

[4-23-2008]

Stephen

Thanks so much for the thoughtful and reflective response. We have many points of agreement, and I find your reply academically responsible and respectful, without simply pandering to my alleged intellectual virtues (which I myself question). But please don't underrate your own philosophical talents – you impressed me, which not all do.

First, yes I agree completely: this is a crucial debate about the moral foundations of business (or any other profession). My father was an accountant for the local gas and electric company for 37 years, worked his way up from being returning WWII veteran to becoming the Plant Accounting Supervisor. And I know from his experiences that doing the right thing was central to his moral vision of American business. In fact, to be honest, much of my moral vision surely comes from that family upbringing. But you're right that economists tend to ignore philosophy, sadly I would say. I am finishing a new class on Rawls, but I also used Nozick's libertarianism as a starting point and worthy opponent to start our consideration of Rawls' egalitarian liberalism this semester. Yes, the debate is often couched in terms of self-interest versus self-sacrifice, but of course that's just the problem philosophically. Rand (& others) state it too simplistically: little in life is that black-and-white. As we endeavor to show our entering students, it's not as simple as egoism vs. altruism: the complexities of life and relationships lead most of us to 'sacrifice' our so-called self-interest on behalf of greater values (like family, or national unity, or perhaps God). Of course, what really happens as we mature is that our adolescent, narrow self-interest gets expanded into more communal values, and hence our former narrow self-interest now becomes familial interests or something else.

Second, surely you're right that Rand is reacting, if over-reacting, to the failures and injustices of communism. So I was not arguing that her voice should not be heard. In fact, I present her position in introductory Ethics courses, and I do explain to students how she fled the USSR, and why she came to mistrust self-sacrifice, the evils of which she tends to overstate. According to her view, no one should ever aspire to live as MLK or Mother Theresa or even perhaps as many parents do on behalf of getting their children greater opportunities than they had. However, she also is reacting to the dominant philosophical viewpoint in ethics which was utilitarianism ('the greatest good for the greatest number'). I also teach that position in introductory Ethics because it is one of the great ethical & political traditions of the modern age. Of course, it's got its philosophical weak spots, but it's important that students consider it, which I did in my Rawls course simply because Rawls regards it (rightly) as the greatest systematic, holistic perspective for a theory of justice, and his main competitor (aside from libertarianism) from which to work out his own 'justice as fairness' position. You know, I sometime have wondered why we isolated Economics here in the Business College, but I think it's a good thing for Business students to get some exposure at least to the great economists' ideas; after all, the classical economists also were all well-trained in philosophy. Adam Smith held a chair of Moral Philosophy (his book, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, still stands up well as a great treatise on moral thought); Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* still functions as a significant work on population theory; Marx was primarily a social and political philosopher; J. M. Keynes' *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* has profound philosophical observations, and Nozick and Rawls do both economic theory and philosophical argumentation throughout their main works. And many philosophers do work in economic theory as well as social and political philosophy. But you make a good observation that being good at logic and ethics does not automatically make one good at avoiding 'economic sophisms'.

Third, despite the fact that Rand was reacting to totalitarianism, and we can appreciate her wishing to refute that, we also agree that she took her ideas too far. Surely, as professors, it is incumbent upon us to challenge our students who (not all do) see only self-interest and self-realization as their primary or only goals in life. Of course, we want them to develop as many talents and proficiencies as possible, whether those be proclivities toward accounting & mathematics or toward logic and moral reasoning. And of course, we raise questions like Rand did, as to whether altruism always leads to good things (though her description of totalitarianism as dominated by

altruistic motives is quite an assumption). But we should also raise questions such as whether a predominant concern with self-interest takes us closer or further away from a concern for community.

Fourth, since Rand describes her own position as ethical egoism, and claims that sacrifice is not a moral good (except in certain narrowly-circumscribed ways, such as caring for a terminally ill spouse), it becomes hard to defend her position as open to a very broad sense of communal concern. And she explicitly denies that we should be concerned with the distant poor or even our own socially disadvantaged (again, due to the strong commitment to self-interest: her book is entitled *The Virtue of Selfishness*). My only point there was that the great world religions and ethical systems all teach a concern with those who are different from us (compassion and charity toward the stranger, the neighbor, those who are quite different from us). And it thus seems very hard to see how an ethical egoist could extend their self-interested concern to those who clearly are less privileged than us.

