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Received 22 May 2016 | Accepted 11 Jan 2017 | Published 14 Feb 2017

DOI: [10.1057/palcomms.2017.3](https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.3)

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The impact agenda and the search for a good life

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ABSTRACT Plato and Aristotle are plumbed for insights concerning the underlying assumptions of the impact agenda, and more generally for how philosophy can offer greater assistance on policy questions. Aristotle reveals the limitations of 'impact' as a way of framing discussions about the relevance of academic knowledge. Plato offers more general counsel on the challenges facing philosophers who seek to be relevant to the concerns of policymakers. Together, their work suggests that policy-sensitive philosophers can help decision makers be more self-conscious about the assumptions underlying their work. This article is published as part of a collection on the future of research assessment.

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Without idealizing the past—there’s always been a sizable contingent that has demanded “show me the money”—we’ve seen a shift in how society views the relation of academic knowledge to the larger world. Armed with Internet-enabled analytics, the focus today is on accountability, or the “impact agenda”.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that greater attention toward both having and demonstrating the impact of academic research on society became inevitable once knowledge and society were linked in the “knowledge economy”. The relative de-industrializing of the developed world meant that economic growth would be increasingly based on the efforts of the creative classes (academic research, but also finance, software, entertainment and so on). These more ephemeral outputs naturally elicit demands for proof of effect. But larger cultural dynamics were also at work. Questions on the nature of the just society were sidelined as the Great Society turned toward neoliberalism, out of a sense that market mechanisms should be applied to all domains of life. Demands for accountability also reflect the so-called end of history (cf. Fukuyama, 1992). With the fall of the Berlin Wall, alternatives to consumer capitalism and market individualism lost favour. In the past, political philosophy had been useful for conservatives, as well as for liberals as bulwarks against totalitarian ideologies—but no more. Capitalism was triumphant, and its imperatives were now to be applied everywhere.

As a consequence, academics today live in a different world. They face pressures coming from all sides—government, public science agencies, university administrators, parents and students. This has prompted differing reactions, including the development of a small cottage industry of books and articles criticizing the loss of academic autonomy (for example, Giroux, 2014). But generally speaking, academics have either acquiesced to the demands of an accountability regime whose triumph seems inevitable, or engaged in foot-dragging tactics of passive resistance. There’s been little coordinated, practical pushback. This is not particularly surprising, since the professorate has always suffered from a deficit of class consciousness. Just as important, academics are specialists who focus on their particular area of research. Questions of impact have been left to administrators, policy professionals, or experts in outreach in museum studies or geoscience education.

Beyond simply ignoring the issue, one can discern three distinct attitudes towards the impact agenda. For some, including many in the natural sciences, as well as in fields like finance and engineering, the focus on “results” has been acceptable or even congenial. It matched with the simple (not to say naïve) assumption that scientific advance is a good barometer of social progress. In other quarters, demands for accountability have led to new funding streams and the development of new academic specialties. Economics and sociology have benefited, as have the policy sciences, which over the last two decades have developed in a number of directions—bibliometrics, the science of science policy, cyber-infrastructure, the managing of Big Data, and the like.

But a third set of disciplines—the humanities—have largely fallen out of the impact discussion, either in terms of the impact that humanities research has upon society, or via philosophical or humanistic critiques of the impact agenda (Frodeman *et al.*, 2013). Yes, one finds *de rigueur* complaints about the depredations of neoliberalism; but fine-grained, theoretical responses on the part of humanists have been few and far between. When impact is not ignored altogether one hears the same old notes: defenses of the intrinsic value of the humanities, or songs of praise about the importance of critical thinking skills for the workplace (for example, Nussbaum, 2010; Small, 2013). Humanists have neither worked on the specifics of the impact agenda, nor have they integrated its conceptual priors into their teaching

and research—not in terms of compliance, but as theoretical questions that go to the heart of humanistic concerns.

