

Disagreement, Progress, and the Goal of Philosophy

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Forthcoming in *Synthese*

(Penultimate version; please only cite or quote the published version)

Abstract

Modest pessimism about philosophical progress is the view that while philosophy may sometimes make some progress, philosophy has made, and can be expected to make, only very little progress (where the extent of philosophical progress is typically judged against progress in the hard sciences). The paper argues against recent attempts to defend this view on the basis of the pervasiveness of disagreement within philosophy. The argument from disagreement for modest pessimism assumes a teleological conception of progress, according to which the attainment of true answers to the big philosophical questions, or knowledge of them, is the primary goal of philosophy. The paper argues that this assumption involves a misconception of the goal of philosophy: if philosophy has a primary goal, its goal is the understanding of philosophical problems rather than knowledge of answers to philosophical questions. Moreover, it is argued that if the primary goal of philosophy is such understanding, then widespread disagreement within philosophy does not indicate that philosophy makes little progress.

Keywords:

Philosophical Progress; Disagreement; Understanding; Knowledge

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1 Introduction

Disagreement in philosophy is pervasive. While recent surveys among philosophers yield more detailed and empirically grounded information about the extent of such disagreements (Bourget & Chalmers 2014, unpublished manuscript), the existence of pervasive disagreement in philosophy is hardly new. Indeed, many great philosophers of the past complained about persistent disagreements among their predecessors and contemporaries (Kant 1998, pp. 99–109; Mill 1998, p. 49; Moore 1903, p. vii). If there is anything new about contemporary philosophers' attitude toward the phenomenon of widespread philosophical disagreements, it is that, unlike some of their predecessors,¹ very few harbor much hope about the prospects of significant convergence on answers to the big questions of philosophy.

This pessimism about the possibility of convergence in philosophy has driven many contemporary philosophers to pessimism not only about convergence but also about philosophical progress. From the pervasiveness of philosophical disagreements about the answers to central philosophical questions, pessimists about philosophical progress (henceforth: pessimists) conclude that we have seen little philosophical progress in the past, and should expect little progress in the future. Extreme pessimists maintain that philosophy never makes any progress (Dietrich 2011; Mironov 2013). Apparently more common, however, is a modest pessimism (Chalmers 2015; Blackford 2017; Loughheed 2019), according to which, while philosophy may sometimes make some progress, philosophy has made, and can be expected to

¹ See, e.g., Moore (1903), p. vii.

make, only very little progress.² My focus here will be on the argument from disagreement for modest pessimism about philosophical progress, as found, for example, in Chalmers (2015).³

As noted by Niiniluoto (2019), progress is a goal-relative concept.⁴ Progress in view of one set of aims or goals may constitute regress in light of another.⁵ Given that no one sees

² Chalmers claims that modest pessimism will “ring true” to “almost anyone deeply involved [in] philosophy” (2015, p. 4), and Stoljar claims that among non-philosophers extreme pessimism “seems a truism” (2017, p. vii). While I know of no empirical data that allows us to evaluate Stoljar’s claim, a recent survey of philosophers’ beliefs does not support Chalmers’ claim: while modest pessimism was the most commonly endorsed view among surveyed philosophers, it was affirmed by only 46.6% of the respondents and nearly as many (41.7%) averred that there is a lot of philosophical progress (Bourget and Chalmers, unpublished manuscript).

³ For a similar argument, see, e.g., Loughheed (2019).

⁴ Kitcher (2015) argues for a non-goal-directed account of progress. However, as the pessimists’ argument from disagreement depends on some goal-directed conception of progress, I do not address Kitcher’s account here.

Recently, Shan (2022) has suggested that questions about philosophical progress and the goal of philosophy may often be discussed separately. However, Shan does not deny the relationship of philosophical progress and the goal (or aim) of philosophy. Rather, Shan’s point is that an ‘account of the aim of philosophy [implies an] account of philosophical progress, but not vice versa’ (p. 177). Accordingly, one might argue for a criterion of philosophical progress while leaving the goal of philosophy moot. My argument in this paper is fully compatible with Shan’s claims. Indeed, as discussed above (§2), the modest-pessimist argument, which takes convergence as a criterion for philosophical progress, may rest on different conceptions of the goal of philosophy.

⁵ In recent literature on philosophical and scientific progress, different teleological terms—‘aim’, ‘goal’, ‘purpose’—are used, often interchangeably, to evaluate the achievements, coherence, and progress of science or philosophy. As the subtle differences among these terms are immaterial to our discussion, for simplicity’s sake I use ‘goal’ as the primary teleological term (and ‘aim’ as a verb). Importantly, however, as Chang (2014) notes, intellectual activities are shaped by various structured sets of aims and goals, and in different evaluative contexts, may be assessed in terms of different kinds of aims. Ultimately, our evaluation of a system of activities depends on

agreement per se as the goal of philosophy, the pessimists' argument from disagreement rests on an assumption about the primary or overall goal of philosophy. According to this GOAL premise, the goal of philosophy is some desired cognitive state typically characterized in terms of (G1) the attainment of true answers to central philosophical questions, or (G2) rational convergence on such answers, or (G3) knowledge of them, or (G4) collective knowledge of them.⁶ I maintain that the pessimists' argument from disagreement fails because the GOAL premise on which it rests is false.

Unlike the claim that philosophy makes no progress at all, modest pessimists' claim that philosophy makes *little* progress also assumes, beyond the GOAL premise, some benchmark against which the extent of philosophical progress toward the goal can be evaluated. While other benchmarks are possible, the hard sciences—physics, chemistry, biology—typically serve as the relevant benchmark in the contemporary debate.⁷ The claim is that even if philosophy has made some progress, it falls far short of the progress made by the relevant hard sciences—an assertion

how different activities, inherent purposes, and external functions are coordinated to achieve its overall aim or goal. Accordingly, 'goal' should be understood as referring to the overall (Chang 2014) or primary (Chalmers, 2015) aim or goal of the intellectual activity discussed.

⁶ Note that this GOAL premise encapsulates two distinct claims: (A) philosophy has a primary goal, and (B) the primary goal of philosophy is one of G1–G4. For endorsement of (A), see, e.g., Chalmers (2015, 14) and Brock (2017, 127). For the sake of the argument, I concede (A) to the pessimist. I argue that even if we accept (A), we must reject (B).

⁷ This is particularly true of recent arguments from disagreement for and against modest pessimism about philosophical progress (see, e.g., Chalmers 2015, p. 4). However, the analogy with science has dominated the debate about the extent of philosophical progress more generally (Dellsén, Lawler, & Norton 2021; see p. 21 for references to recent discussions involving such a comparison).

ultimately based on observations of patterns of agreement in philosophy and in relevant hard sciences. It is on this kind of modest-pessimist claim that I focus here.⁸ I argue that once the modest pessimist's GOAL premise is rejected in favor of a more accurate conception of the goal of philosophy, we should no longer see the comparative absence of convergence in philosophy as indicating less progress in philosophy than in science.

