

Viewpoint Convergence as a Philosophical Defect

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ABSTRACT. *What can we know? How should we live? What is there?* Philosophers famously diverge in the answers they give to these and other philosophical questions. It is widely presumed that a lack of convergence on these questions suggests that philosophy is not progressing at all, is not progressing fast enough, or is not progressing as fast as other disciplines, such as the natural sciences. Call the view that ideal philosophical progress is marked by at least some degree of convergence on the core philosophical questions the pro-convergence thesis. I will argue that there is reason to reject the pro-convergence thesis in favor of the anti-convergence thesis, the view that significant viewpoint convergence is at odds with the aims of a philosophically ideal community. Specifically, I will defend the following disjunctive claim: Either, philosophical communities which evince viewpoint convergence are philosophically defective in at least some respect, or else, our current philosophical methods are so woefully inadequate to the philosophical task that no employment of those methods, no matter how extensive or rigorous, could possibly produce philosophical knowledge. On the latter view, call it philosophical primitivism, ours is a kind of pre-philosophical era, something akin to a pre-scientific era. The argument centers on a thought experiment about two different philosophical communities.

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What can we know? How should we live? What is there? Philosophers famously diverge in the answers they give to these and other philosophical questions, though it is somewhat controversial how extensive this divergence is.¹ In recent metaphilosophy, many theorists treat the fact that philosophers persistently fail to converge on these questions to be a matter of concern, even embarrassment. In particular, it is widely presumed that a lack of convergence on the central questions suggests that philosophy is not progressing at all, is not progressing fast enough, or is not progressing as fast as other disciplines, such as the natural sciences. The guiding presumption of this otherwise varied body of work is that, across philosophical domains, ideal philosophical progress is marked by significant convergence on the core philosophical questions.² Call this *the pro-convergence thesis*.

¹ For the view that there is at least some significant divergence on the core questions, see: Van Inwagen (2004, 2006), Brennan (2010), Dietrich (2010), Horwich (2012), Lycan (2013), Chalmers (2015), Kelly (2016: 374, Cf. 386), Daly (2017), Jackson (2017), Jones (2017: 230), Kamber (2017), Shand (2017), Walker (2017), Williamson (2017), Slezak (2018), and Arroyo (2019). Cf. Cappelen (2017) and Stoljar (2017a, 2017b).

² Those who implicitly or explicitly accept something like this view include: Glover (1988), Rescher (2014), Chalmers (2015), Brock (2017), Kamber (2017), Norris (2017), Stoljar (2017a, 2017b), Shand (2017), Williamson (2017), and Žanic (2020: 10). Cf. Green (2017: 207). Brennan (2010) supposes that without viewpoint convergence, philosophy cannot produce knowledge. Bright (2021) does not explicitly endorse the pro-convergence thesis, but he suggests that analytic philosophy's lack of consensus has contributed to a lack of confidence amongst its practitioners. In contrast, Blackford (2017: 11), Cappelen

The pro-convergence thesis is a normative view about what the ideal philosophical community would look like. This thesis is silent on the descriptive question of whether our own community currently exhibits viewpoint convergence, or ever will.

In this paper, I will suggest that there is some reason to reject the pro-convergence thesis and, in particular, some reason to favor *the anti-convergence thesis*, the view that, for at least some philosophical domains, significant viewpoint convergence is inconsistent with the aims of a philosophically ideal community.³ More specifically, I will defend the following disjunctive claim: Either, philosophical communities which evince viewpoint convergence are philosophically defective in at least some respect, or else, our current philosophical methods are so woefully inadequate to the task for which they are intended that no employment of those methods, no matter how extensive or rigorous, could possibly produce philosophical knowledge. Put otherwise: Either, viewpoint convergence is at odds with philosophical progress or else, philosophy as it is currently practiced is a deeply crude enterprise; we have never figured out, in even rough form, what kinds of tools we should use for the task at hand. On the latter view, call it *philosophical primitivism*, ours is a kind of pre-philosophical era, something akin to a pre-scientific era.

My argument centers on a thought experiment about two philosophical communities, one of which exhibits broad convergence on the core philosophical questions and one of which exhibits broad divergence on these questions. I will suggest that it is natural to think that the convergent community must be philosophically defective in some respect or other. Call this *the convergence intuition*. I will also suggest that it is natural to think that the divergent community might, for all that has been said, be an ideally philosophically flourishing one. Call this *the divergence intuition* (§1).

One strand of my argument is dedicated to considering what might best explain these intuitions. I will argue, by a process of excluding other feasible explanations, that exactly one of these explanations is correct: Either, the intuitions track reality, in that the convergent, in that the convergent community is in fact philosophically deficient in some respect or other, whereas the divergent community might be philosophically ideal. Or, these intuitions do not track reality. I will argue that the most plausible version of this explanation is one on which the reason we have

(2017), and Jones (2017) express sympathy with something like the anti-convergence thesis, as does Riggle (forthcoming), especially in the context of aesthetic discourse.

³ The pro-convergence thesis and the anti-convergence thesis do not exhaust logical options. On a view we might dub *convergence neutrality*, it is neither the case that ideal philosophical progress will be marked by viewpoint convergence nor the case that viewpoint convergence is a sign of philosophical defect. For work that emphasizes the value of viewpoint divergence in science, see, e.g., Longino and Doell (1983), Longino (1990), Fehr (2011), Muldoon (2013, esp. §6) and Gaus (2019a). For work that emphasizes the value of viewpoint divergence in the political context, see, e.g., Gaus (1997, 2010, 2017, 2019b), Muldoon et al. (2014), and Muldoon (2015, 2016, 2017). For feminist work that emphasizes the value of viewpoint divergence, see, e.g., Longino (2002) and Intemann (2011). For a helpful overview, see Grasswick (2018).

the convergence intuition is that our own philosophical methods are so woefully inadequate for the task at hand that we cannot see, even in rough form, how any employment of them might result in a community that is both ideally philosophically flourishing and convergent (§2).

