
Better Spent Elsewhere

Why Philosophy Should Be Funded Less

— ♦ —

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Bernard Williams once posed the awkward question, What is the point of doing philosophy if you're not extraordinarily good at it? The problem is that you can't, by sheer hard work, like a historian of modest gifts, make solid discoveries that others can then rely on in building up larger results. If you're not extraordinary, much of what you do in philosophy will . . . [probably] be both unoriginal and wrong. That is why most of the philosophy of the past is not worth studying. So isn't there something absurd about paying thousands of people to think about these fundamental questions?

—Thomas Nagel, *Other Minds*

In 2018, the investor William H. “Bill” Miller donated \$75 million to the philosophy department at Johns Hopkins University, the biggest of its kind to any philosophy department (Carrig 2018). The act of charity was hailed as laudable because it would (supposedly) encourage social goods made possible by philosophical study: fostering critical thought, enriching lives, supporting a just society, and discovering fundamental philosophical truths. Who could object? Society needs voters and citizens capable of informed, critical thought. However, while Miller's

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generosity cannot be denied, what can be denied is that his donation was a good use of finite financial resources. The thesis of this paper can be stated as follows:

One shouldn't donate money to academic philosophy. That money will most likely fund marginal philosophers who produce poor-quality work with low opportunity costs, or marginal philosophers who produce high-quality work with high opportunity costs because donations could draw them away from work that is more productive overall and does more good.

My thesis focuses on whether a donor or politician, lacking the ability to change the incentives and operations in academia too radically, would have good enough reason either to increase or to continue current funding levels for academic philosophy. There are, of course, related questions, like whether to restructure academia or alter its heavy reliance on publishing to make personnel decisions. However, those tangential issues are beyond the scope of this paper. So the concern here is solely on whether donating to academic philosophy would waste resources, given the current academic regime, and whether that means one should fund academic philosophy at less than status quo levels. One may object that the narrow focus of the thesis pushes aside difficult and interesting questions. However, it is rather that such challenging questions would be neglected if the scope of the paper were broadened.

Some critics have defended the donation to Johns Hopkins University. As the philosopher Ram Neta wrote on a professional philosophy blog,

[This] donation won't immediately save any lives. . . . But the same is true of all resources dedicated to creative or scholarly activity of any kind. None of these activities aim to save lives immediately. But all of them aim (with whatever level of success) to cultivate understanding, appreciation, and sensitivity. And those qualities can save far more lives than any charity can. Imagine the consequences for human well-being . . . if these qualities had been effectively cultivated in every American voter. (Quoted in Weinberg 2018; see also Kazez 2018)

Neta's point is that philosophy isn't (and shouldn't be) aimed at directly relieving suffering, or stopping early death, but that those are the long-term outcomes of doing good philosophy. As with many worthy endeavors, even if the result makes the world a better place, the immediate aim is often something else entirely. As I explain throughout the paper, idealistic niceties aside, there are solid reasons for giving philosophy less funding, including aspirational donations.

Moreover, Neta's defense of funding philosophy is weak for a couple of reasons. First, the defense is too idealistic: the prospect of cultivating appreciation and compassion in voters is dim, to put it mildly. Individual voters are rationally uninformed because their single vote, whether informed or not, is extremely unlikely to decide the outcome of an election (Caplan 2008; Brennan 2016). Second, it is hard to know the effects of a donation prior to making it. Donors lack the local and specific

knowledge required to pick an effective charity, just as politicians and bureaucrats lack the required knowledge to centrally plan an economy (Hayek 1945). And as this paper unfolds, it should become clear that such donations are often better spent elsewhere.

Before arguing that one shouldn't fund philosophy more, and even that one should fund it less, it is worth highlighting that the public goods—informed and critically minded citizens and voters—that allegedly result from philosophical study are often used to justify donations to academic philosophy. The task is thus to evaluate the social and academic value of philosophy, and not the subjective and personal reasons for studying it, e.g., that someone enjoys philosophy.

