Understanding Philosophy
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Abstract
What is the epistemic aim of philosophy? The standard view is that philosophy aims to provide true answers to philosophical questions. But if our aim is to settle controversy by answering philosophical questions, our discipline is an embarrassing failure. Moreover, taking philosophy to aim at true answers to such questions leads to a variety of puzzles: How do we account for philosophical expertise? How is philosophical progress possible? Why do job search committees not care about the truth or falsity of a candidate’s philosophical views? We argue that philosophy does not aim at discovering true answers to philosophical questions. Instead, we argue that its primary intellectual aim is understanding, and that many familiar aspects of philosophy become intelligible once we accept this hypothesis.

1. Puzzles about Philosophy
Philosophers are an unreliable bunch. If you ask one metaphysician whether humans have free will, he will give you a number of convincing arguments for why free will is real and why his opponents are mistaken. If you ask another metaphysician the same question, she will explain in great detail why free will is an illusion. If you ask a third, they’ll tell you that you’re not asking the right question in the first place. If you ask the ethicists whether moral rightness depends on the outcome of an action, some will say this view is obviously correct; some will say this view is not only false but morally reprehensible; and others will claim there’s no such thing as moral rightness. And it’s not surprising that the aestheticians disagree equally radically about whether artistic merit is objective, subjective, or something else.

Philosophy is not a reliable method of discovering true answers to philosophical questions.¹ A reliable method would, at the very least, lead to truth more likely than not. In philosophy, however, it is common for expert opinion to be distributed roughly evenly around many incompatible options.² As Fumerton says, “If you get ten philosophers in a room discussing any of the fundamental issues in philosophy, you are likely to get ten different and incompatible positions” (2010: 107). We can therefore be confident that philosophy is not a

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¹ For arguments against the reliability of philosophy, see Goldberg (2009), Brennan (2010), and Fumerton (2010).
² See Bourget and Chalmers (2013) for a survey of what philosophers believe. In some cases, philosophical opinion tends to converge more strongly than others. Only 4.8% of philosophers accept external world skepticism; but philosophical opinions about epistemic justification, sources of knowledge, and the semantics of knowledge claims are roughly evenly distributed.
reliable way to arrive at philosophical truths, and that philosophers are not reliable sources of knowledge about which philosophical answers are the right ones.³

This is puzzling. From a sociological point of view, philosophy seems organized like any other academic discipline: we write books, publish articles in peer-reviewed journals, draw conclusions based on evidence, and seek to answer important questions.⁴ Unlike many other disciplines, however, philosophy circles back to the same questions, even over millennia. (This may be true of some other disciplines as well, but we will restrict our focus to philosophy.) This seems scandalous. If our aim is to settle controversy by answering philosophical questions, our discipline is an embarrassing failure.

This is not the only puzzling thing about our discipline. As Lewis (1999) observed, academic appointments in philosophy often ignore “the advantage of being right”. When deciding whom to appoint, a job search committee will typically behave as if the truth or falsity of a candidate’s philosophical views is not a legitimate consideration. Lewis writes,

No speaker will ever argue that a candidate should rank high because he has the advantage of being right on many important questions, or low because he is sunk in all manner of error. . . Most likely, there will be no mention of whether the candidate’s doctrines are true or false. . . Maybe someone will be accused of being influenced by the fact that he agrees or disagrees with the candidate’s views, and all present will presuppose that this ought not to happen. (Lewis 1999: 190)

This habit of setting truth aside is especially puzzling when we remind ourselves that having accurate beliefs, and not being in error, are prima facie essential qualifications for a job that contributes to advancing knowledge. And yet these considerations are weightless.⁵ We also don’t seem to care whether our students provide true answers to philosophical questions. After all, we uphold the idea that two classmates can provide utterly opposed answers and yet they may receive equally high marks for their work.

As we will show, there are numerous other aspects of philosophical practice—perennial disagreement, the recognition of expertise in the face of peer disagreement, and more—that appear puzzling if the aim of philosophy is to discover truth or generate collective knowledge.

³ You might argue that some philosophers are reliable. We don’t dispute this. Our claim is about philosophy as a whole. (And even if some philosophers are reliable, there is the further issue of whether we’re in a position to reliably identify them.)
⁴ Stoljar (2017: 37) makes a similar comparison.
⁵ Of course there are things we do expect them to be right about, such as facts about the history of philosophy, who held which view, and the details of various philosophical views. (We would not want to hire someone who asked, “Immanuel… who?”) But our focus is on their answers to the big—or even medium-sized—philosophical questions.
In this paper, our goal is to provide a unified alternative account of this practice. We demonstrate that new light can be cast on all these issues by first answering a more fundamental metaphilosophical question, namely: what is the aim of philosophy as an intellectual activity? The answer, we believe, is: understanding.

In recent years, there has been a surge of philosophical interest in the nature, value, and varieties of understanding. A dominant view in epistemology is as follows: understanding and knowledge are different cognitive achievements; unlike knowledge, understanding is compatible with falsehood (at least to some extent); and understanding should replace knowledge as the primary focus of epistemological inquiry (e.g., Zagzebski 2001; Kvanvig 2003; Elgin 2006; Pritchard 2010). Outside of epistemology, scholars have argued that understanding is the aim of science (de Regt 2017; Elgin 2017); that morally worthy actions require not moral knowledge but moral understanding (Hills 2009); that competent aesthetic judgment requires understanding rather than mere knowledge (Hills 2017); and that inquiry ought to end at understanding instead of knowing (Pritchard 2010). Philosophers have also examined the nature and value of religious (Ellis 2017), linguistic (Longworth 2008), historical (Little 2020), mathematical (Lipton 2011), and practical (Bengson 2017) understanding.

And yet few philosophers have defended the idea that understanding is the aim of philosophy itself. This omission is striking in the context of recent philosophical work on understanding. While scholars have written about a wide variety of types of understanding, and while it has been increasingly popular to claim that understanding is a distinctively valuable goal of inquiry, it is still unpopular to claim that understanding is the primary intellectual aim of philosophical inquiry. We hope to remedy this gap.

The existence of such a gap is even more remarkable when we consider the fact that philosophers have been suggesting this idea for decades, though few have argued for it:

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. (Sellars 1963: 1)

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6 See Hannon (2021) for an overview.
7 Exceptions include Hacker (2009), Graham (2017), and Elgin (2017). However, Hacker is focused primarily on philosophy as conceptual analysis, Elgin seems concerned primarily with science rather than philosophy, and Graham focuses on the differences between the two. In an unpublished paper, Aaron Keren appeals to understanding in order to explain why disagreement in philosophy is compatible with philosophical progress. In another unpublished paper, Kian Mintz-Woo explains why philosophers can have a ‘weak’ form of moral expertise on the grounds that they understand the implications of various ethical theories and principles. We are sympathetic with these claims, but our argument has much broader scope. Unlike Keren, we consider a wider variety of explananda than the issue of philosophical progress; and unlike Mintz-Woo, our claims are about philosophy as a whole, not just moral philosophy. In a recent paper, Dellsén et al. (2021) also consider (but do not endorse) the idea that philosophy aims at understanding.
The original motivation for studying or entering philosophy . . . is puzzlement, curiosity, a desire to understand . . . (Nozick 1981: 13)

Philosophers aim at a kind of understanding, not, more narrowly, at a kind of knowledge. (Brandom 2001: 76)

Other philosophers make similar claims without using the language of ‘understanding’. For example, Wittgenstein believed that philosophical problems were resolved when one “finds their way around”. Lewis said our task in philosophy is to seek “equilibrium” in our opinions.

Our aim is to develop these ideas in a more systematic way, drawing on recent work in the philosophy of understanding. We will develop our account of the aim of philosophy with an eye toward resolving numerous philosophical puzzles; moreover, we will argue against an increasingly prevalent form of skepticism about philosophy that threatens its value. In recent years, it has been argued that disagreement in philosophy is incompatible with progress; that philosophy is an unreliable method of inquiry; and that we should be skeptics about the conclusions of philosophy. We hope to show that this form of skepticism can be largely resisted once we better understand the epistemic ambitions of philosophy.

2. Features of Understanding

Let’s start with a few clarifications. First, we will sometimes speak of “the aim of philosophy,” but what we mean is the primary epistemic aim of philosophy. Philosophers may engage in philosophy for many reasons (e.g., to pay the rent, to change the world, and so forth), but we are interested solely in the intellectual ambitions of philosophers qua philosophers. Second, we do not claim that philosophical understanding is the sole legitimate epistemic goal of philosophy. We are happy to grant that philosophers may have a variety of cognitive goals (e.g., to deepen their understanding, to solve a puzzle, to expand their range of intellectual options, and, at least in some cases, to generate knowledge); thus, our view is compatible with pluralism about the epistemic aim of philosophy. Nevertheless, we will argue that the primary intellectual aim of philosophy is understanding. (More carefully, we claim that if philosophy has a primary epistemic goal, the goal is understanding.) Third, we do not claim that increased understanding is a necessary condition for philosophical progress; but we do believe it is a sufficient condition. Fourth, our claim is about philosophy as it is recognized today. It is well known that the distinction between philosophy and the sciences is a recent vintage. Before the 19th century, natural philosophy encompassed disciplines such as physics, linguistics, and biology. While the

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aim of such disciplines may also be understanding (we are neutral on that issue), our account is about philosophy in its contemporary form.  

