

Why Be an Intellectually Humble Philosopher?

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Abstract: In this paper, I sketch an answer to the question “*Why be an intellectually humble philosopher?*” I argue that, as far as philosophical argumentation is concerned, the historical record of Western Philosophy provides a straightforward answer to this question. That is, the historical record of philosophical argumentation, which is a track record that is marked by an abundance of alternative theories and serious problems for those theories, can teach us important lessons about the limits of philosophical argumentation. These lessons, in turn, show why philosophers should argue with humility.

Keywords: intellectual humility; metaphilosophy; philosophical argumentation; virtue argumentation theory; virtue epistemology

1. Introduction

In the introduction to *Representation and Reality*, Hilary Putnam writes:

In this book I shall be arguing that the computer analogy, call it the “computational view of the mind,” or “functionalism,” or what you will, does not after all answer the question we philosophers (along with many cognitive scientists) want to answer, the question “What is the nature of mental states?” I am, thus, as I have done on more than one occasion, criticizing a view I myself earlier advanced. Strangely enough, there are philosophers who criticize me for doing this. *The fact that I change my mind in philosophy has been viewed as a character defect* (Putnam 1991, xi, emphasis added).

Putnam (1991, xii) goes on to say that, for him, Rudolf “Carnap is still the outstanding example of a human being who puts the search for truth higher than personal vanity.”

Contrary to what appears to be the view of Putnam’s critics, intellectual humility is usually considered, not a character defect, but rather a desirable character trait—a *virtue*—in introductory textbooks of logic and critical thinking. For example:

To overcome the obstacles to Critical Thinking posed by the pitfalls of egocentrism, we must cultivate an attitude of “*intellectual humility*”—in other words, *a recognition of our fallibility or liability to error*—yet maintain a patient and tenacious commitment to the pursuit of truth (Rudinow and Barry 2008, 22, emphasis added).

Philosophical treatments of intellectual humility also take it to be a desirable character trait, especially as far as the pursuit of epistemic goods is concerned. For example, according to Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood (2007, 236-256), intellectual humility, which is marked by an absence of a range of vices of pride, such as vanity, arrogance, domination, superciliousness, conceit, and others, is crucial for the acquisition of intellectual goods.¹ Likewise, Michael Martin (2007, 32) argues that intellectual honesty and intellectual humility “are desirable traits of character that tend to contribute to the good of both ourselves and others.”² And Elke Brendel writes:

[Intellectual] humility [...] is certainly a praiseworthy character trait of an epistemic subject that *can* support the formation of true beliefs. In contrast to a vain and arrogant person an intellectually humble person *can* better overcome obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge “in the long run” (Brendel 2009, 332, original emphasis).

The aim of this paper is to sketch an answer to the question “*Why be an intellectually humble philosopher?*”³ I argue that, as far as philosophical argumentation is concerned,⁴ the historical record of Western Philosophy provides a straightforward answer to this question. That is, the historical record of philosophical argumentation, which is a track record that is marked by an abundance of alternative theories and serious problems for those theories, can teach us important lessons about the limits of philosophical argumentation. These lessons, in turn, should, to borrow a phrase from Wood (1998, 75), “help [philosophers] grow in intellectual humility.”⁵

Here is how I plan to proceed. In Section 2, I say what I take intellectual humility to consist in. Since, for the purposes of this paper, I am interested in the question “*Why be an intellectually humble philosopher?*” rather than the question “*What is intellectual humility?*” I will mostly draw on a common conception of intellectual humility as a mean between two extremes, namely, between intellectual dogmatism and intellectual timidity. In Section 3, I will report the results of a survey of philosophical theories and topics randomly mined from entries in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (SEP). The results of this survey are that, for any given philosophical theory, *T*, the probability that *T* faces serious problems is very high, and that, for any given philosophical topic or subject matter, *S*, the probability that there are several alternative theories about *S* is

¹ See also Roberts and Wood (2003, 257-280) and Zagzebski (1996, 114). On virtue epistemology, see Battaly (2008). On virtue argumentation theory, see Cohen (2009), Bowell and Kingsbury (2013), and Aberdein (2014).