A different strand of my argument does not appeal to the intuitions described. This strand is dialectically important since, as my own informal surveying of others would suggest, many philosophers share the relevant intuitions, but others do not. I therefore develop two distinct routes to the same disjunctive conclusion, one of which proceeds by way of the relevant intuitions, and one of which does not. The second route proceeds by way of explaining the following datum, a datum I take it that even those who reject the relevant intuition would wish to explain: It is extremely hard to imagine how an ideally philosophically flourishing community of arbitrarily large size and duration might reach convergence, given anything like our current methods (§2).

I close by drawing out some implications of the thesis, focusing on its implications for the pro-convergence thesis (§3). I suggest that the conclusion defended places the pro-convergence thesis on the defensive. For, in order to accept the thesis that an ideal philosophical community will converge on the central questions, she must also accept the rather surprising and, some might say, disturbing claim that our philosophical community is methodologically primitive, in that our current methods are fundamentally inadequate for the philosophical task.

To the extent that this paper aims to put the pro-convergence theorist on the defensive, the paper has an overall thrust of supporting the anti-convergence thesis, on which ideal philosophical progress does not require convergence on first-order views. Some might suppose that this view in turn has radical implications about what philosophy is, or what it might be. For, if ideal philosophical progress is not marked by viewpoint convergence, then there is some reason to think that philosophy does not have collective knowledge as an aim. Drawing from this result, some might wonder whether this view in turn leaves philosophy with any epistemic aim whatsoever, or whether it rather commits us to the view that philosophy is a wholly non-epistemic enterprise, much like art.

As it turns out, and as I briefly discuss in §3, the anti-convergence thesis does not, on its own, preclude that philosophy might have a collective epistemic aim. This aim might be knowledge of higher-order philosophical facts, instead of knowledge of first-order facts, or it might (perhaps) be some epistemic status vis-à-vis the first-order facts other than knowledge, such as understanding. The point is merely that the thesis defended leaves much open in the way of the nature of philosophy.

In a similar vein, it might be tempting to suppose that the anti-convergence view all but implies that philosophy forms a natural contrast with the natural sciences. For, it might be supposed that ideal scientific communities will exhibit convergence on their central questions. Suffice it to say, that I take this question, of whether philosophy is relevantly similar to or different than the natural sciences, to be much more fraught than it would at first appear. In particular, I take it to be not at all clear whether ideal scientific communities might converge on the central questions

and thus not obvious whether philosophy is in the relevant respect similar to or rather different than the natural sciences. The present paper is simply neutral on this important question.

Some small points of terminology before proceeding: I tend to employ the term ‘convergence’ instead of the more commonly employed term ‘agreement’ and ‘divergence’ instead of the more commonly employed term ‘disagreement.’ I take ‘convergence’ and ‘divergence’ to be neutral on substantive questions about whether, for instance, the relevant questions have answers, whereas ‘agreement’ and ‘disagreement’ to potentially suggest certain answers to them.

And finally, some clarifications about the paper’s theses: First, the *pro-convergence thesis* is the view that ideal philosophical progress is marked by *significant* convergence on the core philosophical questions, whereas the anti-convergence thesis is the view that ideal philosophical progress is at odds with *significant* convergence on the core philosophical questions. I leave it deliberately open how much convergence constitutes significant convergence, but significance should be understood in the same way in the characterization of both theses. For simplicity, I routinely use ‘convergence’ as short-hand for ‘significant convergence,’ but the reader should bear in mind that it is significant convergence that is relevant to the paper’s core claims, not convergence *simpliciter*.

Second, note that the pro-convergence thesis is the view that *across philosophical domains*, ideal philosophical progress is marked by significant convergence on the core philosophical questions. Note likewise that the anti-convergence thesis is the view that for *at least some* philosophical domains, significant viewpoint convergence is inconsistent with the aims of a philosophically ideal community. It is thus consistent with the anti-convergence thesis that some philosophical domains – perhaps formal semantics, for instance – are such that significant viewpoint convergence on their questions is consistent with ideal philosophical flourishing. In the paper, I tend to focus on examples from traditional metaphysics and epistemology, but I am deliberately neutral on the question of which domains of philosophy are governed by the anti-convergence thesis. The thesis should rather be read as the existential claim that *there exist at least some* domains in philosophy which are such that significant convergence with respect to their questions is inconsistent with philosophical flourishing.

1 Two Philosophical Communities

Consider two different philosophical communities.

Call the first community *the convergent community*. Let this community be arbitrarily long-lived and arbitrarily large. This group of philosophers exhibits, over an arbitrarily long period of time, broad convergence, though not strict consensus, on most or all of the most fundamental philosophical questions, such as: *What can we know? How should we live? What is there?* And so on. This isn’t to say that these philosophers don’t diverge in any of their views. On the contrary, they have sophisticated, well-argued positions, but these differences in viewpoint contrast with a background agreement on the core questions. For instance, perhaps the vast majority of these thinkers take a contextualist approach to the question of external world skepticism but disagree amongst

themselves about which version of the view to favor and why. Or perhaps the vast majority of these thinkers think free will is compatible with determinism about the laws of nature but disagree amongst themselves about why this is the case. Or perhaps the vast majority of these thinkers accept that morality is wholly a matter of optimizing pleasure but disagree about which variant of this view to adopt.

