



The Ethics of Entrepreneurial Philanthropy

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Abstract

A salient if under researched feature of the new age of global inequalities is the rise to prominence of entrepreneurial philanthropy, the pursuit of transformational social goals through philanthropic investment in projects animated by entrepreneurial principles. Super-wealthy entrepreneurs in this way extend their suzerainty from the domain of the economic to the domains of the social and political. We explore the ethics and ethical implications of *entrepreneurial philanthropy* through systematic comparison with what we call *customary philanthropy*, which preferences support for established institutions and social practices. We analyse the ethical statements made at interview by 24 elite UK philanthropists, 12 customary and 12 entrepreneurial, to reveal the co-existence of two ethically charged narratives of elite philanthropic motivations, each instrumental in maintaining the established socio-economic order. We conclude that entrepreneurial philanthropy, as an ostensibly efficacious instrument of social justice, is ethically flawed by its unremitting impulse toward ideological purity.

Keywords Entrepreneurial philanthropy · Ethics · Inequality · Neo-liberalism · Philanthrocapitalism · Rhetoric of motivations

Introduction

A salient if under researched feature of the new age of global inequalities is the rise to prominence of *entrepreneurial philanthropy*, the pursuit of transformational social goals through philanthropic investment in projects animated by entrepreneurial principles (Bishop and Green 2009; Dietlin 2010). The work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in striving to eradicate diseases like malaria and polio is emblematic of a much wider social movement of super-wealthy entrepreneurs to combat poverty and other

manifestations of injustice prevalent in both developed and developing countries (Callahan 2017; McGoey 2015). The doctrine of entrepreneurial philanthropy, first articulated by Carnegie in what became known as *The Gospel of Wealth* (1889), is argued to matter more now than ever before because it offers mitigation for the worst excesses of “winners takes all” capitalism (Acs 2013; Giridharadas 2019). In recycling large fortunes in their own lifetimes, philanthropic entrepreneurs bring capital and expertise to bear in tackling deep-seated social problems, helping disadvantaged others help themselves while arresting the politics of envy and healing social divisions (Harvey et al. 2011).

Entrepreneurial philanthropists make large ethical claims. A banner on the Gates Foundation website proclaims that “all lives have equal value” and that the organization is led by “impatient optimists working to reduce inequity” (Gates Foundation 2018). Technology entrepreneur Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, assert that there can be a “future for everyone” by applying technology to “help remove systemic barriers that limit individual progress” (Chan Zuckerberg Initiative 2018). Investor Christopher Hohn and his former spouse Jamie Cooper promote “bold solutions to seemingly intractable challenges for children and adolescents in developing countries” because “every child deserves to survive and thrive today and in the future”

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(CIFF 2018). Inspiring statements such as these, expressive of the ambitions of entrepreneurial philanthropy, are ethically highly charged. The assertion that all lives have equal value is foundational to much ethical thinking (Nagel 1970; Rawls 2001; Singer 2011) and influential writings on transnational solidarity and social justice (Gould 2007; Sandel 2010; Sen 2009).

Yet, notwithstanding its claims to virtue and efficacy, entrepreneurial philanthropy has been subject to widespread criticism, challenging the large claims made by proponents. Five main concerns have been raised. First, in directly pursuing solutions to complex social problems, entrepreneurial philanthropy inevitably extends the suzerainty of wealthy entrepreneurs from the domain of the economic to those of the social and political (Aschoff 2015; Ball 2008; Su and He 2010; Villadsen 2007), widening the “empowerment gap” between power brokers and ordinary citizens who “already feel shoved aside by elites and the wealthy” (Callahan 2017, p. 9). Second, that this process is encouraged by generous tax breaks on charitable giving is felt by critics to add insult to injury (Reich 2011), increasing the power of private foundations, described by Reich (2016, p. 67) as “the most unaccountable, non-transparent institutional form” in democratic societies. This leads Horvath and Powell (2016, p. 116) to question the role of entrepreneurial philanthropy in “reshaping government by inserting itself as a preferred provider of public goods”, eroding democracy and creating “a tension between philanthropy and the ideal of equality” on which it rests (Pevnick 2016, p. 227). Third, while eroding support for government spending on social goods and services (McGoey 2015, p. 8), entrepreneurial philanthropy unfairly shifts the burden of alleviating poverty onto the poor themselves by promoting self-help poverty action, failing to recognize that poverty is a consequence of the dynamics of capitalism (Kohl-Arenas 2016). Fourth, by funding market-based solutions to social ills, entrepreneurial philanthropists make things worse by reinforcing the structural determinants of poverty (Edwards 2011; Herro and Obeng-Odoom 2019; Roy et al. 2016). Fifth, and most insidious, entrepreneurial philanthropists directly profit from their “generosity” by expanding the reach of markets, creating new opportunities for profit, and legitimizing the existence of extreme inequalities in income and wealth (Aschoff 2015; Eikenberry and Mirabella 2018; McGoey 2012; Nickel and Eikenberry 2009).

Notably, however, these criticisms typically are made without reference to the espoused ethical motivations of the philanthropic elite, despite the recent emergence of the ethics of philanthropy as a vigorous field of academic enquiry (Illingworth et al. 2011; MacAskill 2015; Singer 2009, 2015; White 2018; Woodruff 2018). While there are numerous studies of strategic corporate philanthropy (Gautier and Pache 2015; McAlister and Ferrell 2002;

Porter and Kramer 2006), there are very few empirical studies of the ethics of philanthropic elites; of the values and ideas wealthy people claim motivate and direct their philanthropic interventions and commitments (Schervish 2005). We address this lacuna in what follows through an interpretive enquiry based on life-history interviews with 24 prominent members of Britain’s philanthropic elite, 12 customary and 12 entrepreneurial philanthropists, building on prior research suggesting how entrepreneurial philanthropy differs crucially from the longer established practice of *customary philanthropy* (Harvey et al. 2019). The distinction between customary and entrepreneurial philanthropy elaborated in Table 1 is consistent with that made between “contributory” and “disruptive” philanthropy by Horvath and Powell (2016, p. 89). On the one hand, customary philanthropy is seen to preference support for established institutions and social practices in the ancient tradition of alms giving, relieving the suffering of the poor and disadvantaged and *nurturing* valued organizations and institutions (Bell et al. 2012). On the other hand, entrepreneurial philanthropy is seen as more revolutionary, striving to *transform* society by solving social problems through concentrated investment behind radical theories of change (Rogers 2014). In what follows, we ask how, why and with what effects do customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists respectively express, explain and justify their espoused ethical motivations?

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we draw selectively on the literature on ethics to shed light on fundamental differences between the customary and entrepreneurial modes of elite philanthropy. We then explain our methodology and research procedures. In the subsequent section, we present and interpret our findings on the espoused ethical motivations of customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists. The implications are then discussed, limitations acknowledged, and conclusions drawn.

