



Welcome to the September 2024 newsletter!

Hey there philanthropoids,

I hope everyone is well? Judging from my LinkedIn feed many of you certainly seem to have been very busy so far this September. There have been all kinds of events happening that I have been intrigued to keep tabs on (including a few that I have had to read about through a thick veil of FOMO if I'm honest...), as well as lots of interesting news and views, so there is plenty to catch you all up on. Which is good, as I was a bit worried that the shorter than usual turnaround for this newsletter might mean that I had nothing to say!

Here in the UK, as I write we are just coming to the end of the political party conference season. This is, of course, the premier annual opportunity for political nerds and policy wonks to share ideas and swap gossip whilst hoovering up free breaded prawns and collecting enough branded tote bags to line their attics for the winter. And this year the whole shebang had added interest, since the change of government earlier this year means that there is a far stronger sense of opportunity for influence and action than there has been for quite some time. Heck, I even broke a promise to myself that I would never go near party conference ever again (the result of being scarred by one too many years of working on an exhibition stand and having to have polite conversations with party members about "why charities do too much

fundraising/pay their staff too much/get in the way of socialist revolution"...), and went along to an event about philanthropy organised by the Centre for Social Justice on the fringes of Labour Party Conference. (Of which more below).

Right, let's get on with the newsletter proper, since I already suspect that despite my intention to keep this one briefer, it will (as ever) end up getting fairly long...

Rhodri

PHILANTHROPY IN THE NEWS

A Generous Helping of Policy Ideas

Big news this month for anyone interested in the whole question of how to go about building stronger cultures of philanthropy, with the launch of the Generosity Commission's flagship report "[Everyday Actions, Extraordinary Potential: The Power of Giving and Volunteering](#)". This is the culmination of three years of research and engagement (including many interim outputs that you can find [on the Generosity Commission website](#)), all framed around the question of what is behind the apparent decline in generosity in American society and what can be done to remedy it. There are far too many findings and ideas in the report to go into in detail here, so I am going to restrict myself to just a couple of top-line thoughts for now.



The first is that the whole framing as a commission on “generosity” - rather than on “giving” or “philanthropy” - is notable. It reflects an important shift in the dominant narratives within civil society and the nonprofit sector in the US in recent years (which is also clearly evident in the final report): towards acknowledging that the language and concepts that we have traditionally relied on may be too narrow to capture the full breadth of how real people actually think about their own giving – particularly when we take into account the ways in which we “do good” are evolving, and also when we expand our frames of reference to include other cultures of giving around the world for whom the language of ‘philanthropy’ and ‘nonprofits’ may be ill-fitting. (For more on this linguistic shift, see [this WPM article](#) or listen to our [conversation with global philanthropy expert Pamala Wiepking on the Philanthropisms podcast](#)).

The other thing I wanted to note is that although the Generosity Commission report is undoubtedly focussed on the US, and as a result some of its recommendations are relatively US-specific, there is also plenty within it that has relevance elsewhere. One of the things I am particularly interested in is how the findings and recommendations of this report compare and contrast with the thinking in other countries where there is a clear interest at the moment in developing policy ideas to boost the culture of giving; such as Australia, Ireland and the UK. Are

there opportunities to translate good ideas between contexts? Or can we identify universal themes that crop up across any attempts to come up with policy ideas to boost philanthropy? I am planning on putting some thought into this over next few weeks and writing up some ideas, so keep an eye out if that sound of interest. (And I am telling you this partly as a way of making myself accountable for ensuring that I actually do it!)

In the meantime, I definitely urge you to check out the Generosity Commission report (whether you are in the US or not), as there is a huge amount of food for thought to be had.

Asia Major

Right at the top of my list of “FOMO inducing events I saw updates from this month” was the [Philanthropy For Better Cities Forum \(which also marked the start of a wider Hong Kong Philanthropy Week\)](#). This wasn’t just because I fancy a trip to Hong Kong (although that obviously would have been nice), but rather because it was yet more evidence of how much fascinating growth and evolution is taking place in Asian Philanthropy right now.

