

Why the Humanities Matter Today

In Defense of Liberal Education

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distinction with which we are concerned. See, Uzgalis, William. 2016. "John Locke" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Spring. Zalta ed. "<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/locke/>," accessed 8/1/2016

138. Steiner, Elizabeth. 1984. "Toward a Conception of the Role of the Arts in Liberal Education." *Studies in Art Education*. vol. 26. no. 1. Autumn. 5-13, 6. Also see Knott, 27.

139. *Ibid.*, 6.

140. Kimball, 276.

141. *Ibid.*

142. *Ibid.*

143. *Ibid.* This quotes Spiller. 1942. "Higher Education and the War." *The Journal of Higher Education*. 13. 287.

TWO

Is Philosophy Impractical? Yes and No, but That's Precisely Why We Need It¹

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The Internet has been flooded with think pieces and memes concerning the value of a liberal arts education. Some express that while STEM fields might help us build a clock, the humanities and social sciences provide us the tools to build a world where kids are free to build clocks regardless of their racial, political, or socioeconomic status. Others lament that the humanities have failed to market themselves in ways that make clear the practical (or vocational) value of a liberal education. Still others (including another contributor to this volume—see the introduction) have argued that the focus on practicality has contributed to the demise of the liberal arts education.

The history of the liberal arts education is complicated and many proponents of the liberal arts education have competing ideas of what exactly it should be.² Benjamin Franklin, for instance, insisted that a liberal education should be practical and, "clearly not aimed at learning for learning's sake."³ Franklin was not alone in thinking this was the case; John Dewey insisted that education should be focused on pragmatic considerations. Both agreed, however, that such an education, while practical, was still to be broad and, in some sense, "liberal." Those sympathetic with Franklin and Dewey think that an education should prepare the student for some kind of job, or for an ever changing job market.

We hear calls for precisely this kind of approach to education today, whether it be with the recent STEM push, or with an outright hostility to the liberal arts, as Kim Brooks has recently (and quite unpersuasively)

argued.⁴ Others, W. E. B. Du Bois and Martha Nussbaum for instance, insist that the liberal arts are about human development and should be pursued independent of their economic or practical value. Still others insist that the liberal arts are to be pursued precisely *because* they are "useless."⁵

What all these authors have in common, however, is that a liberal arts education should in some sense be "freeing." But the question remains, to what does this freedom amount? After all, there are a number of arenas and ways in which we might be free. We might be in terms of economic mobility, politically free, intellectually free, etc. Answering the question, "what is freedom?" can help us identify what it is that philosophy can contribute to a liberal arts education. Of course, the answer to this question depends at least in part on which of the above approaches we think best fits the aim of a liberal arts education. If the goal is to be "free" primarily in terms of economic mobility—to be prepared "for a world of great technological and economic change"⁶—then perhaps a more practical approach is warranted. Alternatively, if the goal is more Socratic in that we should be "free" from the "prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of [our] age or [our] nation, and from convictions which have grown up in [our minds] without the cooperation or consent of [our] deliberate reason"—to "enlarge our thoughts and free [us] from the tyranny of custom"⁷—then a more humanistic approach is likely appropriate. To be sure, these two interpretations of what we mean by "free" do not exhaust our options, but for the purpose of this chapter, we will stick with them, at least for now.

In keeping with these two options, we might approach situating philosophy into the liberal arts in one of two ways: 1) Deny that the field is impractical, and try to justify what studying it can *do* for the students (focus on the "practicality" of it, despite appearances to the contrary), or 2) Embrace the impracticality of the field, and argue that the value of a particular study is not exhausted (and perhaps is not even constituted) by its service to a consumer society. I firmly believe that these options are not mutually exclusive. It is true that studying philosophy generally, and the history of philosophy specifically, is in many ways very useful in terms of preparing students for a difficult job market. But it is also the case that such preparation does not exhaust the value of such studies.

In this chapter I will make a case for both the practicality *and* impracticality of the study of philosophy. In doing so I hope to illustrate not only that the value of philosophy extends beyond what it can do for the student, but also that the world is much more complex than many would have us believe. The discussion of the ways in which philosophy is both practical and impractical will serve as an illustration of what philosophy can *do* for its students—allow them to see that the most important issues we face are nuanced, complicated, and that the most obvious answer is almost certainly wrong.

What gives philosophy its pride of place in a liberal arts education is that regardless of which approach we think is the right one for the future of the liberal arts, philosophy has something important to offer. Indeed, philosophy is both practical and impractical. I will defend the value of philosophy by discussing first what it is for a field to be "practical." Once we have a clear idea of what it means when we say that a field of study is practical, we can apply this to the question, "is philosophy impractical?" I will then argue that some aspects of the study of philosophy can and do serve practical ends, while other aspects are deeply impractical. I will do this by highlighting some of the virtues philosophy brings to the student of the liberal arts (e.g., conceptual clarity and epistemic humility). While I will rely on examples primarily from early modern European philosophy (roughly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), nearly any era of philosophical thought will provide ready-made examples and material illustrative of the arguments I offer. I will argue that the study of philosophy brings with it a special set of virtues that are simultaneously practical and impractical. While this seems to be a contradiction (for obviously, one thing cannot have contrary qualities at the same time, in the same way), I will argue that the case is sufficiently nuanced as to allow for the *prima facie* contradiction to obtain without pain of incoherence.

Finally, I will build on this last point by arguing that this chapter is itself an example of the ways in which philosophy challenges the pervasive view that right and wrong answers are easily obtainable. I will not argue that there are no right and wrong answers, nor will I argue that straightforward contradictions are true; I maintain that there are right and wrong answers, and that if one holds two straightforwardly contradictory beliefs, this is an instance of confusion, cognitive dissonance, or irrationality. I will instead argue that philosophy is uniquely situated to enforce epistemic humility (I, for one, am more than happy to admit that I am not *certain* about very many of the right answers), and to draw our attention to the importance of nuance, context, and just how complicated the Truth really is.

WHAT IS PRACTICAL?

As a philosopher (and a historian of philosophy at that), I have felt the pull to focus on the practical skills that the study of my discipline cultivates in students. I immediately face a difficulty. What does it mean to say that the study of philosophy cultivates *practical* skills? What exactly makes a skill practical or impractical? There are a number of ways we can go about figuring out what this means. We might be tempted to consult our bosses, to listen to how other people use the word and try to figure out what they mean, or just defer to the dictionary definition. None of

these, however, are of particular use to the philosopher and as we will see below, they do very little to help with *scientific* conundrums.

One reason that dictionary definitions are not particularly helpful is that the lexicographer is herself an empirical scientist—she reports how people *use words*. What philosophers are after is the answer to a different sort of question, however. People use words all the time, and often use them without knowing really what they mean. One only need to turn her attention to politics to find altogether too many examples of people appealing to vague, ill-understood notions being thrown around carelessly (the notion of “freedom” is a complete disaster in popular discussions of politics, for instance). There is no doubt we have an intuitive sense of what it is to be “practical,” but it is not at all obvious that, off the cuff, we can iron out the conditions that will pick out all and only those skills, disciplines, and areas of study that are actually practical. What philosophers want to know is not how people use words (otherwise we would just refer to dictionaries), but to what those words refer. In most cases this is easy. When we talk about a chair or a sandwich, we (think we) have a clear idea of what such a thing is and we all understand that the specific organization of those symbols, “c-h-a-i-r,” pick out that thing on which we sit. This is easy and natural most of the time, but things get complicated when we start talking about abstract concepts such as “freedom,” “omnipotence,” or “practicality.” We cannot point to “practical” in the same way we can a chair because practicality is not a concrete object. So, what is it that the word “practical” refers to? What *is* practical?

