



Australasian Association of Philosophy

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The Officer in charge,
ERA journal ranking exercise,
Australian Research Council

Please find herewith a revised journal ranking for philosophy journals. The Association has made recommendations primarily under FoR codes 2201 & 2203. It has made recommendations to some journals under FoR codes 2202 & 2204. Though it was indicated that you wished to have submissions from HEPs, we have been advised that that you would accept a submission from the Australasian Association of Philosophy, as the discipline body representing academic philosophers in Australasia. We thank you for this. The ranking list differs considerably from a list supplied under the Association last year to the ASSA, in the context of the planned RQF. That earlier listing, some of which appears to have had some influence in the draft of the ERA draft ranking, has been realised to be quite deficient in a number of respects, it having been prepared without sufficiently broad consultation, and in too much haste.

We would like to make several very important general points in this covering note.

1 *Additional journals.* The original list omitted a very large number of journals. We have added several hundred more philosophy journals. (We are fairly sure that there are many more.)

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2 *Journals where a ranking cannot be confidently provided.* A good number of the newly-added journals are largely unknown to us, many (but by no means all) being published in foreign languages and having specialised readerships, and we have had neither the time or the resources to undertake the extensive investigations necessary to rank all these journals. They are all, however, peer reviewed, and most are taken from the highly regarded *Philosophers' Index* listing. Many of these have a C ranking, unless we have evidence of a higher ranking. This is of course very unsatisfactory. The ARC should be concerned, as are we, not to cause needless offence to those connected with good journals by giving them an inappropriately low ranking. (It has been suggested that we should omit the listing of foreign language journals. However, this would be wholly inappropriate, as Australian philosophers sometimes publish in them.)

3 *The need to treat current rankings as subject to revision.* Because of the considerations raised above, we strongly recommend that the ARC treat the rankings of journals as provisional and subject to revision as more evidence comes to light.

4 *General concerns about the ranking exercise.* We share many of the extremely grave misgivings that have been publicly expressed others over the ranking exercise. A number of the considerations of concern to us parallel those that have been highlighted by the British Philosophical Association regarding the ERIH rankings. Some of the most important of these are:

(a) *The rankings are soft, and conclusions drawn from them are unlikely to be reliable.* There is plenty of room for difference of opinion on the rank of a journal between informed people of good will and intelligence (even when there is agreement on a 5% acceptance rate, and extremely eminent people on the editorial boards). We have found much disagreement of this kind amongst our own members. One does not have to insist that such disagreements show bias against particular approaches to philosophy or that the whole matter of evaluation is completely subjective. But rankings are a matter of judgment, and there is plenty of (utterly reasonable) divergence in judgment, even between well-motivated and intelligent judges. (This is to say nothing of the contentions which are from time to time aired that some rankings betray an outright prejudice on the part of those responsible for them.) This is a problem, as there are going to be consequences for researchers if they publish in one (lower ranked) journal, rather than another (higher ranked one).

(b) *There is a major discrepancy between the percentages allocated to the ranking bands and the descriptors for the bands.* For example, there is no rationale for the contention that those journals which are ranked in the band, below the top 20% of journals, but above the half way mark, and so are designated "B", are going to answer to the descriptors for that band of journals. In particular, we find that many of the journals we are forced to put into the B category by consideration of percentages are *not* "outlets for the papers of PhD students and early career researchers", carrying "only a few papers of very high quality". Nor are they "regional journals". The same sorts of consideration apply to the other descriptors. There may be a correspondence between percentages and descriptors in some disciplines, but there is not in philosophy, where very few journals are "regional", and the very best are often relatively specialised rather than generalist.

In addition, it is clear to us that drawing a line between those journals we have ranked as A* and the top journals ranked as A is completely arbitrary – a division forced by the percentages - and that no quality distinction could be reasonably maintained between them. There are many more journals that meet the descriptors for A* than is allowed for by the 5% cut off. The same applies at the A/B cut off.

This consideration matters because there may be very good reasons, concerned with specialism, or with a set of previously published papers in a journal, for a top researcher to send a top-class paper to a journal ranked B, or even possibly C. It is clear enough that an author publishing in B journals will not contribute to the research prowess (and whatever else may depend on that prowess) of her university as much as one publishing in A or A* journals. This is simply wrong, as the paper in the B journal will in such a case be just as good, and stem from research just as good, as a paper in an A* journal.

(c) *Difficulties in comparison of journals across sub-fields of philosophy.* We found this a particular problem, especially as some journals have different degrees of importance relative to particular sub-fields, when they carry articles in more than one sub-field.

In short, rankings are not objective, and so in turn judgments made on the basis of them, such as judgments on the quality of research published in this or that journal, will not be objective either.

(d) *Effects of an accepted ranking.* It is clear that a ranking system, once “official”, will have the effect of directing submissions away from lower ranked journals to higher ranked journals. This will have both unfortunate effects on some journals which provide a useful niche service, and it will probably even distort choices of research topic. (Check which research areas tend to be most covered by a good number of A* journals. Do not research in areas where there are not a good number of A* outlets.) These are highly undesirable outcomes.

In the light of these considerations, we would welcome ongoing fine-tuning and rethinking of the ranking exercise.

We conclude by noting that some members of our Association have put to us the view that the whole journal ranking process is so intrinsically flawed that we should make no submission at all. We share the misgivings that have been expressed, and would be glad to see a rethink of the whole project. However, it would be inappropriate to fail to submit a revision of the ranking, particularly given the inadequacy of the original draft. We have taken very wide soundings in the profession and received 31 submissions with 75 listed contributors who have done a great deal of work in preparing them. While we accept our current rankings are still likely to be imperfect, we take them to be a considerable improvement on the original ERA ranking list. We commend our re-rankings to you, but repeat our plea that even these be accepted as being subject to ongoing revision.

Yours faithfully

IT (Tim Oakley)
Secretary to Council, The Australasian Association of Philosophy