

# 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 suggest that we must reject the pro-convergence thesis in order to escape the claim that our current philosophical methods are so woefully inadequate to the task of philosophy that no employment of those methods, no matter how extensive or rigorous, could possibly produce philosophical success. On this view, call it *philosophical primitivism*, ours is a kind of pre-philosophical era, something akin to a pre-scientific era. The overall 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 disagreement is.<sup>1</sup> In recent metaphilosophy, many theorists treat the fact that philosophers persistently fail to converge on the answers they give to these questions to be a matter of concern, even embarrassment. In particular, it is widely presumed that a lack of convergence on answers to 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 body of work is that, across philosophical domains, late stages of philosophical inquiry will ideally be marked by significant convergence on answers to the core philosophical questions.<sup>2</sup> Call this

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<sup>1</sup> For the view that there is at least some significant divergence on the core questions, see: Van Inwagen (2004, 2006), Brennan (2010), Dietrich (2010), Lycan (2013), Chalmers (2015), Kelly (2016: 374, Cf. 386), 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).

<sup>2</sup> Those who implicitly or explicitly accept something like this view include: 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). Bright (2021) does not explicitly endorse the pro-convergence thesis, but he

*the pro-convergence thesis*. The pro-convergence thesis is a normative view about what a philosophically flourishing community will look like in later or mature phases of inquiry. This thesis does not rule out that initial or intermediate phases of inquiry might, even ideally, feature significant divergence. This thesis is also silent on the descriptive question of whether our own community currently exhibits viewpoint convergence, or ever will.

In this paper, I will suggest we should reject the pro-convergence thesis in favor of *the anti-convergence thesis*. This is the view that, for at least some philosophical domains and for mature stages of inquiry, significant convergence in the answers philosophers give to philosophical questions is inconsistent with the aims of a philosophically ideal community.<sup>3</sup> My argument exploits the following interim claim: Either, philosophical communities which evince, in late stages of inquiry, widespread, highly diachronically stable 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. On the latter view, call it *philosophical primitivism*, we have never figured out, in even rough form, what kinds of tools we should use for the task at hand. On this view, ours is a kind of pre-philosophical era, something akin to a pre-scientific era. I will further suggest that, given how unappealing philosophical primitivism is, we should reject the view that the relevant form of convergence is a condition on philosophical progress.

My argument centers on a thought experiment about two philosophical communities, one of which exhibits, at a late stage of inquiry, broad and diachronically stable convergence on the core philosophical questions, and one of which exhibits, at a late stage of inquiry, broad and diachronically stable 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*. To be clear, the convergence intuition does not say that it is *in virtue of being convergent* that the relevant community is defective; rather, the intuition says something far coarser--something like 'philosophically speaking, there is something 'off' about this particular community.' The intuition leaves open what is 'off' about this community. I will also suggest that it is natural to think that the divergent community *might* be a philosophically ideal one. Call this *the divergence intuition*. As with the convergence intuition, the divergence intuition is coarse in grain. It 'says' that the relevant divergent community might, for all we know, be a wholly flourishing one, but it doesn't say in virtue of what features this community is potentially flourishing.

One strand of my argument is dedicated to considering what might best explain these intuitions. Either, the intuitions track reality, or they do not track reality. I will first argue, by excluding other plausible explanations,

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suggests that analytic philosophy's lack of consensus has contributed to a lack of confidence amongst its practitioners. Blackford (2017: 11), Cappelen (2017), and Jones (2017) express sympathy with something like the anti-convergence thesis, as does Riggle (2021), in the context of aesthetic discourse. McGrath (2010) criticizes several arguments in favor of the view that if moral realism is true, then reasoners will converge in their moral theories, and Kelly and McGrath (2010) argue that neither reflective equilibrium nor Bayesian methods secure philosophical viewpoint convergence (but leave open that other methods might).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

that we have some reason to take these intuitions at face value (§1). I will second consider a rival explanation, on which these intuitions are false but nevertheless persist due to an imaginative failure on our part. I will argue that this explanation would, if true, help support *philosophical primitivism*, the view that our own community's methods are wholly ill-suited for the task of philosophy. I will suggest that, in order to avoid primitivism, we should reject the pro-convergence thesis (§2). I close by reflecting on some of the motivations for the pro-convergence thesis (§3).

