

# Optimizing Cognitive Allocations – Philosophy’s Shrinking Footprint

## 1. Philosophy’s Diminishing Role in Optimizing Cognitive Cycles

**The Original Assertion:** In the modern landscape of ideas and personal development, it has been asserted that if one wants to *optimize the utility of their cognitive cycles* (i.e. make the most productive use of their time and mental energy), **traditional philosophy is rapidly losing ground to other disciplines, fields, and frameworks**. Once revered as the “mother of all disciplines” and the primary avenue for pursuing wisdom and understanding, philosophy now appears to yield diminishing returns compared to more pragmatic or empirically grounded approaches. In simple terms, *the claim is that thinking like a philosopher is no longer the best way to gain insight or meaning*. Instead, **alternative cognitive practices** – such as **systems thinking, meditation, psychedelics, law, and formal logic** – are purported to offer **superior benefits** for those seeking to understand the world, solve complex problems, or find personal meaning.

In this introductory section, we clarify what this assertion means and why it has emerged:

- **What Are “Cognitive Cycles”?** This phrase refers to the finite mental resources and time one has for thinking, learning, and problem-solving. We all have limited cognitive bandwidth in a day or lifetime. *Optimizing cognitive cycles* means using those resources in the most efficient way to achieve insight, knowledge, or practical results. The **assertion here is essentially about intellectual return on investment** – which activities give the best payoff for one’s mental effort.
- **Philosophy’s Historical Role:** Traditionally, **Western philosophy** was a comprehensive framework for seeking knowledge and wisdom. In ancient times and through the Enlightenment, philosophy encompassed almost all inquiry – from physics and biology (“natural philosophy”) to ethics, logic, and metaphysics. Philosophers were at the forefront of exploring reality, the mind, society, and morality. Over centuries, however, many subfields of philosophy **evolved into independent disciplines** (science, psychology, economics, etc.), leaving academic philosophy with a narrower scope. Philosophers today mostly tackle abstract questions of meaning, knowledge (epistemology), existence (metaphysics), and value (ethics) that are not squarely handled by other fields.
- **The Crux of the Assertion:** According to the claim, **“pure” philosophical thinking is now comparatively inefficient or ineffective at yielding new insights or improving one’s life**, especially when measured against newer or more specialized practices. Why might this be? The argument is that **other disciplines have overtaken many roles philosophy used to play**:
  - *For understanding the natural world*, the empirical sciences (physics, biology, etc.) have far outpaced philosophical speculation.
  - *For understanding the mind and thought*, psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience provide evidence-based models, whereas classical philosophical debates (e.g. mind-body dualism) often remain unresolved.

- *For guiding personal behavior or finding meaning*, practical frameworks like mindfulness meditation or psychedelic therapy can produce profound experiential insights, whereas reading dense philosophical treatises might yield more questions than answers.
- *For solving complex real-world problems*, interdisciplinary and systemic approaches (systems thinking, legal reasoning, computational logic) produce more concrete solutions than philosophical discourse.
- **The Landscape of Competing Cognitive Frameworks:** The assertion specifically highlights **systems thinking, meditation, psychedelics, law, and logic** as examples of approaches that now *outperform philosophy* in certain respects:
  - **Systems Thinking** – a holistic way of analyzing complex systems and interdependencies, often used in fields like organizational development, ecology, and engineering.
  - **Meditation** – practices (often drawn from Eastern traditions) that train attention and awareness, yielding mental clarity and cognitive benefits.
  - **Psychedelics** – the supervised use of psychedelic substances (e.g. psilocybin, LSD) to catalyze cognitive breakthroughs, therapeutic insights, or creative thinking.
  - **Law** – the discipline and practice of legal reasoning, which trains rigorous argumentation grounded in real societal structures (and yields direct societal impact).
  - **Formal Logic** – the study of valid inference and reasoning, which underpins mathematics and computer science, providing precise cognitive tools that outstrip the informal logic typical of philosophical debate.

Each of these alternatives, it is argued, provides a **better “bang for the buck” cognitively**: they either leverage empirical data, produce measurable improvements in mental capabilities, or lead to actionable outcomes more readily than philosophy does.

To illustrate, famed physicist **Stephen Hawking bluntly declared that “philosophy is dead”** – claiming that philosophers have not kept up with scientific advances and thus no longer lead the quest for knowledge <sup>1</sup>. While the “death of philosophy” might be exaggerated, the sentiment reflects a growing perception that **other modes of inquiry have eclipsed philosophy** in effectiveness. Popular science figures like Hawking, Lawrence Krauss, and Neil deGrasse Tyson have publicly questioned the relevance of philosophy in an age where science and technology drive progress.

In the following sections, we will explore this thesis in depth. First, we examine the evidence for a **structural decline of philosophy** as a field and an intellectual enterprise, noting how many of its former domains have spun off into independent disciplines. Next, we will **itemize the alternative cognitive practices** (systems thinking, meditation, etc.) and review evidence of their efficacy compared to philosophy. Finally, we will **identify the remaining niches where philosophy still holds relevance** – acknowledging that even if its footprint is shrinking, philosophy is not entirely obsolete, especially for certain questions and contexts.

## 2. The Structural Decline of Philosophy

If philosophy is losing ground, it's important to understand *how and why this happened*. Over the past two centuries (and accelerating in recent decades), **philosophy's role in the ecosystem of knowledge has**

**contracted.** This section outlines the structural decline of philosophy, including the fragmentation of its domain and indicators of its waning influence.

## 2.1 From “Mother of Disciplines” to One Discipline Among Many

Historically, philosophy was **the grand repository of human knowledge and inquiry**. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, almost everything – physics, astronomy, medicine, politics, theology – was considered part of philosophy. For example, **Isaac Newton’s 1687 masterpiece was titled *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy***. Over time, however, as human knowledge expanded, various branches of inquiry **professionalized and separated from philosophy**:

- **Natural Sciences:** What we now call science was once “natural philosophy.” During the Scientific Revolution, disciplines like physics, chemistry, and biology broke away by developing their own empirical methods. By the 19th and 20th centuries, these sciences had professional communities and methodologies independent of philosophical speculation. *Philosophical questions about nature migrated into scientific laboratories* – leaving philosophy proper with less territory.
- **Social Sciences:** Economics, psychology, sociology, linguistics, and political science also have roots in philosophical thought (e.g. early economists were called “moral philosophers”). These fields became empirical social sciences, relying on data and experimental or statistical techniques. Today they largely operate outside philosophy departments. For instance, questions about human behavior or mind that would have been philosophical are now answered with psychological experiments or cognitive neuroscience.
- **Formal Logic and Mathematics:** Logic was long a core branch of philosophy (since Aristotle’s syllogisms). In the 19th–20th centuries, symbolic logic was developed by figures like Boole, Frege, and Russell, bridging math and philosophy. This gave birth to **mathematical logic and computer science** – fields that took logical reasoning into precise formal and computational realms. Modern logic lives in math and CS departments as much as (or more than) in philosophy departments. The result is that **the cutting edge of logic left the philosophy seminar room for the algorithm and software**. Philosophers still study logic, but much of its advancement now happens in technical domains.
- **Law and Political Theory:** Political philosophy and ethics historically informed the development of legal systems and theories of justice. Over time, the practice of law and the academic field of jurisprudence became their own spheres. Law schools and courts solve practical questions of justice and rights every day, often using precedents and pragmatic reasoning. While philosophers continue to debate ideal theories of justice or rights, **the center of gravity for actionable ideas on justice has shifted to legislatures, courts, and think tanks**. Similarly, policy-making and economics (once part of philosophy under political economy) are now distinct expert domains.

