

UnKoch my Philosophy Department: A Case Study in Billionaire Philanthropy

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Abstract

In the 1980s, my family went on expensive vacations funded by Big Pharma. Extravagant gifts were later banned by guidelines introduced by national medical associations in response to mounting evidence that funding from pharmaceutical companies biases prescription practices. Could corporate donations be exerting the same influence in academia? This essay examines the impact of billionaire philanthropy—particularly funding from the Koch Foundation—on my field of professional philosophy. I show that this funding has undermined democratic procedures and wreaked havoc on receiving departments. I then argue that specific Koch-funded research projects evince an ideological, right-wing bias, even as they purport to be nonpartisan. Finally, I respond to an objection from a libertarian philosopher.

Big Pharma's Interference in Medicine

When I was a kid, my family would go on extravagant trips paid for by pharmaceutical companies. We went on a seven-day Caribbean cruise and a trip to Blue Mountain Ski Resort in Ontario. Then, in the 1990s, the gravy train dried up. In response to growing concerns over “large cash payments and lavish gifts” from pharmaceutical companies to physicians, both the Canadian Medical Association and the American Medical Association introduced restrictions on “the exchange of cash payments and gifts valued over \$100” (Katz et al. 2003; Lexchin et al. 2020). These guidelines were based on evidence that large gifts influence doctors’ prescription practices, biasing them in favor of the gift-giver. When a physician receives a free Caribbean cruise from Pfizer, they are more likely to prescribe Pfizer medications, even if an alternative treatment, such as a generic version, would better serve the patient’s needs.

At the time, pharmaceutical companies justified gifts of paid vacations by classifying them as “continuing medical education.” Not only could they defend such gifts as “professional development,” but they could use them to influence the medical curriculum by selecting speakers, choosing topics, and incorporating “industry-sponsored research” to shape physicians’ beliefs and attitudes (Partin, Kushner, and Horton 2014). In effect, Big Pharma used so-called continuing medical education as a strategic marketing tool to shape the medical field.

After 1991, professional guidelines allowed only small gifts, “such as pens and notepads.” But over the last twenty-five years, a substantial body of evidence has shown that even small gifts have biasing effects. In fact, “pens and notepads emblazoned with product names” provide “commercial sources of information” that bias physicians’ judgments. Such gifts also “entice physicians to speak with company representatives,” fostering quid pro quo relationships. While they may appear to come with no strings attached, gifts “underlie the human tendency to engage in networks of obligation . . . , imposing a sense of indebtedness” on the recipient (Katz et al. 2003). Gifts, in short, influence us in subtle ways.

In the 1980s, my dad would insist that he was too rational to let Big Pharma affect his judgments. But this belief, shared by many physicians, is contradicted by decades of research. Studies show that physicians are just as “susceptible to targeted marketing as others,” and in fact “the more gifts a physician receives, the more likely [they are] to believe that [gifts] do not influence behavior” (Katz et al. 2003). The size of the gift, moreover, hardly matters: “Research on payments to hundreds of thousands of doctors and their subsequent prescribing choices, made possible by the U.S. Sunshine Act, showed that even a meal with a value of less than \$20 affects prescribing in favour of the company supplying the meal” (Lexchin et al. 2020). When physicians deny their susceptibility to quid pro quo exchanges, they lower their defenses, making themselves even *more* vulnerable to manipulation.

This research raises questions for fields beyond medicine, including my own profession of academic philosophy. Do outside donations influence the practice of professional philosophy? Could corporate-backed donations—even small gifts worth less than twenty dollars—create conflicts of interest in philosophy, as they do in medicine? Could they bias philosophers in favor of free-market ideologies, even when alternative theories better serve the needs of their students and the public? In this essay, I will argue that the same biases triggered by pharmaceutical companies exist in corporate-funded philosophy.

