

## Measuring the Impact of Philosophy

1. The question of concern for this inquiry is “what evidence is there on the feasibility or effectiveness of estimating the economic impact of research” in this field? There is a current tendency to think that evidence consists only in empirical studies. But what matters is warrant, and for warrant what matters are the reasons and valid arguments that support the conclusion being warranted. Empirical studies are only a small part of the body of reasons necessary to license a conclusion. There are a number of theoretical and methodological reasons to believe that estimating the impact of philosophical research is not a feasible project.

2. The *impact* that a body of research has made on an outcome is the *difference* in that outcome supposing that the research occurred versus what would have happened had the research not occurred. This makes finding evidence for the impact of philosophical research especially difficult since philosophical impacts are likely to be felt primarily over the middle to long term; they are likely to be indirect rather than direct; and they are likely to have more cultural effects than economic ones, at least in the near to middle future, and cultural effects are in general both harder to articulate and harder to measure than economic ones.

3. Perhaps a vivid example can help. What effects could be expected on culture, thought, politics and the economy in 25 years time from cutting funds for philosophy research by 25% during the next 5 years? Or, instead consider the easier after-the-fact question: Had overall available funds for philosophy been 25% less 25 years ago and onwards, what economic and cultural differences would there be now? What differences would such cuts have made on the effects of research contributions from Britain’s great and well-known post-war philosophers, such as Isaiah Berlin, Bernard Williams, Karl Popper, Amartya Sen, Mary Warnock, AJ Ayer or Michael Dummett? And what would have been the difference in the effects from the research of the large number of fine but lesser known philosophers doing the ‘normal science’ of the field.

4. We will first present a number of respects in which the contributions of philosophy to social, economic and cultural life will remain under the radar of any measure of impact. Subsequently we will turn to some more formal reasons why this is to be expected in the current state of scientific knowledge concerning what kinds of impacts might occur and how these are to be predicted.

### *5. Effects likely to be missed in measuring the impact of philosophical research and practice*

- (i) *Political debate.* There is no doubt that philosophers like Rawls, Nozick and Sen have had a huge impact on the political landscape and their names often occur in newspaper columns. Does this mean that only Harvard should score on impact? The fact that these thinkers have had an impact on the political landscape is due

to the culture of discussion and reflection that philosophy departments offer to their students through their research and teaching. These students then go on in journalism, politics, policy-making etc. The agents of this type of impact, i.e. philosophy faculties around the world, will sadly remain under the radar.

- (ii) *Argumentative skills.* Philosophy department train students in logical reasoning, critical thinking and scientific method. Our students then export these skills in the pursuit of law, scientific research, medical diagnosis etc. But the philosophers that provided these tools will remain under the radar. The situation can be compared to the relationship between calculus and engineering. The mathematics department may have a low score on impact, because their impact in the provision of tools to the engineer would be lost in the measurement of impact.
- (iii) *Professional ethics.* Professionals face moral dilemmas throughout their careers and are called upon to make principled morally defensible decisions within their respective roles – be it business, medicine, human relations, etc. In introducing cohorts of aspiring professionals to the history of moral theory, we provide our students with the tools for moral reasoning that will be invaluable in their future careers. Such impact is of great importance to society, but is bound to get lost in measurement.
- (iv) *Culture.* It is not uncommon for successful writers, film directors, entertainers, ... to have an undergraduate degree in philosophy. A society's cultural achievements is often assessed in terms of its philosophical depth. But once again, the chain of impact from the philosophical work to the actual cultural output is simply too long to be measured by impact factors.
- (v) *The Good Life.* Last but not least, we live in a culture in which so many people face episodes of mental health—often in need of direction in their lives. Religion has lost its relevance for many people in today's increasingly secularised world. Communal support is often lacking due to the anonymity of the metropolis. Counselling services are of great importance, but they are a cure rather than a prophylactic. C.S. Lewis famously wrote 'We read in order to know that we are not alone.' Philosophy has by no means a monopoly on the task of providing insight in the eternal questions that touch on the meaning of life. But it cannot be denied that it is a substantial contributor. When we do lectures and run discussions on the eternal questions and some of our alumni tell us many years later that these courses 'made a huge difference in their lives', then have we, as professional philosophers, had 'impact'? We think so. But no impact factor has any chance of measuring this.

6. There is a tendency to think that only empirical studies, journalistic contributions or actual physical or cultural artefacts count as impact. But there is a long chain that comes into the creation of these achievements. Now it is easier to measure at the end of the chain, since in tracing the chain backward, it does become more and more difficult to assess the weight of all the agents of impact. And this is precisely the danger. The agents of impact

at the beginning of the chain are forgotten, but they are no less real and provide no less of a contribution than the person who signs off on empirical study, the newspaper column, or the creator of the artefacts. In ignoring the agents at the beginning of the chain, we would be only rewarding the workers of the last hour.

*7. General methodological difficulties for the feasibility of impact studies for philosophical research in the current state of knowledge*

- (i) A first issue to consider with respect to economic and cultural impact is what *kinds* of effects there might be. This already presents a major obstacle to the feasibility of impact measurement for philosophy since there has, as yet, been no serious work devoted to addressing this issue. We do not have anything like a reasonable starting list of the kinds of effects that the presence or absence of philosophical research could make. Without a reasonable list of the kinds of effects to be studied one can of course not even get started on devising practicable measures and indicators of the size of these effects.
- (ii) The necessary tools are not available to calculate even roughly what the difference in these effects would be with and without various levels of philosophical research as input. Nor is it likely that reasonable tools can be constructed before the REF exercise. There are a number of obvious reasons for this: a) the time period over which changes in the amount and quality of philosophy research would produce its most dramatic effects on culture, thought, politics and the economy is probably fairly long term; b) prediction gets harder as time goes on since models of evolution for almost any phenomenon tend to work best short term and because it becomes harder and harder to predict other factors that matter to the impact of the starting differences in research input; c) the possible effects of philosophy research are probably highly interactive so what difference in output might result from differences in input will depend heavily on other factors that are themselves very uncertain and extremely sensitive to large and small scale future developments.

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