This shouldn’t entirely come as a surprise to anyone who has been keeping pace with philanthropy over the past decade or so, as the potential for growth in the region has been clear for a long time. However, what I have found most encouraging over the last couple of years has been the sense of a clear shift: from a position where the agenda of ‘Asian philanthropy’ was being driven by Western companies and institutions keen to import their own models and ideas (and, presumably, export large amounts of money as a result), which seemed to be the case 10 years ago, to a position where the agenda is now being driven by Asian institutions.



The launch last year of the new “think-fund-do tank” the Institute of Philanthropy (with \$870 million of initial funding!) was clear evidence of the way in which ownership of the Asian philanthropy agenda has shifted to the region itself, and from reading reports about the Philanthropy For Better Cities Forum (including [an excellent write-up in Alliance](#)) it certainly seems as though there is a keen interest in identifying whether there is such as thing as a distinctively Asian approach, and if so what that looks like. (And, perhaps, most importantly, which aspects of received wisdom and practice from the US, UK and Europe don’t really resonate). There have been quite a few interesting articles over the past year on things like how the context for corporate philanthropy differs in Asian countries, or whether attitudes to impact and measurement diverge from those in Western philanthropic markets, and it sounds like these topics (and more) were discussed on detail at the Forum, which is great to hear.

(And just for the avoidance of doubt: if anyone would like me to come and discuss these topics in Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia or any other Asian locations, that is definitely a thing that I would do...)

(Un)Welcome to New York?

A fascinating article in the New York Times this month [highlighted an increased focus from major philanthropic funders in New York on supporting the needs of immigrant communities](#).



This is interesting for a couple of reasons: firstly because it comes at a time when public attitudes towards immigration in the city are apparently hardening, amidst concerns about the strain on housing and public services in the city, so it might be interpreted as a demonstration of the ability of philanthropy to stick with important issues even when the prevailing winds of political and public opinion are not favourable (which some would argue is one of its most important functions). But what is also interesting is that the funders quoted in the article choose to justify their actions at least in part on the grounds of economic good sense rather than principle (“if we support immigrant communities to learn English and help them integrate, they will be able to start working and paying taxes sooner”). They are far from the first to make a case for philanthropy in these terms, and for some it will be seen as a reflection of a welcome level of pragmatism; for others, however, it may be seen as a missed opportunity to make a more fundamental moral case for supporting immigrant communities as a matter of justice.

Robotic Alms?

There were quite a few interesting stories this month about various aspects of the relationship between philanthropy and AI, so I thought

that rather than cover them all separately I would try and pull a few together here.



First up was an article in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* about [the recent shift by Google.org \(Google's philanthropic arm\) from its traditionally fairly broad-based approach towards a new strategy that is firmly centred on AI](#). This mirrors a shift in corporate strategy by the company, which is now putting AI at the heart of all its work. As part of the new strategy, Google.org will now focus on providing training and support to help nonprofits make use of existing AI tools, as well as supporting the development of new AI tools and applications in areas of social and environmental need where they believe the technology can have a real impact.

On a more critical note, a really interesting [article in Wired magazine highlighted concerns about Google's new Overview function](#) (which provides AI-generated summaries as the first result for searches, as many of you will have seen), and the potential negative impact this may have on nonprofits. As the article explains, in the immediate short term there is a real concern that the information provided is simply not accurate or trustworthy, and that nonprofits may find their work misrepresented or simply obscured by inaccurate AI summaries in response to search enquiries that would in the past have led people to

their websites. In the longer term, there are also concerns about how the algorithms which determine the information people see in their search result summaries actually work. On what basis are they mentioning or recommending certain cause areas or organisations rather than others? Will this simply prioritise already-popular causes and organisations - or those deemed to be “safer” and less controversial – at the expense of more marginal or difficult ones? (FYI this is very close to the subject matter of the chapter I have forthcoming in the new [Routledge Handbook of Artificial Intelligence and Philanthropy](#) in November, which I am planning on writing up as an article, so keep an eye out for that if you are interested).