The **cumulative effect** of these spin-offs is that philosophy has been *hollowed out from within*. One might say philosophy “**spawned**” **many disciplines** – each of which then took on a life of its own and no longer identifies as philosophy. This has left philosophy with a **shrinking core**: primarily abstract questions that other disciplines haven’t fully absorbed (consciousness, fundamental ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, logic of language, etc.). Philosophers often take pride in this heritage of having given birth to the sciences

and other fields. However, it also means that **many problems that used to be philosophical are now handled elsewhere**, sometimes with greater success.

Massimo Pigliucci (philosopher) recounts how **academic philosophy in the late 19th century reacted to the rise of science by trying to become “just another discipline” within the modern research university**, complete with its own specialized domain and technical language <sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>. In doing so, *philosophy adopted the outward forms of scientific academia (journals, peer review, specialization)* but **failed to match the sciences in terms of concrete progress** <sup>3</sup>. Unlike physics or biology, which steadily accumulate consensus knowledge, philosophy often revisits the same perennial questions without resolving them to universal agreement. This lack of clear “progress” has made it easier for newer fields to claim they are more *effective avenues to truth*.

## 2.2 Signs of Decline: Diminishing Academic and Cultural Presence

Beyond this internal shedding of subfields, there are observable signs that **philosophy’s prominence has declined in society and academia** in the 21st century:

- **Declining Enrollments and Departments:** In many universities, *fewer students are studying philosophy*. For example, in the United States the number of philosophy majors sharply decreased after 2010. Between 2010 and 2016, the annual number of bachelor’s degrees in philosophy fell by about 19% (from roughly 9,300 to 7,500) <sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup>. Although there has been a modest rebound since 2016, philosophy remains a tiny fraction of total students (around 0.3% of U.S. graduates, down from nearly 0.5% in the late 2000s) <sup>6</sup>. This indicates that **fewer young people choose philosophy as their primary academic path**, likely preferring fields seen as more practical or job-oriented.
- **Cuts to Philosophy Programs:** Correspondingly, universities facing budget pressures have often targeted philosophy and other humanities for cuts. Reports have emerged of major institutions considering downsizing or eliminating philosophy departments. A recent commentary noted that *“major universities are reducing or eliminating their philosophy departments”* as the subject’s perceived relevance plummets <sup>7</sup>. Especially in the U.S., administrators focusing on enrollment numbers and career outcomes see philosophy as expendable. In some cases, entire departments have been shuttered, and faculty positions cut <sup>8</sup>. This is part of a broader decline of the humanities in higher education, tied to a **“shortsighted focus on immediate economic returns” in education policy** <sup>9</sup> – fields that don’t directly pipeline students into high-paying jobs are under pressure.
- **Diminished Public Influence:** Philosophy appears less frequently in public discourse than in the past. Decades ago, leading philosophers like Bertrand Russell or Jean-Paul Sartre were public intellectuals engaged in societal debates. Today, public intellectual life is often dominated by scientists, economists, political commentators, and technology leaders. Academic philosophy’s highly specialized jargon and niche topics can alienate the general public. As one critic quipped, philosophy has in some quarters descended into *“hyper-specialized, esoteric topics that have zero impact outside academia”* <sup>10</sup>. An extreme (and humorous) example cited was a serious journal paper on the “metaphysics of puns,” illustrating how some philosophical research might appear perplexingly irrelevant to real-world concerns <sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup>. While this characterization might be unfair to the whole field, it highlights a perception that philosophers are often “navel-gazing” in abstruse debates removed from practical life. If the **public and funding bodies perceive philosophy as an ivory-tower exercise with no tangible output**, support naturally wanes.

- **Competition from Science and Technology:** In addressing big questions about reality and human existence, science and technology have taken center stage. People looking for answers about the universe's origin, the nature of consciousness, or how to live a good life increasingly turn to scientists, psychologists, self-help experts, or spiritual practices. Philosophy's voice in these conversations is comparatively quieter. For example, the question of *mind and consciousness* – once purely philosophical – is now vigorously investigated by neuroscientists and AI researchers. The question of *how to live a meaningful life* is often answered by psychology (positive psychology, cognitive behavioral therapy), spirituality, or practical philosophies (like Stoicism in its modern popular resurgence) rather than academic philosophy papers. **Even on ethical issues**, whereas in the past a philosopher like Jeremy Bentham or John Rawls might set the terms of debate, today we see more influence from interdisciplinary fields like bioethics, tech ethics, legal scholars, or activists who draw on philosophy but operate outside it.
- **Cultural Images and Attitudes:** Culturally, philosophers are sometimes depicted as out-of-touch professors debating useless quandaries. Meanwhile, entrepreneurs and engineers are seen as the ones *changing the world*. The meme of “philosophy major working as barista” encapsulates a stereotype that philosophy is an impractical pursuit. This societal attitude further reinforces the idea that **serious-minded people should direct their brainpower elsewhere**.

All these factors paint a picture of a discipline that, while still alive, has a **shrinking footprint** in both academia and the broader intellectual sphere. Importantly, the decline is not only due to external forces – philosophers themselves have noted internal issues. Some have criticized modern philosophy for its **overspecialization and insularity**. For instance, Alexander Jeuk in *Philosophy Now* argued that academic philosophy often focuses on narrow debates accessible only to insiders, losing the expansive spirit that once made it culturally relevant. Others point out that *philosophical writing styles are sometimes needlessly complex*, deterring potential new thinkers. The philosopher Jinmin Lee observes that many philosophers “overcomplicate their works to sound more intelligent,” filled with jargon and convoluted prose, which **discourages wider audiences and even students** <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>. In an era where attention spans are short and clarity is valued, this tendency further marginalizes philosophy.