Some might suppose that to reject viewpoint convergence as a marker of ideal, late-stage philosophical inquiry is to commit to certain, arguably radical broader views about the nature of philosophy. 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.<sup>4</sup> Building on this result, some might wonder whether this view in turn entails that philosophy lacks an epistemic aim altogether; if this is so, perhaps philosophy is more like art, cuisine, or athletics than it is like paradigmatically epistemic activities, such as science. As it turns out, and as I further discuss in §3, the anti-convergence thesis does not require us to relinquish the presumption that philosophy is an epistemic activity. At the same time, it might turn out that the aim of philosophy, though epistemic, is not knowledge of first-order philosophical facts, but is rather some other epistemic aim, such as: knowledge of how certain views and commitments fit together; a kind of epistemically valuable grasping that is independent of knowledge or justification; or something else.<sup>5</sup> The point is merely that the anti-convergence thesis leaves much open in the way of philosophy's ultimate nature, including whether it is an epistemic enterprise.

In a similar vein, it might be tempting to suppose that the anti-convergence view all but implies that philosophy forms a contrast with the natural sciences. For, it might be supposed that ideal scientific communities will ideally exhibit convergence on central scientific questions. As it turns out, this question is much more fraught than it would at first appear. In particular, it is not clear whether ideal scientific communities will ideally converge on central scientific questions and thus not obvious whether philosophy is in this respect similar to or rather different than the natural sciences.<sup>6</sup> The present paper is simply neutral on this issue.

A few smaller comments before proceeding: First, as mentioned, the *pro-convergence thesis* is the view that, in late stages of inquiry, and in suitably large communities, ideal philosophical progress will be marked by widespread, highly diachronically stable convergence on the core philosophical questions, whereas the anti-convergence thesis is the view that ideal philosophical progress is at odds with such convergence. For simplicity, I routinely use 'convergence' as short-hand for the relevant kind of convergence, but the reader should keep in mind that it is *widespread, diachronically stable convergence in a suitably large community at a late stage of inquiry* that is at issue.

Second, one might think that the anti-convergence thesis shares much with—or indeed, is merely a special instance of—a much-discussed class of views in political science and feminist epistemology, on which

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<sup>4</sup> I explore this suggestion further in §3.

<sup>5</sup> McSweeney (2023a, 2023b, this volume) champions this kind of 'grasping' approach.

<sup>6</sup> For a helpful discussion, see Bird (2007).

viewpoint diversity is valuable in collective inquiry, either on epistemic grounds or on grounds of legitimizing such inquiry. Call these ‘viewpoint diversity’ views.<sup>7</sup> While the anti-convergence thesis is consistent with ‘viewpoint diversity’ views, it turns out to be distinct from at least many of them, namely those concerned with the value of viewpoint divergence in *early or intermediate* stages of inquiry. This is because the anti-convergence thesis strictly concerns the disvalue of convergence in *late* stages of inquiry. Moreover, a motive for some ‘viewpoint diversity’ views relies on the thought that viewpoint diversity in earlier stages of inquiry can help contribute to the univocity or collective accuracy of views formed in later stages of inquiry; these approaches presume ideal inquiry will tend to converge over time. The anti-convergence view is at odds with this style of motivation, since it precisely denies that late stages of philosophical inquiry will ideally be marked by viewpoint convergence.

Finally, the pro-convergence thesis is the view that *across philosophical domains*, ideal philosophical progress will be marked by convergence on the core philosophical questions, and the anti-convergence thesis is the view that for *at least some* philosophical domains, viewpoint convergence is inconsistent with the aims of a philosophically ideal community. The anti-convergence thesis is thus consistent with the claim that late stages of inquiry into *some* philosophical domains—formal semantics, perhaps, or philosophy of chemistry—will exhibit viewpoint convergence. 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 suitably large philosophical communities inquiring into their questions should not, at late stages of inquiry, demonstrate marked and diachronically stable convergence on answers to those questions.

## 1 Two Philosophical Communities

Consider two different philosophical communities.