PRELIMINARY ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE “PRACTICAL”

Despite the intuitive sense we might all have regarding what it means for something to be practical, offering a useful set of conditions that will capture all and only those things that are practical is difficult. As an initial pass, we might offer the dictionary definition:

Practical D: Of or concerned with the actual doing or use of something rather than with theory and ideas.⁸

This initial attempt is problematic for a few reasons. In the context of education, it is not immediately obvious that the kinds of fields we think are practical actually fit this definition. And if our definition rules out *obviously practical* fields, then the definition is pretty lousy. Engineering (whether pure, biochemical, electrical, or otherwise), mathematics, computer science, and physics are not “concerned with the actual doing . . . rather than with theory and ideas.” These fields involve more than just doing things—they involve the application of theory to practice—and to be able to apply theory to practice, one must be concerned with the theo-

ry. This is not unique to the current state of science; in 1793, Immanuel Kant pointed out that the distinction between theory and practice in the sciences is not easy to draw. He wrote:

Now if an empirical engineer tried to disparage general mechanics, or an artilleryman the mathematical doctrine of ballistics, by saying that whereas the theory of it is nicely thought out it is not valid in practice since, when it comes to application, experience yields quite different results than theory, one would merely laugh at him (for, if the theory of friction were added to the first and the theory of the resistance of air to the second, hence if only still more theory were added, these would accord very well with experience.)⁹

If Kant is right, and it seems clear that he is, and students today should be trained in practical_D fields, then the STEM push is deeply misguided. None of those fields are practical in the sense we considered. We might wonder whether the STEM push is misguided, but that is a different question (to which I think the answer is, “kind of” —more on this below). There is a sense in which people think that STEM fields are practical, and what we are concerned with right now is what it means to be practical. If STEM fields are paradigm examples of practical fields, then we must not mean practical_D, because they do not fit that definition. In light of this, we need to try again.

What is it about STEM fields that we think makes them practical? Perhaps what folks have in mind is something more along the lines of this. STEM fields prepare students to make money. This is a pervasive view. We can formalize our definition the following way:

Practical V: *x* is practical if and only if *x* offers a clear path to a specific vocation that is in high demand.

This vocational sense of practicality seems to be what a number of people have in mind when they talk about practical education. For instance, Marco Rubio insisted that we “need more welders and less philosophers.” There can be little doubt that being trained in welding lends itself clearly to a vocation, while being a trained philosopher does not obviously lend itself to a specific vocation. Yet, there are a number of problems here. First, I think that conflating the practical and the vocational is a conceptual error, and a dangerous one at that! On one hand, the difference is clear—there are plenty of skills that one might have that are not necessarily vocational (though they could play a part in some particular job). Being able to read, speak (or read) a second language, compose a coherent sentence, and develop a compelling argument free from logical fallacies are all skills that one might use in day-to-day practices. These are exactly the kinds of skills one gets from the liberal arts, and more specifically, from the study of philosophy.¹⁰ And these skills are ubiquitous;

they do not merely apply to the articles published in philosophy journals, nor do they apply only to calling out our friends on Facebook and Twitter. It seems clear that something's being practical does not automatically make it vocational. Few folks who study argument will make a living off of it; some will become philosophy professors, sure, but most will not. Perhaps this is part of what drives the idea that while we can easily locate practical skills that philosophy teaches (if we are familiar with it as a discipline), figuring out what to do with those skills is tricky. The same cannot likely be said for figuring out what to do with the skills one has as a welder, a nurse, or an accountant. We can see at this point that some things are practical despite not being obviously vocational.

The question remains, however, whether something's being vocational necessarily means that it is practical. After all, the skills one learns in a nursing program are both practical *and* vocational. I am inclined to say that something's being vocational does not guarantee that it is practical as well. While it is the case *right now* that studying computer science is a vocationally oriented pre-professional course of study, we have seen time and time again that what is useful, economically speaking, changes quickly. At best, what is vocationally useful right now is a contingent fact about the particular orientation of the economy, both global and local. "As long as the world did not change much, we would be fine (being adept at the status quo). But for at least the last two hundred years, it's been clear that change in the world is accelerating. Conforming to the world at any one time isn't good enough."¹¹ "Given the outrageous pace of technological advancement, the kinds of studies that are vocationally useful now may fail to be so within even the next few years.

I think it is clear that there is at best a contingent tie between the vocational and the practical. I have already hinted at some reasons for why it might well be the case that conflating practicality and vocationally inclined is dangerous. Perhaps something is practical if and only if it leads directly to a vocation. If one insisted on this equivalence, we can apply the same objection we considered to practical_p, viz. that many of the STEM fields, while seemingly practical, do not obviously lead to vocations. It is easy to make jokes about philosophy want-ads, but the same jokes can probably be made for students with degrees in anthropology and sociology. "Physics Student Needed" ads do not seem to dominate the want ads any more than philosopher ads. In many cases, some kind of post-graduate study, or creative re-packaging is required in order to find gainful employment. This is, in practice, no different from any humanities degree, despite the fact that it is often wielded as an argument against the liberal arts. What drove us to abandon our prior definition was that it seemed to rule out science fields as being "practical." The vocational definition seems to fare no better on that front.

TWO MORE ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE "PRACTICAL"

In light of these problems, we might shift gears in trying to make sense of what we mean when we describe a course of study as "practical." Perhaps we might mean that a course of study is practical when it *actually* has a tangible payoff, whether immediately or down the road. Let us call this "Practical_{AP}." We can formalize this definition thus:

Practical AP: x is practical if and only if x results in an actual, not merely perceived or anticipated, tangible payoff either immediately or at some later point in time.

Surely such a definition avoids the more obvious pitfalls of both the dictionary and vocational definitions; after all, it is not difficult to imagine the kinds of tangible goods an engineer or a geologist might offer us. The same can presumably be said for most STEM fields. Another virtue of this definition is that it provides us with a clear idea of what it is for a field to be impractical: it fails to produce actual tangible outcomes. While this seems an initially plausible definition, I think that it is unsatisfactory. There are plenty of examples from the history of philosophy and science that illustrate that we are simply not in a position right now to know what will have tangible payoffs *in the long run*. I will offer this objection in terms of a parallel problem in normative ethics.

Utilitarianism is a view of morality that is likely familiar to most academics. While there are a number of variations of the view, it is central to all of them that the morally salient feature of any act is the consequence that the action produces. The intent of the agent, or the act type itself is morally irrelevant as long as the outcome of the action maximizes the good (however we end up cashing that out). The objections to utilitarian views are numerous, and we need not rehearse them all here. Of particular interest to our discussion is one group of objections. First, one might worry about the scope of the term "consequences." Is there a statute of limitations regarding the time during which we evaluate the value of the consequences of a particular action? The immediate payoff of an action may appear to be morally right, but down the road things may end up significantly worse than if we had done nothing. Do further consequences get tied back to the evaluation of our initial act? The utilitarian owes us an answer to these questions.

