Philanthropic Exchange in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

CECIL E. BOHANON
AND MICHELLE ALBERT VACHRIS

In his presidential address to the Southern Economics Association in 1963, the future Nobel laureate James Buchanan suggested the economics profession ought to turn its attention away from technical conditions of optimization and toward institutions of voluntary exchange, "which involves the co-operative association of individuals, one with another, even when individual interests are different" (Buchanan 1964, 217).

Of course, Buchanan was establishing an intellectual beachhead for his and Gordon Tullock's book *The Calculus of Consent* (Buchanan and Tullock 1962), where they use economic tools of reasoning to examine the operation of democratic government. As several scholars have pointed out, Buchanan always conceived of politics as a form of exchange (Brennan 2012; Gwartney and Holcombe 2014). However, Buchanan's suggestion does not end at democratic politics. In his words, "I am simply proposing, in various ways, that economists concentrate attention on the institutions, the relationships, among individuals as they participate in voluntarily organized activity, in trade or exchange, broadly considered" (Buchanan 1964, 221).

Cecil E. Bohanon is professor of economics at Ball State University. **Michelle Albert Vachris** is professor of management, business, and economics at Virginia Wesleyan University.

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One form of voluntary organized activity is philanthropic contribution. Gifts are a form of exchange. A philanthropic gift has no buyer or seller, but rather a donor and a recipient and quite often intermediaries between the two. The donor voluntarily gives a benefit directly or indirectly to a recipient, who voluntarily accepts the gift. The donor does not receive any goods in return. Nevertheless, few doubt that donors receive some sort of psychological benefit from making donations. This is evidenced by the fact that donors often specify conditions for granting the gift and articulate their expectations regarding outcomes from the gift. This specification is quasi-transactional in nature because future gifts are typically contingent on the recipient fulfilling those donor conditions, conditions that the recipient presumably accepted. There is an enormous literature on philanthropy in economics, other social sciences, and the humanities.[1] The approach offered here most closely resembles that offered by Peter Boettke and Christopher Coyne (2008), who note that there is little in philanthropic exchange that generates the price-and-profit signals that ameliorate the principal-agent problem in for-profit enterprises. Donors instead rely on hands-on monitoring and organizational reputation to ensure that their agents are fulfilling their wishes. The agents, of course, have a strong incentive to maintain their reputational capital by presenting evidence of their faithful execution of the donors' intent.

The young, black, intelligent, and unnamed narrator in Ralph Ellison's celebrated novel *Invisible Man* (1952) spends most of the novel being supported, either directly or indirectly, through philanthropic exchanges. His college experience is supported by the explicitly paternalistic philanthropy of the local white elite in his hometown. At the southern all-black college he attends, he learns at great personal costs the actual workings of the philanthropic exchange between wealthy, white, nonsouthern donors and the black college president who shepherds their gifts. In his time in New York, the narrator is employed as a speaker and activist with a revolutionary political organization called the Brotherhood. Although the terms of his employment can be viewed as a simple labor contract, philanthropic exchange is just below the surface of it. The Brotherhood itself depends on the goodwill and financial commitment of its donors, who appear to be wealthy white "idealists." Both in the Jim Crow South and in the putatively more enlightened North, the narrator's activities and income are subject to a donor–recipient relationship. And it ultimately is his frustration with these relationships that leads him to go underground and conclude that he is invisible. This paper views Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a case study in philanthropic exchange.

A recurring theme in *Invisible Man* is dignity. Can the ambitious, talented, unnamed black narrator channel his talents in an authentic, productive, and

1. In economics, some scholars document the scope, structure, and extent of philanthropy (List 2011); others offer theoretical models that the explain economic rationale behind philanthropy (Ireland 1969; Danielsen 1975; Sugden 1982; Wolpert and Reiner 1984; Willer et al. 2012; Immorlica et al. 2017). Yet others have examined individual giving in real-world or experimental settings (Ariely, Bracha, and Meier 2009; Artez and Kube 2013; Kessler 2017). One humanities scholar's analysis of *Invisible Man* and philanthropy (Gibboney 1997) has both similarities and differences with our approach. The author examines several of the same characters we consider and others but does not view them through the lens of exchange.

self-determined way? As Deirdre McCloskey has pointed out in *Bourgeois Dignity* (2010), both freedom and dignity are necessary for human flourishing. Liberty is concerned primarily with economic rules and institutions, but "dignity is a sociological factor." European Jews, for example, were "liberated legally during the eighteenth and nineteenth century but not accorded dignity—with the dismal result of Russian pogroms and Viennese anti-Semitic politics and the Final Solution" (11).

