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# **Why the Philanthropic Donations of Wealthy Individuals are Not as Great as We May Think**

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## **Abstract:**

Largely overlooked when it comes to nonprofit organizations and their influence in society are the practices and influences of wealthy donors. Throughout history, wealthy individuals have been able to find immense amounts of influence through the donation of their wealth to the nonprofit sector. As individuals, we struggle to be critical of a sector that creates such an immense amount of good. However, this article pushes readers to ask: “What are the true motivations of wealthy donors?” Through a critical analysis of the philanthropic practices of Andrew Carnegie, who is often credited with the start of modern-day big philanthropic giving, this research indicates that the motives of wealthy individuals are not altruistic, and in fact, their donation of funds and the influence it creates have negative consequences on the beneficiaries of nonprofit organizations. A look at modern-day philanthropists such as Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos indicates that the practices, influences, and negative aspects of Carnegie’s philanthropic giving have transcended time, working their way into modern-day giving practices. Using analyses into the motives of wealthy individuals from Carnegie to Gates, my research helps to uncover the fact that the practice of big philanthropy is far from altruistic, and I encourage readers to look past the surface level good that philanthropic donors create in an effort to create a more transparent nonprofit sector.

## **Introduction:**

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), there are more than 1.5 million registered nonprofit organizations in the United States, which equates to the sector employing nearly one third of all Americans annually. In 2018, nonprofit organizations received \$427.71 billion in donations (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2021). It goes without saying that the American nonprofit sector has an immense amount of influence both in the United States and globally. However, it is important to question and examine the individuals and entities funding these nonprofit organizations because, while the nonprofit sector has a vast influence, an argument can be made that the wealthy individuals helping to fund the nonprofits have an even larger influence. Understanding this influence is essential because the influence of the wealthy within the nonprofit sector has historically led to problematic practices that often go unexamined.

The purpose and general ideas of this paper will examine in-depth the influence that the wealthy have had and continue to have in the nonprofit sector by first examining the life and philanthropic works of steel tycoon, Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie's life and shaping of the nonprofit sector and the practice of large giving today is essential to understanding the perceived motivations behind large philanthropy. Though Carnegie directly contributed a great deal to the growth of the nonprofit sector both in the U.S. and abroad, a deeper examination will reveal critiques and questions regarding his motivations surrounding philanthropy (Harvey et al., 2011, p. 433). It is through these examinations that one can see the paternalistic nature in which Carnegie operated through philanthropy, the exploitative wealth creation Carnegie relied upon, and ulterior motives attached to his actions which helped to quell calls for systematic economic

change and further preserved capitalistic ideals around the world. Below, I will be further discussing these main issues with Andrew Carnegie's practicing of philanthropy. However, it is important to note, as well as essential to this paper, to understand that the question surrounding the motivations and negative aspects of large philanthropy is not limited to just Andrew Carnegie. Rather, similar criticisms of modern-day philanthropists such as Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates can be seen, as well.

This is why, following the examination of Carnegie, I will be moving onto the influence that Carnegie has had on modern day wealthy individuals, which can be seen through an examination of the Giving Pledge, a list of 210 of the world's wealthiest individuals who have pledged to donate large portions of their wealth to help solve large societal issues. While many wealthy philanthropists have their names attached to this pledge, one notable individual who will be discussed in great detail throughout this paper who is not a part of the Giving Pledge is Jeff Bezos. Examinations into the Giving Pledge, as well as the overall practice of large philanthropy will lend themselves to a relevant examination of modern-day philanthropists, many of whom were directly inspired by the life and work of Andrew Carnegie.

The latter half of this paper will be examining how the negative aspects of Carnegie's philanthropic efforts have also transcended time, working their way into present day society, and only more deeply ingraining themselves into the way that philanthropy is practiced by wealthy individuals both in the United States and abroad. My purpose throughout this paper will not be to criticize the practice of philanthropy in general, nor is it to place judgement on nonprofit organizations reliant on the support of wealthy individuals. Rather, my purpose will be to push readers to truly question what the motives of big philanthropists appear to be after more than a

base level examination of their actions and influences. More importantly, though, in examining this question myself, I will be arguing that there are large, structural issues with the practice of large philanthropy, all of which support the notion that large philanthropy is not altruistic. Rather, many of the motives behind large philanthropy appear to work to secure the position of the wealthy rather than achieving large structural change.

### **Examining the Influence of Andrew Carnegie**

There is no doubt that Andrew Carnegie has had an immense amount of influence on the philanthropic sector. Hence, it is important to conduct a brief analysis of his life as well as his philanthropic giving. Furthermore, it is also pertinent to understand some of the non-altruistic motivations held by Andrew Carnegie, many of which have followed his legacy into how modern-day philanthropists view their charitable giving efforts.

It was a lifetime of successes that would lead Carnegie to place an immense amount of importance on giving back to society by providing communities with what he believed was essential to that very success he had found. This was seen in the donation of funds to build libraries, reminiscent of Carnegie's belief that education was essential in being able to advance through society. On the surface, these donations may have seemed altruistic, but in looking past the good that Carnegie did, it is also pertinent to recognize the many problems that were associated with Andrew Carnegie's charitable efforts, as well as the structure it built into the American nonprofit sector as society knows it today.

Charles Harvey, Mairi Maclean, Jillian Gordon and Eleanor Shaw examine the life and practices of Andrew Carnegie as they relate to his philanthropic efforts in an article titled "Andrew Carnegie and the foundations of contemporary entrepreneurial philanthropy."

Carnegie began as a bobbin boy in a cotton mill at thirteen years old, and through a variety of professional relationships and hard work through his early years, he would become a steel tycoon, making him one of the richest men in America at the time (Harvey et al., 2011, p.433). As Carnegie rose through the ranks of America's elites, he began using his accumulating wealth to give back to society. What started with smaller donations, such as giving a church organ to his childhood church and swimming pools to his hometown, would lead to Carnegie building libraries in the U.S. and Britain, as well as the donation of thousands more church organs to Churches in the same areas (Harvey et al., 2011, p.433).

