Guy Schultz
Tel Aviv University

Treating Philanthropists as Harshly as Politicians: Is it Justified?

Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of politics and philanthropy, conceptualized as the "political-philanthropic system," wherein "view groups"—entities organized around shared worldviews—utilize political and philanthropic mechanisms to shape society. Drawing on historical and contemporary examples, the analysis delves into the dynamics of power, influence, and accountability within this system, questioning whether philanthropists who support politically-aligned objectives should be treated with the same harshness as politicians. It asks whether it is defensible to expose them to smear campaigns, public ridicule and scorn, and the like. Through an exploration of the philosophical and sociological underpinnings of worldviews, this study highlights the systemic nature of political-philanthropic interactions, the ethical dimensions of their operations, and the practical implications for public discourse. The paper concludes by advocating for tailored accountability measures for philanthropists, distinct from those applied to politicians, while promoting adversarial scrutiny to safeguard the integrity of civil society. The study ultimately advances a framework for understanding and regulating the role of philanthropy in political rivalry.

Keywords:
View Group, Political-Philanthropic System, Worldview Rivalry, Soft Power

Introduction

The intersection of politics and philanthropy represents an important arena of power and influence in contemporary society. While politics is the domain of statecraft and coercive authority, philanthropy operates as a softer, often poorly regulated force shaping society. Together, they form what I term the "political-philanthropic system," a structure that spans from the thoroughly local to the altogether global wherein rival "view groups"—entities bound together by the shared worldviews of their members— continuously compete to mold society according to their visions.

My use here of the term "worldview" is idiosyncratic: it refers to views about the world as much as to views about particular "worlds" nested within the world. Additionally, the definite article does not denote the greatest world imaginable, but only the greatest world we as humans can successfully steer. While we

seek to know about the greatest world imaginable – whether it is called the Universe, Being, or Creation - the greatest world that humans can effectively design is the Sovereign State.[1] It includes within it many particular worlds in various institutional domains: education, religion, welfare, and more. It is these "worlds" that can be controlled, or at least planned, managed and steered to follow a "worldview", to which I refer here. As I will explain, I reserve the term "ideology" only for worldviews geared specifically for the State.

This paper begins by posing a moral-political dilemma, as a kind of exercise: Should philanthropists who support politically-aligned objectives be treated as harshly as politicians? In my terminology, both politicians and philanthropists (and judges, journalists and other professionals for that matter) belong to certain view groups.[2] But what should be the rules of engagement in view group rivalry? To approach this exercise, we must first understand how politics and philanthropy are interrelated in their pursuit of implementing worldviews. In doing so, we reveal the dynamics of the political-philanthropic system. The dynamics consist of the ever-present striving of view groups to remake worlds in their image. The fabric of the social is woven (in part) from this competition of visions. But this does not mean that "everything is political," for not every attempt at remaking the world, or a world is coercive.[3]

A few basic, well-known observations drive the discussion: Human beings are not just individuals; they bind together into groups. And some groups are not content merely to exist—they seek to project their inner sense of order outward onto the world. Each group carries a vision of what is good, just, or proper, i.e. a worldview. The group's flourishing is bound up with making the external world resonate with its inner vision. There are many groups and their visions differ, giving rise to a ceaseless dynamic. No single group's vision can permanently hold sway; the field is always in motion. This is not a mere conflict over resources. It is a rivalry over the very form of the shared social reality. Some spheres (education, culture, etc.) are important battlegrounds, but the state is the "big world"— the overarching structure. Control over the state allows a group to impose its worldview more broadly and durably. In any society composed of plural groups, there will arise a perpetual dynamic of contestation, as groups seek to shape both partial and comprehensive social structures in accordance with their worldviews.

If we see the ceaseless striving of view groups as a fundamental social dynamic, philanthropy appears not as an occasional intervention but as the engine driving much of this process.

---

1   By "effectively" I mean possessing independent robust capabilities to enforce sovereign decrees. Thus, supra-national organs that rely on sovereign states for enforcement of any of their decisions are secondary, dependent entities and as such not "effective" in the sense I mean here.

2   Anybody with the maturity of mind to have a worldview can belong to a view group.

3   This does not mean that all politics is inherently coercive, but vice versa: everything coercive relies on the state's monopoly on legitimately deploying violence. Seizing (coercive) state power is the objective of politics, thus all coercion is ultimately backed by political power. But politically gained state power uses coercion only as a final resort.

View groups require resources to spread their worldviews—people, time, money, institutions. Philanthropy supplies at least some of this fuel, funding educational institutions, think tanks, cultural projects, activist networks—everything that allows a worldview to expand from conviction into reality. In modern, democratic and pluralist societies, state power is not easily seized and maintained. Philanthropy allows view groups to act both preemptively and for the long run—building soft power in education, fashioning the public mind through media and culture, and creating "facts on the ground" before political power is won and while it is being utilized. Philanthropy speeds up the worldview contest—it lets groups "leap ahead" of their formal political strength. Politics is constrained—laws, elections, compromises. Philanthropy is far freer. It allows groups to forge the underlying social terrain—what people think is normal, desirable, or possible. It operates by cultivating shifts in culture, values, and knowledge. A view group is often a coalition of funders and intellectuals, organizers and media figures, all aligned by shared vision and enabled by philanthropic resources.

Drawing on historical and contemporary examples, I provide a framework to investigate the intersections of power and influence within this system. Returning to the dilemma/exercise, I conclude by weighing the ethical considerations of treating philanthropists like politicians and suggesting guidelines for how the former should account to the public at large.