Of course, American blacks' historical experience of freedom and dignity has been checkered. For more than two hundred years, most American blacks were afforded neither freedom nor dignity under the institution of chattel slavery. The emancipation they were guaranteed by post–Civil War amendments to the U.S. Constitution was only partially effective in generating greater freedom for them and even less so in generating dignity. Southern states typically restricted black participation in economic markets as well as in political activities. Social interactions between blacks and whites subordinated blacks to a position that echoed the master–slave relation of pre-emancipation and that was often codified in the Jim Crow laws. Both by law and by custom, blacks' subordination to whites was enforced at great costs to black southerners' freedom and dignity (see Myrdal 1944; Williamson 1984; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997, 25–52). Although the laws and customs were more favorable to blacks in the North, a great deal of segregation and discrimination existed there, too. This is apparent in the narrator's interactions with philanthropic exchange in three distinct settings.

Philanthropic Exchange and Dignity: In the Southern Hometown

The narrator's story begins when he is a black high school student somewhere in the Jim Crow American South before the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. He is an accomplished and successful high school student "praised by the most lily-white men of the town" (Ellison [1952] 1995, 16).[2] On his graduation day, he gives an exceptional oration and is invited to give the speech to the town's white leaders. At the appointed time, he arrives properly groomed and dressed. But he is then informed he is expected to participate in a ring-side fight with other young black men before his speech: a Battle Royale. The narrator is reluctant because he anticipates that his participation in the fight "might detract from the dignity of my speech" (18). Nevertheless, he sees no alternative but to participate as he is told. He and the other black teens are blindfolded and instructed to attack each other. The narrator reflects, "Blindfolded I could no longer control my motions, I had no dignity" (22).

Despite being bloodied and hurt in the battle, the narrator is then instructed to give his speech to the now inebriated audience of white men. The men do not pay much attention to the speech until he says "social equality"—an untoward phrase the narrator

2. Subsequent citations to *Invisible Man* (Ellison [1952] 1995) give page numbers only.

tells us is routinely "denounced in newspaper editorials." It silences the crowd and brings the master of ceremonies to the forefront. Challenged, the narrator backtracks and insists he misspoke, that he intended to say "social responsibility." The MC then tells the narrator to continue but warns: "We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times." The narrator continues the speech, ignored as before, but when he finishes, there is "thunderous applause." Immediately afterward he is presented with a "gleaming calf-skin briefcase . . . and a scholarship to the state college for Negroes." Told he will surely "help shape the destiny of his people," the narrator reveals, "I felt an importance I had never dreamed" (31–32). He is delighted by his success and praised by his family and community.

There has been an exchange, and the terms of the exchange are clear. Black obsequiousness and white control are the price of participating in the system: "you've got to know your place at all times." Yet the young narrator seems satisfied with the outcome of the exchange. Although he does not like the humiliating and undignified ordeal he had to go through, the scholarship and the possibilities now open to him seem to make it worthwhile.

Modern-day readers find it disconcerting if not shocking to think an intelligent young black man would be subject to the indignities of the Battle Royale or that such indignities would be accepted by a black person. Of course, as a novelist, Ellison was free to create an exaggerated and surreal scene to illustrate the reality of the social system of the pre–civil rights South, which has been well documented. In the mid-1940s, Gunnar Myrdal described the Jim Crow South as a society where racial relationships were strictly defined and enforced, where "all of these thousand and one precepts, etiquettes, taboos, and disabilities inflicted upon on the Negro have a common purpose: to express the subordinate status of the Negro and the exalted position of the white" (1944, 66). At the time, few southern whites seemed to have found much wrong with the prevailing system. It was a general belief among them that the "harshness of color exclusion had come to be meliorated by a pervasive ethos of paternalism" (Williamson 1984, 2). The white elite of the narrator's hometown also seem satisfied with the exchange. They have "done him right," and he has "stayed in his place."