With these clarifications in place, we now ask: what is understanding?

While there is no universally accepted definition or conceptual analysis of understanding, recent work in epistemology and the philosophy of science points to several common features. As Le Bihan (2017: 123) observes, understanding is commonly taken to: involve something like grasping connections; be a cognitive achievement due to ability; come in degrees; manifest itself through some abilities or know-how (i.e., to infer, generalize, or answer “what if things had been different” questions); and be not easily transmittable by testimony alone.

Understanding is also closely tied to explanation. In his Posterior Analytics, Aristotle discusses the close connection between explanation and understanding, and this conceptual link is widely acknowledged:  

Understanding, as Salmon puts it, results from “our ability to fashion explanations.” That is almost tautological. (Kim 1996: 61)

While the link between explanation and understanding can be filled out in different ways, Hills maintains that one who understands why \( p \) (and \( q \) is why \( p \)) can successfully: (i) follow an explanation of why \( p \) given by someone else; (ii) explain why \( p \) in their own words; (iii) draw the conclusion that \( p \) (or that probably \( p \)) from the information that \( q \); (iv) draw the conclusion that \( p' \) (or that probably \( p' \)) from the information that \( q' \) (where \( p' \) and \( q' \) are similar to but not identical to \( p \) and \( q \)); (v) given the information that \( p \), give the right explanation, \( q \); (vi) given the information that \( p' \), give the right explanation, \( q' \) (Hills 2016: 663).

It is also commonly argued that understanding requires greater cognitive ability than the corresponding knowledge. As Pritchard (2010) and Hills (2016) show, there are cases in which an agent has knowledge without the corresponding understanding; for example, a young child may come to know via testimony why his house burned down without understanding why, since the child has no conception of how (say) faulty wiring might cause a fire (Pritchard 2010: 81). Thus, it seems that understanding requires a level of intellectual sophistication that is not necessarily demanded by knowledge.

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9 Thus, we set aside epistemic defenses of philosophy that appeal to the established truths in fields like economics, political science, physics, biology, and other fields to which philosophy gave birth. We doubt that philosophy as we understand it should get credit for the convergence in such fields (see Brennan 2010 and Chalmers 2015 for a discussion).
The previous point is not about the reductive relationship between understanding and knowing, which is subject to lively debate.\(^\text{10}\) While there seem to be cases in which an agent has knowledge without the corresponding understanding (see above), it may nevertheless be true that the cognitive state of understanding can be accounted for in terms of knowledge. For example, understanding may consist of systematic knowledge of dependency relations (see Greco 2014; Grimm 2014). But this idea is largely irrelevant for our purposes. The point we wish to emphasize is about the difference in focus when we think about understanding in comparison to knowledge. Even if understanding were ultimately reducible to a kind of knowledge, a distinction between ‘knowing’ and ‘understanding’ would still be worth drawing because the latter would pick out a special kind of knowledge that is a distinctive cognitive achievement. We are interested in two different cognitive phenomena, even if this difference can be recounted in the language of knowing.

Developing this point, we can draw out two additional features of understanding from the recent literature. The first is that understanding, unlike knowledge, is not primarily concerned with belief in individual propositions. While epistemologists have traditionally focused on sentences of the form ‘S know that \(p\)’, the epistemology of understanding has instead focused on what Boyd calls “a mental representation of a relational structure” (2020: 73).\(^\text{11}\) As Kvanvig says,

When we think about the nature of understanding, what is foremost in our minds are the ways in which pieces of information are connected with each other. To understand is to grasp the variety of such connections. (2009: 96)

In other words, understanding is not isolated or episodic: it is directed toward bodies of information in a way that knowledge need not be.

Second, it is widely accepted that understanding requires the ability to grasp connections. As Elgin says, “understanding the Athenian victory involves more than knowing the various truths that belong to a suitable tethered comprehensive, coherent account of the matter. The understander must also grasp how various truths are related to each other and to other elements of the account” (2017: 46). Similarly, Grimm maintains

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\(^{10}\) The view that understanding is just a type of knowledge has been defended by Lipton (2009), Khalifa (2011), Grimm (2006), Greco (2014), Kelp (2015), and Sliwa (2015), among others. However, many philosophers have opposed the reduction of understanding to knowledge, such as Zagzebski (2001), Kvanvig (2003), Elgin (2017), Pritchard (2009), Hills (2016), de Regt (2017), Lawler (2016), and Dellsén (2017).

\(^{11}\) Hills (2016) argues that understanding is ultimately concerned with relationships between propositions, whereas Grimm (2014) argues that grasping is a non-propositional way of knowing. We will leave open whether a relational structure can be expressed in terms of propositions.
that understanding involves grasping a “structure” (2016: 12), while Hills says that understanding why \( p \) requires a grasp of the reason why \( p \) (2016: 663).\(^\text{12}\)

Precisely what “grasping” consists in is a matter of debate. Elgin says, “to grasp a proposition or an account is at least in part to know-how to wield it to further one’s epistemic ends” (2017: 33). Grimm (2006; 2014) defends the view that to have understanding is to have a set of abilities or know-how needed to answer “what if things were different” questions. Khalifa (2013) maintains that grasping involves the ability to reliably evaluate explanations. According to Hills (2016), grasping a relationship between two propositions requires “cognitive control,” which is a set of abilities or know-how. The idea here is that grasping a proposition is a matter of being able to use the information in some way, to have it under your control, and to be able to manipulate it.\(^\text{13}\)

Clearly there is disagreement about the precise nature of understanding, which we won’t resolve here. Instead, we draw from the aforementioned discussions the following symptoms of understanding. Understanding is \textit{holistic} in the sense that it concerns bodies of information; its analysis does not start with individual propositions. It is \textit{pluralistic} in the sense that for a given body of information, there can be multiple routes to understanding it. Moreover, these multiple routes may not be compatible with one another, at least in an obvious way. Understanding is also \textit{non-straightforwardly-factive}, either by being (straightforwardly) non-factive, or alternatively: its relationship with the facts is more complex than that of knowing \( p \), where knowing \( p \) entails the truth of \( p \). Either way, the cognitive state of understanding is compatible with the falsehood of at least some of one’s beliefs that contribute to that cognitive state. (We provide a detailed discussion of the connection between understanding and truth in §4.3.) It is closely related to \textit{explanation} in the sense that understanding some body of information can be realized through explaining at least parts of that body. It requires \textit{ability}, either in the sense of having the ability to provide an explanation, or an ability to manipulate and control the information that one understands. It is \textit{non-testimonial} in the sense that testimony alone is insufficient for the transmission of understanding.

Most theorists agree that understanding has these features, although they may dispute the details about how these features are to be explicated and developed into a fully-fledged account of understanding. What’s important for our project is the shift in focus that analyzing the aim of philosophy in terms of understanding brings. If we can demonstrate that philosophical practice exhibits these symptoms, this provides evidence that

\(^{12}\) For additional defenses of the idea that grasping connections is required for understanding, see Kvanvig (2003); Riggs (2003); de Regt and Dieks (2005); Greco (2014); Kelp (2015); Grimm (2006); Khalifa (2013); Hills (2016); Elgin (2017); and Strevens (2017).

\(^{13}\) Zagzebski (2001), Kvanvig (2003), and de Regt and Dieks (2005) also connect understanding to abilities.
such practice aims at understanding, however ‘understanding’ is to be further explicated. With these general reflections on the nature of understanding in place, we now turn to the epistemic aim of philosophy.

3. The Epistemic Aim of Philosophy

How can we tell what is the aim of philosophy as an intellectual activity? Wittgenstein was fond of saying that one must look and see how an activity is actually done (1953: §66). So, what metaphilosophical lessons do we learn when we look at the practice of philosophy and the behavior of its practitioners?

According to Chalmers (2015), two types of considerations support the view that the primary goal of philosophy is the attainment of truth. First, we can look at the primary motivation of philosophers, which, Chalmers claims, is to obtain true answers to important philosophical questions. As he writes, “I suspect that for the majority of philosophers, the primary motivation in doing philosophy is to figure out the truth about the relevant subject areas” (2015: 14). Second, he looks at what the practice of philosophy consists of. What are the central features of this practice? Chalmers says, “most philosophy, or at least most analytic philosophy, consists in putting forward theses as true and arguing for their truth” (ibid). On these grounds, Chalmers draws two conclusions: first, the primary aim of philosophy is the attainment of truth; second, philosophy has not made much progress towards this goal. If Chalmers is right, this is obviously bad news for philosophy.