Call the first community *the convergent community*. Let this community be extremely large and extremely long-lived. Suppose, for instance, that this community contains thousands of members at a given time and spans a tradition of several centuries, even millennia. This group of philosophers exhibits, over this period, 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

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<sup>7</sup> I thank Josh Armstrong and Daniela Dover for discussion on this point. For work that emphasizes the value of viewpoint divergence in science, see, e.g., Longino and Doell (1983), Longino (1990), Fehr (2011), and Muldoon (2013, esp. §6). For work that emphasizes the value of viewpoint divergence in the political context, see, e.g., Gaus (2019), Muldoon et al. (2014), and Muldoon (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).

suppose 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 this much, 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 extremely large and extremely long-lived. Suppose, for instance, that this community contains thousands of members at a given time and spans a tradition of several centuries, even millennia. Members of the second community evince, over this period, 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.<sup>8</sup> These philosophers do not shun strange views. For instance, some argue that they themselves do not exist.<sup>9</sup> Others argue that roads, cups, mountains, and dabs of paint do not exist.<sup>10</sup>

The divergent community 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 a new cohort 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.<sup>11</sup> But over time, that consensus crumbled, as others stepped in to suggest that such a life might not be so bad.<sup>12</sup>

Might either of these communities, the convergent community or the divergent community, 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 obvious what exactly makes this community deficient. Further, to suggest that the convergent community lacks something isn't to deny that the community enjoys many philosophical

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<sup>8</sup> I respectfully refer to Priest (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Unger (1979).

<sup>10</sup> Van Inwagen (1990).

<sup>11</sup> Nozick (1974: 42–45)

<sup>12</sup> 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 Liam Kofi Bright 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 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.

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 the theorists in this community collectively raise might be rich and suasive. But insofar as this community exhibits highly chronic and pervasive convergence on the core questions—*what can we know? how should we live?* and so on—the community 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 the group as a religious community or some other group organized primarily around doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as we *can* imagine that this community is one of philosophers, it seems to have fallen short of some philosophical ideal or other.<sup>14</sup>

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. It might be that there is some trait which co-varies with convergence which 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.

At this point, many readers will immediately have thought of several possible ways of explaining away this intuition—specifically, of granting that we have the sense that the convergent community is ‘off’ in some way but of positing that the community is ‘off’ in a way that doesn’t entail that it is *philosophically* defective. For instance, perhaps we simply suspect something is wrong with the community because it is different than ours. Or, perhaps we presume that there must be some inapt social limitations on free thought in 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 sense that the convergent community is ‘off,’ and its being ‘off’ is plausibly tied to the fact that the community is a *philosophical* community and not merely (say) a social community or a community organized overtly around doctrine.

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*.

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, many—and perhaps all—actual communities of philosophers have been organized around a shared religion, culture, or other shared sets of values. My suggestion is that the group’s marked dogmatism might incline us to wonder whether the group is *merely* a doctrinal group and not (also) a philosophical one.

<sup>14</sup> Harvey Lederman has suggested that it’s not obvious that this community is sociologically possible. If this is right, I would take the result to be grist for my ultimate aim, which is to suggest that the kind of viewpoint convergence this community evinces cannot be a condition on ideal philosophical theorizing. If this kind of community is not possible, it seems doubtful that it might serve as an exemplar for our own community.

Going forward, I will largely set the divergence intuition to one side, as the argument centers on how best to explain the convergence intuition, with the divergence intuition playing a supporting role. Let us turn, then, to possible routes of explaining away the convergence intuition. Might we admit that the convergent community is ‘off’ in some sense, without conceding that this sense concerns some kind of philosophically defect?

On one view, 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 uneasy about any community which veers so dramatically from this familiar model. Perhaps this unfamiliarity even stems from the a more general *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.<sup>15</sup>

Here is one reason I think the ‘status quo’ explanation should be regarded with 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. 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, even in very rough form, of 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 second, stronger reason to think that status quo bias does not explain the convergence intuition. As mentioned previously, many theorists profess frustration and even embarrassment with philosophy’s current state of seeming divergence on answers to the core questions. These theorists’ responses suggest a kind of discomfort *with the status quo* of our discipline; they openly long for the discipline to be different than they take it currently to be. So, for at least many philosophers, 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.<sup>16</sup> If this is right, then we might expect

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<sup>15</sup> For a classic overview, see Kahneman (1991). I thank Sarah McGrath for suggesting this point.