Beyond a GOAL premise and empirical observations on patterns of disagreement within philosophy, the argument from disagreement also requires a BRIDGING premise that would allow us to infer from empirical observations of the prevalence of disagreements that philosophy achieves its goal more rarely than does some relevant scientific benchmark. Thus non-pessimists can resist the argument from disagreement also by denying the BRIDGING premise without challenging the GOAL premise. They might argue, for example, that even if science aims at truth, it does not converge on truth; or they can deny that the prevalence of disagreement in philosophy indicates that convergence in philosophy is rare (Stoljar 2017).⁹ I doubt whether optimists about philosophical progress should rest much hope on this kind of response, but this question is beyond the scope of this paper. I argue, instead, that even if we grant that science often converges on true answers to central questions and that philosophy only rarely does so, we need not accept the modest pessimists' conclusion because the argument from disagreement is

⁸ My argument does not address alternative modest-pessimist claims that appeal to other possible benchmarks—e.g., some degree of convergence to be expected of philosophy. However, my argument may be relevant to them inasmuch as they draw support from observations on the relative lack of convergence in philosophy.

⁹ Thus, Stoljar claims that widespread disagreement among contemporary philosophers does not indicate that convergence in philosophy is rare, because the (big) questions on which contemporary philosophers disagree are usually different from those on which past philosophers disagreed, and there is in fact 'considerable convergence on how to answer the earlier big questions' (2017, p. 126).

based on a misconception of the goal of philosophy. Given a more accurate conception of the goal of philosophy, we have no reason to believe that the comparative absence of convergence in philosophy attests to less progress in philosophy than in science.

Thus, against the pessimist I argue, first (GU), that if philosophy indeed has a primary goal, it is the understanding of philosophical problems; therefore, something important is missing from pessimist characterizations of the primary goal of philosophy in terms of G1–G4. Second (GU–C), if GU is correct about the primary goal of philosophy, then the relative lack of convergence found in philosophy does not indicate that philosophy makes less progress towards its primary goal than the hard sciences. Thus, the overall structure of the argument put forth in this paper is as follows:

- (1) GU: if philosophy has a primary goal, it is the understanding of central philosophical problems. Therefore, G1–G4 mischaracterize the goal of philosophy.¹⁰
- (2) GU–C: the relative lack of convergence in philosophy does not indicate that philosophy makes little progress toward the goal of understanding central philosophical problems.
- (3) Conclusion: the relative lack of convergence in philosophy does not indicate that philosophy makes little progress toward its primary goal.

The paper is divided as follows: After some preliminaries (§2), Part 1 (§§3–5) defends GU: Sections 3 and 4 discuss two considerations that pessimists sometimes appeal to in support of their characterization of the goal of philosophy; on a closer look, I argue, they actually support the claim that the goal of philosophy is understanding. Section 5 suggests that the latter claim

¹⁰ Note that the claim is not that pessimist philosophers who accept G1–G4 should abandon their pursuit for the sake of an alternative intellectual pursuit with alternative goals; rather, the claim is that they are mistaken about the goals of the intellectual pursuit in which they are involved.

also better explains the very phenomenon that underlies the argument from disagreement: the relative lack of convergence in philosophy. Part 2 (§6) defends the claim GU–C and its compatibility with both factive and reductive accounts of understanding, and their denial.

2 Preliminaries: knowledge, understanding, and the goals of philosophy

As noted, the pessimist argument from disagreement typically rests on the characterizations of the goal of philosophy as (G1) attaining true answers to central philosophical questions,¹¹ or (G2) rational convergence on these true answers, or (G3) knowledge of them, or (G4) collective knowledge of them. I counter-argue (GU) that if philosophy has a primary goal, it is the understanding of philosophical problems; therefore, G1–G4 all mischaracterize the goal of philosophy.¹²

¹¹ Talk of the goal of philosophy being the attainment of truth may be understood in more than one way. G1 is intended to capture a weak interpretation, viewing the goal as merely that of holding true beliefs. However, “attaining truth” may also be understood more strongly, as involving not mere true belief but rather knowledge. This is the sense captured by G3; it also seems to be the sense in which Chalmers (2015, p. 14) uses the expression.

¹² The idea that the primary goal of philosophy is understanding is not new (Brandom, 2001; Hacker, 2009; Nozick, 1981; Sellars, 1963). Moreover, a recent survey suggests that a majority of philosophers either accepts or leans toward it (Bourget & Chalmers, unpublished manuscript). However, while endorsed by several philosophers, few have defended it (Hannon and Nguyen, 2022). Therefore, the objective of this paper is to supply such a defense and show what follows from it for the disagreement-based argument for modest pessimism.

Hacker (2009) is one notable exception who does argue explicitly for GU. His argument, however, is based on controversial claims about the nature of philosophy, which most contemporary philosophers would probably reject (e.g., that philosophy ‘adds nothing to human knowledge save for the realization of how elements in our conceptual fields hang together.’ [p. 151]). My argument, in contrast, is compatible with the claim that philosophy

For simplicity's sake, my argument for GU focuses on the characterization of philosophy's primary goal in terms of (G4), attaining collective knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions (Chalmers 2015), and contends that this characterization is problematic because it fails to refer to understanding. My argument against G4, however, applies to G1–G3 as well because, as I suggest below, if G4 is problematic because it doesn't refer to understanding, then G1–G3 are likewise problematic.

Before I defend the latter claim, a number of clarifications are due. Note, first, that pessimists can, and typically do, accept that philosophy has goals beyond collective knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions (and beyond G1–G3). In particular, pessimists can accept that understanding is among the goals of philosophy and acknowledge significant progress in philosophy toward better understanding of central philosophical problems. Chalmers, for example, acknowledges that ‘understanding, clarity, enlightenment ... are goals worth pursuing, and ... philosophy can help us pursue them. ...’, adding that “[i]t is plausible that we have a greatly increased understanding of the issues underlying the big questions [of philosophy]’ (2015, pp. 13–14). Still, Chalmers is a pessimist because he sees understanding as a

can be a source of knowledge and, particularly, metaphysical knowledge. (For criticisms of some of Hacker's claims, see Stoljar [2017].)

Hannon and Nguyen (2022)—with whom I am quite sympathetic—also argue for GU. Their argument and that presented here complement and support one another. Both contend that various features of philosophy are best explained by the claim that understanding is the primary goal of philosophy. However, while I focus on disagreement and progress, their focus is much broader and concerns a wide range of “puzzles” about philosophy—about philosophical testimony (Ranalli 2020), practices of philosophy departments' hiring committees, and more. Jäger (2016), while not explicitly defending GU, may also be interpreted as indirectly arguing for it by defending an account of intellectual authority (“Socratic authority”) that seeks foremost to promote understanding.

secondary goal of philosophy at most.¹³ Philosophy, he claims, has one primary goal—the attainment of true answers to central philosophical questions or collective knowledge of them¹⁴—and has made little progress toward it. More generally, the pessimist argument from disagreement assumes that one of G1–G4 is philosophy’s primary goal and that lack of convergence in philosophy attests to its relative failure to achieve it. This assumption, I contend, involves a misconception of the goals of philosophy.