This type of skepticism about philosophy is increasingly popular. For example, Brennan argues that truth-seekers do “not have good grounds for pursuing philosophy” (2010: 1). Like Chalmers, Brennan characterizes the epistemic aim of philosophy in terms of discovering true answers to philosophical questions:

The goal of philosophy is to uncover certain truths. Radical dissensus shows that philosophical methods are imprecise and inaccurate. . . Therefore, philosophy is an unreliable instrument for finding truth. A person who enters the field is highly unlikely to arrive at true answers to philosophical questions. (Brennan 2010: 3)

There are other, non-epistemic defences of philosophy. For example, one might argue that philosophy is intrinsically valuable (i.e. good as an end in itself) or instrumentally valuable (i.e. for getting some values other

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14 An alternative formulation of this goal is in terms of collective knowledge.
15 Chalmers acknowledges other forms of progress in philosophy, including progress toward understanding (see Chalmers 2015: 13). Thus, he does not simply equate progress with convergence to the truth. However, he claims that “progress toward the truth has a certain primacy among the forms of philosophical progress” (2015: 14, emphasis ours). We dispute this claim.
than truth). These may be perfectly good reasons to study philosophy, but we ultimately want a defence of its *epistemic* value. Without that, “there is something disappointing about the philosophical enterprise” (ibid).

We argue for an alternative possibility. Instead of taking philosophy to aim at truth (and then concluding that it woefully fails to attain this goal), we should reconsider the assumption that truth is the goal of philosophy. To do so, we will take a closer *look* at the practice of philosophy and *see* how the activity is actually done. We consider: philosophical progress (§3.1); expertise (§3.2); testimony (§3.3); hiring practices (§3.4); student evaluation (§3.5); the value of systematicity (§3.6); and a particular kind of philosophical disagreement (§3.7).

We demonstrate two things for each of them. First, that they are, at the very least, in tension with the idea that philosophy aims at truth. Second, they are better explained by taking the aim of philosophy to be understanding. We do the latter by demonstrating that each exhibits some of the symptoms of understanding outlined above.

### 3.1. Philosophical Progress, Reliability, and Skepticism

Philosophers notoriously struggle with many of the same issues that preoccupied Plato and Aristotle. In a thought-provoking fable, Dietrich (2011) asks us to imagine that Aristotle falls into a time warp and is transported from the Lyceum to a present day university somewhere in North America. Assume that Aristotle has the ability to speak English and is unperturbed by all these sudden changes. Let’s also suppose that Aristotle—a lover of wisdom—attends lectures on various topics. How will he react? As Dietrich explains, Aristotle would be shocked and befuddled by lectures in physics, astronomy, and chemistry. What he learns would be inconceivable to him. But what about ethics or metaphysics? In these lectures, the professors will talk about essences, being qua being, and virtue theory—all topics familiar to Aristotle. While he may learn some new distinctions, new arguments, and new objections, these intellectual developments will likely not befuddle or shock him. What might surprise him, however, is that philosophers continue to disagree about these issues. One thing he will learn for sure is that philosophy has failed, after more than two thousand years, to settle any of its central questions.

Whether or not this constitutes a lack of progress depends on what we take the goal of philosophy to be. The standard view is that philosophy aims at rational convergence on truth or collective knowledge of true answers to philosophical questions. This is suggested by Brennan (2010), Dietrich (2011), Horwich (2012) and Chalmers (2015), among others. If progress requires truth-convergence, then skepticism about philosophical progress is
highly plausible.\textsuperscript{16} As Chalmers says, “there has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy” (2015: 5).\textsuperscript{17}

In reply, optimists like Stoljar argue that philosophical progress is compatible with the truth-convergence aim of philosophy as long as “we are careful about what philosophical questions are” (2017: 33). This concedes too much to the pessimists. While we agree that philosophers have made progress in the ways Stoljar describes, we also suspect that many who read Stoljar’s book will feel relatively underwhelmed by the examples of progress he provides. It leaves us with the sense that if that’s the only progress we can hope for in philosophy, then we had better invest our time and energy elsewhere.\textsuperscript{18} (And we think Aristotle would agree.)

We therefore recommend an alternative defense of optimism. Instead of measuring philosophy against the benchmark of convergence on true answers to philosophical questions (an assumption that Stoljar too quickly grants), we propose that philosophical progress be measured in terms of increased understanding.

Why think philosophy aims at understanding rather than truth? As a start to answering this question, we will first make a large concession to the skeptics about philosophy: we grant that pursuing philosophy is an unreliable means for discovering true answers for philosophical questions. Thus, truth-seekers do not have good grounds to pursue philosophy. But here’s the rub: many people nevertheless do pursue philosophy and find it worthwhile despite knowing that philosophical problems are perennials for which it is unreasonable to expect a solution. How can we make sense of this fact? If the main goal of philosophy were to uncover philosophical truths, then philosophers would either be highly irrational or immensely arrogant. We find both explanations implausible.\textsuperscript{19}

Why must philosophers be irrational or arrogant, according to the truth-convergence view? Well, it is no secret that disagreement in philosophy is pervasive and perennial. In the face of such disagreement, one should not expect to arrive at the true—or universally accepted—answers to philosophical questions. To pursue philosophy as a means of discovering the true answers to philosophical questions would therefore be irrational. (It is irrational to pursue a goal without pursuing the means to achieve that goal.) Now, it would not be irrational if philosophers could reasonably expect—or even reasonably hope—to solve these perennial problems. But

\textsuperscript{16} See note 8.
\textsuperscript{17} What are these “big questions”? As Chalmers says, “the big questions of philosophy are questions like: What is the relationship between mind and body? How do we know about the external world? What are the fundamental principles of morality? Is there a god? Do we have free will? I will not try to provide a more precise list than this, but any philosopher can come up with a list of 10 or so big questions fairly easily, and I suspect that there would be a lot of overlap between these lists. We could even use these lists to operationally define the big questions: the big questions of a field at time t are those that members of that field would count as the big questions of the field at time t.” (2015: 5)
\textsuperscript{18} Baz (2019) raises this point.
\textsuperscript{19} We acknowledge that some philosophers are this arrogant. We won’t name names here.
that would impute to them a form of arrogance whereby each philosopher believes that they will be the ones to solve the philosophical problems that great minds like Plato and Aristotle could not. We find this unlikely. Most of us will admit that we don’t expect to solve these problems once and for all. And yet philosophers continue to find philosophy worthwhile.

Some philosophers even claim that philosophical problems are unsolvable. Bertrand Russell suggests that many philosophical issues are simply “insoluble by the human intellect” (1997: 153; see also McGinn 1993 and van Inwagen 2009). This suggests that something other than solving philosophical problems is the point of doing philosophy. While the intellectual limits described by Russell, McGinn, and van Inwagen are not compatible with knowing the true answers to philosophical questions, they seem perfectly compatible with increasing our understanding of philosophical issues. For example, the creative development of new “philosophical devices” has improved our ability to think about the world. As Brake (2017: 23) points out, many of the most famous moments in philosophy—Descartes’s evil demon, Thomson’s violinist, Nozick’s experience machine—involve the development of thought experiments that are not themselves truths, nor answers to questions, but they deepen our thinking about philosophical issues and give us new ways to think about the world.20

Philosophy has also developed a sophisticated repertoire of concepts and distinctions that allow us to uncover complexities, clarify our thinking, add nuance to our theories, and eliminate clearly erroneous views.21 As disagreement becomes more sophisticated, we come to better “know our way around”. If Wittgenstein is right that this signals philosophical achievement, then it seems right to say that philosophical understanding is an accomplishment that enables us to uncover new promising pathways and avoid dead ends (see Graham 2017: 112). Philosophers also work out the implications of various theories and principles, evaluate whether these implications are consistent with intuitive judgments, and examine whether these theories, principles, or implications have counterexamples. In doing so, the philosopher can tell us the implications of potentially true philosophical theories.

Are we just moving the goalposts? Have we simply lowered the bar in order to claim progress? We will consider this objection in §4.1. For now, we’ll simply point out that it trivializes our argument. Our claim is not that we should redefine philosophical progress in order to claim that philosophy makes progress. Rather, we argue that many aspects of philosophical practice become intelligible on the assumption that philosophy aims at

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20 For more on how thought experiments contribute to understanding, see Elgin (2017) and Stewart et al. (2018).
21 While eliminating erroneous views is a means toward believing truth, this does not obviously favor the truth-convergence view. First, the elimination of implausible views is also a means toward understanding, so the evidence is neutral between these views. Second, we do not deny that philosophers also want truth-convergence. We simply deny that this is the primary epistemic goal of philosophy. Thus, we needn’t show that every aspect of philosophy is incompatible with the truth-convergence goal. Instead, we simply need to show that philosophical activity is better explained by the goal of understanding rather than truth.
understanding (rather than truth or knowledge). In this way, our hypothesis has more explanatory power than the standard view. Indeed, there is something puzzling about the argument made by pessimists about philosophical progress. They seem to argue as follows:

1. If the primary epistemic aim of philosophy is convergence on true answers to philosophical questions, then recent developments in philosophy do not constitute progress.
2. The primary epistemic aim of philosophy is convergence on true answers to philosophical questions.
3. Therefore, recent developments in philosophy do not constitute progress.