The Desire to Implement Worldviews: Politics and Philanthropy

Imagine you perceive a legislative proposal to be direly threatening to your vision of your country, and you discover that an organization funded by philanthropists is promoting it. Imagine your government pursuing a national security policy that you consider disastrous, and you discover that an organization funded by philanthropists is involved in shaping that policy by various influence mechanisms. Imagine your child's school implementing an educational program that you find abhorrent, and you discover that an organization funded by philanthropists has been systematically working to get that program onto the school agenda.[4]

Understandably, in each of these cases, you would be upset. You might be so anxious and angry that you would be willing to demonstrate in front of the said philanthropist's home, harass her in public, or donate money to organizations

---

4   It is true that the law (especially tax codes) in many jurisdictions distinguish between philanthropy and lobbying efforts. In this paper, I do not attack this distinction directly (that would require an entirely different paper), but the overarching theme here is that this distinction is tenuous when the lobbying or influencing is done in the name of a worldview. The realms blend. Donors who want their worldview implemented want results, and they put their money where they can get them: direct interventions as well as influencing legislature or even running candidates into office - these are just means to an end. Lawyers are hired to deal with the legal fictions that might obstruct such efforts. If legal or regulatory push comes to shove, donors can always engage straightforwardly in politics, relinquishing the reputational or tax benefits involved in positioning their efforts squarely within philanthropy.

that send activists to do these things and target her character negatively in the press. In other words, you might consider it justified to treat her as harshly as politicians from the party you oppose. Assuming (controversially) that such tactics are indeed justified in the case of politicians, does it follow that they are justified in the case of philanthropists?

"It certainly follows," one might argue, "in the case where the philanthropist is a crucial contributor to the attempts to get such contested worldviews realized. There is no difference between her and a politician in that regard. And just like a politician, the philanthropist might be susceptible to the application of intense social and psychological pressures, which is a legitimate tactic in a democracy."

"Wrong," an interlocutor might retort, "the donor is a private individual, and as such she should be immune from the kind of treatment politicians can expect. She does not have any coercive powers. She has no part in a monopoly on a formal, sovereign, coercive policy-shaping and decision-making apparatus the way incumbent politicians have. If you do not like the worldview or conception of the good that she is advancing, you are free to advance your own worldview and let them compete in the marketplace of ideas. That is how a healthy civil society operates. The norms of civil society should not be the same as the uncivil norms that unfortunately we have come to expect in politics."

The first speaker might resist this line of argument, saying, "A deep-pocketed, strongly opinionated, and dedicated donor can be a very important figure with real sway over events and their results, not unlike an office-holding politician in that respect, whether or not she has coercive power. What matters is the power to get results. A philanthropist of this sort has more impact than most other figures in the philanthropic-civil society sphere and also more than many politicians. Perhaps only a charismatic leader of a powerful organization is comparable to her. But that leader's power also has to do with money, by which I mean the ability to raise money from many sources to enable the organization to operate. Such leaders are not dependent on this or that individual donor, even if they report to their donors collectively. In any event, such leaders should expect the same treatment as politicians too."

Unconvinced, the interlocutor might say, "The same treatment from whom? Politicians have known, elected opponents, and supporters of their opponents may very well try to apply all those pressures. But who are the philanthropists' opponents? What 'opposition' does a civil society organization and its leaders have? Whatever your answer may be, you must admit that it is a vague state of affairs. Sorting out the philanthropic-civil society sphere into rival camps as in politics is a matter of interpretation, and as such it is prone to misinterpretation, including the malicious kind, especially when angry passions rise. It is bad enough when civic life is fraught with constant protests against office-holders, instead of having political differences contained within designated political institutions, most notably parliament. Aren't politicians paid to do that? What good is it when citizens spend so much time marching? Civic protests against policymakers are already divisive. You must admit that that is a price we pay as a society as a whole, even if your own side gains from it politically. Grudgingly, we can accept that price because the right to protest is indeed inviolable, but it

should be avoided on account of the harmful divisions. Instead, you try to justify spilling out all that rancor into an even wider orbit, that of philanthropy and civil society. You leave no place in society for respectful, rational deliberation between people with different opinions who give each other moral credit. It seems there is no moral credit in politics anymore. Now you want there to be none anywhere?"

To begin unraveling this dilemma, it is necessary to state an unsurprising proposition: the desire to implement a worldview is a driving force both in politics and in philanthropy. It is not the sole driving force, for both politics and philanthropy can take place with little regard to worldviews. A political power struggle can be predominantly personal or driven by material interests. Likewise, a philanthropic gift may be driven by some personal or material motivations which have little to do with one's political convictions. Besides, humans are social animals, and some people experience pleasure in the pro-social act of giving, for its own sake. This is ancient wisdom. In Seneca's words, "(w)hat then are gifts and good deeds? They're generous acts, done in an eager and voluntary spirit, that bring joy, and also reap joy, from the act of giving."[5] It is plausible that the desire to implement a worldview is a distant or weak factor in such cases. Nonetheless, having accepted these caveats, it is still unremarkably true that worldviews are considerable factors in both politics and philanthropy.

What are Worldviews?

What are worldviews? How are they formed? What common qualities do they share? These are debated questions, and various answers have been put forward. I follow Wilhelm Dilthey's conception whereby "life is the ultimate root of a worldview,"[6] and that "all worldviews that undertake to give a complete solution to the riddle of life regularly contain the same structure."[7] He explains:

> This structure is always a complex nexus in which on the basis of a world-picture questions about the meaning and sense of the world are decided, and ideals, the highest good, and the governing principles for the conduct of life are derived. This structure is determined by the laws of the psyche; according to these laws, our conception of what is actual in the course of life underlies the evaluation of whether conditions and objects are pleasurable or displeasurable, satisfying or dissatisfying, worthy of approval or disapproval. This evaluation of life then becomes in turn a supporting level for determinations of the will.[8]

---

5   Seneca, *How to Give: An Ancient Guide to Giving and Receiving,* trans. James S. Romm (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 23.
6   Wilhelm Dilthey, Ethical and World-View Philosophy, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, trans. Rudolf A. Makkreel, Selected Works vol. VI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 254.
7   Dilthey, Ethical and World-View Philosophy, 258.
8   Ibid., 260.