² According to Murphy (2010, 173), “The skills of intellectual carefulness become virtues only when students come to understand and to value these skills precisely because they promote genuine knowledge.”

³ This question is a variation on a central question in ethics, namely, “*Why be moral?*” (See, e.g., Superson 2009, 5.)

⁴ On pursuing virtue theory as a research program in argumentation theory, see Aberdein (2010). See also Battaly (2010).

⁵ On intellectual humility in the practice of philosophical argumentation, see Kidd (2015).

very high. Then, in Section 4, I argue that these lessons concerning the limits of philosophical argumentation provide a straightforward rationale for arguing with humility in philosophy.

2. Intellectual humility

Recently, Saint Louis University has received a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to study the Philosophy and Theology of Intellectual Humility. According to the principal investigators, John Greco and Eleonore Stump:

Intellectual humility is an intellectual virtue, a character trait that allows the intellectually humble person to think and reason well. It is plausibly related to open-mindedness, a sense of one's own fallibility, and a healthy recognition of one's intellectual debts to others. *If intellectual humility marks a mean between extremes, then related vices (on the one side) would be intellectual arrogance, closed-mindedness, and overconfidence in one's own opinions and intellectual powers, and (on the other side) undue timidity in one's intellectual life, or even intellectual cowardice* (<http://humility.slu.edu/about.html>, emphasis added).

Along similar lines, Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder (2015, 12) characterize intellectual humility as “proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one's intellectual limitations.” They add that intellectual humility “is an intellectual virtue just when one is appropriately attentive to, and owns, one's intellectual limitations because one is appropriately motivated to pursue epistemic goods, e.g., truth, knowledge, and understanding” (Whitcomb et al 2015, 12).⁶

Conceived as an intellectual virtue, then, “Intellectual humility is a mean between two extremes (in the manner of moral virtues, according to Aristotle): *intellectual dogmatism* and *intellectual timidity*” (Hazlett 2012, 220).⁷ Dogmatic arguers overestimate the epistemic status of the claims they argue for, whereas timid arguers underestimate the epistemic status of the claims they argue for. Humble arguers, on the other hand, neither overestimate nor underestimate the epistemic status of the claims they argue for. Instead, they adopt the right epistemic attitude toward the claims they argue for “in the right situations” (Hazlett 2012, 220). To adopt a stance of intellectual humility is to “to take a conciliatory stance and reduce [one's] commitment to [a] proposition” (Carter and Pritchard forthcoming).

With this conception of intellectual humility in hand, I will argue in the next section that, as far as philosophical argumentation is concerned, a manifestation of the virtue of intellectual humility involves appreciating the rather precarious epistemic status of philosophical theories, given that the *situation* in Western Philosophy is one of great epistemic uncertainty. To put it the way Whitcomb et al (2015, 12) do, I will show what intellectual limitations philosophers must be attentive to and “own.” To show that,

⁶ Cf. Roberts and Wood (2003, 257-280) on humility and epistemic goods.

⁷ Cf. Kelly (2011) on “following the argument where it leads.”

I will report the results of a survey of philosophical theories and topics randomly mined from entries in the SEP.

3. The track record of philosophical argumentation

Before I report the results of my survey, I should also point out another auxiliary assumption I have made (in addition to the working definition of “intellectual humility” discussed in Section 2). For the purposes of this survey, I have assumed that the SEP is a fairly comprehensive source of philosophy, and thus searching through the SEP would yield a fairly representative sample of philosophical theories and topics. This is a reasonable assumption to make, I think, since the SEP is well-regarded among professional philosophers, professional philosophers use the SEP for their own research (e.g., it is not uncommon to see SEP entries cited in journal articles), and the professional philosophers who write and review entries for the SEP are considered to be leading scholars in their fields. As the *About* section of the SEP states:

From its inception, the SEP was designed so that each entry is maintained and kept up-to-date by an expert or group of experts in the field. All entries and substantive updates are refereed by the members of a distinguished Editorial Board before they are made public. Consequently, our dynamic reference work maintains academic standards while evolving and adapting in response to new research (About the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/about.html>).

