

The Philosothon: Philosophy as performance

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of the place for competition in philosophy by considering the example of the Philosothon, a popular school-based philosophy competition originating in Western Australia. Criticisms of this competition typically focus either on specific *procedural problems*, or else on the claim that *the competitive spirit is inimical to collaborative philosophical inquiry*. The former type of criticism is extrinsic to competitive philosophy per se, while the latter is intrinsic to it. Defenders of the Philosothon dismiss both types of criticism by pointing to an allegedly ancient precedent, Socratic dialogue, as evidence that competition is not inimical to philosophy. If true, then procedural problems, where they can't be eliminated or mitigated, can be accepted, on the basis that the Philosothon serves *the greater good of promoting the practice of philosophy*. My purpose in this paper is twofold. First, to explain both types of criticism based on a detailed description of the Philosothon's rationale and procedures. Second, to challenge the *promotional* assertion used to dismiss the criticisms. Drawing on Plato scholarship, as well as research from social science, I suggest an alternative interpretation of the Philosothon, contrasting it with ancient philosophy and describing it instead in terms of 'signalling'.

Keywords

Community of inquiry, competition, philosophy, Philosothon, signalling, Socratic dialogue

Introduction

The question of the place for competition in philosophy is a vexed one. Some think there are features of competition that are inimical to the values that philosophy should embody. Whether or not we agree depends on how we conceive of both competition and philosophy. Does competition always require a *competitive attitude*? Is philosophy always *collaborative*? If the answer to both questions is yes, then the two would seem to be at least in tension, if not downright incompatible. If the answer to either, or both,

is no, then there could be a place for competition in philosophy, even if the format is debatable.

If philosophy is conceived in the dominant contemporary sense of an academic discipline, where induction into the discipline is regarded as a process of acquiring a combination of content knowledge and cognitive skills, then certain forms of competition might be motivational and even encourage excellence. As Dearden (1972, pp. 125-126) points out, educators have often used *extrinsic* rewards, such as prizes, in the belief that competing for them will induce students to acquire goods that are *intrinsically* desirable (particularly in the case of children, who may not yet appreciate those intrinsic goods). Essay competitions in the humanities are perhaps the best example, where successful performance requires a combination of outstanding research, writing, and reasoning skills. The comparison of essay writing with the academic practice of authoring books and articles seems clear, sufficiently justifying this form of competition for some. As we shall see, however, ardent critics of competition like Alfie Kohn (1986, 1993) believe the drawbacks of competition far outweigh any putative benefits.

In essay competitions, the competitive element remains extrinsic to the educational benefits to be achieved, since the same benefits could, in principle at least, be achieved non-competitively. In a popular philosophy competition known as the Philosothon, however, it is implied that the competitive element is *intrinsic* to the educational benefits to be achieved. The argument is implicit in statements made by defenders of the Philosothon, often in response to critics. First, they claim that the setting for the competition, the pedagogical model of the 'community of inquiry' (CoI), has an ancient philosophical pedigree, the Socratic dialogue. Then they claim that this precedent demonstrates elements of *competition* as well as *collaboration*. Finally, they conclude from this that the Philosothon serves *the greater good of promoting the practice of philosophy*, thereby overriding any procedural problems with the event.

The Philosothon rationale and procedures

The Philosothon originated at Hale School in Perth, Western Australia, in 2007, the brainchild of Matthew Wills (Head of Philosophy, Values and Religion) and Leanne Rucks (Head of Gifted and Talented). Its inception coincided with two developments in the curriculum of WA upper-secondary schools. The first was the attempted implementation of the highly controversial outcomes-based education (OBE) model between 2005 and 2007 (see Shine & O'Donoghue 2013, Chapter 7). The second was

the creation of the ATAR Philosophy and Ethics course,¹ which was introduced to the curriculum in 2008.² Wills later wrote:

Our intention was to provide young people with an opportunity to reflect deeply on philosophical and ethical issues while developing and then demonstrating good critical thinking and communication skills. This initiative coincided with the introduction of a three-year course, entitled Philosophy and Ethics, designed for senior-school students in the secondary schools in the state of Western Australia. Foundational to this new multi-year course was the development of critical-thinking skills, the study of formal logic,³ training in argument mapping, and the study of both formal and informal fallacies. (Wills 2012, p. 13)

He goes on to describe the Philosothon as ‘a friendly “competition” between schools’ (p. 13), a sentiment echoed on the previous official website: ‘The aim of the event is not to promote competition among schools or school students but rather to promote the development of careful, critical and creative reasoning skills. These skills are developed in students as they prepare for and participate in Philosothons’ (Philosothon 2021). According to this account, then, the purpose of the Philosothon is not competition per se, but rather the encouragement of forms of thinking frequently associated with philosophy, such as those taught in the ATAR course.

The first Philosothon involved nine schools (Wills 2012, p. 13),⁴ but this increased substantially in subsequent years, reaching 30 by 2012. In 2010 it was promoted in other Australian states, making possible the inaugural Australasian Philosothon in Sydney in 2011. The first primary Philosothon was held in 2012, and the first UK

¹ ATAR: Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, an exam-based score that ranks Year 12 students for purposes of admission to university. ATAR courses begin in Year 11 and conclude with the ATAR exams at the end of Year 12.

² As well as being the driving force behind the Philosothon, Wills taught the ATAR course at Hale between 2008 and 2016.

³ In fact, instruction in the Philosophy and Ethics course has mostly involved *informal* reasoning, with the exceptions of modus ponens and modus tollens.

⁴ Wills elsewhere says eight (2017, p. 5), although the Wikipedia article agrees with the figure of nine. The new official website has inherited the figure of ten from its predecessor (<https://www.philosothon.org/site/about-history>).

Philosothon in 2013 (Wills 2012, pp. 15-16). Notwithstanding some criticism (see below), the event has been supported by academic philosophers as well as the state and federal associations for philosophy in schools in Australia. In 2017, the Philosothon Project was established with a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust to 'grow existing Philosothons and support the establishment of new ones, particularly in remote schools and at schools catering for students from low socio-economic backgrounds' (FAPSA 2017, para. 3). The Project was managed by members of the Federation of Asia-Pacific Philosophy in Schools Associations (FAPSA) until the end of 2020, at which time it was awarded another Templeton grant and moved to the University of Western Australia.

In order to understand the nature of the Philosothon as a competition, and the criticisms that have been levelled at it, it is necessary to go into some procedural detail. The process begins at least three months before the event, when participating schools are sent an information 'resource pack' that includes the topic questions to be discussed. This generous lead-in time allows for stimulus materials to be studied, contestants to be selected within their schools, practice discussion of the topic questions (e.g. during philosophy-club meetings), and contestants to generate their own open-ended questions on the topics. These student questions are sent by participating schools to the organisers, who collate them and make them available on the night of the event, as described below.

In the case of the high-school Philosothon, schools send five students, one each from Years 8 to 11, as well as a 'reserve' from one of these year levels. In the state events, there are four rounds in one evening, with each round devoted to one of the topic questions (the Australasian Philosothon differs slightly in being held over two days, with eight rounds instead of four). After a plenary welcome, students 'break out' into separate classrooms to join their year-level groups for the first two rounds. These are followed by a refreshment interlude, and then two final rounds in mixed-year-level groups.