Philanthropic Exchange and Dignity: At the All-Black College

The narrator is successful at his all-black college, established by a black founder and now under the iron hand of its current black president, Dr. Bledsoe. The college relies on philanthropic exchange, not from southern whites but from northern whites. On Founder's Day, a number of white millionaires arrive from the North, "smiling, inspecting . . . and each leaving a sizeable check" (37). The narrator is to learn more about the implicit terms of this exchange.

As a star student in his junior year, the narrator is assigned the task of chauffeuring one of the donors, a white Bostonian, Mr. Norton, around the college environs. Norton is a wealthy and successful man who has supported the school since its founding. Having

already seen the campus, he requests a tour of the surrounding countryside. On the drive, Norton tells how the school, indeed the narrator himself, is part of Norton's destiny: "I mean that upon you depends the outcome of the years I have spent helping your school. That has been my real life's work, not my banking or my research, but my first-hand organization of human life" (42). He also praises the black founder of the college, who had more than the wealth, prestige, and reputation that he, Norton, enjoys: the founder had "tens of thousands of lives dependent on his ideas . . . he had the power of a king, or in sense, of a god" (45).

The narrator continues driving Mr. Norton through areas Norton has not seen before. They drive by a black share-cropper house, which the narrator identifies as of pre–Civil War vintage. He also reveals that its occupants, the Trueblood family, are the subject of a scandal. The father, Jim Trueblood, impregnated both his wife and his daughter. This tidbit intrigues Mr. Norton, who now insists on stopping the car and interviewing Trueblood.

After an extensive discussion with Trueblood, Norton is exhausted and faints. He insists the narrator provide him with whiskey. Dutifully complying, the narrator drives the car to the Golden Day, a combination bar, gambling, and prostitution establishment that is the nearest source of whiskey. Because the narrator is unable to obtain whiskey without Norton's presence, Norton enters the dive with him and interacts with the black patrons, black prostitutes, and black war veterans who are residents of a nearby mental institution. Norton faints again in the bar and is moved to a room upstairs and revived by one of the veterans, who claims and credibly appears to be a medical doctor.

The medical doctor asks Norton about his interest in the black college. Norton replies, as he had to the narrator, that it is part of his destiny. The doctor laughs and accuses Norton of considering the narrator as nothing more than "a mark on the scorecard of your achievements, a thing and not a man; a child. Or even less a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force" (95).

The doctor says that the narrator believes in Norton "as he believes in the beat of his heart. He believes in that great false wisdom taught to slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you his destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend. Your man and your destiny" (95).

Although neither the narrator nor Norton quite realizes it, the seemingly deranged black medical doctor is expressing the terms of the philanthropic exchange between black institutions and their northern white benefactors. Norton is seeking justification, praise, and praiseworthiness for his beneficence. He also expresses a desire to "order" the lives of others. However, he views blacks not as a group or individual blacks as humans with dignity and purpose of their own but as children to be "organized" or, worse, simply as statistics to be enumerated and paraded about to illustrate the virtue of the white benefactor. The black recipient, in this case the narrator, is dependent on the white man's generosity and plays to the model out of ignorance or simple self-interest, flattering the white man's moral vanity.

The narrator, now confused and terrified, drives Mr. Norton back to campus. He takes Norton to his accommodation, and Norton tells him to bring Dr. Bledsoe and the school doctor to him. The narrator seeks out Bledsoe and gives a brief sketch of the incident. When the narrator tells Bledsoe that he took Mr. Norton to the former slave quarters, Bledsoe thunders: "The quarters! Boy, are you a fool? . . . Haven't you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see" (102).

When the narrator delivers Bledsoe to Norton, Norton assures the narrator that he will not be held liable for the incident. Nevertheless, later in the evening the narrator is called to Dr. Bledsoe's office, where Bledsoe reveals detailed knowledge of the narrator's excursion with Norton, including the interactions with Trueblood and the patrons of the Golden Day. When the narrator pleads that he was simply doing what Mr. Norton had ordered him to do, Bledsoe cries out:

> "Ordered you," he said. "He ordered you. Dammit, white folks are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness—smallpox—or picked another cabin? Why the Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?"
>
> "Lie sir? Lie to him, lie to a trustee, sir? Me? . . . I was only trying to please him."
>
> "Please him? And here you are a junior in college! Why the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!" (139)