For these reasons, if the author or authors of an SEP entry on a philosophical theory discuss an objection or a problem with that theory, it is safe to assume that this objection or problem is serious insofar as it merits discussion in an SEP entry. Indeed, phrases such as ‘serious problem’, ‘serious objection’, ‘serious charge’, and the like are not uncommon in SEP entries. For example:

- “...serious problems remain for Armstrong’s idea [of relative atoms]” (Menzel 2014).
- “...strong modal fictionalism seems to face serious objections” (Nolan 2011).
- “Indeterminacy is the more serious charge...” (Quong 2013).

Similarly, if the author or authors of an SEP entry on a philosophical topic discuss several theories on the topic, it is safe to assume that these theories are viable alternative theories on the topic insofar as they merit discussion in an SEP entry.

To collect a representative sample of philosophical theories, then, I have searched the SEP for the term *theory*.⁸ After randomly selecting sixty philosophical theories from

⁸ It is important not to confuse the colloquial sense of ‘theory’, namely, a conjecture or a supposition, with the academic sense of ‘theory’, namely, a supported or argued for explanation. For example, philosophical theories of truth are supposed to explain what makes true propositions true by giving an account of the

the search results (using a random number generator), I have noted for those sixty theories whether or not the entry mentions serious problems for the theory under discussion. These results are listed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A random sample of philosophical theories with or without serious problems⁹

	Philosophical theory	Serious problems mentioned in SEP entry
1	A theory	
2	Aristotle's political theory	Inconsistencies in Aristotle's account of the best constitution and his theory of justice
3	Aristotle's theory of perception	Form-reception sufficient/necessary for perception
4	B theory	
5	Bayesian confirmation theory	Logical omniscience; a priori/a posteriori distinction; uncertain evidence; old evidence; rigid conditional probabilities; prediction vs. accommodation; new theories; priors
6	Bolzano's theory of fine arts	
7	Causal choice theory	Newcomb's problem
8	Causal theory of mental content	Logical and mathematical relations; vacuous terms; phenomenal intentionality; reflexive thoughts and more
9	Coherence theory of truth	Specification objection; transcendence objection and more
10	Coherentism	Circularity charge; defining coherence; relationship between coherence and system size and more
11	Computational theory of mind	Syntax/semantics; formalizability and computability of cognitive abilities and more
12	Constructive empiricism	Observable/unobservable distinction; observable vs. observed; modal realism; sense data;

relation that holds between propositions and their truth conditions (e.g., correspondence, coherence, etc.).

⁹ Even though they appeared in the SEP search results, I have excluded from this random sample purely formal theories, such as Set Theory, and scientific theories, such as Quantum Field Theory.

		hermeneutic circle; abstract objects
13	Contractarianism	Passions/rationality dilemma; compliance problem; normativity objection; impartiality objection; contract metaphor and more
14	Correspondence theory of truth	The big fact; No independent access
15	Counterfactual theory of causation	Context-sensitivity; temporal asymmetry; transitivity; preemption
16	Deflationary nominalism	
17	Deflationary theory of truth	Propositions v. sentences; correspondence; truth-value gaps; consistency and adequacy; normativity and more
18	Descartes' theory of ideas	Idea of objective reality; existence of God
19	Description theory of quotation	Novel quotations; relationship between expression and its quotation; dual use and mention; quantifying into quotation
20	Disjunctive theory of perception	Explanatory power of the common kind claims; causal argument and more
21	Disquotational theory of quotation	Specifying domains of expressions; dual use and mention; missing quotation marks
22	Dual coding theory	Mental imagery/mentalese asymmetries; ontology and distinctness of codes
23	Egoism	Self-contradiction charge; self-interest is a wrong kind of reason; inconsistency charge
24	Eliminative materialism	Self-refutation charge; theory-theory; folk psychology and more
25	Eternalism	
26	Formal learning theory	Problem of induction; new riddle; problems with simplicity: justification, description and more
27	Foundationalism	Regress problem
28	Functionalism	Holism; mental causation; introspective belief; norms of reason; qualia; zombies; explanatory gap; knowledge argument
29	Higher-order theory of	Lack of higher-order phenomenology; spot