The format for each round is the 'community of inquiry' (CoI, sometimes referred to as CPI for 'community of philosophical inquiry' or 'collaborative philosophical inquiry'), a pedagogical model that will be discussed below. Typically, each CoI group has eight students, with the total number of groups depending on the number of participating schools. The contestants wear name badges and sit in a circle, along with the CoI facilitator. The judge sits outside the circle, marking the contestants' scores on a sheet according to a rubric. Score sheets are collected after each round. During the

rounds, the Chief Judge moves between classrooms and briefly observes the various CoI discussions. This role also includes oversight of the calculation of cumulative scores, which is now largely automated using an electronic spreadsheet.

The first CoI round begins with an introduction from the facilitator, who reminds contestants of the procedure. Having studied the questions previously submitted by contestants and chosen one for its pertinence, he or she initiates the discussion by inviting the questioner to elaborate on this question. Other participants raise their hands to indicate a desire to respond, and one of these will be chosen by the first speaker. This process is repeated for the duration of the round (40 minutes), with the current speaker choosing the next speaker from among those with raised hands. The CoI model discourages intervention by the facilitator, the objective being a collaborative inquiry democratically managed by the group members. The facilitator may intervene, however, if the discussion becomes bogged down, or perhaps to invite any hesitant students to contribute. The judge can only award points to those who speak.

Judges award points out of 10 in three categories (critical, creative, and collaborative thinking) according to a marking rubric (Table 1). This process requires judges to follow the discussion, note student names, decide which of the three categories contributions belong to, and award points out of 10 against students' names for their contributions. The conversation doesn't stop while judges are considering and writing their scores, which places a significant demand on judges' attention.

Table 1: The ‘community of inquiry’ (CoI) marking rubric used by Philosothon judges.

Criteria	Critical Thinking	Creative Thinking	Collaborative Thinking
Exemplary = 10 Mostly Excellent = 9 At Times Excellent = 8 Mostly Good = 7 At times Good = 6 Mostly Satisfactory = 5 At Times Satisfactory = 4 Mostly Limited = 3 At Times Limited = 2 Mostly Very Limited = 1 Nothing observed = 0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grasped philosophical problem • Crafted an argument • Evaluated others’ arguments • Distinguished beliefs and reasons in own or others’ arguments • Challenged reasons and/or examples in others’ arguments • Identified an assumption in others’ arguments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributed original ideas • Made interesting links between ideas • Provided examples, analogies or thought experiments • Used others’ ideas in an original way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributed appropriately to philosophical discussion • Encouraged peers • Showed intellectual humility • Supported and/or developed others’ reasons or views • Showed intellectual courage • Asked thought-provoking questions

As the rubric indicates, the format of the Philosothon differs from that of a competitive debate. In the CoI participants are encouraged to help one another in the effort to clarify the topic being discussed. Therefore, the rubric awards points for collaborative thinking in addition to critical and creative thinking. We will return to this peculiar feature of the Philosothon below.

By the end of the competition, students and schools are ranked according to their cumulative scores, and all awards (apart from the ‘most promising’ category) are allocated according to this ranking. The winning school is awarded a crystal trophy with an embedded image of Rodin’s *Le Penseur*. Students in second- and third-place schools receive medallions, as do the top three students in each age division. Special awards are given to the most promising female and most promising male philosopher. The scores are also the basis for customised reports provided to participating schools following the event. These include various ‘metrics’ (raw scores, z-scores, rank) for each student in each scoring category (critical, creative, collaborative) for each round,

as well as the cumulative raw and z-scores for the school and its rank among participating schools for each round and category.

Criticism and response

Over the years, post-event surveys conducted by the Philosothon organisers have elicited both positive and negative feedback. I divide the criticism into 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' categories. The first category concerns procedural problems that are specific to the Philosothon, while the second concerns problems with competitive philosophy per se. These categories are not entirely separate, however, as some procedural elements have a bearing on the competitive issue. I will consider each category in turn.

Extrinsic criticism

One rather obvious problem concerns the procedure for speaker turn-taking during the CoI. Compared to a formal debate, where each team has the opportunity to present a prepared position ('for' or 'against' the motion), and also the opportunity to challenge the other team, both under strictly timed circumstances, the Philosothon process has an arbitrary element. Defenders point out that the CoI attempts to replicate the conditions of spontaneous dialogue and consequently must allow for the advantages and disadvantages of natural conversation. Be that as it may, in a *formally competitive* situation it is at least unusual that the choice of would-be speakers is in the hands their competitors, whose basis for choice can have nothing to do with the *content* of what will be said, since that remains unknown. A would-be speaker may have a highly original point, and yet not be chosen because several others also have raised hands, her chances perhaps further curtailed by her seating position in the periphery of the current speaker's visual field. Therefore, although the CoI format is intended to maximise democratic participation in the discussion with truth as the goal, the procedural requirements for convenient rubric scoring act as a limiting factor on this ideal. Although it may have the appearance of a *natural* conversation, it is really an *artificial* conversation.

A second and related problem concerns the non-directive nature of the facilitator role. In the Philosothon, facilitators are cautioned against excessive intervention. Reflecting its roots in the child-centred approach of progressive education (see below), the CoI places a premium on self-direction. It is, of course, very tempting for adults with greater experience, including in philosophy, to dive into the conversation. It can be appreciated that this might be inhibiting for children and teenagers, and interfere with the judges' need to witness the students speaking and managing the discussion for

themselves. The downside to minimal intervention, however, is that the relative immaturity and philosophical inexperience of participants can result in the discussion becoming inane or enmired in confusion. This problem could be circumvented by judicious intervention from an experienced facilitator, effectively exercising a pedagogical role. It should be noted, however, that maturity and experience are relative factors and even adult facilitators will have their own blind spots, including philosophical ones.

A third problem concerns compromised objectivity in scoring, arising from the abovementioned demands placed on judges' attention by the dynamic nature of the CoI. Objective scoring is a significant factor in any competition, and the Philosothon is no exception, given that the collective outcome is dependent on individuals' cumulative scores. How objective can scoring be, however, when judges are attempting to award points using three 1–10 scales (excluding zero) to a group of students in an ongoing dialogue? More experienced judges will perhaps do better than less experienced ones, but that only mitigates the problem rather than solving it.

A fourth problem compounds the third and concerns the subjective nature of rubric interpretation. This is a familiar issue in education and only one of several rubric limitations. Referring to the use of rubrics in typical school assessment situations, such as written assignments, Alfie Kohn expresses the problem as follows:

Consistent and uniform standards are admirable, and maybe even workable, when we're talking about, say, the manufacture of DVD players. The process of trying to gauge children's understanding of ideas is a very different matter, however. It necessarily entails the exercise of human judgment, which is an imprecise, subjective affair. Rubrics are, above all, a tool to promote standardization, to turn teachers into grading machines or at least allow them to pretend that what they're doing is exact and objective. (Kohn 2006, p. 12)

The use of a rubric for scoring purposes reflects and reinforces the OBE-inspired environment in which the Philosothon has existed from the time of its creation. It is an OBE requirement that students be given criteria for successful completion of a task. This is perhaps sensible enough when tasks are practical or procedural, with discrete and quantifiable components. In areas that require interpretation, comprehension, and creativity (traits considered essential in the arts and humanities), numerical rubrics atomise complex and integrated abilities into artificial constituents for scoring convenience. Furthermore, when they are given to students in advance, they create the conditions for formulaic responses, as students attempt to meet the criteria and

achieve a good score, or perhaps the best score they think they can achieve with the least effort.