Worldviews differ widely because life conditions, influenced by history, politics, climate, and culture, are widely different, "as are the human beings that grasp that life." Moreover, "worldviews assume different shapes that struggle with each other to claim power over us."[9] Such struggles do not tend to resolve themselves through reasoning alone, disconnected from life events. Worldviews survive, thrive, or go extinct through a process akin to natural selection: "special formulations of a type may be refuted, but its rootedness in life endures and continues to be active and is always producing new configurations".[10]

I continue Dilthey's line of thinking but with an emphasis on that dynamic aspect of worldviews that wishes to change the world, what he calls "the will." Politics can change states of affairs through government policy, whereas philanthropy can act independently, founding and funding institutions that implement worldviews, as well as influence the people who walk through the gates of established institutions.

I propose that at the core of a worldview there is a relatively stable set of interconnected convictions with regard to states of affairs in various areas.[11] In this context, convictions are *beliefs strong enough to be acted upon*. The convictions sit alongside whatever other components make up worldviews: values, exalted sources of authority, beliefs with regard to the past and to the future, and the like.

I would also like to emphasize a number of features of worldviews relevant to their role in politics and philanthropy:

Worldviews are social attractors. At a certain point in time, one may not have articulate beliefs. One may have no more than vague intuitions that a state of affairs is, say, unreasonable or immoral. But once one encounters a worldview that gives names to things, expresses judgments in understandable terms, derives (validly or not) conclusions from certain premises, and portrays role models in situations typical to the area being viewed, one may be drawn to that articulation and adopt it as one's own. This dynamic has played out in the coming of age of countless youth. To quote Montaigne: "the more empty a soul is and the less furnished with counterweights, the more easily its balance will be swayed under the force of its first convictions."[12] In other cases, usually later in life, one already has a worldview but is attracted by a different one. This can lead to conversion, albeit through a typically tortuous process, as the pull of both worldviews is felt. Some worldviews succeed in attracting great followings, while at the opposite end of the range there are those that fail to gain adherents altogether.

Worldviews are social glue. In addition to attracting followers, they keep them together. It is an elementary sociological reflection that people who view states

9   Ibid.
10   Ibid., 262.
11   The following account resonates with Max Weber's conception of worldviews. For an exposition of his conception see Stephen Kalberg, "The Past and Present Influence of World Views: Max Weber on a Neglected Sociological Concept," Journal of Classical Sociology 4, no. 2 (2004): 139–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X04043931.
12   Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M A Screech (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 200.

of affairs in a similar manner are disposed to discuss them in company, polishing their positions, improving their comprehension, resolving tensions within the worldview, and so on.[13] They spend time with each other and form relationships. They play and evolve with their own language games within their group. Political language games can be used to inspire confidence in a leader or a plan for action, to create hope, and to unite a group. They can be used negatively to smear opponents, play on fears, and downplay the failures of the speaker's or audience's side. Worldviews absorb such uses and many others besides, solidifying them and making them deployable to adherents.

Worldviews are signposts. They are not purely observational or descriptive, even though they contain observations and descriptions. They tell people what has to change in a certain area. This in part explains their attraction, for they include judgments and thus calls for action. In an uncertain world, a call for action – a simple command what to do now, tomorrow, next week – is already a bold and appealing gesture. A call may be revolutionary, in cases where their crafters strive for them to be truly all-encompassing, or at least comprehensively applicable. Alternatively, their reach may be limited. The point is that people coalesce around worldviews they find attractive, and once in agreement, they form movements and institutions to seek the power necessary to enact them, at any range or scale.

Worldviews can be inextricably tied to foundational or pivotal events as well as to the lives of exceptional, exemplary individuals. These events and lives are typically sanctified and mythologized with utmost reverence. The Revelation at Mount Sinai and the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ come to mind.

Worldviews can travel far and wide, both in time and in space. Once released, they are detachable from their crafters' control, intent, and circumstances. Like seeds, they may even be dormant for lengthy periods, only to spring up in hospitable conditions at some point. The rebirth (viz. the Renaissance) of humanistic worldviews established in classical antiquity many centuries later within Western Europe is a striking example of this potential.

I have noted that both politics and philanthropy are motivated at least in part by the desire to realize worldviews. The basic features of worldviews as discussed result in the formation of a system or a socio-political mega-structure in which politics, philanthropy, and civil society merge. This is not a hidden system. We inhabit it. But its units are not simply worldviews, for worldviews are not moral agents in and of themselves. To the description of this system, I now turn.

The Political-Philanthropic System

As humans, we are moral agents. We make choices and are morally responsible for our actions. While individuals are the fundamental unit of moral agency, humans are only effective in worldview-guided action when they act in groups.

---

13   On resolving tensions in worldviews, or what can be termed "the dynamic autonomy of worldviews," see Kalberg, "The Past and Present Influence of World Views: Max Weber on a Neglected Sociological Concept," 145-8.

An individual, by himself, is not comparable on any scale to a social movement or institution. As James Madison observed in Federalist No. 49: "the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on his conduct, depends much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion. The reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated."[14] In the context of statehood, it is more precise to speak of citizens—members of political communities—rather than just humans, when considering the exercise of political agency.

Worldviews in and of themselves are not moral agents, but when citizens are associated around a worldview, they form a group with all the features of a worldview combined with moral agency distributed among its members. I suggest calling such entities "view groups," analogous to the concept of "interest groups." View groups act as social attractors, social glue, and signposts, consisting of agents who raise and use resources to advance their worldview in myriad ways. These groups operate over time frames that allow effectively stable endeavors to take place. Today, there are countless such view groups, collectively making up the "political-philanthropic system."

The concepts of "ideology" and "worldview" (and, by extension, "view group") may seem similar or even synonymous to some readers, but there are distinctions to be made. I seek to reserve "ideology" to denote worldviews that are strictly political in the sense of being designed as blueprints for control over sovereign states. My reasons for this restriction are as follows.

