



Welcome to the November 2023 Newsletter!

Hello there philanthropoids,

Well, somehow that is already a wrap on November... If you are a US reader and you celebrate Thanksgiving, then I hope you had a good break; but more importantly, wherever you are in the world, I hope you all had a good Giving Tuesday! I guess now we can all get on with careering headlong towards the festive season (I have already been to one Xmas pantomime, plus a theatre production of Wind in the Willows, so I feel as though am definitely ahead of the game on that front).

November was busy month for me (as I'm sure it was for many of you). It also brought some exciting WPM news: thanks to the support of the Pears Foundation, we now have core funding in place for another year! That means I will be able to carry on cranking out these newsletters; plus all the various podcasts, articles, speaking gigs etc that make up the rest of WPM's current output. (As well as exploring a few potentially exciting new things...)

November was definitely a busy month in the wider philanthro-sphere too, so there is lots of news and plenty of views to round up. Without further ado, let's get into the business end of the newsletter and start doing precisely that.

Best,

Rhodri

PHILANTHROPY IN THE NEWS

Giving Woohoos-day, or Giving Blues-day?

As I write this, it is two days after Giving Tuesday. From its early origins as a heavily US-focused "day of giving" that was sold on the basis of being an altruistic palate cleanser after the consumerist excess of Black Friday and Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday has evolved over the last decade into something much more interesting (in my view): a genuinely global, decentralised social movement that celebrates giving in all of its multifaceted forms, and which is playing an important role in championing a model of "radical generosity" which provides necessary challenge to the increasingly top-down, technocratic and transactional approaches that have come to dominate the nonprofit world. We were even lucky enough to have Giving Tuesday CEO Asha Curran as a guest at a recent seminar for the Masters in Philanthropic Studies course at the University of Kent (which I teach on part-time), and it was a great reminder of just how interesting the movement's work has become!



It is obviously too early to say with any certainty what the results of this year's Giving Tuesday are, and what they might tell us about broader patterns and trends in philanthropy. The only indications we have so far, as reported in *Associated Press*, are that [levels of giving seem to be consistent with previous years, but levels of participation may be down by as much as 10%](#). If true, many may feel that it lends further weight to the concerns about a "decline in giving" that have been worrying US nonprofit sector watchers for a while now. For now we should probably

hold off making snap judgments, but as the the picture becomes clearer I will return to the topic and dig deeper in a future newsletter.

Open AI, or Closed AI?

AI is a fairly constant topic of discussion in the news these days, but this month saw it move from the business section to the gossip pages, thanks to the [dramatic firing-then-not-firing of talismanic CEO Sam Altman from OpenAI](#). There is plenty of philanthropy relevance to this story - not least the fact that despite its apparent tech unicorn status, OpenAI started life as a non-profit organisation; and that non-profit still retains overall control of the commercial side of OpenAI (or at least it did until this week....)



There is also the fact that the narrative as to what explains the remarkable goings-on at OpenAI has [coalesced around the idea that it reflects a power struggle](#) between AI “boomers” like Altman, who believe in the positive potential of AI and want to accelerate the pace of development, and AI “doomers” who are worried about the risks that developing an Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) might pose for humanity and want to put the brakes on. (Some in the tech industry, [including billionaire VC investor Marc Andreessen](#) are apparently very cross at the latter camp...) The philanthropy angle on this is that the doomer line of thinking on AI is strongly affiliated with the Effective Altruism movement (and particularly with its Longtermist sub-movement, [which I have written about before](#)).

If you want some more detailed thoughts on the lessons the OpenAI story may hold for philanthropy and civil society, you can check out [this WPM article](#). But it is also worth saying that there was some other big philanthropy and AI news this month, which may have been slightly overshadowed by all the hoo-hah around OpenAI, in the shape of a [new \\$200 million fund being launched by a group of 10 major US foundations with the aim of ensuring that AI advances the public interest](#). This accompanied the [announcement by US Vice-President Kamala Harris of a number of new initiatives to advance the safe and responsible use of AI](#), and is very much in line with her statements suggesting that near-term, concrete harms to society and communities should take priority over more abstract and contested existential threats.