Rubrics can be devised for the arts and humanities that take into consideration the sorts of abilities that discipline specialists know their students need to acquire. The less atomised the rubric, the more dependent its interpretation will be on specialist judgement that inevitably has a subjective aspect. This is not necessarily a problem when those making the judgements have enough time, but how trustworthy are judgements made 'on the fly' in the dynamic CoI environment, where snap decisions may be required? Combined with the preceding problem, subjective interpretation of atomised skills can only be a challenge to the objectivity and fairness expected in competitive scoring.

As a final implication of the scoring problem, it should be recalled that scoring is the basis for the post-competition metrics provided to schools. It might be asked what purpose is served by such statistical data. If the scoring is accurate and consistent, then it should reveal areas of strength and weakness for individual students and for the school. Could a school conclude after several years of competing that it is consistently weak in 'collaborative thinking', for example, and focus on training students in this category? This inevitably raises the prospect of 'gaming' the metrics, a phenomenon we shall consider below. If, on the other hand, the scoring is not accurate and consistent, then the reports can serve no useful purpose.

Intrinsic criticism

The procedural problems are not inconsequential, but arguably they can be eliminated or mitigated. Problems of an *intrinsic* nature, on the other hand, are more challenging. The most salient example is the assertion that a competitive spirit is inimical to the collaborative endeavour at the heart of the CoI. In evaluating this, I will draw on the work of Alfie Kohn, an ardent critic of competition in all areas of life, including education. His award-winning *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (1986, revised 1992) presents an impressive range of empirical data in support of the contention that our fundamental ideas about competition are really myths. Kohn devotes separate chapters (2 to 5 respectively) to undermining the assumptions that competition is *inevitable* (or natural), *more productive*, *more enjoyable*, and *character building*. He claims, on the contrary, that it is *cooperation* that bestows the benefits usually attributed to competition (see p. 182 for a summary). If Kohn is right, then the Philosothon appears inherently contradictory: a *collaborative* model (the CoI) in a *competitive* format. In

order to decide whether it succeeds in squaring this circle, it is necessary to tease out some of the nuances involved.

In brief, and greatly simplified, Kohn's argument is that several decades of social science research point to a fundamental psychological trait at the root of competitiveness: low self-esteem, or self-doubt. This trait pushes us to seek success, even when it comes at the cost of others' failure. Hence the defining feature or *essence* of all competition: mutually exclusive goal attainment (MEGA). The behaviours and beliefs to which this gives rise become encoded in cultural norms, which eventually congeal into what Kohn calls 'structural competition'. By this stage, competition is so pervasive (in education, work and leisure) that we barely notice it, and noncompetitive alternatives all but disappear. The genesis of the assumptions mentioned in the previous paragraph can be understood in the light of this pervasiveness. Finally, out of this structural matrix emerges 'intentional competition' (see pp. 3-5, 97-103).

Intentional competition becomes natural, inevitable, and justifiable against the pervasiveness of structural competition. For example, school events, whether sporting, musical or academic, are very commonly established as intentional competitions, and this practice is justified by reference to the generally competitive nature of education and the workplace. In defending the Philosothon against critics of its competitive format, for instance, Wills writes that 'in almost all secondary and tertiary academic institutions, students are ranked with respect to one another relative to certain criteria' (Wills 2012, p. 14). In Kohn's terms, this amounts to justifying *intentional* competition by pointing to the assumed inevitability of *structural* competition.⁵

Although the factors listed so far would be sufficient to explain the near ubiquity of competition in life generally, and in education in particular, towards the end of his book Kohn introduces a topic that may also have a bearing on our consideration of the Philosothon. In Chapter 8 ('Women and Competition') he distinguishes female and male attitudes to cooperation and competition.⁶ He believes that there is some

⁵ It is worth noting that Montessori schools are ideologically opposed to educational competition and attempt to eliminate it as much as possible (e.g. no merit certificates), but they are swimming against the tide of a structurally competitive education system and society.

⁶ For stylistic reasons, I use girl/woman interchangeably with female, and boy/man interchangeably with male, without implying anything about the ultimate basis of competitiveness. I think the

truth in the stereotypes of male competitiveness and female cooperativeness, but that a common mistake is to confuse *success* with *competitive success*. Girls and women are just as interested in success as boys and men but are more likely to seek it *cooperatively* than *competitively*. Kohn maintains that research supports the claim that success is better achieved through cooperation, which doesn't have the deleterious effects of competition. Far from endorsing a conservative attitude to female roles, he believes that feminism (or 'pseudofeminism') falls short when it emulates male preferences for competitive success. If Kohn's analysis is correct, the birthplace of the Philosothon at Hale would only reinforce the structural reason for its establishment as a *competitive event*, Hale being WA's oldest private boys' school (founded in 1858) and a place steeped in the culture of competition.⁷

Kohn describes various individual and social drawbacks of competition. Some of these are a result of structural competition, as in the world of business; while others are a result of intentional competition, as in high-stakes sport. For instance, studies show that, compared to cooperation, competition has an inhibitory effect on creativity (pp. 53-54). Although most of the effects enumerated by Kohn are not relevant to the Philosothon, which is not a high-stakes competition,⁸ there is one that merits attention here, and that is the suppression of empathy.

As mentioned above, the essence of competition is mutually exclusive goal attainment. Regardless of how 'friendly' a competition is, there is no escaping the fact that where there are winners, there must also be losers. My winning comes at the cost of your losing—or, put another way, my success is equivalent to your failure—and vice versa. Competition, in other words, sets us up as rivals. There is an instrumental aspect to rivalry since rivals are obstacles to the achievement of our goals, at least for the duration of the competition. Using the terminology of philosopher Martin Buber,

argument holds whether competitiveness is biological, sociological, or some combination of both. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who brought this issue to my attention.

⁷ Hale is one of the founding members of the Public Schools Association (PSA) of WA, formed in 1905 and now consisting of seven fee-paying boys' schools. Results of PSA sporting fixtures are a regular item on the agenda of school assemblies at Hale. See <https://www.psa.wa.edu.au>. For a discussion of gender in the context of P4C and the CoI, see Thornton and Burgh (2019, pp. 237-241). On the topic of 'Alpha-male' point scoring, see Splitter and Glaser (2019, p. 11). For another perspective on women in competition, see Davion (1987).

⁸ A proposal to use some of the Templeton grant as a cash prize was rejected at the 2018 FAPSA AGM.

Kohn describes a rival as an 'it' rather than a 'thou'. The downside is that treating another as 'it' has an inhibiting effect on empathy, and this contradicts one of the central goals of the philosophy-in-schools movement, to promote 'caring thinking'⁹ (Kohn 1986, pp. 135–43; see Lipman 2003, p. 84 for 'caring thinking', and p. 92 for a reference to Buber on the ethics of dialogue; see also D'Olimpio 2015; Splitter & Glaser 2019, p. 11).

