the world, so I thought I would lump them together. (I am aware that doing so risks making me look like the worst kind of blinkered Eurocentric who sees most of the world map as a big blob emblazoned with the word “foreign”, but I promise that this is done with that risk in mind...)

First up is [a new report from Bain \(the consultancy, rather than the Batman villain\) on the landscape of Indian philanthropy in 2025](#). The report highlights the important role of family philanthropy in the growth of giving in India and reiterates the fact that the lines between corporate philanthropy and family philanthropy remain blurry in India’s family business and owner-entrepreneur dominated economy. (A point I have heard made elsewhere too).

Then there was [a really interesting piece from the law firm Withers, about the phenomenal growth of philanthropy in Singapore in recent](#)

[years and a new \\$600m package of measures in the recent Budget designed to incentivise giving further.](#) (This is on top of remarkably generous existing incentives – did you know for instance, that for donations to qualifying charities that exclusively benefit the Singapore community, you can get a *250% tax break*. So the government is effectively paying you to make donations).

Finally there was [an article from the Institute of Security Studies, exploring the current state of domestic philanthropy across Africa](#), and asking whether it could play a meaningful role in addressing the gaps left by the dismantling of USAID.



[Read the Bain report on Indian philanthropy](#)

[Read the Withers article about philanthropy in Singapore](#)

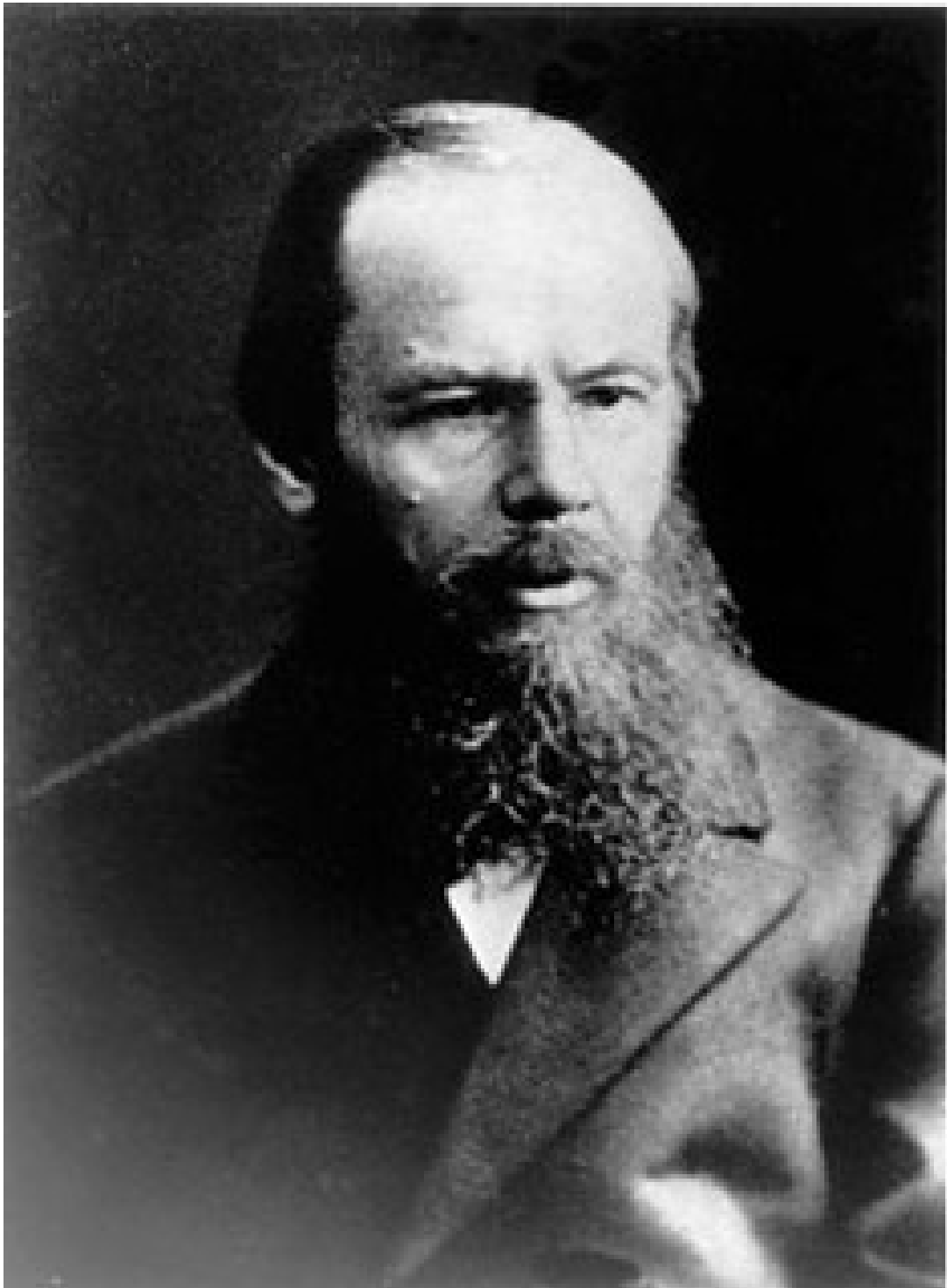
[Read the ISS piece about philanthropy in Africa](#)

