# Any Philosophical Canon is Practically Self-Undermining

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**Abstract**

There has recently been much-needed critical discussion of the current Anglo-American philosophical canons, but not as much consideration of their nature and purposes. I discuss what philosophical canons are and argue that they are practices reinforced by social norms. I then consider what purposes a philosophical canon can have for various stakeholders. Building on Luca Castagnoli's work on self-refutation in ancient philosophy, I clarify various notions of being practically self-undermining. I then argue that even on an inclusive view of what the purposes of a philosophical canon are, any philosophical canon is self-undermining. There is no plausible account of the purposes of a philosophical canon that is not undermined by having one, whatever its makeup.

## 1. Introduction

The Anglo-American philosophical canon has for some time been dead, white, and male.[2] Plenty of quantitative data supports this. For example, dead, white, male philosophers dominate lists of most-cited authors in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.[3] Two-thirds of all articles in *The British Journal for the History of Philosophy* collectively focused on the works of just sixteen dead, white Europeans for the first twenty-five years of its existence.[4] The philosophy journals *Mind*, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Nous*, and *Ethics* published about 10,000 articles collectively between 1940 and 2014: only ten of those, 0.1%, were on any Asian philosophy, whereas 335 articles used or focused on just Aristotle.[5]

In response, there has been explicit pushback with the aim of diversifying the canonical philosophers and traditions discussed.[6] Pushes to "expand the canon" have been persistent and aimed to broaden the sorts of texts, figures, and traditions included in philosophical journals, conferences, classrooms, departments, and more. This can be seen in conferences organized around expanding philosophical canons, as a search on PhilEvents or PHILOs-L shows, and some conferences focused on historiographical issues in history of philosophy. [7] It can be seen in grant-funded initiatives like *Project Vox* and the *Extending New Narratives*. It can also be seen

editorials in *The Stone* and on philosophy blogs, and even in the motif of the podcast *The History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*: as Peter Adamson puts it, the emphasis in the title for this this podcast in progress is on there being *no gaps* in its coverage.[8]

In summary, then, philosophical canon-expanders allege that there is a philosophical canon and that it should be more inclusive of different philosophical figures, texts, and traditions. On the other hand, philosophical canon-keepers have responded by saying "keep the canon". It has been variously argued that the current one is rightly constituted with the right philosophical material, or even that there is no problem here because there is no philosophical canon at all.[9]

However, this debate usually goes without answering the Socratic question, "What is a philosophical canon?"[10] The debate usually even goes without answering the Lyndon Johnsonian question, "What is a philosophical canon for?"[11] And in a philosophical piece arguing either for or against diversification of a canon, one would think that, even if we are not going to define a philosophical canon, we should at least get a description of its alleged purposes. But we do not.

I argue here for an answer to that Socratic question. Indeed, having given an account of what a philosophical canon is, I argue here that philosophical canons are self-undermining. I first examine the assumption that the ultimate purpose of philosophical canons is securing philosophical knowledge. If this is what they assume, philosophical canon-expanders and philosophical canon-keepers cannot achieve their respective aims. This is because philosophical canons are anti-philosophical institutions: the social norms required for philosophical canons to exist undermine the goal of securing philosophical knowledge.

In Sections 2-5, I critically consider what a philosophical canon is and what its purposes plausibly could be. First, I discuss my methodology. Then I discuss what a philosophical canon is and argue that they are constituted by norms that I call *enforcement practices*: a philosophical

canon is a collection of philosophical texts whose uses are enforced and reinforced by social norms. I next consider who the stakeholders in a philosophical canon are and what benefits a philosophical canon could plausibly confer upon them. This gives us a reasonably exhaustive list of the plausible purposes for philosophical canons, though I do not here claim that any subset of constitute 'the' purposes or 'the right' purposes of a philosophical canon.

In Sections 6-7, I argue that, all else being equal, the practical aims of a philosophical canon are best achieved without one. Building on Castagnoli's work on self-refutation in ancient philosophy, I develop a notion of *being practically self-undermining* I use to defend the premise that philosophical inquiry is characterized by *criticism*. I then argue that the plausible purposes of the canon, for each of the stakeholders that stand to benefit from the achievement of that purpose, are undermined by having a philosophical canon: the enforcement practices that make up philosophical canons undermine all of their plausible aims. Just as an argument can be practically self-refuting in a dialectical context, all philosophical canons, however constituted, practically undermine their own ends.

## 2. Methodology

I first explain my methodology. I seek a Socratic account of what a philosophical canon is, that is, necessary and sufficient conditions for being a canonical text. I support this account, on the one hand, by thought experiments criticizing the alternatives. This is indirect evidence for thinking that some further conditions, such as the ones I offer here, are necessary. On the other hand, I rely on the evidence we find in our own autobiographies. Most readers will find that my account is supported by their own first-hand data, that is, ordinary conversations in the discipline of philosophy about philosophical canons. On my account, philosophical canons have the philosophically notable feature that they undermine the goal of securing philosophical

knowledge. On its own, the conceptual analysis of philosophical canons I propose is philosophically fruitful, but we should go further and make this analysis the starting point of a reassessment of philosophical practices.