It is certainly encouraging to see a group of big foundation funders commit resources to addressing some of these more immediate AI issues, as a lot of the high-profile philanthropic activity in the sphere of AI before now has been EA-aligned work on X-risks (often driven by tech donors). But, together with the OpenAI story, it does also highlight one of the of the big challenges when it comes to AI: which is that there is not just a division between those who see it solely as a commercial opportunity and those who see it as a potential societal risk – even amongst the latter, there is deep-running disagreement over the nature of that risk and how we should allocate resources to address it. And that may prove to a challenge for philanthropy, if it finds itself pulled in

different – perhaps even incompatible- directions when it comes to engaging with AI.

A liberal helping of dark money?

The *Daily Beast* had a fascinating story this month about how [a controversial conservative nonprofit has received funding from a number of big philanthropic foundations - including some which are usually known for their association with liberal causes](#). The identities of these donors were revealed after they were accidentally named in a 2022 tax filing (big whoops there, I'm guessing), and the two that particularly raised eyebrows were the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Omidyar Network Foundation. Those eyebrows were raised because the conservative nonprofit in question, American Compass, is not merely some bland think tank, but an organisation that has become closely linked with efforts to re-elect Donald Trump to the White House.



[Image by Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

For their part, Hewlett and Omidyar have explained their support for American Compass in terms of how specific elements of its work fits in

with some of their existing funding programs (in Hewlett's case a \$50 million initiative they launched in 2020 to [“rethink how capitalism should work”](#); in Omidyar's case it is less clear, but the *Daily Beast* reporting mentions that there is some suggestion it is to do with work on worker's rights). However, that is unlikely to wash with a lot of people. In the febrile and polarized atmosphere currently surrounding politics and public discourse in the US, the notion that a pluralism of views and values in the philanthropic sector is acceptable has already come in for strong challenge (as [we explored in the April 2023 edition of this newsletter](#)). The idea that liberal funders can legitimately fund conservative organisations in a limited, programmatic way - even when these organisations do other work that runs fundamentally counter to the funder's mission and values - will, to many observers, seem at best dangerously naïve, and at worse disingenuous. There is also the broader issue that revelations such as these will do little to counter the cynicism of those who feel that elites are all just one homogenous self-serving mass, regardless of their professed political positioning; and it may also contribute to an erosion of public trust in the philanthropic sector.

T'aint No Such Thing As a Bad Donation?

The Chair of the Charity Commission for England and Wales, Orlando Fraser KC, attracted headlines this month for [arguing that charity leaders and trustees should avoid basing any decisions to refuse or return donations on “personal squeamishness”](#). Fraser was giving the annual Shirley Lecture on Philanthropy at the Centre for Philanthropy, University of Kent, when he made the remarks, and I happened to be in the room (since I work part-time as a Research Fellow at the Centre, and was there for a day of wider celebration of its 15th birthday), so I had a grandstand view of both the speech and the subsequent Q& A. In the context of a speech that was mostly focussed on celebrating philanthropy and outlining the Charity Commission's efforts to play a part in driving more of it, the remarks on tainted donations were definitely the bit that stood out as slightly odd to many people in the room at the time, and also to those who subsequently [read about it in media reports](#).



Having mulled over the speech quite a bit since I saw it, I have a couple of thoughts about it:

1) What problem is this actually aimed at addressing? One of the immediate points raised in the room after the speech, and again in subsequent media comment, is that to many in the charity sector the idea that CEOs and trustees are going around wantonly turning down donations left right and centre just because they don't like rich people seems like a straw man because it is such a long way from the reality of their experience. I have to say that this is my instinctive response too: most charities that I know are so keenly aware of how difficult the funding environment is right now that they are pretty unlikely to consider turning down the offer of a donation unless there is very good reason for doing so. And when they do decide to refuse or return a donation, it tends to be done only after a huge amount of agonising. Now, it might well be that the Charity Commission are aware of lots of cases in which they feel that donations have been refused or returned for more spurious reasons; in which case this new stance may be fully justified, but it would be good to share that evidence more widely so that everyone else can understand the rationale.

