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## Book Review: Philanthropy: From Aristotle to Zuckerberg

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*Philanthropy: From Aristotle to Zuckerberg*, by Paul Vallely.  
Bloomsbury Publishing, London; 2020; 756 pp. ISBN HB 978-1-4729-2012-6

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If you have been looking for a comprehensive history of the concept and practice of Western philanthropy, you have it now in the form of this lengthy but very readable book by Paul Vallely, a British writer and commentator.

Vallely was a journalist with *The Times* of London in 1985 when he covered the Ethiopian famine and got to know Bob Geldof, the Irish rock musician and philanthropic activist who helped raise millions to combat the famine through Band Aid and Live Aid. This relationship set Vallely on the road of thinking and writing about giving, whether in the form of humanitarian aid, celebrity philanthropy, religious obligation, or secular patronage. His decades of direct experience and reflection have resulted in this ambitious and wide-ranging history and commentary on approaches to philanthropy. Indeed, philanthropy spurred the writing of this book: over the five years he worked on it, Vallely was supported by a grant from Trevor Pears, a British philanthropist who knew that there had not been a major history of English philanthropy written in more than half a century.

The book goes far beyond English philanthropy in its ambition, however, although it does focus mainly on philanthropy in the global West – essentially, Europe and North America. It covers an enormous amount of ground. Vallely begins by defining philanthropy – derived from the Greek *philanthropia*, or “love of humanity” – not just as giving but as a “term that has encompassed a far richer variety of meanings over the centuries, tying it into personal relationships, social

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hierarchies, the politics of cities, the spread of religions, the shaping of laws and the governance of states.” The compelling fascination of philanthropy is this, that it incorporates so much about human behaviour; the exercise of power; the interaction of spirituality and beliefs about ethics, justice, and the common good; and the nature of our shared condition on this planet.

Vallely’s discussion of philanthropy is wide-ranging because in his definition, the act of philanthropy encompasses individual charity, wealthy sponsorship, religious tithing and almsgiving, state-funded poor relief and welfare, social reform activity, political activism, and endowed foundation work. The book is actually a work in two parts (each book-length in itself and worth a read on its own). The first follows a chronological account of the theory and practice of Western philanthropy, from the Greeks and the Romans through the medieval and renaissance periods and, narrowing the focus somewhat to the United Kingdom, through the 18th and 19th centuries and into the modern British landscape. The second part is a review of current approaches to modern philanthropy, and their critiques, using examples drawn from American and British “big” philanthropy. This is reminiscent of books published in the past couple of years by Anand Giridharadas and Edgar Villanueva, although Vallely is more balanced than these critics.

While he is balanced, he has a clear point of view: that giving is best when it is mutual, when it involves a relationship and reciprocity between giver and receiver, a mutual recognition and respect of each other’s humanity. In this he is very much influenced by the thinking of theologians and religious leaders – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. (He is also the author of a biography of Pope Francis and editor of a book on Catholic social teaching for the 21st century.) Vallely is particularly interested in the role of religious belief in shaping early concepts of charity and philanthropy. In his exhaustive review of the theory and practice of giving through the millennia before and after the birth of Christianity, he describes two interpretations of philanthropy. For the pagan societies of Greece and Rome, it was about “the relationship of the individual to society and it was bound up with notions of status, honour and approval.” For the Jews, the Muslims, and the Christians of the first millennia CE, it was about “the relationship of the individual to God . . . mediated through a sense of community with other believers.”

Vallely underlines the centrality of reciprocal philanthropy through the thousand years of the dominant Christian and Catholic Church in western Europe. The medieval view of philanthropy connected charity and social justice holistically. “Giving involves not simply the donation of money or material goods but a relationship between donor and recipient which is spiritual, reciprocal, communal and inclusive.” The rich had an obligation to give to the poor, but they were not supposed to make moral judgments about the receiver based simply on their poverty. Gradually this evolves, as Vallely describes, to a concept of philanthropy that makes distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor, those who are members in good standing of the human community and those who are not. The state became more and more important not only in delivering services to the poor but also in regulating the meaning and purposes of charity. As we well know in Canada, the regulator’s definition of what is charitable is still derived from the original statute of Queen Elizabeth 1 in 1601.