<sup>16</sup> 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

that 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 that the views formed by those in the convergent community are not coerced via political sanction or social threat. These opinions 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 explain it away. Suppose that the members of this community do not themselves 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.<sup>17</sup> On this view, once we appreciate that the relevant questions are, by the community member’s lights, the central ones, we can see that the community is a kind of divergent community.

I must confess to finding it difficult to imagine that a philosophically ideal community might, over a period of centuries, even millennia, take the very 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 deeper 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. This isn’t to suggest that there can be no variance, across communities of philosophers, about what the most pressing questions are—far from it. But it is to suggest that a philosophical community which chronically focuses wholly on quibbles concerning broadly agreed on positions is not a fully flourishing community.

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

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orthodox and everything else was heretical.’ Jones (2017: 231-233) suggests that practically speaking, such convergence could only be accidental, and thus presumably not the result of suasive reasons.

<sup>17</sup> One might 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 convergence, and these new questions become the new core questions of the discipline.

best, moral action is wholly a matter of optimizing pleasure, and so on. Would we presume that this community is necessarily philosophically defective in some way?

I find it plausible that a small or short-lived 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 importantly, the convergence intuition does not concern a school of thought. The intuition concerns a community which spans (say) many centuries and, at any given moment, thousands of theorists. Once we fix our sights on this very long-lived and large philosophical community, it becomes hard to avoid the sense that there is *something* or other untoward about this community if it consistently converges on the central questions, whether or not its 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 a very large and long-lived community, there is nothing philosophically untoward about convergence, so long as its members reach this convergence by a rational process. Indeed, if these theorists employ similar, normatively constrained processes of reasoning, perhaps we should *expect* them to ultimately converge in their viewpoints.<sup>18</sup> And if this is right, then we simultaneously have a reason to reject both the convergence intuition and the anti-convergence thesis writ large.

The suggestion that philosophers who employ similar, normatively constrained reasoning processes will ultimately converge in their viewpoints is a compelling one, and this thought merits far more in the way of a reply than I can afford it here. But as a kind of starting point, I would point the reader to some arguments developed by Sarah McGrath in the context of assessing whether we should expect that the method of reflective equilibrium will lead reasoners to converge in their moral theories. McGrath suggests that, even if moral realism is true, reasoners who employ reflective equilibrium might not converge in their moral views. Among other things, McGrath points to the fact that such reasoners might begin with different starting points and to the fact that these reasoners might resolve inconsistencies via different strategies.<sup>19</sup> In joint work, Thomas Kelly and Sarah McGrath extend this thought to Bayesian strategies of belief revision. They note that, while in some cases, reasoners with different starting points will, by employing Bayesian methods, ultimately come to converge in their viewpoints, in other cases, reasoners with different starting points will never, through Bayesian methods, converge in their views.<sup>20</sup> So, even perfect employment of Bayesian methods does not invariably result in viewpoint convergence.

I take these considerations to at least cast doubt on the suggestion that rational reasoners who employ

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<sup>18</sup> Many theorists have presumed that realism in particular supports this kind of claim. See, e.g., Wright (1992). Cf. McGrath (2010).

<sup>19</sup> McGrath (2010: 81-4), Kelly and McGrath (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Kelly and McGrath (2010: 339-340).

ideal revision methods will invariably converge in their philosophical viewpoints. For, when it comes to two much-championed philosophical methods, it is far from obvious that reasoners employing those methods will ultimately converge in their viewpoints.<sup>21</sup>

So far, I've argued that many of us, when considering the convergent community, will have a sense that the convergent community is 'off' in some way. I've further considered some ways of defusing this intuition in ways which do not require us to posit that the community is philosophically deficient. I've argued that none of these routes is very compelling. Together, these arguments suggest some reason to take the convergence intuition at face value: Philosophically speaking, there is something 'off' about the convergent community. While this community might be a partly virtuous philosophical community, it is not an ideal philosophical community.

So, if we accept these points, we will have some reason to accept the following claim:

#### THE ANTI-CONVERGENCE THESIS

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

Not everyone will think the arguments I've offered are strong enough to endorse this claim. They might suggest that the convergence intuition is not to be trusted, even if hard to explain away via the considered routes. On one line of thought, the convergent community might be philosophically ideal despite our stubbornly persistent intuition to the contrary, for the simple reason that *we struggle to imagine* how exactly this would be the case. But the fact that we struggle to imagine how the convergent community might be ideal doesn't suggest that the community is in fact not ideal. While, on its face, this suggestion from the limitations of our own imagination seems a reasonable one, I will next argue that this suggestion has unexpected costs.