Another, related objection, concerns actual as opposed to intended consequences. Imagine that I am exhausted from trying to defend the value of my discipline, and that I have poor coping skills. In an attempt to blow off some steam, I decide to go for a drive. Armed with a sizable sports utility vehicle, I intentionally rear-end the first motorist I see at a significant speed. Most of us would, I think rightly, evaluate my actions as morally reprehensible. To be sure, the utilitarian would *probably* agree.

The consequences of my actions are almost certain to be bad. Let's add a wrinkle though. Imagine that the person that I randomly assaulted was, by pure chance, moments away from detonating a bomb that would have caused significant damage to property, and injured or killed a number of people. My rear-ending this person, by purely dumb luck, prevented this person from detonating their bomb, and saved the lives of innocent people as a result. The utilitarian who is concerned only with the actual consequences *must* agree that my actions were morally right! After all, had I not done what I did, the consequences would have been tremendously worse. This is a classic objection to the *actual consequence* version of utilitarianism, and while utilitarians have developed sophisticated responses to it, those need not concern us here.

The reason that I spelled out these objections is that the actual consequence utilitarian position mirrors, in an important way, Practical_{AP}. After all, the very definition we are considering is that a course of study is practical when it *actually has a payoff*. The point is that no matter how skilled we are in navigating the world, we just do not always know what the actual consequences of our actions will be. Similarly, while we might be confident in the short-term regarding tangible payoffs, we simply do not know what the world has in store for us in the long-term. What the rear-ending example illustrates, however, is that the confidence we have, by no fault of our own, may well be misplaced. The fact is that we may not be in a very good position with regard to determining what is going to be practical_{AP}.

Galileo provides what may be the clearest real-world example of how wrong we can be with regard to the actual payoff of our projects. Recall that Galileo pushed for a fundamental re-conceptualization of the way the universe functioned. Not only did he reject the geocentric model of the universe in favor of Copernicanism (which required the rejection of common sense, more on this below), but additionally he challenged the foundational assumptions that had governed physics for nearly 2000 years. In *The Starry Messenger*, Galileo casually describes a portion of the moon as offering "the same appearance as . . . a region like Bohemia."¹² Stillman Drake notes that this passage, "was later the basis of much trouble for Galileo. . . . Even in antiquity the idea that the moon (or any other heavenly body) was of the same nature as the Earth had been dangerous to hold." One reason that this was so dangerous is that it flew in the face of literally everything that had been believed to be true. This included the notion that the stars—including the moon and the planets—were constituted by a more perfect material and as such did not behave according to terrestrial laws. A shake-up such as that which Galileo proposed does not seem to be the kind of thing that, in the moment, will result in tangible payoffs. The folks in the 1630s who condemned Galileo were simply not in a position to know whether rejecting the scientific status quo would result in a greater understanding of the nature of the universe. How

could they have known? Yet, with the benefit of nearly 400 years of perspective, we now believe Galileo's work to have been practical_{AP}.

The examples we have considered are striking, but it is important not to overstate our inability to anticipate consequences. We could never have made it this far as a society if we were wholly incapable of anticipating consequences.¹³ Regardless, we do need to note that there are legitimate difficulties facing this definition. We are sometimes in a poor position to judge how things will turn out, as our examples illustrate. Furthermore, the case of Galileo highlights the difficulty in ascertaining just what counts as the statute of limitations in terms of consequences. If we are not obviously in a good position to judge what will have an *actual* payoff, perhaps we should adjust our definition. We seem to have gotten some traction with the notion of a tangible payoff. Perhaps rather than focusing on *actual* tangible payoff, we should instead take a page from the moral theory, deontology, and focus instead on intention. Maybe what people mean when they say that a course of study is practical is that those who work in that field *aim* at some kind of tangible payoff. We might call this "**Practical AIM.**" We can formalize the definition this way:

Practical AIM: x is practical if and only if x has as its principle aim or goal some tangible outcome, either immediately or at some time in the future.

Like practical_{AP}, this definition seems to provide us with a clear picture of what it is to be impractical as well—those fields that are not aimed at a tangible payoff are impractical. I think that this is an improvement over the three previous attempts. I am not certain that this is the best and final definition of practicality, but it should serve our purposes for the time being. Still, I think that there are reasons to be unhappy with the focus on practicality.

In his *Methods of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick argued that one of the counterintuitive facts about human psychology is that when we maintain a laser-focus on achieving one outcome, we often fail to achieve that goal to the greatest extent. He was concerned with the human capacity for achieving pleasure, and he dubs this the "paradox of hedonism." He writes:

But with the pleasures of pursuit there does seem to be a certain incompatibility: it seems that a certain subordination of self-regard is needed if the person is to have full enjoyment. Take the case of a man engaged in pursuing some goal who keeps his main conscious aim perpetually fixed on the pleasure he expects to get from succeeding. He won't catch the full spirit of the chase; his eagerness will never get just the sharpness of edge that gives the pleasure of pursuit its highest zest. This brings us to what we may call the fundamental paradox of hedonism, that if the impulse towards pleasure is too predominant it will defeat its own aim. This effect is scarcely visible in the case of passive sensual

pleasures. But it's certainly true of our active enjoyments generally—whether associated with bodily or intellectual activities—as well as of many emotional pleasures, that we can't attain them in their highest degree as long as we keep our main conscious aim concentrated on them.¹⁴

Surely he is correct. If we spend all of our time focusing on the pleasure we should receive from some activity (doing philosophy, perhaps), we are likely to fail to fully enjoy it. The solution, it seems, is to stop focusing on the pleasure, and instead focus on other aspects of the activity and allow the pleasure to flourish on its own. I think that we have some reason to worry that we might be cultivating a culture suffering from a parallel problem: the paradox of *practicality*. We have been telling students that they must constantly be ready to explain “what [they] are going to do with that” degree. Yet, by spending all of our time telling students to aim at achieving practical or tangible outcomes, we may well be hindering students' ability to actually achieve tangible outcomes.

I am not alone in thinking that this is the case. Consider the case of Google X. Google X is a secret lab just outside of the Google company headquarters that they describe as a “moonshot factory.”¹⁵ The idea behind the lab is to encourage innovation by refusing to focus on tangible outcomes—instead they are encouraged to develop ideas that are likely to fail. Aiming at failure seems, at least on its face, deeply *impractical*_{AIM} for the outcome of failure is decidedly not a tangible outcome in the sense the proponent of practicality has in mind. What we find, however, is that by rewarding failure, people are encouraged to take risks and make breakthroughs. We don't feel tied to specific ideas and narrow, prescribed outcomes that make incremental advances. By encouraging people to abandon the aim of practicality, we avoid the paradox of practicality and we may well end up hitting the mark more effectively.

While the paradox of practicality is a problem, it does not seem to be a problem with this *analysis* of “practicality.” Instead, it seems to provide *prima facie* reason not to accept that practicality (so understood) is the mark of a successful field of study. At this point it seems that we have a provisional account of what it means to think that a field is practical—that it is aimed at a tangible outcome. We also have reason to think that while many people may find this an agreeable analysis, we should not accept it as the mark of a successful course of study. Our purpose here was only to provide some clarity concerning the question set out at this chapter: is philosophy practical? We can now clarify the question: is philosophy *aimed* at some kind of tangible outcome either immediately or at some time in the future? In what follows, I will address why the answer is both yes and no, and how that illustrates the importance of the field.

IS PHILOSOPHY PRACTICAL?

