

Abstract

The fact that philosophy is systematic—that philosophical issues are thoroughly interconnected—was a commonplace among nineteenth century idealists, then neglected by analytic philosophers throughout much of the twentieth century, and has now finally started to get some renewed attention. But other than calling attention to the fact, few philosophers have tried to say what it consists in, or what its implications are.

I argue that the systematicity of philosophy has disastrous epistemological implications. In particular, it implies philosophical skepticism: philosophers are rationally prohibited from believing any philosophical thesis. The argument goes by way of a new principle that connects inquiry with what is rational to believe. I conclude with a discussion of the relationship between my argument and other, more well-trodden arguments for philosophical skepticism.

1 The Datum and the Disaster

I begin with the banal datum that philosophy is *systematic*: philosophical issues are thoroughly interconnected. I end with the disaster of philosophical *skepticism*: philosophers are rationally prohibited from believing any philosophical thesis. I go by way of an epistemological principle about inquiry.

The datum isn't as banal as it once was. Among nineteenth century philosophers, especially those working in the idealist tradition, the thorough interconnectedness of philosophical issues was commonplace.¹ With the rise of analytic philosophy in the early twentieth century, and the attendant increase in specialization and piecemeal philosophical work, many philosophers conveniently turned a blind eye to the pesky fact of systematicity.² But after about a century of ignoring

¹For relevant secondary literature, see [Franks \[2005\]](#), [Pollock \[2009\]](#), [Kreines \[2015\]](#), and [Nisenbaum \[2018\]](#). It's worth noting that while those works are focused on German idealism, systematicity was a commonplace not only among German idealists, but among British and American idealists as well. When William James [1981, 71] wrote, "our idealists recite their arguments for the Absolute, saying that the slightest union admitted anywhere carries logically absolute Oneness with it, and the slightest separation admitted anywhere logically carries disunion remediless and complete," he is almost certainly referring to the view of his close friend, colleague, and interlocutor, Josiah Royce, who just a few years earlier argued in his *The World and the Individual* [1900, 132] that "The Many, if once irrevocably defined as real, and as essentially independent, can never again be linked by external ties. They indeed thenceforth remain strangers".

²See [Soames \[2003, xv\]](#). Let me be clear about what Soames and I mean here. Our claim isn't that analytic philosophers made no attempts to build comprehensive philosophical systems, or that whether they attempted to or not, they failed to do so. ([Glock \[2008, §6.3\]](#)'s criticism of Soames seems to misinterpret him in exactly that way.) Surely, philosophers at the heart of the analytic

it, analytic philosophers have finally started to take note.³ Banal or not, I take it here as a datum.

Admittedly, the datum is in desperate need of definition. As it stands it's hopelessly vague and toothless. How thorough is 'thoroughly'? 'Interconnected' in what sense, exactly? As to be expected, there are a number of ways in which the

tradition, like Russell and Quine, developed rather wide-ranging philosophical systems. As Soames himself notes, "analytic philosophy is no stranger to grand, encompassing systems, or to grandiose philosophical ambitions" (ibid.). Nor is it the claim that analytic philosophers believed that no two philosophical questions are related. That would be an absurd thing for analytic philosophers to believe, and equally absurd to attribute it to them.

Our claim is rather that analytic philosophers largely followed Russell's [1918] own well-known 'maxim', built upon the *feasibility* of piecemeal philosophical work: "The essence of philosophy as thus conceived is analysis, not synthesis...What is feasible is...the division of traditional problems into a number of separate and less baffling questions. 'Divide and conquer' is the maxim of success here as elsewhere." That is, Soames's claim is that analytic philosophers throughout much of the twentieth century shared the conviction that philosophy *can* be broken down into manageably self-contained units: small, circumscribed issues (which may still encompass a number of different questions, say about both free will and moral responsibility) that can be settled on their own, without *needing* to look beyond them. As Soames puts it, "There is, I think, a widespread presumption within the tradition that it is often possible to make philosophical progress by intensively investigating a small, circumscribed range of philosophical issues while holding broader, systematic questions in abeyance. What distinguishes twentieth-century analytical philosophy from at least some philosophy in other traditions, or at other times, is not a categorical rejection of philosophical systems, but rather the acceptance of a wealth of smaller, more thorough and more rigorous, investigations that need not be tied to any overarching philosophical view." Soames seems pretty clearly correct about this characterization of the common analytic conviction. If they *didn't* think this, it's very hard to understand what they were *doing*. (As I see it, the tide started to turn back with the later stages of David Lewis, who famously reported that he *tried* early on to be a piecemeal philosopher, but then eventually hit upon the realization that it couldn't be done. For much more detail on Lewis and systematicity, see my Segal [ms].) And it was this shared conviction that was widely repudiated by nineteenth-century idealists. The latter held that philosophical issues are interconnected *to the extent* that there is no unit of philosophy that is manageably self-contained—that is, any unit of philosophy that *is* self-contained will be so sprawling and so large, as not to be manageable.

It's to this deep chasm, between the working assumptions of analytic philosophers and those of their idealist predecessors, that Paul Franks ([2005, p. 1]) calls our attention in this pointed passage: "Why do they [German Idealists] think it impossible to contribute to the resolution of a philosophical problem without attempting to resolve them all within an interconnected whole?...In short: Why do they seek, with so much urgency, to say everything about everything, which is unlikely to succeed, instead of being content to say something about something, which might avoid total failure?...For many philosophers from the Anglo-American tradition, these unanswered—indeed, mostly unasked—questions prevent the incorporation of German idealists into the canon of great philosophers who illuminated problems with which we are still concerned. Their systematic project seems not only immodest but, to speak frankly, *foreign*."

³See, *inter alia*, Nolan [2007], Adams [2009], MacBride [2014], Heil [2017, p. 104], Williams [2017, p. 164], Koons and Pickavance [2017], Beebee [2018, p.17], McDaniel [2020], and Segal [2020].

notion of *thorough interconnectedness* can be cashed out.⁴ The way that's relevant to my argument here has to do with the evidential *instability* of philosophical inquiry.

