

Role of Philosophic Knowledge in Developing Common Good and Justification for Government Funding of the Philosophers

Zhaolu Wang^{1,a,*}

¹Branksome Hall, Elm Avenue, downtown Toronto, Canada

a. sinawang666@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Morality can be assessed through a teleological and deontological lens, in which an act is considered to be moral if it advances the common good and the means of achieving this societally beneficial outcome is justified. This study hypothesizes that funding the philosopher's work in a democratic government is moral, as value of philosophy lies in knowledge production and moral enrichment. This is governed by justifying four conditions through empiricism and the scientific method: serving the public interest, involving government role/intervention, strengthening the philosophic knowledge, and financing this knowledge through taxation. Focusing on the observational belief of acts, knowledge production, reasoning, and justification of beliefs continuously develop with philosophic ideas, making them suitable recipients of government funding. Morality is not absolute but socially constructed by several philosophic interventions in conjunction with the government's role. Secondly, there is a need for optimal philosophic knowledge, the adequate knowledge required to attain maximum social advantage with minimum cost. By constructing philosophic knowledge as an economic commodity, their dual status as a public and merit good justify their provision by the state. Lastly, the morality of taxation is discussed through philosophers' lens such as Robert Nozick and John Rawls. As each citizen benefits from the government-provided facilities, thus paying a part of the income as tax to the government is moral. Moreover, the government is assisted by philosophic knowledge and creating moral goods. Thus, it is justified that funding a philosopher through taxation is moral as it does not infringe on individual freedom.

Keywords: epistemology, government funding, moral enrichment, philosophic knowledge

1. Introduction

In the context of government, morality can be examined through a teleological and deontological lens, in which an act is considered to be moral if it advances the common good and the means of achieving this societally beneficial outcome is justified. Within the context of this question, these conditions are fulfilled by satisfying the following four criteria:

- 1) The production of philosophic knowledge serves the public interest
- 2) Philosophic knowledge would be underproduced without government intervention
- 3) Government provision does not have an adverse effect on the utility of philosophy

4) The means of financing philosophy through taxation is moral

The first three criteria adhere to consequentialist notions of morality by guaranteeing a positive outcome through state provision, while the fourth criteria address concerns from rule-based ethics by avoiding justifying means with ends. With this framework in mind, this essay argues that for a democratic government, using public money to fund the work of philosophers is moral.

2. Criteria 1: The Social Value of Philosophy

The social value of philosophy lies in two aspects: knowledge production and moral enrichment.

Firstly, promoting philosophical knowledge is beneficial for society as it is deeply relevant to how mankind acquire, test, and interpret knowledge. Knowledge production in modern science presumes that human can rely on sensory and instrumental perceptions to make accurate observations, an assumption that is grounded in rigorous metaphysical and epistemological thought. For instance, concepts in philosophical skepticism such as Descartes' evil demon [1] and Plato's allegory of the cave [2] suggest that sensory experiences can deceive us, and thus ill-suited to interpret the material world. In contrast, Aristotle believed that people should rely on physical observations, rather than abstract reasoning, to judge the nature of reality, rejecting the Platonic theory of forms. The foundations of empiricism were furthered by John Locke's idea of the mind as a 'tabula rasa', suggesting that all knowledge acquisition is *a posteriori* and challenging the doctrine of innate knowledge [3].

The methods of scientific inquiry were further developed by Francis Bacon in his work *Novum Organum*, in which he rejects the Aristotelian syllogistic method in favor of induction logic, paving the foundations for the scientific method. The Baconian method was extremely influential in the field of science impacting Robert Boyle's work on chemistry [4,5] and Isaac Newton's formulation of universal gravitation [6,7,8]. By focusing the study of science around repeated observation and experimentation, rather than tradition or religion, philosophy steered the course of science away from irrational dogmatism and contributing to the exponential acceleration of scientific progress seen today.

However, David Hume questioned whether humans could place complete trust in empirical observations, arguing that perceived causation could simply entail the 'constant conjunction' of events. Similarly, John Stuart Mill points out that inductive reasoning rests on the unjustified premise of the uniformity of natural events. In response to the problem of induction, Karl Popper rejects the role of inductive logic in scientific inquiry entirely. Reaffirming that basing certainty on previous successful evidence would be committing the fallacy of affirming the consequent, Popper proposed the hypothetico-deductive method, stressing the importance of seeking falsifications, rather than verifications, in theory evaluation. Conversely, Bayesian personalists maintain that scientific inference is built upon statistical probabilities, subjectively assigned in light of evidence [9]. These developments and contradictions suggest that the ways people produce knowledge, reason, and justify their beliefs are not engrained in stone, but continuously developing with philosophic ideas.

