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Article

Negation claims: insights from elite philanthropists' responses to moral devaluation

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of one's positive qualities is fundamental to human dignity. Research in the cultural sociology of morality, worth, and evaluation has explored how individuals respond to stigmatization and moral devaluation, emphasizing the recognition claims that they formulate. However, less attention has been given to what happens when such claims are rejected. This study addresses this gap by examining elite philanthropy: a practice that forms part of claims by economic elites to moral worth, but which is also challenged by a critical public view. Analyzing how elite philanthropists account for such challenges, we identify a sequence of evaluations and devaluations whereby philanthropy is evaluated, the critical public view is devaluated, and the focus of the moral debate is shifted to other social issues. This sequence results in a recognition claim about the moral worth of philanthropy and in what we refer to as a *negation claim*, whereby social actors discredit the public view. Recognition and negation claims reflect two distinct, but not necessarily incompatible, ways in which social actors wrestle with moral devaluation. This distinction, we argue, is conceptually and analytically important for analyzing the responses of social actors to moral devaluation, and has implications for the study of dominance and symbolic inequality.

Individuals, regardless of structural factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity, care deeply about being recognized as possessing positive qualities and adhering to moral standards (e.g., Campeau, Levi, and Foglesong 2021; Krauz-Lahav and Kemp 2020; Shi, Smock, and Hitlin 2025). Such recognition is important in and of itself with regard to matters of moral self-worth, dignity, and symbolic inequality—that is, access (or lack thereof) to ways of life that are valued and recognized as worthy (Lamont 2000; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014; Sayer 2005).

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In recent years, the importance of social and cultural recognition has spurred increasing academic attention, fueling a rich body of research in the cultural sociology of morality, worth, and evaluation. This line of work examines how social actors respond to situations that can undermine their moral or social worth, such as stigmatization or devaluation. It focuses on the content of the moral evaluations and claims that social actors make about their worth, that is, recognition claims (e.g., Campeau et al. 2021; Cohen and Dromi 2018; Kahana 2023; Karazi-Presler 2021; Lahav-Raz, Prior, and Peled 2023; Lamont 2023).[1] Little is known, however, about what happens when recognition claims are rejected or challenged by others. Attention to this matter is particularly significant in a time of growing social polarization and clashes of conflicting moral beliefs about the common good—phenomena accompanied by a lack of trust and respect towards people outside one's in-group (Polletta 2020). Exploring this matter requires extending the analytical lens beyond the content of social actors' moral evaluations and claims—it warrants a closer examination of their moral versatility. By *versatility* we refer to "the dynamics of 'switching' between repertoires, 'borrowing' logics, or mixing multiple arguments and accounts in 'multi-vocal' ways" (Moody and Thévenot 2000: 275).

We begin to address the gap in the literature and to demonstrate the analytical utility of paying closer attention to actors' moral versatility via the empirical case of elite philanthropy. Philanthropy refers to the private giving of valuable resources, such as time and money, for public purposes; elite philanthropy signifies such giving made by the very wealthy (Barman 2017; Silber 2012). Studies show that philanthropy forms part of the economic elite's view of themselves as morally worthy (e.g., Ostrower 1995; Schervish 2006). However, claims to the unmitigated goodness of elite philanthropy have often been challenged by the media, politicians, scholars, public intellectuals, and—most importantly—the public at large (Breeze 2021; Reich 2018).

Taken together, the two sets of views suggest a certain incongruity between elites' claims of moral worth and the worth socially ascribed to them. Furthermore, there are empirical indications that elite philanthropists are aware of the negative public view (e.g., Ostrower 1995; Silber 2012). This observation raises the question: How do elite philanthropists hold and present their recognition claims in the face of the critical view that challenges their claims?

To answer this question, we focus on elite philanthropists' interpretations of the critical views. In doing so, we do not set out to attack or defend elite philanthropy or assess philanthropists' motivations; rather, we examine the moral evaluations and claims through which elite philanthropists seek to establish worth when facing criticism. To that end, we draw on theoretical insights from the cultural sociology of morality—a heterogeneous field examining how cultural processes shape moral categories of right and wrong, worthy and unworthy (e.g., Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

Findings from 24 in-depth interviews with elite philanthropists reveal a sequence of evaluations and devaluations—through which interviewees simultaneously argue for and protect their moral worth. In this sequence, philanthropists evaluate their philanthropic activity as a benevolent act, referring to mutually exclusive repertoires about the common good. Then, drawing on the same repertoires, they devaluate the critical public view, arguing that it is inaccurate, misguided, and irrelevant. In presenting these evaluations, philanthropists express their own concerns regarding the common good, shifting the focus of the moral debate from their actions to those of others or to other social issues altogether. While the positive evaluation of philanthropy forms a recognition claim, the devaluation of the public view, coupled with the shift of the moral debate, forms what we refer to as a *negation claim*—a propositional verbal account in which social actors legitimize their actions and maintain their moral self-worth by contradicting the critical public view. With a negation claim, social actors do not suggest an alternative index of evaluation or "fend off" criticism as in a recognition claim. Instead, they "attack" the criticism directly. Therefore, a negation claim reflects a distinct mechanism of moral positioning and worth maintenance. In this study, the expression of negation claims, we argue, enables the interviewees to hold their recognition claim despite the challenges posed to it.

By identifying the sequence of evaluations and devaluations presented by elite philanthropists regarding the moral worth of their philanthropy, we deepen the existing understanding (e.g., Krauz-Lahav and Kemp 2020) of elites' moral positioning via philanthropy. Moreover, we offer a dual contribution to the cultural sociology of morality, worth, and evaluation. First, while previous research largely observed the content of social actors' claims about their own worthiness, we shift the focus to actors' moral versatility, demonstrating the analytical utility of this focus when actors' recognition claims

are challenged. Second, by focusing on actors' moral versatility, we identify a distinct type of claim through which social actors negate perceived criticism to preserve their moral worth. This, we suggest, opens a new pathway for the sociology of morality to contribute to the understanding of questions of dominance and inequality.

