

Why philosophy needs a concept of progress*

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Abstract

This paper defends the usefulness of the concept of philosophical progress and the common assumption that philosophy and science aim to make the same, or a comparable, kind of progress. It does so by responding to Yafeng Shan's (2022) arguments that the wealth of research on scientific progress is not applicable or useful to philosophy, and that philosophy doesn't need a concept of progress at all. It is ultimately argued that while Shan's arguments are not successful, they reveal the way forward in developing accounts of philosophical progress.

KEYWORDS

philosophical progress, scientific progress, philosophical success, aim of philosophy

1 | INTRODUCTION

There has been a surge of interest amongst philosophers, particularly over the past decade, in questions regarding philosophical progress. It is debated whether philosophy makes any progress at all, whether we can expect philosophy to make progress in the future, and whether philosophy makes less progress than does science (and if so, why). This lively debate has prompted several very different reactions. One such reaction is expressed in a recent paper in this journal by Yafeng Shan (2022), provocatively entitled "Philosophy Doesn't Need a Concept of Progress." Shan draws attention to two tacit yet vital and undefended assumptions underlying debates about the prevalence of philosophical progress. The first assumption is that the concept of progress is a useful tool with which to evaluate philosophical developments. The second assumption is that there can be a meaningful comparison of the rates of progress in science and philosophy (that is, comparison of how much progress is made in each discipline), presumably because philosophy

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and science aim to make progress of the same, or a comparable, kind. Shan argues that these assumptions are both false. If he is right, there is an urgent need to reconsider how we think about and evaluate developments in our discipline.

In what follows, I argue that Shan's reasons to reject these assumptions are not compelling. Indeed, it is ultimately argued that rather than providing reasons to abandon the concept of philosophical progress, Shan's arguments serve to illuminate the way forward in thinking about philosophical progress. Moreover, the paper provides a partial defence of the assumption that philosophy and science aim to make the same, or a comparable, kind of progress. The defence is merely partial, because the assumption is only defended from Shan's particular arguments, and it is left open that there might be other compelling reasons to reject the assumption. Anecdotally speaking, however, Shan's arguments seem to reflect the sorts of reasons underlying some philosophers' hesitation to accept that philosophy and science aim to make the same, or a comparable, kind of progress. Thus it is important to see why these arguments are ultimately not compelling.

The plan is as follows. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the debate about the extent to which there has been philosophical progress, and some reactions to it. Section 3 presents and criticises Shan's arguments against the assumption that philosophy and science aim to make progress of the same, or a comparable, kind. Section 4 presents and criticises Shan's argument against the assumption that the concept of progress is a useful tool with which to evaluate philosophical developments, and makes the case that philosophy really does need a concept of progress.

2 | DEBATES ABOUT THE PREVALENCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL PROGRESS

In debates about the prevalence of philosophical progress, a dizzying range of positions have been defended, from the extremely optimistic view that philosophy has answered all of its big questions to the extremely pessimistic view that philosophy has not made any progress at all. On the extremely pessimistic end of the spectrum, Dietrich (2011, 343) argues that "philosophy does not and cannot progress," Horwich (2012) alleges that philosophy has failed to answer *any* of its central questions, McGinn (1993) argues that humans simply lack the psychological capacities required to solve philosophical problems, and Mironov (2013) argues that philosophical progress is impossible.

More moderate pessimists stress that philosophy has failed to make "enough" progress, where "enough" is typically framed in terms of making an amount of progress comparable to

that seen in the “hard” sciences.² Chalmers (2015), for instance, stresses that philosophers converging on true answers to big philosophical questions is a particularly important form of progress, and he bemoans that philosophy enjoys collective convergence regarding the answers to its questions to a lesser degree than science does.³ A related concern, traceable to Lovejoy (1917) but also articulated in Nagel (1986), Sterba (2004), Jones (2017), and Slezak (2018), is that while science has made enough progress to move well beyond its early theories, contemporary philosophy still takes seriously ideas from its distant past.

While the pessimistic voices have garnered much attention—after all, arguments that our discipline has made little or no progress are hard to ignore—there have also been defences of optimism, the view that philosophy *does* make some, or even a lot of, progress. On the extremely optimistic end of the spectrum, Cappelen (2017) argues that in some important sense philosophy has answered *all* of its big questions. More moderate optimists, like Stoljar (2017) and Rapaport (1982), are less sanguine than Cappelen but still seek to make the case that philosophical problems have been and will be solved. Other moderate optimists respond directly to pessimistic arguments, seeking to make the case that things are not as bad as pessimists make out. Some have resisted the claim that convergence is required for progress (e.g., Brock 2017 and Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau 2019), while others have emphasised how our tendency to focus on issues on which we disagree blinds us to the many questions on which we do agree (Goldstein 2014 and Stoljar 2017).

There have been several recent attempts to move this debate forward by more clearly articulating the concept of philosophical progress. For instance, Brake (2017), following the lead of Chalmers (2015), proposes a pluralistic account of philosophical progress. Alongside finding the true answers to philosophical questions, Brake proposes that progress can come by way of developing new *philosophical devices*, including new models, ideas, concepts, and theories. Examples include Plato’s cave, Descartes’s evil demon, brains in vats, Hobbes’s state of nature, Thomson’s violinist, and “the ubiquitous boy drowning in a shallow pond” (Brake 2017, 33). She also proposes that the expansion of philosophy into new topics and questions is progressive, and emphasises how progress has been made by the emergence of applied philosophy in various

² Comparisons between the extent of philosophical and scientific progress can be found in Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau 2019; Brock 2017; Cappelen 2017; Chalmers 2015; Dietrich 2011; Gutting 2016; van Inwagen 2004; Jones 2017; Kamber 2017; McKenzie 2020; Rapaport 1982; Rescher 2014; Russell 1912; and Stoljar 2017.