First, the widespread concept of "ideology" carries Marxian connotations accumulated throughout its two-hundred-year history. These connotations can be misleading, particularly the Marxian assertion that ideology is a tool of control, a false consciousness imposed by the class of owners of the means of production to pacify and exploit the proletariat. I see no reason to presuppose that a worldview is always an external tool of control by an "oppressor" group over an "oppressed" group. Such a situation would only be the case in pathological instances, and I do not share the view that human history is predominantly pathological. Normally, a worldview is an internal feature of a group; members of a view group adopt those views through many possible life circumstances, of which having them imposed by an external, stronger group is only one. In addition, Marx's concept of ideology necessitates dividing society into "classes" as the fundamental grouping. I do not agree with this presupposition. As has been noted by Marx's critics before, while "class" is indeed a significant social category historically, so are families, nations, professions, political parties, churches, and numerous other groupings. Neither class nor any of these groupings has been proven by anyone to be the ultimate socio-historical determinant.

---

14   Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 251.

Thus, I reject the Marxist conception of ideology.[15] Despite this, had Marxian connotations been the only problem with the concept of ideology, one might still follow scholars such as Clifford Geertz[16] or Michael Freeden,[17] who have sought to recalibrate it, relieving it of that baggage. However, there is a further, unrelated reason to favor a different concept. As Freeden notes: "Once we begin to talk of a million ideologies, we abandon common sense, as well as missing out on their political flavor."[18] This is precisely the point I seek to make: let us distinguish between worldviews geared specifically for statecraft, for party platforms, for control over the "big world", from all the rest. While Freeden's remark may hold true for ideologies, it does not apply to worldviews. Philanthropy is well-suited to the notion of a very large number of view groups, which typically operate at a more granular, retail level rather than at the wholesale level of ideologies.

Worldviews can be about specific domains or "worlds," not necessarily *the* world. For instance, people may develop exceptionally rich worldviews about artistic pursuits—such as a specific genre of music—that deeply consume their thought processes. Even Dilthey's idea of "world-views that undertake to give a complete solution to the riddle of life" can be applied to worlds nested within worlds. All worldviews are inherently partial; we live within various worlds folded into a larger universe. Comprehensive worldviews seek to expand to understand everything, but they inevitably break at the borders of their own ignorance. Partial worldviews, meanwhile, focus their energies internally, eventually reaching their own limits. This idea maps well onto the way philanthropy functions across different areas—education, welfare, religion, culture, and so forth.[19]

In Freeden's conception, ideologies inherently involve the groups that adhere to and utilize them, specifically political groups. The terminology I propose keeps two distinct notions—worldview and view group—separate. It is not a reification to say that worldviews exist even if no one actively adopts them at a given time. An optical instrument can exist without being used.

---

15   I lean towards viewing it as a set of socio-political representations rather than a form of distortion and dissimulation. According to some scholars, it can oscillate between both. See Eve Chiapello, "Reconciling the Two Principal Meanings of the Notion of Ideology: The Example of the Concept of the 'Spirit of Capitalism,'" European Journal of Social Theory 6, no. 2 (2003): 155–71.

16   Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 193–233.

17   Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

18   Freeden, 97.

19   One can illustrate this with examples: If a music educator has an incredibly elaborated view of how young musical talents should be cultivated, that is a partial worldview. The "world" of music education is vast and since we are finite creatures, it can exhaust one's resources. There is no clear connection to anything comprehensive. If an advocate for the disabled has a strong, highly developed view about using sports to raise the quality of living for disabled people, that is a partial worldview. Such people dedicate their careers to such enterprises, leading their view groups. This is the realm of philanthropy. Albeit it is true that there exists a psychological tendency to diverge from small worlds to the big world, but the space is too short to develop this topic here.

The concept of view groups also accommodates internal disagreements and debates. It emphasizes that people sufficiently agree on a view of the world to cooperate over time. Cooperation need not always be formal or reached through explicit agreements. Effective view groups consist of members who control key assets, hold influential positions, or are well-represented in critical professions: judges, lawyers, bureaucrats, journalists, academics, clergy, military professionals, business leaders, and philanthropists are all possible members.

View group members do not necessarily know each other personally. They adhere to a shared worldview, meaning they hold convictions strong enough to prompt action, enabling cooperation even without personal relationships. These convictions are not simply a reflection of material interests; they are influenced by other factors, including informal and sociological factors like friendships or residential patterns.

In our pluralistic civilization today, we are surrounded by countless view groups. This is due not only to human creativity in historical flux but also to technology and institutions that preserve and disseminate the language games in which worldviews are expressed. These view groups are the cradles of the crafters of our political visions, philanthropic missions, and organizational purposes. When articulated freely by founders, mission statements hark back to espoused worldviews, which in turn might trace their roots to larger ideological traditions—with modifications at the retail level.

In this overflowing plurality of worldviews, some individuals hold especially firm convictions, making them highly likely to act on these beliefs. When this is coupled with an abundance of private capital—owing to economic trends such as privatization—it results in an infusion of capital into worldview-driven philanthropy. This is the essence of the political-philanthropic system: countless view groups acting within the framework of politics and philanthropy, shaping policy and society.

Questions, Subsystems, and Subtopics

Before we go back to utilize the idea of a political-philanthropic system comprised of view groups to address the dilemma at the beginning of this essay, it is worth exploring other questions that emerge and subtopics that develop. That moral-political dilemma raises just one question among many. The questions that could prove fruitful are those that deal with the subsystems of this system and those that push us to explore related subtopics.

Comparing Systems

A possible line of questioning is one of comparison: what can we learn about the political-philanthropic system from comparing it to other systems? For instance, we can explore its similarities with what is known as the military-industrial complex, a term that President Dwight Eisenhower introduced in his cautionary farewell address in 1961.