But the following modus tollens is far more compelling:

i. If the primary epistemic aim of philosophy is convergence on true answers to philosophical questions, then recent developments in philosophy do not constitute progress.
ii. Recent developments in philosophy clearly do constitute progress.
iii. Therefore, the primary epistemic aim of philosophy is not convergence on true answers to philosophical questions.

Premise ii seems obvious. It certainly seems like progress when we uncover new philosophical paradoxes, develop new hermeneutical tools, and increase the coherence of our views. It also seems like progress when philosophical understanding leads us to abandon views that no longer seem plausible or coherent. Almost no living philosopher would regard these developments as mere aimless wanderings. As Chalmers writes, “It is hard to deny that the insights of Plato and Aristotle, Hume and Kant, Frege and Russell, Kripke and Lewis have involved significant philosophical progress, despite the lack of convergence in philosophy” (2015: 12). Insofar as we regard these as genuine developments, and to the extent that these developments cannot be accounted for on the traditional hypothesis, this casts doubt on the truth-conducive aim of philosophy.

Beyond its explanatory power, our view has another advantage: it significantly blunts the force of recent skeptical arguments against philosophy. We agree with the skeptics that philosophy is not a reliable method of discovering true answers to philosophical questions. Thus, we concede that “philosophy is not worth doing if truth is our goal” (Brennan 2010: 6, emphasis ours). We also grant that systematic peer disagreement in philosophy makes it unreasonable to think that philosophers know their philosophical views to be correct (see Goldberg 2013; Fumerton 2010; Kornblith 2010; 2012; Lycan 2019).^{22} A philosopher who claims to know the

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^{22} That said, we could characterize the justification of a person’s belief as a function of that belief’s coherence with the rest of that person’s beliefs. On this view, the existence of peer disagreement is not necessarily a threat to the justification of one’s beliefs (see Fumerton 2010: 105).
correct meta-ethical theory, or the answer to the problem of free will, or the relationship between the mind and body, is not making an epistemically warranted assertion.

But this sort of disagreement-based skepticism about philosophy is no threat to our epistemic ambitions (cf. Beebee 2018). We have not spent our intellectual lives toiling away, only to be thwarted in our efforts. The pursuit of philosophy allows us to clarify our ideas, eliminate inconsistency, render the world more coherent, recognize the implications of various theories, make valid inferences from various sets of philosophical principles, articulate our views with greater sophistication, and defend our commitments with greater ingenuity against counterarguments. Moreover, these are all trademark features of understanding. We manifest cognitive abilities that allow us to infer, to generalize, to reliably evaluate explanations, and to have command of the modal space (i.e. how something might have been different given certain assumptions). This understanding is not isolated or episodic: it involves the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a comprehensive body of information.

3.2 Expertise

This alternative notion of progress also accounts for the possibility of philosophical expertise in the face of systematic peer disagreement. If the job of the philosopher were to provide knowledge of true answers to philosophical questions, then philosophers would lack the requisite expertise. Take moral philosophy as an example. Against the benchmark of truth-convergence or collective knowledge, moral philosophers have failed at their job: they are unable to tell us which moral theory is the correct one. How, then, can we recognize expertise?

We should reject the idea that philosophical experts are those who know (or reliably believe) true philosophical theories. Instead, we can take philosophical experts to be those who have a particular set of cognitive abilities and skills that ground understanding. For example, they are superior at detecting invalid inferences, determining the implications of potentially true theories, and evaluating the plausibility of philosophical theories. They also better understand the relevant concepts in their domain and are adept at discussing, criticizing, and refuting arguments, in addition to devising their own. These tasks are amongst the most common in philosophical practice (see Drożdżowicz 2018). The ability to discuss, criticize, and refute arguments

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23 It has also been proposed that philosophers have expertise because they have more reliable “intuitions” than non-philosophers (see Drożdżowicz 2018 for a discussion). However, this view has been thoroughly criticized on the grounds that philosophers’ intuitions are no less prone to biases and distortions. Our account of philosophical expertise does not rely on the contentious assumption that philosophers have better intuitions.
is also one of the best ways to determine whether one has adequately understood the issue (and this is precisely why we evaluate our students on this basis).

Philosophers are also able to locate ideas in a network of possibility. They are able to take some intuitive judgment as a piece of data (e.g. our judgment about a Gettier scenario), use it as a premise in an argument against a particular theory, see theoretical consequences that would follow from accepting this judgment, and employ it in a particular argument for another theory. These are characteristic features of understanding: the abilities to infer, to generalize, to grasp connections, to see how various bits of information hang together, and to explain how one thing is possible supposing certain other things. These abilities are not easily transmittable via testimony alone (another mark of understanding, which we’ll discuss in the next section), but they are intimately connected to our ability to fashion explanations (a key symptom of understanding).

3.3 The Puzzle of Philosophical Testimony

It is common to rely on the testimony of others in science (Hardwig 1991) and everyday life (Coady 1992). But accepting philosophical claims on the basis of others’ testimony is not the norm in philosophy (Allen 2019; Ranalli 2019; Hazlett 2017). According to Thomas Reid, “no philosophical opinion, however ancient, however generally received, ought to rest upon authority” ([1785] 1969, 2.14: 211). Let’s call this view pessimism about philosophical testimony. We find this view intuitively plausible. For example, it is legitimate to believe that black holes exist because a physicist tells you, but there is something fishy about believing that skepticism is false because a philosopher says so. But what explains why there is something intellectually wrong or at least suboptimal about forming philosophical beliefs on the basis of testimony or deference?

Our answer is that philosophy as an intellectual activity aims at understanding, and understanding is not typically transmittable via testimony. However, one might argue that deference on philosophical issues is problematic for reasons that have nothing to do with understanding. In this section, we briefly examine several explanations for pessimism about philosophical testimony that do not appeal to understanding, and we argue that these views lack adequate support.

24 By ‘philosophical testimony’ we mean a philosopher’s sincere assertion that $p$, where $p$ expresses what is (typically) uncontroversially considered by philosophers to be a philosophical thesis (Ranalli 2019: 143). Thus, not all broadly philosophical claims are obviously problematic. Claims about who defends which theories, or the commitments of particular theories, are often unproblematic, as Allen (2019) notes.

25 A lot has been written about the permissibility of acquiring moral or aesthetic knowledge via testimony. One might think that philosophical testimony is problematic in the very same ways as moral and aesthetic testimony (to the extent that it is problematic in those domains). But this is not obviously correct. The ethical and aesthetic domains are fundamentally evaluative, so there might be special normative requirements on ethical and aesthetic knowledge that do not apply to philosophical testimony more broadly. There may also be special reasons for being pessimistic about ethical or aesthetic
philosophical testimony is plausible because a goal of philosophizing is to understand why one’s philosophical beliefs might be true.

One possible explanation for pessimism about philosophical testimony is there are no philosophical experts (or they are difficult to identify). This resembles a familiar argument about moral expertise. It has been claimed that we should not defer to others on moral matters because there are no moral experts or they are difficult to identify (see McGrath 2008: 97). However, in the previous section we argued that there are a variety of recognizable traits of philosophical expertise. Moreover, few philosophers would claim there are no identifiable philosophical experts. Thus, a different explanation is called for.

Perhaps we cannot have knowledge of philosophical theses; thus, we cannot make such knowledge available via testimony. After all, it is trivial that the transmission of philosophical knowledge by testimony is impossible if philosophical knowledge itself is impossible. While we are tempted by this type of skepticism about philosophy, it fails to explain why there is something intellectually wrong or illegitimate about forming beliefs about philosophical theses even in situations where philosophical knowledge is uncontroversially possible. Consider the example of a guru who is known to have infallible true beliefs about philosophical matters. In this situation, we are in a position to acquire philosophical knowledge by deference, even on controversial topics. Still, the situation seems suspect, especially with respect to professional philosophers. It seems intellectually wrong or suboptimal to simply form one’s beliefs about philosophical issues on the basis of reliable deference.26

A third explanation is that experts generally should not form beliefs on the basis of testimony. An expert is someone who ought to settle for herself questions in her domain of expertise, not outsource her judgments to others (Hopkins 2011). This would explain the problem with philosophical testimony as an instance of an entirely general point about expertise. Philosophers would be just one example of experts who ought to use their own intellectual efforts to form judgments in their domain of expertise. But there are two problems with this explanation. First, it doesn’t explain the puzzle of philosophical testimony. Intuitively, there is something comparatively worse about forming judgments on the basis of testimony in philosophy than in science or daily life (Allen 2019; Ranalli 2019; Hazlett 2017).27 This is precisely what gives rise to the puzzle of philosophical

knowledge that do not apply to metaphysics, epistemology, and so forth; for instance, some philosophers think that a necessary condition for aesthetic knowledge is acquaintance with the relevant aesthetic properties. This kind of requirement does not neatly translate over to the rest of philosophy (see Ranalli 2019 for a discussion).

26 One might argue that philosophical deference is suboptimal because one does not know the relevant reasons for one’s philosophical beliefs. But Hills (2009; 2013) convincingly shows that someone could learn the relevant reasons via testimony. What matters is that they grasp the reasons for themselves.