2) Why the deliberately provocative language? For the majority of the section of his speech dealing with tainted donations, Orlando Fraser restricted himself to offering a clear and objective reiteration of the current legal position in this issue. This is something he has consistently done in other areas too - including on potentially contentious issues such as political campaigning by charities - and many people (myself included) have welcomed this approach, because it offers clarity and gives a sense of reassurance that the role of the regulator is not to take sides in divisive culture war battles, but to apply the law without fear or favour. This is perhaps why it was particularly jarring that Fraser chose to use the phrase "personal squeamishness" to characterise the decisions taken by charity leaders to reject or return donations, as this seems deliberately calibrated to imply that those making the decisions are more often than not being unreasonable and over-sensitive, and

suggests that the Commission is firmly positioning itself on the side of the donor as a default.

3) Whose interests does the Charity Commission represent? The point made just now about the Charity Commission seemingly taking the side of donors is an important one. As someone who broadly thinks that the UK would benefit from more (and better) philanthropy, I generally welcome any efforts that anyone is willing to make in this direction. Some may find it slightly odd that the charity sector regulator has decided to take up this cause, and that justifying it as a priority on the basis of the Commission's wider remit of ensuring the "efficient and effective use of charitable resources" is a bit of a stretch. However, I am willing to roll with it, since every Charity Commission Chair seems to pick at least one area to focus on in order to put their distinctive stamp on the organisation, and encouraging philanthropy is certainly preferable to constantly questioning the legitimacy of charity campaigning (as we have seen in recent times). It is important to say that we shouldn't leap to the conclusion that taking the interests of donors into account will automatically undermine the Charity Commission's ability to protect the interests of charities: this relies on the assumption that those two sets of interests are necessarily opposed, and that isn't true in the vast majority of cases where donors and charities work effectively together based on shared goals and shared values. However, there are going to be some situations in which there is potential conflict between donors and recipients (especially when it comes to ethical concerns over "tainted" money), and in these cases the suggestion that the Charity Commission would as a default take the side of the donor may well have a material impact on the ability of charity leaders to make difficult but necessary decisions to refuse or return donations.

4) Is this about where the money comes from, or how it is given? Another important point to note is that the discussion around refusing or returning donations is framed almost entirely in terms of situations in which reservations about the source of the money are the issue (which may reflect either 'valid ethical concerns' or 'personal squeamishness', depending on your point of view...) However, in practice (or certainly in my experience, at least), when charities decide to reject or return donations it is often at least as much to do with *how* the gift has been

given. Perhaps the donor is making unreasonable demands in terms of particular stipulations about how their money is to be used, or perhaps they are just impossibly difficult to work with? What is unclear from Orlando Fraser's statements so far is how decisions like this, which rest more on pragmatic concerns than on ethical qualms or value judgments, fit in to the narrative about "personal squeamishness".

5) Mixed messages on autonomy & public trust The final point to make (for now!) is that the Charity Commission's apparent new, tougher stance on refusing or returning donations may cause some confusion in terms of the mixed messages it creates. For one thing, Orlando Fraser was at pains to say that the Commission wants to respect the autonomy of charity trustees when it comes to making decisions, but this seems a bit difficult to square with statements that so clearly imply that he feels as though too many trustees are currently making invalid decisions when it comes to returning or refusing donations. If I was a charity trustee faced with a difficult decision of this sort right now, I certainly don't think the additional uncertainty of wondering how the regulator will judge my decision would be helping me. The other area in which charities might be getting mixed messages is around public trust: they have been told for many years now that public trust is in decline and that they need to do everything they can to protect it (which, in the last decade or so has generally been a coded way of saying "stop campaigning on difficult issues"). For many organisations, an increasingly important part of maintaining the trust of the public and of their supporters is being transparent about where funding comes from; and if people take issue with certain sources of funding, that can bring significant damage to an organisation's reputation and the trust people are willing to have in it. It is those sorts of complex considerations that trustees need to weigh up when faced with potentially controversial donations, and I worry that Orlando Fraser's recent remarks are not going to make this any easier.