It's worth noting that **Western philosophy** in particular followed this trajectory of academic specialization. By contrast, some other traditions (like many Eastern philosophies) remained more integrated with practice (e.g. meditation, lifestyle) and accessible teachings. We will revisit this point, but the context here is largely Western academic philosophy's decline in influence.

## 2.3 Philosophy's Spawn: Disciplines Taking a Life of Their Own

To summarize the structural decline: one can think of Western philosophy's history as a tree that has continually **branched out**. Each major branch (science, law, psychology, etc.) eventually became robust enough to stand as its own tree, no longer drawing nutrients from the philosophical root. Today, **the branches overshadow the trunk**. Philosophy persists, but largely in the interstitial spaces not claimed by these offshoots.

This branching is not necessarily a failure – in one sense, it's a testament to philosophy's success in inspiring diverse fields. However, for someone deciding where to invest their intellectual energy now, it means: - If you are interested in understanding the natural world, you will likely study science, not philosophy. - If you want to understand the mind or improve mental well-being, you might study psychology, neuroscience, or

engage in contemplative practices, rather than only read philosophy of mind. - If you care about social justice or political change, you might study public policy or law and gain tools to directly influence systems, rather than engage purely in political philosophy arguments. - If you want to sharpen your reasoning, you might dive into formal logic via math or coding (which has clear right/wrong answers and applications), rather than the broader dialectical style of philosophical debate.

In short, the **center of gravity for optimizing different cognitive goals has shifted to specialized disciplines**. Philosophy is left as one option among many, often not the most efficient one for a given goal. The next section will explicitly compare philosophy to some of these alternative approaches that people now turn to for insight or cognitive development, presenting evidence that those alternatives can indeed be *empirically superior* in outcomes.

Before moving on, it is important to note that saying “philosophy has a shrinking footprint” is not to say it has vanished or that it provides no value. Rather, the *relative* prominence and efficiency of philosophy are diminished compared to its past. The modern seeker of knowledge or personal growth has a much larger toolkit at their disposal, and in many cases, the tools taken from outside traditional philosophy have proven more powerful or faster-acting. **This sets the stage for evaluating those other tools.**

### 3. Alternative Cognitive Practices and Their Superiority (Evidence and Comparison)

Assuming one’s goal is to **optimize cognitive yield** – to gain insight, understanding, or personal growth as effectively as possible – the claim is that **other disciplines or practices often outperform philosophy**. In this section, we examine some key alternatives: **systems thinking, meditation, psychedelics, law, and formal logic**. We will explain each and provide evidence or reasoning for why it might be considered *empirically or pragmatically superior* to doing philosophy (at least in certain respects). The term “empirically superior” suggests that there is observable, research-backed evidence or tangible outcomes from these practices that outstrip what philosophizing typically produces.

It is important to be precise: these alternatives each excel in different ways, and none does exactly what philosophy does in full. However, each occupies a domain where **people often once relied on philosophical thought, but now get better results through these other means**. We will go through them one by one.

#### 3.1 Systems Thinking – Holistic Problem Solving vs. Abstract Analysis

**Systems Thinking** is an approach to understanding and solving problems by viewing them as parts of an overall system, recognizing patterns and interdependencies rather than isolating components. It emerged in the mid-20th century from fields like engineering, ecology, and management science. Systems thinking encourages one to map out feedback loops, interactions, and the “big picture” structure of complex situations.

**Why it’s considered superior:** When dealing with **complex, “wicked” problems** (such as climate change, economic systems, organizational management, etc.), systems thinking provides concrete tools (like system maps, causal loop diagrams, simulations) that help predict outcomes and identify leverage points for

change. In contrast, a purely philosophical approach might involve abstract reasoning or ethical principles about the problem, which alone can be insufficient to manage complexity.

- **Practical Impact:** Systems thinking has been applied successfully in areas like project management, public health, and environmental policy to yield better decisions. For example, project managers are taught that moving from linear cause-and-effect thinking to systems thinking is crucial in a complex environment <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup>. By considering how multiple factors interact (rather than treating each in isolation), solutions are more robust. Philosophical analysis might help frame the problem conceptually, but systems thinking *actively models the problem* to avoid unforeseen consequences. As one expert noted, *"As civilization moves toward ever greater levels of interaction and complexity... systems thinking can help us avoid having to say, 'I didn't see that one coming,' as we implement solutions."* <sup>17</sup>. In other words, it's a discipline specifically geared to handle complexity that static philosophical argument often misses.
- **Decision-Making and Insight:** Systems thinking can improve decision-making by revealing the hidden structure of problems – the feedback loops and delayed effects that our intuition might overlook <sup>18</sup>. There is an empirical aspect: tools like system dynamics modeling allow predictions that can be tested or at least debated with data (e.g. predicting an intervention's outcome on an ecosystem or economy). By contrast, philosophical reasoning might yield a principle ("unintended consequences are likely; be cautious") but not the detailed map of *which* unintended consequences to watch for. Systems thinking provides a framework to systematically explore a problem's structure, something that has proven results in fields from **engineering** (ensuring safety by considering how subsystems interact) to **business** (why companies succeed or fail due to systemic effects, as taught by MIT's Peter Senge and others).
- **Cognitive Efficiency:** For someone trying to understand a multifaceted issue, learning systems thinking is arguably a more **efficient use of cognitive cycles** than engaging in open-ended philosophical debate about the issue. Systems thinking guides the mind to categorize elements (stocks, flows, feedback loops) and often uses visual aids. This can yield *clearer insights faster*. Empirical superiority can be seen in outcomes: e.g., city planners using systems thinking might simulate traffic flow and reduce congestion practically, whereas philosophically discussing "the concept of a city" or the ethics of urban design would not directly produce that result.

In summary, **systems thinking is action-oriented and model-driven**, giving concrete insight into complex problems – a domain where philosophy alone often struggled to produce actionable knowledge. It represents a shift from *contemplating problems* to *actively mapping and managing problems*. This doesn't mean philosophy had no role (philosophical thinking can help question assumptions in a system model), but the heavy lifting of generating solutions and predicting results has moved to system-oriented methods.

### 3.2 Meditation – Direct Enhancement of Cognitive Function and Insight

**Meditation** refers to a family of practices (such as mindfulness meditation, concentration meditation, etc.) that train attention and awareness, often rooted in Eastern philosophical and spiritual traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, etc.). In recent decades, meditation has been secularized and scientifically studied extensively. People practice meditation for stress reduction, mental clarity, self-awareness, and spiritual growth.

**Why it's considered superior for optimizing cognition:** Meditation has **demonstrable, research-backed effects on the brain and cognition**. If one's goal is to improve their thinking capabilities, emotional regulation, or even creativity and insight into personal questions, meditation provides a *reliable, cumulative training method* rather than an intellectual gamble.

