

Money, Morality and the Liberal Arts

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Money is Tied to Morality

Some have argued that liberal arts colleges are the primary repositories for institutions that continue to care about teaching morality to students. While certainly not all liberal arts colleges attempt to do this, many do. And while there are non-liberal arts colleges and universities that seek to teach morality, the large majority seem to have long ago abandoned any intentional attempt to develop moral character of the students who attend.

All institutions, liberal arts and non-liberal arts alike, can happily begin with a common understanding of fund raising, namely that money is a tool to be used for the advancement of the institution. Further, all would agree that money should be handled lawfully. However, with money and donors come situations that test our ethical standards. I will argue in this essay that a liberal arts institution that views the teaching of morality as central to its mission is likely to care about the moral aspects of raising money for the institution. Further, I suggest that since the teaching of morality has been removed as a central objective of most institutions of higher education, and because of the increasing pressure to raise large sums of money, the lines of ethical behavior are becoming increasingly blurred when it comes to fund raising. With moral issues as a regular feature when dealing with money, the integrity of the institution can be at stake within the Advancement Office.

For the sake of better nomenclature, I will use the term “advancement” rather than “fund raising” for this reason: “advancement” is a broader, fuller term than “fund raising.” Advancement suggests an attempt to move an institution in a forward direction, whereas the term “fund raising” in many contexts suggests the more immediate needs of paying salaries and the light bill. While paying the operating bills is important, the work of advancement is far broader, and is more closely tied to the overall mission of the institution, namely that of helping create ways that enable the institution to better deliver its mission. Thus, newer, better facilities, state of the art equipment, the ability to hire more and better qualified faculty, and more endowment to help discount tuition are generally thought of as good things. More money makes these objectives possible, hence “advancing” the institution.

The idea that money is not merely utilitarian but has a moral dimension and that generosity is a virtue can be found in both ancient and biblical literature. Aristotle argued that acquisition was to be limited by the proper use of the goods (Lord ch. 8). He argued against greed and tied money to the art of living well, which for Aristotle included living a life of moral virtue. One must use money properly, not merely acquire it. While Aristotle did not see a need to limit wealth or possessions, acquisition is subordinated to proper use. While acknowledging the role of money and wealth in the *polis*, Aristotle rebuffed the argument of the oligarchs, who insisted that they deserved more political power in the *polis*. This would be true, countered Aristotle, if the *polis* was fundamentally a moneymaking association. However, since the *polis* is about much more than making money, the oligarchs’ argument is not true because it is only partially true (Lord ch. 9).

Aristotle also wrote of the act of giving money, which he saw as noble. In the giving and taking of money, the mean is generosity (Aristotle). For Aristotle, those who spend their money on indulging themselves are “extravagant,” which he considers morally weak. On the other hand, those who are generous “are perhaps loved more than any other people who are loved for their excellence, for they are helpful, and their helpfulness consists in giving” (Aristotle 84). He also

makes the point that generosity is relative to a person's property, thus making it possible for the person who gives less to be the more generous.

For the Christian, money and possessions revolve around the idea of stewardship. Christians are to view their resources as not their own, but rather having been entrusted with them, by God, for good use. Although Christian utility of money varies from the Aristotelian version, that distinction will not be treated here. Ultimately, the Christian is accountable directly to God for how well she has been a steward of God's gifts. The Christian is to give generously, joyfully, and from first fruits, all in gratitude for God's grace and mercy.

The Separation of Fact from Value

The political philosopher Leo Strauss, in his critique of "historicism," argues that modern philosophers are distinct, among other ways, from the ancient philosophers, among other ways, in that they separate fact from value. When Strauss speaks of historicism, he refers to the view that all human thought is historical, which means that we are unable to grasp anything eternal (12). Strauss begins his argument with the point that philosophy requires that man be capable of knowing what he does not know (ch2). However, many modern thinkers reject the idea of unchangeable principles of right or of goodness, opting instead for the position that all human thought is historical. Strauss uses the work of Max Weber as an illustration of how value was separated from fact, thus leaving social science as not competent to answer questions of value. Weber's devotion to empirical science was key in this transformation but other elements were also required. Weber, known as one of the fathers of sociology, viewed science as historically relative, thus rendering the "value" of science as varying from one culture to another. Weber, in Strauss' view, held facts and values to be absolutely heterogeneous.