This community produces countless monographs, edited volumes, journals, conferences, seminars, email exchanges, book symposia, lectures, and in-person conversations. In some sense, this community is vibrant, generating what appear to be compelling reasons for myriad positions; it is just that there are few degrees of freedom between these positions.

Call the second community *the divergent community*. Let this community be arbitrarily long-lived and arbitrarily large. Members of the second community evince, over an arbitrarily long period of time, widespread divergence on the central philosophical questions, struggling to come to anything like consensus on even the most fundamental questions: *What can we know? how should we live? what is there?* And so on. To these and other questions, these thinkers manage to provide a dizzying array of answers, seemingly staking out every logically possible position—and then some.⁴ These philosophers do not shun strange views. For instance, some argue that they themselves do not exist. Others maintain that *only* they themselves exist.⁵

The divergent community is an intellectually vibrant one. It produces countless monographs, edited volumes, journals, conferences, seminars, email exchanges, book symposia, lectures, and in-person conversations. Still, this community's approaches to the important questions never stabilize, at least not for long. For short periods, it might *seem* that most of its members have converged on one answer to an important question. But no sooner is this stability achieved than does a new cohort invariably takes over, suggesting an altogether different tack, usually one which upturns the most precious assumptions of the previous generation. For instance, for a time, one of them managed to convince a large number of the others that it would be a bad thing to live your whole life in a machine.⁶ But over time, that consensus crumbled, as others stepped in to suggest that such a life might not be so bad.⁷

⁴ I respectfully refer to Priest (1985, 2000, 2002, 2006).

⁵ Unger (1979); Hare (2009)

⁶ Nozick (1974: 42–45)

⁷ Hewitt (2010), Weijers (2013, 2014); Cf. Lin (2016).

Since some of these examples are from our community, one might suppose that I'm taking our own philosophical community to be a kind of divergent community. In fact, I think our own philosophical community has elements of both the convergent and divergent communities. As {removed for anonymous review} has pointed out to me, the range of views taken seriously in our own community is severely constrained, which suggests that it shares something with the convergent community. To use his helpful example, one would be hard pressed to find an academic philosopher who defends the view

Might either of these communities be a philosophically ideal one? To my mind, it is obvious that the convergent community is not a philosophically ideal community, which isn't to say that it is at all obvious what makes this community deficient. To suggest that there is seemingly *something* less-than-ideal about this community isn't to deny that this community might have some philosophical virtues, even some important ones. For instance, the arguments produced by this community might be novel or interesting in their own right. The kinds of considerations they collectively raise might be rich and suasive. But insofar as this community exhibits chronic and pervasive convergence on the core questions—*what can we know? how should we live?* and so on—it seems somehow to have foundered in at least some part of its philosophical mission. Indeed, insofar as this community's convergence on important questions resembles something like dogmatism, one might even wonder whether this community is a community of *philosophers* at all, or whether it would be more apt to characterize it instead merely as a religious community or some other group organized around doctrine.⁸ Insofar as we *can* imagine that this community is one of philosophers, it seems to have fallen short of the philosophical ideal.

As mentioned, to claim that the convergent community is, philosophically speaking, less than ideal is not to make any more specific claim about what makes this community philosophically non-ideal. In particular, it is not to claim that the fact that this community is convergent is *itself* a defect. This claim is consistent with the view that viewpoint convergence is, in its own right, a philosophical defect, but it is also consistent with the view that some other trait of this community, one which is different than convergence but goes along with it, is the source of the community's philosophical defectiveness. For instance, perhaps a kind of closed-mindedness on the part of this community's members both causes this community to evince viewpoint convergence and is the source of this community's philosophical defectiveness.⁹

At this point, many readers will immediately have thought of several possible ways of explaining away this intuition—that is, of granting that we have this intuition but of explaining it in terms of something other than philosophical defectiveness. For instance, perhaps we simply suspect something is wrong with the community because it is different than ours; perhaps that mere fact of difference makes us uncomfortable. Or, perhaps, we presume that there must be some inapt social limitations on free thought in this community, and it is this presumption which makes

that we ought to de-industrialize society and abolish large-scale technologies, even though this position—*anarcho-primitivism*—is coherent and has something to be said for it.

⁸ Of course, many historical communities of philosophers have been organized around a shared religion, culture, or other set of values. The suggestion is that the fact of this group's marked dogmatism might incline us to wonder whether the group is *merely* a religious group and not (also) a philosophical one.

⁹ Blackford (2017: 11) expresses sympathy with the thought that a convergent community seems philosophically untoward, suggesting that such a community 'smells too much of past situations when certain doctrines were orthodox and everything else was heretical.'

us uneasy about this community. I will shortly consider and defuse these and other routes of explaining away this intuition. For now, the point is just that we have *some* kind of response that there seems to be something ‘off’ about this community.

What of the second, divergent community? Might it be an ideally philosophically flourishing one? To my mind, this community is the only of the two which has any chance of being a philosophically ideal one. Without more information about the kinds of activities this community engages in, we can’t be sure whether this community is a philosophically flourishing one, but the mere fact of its divergence does not give us reason to think it is somehow philosophically defective. Call the intuition that the divergent community is not necessarily a philosophically defective one *the divergence intuition*.