Billionaire grievances?

There was a lot written this month about billionaires - all of it coming from slightly different angles, but in agreement on the basic idea that

their existence is problematic for society. Some of this criticism was specifically about philanthropy: there was a rash of articles and comment pieces off the back of the publication of journalist Tim Schwab's highly critical new book [*The Bill Gates Problem: Reckoning with the Myth of the Good Billionaire*](#), for instance - including pieces in [*New Republic*](#) and the [*New Statesman*](#). There was also [a piece in the Guardian from Zoe Williams, taking aim at the "tech bro" philanthropy of the Silicon Valley elite](#), and their tendency to assume that their technology knowledge makes them uniquely placed to come up with solutions to complex and intractable societal problems, which they then operationalise through their philanthropy. (The focal point for Williams's ire is Sam Bankman-Fried, but given all that has happened this month around OpenAI it is funny how much he almost seems like old news now!)



Slightly off the direct topic of philanthropy, there were also a number of articles this month highlighting the disproportionate negative impact that billionaires are having from a climate point of view, due to the gargantuan carbon footprint many of them have as a result of their use of private jets etc. The most compelling of these pieces was probably the one [by Rebecca Solnit for the Guardian](#).

The most interesting article on billionaires this month though (to my mind at least), was [a piece in Prospect magazine by the social innovation expert and former policy wonk Sir Geoff Mulgan](#). It was more interesting to me because Mulgan doesn't come from such an obviously anti-

billionaire or anti-capitalist starting position as some of the other commentators, so when he does make strongly critical arguments about billionaire wealth or elite philanthropy (as he does in this piece) they are nuanced, grounded in experience, and worth paying attention to.

Sub optimal?

I like to keep track of stories about big donors that I have never heard of, in order to keep my stock of examples fresh and varied, so I enjoyed [a Forbes article this month about Elisabeth DeLuca- a former nurse and the widow of Fred DeLuca, the co-founder of the Subway sandwich chain](#). Since her husband's death in 2015, DeLuca has apparently been giving steadily larger donations to a range of medical and educational causes, culminating recently in [a \\$40 million gift to the University of Connecticut](#) (its largest ever donation).

Following the agreement in August to sell Subway to private equity firm Roark capital for around \$9 billion, there have been some critical rumblings about DeLuca's lack of transparency and the tax affairs of her husband and his co-founder, which may well mount as further context comes to light. For now though, the more important question to my mind is why she hasn't taken the opportunity to perform perhaps the single greatest philanthropic act in history and close Subway down entirely, so that the world can be rid of the abominations it sells under the misleading guise of "sandwiches".

Other views on the merits of Subway are, of course, available.

But they're wrong.



[Image by Peachyeung316, CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Open Hand, Full Pockets?

One story that may not have made it on to your radar this month, but is definitely interesting in the context of future trends for philanthropy, came from gaming news site *IGN*, which reported on [allegations that YouTuber TheCompletionist \(aka Jirard Khalil\) has been using his family's Open Hand Foundation to solicit donations that he has kept for personal gain](#).



There are two main interesting things about this story. The first is that, so far, when it comes to YouTube philanthropy, MrBeast understandably grabs all the attention (I have to admit to being weirdly fascinated by him myself - you can read some thoughts on his giving in [this WPM article](#)). But at a lower level, there is also a whole world of influencer giving emerging - which is sometimes innovative and intriguing, but also can be murky and dubious, as this story shows.