This essay provides one such account. It argues that supposedly woolly-headed philosophers have contributions to make to our thinking about impact. This argument grows out of a recent graduate course I taught in ancient Greek philosophy. In ways that might seem calculated to upset philosophers, the course was framed and the readings approached in terms of ongoing policy debates—including, but not limited to the impact agenda. The class engaged in a close reading of classic works (Plato’s *Republic* and *Symposium*; Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*); but it approached these works as attempts to think deeply about the challenges of making philosophy relevant to contemporary policy debates—which, making allowances for the vast differences in era, is what they were. This approach to making use of the philosophic tradition is something that I and colleagues have taken to calling field philosophy (for example, Frodeman, 2010; Briggie, 2015; Frodeman and Briggie, 2016).

Read from this angle, it’s clear that concerns with accountability and impact have been central to Western philosophy since its beginning. Of course, Plato and Aristotle structure these concerns differently than they are framed today. But these differences in diction and perspective cast a bright light on contemporary concerns. These differences offer telling commentary on the assumptions that underlie current debates about impact and accountability.

And so when we turn to Aristotle’s *Ethics* we will see that it reveals the limitations of ‘impact’ as a way to frame discussions about the relevance of academic knowledge to contemporary life. His account of impact, or as he calls it, the good, suggests that insofar as we continue to talk in this way about the uses of knowledge, the goal of not having an impact should become as important as aiming for impact.

When we turn to Plato we find a wider set of concerns—an account of the challenges attendant to making philosophy relevant to the body politic. Plato confronted this problem head on: The *Republic* is the *locus classicus* of responses to the purported uselessness (or worse) of philosophy for creating the just city. It’s a problem that has only gotten more difficult today, as attempts at deliberation are increasingly confronted by the attention deficits of a twitter-driven culture.

Finally, after reviewing these two examples of the relevance of philosophy to current policy debates, I end with a few suggestions for how contemporary philosophy can better contribute to topics of public concern.

1.

The very first lines of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* broach the question of impact:

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good¹; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them.

Aristotle is concerned with *every* art, enquiry, action, and pursuit, not only theoretical ones such as knowledge production. But in distinguishing activities from “products apart from the activities” Aristotle recognizes the existence of what we now call impact. Note, however, that he frames the question of impact within a larger concern with the good. We will see that this shift, from talk of the good to that of impact, has had portentous consequences.

Aristotle divides ‘good’ into two classes: activities that are good in themselves, and those that result in products separate from these activities (of course, it is possible for something to be good in both senses). In today’s accounts the latter have broader impact, the former do not. The goal today is to make sure that the activity of academic knowledge results in a separate product—for research “does no good” unless it issues in some kind of external result. (Thus the common dismissal of philosophy that it “bakes no bread”). In contrast to contemporary accounts, Aristotle defended the good of things that have no broader impact in the sense of being a product separate from an activity. In fact, he thought they were the highest good attainable.

It’s unclear what lies behind the contemporary dismissal of activities that do not issue in products. Is this a question of audience, or of material product? It sometimes sounds as if such activities are dismissed because they are merely private goods, individual entertainments of the academic class, and as such they do not count, at least not for public funding. But of course it is possible to have intrinsically valuable, non-productive activities that involve any number of people, for instance in public celebrations or in the witnessing of excellence in art or sport. Similarly for research: we can be fascinated by knowledge even when there is no larger outcome. The issue, then, seems to be our bias in favour of productivity, that is, physical things or products that “stick around”.

Note, moreover, that Aristotle is careful to add that both activities and products are *thought* to aim at a good. He adds this proviso in recognition of the fact that we are sometimes mistaken. Knowing what is good can be quite difficult to determine. What is thought of as good often turns out not to be, or at least not as good as the pursuit of something else might have been. Contrary to contemporary prejudices, this point is not affected by claims that what counts as good is subjective, or that each of us should have the right to define the good in our own way. Even if we hold to such claims we can still use some help in determining what our own good consists of. This, after all, is the point of a liberal (compared with a technical) education—to liberate yourself from convention to be more thoughtful about what are the truly good things of life.