Going forward, I will largely set the divergence intuition to one side, as the argument centers on how best to explain the convergence intuition. My reason for drawing out both intuitions in this initial stage is both for the sake of a helpful contrast and because I take the divergence intuition to have independent value for metaphilosophical theorizing. If we take this intuition at face value, then a community can be ideal which diverges profoundly on the core questions. While this result is not needed for the paper’s thesis, it might well become important in an ultimate theory of philosophy’s aims.

Let us turn, then, to possible routes of explaining away the convergence intuition. Perhaps if we further describe the community in relevant ways, while holding fixed its convergence, the intuition will dissolve. If this is so, then neither convergence nor a trait associated with it explains our intuition, which suggests in turn that the intuition does not demand a metaphilosophical explanation.

On one view, one already mentioned, the convergence intuition derives from a kind of stereotype about what our own community is like. We suppose that philosophers disagree; that’s just what they (that is, we ourselves) do, and we therefore feel unease about any community which veers so dramatically from this familiar model. Perhaps this unfamiliarity even stems from the more widely described *status quo* bias, on which, very roughly, in at least some contexts, subjects exhibit a preference that certain things remain the same, just for the sake of remaining the same.¹⁰

Here is one reason I think the ‘status quo’ explanation should be regarded with at least suspicion. This bias does not hold across domains, with the result that we should at least like to know why the philosophical case is special, such that it does hold of it. Here is a case in which the ‘status quo’ explanation does not hold. Consider the scientific community before modern developments in aviation. Technology-enabled flight was a radical impossibility for scientists from previous eras, a mere fantasy. Nonetheless, this fact did not prevent a great many of them from longing for its possibility. Think, for instance, of da Vinci dreaming of machines which propelled humans through the air. Many theorists foresaw and hoped for this change, even if they had no idea,

¹⁰ For a classic overview, see Kahneman (1991). I thank {removed for anonymous review} for pressing me on this point.

even in very rough form, about how to go about it, even if they thought it practically impossible, and even though a world in which humans traveled through the sky diverged dramatically from their current state of affairs. Of course, the case of a convergent philosophical community is importantly different from this example in many potentially significant ways. The point is merely that there are many domains in which 'status quo' bias does *not* hold, so, before adopting this explanation of the convergence intuition, we might wish for more reason to think that the philosophical case is a context in which this preference for the familiar does hold.

Here is a far stronger reason to think that status quo bias does not explain the convergence intuition. As mentioned, many theorists profess frustration and even embarrassment with philosophy's current state, which many of them take to be marked by divergence. These theorists' responses suggest a kind of discomfort with the status quo of our discipline; they openly long for it to be different. These responses suggest that, for whatever reason, a preference for the status quo simply does not hold when it comes to judgments about philosophical communities.

Here is another way one might attempt to explain away the convergence intuition. Perhaps what is behind the intuition is that, in imagining the convergent community, we implicitly suppose that it is a community in which free thought is constricted. On this view, the convergence exhibited is the result of a kind of enforced dogmatism, and we might reasonably repel from such thought policing. If this is right, then further describing the case so as to specify that the convergence in question is not the result of inapt social limitations should dissolve the intuition. So, let us suppose, then, that the views formed by those in the convergent community are not coerced via political sanction or social threat. They are 'freely' formed, or as freely formed as any view can be. Would we still have the intuition that the convergence is somehow inapt?

For my part, the intuition stubbornly persists even when I imagine that the relevant philosophical community is an unstifled, intellectually liberated one. At most, this reimagining of the community slightly deepens the puzzle about how exactly the community might come about, but it does not dissolve the core intuition that philosophically speaking, there is something 'off' about this community.

Here is another way an opponent of the convergence intuition might attempt to re-describe the case in an attempt to dissolve the intuition. Suppose that the members of this community themselves do not take questions such as *what we can we know?* and *how should we live?* to be the most important questions for their community. Suppose rather that the members of this community take the points of dispute between them, for instance, about which version of anti-skeptical contextualism to endorse, to be the central questions of their discipline. If this is the case, then perhaps this community is a philosophically ideal one, at least by its own lights, insofar as it evinces divergence on what its members take to be the central questions.¹¹

¹¹ One might even be tempted to think that this is how the natural sciences proceed; they reach rough convergence on certain, 'starting' core questions and then move on to disputes arising in light of that

I must confess to finding it difficult to imagine that a philosophically ideal community might take the central questions of its discipline to be questions such as *which version of anti-skeptical contextualism is correct?* instead of questions such as *what can we know?* To my mind, such a community has erred, insofar as it has ignored the deep questions to focus exclusively on some shallower ones. This isn't to say that the shallower ones aren't philosophically valuable. But a community that treats these questions as paramount seems somehow to have aimed just to the left of what really matters and has, at least in this much, failed in its philosophical mission.

Here is yet another way an opponent of the convergence intuition might attempt to dissolve the intuition. Suppose that we stipulate that the members of the convergent community are open-minded when it comes to the central questions: *What can we know? how should we live?* and so on. They do not pre-judge these questions. Nevertheless, they all come to agree through compelling reason that (say) contextualist approaches to skepticism are best, moral action is wholly a matter of optimizing pleasure, and so on.¹² Would we presume that this community is necessarily philosophically defective in some way?

I find it plausible that a suitably small philosophical community whose members all come to converge, through compelling argument, on the answers to the core philosophical questions, isn't necessarily a philosophically defective one. Indeed, this is what we might call a *school of thought*, and there is nothing intuitively problematic about a philosophical community's containing different schools of thought, where each school's members tend to converge on answers to the large questions.