Table 1 Two modes of philanthropic practice

Parameter	Philanthropic mode	
	Customary	Entrepreneurial
Objectives	Ameliorative	Transformational
Strategy	Opportunity driven	Theory-of-change driven
Project selection	Responsive	Proactive
Investment decisions	Subjective	Objective
Project management	Limited engagement	Extensive engagement
Partnerships	Low commitment	High commitment
Project evaluation	Qualitative	Quantitative

Ethics and Philanthropy

The earliest ideas on philanthropy can be traced back to Ancient Greece where the term *philanthropos* was equated with love of mankind (Bishop and Green 2009, pp. 21–23). Aristotle identified philanthropy with virtue in enabling elites to justify their special place in society by supporting local communities (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018; White 2018). This view has echoed down the centuries. In the dominant narrative of philanthropy, the rich “generously” express solidarity with the poor by voluntarily supporting causes and institutions that benefit entire communities (Ostrower 1997). In this way, differentials in income and wealth are made more palatable and communities more cohesive (Breeze and Lloyd 2013, pp. 107–116). Only in recent times, however, has the dominant narrative of philanthropy been subject to rigorous critical review, challenging its efficacy as a vehicle for social justice (Ashford 2011, 2018; Eikenberry and Mirabella 2018; Kohl-Arenas 2016; McGoey 2012; Reich 2017; Roy et al. 2016). Peter Singer (2009, 2015) and other writers on effective altruism (MacAskill 2015), have been especially vocal in arguing from a utilitarian perspective that present-day philanthropy is both inadequate, insufficiently beneficent, and misdirected.

Ethics and Customary Philanthropy

Customary philanthropy is rooted in deontology, an ethical framework that suggests people engage in philanthropy out of a sense of duty to extend beneficence to those in need. The starting point is individual beliefs relating to the rightness or wrongness of particular behaviours (Shaw et al. 2016). The first formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative posits that the principle on which a person decides to act should in their view have universal application, as a law of nature, avoiding subjective variations in practice. In the second, less abstract, formulation, we are enjoined to respect ourselves and others equally, treating people always as an end, caring about their well-being selflessly, not simply as a means to an end (Audi 2010, pp. 57–58). Kant argues that the morality of an act is determined by motivation, not consequences, because good will is fundamental to virtue (Paton 1948). This chimes with Ostrower’s (1997, p. 12) observation that “elite philanthropists live in a milieu in which giving is the norm ... part of their privileged position.” The choices made by socially embedded individuals are thus not solely dependent on beliefs, but also on institutional norms and relations with others (Davis and McMaster 2015). As such, philanthropy should be respectful of institutions in distributing power and regulating the rights of individuals.

Rawls (2001) argues that the distributive effects of institutions are crucial in assigning rights and duties to individuals

in society. Income, wealth and status inequalities invariably impact on the life prospects of individuals. Inequalities, however, might be justified within a customary institutional context that supports equal liberty and equality of opportunity. Moreover, envy arising from inequalities might be mitigated by that “plurality of voluntary associations within a well-ordered society, each with its secure internal life, [which] tends to reduce the visibility, or at least the painful visibility in men’s prospects” (Rawls 1999, p. 470). Customary philanthropic support for valued social institutions thus reduces envy and builds social solidarity. This is the argument developed by Heclo (2008), who holds that *thinking institutionally*, as opposed to thinking about institutions, leads citizens to support virtuous institutions that add value to the lives of the many not just the few, such as schools, hospitals, art museums, and community support organizations. It follows that customary philanthropy is respectful of existing institutions while embracing changes necessary to achieve social progress. Ameliorating the consequences of low pay, unemployment and natural disasters is illustrative; foodbanks being heir to the medieval tradition of alms giving, the better-off seeking to relieve the suffering of those in dire need. Customary philanthropy thus suggests that many individuals are driven to care through benevolence, satisfying obligations of beneficence by showing adequate concern for others (Ashford 2011).

The social embeddedness of elite actors motivated by good will toward others is fundamental to customary philanthropy. The obligation to give back is a disposition forged within families and community institutions (Avineri and de-Shalit 1992), suggesting that customary philanthropists contribute to the collective narratives they embrace (Macintyre 1992; Maclean et al. 2015). Communitarian ethics stands squarely in opposition to individualism and neo-liberalism, holding that “exclusive pursuit of private interest erodes the network of social environments on which we all depend” (Bell 1993, p. 1), and that “it is morally good that the self be constituted by its social ties” (Avineri and de-Shalit 1992, p. 7). Etzioni (1995, p. 19) neatly encapsulates the communitarian idea of social justice in the phrase “each member of the community owes something to all the rest, and the community owes something to each of its members.” Customary philanthropy thus prizes social cohesion while tolerating the continued existence of inequalities. Putnam (2000) suggests that engaging in community life is by far the greatest driver of philanthropy, motivated not by self-interest, but by the desire to support those who have supported them (Ashford 2011).

Crucial in this context is the right for the philanthropist to decide which causes to support (Eger et al. 2019). Philanthropy is over and above taxation, it is voluntary, and the generosity of donors would likely evaporate without personal identification with the causes supported. It is possible

therefore that some worthy causes may not be supported (Ashford 2011). This is thought unlikely by committed communitarians, who argue that philanthropists in tune with community narratives are best placed to identify and combat the most challenging social problems (MacIntyre 1992). In short, the politics of the common good, as opposed to common right, is foundational to customary philanthropy, placing obligations of justice and beneficence at its ethical core (Sandel 2010, 2012).

Ethics and Entrepreneurial Philanthropy

In stark contrast to the communitarian ethos of customary philanthropy, entrepreneurial philanthropy embraces individualism. It is an outgrowth of advanced neo-liberalism and its ethical underpinnings correspond to those of the capabilities school of ethics most closely identified with Sen (1993, 2009) and Nussbaum (2011). The emphasis here is on the capabilities needed for people to achieve and flourish, and how these in turn are governed by “economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives” (Sen 1993, p. 5). It is argued that by removing or at least slackening the constraints that limit the development and exercise of capabilities, individuals might expand and exploit the opportunities available to them. Nussbaum (2011) builds on Rawls (2001) in arguing that social justice is best achieved by creating equality of opportunity for all.

Equal access to education, healthcare and food security is seen by Sen as fundamental if all humans are to flourish (Davis and McMaster 2015). Nussbaum (2000, pp. 76–78) goes further in listing ten central capabilities an individual must have to function effectively: life itself; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over immediate circumstances. Many of these capabilities might be developed or deliberately created through the provision of peace, education, training and livelihoods (Nussbaum 2011). She argues that we should aspire to a world in which all human beings have equal dignity wherein plurality is accepted. Global citizenship thus requires genuine empathy and the willingness to act in support of others to create life-enhancing capabilities. The power of this approach lies in specifying what capabilities a person needs to compete on equal terms in the game of life.