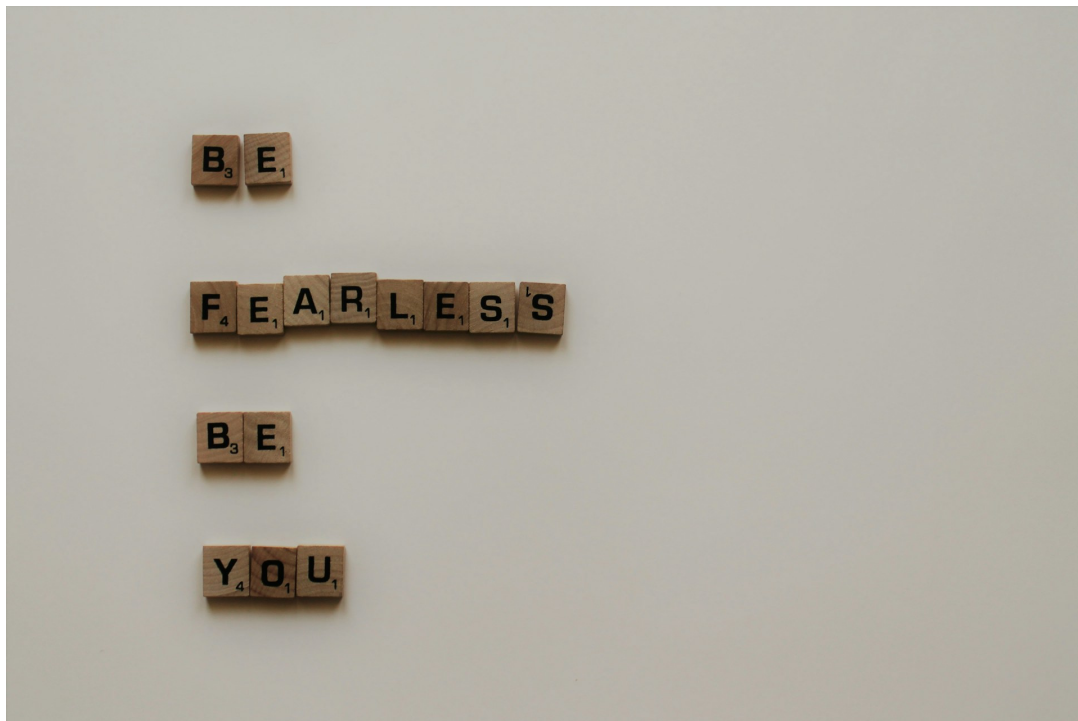
The third of our AI and philanthropy stories comes again from *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, and this time concerns [news that a new tech start-up call Givzey is piloting autonomous agents that can be deployed for fundraising](#). (I.e. AI- powered systems than can interact with existing and potential donors in the same way that a human fundraiser would, albeit only currently via email or text). The company explains that a key part of the rationale for this is that “the goal of the autonomous fundraiser is to reach donors who don’t have a gift officer assigned to them — and that most organizations wouldn’t hire a gift officer to serve — but who could benefit from more personalized engagement.” Interestingly, this very much echoes one of the potential arguments that [I put forward in a blog I wrote all the way back in 2017 \(!\) for why AI-powered philanthropy advice might be a coming trend](#): that it could ‘democratise’ a product that is currently only available to elite donors, by lowering the cost through automation and thus making it economically viable to offer at a mass-market level.

At this stage, the autonomous fundraiser product is still only in the testing stage, so there is still a lot to be determined about the appetite among nonprofits for such a product, how they would use it, and what reaction donors might have to interacting with an AI agent. There are also many potential ethical questions that need addressing, from the question of whether this will lead to human workers being replaced through to the question of whether allowing algorithms to shape donor choices potentially brings with it risks of undermining individual

autonomy (and if so, at what cost?) Again - all questions I will return to soon!

An Unsettling Result?

The [story of the Fearless Fund came to what for many was a somewhat disappointing conclusion this month in the form of an out of court settlement](#). Regular readers may remember from the June edition of the newsletter that Fearless Fund is a grant making fund linked to a venture capital firm owned and led by a group of Black women, which focuses on supporting Black female entrepreneurs. A powerful new conservative group led by the anti-Affirmative Action campaigner Edward Blum took Fearless Fund to court last year, claiming that this grantmaking focus was “discriminatory”.