However, I do not take a position here on whether we should keep, eliminate, expand, or otherwise change philosophical canons. I describe a specific yet widespread account of philosophical canons, and then argue that they are practically self-undermining. This is philosophically interesting, but it is not a defense of *anti-canonism*, the view that philosophical canons are to be eliminated. The argument supporting my thesis is consistent with rejecting anti-canonism: even if the norms that make up philosophical canons undermine the very aims of philosophical practice, it could be argued that philosophical canons are practically indispensable for the existence of a discipline of philosophy. For example, one could hold that philosophical canons and the norms that make them up are needed to retain a common core among philosophical practitioners. This might weigh against anti-canonism on the grounds that canons make the discipline of philosophy possible, and so also promote a great deal of good philosophical activity, even within the confines of a philosophical canon.

On the other hand, my argument is also consistent with endorsing anti-canonism. While I do not take a considered position on such issues here, my inclination is that the philosophical discipline does not depend on there being a philosophical canon. If so, then in light of the analysis here which shows that philosophical canons undermine the very goals of philosophical practice, there is some initial support for embracing anti-canonism.

If I am right that philosophical canons are practically self-undermining, we have additional reasons to adopt anti-canonism. One who further held that there are no sociological or psychological reasons not to dispense with philosophical canons that are self-undermining might

rightly assume that the best course is to get rid of them. The claim that philosophical canons are practically self-undermining thus has philosophical importance.

Second, philosophical canons are messy. There is not just one philosophical canon: Aristotle might be canonical in some philosophical circles, but not necessarily in discussions of Aztec philosophy, which of course developed independently of ancient Greek philosophy.[12] Merleau-Ponty may be canonical among phenomenologists, but is not necessarily so among early modern scholars interpreting the works of Cavendish, and vice-versa. Similarly, Mengzi may be essential among Confucian philosophers, but not necessarily among interpreters of Avicenna. Of course, various philosophers belong to multiple different canons. Aristotle's views on friendship and virtue as well as his arguments for foundationalism in epistemology are part of different canons. And canons will grow, shrink, and otherwise change over time. They will be defined by more or less overlapping and interrelated collections of texts. Philosophical canons or different texts within one canon can have conflicting aims and supporters that are at intellectual odds with each other, and each philosopher is of course at liberty to customize their own version that may embrace texts that might otherwise be seen as belonging to different canons. There is also reason to think there can be multiple canons at once, if the examples given above are apt.[13]

In short, philosophical canons are subject to causal, historical, linguistic, sociological, and disciplinary pressures that impact what texts they include. This evolutionary picture of philosophical canons is taken for granted in what follows. But my concern here is not with the story of any specific, given canon, but with practices that would constitute *any* philosophical canon, even though any particular set of those practices constituting a specific philosophical canon or canons will have a complex history. As such, this discussion will take the form of an ahistorical discussion for the sake of cutting across historical circumstances. Even so, the

ensuing treatment of philosophical canons in this general way will produce results, including describing philosophically notable features of *any* philosophical canon.

## 3. Philosophical canons are constituted by enforcement practices

We first want to say what a philosophical canon is. We can start with what makes a text, a figure, or a tradition canonical. A natural thought would be to appeal to *frequency*: some collection of texts, figures, or traditions are discussed in print, assigned in class, debated at conferences, used in job advertisements or to attract grant funding, and recognized in the public consciousness at a higher frequency or rate than others. One might assume that if the frequency of consideration of given philosophical material is a good deal higher than the consideration of all others, or if there is tacit pressure to consider this material to secure publication or employment, say, then this material is canonical.

This account of what makes something part of the philosophical canon seems *prima facie* plausible when we consider specific figures, texts, or traditions one by one. In reflecting on what is canonical, we might think, 'I cannot get this paper on Y published without citing X, so I suppose that X is canonical.' But further inspection shows that the frequency account is wrong. When seeking necessary and sufficient conditions for what makes *X* part of the philosophical canon, an appeal to the frequency is wrong. In other terms, in the formula, '*X* is philosophical canon if and only if…', cannot not be completed by reference to X's frequency.

The fundamental issue with the frequency account, even with suitable modifications considered below, is just that mere counting of citations, reprintings, translations, fellowships, honors, and so on, is inadequate to capture what makes some text canonical. There are all sorts of ways to count, but quantitatively aggregating the attention of philosophers, however the

aggregation is done, omits the vital role of norms in making a text canonical.[14] Consequently, a quantitative criterion for inclusion in the canon would not be sufficient.