Say you're looking into whether we are wholly material beings. The evidence you accumulate as your inquiry unfolds will presumably consist in the *arguments* for and against. (Some might prefer to speak of the arguments' premises, if that's any different. Nothing of substance will turn on this distinction, so feel free to substitute as you see fit.) And those arguments, if they substantially advance you beyond your initial evidential situation, will presumably be based on various *other* philosophical considerations: metaphysical considerations about composition, persistence, vagueness, identity, modality, explanation, and so on; epistemological considerations regarding skepticism about who you are, conceivability as a guide to possibility, the epistemic significance of appearances, and so on; moral considerations surrounding the intrinsic worth of a human being, the question of whether a wholly material being can be free and morally responsible, and so on. And considerations in the philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind, and philosophy of physics, and philosophy of religion, and still others besides. And if you were to inquire into any of these myriad other issues, the evidence you would accumulate would consist in the arguments on the various sides of *them*, which would in turn be based on still further philosophical considerations of all sorts (including considerations about materialism itself). More generally: Inquiry into a given philosophical issue consists in spinning an intricate web of connections between that issue and a host of other philosophical issues.

Now, it could have turned out (in an epistemic sense of 'could have') that none of these connections actually *matters*, evidentially speaking. Thus, it could have turned out that while there *are* arguments for materialism based on certain views about composition, there are also arguments *against* materialism based on those selfsame views about composition, and that at the end of the day it's a wash: the truth about composition has no bearing on the question of materialism. And that the same is true for *any* two philosophical issues. If that had been the case, philosophy would be maximally *unsystematic*, and philosophical inquiry would be maximally evidentially stable. (That would lead to its own methodological and epistemological problems. If that were true, and we knew it, then the task of arguing for philosophical positions would be pointless, and there'd be no way to gather philosophical evidence at all.)

But that's *not at all* how things turned out. As things turned out—or, at least

⁴In Segal [2020] I cash out systematicity in terms of the “space of grand (metaphysical) theories” and the viable regions in that space—and argue that systematicity so understood leads to skepticism. The way I cash out systematicity here is very different, as is the route I take from systematicity to skepticism. But each of the routes provides support for the other—at least if the two ways of cashing out systematicity are in the end equivalent, or near enough as to be evidentially interchangeable.

as they look at present—there are myriad bottom-line evidential connections between different philosophical issues. What’s more, many of these connections are *impactful*. What I mean by saying they’re ‘impactful’ is that they induce shifts in plausibility.⁵ What’s initially very plausible turns out to have implausible implications; what’s initially very implausible turns out to be an implication of something very plausible. For example, what is initially plausible about the question of materialism—when that question is taken in isolation, or in light of its implications for mental-physical correlations, say—might well be implausible once it’s considered in light of its implications for composition.⁶ How many such connections are impactful? I’m not foolish enough to venture even a semi-precise answer to that question. But what our collective experience has made clear enough is this: However far you’ve gotten in inquiring into a particular philosophical question, it’s very likely that if you were to continue to chase down the implications of the position that is currently best supported by your evidence, you will *at some point* hit upon a connection that induces a shift in plausibility.⁷ This is what I mean by saying that philosophical inquiry is evidentially unstable.

Other philosophers have started to call attention to this meta-philosophical point. Here, for example, is Kris McDaniel on the interconnectedness of metaphysical issues, and the consequent challenges of metaphysical inquiry:

...in general, metaphysical claims connect in intricate and important ways with other metaphysical claims...Metaphysical questions are very hard to answer conclusively, but this isn’t because there are no answers to them. Rather, one reason they are hard to answer is that while attempting to answer one metaphysical question, you almost always end up having to answer many others in the process. Probably we will never run out of metaphysical questions to answer. [McDaniel, 2020, p. 12]

⁵They induce shifts in plausibility for folks like us, who are cognitively imperfect. If we were (broadly) logically omniscient—if we knew in advance all of the prior probabilities, and so we knew the conditional probabilities of every philosophical view given every other one—then none of the connections between philosophical issues would be impactful, since we would have already accounted for all of them from the get-go. Indeed, we should arguably have a credence of 1 from the get-go in all the true philosophical views (or, at least in all of those that are a priori), 0 in all of the false ones, and be done with the inquiry before we start.

This does mean that the notion of systematicity at play here is a relative one, and relative to certain people or cognitive capabilities. But I am aware of no other plausible way to cash out the notion of intrinsic systematicity that doesn’t have that admittedly unfortunate consequence.

⁶See Unger [2004].

⁷Of course this can be so even if philosophers frequently stick to their *opinions*. That we don’t often change our philosophical minds once we’ve made them up is easily explained without recourse to evidential stability. (If you want evidence for the claim that philosophical inquiry is evidentially unstable, look not at your own inquiry but at that of *others*, and how you think they should react to certain arguments.)

And here, for example, is Helen Beebe on the interconnectedness of philosophical issues more generally, and the consequent instability of philosophical inquiry:

You might have your view in some area of metaphysics nicely buttoned down, or so it seems—but there is always the possibility (*indeed, likelihood*) that when you attempt to bring your guiding assumptions and methodological principles to bear on some new area—the philosophy of language, say, or meta-ethics, or the philosophy of physics—you find yourself forced to accept some unpalatable claims... [Beebe, 2018, p.17, emphasis mine]

I will soon give a more formal account of the evidential instability of philosophical inquiry, but what I've already said should help clarify how I'm cashing out the notion of systematicity for present purposes. Philosophy is systematic in the sense that one question leads to another, and so to another, and so on, *in such a way and to such an extent that it ought to induce vacillation in the philosophical views of an honest philosophical inquirer*.⁸

To be sure, the uncrystallized datum ('philosophical issues are thoroughly interconnected') is more obviously true, and more banal, than any particular way of cashing it out—including the cashing out in terms of evidential instability. Such is the price of precision. But I take it the instability of philosophical inquiry is a sufficiently live hypothesis to render the following conditional interesting and potentially very important: *if* philosophy is systematic in the sense that philosophical inquiry is evidentially unstable, then epistemological disaster ensues.