Many legal experts and civil society commentators expressed concern about the potential precedent that this case might set in terms of undermining the principle of philanthropic freedom, so to some extent there might be relief that the case never made it to trial. However, as [Roger Colinvaux argues in an excellent comment piece in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*](#), whilst this outcome does offer some short term respite,

it also very much leaves open the possibility of further challenges to race-conscious grantmaking programs and DEI efforts in the nonprofit sector in the future, so there is in reality probably little to celebrate.

Tainted Donations (Again)

Another month, another entry in the ongoing annals of tainted donations: this time in [the form of the deceased former Harrods owner Mohamed Al Fayed](#). There were plenty who were willing to express the view that Al Fayed was not a very pleasant man when he was alive (this was, indeed, a running theme of *Private Eye* magazine for about 20 years), but a string of new allegations from former female employees and contacts has now laid bare a picture of a man who systematically used and abused his position of power to take advantage of vulnerable younger women over many years. As a result, a number of charities that have received money from Al Fayed's foundation are now faced with the question of what (if anything) to do. Should they return donations they have received in the past? (Which is actually remarkably difficult to do). Should they hold onto the money but publicly disavow Al Fayed and his behaviour? And what should they do about any potential future donations?



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

These are all classic considerations that face any organisations that have received, or are offered, money that is potentially “tainted” in some way. I have covered these questions (and others) in [a fair amount of detail on the Philanthropisms podcast](#) and in [this WPM guide](#), so I won’t dwell on them here. Suffice it just to say that this seems like an interesting example of a particular subset of tainted donations: namely those where the donor is morally problematic as a result of aspects of their

behaviour that don't necessarily directly relate to how they made their money. Now, there might also be perfectly valid questions about how Al Fayed made his money (again, I suspect Private Eye might have a view on this...), but these new allegations don't immediately pertain to that (except, of course, insofar as some of the women who have made allegations of sexual assault against Al Fayed were employees, which might well be sufficient grounds for questioning the business as well).

This is similar to the case of the disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein, who it also became clear was a vile sexual predator, and as a result his donations were brought into question. The point in both cases is not to imply that everything is fine because their wrongdoing wasn't directly relevant to their money-making, but simply to highlight that we need to understand what the relationship is between the moral taint of an individual and their money, and how this gets "transmitted". In the case where money is made in a way that is ethically dubious, the classic question for a charity is "can you take bad money and put it to good uses?"; whereas in the case where an individual is ethically problematic because of their wider behaviour, we may find ourselves asking the slightly different question "can you take OK money from a bad person and put that to good uses?"

It may be that charities find that this additional layer of apparent ethical distance from the source of the taint makes it easier for them to justify taking the money. Certainly a number of organisations quoted in the *Civil Society* article seem to be suggesting that they will keep the money, and basing their argument on the fact that they never had a personal relationship with Al Fayed himself, but only with his money through his family foundation. (Which is presumably seen as sufficiently separate?)

For more on some of these topics, you can check out [my conversation with the political philosopher Patricia Illingworth for the Philanthropisms podcast](#), where we discuss Jeffrey Epstein and tainted donations in detail. And if you want further food for thought on how charity can be used to protect and burnish the reputations of truly awful individuals, I would highly recommend [Jon Dean's paper about Jimmy Savile and charity](#). (Which is not an entirely easy read, but is very much worth it).

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 Masterminds podcast

I had a great time this month speaking to Jay Frost for an episode of the DonorSearch *Philanthropy Masterminds* podcast, which was broadcast live from my garden office! (Since Jay very kindly came up to Liverpool while he was over in the UK to do a series of guest interviews). We talked about a whole range of things, from the history of tainted donations through to what the role of civil society might look like in a future where automation has changed the nature of work. If you want to check it out, the video is available on Youtube for now, or you should be able to listen to it as an audio podcast in due course. You can also read a write up of some of the key bits courtesy of Philanthropy Ireland (so big thanks to them!)