Today, the ramifications of epistemology are increasingly relevant for scholars. For instance, critics of string theory claim that it is untestable [10,11], and proponents of the multiverse theory defend their model by creating disprovable predication [12], which both stem from Popper's demarcation of science. In quantum mechanics, experiments produce non-deterministic, non-definite outcomes under the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, giving rise to several ontological questions, such as what kind of physical reality is depicted by quantum states [13]. In psychology, the mind-body debate [14], the notion of consciousness and intentionality [15], and the neural basis of emotions [16] are also closely related to the philosophy. Therefore, funding philosophers would be a worthwhile goal for the government due to its significance for knowledge production.

In addition, philosophy has the second benefit of encouraging people to reevaluate their values and morals. Reflecting over the past millennia, modern society finds many ideals and institutions endorsed

by past societies now morally impermissible, such as slavery and racial segregation, reflecting philosophic progress within the domain of morality. Today, normative ethics finds its relevance in several disputed social issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, privacy, animal rights etc. In the future, one also finds many important questions that need to be addressed by moral philosophy. For instance, with increased automation, one could ask whether forcing artificial intelligent robots to work for humans for free could be considered slavery [17]; with the development of genetic engineering, one could ask whether or not humans have the right to alter the genome of future generations without their consent [18].

One might challenge the role of philosophy in these situations: does philosophy necessarily make someone more virtuous? This paper proposes a different question: should the notion of an ideally 'virtuous' individual exist in the first place? Given that ethical systems vary greatly across cultures and time periods, it could be argued that morality is not absolute, but socially constructed [19]. In this sense, philosophy is beneficial for society not because it induces collective convergence to a 'correct' moral code or because it provides 'true' answers to the dilemmas above, but because it encourages social discourse over complex moral issues, allowing a person's values to shift through amenable discussion.

To conclude, philosophy advances the common good as a means of knowledge production and moral revaluation, thereby satisfying criteria 1.

3. Criteria 2: The Social Value of Philosophy

By considering the dual status of philosophic knowledge as a merit and a public good, it is argued that philosophic knowledge is underproduced relative to the 'optimal amount', thereby warranting government provision.

Firstly, philosophic knowledge are merit goods because the external benefits it generates for society are not fully recognized [20]. According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, only 29% of Americans view philosophy very favorably, the lowest share compared to any other humanities discipline [21]. Secondly, the classification of philosophic knowledge as a public good, which entails non-rivalry and non-excludability, also causes it to be underproduced [22]. Philosophic knowledge satisfies these conditions, because if one person learns about Plato, it does not diminish the value of Plato's ideas to others (non-rivalry), and it is difficult to prevent someone from learning about Plato if they wished to do so (non-excludability) [23]. This causes utility-maximizing consumers to avoid contributing to the cost of philosophizing, thereby discouraging philosophers from philosophizing [24].

To compensate for people's undervaluation of philosophy (merit goods) and resolve the free-rider problem (public goods), government intervention is warranted, thereby satisfying criteria 2.

4. Criteria 3: The Influence of Government Provision

One potential objection to government intervention is that if philosophers are reliant on the state for funding, it gives authorities excessive power over the content of their work. It would be an act a self-denial for the state to employ philosophers who spread philosophic ideas contrary to official doctrine [25]. By allowing the state to dictate the distribution of financial resources to philosophers, it is argued, the social utility of philosophic knowledge is diminished.

There are two problems with this counterargument. Firstly, for democratic governments, it is unlikely that the state would be able to exert undue influence on how philosophers philosophize due to various checks and balances. For instance, in the US, the distribution of federal research grants is fully disclosed to the public, and such transparency allows citizens to review the government's funding decisions and hold the state accountable [26]. Moreover, most of this funding is given via

predetermined rules and specific criteria and examined by independent reviews, further lessening the chance of philosophers being held hostage to the government's will [27].

Secondly, it is unclear whether the free market would better secure the social utility of philosophic knowledge than a democratic government. For instance, in the 1960s, private sugar companies paying nutrition scientists to falsely claim that saturated fats, not sugar, were the cause of various public health problems [28,29]. These fabricated findings shaped the first Dietary Guidelines of the US and misled millions of citizens, arguably contributing to the 'obesity epidemic' people see today [30]. Similarly, the pharmaceutical industry today has also been accused of bribing scientists in order to have their drugs approved by regulators [31,32]. More generally, the free market discounts the value of philosophy by pressuring philosophers to 'publish or perish', focusing on solely increasing the number of publications rather than taking time to refine the quality of their work [33].