³ This worry is also prominent in Rescher’s (2014) survey of APA presidential addresses.

domains. This inclusive notion of progress readily lends itself to optimism, which, Brake argues, counts in its favour.

While Beebee (2018) also responds to the debate by trying to more clearly articulate the concept of philosophical progress, her articulation proceeds along very different lines. Like many pessimists, Beebee is concerned with the observed widespread disagreement, between philosophical peers, regarding the answers to philosophical questions. Citing Goldberg (2013a), she suggests that this kind of systematic peer disagreement is incompatible with philosophers having *collective knowledge*. This worry does not, however, lead Beebee to become a pessimist. Instead, she develops a Lewis-inspired account according to which progress is made by philosophers finding out “what equilibria there are that can withstand examination” and then coming to rest at one of these points of equilibrium (Lewis 1983, x, qtd. in Beebee 2018, 16). According to this account, which Beebee dubs *equilibrism*, philosophers make progress by identifying sets of philosophical views that coherently and cohesively hang together.⁴ As far as philosophical progress is concerned, there are no further questions about whether any point of equilibrium is better than any other.

Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2022) respond to the debate by drawing attention to the assumption that there can be a meaningful comparison of the rates of progress in science and philosophy, presumably because philosophy and science aim to make progress of the same, or a comparable, kind. We suggest that the debate about philosophical progress has much to gain by looking to the comparatively mature debate about scientific progress. We critique both optimists and pessimists for often failing to articulate accounts of philosophical progress and propose that the debate has reached an impasse due to the lack of common ground, that is, the lack of a shared concept of progress on which interlocutors can agree. To facilitate a more productive debate going forward, we offer a framework for developing and evaluating accounts of philosophical progress. Inspired by analogous work on the concept of scientific progress, we suggest that philosophical progress could be analysed in terms of developing more truthlike philosophical theories (as per the *verisimilitudinarian* account of scientific progress presented in Niiniluoto 1980 and 2014), accumulating philosophical knowledge (as per the *epistemic* account of scientific progress presented in Bird 2007 and 2008), solving philosophical problems (as per the Kuhn-inspired *problem-solving* account of scientific progress presented in Laudan 1977 and 1981), or increasing understanding (as per the *noetic* account of scientific progress presented in Dellsén 2016 and 2021).

⁴ Stoljar (2021) argues against Beebee’s (2018) equilibrism.

In stark contrast to Brake, Beebee, and Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton’s attempts to shed light on the concept of philosophical progress, Shan (2022) instead responds to the debate by questioning the foundational assumption that the concept of progress is a useful tool with which to evaluate philosophical developments. Let’s call this the *Usefulness Assumption* (UA). Shan argues that UA is false, and that we ought do away with the concept of philosophical progress entirely. As part of his argument against UA, he also questions the assumption that philosophy and science aim to make progress of the same, or a comparable, kind. Let’s call this the *Continuity Assumption* (CA), because the idea that philosophical and scientific progress are continuous is a natural extension of Quine’s (1957 and 1981) dictum that the disciplines themselves are continuous, while keeping in mind that the CA in question is not the full-blown Quinean continuity thesis but a narrower assumption about the nature of scientific and philosophical *progress*. Shan rejects CA, going so far as to deny that the wealth of research on scientific progress is “applicable or useful to philosophy” (2022, 181). In what follows, I resist Shan’s arguments against both UA and CA. Since my response to Shan’s argument against UA draws upon the literature on scientific progress (and thus assumes the failure of his arguments against CA), let me first consider and respond to Shan’s argument against CA.

3 | DEFENDING THE CONTINUITY ASSUMPTION

As noted, in the debate about the prevalence of philosophical progress, comparisons abound between the rate of progress in science and the rate of progress in philosophy. It is contested whether, the extent to which, and indeed *why* philosophy makes less progress than does science. Yet, in assuming that it is illuminating to make such comparisons, parties to these debates appear to be tacitly endorsing the Continuity Assumption that philosophy and science aim to make progress of the same, or of a comparable, kind (this point is made in Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton 2022). For if philosophy were to make, or seek to make, progress of a kind completely different from that of science, it would be unclear what shared metric could be used to compare the rates of progress in the respective disciplines. In this case, the word “progress” would be used equivocally to pick out entirely different achievements in philosophy and in science, leading to the illusion of a straightforward comparison.⁵ More carefully, it is those who think that

⁵ By analogy, it makes little sense to worry that your friend is becoming closer to his chihuahua (that is, becoming more tightly bonded with his dog) at a faster rate than you are becoming closer to Chihuahua (that is, increasing your proximity to the Mexican state).

philosophy *does make some progress*, but less than (or more, or the same amount as) science does, who appear to commit to CA when comparing the rates of progress in the respective disciplines. Extreme pessimists, who think that philosophy makes no progress at all, can straightforwardly claim that philosophy makes less progress than science without committing to CA, since if philosophy makes no progress at all then its rate of progress (zero) is thereby trivially rendered commensurable with whatever unit is used to measure scientific progress.⁶

