What Is Philosophical Progress?*

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Abstract

What is it for philosophy to make progress? While various putative forms of philosophical progress have been explored in some depth, this overarching question is rarely addressed explicitly, perhaps because it has been assumed to be intractable or unlikely to have a single, unified answer. In this paper, we aim to show that the question is tractable, that it does admit of a single, unified answer, and that one such answer is plausible. This answer is, roughly, that philosophical progress consists in putting people in a position to increase their understanding, where 'increased understanding' is a matter of better representing the network of dependence relations between phenomena. After identifying four desiderata for an account of philosophical progress, we argue that our account meets the desiderata in a particularly satisfying way. Among other things, the account explains how various other achievements, such as philosophical arguments, counterexamples, and distinctions, may contribute to progress. Finally, we consider the implications of our account for the pressing and contentious question of how much progress has been made in philosophy.

1. Introduction

Our aim in this paper is to answer its titular question, thus providing an account of philosophical progress. But why is this a question that needs answering at all? What is the point of having an account of philosophical progress?

Consider first the much-debated issue of whether, or the extent to which, philosophy has made progress. Some philosophers – *the pessimists* – argue that there has been no philosophical progress (e.g., Dietrich, 2011), or not as much as in the sciences (e.g., Chalmers, 2015). Others – *the optimists* – argue that philosophy has made about as much progress as could reasonably be expected (e.g., Stoljar, 2017), or even that there is a sense in which philosophy has collective knowledge of the answers to all of its big questions (e.g., Cappelen, 2017). However, as Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2022) point out, these views about the prevalence of philosophical progress are difficult to compare and evaluate insofar as they rest on distinct, often tacit, assumptions about what it would be for philosophy to make progress. It's difficult,

*This article has been accepted for publication in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Please cite the published version when available.

if not impossible, to have a productive conversation about the prevalence of philosophical progress unless we get clearer on what it would be to make philosophical progress.

A second reason why it's important to get clearer on what constitutes philosophical progress moves beyond questions about the past prevalence of philosophical progress to consider the extent to which philosophers are currently making progress. In particular, one might want to know whether the expenditure of research time and funding on a given research project is sufficiently likely to generate (enough) progress to justify the expense of pursuing it. Similarly, one might want to know which of two or more research projects is likely to be more progressive. These questions concern the value of undertaking philosophical research on specific issues, and indeed generally. Without a clear idea of what philosophical progress consists in, we cannot even begin to estimate the value of philosophical research projects in a meaningful way.[1]

A third reason why we need to get clearer on the nature of philosophical progress concerns our means for achieving progress (see, e.g., Bengson, Cuneo, and Schafer-Landau 2019, 2022). Recent discussions of philosophical methodology have highlighted the fact that there are often, perhaps always, multiple possible methods with which to approach a given philosophical issue. Accordingly, philosophers must (reflectively or unreflectively) constantly make decisions about which method(s) to use. However, in order to adjudicate between different methods in an informed way we must first establish what philosophical progress *would be*, thus making clear what our methods are supposed to help us achieve.

So there are at least three important reasons that motivate the development of our account of philosophical progress. To a first approximation, our account holds that philosophical progress consists in putting people in a position to increase their understanding, where 'increased understanding' is a matter of more accurately and/or more comprehensively representing the network of dependence relations between various phenomena, and where people are most commonly put 'in a position' to increase their understanding by way of philosophical ideas (theories, arguments, distinctions, etc.) becoming publicly available. We call the account 'Enabling Noeticism'.

To fully defend this account – or indeed any general account of philosophical progress – is in many ways a Herculean task, for it would require a holistic evaluation of the account as compared with potential rival accounts spelled out at the same level of detail. By contrast, within the confines of this paper, we will focus our attention upon the positive project of carefully building our account, Enabling Noeticism, and evaluating it against what we take to be plausible desiderata for any account of philosophical progress. Thus, while we are not in a position to judge whether our account is the best of all possible accounts, we do claim that it has a great deal of initial plausibility.

We proceed as follows. In §2, we propose four desiderata that we believe any account of philosophical progress should satisfy. In §3, we present Enabling Noeticism, drawing upon what we refer to as three distinct 'pillars'. In §4, we return to the desiderata, arguing that our account meets them in an especially satisfying manner. We conclude, in §5, with a brief

[1]This is not to say that these questions are *settled* once we determine what it would be to make philosophical progress. After all, the value of doing research on a particular philosophical issue depends not only on how much progress would be achieved if the project was successful, but also on its likelihood of success, as well as the importance of the philosophical issue in question.

discussion of what this implies about the prevalence of progress and with an invitation to challenge our account, either by arguing that our account doesn't satisfy all our desiderata, by proposing other plausible desiderata that the account might not satisfy, or by proposing detailed rival accounts which might outperform Enabling Noeticism when evaluated against the desiderata we propose.