Discussions of the good were once ubiquitous—and not only among philosophers. But a series of events surrounding the birth of modernity led to the abandonment of such talk, and a shift to discussing matters in a more neutral language. For our purposes we can identify three causes. First was the possibility of an abundance of both space and resources, represented by the discovery of the New World. There was less reason to contest with one another when a person could strike out West if one did not like their current circumstances. Second was the increase in the means to relieve man’s estate through the development of science and technology. Combined, these two factors made possible a third, political and philosophical shift: rather than battle (and sometimes kill) one another over different conceptions of the good, we now had the space and wherewithal necessary to leave one another alone.

Political philosophers refer to this as the privatization of the good. This point is fundamental to modernity, so much so that in the American experiment it forms the First Amendment to the Constitution. For the goal of the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses was not simply to enforce the separation of church and state. More fundamentally, these clauses underwrote the modern habit of trying to short-circuit debates over the nature of the good or the purpose of life by claiming that such questions were a matter of one’s private concern.

Now, such attempts have always rested upon the non sequitur mentioned above, which conflates the claim that we should each be able to define the good in our own way with one that claims

that the question itself is meaningless. For we always seek the good, even in those cases which are radically individualistic. Moreover, our pursuit of the good often has a broader impact, for good or ill, on other’s search for their own good. The interpenetration of goods is obvious in those cases when the good we seek is a social one—clean air or water, for instance, or a stable climate. More generally, separating individual and social good has become more and more difficult in an increasingly global culture. But even if we set such social concerns aside, even individual goods can be better or worse chosen.

It is worth underlining Aristotle’s central point above: we cannot not pursue the good. We are always pursuing something that we believe will have a good effect (impact?) in one sense or another. This is true whether the good is a matter of the activity itself or whether it is a consequence of that activity. This does, however, raise the question of whether it is proper to describe activities in themselves as having an “impact”. This comes down to a question of how we want to use words. I suggest that in keeping with contemporary usage we reserve “impact” for products separate from activities. Activities disconnected from products can then be called ‘intrinsic’ goods. This, however, raises the question of whether we should pursue a policy of intrinsic goods, that is, those which have no impact.

In Book 1 of the *Ethics* Aristotle identifies three types of goods, sensuous, political, and contemplative. Sensuous goods consist of the pleasures of food, drink and sex, and generally what Hobbes meant by “commodious living”. Political goods are those where our goods are all mixed up with others, and that sustain the life of one’s community: the proverbial barn-raising, or any socially pursued goal. These are activities that create and support the enduring institutions of a people.

Now, Aristotle was no prude: he thought sensuous pleasures were eminently worth pursuing. But if they absorb too much of our time and energy then we are living a life more fit for pigs than for humans. Political activities rank higher. Aristotle is not making a moral claim that they *should* rank higher, but that they do in fact *do* rank higher. Like Buddha, Aristotle views himself as simply being an empiricist on this point. Pay attention to pleasures of each type; you will find that while both are worth pursuing, the goods and pleasures that come from being part of something greater and more enduring than one’s own sensuous pleasure are in the end more satisfying.

Aristotle notes, however, that political goods are also limited. For one, they depend on the assistance of others, who may fail us in various ways. Communities can also be fleeting or mistaken in what they value, which can leave one in the lurch. But these limitations are not present in the case of what Aristotle thought was the richest human activity and the greatest good we were capable of: contemplation.