[Read the write up](#)

The Philanthropisms podcast:

The Philanthropisms podcast also returned this month after a short summer break. Partly by accident (as I haven't got any interviews in the can just yet), but also by design (as I have been meaning to get back to doing some deep dive episodes anyway), the first two episodes were an exploration of the history of philanthropic foundations and a detailed look at the relationship between philanthropy and social justice.



Philanthropisms

Philanthropic Foundations: history, role and controversy



Philanthropisms

Philanthropy & Social Justice



University of Geneva CAS

One of my first big bits of work at the start of September was going out to Geneva to teach for a couple of days at the University, delivering a new module on using historical perspective to inform current philanthropy practice. It all seemed to go well – the group of students were lovely and very engaged (if any of you are reading this, hello!) and I was delighted to be joined by a couple of great guests (Cedric Cotter from the International Committee of the Red Cross archives, who I had not met before but was delighted to get to know, and also a couple of existing friends – Rupert Graf Strachwitz and Ben Soskis).

I now just need to finish my marking, but after that I will hopefully also get round to turning some of my thoughts on the value of history into

some WPM content too...



CSJ Philanthropy Big Listen

I mentioned in the intro that I broke one of my own golden rules this month and attended an event that was dangerously close to being a party conference fringe event... Luckily it was worth it, as the event was really good - a "big listen" on philanthropy hosted by the Centre for Social Justice. There was plenty of room for roundtable discussions alongside some interviews and speeches from the stage, and I heard lots of insights from funders and charities about the challenges they face right now. The fact that the event was in Liverpool was also a big draw for me - not just because it made it very convenient (although that was obviously nice...) but because there still aren't enough opportunities for people interested in philanthropy in the North West to come together, so having a chance to meet some new faces and make some new links was really great. (And a big thanks to newsletter reader Kawika Solidum for the invite).

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.

Darren Walker on Julius Rosenwald:

Anyone like me, who spends a fair portion of their time banging on about how valuable historical knowledge and perspective is for practitioners, will be delighted to see the article in *The Atlantic* this month from outgoing Ford Foundation President Darren Walker, in which he explores the legacy of Julius Rosenwald. As Walker points out, Rosenwald is still not that well known as a figure in the history of philanthropy (except perhaps within the US Jewish philanthropy community, where his legacy is more widely recognised), despite the fact that his approach to philanthropy and his thoughts about its role have clear relevance and importance for those trying to understand how philanthropy can become more justice-focused today. (It may be that Rosenwald's relative obscurity is in part a result of his social justice beliefs, since these led him to a strong opposition to perpetual philanthropy of any form and his foundation was purposely limited-life – so it no longer existed after 1948, and as a result may have been more easily forgotten than many of its contemporaries that are still around today).

It is wonderful to see Rosenwald's philanthropy getting some wider mainstream attention, as he is a fascinating figure and there is a huge amount to learn from his approach to giving. (In particular, the long-term value of small, unrestricted grants, which was the focus of the second phase of his philanthropy through the Rosenwald Fund, and which led to an incredible list of Black artists, scientists, writers and social campaigners being funded - as you can see in [this partial list of](#)

[recipients](#)) – many of whom went on to play important roles in the civil rights movement in the second half of the 20th century).



[Read the article](#)

Philanthropy and pluralism:

Regular readers will know that the topic of pluralism in philanthropy is one that we often cover (indeed, there's [a whole episode of the](#)

[Philanthropisms podcast about it](#), if you're interested). So I was fascinated to see a new paper by Daniel Stid (former Program Director of U.S. Democracy at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation) on this issue (through Johns Hopkins University), "[Taking Democracy for Granted: Philanthropy, Polarization, and the Need for Responsible Pluralism](#)". Given that Stid has experience of trying to fund democracy-enhancing work, and the challenges that increased polarisation poses to this, his thoughts are definitely worth reading.