It might be claimed that the Philosothon sidesteps the *intrinsic* criticism by rewarding *collaborative* thinking in addition to critical and creative thinking. The rubric, it could be argued, encourages participants to cooperate, with a third of the points available to judges in the 'collaborative thinking' category. Defenders of the Philosothon can therefore accept Kohn's reasoning that cooperation is preferable to competition and remind us that it is embodied in the very model of the CoI as a cooperative search for truth. As further support, it might be pointed out that girls perform very well in the Philosothon and are seemingly unperturbed by its competitive aspects. Finally, all of this is apparently confirmed by anecdotal evidence that 'many students forget that they are involved in a competition and engage in the exact sort of investigation and collaboration we would hope to see in our philosophy and ethics courses' (Wills 2012, p. 14).

This counter to the intrinsic criticism appears to receive additional support from two sports researchers who largely agree with Kohn's analysis but argue that the target of his criticism should really be classified as 'decompetition'. According to Shields and Bredemeier (2009), 'genuine competition is really a subset of cooperation ... a special form of cooperation that enables participants to push each other toward personal excellence' (p. 33). Elaborating further on this:

Although competition takes place within a contest structure, the psychological goals of the participants are not mutually exclusive, even though winning and losing are. It is possible for both (or all) competitors to simultaneously improve and experience the exhilaration of the contest, regardless of the outcome. Viewed within the metaphor of partnership, the cooperative nature of the contest is highlighted. Even while contesting, opponents cooperate. I cooperate with my opponent

⁹ Note that for every student receiving laurels, and for every school appearing in the tables of winners on the Philosothon website, there are more students and more schools that receive no such recognition.

by providing my best effort, just as my opponent provides the same for me. The opposite of cooperation is not competition, but Decompetition.
(p. 33)

Is the Philosothon an example of 'true competition' in the ideal sense described by Shields and Bredemeier?

It can certainly be agreed that all intentional competition involves some cooperation. At the most basic level, competitors must agree to follow the rules. It can also be accepted that competitors ideally provide their best effort and expect the same of their opponents. In events that require physical exertion, competitors may also share the exhilaration of the contest. The key difference, however, is that these sorts of benefits are *intrinsically rewarding* rather than *extrinsically rewarded*. Shields and Bredemeier are not arguing that competitors should be extrinsically rewarded for cooperative behaviour. In the case of competitive sports—Shields and Bredemeier's paradigm for true competition—players and teams are never *directly* rewarded for things like cooperating or doing their best. Such behaviours can *contribute to* winning, but the latter is decided by the scoring of goals or points. There is apparently no parallel in the world of intentional competition for the Philosothon practice of awarding points for collaboration. Kohn even argues that giving extrinsic rewards for something that should be intrinsically rewarding is counter-productive (see Kohn 1993).

Shields and Bredemeier cannot, therefore, be cited in defence of awarding points for collaborative thinking. Even less encouraging for the pro-competition case is that their general argument about true competition is weaker than it appears. Recognising that there are social and psychological forces that lead to decompetition, they are forced to admit that true competition is an ideal that is never fully attained, even if we can and should aim to do so (Shields & Bredemeier 2009, pp. 48-49). This concession only lends support to Kohn's point about the pervasive influence of structural competition. Indeed, they seem unaware that Kohn anticipated their argument in Chapter 7 of *No Contest* ('The Logic of Playing Dirty'). He points out that terms like 'true competition' and 'real competition' are the 'tack' naturally taken by competition advocates to support their case (see p. 160). Kohn thinks this position is naïve, as it fails to recognise the underlying power of structural competition.

For our purposes, it is not necessary to settle this dispute here. We need only recognise that there is a spectrum of competition, along which are found positive and negative aspects. What both sides seem to agree upon, however, is that extrinsic rewards are

corrupting.¹⁰ Kohn is unequivocal about this, but even Shields and Bredemeier acknowledge that in decompetition the contest 'is pillaged for extrinsic rewards tethered to winning' (p. 48). Presumably none of them would regard the Philosothon as a good competition, then, on the grounds that it confers extrinsic awards (a trophy and medallions) for activities—especially collaborative thinking—that should be intrinsically rewarding.

Wills, however, has a final counter to the claim that competition and collaborative inquiry are incompatible:

If there is some tension between collaborative learning and Philosothon competitions, I, for one, am happy to live with this apparent contradiction—so long, that is, that it remains the case that participating students a) recognize that wisdom is the ultimate goal and b) develop skills along the way in putting together clear and constructive arguments. (Wills 2012, p. 15)

It seems, then, that the ultimate justificatory claim for the Philosothon is that it serves the greater good of promoting the *practice of philosophy*, notwithstanding any limitations as a competitive event. Now there are certainly good etymological and historical grounds for the characterisation of philosophy provided here (that its goal is wisdom, and that it helps practitioners acquire and apply certain logical skills), in each case to be found in the dialogues of Plato. The discussion of love (*philia*) and wisdom (*sophia*) in the *Symposium* (204a–b) is the *locus classicus* for the idea that philosophy is the 'love of wisdom'. Plato's dialogues are also the pre-eminent source for Socrates' manner of cross-examining his interlocutors, to which the roots of Western logic are often traced.

In providing an extract from Peter Worley's *Corrupting Youth: History and Principles of Philosophical Enquiry*, the Philosothon website goes further, suggesting that the historical precedent establishes a competitive attitude as *intrinsic* to the practice of philosophy. Now Worley is not making a case for *formal* competition, but his historical claims are explicitly described on the website as a 'response to those that argue that competition does not have a place in Philosophy'. Among other factors, Worley

¹⁰ Dewey's concept of 'interest' as an educational category is perhaps relevant to the discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. For the development of this concept over the course of Dewey's career, and its relevance to contemporary pedagogy, see Jonas (2011).

invokes the ancient Greek love of contest (*agon*), as well as Socrates' military training, and the latter's paradoxical behaviour in conversation (being alternately collaborative and pugilistic) to suggest that philosophy has always had a 'healthy' competitive element (see Worley 2021, pp. 42-44).¹¹ In other words, the Philosothon promotes the practice of philosophy not only by aiming at wisdom and encouraging argumentative skills, but through the competitive attitude itself.

The problem of Socrates

Therefore, whether the Philosothon succeeds in its claim to promote the practice of philosophy ultimately turns on how philosophy itself is conceived, and it is to this *metaphilosophical* question that we now turn. We must examine more closely the conception of philosophy implied in Worley's image of Socrates, a figure who has often been adopted by educators on questionable historical grounds, for example the 'Socratic method' of teaching that was uncritically employed in 19th- and early-20th-century American schools (see Schneider 2013). Any attempt to answer this must negotiate the so-called 'Socratic problem' — the fact that Socrates wrote nothing and that our only sources for him are in the writings of others, chiefly the dialogues of Plato.

Interpretation of Plato's dialogues has long been a subject of debate, the historically dominant 'doctrinal' position holding that the dialogues contain positive doctrines, and the 'fallibilist' one holding that they demonstrate only that we can know nothing for certain. The former position is often associated with 'unitarians', who attribute a unified philosophical position to Plato, in contrast to 'developmentalists', who posit instead an evolving perspective. One version of developmentalism purports to distinguish early fallibilist dialogues representing the historical Socrates from later doctrinal ones in which Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece. Developmentalist scholarship, therefore, has tended to emphasise the significance of the compositional (as opposed to dramatic) chronology of the dialogues (for more on the complexities of Plato exegesis, see Nails 2018; Press 1996, pp. 507-579; Wolfsdorf 2008, pp. 3–28.)