But the convergence intuition does not concern a school of thought. The intuition concerns an arbitrarily large and long-lived community, and the intuition amounts to the claim that if this community as a whole is such that its members chronically and consistently converge on answers to the central philosophical questions, there is intuitively something less than wholly philosophically ideal about it. Consider, for instance, a community of millions of philosophers and one that spans several centuries. It seems to me that once we fix our sights on this arbitrarily large and long-lived philosophical community, that the intuition remains that this community must be a philosophically defective one whose members chronically and consistently converge on the central questions. This is so even if these members somehow reach this convergence via compelling argument.

Here my opponent might stand firm. She might insist that even if we fix our sights on an arbitrarily large and long-lived convergent community, there is nothing philosophically untoward about this community, so long as its members reach this convergence by compelling reasons.

convergence, and these new questions become the new core questions of the discipline. Special thanks to {removed for anonymous review} for pressing me on this point.

¹² Special thanks to {removed for anonymous review} for pressing me on this point.

Perhaps it is difficult to imagine *how* this might be achieved, but if convergence were achieved in this way, there would be no reason to think the community a philosophically deficient one.

For my own part, I struggle to feel the force of the suggestion that an arbitrarily large and long-lived community which evinced viewpoint convergence might be a philosophically ideal one, even if that convergence is achieved by compelling reasons. The mere fact of the convergence inclines me toward suspicion, to think that this community must be philosophically defective in some way or other. But instead of mongering intuitions, I will offer an opponent of this stripe something else – a different route by which to reach the paper’s conclusion. Even if the intuitions canvassed do not cry out for explanation, there is a different datum, one I take it that all must grapple with: This is the fact that it is extremely difficult to imagine how a very large and long-lived community might, as a result of compelling reasons, reach stable and pervasive convergence on the central questions.¹³ *Why* is this difficult for us to imagine? I sometimes call this difficulty *the relevant imaginative difficulty*. In the next section, I develop both strands of the argument simultaneously. I will argue that in order to explain the convergence intuition (or else, the relevant imaginative difficulty), we must ultimately accept the paper’s disjunctive conclusion: Either, ideal philosophical progress is not marked by significant convergence on the first-order questions or else ours is a philosophically primitive state.

2 What Explains the Convergence Intuition? (Or the Imaginative Difficulty?)

What explains our responses to the communities described? Why do we regard the convergent community with the suspicion that it has somehow foundered in its philosophical mission, whereas we don’t regard the divergent community this way? (Or else, why do we find it difficult to imagine how a convergent community might come about, via anything like cogent reasons?) On a straightforward view, these intuitions track reality. On this explanation, the convergent community *is* philosophically deficient in some respect or other, whether in virtue of its convergence or in virtue of some other trait that goes along with convergence. At the same time, the divergent community isn’t necessarily philosophically defective, at least not in virtue of its divergence or whatever traits go along with that divergence. If this is right, ideal philosophical progress is not marked by viewpoint convergence. On the contrary, it eschews it, as viewpoint convergence is a sign that a philosophical community has faltered in at least some respect.

¹³ One might wonder whether this scenario is not just difficult to imagine but triggers imaginative resistance. For a recent discussion, see Gendler and Lao (2015). Jones (2017: 231-233) suggests that practically speaking, such convergence could only be accidental, and thus presumably not the result of suasive reasons.

I take it, then, that this is one way to explain the intuitions about the communities. Let's focus on the convergence intuition in particular. On this view, the convergence intuition tracks reality; ideal philosophical progress is inconsistent with viewpoint convergence. But of course, this is not the only one way of explaining the intuition. One might instead attempt to show that the intuition is somehow in error, that it does not track reality. Ideally, the claim that this intuition is in error would be accompanied by some explanation of why we have the intuition, given that it does not track reality. Why do we regard convergent philosophical communities with something like suspicion if they are not, in fact, philosophically defective?

As mentioned in the previous section, there is a kind of theorist who lacks altogether the convergence intuition. She will maintain that this intuition does not hold of a community whose members reach their shared conclusions via something like cogent reasons. I have suggested that this theorist must nevertheless explain something else: Why is it difficult for us to imagine how a very large and long-lived community might, as a result of stable reasons, reach stable and pervasive convergence on the central questions?

In what follows, I will suggest that both the theorist who wishes to explain away the convergence intuition and the theorist who denies that we have this intuition, but who concedes the relevant imaginative difficulty, should accept the following view: Our current philosophical tools are so crude so as to make it very difficult to imagine how an ideal philosophical community might converge on the central questions *using anything like our current tools*. For the theorist who accepts that we have the convergence intuition but denies that this intuition is correct, this is how she should explain why we have this intuition in the first place. For the theorist who thinks we don't have this intuition, this is how she should explain the residual datum that it is difficult for us to imagine how a community might reach convergence via reasons.

Consider, first, the theorist who thinks that we do have the intuition that the convergent community is philosophically deficient but who maintains that this intuition is incorrect. What might explain why we have this intuition? On one view this theorist might propose—one I will shortly criticize—our current philosophical tools are usable to achieve convergence, but the reason we judge the convergent community to be deficient is because we fail to imagine in sufficiently vivid detail how some sufficiently extensive or expert employment of our tools might be employed in the service of philosophical convergence. On this view, were we to properly imagine a sufficiently extensive or adroit employment of some or all of our current tools—such as the method of cases, reflective equilibrium, experimental philosophy, formal methods, conceptual engineering, applied approaches, historical work, and comparative methods—we would no longer suppose the convergent community to be philosophically deficient in some respect. The intuition results from our imagining the case in an impoverished way, not from the fact that the convergent community is in fact defective.

