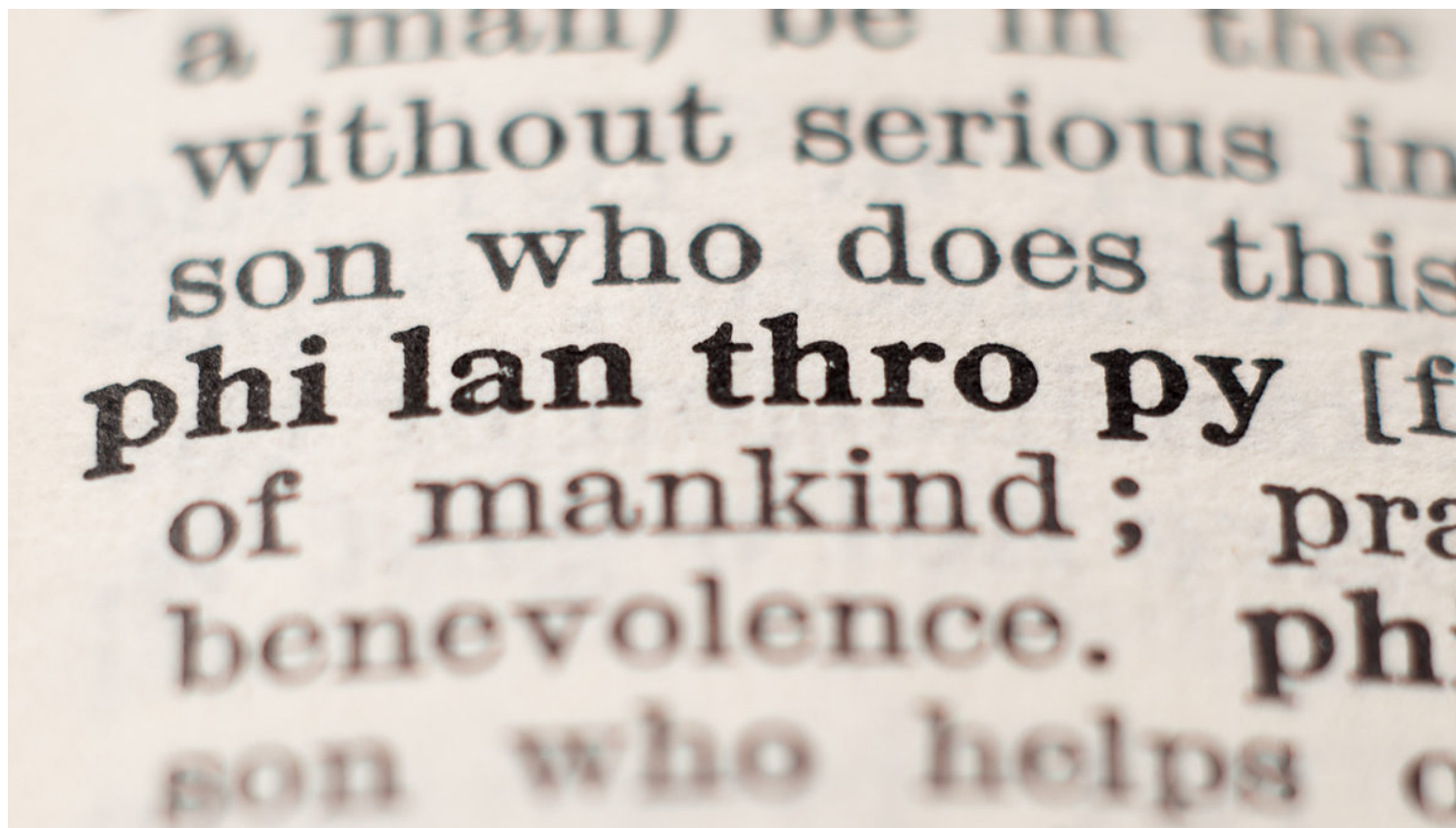


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BLOG / COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY

# Expanding the Definitions of Philanthropy and Philanthropist

by Michael Layton





This article was first published in our *11 Trends in Philanthropy for 2022* report. [Explore all 11 trends in the full report.](#)

One of the most consequential emerging trends in philanthropy is a growing consensus that we must expand our collective definitions of “philanthropy” and “philanthropist.”

Media reports and academic research often narrowly define philanthropy as cash donations to charitable organizations. The roots of this understanding can be dated back to the early 20th century and the rise of large grantmaking institutions and mega-wealthy, industrialist donors (Zunz, 2012). Andrew Carnegie’s (1889) *Gospel of Wealth* has long defined the archetypal philanthropist.

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Today, however, the overlapping challenges of a global pandemic and inchoate racial reckoning have provided an opportunity to recast our conception of philanthropy (Kasper et al., 2021). The kaleidoscopic variety of ways in which Americans in all communities engage in voluntary action for the public good (Payton & Moody, 2008) is beginning to get its rightful due, both currently and historically.