My view is this: what makes a text part of a philosophical canon is the existence of rules or norms that underpin what I call *enforcement practices*. The presence of such enforcement practices seems both necessary and sufficient for a text to acquire canonical status. Canonical status is not a matter of counting: so long as the relevant enforcement norms exist, even only for a moment, the text is canonical at that moment. When such norms do not exist, even for an instant, neither do canons. There are quite plausibly limits on the shortness of time during which a text can be philosophical canon: enforcement practices depend on social institutions and norms and the relevant social institution will need to be established and continue to exist long enough for the relevant philosophical community's practices to emerge.[15]

It will be helpful to give examples of the sort of speech acts that are philosophical canon-constituting enforcement practices. Philosophical canon-constituting enforcement practices need not be limited to speech acts, but I focus on the latter presently because attention to communicative aspects of philosophical practices helps bring out some important characteristic of the type of enforcement involved in the constitution of philosophical canons. The questions, assessment and assertions below are borrowed with modifications from Amy Olberding, and are fairly typical and representative of the sort of speech act used in the constitutive enforcement practices that I have in mind:[16]

- *How is non-canonical philosophical text Y relevant to philosophical canon item X?*[17]
- *How is this an introductory course if you are not teaching philosophical canon item X?*[18]
- *The non-canonical tradition Y is not very good.*
- *The non-canonical tradition Y is not philosophy*.

- *The philosophical canon is already inclusive.*
- *There are already neglected figures in canonical tradition X.*
- *One will not get professional advancement by discussing figure Y.*[19]
- *Time and resources are insufficient to study figures outside the canon like Y.*

Roughly, speech acts like these are contribute to *enforcement practices* when their utterance is meant to enforce a certain conception of what philosophical texts merit attention, i.e. a criterion for what counts as "good philosophy". When the utterance itself has that illocutionary force, then it is an act of enforcement. The existence of canon-constitutive enforcement practices within a philosophical community is what makes texts, figures, or traditions part of a philosophical canon.[20]

My account is supported by the data of common and ordinary conversations in our discipline about philosophical canons. I believe that reflection on your autobiography will support that such practices are fairly common in our philosophical disciplines. Most of us have repeatedly encountered utterances like the above, where the illocutionary force was meant to enforce a given norm as to what merits philosophical attention. Such data is evidence for my account of philosophical canons as being constituted by the presence of rules: the existence of norms and social practices is what makes a text part of the philosophical canon.

The enforcement rules and illocutionary acts that underpin canons are *constitutive*: they determine what it is to be philosophical canon in the same way that rules determine what it is to be a strike in baseball or softball.[21] We make it the case that texts are philosophical canon because we engage in the enforcement practices that make it so. A good model for the process involved can be found in Searle's status function declarations.[22]

The constitutive rules that underpin all social institutions, including philosophical canons. But while they can be seen as on a par with the constitutive rules of complex social institutions like those of professional sports, they are rather unlike those of other types of social institutions like pretend games. The rules of pretend games are typically negotiable with relative ease: they often involve fewer actors whose interests and demands might need to be met. The rules of institutionalized sports like we find in professional basketball are less easily negotiable, at least in their professional settings. Negotiating the rules may require a formal process that involves consulting a large number of stakeholders, so that they do not generally change with a mere declaration, but require some other preconditions to be met. The enforcement practices that constitute a philosophical canon, like many complex social institutions, typically are not so easily negotiable, and so are closer in character to less malleable social institutions like the rules of professional basketball.[23] One person or small group of people cannot simply negotiate among themselves and then declare what texts belong to a philosophical canon, and thereby make it so. The enforcement practices that govern such matters depend on institutions that no single person or small group of people controls. There is a more complex sociological and disciplinary process involved, whether informal or formalized, in the development of social practices that constitute philosophical canons.

So my account of philosophical canons is this: if a philosophical text is part of a philosophical canon (or multiple canons) over an interval or at a time t, there must be corresponding constitutive enforcement practices and norms at *t*.[24] The enforcement practices that constitute a philosophical canon, even if not formally codified themselves, reinforce the practices and norms ensures that philosophical material is evaluated partly by reference to what

is philosophical canon, so that new ideas are understood in terms familiar to canonical texts, and professional advancement and certification is partly structured around mastery of canonical texts.

The question, 'What was the force of that utterance?' is vital here and the answer is not always obvious. Utterances that have the same locutionary type, may have different illocutionary force. Likewise, utterances may fail to have the intended illocutionary effect, even when the appropriate convention and circumstances exist.[25] Moreover, acts of enforcement can take different illocutionary forms, like *advising*, *warning*, and *ordering*.[26] For instance, when the speaker has a certain degree of epistemic or institutional authority, acts of enforcement can interweave these different illocutionary forces into one locutionary act.[27] As such, while all cases of canon enforcement do not fall into the same category of communicative act, all claims about the canon communicate what merits philosophical study with the illocutionary effect of enforcing the canon.

