



## Welcome to the Summer 2023 Newsletter!

Ahoy there philanthropoids!

Are you feeling refreshed and relaxed after the summer break?

No, me neither really.

I certainly had a good bit of time off (for which I am very grateful), but the backdrop of increasingly acute climate concerns and the general ongoing (and thoroughly undesirable) incursion of real life into proceedings did slightly scupper my efforts to switch off. As a result, it feels a bit more like the individual wellbeing equivalent of a quick 30 minute top up to get your phone battery through a potentially difficulty train journey rather than a full recharge, but I guess that'll have to do...

Anyway, enough of externalising my ongoing internal narrative, and on to business. I have been studiously squirreling away interesting philanthro-tidbits over the last couple of months, ready to round them up for you in one giant pre-Autumn glut in this newsletter.

Fun fact: I actually started writing the newsletter over the summer, but the first story summary I did (the one about the *New Yorker* piece on Leah Hunt-Hendrix) ended up being so long that I had to turn it into a standalone blog instead. Whoops - will try to keep things a bit pithier from now on.

It looks set to be a super-busy autumn period too. I know I already have quite a few events and a lot of work lined up (which I will keep all of you lovely people up to date with) and I'm sure there will be plenty of other news from elsewhere to pick up on and pick apart, so without further ado let's get this newsletter back up and running...

Best,

Rhodri

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## PHILANTHROPY IN THE NEWS

### **Oil Change: using philanthropy to challenge the source of wealth**

The most interesting article I read over the summer was definitely this [long profile of philanthropist Leah Hunt-Hendrix in New Yorker magazine](#), which touched on lots of fascinating issues about the relationship between where wealth has come from and the legitimacy of trying to do good through giving it away, the thorny dynamics that can occur within wealthy families when different members hold opposing world views, and the challenges of funding social movements through philanthropy.

As I mentioned in the intro, I did originally write a summary of this story for the newsletter, but it got so long that I decided to turn it into a standalone blog instead. So if you are interested in a bit more thought and analysis you can check that out [HERE](#).



## **Collapsing Foundations: Lankelly Chase, philanthropy & Colonial Capitalism**

The big news at the start of the summer (big enough, indeed to get picked up in the US philanthropy press, which is unusual for a story from the UK...) was the [announcement by the Lankelly Chase Foundation that it is to “wholly redistribute its assets over the next five years” before ceasing to exist](#). The foundation’s rationale for this decision is that, in its view, philanthropy (in its current form) is inescapably tied up with extractive and harmful models of “colonial capitalism”, and that the only way to deal with this is to dismantle themselves so that (hopefully) newer, better models can emerge to take their place.

Now this is a big old meaty story and there is a lot to pick apart in it, so I think I will probably explore it in more depth in an article or podcast soon. But for now it is worth just offering a couple of brief thoughts.

The first is that (as anyone who has read my articles or listened to the podcast will know) I am broadly on board with what is going on here. I too think that philanthropy needs to orientate itself more towards trying to achieve justice, and that this will require rethinking the approaches and models that we use (quite probably in fairly radical ways). I also



think that we need to shift the default norm for philanthropic foundations, from one where we assume that foundations are set up to exist in perpetuity to one where we assume instead that they will have a finite lifespan. (It may still make sense in some cases to exist over the very long term or even indefinitely, but I think the onus should be on organisations to make a case for why this is necessary, as I outline in [this WPM guide](#)).

However, there are a few aspects of this story that do raise questions for me. One in particular is to do with the framing and use of language: is the target here “philanthropy” as a whole, or institutional philanthropy (i.e. foundations), or even just a particular subset of those? The suggestion seems to be that the very concept of philanthropy is a flawed “cult of benevolence” (which I’m not sure is entirely helpful language in itself), but to me that implies an interpretation of “philanthropy” as being solely about a fairly anglocentric model of institutional endowed charity, which is a very narrow way of looking at things. ([For more on the challenges of defining philanthropy, see this WPM guide](#)).





You might well want to do away with this kind of model (and, indeed, many do), but couldn't this equally be framed as 'reclaiming' or 'redefining' philanthropy rather than abandoning it altogether? This may seem like unnecessary semantic quibbling, but in the context of the wider debate about the future of philanthropy I think it is important, as it makes the difference between people positioning themselves within the world of philanthropy and trying to reform/improve it, or positioning themselves outside the world of philanthropy and trying to 'abolish' it. The latter is obviously perfectly valid but my worry is that the more good reform-minded people that choose this path, the more divisive the debate about how to reform philanthropy becomes and the harder it gets to achieve the necessary change.