Fifth, undoubtedly Rand has impacted many in business, and of course corporations can fund whomever they want. But no one is holding them accountable. When external agencies and constituencies want to fund chairs at state universities, they also need to recognize that they cannot tell us what we will teach or which books we should use without violating our academic freedom. Contrary to your claim, I do recognize that corporate moguls have the right to fund academics who insist capitalism has legitimate moral foundations. I also teach John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, and stress its influence on the American founders (rights to life, liberty, and property), and when I do so, we consider it charitably but also critically. This semester, I also taught Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, and its foundation in Lockean private property and his argument for a minimalist state, but again, we also considered critiques of this libertarian position. However, we also looked closely and intensively at Rawls's *Justice as Fairness*, and its stress on concern for the least advantaged members of society. And it is with regard to the latter that the Randian position is so lacking. By the way, should you desire, I could send a syllabus from past semesters from my Ethics class; and therein you would see that I do teach Rand's ethical egoism in my course, and I give it as much support as I can, but students quickly see that it lacks ethical concern for others outside one's immediate circle. This would seem very contrary to the current emphasis on global diversity and moral concern.

Sixth, it is true that the wording of the proposal only stresses the endowed chair 'working closely' with the ARI. But the reason I used the polemical 'screening' metaphor was that in actual fact, that is the way these things usually work. Given the donor's strong desire to support Rand's philosophy, the endowed chair's requirement to "have a reasonable understanding and positive attitude toward" Rand's objectivist philosophy, it's hard to see how this will mean much more than uncritical defense of Rand's ethical egoism, overglorified reveling in self-interest, libertarian political pursuits, etc. Now, of course, you're right that none of this should be dismissed out of hand; otherwise, I am acting uncritically or in a sort of knee-jerk liberal fashion. As I implied above, I present all views as fairly and objectively as possible, but some views simply do not hold up under critical scrutiny. Also, let's not be blind to the knee-jerk neo-conservatism that now dominates much of your profession and much of our national public culture. If we in the Academy do not call both kinds of unreflective, biased views (knee-jerk liberalism and conservatism) into question, who will? If we really want to present an intelligent version of libertarianism, why not use Nozick (or perhaps James Buchanan, for an economist defending free markets and choice)?

Seventh, there is actually a small section of the American Philosophical Association that supports Rand. But it is a small percentage of philosophers who find her interesting. That supports my contention that she's a philosophical lightweight. I certainly cannot buy your claim that CEOs, simply by virtue of their success in the corporate world, are intellectual heavyweights. I recall a very successful multi-millionaire in my hometown who decided he wanted to teach at one of the local universities, a fairly prestigious private one. He did not last very long. Learning the secrets to financial success are not always transferable to the academic realm. If his public persona is anything like his private one, Donald Trump would be an unbearable professor – dogmatic, unsympathetic to needs of students, strident, caught up in his own desires to manipulate and exert power over others. As many of us in philosophy often argue to our students after presenting Rand's position, if you want a better example of one who argues the position of self-advantage, consider Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* (power is the advantage of the stronger) or about anything that Nietzsche wrote – at least, they argue the importance of self-advantage for the higher good of the great suffering artist, poet, or

perhaps even the politician who in some way contributes to the needs of the **polis**. I was not arguing against the presence of the **agora** in influencing the Academy, but was arguing that we let the Academy do what it does well, and what that means is that those who present only wealth, power, or pleasure as dominating human life or needs must be called to task for their moral vacuity. This means that while **agoraists** should be expected to fund some of what we do, they should not expect that to come with no strings attached from our end: the Academy must challenge the priorities of the **agoraists** as well.

Finally, thanks again, Stephen, for the thoughtful and insightful comments on my piece. I hope that this interchange will open more real dialogues on this campus. I look forward to meeting you sometime in the future. I am also pleased that you did not back down, in light of somebody's quip about my alleged intellectual superiority. As most who know me will tell you, I do not suffer fools lightly – but no fear in your case, I sense a worthy opponent. Thanks for your highly challenging remarks.

Sincerely,

Daryl

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