

## Omnivores and Synthesisers: Academic philosophers as interdisciplinary specialists

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### Abstract

I stipulate that an academic discipline is societally relevant insofar as it helps to resolve a society's real problems. What makes such a view correct depends on meta-normative views. I show how one's meta-normative view significantly determines the likelihood that disciplinary philosophy is of societal relevance. On normative non-naturalism, normative naturalism, and normative scepticism, the societal relevance of philosophy is in doubt. I then argue that philosophers should aim for two remedies. They should be omnivores and synthesisers, aiming for empirically sound knowledge and interdisciplinary integration to achieve societal relevance independently of the correct meta-normative view.

### Keywords

Metaphilosophy; societal relevance; scientific relevance; research impact.

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and Culture annually awards \$1 Million to recognise (Berggruen Institute 2019):

"a thinker whose ideas are of broad significance for shaping human self-understanding and the advancement of humanity. It seeks to recognise and encourage philosophy in the ancient sense of the love of wisdom and in the 18th Century sense of intellectual inquiry into all the basic questions of human knowledge."

Philosophers claimed the three first prizes. In 2019, the prize went to a legal scholar, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The world has seemingly run out of living philosophers who ‘shape human self-understanding and the advancement of humanity.’ Philosopher Brian Leiter caustically remarked that “a prize that began as a way of recognising living philosophers has now become a confirmation of their irrelevance” (Leiter 2019). This chapter aims to explore what philosophers should do to be of societal relevance (again).

There is increased pressure on “disciplinary philosophers,” philosophers that produce work primarily for other academic philosophers, to explain and justify the societal relevance of their discipline (Frodeman, Briggie, and Holbrook 2012, 314; Frodeman and Briggie 2016).<sup>2</sup> Partly, the mounting pressure on philosophy follows developments that affect all academic disciplines. Funding bodies, university administrators, and the public increasingly demand from academics of all disciplines to explain and justify the societal relevance of their output. Research funding increasingly aims at work that produces tangible outcomes that are linked to economic targets or the alleviation of a concrete problem.<sup>3</sup> Attempts to quantify and measure societal relevance are just one indicator of this development (e.g. ERIC 2010; van der Meulen and Rip 2000).

For philosophers, however, the quest to be of societal relevance, and to demonstrate it, is of particular urgency compared to other disciplines like physics, medicine, and economics. Philosophy faces severe internal problems concerning the actuality or even possibility of progress in the discipline, as well as criticisms of the apparent lack of a distinct philosophical method, combined with sustained attacks on the reliability of the method of conceptual analysis (see, for example, the contributions of Cohnitz, Hacker, and van de Poel in this volume ).

This chapter addresses the question of philosophy’s societal relevance in a more systematic manner. I assess the implications of a seemingly innocuous idea about the nature of societal relevance in general and then show what follows from accepting that idea. The idea is

that philosophy (or any academic discipline, for that matter) must lead to the Production of Relevant Knowledge (PoRK). I show that PoRK is, in fact, controversial given several other accounts of philosophy's societal relevance, but I provide some preliminary reasons for accepting the view. I do not aim to defend PoRK conclusively but to motivate it sufficiently for the subsequent discussion. Importantly, I also do not defend the claim that philosophers (or any other scientific discipline) ought to strive for societal relevance. Partly, this is because the plausibility of that claim depends on the correct view of societal relevance.

My main aim is to draw out which practical prescriptions follow for disciplinary philosophy if we accept PoRK. First, in section 3, I highlight the fact that evaluating PoRK is a normative exercise in the sense that to judge that a given academic discipline is of societal relevance is to make a normative claim. I show how the debate about societal relevance, therefore, depends on meta-normative views. I discuss normative realism and normative scepticism and show that disciplinary philosophy has uncertain societal relevance on either view – we face a threat of societal relevance trilemma, or so I argue. However, I show that two broad practical implications follow from this trilemma and I close by recommending ways for philosophy to be of societal relevance. Philosophers should be *omnivores* that rely on a priori and a posteriori inputs as well as *synthesisers*, which integrate across disciplines and societal strata.

## 2 A stipulative view of an academic discipline's societal relevance

Overall, there is little discussion of the societal relevance within philosophy (though see Frodeman and Briggle 2016; Briggle and Frodeman 2016), and no area of metaphilosophy devoted to it. This state of affairs contrasts with discussions of philosophical progress and method, which have recently received much attention by philosophers (e.g. Stoljar 2017).

Philosophers have thus largely avoided the question of whether and why their activity is of societal value. Sometimes, one gets the sense that asking about the societal relevance of

philosophy expresses a certain degree of intellectual ineptitude. When asked ‘What is Jazz?’ Louis Armstrong reportedly answered: “If you gotta ask, you’ll never know.” Similarly, some seem to think, if you gotta ask why philosophy is of societal relevance, you haven’t understood what philosophy is and you’ll never understand its societal relevance. Those that have addressed the question have often done so in rather handwavy ways. One approach might be called the Moorean approach, in a loose analogy to Moore’s proof of an external world: ‘Here is some relevant philosophy’ (pointing to a philosophy paper), these philosophers would say, and ‘here is another’ (pointing to another). So, the argument goes, there is relevant philosophy (e.g. Leiter 2006). Both approaches represent extremes, of course, but the middle-ground has not been chartered in great detail yet. This is what this chapter hopes to change.