In the case of Lankelly Chase, the question is whether the cause of reforming philanthropy is better served by them dismantling themselves, or by continuing to exist and act as a powerful voice for change within the foundation world (as they certainly have in the UK in recent years). They have clearly decided that the former is better; however there will almost certainly be people who agree with their aims but disagree with them that this is the best way of achieving them.

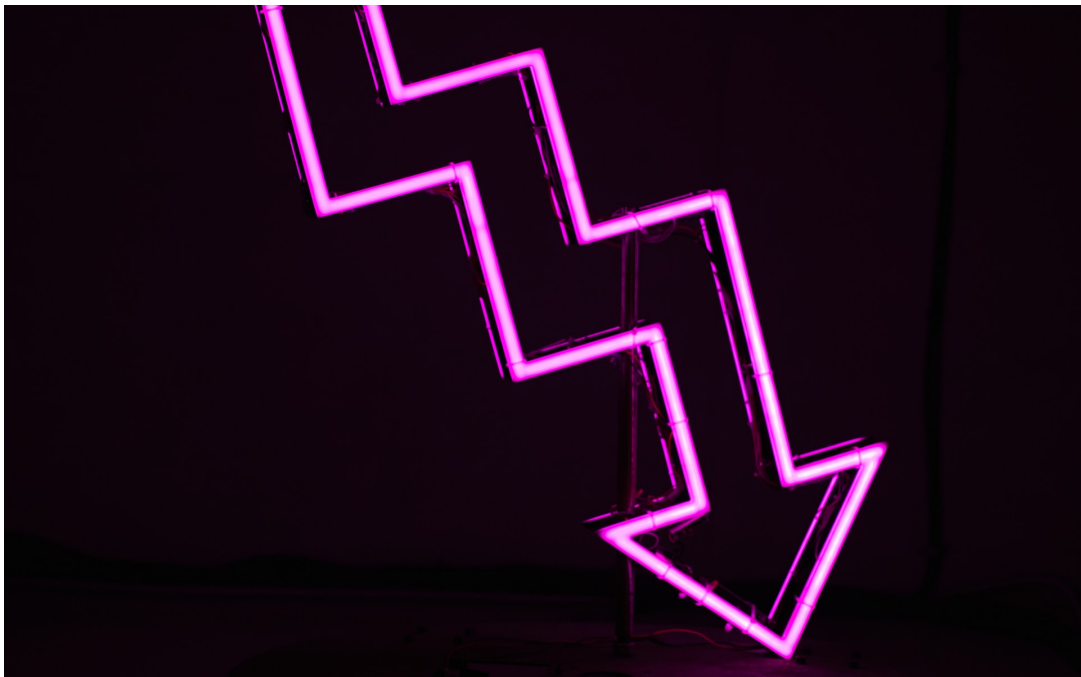
## **Why So Down? Unpicking the decline in US Giving**

*Associated Press* carried an interesting piece back in July as part of its philanthropy coverage, about [a poll conducted in the US which found that nearly half of people who had stopped giving over the past five years had done so because they thought that wealthier people could afford to give more, and should.](#)

The apparent decline in participation in giving is an ongoing source of concern for many in the US. (Indeed, as I reported in this article, it was [one of the major topics of discussion at this year's Gates Foundation Better Giving Summit](#)). This new survey finding potentially adds another worrying dimension to this debate: if the increasing over-reliance of the nonprofit sector on the donations of a relatively small number of very wealthy donors is not only a symptom of declining rates of giving among

the wider public, *but also a cause of them as well*, then are we locked in some kind of philanthropy doom spiral, and how do we get out?

Of course we need to exercise a bit of caution here (as we do with any survey-based findings about philanthropy), since the reasons people *say* they don't give and why they *actually* don't give may well be two quite distinct things because we are not generally great at analysing our own intrinsic motives so there is a big danger of post hoc rationalisation. However, even with this caveat in mind this is definitely an intriguing new dimension to this debate.