To make a plausible case for donating more money to academic philosophy, one would need to appeal to the alleged social good produced by teaching more philosophy classes and publishing more research. However, even granting that academic philosophy produces vital social benefits, like an informed citizenry, tens of thousands of articles and classes are already produced annually. Most philosophical articles are read by a few people, and often only because a reader is writing a related article that too will be read by few people. And if studying philosophy fails to produce the social goods it boosts—e.g., it fails to improve critical-thinking skills—then this implies that at least a large subset of academic philosophy is funded by what economists call *rent seeking*: the misuse of institutional procedures and rules to secure benefits for the philosophy department, instead of offering valuable services (Brennan and Magness 2019).

Prior to examining reasons to fund philosophy less, though, it is worth examining the reasons that one shouldn't fund philosophy *more*.

Philosophy Shouldn't Be Funded More

Though it may be tempting to think that donating \$75 million would improve the state of academic philosophy in terms of improved research and teaching, this is questionable at best. The most likely outcome would be enabling Johns Hopkins to hire elite philosophers away from competing colleges and universities. It doesn't make sense for Johns Hopkins to spend money hiring junior faculty, who with few exceptions will require time and resources to mature into philosophical stars, rather than hiring those stars from other universities, raising the ranking of the department quicker.

The likely result will be that elite philosophers will work at Johns Hopkins instead of another university, and their former university will in turn hire philosophers from different universities, and so forth. Once at Johns Hopkins, the newly hired faculty will likely write similar papers, attend similar conferences, and teach similar students as they would prior to moving. And after the faculty reshuffling, a few marginal philosophers will be hired who would have otherwise left academia, either because they lack sufficient talent and drive as academics, or because they could do better for themselves elsewhere.

There are a couple kinds of marginal philosophers with respect to productivity and opportunity costs. A marginal philosopher either

- (a) produces little or low-quality philosophical work and instruction; their hiring as a philosopher adds little value academically, socially, or economically—this kind of marginal philosopher is a bad investment for donors; *or*,
- (b) chose academic philosophy as a career with high opportunity costs—this kind of philosopher could use their time and resources to do more good and create more value in a different profession, e.g., law or medicine.

There are robust, distinct reasons to avoid funding either kind of marginal philosopher. There are academic reasons not to fund the first type: the quality of their research and teaching is poor—they don't add much of value, either academically or socially, and so the money would be better spent elsewhere. These marginal philosophers aren't worth funding because they don't produce research that anyone would develop further, cite, or even read, and their teaching confers little to no social value, e.g., they robotically read their slides with little interest in their students.

There are effective altruistic reasons to avoid funding the second type of marginal philosophers. This group of highly talented philosophers produces astute research, but they would have been even more productive and produced more social value had they worked, instead, as a medical researcher or attorney. According to effective altruism, funding these folks as academic philosophers is a waste, given they would be markedly more productive and socially valuable if they had pursued other professions. From the perspective of someone who wants to donate to a worthy cause—as presumably Miller wanted—the money would be better placed elsewhere. This distinction will play a pivotal role in the arguments below.

Which philosophers, if any, are worth funding? The reasons to donate money to recipients other than marginal philosophers aren't applicable to philosophers who would be good at producing insightful and influential philosophy, and whose opportunity costs are less than, or equal to, the social and economic value they create as philosophers. These are folks who, though talented at producing important philosophical work, aren't suited as well for other professions, ones where they could make a greater social and economic impact. And so they are productive as philosophers, but their choice of profession has modest opportunity costs.

Before applying these distinctions, we should address a preliminary objection that could undercut the whole project before it gets anywhere. We do that next.

A Preliminary Objection

Our initial argument against more funding for philosophy may look as though it rests on the claim that more funding would likely be used by the profession to produce more low-quality books and articles, and not to improve the quality of the

philosophy produced, *or* used to employ people who would be more socially valuable and productive doing something else with their time and talents.¹ However, a critic may wonder whether increased funding could be used to raise professor salaries, thus better incentivizing individuals to do better academic philosophy. In this scenario, one isn't entitled to assume that more philosophy funding would increase the quantity, instead of the quality, of philosophy research. One cannot rule out the possibility that increased funding would improve the quality and not just the quantity of philosophy books and articles. Despite the objection's initial plausibility, there are solid reasons to doubt it.

