



Is Lack of Literature Engagement a Reason for Rejecting a Paper in Philosophy?

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Abstract

Although philosophy cites less than most other academic subjects, many scholars still take a lack of reference to and engagement with the relevant literature as a reason to reject a paper in philosophy. Here I argue against that idea. Literature requests should only in rare circumstances be an absolute requirement, and a lack of (engagement with) references is not a good reason to reject a paper. Lastly, I briefly discuss whether an author has reasons to provide references, and I argue that although there are special circumstances in which we ought to avoid referencing papers, there are strong reasons in favor of engaging with the literature. Hence there is an asymmetry between what the author has a reason to do in writing a paper and how reviewers and editors ought to evaluate it.

Keywords Referencing · Citation · Literature engagement · Editorial policy · Reviewing · Publishing

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Introduction

Philosophy is a tradition that generally cites less than many other forms of academic inquiry.¹ While under-citation occurs in some of the most well-considered publication venues, it is also, sometimes, considered a sufficient reason for rejecting a paper.² This *prima facie* establishes a conflict between actual publication praxis and the reason for rejecting papers. In this article, I ask whether a lack of literature engagement is a reason for rejecting a paper in philosophy.

I will argue that the reasons for requesting that a paper reference or engage more literature are fairly weak in the sense that most *prima facie* strong reasons for referencing and engaging with literature are actual reasons for improving your arguments or supporting your premises. Moreover, in those limited situations when a request for additional literature is warranted, it is never a reason for rejecting a paper making non-empirical claims—it merely calls for minor revisions. However, this does not imply that the author should not reference and engage with the literature. Indeed, I will reach the asymmetric conclusion that while authors standardly have strong (*pro tanto*) reasons to engage with literature, that does not mean that the evaluation of papers should depend on authors satisfying those reasons. After all, judging whether a paper merits publication is different from the considerations that go into its creation.

The article will proceed as follows. In the next section, I engage with seven reasons to reject papers because of a lack of literature engagement. Those reasons address the issue from the perspective of reviewers and editors. Next, I turn to address the author's perspective, which will include reasons to *avoid* referencing certain literature. Unsurprisingly, those reasons are fairly limited and I argue that authors have *pro tanto* strong reasons to engage with relevant literature—and that those reasons are overridden only in special circumstances. Finally, I end the article with some brief concluding comments.

Before turning to the arguments, I need to list one caveat and one terminological clarification. First, the caveat: In presenting this argument I am setting aside some special categories of articles, such as literary reviews, that by their nature are about the literature and hence require references to do what they do. That is, my focus here is on traditional 'research articles' in philosophy.³ Of course, many research articles do depend on external empirical evidence, which is something I will turn to in the next section. Second, the terminological clarification: Above, I speak of *referencing*

¹ See, e.g., Schwitzgebel (2022).

² For examples of papers and books with few references, it should be noted that this practice was fairly common early in the early- to mid-1900s (see, e.g., Finlay, 1948, with zero references). However, there are also more modern examples. For example, Fine (2000), with five references (including two self-references); Nagel (1998), with six references; and Temkin (1986) with three references (including one self-reference). If we move from articles to books, take Kagan (2012), a 600+ page book with only 11 references (including four self-references). For support for the latter claim, see, e.g., <https://dailynous.com/2017/09/11/desk-rejection-scorecard-guest-post-antti-kauppinen/> and <https://dailynous.com/2015/01/22/reasons-you-rejected-a-paper/>, including the discussions that follow below the article.

³ Of course, literary reviews are not the only work in philosophy that by their nature depend on engagement with the literature. Other examples include articles in the history of philosophy, which often depend on engagement with previous literature, or articles that are primarily empirical in nature (e.g., some articles in the tradition of experimental philosophy). I will discuss further examples in the next section.

and *engaging with literature*. While the former ought to be clear, ‘engaging with literature’ arguably requires further clarification. To engage with literature, one must (1) reference it, and (2) critically discuss the content of the reference. In what follows, I will make use of these different notions, to discuss arguments that relate to mere referencing and citing, as well as literature engagement.