Avoiding the question is inconsequential, especially for a discipline that revels in questioning anything (even if that means asking whether and why wanton killing is morally wrong, to name but one example). The second approach, resorting to exemplars in place of a theory, is premature, as long as the possibilities for a more thorough account of philosophy’s societal relevance have not been explored yet.

Thus, we should attempt answering the question more systematically. We can then see that answering whether philosophy is or could be societally relevant requires an answer to two questions:

STANDARDS:       What is the criterion for societal relevance of an academic discipline?<sup>4</sup>

FACTS:            To what degree does disciplinary philosophy meet whatever standard there is for an academic discipline’s societal relevance?

The question about STANDARDS is evaluative. It is like the question of whether a particular bed is suitable for sleeping in, or whether a knife is good for cutting. Evaluative questions have evaluative claims as answers. I will assume that there is a tight connection between the evaluative and the normative: if something is good *for*, or even good *simpliciter*,

then one has reasons or ought to pursue that thing (cf. Thomson 2008). Based on that assumption, the entire project of debating an academic discipline's societal relevance raises questions of whether and how we can settle normative questions and I will return to this point in the next section. The question about FACTS is potentially a question whose answer can be determined empirically. Once we have an answer to the STANDARDS question, we can check the FACTS question and evaluate whether disciplinary philosophy meets the requirements identified by answering the STANDARDS. So, to answer whether philosophy is of societal relevance, we need to begin with the STANDARDS question.

Let us consider a simple answer to the STANDARDS question. The idea is that a societally relevant academic discipline leads to the *production of relevant knowledge* (PoRK). To avoid tautology, let us stipulate that relevant knowledge helps us to non-serendipitously solve a society's real problems. A society's 'real problems' are states of affairs that keep society from functioning well. These problems are solved non-serendipitously in the minimal sense that the practitioners *intent* to solve these problems using methods they expect would help them do so.<sup>5</sup> Some things may count as paradigm cases of real problems today, such as those that arise from psychological dispositions to think in terms of in- and out-groups (Greene 2013), the impact of irrationality in systems designed for rational agents (Achen and Bartels 2017), and tragedy of commons type cases, such as global warming (Ostrom 2015).<sup>6</sup> Of course, the stipulated prescription is perfectly general. It applies to any academic discipline, not just philosophy.

This stipulative definition of 'relevant knowledge' works well as a characterisation of what academics are and should be doing. They try to identify and solve *real* problems (as opposed to addressing mere symptoms) and they aim to arrive at warranted, reliable answers, not merely truths. That is, academics seeks particular attitudinal states – like knowledge, not mere facts.<sup>7</sup> As a view on the societal relevance of an academic discipline, PoRK has some attractive features. First, the concepts of SCIENCE, ACADEMIA, and KNOWLEDGE are

intimately connected. Insofar as knowledge can be societally relevant at all, it would seem to fall to academic disciplines to produce it. Second, the view explains some recent evaluative trends in academia. Administrators put their focus and money on topics that seem particularly *relevant*, such as existential risks or disruptive technologies. Third, the view recognises that academia is partly a transformative experience. According to PoRK, an academic discipline ought to aim for knowledge, which is an attitudinal state. Academia thus leaves a mark on its practitioners, and it is supposed to transform them from a lack of knowledge to the possession of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Though the PoRK view on knowledge seems innocuous, it turns out to have controversial implications. First, because the view requires more than *truth* it conflicts with an influential deflationary view of the societal relevance of philosophy. According to this view, which I call the ‘truth-only’ view, disciplinary philosophy is exclusively concerned with *truth* rather than other epistemic aims such as knowledge, or non-epistemic aims such as (collective) happiness or a well-functioning society. Insofar as a discipline’s propensity to generate truth contributes to scientific relevance, the discipline’s societal relevance is just that: its scientific relevance. This view has been defended on historical grounds, notably by Scott Soames (2003), and, more informally, by Saul Kripke and Michael Dummett (Saugstad 2001).

Second, because the view requires *relevant knowledge*, PoRK suggests that not anything produced by an academic discipline that people cherish or like qualifies it as societally relevant. The conditions of relevancy and knowledge that plausibly set constraints on what counts as meeting those standards. However, there are notable alternatives to this view. I will call them the ‘personal opinion’ view and the ‘group opinion’ view. According to the former, a discipline’s societal relevance comes down to one’s personal preferences. It may be enjoyable to study it, and therefore societally relevant. According to the latter, societal relevance depends on what a group of people endorse (Abakare and Okeke 2016). A variant of such views about

the grounds of philosophy's societal relevance has been defended. For example, some scholars note the lack of public attention paid to contemporary philosophers. The lack of iconic figures in contemporary philosophy is then taken as a sign of the demise of societally relevant philosophy in this sense (Bohrer 2010; Eilenberger 2019; Di Blasi, September 01, 2012).<sup>9</sup>

