The Case for Philosophy as a General-Education Requirement

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Abstract: I argue that colleges should include philosophy courses as general-education requirements. I begin by explaining the prima facie case against general-education requirements and the need for philosophers to defend their courses' place in the general-education curriculum. Next, I present two arguments for philosophy as a general-education requirement. The first is the Argument from Content: that philosophy courses' content tends to match the intended nature and purposes of general-education courses. The second is the Argument from Outcomes: that even if philosophy courses didn't match the intended purposes of general-education courses, they would still be appropriate as general-education requirements, because there is empirical evidence that philosophy courses produce valuable skills and knowledge in students.

1. The Need to Defend Philosophy

Philosophy is under threat in higher education. In recent years, several philosophy departments have been closed, and others have narrowly escaped elimination.[1] The most-plausible rationale for eliminating philosophy departments is the declining enrollment in those departments.[2] And it's not obvious how to attract more philosophy majors.[3] Thus, the survival of some philosophy departments, and the careers of some philosophy instructors, may depend on whether philosophy courses are included among general-education curricula. Those of us who believe that philosophy education is a genuine benefit to students and to the broader society may therefore wish to argue that philosophy courses should indeed be included among these general-education courses, and indeed, that philosophy courses should occupy a greater portion of the general-education curriculum. I will argue that fortunately, such a case can be made:

- Philosophy courses have an excellent claim—perhaps the best claim among all the disciplines—to being included as general-education requirements.

- Philosophy courses match the aims and purpose of general-education courses better than all other disciplines' courses do.

- There is good empirical evidence that philosophy instruction improves some of students' paradigmatically philosophical skills: ethical reasoning and critical thinking.

- Similarly, there is good empirical evidence that philosophy instruction improves students' general academic skills, such as those measured by postgraduate examinations and acceptance rates.

Given these points, philosophers can make a strong argument for their presence in the academy, and potentially, can also make a strong argument to students that they ought to take more philosophy courses.

As noted, even if students aren't majoring in philosophy, philosophical education can still have a place in higher education. Indeed, most colleges and universities in the United States impose general-education requirements or "gen eds" (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2015a). These typically require that students take courses from among several different disciplines, including disciplines outside the students' major areas of study. It is comparatively rare for students to major in philosophy (National Center for Education Statistics 2020b), so some students end up satisfying gen eds by taking philosophy courses. Colleges normally don't report how their students satisfy gen eds, but we may surmise that philosophy is a fairly common route, for two reasons. First, the vast majority of colleges pursue, as general-education outcomes, "critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills" and "ethical reasoning skills." Indeed, among the "intellectual skills" heading, arguably, only one discipline—philosophy—has an entire entry, "ethical reasoning skills," to itself.[4] Second, while philosophy *enrollment* has been declining as a percentage of total graduates, philosophy-instructor *employment* has increased as a percentage of the total higher-education employment.[5] It's not clear what these new philosophy instructors could be doing except for teaching general-education courses.

Therefore, it seems clear that philosophy courses currently occupy a portion of general-education courses. And I will argue that this is entirely appropriate; indeed, there is reason to maintain or increase the proportion of gen eds satisfied by philosophy courses. In the rest of this paper, I'll present two arguments that philosophy courses should be included among the gen eds: either that general-education requirements should be designed such that philosophy courses satisfy them, or that students should positively be required to take philosophy courses in particular. My first argument—the Argument from Content—holds that philosophy courses tend to comprise content that matches the standard view of the nature of gen eds: that a general education be liberal,

widely applicable, diverse, and comprehensive. The second argument—the Argument from Outcomes—holds that philosophy courses tend to produce valuable discipline-specific academic skills, plus valuable general academic skills, and this result is likely to be partly a treatment (rather than mere selection) effect.

Indeed, I will argue that philosophy courses have one of the best cases among all the academic disciplines to be included among gen eds. Perhaps this conclusion will strike readers of this journal as obvious. Yet there is arguably a powerful prima facie case against gen eds,[6] and so any discipline, including philosophy, has reason to make a positive case for its inclusion. Briefly put, gen eds require many students to pay a lot of money (up front, and as loan interest) for courses they don't like and don't confer clear benefits to them.[7] Presumably, students enjoy their college careers less, and their desires go unsatisfied more, when they are required to pay for, and pass, courses they probably wouldn't normally take. Gen eds prima facie restrict students' autonomy, and don't clearly contribute to other well-being-related goods, such as friendship, or even knowledge (Caplan 2018, 50). Perhaps one might at least argue that these courses build virtue, and in that sense, contribute to students' well-being. But of course, that's a substantive empirical thesis, and to my knowledge, there is very little support for it.[8] In turn, critics of gen eds will argue that any academics who believe that their discipline should be included among gen eds bear the burden of proof.

It might seem obvious that despite all this, philosophy offers paradigmatic general-education courses, and so should occupy a central place among gen eds. But I don't want to be satisfied with this mere intuition. For one thing, I am a philosophy professor, so there's a very obvious error theory: self-interested bias. Given the fact that humanities courses are over-represented in gen eds and in college careers overall relative to the populations of students majoring in humanities, it may

be plausible that some disciplines' advocacy for being included among gen eds is essentially rent-seeking (Brennan and Magness 2020). Thus, some professors may be employed not because they offer courses students want to take, but because their discipline is artificially insulated from competition. And in any case, my guess is that instructors from many other disciplines would find it equally obvious that their discipline should be included among the gen eds as well.

Moreover, critics of gen eds are likely to criticize including philosophy courses *as* gen eds. The standard consent-based critique of gen eds is that students don't want to take the courses (Rosenberg 2015; Hanstedt 2020). That's a fair point, but one might respond immediately that students are free to look for institutions of higher education that don't impose gen eds. The stronger critique, in my view, is that general-education requirements are pro tanto harmful to students. If gen eds provided marketable skills, then it would be difficult to sustain the harm-based critique. Yet critics of gen eds regularly cite expected value as a reason to choose a degree (or to go to college at all), and so presumably, these critics would argue that even if gen eds are to exist, they should comprise only demonstrably valuable skills (Caplan 2018, 205). Philosophers' median salary is on the lower end, at least when it comes to Bachelor's degree holders (Carnevale and Cheah 2015), and critics of gen eds challenge defenders to show how gen-ed courses produce any other measurable value (Caplan 2018, ch. 9). Thus, commentators who believe that gen eds should be reduced or eliminated are likely to argue, for essentially the same reasons, that philosophy courses shouldn't be included as gen eds.