To simplify matters, I will focus on just one source of corporate interference in my field: the Koch network, a group of corporate elites—including conservative and libertarian donors, think tanks, and advocacy groups—that has been “capturing” academic resources for decades. Olufémi O. Táíwò (2022) uses the term “elite capture” to describe the process by which private actors co-opt concepts, resources, and platforms meant to benefit the public, redirecting them to serve their own interests. An example of elite capture is Big Pharma’s lobby against public health care to maintain a profit-driven market, even though universal coverage would better serve the public’s interests. My argument, supported by the UnKoch My Campus initiative, is that the Koch network is co-opting higher education through donations that enable corporate elites to influence hiring decisions, research agendas, course content, and student affairs. While I will focus on the Koch network, my arguments extend to other corporate-backed sponsorships and centers.

To begin, I will examine a case of Koch-sponsored elite capture in philosophy to illustrate the undemocratic and often traumatic impact of Koch funding on affected departments. Then I will explore whether Koch funding biases philosophical research, either by orienting the recipient in

a right-wing direction or by providing resources that allow the recipient to disseminate more right-wing content. In either case, Koch funding influences the epistemic conditions of the profession.

What's Wrong with Billionaire Philanthropy?

In *Dark Money*, Jane Mayer (2016) argues that the Koch family has used the banner of philanthropy to justify the use of corporate money to market a right-wing agenda. Corporate philanthropy, whether from Pfizer or the Kochs, has many harmful effects. For instance, it biases recipients in favor of the gift-giver, undermines public trust in professional institutions, gives corporations control over beneficiaries, funnels money out of well-regulated public institutions and into private ones with little oversight, and allows corporate executives to burnish their reputations by presenting themselves as “bleeding heart” altruists rather than self-interested capitalists (Walters 2016). Over time, corporate philanthropy undermines democracy itself, leading to a plutocratic concentration of power. As Sally Haslanger (2020) puts it, “Large-scale philanthropy is an exercise of power that is fundamentally undemocratic. Since charitable giving brings tax benefits, large-scale philanthropy can undermine the people’s will in favour of the donor’s own values. In effect, taxpayers subsidise the freedom of the rich to realise their own vision of what is good while simultaneously depriving democratically chosen programmes of valuable public funds.”

Even if billionaire philanthropy did not have these democracy-undermining effects, it would still be problematic inasmuch as it involves the exchange of ill-gotten wealth or “dirty money.” Koch Industries, for instance, is one of the top twenty-five polluters in the United States, producing tens of millions of metric tons of carbon per year. Beyond its environmental impact, it uses this money to fund a vast network of right-wing causes, from climate-change denial, to union bashing, to white supremacist ideologies, to lobbying for laws that protect companies from asbestos-related lawsuits, and beyond (UnKoch My Campus n.d.; Sainato 2024; Mayer 2016). Taking Koch funding is tantamount to accepting money from an oil baron or a predator, but the practice has become normalized in higher education. Harvard and MIT, for example, have accepted millions of dollars in research grants from the (late) convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, as well as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has tortured feminists, assassinated journalists, and committed other war crimes (Haslanger 2020). Even though taking money from sex traffickers, fossil fuel magnates, and autocratic regimes is standard practice at elite institutions, we should refuse to participate in this racket. We, as academics, should avoid complicity in academia’s depressing descent into corporate sycophancy.

Elite Capture and Philosophy: A Case Study

One of the highest-profile cases of Koch interference in philosophy occurred at Bowling Green State University, which received a \$1.6 million grant from the Koch Foundation in 2019—three years after hiring Brandom Warmke, who had already received a \$42,000 Koch Foundation grant for the first stage of his work on “moral grandstanding.” Between 2019 and 2021, Warmke

received an additional \$60,000 from the Koch network, according to his CV (Warmke n.d.). During the hiring selection, Bowling Green professor Christian Coons raised concerns that the process was unduly influenced by Koch funding (Gluckman 2021). His colleague Molly Gardner agreed, and alleged further that the selection discriminated against women, since committee-member Kevin Vallier (who has also received Koch funding) asked the committee to “rank the male and female candidates separately,” and, consequently, a “female candidate [was arbitrarily excluded from] the final vote” (Weinberg 2023; Vallier n.d.). Despite faculty concerns that the job search did not follow democratic procedures, Warmke got the job.

