

# Extensive Philosophical Agreement and Progress

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Abstract:

I first argue that there is plenty of agreement among philosophers on philosophically substantive claims, which fall into three categories. This agreement suggests that there is important philosophical progress. I then argue that although it's easy to list several potential kinds of philosophical progress, it is much harder to determine whether the potential is actual. Then I attempt to articulate the truth that the deniers of philosophical progress are latching on to. Finally, I comment on the significance of the agreement and (potential) progress.

## 1. Philosophical Agreement

Philosophers almost unanimously agree that there is precious little agreement amongst philosophers on philosophical matters. Against this, I think there are a great many substantive philosophical claims that we almost unanimously agree on, which fall into three groups: *Reasons* ones, *Basic* ones, and *Conditional* ones.

Here is a list of Reasons claims that receive plenty of agreement amongst philosophers with the appropriate expertise:

1. Epistemicism faces a serious objection regarding how sharp meanings are fixed.
2. There are good reasons to think that truths about causation are closely connected to certain counterfactual truths and/or truths about laws of nature.

3. The thesis that our belief contents are fixed by the internal goings-on of our bodies faces a serious challenge from Putnam's elm-beech story, in which the two terms counterfactually switch meanings while the protagonist is the same from the skin in.
4. Solving the problems of material composition will probably require solutions to various puzzles about vagueness, such as the forced-march sorites paradox.
5. Kripke's puzzle about belief provides a strong challenge to the basic Fregean argument that the interchange of coreferential proper names in belief contexts doesn't always preserve truth-value.
6. Most initially intuitive solutions to the alethic paradoxes are inadequate, as they stand, because they are unable, as they stand, to successfully deal with certain clever "revenge" sentences.
7. The plausible idea that the traditionally conceived God would have to make the best universe within his power to make is challenged by the idea that there are good non-religious grounds for thinking there is no such universe.
8. When people who are mathematically not sophisticated make the base rate fallacy in arguing for a certain conclusion, although their conclusion may not be supported by their evidence, they are in an important epistemic sense blameless in drawing that conclusion.
9. If there are good non-theistic, purely naturalistic reasons for thinking that we are truly awful at judging when an instance of suffering is directly or indirectly paired with an outweighing good, then there is a good chance the theist has a reasonable response to the problem of gratuitous evil.
10. The presentist idea that what really exists doesn't include past or future entities faces a serious challenge from the General Theory of Relativity.

A group of a couple dozen philosophers whose areas of expertise cover a large number of subfields of philosophy could come up with *thousands* of similar claims. I am not saying that every area of philosophy can generate a long list of Reasons claims that garner expert agreement rates of over 90%, say, but I would guess that almost all could. I call them 'Reasons claims' because they are claims about reasons for or against key philosophical positions.

Those ten claims are, I claim, both *substantive* and *very widely agreed upon by philosophers with the relevant expertise* (e.g., an Area of Specialization in the relevant field).

Regarding the second point, about agreement, there are some obvious points to make. First, just because there is agreement doesn't mean the agreed-upon claims are true; I'm not saying that all or even any of (1)-(10) is true. Second, there is of course no *universal* agreement about any of the ten claims, even restricting the pool of philosophers to those with the relevant expertise. But that is true for just about any field of study that has at least a thousand thoroughly trained practitioners. Philosophy is different from other fields—probably *all* other fields—in that no matter how careful a claim is formulated, a relevantly competent and informed philosopher can be found who won't accept it, even after a great deal of expert reflection on the matter. At the limit, a philosopher might think that in order to “accept” a claim one has to hold that it's true, but truth is an inconsistent and hence empty concept (as the alethic paradoxes show, or so she thinks); as a result, she refuses to accept literally any claim.

Regarding the first point, about the *substance* of the claims, I have four comments. First, think about how long and hard one must work before one realizes the truth of (1)-(10): it can take months of exposure to many readings and lectures before a student can even *grasp* virtually any of (1)-(10). They are hardly trivial claims. Second, it took researchers *many years* to establish them. Third, these are not merely claims about the “current state of play”, at least if that phrase is supposed to indicate a consensus that lasts for only a few years. For instance, it's been known *for centuries* that substance dualism faces a difficult problem of interaction (that's an eleventh Reasons claim). Fourth, these claims guide our research in enormous ways, again suggesting their importance. For these reasons, there is good reason to include them as “substantive”.