Both potential alternatives to the PoRK view seem misguided, though a certain case will be beyond the scope of this paper. The 'truth-only' view is problematic because of well-known arguments about the value of knowledge as opposed to the value of truth. There are myriads of truths that do not seem valuable. People do not learn the telephone book by heart, even though they would thusly acquire many truths. The value of exploring the truth within some axiomatic system thus seems dependend partly on that system's relevance to real problems, which already introduces a normative dimension that an exclusive focus on truth is lacking. However, the relevancy of truths for some scientific theory also does not exhaust societal relevance, as the following anecdote illustrates (cited in Bornmann 2012, 673). In a special issue on the societal relevance of medical research in the *British Medical Journal*, editor Richard Smith cites the original research into apoptosis as work that is of high quality, but that has had "no measurable impact on health" (Smith 2001). He contrasts this with, for example, research into "the cost-effectiveness of different incontinence pads", which does not count highly on measures of scientific relevance, but which has had an immediate and vital societal impact.<sup>10</sup> The contrast with scientific relevance illustrates that societal relevance plausibly requires more than the production of truth, and the contrast with personal value and public image illustrates that societal relevance requires an objective measure nonetheless.<sup>11</sup>

Thus far, I have argued the following. Determining whether a given academic discipline is of societal relevance is an evaluative act. That evaluative act proceeds against the background of normative assumptions about what societal relevance is. It could be that these normative assumptions are (mostly) rationally or morally inscrutable because societal relevance is a

relative affair: relative to one's attitudes about it or relative to some group's attitudes about it. However, it seems that what is meant by societal relevance is sometimes more absolute than this. There seems to be an essence to the concept and I stipulated that it might be the resolution of real problems (though, as I acknowledged, that moves the bump in the rug). We can now turn to an assessment of the implications of this view and I will discuss two.

The result of this criticism suggests that philosophers should deliver relevant knowledge, and they should do so in a reliable way, in virtue of being academic, professional philosophers, at least as good as other professional academics.

### 3 The threat of irrelevance trilemma for disciplinary philosophy

So far, I have argued that establishing the societal relevance of a discipline depends on a substantive, normative view about societal relevance. So, establishing that an academic discipline is societally relevant is a normative undertaking (though it will also entail substantive empirical claims). In this section, I will argue the following. The normativity of claims about societal relevance leads to a trilemma depending on the correct meta-normative view. Philosophy turns out to be of doubtful societal relevance in either case, though for different reasons. The trilemma affects those who want to claim that philosophy is or is not societally relevant.

Recall that any substantive view about an academic discipline's societal relevance, like PoRK, is an evaluative view and, I assumed, therefore also a normative view. To illustrate, consider the meta-question whether PoRK is true. That is a substantive meta-normative question. Evaluating whether PoRK or any other answer to the STANDARDS question is right depends on our ability to settle normative questions.

Normative claims can be true or false or neither true nor false. Suppose that normative claims can be true or false. In that case, there are truths about the nature of societal relevance. For example, the claim that societal relevance depends on PoRK could be true or false. On this



view, we should establish truths about the nature of societal relevance (e.g. establish that PoRK is true), and then check which of the academic disciplines meets the standards of societal relevance.

We face an important question now: How can we discover which normative claims are true? More specifically, how can we discover which normative claims about an academic discipline's societal relevance are true? For example, *how* can we determine whether my stipulative example of the PoRK view is the correct view of the standards for a discipline's societal relevance? Recall two critical points. First, this question is perfectly general in that it arises no matter what substantive view of an academic discipline's societal relevance we propose. It does not depend on the specific view that I proposed. Second, recall that we are presently assuming that there *is* a correct view about the answer to the STANDARDS question; we will turn to the denial of this claim shortly.

There are two relevant options concerning the method by which we establish whether normative claims are true. The first option is a non-empirical method, which presupposes that normative non-naturalism is true. In that case, normative claims are irreducibly normative, and there is, in principle, no empirical method that could help us *fully* establish which normative claims are true. By 'fully establishing the truth of a normative claim by an empirical method' I mean that all claims that are relevant for establishing the truth of the claim are in principle falsifiable by some reliable empirical method. The experimental method counts as empirical, as well as observations, as long as there are no reasons to doubt the reliability of those particular observations (e.g. in the case of moral claims). Several prominent philosophers defend the truth of normative non-naturalism (e.g. Enoch 2011; Shafer-Landau 2003). My aim is not to discuss the truth of non-naturalism, but to assess what follows for our question about the societal relevance of philosophy if non-naturalism is true.

If non-naturalism is true, then it is doubtful, but possible, that disciplinary philosophers are of societal relevance. Establishing this claim will require some discussion about the commitments and potential problems of normative non-naturalism.