The other really interesting thing about this story is how it came to light: it appears that some other YouTubers in the gaming community took it upon themselves to investigate and expose Khalil after they began to have suspicions about what he was doing with his family's foundation. In terms of the future for philanthropy, does offer an intriguing glimpse of what transparency and accountability might look like in the age of citizen journalism and social media...?

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

Here's a little update on what we have been up to at WPM over the last month.

Another great guest article!

I was delighted to publish our third guest article this month- bringing my ambitions to turn WPM into a genuine space for exploring philanthropy (in voices other than mine) closer to reality. The article in question was a fascinating reflection from Natasha Friend, CEO of London-based participatory grantmaking organisation [Camden Giving](#), on why it is that we are seemingly so resistant to allowing emotion into the philanthropy sector, and what might be getting lost as a result.

As ever, if you have an idea for an article and fancy joining the slowly-swelling ranks of WPM guest authors then do get in touch!

Rhodri@whyphilanthropymatters.com).

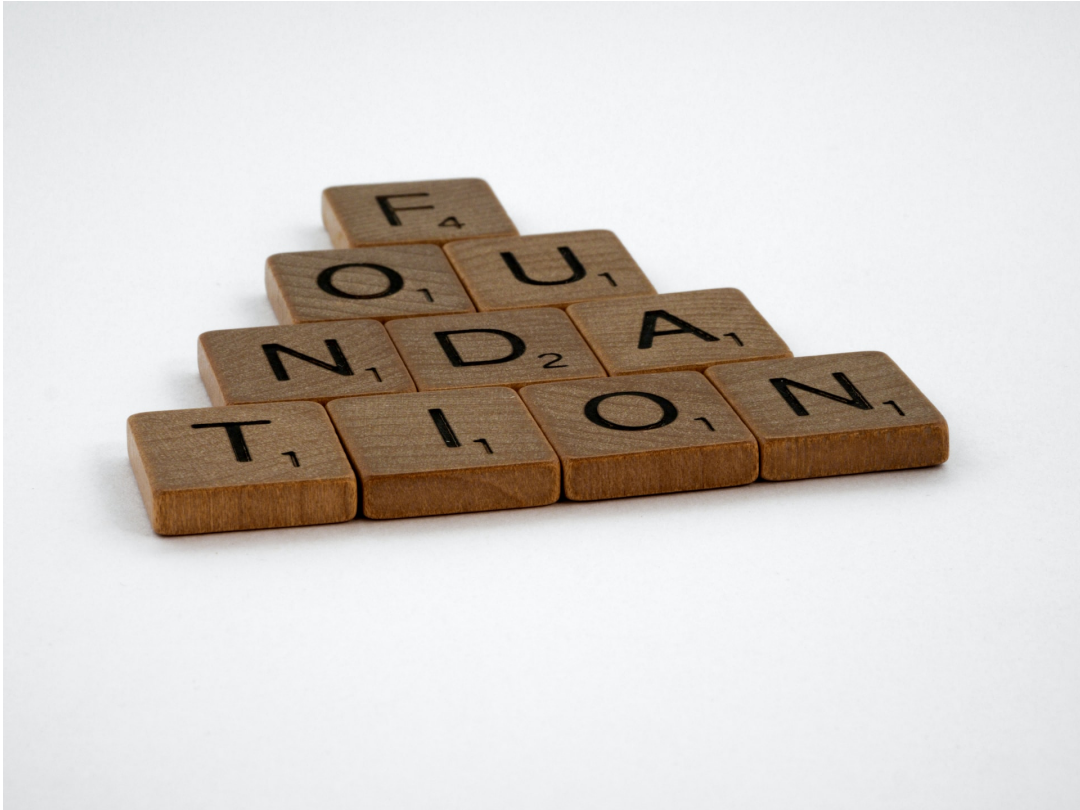


[Read the article](#)

Foundation Trilogy (No, not that one...)