The other finding reported in the article that caught my eye was about younger donors:

“The millennials and Gen Zers surveyed were far more likely than older generations to trust newer solicitation channels, such as social media, crowdfunding sites, and giving circles. They’re also less likely to engage in traditional drivers of small donations, including religious and workplace giving, which declined 10% from 2016 to 2018.”

This chimes with an argument that has been made in various places (and which I explored a bit in the WPM article already mentioned): that perhaps giving isn't *declining* but rather shifting into new forms, and that

we are failing to capture these new types of generosity in our existing systems of measurement. (Thus it ends up looking like a decline).

The corollary that is often added to this argument (sometimes as an assertion, but more often as a question) is whether it matters if giving is changing in this way. If overall levels of generosity are remaining the same (or even going up), but we are just giving in ways that mean traditional nonprofits get a smaller slice of the pie, should we be concerned? An interesting op ed in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* in August, from Phil Buchanan of the Center for Effective Philanthropy, picked up on precisely this question and pushed back on the idea that we should be totally sanguine about giving to traditional nonprofits going down. Expanding our definitions of generosity and the ways in which we measure it, Buchanan argues, is a good thing. But it shouldn't make us less concerned about the fact that giving to nonprofit organisations is declining, because these formalised institutions play a unique and vital role that can't be replaced by informal giving and mutual aid. As Buchanan puts it:

*"Look, it's lovely that my neighbor brought over a dinner after I had surgery, but it's also an entirely different act than donating to a nonprofit... The same goes for supporting your niece's GoFundMe to raise money for her community service project; or offering a gift of money to help a family in your community who lost a parent to cancer; or pulling over to help a stranded motorist."*

I have said something similar in various places before: that I think formal nonprofit organisations and philanthropic giving have a unique value and role to play, even in the context where the range of options for people to express their generosity or to do good is expanding rapidly. The challenge for the nonprofit sector is to clarify precisely what this value is, and to make a much more compelling positive case for it.

(FYI: If you want a bit of historical perspective on why we are generally not very good at measuring levels of giving and why that matters, [check out this WPM article](#)).



## For Your Eyes Only: the misuse of tax deductions for gifts of art and property

If you like your philanthropy coverage forensic and critical, then may I offer you this fascinating (if depressing/rage-inducing) little number from *ProPublica* back in July, about [the way in which some US donors are abusing the rules on donations of art and property to make sizeable and highly tax efficient “gifts” that test the boundaries of what could be construed as charitable.](#)

Current rules allow you to deduct gifts of art or property to a nonprofit, as long as there is some kind of public access so that the donation can be said to result in a public benefit. The problem is that the rules are ripe for abuse. For one thing, the “nonprofits” that some donors choose to donate art or property to are their own private foundations, so there is little or no sense in which they are relinquishing control of the assets or handing them over into collective ownership. Some of these foundations also claim to make assets available to the public, but in reality they limit access to the extent that it is hard to buy the idea that there is any genuine effort to comply with the rules and ensure a public benefit.



For me, this immediately brought to mind the exchange in Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to Galaxy* where protagonist Arthur Dent confronts the Local Council planning official about the fact that his house is being demolished without prior warning, and the official tries to defend the decision on the basis that the plans were on "public display":

*"But the plans were on display..."*

*"On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them."*

*"That's the display department."*

*"With a flashlight."*

*"Ah, well, the lights had probably gone."*

*"So had the stairs."*

*"But look, you found the notice, didn't you?"*

*"Yes," said Arthur, "yes I did. It was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard.'"*

## **The Nature of the Gift: philanthropy and rewilding**

A recent *Financial Times* article took a fascinating [deep dive into the role that big money philanthropy is playing in driving rewilding efforts around the world](#). Many (including me!) would agree that we need to do far more to protect the natural world and to ensure there are areas free from human interference - so that species and ecosystems have the space they need to recover from the damage we have done to them. However, rewilding has proven to be a controversial idea; with some arguing that it can run roughshod over the economic needs and priorities of local communities.

These sorts of concerns are even more acute when we are talking about small numbers of very wealthy donors (or even just individuals) funding particular projects - especially when the donors in question may not even live in the countries where the rewilding is happenign, since there

is a clear sense in which this can be seen as wildly anti-democratic. However, the flipside is that in the context of increasingly acute concerns about biodiversity loss and habitat destruction, and the ongoing failure of governments around the world to face up to the scale of the challenges, one could make a case that this is an example where the ability of philanthropy to run counter to the status quo is a good thing, even if that makes it anti-democratic.