Notice that this same explanation is also available to the theorist who denies that we have the convergence intuition but who grants that it is difficult for us to imagine how, using anything

like cogent reasons, a philosophical community might reach convergence. This theorist too might suggest that what explains this imaginative difficulty is that we aren't imagining a sufficiently rich employment of some or all of our current methods. Were we to do this, it wouldn't be difficult to imagine, at least in very rough form, how a community might converge as the result of compelling reasons.¹⁴

One reason to doubt that the convergence intuition (or else the difficulty in imagining how a convergent community might result from cogent reasons) is explained merely by our own imaginative shortcomings is that it just does not seem that any amount of imagining 'more' of our current methods will result in the view that the convergent community might be philosophically ideal (nor does it make it easier to imagine how such a community might result from cogent reasons). I invite the reader to perform this imaginative experiment themselves. Try to imagine as vividly as you can a philosophical community which employs our methods, any of them, in any combination of your choosing, but in a far, far more sophisticated way than we do. Indeed, imagine that these methods are as sophisticated as you can. For instance, you might imagine a community whose advances in the method of cases, conceptual analysis, experimental philosophy, formal methods, comparative methods, conceptual engineering, and the like are immeasurably more sophisticated than ours, but are still, at least in very rough outline, the same kinds of methods we employ. Does this exercise lessen the strength of the intuition that the convergent community is defective in some respect? Or, does it make it easier to imagine how a community might reach convergence via cogent reasons? In my own case, I find the answer to both questions to be an easy 'no.'

Moreover, there is a ready explanation of why it just seems infeasible that were we merely to imagine a convergent community that employs our own methods in a sufficiently extensive of skillful way, then we would judge that this community is potentially a philosophically ideal one (or else would easily be able to imagine how a community might converge via reasons). The imaginative result draws on our own empirical evidence that in our discipline, increases in how extensively or skillfully our tools are employed has not tended to result in greater convergence on the core questions. On the contrary, in at least some cases, they have tended to result in greater *divergence* on the core questions.

Consider, for instance, the debate over the nature of truth. Classically, some philosophers have defended a pragmatist view of truth, others a correspondence view, and still others an identity view.¹⁵ It might have turned out that the more recent infusion of metaphilosophical concerns into this dispute resulted in greater convergence on one of these views. For instance, it might have

¹⁴ Williamson (2010) is perhaps amenable to this suggestion. Cf. Maudlin (2007) and Cherry (2017: 23). Likewise, Rawls seems to suggest that reflective equilibrium, ideally employed, will result in viewpoint convergence (1974: 290, 1999: 301). Cf. Lewis (1983: x-xi) and Kelly and McGrath (2010: 334-341).

¹⁵ For an overview, see Glanzberg (2021).

turned out that clarifying the aims of the debate somehow resulted in more philosophers becoming (say) pragmatists about truth.

As it turns out, the metaphilosophical turn in this debate has not resolved the dispute. In fact, as it turns out, a self-consciously metaphilosophical stance has helped to generate new ways for philosophers to disagree about the core question. For instance, it has made it possible for some theorists to develop and defend *pluralism* about truth, on which there are multiple correct views of truth.¹⁶ I conclude that there is some empirical evidence from our own case to doubt that our current methods, even when employed especially extensively or adroitly, might result in an ideally flourishing, convergent philosophical community. This empirically grounded knowledge is plausibly what makes it infeasible that, were we just to imagine ‘more’ of our current methods, the convergence intuition would dissolve (or else that it would be easy to imagine how convergence might result from cogent reasons).

If the convergence intuition (or else the difficulty in imagining a community that converges as a result of cogent reasons) is not due to our own failure to envision a sufficiently extensive or adroit employment of our current methods, then what might explain it? I suggest that we take seriously the following explanation: Our current methods are so woefully ill-equipped for the task at hand, so crude, that no philosophically ideal community could, by employing them, reach convergence. This isn’t to say that there couldn’t be a philosophically ideal, convergent community. But this community must use tools that are radically different than our own, tools that are perhaps not even imaginable from our current intellectual perspective. For if they were so imaginable, it would be hard to explain why we have the intuition that the convergent community is philosophically defective in some respect (or else why we struggle to imagine how a community might, via compelling reasons, reach convergence).

On the proposed explanation, viewpoint convergence *is* consistent with a philosophically ideal community, but our own methods are unusable for this end. So, no amount of: the method of cases, or reflective equilibrium, or experimental philosophy, or formal methods, or conceptual engineering, or applied approaches, or historical work, or comparative methods, or any other of our current tools, individually or in combination, will ever result in a philosophically ideal, convergent community. The theorist who accepts that we have the convergence intuition but who thinks it does not track reality can appeal to this view to explain why we have this incorrect view; we have it because we’re imagining that this community uses tools that are, at least in rough form, *like ours*, but it is only if this community uses tools that are not even roughly like ours that it might be ideally philosophically flourishing. Likewise, the theorist who denies that we have the convergence intuition but who concedes that it is difficult for us to imagine how cogent reasons might result in convergence can appeal to this view to explain this imaginative difficulty. It is because

¹⁶ Lynch (e.g. 2001, 2009) and Wright (1992, 999). Indeed, Wright (2013) argues that there are different forms of pluralism worth taking seriously, further proliferating available views.

we're imagining that this community uses tools that are, at least in rough form, *like ours* that it is not easy to imagine how a community might reach convergence by way of cogent reasons. Such a community is possible, but only if it uses tools that are not even roughly like ours.