## 4. The ultimate purpose a philosophical canon

I next aim to give a reasonably complete enumeration of the presumed benefits of a philosophical canon. To do that, we will need to consider who the stakeholders in philosophical canons are. Here is a rough division of persons invested in philosophy in one way or another, within and without academia:

a. Permanent faculty
b. Impermanent faculty
c. Occupational philosophers outside academia
d. Graduate students
e. Undergraduate students
f. K-12 students

g. Policy makers

h. Members of the public

Now what are the plausible benefits of the philosophical canon to any group or groups of such stakeholders? Benefits for one or more of the above groups include the following:[28]

- Occupational or professional advancement, particularly for those in secure positions
- Occupational or professional procurement, particularly for those in insecure positions
- Educational or professional certification, particularly for those who are students
- Educational guidance, particularly for those who are students, teachers, or policymakers
- Leisurely guidance, particularly for members of the public

I take it that this is a reasonably comprehensive list of the practical benefits of having a philosophical canon. The benefits on this list could of course be enjoyed by multiple stakeholders. For example, suppose that a group of policy makers wished to introduce standardized testing into high school philosophy. Beneficiaries of this would include teachers and students, and they might even include academics, who will have a better sense of what their students know when they access their university-level introductory classes, and by extension a better sense of what the public in general knows.

One assumption I make about of these practical benefits of a philosophical canon is that *they are all instrumental*. For example, we do not want to advance occupationally in philosophy merely for its own sake, but for some further goods. Some of these further goods may themselves be instrumental, like money, and others might be final, like the satisfaction accompanying professional success or completing a philosophical project (if such a thing is even possible). And again, the leisurely guidance afforded by having a philosophical canon—as when one tells a person on the Reddit forum r/AskPhilosophy to read so-and-so because so-and-so is canonical—

the point of such direction is not for the sake of giving direction. It is direction given for the sake of some further good, like the instrumental goods of helping the person advance professionally or as a philosophical learner, or of facilitating their enjoyment of what books the person does have leisure to enjoy. And this point, that such practical benefits are all instrumental, strikes me as holding good for all the benefits of having a philosophical canon: it seems that these are all instrumental goods, and not desirable for their own sake.

This raises the question of what the intrinsic good or good of having a philosophical canon are. We are back to the Johnsonian question, "What are philosophical canons for?" One possibility is that they are useful for constituting the philosophical discipline itself. But this raises two questions. First, what is the philosophical discipline itself for? Many state legislatures and boards of trustees, eager to cut university departments, find that the mere existence of faculty who are in a philosophy department not justifiable for the sake of their existing. They are wrong, obviously, to appraise philosophy so low. But it is right that philosophy departments, and the very discipline itself existing, is not justification enough. It is not obvious, or I think true, that the existence of a discipline or faculty is intrinsically good. What is intrinsically good is something like the human skills that they develop and the scientific knowledge that they create.

It is difficult to settle the controversy over what the ultimate point of philosophical activity is, and I will not purport to settle here. Yet there does seem to be an assumption that is made in justifying the existence of a philosophical canon, namely, that the canon reflects the considered judgments of a community of experts about what deserves to be included. There are many ways to develop this notion of philosophical texts' deservingness. One way of developing this assumption is to say that what deserves to be included in the philosophical canon is the best philosophy. On this view, the ultimate or final end of a philosophical canon is something like

developing human abilities or creating philosophical knowledge. The idea, then, would be that what deserves to be in the philosophical canon is those texts exemplify better philosophizing and superior philosophical understanding, whatever that is supposed to be.[29]

Because explicit defenses of the philosophical canon are difficult to find, and Socratic inquiries into the nature of philosophical canons are even rarer, there is not much choice but to assume something about the final purpose of philosophy for the sake of having the dialectical discussion at all. And since an assumption like this—that canonical texts deserve to be such because they facilitate the final goal of philosophical activity, which is better philosophizing—seems to be what animates defenses of the philosophical canon, I will assume for the sake of argument here that the ultimate purpose of a philosophical canon—the ultimate reason someone values the intermediary benefits listed above, and so also the existence of a philosophical canon—is for the sake of philosophical knowledge.

## 5. Being practically self-undermining

When I say that an institution like a philosophical canon is *practically self-undermining*, I mean that the acts that constitute it are contrary to one or more of the practical purposes that are required of those that hold *T* to be consistent. For example, if a speech act enforcing the rule that so-and-so is a philosophical canon undermines the practical purposes of having a philosophical canon, then this suggests that the institution itself is practically self-undermining.