As the foregoing quotations indicate, Chalmers treats the goals of understanding central philosophical problems and knowing the answers to central philosophical questions as distinct; I do the same below.¹⁵ Indeed, this distinction is central to my argument; hence, before I challenge the pessimists’ argument from disagreement, I must explicate my assumptions about these two goals and elaborate on understanding and its relationship with knowledge more generally.

Knowledge and understanding are types of intellectual achievement (Kvanvig 2017) or on some accounts, of mental states (Khalifa 2012). However, there is no agreement in contemporary philosophy about the correct account of the nature of knowledge and of understanding, and about the relations between these two types of achievements or mental states. Fortunately, for the sake of our discussion, a fairly intuitive grasp of the two notions will suffice,

¹³ On Chalmers’ view, we may find some consolation in the progress made by philosophy toward the attainment of secondary goals such as understanding. We should admit, however, that finding consolation in this fact involves “a lowering of our sights for philosophy” (2015, p. 14).

¹⁴ Chalmers is somewhat ambiguous on this point. He writes that “[a] case can be made that attaining the truth is the primary aim at least of many parts of philosophy, such as analytic philosophy” (2015, p. 14). However, he goes on to explain why *convergence* toward truth is important and explains this in terms of the value of collective knowledge (2015, p. 15)—suggesting that he takes collective knowledge, rather than truth, to be of ultimate value.

¹⁵ See also Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2021).

and my argument requires no more than some very non-controversial assumptions about these issues.

Much of the debate about the nature of understanding in recent years centers on its relations with knowledge, and in particular, on whether understanding is reducible to knowledge (Kelp 2017; Hannon 2021). According to reductionists, understanding is reducible to knowledge and is thus, ultimately, a kind of knowledge (Khalifa 2011; Sliwa 2015; Kelp 2017). Non-reductionists reject this claim and typically argue that understanding requires more than knowledge (Kvanvig 2003; Elgin 2007; de Regt 2017).¹⁶ Noteworthy in this context is that the assumption, which Chalmers and I share, that the goals of understanding central philosophical problems and of knowing the answers to central philosophical questions are distinct, is compatible with both sides of the reducibility-of-understanding debate. Indeed, most reductionists agree with non-reductionists that some types of knowledge can be obtained without obtaining understanding¹⁷ and that some ways of obtaining knowledge—such as through testimony—often yield no understanding (Kelp 2017; Hills 2016).¹⁸ In particular, both reductionists and non-reductionists can agree that one may know the answer to a question while

¹⁶ For a helpful review of the contemporary debate, see Hannon (2021).

¹⁷ Sliwa (2015) seems to be an exception, as she argues not only that instances of understanding are reducible to corresponding instances of knowledge, but also that the corresponding instances of knowledge are both necessary and sufficient for understanding. Sliwa's argument focuses on cases of understanding and knowing why *p*, and she claims that similar arguments would apply to *understanding what* and *understanding that*. However, even if this claim is true, it is unclear whether the argument can apply to objectual understanding in general and of philosophical problems in particular.

¹⁸ For an application of these general claims to philosophical knowledge and understanding see, e.g., Hills (2016).

having little understanding of why it is true or what makes it true.¹⁹ My argument for GU assumes no more than this uncontroversial claim.²⁰ Below (§3) I discuss one such possible case of knowledge-*sans*-understanding of an answer to a central philosophical question.²¹

If some kinds of knowledge can be obtained without obtaining understanding, as is widely agreed, it is because understanding has features that at least some types of knowledge do not share. First, it is widely agreed that while knowledge may be isolated or atomistic and its

¹⁹ Consider, for instance, Kelp's (2017) proposal that maximal objectual understanding of phenomenon *p* is to be analyzed in terms of fully comprehensive and well-connected knowledge of *p*. Such a knowledge-based analysis of maximal understanding is compatible with the claim that one can know answers to central questions about *p* without having understanding of *p*—either because one knows too little about *p* to be attributed with outright understanding of *p*, or because one's knowledge regarding *p* is too unconnected.

²⁰ Matters may seem more complicated when it comes to my argument for GU-C. I address this issue below (footnote 23 and, especially, §6).

²¹ The question discussed in §3--whether moral realism is true--is one of thirty central philosophical questions in Bourget and Chalmers' (2015) survey of philosophers' beliefs, which Chalmers (2015) takes as evidence of the extent of disagreements on central philosophical questions among philosophers. This question, like all others in the survey, is phrased as one about which of two or more philosophical theses is true. Knowing its answer is thus an instance of knowledge-whether or knowledge-that—knowledge of the kind that, it is widely assumed, can be obtained without gaining understanding into why it is true.

This conception of central philosophical questions may be considered too restrictive—appropriate for some central philosophical questions (Is moral realism true? Do we have free will?) while excluding others that do not admit to true-or-false answers (What is knowledge? What are the correct arguments for moral realism?). However, this is not so: Once possible answers are suggested to a philosophical question of the latter kind (Q1), it can be reformulated without loss in terms of a true-or-false question of the former kind: Is answer A or B or C to Q1 true? Accordingly, Chalmers' (2015) conception of philosophical questions, adopted here, should not be seen as too restrictive.

object may be an individual proposition, understanding is more holistic both in that its object is more structured and interconnected (Grimm 2021) and in its involving a grasp of such interconnections (Kvanvig 2009). Relatedly, understanding, unlike knowledge, is not easily transmittable via testimony and other sources that yield knowledge of isolated propositions.

A second feature that distinguishes the kind of understanding discussed here from at least some kinds of knowledge is that the former is not an all-or-nothing affair (Jäger 2016). To understand a philosophical problem is to have a certain type of objectual understanding or holistic understanding. Objectual understanding of a problem, a subject, or a domain involves more than understanding why some fact related to it occurred or is true; it involves ‘grasping more explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a more comprehensive body of information’ (Baumberger 2011, p. 17). As I explain below (§6), for the sake of our discussion, we need not determine what full understanding of a philosophical problem entails; rather, the important question is what it takes to improve understanding. Generally speaking, understanding of part of what it takes to have full understanding of a central philosophical problem is a way of improving our understanding of this problem even if it does not amount to full understanding. Thus, understanding theories proposed as solutions to a philosophical problem, while not amounting to (full) understanding of the problem, is plausibly part of what it takes to attain full understanding of it; accordingly, *ceteris paribus*, someone who understands proposed solutions to a problem has a better understanding of it than someone who does not. The same may be said of other elements that must be understood to achieve full understanding of a philosophical problem, such as the source of the problem or reasons for and against suggested solutions.

With these clarifications in hand, I can now better formulate my claim against the characterization of the primary goal of philosophy that underpins the modest pessimists’

argument from disagreement (GU). A description (G) of the goal of a pursuit may fail to fit its actual goal (AG) in at least three distinct ways. First, G may be overly demanding, as occurs when one can achieve AG without achieving G but if whenever one achieves G, one thereby also achieves AG. Second, G may be under-demanding, such that one may achieve G without achieving AG but not vice versa. Third, G may be off-the-mark, such that one can achieve AG without achieving G or vice versa.²² I argue that if philosophy has a primary goal, that goal is, or involves, understanding central philosophical problems and that collective knowledge of answers to philosophical questions can be attained without, or with only very limited, understanding of those problems. Accordingly, the claim that the primary goal of philosophy is collective knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions is mistaken because it is either under-demanding or off-the-mark.