Therefore, I believe that practitioners of any given academic discipline, including philosophy, must make a substantive case for their discipline's being included in gen eds. But what would such a case look like? We can imagine two main views of the standards required to justify including a discipline among gen eds:

> Low Bar: One must demonstrate that courses in a certain discipline satisfy the intended purposes and the standard conception of gen eds.
>
> High Bar: One must demonstrate empirically that courses in a certain discipline produce valuable skills or knowledge.

(These views don't represent all possible opinions about gen eds, but they give us some useful starting points.)

There is room for debate about whether the Low Bar or the High Bar view is true, or something in the vicinity of either. Of course, one might also hold the Very High Bar view, according to which one must demonstrate that a certain discipline's courses produce *long-term retention* of valuable skills. I don't believe that anyone has the empirical data to establish that their discipline satisfies the Very High Bar view, although I'll have a bit to say in Section 3 of this paper that suggests that philosophy might nevertheless have a good case. And for the record, I'm not assuming that the Very High Bar is false; I can see why some authors would find it plausible, for example if they believe that gen eds impose a high pro tanto harm. I'll try, as best I can, not to take a general stand on whether the standard gen-ed curriculum should exist.

I hope that my arguments will help guide colleges, especially those that are experiencing declining enrollments or pressure to trim their core or gen-ed curricula, in deciding whether to retain philosophy courses and instructors. I also hope that these arguments will give philosophy instructors the resources to defend their discipline's place in the academy in a time in which such a defense becomes increasingly necessary.[9]

2. The Argument from Content

The Argument from Content has two premises:

C1.   If a certain discipline's courses, more than most other disciplines' courses, have content that matches the standard view of the nature and purposes of gen eds, then that discipline's courses should satisfy gen eds.

C2.   Philosophy courses, more than most other disciplines' courses, have content that matches the standard view of the nature and purposes of gen eds.

As noted, (C1) may be plausible if we accept the Low Bar view. That premise claims that whether a discipline's courses should be included among gen eds depends on whether those courses cohere well with the standard view of the nature of gen eds. But strictly speaking, the Low Bar view specifies a necessary (rather than sufficient) condition for inclusion among gen eds. Hence, to verify (C1), one would need to say more in defense of gen eds in general. Yet this problem is blunted, in part, by the condition, "… more than most other disciplines' courses." It would be a very low bar to include among the gen eds *any* discipline that seemed to match the nature and content of gen eds. And thus, the added condition makes (C1) compatible with a general *presumption* against gen eds, i.e., a view according to which the general-education portion of the required curriculum should be relatively small.

Yet one might immediately wonder: What is that "standard view" of gen eds? We turn, therefore, to the question of what a general education is supposed to be. Asher Moore, in "The Philosophy of General Education," writes that general education ought to be "liberal and general." A "liberal" education aims "at cultivation of the mind and sensibilities, not at practical training or at the inculcation of certain moral or political ideals." And a general education will impart "a general acquaintance with all of the areas of human knowledge and activity" (Moore 1957, 65). Others define a "liberal" education as "inextricably linked to a deep and abiding commitment to equity and quality as essential to … educating for democracy," but add that "a liberal education

… frees the mind to seek after truth unencumbered by dogma, ideology, or preconceived notions" (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2020, 2-7). Hirst and Peters (1970, 66) write that gen eds ensure that students be "significantly introduced to each of the fundamentally different types of … knowledge." Elliott (1977, 231) holds that gen eds allow students to acquire "the rational virtues which are essential for reflective thought" about actions, beliefs, emotions, and the value of certain ways of life. Brennan and Magness (2019, 201) summarize the purpose of general-education requirements as to "ensure that students are well rounded, develop a wide breadth of knowledge and skills, and are exposed to multiple fields so they can make an informed decision about their major." And, in another work, they say that gen eds are supposed to give students a familiarity with multiple fields of study, and to produce knowledge and skills in writing, mathematics and science, foreign language and the virtue of appreciating diversity (Brennan and Magness 2020, 578). Reed (2021) explains that gen eds exist because "every college graduate, regardless of major, should have some familiarity with various ways of seeing and being in the world, and certain baseline skills."

Colleges and universities make similar statements:

> The purposes of the [University of Central Florida] General Education Program … are to introduce students to a broad range of human knowledge and intellectual pursuits, to equip them with the analytic and expressive skills required to engage in those pursuits, to develop their ability to think critically, and to prepare them for life-long learning. (University of Central Florida 2021)

> Princeton's general education distribution requirements represent different ways of knowing, all of which the University believes are essential for educated citizenship. While each student will concentrate in a discipline, a broad exposure to other kinds of knowledge will enhance students' ability to discern what questions can be answered through methods native to their own fields and what questions require other methods. (Princeton University 2021)

> At Whitman College, … [a] liberal arts education provides students depth and breadth. You'll explore multiple perspectives in a variety of departments …. The General Studies Program offers a framework for broad-based learning …. (Whitman College 2021)

These quotations represent supporters of gen eds as well as detractors, and come from a huge, public university, an Ivy League institution, and a small liberal-arts college.

Now we can detect at least four strands of thought in these rationales behind gen eds: that general-education courses be

1. *liberal*: aimed at improving the mind and at preparing students for democratic participation, but not at practical training nor inculcation of specific ideals;

2. *widely applicable*: covering, applying to, or useful in, many or all specific fields or topics;

3. *dissimilar* (to other courses and areas of study), so that a full general education will comprise a set of topics that are sufficiently diverse; and

4. *comprehensive*: comprising some particular set of valuable areas of study or skills, especially writing, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2015a).