The practice of giving away large sums of money as a wealthy industrialist created a new standard for other wealthy individuals in the United States. Yet, more than this, Carnegie also "raised the philanthropic bar by implementing systematic, criteria-based grant making on an unprecedented scale. The model, refined progressively on the basis of experience, was to guide applicants through a process that ensured projects were properly scaled" (Harvey et al., 2011, p. 434). Carnegie did in fact create a lot of good in society, and his philanthropic giving continues to inspire wealthy individuals, today. However, the amount of good that Carnegie created should not overshadow some of the negative motivators as well as exploitative wealth creation that Carnegie relied upon to get to where he was in society.

### **Problems with Andrew Carnegie's Philanthropy**

#### *Paternalism*

After having examined the life and philanthropic work of Andrew Carnegie, it is now essential to go beyond a base level examination to address some of the issues and perceived ulterior motives of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic efforts. An ideal place to start is with one of

the biggest and most notable problems with Carnegie's philanthropy: its paternalistic nature. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). Further, Stanford includes that a core, conceptual idea of paternalism is that it limits the "freedom or autonomy of some agent" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). While there are a variety of philosophical questions and debates surrounding the idea of paternalism, the base knowledge of it will suffice for the analysis of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic efforts, which will be discussed below.

Starting off, Andrew Carnegie was able to find such incredible wealth, in part, because he paid his workers low wages and forced them to work long hours. While Carnegie was donating pianos and libraries to help better society, he was also doing so at the expense of his workers by continuing to pay them stagnant wages. To further clarify how exactly this fits the definition of paternalism as well as the overall problem with the paternalistic nature of this philanthropy, Carnegie's belief in giving to philanthropy rather than first focusing on the well-being of his employees shows an action being taken by an individual under the pretext that the philanthropic actions will make the individuals, or in this case, the workers, better off than if they were given higher wages and left to decide what to do with those wages themselves. Carnegie's actions as a philanthropist play into a notion that the wealthy are the best equipped to make decisions regarding those who are less well-off, but this means that individuals without immense amounts of wealth are having their ability to make decisions for themselves taken away, especially when it comes to their choices and abilities that could have led to accumulating more wealth. The actions of Carnegie, in the simplest of terms, appear to be paternalistic because they took away

the freedom of individuals to choose what was best for themselves, without any reason to do so.

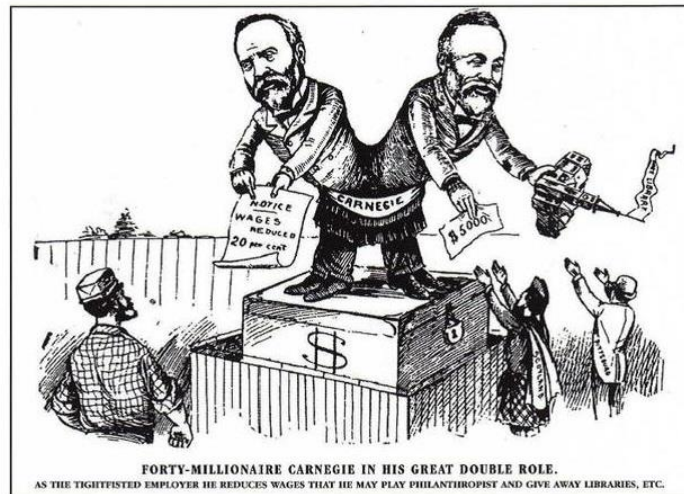
When one thinks of making decisions for others, perhaps they can think of many examples where it is necessary. Take for example, a husband making a decision for a wife who is in a medically induced coma, or a parent making medical decisions for an adult child with a developmental disability. Both of these instances provide situations in which it is likely in the best interest of the second individual that the first individual has taken over their decision-making process.

However, in the case of Carnegie, there were no indications that workers within his steel mills would irresponsibly spend additional income if given raises. This points to a lack of autonomy for the workers under Carnegie, and that, in and of itself, is paternalistic in nature.

In support of this argument, Figure 1 below features a political cartoon, which displays this negative connotation of the way many of Carnegie's workers and the general public perceived his philanthropic donations. While Carnegie, as well as his supporters, could have inevitably made the case that the individuals were left better off by his actions, there is no evidence that truly supports this. Further than this, many of Carnegie's workers, as well as the general public, perceived his philanthropic efforts in a negative way. This can be seen in the political cartoon below as well as the occurrence of the Homestead Strike, which will be discussed below, as both display instances in which public opinion of Carnegie was poor or workers' feelings towards Carnegie culminated into violent actions. In summation, Carnegie was giving away large sums of money, and while this did create good in society, Carnegie's earnings were also possible because he paid his workers lower wages, which is shown in the cartoon. Again, Carnegie's actions can be perceived as paternalistic in the fact that his actions supported this notion that wealth and success made him the best equipped to decide, not only what was best for society as a whole, but also what was best for his employees. The paternalistic



nature of Carnegie's philanthropy will lend itself into further discussion on issues surrounding the motives behind Carnegie's philanthropic efforts. While Carnegie's actions were paternalistic, they were also done so in a way that further supported Capitalism and its place in American society, a fact and motive that cannot be ignored.



Unknown, 'Andrew Carnegie Plays A Double Role.' <https://nara.getarchive.net/media/in-the-limelight-2fe035>

### *The Preservation of Capitalism:*

Overall, and as noted above, the paternalistic nature of Carnegie's philanthropy also lends itself to a larger discussion of what can be seen as an ulterior motive behind his practice of philanthropy. Carnegie, as well as the countless other wealthy individuals who have taken part in the practice of big philanthropy, have helped to preserve the Capitalistic state in America, regardless of whether they openly admitted or admit to doing so. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "capitalism includes a reference to markets, but as a socio-economic system, it is broader; its defining feature is the private ownership of capital" (Stanford Encyclopedia, 2017). In using Carnegie as an example of how and why this occurs, it was the

U.S.'s capitalistic state that allowed for Andrew Carnegie, as well as many other industrialists, to find large sums of wealth for themselves in the private market.