Contagious Kindness?

There was [a piece in *Psychology Today* this month about new study that has found that acts of kindness have a tendency to “ripple outwards” through social networks to affect people up to three degrees of connection away](#) – thus confirming the old adage that “one good deed deserves another”. The researchers found that acts of kindness create “elevation” – where people are moved, inspired and made to feel happier – and this makes them more likely to demonstrate kindness in turn.

Which is also an excuse to share again one of my all-time favourite quotes about giving – from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*:

“In scattering the seed, scattering your “charity,” your kind deeds, you are giving away, in one form or another, part of your personality, and taking into yourself part of another; you are in mutual communion with one another, a little more attention and you will be rewarded with the knowledge of the most unexpected discoveries. You will come at last to look upon your work as a science; it will lay hold of all your life, and may fill up your whole life. On the other hand, all your thoughts, all the seeds scattered by you, perhaps forgotten by you, will grow up and take form. He who has received them from you will hand them on to another. And how can you tell what part you may have in the future determination of the destinies of humanity?”



[Read the article](#)

Altruism Marinera?

On the subject of scientific research, one of the more eye-catching bits of news about altruism that I have seen in recent times was this article about a [new paper from researchers at the University of Bristol which](#)

[identified a link between seafood consumption and prosocial behaviour.](#)

The researchers used data from nearly 6,000 participants in a major longitudinal study on “[Children of the 90s](#)”, and found that those who had consumed higher levels of seafood were more likely to engage in altruism, sharing and friendly interactions.

Scampi and chips all round, then?



[Image by Jurvetson, CC BY 2.0](#)

[Read the article](#)

AND FINALLY: Punk AF Gratitude?

I spotted a little story this month [about Jason Williamson, the lead singer of the post-punk duo Sleaford Mods, who it turns out volunteers at a homeless shelter every week.](#) Williamson is a self-confessed former drug addict, so his volunteering is in part driven by his own personal experience. But Sleaford Mods are also known for their songs cataloguing the seamier side of austerity Britain, and have been vocally critical of government many times, so what particularly caught my eye

was Williamson's explanation for why he thought getting involved with charity was equally (if not more) important:

"He says he is fed up of swearing at politicians on social media without actually helping himself, humbly adding "it doesn't work".

"You can contribute nationally by voting or whatever, but a lot of things are out of your hands," he said.

"You feel powerless, but local community, and adding to that, is one of the best things you can do."



[Image by Edwardx, CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

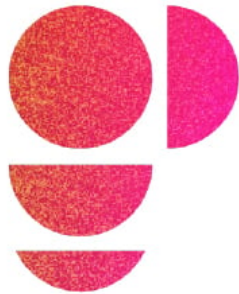
[Read the article](#)

Right. That's that it for another month. And I actually think I did better than usual at keeping that brief (although you might well disagree...)

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

Best,

Rhodri



Why Philanthropy Matters

Why Philanthropy Matters Haskell
House 152 West End Lane, London
United Kingdom



You received this email because you signed up on our website or made a purchase from us.

[Unsubscribe](#)