After being hired at Bowling Green, Warmke was quickly appointed to leadership roles on committees overseeing graduate admissions, graduate job placement, and conference speaker selection: “Suddenly a relatively new professor had a hand in almost every part of the graduate students’ experience,” reported the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Gluckman 2021).

Bowling Green used the 2019 Koch grant to establish the Philosophy, Politics, Economics, and Law program, appointing Warmke and Kevin Vallier as director and assistant director, jointly in charge of the budget and staff supervision. The grant also provided funding for two new tenure-track hires, which would be chosen under the direction of Warmke and Vallier.

In 2020, twenty-two Bowling Green graduate students signed a letter to faculty members criticizing the choice of an invited speaker and asking the department to create clear guidelines for selecting speakers, hoping to curtail the Koch Foundation’s influence. Some students alleged that the Koch grant had created a hostile environment, and Garner worried that nonlibertarian graduate students were being denied professional opportunities (Gluckman 2021).

This, at least, is the version of the story told by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Daily Nous*. But the *Chronicle* disclosed that the Charles Koch Foundation underwrote a recent *Chronicle* virtual panel, and *Daily Nous* acknowledged that the Koch Foundation has advertised on its blog. On Twitter, Coons called the *Chronicle* article “inaccurate for its glaring omissions,” clarifying that the situation “is so much worse than described here” (Weinburg 2021). Given the Kochs’ reputation for using aggressive litigation and financial leverage to intimidate critics, we may never know the full story. Yet what little we do know aligns with UnKoch My Campus’ reports on how the Kochs have used grants to co-opt other departments.

Philosophical Research as Corporate Propaganda

Do corporate grants bias the recipient (whether a person or an institution) in favor of the gift-giver, in the same way that corporate funding influences physicians’ practices? To explore this question further, I will review two examples of Koch-funded philosophy, assessing whether they accord with the Koch agenda. While correlation does not entail causation—perhaps the Koch Foundation selects right-wing philosophers rather than creating them—what matters is whether Koch-funded research skews philosophy in a right-wing direction. Whether the Koch network creates right-wing spokespeople or merely empowers them, if it manages to promote more right-wing content, it is exerting an ideological influence on the profession.

Warmke and Tosi

Brandon Warmke and Justin Tosi, who have both received Koch funding (directly or indirectly), co-authored two books in recent years. Like my dad, they might insist that their professional practices have not been influenced by external funding, since they are too rational to succumb to ordinary human biases in favor of gift-givers. However, this seems implausible given the abundance of evidence showing that even small gifts influence recipients' judgments. These philosophers have received, by their discipline's standards, massive gifts. According to Warmke's (n.d.) CV, he received about \$234,000 from the Koch Foundation between 2019 and 2021. According to Tosi's (n.d.) CV, he received an undisclosed amount of funding from the Freedom Center and the Institute for the Humanities, both in turn funded by the Kochs (UnKoch My Campus 2018).¹ Did this money influence Warmke and Tosi's research? To answer this question, we need to review their work.

Their first book, *Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*, defines "grandstanding" as the use of "moral talk" for purposes of "prestige" and "dominance" (Tosi and Warmke 2020, 4). Grandstanding, as such, has a negative impact on the marketplace of ideas. How can we tell when someone is grandstanding? Warmke and Tosi do not offer much guidance, except to say that "*many people* use moral talk irresponsibly" (11; emphasis mine). In terms of prestige and dominance, they say that "people who hold more extreme political views (whether right or left) are more likely to grandstand for prestige than centrists" (32), while there is "roughly the same amount of dominance grandstanding across the political spectrum" (32).

At first glance, this argument may seem balanced, inasmuch as it does not explicitly favor the left or the right; we are told that both sides engage in moral grandstanding regularly. However, corporations often use the guise of neutrality, or "two-sideism," to deflect criticism. As Mayer (2016) has shown, the Kochs tend to avoid "moral talk," preferring instead to funnel money through dark money networks that obscure their connections to political advocacy groups. Rather than criticize their opponents, they sow distrust in public discourse, thereby casting doubt on moral claims across the political spectrum—although they focus special attention on groups labeled as "extreme," such as environmental activists, feminists, critical race theorists, and the workers and government agencies filing lawsuits against them for asbestos liabilities and other regulatory violations (Sainato 2024).