RECOGNITION, WORTH, AND ELITES' PHILANTHROPY

Being recognized for positive qualities matters to social actors because it relates to human dignity and is associated with physical and subjective well-being (Honneth 2004; Lamont 2023). Further, recognition is related to social justice (Honneth 2004), as gaps in recognition create symbolic inequality—unequal access to lifestyles and practices recognized as morally worthy (Sayer 2005). This symbolic inequality reinforces material inequality by creating obstacles to social mobility (Lamont et al. 2014).

Seeing the importance of recognition to a social actor's sense of moral worth, a growing body of work in the cultural sociology of morality, worth, and evaluation has examined individuals' responses to social criticism, stigmatization, and resulting moral devaluation. Originally, these studies largely focused on members of marginalized groups (as defined by ethnic, racial, gender, or economic features) (e.g., Campeau et al. 2021; Lamont et al. 2017) or observed cases of intersectionality (e.g., Karazi-Presler 2021; Yurdakul and Altay 2022). These studies showed that social actors counter moral devaluation by making recognition claims about their worthiness as social actors, or about the worthiness of their actions for the common good.

Recently, studies have also started to focus on recognition claims made by members of socially and economically privileged groups (e.g., Cohen and Dromi 2018; Kahana 2023). Indeed, these groups are confronted with stigmatization and social criticism, which prompts moral devaluation due to their privilege. Specifically, economic elites, who have significant social power across different realms of life, are often accused of issues such as illegitimate influence over public affairs and dishonest accumulation of wealth (e.g., Khan 2012; Kuusela 2022). This is not new. However, since the 2008 financial crisis, elites have, metaphorically, been "on trial" due to their perceived role in the crisis and the establishment of a neo-liberal regime perpetuating economic inequality (Morgan, Hirsch, and Quack 2015).

In recent scholarship on elites, there has been a shift from a structuralist analysis in the Bourdieusian tradition to more nuanced explorations of how elites legitimize and justify their privileged position, particularly in view of the negative public sentiment expressed towards wealthy people and the public denigration of their moral character. This line of scholarship suggests that through philanthropy elites seek to present themselves as morally worthy subjects who "give back" to society (e.g., Kantola and Kuusela 2019; Krauz-Lahav and Kemp 2020). Namely, philanthropy provides a means for elites to contest moral devaluation and to make claims about their moral worthiness.

However, public opinion surveys conducted in many post-industrial societies indicate that, while the public generally views philanthropy positively, there is skepticism about the sincerity of elites' philanthropic motives. Many speculate that these elites have hidden agendas—aiming to promote their personal interests and strengthen their political ties and influence (Breeze 2021; Independent Sector 2023; Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy 2023; Schmid and Rudich 2008).

These surveys reveal the limits of philanthropy as a source of moral worth and recognition for elites and suggest that it can also lead to moral devaluation. Elite philanthropists are cognizant of the public view and criticism; nevertheless, they are still involved in philanthropy and present this as a token of their moral worth (Krauz-Lahav and Kemp 2020; Ostrower 1995). This creates a conundrum: How do they maintain both their sense of moral worth and their recognition claims?

While the extant literature (as cited above) provides valuable insights into the content of social actors' claims, scant attention has been given to what happens when their recognition claims are challenged or rejected by others. Our aim in this study is to address this empirical conundrum by analyzing the moral versatility evidenced by social actors when they form such claims.

Articulating Moral Claims and Moral Versatility

Recognition claims are moral claims. They are statements stemming from evaluation through which social actors signify right and wrong, good and bad, or worthy and unworthy—what Abend (2014) called "first-order morality." First-order claims are not formulated in a void but in reference to large abstract cultural repertoires—second-order understandings about the nature of morality—that

provide actors with logics, tools, and codes with which to make moral evaluations (Lamont 2023). Western societies hold numerous, mutually exclusive repertoires for conceptualizing moral worth. In their collaborative and pragmatist-oriented work, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) map out six cultural repertoires—or, in their words, "worlds of evaluation."[2]

Each world is organized around one main idea of the common good, which serves as the equivalency principle. It is with reference to this principle that the evaluation of an action, an object, or a person takes place. Each world establishes one way of evaluation and excludes other methods; thus, every world holds a different moral logic about the common good. Because social actors' claims cannot be accepted at face value, each world outlines the type of proof necessary to establish worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). By referring to the main idea of the common good, actors articulate moral claims and ascribe (or disqualify) worth to actions, objects, and people, while also providing relevant proof.

However, under multiple moral demands or in case of pushbacks—such as in the case of elite philanthropy—articulating moral claims is a complex endeavor. In such cases, actors use their moral versatility: their ability to shift between different modes of evaluation, blending or switching among them to formulate multi-layered arguments about the common good (Moody and Thévenot 2000).

The idea of moral versatility is not moral relativism. Even if moral evaluations and claims are shaped in relation to social factors (e.g., group membership; Schwarz 2013) or particular interests (personal or group; Moody and Thévenot 2000), actors are always expected to formulate their claims with reference to universal principles. It has been demonstrated how this dual need results in a *sequence of actions*, where actors move between worlds of evaluation and types of argument (Moody and Thévenot 2000), or in a *sequence of evaluations* within a given world of evaluation (Kahana 2025). In this study, we show another type of moral versatility within a given world—*a sequence of evaluation and devaluation*—by which interviewees claim recognition and then discredit public criticism, shifting moral debate away from their own actions. Through this sequence, interviewees construct a multi-layered argument about their moral worth.