27 As Ranalli (2019: 155) argues, expert scientists often pursue large collaborative research projects and divide the epistemic labor amongst each other. For these projects, reliance on testimony seems both practically and epistemically necessary for
testimony in the first place. To say that experts generally should not form beliefs on the basis of testimony would leave this puzzle unresolved: it would not explain why it is more acceptable to form beliefs about biology, medicine, and physics on the basis of deference. Second, it is not clear that the relevant factor in the philosophical case is expertise. As Allen (2019: 113) points out, we encourage philosophy students to exercise intellectual autonomy and think things through for themselves rather than uncritically accept the views of others. But we do not judge them to be philosophical experts.

A fourth explanation is that one should not take claims on testimony in a controversial domain. There is systematic peer disagreement in philosophy, so it would be problematic to believe philosophical claims on the basis of testimony. But this norm is contentious among epistemologists of testimony. Is it impossible to learn any propositions in controversial domains from reliable testifiers? This may have un acceptably broad consequences. Moreover, not all philosophical claims are terribly controversial, yet the problem with deference remains. For example, only 4.8% of philosophers accept external world skepticism (Bourget and Chalmers 2013), but it seems dubious to believe that skepticism is false for this reason. We can even imagine cases where all traces of controversy are stipulated away. Still, there seems to be something wrong, suboptimal, or dubious about forming beliefs about philosophical matters on the basis of deference.

In contrast, it's easy to see why the understanding view is compatible with pessimism about philosophical testimony. It is generally accepted that understanding is not typically transmittable via testimony, even though testimony is a basic way in which knowledge gets around (Pritchard 2009; Hills 2016). In cases of knowledge, it is common for the testifier to carry a significant amount of the epistemic load (Lackey 2007); in other words, the hearer’s coming to know is often an achievement primarily credible to the testifier. In cases of understanding, however, the hearer’s epistemic role is far more significant. Understanding requires grasping the rational support relations among some cluster of relevant propositions, or having ‘cognitive control’ over a body of information (Hills 2016). These abilities are not transmittable via testimony in any straightforward sense. Thus, advocates of the understanding view can explain why it is important to make philosophical judgments for oneself: without exercising intellectual autonomy, we are unable to secure understanding, which is the aim of philosophical inquiry. This would explain the discomfort that some have expressed about the idea of philosophical deference.

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other members to get knowledge. Thus, the norm that an expert in a domain D must form beliefs about D on the basis of only their own intellectual efforts does not seem true of expertise generally.
3.4 The Advantage of Being Right

In §1 we highlighted another aspect of philosophical practice that is puzzling according to a truth-oriented conception of philosophy: the fact that academic appointments in philosophy often ignore “the advantage of being right”. Job search committees do not take the truth or falsity of a candidate’s philosophical views as a legitimate consideration when deciding to hire them. But if philosophy is in the business of generating new knowledge or providing true answers to philosophical questions, then presumably they should. At the very least, everything else equal (e.g. teaching ability, general collegiality, ability to interact with administrators and so on), the candidate whose views are true would seem to be the better candidate. And yet this isn’t taken into account by job search committees (Lewis 1999). If being right—holding true philosophical beliefs—isn’t an advantage for gaining worthy employment in philosophy, then to what extent should we take philosophy to be in the business of striving for truth?

An immediate objection to be put aside concerns diversity of views within the committee itself. One might argue that job search committees don’t take the truth of a candidate’s views into account because they disagree about what counts as “true” in the first place. For example, a committee containing a materialist and a dualist would disagree about the metaphysics of the mind, and therefore would disagree about the truth and falsity of the candidate’s beliefs. So the committee as a whole cannot appeal to the advantage of being right as part of their decision-making process. This misses Lewis’ point. It’s not that philosophers aren’t very good at identifying what’s true, and that this prevents them from taking truth into account when evaluating future colleagues. His claim is that this holds at the individual level too: it’s not just that the committee disagrees about whether the materialist is right; it’s that the materialist on the committee won’t (or shouldn’t) use their agreement with the (materialist) job candidate as part of their individual evaluation of the candidate.

Lewis (1999: 192-6) suggests a number of reasons why search committee members might ignore the advantage of being right, such as dead dogma (i.e. a colleague with false beliefs might be a worthwhile opponent who can challenge the arguments of committee members), or they might play the role of the specimen (i.e. a bearer of false beliefs who is useful to have around so we can investigate errors up close). Each of these might go some way to explaining why search committees ignore the advantage of being right despite a truth-directed conception of philosophy. The problem with this approach, as Lewis (1999: 196-7) notes, is that it makes the value of the truth or falsity of a candidate’s views to be a fine balancing act: it requires a careful weighing of advantages and disadvantages, rather than getting to the heart of the matter according to which the truth or falsity of the candidate’s beliefs are simply irrelevant to the decision.
Lewis (1999: 197-200) suggests an alternative explanation. Philosophers partake in a *tacit treaty* to ignore the advantage of being right. In doing so, they are able to protect themselves from the winds of fortune, in the sense that we do not know how our colleagues vote, and we do not know how our colleagues will vote in the future (make-ups and majorities may change). And agreeing to ignore the truth of a candidate’s views across the board when making hiring decisions makes for a straightforward way of protecting oneself against being in the minority: if you’re a materialist you might prefer a department of materialists, but a balanced department is in turn preferable to a department of dualists and panpsychists, where you’re the sole voice of reason.

There is, however, another way of thinking about the value of the mixed department according to which it is deemed valuable (even by each individual) for its own sake, rather than as a second-best option. A mixed department provides a *variety of perspectives* on a subject matter. Each individual perspective can be seen as providing understanding about that subject matter, and taken together they may deepen our understanding beyond that which is provided by any individual perspective. By conceptualizing the aims of philosophy in terms of understanding, recalling that a symptom of this is that there can be multiple (even incompatible) routes to understanding, we can see that each individual may prefer the mixed department to the department where everyone agrees with her. Opposing viewpoints help us understand by showing us how things might be, assuming we are mistaken; they allow us to conceptualize how and where our viewpoints are located in conceptual space; they force us to reflect on reasons and explanations for the views we hold; and so on. According to this way of thinking, a mixed department isn’t second-best: its mixture is precisely what makes it valuable in the first place.28

### 3.5 Diametrically Opposed Conclusions

What do teachers look for when evaluating a student philosophy essay? What features should a paper have to ensure that it gains a high mark? Simplifying significantly, teachers often tell students that a good paper should state a thesis $p$ and provide a clear and well-signposted argument for $p$ that demonstrates to the reader a clear grasp of the issues that the paper is concerned with. We take it that no philosophy teacher includes the *truth* of $p$ in their assessment criteria of good philosophy papers, nor do they require $p$ to be something that they (the teacher) accepts—or at least they shouldn’t do this. A popular guide to writing philosophy papers puts this clearly as follows:

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28 Alternatively, if you are not convinced by the epistemic value of variety, search committees might simply ignore the advantage of being right by hiring the candidate who exhibits the deepest understanding irrespective of the truth/falsity of their beliefs.
We do not judge your paper by whether we agree with its conclusion. In fact, we may not agree amongst ourselves about what the correct conclusion is. But we will have no trouble agreeing about whether you do a good job arguing for your conclusion.\textsuperscript{29}

This point can be brought home by considering cases where one student writes a well-reasoned defense of \( p \), and another student writes an equally well-reasoned defense of not-\( p \). We take it that most readers will have been in such a situation. In an ethics course, one student might argue for utilitarianism whilst another argues for a deontological ethical theory; in a philosophy of mind course, one student may espouse the virtues of materialism whilst another admirably defends panpsychism; and so on. If the papers in question are well-written, offer sustained defenses of their respective positions, indicate a strong grasp of the literature, and so on, then presumably both of the students will achieve a similarly high grade.

If philosophy aims at convergence on the truth, this is puzzling. After all, at most one of the competing positions can, as a matter of fact, be true. So only one of each pair of students can be arguing for a true thesis. And, assuming that in teaching philosophical writing we aspire to impart the skills required to do good philosophy, the student who argues for the false thesis must, in some sense, have failed somewhere. And yet, just as in the case of the search committee, this does not feature in our analysis of whether they have written a good philosophy paper whatsoever.

One could object: perhaps philosophy does aim at truth, but we’re not very good at judging whether we have achieved our goal. Accordingly, perhaps the student who argues for the true thesis writes the better paper, but the assessor is not in a position to verify this, and as such, has to rely on other criteria instead. This does not help in cases where a student writes a fantastic paper arguing for \( p \) even though the teacher is highly confident that \( p \) is false. In a philosophy of science class, a devout empiricist, someone who has dedicated their intellectual career to defending constructive empiricism and who is highly confident that it is the correct position, won’t (or, again: shouldn’t) penalize a student who writes a paper in defense of the idea that our best scientific theories provide us with (approximate) knowledge about an unobservable reality. And this doesn’t depend on the fact that the professor has peers with whom they disagree. As noted previously, whilst philosophers have not converged on many philosophical topics, they have converged on some. So, even though only 4.8\% of professional philosophers are external world skeptics, an epistemology professor would (should) still award a student a high mark for an excellent paper defending such a position.

