

PPE: Some Thoughts and Some Progress
Michael Munger
Duke University
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Prefatory note: This is a discussion memo. There is very little here that is original; the content derives from conversations I have had with many people, and from reading. I am not including references for the sake of space and clarity of exposition, but all the ideas here owe their genesis—and often their exposition—to others.

The study of “Philosophy, Politics, and Economics” (PPE) is an important, though partial, palliative to a set of problems facing both academic research and undergraduate education. Economics and political theory, and their philosophical foundations in analytics, epistemology, ethics, and intellectual history, have been subject to two conflicting trends. The academic study of these areas has become increasingly stove-piped and specialized, while the pedagogical requirements for creating an educated citizenry capable of dealing with the 21st century have become broader and more difficult to satisfy in the classroom. Economic, political, and philosophical scholars have all become absorbed by very similar questions, but are prevented by heavily defended academic border controls from taking advantage of progress in the related disciplines.

This problem is getting worse, not better. The three disciplines have widely different accounts of core concepts: rational choice, simulation and modeling, equilibrium and dynamic processes of change, and the role of moral reasoning as a constraint, an objective, or the place of morality in reason or the passions.

There is important work being done in the interstices, and the contested territories between the defended borders, on welfare programs, policy, the environment, and the nature of political institutions. But this work is often dismissed as “applied,” and is little informed by any

deep influence by core elements of the three disciplines. This means that opportunities for intellectual arbitrage are being missed, sometimes even scornfully dismissed, as being “not really _____.” Some of the most exciting developments in each of the three disciplines have been slow—at best—to make their way into other disciplines that, in terms of subject matter, should be eager to welcome the newcomers and make them feel at home.

At the same time that the *academic research* disciplines have grown apart, *students* clearly yearn for integration. When they object, “but there are ethical problems with simply assuming that exchange is voluntary,” the economist says, “Okay, but we will assume in this class that there is no problem.” Or when the student objects, “empirical research shows that the incentive problems with you call a ‘just’ social order means that no society could function like that,” the philosopher says, “Ah, but we are dealing with ‘ideal theory’ here; there is no place for empirical considerations!” This departmental compartmentalization means that adventurous and intellectually curious students must try to navigate an inhospitable terrain, without reliable maps charts, an experienced guide, or identifiable landmarks. Those who are considering the trip “over to [other department] to take some courses” may be even be advised against it by discipline-bound faculty: “Why would you do that? Those people are...different!”

A liberal education should connect the policy questions and timely ethical problems of the day with the enduring analytical principles and timeless legacy of ethical understandings of the past. Almost by definition, the educated student who has aspirations other than graduate school in the field of the undergraduate major must be able to transcend academic boundaries and yet be familiar with the villages and folkways of the different disciplines. The world rather stubbornly refuses to conform to the academic boundaries faculty find professionally convenient.

But the typical “solution” has been both makeshift and insubstantial. We say that our students should be better than we are; our students will be the ones who go talk to those “other people.” Faculty will stay inside their fortified redoubts, and discuss angels and pins. The reason that PPE has grown so quickly is that it provides both a means for students, and an end for faculty, to solve the twin problems. Students who study PPE have a template (and though there are many templates, as we will see, they share important features) to navigate a genuinely liberal education. Faculty who participate in PPE accept as an objective the integration of their research, and their approach to problems, that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Faculty research in PPE is no longer allowed to assume away ethical difficulties, or to ignore fatal empirical problems. In both the teaching and research spaces, PPE has the potential to cross the boundaries of research disciplines, and to break down the academic “subject” fences that have artificially divided the study of the human condition.

Why PPE?

It is plausible to ask, “Why these three disciplines, Philosophy, Politics, and Economics?” After all, it is not difficult to identify other connections, with history, the arts, or engineering and physics, any one of which would enrich a liberal arts curriculum. Why PPE? The answer has two parts.

First, PPE makes no claim to being the only useful interdisciplinary curriculum. There are many combinations that might be useful, and if students are able to obtain informed advising it is possible, and in fact likely, that some other combination of subjects would be desirable. What is interesting is that PPE has demonstrated a synergy in the way that it attracts students, and faculty, who find this particular approach to be both interesting (in classes) and useful (in

later life). A surprising proportion of leaders, both in business and politics, have PPE in their backgrounds.

The second part of the answer is brand name. It is unnecessary to explain, to many of the best students who are considering a university for application for admission, what PPE is. Because of the experience over time in proving the value of PPE shown by existing programs, it is possible to open a PPE program and expect an immediate constituency among both faculty and students. Faculty often say, “This is why I became a professor in the first place!” Students often say, “This is why I wanted to go to college!” There are existing resources, syllabi, and (increasingly) conferences and professional associations that recognize and nurture PPE as an approach to research and teaching that make it understandable to administrators and attractive to prospective students. This particular combination of these three particular disciplines has been shown to create useful and interesting synergies in the study of unanswered questions, and the problematization of unquestioned answers.