As Carnegie found himself in a position of wealth, it is important to consider the historical note of the fact that countries around the world were beginning to see an uptick in the promotion of socialist ideology and socialist uprisings. According to Harvey et al., what was occurring was that society was really beginning to question the right to possess wealth, and for wealthy industrialists like Carnegie, this was not good for business. On this matter, Harvey et al. wrote that, "By voluntarily 'giving back' to communities, entrepreneurs might demonstrate that inequality was a temporary phenomenon which, through wise spending, could deliver public benefit" (Harvey et al., 2011, p. 445). Therefore, philanthropy for Carnegie, while it did create good, also promoted the preservation of capitalism by trying to convince society that, while capitalism did create wealth inequalities, it also allowed for these inequalities to be reduced through philanthropy. Further than that, it played into the notion of the "American Dream," one that led individuals to believe that if they simply worked hard, they would find success, much like Carnegie did. What Carnegie did, and what large philanthropists continue to do today, was placate the masses of individuals questioning the inequalities in American society. If wealthy individuals give back to philanthropy, it also creates an avenue for them to advocate against structural reform because, while inequalities exists, the wealthy continued to donate money as a way to address those inequalities, meaning that there was no reason to stop allowing for mass wealth creation. While there is no way to prove with complete accuracy that Carnegie's philanthropic donations were made solely to preserve the capitalist state, it is pertinent to understand that this was a result of his philanthropic donations, and he, as well as many wealthy industrialists benefitted immensely via the preservation of capitalism.

As it relates to this idea, another influence supporting this notion of the preservation of Capitalism is the fact that, many industrialists were being faced with increased criticisms, seen by the term “Robber Barons,” used by many Americans to refer to the wealthy industrialists of the time. Not only was this bad for the image of America’s elite, but it directly reflected public discourse with the way that industrialists were earning their wealth. For Carnegie, fighting back against this image was especially important following the 1892 Homestead Strike, where seven steel workers on strike at one of his factories would be killed in a fight between the workers and the strike breakers (AFL-CIO, n.d.).

Carnegie was not the only industrialist faced with issues such as these, but the overall importance of this example is to show that, social black eyes such as these only more deeply ingrained the negative feelings towards the wealthy in society. Many men like Andrew Carnegie were blatantly being seen making their money through paying low wages and reacting violently when workers fought back. This is where the influence of philanthropic efforts comes into play. Large donations by men like Carnegie provided a public cure for this poor image, and as written by Harvey et al., “philanthropy provided a stage for public pronouncements, which he used to great effect in the aftermath of the Homestead to restore his reputation” (Harvey et al., 2011, p. 441). During the height of Carnegie’s influence, there were, indeed, outcries against the economic system, and there were examples of its failings, as well. Yet, by using philanthropic efforts and donations, America’s elite were able to turn negative situations into more positive ones by promising to donate large sums of their wealth to charity. These efforts fixed their reputations, and in doing so, they also allowed the capitalistic nature of America’s society to continue on. While some may claim that we cannot know for certain, now, or perhaps ever, what the true intentions of wealthy philanthropists were and continue to be today, it is vital to

understand that their actions helped to further ingrain capitalistic ideals into American society. Moreover, they also did so by quelling calls for systematic change regarding the American economic system, which will be discussed more in-depth below. Problematically, this was all done at a cost to those who suffered, whether it was workers who continued to be paid stagnant wages, workers who continued to have to work long hours, or individuals who were never able to escape the systematic cycle of poverty.

### *Quelling Calls for Systematic Change*

In examining some of the non-altruistic motives of Carnegie, as well as his perceived paternalistic attitude toward his employees, one can see further influences that Carnegie's philanthropy had on the nonprofit sector, as well as society as a whole. For Carnegie, as well as many other wealthy individuals taking part in philanthropy, the donation of funds can be seen, in part, as a way to quell calls for systematic changes. Society, and the people in it, were perfectly aware that inequalities were rising, and the wealthy, like Andrew Carnegie, had a large role to play in this. However, Carnegie's participation in philanthropy helped to quell calls for change by showing that while there was a great deal of wealth inequality in society, it was ok for that inequality to exist because those with the money would simply donate philanthropically, therefore, closing part of the wealth gap. However, there are many issues with this idea, many of which I will be examining below in an analysis of present-day large philanthropy.

### *Summation*

In summing up the role that Andrew Carnegie played in philanthropy, many people do not often look past the surface of his philanthropic gifts. Carnegie is heralded for the role he played in shaping modern day philanthropy; however, above I have worked to show that, while

Carnegie may have done good with his wealth and helped to expand the nonprofit sector, there are many issues with the way that he did this, as well as his motives behind it. Andrew Carnegie developed what many consider as the modern-day nonprofit sector, but in doing so, he also paved the way for the wealthy to find additional influences through the nonprofit sector.

### **Where We Are Today as Carnegie's Influence Lives On**

Today, Andrew Carnegie's legacy lives on through the wealthy individuals who have continued on with his mission of giving wealth back to society. Perhaps this was most apparent in August of 2010 when, according to The Giving Pledge's website, "40 of America's wealthiest people joined together in a commitment to give the majority of their wealth to address some of society's most pressing problems" (The Giving Pledge, n.d.). Created by Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett, the pledge was created based on an admiration of the works of men like Andrew Carnegie. Further, the pledge itself is meant to be more than just one large donation. Rather, "It means becoming part of an energized community of some of the world's most engaged philanthropists to discuss challenges, successes and failures, and to share ideas to get smarter about giving" (The Giving Pledge, n.d.). Yet, no matter how altruistic or kind-hearted the pledge sounds, it should also be noted that, outside of the positive influences of Carnegie, other aspects of his large philanthropy have followed his legacy into modern times. In fact, many of the practices of large philanthropy are just as bad, if not worse, than some of the issues with the large philanthropy practiced by Andrew Carnegie.

In the following sections, I will be examining two concepts. I will first be discussing some of the issues associated with modern day, big philanthropy, which will also lend itself into some of the perceived ulterior motives of the practice of big philanthropy. These final paragraphs

will provide analyses into men like Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates. While Bezos is new to the philanthropic scene, especially in comparison to Gates, both will provide relevant examples of some of the issues with big giving. Through analyses into issues such as big giving and education, the secret buying of land in Omaha, Nebraska, and the general nature of the modern-day practice of big philanthropy, I will work to show how the issues associated with Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic practices have transcended time, with wealthy philanthropists working to find the same amount of influence that Andrew Carnegie did decades ago.