Different colleges may interpret "general education" differently, but I will simply assume that most supporters of gen eds understand a general education to be something like as described in (1)-(4).

I will argue in the rest of this section that given this conception of gen eds, we should affirm (C2) of the Argument from Content. Philosophy courses as gen eds satisfy the aims of liberality, wide applicability, and dissimilarity (to other fields' courses), perhaps better than any other discipline's courses satisfy them. (My arguments in the section following this one will address comprehensiveness.)

2.1. Liberality

The definition of "liberal" mentioned above comprises both positive and negative components. On the positive side, the definition mentions the presence of the intention to improve the mind and preparation for participation in democracy. On the negative side, the definition mentions the absence of teaching practical skills and the absence of inculcating specific ideals, as well as avoiding preconceived dogma or ideology.

If we could rely on etymology alone, then surely a discipline by the name of "love of wisdom" would be clearly intended to improve the mind. But academic philosophy is also normally *advertised* as directly intended to improve the mind. The standard set of arguments for studying philosophy usually begins with citing philosophers' performance on general academic measures such as the GRE (Daily Nous n.d.). Purported justifications of studying philosophy, even if they mention particular careers, tend explicitly to cite intellectual virtues and skills (New York University Department of Philosophy n.d.; Rutgers Department of Philosophy n.d.). Of course,

there is also a general sense of "improving the mind" that is usually satisfied whenever *any* knowledge is bestowed. But that's presumably not what defenders of gen eds have in mind; otherwise, an education that focused only on memorizing digits of pi would qualify as "liberal." Finally, as for participation in democracy, the Association of American Colleges and Universities writes that democracy depends on "a free people who are united in their commitment to the fundamental principles [democracy] is intended to preserve and advance—justice, liberty, human dignity, equality of persons" and to equip students for "civic involvement and the creation of a more just and inclusive society" (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2020, 4). Many or most courses in ethics and social or political philosophy are largely centered on examination of, and defenses of, those fundamental principles.

The negative side of the definition requires that the liberal education avoid teaching practical skills and inculcating specific ideals or dogma. If this means what we intuitively think of when it comes to "practical skills"—maintaining a good credit score, making friends, or keeping a houseplant alive—then philosophy at least is no-more-practical than any other discipline in the academy is. And it's easy to cite certain other disciplines, such as nursing, that deliver more-practical skills. Now, does philosophy inculcate specific ideals? Popular philosophy-textbooks generally present two or three viewpoints about each issue without taking a stand on which is correct.[10] Someone might argue that a philosophy education still tacitly inculcates the general ideal that we ought to try to *have true beliefs*. But even there, philosophy—unlike perhaps every other discipline—questions that very ideal and questions the value and trustworthiness of philosophy itself.[11] So even if, in some sense, every discipline implicitly advocates for the ideal of trusting or valuing that discipline's content or methods, philosophy seems to do this less than every other discipline does. More generally, philosophy courses tend to be about questioning even what are

apparently the most-common or deepest preconceived notions, about the existence of God, the self, or free will, and about the trustworthiness of our senses or of society's prevailing moral attitudes.

2.2. Wide Applicability

Many of the characteristically philosophical skills are intended to apply to *inquiry* in general. Obvious examples are the studies of logic, critical thinking, and epistemology. Philosophy is one of the only disciplines to focus directly and explicitly on the nature of acquiring knowledge and the project of evaluating evidence and arguments. One might argue that psychologists also study the acquisition of knowledge and evaluation of evidence, for example in cognitive psychology. Perhaps this is true; if so, then I would advocate for including cognitive psychology in philosophy courses, or including a cognitive psychology course as a gen ed, although there is some evidence that philosophy does better than psychology in teaching some aspects of critical thinking (Burke et al. 2014). But to return to philosophy, it is one of the only disciplines to focus directly and explicitly on *normative* or evaluative topics: how one *should* behave and make one's decisions, and what's really *valuable* in the world. This includes logic and epistemology (plus some of the philosophy of science) but also ethics, broadly construed. It is thereby more general in focus than any other discipline is; it includes a realm that almost no other discipline ever intentionally ventures into. In any case, it is difficult to imagine any discipline more-directly aimed at cultivating the mind's abilities in general than philosophy, which is mostly about how the mind ought to function and how we ought to make all our choices: logic, epistemology and the philosophy of science, and value theory including ethics. The remainder of philosophy—especially philosophies of language, mind, and action—is mostly about what the mind is and how it actually does function, topics that apply to almost every moment of the average human life.

While philosophy is applicable to inquiry in general, it's also applicable to being a human in general. Logic, epistemology, and some of the philosophy of science are about intentional reasoning and knowledge-gathering, which are mostly human pursuits. Ethics and other value-theory subfields are also mostly about our intentional choices. Some metaphysics, especially philosophy of mind and of action, are about the nature of being a person. This is more basic and more universal than any discipline that investigates something primarily applicable to a specific career. (As noted, some areas of psychology might have some claim to be included in gen ends as well.) But this contrasts with everything else. The vast majority of any college biology course is inapplicable to the students' daily lives unless they become biologists. Students might need to have some medical knowledge in order to be well-functioning human beings, but arguably, it's more important that they have some philosophy-of-science knowledge, namely, that they have excellent reason to *trust* medical science. Analogous points apply to literature, history, and calculus. This doesn't mean that these disciplines are useless, but instead, simply that they're far more *specific* than philosophy is.

Here someone might object that the explicit *content* of these other courses isn't the only material that students are learning in them. Perhaps natural-science courses teach students to respect science. Perhaps literature courses teach students about the human condition. Perhaps history courses teach students to be better citizens, and perhaps calculus courses teach critical thinking. But unfortunately, this is dubious. There seems to be very little transfer of learning from college courses, at least in the way they're commonly taught today (Caplan 2018, 50; Soderstrom and Bjork 2015). There is substantial empirical evidence that if you want to teach some topic, you should teach it directly; don't teach something else and hope that there's some kind of spillover. I want to add again that I am not claiming that these other disciplines are any less "useful" in general

than philosophy is. Instead, I take myself to have shown that they are more *specific* in an important sense of specificity relevant to the rationales behind gen eds. The knowledge from these disciplines mostly applies to specific careers and lives, and only rarely to all human lives.