DATA AND METHOD

The study explores elite philanthropists from Israel as a case study. Since the 1990s, there has been empirical evidence of critical public views of elite philanthropy (Schmid and Rudich 2008) and of philanthropists' awareness of such criticism (Silber 2012). Despite this, the contribution percentages of the very rich in Israel have remained stable (Schmid and Kahana 2024). Operating mainly in the Israeli context, Israeli elite philanthropists are often tied to transnational networks of wealth and philanthropy (Silber 2012).

The study employed in-depth interviews to gain a profound understanding of elites' views and experiences on philanthropy, as interviews serve as a "window" into the interviewees' world (Tavory 2020). As is often the case with elite populations (Cousin, Khan, and Mears 2018), identifying, accessing, and engaging philanthropists is a challenging endeavor: they are a relatively small and elusive group. To overcome these challenges and to gain a deep and diverse view of currently active Israeli philanthropists, we employed theoretical and snowball sampling methods (Gold 1997). We composed personal letters of introduction, providing an overview of the study purpose, the topics we wished to discuss, and an interview request.[3] The letters were sent to well-known philanthropists, whose giving had been frequently reported in the media. When successful, we asked initial interviewees to refer us to other donors in their networks—another way of reaching lesser-known donors.

The resulting sample consisted of 24 philanthropists (11 female and 13 male), ranging in age from late 30s to late 70s. We interviewed well-known philanthropists, the offspring of renowned philanthropic families, also known as "next generation" philanthropists (Krauz-Lahav and Kemp 2020), philanthropists who made their fortunes in the 1990s (also known as "new" philanthropists: Shimoni 2019), and philanthropists who were referred to by other interviewees and themselves as the "newly rich." Like the "new" philanthropists, the "newly rich" made their fortunes in the finance and high-tech industries. They are first-generation wealthy, but they are younger in age.

The two authors conducted the interviews together. The interviews, which were conducted in Hebrew and ranged in duration from 60 to 90 minutes, took place according to the interviewees' preferences: face-to-face or on Zoom. This article is drawn from a larger research project about the

transformation of philanthropic activity in Israel. As such, the interviews consisted of broad, open-ended questions that focused on both the personal and societal levels. On the personal level, we asked interviewees to elaborate on their wealth and personal giving, asking questions about their impetuses and experiences. On the societal level, we asked interviewees to reflect on the past and current state of philanthropy in Israel.

The public view towards philanthropy was discussed on both levels. Generally, interviewees broached the subject independently and acknowledged the public view as critical while sharing with us their own understanding of the public view. In response, we asked interviewees to explain why they continued to donate in the face of negative public perceptions. When appropriate, we also probed interviewees by employing an agonistic interviewing approach, in which "the interviewer deliberately provokes conflicts and emphasizes divergences, similar to some journalistic interviews" (Kvale 2006:487). This approach had methodological and ethical objectives: to further delve into the interviewees' understanding of the public view while also providing them with an opportunity to object to it. To ensure that the interviews remained analytical rather than adversarial—and in accordance with ethical standards—participants were explicitly told at the outset of each interview that we might pose challenging questions for analytical purposes. They were also informed that they were free to skip any question or end the interview at any point. During the interviews, we clearly signaled that such questions were intended to stimulate discussion rather than to criticize. We often prefaced these moments with phrases like "for the sake of argument" or "let me play devil's advocate here." We proceeded with such lines of questioning only after receiving explicit or implicit (e.g., nodding) confirmation from the interviewees.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were used to preserve the interviewees' anonymity. We read the transcripts several times before entering them into the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA for systematic scrutiny. Informed by the abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), we first deductively analyzed the data, searching for recurrent themes and considering their relationships with one another and with existing theories. Several lines of evaluation concerning philanthropic action and devaluation of the public view were identified. The second phase of the analysis involved revisiting, defamiliarizing, and alternative casing. Through this, we explored the interplay between the data and existing theories in search of unexpected discoveries. We then generated original hypotheses and reexamined them by way of supplementary inductive analysis. Based on this, we developed an interpretive framework.

FINDINGS

In the following sections, we first present how the interviewees linked philanthropy, moral worth, and the social advantage, forming recognition claims about themselves. We then show interviewees' awareness of the critical public view and how they maintained their recognition claims amid the critical public view.

Framing Recognition Claims: Philanthropy, Social Advantage, and Moral Worth

Interviewees did not shy away from acknowledging their social advantage. On the contrary, they referred to the inequality between themselves and others when elaborating on their donation impetus, arguing that their philanthropy supports the common good. For example, Max, a member of a family of philanthropists, explained his donation "policy," saying:

> I wish to help. It comes with a bit of "guilt." I have such a good life, good health, a family, really all good. So, I make a kind of compensation. . . . My conscience says, "things are so good, so I have to see those who are not doing well and help them."

Emotions like "guilt" indicate that something has been morally evaluated (Sayer 2005). In his statement, Max acknowledged his better position in life in relation to others and pointed out its implications on his moral sense of self (i.e., he feels guilt and the need to compensate). Referring to his conscience, Max presented his decision to donate as stemming from an internal voice, while acknowledging his singular capacity to assist others. This presentation resonates with the contemporary significance of authenticity as a source of moral orientation and worth, particularly among the

upper-middle class (Kahana 2023; Schwarz 2013), and is akin to what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) identify as the higher common good in the "world of inspiration."