	consciousness	objection; cognitive/computational complexity; targetless higher-order representation problem and more
30	Identity (use) theory of quotation	Relevance of quotational use/mention; semantics/pragmatics divide; over-generation; dual use/mention
31	Identity theory of truth	Problem of false propositions
32	Just war theory	
33	Kant's theory of judgment	Bottom-up problem; top-down problem; dream-skeptical problem
34	Kelsen's pure theory of law	Is/ought gap; reduction
35	Lewis' theory of languages as conventions	
36	Malebranche's theory of ideas and vision in God	Finite beings containing the idea of God; vision in God/vision of God and more
37	Mathematical factionalism	Epistemological problem; problem of the application of math; uniform semantics; taking math literally; ontological problem
38	Mind/Brain identity theory	Objections advanced by Kripke (1980) and Chalmers (1996)
39	Modal structuralism	Uniform semantics; ontological problem
40	Moral error theory	How widespread moral disagreement is; error theory is not the best explanation for disagreement and more
41	Natural law theory	Metaphysical excess
42	Pacifism	Excessive optimism; rewarding aggression; failing to protect people
43	Paratactic/demonstrative theory of quotation	Demonstratives; relevant features; missing quotation marks; iteration; open quotation
44	Peirce's theory of signs	Infinite semiosis; final typology
45	Physicalism	Qualia; consciousness; meaning; intentionality and more
46	Presentism	Talk about non-present objects; relations involving non-present objects; truth-makers

47	Process reliabilism	Evil-demon counterexample; reliability not sufficient for justification; generality problem; easy knowledge problem; value problem; non-accidentally and more
48	Proper name theory of quotation	Novel quotations; semantic value; dual use and mention
49	Quasi-pictorial theory of imagery	Language of thought; establishing causal connection between brain processes and imagery
50	Reism	Self-defeat charge; special fields resist reistic interpretations
51	Representational theory of qualia	Objections to color realism; objections to the nonactual; unconscious representation; counterexamples and more
52	Revision theory of truth	Liar's paradox (genuine); complexity question
53	Rule-consequentialism	Counterexamples; makes justification for moral rules contingent; teaching new generations; dealing with conflicts among rules
54	Russellian multiple relation theory of propositions	Easy arguments for mind-independence and abstractness; substitution problem; objectivization effect
55	Scientific realism	Underdetermination of theory by data; skepticism about inference to the best explanation; pessimistic induction; approximate truth
56	Spinoza's psychological theory	Metaphorical language of 'striving'; naturalism; causes of desires
57	Spinoza's theory of attributes	Substance/attribute gap; mind and body are one and the same but also modes of distinct attributes; knowledge of God
58	Structural realism	Problems with form/content and structure/nature distinctions; loss of structure; metaphysical revisionism; causation; explaining why certain properties and relations cohere and more
59	Teleosemantics	Functional indeterminacy; Swampman; sophisticated concepts and capacities
60	Trope theory	Swapping; piling; sliding

Accordingly, of a random sample of sixty philosophical theories discussed in SEP entries, only seven SEP entries do not mention serious problems for the philosophical theory under discussion.

