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Oxford Union, March 5, 2026, “This House Believes that Modern Philanthropy is a Tool for Reputation Laundering”

1. If this house believes “modern philanthropy is a tool for reputation laundering,” it has its fingers on the AI-generated pulse of the day. Ours is an era of exuberant green-washing, pink-washing, blue-washing, and humane-washing. It is a time of petrol companies trumpeting their efforts to partner with conservationists, save polar bears, and invest in renewable energy. Of industrial meat-producers making prolific use of slogans like “grass-fed” and “cage-free” and touting their commitments to animal welfare. And of big AI companies claiming to lead the charge to safeguard the fate of humanity against a techno-apocalypse. To protest such corporate image-scrubbing is to decry the social wrongs and ecological harms of the very mechanisms by which these industries’ “philanthropically”-disbursed wealth is generated. And it is to call out the injustice of covering over these initial wrongs and treating those who benefit most from their infliction, those whose reputations in fairness should be tarnished, as leaders in the business of doing good.

2. Egregious philanthropic reputation-cleansing has long been part of the capitalist enterprise—think of the giant 20<sup>th</sup> century charitable foundations, such as Carnegie and Rockefeller, built on the back of extraction. But in modest forms, where it seems routine and consistent with good intentions, reputation-cleansing is harder to see. Currently ubiquitous philanthropic traditions like “impact investing” and “Effective Altruism” (or EA) facilitate under-the-radar reputational repair. These traditions tap into two powerful, interrelated forces in our culture. They rely on assumptions of neo-classically-oriented economics, treating the economy as free from ethical and ecological moorings and suppressing questions about whether the established socio-economic system’s internal tendencies are harmful. They combine these assumptions with congenial ideas from consequentialist moral theory, so that acting rightly is taken to be securing the biggest return of quantifiable value. And so they enjoin us to *take strategic investment as the model for all laudable social giving*. This apparently bland philosophical formula is cover for reputation-restoration. Instead of facing violent and socially disruptive chapters in the history of the world’s current wealth distribution, it encourages those with means to go for the most calculable impacts. This privileges working within the system over liberating social transformation, and it positions the inordinately affluent to congratulate themselves for being the greatest altruists in human history.

3. Today reputation-cleansing, both modest and egregious, is taking place on such a scale that unmasking it is of paramount importance. This is happening, most prominently, in AI circles, where the main ideological instrument is an EA-adjacent philanthropic tradition, stemming from strains of 1990s Silicon Valley transhumanism, that here at Oxford is called “longtermism.” Longtermism is the view that morally right action increases the likelihood of a supposedly glorious future in which huge numbers of humans’ digital descendants live on for billions or trillions of years, past the death of our sun, by colonizing exoplanets. (I kid you not!) Although vaguely conceived, artificial general intelligence (or AGI) is represented as our sole route to this future. Those who believe efforts to build AGI could result in evil machines, so-called “AI doomers,” regard these efforts as also the biggest threat to the supposed techno-utopia or, in longtermists’ idiom, the biggest “existential risks.” So, they call for attention to *AI safety*. Those dismissive of safety worries, so-called “accelerationists,” call instead for a no-holds-barred race to AGI. Longtermism equips doomers and accelerationists alike to depict AGI as humanity’s greatest enterprise, a philanthropic pursuit whose

nobility removes the bloody stains of social injustices (think of the harms of algorithmic biases, massive intellectual property theft, and the exploitation of workers in the Global South). And whose nobility negates devastating environmental harms (think of the tremendous use of minerals, water and energy in ever larger and more numerous data-centers). AGI is taken to be so vital to humanity that some high-profile champions claim it warrants measures causing mass near-term suffering and death.

*That* is the philanthropic logic longtermism uses to hide grave wrongs of an industry attracting more money than any investment wave in history. Chillingly, the logic echoes the reasoning of sci-fi villains, like Thanos in the Marvel Universe, and of real-world fascist autocrats. Equally chilling, it has become influential in international policy circles at a time of accelerating deterioration of democratic institutions and growing tolerance for mass surveillance, secret police, concentration camps, genocide, wars of aggression, and authoritarianism's other characteristic forms of violence.

4. To oppose this repackaging of horror as beneficence, we need conceptual tools to critique ideologies. We have to reject the scientific world-picture underlying entrenched economic and moral theories that obscures grievous injustices and environmental harms. We have to recognize that understanding the world calls for hard-fought historical and cultural perspectives and that a new perspective may reveal previously overlooked patterns, relationships, and values. This recognition equips us to appreciate that the considerations that seem to speak for prioritizing longtermists' allegedly glorious techno-future are unsound; that the huge number of posthumans at play in this supposed utopia aren't an argument for getting to AGI; and that they in no way excuse the grievous wrongs for which tech companies are responsible.

5. Society's commitment to democratic ideals has decayed so much, and so quickly, that many damaging industries have stopped even trying to pretty-up their reputations. Major gas companies are abandoning their support for conservation projects, and tech giants, who just yesterday insisted that humanity's fate depended on value-aligned machines, are today backing away from their own AI safety initiatives (some while spreading child sexual abuse material and racist conspiracies). That is not progress. These developments are worse than buffing one's public image with philanthropic polish. But the use of philanthropy for image-burnishing is a key chapter in the story of how we got to this moment. We have gotten here partly through widespread and sometimes well-intentioned philanthropic gestures that hide the injustices and ecological damages of mega-industries. Understanding how this happened is the first step to fighting back.

6. Which is why it is so important to support this house when it observes, most pertinently, that philanthropy is used to launder reputations.

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