Moreover, if this claim is about G4 is correct, then it is true also of all the other typical pessimistic descriptions of the goal of philosophy in terms of attaining (G1) true answers to central questions of philosophy, (G2) rational convergence on these answers, or (G3) knowledge of these answers. This is because the characterization of the goal of philosophy in terms of G4 is more demanding than each of G1–G3. Accordingly, if the former can be achieved without understanding central philosophical problems, then so can each of the less-demanding goals, G1–G3.

I devote most of what follows to my argument for GU and against the pessimists' conception of the primary goal of philosophy. As noted, however, my rejection of the argument from disagreement is based, beyond GU, on GU–C: the claim that lack of convergence in

²² Granting the assumption that philosophy has a primary goal (see note 6), I ignore here another way of mischaracterizing the goals of a pursuit: by ascribing a primary goal to a pursuit that does not have one.

philosophy does not indicate that philosophy hardly makes any progress toward the goal of understanding philosophical problems—a claim accepted by pessimists such as Chalmers (2015, pp. 13–14). Accordingly, I will not put much effort into making a case for it, and will discuss it only toward the end (§6). It may be thought, however, that unlike GU, GU–C and my argument for it do require the rejection of reductive and factive accounts of understanding. I address this challenge in §6 and argue that GU–C is compatible with both reductive and factive views of understanding.²³

Finally, I also base my argument on several assumptions that modest pessimists must grant given their admission that philosophy does make modest progress towards its goal, and given their characterization of the goal of philosophy: (A) philosophical knowledge is possible; (B) philosophy sometimes attains answers to philosophical questions; (C) science attains answers to central questions of its field much more frequently than does philosophy; and (D) philosophy does so only rarely.

3 The Motivation of Philosophers

How can we tell what the primary goal of philosophy is? Chalmers argues for his characterization of the goal of philosophy on the basis of at least two claims: that most

²³ In other words, even if reductionism is true, this would not undermine my argument for either GU or GU–C but merely allow us to reformulate both in terms of knowledge. For instance, if Kelp’s (2017) reductive account of understanding in terms of comprehensive and maximally well-connected knowledge is true, then, without loss of truth, we may reformulate GU and GU–C by replacing reference to “understanding central philosophical problems” with “maximally well-connected knowledge relating to central philosophical problems”.

philosophers' primary motivation is to obtain knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions, and that arguing for the truth of philosophical theses is central to the practice of philosophy.²⁴ Both factors—practitioners' motivations and the nature of the practice—are indeed important in trying to determine the primary goals of a pursuit. A closer consideration of these two factors, however, suggests that the primary goal of philosophy is neither knowledge nor collective knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions but rather, understanding. Moreover, considerations regarding the criteria of philosophical success and the explanation of the very phenomenon of lack of philosophical convergence further support this conclusion.

Consider first the argument from motivation. Chalmers suggestion is that we may learn about the primary goal of philosophy by considering the primary motivation of most philosophers. This is a reasonable idea. While practitioners' primary motivation may not always correspond with the primary goal of the enterprise in which they participate, we can presume that such correspondence exists absent reasons to believe otherwise.

But what is the primary motivation of philosophers? Chalmers writes that at least for him, it is "to figure out the truth about relevant subject areas: What is the relation between mind and body; what is the nature of reality and how can we know about it". Chalmers also 'suspects' that this is the primary motivation of most philosophers (p. 14). Presumably, Chalmers takes this to mean that his primary motivation in doing philosophy, like that of most philosophers, is to know the true answers to central philosophical questions of this kind.

But is this so? Or is the primary motivation of most philosophers to better understand philosophical problems? One way to determine the answer to this question is by imagining a

²⁴ See Lougheed (2019) for similar arguments based on considerations relating to philosophers' typical practices and motivation.

choice situation between two possible ways of pursuing philosophical questions. The first, which resembles philosophy—or at least, good philosophy—as we are familiar with it, is expected to promote our understanding of central philosophical problems and questions but will not provide us with knowledge of answers to these questions. The second is expected to provide us with knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions, but to do so by employing opaque sources of knowledge, that do not provide understanding of why, or by virtue of what, these answers are true.

Consider, for example, the following possibility. Suppose a striking and robust correlation exists between some kind of brain activity and true philosophical thought: whenever some specific neuronal activity can be detected in the lateral amygdala while a person consciously entertains a philosophical proposition, the proposition entertained is true.²⁵ If such a correlation were discovered, my knowing that you are entertaining the proposition that moral realism is true and exhibiting this kind of brain activity would give me very strong reason to believe that moral realism is true. Indeed, if we obtain sufficiently robust yet opaque evidence of this kind, this would arguably allow us to know whether moral realism is true—without understanding why, of course.

²⁵ The example is inspired by Enoch (2014). In Enoch's example, however, the correlation goes the other way: whenever one does something morally wrong, bodily response X occurs. In contrast, in the above example, whenever brain activity X occurs, one entertains a true philosophical proposition. Only the latter kind of correlation allows us to reliably infer the wrongness of the action/the truth of the proposition from the occurrence of X. For somewhat similar examples within a discussion of the aims of science, see de Regt and Dieks (2005) and de Regt (2017).

So consider now the choice of joining one of two philosophical societies: The Association of Really Good Familiar Philosophy or the Association of Really Good Opaque Philosophy. If you join the former, you and the philosophers with whom you interact will use only familiar philosophical tools and arguments (thought experiments, inferences to the best explanation, conceptual analysis, etc.) in ways that will promote your understanding of central philosophical problems but are unlikely to extend your knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions. If you join the latter, you will be exclusively exposed to opaque arguments for philosophical theses (e.g., about people entertaining philosophical propositions while being in brain states that correlate with true philosophical thought) and will not be employing your opaque knowledge to promote your understanding of why the true answers discovered are true. Given the choice, which society would you join?

I don't know about you, but I am not particularly motivated to join the Association of Opaque Philosophy. The motivation that made me turn to philosophy would hardly be answered if I became an opaque philosopher. And while I haven't run rigorous empirical tests, the responses I have received so far suggest that, given the choice, most philosophers would also join the Association of Familiar Philosophy rather than the Association of Opaque philosophy.

If these responses are representative, this suggests that the primary motivation of most philosophers is not to attain true answers to, or even knowledge of, central philosophical questions.. Rather, our primary motivation as philosophers is to obtain understanding of philosophical problems. Therefore, the claim that the primary goal of philosophy is to attain knowledge, or collective knowledge, of the answers to central philosophical questions is either off-the-mark or under-demanding. After all, we can obtain such knowledge without obtaining

understanding of central philosophical problems, as would occur if we joined the Association of Opaque Philosophy.