A related lesson about the limits of philosophical argumentation that can be learned from the historical record of Western Philosophy is the following. I have also searched the SEP for general topics of philosophical interest. After randomly selecting thirty philosophical topics from the search results (using a random number generator), I have noted for those thirty topics whether or not their entries mention several alternative theories on offer. These results are listed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. A random sample of philosophical topics about which there are several alternative theories on offer¹⁰

	Philosophical topic	Alternative theories mentioned in SEP entry
1	Abduction	
2	Ability	Conditional analysis; Restricted possibility
3	Assertion	Pragmatic account; Knowledge account; Principle of correctness; Neo-Gricean accounts
4	Attention	Capacity limitation; Feature integration; Coherence; Competition; Spotlight; Motor
5	Belief	Representationalism; Dispositionalism; interpretationism; Functionalism; Eliminativism
6	Coercion	Baseline; Non-baseline
7	Color	Objectivism; Primitivism; Eliminativism; Dispositionalism; Relationalism; Action-based theories
8	Concepts	Empiricism; Nativism
9	Confirmation	Hempelian confirmation; Hypothetic-deductivism; Bayesian confirmation

¹⁰ Again, I have excluded from this random sample SEP entries on purely formal topics in logic or mathematics as well as entries on philosophers (both historical figures and contemporary).

10	Definitions	
11	Disability	Medical model; Social model
12	Distributive justice	Egalitarianism; Difference principle; Welfare-based; Desert-based; Libertarian
13	Forgiveness	as process; as virtue; as love
14	Happiness	Life satisfaction; Emotional state; Hybrid theories
15	Holes	as qualified objects of spacetime; as ordinary objects; as negative parts of material hosts; as disturbances and more
16	Knowledge	JTB + 4 th condition; Reliabilist theories; Causal theories; Virtue-theoretic approaches; Knowledge first
17	Mathematical knowledge	Platonism; Structuralism; Nominalism; Fictionalism
18	Names	Description theories; Causal theories; Hybrid theories
19	Perception	Sense-datum; Adverbial; Intentionalist; Disjunctivist
20	Personal identity	Psychological approach; Somatic approach
21	Probability	Classical; Logical; Subjective; Frequency; Propensity; Best-system
22	Scientific explanation	DN model; SR model; Causal mechanical model; Unificationist account
23	Simplicity	
24	Thought experiments	
25	Time	Fatalism; Presentism; Eternalism; Growing universe; A theory; B theory
26	Toleration	Permission; Coexistence; Respect; Esteem
27	Truth	Correspondence; Coherence; Pragmatism; Tarski's theory;

		Deflationism; Minimalism
28	Truthlikeness	Content approach; Consequence approach; Likeness approach
29	Well-being	Hedonism; Desire theories; Objective List theories
30	Wisdom	Epistemic humility; Epistemic accuracy; Knowledge; Hybrid theory; Rationality

Accordingly, of a random sample of thirty philosophical topics about which there are SEP entries, only four SEP entries do not mention alternative theories concerning the philosophical topic under discussion.

These findings, which are summarized in Figure 3, support the following inductive generalization:

(P1) 88% of philosophical theories randomly mined from the SEP face serious problems.

Therefore, probably,

(P2) 88% of philosophical theories face serious problems.

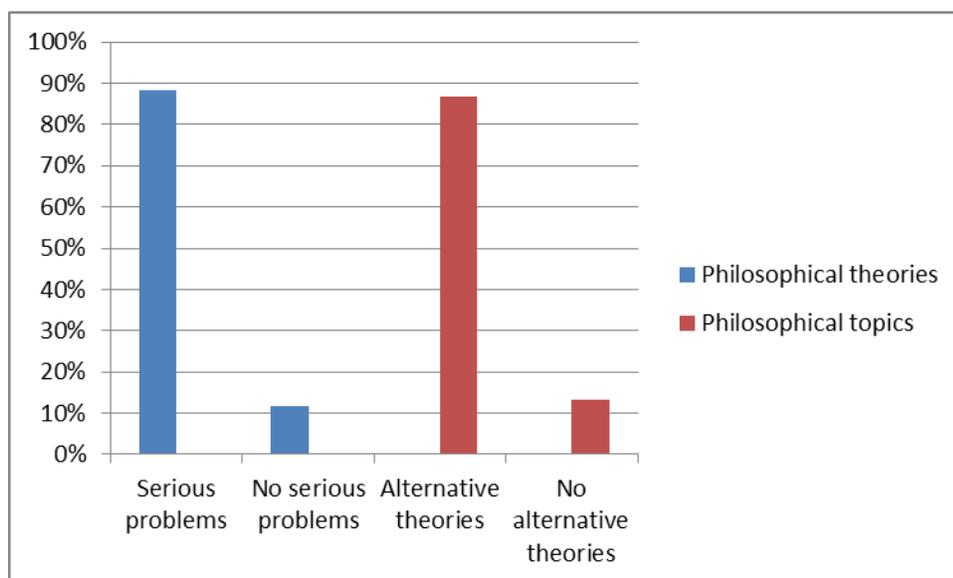
If this inductive argument is cogent, then, for any given philosophical theory, *T*, the likelihood that *T* faces serious problems is very high (approximately 88%). Of course, this applies to all philosophical theories. That is, based on this inductive generalization, we should expect (by singular predictive inference) future philosophical theories to have serious problems, too.