The military-industrial complex is comprised of interest groups, rather than view groups. That is a significant difference. The term denotes a dangerous, pathological, or corrupt state of affairs, where instead of having a military

clearly and unequivocally subordinate to a democratically elected government, a country has a profit-motivated defense industry whose components might share commonalities of interest with certain factors in the military. Together, they could be powerful enough to influence the government's foreign and defense policy.

In contrast, the idea of a political-philanthropic system (rather than a complex) is not intended to denote a dangerous, pathological, or corrupt state of affairs. Instead of commonalities of interest, the dynamic of the political-philanthropic system is driven by a plurality of worldviews. As long as there is freedom of association, and as long as politics is largely a contest between parties divided along ideological lines, view groups will establish and fund philanthropic organizations to advance their worldviews, aligning with political actors along similar lines.

The similarity to the "military-industrial complex" lies in the sense that influence and worldview-advancement mechanisms across a society are distributed within this system. Worldview-driven civil society is one grand parliament, and as citizens, we are one donation, one volunteer effort, or one speech-act away from taking part in it. The bar of entry into this "parliament" is much lower than that of formal lawmaking bodies.

Subsystems and Their Dynamics

One never just enters the entire political-philanthropic system as such. One joins an organization, and finds oneself within one "subsystem" or another. Once adopting a conviction as one's own, and acting upon it together with like-minded people, one becomes part of a view group, which in turn is likely part of a much larger subsystem. A subsystem moves in a definite direction, while the system as a whole is full of subsystems that clash or are otherwise uncoordinated. A subsystem is a group of view groups with some level of coordination between them.

What factor coordinates the movement of a subsystem? It is precisely a shared conviction, a belief strong enough to be acted upon. A view group, by definition, shares a worldview, at whose core is a chain of convictions. One or more convictions can be shared with other view groups, which then coalesce and vie for power and influence throughout society in an attempt to follow through on the conviction(s). One of the roles of philanthropy is to fuel this dynamic, as it establishes and funds institutions (educational, cultural, etc.) that seek, among other goals, to add adherents who believe in the conviction.

Friction arises with opposing subsystems moving in different directions. Philanthropy throws ever more resources at the friction points, but also at logistics and mobilization points, seeking breakthroughs that amount to gaining more adherents and discouraging rival view groups. This dynamic generates new ideas, new convictions, changing conceptions, and even new concepts. Philanthropy is a major source of energy for this dynamic. It is a directed source of energy, guided by the convictions of the philanthropists at a given time, with all the unintended and even unimagined consequences that such a dynamic can cause. Here, I suggest that philanthropy is important for the history and sociology of ideas, perhaps more than is commonly acknowledged.

Convictions and the Role of Philanthropy

Consider convictions regarding poverty. In contemporary parlance there is a tendency to talk about "inequality" rather than poverty. But I would like to discuss "poverty" precisely because it has such a long history. Indeed, poverty is one of the most characteristic concerns of philanthropy. It can induce a range of philanthropic attitudes and emotions—care, shame, guilt, anger, pity, and compassion.

Take, for example, the conviction: "An affluent society should never allow its members to suffer abject poverty or lack of opportunities." Rooted in both individual and collective life experiences common in industrialized economies advanced enough to reach a certain level of general affluence, this conviction lies at the core of the worldviews behind welfare programs, both governmental and philanthropic. It is a vital tenet of modern "liberalism" (as Americans understand this term) and "social democracy" (in European parlance). View groups seeking its implementation enshrine it within party platforms they control, support candidates who promise to enact it in policy, and establish and fund philanthropic organizations whose mission statements are dedicated to it. It is central to a large, sprawling political-philanthropic subsystem.

In general, it hardly matters whether or not worldview implementation is successful, as long as view group members continue to hold on to the convictions. Explaining failure, assigning blame elsewhere, or reconceptualizing it as something other than failure becomes part of the worldview itself, fortifying it from the trials of experience. Some view group members, viz. intellectuals, specialize in saving the worldview from possible disappointments due to perceived failures, which if acute enough, can lead to loss of membership in the view group, and even to its dissolution.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Era, the conviction regarding poverty or inequality has been frequently sermonized and spread throughout modern societies in many ways, stirring consciences and urging the establishment and funding of institutions to supply remedies, as well as the inclusion of these ideas in party platforms and policies. This conviction is at the heart of modern liberalism in the United States, gaining adherents during the Progressive Era in the wake of urban squalor among new immigrants and solidifying as central to a major party platform due to the traumatic events of the Great Depression.

New Deal policy, supported by Keynesian economics, and the newly redefined "liberal" subsystem—focused on egalitarianism, big government, the welfare state, and social justice—was rooted in this conviction. At earlier times, the philanthropic arms of similar view groups included institutions like the Settlement House movement.[20] The political arm favored certain policies, and this trend was consistent across both politics and philanthropy.

---

20   On the Settlement House Movement, see Alan Ryan's chapter "The Philanthropic Perspective after a Hundred Years" in Giving: Western Ideas of Philanthropy, ed. J. B. (Jerome B.) Schneewind (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 76-97.

Connected to this conviction are smaller, charismatic subsystems that form around certain modern liberal politicians, such as former presidents. These are formidable in their own right but are small compared with the encompassing liberal political-philanthropic subsystem. Here we find a subtopic to explore: charismatic subsystems—those strongly connected to the convictions of a charismatic leader, who succeeds through the power of personality to secure followings for associated view groups.

The aforementioned conviction is tied to modern conceptions of rights, equality, and the proper function of the state. Another possible subtopic to explore is the relation of philanthropy to these specific issues, as a source of energy for transformations in their conceptions. This is especially true with regard to the modern notions of socio-economic rights. It includes what one may call "deontological philanthropy"—a current of philanthropy convinced that it is one's duty to secure rights for others. A study of this subtopic would explore the conviction, as well as others in the realm of welfare and beyond, and how these create this specific current.