Although more philosophy funding might improve the quality of philosophical work produced in academia, it would more likely just increase the quantity of philosophical work produced: namely, books and articles that few, if any, philosophers read, cite, or download. Evidence for the claim that most philosophy books and articles are rarely, if ever, read, cited, and downloaded comes from places like Google Scholar, Philosopher's Index, and PhilPapers (see Schwitzgebel 2022). This isn't especially surprising: most academics know their written work is hardly ever, with a few rare exceptions, read by more than a handful of people, and that they produce academic publications to signal to their employer they deserve a raise, promotion, or other benefits.

There is solid empirical evidence that more funding, even with the best of intentions of those in the profession, would be unlikely to improve the quality of the work. Consider a telling datum that cuts against our critic's objection: those who earn the most in the philosophy profession, usually after tenure, do not produce better work than they did in their earlier career. Professors across disciplines, including philosophy, produce less work that is cited less often after they receive tenure, on average, but yet *earn a lot more money* than they did earlier (Brogaard et al. 2018). Moreover, as professors make more money after tenure and promotions, it isn't only their productivity that drops off. When professors across disciplines are evaluated for academic promotions and higher earnings, outside letter writers are less likely to describe their work as outstanding and innovative, and more likely to describe it as prosaic, derivative, or minimally competent (Lewis 1980).

The empirical evidence strongly implies that the incentive structure, not wages per se, accounts for higher-quality work: offering someone a well-paid job for life, with independence and flexibility, often undercuts the incentive to work as hard as they did initially to secure the job. Instead—in the absence of institutional changes to the salient incentive structures—paying academics better would apparently only result in work good enough to gain tenure, with at best a trickle of academic work afterward.

1. Thanks to a referee and journal editor for pressing this point.

Although the evidence to this point suggests that an increase in philosophy funding wouldn't improve the quality of philosophy produced, it fails to justify the claim that philosophy should be funded less. Let's turn to support for the paper's thesis in the next sections.

Diminishing Returns

A basic insight from economics: *ceteris paribus*, the first unit of something is worth more than the next, which is worth more than the next, and so forth. Each extra unit is worth less than the one prior. Even if studying philosophy facilitated the production of public goods, like informing potential voters and citizens, *even more of it* would cease to do so at some point. For example, public parks where children can play and parents can grill burgers are a public good, but it wouldn't benefit the public to have public parks on every corner of every city in America. And the same applies to philosophy: after a certain point, more philosophy isn't valuable.

Currently *tens of thousands* of philosophy books and articles are produced *annually*, many of which are only read by a few people (e.g., the editor, referees, advisers, and the author's mother). This can be quickly and readily established by checking citation numbers and impact scores for philosophy papers: many articles aren't cited or read, and at best, are barely downloaded. Philosophy can impact the critical thinking of citizens and voters, or influence the culture, only if someone *reads it*. Even high-quality research isn't worth much socially if no one knows about it.

Philosophy can of course be a public good—some highly influential philosophy pieces have positively impacted society—but overwhelmingly, philosophy articles on average (and even more so on the margin) don't impact society at all. So one cannot count each philosophy book or article produced as a public good. And while I wish that philosophy were more socially impactful, most of it, unfortunately, is read by too few people.

Philosophical books and articles can advance moral progress, but few philosophy books and articles have a chance of doing that. For example, John Stuart Mill was influential in defense of free expression and laying groundwork for early feminism, while nearly every one of his colleagues failed to influence anyone outside their circle of friends. Few philosophers, historically or currently, have produced philosophy with much social value.

Most of the social value of philosophy, then, isn't in philosophy *per se*, but in exceptional philosophers—even if it is hard to identify the exceptional ones to start. This isn't to say that one should cut philosophy entirely, but that the social value of philosophy *at current levels of production* bumps up against diminishing returns. The same could be said for other fields—for example, physics or history—to the extent that they overproduce work; even though physics or historical research has social value, only so much of it does. The fact that currently too much philosophy is

produced annually is a strong, but not decisive, reason to believe that the marginal costs of funding philosophy exceed the marginal benefits.