I have argued that there are two plausible explanations of the convergence intuition. On the first, the intuition tracks reality; the convergent community is less than philosophically ideal in some respect. This explanation just is the anti-convergence thesis. On the second, the intuition does not track reality, as a convergent community needn't be philosophically defective. Nevertheless, we have this intuition because it reflects the fact that no employment of our current philosophical methods, no matter how extensive or skillful, can be used to reach convergence. This explanation just is a form of philosophical primitivism.¹⁷

I conclude that we have good reason to accept the paper's disjunctive thesis, which says that exactly one of the following claims is true:

THE ANTI-CONVERGENCE THESIS

Any arbitrarily large and long-lived philosophy community whose members converge on the core questions is philosophically deficient in at least some respect.

PHILOSOPHICAL PRIMITIVISM

We are in a kind of pre-philosophical state, in that our current methods are not even remotely suited for the task at hand.

3 Some Conclusions

What would follow from the paper's disjunctive thesis? According to the first disjunct, the anti-convergence thesis, ideal philosophical progress is not marked by viewpoint convergence. On the contrary, only the divergent community stands any chance of being philosophically ideal. The convergent community is deficient, either in virtue of its convergence or in virtue of some trait that goes along with that convergence. If this is right, we needn't fret over our own discipline's apparent lack of convergence on the core questions. Whatever our failures as a philosophical community – and these are no doubt many – the fact that we diverge on the core questions is not one of them.

As it turns out, the anti-convergence thesis is consistent with several broader views about the answerability of philosophical questions, including: the view that philosophical questions

¹⁷ I say that this explanation is a form of primitivism because, as characterized, primitivism is the view that our current methods are unusable for the philosophical task *whatever that may be*. Primitivism thus does not suppose the ideally successful performance of philosophy to require viewpoint convergence. However, the pro-convergence theorist will understand the ideally successful performance of philosophy to entail convergence.

have multiple true answers, the view that philosophical questions have no true answers, and the view that philosophical questions have unique true answers of a kind which, for whatever reason, cannot be collectively known by human philosophers. At the same time, the anti-convergence thesis is inconsistent with the view that philosophical questions have unique true answers of the kind which can be *collectively* known by human philosophers.¹⁸ This view is consistent with the view that philosophy has an epistemic aim, so long as that aim is not collective knowledge of first-order facts. The aim might rather knowledge of higher-order facts, such as facts about how various views hang together, or an aim of understanding of first-order philosophical facts.

The second horn of the disjunctive thesis is philosophical primitivism. On this view, our current tools for doing philosophy are wholly inapt for the task at hand, such that no amount of employing them, no matter how extensively or expertly, will result in philosophical success. On this view, we seek an enlightenment we will not find, unless we are willing to charter a radically different path. Indeed, this path is perhaps not even fathomable from our current intellectual perspective. For it is not clear why, if it were so fathomable, that we should resist the thought that the convergent community might be an ideally philosophically flourishing one.¹⁹

If the paper's disjunctive thesis is correct, then it turns out that to presume that ideal philosophical progress will be marked by viewpoint coherence is to be committed to an extremely pessimistic view about our present state of inquiry: None of our current methods, no matter how well developed, will result in ideal philosophical flourishing.

Viewed in one light, this paper's thesis creates a problem for the theorist who presumes that ideal philosophical progress is marked by viewpoint convergence. The problem is this: In order to embrace this view, she must admit that our present intellectual state is almost unfathomably crude. She must, in other words, accept primitivism about our current discipline. Notably, primitivism goes far beyond the view that our current strategies have not yet helped us realize the aims of philosophy. Primitivism says that our methods won't work, no matter how extensively we employ them or how skillfully; they are altogether the wrong tools for the project. Many will find it hard to accept this view.

¹⁸ See Lewis (1983: x-xi) for the suggestion that philosophical questions have unique answers even though philosophers will evince viewpoint divergence. See Rosen (2001: 71-2) for the suggestion that divergence is consistent with there being a fact of the matter and Rosen (1993: 159) for the suggestion that, despite disagreement, a philosophical debate might be 'tractable' given 'considerations of overall theoretical utility, beauty, coherence with settled doctrine, and so on.' See Kelly and McGrath (2010: 334-341) for the view that Rawlsian reflective equilibrium will not result in convergence, even if philosophical questions have unique answers. (Kelly and McGrath do not say whether they think their preferred normative version of the method will result in convergence, see pp. 346-354.) See Nozick (1983: Introduction), Golding (2011), and Pigliucci (2017) for discussion of views on which philosophy has some epistemic aim other than truth or knowledge. See Ross (forthcoming) for a framework that understands both philosophical and scientific progress in terms of dynamical community inquiry.

¹⁹ For a pessimistic view about the possibility of acquiring such a method, see Daly (2017).

Viewed in this light, one aim of this paper is to put the pro-convergence theorist on the defensive; it is to pose a challenge for her view or at least, to point out that her view has an unexpected cost, namely that, in order to accept this view, one must suppose our own philosophical community to be a profoundly methodologically primitive one. At the same time, this paper has said nothing about the positive reasons one might have to think ideal philosophical progress will be marked by viewpoint coherence. Of course, there are many such reasons, many of them very compelling. While it is not the aim of this paper to attempt to disarm these motivations, I will close with a very brief reflection on just one of them.