Taking Democracy for Granted: Philanthropy, Polarization, and the Need for Responsible Pluralism

Daniel Stid
Visiting Fellow, SNF Agora Institute,
Johns Hopkins University

July 14, 2024



Running list of UK trusts and foundations spending down & closing:

A really interesting thing which caught my eye on LinkedIn this month was [a running list compiled by Joanna Jeffrey \(so big hat tip to her\), of UK trusts and foundations that have either paused their grantmaking, put it under review, or announced plans to close down.](#) There is a lot of debate about whether a growing number of foundations are shifting towards spending down, or what they are doing in the face of wider systemic concerns about inequality and injustice, but often these end up focusing on the same handful of examples so it is hard to get a handle on what (if any) sort of wider trend there is beyond those examples. Which is why it is so useful to see this list and get more of a sense of the overall picture.

The other side of this, of course, is that it also highlights a potential area of concern that I am hearing from more and more charities and civil society organisations - that if a growing number of funders are no longer open for grants or may cease to exist in the near future, then the chances of survival for the organisations that have previously relied on them may be small. What has been interesting in recent months is that I have become more and more aware of a potential disparity here: between the theory of why funders are taking these decisions (which many grantee organisations broadly agree with) and the practical reality of what those decisions mean for their grantees (which, at a time of already-significant financial pressures may well mean closure). How to bridge this gap effectively will, I think, be one of the big questions for the near future.



Explore the list

AI for (Not So) Good?:

An [interesting piece in IEEE Spectrum](#) this month takes a critical look at [“AI For Good” initiatives in the Global South](#). The article considers a number of potential issues, such as the risks of ‘tech solutionism’ that tries to impose AI in a top down way with no appreciation of the relevant local context; as well as growing concerns that some apparently altruistic AI initiatives may be driven in part by a desire to extract more valuable data from users.



[Read the article](#)

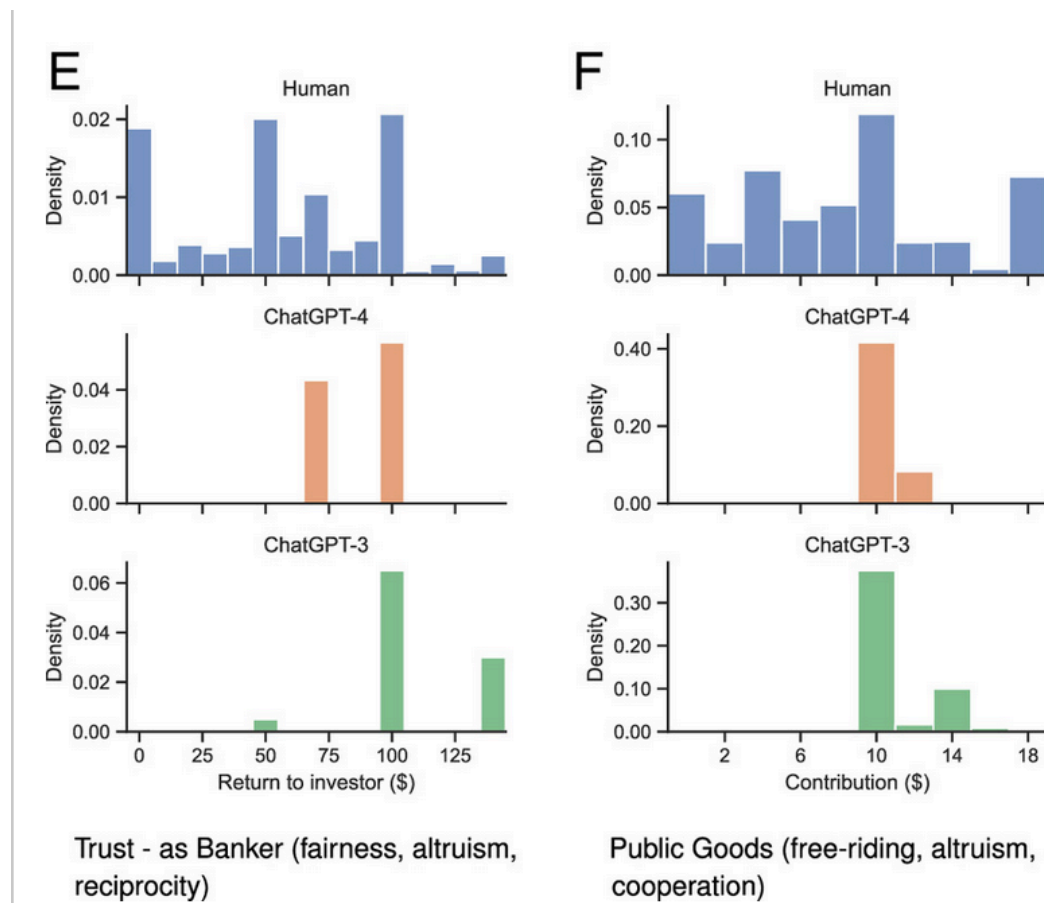
Altruistic AI agents?