I, for one, can certainly convince myself of that without too much difficulty...





## **AI, AI, Oh...: Philanthropic foundations ramping up their AI efforts**

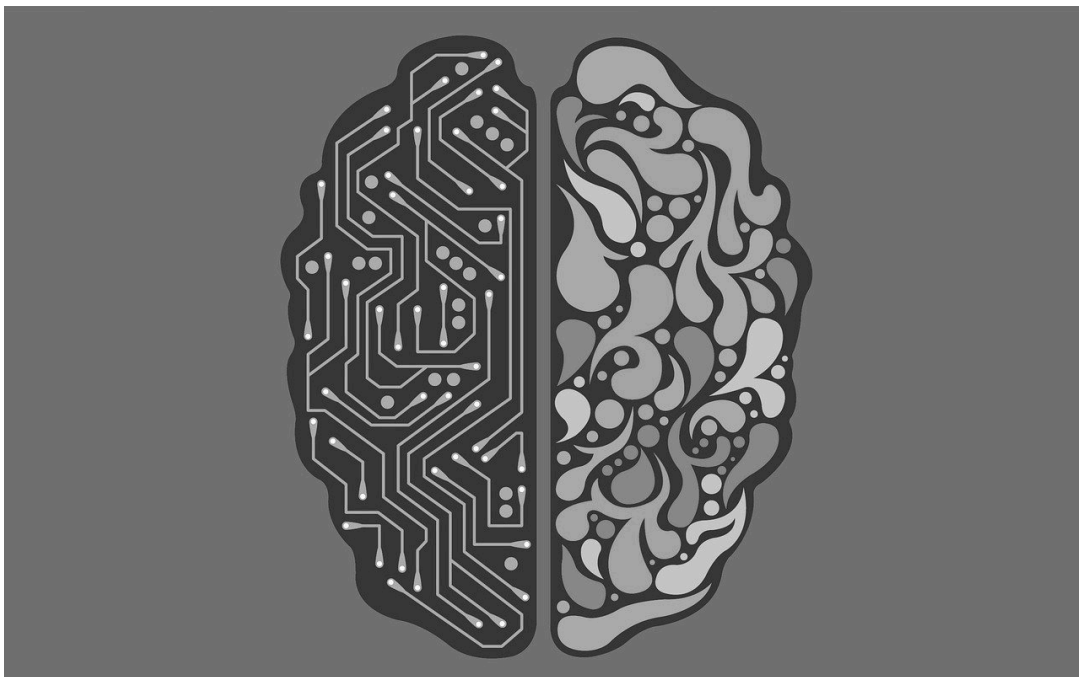
Another [interesting piece in Associated Press in August outlined the increasing focus of big foundations on artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#). One bit

that particularly struck me was this comment about the potential bifurcation of approaches between those funders that have their roots in tech money and those that don't:

"Billionaires who earned their fortunes in technology are more likely to support projects and institutions that emphasize the positive outcomes of AI, while foundations not endowed with tech money have tended to focus more on AI's dangers."

This certainly reflects my sense so far in the work I have done on philanthropy and AI over the last few years. And maybe that is not a bad thing: if we can maintain some sort of balance between the two approaches, then perhaps philanthropy can play a vital role in exploring both the opportunities that AI will bring (of which there are likely to be many), and the challenge (of which we can already see there will be many too).

(NB: if you want some more detailed thoughts on the current state of AI, civil society and philanthropy, then take a listen to this [recent episode of the Philanthropisms podcast](#)).



**Not So Open Society? OSF cutting back its European operations**



Civil society organisations across Europe were rocked over the summer by the news that [Open Society Foundations is to drastically reduce its funding and activities in Europe](#). This has come as a big shock for many, who had no idea that such a move was on the horizon, and is potentially highly significant, as OSF has long been one of the main funders for civil society in many countries - particularly when it comes to issues of human rights and civic freedoms.

This announcement comes on the back of the story we reported in the last newsletter, about founder George Soros's decision to hand the reins of his philanthropic empire over to son Alex. The younger Soros, who is now head of OSF's Board of Directors, announced a new operating model and organisational strategy at the end of June, which has resulted in the decision to cut back European activities. Any illusions that there would be continuity and stability following the handover of power of OSF now seem resolutely shattered, and grantees not just in Europe but around the world must surely be concerned about what comes next.