\textsuperscript{29} Pryor, http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html.
In contrast, if understanding is the aim of philosophy, then the practice of awarding both students top marks is perfectly explicable. Indeed, it is often an explicit criterion with which we assess our students’ work. As Jim Pryor writes, “You’ll be graded on three basic criteria: How well do you understand the issues you’re writing about? How good are the arguments you offer? Is your writing clear and well-organized?” Moreover, on reflection, we take it that many would agree that it is, at least one of, the criterion by which we measure the effectiveness of our teaching:

It should be clear that understanding, so understood, is also of central importance to learning. . . . It seems similarly undeniable that it should be a goal of education to help our students build these perspectives within which they will inevitably try to make sense of the world. To the extent we are successful, we improve or increase their understanding. (Riggs 2015: 20)

The typical features of understanding also help us understand our practices in assessing students. The fact that understanding is compatible with pluralism allows for the fact that each student has exhibited a high level of understanding. This is not to say that a student who defends moral realism and a student who defends anti-realism both understand the nature of moral facts equally well. If moral realism is true, then the anti-realist may not understand the nature of moral facts as well as the moral realist. But each student may nevertheless exhibit a deep philosophical understanding. Indeed, the moral anti-realist may display superior philosophical understanding despite having a false theory about the world. If anti-realism is false, this does not imply that famous anti-realists like Blackburn and Gibbard have a more superficial understanding of metaethics than philosophically amateur moral realists. Philosophical understanding is often compatible with grasping reasons and arguments for even false theories. False theses, like false beliefs, are compatible with understanding. (For those who balk at this, we address your concerns in §4.3.)

Other criteria that we invoke also measure understanding. That a student needs to argue for positions in their own words demonstrates that simply reporting a position, or an argument, does not exhibit the qualities of a good philosophy paper (even if it were true), which also aligns with the fact that philosophical understanding is non-testimonial. This requirement squares well with the idea that understanding requires an ability, and clearly reflects Hill’s (2016) notion of “cognitive control”, the cognitive abilities that accompany “grasping” the relationship between two propositions. We expect students to be able to follow the explanations we give in our lectures; but to get top marks, we want them to be able to reconstruct those explanations in their own words. We expect our students to argue for positions on the basis of premises and to tease out the consequences of the positions argued for. We expect our students to marshal evidence in favor of their theses,

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manipulating the information they have learnt into a coherent argument for their favored conclusion. If students can do this, they have understood the topic (even if what they argue for is, in fact, false), and we award them top marks accordingly.

3.6 Systematicity

By taking philosophy to aim at understanding, we can also explain why philosophers value systematicity. A widely accepted good-making feature of a philosophical project is that it has wide-reaching implications, connecting together (sometimes seemingly disconnected) philosophical issues and explaining them from a uniform basis. David Lewis’ work provides a paradigmatic example of such a project. His work on modal realism connects: causation, laws of nature, reductionism, chance, and modality. By helping himself to the idea that there is a space of concrete possible worlds (equipped with a similarity measure) corresponding to ways the actual world could be, Lewis is able to analyze what laws of nature are (for each world, axioms of a system that provides the optimal balance between simplicity and strength); what causation is (counterfactual dependence explicated via nearby possible worlds); and answer a number of other philosophical questions. His work spanned numerous philosophical fields, and the rich interconnections between his contributions made him, in Johnston’s words “the greatest systematic metaphysician since Gottfried Leibniz”.31

Is the systematicity of his work part of what makes it exemplary? Do the connections between his positions add something to their truth (to the extent that they are true)? Is systematicity a value (at least pro tanto)? Here, we submit, the answer is yes.32 To motivate it, we consider two common reactions to Lewis’ work. The first, infamously described by Lewis himself in terms of the “incredulous stare”, is that, for many at least, it is clearly false that there exist concrete non-actual possible worlds. And without these worlds, Lewis’ project fails (at least if success is measured by the advancement of justified true conclusions). The second reaction is the widespread acceptance that Lewis was an exemplary philosopher. In a 2015 poll he was ranked the 4th most important anglophone philosopher working between 1945-2000,33 and in a 2017 poll he was ranked the 30th most important Western philosopher of all time.34 This provides clear evidence that Lewis’ work is taken as an exemplar of analytic philosophy.

32 For a discussion of the systematicity of Lewis’ project, see Janssen-Lauret and MacBride (2018). In terms of Lewis exegesis, regardless of whether Lewis intended his work to be viewed in this way, it is obvious that his project has (even if against his wishes) been praised, at least in part, for its systematicity. This sociological fact is enough for our argument.
34 https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2017/04/the-most-important-western-philosophers-of-all-time.html
If the aim of philosophy is truth-convergence, these data pose a philosophical puzzle: how can Lewis’ work be held in such high regard whilst also being widely taken to be false? One could, we guess, respond by defending Lewis’ project in terms of truth. Perhaps there are non-actual concrete possible worlds; the incredulous stare is a look, not an argument, after all. Or alternatively, perhaps Lewis’ conclusions can be generated in some ingenious manner without relying on such worlds; perhaps we can strip the falsehoods out of his project without damaging the remaining truths. We’re not inclined to take either of these approaches here.

Luckily, there is another way to evaluate his contribution. Despite its falsity (or at least despite the fact it’s judged to be false), Lewis’ project is good philosophy because it provides understanding via offering a systematic, and thereby holistic, body of information about how the world could be. When we realize how causation and laws of nature can be related to each other via an analysis of certain counterfactuals, we thereby deepen our understanding of those issues, even if we do not learn true answers to philosophical questions. We can understand how things could be, were the metaphysics of the world a certain way, which can be useful even if we in fact don’t agree that the metaphysics of the world is that way (see Godfrey-Smith 2012 for a related discussion about how to conceptualize Lewis’ work). According to what we’re arguing for here: philosophy doesn’t have to be true to be valuable. Of course this is not to say that truth plays no role in a good philosophical theory. One must: grasp true connections between propositions; draw correct inferences; correctly explain how one thing is possible supposing certain other things; and so forth. But the point is that philosophical understanding is compatible with accepting a theory that does not provide a true answer to a philosophical question.

So again, we see that a truth-oriented conception of philosophy has at least prima facie difficulties in accommodating certain aspects of philosophical practice. Moreover, this practice is perfectly explicable if we adopt an understanding-oriented conception in its stead. Another mark for the latter.

3.7 Bottom Out

We now turn to a final feature of philosophical practice that we hope many will find familiar. Consider the ways in which philosophical disagreements can play out. Imagine, for example, that you’re someone of a broadly Humean bent (and thus you generally avoid concepts related to “essences”, “necessary connections”, “grounds”, and so on) and you’re in a conversation with someone who is more sympathetic to an Aristotelian way of viewing the world (and thus they are happy to invoke concepts like “natural function”, “fundamentality”, etc.) but you’re both discussing an issue that is somewhat “upstream” from the disagreement about underlying worldview.
There are usually two ways in which such a conversation can go. You could argue about which worldview is the right one; for instance, the Humean can deny that the Aristotelian has the right to invoke the concepts that she does: one cannot make sense of the idea that anything has an “essence”, so any time that the concept of such an essence is put to work, it has to be immediately flagged and disputed. The conversation cannot proceed where there is disagreement about the underlying concepts being invoked. These kinds of conversations usually don’t go very far. One is typically not inclined to argue about the underlying concepts that one relies on in their worldview; and except in rare cases, one is usually not inclined to shift them. If the disagreement remains at the level of the underlying concepts, then each participant will fail to get much out of the conversation.

But there is another way that these conversations can proceed (and, we hope, usually do). Rather than arguing about the fundamentals, both parties can try to reconstruct why the other thinks the way they do. The Humean can, for the sake of argument, accept the Aristotelian concepts and then attempt to follow the Aristotelian in their line of thought (and vice versa). One can adopt the perspective of one’s interlocutor and see how if you accepted such and such, then you could come to accept something else too. Once this procedure is done, you still don’t agree with your interlocutor (since you deny the antecedent of the conditional), but you at least see why they think what they do. Often we make observations of the form “that aspect of your system is doing the work of this aspect of mine”. These kinds of disagreement usually bottom out here: given the futility in convincing others to change their underlying worldview, the best we can do is come to see why they believe what they do from their perspective.

We take it that the second kind of conversation is philosophically valuable and can contribute to philosophical progress. But why think that? By now our answer should be familiar: this is an instance of practice that is not readily explained if philosophy aims at truth-convergence, but is readily explained if our aim is understanding. According to the former view, participating in the second kind of conversation doesn’t count for much: at best each interlocutor may learn some true conditionals (and indeed the conditionals they have learnt may both be true despite the underlying disagreement); but in a sense the interlocutors have failed, since they still disagree about the underlying concepts and therefore have not converged to the truth.