There is more than one insightful treatments of self-refutation.[30] Here I follow the discussion in Luca Castagnoli's 2010 *Ancient Self-Refutation*.[31] According to Castagnoli, there are different kinds of self-refutation, and various neighboring notions that are not quite self-refutation. Castagnoli, who is developing and refining Mackie's account of "pragmatic self-refutation," splits this notion into two kinds of self-refutation.[32] First, a thesis is *ad hominem*

*practically self-refuting* if the specific speech act of asserting the thesis commits the speaker to some claim that contradicts it.[33] Second, a thesis is *strictly practically self-refuting* when the speech act of asserting it falsifies its content. Note that being self-refuting in either sense does not show that the thesis is false: it only shows that the specific act of asserting the thesis incurs an inconsistency with the content asserted.[34] The common characteristic of these kinds of self-refutation are that it is the specific way in which a thesis is advanced—the specific speech act involved—that refutes it: in these cases there may be other kinds of speech that do "advance" the thesis but do not refute it.[35]

In contrast, following Castagnoli again, a thesis is *operationally self-refuting* when any speech act that implies its assertion commits the speaker to a contradiction (*ad hominem*) or else refutes the very content of the thesis being asserted (*strictly*).[36] Operational self-refutation is stronger than practical self-refutation because operational self-refutation shows there is not just a way of advancing a claim that is self-refuting, but that any way of advancing a claim is self-refuting: as Castagnoli puts it, the operational self-refutation is not contingent on the way in which a thesis is advanced.[37] Again, note that being operationally self-refuting does not show that the thesis is false.[38] It only shows that any way of advancing it is inconsistent with the content of the thesis. In summary, pragmatic self-refutation has to do with some specific way in which a thesis is advanced, while operational self-refutation has to do with any way in which the thesis is advanced.[39]

To take one quick example, in Plato's *Sophist*, the Stranger from Elea aims to refute the "late-learners." The Late-Learners hold the view that every being is wholly separate from all other beings of whatever kind.[40] So even to say 'a human is good' is to mix one thing, perhaps a specific human or the property of *being human*, with another, perhaps the property of *being*

*good*, in a way that is impermissible on their view: rather, one is only permitted to say 'a human is a human' or 'a good thing is a good thing.'[41] As the Stranger summarizes the view, "nothing has any capacity at all for association with anything."[42]

The Stranger then holds that the view of the Late-Learners is operationally self-refuting. It is not possible to advance the view in any way without thereby contradicting their view:

> [The Late-Learners,] they're forced to use *being* about everything, and also *separate from others*, *of itself*, and a million other things. They're powerless to keep from doing it—that is, from linking them together in their speech. So they don't need other people to refute them, but have an enemy within, as people say, to contradict them, and they go carrying him around talking in an undertone inside them like the strange ventriloquist Eurycles.[43]

The Late-Learners' thesis that every being *X* is wholly separate from all other beings *Y* of whatever kind cannot be asserted without a predication that mixes together *X* and *Y*, even one that says '*X* and *Y* are wholly separate from one another'. Making any such predication contradicts the claim that no beings can be mixed together because any predication mixes beings together. This contradiction arises no matter how the thesis is advanced because any way of advancing the Late-Learners' position involves predications, and this necessarily involves mixing words for different beings together, contrary to the thesis that this cannot be done. Hence, the very act of asserting this position involves violating what this position requires. This is what makes the self-refutation operational rather than *ad hominem*. As Castagnoli puts it,

> …it is the non-contingent flaw of operational self-refutation that afflicts the late-learners' position: there is *no way* of coherently asserting the ontology underlying their linguistic reform…Silence seems to be the only coherent option for them.[44]

Any genuinely *predicative* use of the copula 'to be' that would have to be involved in advancing a thesis, contradicts the content of the Late-Learners' own thesis since it consists in asserting that the only admissible use of the copula is to express identity. Hence it cannot be advanced in any way consistently, and so is operationally self-refuting.

For a speaker, self-refutations of any sort are embarrassing dialectically. In their own awful way, they are the best kind of refutations. This is because, as Castagnoli notes, self-refutations are *reflexive*: one does not logically need outsiders' refutational assistance with any self-refuting thesis because they do that work for themselves.[45] A reflexive kind of self-refutation is, if my account of philosophical canons is right and if the assumption from §4 about the final ends of philosophical canons are accepted, present in the individual speech acts that collectively operate as norms of enforcement. And this means that self-refutation of a practical kind occurs in individual speech acts that constitute a philosophical canon no matter what its makeup is.

To unpack this a bit, let me build on Castagnoli and introduce the notion of an individual speech act being practically self-undermining. A speech act *S* is *practically self-undermining* when the speech act has a practical effect that undermines the final end or ends for which one is speaking. Being practically self-undermining is essentially a weaker version of self-refutation in one of Castagnoli's senses, but being self-undermining, unlike being self-refuting, does not necessarily involve a logical contradiction with the content of the speech act, even if the speech act is also an assertion. Being self-undermining rather involves a conflict between the practical effects of one's speech act and the final ends for which one is making the speech act.