Seven Reasons to Reject Papers for Lack of Literature Engagement

In this section, I discuss seven reasons to reject papers because of a lack of literature references or engagement (some of the reasons below are nested). I argue that these reasons are not reasons to reject a paper based on the lack of engagement with or reference to the literature.

1. The Argument is Already Available in the Literature

While the absence of any new contribution is a reason to reject a paper, the problem is not the lack of literature engagement. That is, a paper that does not make a sufficiently new and interesting claim cannot be rescued by adding more references or engaging with the literature. Simply put, the problem is that the paper does not contribute to the literature, not that it is not referencing or critically discussing some relevant literature.

2. There are Relevant Counterarguments in the Literature

This reason is probably one of the most common reasons to reject a paper because of a lack of literature engagement. Indeed, it seems very reasonable to think that a paper that has failed to consider an obvious counterargument in the literature, which cannot easily be solved, should be rejected. However, under closer scrutiny, it is not the lack of literature engagement that is the problem, but the lack of engagement with a relevant counterargument. That is, a lack of engagement with relevant counterarguments is a problem regardless of whether the argument is already part of the literature.

Contrarily, one may reason that if the arguments exist in the literature, then we should have expected that the author knew of them—while we may give more leeway to the possibility of unpublished counterarguments. However, that is just to say that some counterarguments are more obvious by virtue of being known by those with relevant expertise. Again, the problem is not a lack of literature engagement since the same holds for arguments that are obvious to those with expertise irrespective of whether the argument exists in the literature.

3. There May be Arguments that Contradict Views in the Literature and those Views Need to be Addressed

While the previous reason was that there were counterarguments in the literature, there may also be cases such that while the literature does not supply reasons against the paper under consideration, the paper supplies reasons against part of the litera-

ture. That is, an argument can provide a challenge for an established view even if that established view does not necessarily provide a counterargument against the argument.

However, views do not merit engagement simply by virtue of being part of the literature. Clearly, there are published ideas that (no longer) deserve to be engaged with. Moreover, any view that deserves to be addressed, deserves to be addressed regardless of whether it is part of the literature. That is, this is not a call for further references or critical discussion of the literature; rather, it is requested that a paper should engage with relevant alternative views contradicted by the argument, which, if it is true, is true regardless of whether those views are published or not.

We can, of course, consider a parallel line of contrary reasoning as we did with the second reason. However, the same response holds for this reason as for the former, *mutatis mutandis*.

4. The Argument Depends on Arguments in the Literature

A paper that depends on arguments already in the literature and fails to reference them seems to be a serious concern for that paper. Arguably, the lack of reference to premises or arguments already available in the literature can be problematic for two reasons. First, it may be that the conclusion depends on arguments in the literature. This is a problem if the arguments one depends on are not properly defended. But that holds for any argument and has nothing to do with whether the argument one depends on is available in the literature or not (*mutatis mutandis* for similar considerations as for reasons 2 and 3).

Second, the problem could be that the paper does not give credit where credit is due. This is problematic and must be rectified. That is, if arguments are previously available in the literature, those references should be added. However, such a minor oversight is no reason for rejecting a paper, since it merely calls for minor revisions. Moreover, giving credit where credit is due is not necessarily anything that has to do with a lack of references (nor critical discussion for that matter). That is, credit should be given where credit is due regardless of whether the credit is due to previous publications or, for example, comments provided orally, or unpublished writings.

5. The Paper Fails to Establish that the Author is Sufficiently Knowledgeable in the Field

We now turn to a complaint that reviewers sometimes raise about the author of a paper, that is, the author is not sufficiently knowledgeable in the field. Although such a complaint can sometimes be a conclusion, which the reviewer draws based on the failure of an argument, if it is taken as a reason for rejecting a paper this is an utterly mistaken approach from a reviewer and editor. That is, when reviewing, we are supposed to evaluate the paper, not the author. This type of reasoning is arguably an *ad hominem* argument in disguise; the reason conflates the purpose of an academic publication with that of a student exam. Journal papers (or academic books) are worthy of publication by virtue of their contribution to the literature, regardless of whether or not the author is an expert in the field of inquiry.