In contrast, taking the goal of philosophy to be understanding makes this entirely explicable: each interlocutor gains understanding by coming to grasp the ways in which different philosophical projects hang together. Even though the Humean thinks that the Aristotelian worldview is mistaken, by accepting it for the sake of argument and coming to see where it leads, they increase their understanding of the subject matter (the same applies mutatis mutandis to the Aristotelian who explores the Humean terrain). Their underlying disagreement doesn’t
have to affect their discussion, and once they figure out why their interlocutor believes what they do, the disagreement bottoms out.

This is described nicely by Beebee, drawing on Lewis:

I take it that at least a very large part of what most individual philosophers do just is a matter of trying to find a (partial) point of equilibrium, at which one is happy to—as Lewis puts it—come to rest. (Beebee 2018: 17)

It is important for us, and her, that she says “a”, not “the” point of equilibrium. We take it that her account of how philosophy works—“equilibrism” (the combination of skepticism about philosophy as providing knowledge with the positive account that we’re searching for points of equilibrium)—has much in common with what we are urging here. Again, the pluralistic aspects of understanding arise. The Aristotelian is trying to find their point of equilibrium and the Humean is trying to find theirs. In discussion they can help each other do so, despite their preferred points being far away from one another. And once they have done so, their disagreement bottoms out, each comes to rest in their different locations in conceptual space.

We’ve offered seven examples of philosophical practice that are in tension with the standard truth-convergence view of philosophy, but which are perfectly explicable if philosophy aims at understanding. Further examples are easy to find: our syllabi are expected to be balanced, and a teacher who proposes a syllabus focusing on defending a single philosophical view would not be exonerated if they claimed “I only want to teach the truth”; we spend a lot of time arguing for the obvious—that there are material objects, that hares can overtake rabbits, and so on—since we want explanations, not mere truths; and many of us grapple with the intricacies of the thoughts of historical figures, despite the fact their views are widely taken to be false by our current lights. We could go on: there is plenty of support for the idea that philosophy aims at understanding, not truth.

4. Objections and Replies

4.1 Is Understanding a Consolation Prize?

We have argued that understanding is the primary intellectual aim of philosophical inquiry. A common reaction to this is that understanding is a mere consolation prize: we settle for understanding in the absence of our hoped-for goal of truth. As Chalmers writes,
It is sometimes said that an obsession with truth reflects an overly scientistic conception of philosophy. We should not think of philosophy as a quest for the answers. Instead it is a quest for something else: understanding, clarity, enlightenment. I agree that these are goals worth pursuing, and that philosophy can help us pursue them. And I can see why, in the absence of answers to philosophical puzzles, it might seem especially appealing to focus on these goals instead. Still, I think we should acknowledge that this reaction involves something of a lowering of our sights for philosophy. (2015: 14, emphasis ours; see also Stoljar 2017: 24-5)

The attainment of understanding is sometimes assumed to be of secondary importance. While it may provide us with some consolation in the absence of answers to philosophical puzzles, we should acknowledge (according to this line of reasoning) that the quest for understanding is not the primary intellectual goal of philosophy.

But this complaint doesn’t square with actual philosophical practice. We have shown that various aspects of our discipline are incompatible with the hypothesis that philosophy aims at convergence on true answers to philosophical questions. Thus, it would be mistaken to claim that the quest for understanding is of secondary importance or involves a “lowering of our sights”. Our opponents are no longer entitled to assume that philosophers are primarily motivated by truth-convergence.

4.2 Is Philosophy Worthwhile?

One might grant that philosophy aims at understanding (and therefore does make progress, is consistent with expertise, etc.). However, one might also argue that this is not a valuable or worthwhile pursuit. What’s the point of deliberating about, reflecting upon, and evaluating philosophical theories if we are unable to collectively determine which theories are correct?

We grant that many people may not find this activity valuable. But so what? Countless others do find it worthwhile.35 This might sound flippant, but the fact that many people find philosophizing to be a meaningful activity casts some doubt on the claim that it is not a worthwhile endeavor. According to certain views about value, the fact that people take an activity to be valuable entails that it is valuable (to them). Even if you reject this theory of value, the fact that countless people voluntarily decide to pursue philosophy—especially in the

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35 One needn’t be a professional philosopher to regard philosophical understanding as an important epistemic goal. A number of writers, scientists, students, politicians, filmmakers (etc.) find the pursuit of philosophy to be a worthwhile activity.
face of abysmal academic job prospects, high workload, and inadequate pay—provides good evidence that the activity is valuable.

Our case for the value of philosophical understanding needn’t rest here. In the epistemological literature, it is widely acknowledged that understanding is distinctively epistemically valuable (see Pritchard 2009). In fact, understanding is often regarded as a more valuable cognitive achievement than knowledge (Kvanvig 2003; Elgin 2017) and perhaps even the highest epistemic good that humans can achieve (Bondy 2015; Hannon 2019: 255). As Albert Einstein once said, “Any fool can know; the point is to understand.” If these arguments about the value of understanding are correct, it immediately follows that the philosophical quest for understanding is epistemically valuable. In other words, the claim that understanding is not a worthwhile intellectual goal is contradicted by many recent arguments that defend the distinctive value of understanding. Instead of lowering the epistemic bar, we seem to be raising it.

Another way to illustrate the value of philosophical understanding is by considering the following thought experiment by Arnon Keren. Imagine you have a choice between two possible ways of pursuing philosophical questions:

One, which resembles philosophy as we are familiar with it—or at least, good philosophy as we are familiar with it—which is expected to promote our understanding of philosophical questions, but not to provide us with knowledge of answers. The other is expected to provide us with knowledge of answers to philosophical questions, but to do so by employing powerful, yet opaque sources of knowledge: sources that provide knowledge of answers to philosophical questions, without providing understanding of the philosophical questions, or of why the true answers to them are true. (Keren MS)

Suppose you have a choice between joining one of two philosophical organizations: The Association of Really Good Familiar Philosophy or The Society for Opaque Philosophy. If you join the former, it will promote your understanding of big philosophical questions, but it will not significantly extend your knowledge of answers to those questions. If you join the latter, you will be exposed, exclusively, to opaque arguments for (true) philosophical theses. Which society would you join? While the Society for Opaque Philosophy would provide us with access to results obtained by opaque philosophers, devoting your philosophical life exclusively to the kind of work performed within this society does not seem to reflect the motivation that leads many to become philosophers in the first place. Following Keren, we suspect that most philosophers would prefer to join the Association of Really Good Familiar Philosophy. This indicates that the primary motivation for doing philosophy is not to attain truth or collective knowledge.
4.3 Is there Understanding without Truth?

Are we claiming that philosophical understanding does not require truth? Not exactly. Our central claim is that philosophy does not primarily aim at discovering true answers to philosophical questions. We reject this view because it cannot account for many aspects of philosophical practice. Instead, we argue that the epistemic aim of philosophy is understanding and that those aspects become intelligible once we accept this hypothesis.

This is not to say that understanding does not require truth. It seems clear that understanding must somehow answer to the facts, but the relationship between understanding and truth is complicated and contested. According to factive conceptions of understanding, we understand a subject matter only if our central beliefs about that subject matter are true. For example, Khalifa (2011: 108) says it is impossible to understand why a phenomenon took place without believing a correct (i.e. true) explanation for it. To illustrate, consider the fact that 56% of professional philosophers self-identify as moral realists and 44% self-identify as anti-realists or other (Bourget and Chalmers 2013). Let’s suppose that moral realism is true. If so, do anti-realists understand the nature of moral facts? According to the factivist, no: one does not understand the world if one’s theory about the world is false.

To sever the connection between understanding and truth threatens a collapse into radical relativism. Without truth, what limits any old theory from providing understanding? As Elgin writes,

If the acceptability of scientific [or philosophical] theories does not turn on their truth, the distinction between science and pseudoscience threatens to vanish. If not on the basis of truth, on what grounds are we to consider astronomy cognitively reputable and astrology bunk? (2006: 213)

It would not suffice to claim that we grasp the coherence-making relationships between mutually-supporting, internally consistent beliefs. Suppose that, in your effort to understand the nature of free will, you form a variety of seemingly justified but false beliefs from which you say, “Aha! I understand the nature of free will.” Even if you have attained a coherent picture of the subject matter in question, you lack understanding—or so the argument goes.

However, there are at least two lines of reply here. The first is to deny that understanding requires truth; the second is to explain why philosophical understanding is achievable even on factive conceptions of understanding. We take these in turn.

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36 The factive requirement is more relaxed vis-à-vis peripheral beliefs.
37 Which it isn’t.
i. Deny the Factivity of Understanding

In the literature on understanding, it is controversial whether understanding is indeed factive. As Elgin (2017) and de Regt (2017) argue, scientists commonly rely on models, idealizations, and thought experiments that are known not to be true. For example, scientists purport to understand the behavior of actual gases by reference to a (non-existing) so-called “ideal gas”. Elgin calls these “felicitous falsehoods” and claims they are often essential to fostering understanding. If we adopt a strictly factive conception of understanding, we may be unable to account for the cognitive contributions of science.