### **Problems with Big Philanthropy**

#### *Big Philanthropy is Paternalistic*

Perhaps one of the biggest similarities between modern day wealthy philanthropists and their predecessors like Andrew Carnegie, is the paternalistic nature of their philanthropy. Big philanthropy supports the narrative that having wealth makes a wealthy person the best one to solve large issues, such as the root causes of poverty. Yet, as stated by Amarante, this “results in wealthy people choosing the type of food a poor person eats, the type of housing in which a poor person lives, and the type of jobs for which a poor person receives training” (Amarante, 2018, p.33). This is particularly problematic because it gives wealthy individuals a sense of control over individuals in need, which in essence, takes away the freedom of choice for individuals in situations requiring the help of charity. This takes away the autonomy of individuals in poverty because they are not in a situation that allows for them to fight back and regain control over their lives.

A good example of the paternalistic nature of modern-day philanthropy, which is also discussed by Amarante, is the lack of the use of direct cash transfers to those in need. According

to Amarante, studies overwhelmingly support that direct cash transfers can be beneficial to those in need, yet they only make up 6% of humanitarian aid (Amarante, 2018, p.35). In relating this back to the definition of paternalism discussed in an earlier section of the paper, large philanthropy, and the donation of large amounts of wealth by wealthy individuals, creates situations in which they are determining and deciding what is best for those in need without ever really asking the beneficiaries what they actually need. When looking at direct cash transfers, the lack of their use shows that there is a distrust of the poor by the wealthy, yet simply assuming that a person does not know how to handle money simply because they are currently poor is paternalistic in the fact that it takes away their ability to decide what they need to best support themselves. By having to rely on wealthy philanthropists to solve society's issues, it takes away a sense of control from those who need help. When the wealthy are left to decide the best solutions to poverty, those in poverty-stricken situations have their sense of autonomy stripped away, with really no power to fight back against those with the wealth.

### *Big Philanthropy is Unjust*

This examination creates a fluid transition into another negative aspect of the practice of big philanthropy, and that is that big philanthropy is, what Chiara Cordelli defines as 'uncivil.' According to Chiara Cordelli, large philanthropy attaches those ever in need of some form of philanthropic support, to those who provided it. Additionally, Cordelli makes note of the fact that this is immensely different from any kind of government support because, "The kind of dependence philanthropy generates is thus qualitatively different – a form of genuine subordination – from reciprocal dependence on the state" (Cordelli, 2021). What makes philanthropy so different from government intervention, according to Cordelli, is that large

philanthropy is able to exist because of wealth inequality. Dependence on philanthropy is different from dependence on government entities in the fact that many large philanthropists are directly contributing to the problems they claim to be trying to solve (Cordelli, 2021). This can be seen in above examples of Carnegie in his steel mills in the 1800s and Jeff Bezos in his Amazon warehouses in 2021. Both men found immense wealth in America's capitalistic system all while claiming to want to give back to society, while also failing to acknowledge, at least publicly, the roles they played in creating the problems themselves.

Cordelli concludes her thought by writing that, "a society where the wealthy can praise themselves for being entrepreneurial agents of justice, while contributing at the same time to maintain a high unequal system in place, is also a society that structurally forces some to become mere means to the self-realization of others" (Cordelli, 2021). Ideologically, I believe Cordelli's use of the word 'uncivil' to describe these practices of big philanthropy is weak and by no means conveys the deep, structural issue that this is. Large philanthropy creates a forced reliance on private actors, an action that takes away a sense of personal freedom from beneficiaries and makes them dependent on an entity that they can almost never repay. The practice of contributing to problems and then also helping to "solve" them is exploitative and unjust. It creates a constant cycle of need and poverty that many beneficiaries will never be able to escape.

### *Perhaps It All Goes Back to Capitalism*

Before moving forward once more with more negative aspects of big philanthropy, Cordelli's arguments, as well as the paternalistic nature of big philanthropy provide a sense of ulterior motives that have transcended time. A large ulterior motive of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic efforts was the preservation of a capitalistic state, the same one that allowed him to



become immensely wealthy. Today, this ulterior motive still exists when it comes to America's wealthy philanthropists. According to an article written by Patricia Genoe McLaren in 2020, examining the influences of the Ford Foundation, a large philanthropic entity in the United States, "The underlying economic system needs to change for income inequality and poverty to be erased, but while the philanthropists publicly avow their determination to help, they will do so only within the constraints of the system that made them wealthy" (McLaren, 2020, p.189). Further, McLaren examines the fact that society, as a whole, struggles to be critical of an organization, such as the Ford Foundation, given the fact that their stated goals are "to better mankind, that give money with no apparent strings attached to the study of social problems, and that along the way have benefited many people" (McLaren, 2020, p.191). Yet, if one can see past these, surface level, positive aspects of big philanthropy, there are ulterior motives that can, will and should be exposed.

As discussed by McLaren, there are a couple of flaws and ulterior motives that can be exposed through an examination of the Ford Foundation, and their philanthropic support of American business schools. The first significant issue and motive is seen in the creators and board members of any foundation. Foundations created by men like Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller almost all claim to be neutral entities. Yet, the men who created the Foundations are the ones who made the initial decisions. McLaren includes that three of the most well-known foundations – Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford – "were established by industrialists, were (and still are) headed and staffed by people from the business world and invest in business to grow their funds. They are not independent from business .... So while they may espouse the vision of making things better, they do so only within the constraints that will maintain their dominance" (McLaren, 2020, p.191). This addresses an initial ulterior motive of wealthy philanthropists,

especially those who have created their own foundations. Creating a philanthropic foundation creates a perception of neutrality, yet at the end of the day, this simply does not hold to be true. In fact, foundations are far from neutral, and therefore, an ulterior motive can be seen in the simple fact that wealthy individuals create foundations as a way to shield their true motives.

While this may seem to be a weak correlation, one that some may claim is simply conjecture, McLaren goes on to show how this holds to be accurate when it comes to the Ford Foundation and their support of American business schools. While education has long been touted to be uninfluenced by philanthropy, McLaren writes that, “Foundations do not tell researchers what they can and cannot study, but their financial support is such a critical component of research funding that university academics will be influenced by foundation goals and expectations when creating their research programmes” (McLaren, 2020, p.192). McLaren, in her research does find that on a surface level, the Ford Foundation was simply supporting educational institutions in a non-biased way. Yet, below the surface, “the principles and policies were a way for the Ford Foundation to publicly espouse an objective and neutral philosophy, while hiding its goal of building a system that supported capitalism and big business” (McLaren, 2020, p.202). By promoting the teaching of managerialism, which is an “ideology built on the primary value of economic efficiency that places faith in the ability of managers to provide for the needs of organizations,” the Ford Foundation shaped American business teachings far beyond their ten years of involvement (McLaren, 2020, p.189). In fact, today, managerialism is the dominant curriculum in American business schools, despite the fact that there are apparent failures of capitalism, all of which are typically ignored in a school focused on managerialism ideology.