Martha Nussbaum argues convincingly that one important problem facing a public that is narrowly trained in pre-professional fields is the immediate threat to democracy. She notes that students who see education as mere job preparation are apt to fail to be thoughtful citizens engaged in reasoned opinions about the world around them. In order to secure justice and expose prejudice, she argues, we need to be skilled in argumentation. She calls it “an essential tool of civic freedom.”¹⁶ She warns, “What will we have, if these trends continue? Nations of technically trained people who do not know how to criticize authority, useful profit-makers with obtuse imaginations.”¹⁷ If she is right, the very functioning of our government relies on teaching the kinds of skills that philosophy cultivates.

This is an important argument, but it is not my intent to repeat it here. Instead I want to clarify and highlight the point articulated above; that the dangers to democracy notwithstanding, the very motivation for narrow job-training is self-undermining due to short-sightedness. After all, if we narrowly train students to perform only jobs that are economically viable right now, then, given the rate at which technology is making jobs obsolete, that vocational education may well lead them to a dead end just a few years down the road. Furthermore, as we saw with the paradox of practicality, one of the potential problems facing a society that focuses too much on *aiming* at tangible payoffs is that by focusing on those payoffs we may find ourselves unable to fully achieve them. Ultimately, we will end up with a series of “plug and chug” workers who are technically capable of making only incremental adjustments to existing skills and technologies. The liberal arts education on the other hand, and philosophy specifically, aims “not to teach that which is peculiar to any one of the professions; but to lay the foundation which is common to all.”¹⁸ In this way, it seems that in the long-term a philosophical education, embedded in the broader liberal arts education is decidedly *more* practical than the narrower pre-professional educational path.¹⁹

There have been a number of articles of late in popular publications (including *Salon*²⁰ and *The Huffington Post*,²¹ just to name a few) touting the ways in which philosophy makes people more employable. They point to philosophy's tendency toward critical thinking, careful analysis, and creative thinking as ways in which the philosophy student is trained to innovate, rather than do a particular job. I think that all of these things are true of philosophy. In fact, I have urged my students to study philosophy precisely because it is so versatile. Along these lines, there is another popular meme which asserts that the average person changes careers seven times in the course of a professional life. If that's true, that would be a huge selling point for philosophers!²² There are a few important items to note about this claim, however. First, while the meme seems

to be based on "career statistics," the Bureau of Labor Statistics has never collected any statistics on lifetime career changes.²³ There is really no evidence supporting the claim, yet the meme has staying power. Second, the reason that the BLS has never collected data on lifetime career changes is instructive. They note, "the reason we have not produced such estimates is that no consensus has emerged on what constitutes a career change." Put another way, the problem that leads to there being no statistics is *conceptual*. Despite the fact that the meme is likely false, we can learn a lot about the practical value of philosophy from the way in which it is false. I will turn to these two items in detail now.

While the claim is false, it is still quite compelling, which is likely why it's repeated so often. There are any number of reasons for this: it is a scary statistic (and we might think that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions"²⁴), it plays on the volatility and uncertainty of the job market, it helps philosophy professors defend the value of their field (for being broadly qualified and adaptable *frees* you from the bounds of narrow employment), the list goes on. This is illustrative, however, of some serious worries. If we uncritically accept things that sound plausible without looking into them, we are more likely to mindlessly repeat mistakes. "What's so bad about that?" we might ask. In this case, perhaps nothing, but the general principle is dangerous. If we allow ourselves to slide in this one case, then we will develop poor habits of the mind—with such poor habits what else will we uncritically accept? Russell thinks that this is one of dangers of what he calls the "practical man" is that such a person is "shut up within the circle of his private interests: family and friends may be included, but the outer world is not regarded except as it may help or hinder what comes within the circle of instinctive wishes."²⁵ Such a person is living a life that is doomed to sadness and depression—"like a garrison in a beleaguered fortress, knowing that the enemy prevents escape and that ultimate surrender is inevitable." Russell seems to think that this is the ultimate, depressing position for the philosophically unimaginative. And he is not alone in worrying about such habits of mind, though his taste for the dramatic is perhaps unparalleled. W. K. Clifford argued that we are *morally* wrong if we hold even one belief on insufficient evidence:

No real belief, no matter how trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our innermost thoughts, which may someday explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character forever.²⁶

Regardless of whether Clifford is right about the particularly strong moral claim, his warning about habits of mind seem rather plausible. We have an obligation, not just to ourselves, but to everyone around us to

take seriously what we do and do not know. Descartes was aware of this too. In his *First Meditation* he notes, "Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them."²⁷ The foundation analogy is instructive and important. If we build a house on a poor foundation, it is likely to crumble. Likewise, if we build our beliefs on false, unjustified, or otherwise unevaluated claims, all of our beliefs are unstable and likely to come crashing down. If we are to avoid such depressing outcomes as Descartes, Russell and Clifford suggest, we need the tools to properly evaluate claims—those tools are offered by the liberal arts, and philosophy specifically.

The second important feature of the "changing careers" meme, is the reason that it is false. I noted above that the BLS has refrained from even trying to gather these statistics because there is no consensus about what a "career" is. If we do not have a clearly delimited set of conditions according to which we can determine whether something is a career at all, we cannot even begin to question the identity conditions for a career (and thereby determine whether someone has taken on a *new* career). BLS offers a few instructive examples of why this problem is so vexing:

Take the case of a BLS economist who is promoted to a management position. Before the promotion, she spent most of her time conducting economic research. After the promotion to the management position, she still may conduct research, but she also spends much more time supervising staff and reviewing their research, managing her program's finances, and attending to a variety of other management tasks. This promotion represents an occupational change from economist to manager, but does it also represent a career change? . . . Did a construction worker who decided to start his own home-remodeling business experience a career change? What about a newspaper reporter who became a TV news anchor? Each of these examples involves a change in occupation, industry, or both, but do they represent career changes? Most people probably would agree that a medical doctor who quits to become a comedian experienced a career change, but most "career changes" probably are not so dramatic.²⁸

As we can see, what is at issue here is not a practical problem to be faced by analyzing data, or running the numbers, and as we noted above, it is not one that can be adjudicated merely by appeal to the dictionary. We do not really care, in this case, about how people use the word "career," rather we want to know *what* a career *is* (independent of people's idiosyncratic use). In order to determine what constitutes a career, we need to engage in conceptual analysis—determining what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being a career will provide us with a framework according to which we can go out and gather data. After all, we don't want just any old numbers; we want the numbers that track the

change in careers. Nussbaum's technically proficient, but philosophically unimaginative wage-earners would not be in a position to engage in the kind of conceptual analysis that is needed here. The BLS itself even concludes by noting that they are hamstrung with regard to collecting this data until "sociologists, career-guidance professionals, and other labor market observers" come to a consensus (what they really need is a *philosopher*). If these folks don't have the non-vocational, philosophical skills, we may never find the real data. Just as I noted at the outset of this chapter, we often use words without knowing for sure what they mean. The first half of this chapter was devoted to trying to iron out just what we mean by "practical." Determining the meaning of concepts such as "practical" or "career" is not just an exercise reserved for philosophers defending the importance of their fields. Here we see an example of a real-world payoff of doing philosophy. In this case, we *aim* at defining a problematic concept in an attempt to guide empirical research.