On my account of philosophical canons, and assuming that final purpose for which one has a canon is better philosophy, then a canon of any sort is practically *self*-undermining. They have a sort of reflexive destructiveness that self-refutation does. In particular, individual speech act of enforcing that so-and-so is part of the philosophical canon undermines the whole point of so-and-so being canonical.[46]

How is it that the individual speech acts, which collectively constitute collective norms of enforcement that are philosophical canons, undermine the final end of having better philosophy? How would mere words have this self-undermining practical consequence? It is because the speech acts that make up philosophical canons are acts of enforcement. Acts of enforcement are dogmatic acts: they are not the sort of act that admits of, or really tolerates, dialectical debate. Acts of enforcement, as I argue in §6, are thus anti-philosophical acts: if they enforce effectively that such-and-such is canonical, and so is the proper object of philosophical attention, then they will have the practical effect of constraining philosophical activity without the need for reasons.

Before arguing for this claim below, let me first offer an example of something that is *not* an anti-philosophical act. An expert judgment is not the sort of thing that necessarily comes with the illocutionary force of enforcing a rule. For example, at a philosophical event, someone might inform me that I should incorporate *X* into my course syllabus or paper. They might give reasons for this, to the effect that it would fit well with my purpose. They might give this information without making the claim that *X* is the unique philosophical source that could serve this purpose.

This sort of utterance, where one is able to give reasons and where one does not mean to enforce a rule, is not the sort of enforcement practice that I argue below is anti-philosophical. In some cases, 'You should do *X*' might come with the illocutionary force that makes it an act of enforcement, and in other cases that type of utterance might not come with that force. But an expert judgment as to the quality of something, particularly with reasons behind it, is not an anti-philosophical act. Indeed, the chief difference between the enforcement practices that I consider below and an expert judgment is this: expert judgments can be interrogated, whereas rules can merely be obeyed or disobeyed. Enforcement practices are not amenable to rational criticism, though rational criticism may non-rationally cause the institution of enforcing them to die out.

## 6. Philosophical inquiry as unrestricted criticism

In general, one cannot make any argument without appealing to some first principles.[47] That general principle applies here: one cannot argue that a practice is anti-philosophical unless one characterizes what is anti-philosophical or philosophical. I will attempt to do this here.

In my view, what sets philosophy and other sciences apart from other practices like religion is the absence of dogma. In Catholicism, it is a dogma that there will be no further revelation after Jesus. In Islam, it is a dogma that there will be no prophets after Muhammad. In Rabbinic Judaism, no further prophets will come because the era of prophecy was declared over. These are *dogmas* because those that promulgate them lay them down, do not invite dialectical debate over them, and do not hold that these pronouncements require rational grounds independent of revelation or revealed truth, which itself does not require rational grounds.

In contrast, among philosophers it is generally held explicitly, even if it is not widely practiced with perfect skill, that theses require rational grounds to be authoritative. Any thesis can be criticized, and for any premise one might ask what one's grounds for it are. Even the Aristotelian point about argument having to start from some first principle or principles is up for debate. We might call this feature of philosophy *unrestricted criticism*.[48]

Although philosophy embraces unrestricted criticism, in the sense that any thesis can be subjected to rational scrutiny and grounds for it can be demanded, this does not imply any kind of skepticism, although far-reaching skepticism is up for rational debate.[49] Principles of logic itself are subject to rational scrutiny, as the expansive literature on non-classical logics has shown. All views can be subjected to this in their turn in philosophy: there are no discipline-wide dogmas, or so it seems to be widely affirmed explicitly and perhaps believed.

The individual speech acts involved in enforcing a rule are non-rational in the same way that dogmas are. The enforcement of a rule is not up for rational interrogation: it is enforced or not, and when it is enforced, it is obeyed or not. To enforce a rule to the effect that such-and-such is or is not philosophical canon is an attempt at directing philosophical activity without giving reasons. It may be that a philosopher who engages in such speech acts as constitute enforcement norms is open to rational debate as to whether the rule in question or its enforcement is right or just; in this case, the philosopher may be perfectly open to rational discourse about whether a given text should be part of the canon. Still, their speech act of enforcement itself, of the sort discussed in §3, is not up for rational interrogation, or else it is not being enforced.