Over time, philanthropy has become essentially secularized. In many ways it has shifted away from helping the poor and toward supporting social infrastructure in the arts, education, and science. The views of 19th-century American plutocrats such as Andrew Carnegie and John Rockefeller significantly influenced the course of philanthropy. Carnegie’s building of libraries and Rockefeller’s funding of the University of Chicago reflected their view that “philanthropy

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was a ladder not for the poor and destitute but for the able and industrious.”

In the second half of his book, Vallely analyzes the development of “philanthrocapitalism” and the new generation of philanthropists who have created their own wealth in the worlds of finance and technology. Out of this comes the movement to strategic or venture philanthropy and a focus on strategies, metrics, and results. Vallely views this as a top-down and technocratic approach. Essentially a conservative of the Burkean school, he is frank in his critique of this kind of philanthropy: “The value of philanthropy lies not simply in the achieving of results. It also lies in the way that philanthropy . . . helps foster the values which hold a society together . . . the best philanthropy helps build the complex networks of institutions, customs and relationships which Edmund Burke saw as essential to the functioning of a healthy and dynamic society.”

Vallely provides a detailed recounting of major debates in philanthropy today, including the involvement of philanthropy in politics, its role in building democracy (or undermining it), its legitimacy and accountability in the face of rising inequality, and effective altruism versus “philanthrolocalism.” Yet he returns again and again to his fundamental point: the best philanthropy is not strategic but reciprocal. “Reciprocal philanthropy is philanthropy with a human face. It is focused on people rather than product. It is process-driven rather than results-oriented. It comes from the heart as much as the head.”

Vallely’s skill as a journalist lends an enjoyable storytelling aspect to his exposition of ideas about philanthropy. His biographical sketches of philanthropists range from William Wilberforce and John Howard to Carnegie, Rockefeller, Bill Gates, George Soros, Michael Bloomberg, and many others. He combines these short stories within the story with brief interviews with a wide range of people in business, religion, and philanthropy, mostly British, from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, to the entrepreneur Richard Branson; from David Sainsbury and Trevor Pears to Bob Geldof. These interviews add journalistic colour and personality to what is an almost overwhelming amount of detail.

One of the shortcomings of the book, in my opinion, is the lack of a female voice or perspective. This may reflect the fact that most of the history of philanthropy was recorded by men. And most of the recognized “big” philanthropists of the past and of the modern day are also men – mostly white men. Yet, oddly, of the 17 interviews that Vallely conducted, only two were with women. Surely there are more women today who have relevant views on the purposes and practices of philanthropy? Arguably, there is a gendered difference in thinking about philanthropy. One of the people who has been most talked about in US philanthropy in 2019/20 is MacKenzie Scott, the former wife of Jeff Bezos. Her wealth comes from the behemoth firm Amazon, and she is one of the wealthiest women in the world. In the past year she has given away more than US\$5 billion, with more to come. Yet Vallely does not consider her. What is noteworthy about her philanthropy is that she has combined some of the best aspects of strategic and reciprocal philanthropy. She did her data-driven due diligence and researched potential grantees for their contribution to the needs of those suffering from the economic crisis and those working to address long-term systemic inequities. Then she gave her money directly without conditions, trusting the organizations to do what they wanted to do with the funds. She shared her thinking and the names of the organizations she has funded publicly and immediately so that she could demonstrate transparency. This may well be a model of the new philanthropy to come, the combination of head and heart for which Vallely argues throughout this long and thoughtful book.

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*Note: Vallely has provided a list of notes and resources for further readings on philanthropy on his [dedicated website](#).*