Philosophers (in particular, analytic philosophers) spend a good deal of time trying to provide just those conditions for concepts that we frequently employ in our day-to-day lives. Whether we concern ourselves with concepts dealing with value (e.g., right, wrong, just, unjust, good, bad, etc.), or epistemic notions (e.g., knowledge, justification, evidence, etc.), we spend a good deal of time trying to conceptually clarify and make more coherent to what these terms refer. Fluency in conceptual analysis can have directly tangible payoffs when applied to science, as we noted above, but it also has a *personal* payoff. When we attend more carefully to what we mean, it is not entirely unlike getting a new television with higher resolution. Everything becomes clearer, sharper, and more intelligible. Such a benefit is personal, but to suggest that it is not tangible is plainly false.

It might seem that I've made a case for the value of philosophy lying in its utility; that utility being derived from the practical skills it offers—whether it helps create better citizens for a functioning democracy, clearer thinking scientists, or just more thoughtful individuals. If we were to construe a philosophical education only as aimed specifically at these ends, then I have made that argument. I do not think that practical utility exhausts the value of philosophy, and I do not think that this is the correct *aim*. I will now turn to a brief discussion of why philosophy is valuable because it is impractical.

Is Philosophy Impractical?

Despite all of the ways in which the study of philosophy could be seen as a practical course of study (for instance, we might consider the aim of a philosophical education as preparing students for graduate or professional school, giving students the skills needed to be a thoughtful and intelligent contributor to our democracy, or even in terms of midlife earn-

ings in which case it will turn out to be practical both AP and AIM²⁹), the field is deeply impractical in many ways. Aristotle rightly believed that philosophy can only be done when all other needs are met. One simply cannot afford to worry about whether omnipotence means that God is capable of making "it not true that the radii of the circle are equal"³⁰ when she does not have the food to sustain her for the day. Survival first, abstract questions about God's nature second (or later). Of course, this is true for most studies at the university level. Unlike some of the more career-oriented disciplines, philosophy does not *directly* contribute to a society that is consumer driven. *Qua* philosopher, I do not produce consumer items that make life easier, nor do I offer services that ease the burden of a normal life; more often than not what I do is make students uncomfortable, challenge the "obvious," and turn a critical eye to just about everything. Nothing about that is practical in the sense that it is aimed at a concrete, tangible outcome. Despite that, I believe that the very fact that philosophy is impractical contributes to its value. Russell comes close to offering this kind of position. However, he thinks that the value of philosophy is to be found in the effects on the individual rather than the whole of society. It is true that the student of philosophy *should* become more understanding, more charitable, more open-minded, more self-aware, and more careful in her thinking. These virtues may well have practical implications for society but those benefits are, at best, secondary and deeply contingent. The benefits to the student herself are nonetheless valuable:

The impartiality which, in contemplation, is the unalloyed desire for truth, is the very same quality of mind which, in action, is justice, and in emotion is that universal love which can be given to all, and not only to those who are judged useful or admirable. Thus contemplation enlarges not only the objects of our thoughts, but also the objects of our actions and our affections: it makes us citizens of the universe, not only of the walled city at war with all the rest. In this citizenship of the universe consists man's true freedom, and his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears.³¹

Russell is right. The value of the liberal arts education is not purely to be determined by what it can do for the society. I will here discuss the ways in which the very practice of philosophy, while important to the student, and arguably valuable to society as a whole down the road, is quite impractical. To illustrate this, I will first offer a brief example from my introductory courses, then I will tie that in with a brief discussion of how philosophy can cultivate epistemic humility. While epistemic humility is important, I will highlight the ways in which it is deeply impractical.

In my introductory philosophy classes, I begin by asking students why they are there. Invariably, they say something like, "to get a degree," though there are sometimes intermediate steps here (including the fulfill-

ing of a general education requirement, etc.). I ask why they want a degree . . . "to get a job." Why a job? "To make money." Why do you want money? "So I can buy stuff and support my family." Why do you want to do that? And this is where we hit a roadblock. After a pregnant pause, I get a few tentative answers. "Because that's what you're supposed to do." Or, "Buying stuff is fun . . ." I do not think that I'm unique or cutting edge in adopting this first-day pedagogical approach, but I do think it nicely illustrates a few important points about the impracticality of philosophy. First of all, the students in my intro class have really not spent enough time thinking about whether they are doing what they actually want to do. Do my students really want to be in college, or are they just there because they are "supposed to be"? I am not actively trying to talk students out of college (though if I were trying to, it might be a great case for the impracticality of philosophy as a course of study!), but I am pushing them to set aside their assumptions about how and why they need to make money.

I offer this vignette as a concrete example of the ways in which philosophers might challenge fundamental assumptions. We have seen above that we are not obviously in the best position to know what kinds of studies or practices will lead to the most fruitful outcomes, and we have also seen reason to think that by *aiming* at the practical we might hinder our ability to actually maximize the tangible outcomes. But what we want to do here is point to the ways in which philosophy is actually *impractical*. On the surface level, what I ask students to do is plainly impractical. Stopping to think about whether making money is important might come across as a somewhat frivolous task (I happen to think it is tremendously important, but I can see why it might seem nonsensical). Given the structure in which our students live, as a matter of (social) necessity students *do* need to make money. To do that it seems that more and more, some college is required. That much seems certain. There are two related concerns here that a philosophical education will highlight: first, we might ask whether we are right to be so certain about that which seems obvious (are we right that college is the only way?); second we might ask whether, if we are right, this is how our society *ought* to be. I think that both of these questions are very important questions to ask, but I want to focus on the former.

One of the core areas of philosophy is epistemology: the study of knowledge, justification, evidence, etc. It seems that we know all kinds of things, but philosophers will ask whether we really do, and if so, how? Part of my first-day exercise in intro is an attempt to get students to recognize that they believe all kinds of things without recognizing that they do. There are a bunch of assumptions that we all uncritically accept in order to just make it by on a day-to-day basis. "Many people do not know what they believe, since believing something and knowing that one believes it are different acts of thinking, and one often occurs without the

other."³² It is in examining those assumptions, in making sure that we know what we believe and why, that philosophy thrives. Part of the reason that philosophers spend much of their time here is because those foundations determine the viability of the rest of our belief structure. Recall above that we considered Clifford's concerns regarding the uncritical acceptance of beliefs—we have an obligation to everyone to believe only those things we have good reason to accept. For the philosopher, however, that is not enough. We must be willing to revise our beliefs at any time, for certainty of virtually any stripe can be dangerous. If we are certain of the truth of one of our beliefs, we stop searching for more information. We shut ourselves off from new experiences, and presume that those with whom we disagree are not only mistaken, but are somehow irrational, silly, or dangerous. Yet, just as it is "good to know something of the customs of various peoples, so that we may judge our own more soundly and not think that everything contrary to our own ways is ridiculous and irrational,"³³ it is important to be open to beliefs of others. If there is any theme that unifies the thinkers of the early modern period, it is that we need to be acutely aware of our own limits.

Whether we read the work of Rene Descartes, Margaret Cavendish, David Hume, or almost every other thinker from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one of the central themes that unifies virtually all of the disparate views from this era is the observation that we are finite, fallible beings, and that while we often feel confident in our beliefs we must recognize the limits of our own cognition. Descartes notes in the *Meditations* that we often make judgments on the basis of incomplete information and that we ought to be more careful. He writes, "if I look out the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves. . . . Yet do I see any more than hats and coats that could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment."³⁴ What we should take away from this, for our purposes here, is that the senses do not provide us all of the information we frequently take them to provide. There are limits, and while it seems to fly in the face of common sense, what we see is not always what we get. Famously, Hume argued that it is impossible to actually observe causation. The best we can hope to observe is a constant conjunction of events. He says, "As to past *experience*, it can only be allowed to give *direct* and *certain* information of those precise objects only, and that precise period of time, which fell under its cognizance. . . . The bread, which I formerly eat, nourished me; that is a body of such sensible qualities, was, at that time, endowed with such secret powers: but does it follow, that other bread must always also nourish me at another time . . . ?"³⁵ Despite the epistemological differences between Descartes and Hume, they both agree concerning the limits of perceptual

experience and tendency of the human mind to form lasting judgments that far exceed the data provided by the senses.