One might argue, further, that philosophy is also more *fundamental* in content than any other discipline is. This is implied even by lay definitions of "philosophy":

> The rational, abstract, and methodical consideration of reality as a whole or of fundamental dimensions of human existence and experience. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica 2020)

It's not initially obvious what it means, exactly, for a discipline to be "fundamental." But if we assume it means something like "foundational," then the same arguments for the general applicability of philosophical topics would clearly imply arguments for the fundamentality of philosophical topics. If philosophy is about how to decide how I should act and how I should form beliefs, then it is at the foundation of all other choices and all other belief acquisition. And philosophy assesses fundamental assumptions that other disciplines take for granted, while philosophy generally questions any assumptions that other disciplines question as well. That's another way of showing that philosophy is foundational to inquiry in general, and hence, has wide applicability.

Granted, not all of philosophy is about how all human beings should live their lives and form beliefs. Much of a philosophical education comprises formal and informal logic, epistemology, and value theory, all of which are arguably normative (cf. Steinberger 2021 and Howard-Snyder et al. 2019, 36). But some of a philosophy education, such as metaphysics, philosophy of mind and language, and the history of philosophy, seems largely or almost entirely descriptive. In response, perhaps this shows that there is little reason to include metaphysics and history as gen eds. One

might also respond that metaphysics is at least fundamental in the sense just discussed, and that as noted, many topics within those other fields apply to being a person most generally: personal identity, free will, consciousness, and language. And perhaps one cannot understand the rest of philosophy without understanding some of the history of philosophy. So what about the specific topic-areas, such as philosophy of science and philosophy of religion? These subdisciplines also strike me as largely descriptive. However, they do seem more general than the targets of their study: philosophy of science is about the nature of science, the nature of scientific evidence, and the value of scientific methods, rather than about particular scientific facts. And philosophy of religion covers topics in many other subfields as well, since one's theological views might imply a lot about other traditional debates in philosophy, such as in metaethics and the physicalism-dualism debate. In that sense, these subfields are at least more general and more fundamental than most other fields are.

2.3. Dissimilarity

Now let us turn to the topic of dissimilarity. Philosophy is fundamentally different from nearly all of the other disciplines studied at most colleges, in at least two important ways.

First, arguably, the primary method of investigation in philosophy is non-empirical. There are a weak and a strong version of this thesis. The weak version is that while philosophy uses empirical data, scientific *experiments* are almost never *cited* as primary evidence in academic philosophy papers. The truth of this thesis is obvious to anyone who has ever opened a philosophy journal. The strong version is that most philosophical argumentation is *based on* self-evidence, conceivability, intuition, plausibility, common sense, thought experiments, arguments from analogy, reflective equilibrium, and citation of theories that are themselves primarily justified in those ways. (The exception would be the history of philosophy, but the *subjects* of that history

arguably use the methods just cited anyway.) Some philosophers find the strong thesis plausible (cf. Bealer 1996), but to defend it rigorously would require far more space than I have here.

If I'm correct that philosophy relies on non-empirical evidence to a much greater degree than other fields do, then in some sense, philosophy's closest cousins in the academy are pure mathematics and theoretical physics. These disciplines might therefore have some claim to being included in a general education on the grounds of dissimilarity (to most other fields of study). But these fields aren't very dissimilar to other fields in the academy: the natural and social sciences incorporate mathematics very closely and share much in common with each other in method and scope. So philosophy nevertheless stands out as *more* different from the other topics in the academy than are theoretical physics and pure mathematics. In turn, for everyone other than philosophy majors, to require philosophy as a gen ed satisfies the aim of diversity.

Someone might respond here by identifying another set of fields that don't use scientific experiments: the other humanities. Yet many of the humanities (for example, literary and art criticism) tend extensively to cite others' written work as their primary sources of evidence. Hence, their primary source of evidence is still empirical, broadly construed. What about the purely creative arts? The act of creative expression itself, such as in sculpture or dance, doesn't really cite any evidence at all nor make any explicit arguments. Therefore, I would grant that these disciplines are very dissimilar to most of the rest of what's studied in the academy. They might have some prima facie claim to being included as gen eds, at least because of their dissimilarity to most other fields. However, it's not as obvious that they qualify as "liberal" nor as "widely applicable."

The second major difference between philosophy and other fields is that many of philosophy's primary topics are, as noted, inherently normative: arguments' conclusions assert that we ought to live or form beliefs in a certain way, or make claims about what's truly valuable or good. Hence,

if the point of gen eds is to include variety, the resulting educational career must include philosophy, at least epistemology and value theory. Even those who attempt naturalistic reductions of ostensibly normative areas of philosophy will admit that those areas are at least superficially normative, for example in their language. In this way philosophy differs from superficially (and deeply) descriptive fields, such as almost all of the rest of the academy.

Another objection might come from other disciplines, especially from humanities and the social sciences. Surely some English professors and sociologists will argue that they're teaching their students how to live their lives, or what's truly valuable in life. Indeed, philosophers tend to appear on many reading lists for courses that aren't in the "philosophy" department (Ha 2016). Reply: If these courses actually contain in-depth discussion and evaluation of assigned texts that argue for explicitly normative conclusions, then these courses will also qualify as dissimilar to many other disciplines' courses. (They might not, however, count as "liberal" or as "widely applicable," given the aforementioned limitations on transfer of learning.) In the end, I can grant that the more a course *outside* the philosophy department is similar to a traditional *philosophy* course, the more it belongs in a set of general-education requirements. I don't think that looks like much of an objection to my thesis.