Yet despite the widespread acceptance of CA, surprisingly little has been offered by way of a justification or defence of the assumption, perhaps because the assumption often remains tacit. The most sustained discussion of CA appears in two recent papers by Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton. In Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton 2022 (815), we take it as a working assumption that “the debate about philosophical progress can be advanced by looking to the debate about scientific progress” and suggest several ways of developing accounts of philosophical progress in the image of extant accounts of scientific progress, while in Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton forthcoming we further develop two of these accounts. The *prima facie* plausibility of these accounts bodes well for a defence of CA but does not itself constitute a full-fledged defence, as such. There are (at least) two ways such a defence might proceed. One way would be to argue in favour of a particular account of scientific progress—Bird’s epistemic account, say—and then go on to articulate and argue in favour of the corresponding account of philosophical progress. The other way would be to find independent reasons that our account of philosophical progress *must* match our account of scientific progress, without taking a stand on precisely how such a unified account would look. For example, one could point out, following Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton 2022 and forthcoming, that if philosophy and science make different kinds of progress, this would suggest that there is a sharp divide between the disciplines. Then one might argue that we have learned our lesson from the failure of attempts to demarcate science from non-science (see Quine 1957 and Laudan 1983), and thus that we have a strong reason to endorse CA.

In any case, what follows is not a full-fledged defence of CA. It is a partial defence of CA, in the form of a response to Shan’s arguments against it. The case will be made that for all that Shan has said, CA remains a live option. Even so, this partial defence is much needed, since as I

⁶ Compare: if I have taken no steps towards learning Mandarin, while you have learned to cook some new dishes, it is easy to say that you have made more progress improving your cooking repertoire than I have improving my Mandarin. But if I have learned a few phrases, while you have learned some new dishes, judging which of us has made more progress now requires some way of making the unit of language-learning progress commensurable with the unit of cooking-repertoire progress.

noted in section 1, anecdotally speaking, Shan's arguments are reflective of the sorts of reasons philosophers tend to offer against CA.

Shan's rejection of CA is motivated by the fact that "[d]espite their intimate historical relation, there are some differences between philosophical practice and scientific practice" (2022, 181). Importantly, however, merely finding differences between the practices found in the respective disciplines doesn't have any immediate implications regarding the question of whether they aim to make the same kind of progress. Differences in subject matter, and even corresponding methodological differences, are compatible with the truth of CA. Both philosophy and science might make progress by accumulating knowledge of their respective targets of investigation, for example, while using entirely different methods appropriate to these respective targets. Yet if both disciplines aim at knowledge, we could compare the extent to which each has been successful in obtaining knowledge, and so CA would be vindicated. Thus we should explore the differences to which Shan gestures with an eye towards evaluating whether they are the kind of differences that undermine the plausibility of CA.

Shan identifies three differences between scientific and philosophical practice to motivate his rejection of CA. First, he claims that philosophy values disagreement more than science does. Second, he claims that philosophy values "old ideas" more than science does. Third, he claims that while science is fundamentally a collective enterprise, philosophy is not. Since the first and third reasons (disagreement and collectiveness) are tightly connected, let's consider the second reason first.

Shan claims that "unlike science, philosophy values old ideas to a great extent" (2022, 181). This claim about philosophical practice is closely related to the pessimistic concerns expressed by Dietrich, Sterba, Lovejoy, McGinn, and Nagel that philosophical theories are being recycled in an endlessly repeating loop that is disguised by cosmetic terminological updates to the very same theories. Shan mentions the focus on old ideas in both philosophical teaching and research, and I touch on both in what follows.

It is true that there are many philosophers whose research is dedicated to old ideas, and to getting clear on what great past thinkers really did think. Moreover, a case could be made that at most universities a philosophy major is more focused on the history of philosophical thought than a major in any science is focused on learning about the history of that science. Ideally, that case would be based on a large body of evidence of what is in fact taught. But even without that evidence to guide our discussion, let's concede to Shan that this is a difference in practice, at least in so far as the history of science is kept *more* separate from "science proper" than the history of philosophy is from "philosophy proper." Likewise, let's concede to Shan the general

point that philosophy is concerned with old ideas to a greater degree than is science. Nevertheless, this difference does not show that CA is false, for there are (at least) two explanations of philosophy's focus on old ideas that are entirely compatible with CA.

First, it could be that the extreme pessimists have the right of it: philosophy does not make progress. Ancient philosophers grappled with philosophical questions and did their best. Unfortunately, nobody since has done any better. Then, despite perhaps aiming at the very same kind of progress as science, philosophy ends up focussing on old ideas. But we focus on them not because they are valuable in virtue of being old but because they are still amongst our best ideas. Indeed, this seems to be the stance of those pessimists worried about philosophy's focus on old ideas. They do not claim that philosophy places a premium on ideas in virtue of their age, simply that philosophy is perennially caught up in giddy excitement about the same old ideas, which continue, unfortunately, to be our best.