Of course, we want much more from philosophy than the discovery of those claims regarding reasons for or against various philosophical claims. For instance, we want to know not just the primary hurdles epistemicism faces: we want to know whether it is true (I'll return to this point below). But that doesn't mean that (1)-(10) aren't substantive.

The second body of substantive philosophical claims that virtually all philosophers agree on is made up of the *Basic* ones. The reason why philosophers usually deny their existence, if only by implication from

their remarks on the pervasiveness of philosophical disagreement, is that the claims are so obvious to us that they have become virtually invisible. Here are some examples from epistemology:

11. Beliefs can be positive, negative, trivial, controversial, silly, serious, short-term, long-term, and concern just about any topic.
12. Some beliefs are true while others are false.
13. Evidence can be positive or negative. Positive evidence for a belief B is evidence that suggests B is true; negative evidence regarding B is evidence that suggests B is false.
14. One's overall evidence is the combination of all one's evidence regarding that belief. Overall evidence can be weak or strong (or somewhere in between).
15. Two people could have the same belief but one person's belief is irrational while the other's is rational, due to the fact that the first person's belief is based on weak overall evidence and the second person's is based on strong overall evidence.
16. A belief can be reasonable but false provided the person with the belief bases it on excellent overall evidence.
17. A belief can be unreasonable but true provided the person with the true belief has very poor evidence that she is basing her belief on.
18. There are at least three important cognitive attitudes one can take to a claim: believe it, disbelieve it, or suspend judgment on it. Moreover, one can endorse a claim to different degrees, as when one person is extremely confident it's true while another person agrees it's true but isn't as confident as the first person that it's true.
19. In some cases suspension of judgment is temporary; other times it is permanent.
20. Just because you suspend judgment on some claim (so you don't believe it or disbelieve it) doesn't mean that you can't act on it.
21. Knowledge requires truth: you can't know something unless it's true.
22. Knowledge requires good evidence, of some kind or other: you can't know something unless your belief is based on good overall evidence. However, we have to be open-minded about the radically different forms evidence comes in.

23. Knowledge is objective in this sense: just because someone *thinks* she has knowledge doesn't always mean that she *really does* have knowledge.

24. One can have a true belief without it amounting to knowledge.

25. One can have a belief based on excellent overall evidence that doesn't amount to knowledge.

Not every philosopher, or even epistemologist, will agree with each of (11)-(25), but I suspect that over 90% will (some may well receive 100%). The list is not anywhere in the vicinity of being exhaustive; with effort any competent epistemologist could make it one hundred claims long. As with the lists of Reasons claims, I am not saying that every area of philosophy can generate long lists of agreed-upon Basic claims, but I think it can be done with many if not most.

Each of (11)-(25) is a substantive claim about notions central to epistemology: belief, true belief, evidence, knowledge, etc. Philosophers who actually listen to their youngest students, before teaching or indoctrinating them, will realize that few of the fifteen claims are obvious to non-philosophers. For instance, I recently read an article on the difficulties in using 'belief' in translating the Qur'an or of characterizing Islamic religious attitudes, and the author was utterly confused about how 'belief' functions in English, despite his being a native speaker of English. The basics of epistemology are basics only to philosophers. And even though the fifteen claims are considered obviously true to almost all philosophers, this is no mark against the idea that they are substantive. It's also obvious that the earth is round and that other things being equal 10 kg objects fall at the same rate as 5 kg ones, but those are still substantive claims of physics. Substantive ≠ controversial.