An influential developmentalist was Gregory Vlastos, who applied an analytic approach to the logic of the Socratic 'elenchus', the dialectical method supposedly employed by Socrates in the 'early' dialogues, to undermine positive knowledge-

¹¹ The extract on the Philosothon website is from a pre-published version (see <https://www.philosothon.org/site/peter-worley-on-competition>).

claims made by his interlocutors (see Vlastos 1983, 1985, 1991). Vlastos' conclusions were challenged, however, even by analytic scholars who shared his fallibilist assumptions (see Brickhouse & Smith 1984; Irwin 1992; Kraut 1983; Polansky 1985). Subsequent scholarship undermined the existence of *any* consistently demonstrated method or methods that could uniquely be attributed to Socrates (see Scott 2002).

Contrasting with the analytic approach is a literary-contextual one, which takes seriously such features of the dialogues as irony, exhortation, and *ad hominem* argument, thereby revealing a complex interplay of dramatic and logical elements (on the 'dramatic criterion', see Klosko 2020). For instance, in his study of *Gorgias*, Kahn (1983) shows how the refutation of all three interlocutors (Polus, Gorgias and Callicles) is really *ad hominem* (pp. 75-76, 80). Ultimately it is character and a way of life that are on trial (see also Condren, Gaukroger & Hunter 2006, p. 12; Kahn 1992, 1996; Jonas 2018b).¹² The dialogue really describes a contest between two *ways of life* (Kahn 1983, pp. 75, 98, 103), the non-philosophical life, represented by the sophist Gorgias, and the philosophical life, represented by Socrates (pp. 93, 113). The latter's words are 'protreptic', exhorting his interlocutors (and by extension the dialogue's audience) to change their lives. Therefore, although Worley is right to draw attention to a contest (*agon*) in Plato's dialogues, and to the opposition between Socrates and the sophists, his framing of this contest as a clash of ideas, comparable to students locking horns in verbal disagreement, risks trivialising it. A real existential choice is involved, not merely a clash between 'eristic' and 'dialectic', as Worley suggests.¹³

Recent Plato scholarship only confirms the difficulty of distinguishing Socrates from Plato in the dialogues, pointing out that attempts to do so based on chronology tend to be circular (Gerson 2013, Chapter 2, & pp. 82-83; 2014, pp. 406 n. 9, 408, 412 n. 24, 428; see also Press 1996, pp. 511-512). For Gerson, we can never be certain of the historical Socrates, only the character dramatically portrayed by Plato: 'the dialogues

¹² Notwithstanding his fallibilist leanings, by 1983 even Vlastos recognised a positive as well as a negative thrust to the elenchus (1983, pp. 44-50), that it was not employed by Socrates merely as an exercise in logical refutation, but rather as 'a search for moral truth' and 'a challenge to his fellows to change their life' (pp. 30, 36; see also pp. 32-34, 37; see Cottingham 2006, p. 185; Renaud 2002).

¹³ Socrates' words in *Phaedo* (64a) give some indication of the gravity of the choice: 'Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death' (trans. Hugh Tredennick; see Gerson 2013, p. 38). Analytic attempts to emulate the dialogue form (e.g. Sagal 1982) don't do justice to this point.

paint such a powerful portrait of the literary character Socrates that Vlastos and others find themselves taking art for reportage' (2002, p. 219; see also 2013, pp. 53-61).¹⁴ Gerson (2013) further suggests that Plato used the device of 'Socratic ignorance' to indicate that the highest form of cognition is 'nonpropositional' (p. 88 n. 37; see also pp. 41, 75; 2002, p. 224; Jonas 2018a, pp. 87-91), and can only be attained through living a philosophical life (2013, pp. 20, 94, 309; see also Jonas 2018a, pp. 91-94; Jonas 2018b; Jonas & Nakazawa 2021):

Plato does not want to reveal the answers in the dialogues. And it is easy to see why without supposing that it is because there are no answers at all. He does not believe that the answers to these questions can be effectively communicated in a written work or perhaps even verbally ... The fact is that the kind of knowledge Socrates thought so important is not communicable in the way that, say, historical knowledge is communicable. (2002, p. 224)

The claim that philosophy in the ancient world was a 'way of life', including adherence to a school and the practice of 'spiritual exercises', was forcefully made by Pierre Hadot (1995, 2002).¹⁵ The goal of the philosophical life, whose exemplar was Socrates, was purification of the soul in preparation for wisdom, even if the latter could not be fully attained before death (1995, Part II; 2002, pp. 66-76, & Chapter 9). Philosophical discourse had to be grounded in such a life, ungrounded discourse being regarded as empty and essentially sophistic (2002, p. 174). Philosophy retained this connection with a way of life, in one way or another, until the rise of the modern research university in the 19th century, and the emergence of the professional philosopher¹⁶ (2002, Chapter 11; see also Celenza 2013; Cottingham 2006, 2013;

¹⁴ Some philosophers of education have taken recent Plato scholarship on board and attempt to develop a Platonic philosophy of education with practical application (see Jonas 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Jonas & Nakazawa 2021; Marshall 2021).

¹⁵ Hadot's work has stimulated considerable discussion of philosophy as a way of life, most of which is beyond the scope of this paper (see Ambury, Irani & Wallace 2021; Chase, Clark, & McGhee 2013; Sellars 2017; Sharpe 2016, 2017, 2020; Sharpe & Ure 2021).

¹⁶ In an 1851 essay, 'On philosophy at the universities', Schopenhauer (1851/1974) likened paid philosophy to the activities of the sophists as portrayed by Plato: 'With the ancients money-making with philosophy was always the sign that distinguished the sophist from the philosopher' (p. 153; see also p. 156; Hadot 2002, p. 260). Schopenhauer thought that genuine philosophers were rare, comparing the academic version to an actor playing the part of a king (p. 156). He did

Hankins 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Jones 2006; Sellars 2020; on the ‘contested character of philosophy’ and the problem with ‘presentist’ philosophical histories, see Condren, Gaukroger & Hunter 2006).

What can we conclude from the foregoing about the claim that the Philosothon is justified because it promotes the practice of philosophy, with reference to Worley’s text about Socrates and ancient philosophy? Specialist scholarship casts serious doubt on this claim, even if we allow that Worley is referring to the dramatic *persona* of Socrates rather than the unknowable historical entity.¹⁷ In fact, the broad historical perspective reveals two main philosophical personae: the sage and the scholar. Socrates remains the model of the former, through his exemplary life and death. The latter operates in the realm of discourse, and in the modern world is usually a discipline specialist.¹⁸ Neither the Philosothon, nor philosophy for children (P4C) generally, can realistically represent either of these personae. If, however, the Philosothon is *not* promoting philosophy either as a way of life (exemplified by the sage) or as an academic discipline,¹⁹ then what *is* it promoting?

In the rest of this paper, I will contend that the Philosothon promotes a ‘thin’ conception of philosophy, characterised by ‘thinking skills’ that can be acquired and

concede, however, that there might be a role for university teachers of philosophy passing on their knowledge of the subject and explaining ‘the system of the most recent genuine philosopher’ (p. 157), assuming they could identify the latter (see also Hirst 1972, p. 17).