Opportunity Costs

Increased funding of academic philosophy incurs several associated opportunity costs (Buchanan 1991). The first cost is shouldered by *other* philosophy books and articles: adding to the large body of philosophy published annually may displace attention from philosophy books and articles more deserving of attention. This is to highlight that whatever the worth of marginal philosophy books and articles, they can take away attention from excellent philosophy.

Here we find a dilemma. The dilemma's first horn: people will consume marginal philosophy at the expense of high-quality philosophy. And to the extent excellent philosophy *is* a public good, this consumption dilutes the social impact of high-quality philosophical research.² On the other horn of the dilemma: if less-good philosophy books and articles aren't read at the expense of excellent philosophy books and articles, the philosophers who produce the less-good work pay a (perhaps high) opportunity cost. If there are already more philosophy books and articles than can be used, producing philosophy books and articles, even at current levels, is expensive in terms of opportunity costs. One could instead use that human capital and funding to produce greater social value in terms of, for example, reducing poverty or improving public policy. The resources spent on producing more philosophy don't make any discernable social impact, unlike resources spent on, say, medical research. For example, to the extent that aging results from biological processes that could be interrupted without doing net harm, and assuming health conditions like heart disease and cancer are bad, funding research to slow aging and extend life has value (Bostrom 2005).

There's an objection lurking here, though. Perhaps the books and articles produced, even if they are unread, are necessary to create the competition necessary to give rise to the best work by other philosophers who are widely read and highly influential—surely, great philosophers like Plato, Spinoza, Mill, and Rawls didn't arise from nowhere. If so, the opportunity costs are worth it from the perspective of producing great philosophy—call this *the by-product objection*.

Despite the initial appeal of this objection, it has a couple of problems. The first problem is that it *prima facie* conflicts with the history of philosophy: many of the great philosophers, like Plato and Mill, didn't produce their best work in a system that resembles academia. The number of philosophy articles and books produced today dwarfs the number produced in Plato's or Mill's time and in the history of Western philosophy; yet there is no shortage of great philosophy to be found

2. One need not hold a view as to what counts as excellent philosophy to see the point here (van Inwagen 2006, chap. 3).

historically. It isn't necessary to deny that philosophers, especially the great ones, need a competitive atmosphere to hone their craft. The issue is how much philosophy, especially with little to no societal impact, is required for the competitive pressure that molds great philosophers. The historical evidence suggests it is less than the amount of philosophy currently produced. The burden thus rests on the shoulders of those who want to fund philosophy at its current level, and more so on folks who want to increase it.

Second, there is a sizable subset of philosophers who produce work clearly not necessary for a competitive atmosphere to mold great philosophers. For example, Sammy earned his doctorate in philosophy at a low-ranking university and has only a few publications in third- and fourth-tier journals that no one reads, cites, or downloads. Had Sammy not been a philosopher and become an attorney instead, the philosophy profession wouldn't have been any worse off. Cases like Sammy's abound in academic philosophy. The critic again has the burden of proof to show that Sammy is essential for the competitive atmosphere needed for great philosophy.

To this point, the opportunity costs are related to factors like opportunities to consume excellent philosophy books and articles, or the costs of cognitive capital that could be devoted to other, more valuable work—e.g., working at a start-up that designs medical AI to aid surgeons and improve health outcomes. However, there are *moral* opportunity costs too: private and public dollars devoted to philosophy, where the donation aims to improve the lives of others, could be better spent elsewhere. This is explored in greater detail in the next section.

Lessons from Effective Altruism

Effective altruists hold, in a nutshell, that the fruits of our largess should be distributed so that it maximizes the moral good one can do—say, by maximizing the number of lives saved per dollar spent. If one has a moral obligation to aid those who are worse off, especially if it is only marginally costly, one has a good moral reason to ensure those resources make the biggest impact possible. If one donates a thousand dollars to charity, they should presumably maximize the moral impact of that donation (MacAskill 2015; Timmerman 2019). The point here isn't that we must maximize the goodness produced by the money we spend, but rather something more modest: if one wants to donate *to do good in the world*, then one should attend to the effectiveness of one's donation related to salient counterfactuals.