Can modest pessimists object to my use of this example? They cannot do so by claiming that there is some kind of incoherence in the situation described. After all, modest pessimists do not deny that philosophy may occasionally obtain collective knowledge of central philosophical questions; instead, they maintain that philosophy only very rarely does so. But if philosophy does sometimes obtain its alleged primary goal, the idea that the situations in which it does so correlate with certain kinds of brain activity can hardly be seen as incoherent. Thus, only the extreme pessimist can reject the example on grounds of incoherence. The modest pessimist, in contrast, would need to explain the incongruence between the typical motivation of philosophers and what, according to the pessimist, is the primary goal of philosophy. It is not clear what this explanation might be.

4 Philosophical arguments and success

As noted, Chalmers marshals considerations related to the nature of the practice of philosophy in support of his view that the primary goal of philosophy is knowing true answers to core philosophical questions. ‘[A] case can be made’, he writes, ‘that attaining the truth is the primary aim at least of many parts of philosophy ... After all, most philosophy ... consists in putting forward theses as true and arguing for their truth’ (2015, p. 14).²⁶ Supposedly, then, the goal of philosophy being knowledge of true answers to central philosophical question explains the centrality of this philosophical practice.²⁷ I argue, however, that a closer examination of the

²⁶ On the interpretation of “attaining the truth” in this quote, see note 11.

²⁷ For a similar argument, see Loughheed (2019).

practice of philosophy argues against this characterization of the goals of philosophy and reinforces GU.

One may contend that philosophy consists of much more than arguments for philosophical theses, and that arguments are not particularly central in great philosophical texts. What makes a philosophical text great, one may maintain, is not the arguments it puts forth but rather, something else: insightful philosophical theses or pictures, an original framing of a problem, an illuminating metaphor, etc.²⁸ While I am sympathetic to this richer view of the practice of philosophy, I do not deny that much of philosophy consists, centrally, of arguing for the truth of philosophical theses. The question is whether this fact is indeed best explained by the pessimist's characterization of the goal of philosophy in terms of knowledge of true answers to philosophical questions. The answer is far from obvious.

Arguments are indeed tools for convincing audiences of the truth of their conclusions; and good arguments do not only convince but also provide good reasons for believing their conclusions, thus supporting knowledge. Arguments, however, are also tools for revealing the relations among propositions and explaining why their conclusions are true. Indeed, they reveal the relations between propositions even when these propositions are known not to be true.

Thus, it is partly due to the explanatory function of arguments that mathematicians have a practice of re-proving previously proven results. The claim that the goal of mathematical practice is to obtain knowledge of mathematical truths does not make sense of this practice. More plausibly, mathematicians often re-prove results in order to reveal relations among mathematical

²⁸ Chalmers (2015, p. 21) ascribes such a view to Burton Dreben.

truths, thus providing a better understanding of why certain results are true.²⁹ Given that arguments are meant not only to convince but also to reveal relations among propositions and to explain why their conclusions are true, it is far from obvious that the prominence of putting forward theses as true and arguing for their truth in philosophy supports the claim that the primary goal of philosophy is knowledge of philosophical truths rather than understanding.

Philosophers also have a practice of arguing for what everyone already knows. As van Inwagen notes ‘There are philosophers who have devoted a great deal of time and care to arguments for conclusions that almost everyone was going to accept in any case’ (2006, p. 40). Such arguments, as van Inwagen plausibly claims, are meant neither to convince anyone of the truth of their conclusions nor even to provide a rational basis for belief in them. As in the case of mathematics, the claim that the goal of philosophy is collective knowledge of central philosophical theses does not make sense of this practice. This practice does make sense, as does the practice of arguing for more controversial philosophical theses, if the primary goal of philosophy is understanding. Arguing for what is already-known can promote our understanding by strengthening an important determinant of our degree of understanding, which is variously characterized in different accounts of understanding in terms of the connectedness of our knowledge (Kelp 2017), coherence (Elgin 2004), grasp of coherence-making relationship (Kvanving 2003), or appreciation of how things hang together (Riggs 2003).

Further support for the claim that understanding, rather than knowledge of true answers to central philosophical questions, is the primary goal of philosophy may be obtained by considering what *successful* philosophical arguments do. Different conceptions of criteria of

²⁹ For a discussion of what distinguishes mathematical proofs that provide explanation and understanding from those that do not, see Lange (2016).

success in philosophy rest on different underlying views of the goals of philosophy. According to van Inwagen's (2006) influential account of philosophical success, which conforms to the pessimists' conceptions of the goals of philosophy, a philosophical argument for p is successful 'just in case it can be used, under ideal circumstances, to convert an audience of ideal agnostics with respect to p to belief in p —in the presence of an ideal opponent of p ' (p. 44).³⁰ Such a conception of philosophical success, however, raises at least two problems. First, as van Inwagen admits, this account (and its underlying conception of the goal of philosophy) fails when applied to arguments with conclusions that are doubted by no one (p. 49). Second, it seems to give the wrong result in the case of non-familiar but possible arguments of the kind discussed above: strong but opaque arguments for the truth of philosophical theses. In meetings of the Society of Opaque Philosophy, members argue for the truth of philosophical theses, such as free-will compatibilism, by appealing to facts about correlations between neuronal activity and true philosophical thoughts. Such opaque arguments could be used to convert an ideal agnostic to belief in free-will compatibilism in the presence of an ideal opponent. Surely, however, they would not count as successful philosophical argument. What we expect of philosophical arguments is not merely that they give us good reasons to believe true philosophical theses but also that they illuminate philosophical problems and questions. Opaque arguments fail to do so, and, therefore, can hardly be seen as successful philosophical arguments.

³⁰ An 'ideal agnostic with respect to p ' is a thinker who has no initial opinion about whether p is true but would like to know whether p (Van Inwagen 2006, pp. 44–45).

5 Lack of convergence in philosophy

There is another aspect of philosophy that is better explained by GU than by the pessimists' description of philosophy's goal: This is the very phenomenon that underlies the pessimist argument from disagreement, namely, the relative lack of convergence in philosophy.

If there is less convergence in philosophy than in hard sciences, this is something that requires explanation. Indeed, Chalmers (2015) devotes most of his paper not to establishing the 'obvious' (p. 4) claim that there is less convergence and progress in philosophy but to explaining this lack of convergence. The explanation he proposes, however, goes wrong already at an early stage. Once we see why, we find further support for GU. That is, the very phenomenon that underlies modest pessimists' argument from disagreement turns out to be better explained by denying the GOAL premise of the argument.

Thus, Chalmers claims:

[t]here is less convergence in philosophy [than in the sciences] because the philosophical method has less power to compel agreement, and it has less power because of the phenomenon of premise deniability: arguments for strong conclusions in philosophy (unlike science and mathematics) almost always have premises or inferences that can be rejected without too much cost. (2015, p. 15)

This cost, Chalmers explains, should be conceived in terms of plausibility: 'The denial [of philosophical premises] rarely has the implausibility of denying a mathematical axiom, or of denying a well-replicated experimental observation' (2015, pp. 16–17).