Liberal vs. Conservative Subsystems

In the United States, this "liberal" political-philanthropic subsystem has for decades been clashing with an opposing subsystem—the "conservative" one. Adherents of the conservative subsystem in American politics might also agree with the imperative for affluent societies to alleviate poverty and supply opportunities. However, this is moderated by a separate, even stronger conviction: "Over-powerful government poses unique threats to liberty and human dignity." Under this conviction, while it is acceptable that "an affluent society should never allow its members to suffer abject poverty and lack of opportunities," it is not the role of government to alleviate poverty and create opportunities, but rather the role of business and charity.[21] Conservatives might also take a more nuanced approach, and say that even if government must play a role in alleviating poverty, utmost attention should be given to efficiency and avoiding unintended consequences, such as welfare dependency.

This conviction is rooted in life experiences as well. Confronted with the dual problem of alleviating poverty while guarding against government overreach, a subsystem of view groups gathered around convictions in praise of market economies. From there, it is a small step to the conviction that winners and leaders in market economies should take upon themselves the role of philanthropists. Writing about the late 19th-century conservative W.G. Sumner, Jerry Muller relates: "As opposed to those who regarded poverty as the result of the exploitation of workers by the captains of industry, Sumner asserted that the problem of poverty arose from natural scarcity. The solution to the problem, he declared, lay in the development of economic institutions that created greater productivity. It was above all those of greater intelligence and industry who were responsible for the real increase in material well-being which had already

---

21   By "charity" I mean simply in this context philanthropy geared towards the poor

occurred and would increase in the future if the competitive market mechanism was allowed to function, he argued."[22] Echoes of Andrew Carnegie[23] can clearly be heard in these ideas, which were later developed much further by Friedrich Hayek[24] and others, and found their way into influencing politics.

The clash between liberal and conservative subsystems can be understood through their differing approaches to poverty alleviation and government intervention. The liberal approach advocates for direct government action and social safety nets, while the conservative approach emphasizes individual responsibility, market solutions, and direct charity. This ongoing ideological-view group conflict shapes the political-philanthropic landscape, with both sides contributing to the broader discourse on the role of government, business, and philanthropy in society.

Philanthropy and Political Language

Looking at these two subsystems side by side, we see another subtopic emerge: philanthropy and political language. What Freeden says about ideologies is entirely true about view groups: "ideologies compete over the control of political language as well as competing over plans for public policy; indeed, their competition over plans for public policy is primarily conducted through their competition over the control of political language."[25] Sway over political language is achieved through education, and the dissemination of ideas in civil society, which can be enabled by philanthropy. Worldviews, philanthropic mission statements, and political platforms are connected. Between them, convictions are embedded and developed.

Language games help build and reinforce worldviews by painting some groups, individuals, and opinions as possessing certain traits. Some words or phrases are used rhetorically for these purposes, regardless of the validity of the arguments. Teamwork between the political arm and the philanthropic arm of view groups achieves these objectives using language—not necessarily in a strategic or premeditated way, but rather naturally, even subconsciously, fashioning language for political goals.

Freeden continues: "One lesson we may derive from the study of semantics is that whoever exercises such control is in a strong position to determine the political practices that members of a society will consider, or at least be capable of imagining."[26] My sole modification is to say that it places view groups at the heart of the political-philanthropic dynamic.

---

22   Jerry Z. Muller, *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 235.

23   Andrew Carnegie, "Wealth," *North American Review* 148, no. 381 (1889): 653–64.

24   Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1944).

25   Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*, 55.

26   Ibid.

Citizenship and Philanthropy

Somewhat related to the first conviction regarding poverty is the following: "Fairness demands that an affluent country should allow entry to impoverished noncitizens." This conviction is shared by many (but not all) in the liberal subsystem, while it is largely absent in the conservative subsystem, unlike the agreement regarding alleviating poverty. This showcases different approaches to citizenship, leading to another subtopic: philanthropy and citizenship. Connected to this is the observation that citizens, insofar as they have a public life, take it up within view groups. It also relates to the republican ideal of active citizenship.

Peter Singer's work connects here, especially his conviction that: "If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out, and it makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away."[27] An opposing conviction might read: "I agree regarding a child drowning in a nearby pond, but physical distance, as well as other kinds of distance, make a moral difference."

Exploring Subtopics

Philanthropy, Imagination, and Utopia

Karl Mannheim's concept of "deviant attitudes towards reality,"[28] as discussed by Paul Ricoeur, provides a compelling lens to view philanthropy as a creator of new "social realities." These realities require humans to fill roles and depend on physical resources—both of which philanthropy can provide. Ambitious projects like AI development or space colonization exemplify this transformative potential. These endeavors often blend utopian aspirations with practical resource allocation, reshaping our collective imagination and possibilities. What happens when rival view groups embrace clashing utopian visions? Such visions operate on a much larger scale than mere "social change". This dynamic raises questions about the legitimacy of private actors in creating realities that affect society at large.[29]

Philanthropy and Clandestine Operations

Cross-border philanthropy can play a critical role in the target country, influencing international relations. This capability can be co-opted by intelligence agencies, operating as an extension of soft power. Initiatives like the Congress for Cultural Freedom - a Cold War CIA-funded pseudo-foundation - demonstrate how philanthropy can be mobilized by states to defend or propagate worldviews or ideologies on a global scale. This interplay between

---

27   Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–43.

28   Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 2.

29   David Callahan, *The Givers: Wealth, Power and Philanthropy in a New Gilded Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).

philanthropic initiatives and geopolitical strategies underscores the complexity of using non-state resources for state-like influence.[30]

Philanthropy, Politics, and Worldview Revival

Philanthropy has historically been a catalyst for the revival of worldviews, often reconnecting contemporary societies with their intellectual and cultural roots. The revival of humanitas during the Renaissance offers a particularly compelling illustration of philanthropy's transformative role. During this period, wealthy patrons such as the Medici family in Florence invested vast resources into the arts, education, and scholarship, enabling the rediscovery and celebration of classical texts and ideas. This philanthropic support did not merely preserve cultural heritage but actively helped redefine the intellectual and artistic horizons of Europe, greatly contributing to the development of modern Western civilization.