It is important to note that, with respect to effective altruism, the idea is that one should spend money on causes and organizations where it has the most marginal benefit. If there isn't much benefit from, say, sophisticated AI to aid surgeons, but there is from more effective shelters for third-world nations, one should spend the money there instead. And if medical AI is found to be overproduced, and higher

levels of funding would result in large opportunity costs, then one should fund it less too.

The point isn't that donating to academic philosophy runs afoul of effective altruism. However, we can learn a lesson from effective altruism: if one thinks that funding for philosophy should be increased given the public goods it allegedly produces, one should be at least somewhat concerned with the ineffectiveness of philosophy to improve civic matters. One needn't hold that philosophy fails to add societal value to appreciate that beyond a certain point, donating to philosophy departments faces diminishing returns and moral opportunity costs. If one wants to improve the lives of those worse off, say, or to improve one's society, one could do a better job by contributing somewhere else. The charity watchdog organization GiveWell³ estimates that it costs about \$3,000 to \$6,000 to save a life. When this estimate is applied to the story at the start of the paper—the \$75 million donated to philosophy at Johns Hopkins University—roughly twenty-five hundred people could have been saved. (To clarify a bit: GiveWell estimates and tracks QALYs, or quality-adjusted life years, increased by various charities. See MacAskill [2015].)

One needn't wholly agree with effective altruists about an obligation to maximize the impact of donations to see that giving more money to philosophy is among *the least effective uses* of resources. There is clear value to giving *more* effectively, even if one doubts giving *maximally* effectively is morally required. Even if one rejects that one is morally required to *do the most good that one can*, it should still be clear that donating millions of dollars to a philosophy department will, best-case scenario given current conditions, employ a few philosophers to produce philosophy books and articles only few people will cite, read, or download.

Widespread Disagreement

Perhaps philosophy research and teaching aren't about public goods, like an informed citizenry and voters, but about discovering profound philosophical truths, just as one may think funding of physics is valuable since it reveals important truths about the fabric of reality. Fair enough. Even so, one should worry about the fact that philosophers strongly disagree on many issues, with little hope of fruitful resolution. The ubiquity of disagreement among philosophers is well known, as Christensen (2009) acknowledges:

If you'd like to make a professional philosopher uncomfortable, try asking for clear examples of our discipline's achievements in settling the questions we study. . . . Of course, the worry is not about any dearth of philosophers with firm opinions on the great questions. It is about how few of these opinions have, over the years, achieved anything like consensus. (756)

3. An organization that can be found at <https://www.givewell.org/>.

Philosophers rarely change their minds, but instead defend ever more sophisticated versions of the views they held before confronting informed critics. They simply migrate to more nuanced versions of the same position. For example, ethicists are nearly evenly divided over whether consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics is the correct moral theory, with a few who hold positions like moral skepticism. Ethicists rarely give up their pet moral theory for a different moral theory, but instead often double down with a more sophisticated version of their favored moral theory. As William Lycan explains,

[We] Anglo-Americans have seen sense-datum theory reign and then be scorned, mind-body materialism reign and then come under heavy attack, and so forth. . . . [As] a game, I was once challenged by Red Watson to exhibit the arguments that refuted sense-datum theory. I spent an hour or two marshalling them. He swiftly and decisively pointed out that each of them either begs the question or at least has a premise that would not impress an actual sense-datum theorist in the slightest. And not because the sense-datum theorist was being dogmatic. (2013, 116–17)

One needn't belabor the point about disagreement in philosophy because it has been explored in the literature (Frances 2010; Licon 2012, 2019; Barnett 2019). Even if philosophy is valuable as a window into profound truths of existence—like, say, the state, rational self-interest, equality—one should worry that philosophy is too often mistaken. And it doesn't help that many fundamental claims defended in philosophy books and articles contradict each other. Only some philosophical work can be true when it contradicts other philosophical work. There is a reasonable chance that much current philosophy defends credible falsehoods.