I also published a three-part essay series this month (full disclosure: that was largely because I wrote one article and then noticed that it was

11,000 words long...), asking “what is the point of philanthropic foundations?” In light of some pointed criticism of foundations recently, I thought it would be good to dig into what they are, why we have them, and why they consistently attract criticism. So part 1 takes a look at how we define foundations, part 2 takes a look at the historical context, and part 3 takes a look at current controversies and debates.

[Read part 1](#)[Read part 2](#)[Read part 3](#)

OpenAI blog

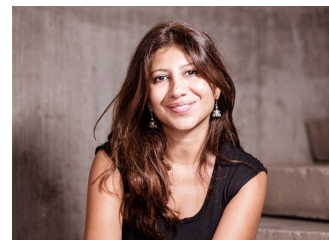
In what has proven (thanks largely to a decent number of train journeys) to have been a bumper month on the writing front, I also published a blog with some thoughts on the implications the chaos at OpenAI might have for philanthropy and civil society (as mentioned in the News section above).



[Read the article](#)

On the Philanthropisms podcast

We had more great guests on the Philanthropisms podcast this month. First of all we had Sara Lomelin, founder and CEO of Philanthropy Together, talking about the power of giving circles and collective philanthropy. Then we had Elizabeth Barajas-Román, President and CEO of the Women's Funding Network, talking about feminist approaches to philanthropy and why gender equity is such an important issues. And finally we had Dr Farahnaz Karim, Founder and CEO of Insaan Group, talking about catalytic philanthropy, impact investing, inequality and the UN SDGs.



**Sara Lomelin,
Philanthropy
Together**

[Listen](#)

**Elizabeth Barajas-
Román, Women's
Funding Network**

[Listen](#)

**Farahnaz Karim,
Insaan Group**

[Listen](#)

AI ethics and charities

I was quoted at reasonable length this month in a piece in *Civil Society* on some of the potential ethical considerations for charities when it comes to using AI.

[Read the article](#)

Book Review of “What is Philanthropy For?”

There was a generous review of my book *What is Philanthropy For?* by Rebecca Richards for *Philanthropy Daily* this month. She concludes that “it is a remarkably useful guide to the significant number of thinkers, politicians, and donors and historical events that have made philanthropy what it is today.” And even better, as she notes, “at just 160 pages, it is well worth the reader’s time.”

[Read the review](#)

ACOSVO conference

I travelled up to Edinburgh this month for the ACOSVO conference-entitled “Where Leaders Dare”. I gave an opening keynote about the opportunities and challenges that AI poses for charities, which seemed to help prompt some thoughts for the rest of the day (if so, I will consider that job done!) If you were there, I hope you found it interesting, and sorry that I had to leave fairly sharply (in order to get home in time for the aforementioned pantomime...)

Perhaps my favourite lasting memento of the day is this image that Ross McCulloch, Director of the Third Sector Digital Lab, made based on my speech using the AI image generator DALL-E. Is this how I see myself in my mind's eye? No comment...



OTHER GOOD STUFF

Interesting-looking new book on philanthropy:

There is no shortage of books on philanthropy coming out at the moment (and I consider myself entirely guilty of adding to the pile!) But

one that particularly caught my eye this month is a new book coming out early in December by Amy Schiller entitled *The Price of Humanity*. There was an interesting interview with Schiller published by *Public Seminar*, in which she outlined some of her critiques of Effective Altruism and the wider notion that philanthropy should be aiming to provide the “biggest bang for your buck”- a lot of which sounded very close to my heart, so I am looking forward to getting hold of a copy asap!

THE PRICE OF HUMANITY

HOW
PHILANTHROPY
WENT WRONG AND
HOW TO FIX IT

AMY SCHILLER

"Absolutely essential reading for anyone working in or involved with philanthropy today."