Herein lies the central tenet of entrepreneurial philanthropy: creating the conditions in which individuals can prosper takes precedence over the provision of palliatives. Most particularly, the capabilities of disadvantaged members of society must be enhanced so that they can compete as autonomous actors no longer beholden to others. The reflex of entrepreneurial philanthropists is thus to embrace

market solutions to tackle problems arising from inequality and injustice. The application of market logics derived from wealth creation and applied in a philanthropic context is encapsulated in terms such as ‘philanthrocapitalism’ and ‘philanthropreneurship’, which are often used to describe the philanthropic practices of wealthy entrepreneurs bent on driving transformational change (Bishop and Green 2009; Callahan 2017; McGoey 2012). The proactive and transformational orientation of entrepreneurial philanthropy invariably involves the enactment of a viable theory of change; a declared means of solving a problem at source rather than simply offering relief from the consequences (Rogers 2014).

The origins of this approach can be traced back to 1889 and the publication by wealthy industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie of his essay *The Gospel of Wealth* (Putnam 2000; Harvey et al. 2011). Carnegie acknowledges that social and economic inequalities are a product of capitalist economic development, and that the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few is socially divisive. The solution he proposes is for entrepreneurs to invest in well-conceived, sustainable social projects that create opportunities for upward social mobility. The ethically sound thing to do, he concluded, was for the rich to dispose of the entirety of their surplus wealth during their lifetimes by supporting schemes to help others rise in society (Bishop and Green 2009; Harvey et al. 2011). It is a narrative repeated and endorsed by present-day tech-entrepreneurs like Pierre Omidyar, Mark Zuckerberg, and the late Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen (Callahan 2017). Likewise, the commitment made by billionaire signatories of the Giving Pledge to dispose of at least half their wealth philanthropically bears testimony to the lasting impact of Carnegie’s ethical principles. The same principles are congruent with those of effective altruists like Singer (2009, 2015) and MacAskill (2015), who favour putting head before heart in the practice of philanthropy, preferencing causes and organizations proven to do the most good with a given quantum of resources. This resonates with the scientific, planned, results driven, quantified and strategic logic of entrepreneurial philanthropy (Eikenberry and Mirabella 2018; McGoey 2012, 2015; Shaw et al. 2013).

As Sen argues (2009), social justice cannot be achieved simply by ensuring theoretical equality at the institutional level but must extend to the material factors that create the capacity for an individual to live a life of their own choosing. The emphasis here is on the capacity of the individual rather than on utility and equalizing the distribution of resources. In this, the capabilities approach to social justice is rooted in the ideas of political liberalism identified with philosophers like Rawls (Rawls 1999, 2001; Nussbaum 2011). This explains its appeal to self-made entrepreneurs turned philanthropists, who in the broadest sense aspire to liberate people to achieve fulfilment through self-sufficiency. It is from this

starting point that they design, engage in and financially support transformational philanthropic interventions.

Entrepreneurial philanthropy is thus identified with the neo-liberal political ideology that has held sway in western countries since the 1980s (Harvey 2005; Sandel 2012). The ultimate solution to the related evils of poverty, ill-health, lack of education and low incomes in developing countries is not to issue handouts but to create thriving economies powered by private enterprise. Hence the emphasis placed on educational opportunity, skills training, knowledge transfer, micro-finance and new business creation, with the goal of equipping people to compete in an enlarged and all-encompassing global economic system (Nickel and Eikenberry 2009; Eikenberry and Mirabella 2018; McGoey 2012). The sure and certain belief inspiring entrepreneurial philanthropy, notwithstanding evidence that capitalism pits winners against losers, is that competition in unfettered markets is the only viable route to creating prosperity, liberty and a cohesive, fair society (Avnon and de-Shalit 1999; Harvey 2005).

Methodology

Elite Philanthropy

Elite philanthropists, individuals who donate substantial sums to charitable causes, may predominantly be disposed to either customary or entrepreneurial philanthropy. They are identified here as high net worth individuals at the financial pinnacle of society who have donated to charitable causes an average of a million pounds a year or more over a 5-year period or longer. There are relatively few of these in Britain. The annual *Sunday Times Rich List* ranks the 1000 wealthiest individuals and families by net worth in descending order. The list for 2017 includes 134 billionaires and collectively the top 1000 wealthiest British residents are estimated to own assets valued at £658 billion (The Sunday Times 2017). Less than a fifth of those on the Rich List (178) are included in the *Giving List* of the top 200 donors in the corresponding year (Charities Aid Foundation 2016). Some, of course, may have given substantially in previous years, and there are million pounds plus donors not included in the Rich List. The *Coutts Million Pound Donors Report 2017* records 310 donations of a million pounds plus with a total value of £1.83 billion. The same report provides a 10-year cumulative total of 2416 million pound plus donations worth £15 billion (Coutts Institute 2017).

Matched Sampling Procedure

In selecting elite philanthropists for interview, we were mindful of the need for variety in our dataset, ensuring a sufficient representation of both customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists. Generating a dichotomized statistically nonrepresentative matched sample is appropriate when interview numbers are small, and the need is to create a varied sample for qualitative data analysis (Trost 1986). To this end, we created, based on publicly available information, a database tracking the activities of 320 British elite philanthropists over the decade 2008–2017. We classified each of these as either a customary (213) or an entrepreneurial (107) philanthropist based on three of the criteria enumerated in Table 1 for which we had complete data: revealed strategy (opportunity or theory-of-change driven), project selection (responsive or proactive), and project management (limited or extensive engagement). Given our primary interest in the ethics of entrepreneurial philanthropy, we decided to create a matching sample of 24 elite philanthropic actors—12 customary and 12 entrepreneurial—willing to be interviewed about the motivational and ethical dimensions of their personal philanthropic journeys (Maclean et al. 2015). This sampling procedure is similar to that used by Hambrick and D'Aveni (1988) in their quantitative study of large corporate failures in which data on 57 bankrupt firms are matched by data on 57 survivor firms. Under this form of purposive non-random sampling, when the minority within a population (entrepreneurial philanthropists) is of primary interest, the sample representing the majority (customary philanthropists) effectively serves as a control group, enabling systematic comparisons to be made (Forgues 2012). We sought interviews through personal networks with committed philanthropists operating at scale through foundations they or other family members had established. All interviewees fall within the upper half of the giving distribution ranked by donations made between 2008 and 2017, 18 within the upper quartile, and 10 within the top decile. Several of those interviewed are pre-eminent within UK philanthropy and players on the global philanthropic stage. All are white British, apart from one US citizen resident in Britain and one Asian British citizen. Their ages ranged from 39 to 71 at the time of interview, with a mean age of 55. Four interviewees are women.