Overall, the importance is not to understand what managerialism is or what American business schools are teaching, per se. Instead, the importance is to see that, whether it was Andrew Carnegie or Jeff Bezos, Henry Ford or Bill Gates, big philanthropy has ulterior motives, many of which can be seen in the creation of philanthropic foundations. All foundations, on the surface, are typically seen as being neutral entities that do not support the notions of those individuals who created or ran them. Yet, as shown by McLaren, the decisions being made in foundations are being made by the people who have a direct interest in the preservation of capitalism. Furthermore, foundations directly support this by the ventures they choose to fund, which can be seen in the Ford Foundation's support of teaching managerialism in American business schools.

In summation of both the paternalistic and uncivil nature of big philanthropy, both expose an ulterior motive of big philanthropy that has existed since the practice of big philanthropy became more prevalent with the works of Andrew Carnegie: the preservation of capitalism. America's elite have been able to thrive and find vast amounts of wealth within the country's capitalistic economy, and there is no incentive for them to leave this behind. Philanthropy provides wealthy individuals with a veil to hide their support of capitalism while also convincing others in society that philanthropy is working to solve vast inequalities and issues. On this, Morvaridi writes that, "Many capitalist philanthropists have built their wealth by trading on the gap between the rich and the poor. Therefore, there can be a paradoxical tension between their engagement in philanthropic activities that help to ease conditions of poverty and their business activity" (Morvaridi, 2012, p. 1193).

Overall, the support and preservation of capitalism has allowed some to prosper at the detriment to others. Those who have prospered then take advantage of the system by taking part in big philanthropy. When wealthy philanthropists donate large sums of money, it is perceived that the economic inequalities faced in a capitalistic system are not as bad because those who benefit from the system simply give back, helping to close any economic inequalities that Capitalism has created. However, this creates a system in which wealthy individuals are given immense amounts of power to decide which social ills and inequalities are most important to fix, as well as the best ways to fix them. This speaks to the point that while Capitalism itself does not necessarily cause people to be poor, it does create and preserve power imbalances between those with immense amounts of wealth, which helps to cement wealth inequalities. The fact that wealthy individuals provide no other answers to social problems, besides their own financial support, also helps to indicate their support of the capitalistic system.

#### *Big Philanthropy is Undemocratic and Lacks Transparency and Accountability*

Moving forward, the next large issue with big philanthropy that should be examined is its lack of democratic principles, transparency and accountability. A great place to start is with an examination of the efforts being taken by a company tied to Susie Buffett's Sherwood Foundation in Omaha, Nebraska in 2014. It was during this time that this company tied to Susie Buffett's Sherwood Foundation began buying real estate in North Omaha, something with motives unbeknownst to many of Omaha's citizens (Wade, 2020). According to Burbach, writing for the *Omaha World-Herald*, there were mixed reactions from residents, some of whom were upset at the lack of transparency and others who felt that the Foundation would have the best interest of the city at heart (Burbach, 2020). Further, an editorial published in May of 2020

in the same newspaper emphasized many in the communities' desire for Buffett to be more transparent in what her goals were with acquiring land. As written in the editorial, "Investment is welcome, but development must go hand in hand with outreach to residents .... The residents of North Omaha know best what their neighborhood and its residents need. Redevelopment must be both useful and used, which is more likely with neighbors' input" (Editorial Staff at *Omaha World Herald*, 2020).

This event shows that philanthropic efforts do not necessarily need to have bad intentions or ulterior motives to be problematic. A lack of transparency, in and of itself, when it comes to philanthropic efforts is problematic in the fact that it displays a sense of knowing what is best for a community based solely on one's ability to invest in it. Even if Susie Buffett and the Sherwood Foundation had good intentions in investing in the community, the action of investing in it without any sort of information given to the residents or questions asked of the community make it one that is undemocratic and rather paternalistic.

A similar issue can be seen in a lack of accountability when it comes to large philanthropy. According to Angela M. Eikenberry and Roseanne Marie Mirabella, as it relates to this lack of accountability, "the Gates Foundation provides 10% of the World Health Organization's overall budget and is the largest single donor to the United Nations Health Agency but is only accountable to its three trustees: Bill, Melinda, and Warren Buffett" (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2017, p. 45). This addresses a similar issue to that of a lack of transparency. There are few who would argue that the Gates Foundation is doing bad work, especially when it comes to their support of global health endeavors. Yet, a lack of accountability can mean that there are missed issues, ineffective programs, and an overall

detriment to the beneficiaries the foundation is trying to help. When it comes to both a lack of transparency and a lack of accountability, the issue with big philanthropy does not necessarily lie in its intentions. Rather, it lies in a lack of oversight and community insight into what communities actually need and how effective programs actually are. Along with this, they both play into a negative perception that poorer people and nations are ill equipped to make their own decisions.

Yet, an overarching issue with both of these issues is the undemocratic nature of big philanthropy. Outside of simple examples, it is important to understand the base of how big philanthropy is undemocratic. Eric Amarante examines this idea and states his belief when he writes that, “When a wealthy person determines the best way to address a societal problem without the input of either society at large or the philanthropists’ beneficiaries, the result is a deficit of democracy” (Amarante, 2018, p.5). The practice of big philanthropy means that the wealthy are determining the most important societal ills to fix, and in doing so, they are also determining the best way to fix them without any input from the people they are supposedly trying to help, as was seen in the property acquisition in Omaha on behalf of the Sherwood Foundation.