—ANNE HELEN PETERSEN, author of *CAN'T EVEN*

HOW MILLENNIALS BECAME THE BURNOUT GENERATION

[Read the article](#)

[Find the book](#)

Citi Report on Future of Philanthropy:

Worth checking out the report from Citi's Global Perspectives and Solutions team on the future of philanthropy that came out this month. It features insights and ideas from interviews with a range of experts around the globe, and there is some good food for thought in it.



PHILANTHROPY AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY v3.0

Perspectives on the Future of Giving

Citi GPS: Global Perspectives & Solutions
October 2023

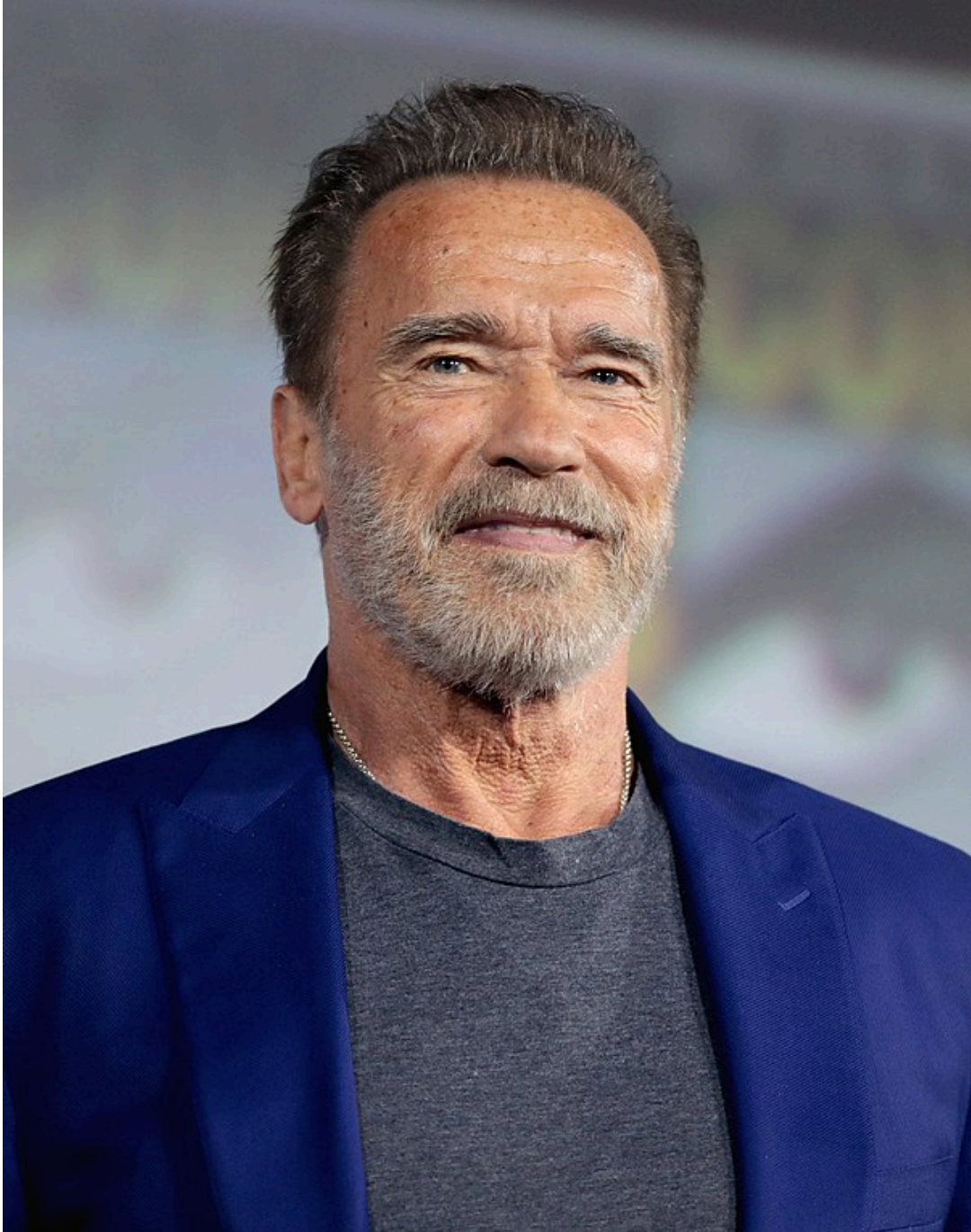


[Read the report](#)