Bledsoe informs the narrator that he must be expelled from the school. This interaction illuminates a major component of Ellison's view of the philanthropic exchange between northern white and southern black: it is based on a lie. The black gatekeeper, Bledsoe, follows a strategy of trying to convince the distant white donors that the philanthropic exchange is effectively working—it is training and uplifting blacks. Of course, there is no doubt that this is partially true—as heralded in speeches given earlier in the day with respect to the school's expanded student body, its sizeable faculty, and its financial stability. It is noted that the school's electrical plant that supplied "power to an area larger than many town . . . [was] all operated by *black hands*" (132–33, emphasis in the original). The positive impact of the northern philanthropists' gifts on the students is reminiscent of a major philanthropic project by white philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, who established more than five thousand schools for blacks in the South between 1914 and 1931. These Rosenwald Schools were effective in generating significant educational gains for southern blacks (Aaronson and Mazumder 2011).

Although the northerners' philanthropy is shown to generate some positive effects in *Invisible Man,* part of Bledsoe's philanthropic exchange strategy is to shield Norton

and the other rich white patrons from the harsh and unsavory realities of black southern life. The narrator has inadvertently exposed to a white patron the worst side of black poverty, deprivation, and despair: a poor and incestuous sharecropper, mentally ill black veterans, black prostitutes, and a gambling joint. So the narrator has to be punished and expelled.

This is very disconcerting to the narrator, who is clearly a smart and ambitious young man. He is aware of "how things work" in the Jim Crow South and seems willing to play along with the game as he understands it. He aspires to the top. He sees Bledsoe as a black man who is at the top of the game. He admires Bledsoe. The narrator tells us Bledsoe is "the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary . . . he had achieved power and authority" (101). Moreover, he is the only black man the narrator knows who "could touch a white man with impunity" (114–15).

In the office confrontation with the narrator, Bledsoe reveals even more about the nature of his success in this system of philanthropic exchange: "Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else. . . . No sir, they don't control this school, nor white folks either. True they *support* it but I control it. . . . The only ones I pretend to please are *big* white folks, and even those I control more than they control me. . . . The white folks tell everybody what to think—except men like me. I tell *them;* that's my life, telling white folks how to think about the things I know about" (142–43, emphasis in original).

According to Boettke and Coyne's framework, major issues in philanthropic exchange are monitoring and reputation (2008, 80–81). In Bledsoe's view, the donor's monitoring has to be strictly monitored lest the illusion of success be shattered and both his reputation and his fund-raising prowess be sullied.[3] His superior information about the black South, his ability to manipulate his donors' access to information, and the donors' own vanity work to make the illusion sustainable.

Bledsoe offers the narrator some additional advice and an opening. Bledsoe indicates he is keenly aware that the narrator will be humiliated if expelled and sent home. He attributes this sense of humiliation to "you hav[ing] some vague notions about dignity" (144). He is quite dismissive, though, of dignity as an ideal appropriate for an ambitious young black man, telling the narrator, "In spite of me such notions seep in along with the gimcrack teachers and northern trained idealists. . . . [I]t's foolish and expensive and a lot of dead weight. You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity. . . . [G]et yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people—then stay in the dark and use it" (144–45). Bledsoe then offers the narrator letters of introduction to rich white trustees in New York and encourages him to leave

3. A reader of this paper commented that Bledsoe might have used Norton's exposure to local conditions as a way to expand the college's fund-raising, arguing that more gifts were necessary to set up new programs to help the local community. Bledsoe was apparently not that inventive a philanthropic entrepreneur.

the school and take a job in New York, intimating that if he is successful, he might be readmitted to the school.[4] So the narrator makes his move to New York's Harlem.

Philanthropic Exchange and Dignity: With the Brotherhood in New York

Harlem is quite different from the South in many ways. Black police officers direct white motorists, and the whites obey! Indeed, on his first day there the narrator notes, "I would have to take Harlem in a little at a time" (161). Of course, this scene, too, is consistent with the times. Blacks in the North were not explicitly prevented from engaging in certain economic activities nor explicitly segregated in public businesses and venues. Myrdal reported that "[i]n the North the Negroes have fair justice and are not disenfranchised; they are not Jim-Crowed in public means of conveyance and educational institutions are less segregated." But he also added, "There is plenty of discrimination in the North" (1944, 66–67).