Some might object to my methodology by claiming that, from the fact that an SEP entry on a philosophical theory, *T*, does not mention serious problems for *T*, it doesn't necessarily follow that *T* does not face serious problems. Surely, some might think, there are serious problems with Just War Theory, for instance, despite the fact that none are mentioned in the SEP entry on Just War Theory.

In reply, I would like to make two points. First, the premise of an inductive generalization (*X%* of sampled *F*s are *G*s) is not supposed to *entail* the conclusion of an inductive generalization (*X%* of *F*s are *G*s) but rather to make it more probable (provided that proper conditions of random sampling are met). To complain that 'the SEP entry on *T* does not mention serious problems with *T*' does not *entail* 'there are no serious problems with *T*', then, is to misunderstand the type of argument I advance in this paper. Like any argument from a sample, the samples on which my inductive generalizations are based will probably contain some outliers. In other words, the conclusion of any inductive generalization allows for a margin of error. But that does not mean that the sample is not representative of the general population. Second, as a matter of fact, this objection makes the inductive inference from (P1) to (P2) *stronger*,

not weaker. For, if this objection were correct, then the observed percentage in the sample would be even greater than 88%, which, of course, would make the inductive inference from (P1) to (P2) *stronger*, not weaker.

Figure 3. Percentages of philosophical theories with/without serious problems and philosophical topics with/without alternative theories on offer



Likewise, the aforementioned findings, which are summarized in Figure 3, also support the following inductive generalization:

- (A1) 87% of philosophical topics mined from the SEP are topics about which there are several alternative theories on offer.

Therefore, probably,

- (A2) 87% of philosophical topics are topics about which there are several alternative theories on offer.

If this inductive argument is cogent, then, for any given philosophical topic or subject matter, *S*, the likelihood that there are alternative theories about *S* is very high (approximately 87%). Of course, this applies to all philosophical topics. That is, based on this inductive generalization, we should expect (by singular predictive inference) there to be alternative theories about future topics that will attract philosophical attention.

Some might object to my methodology by claiming that, from the fact that an SEP entry on a philosophical topic, *S*, does not mention several alternative theories about *S*, it doesn't necessarily follow that there are no alternative theories about *S*. Surely, some might think, there are several theoretical accounts of Thought Experiments, for

instance, despite the fact that none are mentioned in the SEP entry on Thought Experiments.

Again, this objection is misguided for the following reasons. First, the premise of an inductive generalization ($X\%$ of sampled F s are G s) is not supposed to *entail* the conclusion of an inductive generalization ($X\%$ of F s are G s) but rather to make it more probable (provided that proper conditions of random sampling are met). To complain that ‘the SEP entry on S does not mention alternative theories about S ’ does not *entail* ‘there are no alternative theories about S ’, then, is to misunderstand the type of argument I advance in this paper. Like any argument from a sample, the samples on which my inductive generalizations are based will probably contain some outliers. In other words, the conclusion of any inductive generalization allows for a margin of error. But that does not mean that the sample is not representative of the general population. Second, as a matter of fact, this objection makes the inductive inference from (A1) to (A2) *stronger*, not weaker. For, if this objection were correct, then the observed percentage in the sample would be even greater than 87%, which, of course, would make the inductive inference from (A1) to (A2) *stronger*, not weaker.