Similarly, the revival of Jewish sovereignty in what is known in the Jewish tradition as "the Land of Israel" or "the Promised Land" reflects how philanthropy and political will converge to realize long-standing convictions. Philanthropic support played a pivotal role in establishing institutions that laid the groundwork for modern Jewish statehood. These examples demonstrate philanthropy's ability to bridge temporal and spatial divides.

Normative Questions and the Rules of Engagement [31]

Up to this point, the questions have concerned including the idea of a political-philanthropic system in historical descriptions, descriptions of current events, and the history and sociology of ideas. But there are also normative questions that must be addressed, as this paper seeks to do.

These normative questions include:

•   Limits of Power on View Groups: In addition to well-rehearsed ideas about limits on political parties and branches of government, should there also be clear limitations on the power of view groups?

•   "Rules of Engagement": What are the permissible actions in the rivalry between view groups vying for power throughout state and society? Understanding that philanthropy plays a role in this competition, the specific question posed at the beginning of this essay is one instance of these broader questions.

---

30   See Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

31   The goal of this paper is to develop a broad conceptual scheme applicable to many questions. But the narrative arc is to begin with a normative question, develop the systemic concepts, and circle back to the question better prepared after we've covered theoretical ground.

The Stakes

The impassioned tensions between view groups or between larger subsystems (which comprise various view groups connected through one or more convictions) are a perennial feature of the political-philanthropic system. Given the ubiquity of this system and its constant presence in the lives of large numbers of citizens in democracies, it is imperative to agree on the rules of engagement. View groups amass power throughout numerous institutions in society, and philanthropy is a central tool for this. Should there be clear limits to their power? For instance, should a particular view group be allowed to capture academia, the judiciary, or the media?

The idea of "separation of powers" takes on a different interpretation when applied solely to the political system compared to its application to the political-philanthropic system.

The stakes are high: philanthropy consists of a very large number of worldview "weights." If these weights tend to fall to the extremes, society can become factionalized and destabilized—potentially leading to civil conflict. If there is less capital in the hands of philanthropists, this danger diminishes. However, in our times, there is a great amount of capital controlled by philanthropists, many of whom act as lay leaders who can easily follow their whims when funding institutions.

In the next section, I will circle back to the original question about whether philanthropists should be treated like politicians.

Back to the Moral-Political Dilemma: Should Philanthropists Be Treated Like Politicians?

Having named and begun exploring the political-philanthropic system, we can now address the original dilemma: Should philanthropists be treated as harshly as politicians? The argument can be made that since both philanthropists and politicians act as agents of view groups, attempting to implement worldviews, they should be subject to similar forms of scrutiny and accountability.

Let us first determine the baseline for how politicians from rival view groups are treated and then consider to what extent this should differ when applied to philanthropists. Should there be no difference—and if not, why? If there is a difference, what justifies it?

In determining the baseline, we must first clarify to whom it applies. When we discuss the limits on how politicians and philanthropists are "treated," we refer to members of the opposing view group, and not just citizens in general. "Members of the opposing view group" include office-holders and individuals with special influence, such as philanthropists who wield considerable resources. The baseline we are establishing falls under the "rules of engagement" that govern rivalry between view groups.

Our inquiry centers on what tactics are permissible for members of one view group to deploy in attempts to prevent a politician from the opposing

group from enacting policies. These tactics must fall within an absolute moral boundary, although they may vary in nature. Consider the types of events that hinder politicians: social pressures, psychological manipulation, political opposition, and ultimately removal from office. While assassination and changing a politician's worldview both prevent policy implementation, they are certainly not morally equivalent. Similarly, tactics like corrupting the judicial system to indict and eventually imprison a politician fall into a different category from, say, appealing to their constituents to erode their support.

This moral boundary is crucial, but it moves in relation to context: some pressures are permissible for politicians in some contexts but would be inappropriate in other contexts. Politicians face social, psychological, political, and diplomatic pressures, often as part of the expected gamesmanship inherent in their profession. The scale of politics often brings such pressures into the public domain, manifesting through mass protests, intense media coverage, or personal attacks that would be unacceptable in most other walks of life. Were such tactics to become widespread, it would spell a dangerous downward spiral into factionalism and civil strife.

Politicians, as public servants wielding coercive power, are expected to withstand pressures from which others can rightly expect to be immune. This expectation aligns with their accountability to the public. They must be alerted if their policies harm any part of society. The methods used (outside the formal electoral processes) include protests, press critiques, and even cruel satire—all tools meant to keep politicians in check.

Philanthropists, on the other hand, do not hold coercive power, nor do they directly decide policy. They influence policy indirectly by funding initiatives, always at least one step removed from direct decision-making.[32] If this degree of separation carries no significance in determining permissible tactics against philanthropists, it effectively means that any member of a rival view group could face similar tactics to those politicians endure. But norms and laws protect regular citizens from these pressures.

If we were to engage in a public smear campaign against a co-worker simply because of a political disagreement, it would be a serious moral violation. We recognize these individuals are not politicians and lack coercive influence. This is reflected in defamation law, where private individuals are more protected from defamatory statements than public figures. In this vein, each degree of removal from political authority reduces the legitimacy of aggressive tactics used.