The third and final category of agreed-upon claims are perhaps more familiar if harder to formulate: the *Conditional* ones. Example 1: a philosopher might not agree with 'There is a priori knowledge', because she is an anti-realist about knowledge, but she will agree with 'If anti-realism about knowledge is false, then there is a priori knowledge'. Example 2: a philosopher might not agree with 'Content externalism is true for belief contents', because she thinks there is no such thing as sharable belief content, but she will agree with 'If there is sharable belief content, then content externalism is true for such content'. Example 3: a philosopher might not agree with virtue ethics, because she thinks consequentialism is superior, but she will agree with 'If consequentialism is false, then virtue ethics is true', as she thinks that deontological theories are all false. Example 4: I may not agree with 'Propositions contain concepts

as parts', because I'm a nominalist, but I will agree with 'If propositions exist, then they contain concepts as parts'. Example 5: although an epistemologist doesn't agree that external world skepticism is false, she agrees that if epistemic externalism is true, then external world skepticism is false. Example 6: although I don't think presentism is true, I do think that if the General Theory of Relativity is false, then presentism is true.

Notice that in order to win significant agreement amongst philosophers, one has to pack significant material in the antecedents, but as we can see from those six examples one doesn't have to pack so much in that the conditional becomes logically, conceptually, or trivially true. So the conditionals are substantive.

The three sets of agreed-upon claims show that it is *not* inevitable that a survey of philosophers about their substantive philosophical beliefs will result in profound disagreement. My guess is that since we spend so much time, in both teaching and research, on the *most* controversial questions and answers, we lose sight of the vast collection of claims almost all of us agree on and take for granted.

A critic of the preceding may argue that there is a set of central philosophical questions whose answers never earn significant agreement that lasts more than a century, say, and that is precisely why philosophical progress is so anemic.

In response, I agree that there are many central philosophical problems that have been unsolved for centuries (more on this point in the next section). The results of the 2009 PhilPapers survey regarding thirty central philosophical issues supports that thesis (Bourget and Chalmers 2009, 2010). But three things are worth keeping in mind when thinking about centuries-old philosophical controversy.

First, the same is true for virtually any field that has been around for centuries, even the most successful ones. For instance, a team of competent physicists would not have too much trouble coming up with thirty questions in physics that got comparable rates of disagreement—despite the fact that that field is probably the most successful empirical one ever. Second, some of the open questions in physics—the ones for which there is little agreement—have been around for centuries, just like in philosophy. Hence, even though the problem of universals and the sorites paradox, for instance, have been around for millennia and are still unsolved (at least at the community level; there may be a lone genius who *knows*

the solution, and not merely has a true belief in it), we are in the same boat as physicists—a pretty impressive boat. Third, it is not at all obvious that most of the questions that we find most important were addressed at all many centuries ago, appearances to the contrary. For instance, the metaphysical mind-body problem was not nearly as well recognized before Descartes' time as it is now. *The reason the PhilPapers survey showed so much disagreement is entirely a result of the choice of the survey questions.*

It helps to have an illustration to think about the physics/philosophy comparison. Consider how a team of physicists and a team of philosophers could respond to the questions 'What is gravity?' and 'What is knowledge?' It goes without saying that the physicists would have little trouble agreeing on what to say in response—and they would have plenty to say. But the same is true, or *should* be true, of the philosophers. We could start out by noting that there are different kinds of knowledge: for instance, knowing *that* water expands when turning into ice, knowing *how* to knit, knowing *when* to shut up in a conversation, knowing *who* Tony Blair is, etc. We could go on to note that there are true beliefs and false beliefs; that true belief is not the same thing as knowledge; that true belief is not the same thing as reasonable belief; etc. In other words, we could start out with the Basic claims. Then, after a few weeks of that task (it takes time for a student to fully digest a few dozen Basics claims), we could move on to the Conditional and Reasons claims. There would be questions we cannot say we have reached agreement on, such as 'Is externalism true for epistemic justification?' But the same is true for the physicists. They will have to admit that they have yet to reach agreement on 'Why do masses attract at all?' and 'Why don't masses attract at different rates over time?'

For those reasons, I suspect that when it comes to professional agreement and disagreement, there is a lot less difference between philosophy and physics (or other successful empirical sciences) than is commonly supposed.

## 2. Philosophical Progress?

In the previous section I purposely chose ten Reasons claims that are relatively *recent*. As such, they collectively hint that there is *substantive progress in philosophy*: we are generating new important results all the time.