If we accept the view that philosophy eschews dogmas of any sort, then individual speech acts enforcing that *X* is philosophical canon is contrary to the final end of philosophical activity: the act of enforcing that *X* is philosophical canon, if it has any effect at all and if it is indeed enforcing the rule that one should study *X* rather than *Y*, is anti-philosophical. For such acts, if they have any impact at all, inhibit philosophical inquiry, or prescribe philosophical inquiry using a rule of enforcement rather than a philosophical justification. Acts whose illocutionary effect is that of enforcing a rule, such as the individual speech acts that constitute a philosophical canon, are anti-philosophical acts. Acts like these aim to encourage or discourage philosophical activity in a certain direction and are not part of the practice of giving reasons: they can be obeyed or not, but the enforcement itself is not open to argument. The point of such enforcement practices is to enforce a rule to the effect that so-and-so's value is beyond scrutiny and thus part of the philosophical canon, with the implication that non-canonical figures are not.[50]

Here is the argument of this paper presented in a valid argument form:

1. Philosophy is unrestrictedly critical; it has no dogmas. (Premise, §7)
2. Philosophical practices ultimately aim at philosophical knowledge. (Premise, §4)

3. Philosophical canons, like all philosophical practices, ultimately aims at philosophical knowledge. (By (2))
4. Philosophical canons are constituted by speech acts and practices whose effect is to enforce dogmatic rules. (Premise, §4)
5. Practices that have the effect of enforcing dogmatic rules undermine the final end of philosophical practice, which is philosophical knowledge.
6. Hence, Philosophical canons undermine the ultimate aim philosophical knowledge.
7. Thus, philosophical canons are practically self-undermining. (By (5), (6), (7), and (8))

Thus, a philosophical canon is practically self-undermining: the enforcement practices that constitute a philosophical canon undermine the practical purposes of having a philosophical canon. This is because the enforcement practices are anti-philosophical acts, since such practices are essentially dogmas. And dogmas have no place in philosophy, at least as it is conceived here.

Arguably, we could not have discipline of philosophy without the guiding influence of a philosophical canon or canons. Whether this is so is irrelevant to my argument here. For even if we need philosophical canons, we should recognize that they are practically self-undermining. Even if their benefits outweigh their costs, they undermine the final end that their existence is supposed to bring about. What we can or should do with this realization is another matter, and not one that I address here.

If it is so that philosophical canons are practically dispensable, and that they are not in principle required for the philosophical discipline to exist—as I am inclined to think—then a noteworthy implication of this claim is that neither philosophical canon-expanders nor philosophical canon-keepers are out of luck: either party will undermine its ultimate purpose, assuming that this purpose is philosophical knowledge, by using philosophical canons.[51]

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[2] It has also been predominantly done in English (Schwitzgebel *et al.* 2018: 44-45). Note that it is probably true that there are multiple overlapping philosophical canons. On the other hand, nothing about my argument requires that a philosophical canon exist. My argument here considers features of any philosophical canon. It is also arguably true that what counts as philosophical canon is sensitive to the subject-matter. Philosopher *X* might be philosophical canon if one is working in area *A*, but perhaps not otherwise. What I say applies to philosophical canons even when understood in this subject-relative manner. I thank Gregory Stoutenburg for suggesting that I make these two points clear.

[3] (Schwitzgebel and Jennings 2017:95-96)

[4] (Beaney 2018: 2-3)

[5] (Olberding 2016a: 4). Those quick to defend Aristotle's significance should note that whether this disparity has a justification or can be justified is besides the point. My point here is only to note that the philosophical canon is largely dead, white, and male. I thank Gregory Stoutenburg for suggesting that I make this point clear.

[6] See (Rée 2002: 651-652), (O'Neill 2005: 185-186), (Conley 2006: 111-112), (Berges 2015: 393-394), (Garfield and Van Norden 2016), (Mercer 2017), and (Shapiro 2018).

[7] Credit is due to those who have brought attention to historiographical questions facing historians of philosophy, especially Sandra Lapointe, who is the common thread of many efforts in this direction, including the June 2018 Workshop "Historiography, Methodology, Metaphilosophy and the Canon" and (Lapointe and Pincock 2017).

[8] (Adamson 2016)

[9] (Weinberg 2016: Update)

[10] I am aware that the pursuit of necessary and sufficient questions such as answer to the Socratic *to ti esti?* is tied into a particular view of the object of philosophizing. Nonetheless, I think that the Socratic inquiry into the nature of philosophical canons will be illuminating even to those who reject the Socratic approach.

[11] Shortly after John Kennedy's assassination, now-President Lyndon Johnson was meeting with advisors before his first address to a joint session of Congress. Advisors were urging against advocacy of civil rights legislation in this vital speech, holding that it was both a lost cause and would exhaust the president's political capital. After someone said, "The presidency has only a certain amount of coinage to expend, and you oughtn't to expend it on this [civil rights legislation]," Johnson replied, "Well, what the hell's the presidency for?" See (Caro 2012: 428).

[12] (Maffie, 2014)

[13] When I do speak in the singular of 'a philosophical canon', it is in places where it is briefer or more convenient and a mere matter of style. For example, in the next section I consider whether certain criteria can suitably characterize *any* philosophical canon. In giving a counterexample to these criteria, talking of one philosophical canon in a thought experiment is appropriate because only one counterexample is necessary.

