Why Isn’t There More Progress in Philosophy?

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Philosophical Progress

• Does philosophy make progress?
  • Glass half-full: Yes, it makes some progress
  • Glass half-empty: Not as much as we’d like.
Plan

• 1. Central thesis on lack of progress.
• 3. Compatible varieties of progress.
• 4. Explanations of central thesis
• 5. Is more progress possible?
Central Thesis

- There has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.
Definitions

- Big questions:
  - What is the relationship between mind and body?
  - How do we know about the external world?
  - What are the fundamental principles of morality?
Definitions II

• Large collective convergence: high degree of agreement over philosophical community on answers to these questions.

• High degree of agreement: As much or nearly as much as in the natural sciences.

• Convergence to the truth: The agreement involves true beliefs about the answers.
Argument for Central Thesis

• Empirical premise: There has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy.

• Logical premise: If there has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy, there has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.

• Conclusion: There has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.
Support for Empirical Premise

• 2009 PhilPapers Survey (931 philosophers)
  • Physicalism 56%, non-physicalism 28%
  • Empiricism 37%, rationalism 35%
  • Moral realism 56%, moral anti-realism 28%
  • Atheism 73%, theism 15%
  • Platonism 39%, nominalism 38%
  • Deontology 26%, consequentialism 24%, virtue ethics 18%
Comparative Results

• Strictly speaking, we’d also need
  • PhilPapers Survey results from ..., 9, ..., 1009, ..., 1609, 1709, 1809, 1909, asking philosophers (i) what are the big questions and (ii) what are the answers?
  • Corresponding results for PhysPapers, ChemPapers, BioPapers surveys.
  • A measure of convergence
  • Prediction: Less convergence for philosophy.
Collective Knowledge

• Why does collective agreement matter?
• For a start, because without sufficient collective agreement (among experts who have considered the question) we plausibly don’t have collective knowledge.
Weaker Forms of Progress

• Central thesis: There has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.

• This thesis is compatible with many weaker forms of progress.

• We can obtain these by dropping elements from the central theses.
Drop “Large”

- Non-large convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.
- Major convergence on a few questions (logic, god?)
- Minor convergence on other questions.
Drop “Collective”

• Large individual/local convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.
  • Individual convergence
  • Local groups
  • Hasn’t led to community-wide convergence.
Drop “On the Big Questions”

• Large collective to the truth on smaller questions in philosophy

• Conditional probabilities, logic, negative theses, conditional theses, ...

• Subfields split when they make progress: e.g. logic, psychology, formal semantics.

• But often these aren’t answering the big philosophical questions.
Drop “Convergence To the Truth”

- Forms of progress that don’t involve convergence to the truth.
- Increased understanding
- Exploration of possibilities
- Development of new views
- Asking new questions
- Making a difference to the world
Illustration

• E.g. in the philosophy of mind, there has been enormous progress in last century

• convergence on small questions and among subcommunities, much increased understanding

• But not large collective convergence on the big questions, e.g. the mind-body problem.
Why Isn’t There More Convergence?

• What explains the relative lack of convergence in philosophy, compared to science, mathematics, etc?
Relatively Powerless Method?

• Science and mathematics have methods (experiment, proof) that seem to compel agreement.

• Philosophy has a method (argument) that does not.

• What’s the difference?
Denying Premises

- Science and math start from widely agreed premises (observation, axioms) and proceed to strong conclusions. But such premises rarely get us far in philosophy.

- Most arguments for strong conclusions have premises that opponents can deny without too much cost.

- Maybe the denial is antecedently surprising, but it’s usually tenable.
Sophisticated Disagreement

- In effect, philosophical arguments don’t lead to agreement but to sophisticated disagreement
- Refuting bad versions of views, yielding more sophisticated versions.
- Parties recognize the commitments they need to take on to avoid the arguments
- Gradual fragmented elimination of philosophical space, yielding a fractal space as residue.
Clarification

• This is not to say that philosophical arguments are question-begging, or dialectically powerless, or that they cannot produce knowledge.

• But they are not so powerful that they compel widespread agreement.
New Methods

• All sorts of new methods: linguistic philosophy, empirical philosophy, phenomenology, formal philosophy, feminist philosophy, crosscultural philosophy, experimental philosophy

• All have led to many new insights, but not to convergence. Instead to more sophisticated versions of old disagreements.
Disappointment

- The largest disappointment in the practice of philosophy?
- Antecedently one might have hoped that philosophical argument would have the power to produce widespread agreement.
- In practice, we recognize good arguments but they do not lead to agreement.
Further Explanations?

- But why doesn’t philosophical argument lead to agreement?
Anti-Realism

• There’s no truth to be had in the relevant domains.
Verbal Disputes

- Proponents are talking past each other.
Self-Selection

- When there is sufficiently widespread agreement on the answer to a question it ceases to be counted as a philosophical question.
Sociological Factors

• Some people know the truth but sociological factors have prevented others from agreeing.
My View

• My view: None of these explanations provide a full explanation of lack of convergence on the big questions.

• Are there better explanations?
Is More Progress Possible?

- Is more convergence possible? Might we eventually obtain collective knowledge?
- Are the answers even knowable in principle?
Scrutability and Progress

• I’ve argued (*Constructing the World*): all truths are a priori entailed by fundamental empirical truths.

• So if someone can know the fundamental empirical truths and reason ideally, this should get them to all the truths.
Sources of Disagreement

• Sometimes there’s no fact of the matter
• Sometimes we know it, but verbal disputes or sociology get in the way
• Sometimes we’re empirically ignorant.
• Sometimes our reasoning is non-ideal.
Hardest Cases

• I think many of the hardest cases fall into the last category: knowable by ideal reasoning, but not (yet) known by us.

• Question: Are the problems humanly unsolvable, or humanly solvable and just unsolved?
Meta-Humility

• I don’t know the answer to this question, but I think both possibilities are open.

• We don’t have strong reason to exclude either answer.
Glass-Half-Full
Conclusion

• If we don’t know which of these options obtain, I think to do philosophy we can make the working assumption that it is the second: solvable but as yet unsolved.

• We are still learning to do philosophy well.

• We just have to keep doing it and see where it leads.