And not only is a lot of philosophy contradictory—that's bad enough—but it is also often hard to determine if one's favorite philosophical views are true. As Jason Brennan argues:

Suppose, thousands of people, each of whom wants to go to São Paulo, randomly board all flights departing Dallas–Fort Worth. Suppose they fill all departing seats, but are not told where they are going. Of these thousands, a few hundred in fact will land in São Paulo. Most will arrive somewhere else. Philosophy seems like this in many respects. It may bring some people to the proper destination, but it dumps most somewhere else. Actually, matters are worse than that. Travelers will know whether they have arrived in São Paulo. In philosophy's case, some may indeed arrive at truth. However, they will not have discernibly better grounds for believing this than their mistaken peers. (2010, 3–4)

It is difficult to discern whether a philosophical claim is true or false, evidenced by the fact that philosophers continue to debate fundamental issues from the origins of the discipline. Even if one discovers some profound philosophical truths, it isn't

clear how one could identify them as such without ubiquitous controversy. Consuming philosophy isn't sufficient to distinguish the true from the false, but it is necessary. Too much philosophy is currently produced to be consumed, and for insights to be identified.

Finally, the proliferation of false philosophy is exacerbated by perverse incentives: professors are incentivized to publish interesting research to secure tenure and establish a name for themselves in the profession. This may motivate them to avoid controversial views to ensure they will be published and to maximize the number of publications they produce; e.g., they may use a single idea to produce two minimally interesting papers instead of a longer and more interesting one. This practice undercuts the appeal of philosophy with respect to advancing human knowledge; in the logical space of philosophy papers barely publishable, many will be false. Perhaps false publishable papers may even outnumber true philosophy papers, as there could be many more interesting falsehoods than interesting truths.

A potential objection: someone unfamiliar with academic philosophy may think that disparaging philosophy because of its disagreements is too broad a reason not to donate to philosophy because there is lots of disagreement in other fields too, such as physics and economics. Although this observation is accurate, it simply misses the point. It isn't simply that there is disagreement in philosophy, but that the disagreement is abundant and ubiquitous. Few philosophical positions aren't subject to deep and abiding disagreement—not only do philosophers often disagree about how to solve philosophical problems, but they also often disagree about what counts as a real philosophical problem and what methods they should use to settle the dispute. Disagreement in philosophy is at a level unrivaled in most, if not all, other academic fields.

Even if most philosophy articles and books are uninteresting or false, the focus on written work may be a distraction. Perhaps the social value of philosophy is in the classroom.

Teaching and Rent Seeking

Although we explored the implications of more funding for philosophy research, we haven't looked at the teaching side of the discipline. Perhaps philosophy's social value is actually teaching students to be informed and critically engaged voters and citizens, instead of research citation rates. To justify their budget and entice students to study philosophy, philosophy departments often claim that philosophical study makes for a better society by teaching students how to think critically as voters and citizens. In a democracy, where those skills could make an impact, more informed voters and citizens would presumably be socially valuable.

Before accepting this view, one should review the empirical evidence. Unfortunately, the results are discouraging. Approximately five studies have been made to determine if philosophy and critical-thinking classes “stick” with students. The issue

is whether philosophy and logic students improve their critical-thinking skills more than a proper control group.

The evidence is mixed but leans negative: philosophy and logic classes don't improve the critical-thinking skills of most students. Several studies show that students performed better on a standard test for critical thinking (the Watson-Glaser test) after taking an introductory class in philosophy than students in the control group (Ross and Semb 1981). In another study, Harrell (2004) found students gained some critical-thinking skills from taking philosophy classes. However, several others found little to no improvement in students' critical thinking (Annis and Annis 1979; Facione 1990; Reiter 1994). When students' critical thinking did improve, it wasn't a bigger improvement than among students who took other classes, such as psychology or history (Facione 1990). This doesn't demonstrate that philosophy classes should be cut in favor of history or psychology classes, for example, but that if non-philosophy classes do a similar job of teaching students critical-thinking skills, adding more philosophy classes to accomplish the same goal inflicts higher costs on students with little return. We find that philosophy and logic classes do little to improve students' critical-thinking skills with the caveat that the question of whether philosophy and logic improve students' critical-thinking skills has been understudied.