Similarly, Hagit, a young philanthropist and daughter of an established family of philanthropists, acknowledged inequality between herself and others; yet, she articulated a different moral logic behind her decision to give. She referred to states of need and attributed worth to the importance of acting in such states—an attribution attuned to the "world of project," where activity is the higher common good (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007):

> People say, "you have the luxury [to deal with climate change issues]." It is the opposite! If [global] temperatures rise and we face a famine, I will probably be able to cope, but for those who are weak, it will be more difficult. . . . So, I can afford to "suffer" financially. [But] I'm morally unwilling to be there, you see?

Likewise, Dana, a second-generation philanthropist, referred to her privileged position when reflecting on her philanthropy. Yet, her explanation was based on logic from the "civil world" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), as she argued for contribution to the society at large, a documented explanation among Israeli philanthropists (Silber 2012):

> I've always felt that I have the privilege to "spend" my family money and to invest in Israeli society. . . . As a philanthropist, I consider myself as an enabler. I want to provide beneficiaries with an opportunity to flourish . . . I believe that every dollar I invest will bring more dollars back to Israeli society. This is my impact, and this is my joy.

Representing the dominant view among interviewees, Max, Hagit, and Dana— regardless of the moral logic they expressed—all related their giving to their privilege and position as affluent people. Recent scholarship about elites in times of growing economic inequality shows that the distribution of private wealth to social causes enables economic elites to justify and legitimize their accumulation and possession of wealth (e.g., Kantola and Kuusela 2019; Sherman 2020). Similarly, by acknowledging their privilege while stressing their giving, interviewees offered an alternative index according to which they, as rich people, should be evaluated: not by their accumulation of material wealth, but by the redistribution of their material resources for the common good. Setting this index can be seen as an implicit response to social concerns about the morality of rich people, because it is within this index that interviewees presented themselves as a morally worthy elite who utilize their private wealth for the common good. In short, using this index helped them to form a recognition claim.

At the same time, interviewees were aware of the critical public view towards philanthropy. At the outset of the interview, Dana declared, "introducing yourself in Israel as a philanthropist is very problematic. It reflects how we are seen. We will get to it later [in the interview]." This "opening" statement suggests that the public view is a troubling matter. While Dana referred to the critical public view as common knowledge, Max was one of the interviewees who cited public surveys, saying: "Surveys show that in Israel, by definition, a donor is a criminal who must be doing it as a cover-up because of some whitewashing to hide something."

The public view challenges the interviewees' moral evaluations, undermining their claims as well as their moral character (as apparent in Max's statement). Referring to the critical view, interviewees still qualified their philanthropy as a social engagement that supports the common good (and not as other forms of social engagement; Thévenot 2014). Furthermore, they did not imply they had changed the course of their actions (e.g., Dromi and Stabler 2019), nor did they make substantive arguments about their actions (e.g., Kahana 2025). Instead, they devaluated the critical public view based on the same worlds of evaluation used to evaluate philanthropy and marked other social groups, topics, or matters as warranting moral concerns. In brief, interviewees dismissed the critical public view by forming particular moral claims that are labeled here as negation claims. The analysis uncovered three central types of negation claims (see Table 1), which are presented in detail in what follows.

The Inspiration Negation: The Difference between "Fake" and "Real" Philanthropists

In this negation, interviews account for the public view that sees philanthropy as a means of promoting donors' personal interests. Interviewees did not reject the possibility that philanthropy could be

Table 1. Types of negation claims.

	Line of criticism	Evaluation of critical public view	Proof	Requires moral concern	World of evaluation	The negation claim
The inspiration negation	Promoting personal interests	The public cannot differentiate between real and fake donors	"Philanthropists" imprisoned for criminal activity	Fake donors	The world of inspiration	The critical public view is inaccurate
The civic negation	Strengthening political ties and influence	Lack of knowledge of the true nature of philanthropy	Ongoing involvement: philanthropy is open to everyone	Lack of civic knowledge	The civic world	The critical public view misunderstands the nature of philanthropic action
The socio-cultural negation	Unspecified criticisms	In a critical social-cultural environment, everyone who acts is subject to criticism.	Common knowledge which does not warrant proof	The critical public view	The world of project	The critical public view is irrelevant to the philanthropic act itself, and even poses a danger to the common good

used instrumentally. Nevertheless, they argued that this possibility does not apply to their philanthropy or to mainstream philanthropy in Israel; rather, it applies only to individuals who misuse philanthropy for their personal agenda. Interviewees claimed that this group of donors, a minority in Israel's philanthropy community, cannot be called philanthropists. In contrast, when describing their own or mainstream philanthropy, the prevalent adjective interviewees used was "real," suggesting that the opposite group are "fake" philanthropists. Theoretically speaking, interviewees performed *moral boundary work* (Lamont 2000), differentiating between themselves and others involved in the same practice. Yeela, a "new" philanthropist, illustrated this line of moral boundary work when she accounted for the critical public view:

> I am fully aware of this [critical public view], and my heart hurts. Yes, there are people who may have gained wealth unfairly, but they are the minority. They are the ones who made the public see philanthropists as those who launder money and run the country with their capital and power. But, in my view, these are the minority. Most philanthropy is really real philanthropy, people who really believe that we are here to create a better society.

Yeela emphasized the source of the money and its use to distinguish between "real" and "fake" philanthropists. She pointed out (unnamed) people who acquired wealth in a questionable manner and then used philanthropy for a range of dubious causes that did not serve the common good. Ilan, who made his fortune during the 1990s, also referred to the source of the money and its use for portraying "fake" philanthropists, and went on to specify their identity and time of operation:

> Look, the notion of "washing" was strong in the days of [the] Dankner[s] and the like, okay? There were people who made a cynical use of corporate money, which was partially public, to promote their personal agenda. So, rightfully, it created a negative attitude towards donors.