## 2 The Imaginative Difficulty and Philosophical Primitivism

Let's reflect: On the assumption that the convergent community might in fact be a philosophically ideal one, why is it so difficult for us to imagine, even in rough form, how it might be so? Think once more of da Vinci's detailed rendering of machines which would permit humans to fly through the air. In da Vinci's time, the technology for such flight was not even remotely within reach and yet, this was no barrier to his being able to imagine, in at least crude mechanical form, how such an accomplishment might come about. So, it is not as though, *in general*, we cannot imagine some future state of more advanced achievement if our current level of achievement with respect to the domain is extremely crude.

Perhaps it is merely difficult, and not impossible, for us to imagine how the convergent community might

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<sup>21</sup> Kelly and McGrath (2010: 353-54) ultimately suggest that we should focus on a kind of normatively-constrained strategy and on '...what makes it the case that some starting points are more reasonable than others, and how we manage to recognize or grasp such facts.'

be a philosophically flourishing one. Perhaps in conceiving the original case, we simply didn't fill in the details of the philosophers' methods enough to make it intelligible how they might rationally converge on the central questions. On this view, were we to properly imagine a sufficiently extensive or adroit employment of some or all of our current philosophical 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.<sup>22</sup> On this view, the intuition results from our imagining the case in an impoverished way, not from the fact that the convergent community is in fact defective.

One reason to doubt that the imaginative difficulty 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 shifts the sense that the convergent community is philosophically 'off' in some sense. You can test this for yourself. Try to imagine as vividly as you can a philosophical community which employs our methods, any of them you like, in any combination you like. Imagine also that these methods are as sophisticated as they might possibly be. For instance, you might imagine a community whose employment of 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 'no.'

Moreover, there is a ready explanation of why this imaginative exercise would not help to mitigate the sense that there is something philosophically 'off' about the convergent community. This imagining is plausibly a kind of extrapolation from our present empirical knowledge of the role these methods have played in our discipline. And arguably, increasing levels of sophistication of these methods has not led to convergence on the core questions. If anything, they have led, in at least some cases, to the development of novel ways of disagreeing about these 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.<sup>23</sup> One might have thought (perhaps naively) that the recent metaphilosophical turn in this dispute would somehow lead to greater convergence amongst philosophers about the first-order question. For instance, one might have thought that clarifying the metaphilosophical considerations in this case would have resulted in more philosophers moving to one of the three mentioned first-order views, with a net result of greater first-order convergence.

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<sup>22</sup> Williamson (2010) is perhaps amenable to this suggestion. Cf. 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).

<sup>23</sup> For an overview, see Glanzberg (2021).

As it turns out, a turn to metaphilosophical considerations has not contributed to any increase in first-order convergence about the nature of truth. On the contrary, a self-consciously metaphilosophical stance has merely helped philosophers 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.<sup>24</sup> Examples like this—not to mention the history of philosophy understood as a history of persistent disagreement—plausibly underpin our difficulty in imagining how the convergent community might in fact be a philosophically ideal one. We are attempting to extrapolate from our current methods to envision, even in extremely dim form, how some extremely sophisticated version of those methods could result in significant convergence, but this extrapolation is impeded by empirically-grounded awareness that increasingly sophisticated methods have not, in our own community, resulted in greater convergence.

What I am proposing is that the suggestion that the convergent community might be philosophically ideal, despite our difficulty in imagining how it could be so, leads us fairly naturally to a rather disturbing (defeasible) conclusion: If the convergent community is indeed ideal despite this imaginative difficulty, this is because *our own tools are so woefully ill-equipped for the task of philosophy, that we cannot imagine, even in dim form, how the employment of any such tools could possibly result in a convergent, philosophically ideal community.* In other words, ours is something like a pre-philosophical state, much like a pre-scientific state. Our methods are not merely crude; they are entirely misguided for the task of philosophy.