While social science relies heavily on values, these values are not trans-cultural in nature. Rather, Weber relied on a 'reference to values,' meaning that the social scientist explains certain things, but must remain ethically neutral. The social scientist does not evaluate objects on a normative basis, instead answering questions of facts and their causes. The social scientist must make a clear distinction between a "reference to values" and "value judgments," with only the former being scientifically, and educationally, valid.

Another way of understanding Weber's distinction of a value-free and ethically neutral social science is the opposition of the "Is" from the "Ought." Weber considered this as the most fundamental of all oppositions. This opposition changes the basis of knowledge, with Weber arguing there cannot be any genuine knowledge of the "Ought." Strauss argues that Weber's thesis leads to nihilism, or at least that all views are equally legitimate. It leaves us with only preferences, with Strauss remarking that "the final formulation of Weber's ethical principles would thus be 'thou shalt have preferences' – an Ought whose fulfillment is fully guaranteed by the Is" (47)

Thus, Strauss makes his case that in science and the academy, something has gone very much awry. In the quest to cultivate reason, nihilism has instead been cultivated. The quest for truth has been reduced to a preference. And this great variety of value-neutral preferences creates challenges and problems for the future of liberal arts colleges.

Holding Fact and Value Together is Meaningful for the Advancement of Liberal Arts

I suggest that the refusal to separate fact from value continues to separate religious liberal arts institutions from those that are not. It also seems that the religious institutions are the only ones remaining that intentionally seek to foster morality, seeing it as part of their curriculum.

What are the implications of holding fact and value together as it relates to the task of the advancement office? While I certainly do not possess the full answer to that question, I suggest it provides a crucial measure of thoughtfulness and accountability when ethical issues arise. I offer the following thoughts:

First, I offer an illustration from a recent phone call I received from someone “representing” a family whose daughter (I’ll call her “Sarah”) was hoping to gain admission into Westmont College. The caller told me that Sarah had gained admission to Westmont the previous year but had chosen instead to attend another fine institution. While Sarah had done well academically (3.4 gpa), she decided after her first year that she would rather be at Westmont. Unfortunately, Sarah had not reapplied and missed the deadline for transfer students. The caller wanted to know “what it would take” to get Sarah into Westmont for the Fall semester, informing me that the family was prepared to make a financial contribution to the college. Hoping to deflect the caller with a subtle, “ignorant” reply, I told him that “I didn’t know what it would take,” suggesting that he or the family call our director of admissions instead. I explained that while the deadlines had passed and our applications for admission were very competitive, only a call to the admissions office could truly answer whether this fine student could join us for the fall semester. I even gave him, as if he needed it, the name, correct spelling and direct phone number of our director of admissions. Undeterred, the caller then asked “should I speak with the director of admissions about the financial contribution to the college?” I replied, “if the family would like to make a financial gift to the college, we would be deeply grateful and appreciative, and I would be the person to speak with.” And then, since the subtle approach seemed not to be succeeding, I concluded by saying “if you are wondering whether a gift from the family is tied to Sarah’s admission, the answer is ‘no.’” To my surprise, he actually told me that that was precisely what he was asking. I assured him once again that the two were not related and wished Sarah all the best trying to gain admission to Westmont.

Although I must admit to some level of curiosity about how much the family might have given had I tried to negotiate a settlement, I hung up the phone mainly thinking that there were probably many institutions that would have gladly, and perhaps without shame, admitted Sarah for the right price. After all, that money could be put to very good use, say as a scholarship for a more needy student. I even briefly wondered whether my advancement skills were somehow defective. But I was mainly feeling I had just experienced a dirty encounter. I was appalled by the caller’s brashness, thinking that he could purchase Sarah’s admission, putting her ahead of someone who had played by the rules by meeting the college’s published deadlines and qualifications.

My point here is *not* what other institutions may or may not do, for I cannot answer that question. My point is that as part of an institution that intentionally fosters the teaching of morality and carefully screens its employees regarding moral conduct, this situation was dealt with almost on the basis of instinct. Issues of morality matter in accepting financial gifts.

Second, my Christian worldview and values lead me to treat donors and prospective donors as people, not as check-writers. There is a common depersonalization that can accompany advancement work, in part because there is a great emphasis on goals, tasks and deadlines. Thus, the pressure to meet certain objectives competes with the time required to treat people as unique individuals. Treating donors as people runs counter to some of the negative connotations associated with the work. For example, I find quite demeaning the idea of “schmoozing” a person. Why? Because “schmoozing” someone implies that the encounter is disingenuous, that an advancement professional wants one thing and only one thing...money. In order to get the

money, the thinking goes, one must tickle the ears of the donor or “sell” the project at hand. While ultimately the goal is for the donor to give, it can be achieved via a genuine and deep relationship. It does not require a “salesperson.” It does require an advancement officer who can articulate the mission and vision of the institution in a compelling way. I would argue that the best and most generous donor relationships grow out of their genuine engagement in the life of the institution. To the degree that donors are in love with the mission and function of the institution and believe they are part of something great or beautiful, they are more inclined to be involved financially. And as advancement officers treat donors as human beings rather than check-writers, they are better listeners, listening for the things that engage the heart and mind of the person.