By "the days of Dankner[s] and the like," Ilan referred to two Israeli businessmen, who were convicted of securities fraud and bribery. Both had also used corporate money for donations, leveraging philanthropy for their personal and business interests (Shpurer 2011). Following the 2011 social protests in Israel, sparked by the increasing cost of living and economic inequality, both Dankners

and other tycoons became the targets of harsh criticism, and are generally considered the epitome of dubious crony capitalism (Hovel 2014).

By referring to real people, the interviewees provided proof that "fake" philanthropists are not a figment of their imagination but real individuals, who were even imprisoned because of their crooked ways. Moreover, their reference to those who are no longer active enabled interviewees to differentiate between the two types of philanthropists on a temporal axis. A clear expression of this was made by Dror, a second-generation philanthropist, who also mentioned Dankner. He claimed that while philanthropists with business agendas had been dominant in the past, today philanthropists with a "real" giving agenda dominated the scene, emphasizing the category that he and his circles belonged to:

> It was from a very clear [business] agenda, and it is clear that there are some, and I think there were more of them in the past . . . then they stood out. Today, it's really philanthropy with a different agenda, really with a real agenda of giving. I see it in my circles, many people who really come to give without any [business] agenda.

Two types of donors emerge from the above quotes. On the one hand, there are "fake" philanthropists, described as part of a historical trend. These donors came to their wealth by dishonest means and used it for personal ends, such as self-glorification or promoting business interests. Hence, their contribution did not serve the common good but rather promoted narrow—and even dubious—personal agendas. On the other hand, there are "real" philanthropists, representative of contemporary philanthropy. They donate from their own wealth, without any self-interest other than supporting the common good.

The interviewees' evaluation of the two types of donors echoes what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) describe as the "world of inspiration." Synonymous with "real," authenticity and truth are the higher common good in this world. Accordingly, the state of worth rests on the social actors' ability to turn their singularity into actions that contribute to the common good. In the case of the interviewees, they consider their singularity as driven by both their unique structural advantage and their sense of self. Thus, by drawing a boundary between "real" and "fake" donors and positioning themselves as the former, the interviewees simultaneously attributed moral worth to themselves, emphasized their personal singularity, and deflected public criticism onto the "fake" donors.

By setting this boundary, the interviewees not only attributed moral worth, marked singularity, and shifted criticism, but also framed the public view as inaccurate. The interviewees lamented that while there are two distinct types of donors, the public tends to see all donors as one homogeneous group. This is reflected in Tova's recollection of her views before and after becoming a philanthropist. Tova recalled her goals after she acquired her fortune years ago: "It was so much money, and I felt I had a debt to society that I wanted to repay." She also recalled her early view of philanthropy, which also confirms, to some extent, donors' tendency to question the public view of philanthropy: "I did not relate to this [philanthropy]. Like [the general public], I was critical. Me, a little girl from the [housing] *projects*, what do I have in common with the Recanatis?" One of the founding families of the business community in Israel, the Recanati family is also involved in philanthropy. Tova initially doubted the Recanatis, just as she was doubting philanthropy; she did not think she could have the same goals as the renowned family. Later in the interview, she said that over the years she had met some members of the family, whom she found to be "wonderful people that really care." Given her earlier critical view, she admitted, "I was a little ashamed of what I had previously [believed]. On the other hand, I didn't know. The public still doesn't."

The perception that the public does not distinguish between donor types was also evident in the interviewees' reasoning behind their preference to be called social "entrepreneurs" or "investors" rather than philanthropists. Ten interviewees expressed such a preference, citing the explosiveness of the term "philanthropy." As Gideon, a long-time philanthropist, observed:

> There is a difference between the "bad apples" who did great damage and . . . look, long ago we decided not to use "philanthropy" [but] "social investors." This word [philanthropy] is so loaded in business [jargon] so . . . it's a shame . . . it's impossible to change it because it's inherent.

Following this vein, the philanthropists' self-categorization as "social entrepreneurs" or "social investors" goes beyond the prevalent view that sees this categorization as another indicator of market logic penetrating the social sphere (Shimoni 2019). It is also a way of circumventing the potential explosiveness of the term "philanthropy."

To sum up, studies have shown that economic elites use philanthropy to distinguish themselves from other groups in the upper social and economic strata who do not donate, thereby positioning themselves as moral elites (e.g., Kantola and Kuusela 2019; Krauz-Lahav and Kemp 2020). Here, however, interviewees presented themselves as moral elites by marking a boundary among donors. Interviewees argued that the critical public view related to "fake" donors, which harmed the common good in two ways. First, these donors broke the law by the illegal use of corporate funds. Second, they undermined public trust in philanthropy, pushing the public into considering "real" philanthropists as morally flawed. By redirecting the criticism towards "fake" philanthropists and portraying the public view as inaccurate, interviewees were able to keep presenting their philanthropic activity as supporting the common good, thus maintaining their moral self-worth.

The Civic Negation: Articulating What Philanthropy Is

With the civic negation, interviewees did not negate the public view due to the inaccurate understanding of who real philanthropists are, as with the previous negation. Rather, the reason for negation was the general public's erroneous understanding of the philanthropic act itself, specifically the portrayal of philanthropy as a means of strengthening the elites' political ties and influence. This negation was largely raised by interviewees who evaluated philanthropy with logic from the "civil world," within which the highest moral worth is ascribed to the collective will, and an individual's worth is related to their contribution to the prosperity of the collective. Accordingly, interviewees presented philanthropy as an ordinary civic act of social involvement directed toward remedying social problems.