Do explanations and theories have to be approximately true to provide understanding? Not necessarily. Elgin (2017) argues that scientific models involving highly unrealistic idealizations can enhance, and indeed are indispensable parts of, our understanding of the phenomena in the world they represent. Further, it seems possible to use fictions and counterfactual scenarios to advance understanding. Consider Thomas Hobbes’s genealogical account of the political sovereign. Hobbes imagines a “state of nature” in which there was no government, no laws, no civilization, but rather a war of “all against all” where life was “nasty, brutish, and short.” Even though this is philosophical fantasy, it is used to shed light on the legitimacy of political authority. We could make similar points about Hume’s genealogy of justice and Rawls’s thought experiment involving humans in the “original position” behind a veil of ignorance (see Elgin 2017: 29). These theorists did not believe their accounts were accurate descriptions of human history, yet these theories foster genuine understanding nonetheless.

The non-factivist takes this to illustrate that even central falsehoods are sometimes compatible with understanding. As Elgin writes,

A central element in a second grader’s view of human descent may be that humans descended from apes, although, on a more sophisticated account, humans and great apes descended from a common hominid ancestor who was not, strictly speaking, an ape. Nonetheless, the child’s view displays some understanding and is certainly better than thinking that humans and apes are not relatives of any sort. Likewise, even though Copernicus thought that the Earth orbits around the sun in a circle (and not in an ellipse), his theory constitutes a major advance in understanding the motion of the planets if compared to Ptolemaic theories. (2007: 37-8)

This contradicts the idea that we cannot understand a subject matter unless all of the central propositions in a comprehensive body of information are true. In some cases, divergences from the truth may be large without
undermining one's understanding. Indeed, Elgin says that divergences from the truth are often essential to fostering understanding.

So, according to the non-factivist, there are scientific theories and models that, by our current lights, are significantly false but nevertheless contribute to our understanding. If this is right, then a question remains how to distinguish between those that provide such a contribution and those that don’t. Here, non-factivists emphasize that, at the very least, theories as a whole have testable implications and thus face the tribunal of empirical evidence; there are “determinate, epistemically accessible situations which, if found to obtain, would discredit the theories” (Elgin 2006: 213). And presumably such discredit is not just that the theories are found to be false; it also tells against the idea that they provide us with understanding. de Regt requires that any theory which is to offer understanding must be intelligible and conform to the “basic epistemic values of empirical adequacy and internal consistency” (2017: 92); thus, unintelligible, empirically inadequate, or inconsistent theories fail on this count. Thus, non-factivists about understanding are not extreme relativists; there are constraints on which theories provide us with understanding and which do not.

A non-factivist about philosophical understanding should concede that philosophical theories face analogous constraints. Asking what these are is just to ask what counts as evidence in philosophy. Relinquishing the idea that philosophy aims at truth doesn’t mean giving up on the idea that there are no evidential standards for philosophically acceptable theories. For example, Lycan (2019) provides three sources of evidence that can be co-opted by the non-factivist in this context. In order to provide understanding, a philosophical theory needs to cohere with: common sense; the deliverances of the sciences; and our philosophical intuitions. An argument in the philosophy of mind that was entirely refuted by well-tested and unanimously agreed upon evidence from the neurological sciences would not contribute to our understanding, and neither would an ethical theory according to which the measure of the goodness of an act is given by the number of pigeons on the moon that would result from it. Alternatively, one could further emphasize the analogy between philosophical projects and scientific modelling, and appeal to theoretical virtues like “simplicity, explanatory power, fertility, elegance, etc.” (Paul 2012: 21) as providing conditions on which philosophical theories contribute to our understanding.

Of course, what counts as evidence in philosophy is up for debate, but for our current purposes what matters is that there are such standards. So, the non-factivist can appeal to their preferred account of these standards to provide constraints on which philosophical theories contribute to our understanding and which do not. This allows the non-factivist to accommodate a pluralist conception of philosophical practice (that there can be

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38 Hallvard Lillehammer uses “pigeon on the moon consequentialism” to demonstrate the distinction between consequentialism and utilitarianism.
multiple routes to understanding), without thereby adopting a radically relativist position (that any coherent philosophical beliefs contribute to philosophical understanding).

**ii. Endorse Factivity and Defend Philosophy**

As shown above, a number of theorists have argued that understanding is compatible with falsity. But you might object that there are some obvious ways in which understanding requires truth. For example, it doesn’t seem like you understand why (or how) the Titanic capsized if your beliefs about why (or how) it capsized are false. In general, according to the factivist, it is impossible to understand a phenomenon (or some aspect of the world) without believing a correct explanation for it. In this sense, understanding is beholden to the facts. Moreover, a number of theorists have argued that understanding is a species of knowledge (see note 10). If this view is correct, then understanding would require truth to the same extent that knowledge does (and it is widely acknowledged that knowledge is factive). Are these problems for our account of the epistemic aim of philosophy? We think not.

It will be useful to distinguish between two types of understanding: **holistic** and **explanatory** understanding. Holistic understanding is the kind of understanding that one has toward a subject matter or body of information. It is sometimes called “objectual” understanding (Kvanvig 2003: 191). Explanatory understanding, by contrast, is the kind of understanding that one has when one understands why something is the case; thus, explanatory understanding is often called “understanding why” (see Pritchard 2010 and Hills 2016). The factivist is committed to the idea that understanding-why is factive in the sense that it requires explanations involving true explanans and explananda. If they’re right, then it would be a mistake to claim that one understands why humans have free will if (a) we lack free will or (b) we have free will but one’s reasons for why this is true are significantly false. Does this entail that philosophers with false theories lack understanding, understood factively?

Yes and no. They may lack understanding of why some phenomenon is the case. However, this is perfectly compatible with holistic philosophical understanding; for instance, one might understand why a theory could be true; one might also understand the various commitments and entailments of various theories, as well as the significant objections and replies to these views. One might also have systematized knowledge of a comprehensive body of information relevant to the issue, or grasp the (true) dependency relations among various items of information. One might also uncover new objections to a theory or provide a (true) explanation for why an existing objection to a theory is mistaken. In general, the various cognitive abilities and achievements that we’ve outlined above do not require us to sever the connection between truth and
understanding. Moreover, this is compatible with the claim that philosophy's primary intellectual aim is understanding rather than the discovery of true answers to philosophical questions. We can have a holistic understanding of a philosophical issue or domain.

Is this enough? Should the primary goal of philosophy be holistic understanding? If you agreed you'd rather join the Association of Really Good Familiar Philosophy than the Society for Opaque Philosophy, then presumably yes. But it's also worth noting that, at least in some cases, what contributes to holistic understanding can also serve as routes towards explanatory understanding. In the case of scientific understanding, factivists have pointed out that false (if interpreted literally) models can provide true explanations (Lawler 2019, Frigg and Nguyen 2021). The same applies in the above cases: if a false philosophical theory provides the means to grasp the true dependency relations among bodies of information, then even though the theory is false, it can nevertheless provide a correct explanation, and thereby provide explanatory understanding.

For our current purposes we don’t have to adjudicate between the non-factivist and factivist about understanding. If the former is correct, then it’s straightforward how false philosophical theories nevertheless contribute to philosophical understanding, and this can be defended without the collapse into relativism. If the latter is correct, philosophers who believe false theories may nonetheless have a deeper understanding of philosophical questions, problems, and topics than those with true theories. We need not discover the true answer to a philosophical question in order to improve our understanding of the relevant philosophical issue. Moreover, a philosopher with a false theory might have a better understanding of the world (and not just the relevant theory) than someone with a true theory (assuming that their false theory provided them with the means to grasp more true dependencies). Our claim that philosophy aims at understanding is consistent with both ways of explicating understanding, and therefore entails neither that any old philosophical theory can provide understanding, nor that truth is irrelevant to such an epistemic aim. Our point is simply that philosophy doesn’t, and shouldn’t, be taken to aim at providing true answers to philosophical questions.

5. Conclusion

Philosophy is rife with practices that are difficult to square with the idea that it aims at truth-convergence or collective knowledge of true answers to philosophical questions. These practices range from those tied to the nature of philosophy as a cognitive enterprise (the circling back on perennial questions, the suboptimality of forming philosophical beliefs on the basis of testimony, and the bottoming out of disagreements) to those that characterize our disciplinary practices (how academic appointments are made and the way we evaluate our
students), and in between (the value of systematicity and the identification of experts). Indeed, many of these aspects of philosophy have been invoked in order to cast doubt on its value; to provide ammunition for arguments to skeptical conclusions about the value of our professional projects. We’ve drawn on recent investigations into the nature of understanding to suggest an alternative picture of the intellectual aim of philosophy: we are trying to gain understanding, an epistemic good distinct from (but related to) knowledge, which doesn’t require convergence on true answers to philosophical questions. Viewing philosophy through this lens brings our practices into better focus, rendering them perfectly explicable and at the same time undermining the skeptical conclusions drawn by some. If we’re right, there’s epistemic value in what we spend our time doing, and this is compatible with widespread philosophical disagreement. If we’re wrong, the practices we’ve identified indicate that we’re a highly dysfunctional discipline.
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