Other potential kinds of progress are more obvious and don't rely on the above arguments: new distinctions are discovered that are philosophically key, new problems are discovered, new theories are formulated, new arguments are constructed, new thought experiments are conceived, new fields are generated, etc. A particularly important kind of progress is the discovery and partial resolution of subtle ambiguity. For instance, I don't suppose anyone who works on free will is happy to give a straightforward answer to 'Do we have free will?' Instead, she will say something with a form such as 'Well, if you mean A, then 'no'; if you mean B, then 'yes'; if you mean C, I'm not sure I understand you; if you mean D, then I understand you but I have no firm opinion on the matter'. She knows that there are crucially different ways of precisifying 'free will', different ones meriting different answers to 'Do we have free will?' This is progress of a sort: discovering ambiguity in philosophically key terms such as 'free will', 'determination', 'consciousness', 'physical', 'justice', 'art', 'meaning', 'reasonable', 'know', 'believe', 'intention', etc.

However, it is harder to argue that these *potential* cases of progress are *actual* cases of progress than it is to argue for the existence of extensive philosophical agreement. There are at least three reasons for the difficulty.

First, one would have to argue that the recent Reasons claims are true, or at least closer to the truth than some prior alternative. This would involve first-order philosophizing, and despite the current excellent consensus on those Reasons claims, the task is difficult.

Second, one would have to argue that the alleged discoveries of new problems, new theories, new ambiguities, and the rest *lead us in the right direction*, which, presumably, would be, in part, towards accepting additional true Basic, Reasons, and/or Conditional claims. A critic might agree that we acquire new philosophical understanding, perhaps even at a great rate. But she might go on to suggest that it's often the case that that new understanding leads us astray. Perhaps it directs us down some blind alleys, towards new theories that are false and new concepts that are extensionally empty. For instance, suppose that substance dualism is true and the mental is not fixed by the physical (e.g., all physical-mental supervenience theses, even global ones, are false). By coming up with the notion of supervenience we have found a nice way to precisify theses relevant to the alternative theory of physicalism. This is not to say that supervenience is sufficient for stating physicalism; rather, the idea is that it *helps* us formulate and better understand physicalism. But armed with this nice way to better



understand physicalism, we grow content with physicalism—a false theory (in this thought experiment). Oddly enough, we stick in the blind alley *because* we have this improved understanding.

Third, there is the real danger that certain increases in understanding can be lost through neglect or other factors. For instance, perhaps the medieval philosophers reached knowledge of the solution to the liar paradox or some other key issue. Even so, this community knowledge, if it existed at all, has been lost (at the level of the philosophical community). For a recent example, consider that during 1975-1995 a great many excellent philosophers worked on the problem of how beliefs get their propositional contents (think of Fodor, Millikan, and Dretske as leaders here). The number of philosophers working on that problem has decreased significantly since then, as most philosophers of mind have been occupied with problems involving consciousness or perception instead. There is a real chance that much of what we learned during that twenty-year period about the determination of content will be lost. One can easily imagine that the neglect of the topic will continue for decades (because our attention is elsewhere), and when it is finally revived few philosophers will go through the difficulty of conducting a thorough study of the relevant articles from that period. After all, how many articles do people today carefully read from the 1930s?

Setting aside the issue of the difficulty of establishing progress in philosophy, I suspect that the one key failure in philosophy compared to the successful hard sciences is this: it rarely happens that cutting edge research questions are answered and not forgotten. In 2015 we rarely have knowledge of the correct answers to the questions that gripped the philosophers of 1915; in 1915 we rarely had knowledge of the correct answers to the questions that gripped the philosophers of 1815; etc. (The 100-year jumps should not be taken precisely.) I suspect that the cold hard truth that animates the philosophers who moan about the lack of progress in philosophy—I've occasionally been a moaner myself—is that very truth. In astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology the analogue of the 2015/1915/1815/etc. point is clearly false. Thus, one should not say that there is *no sense* in which philosophy fails to progress in a significant way unlike the sciences.