Studies have demonstrated immense efforts by the elite to present themselves as ordinary people living an average life, not much different from non-elite groups, by adopting cultural practices and expressing the cultural preferences of less affluent classes (e.g., Krauz-Lahav and Kemp 2020; Sherman 2020). Interviewees in this study did not express their cultural preferences in relation to other groups but in relation to their own life course and the core of philanthropy as a social action, suggesting that social involvement is an ordinary activity for them. This can be seen in a statement made by Keren, a "newly rich": "It has always been there. We've [Keren and her spouse] always volunteered and donated before all this [becoming rich], and obviously we did not call it philanthropy." In a similar vein, Chanan presented philanthropy as akin to other social involvement activities that had been part of his life course:

> I was active in the student union at high school and at university. I was even the representative of the soldiers of my regiment during my military service, but it was clear to me that I would not make it in politics. So, this [philanthropy] is a kind of transformation, to make an impact where I can.

Keren and Chanan presented philanthropy as a "natural" continuation of their ongoing social involvement—or, more precisely, an updated calibration between their social involvement and their new financial abilities, thus positioning philanthropy as one more form of social involvement. Interviewees who are members of wealthy families also described a lifetime of social involvement. For instance, Lilach, a third-generation member of a wealthy philanthropic family, stated that she had always been socially involved, as were other members of her family. Referring to her family values:

> Equality and equal opportunities—these are the values I grew up with. In my family, we were all socially involved, for example, in youth movements. It's related. My exposure as a volunteer—I've always volunteered—started in my twenties, and throughout my career in the business, I continued to volunteer, always [in] educational projects, and by that, we reached out to some of the NGOs we [the family] support today.

Lilach presented her social involvement as rooted in her upbringing while also explaining how her experience as a solo volunteer contributed to and is intertwined with her activities as a philanthropist.

Like Lilach, most of the interviewees (18) highlighted their voluntary involvement in social projects alongside their monetary contributions, stressing the relationship between the volunteering and the donating, and thus positioning philanthropy and volunteering on the same spectrum of social involvement.

Outlining a spectrum of practices of social involvement ranging from volunteering and writing (e.g., on social media) to philanthropy, interviewees suggested that these practices are available to concerned citizens. Admittedly, everyone can volunteer, advocate, and donate money for social purposes and exert influence; however, social involvement requires numerous resources not equally available to everyone (Hustinx et al. 2022). Indeed, one of the lines of criticism leveled at elite philanthropists concerns their influence on society through their philanthropy (Breeze 2021). When we raised this point, the interviewees repeatedly argued that philanthropy is just one activity in a range of civic actions available to people willing to make an impact, as illustrated in Dana's statement:

> I think that some people can misuse their power. This should be stopped! How? I am not sure but what is beautiful about philanthropy is that everyone can establish a non-profit and everybody can volunteer and contribute.

Using an agonistic interviewing approach (Kvale 2006), we pointed out to Chanan that lay people do not have access to the same level of social and material resources to promote their agendas as he does, being a member of Israel's economic elite. After discussing his lifelong social engagement, the critical public discourse, and his current involvement in policy initiatives, we signaled to Chanan that we were about to pose "provocative" questions, punctuating the word with "air quotes." We clarified that, for the sake of discussion, we were adopting the perspective of a "lay person." Chanan nodded, acknowledging our transition to this previously agreed-upon line of questioning. Interestingly, Chanan did not refer to his privilege but shifted the focus to the "lay person" (the author). After a brief exchange, Chanan stared at the author and stated, assertively, what a "lay person" could do if they wished to change some aspects of social life:

> Do you have an agenda? Find investors for the agenda! Collaborate with the government and do what many others have done! I mean, an entrepreneur who starts an activity, and there are many such examples of entrepreneurs who have established a very nice activity from scratch.

The second-person reference, together with the assertive tone, made Chanan's words sound like more than a mere suggestion, implying that the "lay person" did not know these possibilities were available to citizens. In citing an example of a successful collaborative activity, Chanan provided proof to that effect. The claim about the lack of civic knowledge among the public, as implied in Chanan's utterances, was more apparent in a comment made by Nadav, a young philanthropist:

> I look at it [philanthropy] as a civic duty. It bothers me that in citizenship classes they don't teach what it means to be a citizen. They teach about the structure of the government, but not what it means to be an active citizen in a democracy, how to express your opinion about how things should be and how to do it—it doesn't have to be with money; you can volunteer, you can write.

Critics can argue that the claim about philanthropy being one of the civic tools available to concerned citizens is another indication of the "discursive blindness" (Kuusela 2022) that wealthy people sometimes have toward the structural settings of economic disparities. Yet, this argument should also be understood within the interviewees' line of reasoning in this negation: the public does not understand that philanthropy is an ordinary act of social involvement, and this lack of knowledge is concerning.

Overall, in this negation, interviewees made personal and general arguments. The personal argument related to the ordinariness of their own social involvement, highlighting their ongoing social involvement regardless of their financial means and suggesting that their philanthropy is an expression of their social concern rather than self-interest and power accumulation. The general argument was that philanthropy is but one of a range of civic actions through which citizens can express their opinion and influence society. Presenting philanthropy as an ordinary activity available to all, they negated

the view that philanthropy constitutes improper interference in the civil realm, instead portraying the public lack of knowledge as a matter of moral concern.

The Socio-Cultural Negation: Juxtaposing the Public View against the Socio-Cultural Background

In this negation, as opposed to the previous two, interviewees rendered the critical view held by the public at large as irrelevant by juxtaposing the public view against the socio-cultural background, which, in their view, characterizes Israeli society and culture. Specifically, interviewees portrayed Israeli culture as cynical, suspicious, and critical. Within this portrayal, interviewees depicted hatred of the rich as a specific cultural characteristic, leading to a critical view of those who donate from their private wealth.