To see how fearmongering about "moral grandstanding" benefits the Kochs, consider the case of Lori Knapp, whose father, Ed Chapman, worked as a construction worker in the 1970s, handling drywall products containing asbestos from Koch Industries-owned Georgia-Pacific. Knapp was involved in an asbestos class-action lawsuit against Koch Industries, which was sidetracked when the corporation shifted liabilities onto another company while keeping the profits. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Knapp called the Koch family "evil" and "right up

¹ Tosi's (n.d.) CV does not specify the value of his fellowships. Often, philosophers do not even cite their funding sources, as transparency is not required in the profession, nor are there limits on external funding to my knowledge.

there with the Sackler family” (Sainato 2024). Is she a sincere moral claimant or a bad-faith moral grandstander? If we can’t confidently answer this question, the Koch family wins. The Kochs don’t need us to assume that their critics are grandstanding—they just need us to distrust moral talk enough to never take a stand on anything.

Trust, as Hannah Arendt (1972) argued, is the foundation of political life. When public trust breaks down, people retreat into isolation, doubt their own convictions, and become less politically engaged. Democracies fail when we can no longer trust each other’s moral claims.

Warmke and Tosi’s second book, *Why It’s OK to Mind Your Own Business* (2024), argues that, “for all the messaging about solving social problems and changing the world,” there’s nothing wrong with “liv[ing] quiet lives and devot[ing] our energies to our families, friends, immediate communities—and even ourselves” (5). Some folks participate in politics while others take up a new hobby—who’s to say that one is better than the other? The authors label those who fail to “mind their own business” as “moralizers,” “busybodies,” and “purists” (1).

Once again, the argument is designed to appear bipartisan while providing conceptual tools that corporations can use to deflect moral claims from activists, litigants, and government agencies. Are the Koch Foundation’s critics grandstanders, busybodies, moralizers, and purists? Warmke and Tosi provide many disparaging labels to apply to activists but none for corporate elites. Indeed, their book offers no analysis whatsoever of the hierarchies of power that grant corporations disproportionate control over the marketplace of ideas. In this sense, it is an example of what Charles Mills (2017) called “ideal theory,” a framework that ignores and obfuscates structural injustices, thereby contributing to them.

This is how Warmke and Tosi manage to quietly sidestep the fact that political engagement is *not* a choice for many of us, including queer, genderfluid, disabled migrants like me, whose moral testimony is automatically politicized as “extreme,” “intrusive,” and “moralizing.” Queer, disabled migrants do not have the luxury of minding our own business, because our business is already culturally defined *as* the business of everyone else. Our very existence is culturally coded as intrusive, offensive, and an affront to “polite society.” It is therefore impossible for us to “mind our own business,” because our business—along with our testimonies, bodies, and communities—are positioned as public spectacle: fodder for moral debate. Warmke and Tosi do not address this double standard concerning whose business is “public” versus whose is “private.” As a result, they normalize multiple oppressions without naming them.

As second-wave feminists proclaimed in the 1970s, “The personal is political”; the notion of an apolitical private sphere of “your own business” is a myth promoted by classical liberals (like John Rawls) to normalize, naturalize, and depoliticize the cis-het-patriarchal nuclear family, which is framed as the proper and even mandatory site of caregiving, especially for women, the “angels of the house” (Pateman 1988). The myth of the public/private dichotomy, smuggled into *Why You Should Mind Your Own Business* through the sanitizing lens of classical liberalism, helps Koch Industries deny that the care of poisoned workers is a corporate obligation rather than a domestic responsibility.

Warmke and Tosi may be speaking from the heart—who knows?—but do their intentions really matter if their work is lending credibility to Koch ideologies by cloaking them in philosophical rhetoric and bolstering them with quotes from long deceased classical liberals? Whatever their intentions, their work is a threat to public trust, democratic governance, and social justice.