A *prima facie* objection here is that philosophy students perform well relative to academic peers on standardized tests like the LSAT and GRE (Brennan and Magness 2019, 59). And this at least suggests that, despite what studies report, philosophy is a field of study that makes students better critical thinkers and reasoners, especially because the standardized tests on which philosophy students excel overall, compared with students in nearly every other discipline, are disguised tests of cognitive ability and aptitude.

The problem is that this reading of standardized test differences conflates treatment effect and selection effect. The former effect is where students are made better critical thinkers as a result of studying philosophy, whereas the latter effect is where students who pick philosophy as their major are often already smarter than students who choose other majors. One would need solid evidence for a treatment effect to be justified in claiming that a better performance on standardized tests by philosophy majors shows that philosophy *makes* students better critical thinkers. And as it happens, the evidence unfortunately either weakly favors selection effect, or is too inconclusive, to decide the matter (Brennan and Magness, 67–71).

The weakness of the evidence of the treatment effect of taking philosophy and logic classes suggests that requirements to take such classes are better explained by what economists call *rent seeking*. (This, of course, assumes the social value of taking philosophy classes is helping students develop critical-thinking skills to become better citizens and voters.) Before expanding on this thought, though, it should be understood that

[a] rent-seeker is anyone who uses a political process—as opposed to supplying a productive service—to obtain, extend, and preserve the flow of income or other benefits to him- or herself at others’ expense. Rent seeking refers to when a person or group tries to *rig the rules of the game to get a special advantage at the expense of others*. (Brennan and Magness 2019, 161; my emphasis)

Philosophy departments, along with most other departments, with English departments among the worst (Brennan and Magness 2019), rent seek by lobbying school administrators to require undergraduate students to take philosophy and critical-thinking classes, instead of allowing them to pick classes they prefer. Although philosophy isn’t the only discipline to engage in rent seeking, if philosophy classes aren’t good at teaching critical-thinking skills, the rent-seeking explanation looks more like a plausible explanation for requiring them.

However, as a referee of this paper notes, rent seeking by academic departments is but a partial explanation. The other part of why students pay for classes that, apparently, do not confer the educational benefits they advertise involves signaling to prospective employers: students pay to attend a college or university, mostly not to acquire soft skills and educational enrichment—with the obvious exceptions of STEM classes—but instead to assure prospective employers that they would be intelligent, reliable, and compliant workers (Spence 1973; Caplan 2018). Hiring is an investment under uncertainty: it is costly to hire and fire incompetent workers, so the better to hire competent workers to begin with. Not only is there substantial economic research—though not without a few critics—to back up the signaling theory of the value of higher education, but, as Caplan (2018) found, there is a good deal of anecdotal collaboration too, as the following list illustrates.

- Students like it when professors cancel class.
- The subject matter (e.g., philosophy, Shakespeare) is often unrelated to the labor market.
- The graduation year explains the vast majority of benefits from a degree.
- The best education (read: skills) is already available (e.g., free online MIT classes).
- Failing to pass a class is worse than forgetting the material.
- Students often look for easy classes, not ones that convey knowledge or skills.
- Undetected cheating is as good as passing without cheating.

These are behaviors one expects if higher education is more about signaling (otherwise opaque) qualities to potential employers than instilling knowledge and skills in students for the workplace. And just as with critical thinking, philosophy as a discipline isn’t superior in its capacity to signal to potential employers that a specific student is intelligent, reliable, and compliant. In either case, whether students are

taking a class because of rent seeking, or to signal to prospective employers, clearly the philosophical content in these classes is largely beside the point.

Because most academic departments engage in rent seeking, philosophy as an academic field is nothing special. So, if a donor is open to donating to causes where their money will have a larger impact, for example in terms of lives saved, they would be better off donating to causes other than higher education. However, if a donor is determined to donate to higher education, donating to philosophy is as good a place as any *among academic departments*, perhaps better, with respect to the rent seeking and signaling aspects of higher education.