Indeed, there are indications of negative perceptions of the wealthy in Israel. This perception reached a peak during the 2011 social protests (Kraus-Lahav and Kemp, 2020), accompanied by sharp public criticism of Israeli "tycoons" (Rosenhek and Shalev 2013). However, negative perceptions of and suspicion toward rich people are not unique to Israeli society. These are prevalent in a number of post-industrial societies, especially due to the perceived role of the rich in the establishment of a neoliberal regime that perpetuates economic inequality (Breeze 2021; Morgan et al. 2015). Nevertheless, against this "hostile" socio-cultural background, interviewees presented the critical public view as not relevant to the philanthropic act itself but as general criticism aimed at rich people. Avner, a "new" philanthropist who made his fortune in the 1990s, offered this view when explaining his philanthropic activities despite the public view:

> The rich are treated with suspicion. If you are rich, it means you are a thief. If you give, it means that something weighs on your conscience . . . this needs a change, a cultural change, a cultural change is needed!

Avner, a member of a network of philanthropists that aims to promote private giving, mentioned attempts to foster a "cultural change," as yet unsuccessful: "We [the network] have not changed . . . the culture . . . towards philanthropists."

Similarly, Alik, a "new" philanthropist, did not directly refer to the content of the critical public view but to the cultural "source" of this view. When we asked Alik about social criticism leveled at philanthropy, he initially rejected our question outright, portraying it as "demagogy." However, when we backed up the question with empirical evidence from public surveys—to elucidate that it is not we who criticize elite philanthropy—Alik lost his temper. Raising his voice, he said: "It's mainly driven by the jealousy of small people who don't see the big picture." After establishing the critics' misconception of elite philanthropy, Alik presented his own perception, signifying it as the "correct" one:

> Most of the people who are involved in philanthropy and social activities in Israel are good people, they come from a good place, with good intentions, and do lots of good for society. Oftentimes they don't particularly publicize it and don't talk about it, I don't think you will find many places where I have been interviewed about my philanthropy.

Interestingly, Alik explained his lack of desire for public recognition as a sign of modesty and as evidence that he and others were not looking for recognition, self-glorification, or power accumulation. However, when the interviewees talked about donors' desire to remain anonymous, the dominant voice presented it as a means to avoid negative responses from others. Recalling his conversations with peer donors, Victor, a renowned philanthropist, said:

> People say, I'm willing to donate, but don't publish my name, because they're afraid of all kinds of things, [the] "Evil Eye"[4] . . . and that people will say "you donated because you want to show off," or because you made your money dishonestly.

Hagit similarly linked public attitudes towards philanthropy with the willingness to donate, declaring that "the public sentiment is very ambivalent towards people who have money and towards people

who want to make money, although everyone, in fact, wants to make money . . . those who make money, everyone likes to hate them." After describing the public sentiment, she evaluated its detrimental effect on the common good: "Lots of people decided not to donate. They don't want to be in this position."

As discussed earlier, interviewees considered philanthropy as an act of caring for those in need. The interviewees cited above claimed that the critical view endangers the common good, because potential donors who want to do good might stay away from or reconsider donating. In making this claim, they transcended the Israeli context and used logic from the world of projects, where activity is the higher common good and the state of worth is related to one's ability to engage in a multiplicity of temporary projects. No less importantly, knowledge gained in one project is distributed between other projects, to the benefit of all of them (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). In this regard, elite philanthropists (including the interviewees in this study) often cite the ability to bring managerial skills and business acumen to the social realm when accounting for their added value to social projects (Shimoni 2019). Drawing on the logic from the world of projects, in this negation claim, interviewees devaluated the public view as unworthy because of its potential to deter people from active involvement in philanthropy.

If hatred of the rich is so prevalent, the next question is: Why do rich people still donate? Two predominant strands of answers to this question were identified; in both, the worth interviewees attributed to being active was visible. In the first strand, interviewees argued that the importance of acting and contributing trumps other concerns. For instance, Helena, a second-generation philanthropist, ruled out the possibility of putting her social involvement on hold due to criticism: "It's not a question of donating or not. For me, to do what is important in terms of meaning, what I can contribute to the world, I will do it in every possible way."

In the second strand, interviewees did not only argue for the importance of action in view of social problems but also in view of a broader criticism of philanthropy, arguing that their actions can change the negative public view. Zohar, a "new" philanthropist, provided an example that gave a glimpse into his interactions outside the interview. Answering the above question, Zohar referred us to the nonprofit organizations he works with, saying: "No one will tell you 'these philanthropists came to make money at our expense.'" Yet, he admitted it was not always the case:

> It starts like this: When I came to the community center, they [staff] told me "You're thinking about real estate. You wish to make a fortune out of it." I said, "Are you out of your mind? It's not, it's not my goal."

Explaining the staff's initial suspicion, Zohar also cited cultural characteristics: "It [the initial suspicion] has to do with the fact that in Israel there is a certain perception that you can't do anything without [having] a personal interest." By presenting the staff's view of philanthropy before and after their joint work, Zohar implied that the general perception is not established on solid ground, but can change upon exposure to philanthropy.

To sum, with this negation, interviewees disconnected the critical public view from the philanthropic act itself. They challenged the relevance of the public view by presenting it as a reflex towards rich people, suggesting that the critical view lacks substance. For this reason, the critical view cannot be taken seriously: therefore, there is no "moral problem" with philanthropy, and the moral worth of the donor is maintained. Furthermore, according to the interviewees, the critical public view is harmful for the common good because it deters people willing to contribute to the common good from doing so.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how elite philanthropists maintain their moral worth amid public criticism. The analyses revealed a sequence of evaluations and devaluations by which elite philanthropists expressed and maintained moral claims about their moral worth. To elaborate, interviewees drew on different cultural repertoires to evaluate philanthropy as a morally worthy act, thus forming a recognition claim about their own moral worth. With the critical public view in mind, interviewees also devaluated the public view while shifting the moral debate from themselves to others, thus formulating what we have

defined as a negation claim. These findings hold implications for two bodies of knowledge: the study of elites and the study of morality, worth, and evaluation within cultural sociology.

