

Opinion Page

Opinion Page: *The Impact of Philosophy – And the Philosophy of Impact*

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Introduction

Where is philosophy in public life? Can we point to how the world in 2020 is different than it was in 2010 or 1990 because of philosophical research?

On the first day of class, philosophy professors tell their students that philosophy promises to make us better citizens and to increase our understanding of science, politics, and art. Or in the words of the American Philosophical Association's [guide for undergraduates](#), philosophy develops the capacity to see the world from the perspective of

other individuals and other cultures; it enhances one's ability to perceive the relationships among the various fields of study; and it deepens one's sense of the meaning and variety of human experience.

We agree. But more needs to be said about the relevance of philosophy to shaping society than that. People want to know that philosophy and the humanities are valuable not only to college students while taking a class or two, but also how the massive bodies of professional research that are being produced are relevant to society at large.

This is where philosophy (and the humanities generally) has failed: philosophers don't investigate the specificities of philosophy's relevance. Granted, there's a pile of works (e.g., Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit*, Fareed Zakaria's *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, Michael Roth's *Beyond the University*) that provide a general defence of the humanities. But when the question is put: 'How specifically is humanities research relevant to society?' any answer is seen as either a political challenge aligned with a defence of ignorance or else as being self-evident.

We think that asking—and answering—this question is neither a disrespectful nor a trivial task.

As it stands, professors teach their classes and write their books and articles, trusting that their insights will eventually seep out into the culture at large. In a nod toward Reagan, call it the trickle-down model. The whole process is radically accidental. Humanities research is rarely given an active push to get it in front of wider audiences.

Of course, humanists do work that's directly relevant to society: they spot inconsistencies in scientific practice and uncover missed opportunities for social justice. What's missing is the follow-

through—practical efforts to see that one's research makes it into the hands of those who could field test the ideas. This is not a matter of individual incompetence. The problem is institutional: tenure committees, publishing houses, and philosophy journals do not require an action plan as part of the work humanists produce. Demonstrating relevance is not part of the everyday workflow.

As it turns out, the science community has been debating the nature of relevance concerning their research for more than 20 years. As we might expect, their language is somewhat different: the term of art has been 'impact'. But the issues at stake are similar. They have made some headway, too, in understanding how to better connect research to the ongoing needs of the public.

How could it be that the sciences elaborated a philosophy of impact before philosophers did? In 1997, in response to GPRA, the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act, the US National Science Foundation changed its criteria for the review of grant proposals. It required that applications be judged in terms of their 'broader impact' as well as for their 'intellectual merit'. (And this wasn't only a US phenomenon. Science agencies in the UK, the EU, and Brazil (among others) all enacted requirements where scientists had to describe the expected societal impact of their research.) This has led to a twenty-year effort to understand what broader impact means, how attempts to achieve them can be evaluated, and how such impact can be increased.

Making scientists explain how their research would improve society marked a decisive break with the past. Previously the sciences behaved in the same way that philosophy still behaves: the sciences had their own version of the trickle-down model. The canonical statement of this view was

provided by Vannevar Bush, head of the U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development during the Second World War. In *Science, The Endless Frontier* (1945), Bush described a world where science functions best, and indeed ends up being most relevant, when scientists are left alone to pursue their own curiosity. In an ironic twist, societal relevance was best served by not thinking about relevance at all.

Changing this attitude wasn't easy. In the case of the NSF, in the first years the scientific community simply ignored the new criterion. When NSF forced the issue in 2001 by refusing to review proposals that did not address broader impacts, scientists protested its implementation, claiming the idea was incoherent, and that in any case social impact wasn't their responsibility. Gradually, however, the idea of broader impacts took hold. Today, some twenty years on, broader impacts mark a decisive (indeed, philosophic) change in scientific culture: the scientific community now accepts that social responsibility is an intrinsic part of their work.

Not that the conceptual work has been completed. The debate over the 'impact agenda' continues; in fact, it has been in the news recently. As part of initiatives launched by the new Boris Johnson government, in late January, United Kingdom Research and Innovation announced that they will be removing the 'Pathways to Impact' section from grant applications. This change was described in terms of the cutting of red tape. Some have read this as a retreat from giving attention to impacts. But rather than marking the failure of the impact agenda, it's a sign that impact or social relevance has been so integrated in the knowledge production system that a separate section has become unnecessary. In other words, the conversation has advanced.

All of these issues stand as an open invitation for philosophers and humanists to jump into the debate. When they do (and a small number have been doing so for some time) they will find that they have two tasks to take up – helping the science and science policy communities reckon with the intricacies of understanding impact, and developing a philosophy of impact for research across the humanities.

The amount of money at stake in the humanities is trivial compared with the sciences. And traditional defences of the humanities – that they involve noble thinking far above the merely pecuniary interests of other fields – will remain important. But society is increasingly focused on understanding the practical results of its funding. Call it an accountability moment. Humanists should get out in front of these demands before reductive versions of impact are forced upon them.