2. Desiderata for an Account of Philosophical Progress

In this section, we review the contemporary discussion about the prevalence and nature of philosophical progress with an eye towards motivating that an account of philosophical progress should possess certain characteristics. We will codify these characteristics as 'desiderata', but in doing so we don't mean to indicate that they are not themselves legitimate targets of criticism. On the contrary, we hope to open a productive conversation about what we should want from an account of philosophical progress. Moreover, although these desiderata strike us as capturing the most important features of an account of philosophical progress, we do not take our list of desiderata to be exhaustive. Readers suspicious that we are only articulating desiderata which – lo and behold! – our account is particularly well-placed to satisfy, are encouraged to propose and defend further desiderata.

2.1. Diversity of Achievements

Amongst the diverse range of outcomes that can emerge from philosophical endeavors there are many manifestly valuable achievements. Philosophers develop new *theories*. We mount new *arguments* for and against these theories. We identify *distinctions* to facilitate more careful and productive conversations about the problems we tackle. We are forever formulating new and more careful *questions*, articulating novel and illuminating *examples* and *thought experiments*, and finding *new applications* for existing methods and theories. Indeed, philosophers can proudly include amongst the achievements of our discipline the inception of science itself, and of many scientific (sub)disciplines. This observation motivates us to propose that an account of philosophical progress ought to do justice to the diverse ways in which philosophical research plausibly contributes to progress.

The debate about philosophical progress has been sensitive to this diversity. Indeed, it has been explicitly proposed that we make progress by proposing new distinctions (Kamber, 2017, Gutting, 2009), devising new questions (Habgood-Coote, Watson, and Whitcomb, 2022), new theories (Wilson, 2013, Mironov, 2013), conditional theses (Frances, 2017), new philosophical tools – such as thought experiments – and new applications (Brake, 2017), and by spawning new disciplines (Ladyman, 2017, 31, Blackford, 2017, 3).

Although discussions of philosophical progress often acknowledge this diversity, they nevertheless frequently focus on one achievement to the exclusion of others. Such a focus is understandable in so far as the aim is to have a tractable conversation about the extent to which there has been progress, rather than a series of quite separate conversations about the extent to which various particular outcomes have been achieved. Stoljar (2017, 23), for instance, declares that there is "no point arguing about what 'the' aim of philosophy is", since "no doubt many things could legitimately meet that description". Rather than trying to adjudicate this issue, Stoljar focuses on articulating the nature of one type of achievement

– answering 'big' philosophical questions – since he takes this to be the achievement that "people are worried about when they worry about philosophical progress" (Stoljar, 2017, 23).

This inclusive *pluralistic* approach to philosophical progress, according to which there are many distinct forms of philosophical progress, is common, as is the tendency for pluralists to focus on a narrower class of achievements. Chalmers (2015, 13), for example, presents a generous list of philosophical achievements, and states that the listed achievements are "all certainly forms of progress". Yet Chalmers goes on to use "collective convergence to the truth" as a *measure* of progress, and claims that "a case can be made that attaining the truth is the primary aim at least of many parts of philosophy". While this suggests that on Chalmers' view, not all forms of progress are equal, the sense in which convergence to the truth is *primary* is not spelled out. Likewise, Rescher (2014, 3) proposes that "there are in theory various different possible modes of philosophical progress" and follows this up with a list of his own. Yet Rescher too acknowledges that people deliberating about philosophical progress almost always "focus on resolving problems and answering questions definitively or at least more reliably than heretofore" (Rescher, 2014, 3).

Ideally, an account of philosophical progress would do justice to the manifest value of a broad range of philosophical achievements, without setting some such achievements aside. For if progress were to be identified with just one of the achievements discussed above, and the others deemed to ultimately have no bearing on progress, that would indicate that philosophers have been quite radically mistaken about the nature of philosophical progress, or perhaps about the connection between progress and their philosophical activities. We think it unlikely that philosophers devote so much energy to pursuing entirely non-progressive achievements, and that it counts in favor of an account of progress if it does not deliver this verdict.