¹⁷ It should be noted that the Philosothon website takes the Worley extract out of context, using the notion of an *informal* ‘contest’ (*agon*) in Plato’s dialogues to support a case for *formal* competition involving scoring rubrics and prizes. Furthermore, Worley expresses a clear preference for a fallibilistic appropriation of Plato, distinguishing dialectic as a ‘method’ that can be employed without commitment to ‘Platonic metaphysics and epistemology’ (2021, p. 20; see also p. xxxii). This preference also seems to influence his interpretation of Hadot on philosophy as a way of life, which doesn’t do justice to the existential depth of this concept as we find it in Hadot (see pp. xxxi–xxxii, 2–3; the Bibliography contains only one of Hadot’s books, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*). Worley’s concern (both in this book and its companion volume) is to establish an ancient pedigree for ‘PhiE’ (philosophical enquiry), the conversational method used by The Philosophy Foundation, a UK-based charitable organisation of which he is co-founder and co-CEO.

¹⁸ Historically the two are in tension, but not essentially so, as discourse can be used to explain, promote and justify a way of life (see Cottingham 2006, pp. 196–201, 2013, pp. 156–164; Gerson 2013, Conclusion; Sellars 2017, pp. 47–50).

¹⁹ The information given to Philosothon contestants in 2020 includes the following statement: ‘There is *no* expectation on students that they will have studied Philosophy before or [will study Philosophy] after participating in the Philosothon’ (AAPP 2020, p. 2).

practised apart from traditional philosophical 'discipline'. In the following section I will show how the 'progressive' ideas attributed to John Dewey were channelled by Matthew Lipman into the P4C movement, which then combined with OBE and analytic philosophy to influence the Australian creators and promoters of the Philosothon. In the final section I will argue that this 'thinking skills' model does not serve philosophy well, as it reinforces an 'instrumentalist' approach that attempts to 'market' philosophy for extrinsic ends.

Democratic philosophy

As noted at the outset, the inaugural Philosothon was held in 2007, its development coinciding with the design and implementation of the ATAR Philosophy and Ethics course (2004–2008). The course and the competition are cut from the same cloth, so to speak—a cloth woven from the threads of P4C, OBE and analytic philosophy. The father of P4C, Matthew Lipman, acknowledges multiple influences on the movement (Lipman 2003, Chapter 2, & pp. 84–95; see also Kennedy 2011, p. 59), but one in particular, the educational and social progressivism of John Dewey, is clearly discernible in its pedagogical formation, including the CoI (Lipman 2004; Millett & Tapper 2012, p. 548).

For Hofstadter (1964, Chapter XIV), the two major influences on Dewey's thought were Darwinian naturalism (pp. 362, 368, 372–373) and, more significantly, romantic primitivism (pp. 363, 368–369). Dewey referred approvingly to Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Emerson, pedagogical reformers who 'envisaged a child life engaged more or less directly with nature and with activity, and not with absorbing traditions meaningful only to adults or with reading books and mastering skills set not by the child's desires and interests but by adult society' (pp. 368–369). These influences made Dewey suspicious of the authoritarian model of schooling and led him to conceive of education in terms of natural 'growth', a conception that Hofstadter describes as 'the source of endless difficulties ... in the hands of some of Dewey's followers [becoming] one of the most mischievous metaphors in the history of modern education' (p. 373; see also p. 379; see Hirsch 2009, pp. 44–48, 227–228 n. 41; Peters 2010, pp. 61–66). Well intentioned as Dewey's ideals may have been, and notwithstanding some beneficial reforms achieved by pedagogical progressives, the emphasis on child-centred education, and its suspicion of tradition, were devastating for curricular systems (pp. 359–362, 374, 375–378; see also Lagemann 2000, p. 99; on the misappropriation of Dewey's ideas, see Ryan 1998, pp. 395, 400; Jonas 2011, pp. 113, 128 n. 2). Deprived of its former hierarchical structure, the fragmented curriculum needed an alternative

organising principle. For Dewey, the scientific method of ‘inquiry’ fulfilled this purpose (see Hirsch 2009, p. 27; 2016, p. 12; 2020, p. 85).

For Dewey and other pragmatists—including his teacher CS Peirce,²⁰ and his close friend GH Mead—Plato’s dialogues provided the model for the ‘democratic’ and ‘experimental’ inquiry method. Lipman quotes Mead, who in 1910 had referred to the ‘dictum of the Platonic Socrates, that one must follow the argument where it leads in the dialogue’ (Lipman 2003, p. 85).²¹ Lipman credits the pragmatists with ‘fusing together ... the two independently powerful notions of *inquiry* and *community* into the single transformative concept of the *community of inquiry*’ (p. 84), a term he assumes was coined by Peirce (p. 20). Theirs was, however, a ‘fallibilist’ rather than a ‘doctrinal’ reading of Plato, one in which Socrates claims not to teach anything.²² As we have seen, this reading is not supported by contemporary Plato scholarship.

Therefore, when Laurance Splitter introduced Lipman’s CoI to Australia,²³ he imported a Deweyan model of democratic inquiry that derived its ultimate authority from a fallibilist interpretation of Plato’s dialogues. This model favours *reasoning skills* and *conceptual clarification* over the *content* of the philosophical canon as structured according to a traditional curriculum.²⁴ It is compatible with the dominant culture of

²⁰ For convenience I include Peirce as a pragmatist, although he distinguished his ideas with the label ‘pragmaticist’.

²¹ The reference is to *Republic* 394d, where Socrates says: ‘whithersoever the wind, as it were, of the argument blows, there lies our course’ (trans. Paul Shorey).

²² For the influence of Plato on Peirce and Dewey, see O’Hara (2005), Press (1996, pp. 511, 522 n. 33) and Spencer (2007).

²³ Splitter had enthusiastically observed the CoI in practice at Montclair State College in 1982, where Matthew Lipman had established the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) ten years earlier. In 1985, Lipman and a colleague, Ann Margaret Sharp, conducted the first Australian teacher-trainer workshop in P4C, at which time the Australian Institute of Philosophy for Children (AIPC) was established (Splitter & Glaser 2019, pp. 9-13).

²⁴ Significantly, Australian advocates of P4C subsequently dropped aspects of the Western philosophical canon that Lipman had included in his novels for children and accompanying curriculum and teachers’ manual. Splitter had noted these elements of Lipman’s practice during visits to Montclair from 1982 (Splitter & Glaser 2019, p. 10), and was aware of their importance to Lipman (p. 12). Their jettison in the Australian context led to a greater emphasis on ‘skill development’ (Poulton 2019, p. 150) at the expense of a disciplinary understanding of philosophy.

analytic philosophy,²⁵ which has a reputation for ahistorical—sometimes even anti-historical—tendencies. Unsurprisingly, it is also compatible with the student-centred, skills-based approach of OBE, since both have their roots in the same progressive movement.²⁶

What the Philosothon promotes, then, is not philosophy in any traditional sense of the word, but the use of general thinking skills in a group-dialogue context. Rather than drawing on the authority of the sage or the scholar, it encourages a ‘democratic’ use of these skills in the CoI. The skills are applied to questions that are ‘philosophical’ in the topical manner of analytic philosophy, often represented by a ‘thinking tools’ approach (e.g. Cam 2006; Baggini & Fosl 2020).²⁷ It is perhaps best described as an adjunct to the ATAR course, which has the teaching and assessment of critical thinking and argument at its core.²⁸

See also APIS (2010), quoting Philip Cam: ‘The move to Philosophy in Schools away from Philosophy for Children was a move away from Lipman’s materials’ (p. 2).

