



The Ethics of Funding / The Funding of Ethics

Dan O'Connor, PhD
Head of Humanities & Social Science
Wellcome Trust

Wellcome Genome Campus 10.4.19

@drdanococonnor

Disclaimer

Key Questions:

- How and why do we decide to fund research?
- How do we prioritise those decisions?
- How, or to whom, are we accountable for those decisions?

Outline

1. Science Funding is ~~Ethical~~ Political.
2. Foundations are Political, too.
3. The Foundation Strikes Back
4. A Wellcome Example
5. Accountability and Idiocy
6. The Funding of Ethics (a reasonable account)

Science Funding is ~~Ethical~~ Political

“Funding science is not a default position when creating a country; it’s a decision we made once and continue to revisit...”

Ubadah Sabbagh, *Scientific American*, 25.5.17

“We’ve decided to pool our money together and divvy it up to the women and men who work tirelessly at the forefront of knowledge to discover more. We decided this because we realised that science helps us live longer, healthier, more enriching lives.”

Sabbagh

“When we cast our vote in an election, part of what we’re doing is determining what will be prioritized in scientific research. Our elected officials control our money and therefore control our scientific pursuits.”

Sabbagh

“Political oversight of NIH funding decisions provides an important mechanism for public input into scientific judgements regarding health research needs. Nevertheless, the exercise of such influence clearly mediates the effects of rigorous peer review.”

Deepak Hodge & David Money, *Science*, 19.12.2008



**“Society decides what kind of knowledge
scientists are permitted to obtain and
disseminate”**



Sabbagh



“To discount the utilitarian value of public R&D would be a foolish manoeuvre... That’s not to argue that only research that can be predicted to lead to innovation and economic benefit should be funded. Such linear thinking might have seductive appeal for politicians on a short electoral leash, but I think we are fortunate in the UK in having progressed the political debate to a level of sophistication where the value of funding curiosity-driven research is widely acknowledged”



Stephen Curry, *The Guardian*, 5.11.15



“We have to engage with politicians if we are to maintain their support for science, which is in the public good and promotes the economy... We, as scientists, cost the government a lot of money, and *we have to justify what we do.*”



Paul Nurse, quoted in Curry (italics mine)

**Foundations are
~~Ethical~~ Political, too**

Opioids crisis

Sackler Trust halts new philanthropic giving due to opioid lawsuits

Sackler family's Purdue Pharma faces hundreds of lawsuits over its drug OxyContin

PHARMACEUTICALS

More lawsuits are hanging over the billionaire family that made its fortune in opioids

- The Sackler Trust, the family's charitable organization, has donated millions of dollars to charities and institutions, but announced this week it was halting new donations in the U.K.

NATIONAL

Institutions Distance Themselves From Sackler Family Donations

March 28, 2019 · 4:19 PM ET

Heard on [All Things Considered](#)

“Big philanthropy is definitely a plutocratic voice in our democracy, an exercise of power by the wealthy that is unaccountable, non-transparent, donor-directed, perpetual, and tax-subsidised... (it) is an exercise of power and, in a democracy, any form of concentrated power deserves scrutiny, not gratitude.”

Rob Reich, “Against Big Philanthropy”, *The Atlantic*, 27.6.18

“Because they are free to do what they want, mega-foundations threaten democratic governance and civil society... wealth in capitalist societies already translates into political power, big philanthropy reinforces this tendency.”

Joanne Barkan, “Plutocrats at Work”, *Dissent*, Fall 2013

“The amassment of wealth doesn’t naturally endow any individual with leadership rights..”

Lindsay McGoey (author of *No Such Thing as a Free Gift*) quoted in George Joseph, “Why Philanthropy Hurts Rather than Helps”, *The Progressive*, 6.1.16

“Are we ready to hand over our future to the elite, one supposedly world-changing initiative at a time? Are we ready to call participatory democracy a failure and to declare these other, private forms of change-making the new way forward?”

Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (2018), p.7

'Dark day for freedom': Soros-affiliated university quits Hungary

Central European University is first major university to be pushed out of an EU country

George Soros-Founded University Is Forced Out of Hungary



A rally in Budapest in November to show support for Central European University. Hungary's increasingly authoritarian government has forced the school to abandon its campus there. Bernadett Szabo/Reuters

The Foundations Strike Back

“...the social compact that supports private foundations is under pressure in many parts of the world... the role of foundations as policymakers has long seemed inappropriate to many.”

Melissa Batemann, “The Theory of The Foundation”,
Stanford Social Innovation Review, 21.3.16

“Theory of The Foundation”

1. Charter – “what is explicit in founding documents and commitments and choices of subsequent stewards”
2. Capabilities – “core competencies... plus resources, skills and processes cultivated in an area of activity”
3. Compact – “how a foundation defines its licence to operate, the value it creates and its accountability to and relationships with stakeholders”

“Theory of The Foundation”

1. Charter – “what is explicit in founding documents and commitments and choices of subsequent stewards” **WHAT WE DO**
2. Capabilities – “core competencies... plus resources, skills and processes cultivated in an area of activity” **HOW WE DO IT**
3. Compact – “how a foundation defines its licence to operate, the value it creates in operating and its accountability to and relationships with stakeholders” **WHY WE DO IT**

“The social compact... is the source of the foundation’s legitimacy in the ethical, if not in the legal, sense... The questions comes down to: *to whom are we responsible?*”

Batemann, my italics



*to whom are we
responsible?*



A **welcome** example

—
“We are accountable to society, for delivering our mission, while using our independence for good.”
—

Wellcome Trust, Accountability Statement, 2019

“Foundations should be making long-time-horizon, risky experiments in social innovation that government won’t do and the marketplace is unlikely to do.”

Reich, “Against Big Philanthropy”

Accountability and Idiocy

“To whom are we responsible?”
“We are accountable to society...”

Theory of the Foundation
Wellcome

“Being morally responsible for an act amounts to being accountable for that act... being accountable requires being a moral interlocutor... which is to be alert to moral reasons in favor or against the behaviour in questions and it is to be a discursive partner”

Marina Oshana, “Moral Accountability”,
Philosophical Topics 32 (1/2):255-274 (2004)

“It is appropriate that the person explain her intentions or beliefs about her behaviour...the key to accountability is a disposition to regulate one’s behaviour according to standards others could not reasonably reject... Accountability and the freedom moral responsibility demands are a function of whether a person is constitutionally equipped to be attuned to these norms and to respond fittingly ”

Oshana

“It is appropriate that the person explain her intentions or beliefs about her behaviour...the key to accountability is a disposition to regulate one’s behaviour according to standards others could not reasonably reject... *Accountability and the freedom moral responsibility demands* are a function of whether a person is constitutionally equipped to be attuned to these norms and to respond fittingly ”

Oshana



“Because they are free to do what they want, mega foundations are a threat...”



Barkan, “Plutocrats at Work”



**Freedom to act = duty to
account for those actions**



Me

“...we seek confirmation that the agent is able to regulate her own behaviour, not by means of public sanctions, but “from within”, through critical reflection on one’s conduct under the pressure provided by the desire to justify one’s actions to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject.”

Oshana

“The Moral Idiot... is motivated by reflecting on the fact that a particular course of action will indispose him or inconvenience him in some way... he may be constrained by the context of a particular community and tradition (but) the reasons for his constraint will be prudential, reflecting nothing in the manner of moral appreciation”

Oshana

Are Foundations Moral Idiots?

Accounting for Ethics (Funding)

**Is it possible to give a
reasonable account of why
Wellcome has chosen to fund
bioethics?**