*George Soros - World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2011, [Image by World Economic Forum](#), [CC BY-SA 2.0 License](#)*



As a private foundation, OSF is of course free to change its approach and focus, even in radical ways. This story does raise questions, however, about what kinds of responsibilities big funders bear – not only to their grantees, but to entire civil society sectors that may (rightly or wrongly) have come to rely on them. I have heard from people who work in Ireland, for instance, that the closure of Chuck Feeney’s Atlantic Philanthropies in 2020 had a seismic impact on the Irish civil society sector (where Atlantic Philanthropies had become the dominant funder). In that case, of course, people knew the closure was coming as it had been planned from the outset – although that didn’t stop the disappearance of Atlantic’s funding coming as a big challenge for many. In the case of OSF’s decision to pull back from Europe, it has come as a much nastier shock for many grantees, who had no idea this was coming and have complained that there was no openness or consultation of any kind.

## **Elon Musk’s population hobby horse**

It was revealed over the summer that Tesla, SpaceX and Twitter (nope, I won’t call it “X”) owner [Elon Musk donated \\$10m through his Musk Foundation to a project at the University of Austin, Texas called the Population Wellbeing Initiative](#), which does research into population issues and “explores issues around fertility, parenting and the future of population and economic growth, as well as infant and child welfare.” This doesn’t come as a particular surprise, as Musk has long voiced his concerns about the challenges of declining populations and the demographic implications this may have – many of which sound, well... a bit eugenics-y to be honest.

I was interested in this story both because I have an ongoing fascination with Musk’s philanthropy (as [outlined in this article](#)) and with the long and murky entanglement of philanthropy with eugenics (which I [explored in more detail in this other WPM piece](#)). As interest in population issues, life extension technologies, and existential risks to the human race among tech billionaires increase and converge, I suspect very strongly that we will see more funding of this kind in coming years. And as a result, I think concerns about the slippery slope

from top-down, technocratic philanthropy to eugenic thinking of the kind I highlight in that article are ones that we must take very seriously once again.





# WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

Here's a quick update on what we've been up to over the last couple of months. TBH it isn't loads, as I made sure to be on holiday with my kids quite a lot over the summer, but there are a few bits worth flagging up and also lots of things coming up over the autumn that you might be interested in.

## **In an ideal world, would there be no charity?**

The most substantive thing I did over the summer was probably this article, in which I took a detailed look at the idea that "in a just or ideal world, there would be no charity"- exploring where the idea has come from historically, why it has exerted such enduring power, and (crucially) whether it is right. (And thanks to João Paulo Vergueiro from Giving Tuesday, you can even read this one in Portuguese if you like!)



Image by [Felipe Venâncio](#), [CC BY 2.0 license](#)



[Read the article](#)

[Read the article in Portuguese](#)

## **Leah Hunt Hendrix and radical philanthropy**

I already mentioned this one at the start of the newsletter, but in case you missed it there, I also wrote a blog with some thoughts on philanthropy wealth and radicalism, prompted by the *New Yorker* profile of Leah Hunt-Hendrix.



[Read the article](#)

### **On the Philanthropisms podcast**

Due to my planned indolence over the summer, the podcast took a short break (and will be back next week on 7<sup>th</sup> Sept). However, before we went off, we published two more epsiodes: the first was the second of our series in partnership with ERNOP, looking at their research note series and what is going on in philanthropy academia in Europe; and the

second was an interview with philanthropy consultant and BAMEOnline conference organiser Martha Awojobi.



## ERNOP 2

[Listen](#)

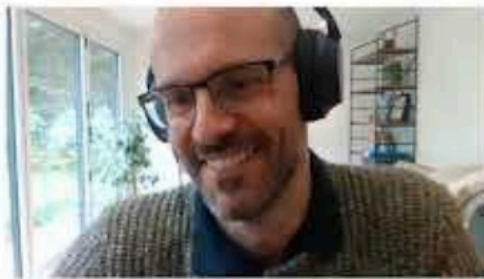


## Martha Awojobi

[Listen](#)

### **Me, but on another podcast**

I also managed to squeeze in a guest appearance on another podcast, RKD's Group Thinkers, where I joined hosts Justin McCord and Ronnie Richard for a great chat about what got me in to philanthropy and what I'm trying to do with Why Philanthropy Matters.



