

# THE ETHICS OF OUTSIDE FUNDING

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Abstract: BB&T's initiative to fund programs on the moral foundations of capitalism is evaluated by reference to the criteria of academic freedom, integrity, and philosopher-novelist Ayn Rand's status as an intellectual.

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My brief remarks are organized under three headings: academic freedom, academic integrity, and the status of Ayn Rand as an intellectual.

## ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Consider the following four scenarios:

- You are chair of your college's theatre department. A regional theatre group offers \$200,000 to fund at your college a year-long series of performances of plays by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht.
- You are director of college art gallery. A local art patron offers your college \$30,000 to put on a showing of the works of pop artist Andy Warhol.
- You are a research professor of biology. A pharmaceutical company is investigating therapeutic potential of stem cells and offers \$2.5 million to fund a research project if you are willing to work on stem cells.
- You are a professor of Eastern European languages. I am a student at your college and I come to you and offer you \$100 per hour if you will tutor me in reading Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* in the original Russian.

In these four cases, do you have before you four *opportunities*, which you may or may not choose to pursue? Or are you faced with four *threats* to your academic freedom? And does anything change if the proposed funding is for academic projects in philosophy, religion, politics, or economics?

The questions matter because we academics have fought for many centuries to win the degree of academic freedom that we enjoy today in higher education. Defending that academic freedom is an ongoing challenge, sometimes a battle, on many fronts.

One challenge involves money. Higher education is an expensive enterprise, so we seek funding, lots of it. We can ask our students to pay tuition, we can ask governments to divert tax dollars to us, or we can ask for donations from alumni, private foundations, and businesses. Sometimes we academics initiate the ask, and sometimes the offer is initiated by students, governments, or private parties. In each case there is an opportunity, and in each case there is possible pressure: all sources of funding have a *quid pro quo*.

Student put pressure on us to cut exams, not to make them learn foreign languages, to grade more easily, and so on. Governments can exert pressure upon us to conform to their policy goals. Private parties have their particular interests and can attach strings to gifts and donations.

These sorts of pressure raises two questions: How do we distinguish appropriate and inappropriate influences and pressures, and how do we ensure that appropriate influences are accepted and inappropriate influences rejected?

That is the purpose of integrity.

## INTEGRITY

Integrity is the policy of acting according to one's principles. The opposite policy is hypocrisy, allowing breaches between what one believes and what one does. The application of integrity depends on identifying the principles that are to govern one's actions.

In the case of colleges, the application of integrity depends on who is making the judgment call. A college operates on many levels and with many overlapping constituencies and missions.

*Mission principles at the college-as-a-whole level.* Here I am going to take the liberal arts mission as my standard. Its goal is to educate students so that they are informed about what we know, able to advance that knowledge and apply it, and, where there are significant controversies, to know the major positions and be able themselves to enter the debate in an informed way. A college's mission, so conceived, directs many curricular decisions, for example how a college sets its general education requirements.

Not all colleges conceive of their missions this broadly. Some colleges limit or nest the liberal arts mission within a particular intellectual framework:

- Religious mission (e.g., Bob Jones University, Notre Dame University).
- Social-political mission (e.g., Reed College, Antioch College).

Such colleges may therefore decide not to include certain subject matters, if those subject matters, or to teach certain views, if those subjects or views conflict with their missions.

Other colleges may, while committed to a general liberal arts mission, also choose to host centers or institutes that incorporate a particular viewpoint. Examples:

- John Dewey Center at Southern Illinois University: secular social democrat.
- Eric Voegelin Institute at Louisiana State University: religious conservatism.
- Theological institutes or seminaries of a particular religious persuasion.

Academic integrity will accordingly lead to different curricular decisions at different kinds of colleges. Yet the vast majority of colleges in the United States do and should conceive of their mission in terms of the liberal arts ideal.

*Mission principles at the department level.* The mission of department is to research and teach in a particular discipline and to support the individual professors hired in that discipline. Departments then develop their curricula in part with an eye to the academic discipline as a whole and in part with an eye to each professor's individual research and teaching interests. The department chair holds a special place, having also as part of his or her mission the responsibility of administratively supporting the department and its members.

Here there is a special connection between integrity and academic freedom.