OK, maybe not *disaster*. Just as the datum isn't as banal as it once was, the conclusion isn't considered as disastrous as it once was. An increasing number of philosophers have come to the conclusion that we are rationally prohibited from believing any substantive philosophical thesis. Some are moved by the fact of ubiquitous and persistent philosophical disagreement, together with one version or another of conciliationism in the epistemology of disagreement.⁹ Others are moved by challenges to standard philosophical methodology—either stemming from particular experimental results or based on the lack of any well-developed theory that

⁸Some disciplines, such as mathematics, might be systematic, but only in a weaker way and to a lesser extent, so that the further, italicized condition, isn't met. Even if mathematical questions often lead to others—and even if some can be answered (by us) only by settling other mathematical questions—it's just not true of mathematical questions that as we 'widen our mathematical lens' the plausible answer flits back and forth, and never settles down. At any rate, that's certainly not true regarding *all or most* mathematical questions.

But it's worth emphasizing that evidential instability isn't *tacked on* to systematicity. It's a determinate *form* that systematicity can take: the form in which no issue can plausibly be isolated from any other. Thanks to a referee for this journal.

⁹See Beebe [2018], Christensen [2014], and Barnett [2019].

explains how such methodology is truth-conducive.¹⁰ But despite their skepticism, a number of these philosophers have sought to minimize the *significance* of this conclusion in one way or another. Some suggest alternative attitudes we might still rationally take toward substantive philosophical theses, such as acceptance (Elgin [2010]), regarding-as-defensible (Goldberg [2013]) and (insulated) inclination (Barnett [2019]). Others point to important philosophical tasks we might still rationally engage in aside from taking attitudes toward substantive philosophical theses, such as achieving reflective equilibrium (Beebee [2018]) and uncovering new questions (Weinberg [2017]).

It seems to me that if we have to settle for any of the substitutes these philosophers put forward, then philosophy matters a lot less than many philosophers would have hoped (see Chalmers [2015]). Any expectation that we're learning the truth about issues of ultimate concern—or, even just about issues that have implications *outside* philosophy—is dashed. (The only truths we'd be learning, it seems, are what the philosophical possibilities are, and what the philosophical entailments are. That's *something* alright, but, unlike substantive philosophical theses, those things don't have implications outside philosophy.) Even if that's not disastrous, it'll be pretty disappointing for many philosophers.

That being said: regardless of whether any of this is disastrous or even disappointing, I take it it's still interesting and potentially very important if it turns out that philosophers are rationally prohibited from believing any philosophical thesis. For the remainder of the paper I'll simply be arguing that this conclusion follows from the evidential instability of philosophical inquiry, setting aside both whether the conclusion is indeed a disaster and whether there's any way to definitively establish that philosophical inquiry is evidentially unstable. (I won't try to *definitively establish* that philosophical inquiry is evidentially unstable. But in section 3.3 I will sketch an abductive argument that I think provides significant support for that claim. Readers who do not find the claim independently plausible are kindly requested to reserve judgment until then.)

2 Divergent Inquiries

In order to formulate the epistemological principle that's going to be doing the heavy lifting—and to further crystallize the datum about philosophical systematicity—it'll be helpful to make the notion of an *evidentially unstable inquiry* a bit more precise.

We can start by thinking about different patterns that an inquiry can take.

¹⁰For a fairly wide-ranging philosophical skepticism based on experimental results, see Machery [2017]. For a philosophical skepticism rooted in the lack of any well-developed theory of the truth-conduciveness of philosophical methodology, see Beebee [2018].

Say we model an inquiry into a given claim as a series of real numbers between 0 and 1, where each term in the series represents a stage in the inquiry, and the term's value represents the likelihood of the claim, given the evidence the inquirer has accumulated until that stage. (By 'likelihood of p' I mean 'the credence(s) it is rational to have in p'.¹¹) So modeled, we can characterize any inquiry the way we characterize a series. Some (very boring) inquiries are constant: as more evidence is accumulated, the likelihood of the claim in question stays constant. Other (slightly less boring) inquiries are non-constant, but they are still monotonic: as more evidence is accumulated, the *direction* in which the likelihood changes always stays the same. Some inquiries are non-monotonic, but they still converge: there are ups and downs, but the series still approaches a single likelihood.¹² And then there are divergent inquiries: inquiries that never converge to any likelihood at all.

Credences are very fine-grained, so even a little evidence almost always has *some* bearing on which credence is rational; further inquiry will almost always turn up *some* evidence, even if only a little; and rarely will it consistently point in the same direction. Given this, almost all inquiries will be non-monotonic, and will never even become monotonic after a finite number of stages; indeed, many inquiries, perhaps most inquiries, will be divergent. For much the same reason, even if you know that continued inquiry into p would diverge, that knowledge won't have interesting implications regarding the epistemic status of outright belief or disbelief in p. Even if I know that continued inquiry into whether Jones is the murderer would endlessly vacillate between a likelihood (that Jones is the murderer) of 0.99991 and a likelihood of 0.99992, that knowledge all by itself would do nothing to impugn the epistemic credentials of my present belief that Jones is in fact the murderer.

But the classification is potentially of much greater significance if we employ a more coarse-grained division of doxastic attitudes. Let's divide the credences into just three bands, where what defines the middle band is that having a credence in that band is incompatible with, or rationally prohibits, having outright belief or disbelief in the claim. Perhaps the middle band is wide; perhaps it's as narrow as

¹¹It bears repeating (see nt. 5) that I am working with a notion of rationality that can accommodate logical ignorance. It thus allows for non-extremal likelihoods of a priori claims, and makes room for the claim I go on to make, that philosophy is divergent. (Thanks to a referee for this journal for pointing out the need to make this explicit.) But I don't consider this a serious cost. Anyone who wants to distinguish between rational and irrational (or more and less rational) responses to philosophical evidence—when comparing subjects with the very same credences, but different evidence—will need some such notion of rationality. And everyone should want the ability to draw such distinctions.

¹²Because likelihoods are bounded above and below, any monotonic series—along with any series that becomes monotonic after a finite number of terms—is also convergent. That's why each of the above conditions entails the next.

single value of 0.5. We don't need to settle that.