²⁵ Splitter defines philosophy as ‘reflective inquiry into key concepts or ideas, that is, concepts and ideas that matter’ (Splitter 2006, p. 4). Having received his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Oxford, Splitter acknowledges ‘the possibility that my own philosophical training in the British analytic tradition has left me with a bias towards the centrality of concepts to philosophy’ (Splitter 2006, p. 5, n. 1). Another formative influence on P4C in Australia, Philip Cam, also studied philosophy at Oxford (APIS 2010, p. 1). See Betz (1980, pp. 342-343) on Dewey’s understanding of Plato as representative of the ‘conceptual stage’ of philosophy.

²⁶ Hence the ease with which Millett and Tapper (2014) could write: ‘An outcomes approach actually suits philosophy well, as philosophy can readily be thought of not so much as subject matter to be learned but as a set of skills to be acquired by practice ... One of the effects of an outcomes focus was to downplay the study of the history and classics of philosophy and to place the primary focus on reasoning skills (Outcome 1) and conceptual inquiry (Outcome 2) and on the ways in which these can be applied in a variety of contexts (Outcome 3)’ (pp. 1217-2118; see also Millett & Tapper 2009).

²⁷ Matthew Del Nevo (n.d.) has produced *The Continental Community of Inquiry*, a reader containing 27 extracts from continental European writers (plus William James). Although the sources are untypical for a CoI, the discussion format remains the same. Baggini and Fosl (2020) notably devote chapters to continental philosophers (Chapter 6) and the limits of rational philosophy (Chapter 7).

²⁸ It is this thinking-skills conception of philosophy that is employed by those who defend P4C against what they term the ‘deficit’ model of childhood, according to which children are developmentally incapable of philosophy. The modern version of this model is attributed to Jean Piaget, while an older one is traced to Book VII of Plato’s *Republic* (539b–c), where Socrates argues that young people are too immature to employ dialectic responsibly. Advocates for P4C tend to

Instrumentalisation, metrics, and signalling

That ‘critical thinking’ is best taught—or democracy best served—outside a traditional discipline-based curriculum has been contested (see Hirsch 1987, 2009, 2016, 2020; Hofstadter 1964, pp. 377-390; Passmore 1967; Ravitch 2001, p. 15; Willingham 2008, p. 26). While evaluation of such concerns lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is pertinent to consider whether the Philosothon achieves even the limited goal of promoting ‘critical, creative, and collaborative’ thinking in participants. In this final section I will suggest that such ideals are potentially subverted by forces beyond the control of those who run the Philosothon.

It is tempting to view the undeniable popularity of the Philosothon—its spread across Australasia and into the UK, its expansion into primary schools, and its funding by the Templeton Religion Trust—as a sign of educational effectiveness. Such a conclusion might, however, be premature. Some of the popularity can be attributed to the convivial atmosphere of the event itself: students, schoolteachers, university academics and families enjoying social interaction organised around lively intellectual discussion. More broadly, the Philosothon emerged during a swell of interest in ‘public philosophy’ over recent decades, attested by burgeoning book and magazine publications, radio and television programs, podcasts, philosophy cafés, online

draw on recent empirical research to reject this model. I suggest, however, that a deficit (i.e. ‘thin’) model of philosophy is being employed in such advocacy, one that focuses primarily on cognitive skills. This is not an argument *against* optimising children’s cognitive abilities (however that might be achieved), so much as an argument *for* a richer conception of philosophy. It proposes that the philosophical personae of sage and scholar depend on a combination of interests, aptitudes and opportunities that *do* presuppose physical and psychological maturity, as well as greater self-determination (and even then, success is not guaranteed, as such factors may only be actualised through life experience and virtuous striving). Against this richer understanding of philosophy, the cognitive argument for P4C becomes circular: children are capable of philosophy because the latter requires only those cognitive capacities that even children have. The case against Plato and Piaget may come undone for another reason, however, if it is based not only on a deficit model of philosophy, but also on a *deficient* understanding of those thinkers. Worley, for instance, assumes that Plato intends a literal interpretation of the training of the philosopher-kings in the abovementioned passage (2021, pp. 53-55), whereas others read the passage allegorically (e.g. Jonas 2012; 2016a, pp. 209-210; 2016b, pp. 308-314; Jonas & Nakazawa 2021, Appendix). Similarly, Lourenço and Machado (1996) argue persuasively that Piaget has been misinterpreted by his critics.

groups, etc. (see Ziglioli 2022).²⁹ This trend has ‘practical’ and ‘discursive’ elements, neo-Stoicism being an example of the former, and the philosophy café an example of the latter. It can certainly be seen as a democratic departure from—or reaction against—the specialised and often technical nature of academic philosophy, even if academics are occasionally participants in—or their work used in support of—the trend (on Hadot as an example of the latter, see Chase 2013a, p. 5; also Chase 2013b; Hadot 1995, Postscript).³⁰

The Philosothon and the ATAR course differ from the popular trend, however, in being part of a formal education system that is itself embedded in a broader cultural matrix. In the case of ATAR, the stakes are high, and while this is not true of the Philosothon, the influence of a structurally competitive market economy—and education system—should not be underestimated. For instance, it has become common for academic philosophers to publicise research indicating some instrumental benefit conferred by studying the subject, such as improved performance in standardised tests (see Metcalf 2021 for a recent example), or enhanced career prospects. Similarly, we find a range of academic and social benefits attributed to the practice of P4C (Millett & Tapper 2012; UNESCO 2007), an instrumentalising tendency that has been criticised by some (see Biesta 2011; Vansieleghem 2005, p. 21). Wills follows suit in the grant application for the Philosothon Project submitted to the Templeton Religion Trust: ‘This project will meet a vital need in our education system which promotes outcomes based education or *career preparation* and often neglects skills in critical thinking and the development of independent and creative thinkers’

²⁹ Early indicators of the trend were the establishment of *Philosophy Now* magazine in May 1991, and the publication of Jostein Gaarder’s *Sofies verden* in December that year, subsequently translated into English as *Sophie’s world* (see Gaarder 1995).

³⁰ Although the desire to philosophise can be interpreted as a natural expression of the human search for meaning, the cultural products of which are part of our common heritage, self-selecting philosophy groups are not without pitfalls. They may lack rigour, be hijacked by dominant personalities, become superficially social, or turn into therapy (for discussion of neo-Stoicism, and philosophy as therapy, see Love 2021a, 2021b). This is not to suggest that academics have a monopoly on rigorous philosophical thinking, however, or to deny a role for the serious amateur. An interesting example of the latter is ‘citizen philosopher’ Kevin Shepherd, who combines a scholarly approach with social criticism (Shepherd 1989, 1991, 2004, 2005). See also Frodeman and Briggle (2016) on their proposal for ‘field philosophy’.

(2017, p. 3, emphasis added; see also Wills 2012, p. 13).³¹ If strategically motivated, such a recourse is understandable, but it can also backfire, as it risks confusing the intrinsic goods of education with merely utilitarian benefits (see Ozoliņš 2019, Introduction).