Chalmers then seeks an explanation for this phenomenon of premise deniability in philosophy, admitting that explaining the lack of convergence in its terms is not sufficiently

illuminating. This further explanation, however, is of no interest to us because we have reason to deem Chalmers' explanation mistaken in its first stage, namely, in its description of the phenomenon of premise deniability. Even if denying premises of philosophical arguments in philosophical debate is almost always less costly than denying well-replicated scientific observations, this lower cost cannot be explained in terms of plausibility. For the idea that philosophical premises are almost always less plausible, and therefore easier to deny, than well-replicated empirical observations and well-supported scientific claims ignores the role of philosophical claims and presuppositions in science.

No science can proceed without making at least minimal philosophical presuppositions.³¹ Moreover, philosophical claims presupposed by science often function as premises (or conclusions) in philosophical arguments. But if the philosophical presuppositions that undergird scientific disciplines and programs lack in plausibility and, therefore, may be denied at little cost, then so can the empirical results of sciences based on these presuppositions. Consider the very claim that certain empirical results are well-replicated. This description presupposes various philosophical assumptions about solipsism and its falsity, external-world skepticism, the nature of time, and more. If these philosophical assumptions can indeed be denied without excessive cost because their denial is not extremely implausible, then so can even the best-replicated scientific results.

³¹ Note that for the argument above to go through, a more modest claim would suffice: that many sciences, including well-supported scientific theories, make philosophical presuppositions (as Rinard shows is the case with the special relativity). However, as argued by Rinard (2013), the more general claim made above is hard to deny: it is doubtful if any science can proceed without drawing on some minimal epistemological assumptions which underlie the evaluation of support given by observational evidence to alternative theories.

It may be objected that philosophical presuppositions of scientific discourse should not be confused with premises of philosophical arguments. Presuppositions of a disciplinary discourse and premises of an argument play different roles, and function in different ways, in discourse and in reasoning.³² In particular, while scientific discourse may rely on philosophical presuppositions, these presuppositions are rarely an explicit part of a disciplinary scientific discourse: even if they are presupposed in “normal” scientific discourse, they are seldom discussed, denied, or stated explicitly as premises of arguments for scientific conclusions (Kuhn 2012).

Yet this objection fails. The difference between the role of philosophical presuppositions in scientific discourse and that of premises in philosophical arguments does not undermine the argument against Chalmers’ explanation of non-convergence in philosophy. In fact, as I elaborate below, this difference may lend further support to an alternative explanation, based on GU.

Insofar as scientific results are based on philosophical presuppositions, the rejection of these presuppositions would cast doubt on their plausibility just as much as the rejection of philosophical premises would cast doubt on argument-conclusions based upon them. For even if scientists do not spell out the philosophical presuppositions that underlie scientific claims and reasoning, the plausibility and support enjoyed by these scientific claims is nonetheless beholden to the plausibility of these presuppositions. This is why some more revolutionary scientists

³² I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

sometimes find it necessary to engage explicitly with the philosophical presuppositions of their field in order to explore alternatives to conventional disciplinary wisdom.³³

Therefore, insofar as premise deniability is understood in terms of the plausibility of denying premises of arguments or presuppositions of scientific discourse, it applies equally well to philosophical premises on which philosophical arguments are based and to philosophical presuppositions that underlie scientific claims and reasoning. Accordingly, if premise deniability indeed underlies the relative lack of convergence in philosophy as compared with science, then what must be explained is why it is easier, or less costly, to deny philosophical premises in philosophical debates than to deny the very same claims in scientific debates that presuppose them. The most natural candidate for explaining this difference appeals to the different goals of these different fields of discourse.³⁴

Note first that G1–G4 all seem ill-suited to explaining this difference between philosophical and scientific debates. Because both scientific discourse and philosophical arguments rely on philosophical claims, it is not clear why the cost of denying them would be lower in a debate aimed at knowledge of answers to philosophical questions than in one aimed at knowledge of answers to scientific questions. Why would the possible falsity, implausibility, or

³³ Einstein's account of his arrival at the formulation of the theory of special relativity is a good example. See Slavov (2018).

³⁴ Alternative explanations, appealing, e.g., to psychological and sociological differences between philosophers and scientists, are possible, of course. However, they merely push the explanation one step back: why is there such a psychological or sociological difference between philosophers and scientists? An explanation that appeals to differences in the goals of these pursuits would obviously be more satisfying.

unjustifiability of philosophical premises and presuppositions affect the quest for philosophical knowledge but not the quest for scientific knowledge? This is far from clear.

By contrast, the claim that the goal of philosophy is the understanding of philosophical problems offers a natural and satisfying explanation of this difference. Exploring ways of denying widely held and seemingly obvious premises, and ways of responding to such denials, is an integral part of philosophical practice if not part of its very point³⁵ because it is integral to the quest for understanding. The kind of denial of well-accepted premises that plays a legitimate role within philosophical debate is not stubborn denial, unsupported by reasons and uninterested in implications of the premise and its denial. Instead, such denial invites, indeed requires, an exploration of reasons for and against well-accepted premises, and study of their implications and those of alternatives. Thus, such denial can advance our understanding of possible positions, reasons for and against them, and our grasp of the relations among relevant propositions. Therefore, within a philosophical debate aimed at understanding, denying premises—even plausible ones—is often not only non-costly but even valuable.³⁶

Moreover, this explanation of the low cost of denying philosophical premises in philosophical debates does not mean that their denial in scientific debates should be equally non-costly. This is so because it is plausible to suggest that even if understanding is a central goal of science as well, as several philosophers have maintained (Elgin 2017; de Regt 2017), understanding plays a more prominent role in philosophy than in science. More importantly, denial of plausible philosophical premises would not further the kind of understanding sought by

³⁵ As Russell (2009, p. 20) famously suggested.

³⁶ J. S. Mill (1859/2012, pp. 66, 79–80) emphasized the value of engaging with opponents who actually contest plausible and widely accepted views for our understanding of the rational grounds supporting these views.

scientists to the same extent that it serves the kind of understanding sought by philosophers, because philosophy and the sciences arguably seek different kinds of understanding and understanding of different things.³⁷ Thus, even if the denial of certain philosophical premises can promote the understanding of certain philosophical problems, the denial of the same claims would not similarly serve our scientific understanding of why certain phenomena occur, even if the scientific inquiry of these phenomena presupposes the same philosophical premises. This may explain, in part, why scientists rarely engage explicitly with such presuppositions: explicitly stating and discussing these philosophical presuppositions may often not contribute much to the kind of knowledge and understanding that the sciences seek.

Given these differences between philosophy and science in their goals, plausible philosophical claims cannot be denied in scientific debates on the kinds of grounds that would suffice for their denial in philosophical debates. It takes more to deny plausible, well-accepted claims in science than in philosophy because the scientific quest for knowledge requires taking much for granted (Kuhn 2012). In other words, it is costlier to deny well-accepted fundamental claims and presuppositions in scientific debates than in a philosophical debate because the cost of denying them is often that of abandoning a scientific debate in favor of a philosophical one.