This allows us to still classify inquiries in the way I've suggested, and just reinterpret the classes accordingly. Constant inquiries always stay in the same band—though they might not stay the same likelihood. Non-constant but monotonic inquiries will switch bands, at most twice and only in the same direction (from lower to middle and middle to upper, or vice versa)—though they might have ups-and-downs within the same band. Non-monotonic but convergent inquiries will flip-flop, from a lower band to a higher band and then back (or vice versa), but eventually settle down in one band—though they might never converge to a single likelihood. Finally, divergent inquiries never settle in any of the three bands. It'll be easier for an inquiry to be convergent, and even to be monotonic or constant, given this reinterpretation. So if you know or even just have good evidence to think that further inquiry into a certain claim *won't* converge—evidence that you'll have regarding any philosophical claim, given the systematicity of philosophy!—that fact could well have interesting implications regarding the epistemic status of outright belief or disbelief in the claim. My proposed principle contends exactly that.

2.1 PRINCIPLE

The principle lays down a necessary condition for when a person is rationally permitted to take a position on whether p (that is, to either believe that p or believe that it's not the case that p); equivalently, it lays down a sufficient condition for when it is rationally prohibited to take a position on whether p . Of course, if the condition were both necessary and sufficient, it would serve to answer one of the central questions in epistemology. My condition will provide only a partial answer. But the answer it provides is both surprising and powerful. It's surprising because it can prohibit you from believing what your total evidence overwhelmingly supports, even in scenarios that are neither like lotteries (Hawthorne [2004]) nor high stakes (Stanley [2005]).¹³ And it is powerful because it leads to skepticism

¹³The principle connects what's epistemically rationally permissible to believe with what future inquiry would likely turn up, and in this way resembles suggestions that have recently been put forward by Mark Schroeder [2012] and Sara Aronowitz [2021]. Their suggestions also have the consequence that the claims it's epistemically rational to believe at a given time might not be wholly fixed by the likelihoods of those propositions given the total evidence that the subject has at that time, and that this is due to facts about what further inquiry would likely turn up. But there are significant differences between their suggestions and mine, as well as between the degree and kind of departures from evidentialist orthodoxy that they warrant.

Aronowitz suggests that at least at the beginning of one's inquiry into p it can be epistemically rational to 'explore' (framework beliefs that are incompatible with p) rather than 'exploit' (one's current evidence that makes p more likely than not). And Schroeder suggests that at least if you have good reason to think that better evidence about p will come in if you were to inquire further or wait then it can be epistemically rational to withhold from believing p (or its negation) in the meantime. Both of them in effect rely on the possibility that I might have good reason to believe

about philosophy.

Suppose that you've collected evidence regarding some claim, and all the evidence (at least all the first-order evidence) you've collected hitherto strongly supports it; so strongly in fact that the likelihood of the claim, given that evidence, is within the 'upper band'. But suppose that evidence also makes it very likely that *if you were to inquire (further) into it*, then your inquiry would diverge (in the strong sense that it wouldn't settle even in a single band). Then the principle I'd propose says that in that circumstance it's rationally prohibited to outright believe the claim. Here's how we can put it:

DIVERGENT INQUIRY: If S's evidence makes it very likely that S's further inquiry into p would diverge, then S is rationally prohibited to believe (or disbelieve) p¹⁴

Consider an example. Say I'm 800 years old, and I've been trying to figure out for a very long time if the universe is the product of design. When I started my investigation, all I could see was Earth (I used to just call it 'the world') and the celestial bodies (sun, moon, and stars). Everything seemed exquisitely well-ordered, with means beautifully adapted to ends, and the ambient conditions so fortuitously

that my current evidential situation can be *improved upon*. My suggestion, on the other hand, relies on the possibility that I might have good reason not to *privilege* my current evidential situation, whether or not it can be improved.

This relates to two further differences. First, while my suggested principle *prohibits* a subject from believing what her evidence overwhelmingly supports, their suggested principles might simply *permit not believing* what one's evidence overwhelmingly supports. (Aronowitz's principle is clear on this score; I am less certain where Schroeder stands.) Second, my principle applies no matter how likely p is on my current evidence. Theirs presumably don't; presumably, there's some threshold such that if the likelihood of p given one's evidence exceeds *that*, then one could, and maybe should, disregard the fact that one's evidential situation could still be improved.

On the other hand, Aronowitz's principle licenses a more radical departure from evidentialist orthodoxy than either mine or Schroeder's, insofar as it allows you to *believe* something not supported by your current evidence, rather than just to *withhold* regarding something that is supported by your current evidence.

¹⁴As a referee very helpfully pointed out, there are a number of ways in which we might consider strengthening this principle, by weakening the condition in the antecedent.

For one thing, you might endorse a stronger principle that says that if S's evidence makes it very likely that S's further inquiry into p *might* diverge (that is, it's not the case that it *would* converge), then S is rationally prohibited to believe (or disbelieve) p.

A further strengthening would say: If S's evidence makes it very likely that there's no band such that S's further inquiry into p would converge to that band (even if further inquiry would converge to some band or other), then S is rationally prohibited to believe (or disbelieve) p.

Each of these strengthenings would allow the argument to go through with a correspondingly weakened version of PHILOSOPHY IS DIVERGENT.

It does seem to me that my argument in section 2.3 would support these stronger principles as well, and that I could therefore get by with a weaker claim about the systematicity of philosophy. But I will leave an exploration of that possibility for another occasion.

conducive to life. At that stage, my evidence made it very likely that the universe was designed. As time went on and my equipment improved, I was able to see that we inhabit a galaxy with an absolutely enormous number of stars, many of which have planets revolving around them. After doing some calculations, I realized that it was exceedingly likely that at least one of the stars would be orbited by a planet whose composition and atmosphere was conducive to life. At that stage, we might reasonably assume, my evidence no longer made it likely that the universe was designed. But then I widened my lens further and saw the most amazing thing. Our galaxy is just one of very many galaxies, each of which has an enormous number of stars, many of which have life-filled planets. And when you look from Earth at all of the life-filled planets in all of the visible galaxies, they clearly form a pattern: they keep spelling out (in Latin characters) “In the beginning, God created Heaven and Earth”. At that stage, my evidence again made it enormously likely that the universe was designed. And this pattern kept on repeating itself. Clear evidence of design would give way, as I widened my lens, to what appeared to be dumb luck, which would give way in turn, as I widened my lens further, to evidence of design at a larger scale, which would then give way to what appeared to be dumb luck...If this went on for long enough, I’d have very good inductive evidence about how my continued inquiry would look. In particular, at any stage after the pattern had repeated itself sufficiently many times—and hadn’t stopped repeating itself—I’d have good inductive evidence that if I were to inquire further into whether the universe was designed, my inquiry would not converge. Then DIVERGENT INQUIRY would say that at any such stage—even if, say, I’m at the stage where the life-filled pockets spell out the entire Bible—I’m rationally prohibited to believe (or disbelieve) that the universe was designed.