Kleinfeld and Sachs

Joshua Kleinfeld and Stephen E. Sachs have also received funding from the Koch network. According to his CV, Kleinfeld (n.d.) has accepted money from the Institute for Humane Studies and is affiliated with the Federalist Society’s “Next Gen” project, of which he is cofounder and director. He is also connected to the Antonin Scalia Law School, which was renamed after George Mason University accepted a \$30 million grant from Charles Koch and an anonymous donor. The name change “raised suspicions that the administration and trustees at George Mason had allowed Virginia’s largest public university to become an ideological outpost” (Fandos 2016). Sachs has also taken money from the Federalist Society. While Kleinfeld and Sachs publish in law, their research is influential in philosophy—as I can attest, having participated in a debate on their work at Washington University in St. Louis.²

Kleinfeld and Sachs (2024, 1) recently published an essay called “Give Parents the Right to Vote,” which argues that “voting parents should be able to cast proxy ballots on behalf of their minor children,” as should “the court-appointed guardians of those who can’t vote due to mental incapacity.” If this “weird idea” sounds familiar, it is probably because JD Vance promoted a version of it in a 2001 speech, which was sponsored by the right-wing Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Vance argued, more precisely, that parents should get “extra votes” as a bonus for having children. Vance added that he wanted to “take aim at the left, especially the childless left,” particularly “childless cat ladies” (Beauchamp 2024).

Why would Vance, backed by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, want to advocate for parental proxy voting? One reason might be that conservatives tend to have more children than leftists (Stone 2020), so this policy would give them more votes. Another reason might be that proxy voting for parents aligns with other right-wing priorities, such as forcing (white) women to give birth, pressuring women into domestic roles, reducing competition in the workforce, privatizing public caregiving services, and restoring the patriarchal nuclear family.

When Kleinfeld and Sachs (2024, 5) argue for parental proxy voting, however, they defend it as beneficial to children, who “have legitimate political interests constituting almost a quarter of the country.” This is very different from the reasons given by Vance. But is it mere coincidence that their proposal aligns with the interests of the Koch network, which supports giving conservatives more votes, promoting traditional family values, and limiting women’s

² Notably, the debate series at Washington University in St. Louis, organized by the Civil Society Initiative, is partially funded by the Frick Initiative (Otten 2024), which claims to be committed to “free-market” enterprise and was founded by Robert Frick, a retired economist who has served in senior executive roles at Bank of America.

reproductive autonomy (Mayer 2016)? Given the authors' ties to the Koch network, one must question whether they genuinely support children's rights or are strategically "capturing" arguments from the Left—such as the National Youth Rights Association—to whitewash a conservative agenda that offers *no real benefit to children*.

In left-wing circles, there is a growing movement to enfranchise youths by granting them the right to vote (for example, Wall 2021; Cieurria 2023; National Youth Rights Association 2025). But youth suffragists do not argue that *parents* should be allowed to vote on behalf of children; we argue that *children* should have the right to vote for themselves. The reason we reject proxy voting is that parents already have too much control over children—indeed, they are the main source of violence against them. Granting parents *more* political power would simply reinforce "adultism," or structural ageism against the young. Youths must be empowered to vote for their own political interests, including legislation that protects them from adult supremacy.

Do Kleinfeld and Sachs genuinely believe that proxy voting will improve the lives of children? Who knows? But one thing is certain: The Koch network has no regrets about funding them.

Jason Brennan's Koch Apologism

I have argued that Koch funding introduces bias into professional philosophy by enabling philosophers to promote right-wing ideologies under the guise of "bipartisan" and "impartial" argumentation. Whether Koch funding biases the recipient or merely allows the recipient to produce more right-wing content, it is harmful to the profession, as well as democracy itself.

A vehement opponent of this thesis is Jason Brennan, an American philosopher and business professor who has published several opinion pieces on why philosophers *should* accept Koch funding, including a blog post ironically titled "The Kochs Are Going to Destroy Academia with Their Evil Kochness!" (2020). Brennan insists that he does not "get Koch money," aside from "perhaps" two or three partially Koch-funded honoraria. As of January 2025, Brennan's (n.d.) CV doesn't disclose any funding at all, except for a \$2.1 million grant from the right-wing Templeton Foundation (Bains 2011), which expired last year. Nonetheless, a Google search reveals that Brennan was research assistant director of the Koch-funded Political Theory Project; was affiliated with the Koch-funded Georgetown Institute for the Study of Markets and Ethics (for which he designed the Ethics Project); was a regular contributor to the *Cato Unbound* blog, run by the Koch-affiliated Cato Institute, as well as the (now defunct) Open Inquiry Project, supported by the Koch-funded Institute for Humane Studies. Therefore, even if Brennan has not directly received Koch funding, his affiliations with so many Koch-funded and Koch-adjacent organizations could have influenced him in much the same way that physicians' relationships with drug representatives influence their professional practices.