More Objections

The Idealistic Objection

A referee objects that the focus of this paper is too narrow. Instead of thinking about the good that a large donation would do for a prominent school like Johns Hopkins or Harvard, it would be better to focus on how donations could improve the professors' teaching and research outputs if directed instead to a small liberal arts college, for example, where faculty have a high teaching load, enabling them to teach smaller, more focused classes and produce better quality research. Giving to a department like that could make a substantial difference in terms of the quality of teaching and learning outcomes, and the research produced.

Although this objection has some value—a strong case can be made for the significant reform of the higher education system—it neglects the strong equilibrium at work in the higher education system. It is an argument for radical changes to the higher education system that, while justified, aren't practical. Politicians and donors will continue to fund colleges and universities like Johns Hopkins, Harvard, and Duke, and that won't change anytime soon. And that equilibrium is the paper's focus: under the current structure, for practical purposes, money is better spent elsewhere than academic philosophy.

The Knowledge Objection

Here one may rightly object that deciding how and where best to spend donor money is beset by knowledge problems.⁴ How can the author or reader know the best socially and economically valuable way to spend money that would otherwise be donated to academic departments? It isn't clear. Too many factors must be considered to make a credible judgment of where the money would do the most good. This worry resembles the knowledge problem that, to a larger degree, afflicts centrally

4. Thanks to a referee for (rightly) pressing this point.

planned economies. As the economist F. A. Hayek noted about the prospect of planning an economy,

[Knowledge] of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess. . . . It is rather a problem of how to secure the best use of resources known to any of the members of society, for ends whose relative importance only these individuals know. (1945, 519–20)

The knowledge problem is deep and troublesome. And it applies to the question of what cause or institution to which one should donate their money, including higher education, just as much as to the central planning of an economy. The problem with this objection, though, is that it acts as a double-edged sword: although the critic is correct to highlight that estimations of the social value of a given donation are difficult to determine for those who argue we should fund philosophy less, they are equally difficult for those who want to donate to academic philosophy due to its alleged social value. Both face a comparable knowledge problem.

So it appears this knowledge problem is another reason not to donate to philosophy—would-be donors are in no better position to know whether their donation would have sufficient social value to justify making the donation to academic philosophy, rather than somewhere else. This knowledge problem can be addressed in places like the marketplace and, to a lesser extent, by folks like those at GiveWell with extensive experience identifying more and less effective charities and causes in terms of dollars spent per life saved. These outlets don't exhaust places where one can donate to improve society, but they are better placed to deal with the knowledge problem than those who donate money based on (noble) whim.

The Lump-in-the-Carpet Objection

A referee pointed out that, realistically, one shouldn't expect that funding overall would simply shrink, but rather that it would be dedicated to academic fields other than philosophy. And further, that these other academic fields may be even less worthy of funding—in light of the concerns raised here—than philosophy. Maybe the funding would be dedicated to English departments, rather than to medicine or physics. There are two responses to this objection.

First, many other academic departments, like English or history, have similar issues as philosophy does in terms of an overproduction of publications and teaching that doesn't stick with students beyond the final. So, there are good reasons, of the sort discussed in this paper, not to donate to those fields either—the money is likely better spent elsewhere, rather than donated to disciplines outside of philosophy. Second, however, if a donor is determined to donate money to academia, then

philosophy is (roughly) as good a place to donate *as other disciplines* given that the issues that plague academic philosophy apply to other academic departments.

Conclusion

This paper opened by arguing that philosophy shouldn't be funded more: even if philosophy facilitates a public good, like an informed citizenry, or uncovers deep philosophical truths, these goods are subject to diminishing returns and opportunity costs. And once we recognize there is currently more philosophy produced than is consumed, by a wide margin, this suggests that we should fund philosophy less, and the resources that would be spent on philosophy would be better spent elsewhere.

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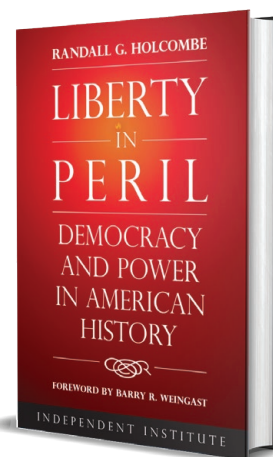
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