If non-naturalism is true, then normative claims require, by definition, a non-empirical method to establish their truth. Claims about societal relevance are normative claims. So, we need non-empirical methods to establish the truth of claims about a discipline's societal relevance. Philosophers could help determine what relevant knowledge is, thereby enabling all other disciplines to attain societal relevance. Ultimately, this task would require philosophers to be able to settle normative questions. If that works, then philosophers play a crucial role for societal relevance, not only for their discipline but for all academic disciplines. There is considerable debate about the prospects of moral knowledge, actual or possible, on the assumption that normative non-naturalism is true. If normative facts are irreducibly normative, then it seems dubious to many how our beliefs about them could meet the standards for justified belief and knowledge (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006; Tersman 2006).

This epistemological problem for non-naturalism creeps up on our question about the societal relevance of philosophy, too. If we cannot establish normative truths in general, and there are normative truths about an academic discipline's societal relevance, then we cannot establish truths about an academic discipline's societal relevance, either. A view like PoRK may or may not be true, but we just would not be able to tell. Since we would then lack an answer to the STANDARDS question (about the nature of societal relevance), we would have no hope of answering the FACTS question reliably. Therefore, if non-naturalism is true, we might have no hope of answering whether philosophy (or any other academic discipline) is of societal relevance (nor any reasonable ground for denying it).

Non-naturalists have of course disputed such sceptical worries and they produced some reasonable accounts of the actuality and possibility of moral knowledge (if normative non-

naturalism is true) and this particular epistemic challenge would go away. However, there would be a further and less recognised problem. We would still have to establish that *disciplinary philosophers* are required to uncover answers to normative questions. That is, we would need to know whether disciplinary philosophy provides us with the unique epistemic skills to uncover answers to normative questions. Showing that this is the case would swiftly establish the societal relevance of disciplinary philosophers. Since they are well suited to answer the STANDARDS question, and an answer to the STANDARDS question is required to establish a discipline's societal relevance, disciplinary philosophers are required to determine what societal relevance is. This argument does not directly establish that disciplinary philosophy is of societal relevance, but it gets us close enough to an indirect route for doing so. Answering the STANDARDS question, knowing what societal relevance is, will likely help other academic disciplines to be of societal relevance as they could orient their aims and methods accordingly. In uncovering the 'aims', disciplinary philosophers could be of (indirect) societal relevance.

The problem is that none of the arguments put forward by proponents of non-naturalism suggests that *disciplinary philosophers* are particularly adept at uncovering normative truths. They only establish that reasonable people in general can arrive at normative truths. The question is not just whether we can arrive at answers about the permissibility of abortion or the right to explanation. Instead, the question is whether disciplinary philosophers have any unique ability to do so. There is an intense debate about the possibility of normative knowledge in metaethics. Sceptics have advanced several reasonable arguments to show that moral knowledge is unlikely or even impossible if non-naturalism is accurate, and anti-sceptics have tried to rebut those arguments. The debate does not address whether philosophers, qua being disciplinary philosophers, can lay a claim to moral knowledge.

Nonetheless, normative non-naturalism may turn out to be the sole metaethical position on which disciplinary philosophy can confidentially be called societally relevant. That is if it turns out that disciplinary philosophy itself helps us to arrive at normative truths. Arguments for the claim that disciplinary philosophy helps us to uncover truths may start in different locations. Perhaps philosophical training is particularly conducive to uncovering normative truth. Perhaps disciplinary philosophy as a collective is conducive to normative truth. Teaching, debate, participation in conferences, peer review – all these things might help to uncover normative truth. Until that has been argued for, however, one should be agnostic about whether we have a good idea about what societal relevance is. But if we are uncertain about that, then we cannot be certain in answering whether philosophy is of societal relevance (nor deny that it is, with certainty).

That leaves us doubly open to doubt. First, though we may be able to tell whether, for example, the PoRK view is accurate, it is not clear that disciplinary philosophy is required to answer that question. Hence, the ‘derivative way’ for philosophy to be of societal relevance fails. Second, we remain uncertain whether disciplinary philosophy contributes to any of the actual requirements established for an academic discipline to be of societal relevance.

The conclusion from assuming normative non-naturalism is that it is uncertain whether disciplinary philosophers are of societal relevance. Disciplinary philosophers *may* be required to answer the STANDARDS question, and it is uncertain whether they are of societal relevance, given some substantive view of societal relevance. This argument constitutes the first horn of our trilemma.

Above I noted that there are two relevant options concerning the method by which we establish whether normative claims are true. We have discussed non-empirical methods, which presupposed that normative non-naturalism is true. We can now discuss empirical methods, which presuppose that normative naturalism is true. In that case, normative claims are not

irreducible normative and there is, in principle, some empirical method that could help us fully establish which normative claims are true. Normativity could be fully naturalised. This view of normativity has also been defended by several prominent philosophers (Railton 1986; Copp 2007). Again, my aim is not to discuss the merits of the view per se, but its implications for our question about philosophy's societal relevance.

If normative naturalism is true, then it is even more doubtful, but still possible, that disciplinary philosophers are of societal relevance. The argument for this claim is rather simple. If we can establish answers to the STANDARDS question by empirical methods (e.g. experiments, or reliable observations), then any discipline capable of employing these methods can inform us about the nature of societal relevance. Though disciplinary philosophers form a heterogeneous group, it seems fair to say that disciplinary philosophy in itself is not focused on using and improving empirical methods (though see Cohnitz's contribution to this volume for an argument against taking philosophy as a homogeneous entity at all). Disciplinary philosophers would not have the indirect route to societal relevance available that I discussed above.