- **Empirical Cognitive Benefits:** A large body of neuroscience research shows that regular meditation literally changes the brain in beneficial ways. For instance, studies using brain imaging have found **increased gray matter density in areas of the brain associated with complex thinking, memory, and emotional regulation (such as the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus)** in long-term meditators <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>. Meditation practice has been linked to **enhanced attention and focus** <sup>21</sup>, improved working memory <sup>22</sup>, and **better executive function**. It can reduce activity in the brain's default mode network (which underlies mind-wandering and self-referential rumination) <sup>23</sup>, leading to greater present-moment awareness and less distraction. In plain terms, meditation is like a workout for the brain: it strengthens the neural circuits of concentration and calm. **No amount of reading philosophy is known to directly produce such neural changes** – at least not in a systematically observable way.
- **Emotional and Mental Health:** Philosophers might write about what it means to live a good life or control one's emotions, but meditation provides a direct tool to *actually alter one's emotional patterns*. Empirical studies show meditation can reduce stress and anxiety by shrinking activation (and even volume) in the amygdala – the brain's fear and stress center <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup>. It also improves emotional regulation networks in the brain <sup>26</sup>. For someone seeking peace of mind or resilience, **meditation yields tangible results** (often measurable in weeks or months of practice), whereas reading Stoic philosophy, for example, might offer good advice but doesn't physically rewire your stress response in the way meditation does. In terms of optimizing cognitive cycles, spending 20 minutes a day meditating can gradually **increase your baseline cognitive clarity and decrease mental clutter**, arguably giving more returns than 20 minutes spent reading an abstract text. Research even indicates meditation can *delay age-related cognitive decline*, keeping the brain sharper for longer <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup>.
- **Insight and Creativity:** Interestingly, meditation is not just about calm and focus; it can also foster creativity and deep personal insight. Certain forms (like Open Monitoring meditation) have been shown to promote **divergent thinking – the ability to generate new ideas** <sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup>. In one study, open-monitoring meditation significantly improved participants' performance on tasks requiring creative idea generation <sup>29</sup>. Many practitioners report that meditation helps them see their problems or life from a new perspective, sometimes triggering profound realizations about themselves – experiences one might label as *insights* or even *philosophical epiphanies*. The difference is, these insights come from direct introspective observation of the mind, rather than from grappling with someone else's arguments on a page. It is an **experiential learning** versus the **intellectual learning** of philosophy. For example, one might read dozens of pages of epistemology about the nature of the self, but a firsthand experience in meditation of observing one's thoughts can give a *felt understanding* of how transient and constructed the "self" is. Many people consider this firsthand, visceral insight more impactful and illuminating than intellectual theory.
- **Efficiency and Accessibility:** Meditation techniques can be learned and practiced by anyone, and their benefits accrue with practice. They do not require years of academic study to yield fruit – a few weeks of consistent mindfulness practice can show noticeable effects (like improved concentration



or reduced stress), as supported by numerous studies. Philosophy, on the other hand, often requires reading complex texts for years to even grasp the problems, and one may end up with more questions than answers. From a cognitive investment perspective, **meditation provides a comparatively quick return** in mental well-being and cognitive improvement. It's notable that *businesses and the public have embraced meditation en masse* in recent times (mindfulness apps, corporate meditation programs, etc.), indicating that it's seen as a *practical tool* for mental optimization, not just a spiritual pursuit. This mainstreaming is due in large part to the hard evidence of its benefits – something philosophy struggles to demonstrate so concretely.

In sum, **meditation can be seen as an empirically validated method for refining the mind**, offering benefits that philosophical contemplation alone doesn't guarantee. Indeed, meditation could be considered a form of *applied philosophy* – especially in traditions like Buddhism, where meditation is part of a philosophical framework about the mind and suffering. But in the context of our discussion, meditation stands as an alternative to just thinking or reading: it's *doing* and *experiencing* as a path to insight. If the aim is to optimize cognition and gain meaningful personal insight, meditation has a strong claim to be more effective than traditional philosophical study.

### 3.3 Psychedelics – Catalyzing Insights and Cognitive Flexibility

**Psychedelics** refer to substances (like psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, DMT, etc.) that induce altered states of consciousness often characterized by profound changes in perception, cognition, and emotion. Psychedelic experiences are typically intense and can lead to feelings of ego-dissolution, interconnectedness, and novel insights. After a long period of stigma and prohibition, there is currently a **renaissance in scientific research** on psychedelics and their therapeutic and cognitive effects.

**Why it's considered superior (in some ways):** When used responsibly (for example, in clinical or guided settings), psychedelics have shown an **extraordinary capacity to rapidly induce experiences that people describe as insightful, meaningful, and even transformative**. In terms of cognitive ROI, one supervised psychedelic session can sometimes deliver life-altering perspectives that years of pondering might not achieve. While obviously not an everyday “practice” like meditation, psychedelics represent a *tool for cognitive breakthrough* that is arguably unparalleled in philosophy.

- **Empirical Research on Insight and Creativity:** Recent studies indicate that psychedelics can indeed enhance certain cognitive and emotional traits. For instance, a 2025 study found that individuals who use psychedelics (even outside laboratory settings) scored higher on measures of **divergent thinking (creative idea generation)** and **reported a greater sense of connectedness to others, self, and the world** <sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup>. The sense of connectedness often correlates with feelings of meaning and reduced ego-centric thinking. Creativity tests have shown increased originality and fluency of ideas in psychedelic users <sup>33</sup>. Moreover, research by psychiatrists and neuroscientists has documented cases where psychedelics helped scientists and innovators solve problems or catalyzed scientific creativity <sup>34</sup>. Historically, there are anecdotal reports (e.g., Kary Mullis crediting an LSD experience for insights leading to the invention of PCR, a Nobel-winning breakthrough in chemistry). While anecdotes aren't proof, controlled studies now back up that **psychedelics can temporarily reduce “top-down” thinking constraints, potentially allowing the brain to make novel connections** – essentially a state of heightened cognitive flexibility.