I think this is an intuitively correct verdict on the example. Intuitive or not, it’s what follows from the principle, and I will shortly offer a defense of the latter.

As should hopefully be evident, if I’m right about philosophical inquiry, then I could have used any inquiry into any philosophical question as my example. That’s precisely the point of the datum. Or, as we can now put it, so that it’s clear how the larger argument is supposed to go:

PHILOSOPHY IS DIVERGENT: For any philosophical thesis *p* and subject *S*, *S*’s evidence makes it very likely that *S*’s further inquiry into *p* would diverge

It follows, of course, from PHILOSOPHY IS DIVERGENT and DIVERGENT INQUIRY that no one is rationally permitted to believe (or disbelieve) any philosophical thesis.

2.2 ROADS NOT TAKEN

In the next section I will offer my own defense of DIVERGENT INQUIRY, which relies on specifically *inquiry*-governing norms, and which issues only in a rational pro-

hibition on being in a state of outright belief (under the conditions specified in DIVERGENT INQUIRY), rather than a rational prohibition of having certain credences. But the reader might be tempted by certain easier, more traditional routes to my conclusion—ones which rely on some general and familiar epistemic norms—and that issue in the even stronger conclusion that one is rationally prohibited from having any credence other than a middling one (under the conditions specified in DIVERGENT INQUIRY). So before I turn to my own defense of my more modest principle, I will explain why I don't rely on the other routes that might naturally suggest themselves.

Let's begin with the simplest of thoughts in defense of DIVERGENT INQUIRY. You might argue as follows. Of course it's true that in any case of the sort described by the principle, the subject is prohibited to take a position. The reason is that the subject's *total* evidence includes the higher-order evidence about the shape any future inquiry would take. And that higher-order evidence has the effect of swamping whatever first-order evidence the subject has, so that the likelihood of the claim in question is invariably *middling*. Thus, in the example I brought, the likelihood that the universe was designed, conditional upon the subject's *total* evidence, is in the middle band. And we've been assuming that if the likelihood of *p*, conditional upon a subject's total evidence, is in the middle band, then it's rationally prohibited for the subject to believe one way or the other. (That's how 'the middle band' was defined.) So DIVERGENT INQUIRY, far from being surprising, just falls out of the principle of total evidence, in conjunction with our plausible assumption that there is some minimum rational credence necessary for rational belief.

I'm afraid it's not so simple, however. It's far from obvious that evidence about the shape of a counterfactual inquiry has the swamping effect that the objector is alleging—or that it has any substantial impact on the *likelihood* whatsoever. If we try to spell out our reasons for taking it to have such an impact, we can see where the reasoning founders.

As should be clear from the example I adduced, the evidence about the shape that your inquiry would take need not be evidence that there's anything *wrong* with the first-order evidence you currently possess. If I'm currently at the stage at which planets are spelling out the first verse of Genesis, then my first-order evidence certainly supports the design hypothesis, and the evidence I have for the lack of convergence does nothing to suggest otherwise. To the extent that the evidence for lack of convergence is genuine higher-order evidence—evidence about evidence—it's just evidence that there is *other potential evidence* which, taken together with the currently possessed pro-design evidence, supports the denial of the design hypothesis.

So the objector might be assuming something like this: if a subject's current total first-order evidence supports *p*, but the subject has evidence that there is *other potential evidence*—other evidence the subject *could* come to have—which, taken

together with the current total first-order evidence, supports $\neg p$, then the subject's total evidence fails to support p . But this assumption is false. For one thing, the subject might *also* have evidence that there is *still other* potential evidence which, taken taken together with the current total first-order evidence and said anti- p potential evidence, actually supports p . Indeed, every case in which a subject has evidence that her continued inquiry would diverge will be like that. But more importantly, potential evidence isn't itself evidence (at least it's not evidence that the subject *in fact has*); and *evidence* of potential evidence, while it is evidence, is pretty insignificant evidentially. It's almost *always* going to be very likely, given the subject's total evidence, that there is *some* potential evidence which, taken together with her first-order evidence, would make what is otherwise likely unlikely. We all know there are clever tricksters out there, and misleading appearances to be had, and lots of other things that would provide (what is by our current evidential lights) misleading but powerful evidence. But that doesn't mean we should never follow our current evidence where it leads. What DIVERGENT INQUIRY does, and the principle of total evidence doesn't, is single out for distinction just the potential evidence that you *would* hit upon if you *were* to inquire further.

Here's a second natural thought, this one slightly more refined than the previous one. The point, you might say, isn't that our total evidence includes evidence of potential *evidence*, but that it includes evidence of potential (rational) *credences*. van Fraassen [1984] famously proposed a constraint on synchronic coherence in the form of a Future Reflection Principle: a subject's credence in p , conditional upon her future credence in p being X , is rationally required to be X . Now, there's no straightforward way to derive DIVERGENT INQUIRY from van Fraassen's principle, since the former principle is about the credence you *would* (rationally) have if you were to inquire further, not the credence you *will* (rationally) have after you inquire further. But a counterfactual reflection principle seems to be in the same spirit as a future reflection principle.

Nevertheless, I don't think any reflection principle, whether future or counterfactual, can vindicate the triviality objection. Setting aside whatever general problems there are with reflection principles (Talbot [1991], Christensen [1991], Briggs [2009]), the real difficulty in employing a reflection principle to derive DIVERGENT INQUIRY is that the counterfactual inquiry treated by that principle is, of course, divergent. There's no single band, and no privileged band, that the inquiry would settle in. So a reflection principle is of no use here, at least if it's meant to rationally pin the subject down to a single band (the middle one).¹⁵

The bottom line is that as much as it would be nice if there were some easy, traditional route to DIVERGENT INQUIRY, I don't believe there is. There's no good reason to think that in the sort of case treated by DIVERGENT INQUIRY, the subject

¹⁵van Fraassen [1995] proposes a General Reflection Principle, which is meant to pin the subject down to a certain range of credences, but that wouldn't prohibit the subject described in DIVERGENT INQUIRY from occupying the upper or lower band.

is rationally prohibited from having a credence in the upper band. The subject's evidence might well overwhelmingly support p —and she might well be permitted to have a credence that matches the evidence—and yet DIVERGENT INQUIRY will still prohibit her from taking a position on p . The question, then, is: why would that be?