5. Criteria 4: The Morality of Taxation

Some argue that the very act of taxation is immoral, even if it advances the common good. One pervasive line of reasoning rests on the libertarian principle of self-ownership, which argues that since individuals are entitled to the product of their own labor, expropriating the fruits of one's labor would be morally illegitimate [34]. As Robert Nozick claims, 'taxation of earnings is on par with forced labor' [35].

However, this perspective could be challenged, as the fruits of one's labor are partially dependent on natural endowments outside their own control. For instance, one's genetic inheritance, family and educational environment, and the society they are born into are all determinants of their wealth, yet these factors have little to do with their conscious choices. The moral arbitrariness of these circumstances suggest that one can only claim partial entitlement of one's earnings. Similar ideas are expressed in John Rawls's theory of redistributive justice [36] and luck egalitarianism [37], which argue distributive shares should not be influenced by the 'natural lottery' and that social institutions should try to offset the effects of misfortune. Thus, the actual fruits of a person's labor, which are solely amassed by one's own responsible decisions, are only a subset of the total income he or she receives, and the portion of wealth due to luck could be taxed by the government to pay philosophers without violating individuals' self-ownership [38].

Furthermore, when taxation is used to fund philosophers, the social benefits of philosophic knowledge contribute to individuals amassing wealth in the first place. For instance, a businessman would benefit from scientific advances in engineering and medicine, which is in turn founded on epistemological principles; a worker would benefit from living in a society in which slavery, institutional discrimination, and arbitrary government are morally denounced. By benefiting from the public provision of philosophy, people express tacit consent to the use of taxation by the democratic governing body to advance the common good [39,40]. Importantly, this defense of taxation does not rest on a utilitarian or reciprocal basis (as teleological justification is sought here), so the counterargument that each citizen may not benefit from philosophic knowledge commensurate to the amount paid in taxes is irrelevant [41,42].

Therefore, from a deontological viewpoint, the means of funding philosophers through taxation is justified, thereby satisfying criteria 4.

6. Conclusion

With all four criteria satisfied, it is argued that using the force of law to pay philosophers is moral from both teleological and deontological standpoints. Firstly, philosophy promotes the general welfare by aiding knowledge production and encouraging social discourse over important moral issues. Secondly, the dual status of philosophic knowledge as a merit and public good entails

underproduction, thereby warranting government provision. Thirdly, the influence of government does not discount the social value of philosophy, due to checks and balances in democratic governance and inherent issues present in the free market. Fourthly, the means of achieving the common good is justified since taxation does not infringe on individual freedoms and benefiting from philosophic knowledge entails tacit consent of such expropriation.

References

- [1] Descartes, René, John Cottingham, and René Descartes. *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Rev. ed. 1996, 13th printing. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- [2] Plato, Robin Waterfield, and Plato. *Republic*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr, 1994.
- [3] Locke, John, and Anthony Douglas Woozley. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Fontana Philosophy Classics. London: Collins, 1964.
- [4] Sargent, Rose-Mary. "Robert Boyle's Baconian Inheritance: A Response to Laudan's Cartesian Thesis." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 17, no. 4 (December 1986): 469–86. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0039-3681\(86\)90005-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0039-3681(86)90005-1);
- [5] Agassi, Joseph. *The Very Idea of Modern Science: Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science, v. 298. Dordrecht ; New York: Springer, 2013.
- [6] Ducheyne, Steffen. "Bacon's Idea and Newton's Practice of Induction." *Philosophica* 76, no. 2 (January 2, 2005). <https://doi.org/10.21825/philosophica.82206>.
- [7] Dear, Peter. *Discipline & Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution*. Science and Its Conceptual Foundations. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- [8] Porter, Dahlia. *Science, Form, and the Problem of Induction in British Romanticism*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 120. Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- [9] Dorling, Jon, and David Miller. "Bayesian Personalism, Falsificationism, and the Problem of Induction." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 55 (1981): 109–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4106855>.
- [10] Woit, Peter. *Not Even Wrong: The Failure of String Theory and the Continuing Challenge to Unify the Laws of Physics*. London: Vintage books, 2006.
- [11] Siegel, Ethan. "Why String Theory Is Not A Scientific Theory." *Forbes*. Accessed June 20, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2015/12/23/why-string-theory-is-not-science/>.
- [12] Tegmark, Max. "Parallel Universes," 2003. <https://doi.org/10.48550/ARXIV.ASTRO-PH/0302131>.
- [13] Myrvold, Wayne. "Philosophical Issues in Quantum Theory." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/qt-issues/>.
- [14] Ludwig, Kirk. "The Mind-Body Problem: An Overview." In *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Stephen P. Stich and Ted A. Warfield, 1–46. Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470998762.ch1>.
- [15] Zelazo, Philip David, Morris Moscovitch, and Evan Thompson, eds. *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- [16] Flanagan, Owen. *Neuro-Eudaimonics or Buddhists Lead Neuroscientists to the Seat of Happiness*. Edited by John Bickle. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195304787.003.0024>.
- [17] Bostrom, Nick, and Eliezer Yudkowsky. "The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Artificial Intelligence*, edited by Keith Frankish and William M. Ramsey, 1st ed., 316–34. Cambridge University Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139046855.020>.
- [18] Larrère, Raphaël. "Genetic Engineering and Ethical Issues." *Outlook on Agriculture* 32, no. 4 (December 2003): 267–71. <https://doi.org/10.5367/000000003322740496>.
- [19] Wright, Quincy. "Moral Standards in Government and Politics." *Ethics* 64, no. 3 (1954): 157–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2378580>.
- [20] Musgrave, Richard Abel. *The Theory of Public Finance a Study in Public Economy*. Tokyo: McGraw-Hill Kogakusha, 1959.
- [21] *Humanities Indicators of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The Humanities in American Life: Insights from a 2019 Survey of the Public's Attitudes & Engagement*. Cambridge, Mass: American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Accessed June 20, 2022. <https://www.amacad.org/publication/humanities-american-life>
- [22] Oakland, William H. "Theory of Public Goods." In *Handbook of Public Economics*, 2:485–535. Elsevier, 1987. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1573-4420\(87\)80004-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1573-4420(87)80004-6)