Additionally, other examples of this occurring can be seen through an examination of the Gates Foundation and one of their first major education ventures, which was an effort to create smaller schools/learning communities in an effort to increase student success. The Gates Foundation helped to create 2,600 schools, which affected nearly 750,000 students (Amarante 2018, p. 20). Yet, when this educational system failed, which Bill Gates acknowledged, the Gates Foundation simply pulled out of the venture, leaving the school districts to deal with the

costly aftermath of the ‘experiment’ (Amarante, 2018, p. 20). Just this one instance affected 750,000 children, none of whom had a say in the efforts taken by the Gates Foundation, yet they were the ones who suffered when the Gates Foundation’s venture failed (Amarante, 2018, p. 20).

In looking at educational systems further in depth, there are also additional problems with the way that philanthropy helps to fund school systems based on wealth. A 2005 article titled, “A Failure of Philanthropy” written by Rob Reich explores this idea. Reich includes a discussion of the Woodside School Foundation in Woodside California, which is a local education foundation (LEF). With the wealth accumulated through the LEF, which is a 501(c)(3), tax deductible organization, the school is incredibly successful, offering its students programs in music, art, physical education, and technology, along with high academic ratings (Reich, 2005). Yet, in East Palo Alto, just under ten miles away from Woodside, a district serving 4,500 students struggled to provide the basic elements needed for an education, such as textbooks and classroom supplies (Reich, 2005). According to Reich, the fact that the Woodside School Foundation is allowed to exist as a tax-exempt entity encourages giving by wealthy individuals, which in turn, benefits the students attending the school, but not the students attending other schools. Reich writes that, “The effect of these unequal subsidies is to increase inequalities between the rich and the poor, not only in education, but also in other domains of charitable giving” (Reich, 2005). Further, Reich includes the fact that in 2000, the charitable tax deduction cost the U.S. Treasury nearly \$26 billion in lost income tax (Reich, 2005). Using this, Reich argues that, if we simply taxed wealthier individuals, rather than allowing them to deduct charitable contributions to nonprofit schools and foundations, the additional revenue could be used to try and create a more equitable funding system when it came to public schools (Reich, 2005).

Overall, both Amarante and Reich's writings use education as a prime example of where the lines between private, philanthropic endeavors, have been blurred with typically publicly funded entities, which shows that there are undemocratic processes attached to big philanthropy. In both instances, students were the ones to suffer from the effects of these processes, and overall, the practice of allowing for wealthy individuals to determine how best to fund schools has shown to be ineffective in the fact that some students are either left behind or the inequalities between wealthy and poorer districts only seem to grow.

Some may be wondering though whether this issue expands outside of the educational realm. In continuing on with the undemocratic nature of big philanthropy, the ability to have any influence in the nonprofit sector is an elitist practice, one that means being part of an exclusive society that many Americans, or global citizens, will never find their way into. As discussed by David Hammack, "great divisions in American society fall along the lines of race, class, and gender, not religion and ethnicity. We should explore the ways that nonprofit organizations and the rules governing them reinforced those divisions" (Hammack, 2002, p.1655). Further, Hammack also points out that for a significant period of American history, wealthy, white, Protestant men held a majority of the advantages related with the nonprofit sector (Hammack, 2002, p.1655). Therefore, when one examines the undemocratic nature of philanthropy, it is also important to take note of the fact that a large issue with it as it relates to being undemocratic is that many people are not having their voices heard. It is not necessarily just the beneficiaries, but it has also been historically the case that decisions made by wealthy philanthropists are inevitably being made by almost exclusively White men, therefore, leaving out important contributions from a large section of society. This shows that, while education is a prevalent example of where big philanthropy goes wrong, the ability to donate so much money to



philanthropy is, in and of itself, a problematic practice, one that is undemocratic and lacking in transparency.

### *The Motives*

After having examined the undemocratic nature of big philanthropy, this seems to be another ideal time to examine some of the motives of big philanthropists before moving on to some of the other harmful aspects of the practice. According to Reich, large portions of philanthropic donations do not support the less fortunate. In fact, “Social welfare groups receive only 2 percent of charitable dollars and human services only 9 percent” (Reich, 2005). When this is broken down to examine the donations of large foundations, Reich includes that they are also doing very little to be redistributing wealth (Reich, 2005). This may seem like an enigma given the fact that many wealthy philanthropists are giving back to society, and large giving itself has increased in recent years. In fact, in 2012, Behrooz Morvaridi posed a similar question when wondering how the number of billionaires in the world could be increasing during a time in which there were increases in both inequality and absolute poverty. The fact of the matter seems to be that big philanthropy is not really meant to solve inequality.

Morvaridi starts by examining this fact when they write that, “High-profile examples of philanthropist activities are typically targeted at dealing with the symptoms of poverty and not the underlying inequality. Rich philanthropists are content to be concerned with poverty so long as it diverts attention away from their own assets and income” (Morvaridi, 2012, p.1208). This idea is supported by Angela Eikenberry and Roseanne Mirabella when they write that “Many Philanthrocapitalists earn their fortune through business or market strategies that exacerbate the

same social and economic inequalities that they purport to remedy” (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2017, p.45).

Jeff Bezos and his tactics as the founder and CEO of Amazon provide a great example of the market strategies used to exacerbate the social and economic inequalities many philanthropists, including Jeff Bezos claim to be trying to solve. In March of this year, the Brookings Institute published an article examining some of the pro-union efforts being taken by Amazon employees in Bessemer, Alabama. While the vote on the unionization of this Amazon warehouse will not be tallied until the end of March of 2021, if the warehouse were to unionize, it would be the first Amazon warehouse to do so. The more relevant aspect of this article published by the Brookings Institute as it relates to Jeff Bezos, is its examination of the wages paid by Amazon, which has seen extraordinary profits brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic (Perry et al., 2021). According to Perry et al., “Jeff Bezos has added \$67.9 billion to his wealth – 38 times the total hazard pay Amazon has paid its 1 million workers since March” (Perry et al., 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that Amazon could have paid its workers five times more hazard pay than what it did, and the company still would have earned more profit than what it did in 2019. Therefore, when ones goes back to examining the pro-union efforts being taken by some warehouse employees, it makes sense that they feel that need to have more protections in place to ensure higher wages and safer working conditions (Perry et al., 2021).