Philanthropists operate within civil society. The norms of civil society differ from those of the political sphere. The political sphere controls monopolies over sovereign decision-making apparatuses, whereas civil society is defined by a plurality of institutions. The former possesses practices such as elections, constant

---

32   As noted above, it is well-known that in many jurisdictions, currently and historically, legislators and policy-makers have enacted various forms of distinction between "charitable" causes and political ones. This has implications for regulation and taxation. I deliberately avoid this very large topic in this paper, since I seek to approach it philosophically, and to maintain and defend such a distinction with philosophical rigor is neither a simple matter nor my goal.

media coverage, lobbying and more. The stakes are high and the norms reflect that. The latter is more relaxed: a view group is always free to establish a new institution if it finds the current ones lacking. This suggests that philanthropists should not be subjected to the same treatment as politicians. Yet, given their key role in advancing certain worldviews by funding their view group's activities, there must be ways to hold more powerful philanthropists accountable.

What are legitimate ways? I suggest shining a light, according to the well-known principle that "sunlight is the best disinfectant". But in what sense? The view group model suggests that we interpret "sunlight" as exposure to reasoned criticism *from rival view groups*. This is not the idea of "transparency", which means to make as much information about donations accessible to the public. While that idea is valuable in and of itself, I am referring to something else: that philanthropists and their entourages engage in sustained, deliberate dialogue with their rivals from other view groups.[33] This is not the mode of protest, of shouting contests, of rhetoric and propaganda. This is the mode of actually defending one's positions and actions in front of your rivals.

There are two well-established models that can be made routine in relevant cases. The models are well-known, but their application must allow for exchanges between rival view groups[34]:

1.   **Journalistic Model: The Adversarial Interview**

Investigative journalism can be used much more for philanthropy. Journalistic entities themselves are part of view groups, and it would serve the public well if journalists from competing view groups were to interview philanthropists and ask hard questions. There are ethical codes, standards, and procedures in place for this kind of work. A norm whereby philanthropists who seek to advance a worldview agree to interviews, not from their own view group but from competing ones, can be established. This ensures that philanthropists who are active in advancing their worldviews sit down with adversarial journalists and submit themselves to serious questioning. This is quite different from sycophantic interviews, which are worthless as far as public scrutiny is concerned.

2.   **Academic Model: Conferences with Rival View Groups**

Philanthropists and their professional staff should also be expected to participate in conferences, workshops and the like, where they can engage with adversarial scholars, policymakers, and the public. Forums like these can provide opportunities for rational deliberation and civil debate between competing view

---

33   Insofar as such things already happen, then it is commendable and there should be more. Insofar as they are lacking, they should exist.
34   I do not claim that these models are perfect or non-corruptible. In politics the journalistic model already exists yet is up against many challenges. But as mentioned above, the stakes in politics are as high as they get, and so the incentives for non-cooperation or corruption are also high. If a politician or a party consider it disadvantageous to engage in rational deliberation, especially defense of positions in dialogue with rivals, then it will not happen, even though parliaments are literally built for that. But these are not reasons to abandon parliaments. One can only hope that philanthropy will go down better pathways.

groups. This is quite different from academic platforms that merely provide echo chambers for the dominant view groups who control academic institutions, isolating and shielding them from their rivals.

Submitting to such scrutiny is essential for maintaining accountability and fostering a healthy civil society. While philanthropists should not face the same harsh tactics as politicians, they must be open to questioning and dialogue.

Conclusion

The above analysis reveals that the political-philanthropic system is a pervasive and influential structure in contemporary society, with view groups serving as its active agents. Both politics and philanthropy are partially driven by the desire to implement worldviews, but the means and norms governing these domains diverge. While philanthropists lack the coercive authority of politicians, their substantial influence demands accountability. However, subjecting them to the same harsh treatment reserved for politicians risks undermining the norms of civil society and further factionalizing public discourse.

Instead, this paper argues for mechanisms of accountability that respect the unique role of philanthropy, including adversarial journalism and inclusive academic forums. These approaches can better foster debate, promote rational deliberation, and maintain the health of a pluralistic democracy. Ultimately, establishing clear norms for the interactions between rival view groups, as well as the roles of politics and philanthropy within this system, is essential to balancing the competing demands of influence, responsibility, and civil engagement.

About the Author

Guy Schultz is a political philosopher and research fellow at the Institute for Law and Philanthropy at Tel Aviv University. His work explores the intersection of philanthropy and politics, focusing on worldview rivalry, legitimacy, and the normative frameworks that shape civil society. He holds a PhD in philosophy, with a dissertation on John Rawls's concept of 'the basic structure of society,' and teaches a Master's-level course on philanthropy for students of Public Policy. Schultz's current research develops the concept of "view groups" as collectives competing across political and philanthropic domains, and examines the implications of these struggles for democratic stability. He is also engaged in conceptualizing the basic moral distinction between humans and artificial intelligence, as part of a broader inquiry into the societal risks posed by advanced AI systems.

Bibliography

Callahan, David. *The Givers: Wealth, Power and Philanthropy in a New Gilded Age*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

Carnegie, Andrew. "Wealth." *North American Review* 148, no. 381 (1889): 653–64.

Chiapello, Eve. "Reconciling the Two Principal Meanings of the Notion of Ideology: The Example of the Concept of the 'Spirit of Capitalism.'" *European Journal of Social Theory* 6, no. 2 (2003): 155–71.

Dilthey, WIlhelm. *Ethical and World-View Philosophy*. Edited by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Translated by Rudolf A. Makkreel. Vol. VI, Selected Works. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Freeden, Michael. *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers.* Edited by Lawrence Goldman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hayek, Friedrich August von. *The Road to Serfdom.* London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1944.

Kalberg, Stephen. "The Past and Present Influence of World Views: Max Weber on a Neglected Sociological Concept." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 4, no. 2 (2004): 139–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X04043931.

Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Essays.* Translated by M A Screech. London: Penguin Books, 1987.

Muller, Jerry Z. *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Saunders, Frances Stonor. *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War.* London: Granta Books, 1999.

Schneewind, Jerome B., ed. Giving: *Western Ideas of Philanthropy.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Seneca. *How to Give: An Ancient Guide to Giving and Receiving.* Translated by James S. Romm. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–43.