The closest philosophical analogue to answering cutting edge questions, that happens with any significant frequency anyway, would probably be the times when a cutting edge research question is seen to be ambiguous in a philosophically important way or having a false or badly warranted presupposition. For instance, the point I made above about answers to 'Do we have free will?' is very

probably correct: there are multiple philosophically key notions there, so the question has no straightforward answer. That's progress of a sort.

If my experience is any guide, then (a) in our research we *aim* at answering the cutting edge questions; (b) in our publications we mostly *defend* and *discuss* Conditional and Reasons claims; and (c) when we *experience*, on an individual level, what we take to be philosophical progress, what is happening is (i) we are coming to accept a great many Basic, Reasons, and Conditional claims; and (ii) we implicitly think that learning those claims constitutes a huge increase in understanding the issues in question. I have no idea how to argue for either (a) or (c), but I think any careful reading of contemporary journal literature will confirm (b). I know that in my own case, (a) is true.

With regard to (c), perhaps it's appropriate for some autobiography, as it may trigger confirming experiences in readers. In 2002 I knew very little epistemology, as I had earned my PhD in 1998 and had worked exclusively in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language. But in 2002 I came up with a decent idea that belonged to epistemology. I spent the next year or so reading, writing, and thinking about various topics in epistemology. After that year I understood some basic epistemological notions—knowledge, understanding, evidence, justification—*much* better than I did before, and it led to two books (2005, 2014).

It isn't hard to multiply examples. I recall an episode in the early 1990s, when I had started graduate school, in which I got myself deeply confused about whether certain truths were necessarily necessary, and whether certain possibilities were necessarily possible. After taking a course in modal logic I understood things much better, as I now had the tools to pose questions and answers that were previously cognitively closed to me. In 2004 I started reading Williamson's *Vagueness*, and as a result greatly increased my understanding of the sorites paradox. I haven't the foggiest idea how to solve it, but I understand what the problem is much better than I did before. A final example: when as a graduate student I came to understand the concept of supervenience upon being introduced to Jaegwon Kim's work, I greatly increased my understanding of certain vague ideas, such as that expressed by 'the mental is fixed or determined by the physical'.

### 3. Consequences of Agreement

I think this agreement and potential progress in philosophy matters for our self-conception, pedagogy, and our relations with non-philosophers. I will offer only the briefest remarks.

When it comes to pedagogy: when undergraduates take our classes, I think it's a good idea to generate the lists of Basic results in class. Graduate classes can be partly devoted to compiling lists of Reasons and Conditional results. I have done the former with success. These lists would not only be useful during the semester but make students leave the class with the sense that philosophy isn't wholly about questions we never answer. Hence, it would be good advertising (as will the kinds of philosophical accomplishments listed below). Contrast philosophy with a hard science such as physics: one of the biggest pedagogical differences is that in undergraduate physics but not philosophy classes a great deal of time is spent going over the Basic results.

The lists might be useful for communicating and teaming up with non-philosophers. Contrary to our self-conception, we *do* generate results in our field, a great many results, which might be helpful in promoting our profession with non-philosophers such as other academics and people with real power in the world. In order to pull this off, I suspect we would have to have a large public recognition of this agreement; otherwise it would not be as convincing to outsiders.

For me anyway, the immediate upshot of the above reflections is a huge shift in my conception of philosophy. Like many philosophers, I have long thought that philosophy has some genuine accomplishments. For instance, we have been successful at pointing out that there are certain *notions* that are of fundamental importance to our lives, how we interact with each other, how we interact with the world, and the world itself: justice, freedom, consciousness, perception, reason, beauty, truth, evidence, time, knowledge, intentionality, suffering, change, moral goodness, etc. We are also superb at generating fascinating *questions*, ones that are central to understanding the notions just mentioned. We are excellent at discovering certain *problems* or even paradoxes involving those notions. We are probably too good at crafting potential *answers* to the questions. We are creative and profligate at making a great many highly sophisticated *arguments* for and against those answers. Finally, over the millennia we have been good at generating new *fields of investigation*, such as special sciences. That's an impressive list: notions, questions, problems, answers, arguments, and fields. What I'm claiming is that we are also good at generating actual *results*, claims that can be handed down from generation to generation as things almost all of us accept.

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