On one hand, we have a default position that what we perceive is objective, the same as what everyone else perceives, and is verifiable. Just look! Yet, on the other hand, so much of what we think we perceive goes well beyond what we actually do. We constantly make judgments about causality, about others' thoughts/experiences, and about things that are either well beyond what we experience or are impossible to observe. Philosophers draw our attention to the limits of what we can know, and the focus on the literal limits of what we perceive is itself decidedly impractical. When we focus on what we *do not* actually know, we are decidedly not aimed at reaching a tangible outcome. In that way, the practice is *really* impractical. Perhaps it is this focus that has raised the ire of some folks in the STEM fields. Perhaps this is what drives people to view philosophy as an impractical major; after all, if our provisional definition of practicality is correct, then this is a paradigm case of how the field *is* impractical. Despite the impracticality, I would like to briefly return to the ways in which the impracticality of philosophy can be helpful to STEM fields.

THE TREE OF PHILOSOPHY (AND STEM)

One reason that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are so important is that it is during this time we see a tremendous shift in scientific thought. The reasons that this is of particular importance to the history of *philosophy* are likely familiar to most philosophers. The distinction between "science" and "philosophy" is a relatively recent one. Newton took himself to be doing "natural philosophy," as did Galileo, Descartes, and altogether too many others to name here. The modern period is one of the richest periods in scientific history—from Copernicus's instrumentalism regarding his mathematical models, to Galileo's audacity, to Newton's developments, natural philosophy (science) progressed at a feverish pace. Undergraduate students taking a course in physics today are not likely to learn about the conceptual, metaphysical, and theological issues that faced any of these figures. Furthermore, science students are likely not concerned to learn 500-year-old theorems, or other views that we now believe to be false. The history of science is nothing if not a history of failures that we (seem to) have overcome. As a result, influential scientists (including Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Lawrence Krauss, and Stephen Hawking) have loudly and publicly condemned philosophy. Those influential scientists are wrong for all sorts of reasons. Apart from the reasons I cited above, for the remainder of this section I intend to discuss the practical value that studying the history of early modern philosophy can

have for students (STEM and non-STEM alike), and also to highlight how deeply impractical this study is.

I mentioned above that one of the fundamental assumptions that philosophers attack concerns the reliability of perceptual experience. I also noted that this line of questioning seems to be rather upsetting to empirical scientists, and they are not without reason. After all, look at all the amazing things empirical science has been able to accomplish in a relatively short amount of time! We have pocket computers that contact satellites we put in space, which allow us to see the face of the person we are calling. It's unreal. If anything seems clear, it is that science is doing something right. Yet, philosophers love to challenge the viability of the fundamental nature of observability. There are countless examples from the history of philosophy that challenge the reliability of perceptual experience. Whether Descartes's famous dream argument, Locke's view that secondary qualities only exist in the mind, or Hume's external world skepticism, we have all kinds of reasons to doubt that what we see is what is actually out there. Despite these, science moves on, creating amazing stuff. Does this not provide evidence to the effect that scientists are right about philosophy?

No. They are wrong. Returning to the Copernican revolution will help illustrate why. What could be more obvious than that the Earth revolves around the sun, while turning on its axis? Before we answer, we should consider our own immediate perceptual experiences. Do we feel as if we are spinning at ~1000 mph? Do we feel as if we are traveling at ~67,000 mph? To drive the point home, do we feel as if we are moving in a corkscrew motion, spinning at over a thousand miles per hour, while flying at over 60,000 mph? Plainly not, and those of us who are scientifically literate can appeal to the constancy of motion to help explain why we do not feel it. Now look at the sun in the evening. As it begins to disappear from sight, how do we describe it? The *real* explanation for what we see is that the Earth is rotating, but we call it a "sunset." Perhaps this is for poetic reasons (it is not very romantic to ask your partner to "go watch the rotation of the earth such that the sun becomes no longer visible from our perspective"), or perhaps it better describes what we *actually see*. It looks as if the sun is moving, and we are not. "We know better, though" we might think. Sure, but how? We know better because we have learned some elementary science. How did scientists figure this out? Through mathematical models, observation, and a lot of hard work, of course. There is a tendency to overemphasize the observability of the motion of the Earth.

Let us place ourselves in the mindset of someone in the early seventeenth century. During this time, we have the famous struggle between the geocentric view of the universe and the new science that tells us that it is not the sun that is in motion, but the Earth. We are now told that everything we have ever believed about physics is false, that the way we

have heretofore conceived of our very existence relative to the universe is misguided. Even more importantly, we are told that *what we see and feel is wrong*. Think about what we actually perceive. We seem to watch the sun move overhead. We seem to feel the ground beneath us staying still. We do not feel the Earth's rotation. The issue facing natural philosophers at the time was not one of observation. Both the geocentric and heliocentric models of the universe were equally equipped to explain the *observable* phenomena. The dispute was not concerning *observation*; it was a *conceptual* dispute. I will not get into all of the fascinating history here as I do not think that it is necessary for me to make my point. The basic point is this. The proponents of the geocentric and heliocentric models of the universe were working with the *same* empirical data, and providing different conceptual frameworks with which to understand that data. No amount of pure technical proficiency or observation would be enough to decide between them. Furthermore, the heliocentric model was only put forth by a particularly clever Copernicus (who professed only to care about crafting a better calendar, not describing the way the universe actually worked) who dared to reject the received wisdom of his day and constructed a model that placed the Earth in motion and the sun in a stationary position.

Even in this cursory and oversimplified discussion of the shift from the geocentric to the heliocentric model of the universe we can see, in historical practice, some of the value of philosophical study. What is of particular importance to my discussion in this chapter, however, is that the value that comes from philosophical study is at once practical and impractical. On one hand, it seems crazy to doubt the evidence provided by the senses; to do so at great lengths seems an unneeded distraction from the serious work that natural science does. This seems to be the view of some prominent physicists today. If this historical example (which is by no means the only one) is any indication, then there are serious conceptual issues that cannot be handled *unless* we question the most central tenets of our best science. In this case, folks in the seventeenth century had to question what they saw and felt, *and* reject the "common-sense" view that the Earth was stationary. Rejecting common sense, we might think, is rarely practical. And more often than not, we are correct. It is impractical! That, however, is exactly my point. The Copernican and Galilean rejection of common sense led to tremendous leaps in the development of science. But those leaps were only possible because of the deeply impractical mental habits of some of the natural philosophers at the time.