6 Convergence and understanding

Above I argued (GU) that if philosophy has a primary goal, it is the understanding of philosophical problems rather than G1–G4, as assumed by the pessimist argument from disagreement. I now turn to the other premise of my argument (GU–C): if we reject the pessimists’ view of the goal of philosophy, as is suggested here, then the lack of convergence in

³⁷ For a helpful discussion of various types of understanding across different domains, see Hannon (2021).

philosophy gives us no reason to accept the modest pessimists' conclusion about the little progress philosophy has made.

As noted, modest pessimists have often accepted GU–C, conceding that despite the relative lack of progress on answers to central philosophical questions, we have “greatly increased understanding” of central philosophical problems (Chalmers 2015, 13-14). In this sense, they distinguish between the implications of non-convergence for the advancement of understanding of central philosophical problems and its implications for the attainment of true answers, or knowledge of true answers, to central philosophical questions. However, might modest pessimists nevertheless deny this distinction? Such a denial, it may be suggested (Lougheed 2019; Dellsén, Lawler, & Norton 2021), would follow if we accept either a reductive account of the relationship of understanding and knowledge or an otherwise factive conception of understanding (Kvanvig 2003).³⁸ In other words, a modest pessimist may admit that the goal of philosophy is understanding philosophical problems and that G1–G4 mischaracterize philosophy's goal. She would argue, however, that because understanding is reducible to knowledge or is otherwise factive, insofar as non-convergence indicates that philosophy has made little progress toward attaining true answers to central philosophical questions, it also shows that philosophy has made little progress toward understanding central philosophical problems.

Indeed, my argument for GU, conjoined with a factive or reductive account of understanding, may suggest an even stronger pessimist claim. I have rejected G1–G4 because they are either under-demanding or off-the-mark. If factive or reductive accounts are correct,

³⁸ On a factive conception of understanding, ‘all or most of the propositional commitments that comprise genuine understanding are true’ (Elgin 2017, p. 37).

however, then G1–G4 are not off-the-mark because the actual goal of philosophy—understanding philosophical problems—is unattainable without attaining true answers to philosophical questions or knowledge of them. If so, then the argument for GU actually shows that G1–G4 are under-demanding: one can achieve them without attaining the actual goal of philosophy but not vice versa. But then, the objection goes, if non-convergence indicates that philosophy rarely achieves G1–G4, it also indicates that philosophy even more rarely attains its more demanding actual goal, understanding. Therefore, the argument for GU, conjoined with a reductive or factive account of understanding, leads to an even more pessimistic conclusion than the familiar argument from disagreement.³⁹

One may call these two arguments the weak- and strong-pessimist understanding-based arguments. One type of response to both would involve rejecting their shared premise that understanding is reducible to knowledge (Elgin 2007; Kvanvig 2003; Zagzebski 2001) or is otherwise factive (Elgin 2017; de Regt & Gijssbers 2016). Thus Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2021) respond to this kind of argument. However, while philosophers have argued variously against this premise, I do not wish to put too much weight on this response. First, the factivity and reducibility of understanding remain controversial despite these arguments; and second, even non-factivists admit that understanding is related to the facts (Elgin 2009). Thus, it may not be evident, even on a non-factive account, that disagreement on a philosophical question does not indicate that at least one side displays some misunderstanding. Third and more importantly, an alternative, more powerful response to both pessimist understanding-based arguments is available.

³⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this argument.

The problem with both pessimist understanding-based arguments is that they confuse questions about what full, genuine understanding consists in, with questions about what improvements in understanding involve. Once these two types of questions are clearly separated, both factivists and reductionists and their rivals can, and should, accept GU–C and reject these arguments.

The point is this: progress in a pursuit does not require that it fully attain its goal; rather, progress requires that with time, it attain the goal to a greater extent or get closer to fully attaining it. Both pessimist understanding-based arguments plausibly assume that on a reductive account of understanding, one cannot *fully* understand the central problems of philosophy without knowing true answers to central philosophical questions.⁴⁰ It does not follow, however, that obtaining *better* understanding of central philosophical problems requires obtaining *more* knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions. Thus, both sides of the debate about the factivity or reducibility of understanding can agree, and have agreed, that generally we can significantly improve our understanding of important questions without knowing additional true answers to these questions (Elgin 2017; Kelp 2017). There is no reason to think that this is not also true of understanding philosophical problems.

Thus, the weak pessimist understanding-based argument infers from a reductive account of understanding that if non-convergence means scant progress toward knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions, it also means that the same little degree of progress has been made toward understanding central philosophical problems. However, even if we accept that the former (knowledge) is a necessary condition for the latter (understanding), this conclusion does

⁴⁰ I say ‘plausibly’ because, without specifying the reductive accounts, we cannot tell what kind of knowledge understanding consists of.

not follow. That X is a necessary condition for the *full* achievement of Y does not mean that we have achieved X either to the same extent or to a greater extent that we have achieved Y. After all, we may be very bad at achieving X but very good at satisfying another necessary condition for full achievement of Y. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that the degree of progress toward Y corresponds to the degree of progress toward X. Therefore, the weak pessimist understanding-based argument fails. The strong understanding-based argument fails for similar reasons: Even if we can know $X_1 \dots X_n$ without *fully* understanding $Y_1 \dots Y_m$, but not vice versa, it does not follow that the degree of our progress toward knowing $X_1 \dots X_n$ must exceed or be equal to the degree of our progress toward understanding $Y_1 \dots Y_m$.

Thus, regardless of whether reductive accounts of understanding are true, lack of convergence in philosophy does not indicate little progress toward understanding of philosophical problems, even if it does indicate little progress towards knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions. Indeed, there are a number of ways in which philosophical inquiry can significantly improve our understanding of central philosophical problems even in the absence of convergence on answers to central philosophical questions:

One is by acquiring collective knowledge of answers to non-central philosophical questions—a possibility not ruled out by the supposed lack of convergence on answers to central philosophical questions.⁴¹ Presumably, on a reductive account of understanding, knowing the answers to relevant non-central philosophical questions is part of what it takes to attain full understanding of relevant philosophical problems. Accordingly, *ceteris paribus*, those who know

⁴¹ Thus Chalmers explicitly notes that he does not deny that '[t]here has been large collective convergence to the truth on (non-big) questions of philosophy' (2015, p. 13).

the answers to non-central philosophical questions, even if they do not know the answers to central questions, have a better understanding of relevant philosophical problems than do those who know the answers to neither kind of questions.⁴²

A second way of obtaining better understanding of a philosophical problem without knowing the answer to a central related question involves recognizing the importance of the relevant question. Both factive and reductive accounts of understanding may acknowledge that philosophical inquiry contributes to our understanding in this way, even if it does not answer the question under consideration or lead to convergence on an answer. As a case in point, significant philosophical progress has arguably been made in the understanding of the problem of free will over the past sixty years (Smilansky 2017), and much of this progress consists of the recognition

⁴² This claim follows from Kelp's (2017) reductive account of understanding and, in particular, from the 'Better Understanding (Bet-U)' principle, if we accept the plausible assumption that fully comprehensive and maximally well-connected knowledge relating to central philosophical questions includes knowledge of answers to relevant non-central philosophical questions.