Overall, philosophy is dissimilar from other disciplines at arguably *fundamental* points, such as descriptive-versus-normative and a priori-versus-empirical. These differences are *in addition* to philosophy's being dissimilar in the familiar content-related and style-related ways: that it's about epistemic justification and logic rather than about plate tectonics or poetry, and that it uses its own writing styles. I would add, finally, that philosophy also tends to be *internally* diverse in content: intuitively, philosophy of logic seems very different from aesthetics, and applied ethics seems very different from formal epistemology. In contrast, many other fields tend to build up knowledge

progressively and iteratively: one needs elementary Spanish before intermediate Spanish, but the latter will still employ much of the knowledge acquired in the former. Precalculus, unsurprisingly, comes before calculus. Yet a philosopher can excel in ethics courses without having taken a day of a metaphysics course, and can excel in modal logic without having read a word of the modern philosophers. Thus, philosophy tends to be internally diverse as well. If part of the point of a gen ed is that it be part of a diverse education, then everyone—not just philosophy majors—should take philosophy courses.

2.4 Conclusion so far

I have argued that philosophy courses match the standard conception of gen eds better than most or all other disciplines' courses. This conclusion is not intended to impugn the overall *value* of other areas of study, but instead, only to suggest that philosophy happens to *match* a certain popular *conception* of what gen eds ought to be. Therefore, given the Low Bar view, it's clear that philosophy courses should be included among gen eds, indeed, perhaps far clearer than it is for most other disciplines. This completes the Argument from Content.

3. The Argument from Outcomes

The Argument from Outcomes also has two premises:

O1. If a discipline's courses, more than most other disciplines' courses, produce valuable skills and knowledge in students, then that discipline's courses should be included among gen eds.

O2. Philosophy courses, more than most other disciplines' courses, produce valuable skills and knowledge in students.

Premise (O1) is compatible with the High Bar view of gen eds. According to that view, a discipline's courses should only be required as gen eds if they actually do produce valuable skills and knowledge. As before, the High Bar imposes a necessary rather than sufficient condition. But in this case, it's a shorter step than in the Argument from Content to that sufficiency. After all, if a certain discipline's courses actually produce valuable skills and knowledge, then that's at least a paternalistic and a consequentialistic reason to include that discipline's courses in every student's academic career: paternalistic because it benefits the students and consequentialistic because—as we'll see below—the actual skills and knowledge generated are likely to be beneficial to the wider society. And importantly, this would be true regardless of whether we call those courses "general-education courses." If, at the end of the day, we jettison "general-education courses" and replace them with "required philosophy courses," then I haven't said anything in this paper to recommend against that measure. Note, also, that as with the Argument from Content, I've included a condition, "… more than most other disciplines' courses." As before, this should help to satisfy those readers who come to the table with a presumption against gen eds. If, for example, we are very much against gen eds, and think that students should only be required to take one general-education course throughout their careers, then there would be an excellent case for ensuring that that one course is a philosophy course.

Now what about premise (O2)? Most philosophers have encountered the claim that philosophy majors perform extremely well on postgraduate standardized tests and graduate-school and professional-school admissions (Hoekema 1986). For example, philosophy majors tend to score at or near the top on the GRE, on the LSAT and in law-school admission rates, on the GMAT, and on the MCAT, and at or near the top in acceptance rates to medical school. They also score among the highest in IQ estimates.[12] Yet we don't yet know whether this is a *treatment* effect or instead a

selection effect. Perhaps a philosophical education doesn't actually *make* anyone any smarter (which would be a treatment effect), but instead, simply certifies that some people are *already* smart. This is the basis of a potentially powerful objection to similar cases for taking philosophy courses. Here's a version of the objection:

> Suppose we know the following facts to be true:
>
> 1. People with bachelor's degrees are generally smarter and more successful than people without bachelor's degrees.
>
> 2. Philosophy majors tend to be smarter and more successful than other majors.
>
> Even if claims 1 and 2 are true (and yes, they are true), it does not follow that getting a bachelor's degree or that majoring in philosophy *makes* you smarter or more successful. (Brennan and Magness 2019, 59, emphasis original)

This objection does not obviously apply to the Argument from Content. That argument dealt only with the standard view of gen eds. But we must now deal with the question of whether gen eds actually *give* students useful skills and knowledge. We might be interested in whether philosophy courses teach the skills particular to philosophy itself, and we might be interested in whether philosophy courses teach general academic skills, such as those potentially measured on the GRE and LSAT. To the degree that philosophical education has been studied, the results are encouraging.

3.1. Philosophical Skills and Knowledge

We have good evidence that some ethics instruction and some critical-thinking instruction produce measurable benefits in college students. Both, especially critical thinking, are widely required as intended general-education outcomes (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2015a).

Thus, both help satisfy the aim of comprehensiveness, in addition to helping satisfy the aims of liberality and wide applicability. These facts thus further support the Argument from Content. But given the assumption that ethical reasoning and critical-thinking skills are valuable to the student and to the broader society, these facts also support the Argument from Outcomes. Of course, one might question that assumption. I'm not sure what to say in defense of the claim that the world would be better, and people's lives would be better, if people were better at ethical reasoning and critical thinking. Perhaps this thesis depends on moral realism, but many readers will be happy with that assumption (Bourget and Chalmers 2014, 476). One might also argue that many of the world's problems are partly results of insufficient epistemic rationality (Huemer 2016); if so, then this supports the claim that a population with better critical-thinking skills would make the world a better place. And presumably, individual lives would be better if the people living those lives were more epistemically rational; for example, they might lead healthier lives because they knew they should get vaccinated, and they would be less likely to spread diseases. In any case, critics of gen eds usually don't argue that gen-ed outcomes are *pointless*; instead, they argue that gen-ed courses don't clearly *achieve* those outcomes. For example, I'm certain that Caplan regards epistemic irrationality to be a very serious social problem (Caplan 2011); he just doesn't think that college education does a good job of curing irrationality (Caplan 2018, ch. 2). Yet we have good evidence that philosophy courses, at least, often do achieve those intended outcomes, such as improving critical-thinking skills.