Second, it could be that the picture advocated by moderate optimists or moderate pessimists is right, and philosophy has merely made modest progress. Then, too, the focus on old ideas can be explained without any threat to CA. Since we've not come very far, our old ideas are nearby precursors to our best ideas. We continue to focus upon and value old ideas because we've not moved far beyond them. Indeed, Shan paints a picture along these lines when he says, "It is not a big surprise for philosophers to develop a historically motivated approach to contemporary issues" (2022, 181). If we have not moved sufficiently far beyond old ideas to make those ideas irrelevant to current theorising, and indeed these old ideas still provide a reservoir of inspiration for new approaches, it is no surprise that we continue to focus on old ideas. In sum, the value that philosophy places on old ideas is entirely compatible with CA if in philosophical research, more so than in scientific research, old ideas remain relevant to our best cutting-edge work.⁷

Briefly consider now the focus on old ideas in the teaching of philosophy. To see the role of philosophy pedagogy in relation to the debate about progress, it is helpful to draw upon Bird's (2008) distinction between those activities and achievements that *constitute* progress versus those that merely *promote* progress by making the achievements that constitute progress more likely. In so far as we teach philosophy in order to promote philosophical progress, if the philosophical state of the art today has not moved far beyond that of our forebears, it is no surprise that we teach a lot of history of philosophy in order to equip students with the skills needed to make progress should they choose to become philosophers.

⁷ For an argument to the conclusion that "studying the history of philosophy is philosophically unhelpful," see Sauer (2022, 2). Note that even if Sauer is right, the mere belief that old ideas remain relevant to our best cutting-edge work is sufficient to explain our focus on old ideas without undermining CA.

In addition, we teach both philosophy and science with several goals in mind that are quite distinct from the progress of the discipline. These goals include things like making students familiar with the evolution of thought and concepts, and developing their reasoning skills. After all, most undergraduates, in both philosophy and science, have no plans to enter the academy, and their training reflects this. Thus, in so far as teaching students about the history of their discipline both equips budding academics with the skills they need to make progress and equips students following other paths with more generally applicable skills, the focus on old ideas in the teaching of philosophy is easily explained without supposing that philosophy and science aim at different kinds of progress.

Summarising thus far, to see why philosophy's focus on old ideas is compatible with CA, it is crucial to recognise that CA is not the assumption that philosophy makes as much progress as science does but the assumption that the disciplines *aim* to make the same, or a comparable, kind of progress. It is entirely silent on the question of how much progress is made in each discipline. This is why it is no threat to CA that science moves beyond its old ideas in a way that philosophy does not. At best, this observation threatens the claim that philosophy and science make progress at similar rates, which is no part of CA.⁸

Shan's other two, related, reasons to reject CA are that "philosophy values disagreement to a greater extent" (2022, 181) than science does, and that, unlike science, "philosophy is not fundamentally a collective enterprise. Philosophers are more used to working individually. The division of labour in philosophy is not as necessary as it is in science" (182). The latter claim would once again benefit from a large body of evidential support regarding the division of labour in the respective disciplines, since—now drawing upon merely anecdotal evidence myself—it seems that some parts of science are quite individualistic and some parts of philosophy are highly collaborative. As before, though, let's concede to Shan the empirical point, and accept that philosophy has a greater tendency towards individualism and requires less division of labour. That would reflect a methodological difference between the disciplines. But such a difference would not threaten CA. It could be that both disciplines make progress by solving problems but that scientists tend to solve problems collectively in a lab, whereas philosophers tend to solve their problems by thinking them out alone (or, more realistically, by talking them out at length with others and then writing the solutions up alone). Likewise, if we suppose that the disciplines make progress by accumulating truth or knowledge or understanding, we can easily imagine that

⁸ This point can be made more concrete by drawing upon the framework in Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton's 2022. Suppose, for example, that science and philosophy both aim at accumulating knowledge but science gains knowledge faster than philosophy, abandoning its failed attempts at knowledge in the process. Then, despite the truth of CA, philosophy will focus on old ideas to a greater extent than science will.

scientists tend to achieve the progress-constituting goal via collective endeavours, while philosophers tend to achieve it individually.

Perhaps, though, when Shan argues against CA by claiming that philosophy is not fundamentally a collective enterprise, he is simply reinforcing his point about the special value allegedly placed on disagreement in philosophy. So, let's explore more carefully whether this supposed difference threatens CA. The example used to shore up this claim about the special value placed on disagreement in philosophy is the reception of Gettier's (1963) counterexamples to the justified true belief (JTB) account of knowledge. Gettier's paper expressed disagreement with a widely held view and is highly celebrated. While Shan concedes that disagreement also plays an important role in science, he contends that scientists "are more eager to look for a new consensus to replace the old one in order to end disagreement, while philosophers are more comfortable about keeping disagreement ongoing. To a great extent scientific disagreements are the means to scientific consensus" (2022, n. 10).

One way to make precise the point Shan is hinting at here is to once again draw upon Bird's (2008) distinction between those activities and achievements that constitute progress versus those that merely promote progress. Perhaps while disagreement in science merely promotes progress—by leading us to agreement on a better theory—disagreement in philosophy can constitute progress, as when a popular theory like JTB account of knowledge is replaced by broad dissensus on the nature of knowledge. The value of disagreement in science would thus be merely instrumental in promoting consensus on better theories, whereas in philosophy disagreement would be intrinsically valuable. If that were so, then we would have a reason to think that CA is false, since there are developments that constitute progress in philosophy but do not constitute progress in science.

The idea, however, that disagreement is (inter alia, presumably) constitutive of progress in philosophy is not borne out when we look to the literature on disagreement and progress. In that literature, ironically perhaps, we find disagreement, in the form of a variety of attitudes towards the presence of disagreement in philosophy. Nevertheless, most philosophers who have written about disagreement and progress are concerned that the observed disagreement *undermines* progress, and this concern makes little sense if disagreement constitutes progress.