Interviewing Philanthropic Elites

Interviewing was shared between two members of the research team using a semi-structured life-history template (Miller 2000, pp. 85–103), moving as seamlessly as possible from life story to motivations, beliefs and ethics. One of the most powerful advantages of progressing from self-narration to self-explanation is that interviewees can

establish contexts, key events and turning points before engaging more deeply in processes of sense making and sense giving (Fontana and Frey 2008; Maclean et al. 2015). As Linde (1993, p. 98) puts it, “narrative is a significant resource for creating our internal, private sense of the self and is all the more a major resource for conveying that self to and negotiating that self with others.” We began with questions concerning participants’ early life, before documenting their career histories, critical turning points and the transition to philanthropic engagement, including setbacks and highlights, and concluding with questions regarding ethical influences, values, beliefs, principles, dilemmas and satisfactions. All interviews, typically lasting between 90 min and two hours, were recorded and transcribed, and participants accorded pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality as per protocol.

Data Analysis

Life-history interviewing provides researchers “with a tool with which to access the sense of reality that people have about their own world, giving ‘voice’ to that reality” reflexively to “theorize and explain their past, present and future” (Musson 1998, pp. 10–11). Hence, we regard our interviews as the testimonies of knowledgeable actors who “know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions” (Gioia et al. 2012, p. 17). In focusing on espoused ethical motivations, we follow Mills (1940) in reading motivations as rhetorical constructions serving the “social function of coordinating diverse actions” (p. 904), rather than as “external manifestations of subjective and deeper lying elements in individuals” (p. 913). Our purpose, therefore, is not to interpret the thoughts and feelings behind

philanthropic actions, but to analyse how philanthropic actors “explain, justify, characterize, or interpret those actions”, individually and collectively (Benoit 1996, p. 70).

The first step in our analytical procedure was to explore near 180,000 words of interview data through the process of open coding (Corbin and Strauss 2015). This yielded 295 text segments relating to ethics, labelled by 23 first-order terms. Taking a grounded approach to theorization, iterating between theory and data, while bearing in mind the need to avoid “being influenced by pre-existing conceptualizations” (Suddaby 2006, p. 635), the 23 first-order terms were distilled down to nine second-order ethical concepts during a second stage of coding, effectively grouping together conceptually clustered first-order terms to create a manageable conceptual apparatus. To ensure reliability, coding was carried out by two members of the research team, with differences discussed and reconciled at each stage. The emerging concept definitions and related ethical statement counts for customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists respectively are presented in Table 2.

To investigate systematically the similarities and differences in the ethical motivations of customary and entrepreneurial philanthropy, we next analysed the specific meanings or interpretations attributed to each of the nine second-order ethical concepts identified. These are expressed as two sets of summative statements—ethical concepts-in-use—in the second columns of Tables 3 and 4, respectively. Quotations from individual interviews are provided in each case to illustrate how ethical statements have been interpreted by the researchers. Next, following the Gioia method of theoretical refinement (Gioia et al. 2012), we aggregated the nine second-order concepts into three aggregate ethical dimensions: *formation*, *engagement* and *conduct*. Again, these are

Table 2 Ethical concepts and related statements in philanthropist interviews

Concepts	Definitions	Number of related statements	
		Customary philanthropists	Entrepreneurial philanthropists
Ethical influence	Individuals, groups or organizations that have helped shape the ethical beliefs of the philanthropist	16	14
Ethical stance	Overarching ethical position that the philanthropist believes to be right and true	15	10
Ethical system	Beliefs system referenced by the philanthropist as having a formative influence on their ethical stance	17	14
Ethical sensitivity	Identification by the philanthropist of generalized social outcomes or processes they consider unethical, unjust or unfair	11	16
Ethical trigger	An event or encounter causing the philanthropist to engage in philanthropy	12	12
Ethical satisfaction	Ethically satisfying thoughts and feelings derived from engagement in philanthropy	14	15
Ethical issue	A problem or situation that the philanthropist considers wrong, which through a philanthropic intervention might be put right	16	20
Ethical dilemma	Recognition by the philanthropist of difficult choices between competing moral imperatives	8	20
Ethical principle	A rule or standard applied by the philanthropist in making philanthropic decisions	23	42

Table 3 Ethics of customary philanthropy

Illustrative quotations	Ethical concepts	Ethical dimensions
<p>“I was brought up in a Muslim household and charity and giving back to the community and contributing to the community is a very large component of that. I would say that (Islam) was a big influence in terms of my world view.” Abdullah</p>	<p><i>Influence</i>—I remain true to family and community values</p>	<p><i>Ethical formation</i>—developing the impulse to enrich communities and improve the lives of others less fortunate</p>
<p>“The whole ethos of western society is about working hard to improve yourself, and if you end up with wealth then fine. What should be clearer is that once [people] have wealth they should think more about recycling it back into society. The sin is not so much inequality but the failure to do something about it. It’s not a sin to have wealth. It’s a sin not to do good things with it.” Louise</p>	<p><i>Stance</i>—doing good for society is an obligation of having wealth</p>	
<p>“I think Christian values and ethics are good values as a basis for managing society and living together, [although] I don’t believe in where they come from ... Most important is being fair with people and to do unto others as you would have them do unto you ... [It is] a nice thing to do, reciprocate and give back something to the community.” Ignatius</p>	<p><i>System</i>—ethics teaches us to care for others not just ourselves and our families</p>	
<p>“If I was lying on a psychiatrist’s couch, I would be saying maybe there’s a kind of a guilt associated [with wealth]. Maybe I feel like ridiculously lucky to have what I have, so [philanthropy is] a way of ameliorating that sense of, not guilt actually, because it’s also pride ... Not being very comfortable with our wealth – that is part of the family culture” Matthew</p>	<p><i>Sensitivity</i>—the world is unjust; I am fortunate to be able to help by giving back</p>	<p><i>Ethical engagement</i>—identifying with favoured charitable causes, projects and organizations</p>
<p>“It began when my daughter was diagnosed with a faulty heart ... She had a hole in her heart and the veins from her lungs to her heart went to the wrong side of her heart, which they’d never seen before ... It’s because of that that I created my foundation, to help other people who have similar issues and problems.” Garrett</p>	<p><i>Trigger</i>—deep personal experience has brought me to help others</p>	
<p>“I think [philanthropy] validates a lot of what we do. Self-ambition and pure avarice are ugly things, but ambition for other people, your community and family, I think these are quite wholesome things and when you see the benefits that [result], it just determines you to go on and be more successful.” Jamison</p>	<p><i>Satisfaction</i>—seeing the results of good works is spiritually uplifting</p>	