So, how does this relate to ulterior motives when it comes to big philanthropy? Well, Jeff Bezos is one of the richest men in the world, and in adding that title, he has also begun venturing into the philanthropic world. One of his largest focuses is on addressing the issue of homelessness. Yet, low wages seem to be correlated to issues when it comes to finding housing,

especially in more expensive cities. Therefore, it also seems to be an enigma that Jeff Bezos focuses on anti-homelessness efforts through philanthropy, despite the fact that lower wages, paid by his own company, help to contribute to the issue of homelessness. An argument can be made that, before venturing into the philanthropic world, Bezos should focus on ways that he can help to solve social issues through his own company, such as paying higher wages and focusing on safer working conditions.

Overall, Jeff Bezos is not the only wealthy philanthropist who also contributes to societal issues such as poverty. In all reality, according to an article written by Iain Hay and Samantha Muller, “philanthropy tends not to redistribute wealth to those who are much less well-off. Instead, it appears likely to consolidate the position of the wealthy” (Hay and Muller, 2014, p.643). There are many examples throughout this paper that support this notion, such as the Ford Foundation and its support of managerialism, which helped to solidify the positions of the wealthy individuals involved with the foundation and Rob Reich’s example of private education foundations. Both of these support the notion that when issues are being solved by wealthy individuals through philanthropy, there is no incentive for them not to do so in a way that solidifies their own positions of wealth. Many may claim that the philanthropic efforts taken by wealthy philanthropists are altruistic, but research and current examples does not seem to support this idea. Big philanthropy, much like it did during the times of Andrew Carnegie, seems to only put a band aid over large social issues, while obscuring the fact that the ability to have so much wealth, on its own, contributes to a variety of the problems philanthropists claim to be trying to solve.

*Forced Reliance on the Wealthy Rather than Government Entities*

One of the last negative aspects I will be touching as it relate to big philanthropy, is the forced reliance on the wealthy and the delegitimization of government that big philanthropy causes. Philanthropy has historically been seen as a sector that fills the void left by government. However, there have been more common instances in which philanthropists worked in direct disregard for government entities, undermining them and threatening their legitimacy.

An example of this can be seen in Seattle, Washington, the headquarters of Amazon, owned by Jeff Bezos. As discussed above, Jeff Bezos is relatively new to the philanthropic scene, however, in recent years, he has been known to make large philanthropic donations towards a variety of causes, including the issue of homelessness in Seattle. According to Amazon, they have created a Housing Equity Fund, which is “providing more than \$2 billion in below-market loans and grants to preserve and create more than 20,000 affordable homes for individuals and families earning moderate to low incomes” (Amazon, 2021). Additionally, Amazon has partnered with Mary’s Place, and in doing so has built “the largest family shelter in Washington state inside an Amazon office building” (Amazon, 2021). On the surface, this is a great way for Jeff Bezos to work his way into the practice of big philanthropy, however, these actions directly undermined government intervention in trying to deal with the issue of homelessness.

Prior to these actions being taken by Amazon, the company had helped to stop a tax created by the Seattle city government that would have created a \$275 head tax for businesses making over a certain threshold each year (Semuels, 2018). While many companies did not support the head tax, and instead said they would have preferred a simpler payroll tax, it was Amazon that originally supported only the head tax, and with the size of Amazon, Seattle’s city

council stuck with the head tax. However, just months after the bill was proposed, Amazon reneged and claimed that they would not support the head tax, and instead would halt production on a building until further negotiations on the tax were held (Semuels, 2018). Despite the fact that the head tax would have made the city \$20 million a year, just months after it was passed, they repealed the tax, saying that “companies like Amazon have held the city hostage by refusing to engage in a discussion about new revenue streams to fund affordable housing, and that though they might have quashed this effort, they have put forward no solutions for the city’s problem” (Semuels, 2018). Of course, as shown in the paragraph above, Amazon would go onto to take efforts to address the issue of homelessness in Seattle, however, this undermined the democratic process established by our political system. When given the opportunity to work directly with city government, Amazon refused, yet they were able to take their own actions to fight homelessness.

Overall, this shows another issue with big philanthropy, and that is that it plays into this belief that the wealthy are even better equipped to handle society’s issues than government, despite the fact that wealthy individuals are creating this issue themselves and supposedly then solving it through philanthropy. When organizations like Amazon, and people like Jeff Bezos, take actions as shown above, it delegitimizes the efforts of government, making it seem like government entities are unable to deal with large social issues. Yet, it is not that government is incapable of solving social problems, it is that wealthy individuals have the resources and power to control government decision making. Therefore, this gives wealthy philanthropists the ability to shape the narrative, making it seem that they are better equipped to solve society’s issues. When government action fails, as seen in Seattle’s head tax proposal, the individuals behind the efforts causing the government action to fail, are able to swoop in and solve the issue themselves,

creating a positive scenario for themselves, but undermining government authority and action along the way. This is problematic in nature because of a lack of democratic values and practices. When government is tasked with solving issues, such as homelessness, they are also held accountable by a system of checks and balances, as well as experts within the field. When wealthy individuals delegitimize government and work to “solve” these issues themselves, they are held only accountable to themselves, meaning that there is a lack of oversight in the actions being taken and a lack of transparency and accountability when things go wrong.

### **Counter Claims**

At this point, some may truly be wondering: Why does any of this matter? The Gates Foundation has helped to almost eradicate malaria, Jeff Bezos built a homeless shelter inside of Amazon’s headquarters, and Andrew Carnegie’s influence on the educational system and philanthropy in general has created a lot of good. Therefore, one of the largest counterclaims to everything that I have offered is that none of this matters because, despite ulterior motives and negative aspects of big philanthropy, it is still doing a lot of good in society. However, my point has never been to argue that philanthropy, itself is bad, nor is it to ridicule nonprofit organizations reliant on big donors and foundations. Rather, it has been to examine the issues with big philanthropy and the ulterior motives in an effort to show that big philanthropy is far from altruistic, and in an effort to preserve the nonprofit sector, this idea needs to be further examined and realized.