To be sure, there is evidence that *some* philosophers place a special value on disagreement (and on individualism; here the connection between these reasons is brought to light). For example, en route to his extreme optimism, Cappelen (2017) makes the case that if any single philosopher finds the answer to a philosophical question, then *we*—the community of

philosophers—have found the answer.⁹ Disagreement is not *constitutive* of progress here, however; it is merely serving to *promote* progress by making it more likely that one of us will find the answer. Nevertheless, Cappelen’s view does suggest a radically individualistic approach to philosophy: since in philosophy it pays to have all bases covered, there is a peculiar sense in which it would be *wasteful* for more than one philosopher to endorse the same answer. It follows that disagreement in philosophy takes on a particular value that it lacks in science: disagreement strongly promotes progress. Moreover, Mironov (2013) prizes disagreement and individualism in making philosophical progress, in just the way Shan describes. Philosophy, as envisaged by Mironov, aims to articulate different and even conflicting interpretations of phenomena, and there is no end goal of convergence on a set of agreed-upon views. And indeed, given Beebee’s (2018) equilibrium, so long as your individual philosophical views cohere there is no need to be concerned that your peers disagree with them. Indeed, peers who disagree can come to find their own distinct equilibria, and arguably the discipline makes more progress by identifying more distinct equilibria.

There is evidence, however, that *most* philosophers conceive of the aim of the discipline as more ambitious than the projects described by Mironov and Beebee. In particular, most philosophers think the discipline aims at truth or knowledge or understanding (according to the results of the 2020 PhilPapers survey (Bourget and Chalmers 2021)). With these more ambitious aims in mind, it is natural to judge that the value of Mironov’s project (of articulating different and conflicting interpretations of phenomena) lies in promoting, rather than constituting, progress, since the truth (or knowledge) might be found amongst the interpretations articulated. Along similar lines, it is natural to judge that the value of philosophy’s tendency to explore logical space without constraint—a practice that differs, at least in degree, from science—lies in promoting progress. The more of logical space we explore, the more likely we are to find the truth (or knowledge). Likewise, assuming that the views in the true (or knowable) set of views will cohere with one another, it is natural to judge that the value of finding sets of views that are in equilibrium is to make it more likely that we will find the true set of views.

Moreover, in stark contrast to Shan’s description of philosophy as *valuing* disagreement to a larger extent than science does, many philosophers have explicitly expressed concern about the

⁹ Likewise, Jones (2017, 236) claims that “dissensus multiplies the value potentially to be gained from philosophy.”

extent to which experts on philosophical questions disagree with their peers.¹⁰ One version of this worry takes its cue from the conciliationist view of peer disagreement (see, e.g., Christensen 2007; Christensen and Lackey 2013; Matheson 2014). According to conciliationists, when two agents are epistemic peers regarding some proposition P—that is, they are (roughly) equally competent reasoners regarding P and (roughly) equally well-informed regarding P—and yet they disagree on P, each agent loses her justification for her belief (in P and not-P, respectively). It then seems to follow, from widespread peer disagreement between philosophers regarding a broad range of philosophical theses, that philosophers lack justified beliefs in—and thus lack knowledge of—many of their philosophical views.¹¹ In so far as philosophical progress requires justified beliefs in philosophical theses, then, disagreement prevents progress. Far from placing a special value on disagreement, or seeing disagreement as constitutive of progress, philosophers are worried that disagreement is incompatible with progress.

Another version of this worry takes its cue from the idea that without agreement on philosophical theses, there can be no view that is collectively held by the discipline (Chalmers 2015). Though she ends up proposing a view according to which disagreement does not impede progress, Beebee expresses the worry clearly by asking us to imagine “what would happen if the philosophy detective were to gather the philosophy team—the epistemic community of philosophers—in the incident room and ask the question, ‘What do we know?’ The list of purported facts,” she supposes, “at least when it comes to substantive philosophical theses—is likely to be rather short” (2018, 11), due to the diverse views of the team. Even Cappelen, whose view features a certain kind of individualism, ultimately argues that “*We have collective knowledge of the answers to all the Big Questions*” (2017, 73, emphasis added), revealing an ultimate concern for us to make progress collectively. These concerns about, and focus upon, collective knowledge run contrary to Shan’s claim about philosophy placing a special value on disagreement.

¹⁰ And not just philosophers. There is evidence that cognitive scientists (e.g., Khemlani and Johnson-Laird 2012) and economists (e.g., Klamer and McCloskey 1989 and Solow 1982) are worried about the extent of expert disagreements in their fields.

¹¹ See Goldberg 2013a; 2013b; 2009; Stoljar 2017; van Inwagen 2004; Barnett 2019; Carter 2018; Beebee 2018. See Kelly 2016 for a nuanced discussion of how the *extent* to which there is disagreement makes a big difference to the extent to which justification is undermined.

In the light of this discussion, let's return to Gettier's famous paper. While the ensuing shake-up of epistemology led to more disagreement, and the paper was indeed seen as a highly valuable contribution, it wasn't valued *because* it increased disagreement. It was valued in spite of that. More precisely, it was valued in virtue of bursting a bubble of agreement on a view that was mistaken. To draw out this intuition, imagine a scenario in which Gettier had decided to bless us with a few more pages, in which he moved on from his destructive project to a constructive one and developed a new account of knowledge that could accommodate our intuitions about his cases. Suppose, too, that his new account came to enjoy an immediate consensus of support. This counterfactual scenario features more philosophical progress than the actual scenario, and disagreement is avoided. Indeed, the actual aftermath of Gettier's paper features a broad range of theories of knowledge, and if these tend to be better than the JTB analysis, then the paper arguably led to progress. But once again there was progress, not because there was more (intrinsically valuable) disagreement, but because the many theories of knowledge we now have, post-Gettier, are arguably all better than the JTB analysis that his paper refuted (I return to this in section 4).