- [23] Kaul, Inge, Isabelle Grunberg, and Marc Stern. *Global Public Goods*. Oxford University Press, 1999. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195130529.001.0001>
- [24] Groves, Theodore, and John Ledyard. "Optimal Allocation of Public Goods: A Solution to the 'Free Rider' Problem." *Econometrica* 45, no. 4 (May 1977): 783. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1912672>
- [25] Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Repr. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997.
- [26] "FFATA Act (2006) | GRANTS.GOV." Accessed June 20, 2022. <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/learn-grants/grant-policies/ffata-act-2006.html>.
- [27] "Grant Terminology | GRANTS.GOV." Accessed June 20, 2022. <https://www.grants.gov/learn-grants/grant-terminology.html>.
- [28] O'Connor, Anahad. "How the Sugar Industry Shifted Blame to Fat." *The New York Times*, September 12, 2016, sec. Well. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/13/well/eat/how-the-sugar-industry-shifted-blame-to-fat.html>.
- [29] Damle, Sg. "Smart Sugar? The Sugar Conspiracy." *Contemporary Clinical Dentistry* 8, no. 2 (2017): 191. https://doi.org/10.4103/ccd.ccd_568_17.
- [30] Leslie, Ian. "The Sugar Conspiracy." *The Guardian*, April 7, 2016, sec. Society. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/apr/07/the-sugar-conspiracy-robert-lustig-john-yudkin>.
- [31] Spinney, Laura. "Drugs, Money and Misleading Evidence." *Nature* 583, no. 7814 (June 29, 2020): 26–28. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-01911-7>.
- [32] "Hidden Conflicts? Pharma Payments to FDA Advisers after Drug Approvals Spark Ethical Concerns." Accessed June 28, 2022. <https://www.science.org/content/article/hidden-conflicts-pharma-payments-fda-advisers-after-drug-approvals-spark-ethical>.
- [33] "Publish or Perish." *Nature* 467, no. 7313 (September 2010): 252–252. <https://doi.org/10.1038/467252a>
- [34] Moore, Adam D. "Taxation, Forced Labor, and Theft: Why Taxation Is 'On a Par' with Forced Labor." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 59, no. 3 (September 2021): 362–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12395>.
- [35] Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 1974, p. 169.
- [36] Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- [37] Knight, Carl. "Luck Egalitarianism." *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 10 (October 2013): 924–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12077>.
- [38] Michael, Mark A. "Redistributive Taxation, Self-Ownership and the Fruit of Labour." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (1997): 137–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24353944>.
- [39] Christiano, Tom. "Authority." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2020. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/authority/>.
- [40] Locke, John, and Thomas Preston Peardon. *The Second Treatise of Government*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- [41] Binmore, Ken. "A Utilitarian Theory of Political Legitimacy." In *Economics, Values, and Organization*, edited by Avner Ben-Ner and Louis Putterman, 101–32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139174855.005>.
- [42] Waldron, Jeremy. "Nonsense upon Stilts": Bentham, Burke and Marx on the Rights of Man. *Reprod. en fac-Similé*. Routledge Revivals. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, 2015.