

# 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.
- 2. Argument for central thesis.
- 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.