Do not misread me here. I am not meaning to suggest that science now is on the wrong track, or that every time someone tries out a weird new theoretical hypothesis that we are automatically going to embark on the next great scientific revolution. What I mean to suggest is that it is the very impracticality of philosophy that can and does lead to *long-term*

practical results. To return to the concerns regarding a technically skilled, but unimaginative workforce, we can only imagine what the world would be like were it not for the deeply philosophical, conceptually questioning individuals of the Copernican Revolution. For if seventeenth-century scientists were unwilling or unable to question assumptions about the motion of the Earth, about the perfectly spherical nature of the moon, about the uniform circularity of the orbits, or about their own perceptual experience, our own understanding of the universe now would have been impossible. Again, challenging fundamental assumptions, whether of society, morality, science, government, or anything else, is ultimately impractical. These questions do little to nothing to directly help advance practical affairs. Yet, without the skills to address these questions properly, progress is unlikely to occur. In this way, the study of the history of philosophy is at once practical *and* impractical.

Through a careful study of the deep interconnections between physics, metaphysics, observation, and explanation, and epistemology, students gain a perspective of just how radically and how quickly things changed during the seventeenth century. They are also provided with the tools needed to reflect on what they are doing, and recognize their own limitations, both in, and outside of the lab. The very people who did science, until very recently, *were* philosophers. During the Copernican Revolution, physics was a part of a philosophy curriculum, right alongside metaphysics, logic, moral theory and theology. In fact, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, physics was *grounded in* metaphysics.³⁶ I see no reason that this trend should not reemerge. We should take a page from, not just the seventeenth century, but the period in American history between the world wars where "a liberal education surely included the sciences, but many educators insisted that it not be reduced to them."³⁷ We need to prepare students not just to *do* things in this economy, but to be prepared to shape the future.

THE PLACE OF PHILOSOPHY IN A LIBERAL EDUCATION

Thus far I have argued that philosophy as a discipline is precisely the kind of field that needs to be central to a liberal arts education regardless of whether we think such an education should be "practical." When properly understood, philosophy is practical in many ways. The skills that philosophy reinforces provide an avenue to economic mobility and freedom, provide ways to help clarify conceptual problems that applied sciences face, thus freeing the scientist to pursue worthwhile projects and reinforce traits that are essential for the proper functioning of a democracy. If we consider the role of the liberal arts to be less outwardly focused—aimed more at crafting a well-rounded person, there is still a clear place for philosophy. The most direct benefit that the study of phi-

losophy can offer is the benefit to the student herself. She is forced to reevaluate the obvious, to engage with the unfamiliar, become a more empathic person, open to others' points of view. These benefits all point to the ways in which philosophy is good for the student.

It is important, however, not to overemphasize the utility of the study of philosophy—whether to the student herself, or to society as a whole. The *intellectual* freedom that comes along with the study of philosophy can be uncomfortable and terrifying. In spite of the connotations that discomfort and terror frequently carry, I maintain that the intellectual freedom that comes with the study of philosophy constitutes at least a part of the value of philosophy. Kim Brooks thought the impracticality of the liberal arts was reason to destroy it. She rightly notes that, "freedom can promote growth, but it can also cause paralysis. Faced with limitless possibilities, a certain number of people will just stand still."³⁸ Where Brooks and I disagree is not on the outcome, but on the value of what comes before that paralysis. Philosophy is good in spite of, and antecedent to the paralysis she describes. What Brooks describes leads me to think that she understands the *impracticality* of the liberal arts in terms of the broad scope of freedom that one can gain from such a course of study. That is, when we find ourselves free from the narrow confines of a vocational, or pre-professional course of education, we also find ourselves without a singular, tangible *aim*. Since we have tentatively accepted that "practicality" has to do with the aims of a particular field of study, and philosophy, for example, tends to aim not at tangible outcomes but rather at increasing the scope of intellectual freedom, I think that we can make a case that Brooks understands the liberal arts to be impractical just because the study of them does not promote a tangible aim. The freedom that comes from such studies is tantamount to its impracticality.

Moreover, Brooks seems to identify "impracticality" with the weight that comes from being free to make, and responsible for what follows from, one's own decisions. When we take on a more vocational form of education, there is a sense in which what we do next is already decided for us. There is less that we need to think about, the parameters are narrowed, and the responsibilities clearly demarcated. Yet, when one studies the liberal arts, this is usually not the case. What comes next is, as Brooks rightly suggests, completely open. While we might initially applaud this freedom of economic mobility, there can be little doubt that the sheer number of unguided possibilities makes some people uncomfortable. What seems to make it scary is the scope of the freedom. The student of philosophy is not merely free in terms of economic or vocational mobility, but is intellectually freed from custom and prejudice. The student of philosophy becomes, as much as one can, free in every respect. Jean-Paul Sartre thinks that this is the situation in which we all find ourselves. Yet, with such freedom comes the awareness of our responsibilities. He argues, "It is therefore senseless to think of complaining

since nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are. Furthermore this absolute responsibility is not resignation; it is simply the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom."³⁹ It is this level of responsibility that makes many of us uncomfortable. Yet, despite the discomfort, despite the increased sense of responsibility, we seem to think that freedom is a foundational good. It nearly makes no sense to ask *why* freedom is good, particularly in America. We simply accept that freedom is good as a foundational truth (whether we ought to do so is a separate question). If I am correct about Brooks's motivation, then it seems that the impracticality of a degree in the liberal arts, specifically philosophy, is precisely what makes it valuable. To study philosophy is to radically free oneself, economically, socially, intellectually. With that freedom comes discomfort, fear and existential angst. None of that is practical in any of the senses we noted above, least of all in terms of aiming at something concrete or tangible. It *is* impractical.

But the fear, discomfort, and existential angst that can accompany the freedom gained through the study of philosophy are not the only ways in which philosophy is deeply impractical. The *practice* of philosophy itself is decidedly impractical. We study the most abstract of topics, challenging received views of what is obviously correct. We challenge the reliability of observation itself (much to the dismay of some empirical scientists), question that which lies beyond the scope of the sciences, and infrequently (or never) find definitive answers. "Yet, however slight may be the hope of discovering an answer, it is part of the business of philosophy to continue consideration of such questions . . . and to keep alive that speculative interest in the universe which is apt to be killed by confining ourselves to definitely ascertainable answers."⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

One of the greatest, if not the greatest, virtue that the study of philosophy can offer a student is an awareness of her own intellectual limitations. Too often, students walk into the university looking for not only the specific skills they will need to perform some particular task, but they come in with the idea that what they are going to get from professors is a tidy set of all the "right" answers to difficult questions. Philosophy can help to demonstrate that this is simply not how the world works. While it would be nice to have all the answers, to be able to box them up and sell them off to students eager to go do things with them, the universe tends to resist such tidy classification. When presenting normative moral theories in my introductory classes, students often try to boil the issue down to just two (often deontology and consequentialism). When I point out that there are a bunch of other views, they become frustrated, ornery, and uncomfortable. They want there to be two sides, one right, one wrong.

Sadly, in most cases, the world does not play along. The answer to most questions, both in and outside of philosophy, if we are being honest with ourselves is, "well, it's complicated." In this chapter I have not only argued that philosophy plays an important role in a liberal arts education, but over the course of the discussion highlighted another virtue of philosophical thought: That even seemingly straightforward questions can result in complicated, nuanced responses. Is philosophy impractical? Well, the answer is complicated. It is and it isn't.