Additionally, there are inevitably individuals in society who do not believe that ulterior motives correlate to the overall practice being bad. For example, on a very small scale, say there is a child drowning in a lake. If an individual dives into the water and saves the child, on their

own volition, they will likely be praised by everyone, even if their motives were not truly altruistic. Perhaps the individual just wanted to show off, and that is why they jumped in to save the child. The motives of the individual who saved the child do not really matter because, at the end of day, the individual still saved a child from drowning. This same approach can be used to argue against many of my arguments above. For example, perhaps it does not matter that Andrew Carnegie and modern-day philanthropists want to preserve capitalism, as long as that means they are supporting other philanthropic ventures. However, the reason that this is important to note, and why this counter claim does not hold to be as strong, is because the ulterior motives of philanthropists directly correlate to the causes they support, how they spend their money, and what societal issues are being given direct philanthropic focus. The practice of large philanthropy has a direct influence on issues being solved and how they are being solved. For example, above, I discussed how the Gates Foundations provides 10% of the World Health Organization's Budget, yet the Gates Foundation is really only accountable to their three trustees: Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett. This is not to say that the work of the Gates Foundation is bad. Rather, the point to be made is that we should understand the motives of the Gates Foundation because of the direct influence that they have over the organization. This is one example; however, it works to show the influence of the wealthy and the decision-making power they have. Understanding why they want and have that power is essential to ensuring that the work being done by wealthy philanthropists is having a positive impact on those they are trying to help.

Another large counterclaim to my belief that large philanthropy is undemocratic in nature is that philanthropy is not meant to be democratic. In fact, wealthy individuals are giving away their own money to causes they care about, and therefore, they are not bound by democratic

processes as it relates to how the public may want them to spend their money. Yet, Amarante counters this claim by pointing out that big philanthropy, or Philanthrocapitalism, is much larger than simply giving money away to causes that the wealthy care about. Rather the influence of these wealthy philanthropists inevitably blur the lines between the private and the public sector (Amarante, 2018, p.17). This supports two notions. The first is that the blurring of private and public sectors leads to undemocratic processes being followed. Above, I included two examinations in which philanthropic efforts directly affected school systems, which are typically publicly funded ventures, and the students affected had no say in the affects faced by these efforts. Both of these educational examples work to show that the practice of big philanthropy is undemocratic in nature because the people being affected have no say in the philanthropic support of the institutions and services they rely upon.

However, the second notion is perhaps more important. The inclusion of the example in Seattle, in which the actions taken by Jeff Bezos and Amazon undermined the actions of city officials, shows that the practice of big philanthropy can also be anti-democratic. In this case, a wealthy individual directly undermined a democratic system and then took direct action themselves. These actions take away the ability of government to effectively solve social issues, and they also place an immense amount of decision-making power in the hands of wealthy individuals, who are not bound by democratic institutions or practices.

Overall, both of these notions are important to include, as they directly show that, while some may claim that the practice of philanthropy is not meant to democratic, that simply is not true. Examples and evidence show that big philanthropy does indeed take part in systems where



all entities should be bound by the democratic system and values established within the United States.

The last counterclaim that should be addressed is one from Bishop and Green addressing Philanthrocapitalism, specifically, which in essence, is the practice of big philanthropy by wealthy individuals. Bishop and Green make the argument that these large philanthropic ventures on behalf of the wealthy are simply needed evolutions for the sector, ones that can allow it to be more effective. Bishop and Green argue that, in our society, there is a fear of failure, one that many wealthy philanthropists simply do not have. They write that, “Philanthrocapitalists should not be cowed by expert opinion just to go along with received best practice. Some donors at least should be testing the boundaries” (Bishop and Green, 2015, p.545). Bishop and Green’s argument is that, by big philanthropy pushing the boundaries, the nonprofit sector is able to create new and effective ways of social change, ones that may not have been discovered in typical practices of philanthropy.

However, on this point, the argument that wealthy individuals are more likely to take risks, which makes them more effective at large scale social change, can be detrimental in the long run, especially if things go wrong. It is paramount to note that the people who are harmed if these large-scale risks go wrong are the beneficiaries of the actions being taken by philanthropists, not the philanthropists themselves. This very ideology shows the lack of democratic processes within philanthropy, as well as its elitist practices, rather than an argument in favor of its benefits.

If we are truly to argue that a change to philanthropy should be made through taking risks and experimenting with new practices, we should do so in a way that allows for individuals

benefitting from philanthropic services to be the main ‘experimenters.’ A great example of this would be increasing the use of direct cash transfers. This would allow for a more decentralized way of experimentation in the nonprofit sector, which would help to limit the damage of a philanthropic experiment gone wrong, as well as give more decision-making power to beneficiaries.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In my thesis, I argued that my general purpose throughout this paper has been to push readers to question the practice of big philanthropy and the donors partaking in it. Further it was to argue that the practice of big philanthropy is not altruistic, which brings about a difficult discussion on what the true motives of wealthy philanthropists really are. As I come to a close, my final discussion brings me to this this. As the number of wealthy individuals in America grows, so does their influence within philanthropy. I, as well as so many others, know and understand the difficulties associated with looking past the good that wealthy individuals have done through philanthropy. This is exactly why my intention has not been to critique philanthropy itself, nor is it to critique the nonprofit organizations who rely on wealthy philanthropists and foundations. I will openly support the fact that the work of nonprofits, and even the wealthy individuals I examined in this paper, do an immense amount of good. However, my intention throughout has been to provide analyses into problems with big philanthropy, such as the paternalistic nature of it, the economic system it is has supported and directly benefitted from, and the individuals that big philanthropy has not and will not help. It is essential to understand that the practice of big philanthropy is far from perfect, and there are deep, systematic issues that need addressed. I point out these issues, not to bring an end to the overall

practice of big philanthropy or the nonprofit sector itself, but to start working towards a more transparent sector, one that, at its core, truly works to the benefit of the beneficiaries it is meant to serve.

It is possible to accept that we live in an imperfect society, one built upon Capitalistic principles and a lack of government intervention. A society that needs and greatly benefits from the philanthropic support on behalf of the wealthy. Yet, this should not take away our criticalness of the sector. In fact, I would argue that it should push us to be more critical in an effort to ensure that, despite an imperfect society, we are able to advocate for change towards the betterment of it. The philanthropic practices of wealthy individuals from Carnegie to Gates are deeply ingrained in our society, and it is important to acknowledge that big philanthropy is not altruistic, and in many instances, it is working and/or has worked to more deeply ingrain social issues in our society. Nevertheless, the first step towards change is being aware and being informed. The ulterior motives and critiques of big philanthropy often go unspoken. Throughout this paper, I hope to have played a role in the beginning of changing this and creating a more open and honest discussion surrounding the issues with big philanthropy in an effort to create a more transparent sector moving forward.

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