In this section and the last, I have considered two approaches to the convergence intuition. On the first, the intuition tracks reality; the convergent community is less than philosophically ideal in some respect. This explanation straightforwardly supports the anti-convergence thesis. On the second approach, the convergence intuition does not track reality, and in particular, the convergent community might be philosophically ideal, even though we cannot imagine, even in rough form, how this community might be philosophically ideal. I have argued that a plausible explanation of this imaginative difficulty is 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.<sup>25</sup> I conclude that we have good (defeasible) reason to accept the paper's disjunctive, interim thesis, which says that exactly one of the following claims is true:

#### THE ANTI-CONVERGENCE THESIS

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

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<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL PRIMITIVISM

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

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 at least partly philosophically 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.

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, the path required is perhaps not even fathomable from our current intellectual perspective. 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.

I am presuming that primitivism is an extremely unappealing approach, to the extent that, faced with the choice between the anti-convergence thesis and primitivism, we should embrace the anti-convergence thesis. Thus, I take the paper's arguments to together suggest some (defeasible) reason to reject the pro-convergence thesis. So, we can tentatively conclude that the ideal philosophical community will not demonstrate, in late stages of inquiry, diachronically stable convergence on answers to the core philosophical questions. In the next and final section, I draw out some further issues connected to this tentative conclusion.

### 3 Some Conclusions

So far, I have offered *some* reason in favor of the thought that the ideal philosophical community will not, in late stages of inquiry, show marked convergence on the core questions. But this reason is arguably trump-able by some of the motivations for the pro-convergence thesis, motivations I have not engaged with here. I will close with a brief reflection on just one motivation for the pro-convergence thesis, in an attempt to suggest how it might be disarmed.

Some philosophers view their discipline as aimed at collective knowledge of philosophical truths, and they see rough viewpoint coherence as required in order for the attainment of such collective knowledge. One motivation for this thought comes from a *conciliationist* approach to the epistemology of disagreement. If the mere

fact of disagreement between epistemic peers can alter one's justification for one's own beliefs, then, the worry arises that facts from philosophical disagreement entail that philosophers are not justified in believing their views, even if those views are true.<sup>26</sup> So, arguably, some philosophers do not know their views, even if these views are true. For the sake of argument, let's take all these points on board. Still, we can ask, why think knowledge of first-order philosophical truths is an aim of philosophy at all? 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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*:

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.<sup>29</sup>

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

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<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Goldberg (2009, 2013a), Kornblith (2013), Barnett (2019), Brennan (2010), and Walker (2022).

<sup>27</sup> 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).

<sup>28</sup> Chalmers (2015: 14-15).

<sup>29</sup> 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).

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).

Certainly, 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. 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).<sup>30</sup> 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 of the view that philosophy is a route to truth or knowledge.<sup>31</sup> 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*.<sup>32</sup>

No doubt Chalmers is right that in pursuing philosophy, many philosophers have been driven by a desire

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<sup>30</sup> Thanks to Sarah McGrath for raising this point.

<sup>31</sup> 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, and so on.

<sup>32</sup> For an ancient perspective on philosophy's shocking endlessness, see Annas, J. and Barnes, J. (1985). For a helpful overview, see Morison (2019).

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.<sup>33</sup>

Notably, if knowledge of philosophical truths is not an aim for at least some philosophers, this doesn't preclude that these philosophers might have some other epistemic motivation for pursuing philosophy. Likewise, the field of philosophy as a whole might have some epistemic aim other than knowledge of first-order philosophical truths. For example, one such epistemic aim might be the acquisition of higher-order knowledge about how first-order views are or are not supported by further considerations. Another such epistemic aim might be the acquisition of a grasp of a kind which has epistemic value distinct from that of first-order knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Another such epistemic aim might concern non-doxastic, but nevertheless epistemically valuable, mental states concerning first-order philosophical claims;<sup>35</sup> on some views, these epistemically valuable first-order mental states might help constitute knowledge, but on others, they will not.

I leave it as a further question how these points should be made to hang together in an ultimate theory of philosophy's aims.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 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).

<sup>34</sup> McSweeney (2023a, 2023b, and this volume). 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 (2021) for a framework that understands both philosophical and scientific progress in terms of dynamical community inquiry.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Goldman's (2013) claim that philosophers' views are special kinds of speculations and Barnett's (2019) claim that philosophers' views are disagreement-insulated inclinations. Cf. Jackson (this volume).

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