After a number of experiences, the narrator is solicited by a red-headed white man named Brother Jack to work for an organization called "the Brotherhood." The organization wants to build a better world for all people. It has an extensive program to achieve this end. Its principles are scientific, realistic, and materialistic, and what it works toward is part of an inevitable historic process. The narrator would take on a new identity and obey instructions. He would be given $300 immediately to settle his debts and buy new clothing, a paid apartment, and salary of $60 a week (304–10). The narrator accepts.

After his maiden speech to a crowd in Harlem at a Brotherhood event, the narrator begins to relish his role in the organization. That evening in bed he reflects: "My possibilities were suddenly broadened. As a Brotherhood spokesman I would not only represent my own group but one that was much larger. The audience was mixed, their claims broader than race. I would do whatever necessary to serve them well" (353). He goes on to reflect that "[h]ere was a way that didn't lead through the back door, a way not limited to black and white but a way which . . . could lead to the highest possible rewards. . . . I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. It was no dream, the possibility existed" (355). Unlike in the segregated South, where black men can rise only so far, under the expansive and racially inclusive philosophy of the Brotherhood race is no barrier to rising to the very top. Or so it seems.

After his maiden speech, the narrator is directed to engage in a period of study under the tutelage of Brother Hambro. The narrator calls Hambro a "fantastic teacher . . . a hard taskmaster between daily discussions and a rigid schedule of reading" (357). He now "knew most of the Brotherhood arguments so well—those I doubted as

4. The letters are of no use to the narrator because they are poison-pen recommendations, as he discovers later in the novel.

well as those I believed—that I could repeat them in my sleep" (358). He is then assigned the job of being the chief spokesman of the Harlem District. He is advised that he should "strike a medium between ideology and inspiration. Say what the people want to hear, but say it in such a way that they will do what we wish" (359). Although he will have freedom of action, he is also told, "[Y]ou will be under the strict discipline of the committee. . . . You must not underestimate the discipline" (360).

The narrator's work initially unfolds well in Harlem. However, a conflict with another black Brotherhood operative, Brother Wrestrum, causes the narrator to be temporarily reassigned from Harlem to Lower Manhattan and become a speaker on women's issues. After several revealing experiences in this assignment, the narrator is suddenly reassigned to Harlem.

Upon this reassignment, the narrator looks forward to the weekly strategy meeting scheduled for one o'clock that day at the Brotherhood's downtown office, only to find he has apparently been excluded from the meeting. Stopping off to buy a pair of shoes in Midtown before returning to the Harlem office, he sees a black man selling Sambo dolls on the street. The man is another black speaker-organizer for the Brotherhood who also worked at the Harlem office, a Brother Clifton. The narrator is shocked and appalled but in short order observes Clifton in a confrontation with the police, which results in Clifton's shooting and death.

The narrator returns to the Harlem office to find that news of Clifton's shooting is spreading through the Harlem community. He receives no directions from the Brotherhood's downtown office, and his calls to the office do not go through. He then proceeds to organize a public funeral for Brother Clifton. The funeral occurs on a hot Saturday afternoon. Hundreds of Harlem residents join the funeral procession, and hundreds more line the streets as Brother Clifton's body is taken to a graveyard for burial. The narrator gives another memorable and rousing speech to the mourners.

Immediately after the funeral, though, the narrator is ordered to meet with the Brotherhood's Central Committee. Far from being pleased by his organization of the funeral, the committee roundly condemns him for taking it on as his "personal responsibility" (463). The committee says it had deemed Clifton a traitor for selling the Sambo dolls and wanted to distance the Brotherhood from Clifton. The narrator argues that Harlem does not see Clifton as a traitor and that he thinks the organization of the funeral and the march are in the Brotherhood's interest. Brother Jack quickly reminds him, "You were not hired to think. Had you forgotten that? If so, listen to me: You were not hired to think" (469). When the narrator tells the committee that the lack of action by the Brotherhood has led to its decline in Harlem and that the committee is out of touch with Harlem, he is told, "We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man on the street. Our job is not to ask them what they think but to tell them" (473).