I came across an interesting nugget this week that isn't actually new, but is new to me and very interesting, so I thought it was justifiable to put it in this month's newsletter. (Also: my newsletter, my rules). The nugget in question is a paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) earlier this year which [suggests that chatbots may display more cooperative and altruistic behaviour than humans in certain circumstances.](#)

The researchers tested various existing conversational AI systems on a series of classic economics games (Prisoner's Dilemma, Dictator Game etc) to see how close their behaviour was to that expected of human participants, and found that whilst the chatbots mirrored humans in many regards, they were more likely to act altruistically and display generosity in certain games.

This obviously has all the usual caveats about lab findings in economics (esp ones that rely on student participants), but it is definitely interesting. And, as I pointed out on LinkedIn, it also raises the possibility of a brilliant philanthropy-themed future Blade Runner scenario in which the most effective way of identifying rogue Replicants

turns out *not* to be asking them questions about turtles whilst observing their retinal responses, but rather just asking them to donate to charity and then shooting them if they seem too eager...



[Read the paper](#)

FTSE 100 giving down:

A [new report from CAF this month found that charitable donations from companies in the FTSE 100 were down in 2023 compared in 2022](#). And perhaps even more worryingly - [charitable giving by FTSE 100 companies over the past ten years has not kept pace with profits](#). While the FTSE 100's combined profits have increased by 49% since 2014, total donations declined by 13% in the same period – a 34% decline in real terms.

The only slight caveat to all of this is that I know from past experience that measuring corporate giving in a meaningful and consistent way can be extremely difficult. For one thing, the UK government scrapped

mandatory reporting requirements for charitable giving back in 2013, so ever since then researchers have been reliant on voluntary reporting by companies. For another thing, it is not always clear exactly what is being counted as 'giving' and whether it lends itself to like for like comparisons (are in-kind donations of pharmaceuticals from pharma companies the same as giving cash gifts, for instance? And what about staff time – do you count that as a donation, and if so do you value it at the same hourly rate an employee would bill for their normal work?)

That being said, whatever the methodological challenges, I can absolutely believe that companies are not giving anywhere near as much as they could and that there is a lot of scope for getting them to give more.