Town & Country Philanthropy Edition:

If you like your philanthropy glossy and star-studded, then FYI that [venerable US lifestyle magazine *Town and Country's* latest annual](#)

[philanthropy edition](#) came out this month. In among the celebs (Charlize Theron, Michael J Fox), there are also interviews with figures from the philanthropy world such as Ford Foundation President Darren Walker. In amongst what is, it must be said, a fairly healthy serving of gushing hagiography, there are definitely some interesting nuggets. (TBH as an avowed 80s-era Arnie fan, I was basically sold at the point where I read the line ““I’ll give back” is the new go-to motto of the legendary actor and former governor of California.”)



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

Read the edition

Social justice grantmaking in the UK

Less celeb-oriented, but also a lot more substantive, is the [second edition of an annual report looking at the current state of social justice funding in the UK](#) from the relatively new Civic Power Fund. The report highlights some inspiring examples and reason for optimism, but it also shows that there is a long way to go in the UK if current rhetoric on making philanthropy more social justice-focused is to become reality.

Read about the report

Bonobo Altruism:

If you are interested in the roots of the fundamental drivers for human philanthropy, it is always interesting to look at examples from the animal kingdom. So [a story this month in *The Messenger* about altruistic behaviour in bonobos](#) caught my eye.

Altruism has long been a contested topic in evolutionary biology, since in many ways it makes little or no sense: if animals are solely driven by a desire to maximise the chances of their own genes surviving through their offspring (as the interpretation in books like Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* would have us believe), then why would they help others who are not directly related to them? Various answers have been offered to this question - often in the form of theories which suggest that natural selection operates at the level of kin relationships or wider groups rather than just direct parental relationships.

A new paper in *Science*, however, which is the prompt for the *Messenger* article, reports that bonobos engage in cooperative behaviour even with individuals outside their own social group, which once again brings into question whether such efforts to recast seemingly altruistic behaviour as self-interested are successful. Whatever the correct explanation, the one certain thing is that examples of apparently altruistic behaviour keep cropping up, so there is certainly something going on...



[Read the article](#)

AND FINALLY: BlackPink in One's Area...?

I don't normally pay that much attention to the awarding of royal honours, but as the parent of a KPop obsessed 8 year old I did sit up and take notice of the news that the members of her favourite band, Blackpink, were [this month awarded honorary MBEs by King Charles as part of a State Visit by the President of the Republic of Korea](#). And what's more, they were given the gongs in recognition of their support for environmental causes, so I thought it was legitimate to include it in this newsletter.

If you haven't yet heard the good word about Blackpink, just let me know and I can arrange for my daughter to come round and proselytise until you repent. (And if you fancy some non-philanthropy reading, you can also check out this article my wife wrote for the *Independent* earlier this year about [taking our daughters to see Blackpink live in Hyde Park](#)).

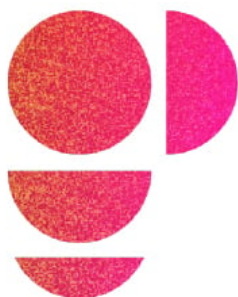


[Image by PUBG Mobile, CC BY 3.0](#)

[Read the article](#)

Well, I think it is time to round off another meandering missive. I'll be back at some point over the festive period with some more dispatches from the philanthro-sphere, but until then adieu.

Rhodri



**Why
Philanthropy
Matters**

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