After this confrontation, the narrator is disillusioned and plans to sever his ties with the Brotherhood. He reflects:

> I leaned against a stone wall along the park, thinking of Jack and Hambro and the day's events and shook with rage. It was all a swindle, an obscene swindle! They had set themselves up to describe the world. What did they know of us, except that we numbered so many, worked on certain jobs, offered so many votes, and provided so many marchers for some protest parade of theirs? . . . [T]hey were blind, bat blind, moving by the echoed sound of their own voices. . . . [H]ere I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men. . . . I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton . . . to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except I now recognized my invisibility. (507–8)

At this point, the narrator takes on the moniker "Invisible Man." It is certainly reasonable to see this moment as the one where the narrator ends his association with the Brotherhood. It can also be interpreted as the point where Ellison rejects the Communist Party as a way to improve the lot of black Americans.[5] However, an examination of the source of the Brotherhood's funds reveals a much deeper reason for his invisibility.

Ellison does not give exact details on how the Brotherhood is financed, but it becomes clear from context that its money comes from wealthy white northerners. On the night of his recruitment, the narrator is whisked away to a sleek luxury apartment building. The lobby is "lighted by dim bulbs set behind frosted glass" and has "a uniformed doorman . . . [and a] sound-proof elevator." They are greeted by a "smartly dressed woman . . . [whose] exotic perfume [filled] the foyer. I noticed a clip of blazing diamonds on her dress" (299–300). Her name is Emma. She provides without question or effort the $300 cash given to the narrator. Later in the novel it is revealed she is Jack's mistress.

The narrator comes across another one of these grandees after his first lecture on the "woman issue." A white, "small, delicately plump woman with raven hair" (411) invites the narrator to her apartment, "located in one of the better sections of the city" (410), telling him she wants to talk about "certain aspects of our ideology" (409).

Her name is never revealed, but her husband, named Hubert, on a business trip, is, according to her, "not at all interested in uplifting things—freedom and necessity, women's rights and all that. You know, the sickness of our class" (415). Earlier, when the narrator asked what part of the Brotherhood ideology she wished to discuss, she responded, "I wish to embrace the whole of it. Life is so terribly empty and disorganized

5. Ellison's association and subsequent rejection of the American Communist Party have been well documented from a variety of perspectives (see Foley 1997; Wolfe 2000; and Denby 2012). Fellow black novelist Richard Wright, a friend of Ellison's, also became disillusioned with the party on grounds similar to Ellison's, as Wright outlined in a two-part series in the *Atlantic* in 1944 before the advent of the Cold War, entitled "I Tried to Be a Communist" (Wright 1944).

without it. I sincerely believe that only the Brotherhood offers any hope of making life worth living again—" (412).

The narrator is subsequently seduced by this woman and sleeps with her despite his misgivings. His seductress seems interested in having a sexual liaison with him because he is black: she tells him he "convey[s] the great throbbing vitality of the movement . . . it is so—so primitive. . . . Yes primitive; no one has told you, Brother, that at times you have tom-toms beating in your voice?" (413). Later he risibly reveals he felt conflicted between "the ideological and biological" (416), confusing "class struggle with ass struggle" (418).[6]

The narrator continues to lecture on the woman issue to audiences of rich whites, although he makes a point to avoid additional sexual liaisons. He notes, "I found that most downtown audiences seemed to expect some unnamed something whenever I appeared. I could sense it the moment I stood before them, and it had nothing to do with anything I might say. For I had merely to appear before them, and from the moment they turned their eyes upon me they seemed to undergo a strange unburdening . . . a form of expectancy, a mood of waiting, a hoping for something like justification" (420).

Although the New York grandees would be appalled by the comparison, they are thus similar to the white racist elite in the narrator's hometown. Neither group has a particular interest in the narrator's ideas. Both view him through the lens of his race, not as an individual. The hometown whites support the narrator in exchange for his acquiescence to their terms of trade. The New York wealthy white radicals support the narrator in exchange for his repetition of arguments that align with their own utopian vision. That he is a member of an exotic marginalized group simply adds to the benefit they receive.

The price the narrator pays in personal dignity in his New York experience is not that different from the price he paid in the Norton/Bledsoe experience or in the opportunity to give a speech to white southerners. The narrator is hemmed in by the overarching ideology of the Brotherhood as administered by a manipulative and authoritarian power elite. The Brotherhood is, in turn, supported by a rather neurotic group of wealthy whites looking for personal salvation and justification.