2.3 PRINCIPLE DEFENDED

My defense of DIVERGENT INQUIRY relies first and foremost on the idea that there are rational norms governing inquiry—what Jane Friedman [2020] has called zetetic norms.¹⁶ As I see things, some such norms are inquiry-*obligating*: they say that you *are rationally obligated to inquire* into p , under such-and-such conditions. Others are inquiry-*prohibiting* norms: they say that you *are rationally prohibited to inquire* into p , under thus-and-such conditions. (The conditions for both sorts usually have to do with the doxastic states you're in regarding p .) I will exploit both sorts of norms. The particular norms I will exploit are *wide-scope* conditional norms: in essence, the inquiry-obligating norms tell you that it is rationally prohibited to *both* be in thus-and-such a doxastic state regarding p and nevertheless *not* inquire into p . And the inquiry-prohibiting norms tell you that it is rationally prohibited to *both* be in such-and-such a doxastic state regarding p and nevertheless inquire into p .

The crux of my argument is that the subject described in DIVERGENT INQUIRY is in a normative pickle if she takes a position on p : she is bound by incompatible inquiry-obligating and inquiry-prohibiting norms. On the one hand, because of the particulars of her situation, she is obligated to inquire further into p if she takes any position at all on p ; that is, she is *prohibited* from taking a position on p *without* inquiring further into p . On the other hand, she, like everyone else, is also *prohibited* from taking a position on p *while* inquiring further into p . So, if she took a position on p , she'd be rationally compelled both to inquire into p and to desist from inquiring into p . She is therefore prohibited from taking a position at all on p .

Here is the argument laid out more carefully:

1. If S 's evidence makes it very likely that S 's further inquiry into p would diverge, then S is rationally prohibited to: not inquire into whether p , and (yet) believe (or disbelieve) p
2. S is rationally prohibited to: inquire into whether p and (yet) believe (or disbelieve) p

¹⁶To be clear, Divergent Inquiry itself is not a zetetic norm; it's a synchronic epistemic norm, governing rational belief. But my *defense* of Divergent Inquiry relies on two norms that are zetetic—that is, norms that *do* govern rational inquiry. Thanks to a referee here.

Therefore,

3. If S's evidence makes it very likely that S's further inquiry into p would diverge, then S is rationally prohibited to believe (or disbelieve) p

The argument is valid if the following argument form is valid:

- I. S is rationally prohibited to: not- ϕ and ψ
- II. S is rationally prohibited to: ϕ and ψ

Therefore,

- III. S is rationally prohibited to ψ

And, quite plausibly, that argument form is indeed valid. Its validity follows from (a) rational prohibition being closed under disjunction, and (b) rational prohibition being closed under equivalence.¹⁷

What about the premises? The first premise is motivated by the idea that rationality is incompatible with arbitrariness. If you're inquiring into p, and you have good evidence that continued inquiry into p would diverge, then it would be objectionably arbitrary of you to call off the inquiry, and take a position, *right now*. It's one thing if you call off the inquiry *without* taking a position. We all have lots of things to do; you're entitled to do other things, *especially* if it looks like inquiring further would lead to a dead end. And it's also one thing if you tentatively take a position that accords with the likelihood given your current evidence—all the while continuing to inquire. There's nothing arbitrary about tying your *present position* to your *present likelihood* (the likelihood given your present evidence). (There might be something *else* objectionable about inquiring into a claim that you have a position on, as premise 2 says. But it won't be arbitrariness.) And finally, it's one thing if you didn't have any particular reason to think that continued inquiry would diverge. There's nothing arbitrary about tying your *once-and-for-all position* to what, by your lights, looks to be the *once-and-for-all likelihood* band.

But it's entirely different if you call off your inquiry and therewith form your once-and-for-all position, despite your good evidence that continued inquiry would diverge. It *is* objectionably arbitrary to tie your once-and-for-all position to your present likelihood when that likelihood seems *not* to lie in the once-and-for-all likelihood band.

¹⁷Given (a), it follows from (I) and (II) that S is rationally prohibited to: either (not- ϕ and ψ) or (ϕ and ψ). Given (b), it then follows that S is rationally prohibited to ψ .

Note: given the interdefinability of rational prohibition and rational obligation, (a) is equivalent to the claim that rational obligation is closed under conjunction, and (b) is equivalent to the claim that rational obligation is closed under equivalence. Both of the latter are theorems of Standard Deontic Logic, although the former is not without its detractors.

Consider my fictionalized inquiry into whether the universe is designed. If I decide to call off my inquiry at some very late “dumb luck appearance” stage, that’s perfectly reasonable. *As long as I don’t then take a position on whether the universe is designed.* But if I do then take a position, even if it’s the position that the universe was a product of dumb luck, then my whole complex of behaviors—the calling off the inquiry, together with the taking a position—is unreasonable. And it’s unreasonable because it’s arbitrary. It might not seem at first glance to be arbitrary—so long as I took the position that the universe wasn’t designed—since the position I’d have taken would have aligned with the evidence I had at the time. But it’s not the position all by itself that’s supposed to be arbitrary. What’s supposed to be arbitrary is the selection of the *present* stage in my inquiry as the one at which to arrive at a *conclusion*. I know or have very good reason to believe that if I keep on inquiring I will soon enough discover telltale signs of design. So why privilege my present “dumb-luck” evidence? There’s no good answer to that.

The second premise, the inquiry-prohibiting norm—what [Friedman \[2019\]](#) calls DON’T BELIEVE AND INQUIRE (DBI)—is motivated (at least in part) by the idea that rationality is incompatible with contradiction. One way to spell this out is to say that anyone in violation of the norm holds *conflicting attitudes* toward the same claim, and so is irrational. If you are inquiring into *p* then you are asking or wondering whether *p* is true; so then you are suspending judgment about *p* ([Friedman \[2017\]](#)). But taking a position on *p* and suspending judgment about *p* is to take conflicting attitudes toward *p*, and so is irrational.