- **Therapeutic and Personal Meaning:** One of the most striking empirical findings is how **effective psychedelics can be in therapeutic settings**. Studies at Johns Hopkins University and elsewhere have shown that a single high-dose psilocybin session, under guided conditions, can lead to lasting decreases in depression or anxiety in clinical populations. Many participants in these studies also rank the psychedelic session as one of the “most meaningful experiences of their lives,” comparable to the birth of a child <sup>35</sup>. From a meaning-of-life perspective, psychedelics can *directly induce* profound, ineffable experiences that people interpret in philosophical or spiritual terms. For example, encountering a sense of unity of all things, or confronting one’s psyche, can result in personal insights about what matters in life, the nature of consciousness, etc. These are the kinds of insights philosophers have theorized about, but **psychedelics provide them through direct, subjective experience rather than discursive reasoning**. Some researchers note that *mystical-type experiences occasioned by psilocybin correlate with positive personality changes*, such as **increases in the personality trait of “openness to experience” that persist long-term** <sup>36</sup>. In plainer words, a psychedelic journey might make someone more open-minded, creative, and appreciative of life – outcomes that many hope philosophical contemplation will yield, but which are hard to come by through reading alone.
- **Speed and Efficacy:** To highlight the contrast in optimizing cognitive cycles: imagine someone seeking answers to big existential questions or struggling with mental blocks. They could spend months or years reading philosophy, gradually piecing together ideas and perhaps still feeling uncertain. Alternatively, a single guided psychedelic session (again, under proper conditions) might give that person a *breakthrough experience* – such as a sudden revelation about their life patterns, a feeling of transcending their ego, or a confrontation with deep values – which can *reframe their perspective overnight*. While this isn’t guaranteed and comes with risks (these substances are powerful and not to be taken lightly), the potential for a **rapid, high-impact insight is well documented** in clinical research. It’s a bit like comparing traveling by foot (philosophical pondering) to taking a rocket (psychedelic experience) to reach a mental destination. The rocket can get you there faster and show you a breathtaking view, but you need to know how to navigate it safely.
- **Cognitive Flexibility and Breaking Rigid Thinking:** From a neurological standpoint, psychedelics are thought to induce a state of **“entropy” or increased neural network connectivity** – essentially shaking up entrenched patterns of thought. This can help break depressive rumination or rigid worldviews. For someone who is intellectually stuck, considering problems in the same conventional ways, a psychedelic experience can jolt them out of those grooves, sometimes enabling **novel problem-solving approaches or perspectives**. This property is being researched not only for therapy but for enhancing creativity in otherwise healthy individuals <sup>34</sup>. By contrast, traditional philosophical thinking might sometimes reinforce a single track of thought or get one stuck in verbal loops. Psychedelics, quite literally, *change your mind’s dynamics*, showing that alternate modes of cognition are possible.

In summary, **psychedelics serve as a dramatic, if unconventional, means of optimizing cognitive and existential exploration**. They demonstrate empirical benefits in terms of creativity, mental health, and perceived meaning. Of course, they are not without risks and need to be approached responsibly (the wild, reckless use of psychedelics can cause harm, just as misguided philosophical doctrines can). But under guided conditions, psychedelics have a growing evidence base supporting claims that they can achieve in a few sessions what might take years of therapy or introspection. In the context of our theme: if the aim is to

get profound insight or to “shake the snow globe” of the mind for new patterns, psychedelics appear extremely potent compared to reading or debating philosophy.

### 3.4 Legal and Logical Frameworks – Concrete Reasoning with Impact

This combined category looks at **Law** and **Formal Logic** – two domains that, while quite different, share an emphasis on rigorous structure and clear outcomes. Both emerged in part from philosophy (ethics and political philosophy for law; logic from philosophy of logic and mathematics) but now operate largely outside it. They offer *frameworks for thinking* that are often more exacting and outcome-oriented than general philosophical thought.

#### Law and Jurisprudence – Turning Moral Philosophy into Action

**Law** is the system of rules that a society or government develops to regulate behavior, with the backing of institutional power (courts, enforcement). The study of law (jurisprudence) trains individuals in interpreting statutes, constructing legal arguments, and applying ethical and logical reasoning to specific cases.

**Why it's superior (from a cognitive-utilitarian perspective):** If one's goal is to *affect the world and test ideas of justice or rights in reality*, training in law provides a direct avenue. It requires clear thinking, analysis of concrete situations, and results in decisions or policies that impact lives – essentially, law *bridges thought and action*. Meanwhile, philosophy might expound beautiful theories of justice that remain hypothetical.

- **Real-World Feedback:** A key advantage of the legal realm is that it provides **immediate feedback and consequences for one's reasoning**. A philosophical argument about justice might end in stalemate or endless counterarguments; a legal argument in court ends in a verdict – one side wins, the other loses, and precedent is set. This doesn't mean law is always just or correct, but it means *arguments are put to the test*. One could spend cognitive cycles contemplating “What is a just society?” philosophically, or one could work on an actual case or policy that implements a notion of justice and see how it fares (does it get passed? struck down? cause unintended effects?). The latter route, through law, arguably **teaches practical wisdom and refines one's understanding faster** because the ideas meet reality. In optimizing cognitive use, having that feedback loop can be crucial to improving one's understanding.
- **Structured Analytical Training:** Law school is famous for teaching the *Socratic method* and rigorous analytical thinking. Law students learn to parse complex fact patterns, identify relevant principles, and construct logical arguments. This training is a form of cognitive bootcamp: it disciplines the mind to think in terms of evidence, precedents, and logical consistency within a legal framework. While philosophy also teaches argumentation, law grounds it in specifics. One has to argue within the confines of statutes or case law, which trains a kind of disciplined creativity – finding interpretive space in fixed rules. The **cognitive skills from legal training** (critical reading, argument construction, spotting logical fallacies or ambiguities) are similar to those philosophy aims to develop, but often more **finely honed due to practical necessity**. If a philosophy argument has a flaw, a student might get a lower grade; if a legal argument has a flaw, a client might go to jail or a contract falls apart. The stakes enforce rigor.
- **Impact and Meaning:** Many people are drawn to philosophy searching for meaning or ethical clarity. Studying or practicing law can actually put one in the position to *implement ethical principles*.

For example, rather than merely debating what rights people should have in theory, a lawyer or judge might expand or defend rights through cases and legislation. This direct impact can be deeply fulfilling in a way that abstract discussion isn't. To illustrate, philosophical arguments against segregation existed, but it was through legal action (*Brown v. Board of Education* and others) that integration was achieved, which in turn validated certain moral truths in practice. For someone allocating their cognitive effort, investing it in learning law might yield more tangible progress toward justice or societal change than isolated philosophical contemplation, thus arguably optimizing the *utility* of that effort if concrete change is a goal.

- **Empirical Outcome Orientation:** Law is evidence-based in its own way – lawyers marshal facts and precedents, and the outcome of legal decisions can be studied (Did crime rates change after this law? Did this ruling cause economic effects?). Increasingly, fields like *empirical legal studies* analyze data to see what laws are effective. Philosophy, lacking this outcome orientation, can spin elaborate theories that might inadvertently be unworkable or harmful if applied (there's no immediate check on them). Legal reasoning, by being tied to real cases, has to confront consequences more directly, making it in some sense a more *grounded and optimized use of thought for societal issues*.