How does Brennan justify his ardent support for the Koch network? In "Outside Funding to Centers," he argues that "academia is already so corrupt and beset by ideological bias [from the left] that introducing new sources of biases actually improves the intellectual atmosphere" (Brennan 2018, 97). That is, Koch funding counteracts academia's left-wing bias, fostering a more

impartial epistemic culture. In response to allegations of undue interference, Brennan claims that there is no evidence that right-wing donors have “special power over hiring or teaching content” (Brennan 2018, 98); but even if they did, this would not be problematic, so long as their political stance is correct—and Brennan believes that the political right is, in fact, correct. He adds that there is nothing wrong with bribing someone to believe true things. Thus, if Koch funding *is* bribery, it is of an epistemically helpful sort.

Unlike Warmke, Tosi, Kleinfeld, and Sachs, Brennan explicitly defends right-wing politics, rather than cloaking his agenda in a veneer of neutrality. Nonetheless, his arguments are demonstrably false. There *is* evidence that Koch money introduces bias into higher education, as reported by Jane Meyer, UnKoch My Campus, and other sources. Furthermore, it *is* problematic to bribe academics to adopt a specific political belief, even if that belief *seems* right, because it is precisely through democratic, uncoerced, honest debate that we *figure out* which beliefs are likely to be true and which false (Harding 2015). Brennan fails to grasp the essential role that democracy plays in *generating* objective, unbiased knowledge. Since we are fallible, we simply can’t know which beliefs are true without first engaging in honest, democratic debate and learning from each other.

But Brennan is openly against democracy. In his *Against Democracy*, he argues that we should replace it with “epistocracy,” or rule by the wise. What would epistocracy look like? Brennan offers little guidance, except to say that, as of now, white men would be in power: “There is ample and persistent evidence that right now, rich white men know more about politics than poor black women. . . . I would recommend that the president take the advice of the rich white men over the poor black women” (Brennan 2016, 170). Lest readers suspect Brennan of prejudice, he reassures us that “the problem here isn’t that I’m racist, sexist, or classist. My moral credentials are of course impeccable, and on implicit bias tests, I score many standard deviations lower than the average person” (Brennan 2016, 183). Apparently, white men like Brennan are just wiser than the rest of us, and that is something billionaires are willing to bet on.

Brennan conveniently omits an abundance of philosophical literature on the epistemic advantages of being oppressed (Harding 2015); on “double consciousness,” the epistemic privilege afforded to oppressed people who must navigate the world from multiple standpoints (Fanon 1992); and on “white ignorance,” the epistemic limitations that tend to accrue to white people (Mills 2017). In short, his model of epistocracy is epistemically irresponsible, having completely ignored its main critics.

But Brennan’s proposal does align with the Koch agenda, which is not merely to give right-wing voters more power but also to disempower Black people, women, the poor, and disabled folks—those who, according to Brennan, are less knowledgeable than privileged white men like himself. How convenient that he happens to belong to the epistocratic royalty that ought to rule the world!

UnKoch My Philosophy Department

UnKoch My Campus is a mass movement dedicated to protecting higher education from the harms of billionaire philanthropy, including expanding dark money networks, burnishing the reputations of billionaires, co-opting professors, giving corporations control over education, and using academia to undermine democracy. Regardless of what Jason Brennan says, democracy is a good thing, and we should not let self-serving billionaires steal it from us. Philosophers should apply the principles of the UnKoch My Campus (n.d.) campaign to their own departments by joining one of the active campaigns listed on their website or starting their own, and by renouncing billionaire donations.

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