Suppose, for example, that a department, department chair or dean vetoed an individual professor's grant opportunity. That would be an academic freedom issue. E.g., one of my colleagues is a big fan of the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In my estimation, Rousseau is one of the major bad guys in the history of philosophy. I am also the chair of my department. If, however, my colleague were to receive a grant opportunity that involved the work of Rousseau, I would be honor-bound as department chair to support my colleague's grant. Otherwise I would be, in the first place *not* acting with integrity by *not* doing what department chairs are supposed to do, which is to support the academic work of the faculty members in their departments—and, in the second place, undercutting my colleague's academic freedom by using my power to prevent him from pursuing the truth as he sees it.

[Other examples of departmental academic freedom issues for consideration:

- Introduction to Philosophy course: the department decides that all instructors will use Plato's *Republic*.
- Introduction to Logic course: the department requires that all instructors will use Irving Copi's *Logic* text.
- Freshman Seminar course: all instructors will use Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.]

*Finally, mission at the level of an individual professor.* Here our integrity as individuals is a matter of keeping up with the literature and in our research and writing, and teaching, exercising our best judgment about what issues, positions, and readings we should include in the courses we teach.

This leads to what we as individual professors should think about Ayn Rand.

### **AYN RAND'S STATUS AS AN INTELLECTUAL**

As I see it, our job as intellectuals is to take on the big issues, including the big issues about which there is controversy, including understanding positions that, given our own views, are distasteful.

We argue about cloning and the morality of stem cell research, about whether there's a biological component to intelligence, about whether Robert Mapplethorpe's photos should receive NEA government funding, about whether Islamism is true Islam or perverted Islam, and so on.

In the case of Ayn Rand we have a thinker who argues that free markets are good, both practically and morally. Should those views have a place at the table?

My view is that of course they should, and for two reasons.

The first is that our responsibility as educators is to teach students all the major positions, so they know the range of options and the arguments for and against each option. Certainly professors should have something to profess, so it is appropriate, once the students know the major options, to enter the debate and argue for and against. Professors who don't do this—who ignore major positions, who don't do their research, who misrepresent their opponents, who argue against straw men—are irresponsible. On the issue of the morality of capitalism, Rand offers a distinctive case and a powerful case. Agree with her views or not, if we want our students to know the full range of opinion, then they should know Rand—in the same way they should know the views of Foucault, Nietzsche, Marx, and so on, all of whom I disagree with. Otherwise, they are unprepared for the real world.

The second reason is Rand's staying power as an intellectual. Fifty years ago when Rand was known only as a philosophical novelist outside of the academic world, it was understandable that she might not get much attention from academics. Forty years ago when she was also known as a public intellectual at the head of a growing grassroots philosophical movement, it was perhaps still understandable that she might not get much attention from academics.

But that was forty years ago. Since then Rand has had staying power among the thinking public and among major American movers and shakers, including the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, a Supreme Court justice, and a large number of CEOs of major businesses.

For a quarter of a century there has been a professional philosophical society, the Ayn Rand Society, affiliated with the American Philosophical Association, with a membership dozens of Objectivist scholars and many other Objectivism-respecting scholars. Scholarly books about Rand and by Objectivist intellectuals have been published by university presses: Cambridge University Press, Kansas, Illinois, Penn State, and others. In academic journals, scholars interested in Rand's work, whether positively or critically, publish in all the usual places.

So it seems clear to me that for any of us, as individual professors, we should be professionally familiar with Rand's work and subject it to the same standards of evaluation we use for any intellectual.

### **CLOSING REMARK**

Our integrity is something that we academics are in complete control of. How we use our academic freedom is also something that we are in complete control of. Offers of outside funding do not threaten our freedom or our integrity and should simply be evaluated according to the standards set by our academic missions.

Sometimes we academics complain that not enough support for education exists. Some of us say that governments should give us more money, or that businesses should be more committed to education, and so on. On that score, we should be greatly appreciative that there are corporations such as BB&T that put their money where their mouths are and are willing to fund educational programs on one of the great issues of our times—the moral status of capitalism.

And here there is of course a natural connection to Ayn Rand's work. Capitalism is based on freedom, and that freedom can only work if it is integrated with moral virtue, including the virtue of integrity. Rand wrote two major novels. *The Fountainhead* is a great hymn to integrity. *Atlas Shrugged* is a polemic against all philosophical threats to freedom. Accordingly, if we academics are looking for an ally in the causes of freedom and integrity, Ayn Rand is an excellent one.

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