Another way to spell it out is to say that anyone in violation of the norm holds *contradictory beliefs*—that is, she believes both a claim and something incompatible with that claim. If you’ve taken a position on *p*, then you take yourself to have settled the issue of whether *p* is true; but then you take the issue of whether *p* is true to be settled; but then you take the question of whether *p* is true to be closed. On the other hand, if you are inquiring into *p*, then you take the question of whether *p* is true to be open; the very act of inquiry into *p* involves asking or wondering whether *p* is true (see [Friedman \[2017, 2019\]](#)). But taking the very same question to be open and closed is to hold contradictory beliefs.

There are a number of ways to resist these arguments, none too promising. You might deny the move from inquiring to wondering, or from wondering to taking the issue to be open. Perhaps inquiry can have a purpose other than trying to settle an open question, and perhaps it can have that purpose even if the question is *not* open (for the inquirer). For example, a person might continue to inquire into whether God exists even after they’ve concluded that He does, in order to accumulate more evidence, or become more confident, or gain deeper theological understanding (see [Millson \[2021\]](#)).

This response seems to trade on a confusion between two senses of ‘inquiry’. There might be a legitimate (albeit loose) sense of ‘inquiry’ in which a person can inquire without asking, or wondering, or taking any interrogative attitude what-

soever, into any particular question. This will involve, at the very least, doing the sorts of things that an inquiring person (strictly speaking) would do—collecting evidence, questioning others, reading up, etc. They’re doing *research*, as we might say. But unless those activities are directed at discovering the truth about some claim, then they’re not inquiring *into whether such-and-such*. At least I think that’s so according to the standard meaning of that phrase. But if it isn’t, then I am willing to just stipulate a meaning for ‘inquire into whether p’ that has that consequence, and use the phrase with the stipulated meaning. The defense of the first premise stays the same, even given this stipulated or clarified meaning for ‘inquiry into p’.

You might instead deny the move from taking a position on a certain claim to taking the issue (of whether that claim is true) to have been settled, or closed. Perhaps closing requires something stronger than mere belief, such as knowledge. Thus, a person might already believe that God exists, but continue to inquire because they take the question of God’s existence to still be open—at least so long as they don’t know that God exists (see [Kelp \[2014, 2018\]](#)).

This response is more promising. But note first that it does nothing to avoid the conflicting attitude problem. That problem arises whether or not we deny the move from taking a position on a certain claim to taking the issue to be closed. All that’s needed is that it’s irrational to both suspend judgment and believe the same claim. One might deny that as well ([McGrath \[2021\]](#)), but that’s yet another commitment to take on. Note second that even we grant this response, I can retreat to a principle slightly weaker than DIVERGENT INQUIRY:

DIVERGENT INQUIRY*: If S’s evidence makes it very likely that S’s further inquiry into p would diverge, then S is rationally prohibited to believe **that she knows p**

The argument for DIVERGENT INQUIRY* is exactly the same as the argument for DIVERGENT INQUIRY, with the exception that believing is replaced by believing that one knows:

- I. If S’s evidence makes it very likely that S’s further inquiry into p would diverge, then S is rationally prohibited to: not inquire into whether p, and (yet) believe **that she knows p**
- II. S is rationally prohibited to: inquire into whether p and (yet) believe **that she knows p**

Therefore,

- III. If S’s evidence makes it very likely that S’s further inquiry into p would diverge, then S is rationally prohibited to believe **that she knows p**

The defense of the first premise is even more plausible than before. The defense of the second premise is just as before, but now there's no place for the reply that knowledge is necessary for closing a question. For even if that's true, it's still the case that if you believe **that you know** p, then you've taken yourself to have settled the issue of whether p is true.

Admittedly, a retreat to the weaker DIVERGENT INQUIRY* would lead to a corresponding weakening of my overall conclusion. Rather than conclude that no one is rationally permitted to believe (or disbelieve) any philosophical thesis, my conclusion would instead be that no one is rationally permitted to believe (or disbelieve) that they know any philosophical thesis. But that would be pretty bad. Indeed, it might end up in the very same disaster. If you can't rationally take yourself to know any philosophical thesis, then you probably have no business asserting any such thesis.¹⁸ Mutatis mutandis for "inner assertion": you probably have no business asserting it to *yourself*, which is to say, believing it.¹⁹ So it turns out you're rationally prohibited from believing any philosophical thesis after all.

3 Distinguishing Arguments

Someone might buy everything I've said, but think it's old hat. Of course, historically there have been a number of routes to skepticism, both in general and about philosophy in particular, and some bear some resemblance to the argument I've given. Despite their resemblance, however, they're essentially different arguments.²⁰ Let me briefly highlight some of the arguments that might be conflated with mine, and explain how they're different.

3.1 GENERALIZED PROBLEM OF INDUCTION

You might consider my sort of skepticism as a mere generalization of inductive skepticism. Whenever our evidence for p is less than fully conclusive, but powerful enough that we would ordinarily take ourselves to be justified in believing p, a 'generalized inductive skeptic' might argue as follows:

Since our evidence for p is less than fully conclusive, it's possible that it's misleading regarding p; but if it's possible that that our evidence

¹⁸Assuming you ought to: assert only what you know (Williamson [2000]), then there is at least a "secondary impropriety" in asserting what you don't rationally believe that you know (DeRose [2002]).

¹⁹See Williamson [2000, §11.4].

²⁰How does one tell whether you have different versions of the same argument, or different arguments? See Van Inwagen [2012] for a general discussion. Even without an answer to the question in general, it's fairly easy to tell in this particular case that the arguments are different.

is misleading regarding p , then it's possible that our evidence is *unrepresentative* of all of the (potential) evidence that bears on p ; and if it's so much as possible that our evidence is unrepresentative of all of the (potential) evidence that bears on p , then we have no grounds for believing that it *is* representative. (We certainly can't rely on our evidence as grounds, any more that we can rely on our past observations as grounds for concluding that the future will resemble the past.) But absent such grounds, any belief about p formed on the basis of such evidence is unjustified. So no evidence that's less than fully conclusive can justify any belief, no matter how strong the evidence is.