The upshot, then, is that disagreement and consensus quite plausibly play the same role in philosophy as they do in science. New data, or a new argument, undermines a theory, leading to the proposal of different (and, if all is going well, better) theories. Ideally, perhaps, the next step is to reach consensus on a better theory. Science is arguably much better at this next step than is philosophy.¹² Perhaps this is because the scientific method can generate new empirical evidence and data that are frequently convincing enough to generate a new consensus, while philosophical disagreements can rarely be resolved in such a decisive manner.¹³ Whatever the explanation, it is not because it is philosophical practice to place special value on disagreement and individualism. Rather, philosophy struggles to achieve a desired consensus. To reach for an analogy, saying that philosophy has a practice of placing more value on disagreement than science does is like saying that a man with a patchy beard has a practice of placing more value on revealing his chin than his more hirsute peers do. Just because some individual, or some discipline, features a lot of something, it doesn't follow that they place particular value on it. They may find it undesirable and simply be stuck with it. Analogously, by the lights of most philosophers, the large extent of

¹² Though even in science there is value in maintaining competing research projects rather than having all scientists investigate the most promising theory (see e.g., Kitcher 1990 and Longino 1991).

¹³ See Ballantyne 2014; Keller 2015; and Stoljar 2017 on the prevalence of "knock-down" arguments in philosophy and Chalmers 2015 on the phenomenon of "premise deniability."

disagreement in philosophy does not reflect a practice of valuing disagreement that would undermine the plausibility of CA.

In sum, the differences in philosophical and scientific practices to which Shan alludes can be explained without supposing that philosophy places a particular *value* on disagreement, or old ideas, or individualism. Instead, these differences, in so far as they are borne out, can be explained by de facto differences between the evolution of philosophical and scientific inquiry: in particular, the frequency with which we achieve consensus and the extent to which we have moved beyond old answers to the discipline's questions. Thus CA withstands this assault, and the door remains open for theorising about philosophical progress to draw on the wealth of research on scientific progress.

4 | DEFENDING THE USEFULNESS ASSUMPTION

This section presents and critiques Shan's argument that philosophy doesn't need a concept of progress: that is, his argument against UA. While the provocative title of his paper might suggest otherwise, Shan is not advocating for the extreme view that philosophical inquiry has no aims or goals, or that all developments in philosophy are equally good. Instead, he is making the subtle point that developments in philosophy ought to be evaluated in terms of the concept of *philosophical success*, rather than philosophical progress. The distinction between success and progress is Shan's own, and it needs to be spelled out.

Shan articulates the difference between these concepts as follows: "Suppose the aim of philosophy is X. Philosophical success is typically defined as the achievement of X. Accordingly, philosophical progress is construed as a better achievement of X" (2022, 177). More illumination is found in footnote 2, where he proposes that "philosophical progress can also be defined as getting closer to achieving X than before but not actually achieving it." So, philosophical success occurs when we achieve our aim, *tout court*, while philosophical progress is movement towards achieving our aim. To see this distinction in action, suppose that the aim of philosophy is to find the true answers to philosophical questions. Then when we find the true answer to philosophical question Q, that will be a philosophical success, whereas each step towards the true answer to Q (perhaps a series of answers of increasing truthlikeness) will be progressive. Importantly, progress comes in degrees (as Shan puts it, it is a "comparative notion"). We can make a little, or a lot of, or no progress on a question. We can repeatedly make progress on the same question. By contrast, success does not come in degrees, but is all or nothing (as Shan puts it, it is a "non-comparative notion"). We either achieve success (by achieving our aim—for example, by truly

answering a question) or we don't. Shan's claim is that we need this all-or-nothing concept of success, but we have no need of a notion of progress that comes in degrees.

What does Shan mean when he claims that philosophy doesn't *need* a concept of progress but instead *needs* a concept of success? He proposes that "*a concept of philosophical progress is useful if and only if it helps us to have a good understanding of the development of philosophy in history*". Therefore, philosophy needs a concept of progress if and only if it is a useful conceptual tool to understand the history of philosophy" (2022, 178, emphasis in original). So, the claim that philosophy doesn't need a concept of progress boils down to the claim that the concept of philosophical progress is not a useful conceptual tool with which to understand the history of philosophy (that is, a rejection of UA).