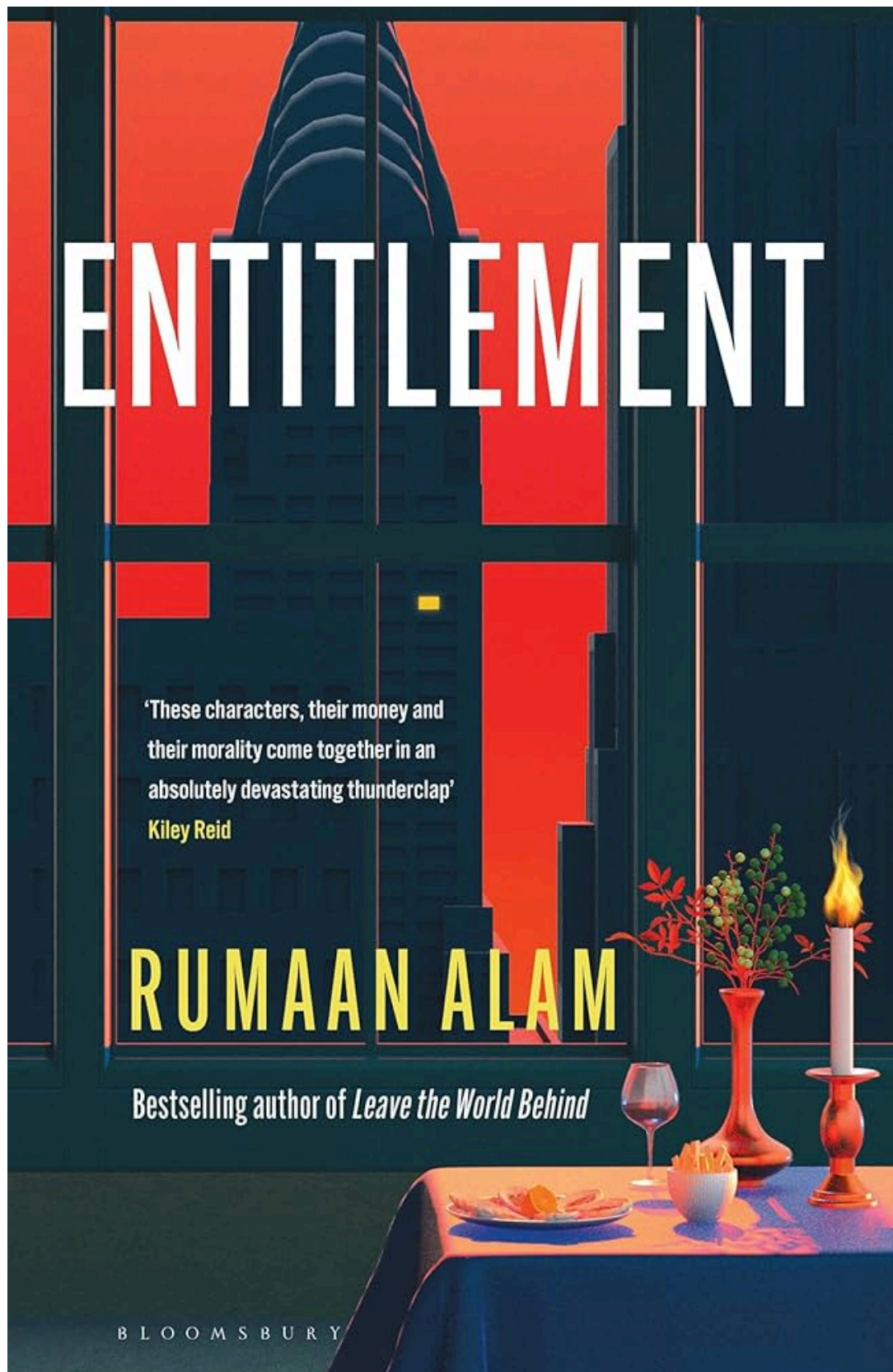


[Read the report](#)

Philanthropy in fiction:

I'm always on the lookout for explorations of philanthropy in popular culture, so my little ears pricked up this month when I read in the Spectator magazine that the new novel from Rumaan Alam (author of *Leave the World Behind*) is called "Entitlement", and concerns the story of a young woman named Brooke Orr who joins the staff of a family

foundation set up by a wealthy couple in memory of their daughter. I haven't read it yet, but based on what I have heard so far I am definitely going to!



AND FINALLY: Hammer Time

It was reported this month that [a newly-discovered species of Hammerhead Shark has been named after late philanthropist and Microsoft co-founder Paul G. Allen](#), in recognition of his support for marine conservation throughout his life. The shark – scientific name *Sphyrna alleni* – has a range that runs from Belize to Brazil, but has only recently been confirmed as a separate species due to its close resemblance to the Bonnethead Shark (*Sphyrna tiburo*).

In the context of ongoing debates about the ethics of philanthropic naming rights it is quite nice to see a story about a philanthropist having something named after them that doesn't seem to raise any immediate concerns about inappropriate power dynamics, reputation laundering etc. Also, if I was a big donor, I would definitely want a frickin' shark named after me so I can totally get on board with this.



[Read the article](#)

Well, that's it for another month. I hope that was interesting and/or enjoyable, and I will be back with more philanthro-gubbins at the end of October.

Rhodri



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