Some philosophers view their own discipline as aimed at collective knowledge of philosophical truths, and they see viewpoint coherence as required in order for the attainment of such collective knowledge. This in turn is what undergirds their presumption that ideal philosophical progress will be marked by viewpoint convergence. But, why think knowledge of first-order philosophical truths is an aim of philosophy? Here is David Chalmers on this point:

I think a case can be made that attaining the truth is the primary aim at least of many parts of philosophy, such as analytic philosophy. After all, most philosophy, or at least most analytic philosophy, consists in putting forward theses as true and arguing for their truth. 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: What is the relation between mind and body? What is the nature of reality and how can we know about it? Certainly this is the primary motivation in my own case.²⁰

While Chalmers refers to truth in this passage, in the broader context in which he argues, he makes clear that he thinks knowledge, and not merely truth, is an aim of philosophy.²¹ In what follows, I will construe his argument in terms of knowledge.

The first reason Chalmers gives for thinking philosophy aims at knowledge is that certain aspects of philosophical work suggest that philosophers view their own project this way. Chalmers is of course correct that philosophers routinely present claims as true and adduce arguments in favor of those claims. But it is worth noting that running alongside these activities, we sometimes find commentary suggesting that the very authors engaging in these activities do not see knowledge of philosophical truths as an aim. This fact considerably complicates the picture. Consider, for instance, the way Robert Nozick describes the aim of his own book in the introduction to *Philosophical Explanations*:

²⁰ Chalmers (2015: 14). Van Inwagen (2004: 339) similarly attributes to other philosophers the view that there can be successful arguments, though he himself rejects this view. Cf. Nozick (1981: 13).

²¹ Chalmers (2015: 14-15).

This book puts forward its explanations in a very tentative spirit; not only do I not ask you to believe they are correct, I do not think it important for me to believe them correct, either.²²

In a similar vein, here is Ward E. Jones' perspective on how philosophers view their enterprise:

Of course, philosophers would like to have some of their colleagues agree with them, but they do not expect community-wide agreement. The expectations of the individual philosopher are different from those of scientists in a deep and revealing way. More important than agreement, to the philosopher, is *attention*; she wishes to be read and discussed by her colleagues, to have her claims found *interesting* (Jones 2017: 231, emphases original).²³

There are some domains within philosophy with respect to which the sentiments expressed by Nozick and Jones do not seem apt. Think, for instance, of applied ethics.²⁴ Surely, many applied ethicists *do* think it important that their readers agree with them and *do* hope for community-wide agreement (whether or not they expect it is another matter). Here it is worth reminding the reader that the anti-convergence thesis is the claim that *there are at least some* domains of philosophy which are such that convergence with respect to their question is inconsistent with ideal philosophical flourishing. I take it that Nozick's and Jones' remarks will resonate, for at least some readers, with respect to at least some provinces of philosophy, whether or not they seem equally apt for all of the discipline's sub-fields.

The second reason Chalmers gives for thinking philosophy aims at knowledge is that many philosophers, including—as he reports—himself, pursue philosophy in order to acquire philosophical knowledge. No doubt Chalmers is correct that many philosophers share this motivation. But, I suspect that many other philosophers will find this motivation missing in themselves, even alien. In the very least, I suspect that many philosophers will find that this motivation, if present, stands alongside others, some of which seemingly stand in tension with this one.

For my own part, when I try to reflect honestly on why I have found philosophy worth pursuing, I think it's possible that I can identify—at least in some periods of my life—something

²² Nozick (1981: 42). If we assume that knowledge requires belief, Nozick's claim is that producing knowledge, whether in himself or in his readers, is not the aim of his work. Similarly, Wilson (2017: 102) suggests philosophical claims should be presented as 'provisional.' See also Jones (2017: 231). For a recent discussion of how philosophy might proceed without belief, see Barnett (2019).

²³ Jones does not disavow that collective knowledge might be the aim of philosophy, but insofar as convergence is required for this, his view is inconsistent with this being an aim of philosophy.

²⁴ I thank {removed for anonymous review} for pressing me on this point.

of the view that philosophy is a route to truth or knowledge.²⁵ Haven't I thought philosophy could help me learn important new things, and perhaps even be able to share these things with others? And yet, I'm not entirely sure whether this has ever been a central reason I found philosophy worth pursuing, or even any part of my reason at all. For no sooner did I enter philosophy than I learned what every philosopher quickly learns: Every argument has an interesting rebuttal, every objection a cogent rejoinder, every view a coherent and compelling rival. I learned that philosophy is never done, that there is a kind of shocking endlessness to it, that as soon as one thinks one has made some progress, it all falls apart. I suspect, in fact, that this is a large part of what I found so compelling about the discipline, the fact that its questions were seemingly so urgent and yet seemingly *unsettle-able*.

No doubt Chalmers is right that in pursuing philosophy, many philosophers have been driven by a desire for knowledge. But this datum, however significant, should be made to stand alongside this other one: that every philosophical argument can seemingly be met with a suasive reply from the other side, that often this reply comes from oneself against one's very own work, that many philosophers are keenly aware of this aspect of their discipline, and that at least some of them see the unsettle-ability of philosophy as somehow linked to the value of the discipline.²⁶ I leave it as a further question how these points of data should be made to hang together in an ultimate theory of philosophy's aims.²⁷

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²⁵ More particularly, the relevant question is why I or any other philosopher has thought the pursuit of philosophy to have *intrinsic* value. The question of why philosophers are motivated to pursue their discipline isn't the right one because these motivations will often be instrumental; pursuing philosophy helps us forget other problems, is absorbing and enjoyable, beats being a bartender, and so on.

²⁶ For the view that there are no successful philosophical arguments concerning the core questions, see, e.g., Lewis (1983: x) and Van Inwagen (2009 :105, cf. 34). Cf. Ballantyne (2014) and Kelly and McGrath (2017).

²⁷ For extremely helpful discussion on this paper and related topics, I am indebted to: {removed for anonymous review}.

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