Table 3 (continued)

Illustrative quotations	Ethical concepts	Ethical dimensions
<p>“We earmarked quite a chunk of money towards climate change issues and that’s because these issues need addressing now. We won’t have wealth if we don’t have the climate of the world as we know it, and I think that’s more important than anything a lot of the problems that have been brought to our door.” Harriet</p>	<p><i>Issue</i>—some issues facing society are more pressing than others</p>	<p><i>Ethical conduct</i>—judiciously allocating philanthropic resources between approved causes, projects and organizations</p>
<p>“I definitely want to give more in the future. It is definitely a part of me, but it’s like finding the right time and the right people to give to and making sure I’m giving an appropriate amount ... I do feel bad [sometimes] because there are a lot of really good causes but if I’ve never heard of them why would I give? Gavin</p>	<p><i>Dilemma</i>—choosing the right causes to support is problematic</p>	
<p>“We don’t sort of go out with a mission to do this, that or the other. We like people with brilliant ideas and brilliant minds to come to us and say could we help them ... the idea is that there are lots and lots of fantastic things out there which are deserving of our support and we don’t have such huge egos that we feel we must dictate what those things should be.” Gregory</p>	<p><i>Principle</i>—keep open minded and responsive to needs</p>	

Table 4 Ethics of entrepreneurial philanthropy

Illustrative quotations	Ethical concepts	Ethical dimensions
<p>“I think Scotland is quite unique in the willingness of every single person who has made money in Scotland to give a substantial amount of it away and feel like it is their duty to do. The big names are obviously myself, [James], [Andrew], [Neil] but really everyone down to smaller levels.” Isaac</p>	<p><i>Influence</i>—I subscribe to the values of my peers</p>	<p><i>Ethical formation</i>—developing the impulse to apply entrepreneurial principles in helping to solve big social problems</p>
<p>“I think [entrepreneurship and philanthropy] go hand in hand ... two sides of the same coin. It is great to make money and to make the wealth, but it is better to put it to good use ... I very much see that as encouraging entrepreneurship and encouraging philanthropy as natural bedfellows.” Theo</p>	<p><i>Stance</i>—entrepreneurship and philanthropy go together</p>	
<p>“I want a better outcome for children, I don’t want a lot of inefficiency. I don’t want money wasted. I want more going to the areas that really can make a difference ... That, then, naturally focuses you approaching it more like a business ... I don’t want to be just putting money into something that is not giving a return, it’s got to be a good investment.” Jonathan</p>	<p><i>System</i>—the value system of business is the best guide for philanthropy</p>	
<p>“They [Africans] don’t feel helped by Aid ... they feel it is to a large extent dehumanising ... without economic development people are forced to live on a dollar a day ... So, what can government tell you about economics? Not much. What can NGOs tell you? Not much. What can business tell you about it? Well quite a lot, actually. This is what we want to do.” Duncan</p>	<p><i>Sensitivity</i>—we help most by showing others how to help themselves</p>	<p><i>Ethical engagement</i>—identifying closely with potentially transformative ideas and initiatives</p>
<p>“I got a phone ... I went along, and it was ... a completely life changing event ... They had 300 kids [doing] everything a child could want to do, from sport to drama to art to music to doing their homework, to having a meal. I thought why doesn’t every town have one of these? So, we set up a charity to replicate the club in every town and city.” Wesley</p>	<p><i>Trigger</i>—the critical revelation was to see how this could change the lives of many not the few</p>	
<p>“I get huge intellectual fulfilment from developing and devising projects [and] huge emotional fulfilment from seeing the impact on the children ... The knowledge that you have changed tens of thousands of lives, saved tens of thousands of lives, is ultimately ... most rewarding.” Percival</p>	<p><i>Satisfaction</i>—it is very gratifying to be engaged in a transformational change process</p>	

Table 4 (continued)

Illustrative quotations	Ethical concepts	Ethical dimensions
<p>“The root cause of the problem is there are 93,000 children in care and 43% of them will serve a prison sentence before they are 21, and 70% will reoffend within 12 months ... The real problem is the breakdown of the family, mothers cannot manage, multiple men in the house, just a lack of stability, and the real thing is [these] mothers need.” Patterson</p>	<p><i>Issue</i>—we need to address the root cause of the problem not the symptoms</p>	<p><i>Ethical conduct</i>—leveraging philanthropic resources in pursuit of transformational strategic objectives</p>
<p>“We don’t want to do it unless we know there is a real impact on children. It is not to assuage our consciences. You assess the impact you are having and support the organization in scaling. It is really being an engaged funder throughout. That is a big piece of our thinking.” Jeanette</p>	<p><i>Dilemma</i>—have the courage to reject propositions that are unlikely to be impactful</p>	
<p>“Internationally, [we are] focused on helping people help themselves. We don’t give aid, we don’t give fish; we help people to catch fish. We try and create economic activity, try and create enterprise, try and create employment, try and give a family the ability to earn money to pay for the education of their children, buy food for the kids ... Our whole African program is based on that.” Ivan</p>	<p><i>Principle</i>—we strive for lasting solutions not short-term relief</p>	

found to differ significantly between customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists, confirming the existence of two sets of espoused ethical motivations.

Findings

Our analysis proceeds on the basis that ethical statements made at interview are rhetorical constructions (Burke 1969). Elite actors communicate personal narratives that are socially desirable, justifying their power and position (Maclean et al. 2012). Interviews are granted partly because philanthropists wish to persuade others of the virtuousness of their actions and motivations, drawing on *vocabularies of motive*, the “observable lingual mechanisms” used by groups of actors to situate and explain their actions (Mills 1940, p. 904). We compare the ethical statements of customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists on a concept-by-concept basis, as defined and enumerated in Table 2, to identify similarities and differences in vocabularies of motive. For each of nine concepts, three per ethical dimension, we educe a subjective score on a three-point scale (low, moderate, high) of the *degree of correspondence* between the ethical statements of customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists.

Ethical Formation

The term *ethical formation* refers here to the reasons given by elite philanthropists to explain their commitment to philanthropy, which we compare in terms of ethical influences, stances and systems. At stake here is *authenticity*. Authenticity follows from popular acceptance that the philanthropist is concerned primarily with the welfare of others, not the self. Narratives of ethical formation serve this purpose.

Ethical Influences (High Correspondence)

Most interviewees (21/24) credit family members as their primary ethical influence. For example, Matthew (CP) says that “giving was endlessly demonstrated at home”; Gregory (CP) states that “doing good works is a family belief”; Louise (CP) describes how her family “put pennies for good causes into a jam jar on the table”; Ignacio (EP) claims that “generosity is in the family DNA”; Theo (EP) makes sure his “kids understand the values instilled by [his] and [wife’s name] parents and don’t see life as just about big houses, planes and boats”; and Wesley (EP) reports that his “mother’s values are my values, without a doubt.”