To begin with, intervention studies have repeatedly shown that a moderate degree of classroom-style ethics education (especially the method of cases, presentation of dilemmas, class discussion, and appeals to coherence) can improve people's morally salient reasoning and behavior.[13] Here, someone might object that there is evidence that ethicists, at least, are not morally

better than non-ethicists are.[14] But I grant that protracted, postgraduate study of ethics may be counter-productive. Indeed, especially if certain metaethical or metaphilosophical views are correct, we should *expect* this result. Perhaps we should worry that long-term philosophical education is misleading, especially since it might give the student better ability to rationalize their decisions (cf. West et al. 2012; Kornblith 1999, 182).

We must also consider whether philosophical education actually teaches critical thinking. Recall that transfer of learning is rare (Caplan 2018, 50; Soderstrom and Bjork 2015). So perhaps a *necessary* condition for effectively teaching critical thinking would be to teach logic, which is normally a part of a philosophy education. But it doesn't follow that teaching logic is *sufficient* for instilling critical-thinking skills. Fortunately, we also know that it is possible to improve people's critical thinking and reflective judgment through philosophy instruction, and there is some evidence that this is not merely a selection effect.[15] There is also some evidence that even philosophers are subject to various cognitive biases to nearly the degree that laypeople are (Horvath and Wiegmann 2021). However, these are typically judgment biases such as framing effects, which at most suggest some unreliability in moral intuitions, rather than suggesting that philosophers regularly commit fallacies.

Unfortunately, most colleges do not publicly report whether their gen ed courses actually instill the intended skills and knowledge. But it is possible, at least, to approach the question of selection versus treatment when it comes to philosophy. As noted above, there is actually some evidence that some of the effects of a philosophy education are not merely selection. Annis and Annis (1979) found that logic courses improved on critical-thinking measures by the end of the course. Ross and Semb (1981) and Harrell (2004) found that an introductory philosophy course also improved critical thinking. Iliadi et al. (2019), in a study in Greece, found that students who have experience

with philosophy are better at argument recognition and evaluation, again suggesting a treatment effect. In some test questions in the study, those who had no experience with philosophy only answered correctly in 14% of cases. Yet those who studied philosophy *but are not philosophy majors* answered correctly in 18% of cases. Philosophy *majors* only scored correctly in 20% of cases. In the argument-related questions as a whole, those with no prior experience scored correctly in 40% of cases; those who take some philosophy but aren't philosophy majors scored correctly in 45%; and undergraduate philosophy majors scored correctly in 48%. Thus, the major contributing factor to critical-thinking success is not whether one is a philosophy major but whether one *takes philosophy courses*. Philosophy instruction produces better reasoning-skills even in students who have not intentionally selected philosophy as a career. (Someone might object that it's still those with antecedent *interest* in philosophy who take philosophy courses, but I reply that in Greece, the vast majority of students take philosophy courses at the secondary-school level (Iliadi et al. 2019).) In any case, these results make a prima facie case for believing that philosophy instruction improves argument-related skills. I leave it to critics to present their opposing case. More generally, the sources surveyed above suggest that (as one might expect) there are better and worse ways to teach these skills. Perhaps, then, when treatment effects are weak, the blame sometimes lies with the instructor. Anecdotally, I report that philosophy instructors are very rarely extensively trained in evidence-based teaching techniques, especially not in specific areas such as critical-thinking instruction.

Still, critics are likely to cite empirical data about the failures of gen-ed requirements to promote widely applicable skills. For example, as noted, there is good reason to doubt that meaningful transfer of learning occurs (Caplan 2018, 50). In response, even if this is correct, then this simply tells us which philosophy courses should be gen eds: those that directly teach the skills

we want to teach. If we want people to know how to form justified beliefs, we can teach logic and critical thinking. If we want people to know how, from the moral perspective, they should behave in the real world, we can teach ethics and other value-theory subdisciplines. If we want people to know what knowledge is and how it's acquired, we can teach some epistemology.

A critic might also cite the data about lack of long-term retention of what one learns in college overall (Caplan 2018, 40). Reply: These data don't report whether there is long-term retention of logical and ethical skills and knowledge, nor long-term retention of general academic skills. Indeed, given that various professions and institutions require these tests and postgraduate degrees, we can surmise that employers expect that graduates who perform well on these tests (or acquire the postgraduate degree in question) will retain (or be likely to develop), in the long term, the knowledge and skills that allowed them to score well in the first place (cf. Somin 2018). But graduates actually can retain their knowledge and skills in the long term when they practice or mentally retrieve that knowledge or skill frequently (Karpicke 2016; Ericsson 2008). So here, as before, the general nature of philosophy helps to defend it as a gen ed. It is very difficult to imagine a normal human life in which the subject almost never is called upon to evaluate an argument or item of evidence, or to make a morally salient decision.

3.2. General Academic Performance

I've argued that there is good evidence that philosophy education actually causes students to become better at the philosophy-related skills of critical thinking and ethical reasoning. But what about general academic performance? As above, philosophers' stellar performance on the GRE, LSAT, and other tests and admission rates might be selection and it might be treatment. If it's a treatment effect, then we might suspect that students who take a few philosophy courses as part of their gen eds will gain some of that effect, even if they don't major in philosophy. In turn, this

would be more evidence that philosophy education does a very good job satisfying the general-education aims of liberality, wide applicability, and comprehensiveness, in addition to producing valuable outcomes.

We can compare the ACT and SAT results of students who *intend* to major in philosophy or religion (the two majors are typically combined in statistics) to the GRE, LSAT, and GMAT scores, and law-school acceptance rates, of those who actually *complete* their degrees in philosophy or religion. Completing the philosophy or religion degree seems to make an average-sized contribution to GRE verbal and quantitative skills and to LSAT scores, a large contribution to law-school acceptance rate, and a very large contribution to GRE writing skills and to GMAT (chiefly writing and reasoning) skills, versus other majors' average contributions.[16] This is some evidence that students who begin as first-year philosophy majors improve greatly by the time they graduate with philosophy degrees, while students who begin as first-year STEM or English majors don't improve nearly as much by the time they get their STEM or English degrees, at least not in certain skills. But if this were just a selection effect—smart students choose to major in philosophy—then the improvement wouldn't be nearly as great; these smart students would have performed much better than the average on the ACT and SAT as well.

