

INTRODUCTION

HERE BE DRAGONS. Marking *terra incognita* as well as invoking human imagination, the dragon is a universal motif in human literature. As William Jackson observes in this volume, dragons present us a powerful and universal archetype that “carry associations of transcendent energy, wealth, wisdom and awe,” such associations that some might also make when regarding philanthropists. Here we seek not to make philanthropists out to be such dragons, but rather to encourage those who practice and study philanthropy to attend to the many species of dragon that surround the art. As J.R.R. Tolkien put it in *The Hobbit*, “[i]t does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him” (1937, 229).

The cartography of this volume of *Conversations on Philanthropy* seeks both to invite and to caution the reader. The myths that surround philanthropy are many, but they are not tame. Our dragon is fiery, endowed perhaps with the fire of Prometheus to which several of our contributors refer, a fire that can at once enlighten and consume. How do our beliefs about wealth creation and preservation, our beliefs about reciprocity in exchange, our beliefs about generosity and gratitude, our beliefs about the possibility or impossibility of pure altruism inform our philanthropy? What are the myths, creative and destructive, that shape these beliefs and open or foreclose to us various forms of philanthropic action?

Our contributors take us on an intriguing tour through time and space and mind to search out some of the myths of philanthropy and to imagine its opportunities. Richard Gunderman frames our examination of myth around Aristotelian-inspired categories that establish the breadth and importance of the inquiry. Steven Grosby guides our vision to Athens and Jerusalem (and Bethlehem and Rome); while William Jackson introduces us to more oriental frames of reference for examining similar questions. George McCully takes up a redefinition of the philanthropic terrain as it has evolved in the United States, invoking as a backdrop the American founders’ perception of their Constitution-making as an act of philanthropy. Rob Garnett engages us as well with eighteenth-century paradigms in order to help us navigate the challenges of modern commercial society. By taking us back to Adam Smith he helps us map an alternate route than that followed by modernist

economics. Heather Wood Ion offers a concluding reflection on these essays that urges us to consider whether our philanthropic efforts are always noble and good or whether a form of moral greed often tied closely to the act of giving can actually diminish the inspiring, empowering, and efficacious aspects of philanthropy.

The forms philanthropy has taken in the past century require us to keep an eye on the dragons explored in these essays as well as to re-consider what we believe about the relationships of philanthropy and justice. In *The Dragons of Expectation*, Robert Conquest proposes that one of the persistent “brain blindfolds” of the present age is “the notion that for all problems there is a ‘solution,’ and that when found this can be put into effect by the state (or its opponents)” (2005, 12-13). Modern philanthropy has largely taken up the side of the state in this battle against social problems, linking its fate with the attainment of “social justice.” The elevation of philanthropy out of the realm of charity into the territory of justice has not gone undisputed. F. A. Hayek, for one, called social justice a “mirage” and believed that the concept would ultimately work to the demise of the rule of law.

Perhaps most importantly for our discussion of myths is the challenging fact that this expansion of philanthropy into the broader realm of “humanitarianism” has itself not resolved the dilemmas that surround our beliefs about the appropriate relationships between wealth and poverty in the global commercial economy. The “haves” often feel impelled—whether by a sense of justice, an imperative of religious charity, or a moral sympathy—to assist the “have nots,” but modern humanitarian aid has been fraught with unintended consequences, often shoring up criminal regimes and doing little to ameliorate conditions of hunger and violence affecting millions of lives. The challenges of humanitarianism draw us right back to the ironies of Promethian philanthropy, described by our contributors variously as an act of compassion for humanity, an act endowing men with generative creativity, and an act of vindication against the tyranny of Zeus, who proposed to destroy humanity and design a new race of creatures to replace these flawed creatures of clay.

In the end, the examination of myths we propose here is essential. In literature, dragons often are depicted as hoarders of wealth. In attributing dragon-like characteristics to the self-renewing myths surrounding producing

and consuming, giving and receiving, we seek to promote awareness of the often unexamined beliefs that shape what we can imagine and do. It is easy to imagine the dragon we are describing from various perspectives, much as the blind men in the room with the elephant, as the symbolic Ouroboros, the dragon depicted consuming its own tail. Our intent is not to paralyze philanthropy in circular musings, but we do hope that through our examination we may discover understanding and tools needed to cohabit the landscape with and perhaps even somewhat tame these dragons, thus harnessing their power in support of our own reflexivity and re-creation and improving our chances of avoiding the unbidden destruction that can come from playing with fire.

—*Lenore T. Ealy*
Editor