Attributing motivation to family values is a strong rhetorical move. Less is made of later influences like Harriet’s (CP) “longstanding membership of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth”, Percival’s identification “with Carnegie and great liberal philanthropists like Rowntree, Cadbury, Lever and

Boot”; or Matthew’s (CP) meeting with social entrepreneur Muhammad Yunis, which caused him to question whether “the entrepreneurial approach might be a much more fitting, respectful and empowering approach to world issues [than customary philanthropy].” For both types of philanthropist, it is simpler and more persuasive to attribute philanthropic dispositions to upbringing rather than learning.

Ethical Stances (Moderate Correspondence)

Interviewees identify with less fortunate others by deploring poverty and injustice. Patterson (EP) is typical in berating “shocking inequality ... the money that people earn is scandalous at one end and shocking at the other.” Customary philanthropists speak of feeling under an obligation to support people and places with whom they share a common heritage. Garrett (CP) says that he “should be giving back, I have been lucky and should be helping other people”; Harriet (CP) says there is no justification for “ridiculous levels of wealth, in having so much locked up in shares just sitting around.” Others agree with Gregory (CP), however, that “what we guard most fiercely is our independence ... we really resent being told how to do it by anybody else.” In other words, customary philanthropists cherish their freedom to choose what causes to support and to what extent.

Entrepreneurial philanthropists go further. Not only do they believe in absolute freedom to select causes, but also in restricting giving to causes that help beneficiaries help themselves. Martin (EP) argues “there is just no point in giving people handouts.” As Ivan (EP) emphatically states, “We don’t give aid, we don’t give fish; we help people to catch fish.” It is commonplace that philanthropy should help people to help themselves. This leads Wesley (EP), builder of state-of-the-art youth centres, to propose that “the currency we work in is confidence, that is what we’re investing in our kids, and that is the outcome.” Alexander (EP) says that “instead of giving my money to a cause full stop, I prefer to invest in something. I started a woman’s charity that is now independent and self-funding. That investment of £1 million, you know, it has been going twenty years, and it now has an earned income of £2.5 million a year, which is a fantastic return. It’s about using my money to leverage more.”

Ethical Systems (Moderate Correspondence)

None of our 24 interviewees name ethicists or philosophers as having a formative influence on them. Religious creeds feature more prominently. Nine customary philanthropists speak of religious ideas (Christian, Islamic, Jewish) as influential. For example, Garrett (CP), who “went to church every Sunday morning” still “subscribes to Christian values”; Abdullah (CP) acknowledges Islam as “a big influence in terms of world view”; Louise (CP) says that Christianity

fashioned her “moral values”; Ignatius (CP) quotes from the Bible saying “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”; and Daniel acknowledges that his orthodox Jewish family is “more religious than many.”

The ethical thinking of entrepreneurial philanthropists is generally more secularized, although three interviewees spoke passionately about their Christian beliefs. Patterson (EP), for example, declares he is “motivated by [his] Christian faith” and that he gets on with “whatever he [God] shows me.” Percival (EP) reveals that “faith has been a very big part of [his] philanthropic journey and the motivation to give.” Both articulate their philanthropic missions as helping the poor to help themselves. For Patterson this means raising families “out of their malaise”; for Percival it means “helping each person fulfil their potential” because “each person has God-given gifts and should have the opportunity to realise them.” Religious beliefs are in this way neatly aligned with entrepreneurial beliefs in the necessity of self-initiative and agency, underscoring authenticity.

Ethical Engagement

The term *ethical engagement* is used here to describe how philanthropists reportedly identify and commit to favoured charitable causes, which we compare in terms of ethical sensitivities, triggers and satisfactions. At stake here is *trust*. Establishing and maintaining trust is fundamental both to the reputation of philanthropy as an institution, and to the reputations of individual philanthropists. Narratives of ethical engagement serve this purpose.

Ethical Sensitivities (Moderate Correspondence)

Burke (1969, pp. 55–65) argues that *identification* with others is fundamental to rhetorical strategies. Emotional appeals convey empathetic understanding, as when Ignatius (CP) speaks of “people finding themselves in horrendous situations where maybe just two hundred quid [pounds sterling] might get them out of a hole,” and when Gavin (CP) speaks of “caring for families confronted daily by drug taking and fights.” Rational appeals more often favoured by entrepreneurial philanthropists, in contrast, convey expert knowledge, as when Percival (EP) states that “in the average school we take over, only 19% of pupils gained five GCSEs at C or above, but we improve them at 11% per annum across the network ... sixth formers now get into the best universities.” Both types of appeal increase identification and help in portraying philanthropy as a force for good.

Ethical Triggers (Moderate Correspondence)

Ethical triggers, as consequential life events, evoke at interview strong emotional and rational motivational statements.

Nine customary philanthropists emphasize emotional motivations. Gavin (CP), for example, says he became philanthropic after the death of his mother caused him to “feel vulnerable and wishing he did more to help others.” Daniel (CP) likewise says his father’s illness spurred him to support medical charities treating conditions caused by “smoking, drinking, drugs and so forth.” Garrett (CP) reports being so moved by his daughter’s suffering from a life-threatening heart condition that he “created [his] foundation, to help other people who have similar issues and problems.” Three entrepreneurial philanthropists also gave emotionally impactful accounts of motivational incidents, as when a young boy told Jonathan (EP) that every time he moved to a new foster home “his clothes got put into a bin bag ... what do you put in a bin bag? You put rubbish.”

Generally, however, the entrepreneurial philanthropists in our sample (7/12) offered rationally framed accounts of trigger events. Patterson (EP), for example, explains his decision to set up a charity to support families following a visit to a young offenders’ institute where he “asked the Governor how many had been in care. She said 65%. I thought I must do something about that.” Theo (EP) says he became philanthropic on learning that “30,000 children die of curable diseases every day and a billion people live on less than a dollar a day, which I just couldn’t comprehend. It was just instinctive to get involved.” Percival says his commitment began when serving on “a committee responsible for the annual [industry] awards when somebody said, ‘this is all a bit self-congratulatory, why don’t we make it for charity? It evolved as a group of people reaching conclusions through active debate.”

Ethical Satisfactions (Moderate Correspondence)

All interviewees speak of philanthropy as life affirming. Charmaine (CP) regards philanthropy as “just the most wonderful thing”; Gavin (CP) finds it “unbelievably rewarding”; Louise considers it “empowering, satisfying and at times humbling”; Garrett, on seeing disabled children “write and read and listen to stories, listen to music and have a smile on their face makes you very happy”; and Ignacio (EP) says “it’s immeasurably satisfying seeing [disadvantaged] kids doing things they didn’t believe they could do.”