[Listen to the podcast](#)

## UPCOMING EVENTS

I've got quite a few speaking gigs and events lined up for the coming weeks and months, both online and in-person, so if you've ever harboured a desire to hear me blab on live, then you may be able to fulfil your wish:



## RSA Fellows Event

On 11<sup>th</sup> Sept at **1830 (UK time)**, I'm taking part in an online RSA Fellows event about my book *What Is Philanthropy For?*, alongside a great panel of other speakers



[Sign up](#)

## Charity Law Association panel



On **12<sup>th</sup> October** I will be in London to take part in a keynote panel on charities and the culture wars at the Charity Law Association annual conference (which should be fascinating!)

## UK Community Foundations conference



On **Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> October at 11.30am**, I will be taking part in a virtual panel session on philanthropy and social justice for the UK Community Foundations Together 23 conference.

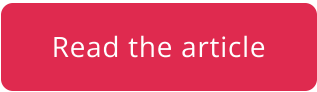
[Sign up here](#)

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## OTHER GOOD STUFF

**Giving as a predictor of political affiliation:**

This is really interesting, as it hints at the fact that there are different conceptions of the role & purpose of philanthropy and that these tend to align with different political traditions. (Which is something you definitely come to feel if you work in this field for any length of time, but isn't often spelled out).



[Read the original journal paper](#)

## **Should we let billionaires save the world?**

There was an interesting partial defence of grandiose, world-saving philanthropy in the FT over the summer, by comedian-turned-Sci Fi author Andrew Hunter Murray. Hunter Murray's latest book "The Sanctuary" (which I have on my Kindle, but confess to not having read yet) revolves around a mysterious philanthropist, Sir John Pemberley, and his utopian (or perhaps dystopian) plans to create a 'new eden' as a refuge in the face of climate breakdown, and Hunter Murray has taken this as a peg for a surprisingly balanced and incisive look at the pros and cons of big-bet philanthropy.

[Read the article](#)

## **Putting environmental justice at the front of climate philanthropy efforts:**

Offering perhaps something of a counterpoint to the story covered earlier about billionaires and rewilding is this piece in *The 19<sup>th</sup>*, profiling The Fund For Frontline Power: a new women-led pooled fund that seeks to provide a way for funders who want to address climate issues to do so in a way that prioritises environmental and racial justice.

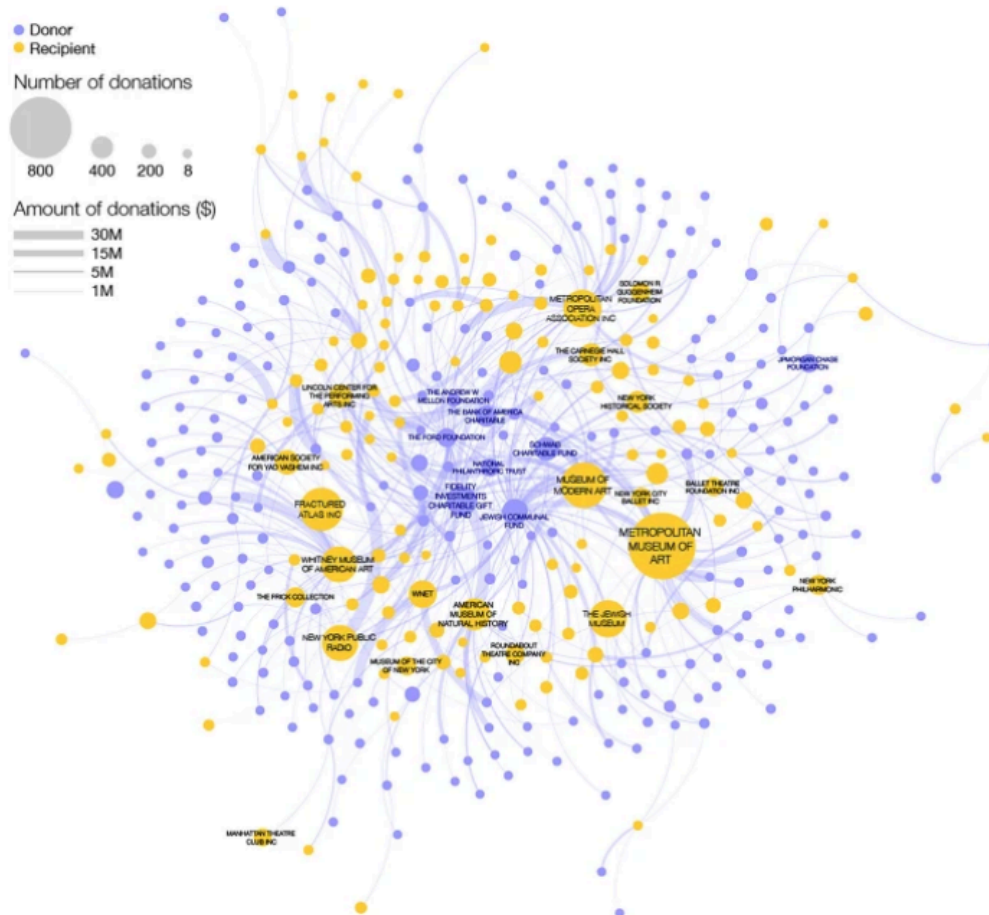
[Read the article](#)