2.2. Informativeness

Our second desideratum draws its motivation from the various roles that an account of philosophical progress should play. Recall that in §1, we identified three distinct motivations for developing an account of philosophical progress: such an account would help us (i) gauge the prevalence of philosophical progress, (ii) estimate the value of philosophical research, and (iii) determine the suitability of philosophical methods.

In order to play these roles successfully, an account of philosophical progress must be sufficiently informative to classify various episodes as either progressive or non-progressive. Moreover, the account should provide some indication of *how progressive* a given episode is, or at least be able to answer comparative questions regarding which of two progressive episodes is *more* progressive. Further examination of the literature on philosophical progress, however, reveals that optimists, understandably, have focused their attention on identifying *sufficient* conditions for progress – and on arguing that these conditions are met – while pessimists have focused on identifying *necessary* conditions – and on arguing that these have *not* been met (for details, see Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2022)). Unfortunately, however, these proposals do not facilitate all the judgments we wish to make about the extent to which there has been philosophical progress. This highlights the need for a sufficiently informative account.

Consider, for example, Stoljar's (2017) book-length discussion of philosophical progress. Stoljar's primary goal is to argue for 'reasonable optimism' about philosophical progress:

progress has been made, and we can reasonably expect more of it. To make the case for reasonable optimism, Stoljar proceeds by carefully characterizing two different kinds of philosophical problems – *boundary problems* and *explanatory problems* – and arguing that many problems of each type have been solved in the past and are likely to be solved in the future. According to Stoljar's account, solving either kind of problem counts as philosophical progress (i.e., as answering a big philosophical question), and since each has been and is likely to be solved, optimism follows.

Stoljar's account is one of the most developed in the literature, and goes some way towards being sufficiently informative to play the roles identified above. In particular, in virtue of providing some sufficient conditions for progress, it has the resources with which to *positively* evaluate some philosophical developments by deeming them progressive. However, to play all the desired roles, an account of philosophical progress must also provide the resources with which to *negatively* evaluate philosophical developments, i.e., to tell us which developments fail to be progressive. Furthermore, the account should provide the resources with which to compare *the degree* to which progress has been made in different episodes, i.e., to tell us which of two progressive episodes is more progressive. These are prerequisites for an account to play the roles identified in §1, such as evaluating the prevalence of progress, since it will otherwise be impossible to tell whether philosophy has made more or less, or indeed *much* more or less, progress than other disciplines.

Stoljar's account cannot facilitate such judgements, since it leaves open that there are other kinds of philosophical problems, beyond boundary problems and explanatory problems, the solving of which would constitute progress. In the absence of a careful characterization of these other problems, and what would count as a solution to them, the account cannot be used to judge that a given episode was *not* progressive, since the episode might feature the solution of a yet-to-be-characterized type of philosophical problem (or indeed some other development that might constitute progress, such as those discussed in §2.1). Moreover, Stoljar's account cannot be used to judge that one episode was *more* progressive than another. After all, his account is silent on how we ought to compare the amount of progress achieved by solving boundary problems versus explanatory problems, and on how much progress would be made via solving the other potential types of problems his account allows for. How much more or less progressive is it, for example, to solve two specific boundary problems, versus solving a specific explanatory problem and another yet-to-be-characterized type of problem?

Interestingly, accounts that explicitly embrace a plurality of distinct forms of philosophical progress (e.g., Chalmers, 2015, Brake, 2017) also struggle to be sufficiently informative, precisely in virtue of their permissiveness and the multiplication of forms of progress.[2] The problem is that without a way of weighing the different achievements against one another, pluralistic accounts do not provide us with the resources to judge that one episode was more progressive than another. Viewing side-by-side two episodes in the history of philosophy through the lens of such an account, what can we say? Well, for each episode, if a form of philosophical progress was achieved, we can positively judge that each episode was progres-

[2]To be fair, it is worth noting that neither Brake (2017) nor Chalmers (2015) is primarily concerned with formulating and defending a detailed account of the nature of philosophical progress. Thus we don't seek to take them to task for failing to do so. Nevertheless, it is instructive to see how accounts modeled on their pluralistic characterizations of progress struggle to be sufficiently informative in some crucial respects.

sive. That is a good start. But what about judging that either episode is non-progressive, or that one of the two episodes was more progressive than the other?