Third, those working in a Christian setting can have a perspective about money that keeps the view of money in its proper place. As we have already explored, biblical and ancient teaching suggests that money is a tool to be used for good. Further, this view of money argues that it is not precious, meaning it has little value beyond its use for the good. Thus, when we ask someone to participate with us in a great enterprise, we are not asking people to make a great sacrifice. Rather, we provide the opportunity for the donor to use some of their resources to partner with a ministry that seeks to influence the culture in which we live.

Fourth, and like my first point, I offer a situation that deals with the relationship between admissions and wealth. There are occasions when the advancement office becomes aware of a student who is seeking admission whose family has financial resources that would not only enable them to pay full tuition, but could also make large contributions to the college in addition. Being able to pay tuition is significant unto itself, particularly for the raft of liberal arts institutions that are heavily tuition-dependent. This allows the institution to either save or redirect need-based assistance that it gives to students as they discount tuition cost. Some of these parents also have given financial gifts to the college and/or have had older children attend.

So what does an advancement officer do with this information? Does she say nothing and hope for the best? Or, does she appeal to the admissions office to admit the student, arguing that it is for the good of the institution to admit the student so that the financial aid office has additional latitude with its resources, and further arguing that the institution may also benefit from the donor’s largesse? Certainly, each position has its advocates. I would argue for a position that rests somewhere in between.

The second argument is not without merit, since many institutions work hard just to finish the year in the black. Students whose families have financial resources make the institution healthier, provided they fit the admissions profile. Yet, this is a slippery argument in my judgment because on the occasions when this becomes an issue, it is *because* the student does not neatly fit the admissions profile. Students who meet the character and academic characteristics are easily admitted. However, when the applicant has marginal grades and/or a learning disability, both cast doubt on the applicant’s chances for academic success. An institution that willingly admits a student of wealthy parents, knowing the applicant’s chance for success is slim, takes a horrible risk with that student’s future. Big donor or not, the institution is derelict in my view, by not putting the student’s interests first.

My position, in between the “say nothing and hope for the best” and the “please admit this student” options, is one of *providing information* to the admissions office. Giving information is not the same as applying pressure or even making a recommendation. Admission decisions are for the Admissions Office, not for the Advancement Office. A bright line distinction should exist between the two functions. Yet, as Admissions weigh a complex variety of factors in their

decision-making, information from Advancement can be useful. After all, the admissions process is not divorced from financial realities. Rather, the admissions process is central to the financial health of the institution, which in turn directly impacts the ability of the institution to deliver a quality education. Thus, I see no moral conflict with providing information, so long as the Admissions Office has the authority to make independent decisions. In my own experience, admissions decisions have gone both ways, both for and against the applicant who comes from a wealthy home. In these cases, it appears as though the potential success of the student was prominently considered.

Undoubtedly some will argue, on a moral basis, with how to handle these illustrations. And *many* more issues exist. My point is not that correct action was taken or even that the correct view was argued. My central point is that they are seen as issues to be thought about and wrestled with, not merely seen as a choice of preferences. Institutions that teach morality are more likely to care about the moral issues involved in raising money. These institutions continue to hold together fact and value.

There are certainly other benefits to Advancement at these kinds of institutions. Asking someone to invest provides the president, faculty, athletic department and advancement staff with the opportunity to articulate how the institution develops the whole person, not merely the intellect. It provides the opportunity to articulate how our culture needs morally grounded leaders and how civil society depends on strong families and ethics. The Christian liberal arts institution, following this line of argument, theoretically has a great advantage over institutions that do not focus attention on the spiritual and holistic development of the person. These additional points, while deserving of fuller treatment, will not be taken up here.

For now, let us see that morality and ethics are likely to be considered, if not debated, in the Advancement Office of institutions that focus attention on teaching morality and ethics. It would seem logical that the more an institution focuses on this as part of its curriculum and hiring practice, the more likely staff members will recognize the difference between an ethical decision and a preference.

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