6. The Lack Of Literature References Makes the Paper A Worse Guide For Uninformed Readers

Many generalist journals indicate a desire for their papers to be accessible to a broader audience of philosophers, which in some cases requires engagement with part of the literature (irrespective of whether the argument turns on the existence of those papers). This idea can further be strengthened by arguing that papers that under-cite are *ceteris paribus* a worse contribution to the overall joint academic improvement since they are worse guides for non-experts.

Although this line of argument may seem reasonable, it is misguided. What is the purpose of a paper? Is the purpose of a paper to provide a teaching opportunity regarding relevant connections in the literature or to push the literature forward? Arguably, both of these can be a sufficient reason for a publication, but the former is clearly not necessary (and arguably, in many cases insufficient). That is, a paper that makes an important contribution to the literature should never be rejected on the basis that it does not supply a teaching opportunity for the reader. That would conflate teaching material—or, perhaps literary overviews—with research contributions.

However, there is nothing wrong with a reviewer/editor *suggesting* that an author engages with references A, B, and C to make the paper more accessible or to provide a better introduction to a broader readership (as many non-specialized journal editors may want to do). However, any such requests should be specified (i.e., relevant papers should be referenced), so as to allow the author to decide whether to integrate those references in their work. More importantly, such a call for literature engagement cannot serve as a reason to reject a paper, since it is not a matter of the quality of the contribution but purely a matter of making the presentation more beneficial to some set of readers.

It is worrisome if we create roadblocks for good ideas because we require authors to engage with literature that does not affect the contribution. Indeed, it is important to realize that there is a potential trade-off between a request to add references and the publication of important contributions to the literature. That is, it is fully possible for an author to make a relevant contribution to a field of inquiry without being broadly knowledgeable about the literature. Hence, it is clear that conditional requests and rejections based on such requests can stymie development.

Some may think that it is difficult or unlikely to make a substantial or even publishable contribution without having an expert grasp of the broader literature. However, that is an empirical claim that we—in the absence of data—should question for the simple reason that a person not invested in the literature may be more likely to avoid getting stuck in the current trends and dogmas. However, regardless of the empirical realities in the given case, a lack of literature engagement is not a reason to reject or block a paper that makes a relevant contribution.

7. The Paper Depends On Empirical Claims

If a paper depends on empirical claims, then those should be supported. However, referencing or engaging with empirical studies is not—as those empirical studies

teach us—the only way to support empirical claims. Hence, this is not a call for more references, but a call for providing support for empirical premises.

Two things are worth noting with regard to this. First, in many cases, empirical claims in philosophy can be dealt with conditionally (i.e., granted that x is the case, we ought to P). Second, given that philosophical arguments standardly are concerned with some non-empirical considerations (such as normative arguments), a lack of empirical evidence would in most cases not be a reason for rejecting a paper but merely a call for adding such evidence (in cases when the argument actual depends on some empirical claims). *N.B.*, I wrote *in most cases* in the previous sentence to make it clear that I exclude works in philosophy that are purely empirical (of course, I already excluded them in the Introduction).

My main point here is that a call for evidence is not a reason for rejecting a paper. However, that does not mean that it cannot be a necessary revision for accepting a paper. For example, the importance of a work on the ethics of technology may depend on facts about a certain technology (for otherwise the contribution may not be relevant). However, that merely seems to be a call for revisions and the addition of such evidence or a response to why such evidence is not needed (e.g., the arguments are of interest even if the technology is merely possible). Of course, there may be cases in which such a request cannot be fulfilled because there is no empirical support for a given necessary premise. However, the problem in such cases is not a lack of references or engagement with the literature; on the contrary, the problem is that the arguments depend on a premise that lacks support and cannot be supported.