Someone might object that the gain in performance relative to the average may be because smart students end up switching into the philosophy major, or poor students end up switching out of it. Reply: There is no evidence that philosophy is a particularly difficult major. Philosophy majors' GPAs are lower than average but not by much (about a quarter of a standard deviation from the mean) (Lindsay 2020), and grades are a major determining factor for whether students switch majors (Rask 2010). Similarly, NSSE data suggest that philosophy isn't in the top thirteen of majors by average hours per week spent studying (Muniz 2021), and by broad major categories,

arts-and-humanities senior students report studying around the average amount (National Survey of Student Engagement n.d.). Other sources show that the most-common major-switching cases due to perceived difficulty are out of STEM fields (Wright 2018, 12). Here, someone might also object that maybe these are *good* students switching *into* philosophy majors. But presumably, if that were true, then the contribution would be to *quantitative reasoning* more than to writing; we know that intended STEM majors perform very well in mathematics sections of the SAT. Yet *intended* philosophy-and-religion majors do better versus the math means than *actual* philosophy *graduates* do (National Center for Education Statistics 2017; Educational Testing Service 2019). If a lot of intended STEM majors were actually switching into philosophy, then philosophy graduates' math performance would be much better than intended philosophy majors' math performance.[17]

Someone might finally object that the treatment effect we seem to observe is from *majoring* in philosophy (or religion), not merely from taking a couple of philosophy courses to satisfy gen eds. Reply: This doesn't seem to be the case when it comes to critical-thinking and logic skills; see the previous subsection's discussion of the Greek study (Iliadi et al. 2019). More generally, I'm not aware of any reason to think that the majority of the effect of taking philosophy courses happens at the last few courses taken rather than the first few courses. By analogy, presumably someone who has spent 20 hours learning Spanish is much better at it than someone who has spent zero hours, but someone who has spent 120 hours is only slightly better than someone who has spent 100 hours. Certainly, more courses will contribute to more benefit, but it's likely that some of the benefit is achieved in just a few courses, especially since courses later in the career tend to be more specific: "Metaphysics" versus "Introduction to Philosophy," for example. But if the objection to my case is essentially, "You have argued that everyone should take a few philosophy courses.

You're wrong. Everyone should take lots of philosophy courses," then I grudgingly concede the point.

3.3 Conclusion so far

Overall, then, there is some evidence that philosophy instruction actually improves both its target skills (e.g., critical thinking and moral reasoning) and general academic performance, especially in analytical and persuasive writing. Indeed, the most common general-education learning outcome of twenty-two outcomes measured is "writing skills," so improvement in writing would be an important outcome of general education (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2015b, 4). And I've argued that probably, at least some of this performance is a treatment effect, rather than mere selection. As with the Argument from Content, this conclusion is not intended to suggest that other areas of study are of lesser value *overall* than philosophy is. My position is compatible with the view that many other disciplines have produced much more overall value to society than philosophy has. Instead, I hope to have shown that from the perspective of *intended general-education outcomes*, and certain valuable skills, there is good evidence that philosophy does better than most other disciplines at achieving those outcomes. I leave it to other disciplines to present their own cases.

4. Conclusion

Including philosophy courses among gen eds is compatible with both the Low Bar and the High Bar views of gen eds. Indeed, even if there is some presumption against gen eds, philosophy courses survive this presumption because they seem to do better than nearly all other disciplines at meeting the standard view of the nature of gen eds, and at producing generally valuable skills

and knowledge. Hence, even if we believe that the general-education portion of the curriculum at most colleges should be greatly *reduced*, there is still good reason to include philosophy courses. Yet as noted, some philosophers and economists criticize the very existence of gen eds. These authors would say that the general-education portion of the curriculum should be *eliminated*.

I don't have the space herein to provide a full defense of gen eds. Indeed, I'm not convinced that they deserve a full defense. But I hope I've shown that for two views about gen eds—Low Bar and High Bar—it is plausible that philosophy courses should be included as gen eds. Indeed, even those readers who reject gen eds overall should take seriously the possibility that *philosophy* courses in particular produce valuable skills and knowledge. As noted, there might be good reason to abandon gen eds. But it doesn't follow that colleges have no reason to impose philosophy-coursework requirements on their graduates. As we've seen, there is good evidence that such a requirement will lead students to acquire valuable skills and knowledge. At a time in which both philosophy departments and general-education curricula are under threat, at least philosophers can make a very strong case in their own defense.[18]

Notes

[1] See e.g. Weinberg (2021) for a summary and helpful links. In 2021 alone, nine instances of threatened cuts to philosophy programs are listed so far.

[2] For example, philosophy enrollment has declined by 29% from 2001 to 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics n.d.a). This continues a steep decline since 1970 (National Center for Education Statistics 2020b).

[3] As noted, philosophy enrollment has been declining for decades (National Center for Education Statistics 2020b), and philosophers have been aware of the need to advertise philosophy since at least 2011 or so; see for example the charts and graphs presented at *Daily Nous* (n.d.). Yet philosophy graduates have been declining in population steadily: from 0.706% of total majors in 2011-12 to 0.695% in 2012-13, 0.641% in 2013-14, 0.584% in 2014-15, 0.529% in 2015-16, 0.496% in 2016-17, 0.485% in 2017-18, and 0.478% in 2018-19. This continues a steady decline from previous years. (National Center for Education Statistics 2020b). I take this to be strong evidence that there is no easy, obvious way to grow the population of philosophy majors.

[4] See e.g. Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2015b). As noted, I believe philosophy is the only discipline that can be said to have its own entry; "writing skills" can be taught by different departments (e.g. business schools' discipline-specific writing courses), as can "quantitative reasoning."