A natural objection to Shan's biconditional (italicised above) is that the concept of progress is (or should be) both retrospectively valuable (by helping us to evaluate episodes in the history of philosophy) and also prospectively or prescriptively valuable (by providing us with guidance regarding which projects we ought to undertake in the future given our limited cognitive and institutional resources). Shan pre-empts this worry but in response simply states that it is a concept of success—and not a concept of progress—that is needed to play the prospective/prescriptive role. This is surprising. Suppose that a modest assessment of the prospects of the various projects we might attempt delivers the verdict that *no* project is likely to produce philosophical success, which is after all a high bar. Viewed through the lens of the concept of success, it seems that these projects are equally valuable (or valueless). In this scenario, it is natural to look instead to the potentially different degrees of progress that the different projects are likely to generate. Indeed, it seems that the concept of progress is the *better* tool to use when faced with this kind of decision, since success is just the limiting case of progress. We should undertake those projects likely to lead to the most progress, and a project we think likely to lead to success is of course the project that is predicted to make the most progress.¹⁴

With that said, it does seem reasonable to expect that the concept of progress should help us to understand the history of philosophy. If Shan is right that no illumination of the history of

¹⁴ Indeed, given the limited resources available to undertake philosophical projects, it will sometimes be preferable to choose a project likely to generate progress rather than success, since the latter project is too costly. Or we might prefer progress on multiple questions to success on a single question. Importantly, in order to even formulate these decisions (and thus in order to make prudent choices), we need a degreed notion of progress. Such decisions cannot be formulated with only the concept of success.

philosophy is gained when looking through the lens of the concept of progress, that would indeed be a reason to rethink the importance of the concept. In particular, our concept of progress ought to help us evaluate which developments in the history of philosophy were better (that is, more progressive), and which were worse (that is, less progressive, not progressive, or even regressive).

Shan's argument that our concept of progress doesn't help us to understand historical developments in philosophy proceeds by putting what he takes to be "the two" approaches to philosophical progress through their paces (scare quotes here, since it will emerge that these approaches are far from exhaustive). The first is the *consensus-based approach*, according to which "philosophical progress is fundamentally a process of replacing one consensus with another, in which the new consensus is better than the old one in some sense" (Shan 2022, 179). The reason the consensus-based approach fails to illuminate the history of philosophy, argues Shan, is that episodes in which one consensus is replaced with another are so hard to find.¹⁵ The view thus leads to the pessimistic conclusion that progress is very rare. But Shan makes clear that the fact that the approach leads to this pessimistic conclusion is not itself the problem. Instead, the problem is that the concept is "useless for evaluating and understanding the historical development of philosophy" (179). While Shan doesn't expand on why this is so, a natural proposal is that even if no developments in that history involved a shift from one consensus to another (in some sense, better) consensus, surely some developments were better than others. So the consensus-based approach to concept of progress fails to illuminate the history of philosophy because it yields the very same verdict on (almost) every development that occurred: namely, that the development was not progressive.

The second approach is the *novelty-based approach*, according to which philosophy makes progress by developing new models and tools and questions.¹⁶ Shan is friendlier to this approach, conceding that it does "reflect achievements in philosophy to some extent" (2022, 180). He points out, however, that such developments are not comparative. Whether or not a new model or tool or question is developed is not something that happens to a degree. Something is

¹⁵ Here it is worth repeating from section 2 that there is a continuing debate about whether philosophical dissensus is really as rife as it seems to be. But let's grant Shan the assumption that consensus is rare.

¹⁶ Shan alleges that Brake (2017) "defines philosophical progress as the creative development of new models and tools to think about the world and the introduction of new problems" (2022, 180), but as we have seen, Brake defends a pluralist view according to which such achievements constitute only one form of progress.

developed, or it is not. Thus, if the aim of philosophy is to develop new models and tools and questions, then each such development is an instance of philosophical *success*, not progress.¹⁷

Since the novelty-based approach turns out to be an account of success rather than of progress, and since the consensus-based approach fails to illuminate the history of philosophy, Shan concludes that we don't need a concept of philosophical progress. But this conclusion is too hasty. Before endorsing such an extreme conclusion, we should more thoroughly explore prospective accounts of philosophical progress, in search of an account that illuminates the history of philosophy via a notion of progress that comes in degrees.

For instance, consider a very simple *proportional* account of philosophical progress according to which consensus is not a prerequisite for progress, and yet progress comes in degrees. For example, suppose that progress is made on a philosophical question Q just in case the *proportion* of philosophers (or: the proportion of philosophers who specialise in Q) who believe the true answer to Q *increases*.¹⁸ On this view, when the first philosopher came to believe the true answer to Q, that was a progressive development. As more philosophers come to believe the true answer, more progress is made. Whenever a philosopher ceases to believe the true answer, regress occurs.

This account has two important features. First, it is an account of philosophical progress, not philosophical success. The proportion of philosophers who believe the true answer to Q is something that comes in degrees. Moreover, reformulating the account in terms of success either seems mistaken or seems to collapse the distinction between progress and success. If the relevant philosophical success occurs when the first philosopher finds the true answer to Q, without the concept of progress we do not have the resources to explain why it is an *even better* development when more philosophers also come to believe the true answer to Q. To see this, consider two scenarios that might have played out yesterday regarding some previously unanswered philosophical question Q. Perhaps one philosopher came to believe the true answer

¹⁷ Once again, with the distinction between those achievements that constitute progress and those that merely promote it in hand, it is natural to propose that the development of new models and tools merely serves to promote progress (or to promote success; this point is orthogonal to Shan's argument). It is noteworthy that Brake explicitly rejects this view, insisting that the value of developing philosophical devices "is not reducible to their instrumental value in reaching truth" (2017, 34).

¹⁸ For simplicity, this view is formulated in terms of "the" true answer, but this is not intended to rule out that some philosophical questions have multiple true answers.

to Q, and perhaps one thousand philosophers came to believe the true answer to Q. Viewed through the lens of the concept of success, we can say that either scenario would have been a positive development, for either would have been a success. But when viewing the two scenarios through this lens, we lack the resources to explain why the second scenario is *better than* the first. To explain this important difference between these two scenarios, we need a concept that comes in degrees. We need the concept of progress, so we can say that *more* progress occurs when more philosophers find the true answer to Q.