## **Mapping Arts Philanthropy:**

There was an intriguing article in *Nature* over the summer, reporting on a new paper which has used machine learning to do big data analysis of over 3.6 million IRS 990 forms (the tax filings that US nonprofits have to submit), and map out what giving to the arts looks like. This resulted in a great (if slightly eye-watering) network visualisation of arts philanthropy in New York, as well as some interesting findings on things like the

extent to which arts donations come from donors who are primarily or solely focused on the arts, or from those who have broader interests.

### Figure 1

[Read the article](#)

## Giving in Higher Education:

If you are interested in the role of philanthropy in funding higher education in the UK, then you should definitely check out the new report from CASE and More Partnership, which looks back over a decade of giving to HE and highlights key figures and trends.





The CASE-More UK Philanthropy Report

Accelerating ambitions: a decade of giving to higher education and how it informs the future.

CASE Insights™



[Read the report](#)

## **New Book on philanthropic foundations in Canada**

If you are interested in the world of philanthropic foundations, or philanthropy in Canada, or just fancy finding out more about either, then you should definitely check out the new book from Hilary Pearson, former president of Philanthropic Foundations Canada, *From Charity to Change: Inside the World of Canadian Foundations*. (And I am not just saying that because Hilary gave a positive review of my book fairly recently!)

# FROM CHARITY TO CHANGE

*Inside the World of  
Canadian Foundations*

**HILARY M. PEARSON**

[Buy the book](#)

**New Professor of Philanthropic Studies at IUPUI Lilly Family  
School of Philanthropy**

A piece of news that caught my eye a couple of weeks ago was the announcement that philanthropy scholar Michael Moody has been appointed as Professor of Philanthropic Studies at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (which is probably the most prestigious philanthropy research centre in the world, or at least in the top 3). I have enjoyed many of Michael's bits of writing over the years (such as his seminal book with Robert Payton *Understanding Philanthropy: Its Meaning and Mission*), and have also met him a couple of times (once sharing a panel with him at the ARNOVA conference in 2019, and once interviewing him and Sharna Goldseker about their book *Generation Impact* for the CAF Giving Thought podcast). So I thought I would take the opportunity to offer my congratulations on a thoroughly deserved appointment!

[Read the announcement](#)

### **AND FINALLY: It couldn't happen... could it?**

Last but not least, fans of speculating about the dangers of Effective Altruism, Longtermism and the focus on X-risks might enjoy [“No Regrets”, a short story by Carter Schultz published in Slate](#), which tells a tale of “geoengineering, billionaire hubris, and “altruistic” narcissism”. I really enjoyed it, although the only sour note for me is that it is quite close to an idea for a short story that I have been mulling over for a while! (But in fairness, I have done precisely nothing about that, so I can really gripe...) Slate also published an interesting analysis of the themes in the story by academic Tyler Austin Harper, who talks about what he calls the “new misanthropy” of many tech billionaires, even when they are purportedly acting philanthropically to solve the world's problems.

[Read the story](#)

[Read the analysis piece](#)

Right, hopefully that has got us all back up to speed with what's going on in the philanthro-sphere. I should probably return to my worryingly large To Do list at this point, so bye for now - I'll be back with more at the end of September.

Rhodri



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