In brief, **the practice of law translates thought into action under real constraints**, sharpening the mind and achieving results. It's an arena where cognitive effort clearly "does work" in the world. Philosophy can inspire the laws (e.g., Enlightenment philosophers influenced modern democratic constitutions), but without the legal implementation, those ideas remain inert. Thus, from an optimization standpoint, many who want to improve society or test moral ideas may find the law a more efficient path.

### **Formal Logic (and Mathematics) – Precision and Unambiguous Knowledge**

**Formal Logic** is the study of valid inference, employing a formal language (like propositional or predicate logic) with clearly defined rules. It's closely related to mathematics and computer science. Modern logic allows one to determine with certainty whether a conclusion follows from premises (given the rules) and underpins algorithm design and computational thinking.

**Why it's superior for cognitive precision:** In contrast to the often messy and interpretive reasoning in philosophy, formal logic provides **crystal-clear clarity**. If one aims to hone their ability to think without error and to build systems of thought that actually work (like software or proofs), formal logic is indispensable.

- **Absolute Rigor and Feedback:** Formal logic and mathematics allow no room for the kind of ambiguity that many philosophical arguments contain. A proof either is valid or has a flaw – and that flaw can be pinpointed exactly. Learning logic trains the brain in *structured, step-by-step reasoning*. For instance, understanding the difference between a valid argument and a sound argument, or mastering techniques like proof by contradiction, guards one's thinking against many common errors. **Immediate feedback** comes in the form of verification: does the proof hold or does the program run? This is a more concrete test than peer review of a philosophy paper (where disagreements can be interminable). If optimizing cognitive use means minimizing wasted effort on wrong turns, logic is a safeguard: it catches inconsistencies instantly. As an example, someone deeply versed in logic will quickly see through a fallacious argument that might confuse an intelligent but untrained philosopher engaging in informal debate.

- **Powering the Modern World:** Formal logic is not just an intellectual exercise; it's the foundation of the digital age. Computer algorithms, circuits, and database queries are all expressions of logical structures. By studying logic (or its applied forms in coding), one can **create tools and solve problems with real-world impact** – from simple programs to complex AI systems. This ability to directly affect the world via technology can be seen as a tremendous amplification of cognitive power. A philosopher's clever argument might influence a few readers; a programmer's elegant algorithm (grounded in logic) can run millions of times a second, affecting lives globally (for better or worse). For someone allocating cognitive cycles, learning to code or to work with formal systems often yields very **high leverage** results – you build once, it operates many times. Philosophy seldom has that multiplier effect; each convincing of an argument is one conversation at a time.
- **Cross-Disciplinary Utility:** The precision of logical thinking is applicable in all fields. Scientists need logic to form consistent hypotheses; engineers to avoid design flaws; lawyers to structure arguments; even philosophers benefit from logic to clarify arguments. However, logic has grown into a domain of its own, particularly as *mathematical logic*. The cutting edge of logic research lives in places like computer science departments (e.g., logic for verification of software/hardware, or logic in AI for knowledge representation). By immersing in formal logic or mathematics, one often **surpasses the level of rigor achievable in everyday philosophical discourse**. This can expose how loose or intuitive much philosophical reasoning is. In fact, some philosophical problems get resolved or dissolved when formalized. For example, many paradoxes or confusion in philosophy of language were clarified by formal semantics (Montague grammar, etc.). The ability to formalize a problem is a cognitive superpower that philosophy on its own doesn't always employ.
- **Empirical Evidence of Efficacy:** While one doesn't run a randomized trial for logic, we can observe outcomes: students who engage in formal logic or math puzzles can drastically improve their problem-solving skills, and these skills transfer to other domains (like analytical thinking in everyday life). There's a reason standardized tests for various professions often include logic puzzles or math problems: skill in logic correlates with general cognitive aptitude. In an educational sense, spending time solving logic problems is shown to sharpen reasoning more effectively than, say, reading complex prose and trying to parse it. It's the difference between *training in a gym vs. theorizing about muscle movements*. Logic training is direct cognitive exercise, whereas philosophy is often indirect.

In conclusion, **both law and logic demonstrate domains where cognitive effort is channeled into structures that yield definitive outcomes** – whether it's a court decision or a proven theorem. They exemplify how fields once under philosophy's umbrella have developed specific methods to maximize the efficacy of thinking. For someone aiming to refine their intellect or make a difference, these fields offer a clarity and consequence that pure philosophy may lack.

### 3.5 Summary: Why These Practices Often Win Out

Having examined these alternatives, we can summarize the ways in which they collectively appear superior to philosophy for optimizing cognitive cycles:

- **They provide** feedback loops\*\*\*\*: Be it scientific experiment, legal judgment, meditation experience, or logical proof, each practice offers results or data that inform you if you're on the right track. Philosophy's feedback is often just counter-argument or endless debate, which doesn't conclusively validate or invalidate ideas.

- **They are** empirically grounded or experientially rich\*\*\*\*: Systems thinking and law deal with real-world systems and cases; meditation and psychedelics deal with direct conscious experience and have measurable psychological effects; logic deals with formal structures that we can rigorously test. Philosophy by contrast often deals with thought experiments or hypothetical scenarios, which, while enlightening, don't always connect back to concrete reality or lived experience.
- **They specialize in** outcomes that philosophy only theorizes about: *Want inner peace or an expanded mind? Meditation and psychedelics can deliver biochemical and phenomenological changes to get you there. Want to solve a practical problem? Systems thinking or law gives you frameworks to act and solve. Want absolute certainty of a conclusion? Formal logic can give you that within a formal system. Philosophy might discuss what inner peace means, or what an ideal society ought to be, or whether certainty exists, but one can spend ages on definitions without moving toward actually achieving peace, justice, or certainty. The alternatives are engineered (or evolved) to achieve those ends more directly.*
- **They attract interdisciplinary influence and improvement:** Because these practices engage with the empirical world, they benefit from scientific and technological advances. For example, meditation research is enhanced by neuroscience tools; psychedelics research uses psychology and pharmacology; systems thinking uses computer modeling. Philosophy, remaining mostly in the realm of discourse, doesn't accelerate at the same pace because it's not leveraging laboratories or new instruments – it largely uses the same tool it always has: human reasoning and argumentation. There is improvement (new insights, new arguments), but not the exponential growth we see in science or tech-related fields.