Speaking in warm terms about the satisfactions of giving is a rhetorical device intended to build trust in listeners. It is universal and readily accepted as a legitimate motivation for philanthropy. However, entrepreneurial philanthropists add to the basic formula the rational appeal of transformational outcomes. Isaac (EP) talks of “the thrill of another ten thousand people treated through robotic rather than open surgery,” adding that “they won’t know me, but I will have

really accomplished something.” Jeanette (EP) says “you can sleep well at night knowing that 10,000 kids didn’t die because of you” but an even bigger “win is when you start to see spontaneous replication, when you start to see policy change.” Patterson (EP) claims “I kept going [reforming schools] because it benefited 5500 children. It was fantastic.”

Ethical Conduct

The term *ethical conduct* is used here to describe how philanthropists reportedly allocate and manage their philanthropic resources, which we compare in terms of ethical issues, dilemmas and principles. At stake here is *approbation*. Continuation of the legal protections and fiscal advantages philanthropists enjoy depends crucially on demonstrating commendable philanthropic outcomes. Narratives of ethical conduct serve this purpose.

Ethical Issues (Low Correspondence)

Customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists speak in significantly different terms about the ethical issues said to motivate them. Customary philanthropists support charitable organizations in defined geographical areas, typically local, regional or national, combatting disadvantage close to home. Ignatius (CP) says his focus is on “supporting charities in deprived communities dealing with hardship.” Keenan (CP) says he was drawn to “homelessness and doing what he can to combat the huge housing crisis and housing affordability issues.” Louise (CP) prioritises “environmental, health, deprivation, community development and educational issues within the region.” Abdullah (CP) says he is motivated to “combat extremism within the Muslim community by training young people in traditional Islamic sciences to immunise them, to inoculate them, against radical narratives.”

Just as ‘community’ is a pivotal word in the language of customary philanthropy, so the word ‘transformation’ is pivotal in the language of entrepreneurial philanthropy. Martin (EP) claims he is involved in micro-finance because “it is an offence to my intellect that poverty exists ... imagine what can be done by releasing entrepreneurial talent in the developing world where just 3% of an estimated 500,000,000 micro entrepreneurs have access to finance.” Jeanette (EP) speaks of transforming the life chances of children in developing countries by “researching areas that are fundamental [to] a child’s ability to survive, thrive and move on” and then initiating large-scale programmes and policy changes to deliver results. Percival’s stated “aim is to transform the whole mentality of people about what disadvantaged children can achieve ... [to] destroy the complacency which has marred the lives of generations of children in the UK.”

Ethical Dilemmas (Moderate Correspondence)

Two main ethical dilemmas were raised at interview. First, when so much poverty exists, how do elite philanthropists justify retaining the greater part of their fortunes? The response of both customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists is that giving is voluntary and what you give is a matter of personal choice. Garrett (CP) is typical in explaining that while he plans to give away a large proportion of his wealth, he “would never, ever (a) condemn those who don’t give, or (b) persuade them to do something ... Their choice, they’ve earned their money.” Second, how do you choose one worthy cause while rejecting others? On this matter, customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists disagree. Customary philanthropists admit to making subjective thematic choices about things that matter to them. Matthew (CP), for example, after learning about divest-invest philanthropy from a supporter decided straightway, “okay we’ve got to bloody get involved.” Entrepreneurial philanthropists, in contrast, state that they make choices deliberately, only investing in transformative projects that “ultimately change the system” (Ignacio, EP).

Ethical Principles (Low Correspondence)

It is in stating ethical principles that elite philanthropists differ most. Customary philanthropists do not present grandiose visions but speak of supporting communities by “helping people by supporting grass roots voluntary organisations” (Gavin CP); of “staying close to home because there is enough to do without going abroad” (Louise CP); of “supporting charities doing good work, delegating, having faith in them spending the money wisely” (Gregory CP); of wanting to “see tangible benefits rather than committing to things in places you cannot monitor” (Jamison CP); and of “trusting charities to deliver without making it overly arduous for them to do so” (Harriet CP).

The language of entrepreneurial philanthropy is more challenging. The starting point is “rejection of charitable handouts” as these “achieve little and erode your character” (Martin EP). Rather, philanthropy should “focus on helping people help themselves” (Ivan EP) to “create long-term sustainable economic opportunities” (Duncan EP) by addressing “the root cause of the problem” (Theo EP). Then, “the single biggest thing is to be transformative, to improve the lives of the disadvantaged at scale” (Percival EP). This requires “measuring your impacts” (Wesley EP), “taking a partnership approach with governments and other funders” (Theo EP), and “applying business principles to get a good return on philanthropic investments” (Jeanette EP).

Summation

The vocabularies of motives deployed rhetorically by customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists are not exclusive but overlapping. There are considerable overlaps in the vocabularies used to construct narratives of ethical formation and engagement, but few in narratives of ethical conduct. Each set of narratives—customary and entrepreneurial—serves to win approval in terms of authenticity, trust and approbation by identifying with others through a persuasive blend of emotional and rational appeals emphasizing social solidarity.

Discussion

We live today in an age of global inequalities (Piketty 2014). Over the past four decades, inequalities of income and wealth have grown progressively in most of the world’s countries, developed and developing, although inequalities between countries have decreased (Atkinson 2015; Bourguignon 2015). In short, almost everywhere, the relativities between rich and poor have widened, which explains the prevalence of food banks in countries with high mean per capita incomes like Britain and the United States. Moreover, differences in income and wealth are mirrored in differences in education, health and well-being, those at the top enjoying more learning, longer lives and greater happiness (Bosworth 2011, p. 382). Governments struggling to pay the bills have been unable to counteract these trends, leading some to give a cautious welcome to higher levels of philanthropic giving as a means of offsetting the socially divisive effects of rising inequalities (Bishop and Green 2009; Callahan 2017). Others find virtue in the voluntary redistribution of wealth from rich to poor (Singer 2009; MacAskill 2015). AcS (2013, p. 199) goes further in heralding “the coming golden age of philanthropy” wherein “the unequal distribution of wealth ... creates the investments that lead to positive feedback loops of opportunity, innovation, and future prosperity.”

Our study makes a distinctive contribution to research on elite philanthropy. It is the first to identify and analyse the role of rhetoric in promoting the cause of elite philanthropy in both its customary and entrepreneurial forms. Elite philanthropy is heavily implicated in justifying extreme inequalities, within and between nations, because it is through the persuasive use of ethically charged language that toleration of the *status quo* is increased. Elite philanthropists are the white knights of capitalism and vocabularies of motivations instrumental in the weaponization of philanthropy. As Mills (1940, p. 906) asserts, it is “through such vocabularies

[that] types of societal controls operate.” Ethically appealing philanthropic narratives are performative in demonstrating authenticity, generating trust and winning approbation. Customary philanthropists speak of generosity and solidarity with disadvantaged individuals and communities; entrepreneurial philanthropists promise a new age of abundance with equal rights, opportunities and justice for all. The effect is to wrongfoot opposition to domination by further elevating the status of the wealthy.