Even though philosophers qua being disciplinary philosophers are not needed to determine normative truths, if naturalism were true, they might still be needed for their contribution to meet whatever substantive criterion (or criteria) of societal relevance we established. For example, suppose that the PoRK view is true. If naturalism is true, then we might establish this by empirical methods, and we might then find out that disciplinary philosophers are contributing to the resolution of our society's real problems. There may be a recourse for philosophy because philosophers may be needed (or can positively contribute to) the solution of other questions that are relevant for society. Note, however, that we can distinguish two types of problems. Some problems seem distinctively philosophical (solutions to which provide us with a 'conceptual framework', for example, to think through things),

while others are non-philosophical, like how to clean the ocean of plastic. There is no indication that disciplinary philosophy can help with the latter questions (though it might be able to – given that it is a heterogeneous field). Answers to the former question may contribute to the solution of real problems. However, some have argued that all debates in philosophy ultimately concern normative matters (cf. Burgess and Plunkett 2013)(REFS). Even questions about the meaning of concepts will be normative questions, and thus subject to the same naturalistic reduction. If, however, naturalism is true, then all these debates can be reduced to empirically answerable questions. Again, there would be no need for disciplinary philosophy to exist.

The conclusion from assuming normative naturalism is that disciplinary philosophy is even less likely to be of societal relevance. It *will not* be required as a ‘searchlight’ for other disciplines (because normative questions can be answered using empirical methods), and it is unclear whether disciplinary philosophy fulfils some function according to some substantive view of societal relevance. That constitutes the second horn of our trilemma: If naturalism is true, then disciplinary philosophy is also unlikely to be of societal relevance.

Thus far, I have considered the options for assuming that normative claims are true or false. It may also be that normative claims are neither true nor false. That could be because there are no normative facts, or because normative claims are not truth-apt in the first place. Again, both positions have been defended by reasonable philosophers (Gibbard 1992; Joyce 2016; Kalf 2018). Both views have an essential commonality for this paper. They imply that we cannot say anything true about societal relevance. I will call this position normative scepticism.

Though normative scepticism implies that we cannot say anything true about societal relevance, it does not imply that societal relevance is not worth discussing.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, proponents of such views usually acknowledge the important role that normative concepts play in our lives. They frequently propose ways to honour these roles even if there are no normative

truths.<sup>13</sup> For example, even if there are no true claims about the wrongness of murder, we can recognise that people are appalled by murder, that they fear it, and that it is met with punishment. Similarly, suppose that there may be no valid claims about an academic discipline's societal relevance. We can still recognise that people have positive attitudes toward some disciplines and reject others, that they are willing to study those subjects and pay for others, while they have less interest and much contempt for the products of yet others. These attitudes about academic disciplines would be all we have to go by if normative scepticism were true. Let us stipulate that, on normative scepticism, a discipline's societal relevance is met with pro attitudes. People will be positively disposed of in its favour (e.g. they want to have that discipline around, may perhaps give money for it, and perhaps enjoy studying it).

If normative scepticism is true, societal relevance would still matter. Even though one might not share the targets of the pro attitudes of society, one will likely be affected by it. So, it makes sense to ask still, if normative scepticism is true, whether disciplinary philosophy is of societal relevance. We just have to interpret the question as asking about whether disciplinary philosophy is the target of many pro attitudes in our society. As the introductory paragraph of this essay, about the Berggruen prize, indicated, there are plausibly not very many pro attitudes directed at philosophy. Ultimately, however, the question is an empirical one.

The conclusion from assuming normative scepticism is that we are uncertain about the societal relevance of disciplinary philosophy. That completes our trilemma: if normative scepticism is true, then we lack information about the societal relevance of philosophy, and current indicators suggest that philosophy is *not* societally relevant (read: it is *not* the subject of many pro attitudes). We cannot be confident that philosophers are societally relevant if non-naturalism is true. They are not if naturalism is true. It will depend on whether what people happen to find urgent turns out to be the institution of disciplinary philosophy if scepticism is true.

Interestingly, the argument of this section suggests that one's meta-normative view should influence one's view on philosophy's societal relevance. If one is a non-sceptic, one should strive for normative truth about societal relevance, like the PoRK view. Then, one needs to make sure that disciplinary philosophy contributes according to that understanding of societal relevance, for example, by helping to resolve our society's real problems. On a strict view, one would require that disciplinary philosophy offers some *unique* contribution, which will be hard to defend on normative naturalism, though still possible. However, if one is a normative sceptic, then one should strive for truth about societal relevance in the sense that one needs to find out what people favour. Again, truth and knowledge is important, but it concerns different matters. The normative sceptic interested in societal relevance will have the want of the people guide her aims; non-sceptics will look at the problems that need solving.