Today “contemplation” has come to mean something like speculative navel-gazing. But in fact, these are experiences that we are all familiar with, in the appreciation of nature, the enjoyment of a musical performance, or in genial conversation with friends. Aristotle notes that the value of these moments lies in the bare fact that they *are* rather than in their producing anything:

Now if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation? Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, Chapter 8

Aristotle would be dismayed at how contemporary society—at least in the developed world—has so vastly over-valued the

sensuous and productive elements in life. To put the point in more contemporary terms, modern culture has embraced what Martin Heidegger called a “productionist metaphysics”: our activities are seen as having substance only insofar as they result in the creation of “stuff”. Of course, for Aristotle and Heidegger and a legion of other philosophical and spiritual thinkers, the supposed practicality of economic impacts is beyond a certain level of prosperity anything but. Today this point should be obvious, as the pursuit of more and more stuff has led to obesity, social alienation, the breakdown of families, the decay of political structures, and widespread environmental degradation. But by the same token, Aristotle would hardly be surprised by the current state of affairs. As already noted, humans are regularly mistaken about their own good—which is why philosophy, the examination of what constitutes the good life, is the most practical of studies.

To sum up: contemporary discussions of impact are based on a tacit metaphysical assumption, that is, that it is *stuff* that counts as real. Moreover, talk of impact has been substituted for discussions of the good in the belief that this way of speaking is neutral among different ends. Impact has then been reduced to economic impact, because economic growth was the one thing that everyone could agree on—for everyone, it was thought, wants more money (and thus more stuff). In terms of knowledge production, science and technology were the motors of this growth. Like the appeal to increased wealth, the promise of technoscientific progress was presented as a win-win: science and technology would give us more knowledge and thus tools that can be used however we wish. Both economic growth and technoscience were viewed as unalloyed goods that provide greater autonomy by increasing the number of choices that people have.

Today the cracks in this argument are becoming apparent. The limits to the amount of happiness that can be obtained through material goods have become obvious, especially in the face of other, declining indicators. Thus Donovan (2007), noting the economic bias within contemporary discussions of impact, calls for the recognition of a “quadruple bottom line” of economic, environmental, societal and cultural impacts. But as soon as we recognize the existence of multiple bottom lines we face the question of the relative value of these different ends—and thus the re-emergence of debates about the good. And just as economic growth can come at the cost of other values—the disruption of a way of life, or the destruction of nature—scientific progress forecloses as well as expands options. Cell phones are wonderfully convenient, but also make it harder to be out of touch—and easier for governments to track our every movement. Self-driving cars promise the end of the drudgery of driving—but also the end of employment for the 6 million men in the United States who drive vehicles for a living.

What is gained in the shift from the good to impact? In part the difference is rhetorical. Talk of “the good” sounds abstract and moralistic; “impact” sounds serious, hard-hitting (albeit a bit scary, that is, impact craters), Newtonian, and comfortably neutral. But beyond these differences in connotation there is also a premise that underlies our politics: that it is possible to have a society where questions of the good can be largely privatized. The strains of this position are visible throughout society, for instance in debates that the United States is a Christian nation (or not). These strains will grow in an increasingly resource-limited and interconnected world. Talk of “impact” rather than “the good” thus represents an increasingly futile attempt to avoid conversations about the ends of life—apparent in the growing recognition of potential negative impacts or ‘grimpts’ of knowledge production. In short, discussion of the good is becoming unavoidable.

2.

But let’s be realistic. Suggesting that the conversation about impact needs to shift into a discussion about “the good” sounds like a recipe for irrelevance—or perhaps disaster. On the account offered above, the impact agenda has been shaped by cultural assumptions that can be traced back hundreds of years. Policy analysis exists within the realm of the possible; how are we to make use of an argument like this? Call for a constitutional convention? Hold nationwide seminars on the nature of the good? Set about trying to change the founding principles of modernity?

Such criticism—even with the ridicule—is well taken. Philosophy addresses basic and abstract questions that exist at a distance from the pressing problems faced by decision makers. If philosophy is to be relevant some type of connective tissue is needed, a step-down function that helps us move from philosophical abstractions to the specificities and practical limitations of practical problems. But contemporary philosophy has not treated the creation of a step-down function as part of its remit—with the exception of teaching, which is itself directed towards young people who are not in the midst of their working careers. Philosophy needs the equivalent of a class of engineers who translate scientific insights into concepts that are useful in policy contexts.