Lastly, in some cases work in philosophy may be heavily empirically dependent. For example, legal philosophy may depend on jurisprudence, legal facts, and so forth. I do not deny that in such cases references may be necessary but even in those cases it is not clear that literary engagement is necessary and, more importantly, as stated above, if the problem is purely a matter of empirical support it is not a reason for rejecting the paper. Of course, if the paper's strict contribution is about an empirical fact, then engagement with that fact is necessary, but such examples have already been excluded in the Introduction.

In summation, my point can—simplified—be said to be that empirical complaints are either, and often, easily resolvable—and hence a call for minor revisions—or, more rarely, fall outside of the scope of the type of philosophical papers that I am discussing (i.e., they are empirical investigations).

Should Authors Reference Literature?

In the previous section, I rejected seven reasons for rejecting papers because of a lack of references or literature engagement. However, the reasons against rejecting a paper due to a lack of literature engagement do not necessarily provide us with any reasons for how we ought to act as authors. In this section, I will aim to discuss what we ought to do in light of the above-discussed considerations. However, before turning to that I first need to consider if there are any reasons *not* to cite literature.

If we set aside situations when there is no reason to cite literature (e.g., because it has no relevance for the paper) or situations when we should avoid citing literature to

prove a point of some kind (such as I am doing in this paper), there is one main reason not to reference literature. Simply put, since we often have a reason not to engage in bad arguments, we have to recognize that some papers are really bad. Problematically, referencing them creates citations, which in turn creates academic credits; creating academic credits is problematic if neither the paper nor the ideas within it deserve any credits. Of course, such considerations can be overridden in cases when bad ideas have already become broadly accepted and you must engage with them to criticize them. (But up until the point when we can distinguish between positive and negative citations, we have a *pro tanto* reason not to engage with bad articles.)

Another reason was already given in the previous section and it relates to the potential to make a relevant contribution to a field of inquiry in which one is not an expert. In such cases, there may be a trade-off between reading literature that will allow contextualization of the argument and going through with the project. Although co-authoring may be an option in some cases, an author should not avoid publishing a paper because the task of reading up on background literature is too overwhelming. If the argument of a given paper holds, it holds irrespective of the authors' expertise.⁴

Thus, although there are situations in which one may have a reason not to reference literature, it is clear that reasons not to reference papers are limited to fairly special circumstances. In most cases, philosophers publish on topics in which they are experts and hence are in a position to reference relevant literature. Doing so can—as noted in the previous section—be helpful for the reader and benefit academia at large. Moreover, it arguably makes a paper easier to publish (even if, granted that my arguments in the previous section hold and are sufficiently complete, it *should* not be a strong factor influencing publication decisions).

Hence, there is a clear asymmetry between what an author ought to do when writing a paper and what a reviewer and editor ought to do when evaluating the same paper. An author has strong *pro tanto* reasons to engage with and reference literature, unless they find themselves in some special circumstances in which they have *pro tanto* reasons to avoid citing bad arguments or in which referencing literature implies that they will not write and publish a relevant contribution to the literature.

Concluding Comments

In this paper, I have argued that a lack of references or engagement with the literature is not a reason for rejecting a paper, even if an author, in most circumstances, has strong *pro tanto* reasons to reference and engage with the relevant literature.

I hope that this paper can contribute to a broader discussion on the ethics of reviewing and editing that goes beyond the debates in research ethics, which are mostly concerned with other disciplines and hence often do not address the peculiarities of philosophy. Of course, my hope is also more practical. That is, I hope that editors and reviewers will consider the arguments in this paper so that we may improve upon the

⁴ One may wonder how one can be in a position to know that something is a relevant contribution to the literature without sufficient expertise in the literature. However, that is generally not a problem, since there are other routes to inquire about such things (e.g., talking with someone with the relevant expertise).

practices of reviewing and editorial decision-making. Of course, the last word is not said about this issue; moreover, a lot more can and should be said about reviewing and editorial practices in general, in the hope of further engagement with these issues.

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