#### 4 First remedy: Philosophers must be omnivores

Given the trilemma laid out in the previous section, the prospects for academic philosophers to be of societal relevance seem problematic. However, there are commonalities to all horns of the trilemma that can help us see remedies for philosophers to achieve societal relevance. In this section, I will defend two claims. First, the production of true claims helps philosophers to achieve societal relevance on all three meta-normative possibilities outlined in the previous section. Second, and more controversially, philosophers should invoke empirical findings in their quest. I thus recommend an *omnivore* diet for philosophers that aim to be of societal relevance.

It helps to clarify what kind of argument I am about to make. The previous section established knowledge gaps for us to determine whether philosophy is of societal relevance, on all three horns of the trilemma. The commonality was that we cannot say for sure whether disciplinary philosophers are particularly adept at uncovering normative truth (assuming normative non-naturalism or naturalism) and whether disciplinary philosophers fulfil whatever



substantive criteria of societal relevance are applicable (assuming any of the three metaethical options). The first uncertainty explicitly concerns truth, and the second plausibly does so implicitly. The task of meeting a plausible substantive criterion for societal relevance will be made more accessible by the ability to uncover truths. These could be truths about the nature and solutions to our real problems (if PoRK is true and non-scepticism is true), or truths about the contents and determinants of people's pro attitudes (if scepticism is true). So, if philosophy wants to be of societal relevance, it needs to aim for truth.

If philosophers should be interested in truth (for the sake of societal relevance), then the question of how to arrive at truth arises. I claim that philosophers must invoke empirical insights in their theories by incorporating the best empirically tested theories about the objects of their theories and also by incorporating empirical insights about the reliability of their intuitions. Hence, I argue, philosophers must be *omnivores* about the data they consult. They cannot stick to the a priori. Most obviously, philosophers make true claims by basing their claims on evidence, which will often if not always be gained a posteriori. When making claims that are testable by scientific methods or that depend on assumptions that are testable by scientific methods, philosophers should check their claims against the current state of knowledge in the relevant field.

This is not an uncontroversial claim. Williamson (2017) for example, advocates model building as a fruitful (and hitherto neglected) methodology in philosophy. In principle, model building could proceed apart from empirical-based information about the world, and it could be an exercise in axiomatic truth-seeking, where truths are discovered within an axiomatic system irrespective of whether the model is representative of the world (as criticised by Boghossian and Lindsay 2017). Clearly, however, models are interesting insofar as they lead to an enhanced understanding of the world or a greater ability to act in the world. Model building as a methodology has the world in mind. As Williamson (2017, 159) writes, “studying

a model often yields insights into the phenomena it models.” Therefore, even philosophers who claim that philosophy is a priori should accept this view.

However, suppose that philosophers are not or should not be concerned with making claims about empirically observable phenomena. That is, suppose that philosophy is characterised by a priori inquiry into necessary truths. Note, first, that this view is incorrect if taken as a descriptive characterisation of disciplinary philosophy. For example, philosophers make empirically testable claims, such as claims about the effect of social media on the psychology of humans (Klenk 2020a) or about the evolutionary genealogy of morality (Sharon Street 2006).

Suppose then, for the sake of argument, that philosophers should avoid such claims, aiming at a priori claims about necessary truths instead. Even then, the requirement to consult science, and to be omnivores regarding on her findings, emerges. Philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence in a priori inquiry (Climenhaga 2018). So, insofar as intuitions are “empirically conditioned” (Floyd and Shieh 2001, 5), philosophers must consult science to see whether their intuitions are reliable at all. There is now tremendous evidence that intuitions are subject to seemingly problematic influences, both in non-moral philosophy (Boyd and Nagel 2014) and in moral philosophy (Klenk 2019) (Paulo 2020). It is controversial whether the influences that have been uncovered until now can be said to bear on the likelihood of truth for philosophical claims (see references about debunking debate, and book). But it is imminently plausible that some such evidence, also called higher-order evidence, bears on the warrant of our philosophical claims (Klenk 2020b).

Thus, though the exact bearing of empirical claims on intuition may still be controversial, it seems overwhelmingly plausible that there is some significant relation, in at least some cases. If that is granted, then philosophers have ample reason to be parasitic on science, in the spirit of knowing themselves. The reason is simply that the warrant of any belief is partially

determined by the preceding chain of reasoning, on a foundationalist model, or the web of reasons in which it is embedded, on a coherentist picture. Science is there for philosophers to bring their own house in order.

Therefore, being omnivores should help philosophers to be better knowledge producers. By following the same method of incorporating empirical information, as far as possible, to determine what relevancy is, they should meet their goal. Thus far, I have defended a necessary step for philosophers to maintain or achieve societal relevance. The open question is, however, whether philosophy can add anything beyond. I will turn to this question now.

## 5 Second remedy: Philosophers must be synthesisers

Thus far, I have suggested an omnivore diet for philosophers interested in societal relevance. The most interesting upshot of that argument was that such an empirically-based approach is implied by any of the meta-normative view one presupposes. It is only that in the case of normative scepticism, true claims will be about different matters: they will be about the pro attitudes of people, rather than true claims about whatever turns out to be of societal relevance.

