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What is philanthropy and what is not?

By [Naomi Schaefer Riley](#) | 27 Aug 2010 | 124 views

Reading Jane Mayer's piece in the August 30 *New Yorker* [piece on the Koch brothers](#) got me thinking about how we decide what is philanthropy and what is not. The thrust of the piece, in which Mayer discovers a vast right-wing conspiracy, is not surprising. Heck, even plenty of right-wingers I know have been surprised to learn about the far-reaching arms of the "Kochtopus." From think tanks like Citizens for a Sound Economy where I worked one summer as a Koch fellow and the Cato Institute to the more recently founded Americans for Prosperity and Patients United Now, Koch money is all over Washington and all over politics and the Koch name is not always in lights either.

But Mayer's brief attempt at a comparison with the Left is laughable:

Of course, Democrats give money, too. Their most prominent donor, the financier George Soros, runs a foundation, the Open Society Institute, that has spent as much as a hundred million dollars a year in America. Soros has also made generous private contributions to various Democratic campaigns, including Obama's. But Michael Vachon, his spokesman, argued that Soros's giving is transparent, and that "none of his contributions are in the service of his own economic interests." The Kochs have given millions of dollars to nonprofit groups that criticize environmental regulation and support lower taxes for industry. Gus diZerega, the former friend, suggested that the Kochs' youthful idealism about libertarianism had largely devolved into a rationale for corporate self-interest. He said of Charles, "Perhaps he has confused making money with freedom."

Perhaps Mayer has missed the story of Al Gore's investments in green technology while he has been the face of climate change philanthropy. See, for instance, [this story](#) on his \$300 million Alliance for Climate Protection [or this on his corporate conflicts of interest](#). Mayer goes much further than to accuse the Kochs of financially profiting from their philanthropy. She implies that David Koch's gifts of tens of millions of dollars to cancer research will put him in a position to influence EPA policies on whether chemicals that his company produces are declared carcinogens. And then she suggests that he has used his gifts at the American Museum of Natural History to influence the way the museum depicts climate change in its exhibits. This, too, she suggests will influence public opinion of climate change and therefore help his environment-destroying company.

Maybe I'm being naive but this seems a little far-fetched. Maybe David Koch just thinks cancer research and the AMNH are good causes. (She didn't find an ulterior motive for his gifts to the American Ballet Theater, but give it time)

At any rate, it seems to me that by Mayer's account any gift to a free-market think tank or advocacy organization by anyone would not be considered philanthropy. Anyone who earns a

paycheck might want lower taxes and give to a group that fights for them. Is that not philanthropy because it could mean more money in that person's pocket someday? In Mayer's view, the only reason you'd want less government intervention in your life is to make money and if you make money then you can't have a charitable intent.

Or maybe I've just "confused making money with freedom."