However, it's crucial to note a caveat: *philosophy is not entirely absent* from these practices. Often, the most effective use of these tools involves some philosophical reflection to guide them. For instance, designing a fair law requires ethical philosophy; using psychedelics responsibly raises philosophical questions about meaning and ontology; systems thinking can benefit from philosophical clarity on system boundaries and values. In that sense, philosophy may have a **secondary, supportive role** – ensuring these powerful practices are used wisely. But the point remains: **as primary methods for getting results, these other approaches tend to outshine philosophy in their respective domains.**

## 4. The Remaining Relevance of Philosophy: Edges and Niches

Given the critiques and trends we've outlined, one might think philosophy is entirely obsolete. That is not the case. **Philosophy still holds relevance**, especially in certain *edges and niches* of inquiry where other disciplines either fear to tread or lack the appropriate tools. In this final section, we clarify where philosophy – particularly Western philosophy, since that's been our focus – continues to be valuable and perhaps irreplaceable.

### 4.1 Defining and Addressing Questions Others Don't

One core strength of philosophy is its **willingness to tackle foundational questions** that other fields often bracket out. When a topic is too abstract, too normative, or currently unanswerable with empirical methods,

it tends to become labeled “philosophical.” This may sound like a dumping ground for the unsolvable, but it’s also a crucial frontier. For example:

- **Metaphysical Questions:** “Why is there something rather than nothing?”; “What is the nature of consciousness beyond neural activity?”; “Do we have free will?” These are profound questions that science has difficulty formulating, let alone answering. Philosophers keep these questions alive and propose possible frameworks or interpretations. Even if they don’t yield final answers, they ensure that our worldview is not confined to only what is easily measurable. Without philosophy, such questions risk being ignored entirely, which could impoverish our understanding of reality.
- **Conceptual Clarification:** Philosophy excels at **clarifying concepts and arguments**, which is a service to all disciplines. When physicists speak of the “multiverse” or AI researchers discuss “intelligence,” philosophical analysis helps ensure these concepts are used coherently and consistently. In the past, philosophers like Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein clarified the foundations of mathematics and language, enabling progress in those fields. Today, analytic philosophers work on clarifying things like what counts as consciousness (useful for AI and neuroscience), or what we mean by causation (important in law and science). This kind of work isn’t flashy or immediately rewarding, but it prevents confusion down the line. In a sense, philosophy acts as *intellectual maintenance*, tightening definitions and spotting hidden assumptions. Other specialists sometimes don’t have time or training for that level of abstract scrutiny.
- **Interdisciplinary Integration:** In an age of specialization, there’s a need for generalists who try to **connect the dots between fields**. Philosophy can play this integrative role. A philosopher of biology, for instance, can draw connections between evolutionary theory and ethics (leading to fields like bioethics). A philosopher of mind can engage with psychology, computer science, and phenomenology to form a more holistic picture of consciousness than any single empirical field might. Similarly, new fields like *environmental philosophy* synthesize science, economics, and moral values to address environmental crisis in a comprehensive way. Philosophers can roam across disciplinary boundaries more freely since they are not tied to one experimental toolkit. This freedom means they can sometimes see the **bigger picture or ethical implications** that siloed experts might miss.

## 4.2 Normative and Ethical Foundations

While law and policy implement ethics in concrete ways, they still **draw from moral philosophy** when new or complex ethical dilemmas arise. Philosophy retains a crucial niche in:

- **Ethics and Morality:** Questions of what is right or wrong, what rights individuals have, and how society should value various outcomes ultimately require normative judgment. Science can inform us about consequences and psychology can tell us about moral intuitions, but deciding on principles (like “Is it ethical to enhance humans genetically?” or “What do we owe to future generations?”) remains a philosophical endeavor. We see this today in *AI ethics*, *bioethics*, and *human rights discussions*. Philosophers often sit on ethics boards for hospitals or advise on AI guidelines. Their role is to articulate the moral principles at stake and reason through consistency and implications. Here, philosophy’s slow, careful approach is appropriate, because a rush to an answer could lead to injustice or oversight. Other fields can’t determine “ought” from “is” – that leap is precisely the domain of philosophy.

- **Value Theory and Aesthetics:** In areas like aesthetics (the philosophy of art and beauty) or political philosophy (justice, rights, liberty), philosophy continues to provide frameworks that influence culture and policy. For example, the very *concept of human rights* was essentially developed by philosophers (from Stoics to Locke to Kant) long before it became enshrined in law. If we are to expand moral consideration to, say, artificial intelligences or to animals or ecosystems, those ideas are incubated in philosophy first. Over time, society may adopt them, but someone must do the initial ethical reasoning unfettered by current law – that’s often a philosopher’s role.
- **Western vs. Eastern Synthesis:** We’ve focused on Western philosophy’s decline, but interestingly one niche for philosophy is bridging Western and Eastern thought. As meditation and Eastern practices become popular, philosophical questions arise: How do Buddhist notions of non-self integrate with Western notions of individual autonomy? This cross-cultural dialogue is a space where comparative philosophy thrives, helping to **translate and integrate wisdom from different traditions**. Western philosophy, with its analytic tools, can help parse Eastern insights for a global audience and vice versa. This enriches the toolkit for meaning and cognition beyond what any single tradition offers.

### 4.3 Critical Self-Reflection and Societal Critique

Philosophy also remains relevant as a **tool for critical reflection** on both knowledge and society at large:

- **Philosophy of Science:** Even as science leads in explaining the world, philosophy of science asks important questions like “What counts as a scientific explanation?”, “Are there limits to the scientific method?”, or “How do values influence science?” These reflective questions ensure that science does not become blindly reductionist or arrogantly certain. They can improve science by highlighting biases or conceptual issues. For instance, philosophical critique of how studies are done can lead to better methodologies (like understanding causation vs. correlation).
- **Existential Exploration:** On a personal level, not everyone will take psychedelics or even meditate. Some people *find meaning through reflective reading and contemplation*, a more classical philosophical approach. The existentialist literature (Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard) or works of moral philosophy (like Martha Nussbaum’s writings on human flourishing) still speak to individuals grappling with purpose and values. These works might not be “empirically optimal” in a lab sense, but for certain minds, they resonate deeply. People in times of crisis or transition often do turn to philosophical essays or classics for guidance, solace, or a sense of connection to the human condition. Philosophy as *literature of ideas* continues to provide a kind of companionship and insight that isn’t quantifiable but is part of its enduring relevance.
- **Social and Political Critique:** Philosophers often stand somewhat outside the mainstream currents, which allows them to critique society in fundamental ways. While activists and social scientists also critique, philosophers can question the underlying assumptions of a society’s direction (e.g., “Are endless economic growth and consumption truly good? What is a good life?”). They can keep alternative visions alive – like utopian thinking, or radical doubt about technology’s beneficence – which might not be immediate or popular, but serve as **conscience and imaginative foil** to the status quo. Historically, many positive social movements were sparked or bolstered by philosophers questioning prevailing norms (think of Wollstonecraft on women’s rights, or John Stuart Mill on liberty, or more recently philosophers questioning the ethics of AI or climate inaction).