In this section, I defend a second recommendation that applies on all horns of the irrelevance trilemma for philosophy. Philosophers should be *synthesisers*, which means that they should strive to connect knowledge across disciplines and across social strata. This is thus a recommendation about the output of philosophy: disciplinary philosophy in the sense defined here – as producing output primarily for other disciplinary philosophers – has uncertain hope to be of societal relevance. By abandoning disciplinary philosophy, however, the achievement of societal relevance becomes much more likely. It is important to be clear about my claim here. I am arguing that philosophers should be synthesisers because that will increase their chances of being of societal relevance, whatever societal relevance turns out to be (again, I am assuming that disciplinary philosophy ought to be of societal relevance).

The prescription of *horizontal synthesis* (i.e. across academic disciplines) flows out of the previous argument. Insofar as truth – about the nature of societal relevance, the substantive aim of societal relevance, or the pro attitudes of people – is required on any meta-normative view, philosophers should purposefully employ interdisciplinary methodology. It seems eminently plausible that, for example, academics studying morality from a philosophical, anthropological, sociological, gender studies, or game-theoretic perspective are ultimately interested in the same thing. However, their disciplinary pressures have made them focus on a different aspect (cf. Frodeman and Briggles 2016; Briggles and Frodeman 2016). Sometimes, the interdisciplinary divide is hard to bridge. Bridging that divide is a skill that would help knowledge production on the non-sceptical accounts discussed above. As Frodeman (Frodeman 2010, xxxiii) writes, we have to strive for philosophy *as* interdisciplinarity, not a philosophy *of* interdisciplinarity (Frodeman, Briggles, and Holbrook 2012). The general meta-normative considerations outlined above support this idea.

Interdisciplinary specialism is required because of the unique challenges of interdisciplinary work. I illustrate these with a personal example. In a study of online manipulation, the question is what people from different disciplinary backgrounds find essential. Then, one needs to develop a shared understanding. Apart from the common understanding, one needs common aims. Both parties need to be able to benefit from cooperation. Otherwise, it becomes unlikely to happen. Some of these challenges are inevitably best attacked on a systemic level. Others, however, seem to require the ability to recognise someone else's needs and to align one's goals for mutual benefit.

Interdisciplinary specialism is also required because of the vast amount of knowledge generated on similar topics though in unconnected fields. Take the example of studies of online manipulation again. Though there is a plethora of work on the need for autonomy within psychology and communication studies, philosophers have discussed mainly why humans

should be interested in autonomy, and the former have ignored mainly what problems for autonomy could be. Herein lies another systemic challenge. Being focused on one's disciplinary discussion will just allow for little time to discuss other work. It is conceivable to have an academic discipline that is devoted to taking findings from other disciplines. Disciplinary philosophers could fill that role. Therefore, philosophers will be more likely to be of societal relevance if they engage in interdisciplinary work.

There is a demand for *vertical* synthesis (i.e. across societal strata), too. If normative scepticism is true, then it matters most to satisfy what people think is important. An academic discipline of societal relevance just will be an academic discipline that people are positively disposed to. There would then not be truths about societal relevance. However, people would still have pro attitudes. Philosophers should ultimately care to cater to those interests (still assuming that they should, in some sceptical interpretation of 'should', aim for societal relevance).

On the horizontal synthesis, philosophers should make sure that scientific findings arrive in practice. Frodeman and Briggle have defended this view based on considerations that are sceptical about the ability of philosophy to make progress, especially assuming a non-naturalist view of normativity. The argument in this paper shows that broader meta-normative considerations support their conclusion. Philosophers need to make sure that the products of academia are taken up in practice. As Briggle and Frodeman show, there is currently too much left to the invisible hand (cf. Frodeman et al., 2012). As they note, there has been an application of concepts, or discussion of practically relevant issues in the applied philosophy literature. However, there is little practical engagement beyond the writing of the articles. Thus, while Leaman (1995) correctly predicted that there "will be more work on the application of philosophy to practical issues" it has not been the case that philosophers became "much more involved in practical decision making," such as policymaking. For both synthesising efforts,

some guidelines emphasise that for knowledge to be ‘usable’, to be taken up in the debate, one must listen to the demands of people who will eventually use it (Clark, W. C. et al. 2016).

Apart from the aim of spreading knowledge, which may be met with pro attitudes of people, it has been suggested that philosophy helps some of us to get our bearings (interview with R. Goldstein, 2019). It is about finding out what one believes about a topic, to bring it in concordance with one's other views. An argument could be made to the effect that by producing an account of how to get one's bearings, lucidly and accessibly one can help others to get their bearings, too (cf. Lachs 1995). Insofar as helping others to get their bearings means that we resolve societal problems, this account is entirely compatible with my account. It does strike me; however, as a faint hope that many of today's societal problems do depend on us getting our bearings. Philosophy as therapy seems like a secondary aim only. Therefore, philosophers will put themselves in a much better position for achieving societal relevance if they are synthesisers, striving for horizontal and vertical synthesis.