## Grantmaking, Research, and Advocacy on Diverse Forms of Philanthropy

Much of this progress can be attributed to the growing body of grantmaking, research, and advocacy focused upon acknowledging and building up philanthropy in communities of color. Large-scale research projects such as *Everyday Donors of Color* (Mays Family Institute on Diverse Philanthropy, 2021), *The Apparitional Donor* (Vaid & Maxton, 2017), and others are describing long-standing traditions and shedding light on their prevalence (See: Carson, 1993; Freeman, 2020; Mottino & Miller, 2005; New England Blacks in Philanthropy, 2021; Smith et al., 1999; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, n.d., 2012).

While these forms of community philanthropy go back generations and span the globe, what is new is institutional philanthropy's growing appreciation and support for and study of these practices. These works acknowledge actions that go beyond monetary contributions to registered charities and include "a medley of beneficent acts and gifts that address someone's needs or larger social purposes that arise from a collective consciousness and shared experience of humanity" (Freeman, 2020, pp. 3-4).

We have now arrived at an emerging consensus that these practices are not a marginal aspect of philanthropy but constitute some of its core components (Bernholz, 2021).

## Redefining our Understanding of American Philanthropy — Past and Present

Two recent publications nicely encapsulate how the definitions of philanthropy and philanthropist are being transformed, expanded, and enriched in ways that are having a lasting impact on the field. They also reinforce the sense that we have come to an inflection point in our understanding of philanthropy, where cumulative progress is supplanted by an enduring paradigm shift in how we understand this crucial aspect of society (Kuhn, 1970).

The first publication is a historical biography, Tyrone McKinley Freeman's (2020) *Madam C. J. Walker's Gospel of Giving*. Freeman writes that Walker embodied a tradition of generosity in the Black community that identifies "any resource that has the potential to alleviate suffering or bring about meaningful change ... as being useful philanthropic currency — be it time, money, employment, education, beauty, influence, inspiration, or tangible goods" (p. 208).

Walker's gospel of giving stands in sharp contrast to Carnegie's gospel of wealth. Walker's philanthropy was an ongoing aspect of her life, which grew in ambition and magnitude as her fortune grew — it was not something she came to after she achieved material success (Freeman, 2020).

The second publication is a work of social science. Lucy Bernholz's (2021) *How We Give Now: A Philanthropic Guide for the Rest of Us*, was sponsored by the [Generosity Commission](#). In it, Bernholz moves beyond the analysis of survey results and IRS Form 990s to use case studies and focus groups to ask people, "How do you give?" This open-ended inquiry encouraged respondents to use their own words to describe how they seek to improve their communities, including: "I host events for local families," "I give shoes, backpacks and jackets every year," and "Employ poverty-level people, support them with daycare" (Bernholz & Pawliw-Fry, 2020, p. 11).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, monetary donations are only a small part of the efforts they describe.

## Collective Action for the Public Good

Taken together, and placed within the broader movements for collective giving we have seen in [previous 11 Trends in Philanthropy reports](#) (e.g., giving circles, global giving traditions, the leadership of donors of color), these two works are helping our sector to question and redefine itself in three critical and mutually reinforcing ways:

- **How we engage in philanthropy, emphasizing the importance of collective action and community connection.** In a historic nadir of "[community connectedness and social solidarity in America](#)" (Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2021, p. 105; Layton & Martin, 2021), the movement towards giving circles and other forms of collective giving grounded in conversation and collaboration is more important than ever. Through the [Latino Giving Circle Network](#), the [Latino Community Foundation](#), for instance, has been explicit about how giving circle participation aims "[to change the meaning of philanthropist to be both more inclusive and a step toward building power](#)" (Bernholz, 2021, p. 177; Layton, 2021).
- **Reimagining how we identify philanthropists, seeing generosity not only in those who make large monetary donations.** Since 1996, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has supported organizations working to expand who is considered

a philanthropist. Most recently, as part of the [Catalyzing Community Giving initiative](#), their work is to underline the centrality of community in identifying and solving community-based challenges (n.d.).

Organizations such as [Learning to Give](#) and [The Giving Square](#) are working to redefine the age of the “typical” philanthropist, as they [encourage children and youth to understand the philanthropic relevance of their actions as caregivers](#) and to see their calls for fairness as essentially philanthropic (Neugebauer, 2021; Mangrulkar & Behrens, 2013).

- **Where we express our solidarity, beyond the formal, institutional settings of organizations and foundations.** Part of expanding who counts as a philanthropist is appreciating the myriad ways in which we seek to improve our communities. When we help a neighbor, participate in a public meeting, or make purchases taking into account our environmental and community impact, we are acting to advance the public good.

Today, while some entrepreneurs have monetized the sharing economy, others have used the concept to provide mutual aid and advance connection. For example, the [Buy Nothing Project](#) was “founded in 2013 with the mission to build community by connecting people through hyperlocal gifting, and reducing our impact on the environment” (para. 3).

Overall, these expansions of the definitions of philanthropy and philanthropists acknowledge the myriad ways in which we collectively engage and mobilize our generosity to improve our communities. But perhaps the largest benefit will come when this recognition results in regulatory frameworks, incentive structures, and organizational practices that encourage greater numbers of Americans of all backgrounds to become engaged in giving (Bernholz, 2021).





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