



Reparative Justice and the Moral Limits of Discretionary Philanthropy

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This article challenges the assumption that donors should be able to give to whichever causes they choose, based on personal passion and interest. The author contends that this level of donor freedom is unjustified, yet governments support it to compensate for underfunded public services.

To what extent is philanthropy a private act and is there a moral and social obligation to see philanthropy instead as a public act of reparative justice?

The author argues that philanthropists should see giving as a moral duty, not personal choice, and that public bodies should minimise discretion in the design of their tax incentives for giving. This is important to practitioners because it disrupts conventional thinking about the dynamic between society and philanthropists, and challenges us to consider the role of philanthropy in subsidising or influencing public services.

[#DistributiveJustice](#) [#ReparativeJustice](#) [#DonorDiscretion](#) [#DonorControl](#)
[#JusticePhilanthropy](#)

Background

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Context



- Societal norms assume that **philanthropic giving is a matter of personal choice, and this assumption is reinforced by governments**. Any notion of 'duty' in giving is usually understood broadly - as a duty for the wealthy to contribute to society - rather than as a matter of **redistributive justice: returning to others what is rightfully theirs**.
- In an ideal system, government collection of resources would both assure the redistribution of cash from rich to poor and adequately fund the provision of public goods and services. **However, the real world system leaves these goods and services underfunded** and while philanthropists see themselves as having a duty to give towards them, **the distribution of funds they give is uneven, and subject to personal choice**.
- **Inequality is inherent** when wealthy individuals have the ability to influence the provision of goods and services, which should be seen as a right. **Wealthy individuals also benefit from the disadvantages faced by poorer citizens**, which stem from the government's failure to provide adequate support through fair and efficient taxation.
- In this unjust system, where poorer households already give proportionately more than the wealthy there **is limited justification for discretion in philanthropic giving**, and objections about "loopholes" in the proposed reimagining of the system are unjustified.

ERNOP Research Note

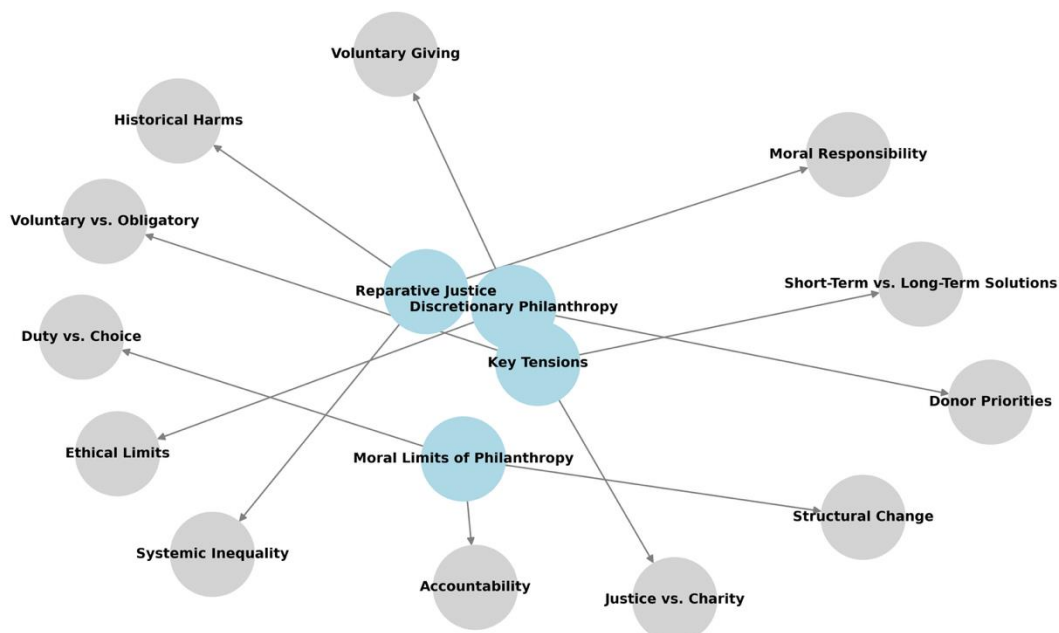
Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- The author concludes that philanthropists have a duty according to principles of distributive justice **to give to effective advocacy organisations**, who can use this funding to bring about the **systemic change that will assure the equitable provision of goods and services**. They also have a duty of reparative justice to give to service providing organisations to meet **essential short-term needs**.
- In either case, donors should **give as if what they give is not their own**, and look to the public need, **rather than personal interest and history**, in selecting how to direct their giving – this conflicts with prevailing assumptions about philanthropic choice, which underpins how many charities solicit and cultivate these donors.
- The author posits that their argument provides justifiable grounds for government to not only **curb their practice of encouraging donor discretion**, but to **actively discourage it through restructuring tax incentives** for charitable giving in a way that disincentivises discretion.
- If the **Government were adequately providing all goods and services**, thus limiting the power and influence of philanthropy to shape these, or to leverage supporting them for personal gain, there would be **greater scope for discretionary giving which reflects donor interests**.

Discretionary philanthropy concept map



ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 11/2025 is published as part of a Special Issue on Justice Philanthropy in collaboration with PHILEA in June 2025 and has been written by Jemma Chambers from Habitat for Humanity Great Britain. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.