It might be asked how knowledge of answers to non-central philosophical questions can promote understanding, but not knowledge, of central philosophical questions. However, insofar as this question interprets the aforementioned claim as one concerning the causal effects of knowing answers to non-central philosophical questions on knowledge and understanding, it misinterprets this claim. The claim is not causal but rather conceptual: *ceteris paribus*, it suffices to obtain knowledge of answers to non-central philosophical questions, and thus, of part of what needs to be known to obtain full understanding of a central philosophical problem, for a better understanding of that problem. By contrast, obtaining knowledge of answers to non-central philosophical questions does not suffice for more or better knowledge of central philosophical questions.

of the significance of a number of questions whose importance had hardly been recognized before 1960.⁴³

A third way of improving our understanding of central philosophical problems may actually involve loss of knowledge. One way to get closer to genuine understanding, often promoted by Socratic inquiry, involves moving from a false belief that items in our noetic system fit together to recognition of imbalances and tensions in our system (Jäger & Malfatti, 2021). While this transition involves obtaining knowledge about these tensions, it often also involves loss of knowledge. Namely, the imbalanced state in which we start may contain items of knowledge alongside falsehoods, and as a result of appreciating the tension between our various commitments, we may suspend judgment about both, thus ridding ourselves of both knowledge and false beliefs. Such a transition, despite its epistemic “destructiveness” (Jäger & Malfatti 2021, p. 1192), nonetheless often involves an improvement in understanding.

A fourth way of obtaining improved understanding without obtaining new knowledge is by adopting an erroneous model of an aspect of reality that is closer to the truth than an antecedently-believed erroneous model. Elgin (2017) gives the example of the Copernican claim that the Earth travels around the sun in a circular orbit, and contends that ‘[even though] Copernicus’s central claim was strictly false, the account it belongs to constitutes a major advance in understanding over the Ptolemaic account it supplanted’ (p. 60). While Elgin sees this as a consideration in favour of non-factive accounts of understanding, factivists may admit that Copernicans who accepted the false Copernican claim had a more advanced astronomical understanding than their Ptolemaic predecessors, while insisting that the former nonetheless

⁴³ Such as whether common beliefs, attitudes, and practices concerning free will, moral responsibility, and desert can change (Strawson 2003).

exhibited a defect in their understanding and lacked full or genuine understanding. As Kelp (2017) points out, reductionists about understanding contend that full or genuine understanding entails the possession of knowledge but do not insist that progress toward full, genuine (scientific) understanding must involve the acceptance of a theory that is either true or known to be true. ‘Moving from one false theory to another may do the trick’ (p. 19).⁴⁴ Obviously, such an improvement in understanding by both parties to a disagreement does not require convergence on true answers.

Therefore, I conclude that both reductionists and factivists about understanding and their rivals can agree that we can better understand philosophical problems without converging on true answers to central philosophical questions. Accordingly, if GU is true, then lack of convergence in philosophy does not indicate that philosophy has made little progress toward its actual goal, even if it does indicate that little progress has been made toward G1–G4. Of course, this is not to deny that on reductive and factive accounts—and perhaps even on some non-factive accounts—lack of convergence does indicate that the understanding of at least one party to the disagreement is less than perfect. As emphasized above, however, the imperfection of our understanding does not imply lack of significant progress in our quest for understanding.

7 Conclusions

I conclude that we should reject the argument from disagreement for modest pessimism about philosophical progress. Even if the high prevalence of disagreements in philosophy indicates that philosophy rarely attains collective knowledge of true answers to its core questions, this does not

⁴⁴ One may wonder how we can improve our understanding by accepting a false philosophical theory that leads us away from believing the truth. However, we should be reminded of Elgin’s important point, that a false theory, such as the Copernican theory, may actually move us closer to, rather than away from, the truth.

mean that philosophy only rarely progresses toward its primary goal. For if philosophy has a primary goal, it is the attainment of understanding of philosophical problems rather than collective knowledge of answers to central philosophical questions or any other goal that the pessimist argument from disagreement assumes.

This paper addressed only one type of argument for modest pessimism; therefore, we cannot conclude that modest pessimism about philosophical progress is false. Nevertheless, there are reasons to doubt the prospects of defending modest pessimism in other ways. The modest pessimists' claim typically depends on a comparison of the extent to which philosophy progresses toward its primary goal with the extent to which science does so.⁴⁵ However, once we realize that the primary goal of philosophy, if it has one, is understanding, it becomes much less plausible to suggest that philosophy has made less progress than science toward its goal—not because philosophy has made more progress than science but because even if we assume that understanding is the common goal of both philosophy and science, the very possibility of comparing the degree of progress in science with that in philosophy is put into doubt. It may be much more difficult to compare between the degree of progress of the two disciplines when progress is understood in terms of understanding than when understood in terms of knowledge.

The first reason for this is that the former comparison, unlike the latter, is multidimensional. We improve our knowledge by knowing more, by increasing the scope of what we know. This is why a modest pessimist such as Chalmers (2015) can suggest comparing progress in philosophy with that in science on the basis of the number of big questions that each discipline has answered over a certain period of time. By contrast, we can improve our understanding not only by increasing its scope but also by increasing its depth and significance.

⁴⁵ See, however, note 8.

It is at least possible that scientific inquiry led to greater improvement in one dimension of understanding and that philosophy has done the same in another. How improvements in these different dimensions can be compared is, of course, far from clear.

The second reason for the difficulty, if not the pointlessness, of comparing philosophical inquiry with scientific inquiry in the extent of their progress toward understanding is less technical and, in a sense, deeper. Where understanding is concerned, the very idea of separating science from philosophy in terms of subject matter and accordingly, in terms of their contributions to our understanding seems ill-conceived. Even if we can separate the methods of philosophy from those of science and thus distinguish between items of scientific knowledge and the (possibly rare) items of philosophical knowledge, we cannot distinguish among items of understanding in the same way. For understanding is holistic in nature, involving an appreciation of how different things (facts, items of knowledge, theories) are related and fit together (Kosso 2007; Elgin 2017). Therefore, the fruit of philosophical inquiry is often not only a deeper understanding of philosophical questions but also a deeper understanding of what we scientifically know (and do not know). Even where we can agree that our understanding of certain scientific phenomena has deepened, it is far from clear that we can divide the degree of this deepening into one part owed to science and another owed to philosophy.

Acknowledgements

Research on this paper was generously funded by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant No. 650/18). Versions of this paper were presented at the 7th TiLPS Descartes Lectures Online Conference at Tilburg University, at the Israel Association of Philosophy annual conference, and at the University of Haifa. For helpful comments, I am grateful to audiences in these fora, to anonymous reviewers of this journal, and to Arnon Levy, Assaf Weskler, David Fire, Gil Sagi, Iddo Landau, Henk de Regt, Philip Kitcher, Ruth Weintraub, Saul Smilansky, and Tamar Parush.

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