#### 4.4 The Meta-Cognitive Role: Philosophy on Cognitive Tools

Interestingly, as we champion systems thinking, meditation, psychedelics, etc., philosophy can also help by **critically examining these very tools**. For instance: - What are the philosophical implications of a world where psychedelics are widely used? Does it change our understanding of reality if chemically-induced experiences can feel more profound than “normal” consciousness? - How do meditative insights (like the illusory nature of a permanent self) fit into Western philosophical frameworks about personal identity and ethics? Philosophers can work on integrating those insights so that they enrich overall knowledge rather than stand apart. - If systems thinking teaches interconnectedness, philosophers can ask how this should influence our moral responsibility (perhaps arguing for more holistic ethical systems). - In law, philosophers of law (jurisprudents) continuously debate what the law *ought* to be, ensuring the legal system is grounded in justice, not just power or tradition. - In logic and AI, philosophers probe whether an AI following logical rules truly “understands” or has consciousness, shaping how we should treat AI or how far we trust algorithmic decisions.

In all these ways, **philosophy remains the background thinker**, ensuring we don't just use powerful cognitive tools, but also *understand and question them*. This meta-cognitive stance prevents us from becoming overly enamored with any one approach without seeing its limits. No other field does this as systematically as philosophy.

#### 4.5 Western Philosophy's Ongoing Evolution

Western philosophy itself has not stood completely still. In response to some of the pressures and opportunities: - There's a movement (sometimes called “experimental philosophy”) that actually brings empirical methods (like surveys and psychological experiments) to philosophical questions, blending with cognitive science. - There is increased dialogue with Eastern and Indigenous philosophies, which may revitalize Western thought by bringing in more praxis-oriented and holistic perspectives (something Western tradition was critiqued for lacking). - Public philosophy is making a minor comeback – through blogs, podcasts, and accessible books – trying to undo the damage of overspecialization. Philosophers like Massimo Pigliucci, mentioned earlier, actively engage with public discourse (e.g. on Stoicism, science vs. philosophy debates, etc.). This tries to make philosophy more relevant to everyday concerns again.

So while philosophy's footprint shrank in the late 20th century, it may find a new equilibrium by focusing on what it *uniquely can do*: question assumptions, unify knowledge, and address the normative dimensions of life.

## Conclusion

Throughout this report, we examined the claim that **philosophy is losing ground as a way to productively use one's cognitive resources**, especially when compared to other disciplines and practices that have emerged or ascended in recent times. We outlined how philosophy, particularly in the Western academic tradition, has seen a structural decline – both because it shed many of its former branches to specialized sciences and arts, and because of diminishing engagement in the modern era. We presented evidence and reasoning that **systems thinking, meditation, psychedelics, law, and logic** (among possibly others) can in many cases deliver more immediate or measurable benefits for understanding the world, improving one's mind, and finding meaning, thus representing “optimizations” over classical philosophical inquiry for those specific ends.

To recapitulate key insights:

- **Philosophy's Shrinking Footprint:** Once encompassing all intellectual pursuits, Western philosophy now occupies a much smaller niche. Its influence in academia and public life has waned due to internal specialization and external competition from scientific and practical fields. Signs of this include reduced student interest, cuts to departments, and a cultural narrative that questions philosophy's practicality.
- **Rise of Alternative Cognitive Tools:** Where one might historically have turned to a philosopher's wisdom, people now often turn to scientists, systems analysts, therapists, mindfulness teachers, or data-driven methodologies. Systems thinking offers tools to comprehend complexity that philosophical musings can't easily match. Meditation and psychedelics offer direct routes to personal insight and mental growth, supported by empirical research, unlike the unproven hopes one might place in reading philosophy for enlightenment. Law and logic channel intellectual effort into structured, socially and technologically impactful outcomes, highlighting philosophy's relative inefficiency in those regards.
- **Empirical and Pragmatic Superiority:** We underscored that these alternatives come with evidence – from neuroscience scans of meditators' brains to creativity scores among psychedelic users, from the tangible successes of systems approaches to the rigorous problem-solving of legal courts and code – that demonstrate their effectiveness. In contrast, philosophy's outcomes are harder to quantify, and its debates often don't reach consensus or real-world application. By a certain utilitarian calculus, if one's aim is to maximize insight or problem-solving ability per hour of effort, these other approaches often seem to yield more.
- **Enduring Roles of Philosophy:** Crucially, we also identified *where philosophy remains relevant*. Philosophy still asks and refines the deepest questions, provides ethical orientation, and keeps human values in view in a rapidly changing world. It serves as the connective tissue between disciplines and a check on their excesses. In niches like foundational conceptual work, normative frameworks, and integrative thinking, philosophy's value is not easily replaced. Even the powerful practices we praised benefit from philosophical reflection to use them wisely and interpret their significance.

In essence, the **footprint of philosophy has indeed shrunk**, but it has not disappeared. Philosophy may no longer claim to be the primary engine of knowledge or the sole path to wisdom, yet it occupies a critical corner: guarding the **why** and **should** questions that purely empirical or technical fields might overlook. It's also the historical archive of humanity's attempts to reason through everything – an archive that can still surprise and inspire.

For someone looking to **optimize their cognitive allocations** today, the takeaway would be: - Leverage the strengths of the specialized practices (be scientifically informed, think in systems, care for your mental landscape with practices like meditation, be open to paradigm-shifting experiences, learn formal reasoning skills, etc.) – these will likely accelerate your understanding and effectiveness. - But also *use philosophy in a targeted way*: to ensure you're asking the right questions, to examine your own assumptions, to remind yourself of ethical principles, and to synthesize your knowledge into wisdom. Philosophy can be a guide and a glue between all those other activities.

In a metaphor, if modern intellectual life is an endeavor to build a ship of knowledge and meaning: the engineers, navigators, and engines might be the scientists, systems thinkers, and other practitioners – they make the ship move powerfully. Philosophy might no longer be the captain, but perhaps it is the **compass and the map**, sometimes forgotten in the glovebox but crucial when deciding where to actually steer and why.

The notion that philosophy is *rapidly losing ground* is accurate in terms of prominence and perhaps raw efficiency. Yet, if we define “optimizing cognitive cycles” in a broader sense – not just raw output, but *wisdom* and *orientation* – then the optimal allocation likely still includes a dose of philosophy, informed and transformed by all that came from it. In a future that is increasingly dominated by complex systems, advanced technologies, and novel cognitive tools, philosophy may have a smaller footprint, but one that keeps us mindful of the bigger picture: the human quest for truth, meaning, and goodness.

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