Aligning with recent scholarship on elites from several post-industrial societies (e.g., Krauz-Lahav and Kemp 2020; Sherman 2020), the findings illustrate that philanthropy is conducive to elites' sense of moral worth. Extending this scholarship, the findings highlight the extensive cultural work elites undertake in order to maintain their claims in light of the critical public view. By highlighting this cultural work, we deepen the existing understanding of how economic elites establish moral worth in a time of increasing economic inequality and call for a more nuanced exploration of elites' moral positioning via philanthropy. While all the interviewees in this study were from Israel and devaluated the critical public view in Israel, they referred to general logics about the common good, thereby transcending the Israeli context. Some logics about the common good are more acceptable than others in different national contexts, given the different historical and political paths that shaped different national cultures (e.g., Moody and Thévenot 2000); at the same time, criticism of elite philanthropy is a global trend. Considering this as well as the call for cross-national research (Cousin et al. 2018), examination of elite philanthropists' responses in other national contexts can reveal variations in the national vocabularies used by economic elites to articulate the relationship between wealth, moral worth, and legitimacy.

Beyond the empirical case, the findings offer an analytical and conceptual contribution to the study of morality, worth, and evaluation within cultural sociology. Analytically, they demonstrate the utility of expanding the analytical prism beyond the present focus on the content of social actors' claims about their own worthiness (e.g., Campeau et al. 2021; Cohen and Dromi 2018). This expansion involves paying closer attention to the moral versatility of actors when forming these claims. Conceptually, scrutinizing the interviewees' moral versatility revealed a particular kind of moral claim—a negation claim—that operates differently from a recognition claim. Each claim reflects a different mechanism for maintaining moral worth. While with recognition claims the morality of the criticized social actor is still the center of attention and is still pending, with negation claims the morality of the criticized social actor is taken for granted—it is the morality of others that falls under scrutiny. In essence, with recognition claims actors "fend off" criticism by suggesting an alternative index of evaluation, whereas with negation claims actors "attack" the criticism.

In the current study, we argue that negation claims supplement recognition claims. It is possible, however, that negation claims can also be formed independently of recognition claims; for example, social actors can argue for their moral worth only by forming negation claims (which does not mean that they do not evaluate their own worth; rather, they do not formulate it into overt claims). This and other possibilities merit further analytical attention, which, in view of the "offensive" mood of negation claims, would be conducive to the broader study of inequality and dominance. Recently, Spillman (2023) proposed that tracing the genealogy of moral categories is a productive avenue for the sociology of morality to contribute to understanding inequality and domination. Thinking about the formation of negation claims opens an additional and pragmatist-oriented avenue of investigation.

This suggestion can meet an objection. It can be argued that negation claims reflect only a class or elite habitus of domination. Indeed, elites can be seen as those who hold power over many social domains and situations (Cousin et al. 2018). However, negation claims are not exclusive to elites. Social actors have a critical capacity to make evaluations of social criticism (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Moreover, social actors can point out that others do not uphold moral standards, thus shifting the moral debate to others (Lamont 2000). Therefore, if social actors can devaluate the criticisms directed at them and steer the moral debate elsewhere, the question then becomes: In which situational, contextual, and relational settings can they express negation claims?

Structural factors (e.g., group membership, Schwarz 2013) and background factors, such as real or imagined relationships or situational and contextual settings (Polletta 2020; Shi et al. 2025), have long been seen as playing a significant role in shaping actors' moral evaluations. Further, social actors take into consideration these factors when choosing which claims to express (Marom 2024). However, actors' choice of what claims to express is not necessarily a matter of independent choice, just like not having equal access to cultural repertoires (Schwarz 2013).

Consider, for example, a meeting between the president of the United States—currently the world's leading geopolitical power—and a leader of a foreign country. In private sections of the meeting, the

foreign leader may negate the American president's opinions about the foreign leader's policy and its contribution to the common good. But would the same be possible in a public setting (e.g., a press conference), and how might doing so publicly affect the ongoing interaction pattern between the leaders or the states? How might the type of relationship between the two countries (e.g., allies) and the location of the meeting shape the line of argument that each leader takes? Therefore, examining how structural factors, together with background factors, can constrain the social actors' ability to express certain claims may reveal new forms of symbolic domination or forms of resilience to stigmatization, which would significantly contribute to scholarly understanding of current symbolic inequality (Lamont 2023).

This study highlighted how participants use negation claims in interview settings rather than in direct interactions or in the public realm. Moral claims require recognition by others, and the repeated ways in which interviewees described themselves as moral actors reflect intra-group recognition. Although some participants referred to face-to-face interactions and inter-group reactions, these were beyond the scope of our analysis. To deepen our understanding of the formation and expression of negation claims in relation to moral positioning, power, and dominance, further research should explore how actors seek inter-group and public validation of their claims. A combination of interviews with other research methods (e.g., observations) could help uncover the matrices of power and dominance within direct interactions, social relationships, and public debates.

ENDNOTES

1. We group under the label "recognition claims" both (a) studies that explicitly refer to the idea of recognition claims (e.g., Karazi-Presler 2021) and (b) studies that refer to verbal accounts used by actors to protest moral devaluation and to argue for their moral worth under other labels, for example, justifications (e.g., Lahav-Raz et al. 2023).
2. Additional worlds were mapped in later works (e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello 2007).
3. We specified that the study deals with philanthropy; as such, all the interviewees considered themselves as philanthropists, even if they preferred to be called by other names.
4. The belief that envy from others can cause one's misfortune.

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