Accordingly, the results of my SEP survey suggest that the historical record of philosophical argumentation is a track record that is marked by an abundance of alternative theories and serious problems for those theories. Some might worry about the scope of these results. More specifically, do the results of my SEP survey point to some *intrinsic* limit to the possibility of attaining truth? Worse still, are the results of my SEP survey self-defeating? That is, do (P2) and (A2) face serious problems and alternative theories as well?

To address these worries, I would like to make the following points. First, for the purposes of this survey, I have looked at the track record of *philosophical* argumentation, so I think it would be rather hasty to apply the results of my SEP survey to argumentation in general (as opposed to *philosophical* argumentation in particular). It may be the case that the epistemic status of theories in other areas of inquiry is as precarious as that of philosophical theories. But we would need data on those fields to support such a claim. The results of my SEP survey do not support such a generalization to other areas of inquiry.

Second, I also think it would be rather premature to conclude from the results of my SEP survey that there is some *intrinsic* limit to the possibility of attaining philosophical truth. Even if the track record of philosophical argumentation is as bad as the results of my SEP survey suggest, it doesn’t necessarily follow that philosophical argumentation *must be* that way. Unless one thinks that there is only one way to do philosophy, which is the way philosophy has been done thus far (at least Western Philosophy), it is possible that new methods and ways of doing philosophy would improve the track record of philosophical argumentation. Precisely because the historical record of philosophical argumentation is a track record that is marked by an abundance of alternative theories and serious problems for those theories, philosophers should be open to new methods and ways of doing philosophy. Without such open-

mindedness, however, perhaps philosophers are doomed to wallow in the mire of epistemic uncertainty.¹¹

Finally, it may be the case that (P2) and (A2) face serious problems and alternative theories as well. But the results of my SEP survey do not support that for the following reason. I have surveyed *philosophical* theories and topics in the SEP, whereas (P2) and (A2) are claims *about* philosophical theories and topics. To find out if (P2) and (A2) face serious problems and alternative theories, then, we need to gather data on *metaphilosophical* theories and topics. This will have to wait for another occasion.

4. Why be an intellectually humble philosopher?

If the inductive generalizations outlined in Section 3 are cogent, then the lessons that can be learned from the track record of Western Philosophy are the following:

- (L1) For any given philosophical theory, *T*, the probability that *T* faces serious problems is very high (approximately 88%).
- (L2) For any given philosophical topic or subject matter, *S*, the probability that there are several alternative theories about *S* is very high (approximately 87%).

In this section, I argue that these lessons concerning the limits of philosophical argumentation show why philosophers should argue with humility. In other words, these lessons should, to borrow a phrase from Wood (1998, 75), “help [philosophers] grow in intellectual humility.” To put it another way, these are the limitations that philosophers must be attentive to and own (Whitcomb et al 2015, 12).

So why be an intellectually humble philosopher? As far as philosophical argumentation is concerned, the answer is straightforward: a philosopher should be intellectually humble because his or her philosophical conclusions probably face serious problems. As the inductive inference from (P1) to (P2) shows, any philosophical conclusion probably faces serious problems. Given (L1), then, the very high likelihood that one’s philosophical conclusions face serious problems should make one argue for those conclusions with humility.