What a philanthropist like Norton receives from his gifts to the black southern college is not that different from what the wealthy Manhattan socialites get from their contributions to the Brotherhood. Norton fulfills his "destiny" or, more cynically, gets "a mark on the scorecard of his achievements." He gets to glow in the light of his own beneficence. The Brotherhood donors are enthralled by their place in the drama of historical inevitability and by being in the avant-garde while still living a pampered and comfortable urban life. They are more intelligent, moral, and interesting people, at least in their own estimation, by their association with the Brotherhood. They are, as the

6. In discussing this part of the novel, Ellison remarked, "Look, didn't you find the book at all *funny?*" (Chester and Howard 1995, 17, emphasis in original).

narrator's seducer says, "spiritually" fulfilled by this association. A rather strange and perverse trade.

Ellison's View of His Novel

The novel is clearly an expression of the frustration American blacks encountered in the pre–civil rights era, a point that its author, Ralph Ellison, fully acknowledged. But in a number of published interviews, Ellison also indicated that the narrator is more than a helpless victim in a racist system.

In an interview in 1954, Ellison revealed: "It's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. . . . The major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success, and this was the specific form of his 'innocence.' He goes where he is told to go; he does what he is told to do; he does not even choose his Brotherhood name" (Chester and Howard 1995, 14–15). In an interview in 1965, republished with Ellison's consent in 1989, he again provided a correction.

> INTERVIEWER: But there's a sense in which *Invisible Man* might first strike a reader as a catalogue of diverse experiences of an innocent Negro in America. Is this a correct interpretation?
>
> ELLISON: I would think that it was an incorrect and sentimental interpretation inasmuch as the narrator of the book could have stopped much of his experience had he been willing to accept the harsh nature of reality. He creates much of his own fate. I don't look upon him as heroic in that way. I think that he made a lot of mistakes. But many white readers certainly are so sentimental about the Negro thing that they can't see that. . . . [T]he problem for the narrator of *Invisible Man* is that he creates his own invisibility to a certain extent by not asserting himself. He does not do the things which will break the pattern. . . . *So he is not a victim. At least not merely a victim. He is a man who is wrong-headed.* (Kostelanetz 1995, 95–96, emphasis added)

Ellison's narrator is engaged as a receiver in a philanthropic exchange. He accedes to the terms of the exchange—with the white elite in his hometown, with Mr. Norton and Dr. Bledsoe at his college, and with Jack and the Brotherhood in New York. He does what he is expected to do and refuses to negotiate any modification of the terms of the trade. He comes to understand by the end of the novel that despite the putative importance of his roles—as the star black student in the first half of the novel, as the star black spokesperson for the Brotherhood—he is invisible. He does not matter. His perspective is rolled over by ideology: in the South by a racist ideology of white supremacy, in the North by a collectivist ideology of radical revolution. In neither place can he find dignity. But in Ellison's view he is not helpless. He has agency. He is capable

of engaging in exchange—but can't quite get his act together to do it in a way that is productive. This is perhaps quite understandable given that he is a very young man and a product of the Jim Crow South, but Ellison insisted that the primary point of the novel "is not an indictment of white society! . . . He [the narrator] must assert and achieve his own humanity; he cannot run with the pack and do this" (Chester and Howard 1995, 16).

Concluding Remarks

James Buchanan argued that the study of voluntary organized activity is the proper domain of economics. Certainly, philanthropy is a form of exchange: both donor and giver must consent, and there are implicit terms for such exchanges, especially ones that are ongoing. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a useful study in the ways philanthropic exchange can go awry. Philanthropy based on falsehoods and ideology denies dignity to those on the receiving end of the exchange. The recipients are required first and foremost to serve the donor's underlying ideology. Ellison's narrator is invisible—not so much because he is exploited by these exchanges but because he has no part in the exchanges and makes no effort to insist he have a part.

In the prologue to the novel, the narrator is living an underground existence after all the events of the novel have unfolded. After pummeling a white man who has hurled a racial insult at him, the narrator admits his anger and personal irresponsibility in the matter. However, he goes on to tell the reader that he cannot be castigated for his irresponsibility because "[r]esponsibility rests upon recognition"—and who recognizes an invisible man? But Ellison also ends the sentence by stating, "and recognition is a form of *agreement*" (14, emphasis added). Buchanan's voluntary organized activities must include agreement. But who enters into agreement with someone who refuses to insist he be recognized? That is a recipe for a perverse system of philanthropy.

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