[5] According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.b), in 2001, 0.43% of employees of "colleges, universities, professional schools, and junior colleges" were philosophy or religion teachers. By May 2020, 0.66% relative to the total of "colleges, universities, and professional schools" employment was philosophy and religion teachers, which is 88% of the total employment in the sum of colleges, universities, professional schools, and junior colleges (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics n.d.a). Weighting these types of school by percentage of total employment yields 0.58% of employees in higher education in 2020 as philosophy or religion instructors. Thus, there has been an increase of 35% relative to total from 2001 to 2020. In same period, philosophy majors declined by 29% relative to the total (National Center for Education Statistics (2020b). (I borrow this method of estimation from Brennan and Magness (2019, 164-65).)

[6] That case, following Caplan (2018, chs. 8-9) and Brennan and Magness (2019, ch. 7) and (2020), comprises four main points. (1) College is expensive, and the cost of college has been rising much faster than inflation (Akers 2020). (2) Humanities courses are over-represented in the average college career, and humanities content is over-represented among gen-ed intended outcomes, relative to the proportion of students who major in humanities (cf. Association of American Colleges and Universities 2015a; National Center for Education Statistics 2020b). (3) Similarly, students often don't like general-education requirements, don't understand the rationale behind them, and tend to take such courses less seriously (Rosenberg 2015; Hanstedt 2020). (4) There is little-to-no high-quality empirical research indicating that students acquire useful knowledge or skills from standard gen ed courses and retain those benefits in the long term (Caplan 2018, 50; Brennan and Magness 2019, ch. 7; Brennan and Magness 2020).

[7] Here, someone might ask why, if these courses really are so unpopular and useless, colleges still require them. The critic of gen eds will reply following Caplan (2018) and Brennan and Magness (2020). Basically, faculty members have political power at colleges and, like other political power, that power can be used to extract rents. As long as curriculum committees require proportional representation from most departments or academic divisions, gen-ed disciplines will have the votes necessary to retain their places in the gen-ed curriculum.

[8] See Caplan 2018, ch. 9; Brennan and Magness 2019, ch. 3. Beyond this, perfectionism itself is not a very popular theory of well-being anyway; see Crisp 2021.

[9] The pressure to trim gen-ed curricula comes from the general flattening or decline in college enrollment rates (National Center for Education Statistics 2020a); see also n. 1. As for defending the philosophy major in general, this becomes necessary when philosophy enrollments steeply decline; see e.g. National Center for Education Statistics (2020b), which reports that philosophy-

and-religious-studies bachelor's degrees were 0.97% of those awarded in 1970-71, 0.72% in 1980-81, 0.68% in 1990-91, 0.70% in 2000-01, 0.75% in 2010-11, and 0.50% of those awarded in 2015-18. Thus philosophy and religion majors declined a lot from 1970-71 to 1980-81, and declined a lot again from 2000-01 to 2015-18.

[10] See for example Pojman and Vaughn (2020); Rosen et al. (2018); Solomon et al. (2021); Shafer-Landau (2020a); Shafer-Landau (2020b). I add anecdotally that the vast majority of philosophy textbooks I've encountered are not opinionated; they attempt to provide multiple perspectives without endorsing any particular one.

[11] See e.g. Sorensen 1992; Gendler and Hawthorne 2002; Williamson 2007; Pritchard et al. 2010; Cappelen 2012; Chalmers 2015; and D'Oro and Overgaard 2017.

[12] On the GRE, see Educational Testing Service (2019). On the LSAT and law-school admission rates, see American Philosophical Association (2019) and Nieswiadomy (2017). On the GMAT, see Graduate Management Admission Council (2012, 13). On the MCAT and medical-school acceptance rates, see Association of American Medical Colleges (2020) and Jung (2000). On IQ, see Educational Testing Service (2012).

[13] Horne et al. (2021) found evidence that arguments from analogy and appeals to coherence improve moral reasoning. Holyoak and Powell 2016 also found evidence that appeals to coherence can change moral beliefs. Duke (2020) found that an ethics simulation game (analogues of which have been employed in ethics courses) can improve moral reasoning. Salvador (2019) found evidence that moral-dilemma discussion improves ethical judgment. Dahm (2015) and Schlaefli et al. (1985) also found such evidence. Cain and Smith (2009) found that classroom ethics discussion improves moral-reasoning skills. Blatt & Kohlberg (1975) also

found support for classroom discussion of moral problems. Cf. Blasi (1980) who found that in general, discussion of morality in terms of reasons and arguments yielded better moral judgment.

[14] See e.g. Schwitzgebel et al. (2014) and Schoenegger and Wagner (2018) although see Klugman (2019) for rebuttal.

[15] Annis and Annis (1979) found some improvement from philosophy instruction on critical-thinking ability. Ortiz (2007) found some effect in analytic-philosophy courses comprising critical-thinking instruction and argument mapping. See also Burke et al. (2013), which found philosophy to be somewhat better than psychology for teaching critical thinking. See Dwyer et al. (2015) on argument mapping and reflective judgment. And see Iliadi et al. (2019) for strong evidence that philosophy instruction's improvement in students' critical-thinking skills is not merely a selection effect. See also Ross et al. (1981) and Harrell (2004) who found evidence for treatment effects. Huber and Kuncel (2016) argue that domain-specific critical-thinking teaching is likely to be more effective than "general" approaches, but El Soufi and See (2019) find that *explicit* instruction in *general* critical thinking skills was most likely to improve critical-thinking skills. Possin (2016) also argues that trying to teach critical thinking "across the curriculum" is ineffectual, and that we can successfully teaching critical thinking by actually focusing on explicitly and substantively teaching it in multiple courses.

[16] See e.g. ACT, Inc. (2016), National Center for Education Statistics (2017) and Educational Testing Service (2019). See Metcalf (2021) for a general summary.

[17] Granted, there is some evidence that the GRE is a poor predictor of graduate-school and career performance (Benderly 2017). But most undergraduate students don't plan to go into graduate school anyway (Baum et al. 2017). Hence, if preparation for graduate school or careers were the point of gen eds, this would be a problem for measuring gen-ed usefulness by GRE score. But if

the point of gen eds is instead some combination of rationales (1)-(4) above, then the point about graduate-school success is irrelevant.

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