Instrumentalisation often relies on the employment of metrics for a veneer of justification, even where such measurement is excessive or inappropriate, what Muller calls ‘metric fixation’ (2018, p. 4). He uses the term ‘virtue signaling’ to describe the ‘gathering and publication of performance data’, even when the measurement is of dubious benefit (p. 20). The Philosothon scoring rubric is a good example, applying numerical scales to the measurement of performance in critical, creative, or collaborative thinking, all subsequently compiled into post-competition reports. Remember Kohn’s words: ‘Rubrics are, above all, a tool to promote standardization, to turn teachers into grading machines or at least *allow them to pretend that what they’re doing is exact and objective*’ (2006, p. 12, emphasis added).

Even more troubling, however, is the effect of metrics on the behaviour of those whose performance is being measured. Once a numerical scale is assigned to something, the scale itself becomes the benchmark for success or failure, and those who stand to gain or lose will gear their performance to the scale rather than what is supposedly measured by it. Social scientists describe this variously as ‘Campbell’s Law’ (in the US) or ‘Goodhart’s Law’ (in the UK), but both describe ‘corruption pressures’ that distort the processes being measured (Muller 2018, pp. 19-20). As Muller puts it: ‘anything that can be measured and rewarded will be gamed’ (p. 20). This tendency

³¹ Ironically, Dewey—a ‘pedagogical’ progressive—was opposed to the ‘administrative’ progressives who had been influenced by the broader ‘social efficiency’ movement associated with Frederick Winslow Taylor’s theory of ‘scientific management’ (see Callahan 1962). He criticised them for adopting a narrowly measurement-oriented conception of science, which was used, on the one hand, to classify and standardise students (see Callahan 1962, pp. 124-125) and, on the other, to improve the efficiency of traditional educational practices, rather than reforming the practices themselves (see Holt 1994, pp. 81-82, 85-86; Labaree 2010, pp. 168-170). Referring to the ‘Project Method’, one of the classroom techniques promoted by the administrative progressives, Holt writes: ‘Students ostensibly learned in the classroom the skills required to make them participating citizens in a socially-efficient meritocracy, not Dewey’s grass-roots democracy, unpredictable and full of conflict, but rather a socially-engineered industrial democracy in which teachers prepared students for the work force’ (1994, pp. 81-82; see also Burgh & Thornton 2019, p. 1; Yengo 1964, p. 48).

to ‘game the metrics’ means that even the best intentions can lead to unintended consequences.

One way of understanding this is in terms of what economists call ‘signalling’.³² Bryan Caplan (2018)³³ believes that *most* education is ‘signalling’ (see pp. 118, 123), arguing that employers generally treat educational qualifications, particularly in non-vocational areas, as signals that the holders possess the desirable characteristics of intelligence, conscientiousness and conformity. This is because ‘the road to academic success and the road to job success are paved with the same materials’ (p. 18; see also pp. 64, 68, 85).

I suggest that in the current educational ‘market’, philosophy itself has become a type of signal, particularly when understood as ‘a set of skills to be acquired by practice’ (Millet & Tapper 2014, pp. 1217-1218; see n. 26 above). Hence the significance of Socrates as the ancient source of authority, legitimating the ‘Socratic method’ of ‘critical thinking’. When, in his grant application, Wills refers to ‘critical thinking and the development of independent and creative thinkers’, he is participating in the signalling process, in this case to the Templeton Religion Trust. The same might be said of the Philosothon, which functions as a signal to schools, and by extension to parents. Finally, the competitors themselves must signal—through their verbal utterances—their ‘critical’, ‘creative’, and ‘collaborative’ thinking to judges who award points according to a metrically-driven rubric. This creates an incentive for ‘gaming the metrics’. There might be no immediate financial or academic gain, but neither is there any harm in having it on the resume, especially for those who ‘perform’ well.

In the final analysis, then, I suggest that the Philosothon is best understood as a *performance* of philosophy. This is not intended to suggest intentional deception. It is, rather, a systemic or ‘structural’ phenomenon. I believe, however, that it is problematic, insofar as it entrenches a ‘thin’ notion of philosophy (see Ozoliņš 2019, p. 6), conceived in terms of ‘thinking skills’ that can be acquired and practised apart from traditional philosophical ‘discipline’ (either as a way of life, or as a scholarly

³² In circumstances where there is an asymmetry of information between employers and job seekers, the former rely on educational qualifications as proxies, i.e. ‘signals’, for useful traits (see Arrow 1973; Spence 1973).

³³ One of three books cited in the first paragraph of Metcalf (2021), against all of which he is arguing.

pursuit, or both). Most disturbing of all is when such skills are commodified—measurable outcomes packaged for a corporatised education market (see Gare 2006, 2012). While not the only characteristic of the ancient sophists, the tethering of instruction in argument to extrinsic rewards was certainly one of their defining ones. Professional teachers of rhetoric, like Gorgias, taught their students how to *perform* virtue for purposes of career advancement. If Plato's dialogues depict a contest between two ways of life, the Philosothon arguably creates the conditions for participants to emulate Gorgias rather than Socrates. When the sophist takes the stage, *exeunt* the sage and the scholar.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that the Philosothon suffers from several extrinsic and intrinsic problems. While the former category is significant, the latter is more serious. One way to avoid criticisms of the competitive element is simply to remove it. When Wills reports that 'many students forget that they are involved in a competition' (2012, p. 14), he is unintentionally making a case *against* competition. Would students enjoy a non-competitive event as much as a competitive one? Perhaps they would. Would schools be interested in participating in an event without trophies and medallions? Perhaps they would too. Some basic research should be able to answer these questions. If the answer to either or both is negative, then we must wonder whether Kohn is right about the pervasive (and potentially unconscious) influence of structural competition.³⁴

The competitive nature of the Philosothon is, however, only half the problem. As I have tried to show, attempts to defend this aspect of the event have led to questionable comparisons with philosophy as traditionally conceived, personified by the sage and the scholar. What is at issue here is a metaphilosophical question about the nature of

³⁴ Although further research might reveal interesting things about participant experiences of the Philosothon, it goes beyond the scope of this paper, which is concerned with a *philosophical* appraisal of competitive philosophy. Wills' comment about student amnesia is quoted only to suggest that the event might succeed even if it became *intentionally* non-competitive. Of course, if Kohn is right about 'structural competition', then even an intentionally non-competitive event can be affected by broader social influences. Furthermore, participants' subjective experiences of an event, whether intentionally competitive or not, would not override any philosophical critique, since people can be in competition without being aware of it. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer whose comment stimulated further consideration of this issue.

philosophy itself and removing the competitive element would not change that.³⁵ If this really is a problem, then identifying it is the first step towards addressing it, followed by consideration of alternatives. Some academics (e.g. Ozoliņš) have already entered the discussion. The present paper is intended as a modest contribution.

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³⁵ While I have attempted to show how the Philosothon embodies and promotes a certain conception of philosophy, the metaphilosophical issues raised by this go beyond the Philosothon itself. Variant conceptions of philosophy are to be found both within the P4C literature—Bowyer, Amos and Stevens (2020) usefully describe ten variants derived from their survey—and in philosophy generally. The extent to which variant conceptions are compatible or incompatible with one another, and whether any one conception or combination of conceptions is more deserving of the name of ‘philosophy’, are not questions that can be settled in the context of the Philosothon. They are also beyond the scope of this paper, which has the more limited goal of raising awareness of the issue, as well as considering some potentially undesirable consequences of it. Once again, I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer whose comment encouraged me to clarify this point.

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