Philosophers will be quick to disagree with these claims. They will point to applied philosophy as evidence that philosophers are involved in practical affairs. It’s an argument that Adam Briggles and I address at length in *Socrates Tenured* (2016). We argue there that the self-understanding of applied philosophy on this point is badly mistaken. Since its origins in the 1970s, applied philosophy has offered a large number of philosophical analyses on matters of practical concern; but as a practical project, applied philosophy has been a failure.² The field has ignored the need for a philosophic rhetoric that complements the richness of its philosophic insights. It has overlooked the vast difference between *writing about* practical problems, versus *working on* these problems with scientists, engineers, policymakers and others. As a rule—there are exceptions—applied philosophers write for other philosophers rather than for the wider world, and stay in the seminar room rather than get their hands dirty in an ongoing engagement with non-academics—which would require adjusting their accounts in light of temporal, financial and political realities.

In *Socrates Tenured* we explained this practical failure of applied philosophy through the phenomenon of disciplinary capture. When it was formed in the 1970s, applied philosophy certainly intended to be relevant. The founding statements of the two major journals in the field both made claims like “philosophy should be brought to bear upon the practical issues of life”. But these sentiments were immediately overwhelmed by the need to show that applied philosophers live up to disciplinary standards of theoretical excellence. This, somewhat ironically, was a practical necessity, given that mainstream philosophers were in charge of decisions concerning hiring, tenure and promotion. If one wanted to work on these topics at all one needed to speak the language of philosophers—a reflection of the fact that there were very few positions for philosophers within the public and private sectors. Disciplinary capture, then, is part and parcel of the fact that philosophers have only one institutional home within culture: the modern research university.

This needs to change, for the health of both philosophy and policymaking. But the absence of a contemporary body of work concerned with the rhetoric of philosophy also explains why it is useful to look to the tradition for help in bringing philosophy into accord with practical needs. And once we turn to the tradition, we find the *Republic* to be the classic account of a rhetoric of

philosophy. Plato's masterwork devotes sustained attention to the philosophy's bad reputation, and the need for a step down function to overcome the supposed uselessness of philosophy. Indeed, the entirety of the Platonic corpus can be viewed as a series of examples of and commentaries upon these tasks.

In Book 6 of the *Republic*, in a section that is often skimmed in the rush to get to those sections (the Divided Line and the Allegory of the Cave) more in line with contemporary epistemological interests, we find Adeimantus bluntly challenging Socrates:

[O]f all those who start out on philosophy—not those who take it up for the sake of getting educated when they are young and then drop it, but those who linger in it for a longer time—most become quite queer, not to say completely vicious; while the ones who seem perfectly decent, do nevertheless suffer at least one consequence of the practice you are praising—they become useless to the cities. (487d)

An Introduction to Philosophy course may nicely round out a person's education; but devotion to philosophy threatens to make a person odd, or useless, and perhaps even harmful in their inability to contribute to practical affairs.

The entirety of the *Republic* is a reply to these charges. The dialogue opens with the issue that precedes, or at least should precede, every occasion of thinking: in a given situation, how much philosophizing is appropriate? In Book 1 Socrates confronts a series of interlocutors—Cephalus, Polemarchus and Thrasymachus—who represent a life governed by piety and religion, custom and tradition, and egotism and self-interest. There is no final philosophical refutation of these positions; they represent attitudes that are a perennial presence in our lives. Philosophizing in a public setting is always constrained by these perspectives on life to one degree or another; moreover, they can be disregarded or challenged only so far before a reaction ensues. The task of philosophy, then, is not simply to come up with insights, but also to determine how wide the philosophic space is at a given moment, and how much change or challenge the status quo will tolerate. Beyond that, philosophy becomes useless or counter-productive.