There are also plausible considerations, though they are conjectures, for why philosophers, of all academic disciplines, might have an easy time at taking up this task. The conjecture, based on anecdotal evidence, is that philosophers spend less time studying a methodology. Anyone remotely familiar with the daily work of empirical scientists gets the idea that they spend a lot of their time solving operational problems related to their methodology (Wilson 2007). Disciplinary philosophers do not need to spend as much time doing that within the demands of their discipline. Though that is often considered a problem, it may turn out to be to their advantage given their quest for societal relevance. Philosophers have the resources to become interdisciplinary specialists. Philosophers are well placed to be parasites and synthesisers because their training does not need to involve as much methodological sophistication, related to statistical analysis and the use of experimental

machineries, like that of other disciplines.<sup>14</sup> Philosophers as synthesisers do not solely aim at understanding the world. They also aim at changing it.<sup>15</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

I have stipulated that an academic discipline is societally relevant insofar as it helps to resolve a society's real problems. What makes such a view correct depends on meta-normative views. I have shown how one's meta-normative view significantly determines the likelihood that disciplinary philosophy is of societal relevance. On normative non-naturalism, normative naturalism, and normative scepticism, the societal relevance of philosophy is in doubt. I then argued that philosophers should aim for two remedies. They should be omnivores and synthesisers, aiming for empirically sound knowledge and interdisciplinary integration to achieve societal relevance independently of the correct meta-normative view.

Are there philosophers of this kind? In an interview with NRC, Herman Philipse proclaimed that he wants to be an omnivore when it comes to philosophy (interview with H. Philipse). As his scholarly work demonstrates, he has been an omnivore throughout his career, supplementing his philosophical work with scientific findings (e.g. Philipse 2012). His public engagement has also shown himself to be a synthesiser, and it received enormous attention (e.g. Philipse 1995). Thus, no matter what meta-normative view one holds, Herman Philipse is an exemplar for a philosopher of societal relevance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thanks for Julia Hermann for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks to Herman Philipse for being a wonderful supervisor. He opened the door to disciplinary philosophy for me, while allowing me to keep an eye out for the bigger picture.

<sup>2</sup> I will henceforth drop the qualifier 'disciplinary,' and mean disciplinary philosophers whenever I talk of philosophers.

<sup>3</sup> Though the often lamented ‘managerialisation’ of university administration is nothing new, but was there from the very beginning of the modern research university, see Clark, W. (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, there might be multiple equally valid criteria for societal relevance. That would be the case, for example, if a form of normative pluralism were true; see (Wong 2006). In what follows, I will ignore this complication because it has negligible impact on my argument.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, there cannot be an ‘accidentally’ societally relevant discipline. Thanks to Julia Hermann for prompting me to clarify this point. It is possible that a discipline aims at solving problem A, but ends up solving B. This case is covered by my definition of societal relevance.

<sup>6</sup> Ideally, I would like to talk about the value of philosophy in relative terms, given the value of the other disciplines. I cannot do that, because I know too little about the other disciplines, but this is how I wish to be understood.

<sup>7</sup> The PoRK view thus leaves open whether academics should be concerned with their own knowledge – or whether they should strive to bring many people into states of knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> A third one may be called the methodological conception of societal relevance, according to which philosophy must be accessible to society. This could be done, for example, by writing lucidly and without using jargon, and by publishing in open access journals; (see Lachs 1995). The methodological conception may be a condition for full societal relevance, but does not seem to exhaust it.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, proponents of this view might argue that the point is that few philosopher are taken to be important by the public *because* of their excellent work. But if ‘producing excellent work’ is part of the definition of societal relevance, then my discussion of the need for philosophy to be parasitic covers it. It would, furthermore, be unclear why a reference to public esteem should be included.



<sup>10</sup> Of course, it could be claimed that societal relevance is *also* concerned with truth, in which case anything that is of scientific relevance would bear some societal relevance.

<sup>11</sup> It is possible to hold that there is a link between scientific relevance and societal relevance, and therefore analysis of both concepts should be combined. For example, it seems plausible that a discipline that uncovers truths about the world will be of scientific relevance and also, directly or indirectly, relevant for society. It would make discussions easier to treat conditions for both concepts as similar. But there is the danger of an error that is like the basic justification for the value of research in general. The hope is that by discovering truths about the world, they would somehow ‘trickle down’ to society, but it was not explained how, exactly, this would be the case. So, until more is said about both concepts, it is plausible to assume that these concepts have distinct conditions. Therefore, the indicators of societal relevance differ from those of scientific relevance.

<sup>12</sup> Both views of course allow that we can make true descriptive claims about societal relevance, e.g. that ‘so-and-so thinks that philosophy is of societal relevance,’ but they deny that there are truths about substantive answers to the STANDARDS question and, ultimately, the FACTS question.

<sup>13</sup> See, for discussion of some such attempts, Kalf’s contribution to this volume.

<sup>14</sup> Though all disciplines share a commitment to methodological tools like the ability to write clearly, or to present one’s research to a lay audience.

<sup>15</sup> Others have called this a “Marxist view” of philosophy, according to which philosophy is not only to understand the world but also to change it (cf. Fox 1973, 262). I assent to the idea, though the label might be more confusing than helpful.

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