In uncovering the co-existence of two complementary vocabularies of philanthropic motivations, we lay the foundations for further critical theorization of the rise of elite philanthropy and its effects. Customary philanthropists claim strongly to identify with the communities from which they emerged and to which they express the desire to give back (Maclean et al. 2013). They claim a high degree of solidarity with familiar and valued institutions like churches, schools, universities, hospitals, art galleries, museums and community groups, ostensibly seeing it as their duty to support others less fortunate. Entrepreneurial philanthropists, in contrast, claim to be motivated by more ambitious, transformational goals (Dietlin 2010). For them, it is not enough to fund established causes and institutions; rather, they support market-based reforms and apply business methods to solve social problems (Brainard and La Fleur 2008).

Ethical theory is helpful in explaining these differences. Communitarian ethics is predicated on a rejection of individualism, whether in its stronger or weaker forms (Bell 1993). Since people are rooted in communities, they incur obligations to one another in a system of collective responsibilities of which charitable endeavours form an integral part (Ashford 2011; Putnam 2000). Fairness and justice, as desirable social goals, cannot be attained simply through the promotion of individual rights, something more is needed: collective interventions to countermand the consequences of individualistic processes. The same ethical logic is at play when customary philanthropists express a duty of care to communities and valued institutions. This is not a socialist manifesto. Customary philanthropists accept inequalities of income and wealth as a natural and even desirable outcome of economic forces, but that duty demands that the wealthy exhibit an adequate concern and beneficence toward others. Freedom in the selection of philanthropic causes is a fundamental right, necessary to keeping funds flowing, and central to the ethos of customary philanthropy (Eger et al. 2019). At bottom, the ethos and purpose of customary philanthropy is ameliorative and conservative, accepting that persistent inequalities are part of the natural order of society (Rawls 1999, pp. 468–474).

Entrepreneurial philanthropy, likewise, does not pursue equal outcomes as a desirable ethical goal. Indeed, it goes much further in disavowing Rawls’ (1999) idea that in a well-ordered society—“one designed to advance the good

of its members and effectively regulated by a public conception of justice” (p. 397)—“the spread of income and wealth should not be excessive” (p. 470). Rather, its radicalism, following Carnegie (1889), lies in the idea of multiplying opportunities for personal gain as the ultimate philanthropic goal. In this, it offers a radical extension of the capabilities approach to ethics of Sen (2009) and Nussbaum (2011). Hence the focus on health and education, especially of children, as a pre-requisite for accessing economic opportunities. Beyond this basic, short-term objective, however, is the goal of creating more entrepreneurs, more enterprises, and a more all-encompassing global economic system, free of commercial restrictions and governed by neo-liberal principles and institutions (Eikenberry and Mirabella 2018; Giridharadas 2019; McGoey 2012; 2015; Nickel and Eikenberry 2009). Underpinning this transformational intent is the conviction that open markets and entrepreneurs offer a better solution to problems of economic and social development than do governments and bureaucrats (Horvath and Powell 2016).

What is perhaps most surprising in our own findings is the high degree of in-group consistency between the ethical narratives of customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists, respectively. Unique stories and ethical insights are found in each of the 24 interviews but, illuminating details apart, all narratives conform to one of two readily accessible rhetorical templates, each with its own vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940). At the heart of both is a myth, a social stereotype passed off as part of the natural order of things (Barthes 1957). On the one hand, individual narratives of customary philanthropy emphasize the duty of beneficence that comes with wealth, promoting the “myth of generosity”. On the other hand, individual narratives of entrepreneurial philanthropy underscore the creation of opportunities for social inclusion, promoting the “myth of transformational social change”. These myths are complementary and have powerful real-world effects. The myth of generosity condones the economic and social *status quo*, naturalizing existing divisions and distinctions. The myth of transformational change, of creating a world of equal opportunities for all, shores up the continued existence of profound difference in the distributions of income and wealth. It holds out the promise of a new age of equality, always prospective but never emerging. The incessant repetition of these myths, we contend, implicit in the persuasive and ethically charged narratives of both customary and entrepreneurial philanthropists, blindsides and confounds the critics of elite philanthropy, perpetuating iniquity by disguising the fact of “inequality as the disease behind injustice” (Dorling 2011, p. 310).

Amable (2011, p. 5) argues “that neo-liberalism is based on the idea that the ideal world order should be a ‘free’ and ‘fair’ competition between individuals.” It is, according to Harvey (2005, p. 2), “a theory of political economic

practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” Considered thus, entrepreneurial philanthropy is a powerful force for the advancement of individualism, entrepreneurialism and the neo-liberal project, promoting the growth of the private sector at the expense of the public sector through such means as privatization and the outsourcing of government services. The upshot has been that power and resources have become ever more concentrated in the hands of rent-seeking financial, corporate and entrepreneurial elites that have won for themselves ever larger shares of income and wealth, effectively scooping up the fruits of economic growth, leaving many governments starved of resources and compelled to increase debt and cut public services (Piketty 2014; Stiglitz 2012). It is paradoxical that entrepreneurial philanthropy, while on the one hand promoting universal access to sustenance, healthcare and education, is on the other hand inextricably wedded to the inequality-inducing cause of neo-liberalism.

Conclusion

We urge researchers and policymakers to beware of the rhetorically charged motivational narratives of elite philanthropists. Narratives of philanthropic formation, engagement and conduct are intended to persuade others to condone the arguments they embrace. Burke (1969, pp. xiii–xiv) observes that “a man who identifies his private ambitions with the good of the community may ... be using a mere pretext to gain individual advantage at the public expense; yet he might be quite sincere, or even may willingly make sacrifices in behalf of such identification.” Whether or not individual philanthropists are cynical or sincere is hard to determine since they routinely draw on standard vocabularies of motives current in elite circles. Customary philanthropy, in championing voluntary redistribution in support of good causes, is relatively unproblematic. Entrepreneurial philanthropy is altogether more problematic. It is ethically motivated not by the immediate desire to even things up materially, but to equalize access to opportunities for wealth creation within capitalistic free market economies. As such, entrepreneurial philanthropy is ideologically committed to neo-liberalism, tolerant of inequalities and supportive of current trends. We conclude that entrepreneurial philanthropy, as an ostensibly efficacious instrument of social justice, is ethically flawed by its unremitting impulse toward ideological purity.

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