Moreover, if we try to tweak the concept of success such that it facilitates these more fine-grained judgements, the distinction between success and progress collapses. For instance, if each time a philosopher comes to believe the true answer to Q there is a new philosophical success, then we can have a larger or smaller number of successes regarding Q. Since the number of successes on a question during a given episode is something that comes in degrees, this approach would enable more fine-grained judgements about the extent to which a given development was “successful,” and about which developments were better than which. But it was precisely the all-or-nothing nature of success that set it apart from progress; tweaking the concept of success in this way is tantamount to accepting that we need a concept of progress.

The second important feature of this proportional account is that this account helps us to understand the history of philosophy. It requires no consensus and is thus not at risk of uselessly judging every development as (non-)progressive in the face of perennial philosophical disagreements. Moreover, it illuminates how some developments can be progressive while others are regressive, depending upon whether philosophers come to believe true answers to philosophical questions or come to abandon them.

Now, despite its virtues, this proportional account is too simplistic to capture the concept of philosophical progress. That’s because by analysing progress in terms of whether or not philosophers believe the true answer to Q, the concept is insufficiently fine-grained (indeed, it is too close to the concept of success). To properly account for the *degreed* nature of progress, an account of progress should allow that progress on Q can be made without any philosophers coming to believe the true answer to Q. Progress can instead come by way of philosophers coming to believe *better* (yet still false) answers to Q. (To put the point more combatively, if the extreme pessimists are right that no philosopher has ever believed the true answer to any philosophical question, the account sketched above would fail to illuminate the history of philosophy, since all developments would be judged to be equally (non-)progressive.) Thus, we are in need of a more sophisticated account. Fortunately, with CA defended, we can look to the

philosophical extensions of the accounts of scientific progress, sketched by Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2022).

For example, consider the philosophical extension of Niiniluoto's (1980; 2014) truthlikeness account of scientific progress which Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (forthcoming) call *mean proportional veritism*. A simple way to present this view is to suppose that the state of play regarding a philosophical question Q is the *mean truthlikeness* of the answers to Q endorsed by each philosopher who is an expert on Q. Whenever an expert on Q revises their view on Q so as to believe a more truthlike theory, progress is made on Q. This is so regardless of whether this more truthlike theory is believed by all, some, or any of the other experts. Conversely, whenever an expert on Q revises their view on Q so as to believe a less truthlike theory, that would be a regressive development regarding Q. Consensus, on this view, is largely beside the point. Progress can be made by experts abandoning a consensus on Q, with each expert separately developing a new, but more truthlike, answer to Q. Indeed, progress can be made without any two experts ever believing the same answer to Q.

Seen through the lens of mean proportional veritism, the history of philosophy is a story of experts proposing and debating new answers to philosophical questions and shifting their views accordingly. The mean truthlikeness of their answers goes up and down, and accordingly progress and regress occur. Whether or not there is anything in that history corresponding with philosophical success (in Shan's sense of the term), there is nevertheless a clear sense in which some developments were better than others.¹⁹ Returning to the case of Gettier's paper, mean proportional veritism shows how a development in which consensus is replaced by dissensus can be progressive. So long as the many competing theories of knowledge developed in the wake of Gettier's destructive paper were all more truthlike than the rejected JTB analysis (or even merely tended to be more truthlike), the impact of the paper was to promote progress, since it caused an increase in the mean truthlikeness of the theories of knowledge endorsed by experts.²⁰

¹⁹ Of course, it's very difficult for us to know, without access to the true answer to Q, which developments were progressive and which regressive. But this epistemic limitation shouldn't prompt us to abandon the concept of progress but rather prompt us to be humble in our evaluations of which developments were progressive.

²⁰ Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2022) also develop philosophical extensions of the epistemic, noetic, and problem-solving accounts. There is no space to develop proportional versions of these views here, but it's worth noting that there is a whole class of potential views that illuminate the history of philosophy in a way that Shan's consensus-based approach does not.

To conclude this discussion on a more constructive note, the positive upshot of Shan's argument against UA is that we should be guided, when developing accounts of philosophical progress, towards those accounts that shed light on the history of philosophy, providing insight and aiding our evaluations of which developments were better than others. Given the lack of consensus in philosophy, Shan's insight is that accounts which require consensus will prove largely useless in this regard. Such accounts not only lead quickly to pessimism but also fail to play an important role we want our concept of progress to play. Thus, Shan's arguments reveal the need for accounts of philosophical progress according to which consensus is not a prerequisite for progress.²¹

To summarise, recall that section 3 argued that CA is alive and well: for all that has been said, it remains open that philosophy and science aim at the same, or a comparable, kind of progress. Section 4 went on to argue that we need a concept of progress, both to prospectively inform our decisions about which research projects to undertake and to fund, and as a tool through which to retrospectively evaluate developments in the history of philosophy. These roles cannot be adequately played if we only utilise the all-or-nothing concept of philosophical success; we need the more fine-grained, degreed, concept of progress. Consideration of Shan's arguments, however, helps to emphasise that a concept of progress which requires consensus cannot play these roles and hence would not be useful. In this way, his attack on UA ultimately points the way forward in thinking about philosophical progress.

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²¹ The proposal to reject this prerequisite is not new. See Cappelen 2017; Brock 2017; Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau 2019; and Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton forthcoming.

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