Likewise, philosophers should be intellectually humble because, as the inductive inference from (A1) to (A2) shows, for any given philosophical theory, *T*₁, they argue for, the likelihood that there is an alternative theory, *T*₂, on offer is very high. Given (L2), the very high likelihood that there are alternative theories to one’s theory about a particular topic of philosophical interest should make one argue for one’s own theory with humility. In other words, if intellectual humility involves “a recognition of [one’s] fallibility or liability to error” (Rudinow and Barry 2008, 22), then learning that one’s fellow philosophers have been liable to error, that one’s fellow philosophers have failed to anticipate serious problems with the theories they were arguing for, and that the

¹¹ I will say more about open-mindedness and intellectual humility in Section 4.

theory one argues for is probably one among several alternative theories, should make one argue for one's own theory with humility. After all, one has no reason to think that, unlike one's predecessors, one is not liable to error or that one's theory is problem-free. To think otherwise is to be intellectually arrogant. As Roberts and Wood put it:

As the opposite of intellectual arrogance, [intellectual] humility is a disposition not to make unwarranted intellectual entitlement claim on the basis of one's (supposed) superiority or excellence (Roberts and Wood 2003, 271).

In fact, (L1) and (L2) give one strong reasons to believe that one's theory is probably not different from the theories of one's predecessors insofar as it, too, probably faces serious problems and has competing alternatives. If one were to think otherwise, one would be intellectually arrogant.¹²

According to Daniel Cohen (2013, 30), "the real lesson to be taken away from thinking about argumentation in terms of arguer's virtues is that epistemic humility is a virtue to argue for and to argue by." If (L1) and (L2) are correct, then the key lesson to be taken away from thinking about the limits of philosophical argumentation in terms of arguer's virtues is that intellectual humility is a virtue that philosophers should argue by. That is, if intellectual humility involves a "willingness to modify one's own position" (Aberdein 2014, 89), as well as an attentiveness to and owning of one's intellectual limitations (Whitcomb et al 2015, 12), then learning about the track record of philosophical argumentation, which is a track record that is marked by an abundance of alternative theories and serious problems for those theories, should make one willing to change one's position in the face of alternative theories and serious problems.

Given that "Intellectual humility is a mean between two extremes (in the manner of moral virtues, according to Aristotle): *intellectual dogmatism* and *intellectual timidity*" (Hazlett 2012, 220), humble arguers adopt the right epistemic attitude toward the claims they argue for "*in the right situations*" (Hazlett 2012, 220; emphasis added). As far as philosophical argumentation is concerned, a manifestation of the virtue of intellectual humility involves appreciating the rather precarious epistemic status of philosophical theories, since the *situation* in Western Philosophy is one of great epistemic uncertainty, as (L1) and (L2) make clear. If this is correct, then, contrary to the accusation made by his critics, Putnam's willingness to consider serious problems with the views he himself held, as well as the alternative views on offer, and then change his mind as a result, is not a character defect but rather the right epistemic attitude in light of the epistemic circumstances that prevail in Western Philosophy.

¹² I acknowledge the literature on peer disagreement, which may be relevant here, and to which I have made several contributions. (See Mizrahi 2012, 2013, and 2015.) In this paper, however, I would like to take a different approach. The overall argument of this paper, then, is an argument from the historical record of Western Philosophy, not an argument from disagreement.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the track record of Western Philosophy can teach us the following lessons about the limits of philosophical argumentation:

- (L1) For any given philosophical theory, *T*, the probability that *T* faces serious problems is very high (approximately 88%).
- (L2) For any given philosophical topic or subject matter, *S*, the probability that there are several alternative theories about *S* is very high (approximately 87%).

I have argued that these lessons should “help [philosophers] grow in intellectual humility” (Wood 1998, 75). Any philosopher, I submit, should be humbled by these facts about the limits of philosophical argumentation. Furthermore, since being intellectually humble involves adopting the right epistemic attitude (i.e., the mean between the extremes of intellectual dogmatism and intellectual timidity) *in the right circumstances*, being a humble philosophical arguer requires appreciating the historical record of philosophical argumentation, which is a track record that is marked by an abundance of alternative theories and serious problems for those theories. In such circumstances of great epistemic uncertainty, the right epistemic attitude is one that manifests intellectual humility. Rather than ridicule those who are attentive to the limitations of philosophical argumentation,¹³ philosophers should own those limitations.

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¹³ See Hickey (2009, 49-51) on how Putnam earned the nickname “renegade Putnam.”

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