Origin and Format

The first PPE program was founded at Oxford, in the UK, in the 1920s as an alternative to the then standard curriculum of Classics (colloquially called, sometimes ironically, by the students “Greats”). There was a perceived problem of mismatch between the offerings of the faculty and the needs of students and the larger society. In particular, the putative reason for the creation of PPE was to create generations of the best young minds equipped to run a world-wide empire in a way served the needs of Britain and the moral obligations of an enlightened society. The PPE program has grown rapidly, and it is still one of the most popular courses of study at Oxford, and in fact in much of England, today.

The Oxford program is, in American terms, a “major.” Its format is to require a selection of courses in all three disciplines in the first year, and then choosing some two (dropping one, often Economics) in the second and third years (the British system uses tutorials, and lasts only three years rather than the four or more typical of the American system).

There are other forms of PPE as a “degree” or certification device, however. The main differences are the type of degree, and the degree of integration. By “integration” I mean gateway and capstone courses, for example, or team-taught courses with faculty from different disciplines. A (partial) list of the possibilities would include:

	Integrated	Not Integrated
Stand-alone major		
Major, but only as 2nd		
Minor		
Certificate		

Penetration and Expansion

I do not have comprehensive information on the number and size of PPE programs in the U.S., but present here a (non-representative!) sample of programs that I am aware of, with some numbers on enrollments. (These data, in this table and the one that follows, come from work by Dr. Amanda Beal, at Mount St. Mary's University, in Emmitsburg, MD. Dr. Beal is not responsible for errors that I in representing or interpreting these data, however).

Some Existing PPE Programs: Age and Size (Tentative and Incomplete)

University	Years/Age	Enrollment	Program
Carroll University	8	4 - 6	
Claremont McKenna College		12 - 16	Limited enrollment
Denison University		10 - 15	
Duke University	12	15 - 20	Certificate Program
Emory & Henry College	3	4	
Juniata College	8	2	
La Salle University	3	1-3	
Mercer University	5	2	
Pomona College	15	5 - 12	
Princeton University	6	19	Limited enrollment
Tulane University	30	25	
University of Akron	16	3 - 6	
University of Alabama at Birmingham		5 - 7	
University of Arizona		7 - 10	PPEL, with law
University of Michigan	3	12 - 15	Limited enrollment
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	11	75	Limited enrollment, minor
University of Notre Dame		5 - 7	
University of Pennsylvania	20	120	
University of Pittsburgh	32	20	
University of Richmond	5	24	
University of Virginia	11	100+	
Wheeling Jesuit University	10 to 12	3 - 4	
Yale University		30 - 40	

57 Existing PPE Programs

	University	Country	State
1	Carnegie Mellon University	United States	Pennsylvania
2	Carroll University	United States	Wisconsin
3	Claremont McKenna College	United States	California
4	Denison University	United States	Ohio
5	Duke University	United States	North Carolina
6	Durham University	England	
7	Eastern Oregon University	United States	Oregon
8	Emory & Henry College	United States	Virginia
9	George Mason University	United States	Virginia
10	Juniata College	United States	Pennsylvania
11	King's College	United States	New York
12	King's College London	England	
13	La Salle University	United States	Pennsylvania
14	Lancaster University	England	
15	Mercer University	United States	Georgia
16	Minnesota State University, Mankato	United States	Minnesota
17	Mount Allison University	Canada	
18	National University of Ireland, Maynooth	Ireland	
19	Pomona College	United States	California
20	Princeton University	United States	New Jersey
21	Queen's University Belfast	Ireland	
22	Royal Holloway, university of London	England	
23	Swansea University	Wales	
24	Taylor University	United States	Indiana
25	Transylvania University	United States	Kentucky
26	Tulane University	United States	Louisiana
27	University College London	England	
28	University of Akron	United States	Ohio
29	University of Alabama at Birmingham	United States	Alabama
30	University of Arizona	United States	Arizona
31	University of Dublin	Ireland	
32	University of East Anglia	England	
33	University of Essex	England	
34	University of Exeter	England	
35	University of Iowa	United States	Iowa
36	University of Leeds	England	
37	University of Manchester	England	
38	University of Michigan	United States	Michigan
39	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	United States	North Carolina
40	University of Notre Dame	United States	Indiana
41	University of Oxford	England	

42	University of Pennsylvania	United States	Pennsylvania
43	University of Pittsburgh	United States	Pennsylvania
44	University of Regina	Canada	
45	University of Richmond	United States	Virginia
46	University of Stirling	Scotland	
47	University of Virginia	United States	Virginia
48	University of Warwick	England	
49	University of Washington Tacoma	United States	Washington
50	University of Western Ontario	Canada	
51	University of York	England	
52	Virginia Tech	United States	Virginia
53	Wesleyan University	United States	Connecticut
54	Western Washington University	United States	Washington
55	Wheeling Jesuit University	United States	West Virginia
56	Wilfrid Laurier University	Canada	
57	Yale University	United States	Connecticut