[14] I thank Sandra Lapointe for suggesting that I couch my criticism of the counting approach in terms of normativity.

[15] My account thus has the feature that it is falsifiable. To falsify this account, one needs only to produce a text that is widely agreed to be part of a philosophical canon, but such that no enforcement norms exist.

[16] (Olberding 2016b). See also the comment sections of *ibid*., plus (Weinberg 2016) and (Garfield and Van Norden 2016), for some actual cases of canon-enforcement speech acts similar to the ones given here.

[17] This can be a highly effective strategy for drawing attention to non-canonical philosophical texts (Witt and Shaprio 2018: §2). Note however that there is still an enforcement norm that is being navigated.

[18] (Liao 2018)

[19] (Olberding 2016a: 7)

[20] Enforcement practices need not be communications or speech acts. For example, *S* might reject a grant proposal on the explicit or implicit grounds that 'it is not philosophy' without communicating that to anyone, and absent any disposition to give reasons for the belief that the grant proposal suggests work that is `not philosophy'. Enforcement practices that constitute a philosophical canon are acts of enforcing a rule to the effect that so-and-so is to be studied. Speech acts are a familiar example of such enforcement practices, and there are others kinds of them, too. I thank Gregory Stoutenburg for suggesting that I make this point clear.
[21] A clear discussion of constitutive rules and citations of some relevant literature are in (Brinck 2015: 701-702).
[22] In Searle's view, Status Function Declarations by which "all of institutional reality is created" have the form, "We (or I) make it the case by Declaration that the Y status function exists." (Searle 2008b: 453). However, I am agnostic here as to whether all philosophical canon enforcement practices have the form of Status Function Declarations.
[23] (Brinck 2015: 701). Much of Paglieri's discussion of playing by the rules in adulthood and playing with the rules in childhood applies readily to the rather different topic of philosophical canons. For example: "Do we still *know* that we have the right of changing the rules of our games? Are we still *capable* of doing so?" (Paglieri 2005: 161)
[24] Note that the first philosophical canon could be explained readily on this account. Human figures will already have a certain amount of authority and power. They will use that pre-existing power to canonize philosophical works. The evolution of what is philosophical canon will change over time as the enforcement practices change. Thanks to Kristopher G. Phillips for bringing up this example.
[25] (Austin 2008: 138-139).
[26] (Searle 2008a: 154-155).
[27] This even gives the speaker plausible deniability when it is asked whether they really were enforcing the philosophical canon.
[28] Much of my thinking on this point, at least my starting to think about it, was prompted by (Lenz 2018).
[29] Even if someone argued that a given philosophical canon had the specific purpose of achieving philosophical understanding of tradition *X*, like European intellectual history over some period, I assume that the final philosophical rather than historical purpose of this understanding would be for the sake of superior philosophical understanding. I thank Gregory Stoutenburg for suggesting that I elaborate on this issue.
[30] For example: (Mackie 1964), and (Castagnoli 2010).
[31] For ease of presentation, I ignore issues in scholarly interpretations of Plato. Wherever such interpretative issues arise incidentally, I will follow Castagnoli's interpretation of Plato, though I do not thereby endorse or reject it.
[32] Castagnoli (2010: 205) uses "(strict) pragmatic self-refutation," following Mackie's use. Here I use "practically" and "practical" in place of "pragmatically" and "pragmatic."
[33] (Castagnoli 2010: 228)
[34] (Castagnoli 2010: 205, 216, 228)
[35] (Castagnoli 2010: 205)
[36] (Castagnoli 2010: 205)
[37] (Castagnoli 2010: 230)
[38] (Castagnoli 2010: 218)
[39] (Castagnoli 2010: 221)
[40] (Castagnoli 2010: 226)
[41] (Plato 1993: *Sophist* 251c)
[42] (Plato 1993: *Sophist* 251e)
[43] (Plato 1993: *Sophist* 252c)
[44] (Castagnoli 2010: 230)
[45] (Castagnoli 2010: 235)
[46] Although I am calling canons "practically self-undermining," I think that the individual speech acts making up philosophical canons are self-undermining in the stronger, operational sense. If my account of canons is correct, then there is no way of making the individual speech act that makes up a philosophical canon can avoid being practically self-undermining.
[47] (Aristotle 1984: *Posterior Analytics* II.19, 99b)
[48] "The essential characteristic of philosophy, which makes it a study distinct from science, is *criticism*. It examines critically the principles employed in science and in daily life; it searches out any inconsistencies there may be in these principles, and it only accepts them when, as the result of a critical inquiry, no reason for rejecting them has appeared." (Russell 1912: 233)
[49] (Russell 1912: 234)
[50] Note that a speech act of enforcement need not be successful to be dogmatic: all that is required is that the rule be enforced because the act of enforcement itself is not open to philosophical argument.

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