A second part of Plato's concern with a philosophical rhetoric comes in Books 3 and 4 of the *Republic*, when Socrates describes the type of education necessary for the city's guardians. The account culminates in the claim that it is sometimes necessary to administer a powerful *pharmakon* or drug to the guardians so that they will develop the correct habits and beliefs. This account has gained fame (or infamy) as the Noble Lie, what Socrates himself describes as a "Phoenician tale": people have different degrees of intelligence and nobility, or as Socrates put it, different metals (gold, silver, or bronze and iron) mixed within them. The point of this lie is to persuade people to accept their station in life—which Socrates viewed as a practical necessity, in that democracy was an inherently fragile form of government. But Socrates' (and Plato's) point is less about lying (which is also described as something that should be done as rarely as possible), and more about recognizing the limitations of people and situations (cf. Book 1), and speaking in ways that move a conversation toward practical if limited improvements.

Plato is thus outlining an ameliorative approach to philosophizing: keep an eye out for the ideal state, while recognizing that only limited victories are possible. It expresses a philosophical conservatism similar to Edmund Burke's. Burke, having lived through the French Revolution, recognized the dangers of radical social experimentation. (Gopnik 2016 describes Obama's liberalism in similar terms, as "a belief in radical change made through practical measures"). Plato, of course, had the example of

Socrates' death at the hands of Athens as an object lesson in the dangers of excessive philosophizing. Plato exhibited great care on this point, which extended to his manner of writing though the development of the dialogue form, which allowed him to explore radical possibilities via different characters without identifying himself with any one of them.

A third element in Plato's philosophical rhetoric can be found in Socrates' response to Adeimantus in Book 6 (488dff). This is a difficult passage, for the bulk of it is devoted to Socrates extolling the virtues of the most abstract kinds of knowledge—insight into the pure, unchanging being of the platonic forms. In themselves, such crowning abstractions would seem to offer little help to the statesman. Now, it's possible that Socrates meant to defend the importance of principles that can serve as lodestars to our actions. Or this may be an occasion where Plato is drawing a contrast between Socrates' thinking and his own.

But it is also possible that Plato is hiding his real opinion in plain sight. For in the midst of Socrates' extended account in praise of pure being, he offers a vastly different account of the philosopher—as someone who, like the pilot of a ship, is able to take account of all the variables—wind, weather, seas, stars and provisions—necessary to bring a vessel safely to port. This jarring shift in description is more in keeping with challenges facing the policy maker, who must constantly adjust general principles to the particularities of the moment. This reading is also more consistent with the message of the most famous of all Platonic images, the Allegory of the Cave. Philosophers invariably focus on the epistemological aspects of the allegory, where sensuous experience is criticized for its unreliability in comparison with pure theory. But the allegory ends with the philosopher being the person who guides his or her fellow citizens out into of the shadows and into the daylight of reality where things can be rightly seen. This, moreover, requires the development of "an art of turning around"—what I am calling here the development of a philosophical rhetoric.

Of course, these are only *possible* readings of the *Republic*. The dialogue can be interpreted in any number of ways. But that's part of Plato's point: he has created a philosophic form that is open to multiple interpretations and audiences, forcing the reader to actively think for themselves. The *Republic* represents Plato's efforts at creating a workable philosophical rhetoric: the dialogue not only defines the nature of the just city, but it also describes an educational programme for its fulfillment, and explores the degree to which philosophy can practically contribute to its stability. It's the classic example of a philosopher seeking to connect philosophic abstractions to the issues of everyday life.

The entirety of Plato's dialogues are experiments in the creation of the step-down function. The dialogues show Socrates engaging people from all walks of life. Plato puts his arguments in the form of a dialogue, not as an attempt at outreach or "dumbing down", or simply out of fear for his safety given the fate of Socrates, but because the dialogue form allows the presentation of a series of positions that evolve through the back and forth of conversation. This is a degree of public engagement that is exceedingly rare among philosophers today.

3.