When done properly, "Philosophic contemplation does not, in its widest survey, divide the universe into two hostile camps—friends and foes, helpful and hostile, good and bad—it views the whole impartially."⁴¹ By forcing students to recognize that even the beliefs that seem most obviously correct can be up for grabs (whether that be immediate perceptual experience, or something else), the notion that there is no room for nuance, subtlety and complication becomes untenable. A philosophical education encourages students to contextualize the positions of their interlocutors and try to understand *why* it is that otherwise intelligent people might say or believe seemingly crazy things. One of my favorite examples comes from Descartes. In order to demonstrate the impossibility of empty space, he imagines that there is *nothing* between two objects. In such a case, Descartes says, the two objects must touch (for nothing is between them).⁴² There is a way of reading this argument that makes Descartes look like a fool. All we have to do is imagine two things (perhaps, Earth and the moon) apart, but not touching. What a buffoon! Of course, there are a few issues that we ought to consider. First, Descartes was writing in the 1640s, he was a mechanist, and *nobody* had considered action at a distance (e.g., gravity) to be anything other than magic. If we give Descartes the benefit of the doubt, we might imagine him taking a bag and inhaling all of the air out of it. We know what happens to the outer walls of the bag (they contract to the point where they touch). It is not unreasonable to read Descartes as offering something like this account. Of course, if we merely read the words on the page, and we are not in a generous mood, we might be inclined to read him as offering a preposterous argument. The study of philosophy teaches us not to think this way about our interlocutors, whether long-dead but important philosophers, or very much alive politically opposed peers. Instead the student of philosophy is trained to recognize, impartially, the perspective of those who have competing views. Only then can she plausibly evaluate the views. This is perhaps the principle virtue philosophy offers to a liberal arts education: the ability to bridge seemingly disparate fields, to understand them, recognize the connections and to clarify the fundamental concepts in a charitable fashion. What could be more practical than unifying one's education? What could be more impractical than challenging the fundamental assumptions present in every field? Yet, this is exactly what philosophy does, and that's exactly why we need it.

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NOTES

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2. For a discussion of the history of liberal education as a conflict between philosophy and rhetoric, see: Kimball, Bruce A. 2010. "Introduction: The Disputed Origins" in *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Documentary History*, Kimball, Bruce A. ed. Lanham: University Press of America. For a discussion of the history of liberal education as a conflict between the practical and the humanistic, see Roth, Michael S. 2014. *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
3. Roth, Michael S. 2014. *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press. p. 100.
4. Brooks, Kim. 2011. "Is It Time to Kill the Liberal Arts Degree?" http://www.salon.com/2011/06/19/time_to_kill_liberal_arts/ (published June 19, 2011; accessed June 27, 2016).
5. Jones, Nicholaos. 2012. "Liberal Arts, and the Advantages of Being Useless" https://www.academia.edu/2454947/Liberal_Arts_and_the_Advantages_of_Being_Useless (accessed June 27, 2016).
6. Roth, Michael S. 2014, p. 102.
7. Russell, Bertrand. 1912 (2007). *The Problems of Philosophy*. Charleston: Bibliobazaar. pp. 114–15.
8. Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/practical> (accessed Aug 13, 2016).
9. Kant, Immanuel. 1793. "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But Is of No Use in Practice," in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, Gregor, Mary J. Ed. (1996). Cambridge University Press. p. 280.
10. Data collected from the Educational Testing Service in 2014 comparing students' performance on standardized postgraduate exams (the GRE, GMAT, LSAT) show that philosophy students across the board perform better than any other major (with the notable exception of quantitative reasoning, where philosophers fall well behind many of the hard sciences). The correlation is clearly present, but there are legitimate questions concerning selection bias (was it philosophy that taught these skills, or did students already adept at these skills thrive in philosophy?), but the data are striking

- nonetheless. For a summary of these findings, see <http://dailynous.com/value-of-philosophy/charts-and-graphs> (accessed June 29, 2016).
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 14. Sidgwick, Henry 1907. *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edition. Rawls, John Ed. (1982) Hackett. p. 48.
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 19. For another argument along these lines, see also, Zakaria, Fareed. 2015. "Why America's Obsession with STEM Education is Dangerous" in *The Washington Post* (March 26). https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-stem-wont-make-us-successful/2015/03/26/5f4604f2-d2a5-11e4-ab77-9646eea6a4c7_story.html (accessed June 16, 2016).
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 22. I will admit, here in an endnote, because I presume you're not reading it, that I have leaned on this meme myself in trying to convince students to study philosophy. That was before I found out what I'm about to tell you. Now that I know better, I'll offer a more nuanced version of the argument to my students—one that mirrors where I'm going in this text. This is my mea culpa.
 23. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsfaqs.htm#anch43> (accessed June 29, 2016). They note, "The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) never has attempted to estimate the number of times people change careers in the course of their working lives."
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 26. Clifford, W.K. 1877. "The Ethics of Belief" in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*. (1999) Prometheus Books.
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31. Russell, Bertrand. 1912 (2007). p. 117.

32. Descartes, Rene. 1637. *Discourse on the Method* in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* v. I. Cottingham, John; Stoothoff, Robert; Murdoch, Dugald eds. (1985) Cambridge University Press. p. 122.

33. Ibid, pp. 113–14.

34. Descartes, Rene. 1641 (1984). p. 21.

35. Hume, David. 1748. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Beauchamp, Tom L. Ed. (1999) Oxford University Press. p. 114.

36. The examples of the grounding of science in metaphysics are too numerous to list. One example, however, concerns Newton. Students are often shocked and baffled to learn that Newton believed in and practiced alchemy. After all, how could such an important scientist believe something so silly? A little digging into Newtonian metaphysics, however, can help to explain why he was not merely superstitious. Newton seemed to believe that all matter was composed of the same fundamental particles, and that the macro-level properties of mid-sized objects resulted from the ways in which those particles were organized (a view not terribly far removed from our own—and even closer to Descartes's own view of matter some sixty years earlier). If this is true of matter, then working to change, e.g., lead into gold seems not crazy, but a mere matter of fundamental physical manipulation. I mention this for two reasons—first, it demonstrates that Newtonian physics was grounded in a view about the nature of material reality (which is a metaphysical question), and second, it illustrates that some things that strike us as silly, misguided, or even dumb are decidedly less so when understood in context. Ideally, students will apply this realization both to their own views and to the views of their interlocutors, whether scientists or otherwise.

37. Roth, Michael, S. 2014. p. 126.

38. Brooks, Kim. 2011. "Is it Time to Kill the Liberal Arts Degree?" http://www.salon.com/2011/06/19/time_to_kill_liberal_arts/ (published June 19, 2011; accessed June 27, 2016).

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41. Russell, Bertrand. 1912 (2007). p. 115.

42. See Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (II.18).

THREE

Comparative Literature

From "Crossroads" of the Humanities to "Rhizome"

Nozomi Irei

For some time now, the humanities in general have been in a state of crisis. Consequently, the goals of a liberal education have increasingly come into question. While I cannot delve deeply into these complex issues here, I will outline how Comparative Literature is symptomatic of the crisis.¹ Comparative Literature is often positioned at the "crossroads" of the humanities (or the "human sciences"), and as such, it is reflective of some important questions and controversies in humanistic study today. Much of what I will deal with concerns how Comparative Literature can renew itself and how such a renewal can contribute to the construction of a new direction for liberal education today.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE WITHIN LIBERAL EDUCATION

At first glance, "Comparative Literature" may sound like a "newfangled" discipline in liberal education. Hence, the question often arises: What is Comparative Literature, and how does it contribute to liberal education? The origin and evolution of Comparative Literature is too complex to take up here. The same holds for what has come to be called a liberal education.

Just as the history of Comparative Literature is too vast to take up here, so too is the history of liberal education. It is important to note that their modern forms emerge together, as we see them both come into their