One might assimilate my argument to this general pattern, since my argument also seems to exploit the possibility that your present evidence regarding philosophical claim p is unrepresentative of all of the evidence that bears on p . But it doesn't actually exploit that possibility at all. For one thing, it relies not on a possibility but on a (high) probability; the other side of that coin is that my argument nowhere assumes inductive inference *needs* to be justified by something else—it's perfectly compatible with a fundamentalism about induction; the problem isn't that you have no reason to think continued inquiry would still support your present philosophical position, it's that you have *positive* (inductive!) reason to think continued philosophical inquiry would at some point support the denial of that position. And as should be evident from the previous sentence, it's not that you have positive reason to think anything about the totality of the potential evidence, including whether your present evidence is representative thereof; it's a positive reason to think your continued *inquiry* would have a certain character. All in all, it's a very different argument.

3.2 AGRIPPAN MODES

A hyper-sensitive ear might hear in my argument echoes of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Pyrrhonian skeptics also argued for a rational requirement to suspend judgment on all philosophical issues, and they did so on the basis of an allegedly unceasing obligation to continue inquiring into every philosophical issue. But their reasons for taking there to be such an unceasing obligation were quite different from mine. While my route might remind someone of the mode of infinite regress—with its requirement to keep on chasing down a view's dialectical connections to other views—the similarity is merely superficial. The mode of infinite regress gets purchase only when taken together with the mode of hypothesis and the mode of reciprocity; together they constitute the Agrippan Trilemma. But I take no stand here on whether a claim can be justified without being justified on the basis of some other claim (mode of hypothesis), or on whether there can be 'circles of justification' (mode of reciprocity). Conversely, the Agrippan Trilemma is a completely general trilemma, and draws on nothing specific to philosophy

per se, whether its systematicity or otherwise; if it leads to skepticism, it leads to completely global skepticism. All in all, it's a very different argument.

There is of course the mode of disagreement—which brings me to another argument, much more popular these days.

3.3 DISAGREEMENT

As I mentioned in section 1, a growing number of contemporary philosophers are moved by the fact of ubiquitous and persistent philosophical disagreement to reach the same conclusion as me. I don't think anyone could *confuse* these two arguments. The argument from disagreement relies essentially on a contingent fact about the distribution of philosophical opinion.²¹ My argument relies on no such fact. Suppose we were all engaged in a collective philosophical inquiry, and that at each stage in the collective inquiry we achieved a consensus, or even unanimity, regarding the philosophical issue at hand. Nevertheless, if we also have strong evidence for the systematicity of philosophy—a supposition that's consistent with the first supposition—my argument would still lead to the conclusion that we are rationally prohibited from believing any philosophical thesis. Clearly, then, disagreement plays no real role in my argument.

Conversely, suppose philosophy was maximally *unsystematic*—and philosophical inquiry was maximally evidentially stable. Nevertheless, if there were ubiquitous and persistent philosophical disagreement—a supposition that's clearly consistent with the first supposition—then the argument from disagreement would still lead to the conclusion that we are rationally prohibited from believing any philosophical thesis. Clearly, then, systematicity plays no real role in the argument from disagreement.

All in all, they're very different arguments. But while the arguments are different, I don't think the *phenomena* of systematicity and disagreement are unrelated. Given the *divergence* of philosophical *inquiry*, it's extremely unlikely for there to be a *convergence* of philosophical *opinion*. Each of us is spinning a web of philosophical inquiry, and as we do we're either responding to the accumulating evidence as we should, or we're not. For those who aren't responding to the evidence as they should, there's little hope of reaching consensus among themselves. For those who are, there's likewise little hope of reaching consensus, since they'll

²¹The bare fact of possible disagreement, or of philosophical opinion distributed thus-and-so, would presumably not give me reason to adjust my own philosophical beliefs or credences. That's not to say that no modal facts about philosophical disagreement can be epistemically relevant. For example (Barnett and Li [2016]), the fact *that had the Evil Prophetic Tyrant not systematically annihilated all the would-be believers in dualism, then many more philosophers would have been dualists* could well be epistemically relevant (at least if actual disagreement is epistemically relevant). But such facts are still contingent facts about the distribution of philosophical opinion—whether in the actual world, or in nearby possible worlds. See also Carey [2011].

find themselves at different points along a divergent inquiry.²² Thus, philosophical consensus is extremely unlikely, and that it's so can very nicely be explained by the divergence of philosophical inquiry.

Indeed, while I said at the outset that I wouldn't try to conclusively establish the divergence of philosophical inquiry, I think the ubiquity and persistence of philosophical disagreement provides very strong abductive justification for it. For while other explanations have been proposed for the ubiquity and persistence of philosophical disagreement, none seems to be a full and adequate explanation. By far the most comprehensive attempt to explain the phenomenon is Chalmers [2015, §6], in which he catalogues seven potential explanations. But as Chalmers himself points out, a good number of them require very strong and somewhat dubious assumptions about the subject matter or practice of philosophy (anti-realism about the subject matter, ubiquity of verbal disputes about the practice), and several others are patently inadequate. In any case, Chalmers concedes about *all seven taken together* that they "don't collectively provide a full explanation of the phenomena, as they stand". But I would contend that is because Chalmers overlooks the systematicity of philosophy in general, and the divergence of philosophical inquiry in particular, as a potential explanation. That philosophical inquiry is divergent is independently plausible, and it provides an excellent explanation for a phenomenon otherwise resistant to explanation.

The bottom line is this: while the skeptical argument from disagreement is much more popular than the heretofore unexplored skeptical argument from systematicity, the latter is in a certain way *deeper* than the former. The argument from systematicity is based on a profound fact about the nature of philosophy itself, while the argument from disagreement is based on a contingent, sociological shadow thereof. Perhaps philosophers should start paying some more attention to systematicity and its epistemological implications.²³

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²²At best we would expect more and more folks to respond to *all* of their evidence as they should, including the evidence that philosophical inquiry is evidentially unstable. This wouldn't lead to a convergence of philosophical opinion, but rather to a convergence of a philosophical *non*-opinion. Alas, I don't expect any more consensus about my argument than about anything else in philosophy, and so I suspect that alongside the philosophical skeptics, dogmatists of every stripe will be with us until the end of days.

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