The absence of a contemporary tradition of philosophical rhetoric is one of the striking omissions of twentieth and now twenty-first century philosophic culture. Taking Socrates as our inspiration, Briggie and I have developed field philosophy as an attempt to fill in this gap in the philosophic literature (for example, Frodeman, 2014; Briggie, 2015; Frodeman and Briggie, 2016). In contrast with applied philosophy, and seeking to update the platonic approach for the twenty-first century, field philosophy begins with problems as they are defined by non-philosophic actors in

real-world settings, and seeks to make piecemeal contributions to societal problems as part of a team effort. In terms of evaluating its impact—besides treating this question as itself a philosophic question—the efforts of field philosophy are judged successful (or not) according to more-than-disciplinary standards, that is, by the judgments made by our non-academic colleagues. Following upon Plato's thought, field philosophy is fundamentally ameliorative in nature, in its recognition that most problems need to be managed rather than solved. Attempts at “solutions”, that is, a complete and tidy resolution of a problem, are typically too top-down, inflexible and authoritarian in nature.

In our thinking to date, field philosophy has five characteristics:

- It seeks to help excavate, articulate, discuss and assess the philosophical dimensions of real-world policy problems.
- It pursues case based research at the meso-level, beginning with problems as defined and contested by the stakeholders involved.
- The primary audience for its work consists of non-disciplinary stakeholders faced with a “live” problem. The knowledge generated is produced in the context of use.
- There is no “method”, unless that term is understood in terms of rules of thumb, pluralism, sensitivity to context, and a bottom-up orientation.
- In terms of evaluation, it uses context-dependent standards and non-disciplinary metrics for assessing success, defined in the first instance by the stakeholders.

This essay, then, has a recursive element. It is both an effort to bring philosophic resources to the question of impact, and, in terms of its future influence (or not), one experiment in the usefulness of philosophy.

With that in mind, in totalling up the implications of Aristotle's thinking for the impact agenda, two points seem salient. The first is to look for opportunities to shift impact discussions towards substantive questions of what constitutes our societal good. This approach is more advanced in Europe than in the United States. At both the Research Councils of the United Kingdom and at the European Commission's Horizon2020, one finds explicit expression on specific societal goals, whereas in the United States, conversations about broader impacts have tended to oscillate between a defence of scientific autonomy *a la* Vannevar Bush and Republican efforts to define “national needs” in terms of the military industrial complex. But both cultures have shared a modern version of the Noble Lie—that there is no need for people to compromise, to control themselves, and to recognize the possibility of limits, for science and technology will make it possible to fulfil all our desires. A more sober science policy will make the tradeoffs of “progress” more explicit, rather than hiding behind the mask of an invariably positive “impact”. Of course, such becoming modesty in an era of constant overpromising immediately places itself at a disadvantage. By the same token, people are increasingly aware of such overpromising, and have sometimes reacted favourably to being told the truth.

The second point consists of making “no impact” into a plausible goal for policymaking. We already have examples where the contemplative element of science delights our fellow citizens: for instance, the Hubble space telescope offers an example of a

high budget technoscientific project the results of which have been basically contemplative in nature. The same can be said for any number of recent scientific advances—the detection of a black hole 12 billion times as massive as our sun, or the discovery of artistic patterns made 500,000 years ago by *Homo erectus*. Of course, this should not be taken as a dismissal of the need for impact. But the pursuit of impact should be counter-balanced by what might be called an ecological critique of impact—that in many cases we are suffering from excessive impact. Whether we want to call the lessening of a past impact an “impact” or not is a matter of semantics. The point is to recognize that many good things are good in and of themselves, without a resultant “product”. In that sense, the impact agenda needs to make room for a positive account of “no impact”.

Notes

- 1 The Greek ἀγαθόν (agathon) means the desirable or that which is wished for.
- 2 There are a number of caveats to these statements that we acknowledge in *Socrates Tenured*.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable as no datasets were analysed or generated during this study.

Additional information

Competing interests: The author declares no competing financial interests.

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How to cite this article: Frodeman R (2017) The impact agenda and the search for a good life. *Palgrave Communications*. 3:17003 doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2017.3.



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