In order to begin to answer such questions, proponents of pluralistic accounts in question must first decide whether their list of forms of progress is exhaustive. If not, they cannot even negatively judge that an episode was non-progressive in virtue of featuring no achievement on the list. In other words, accounts which decline to state a necessary condition for the occurrence of progress will never license the judgment that an episode was not progressive.

So, suppose instead that the pluralistic account in question takes its list of forms of progress to be exhaustive. Then, while the account will be able to deem a given episode non-progressive, it may still fail to facilitate more fine-grained judgments about how much progress was made. Suppose that each of our side-by-side episodes was progressive, but in different ways – the first developed new methods and arguments, say, while the second explored and applied a new theory. The sorts of pluralism we see in the literature say nothing to help us evaluate which episode was more progressive overall. Such accounts simply acknowledge a collection of quite different forms of progress, rendering most of the comparisons we want to make seemingly impossible, not just in practice but also in principle.

In sum, the problem is that pluralistic accounts are unable to play some of the most central roles an account of progress ought to play. While such accounts allow us to judge positively that progress was made during some episodes, they do not facilitate important comparative judgments about philosophical progress.

2.3. Science vs Philosophy

In the debate about the prevalence of philosophical progress, it is common to compare the extent to which there has been philosophical progress to the extent to which there has been progress in science.[3] These frequent comparisons, usually made in order to bemoan that philosophy makes less progress than science, suggest that it is a widespread assumption that science and philosophy each seek to make the very same kind of progress. For if that were not the case, it would be unclear what shared metric could be used to compare the extent to which there has been progress in the respective disciplines, and it would thus make little sense to compare how much progress each discipline has made (Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton, 2022). While this assumption has often remained tacit, its ubiquity suggests a general acceptance that philosophy and science seek to make progress via the same kind of achievement, perhaps due to the influential Quinean view that philosophy is not different in kind from science or other forms of inquiry (Quine, 1957).

Others, such as Beebee (2018), explicitly reject this assumption. Beebee develops what we might call an *exceptionalist* account of philosophical progress, according to which philosophical progress consists in an entirely different achievement than does scientific progress. In particular, Beebee develops a Lewis-inspired view according to which philosophy progresses by finding out "what equilibria there are that can withstand examination" (Lewis, 1983, x, quoted in Beebee, 2018, 16). The core of the account, which Beebee dubs *equilibrism*, is that philosophers make progress by identifying sets of philosophical views that coherently and

[3]See, for instance, Bengson et al. (2019), Brock (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).

cohesively hang together. There is no further philosophical progress to be made by considering whether any point of equilibrium is better than any other, and in this sense the account explicitly abandons the idea that philosophical progress is *factive*.

Differences between philosophical practice and scientific practice surely do invite the question of whether philosophical progress and scientific progress might be entirely different things. For example, scientists tend to focus on empirical observation and real-world experimentation whereas philosophers tend to focus on clarifying concepts and conducting thought experiments, along with all the other achievements discussed in §2.1. By supposing that philosophy doesn't aim at the same kind of progress as science, exceptionalist accounts avoid the burden of accounting for these methodological differences between philosophy and the empirical sciences.

On the other hand, by cleaving apart philosophical and scientific progress, exceptionalist accounts incur the burden of demarcating science from philosophy in a principled way. For if philosophical progress is different in kind from scientific progress, we need to know where science stops and philosophy begins. However, attempts at demarcating science from other forms of inquiry (see, e.g., Popper, 1959) are widely considered to have failed rather spectacularly (see, e.g., Laudan, 1983). A related concern is that scientific and philosophical claims are often *entangled* as premises and conclusions of various arguments (Stoljar, 2021). For example, consider arguments that move from apparently non-philosophical premises supported by scientific evidence to apparently philosophical conclusions – or, *vice versa*, from apparently philosophical premises to conclusions that are used in empirical science. Given this entanglement, those who would hold onto a non-factive account of philosophical progress alongside a factive account of scientific progress have their work cut out for them. More generally, an account of progress must do justice to the apparent differences between scientific and philosophical practice without running afoul of the problems associated with demarcation and entanglement.

2.4. Progress Worth Making

As noted, there are a number of related arguments employed by pessimists about philosophical progress. Most prominent is the argument from disagreement, according to which lack of collective convergence between philosophers regarding the answers to philosophical questions implies that there has not been progress on these questions (e.g., Rescher, 2014, Chalmers, 2015, Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton, 2023, Coliva and Doulas, 2023, Keren, 2023). Along similar lines, some philosophers have worried that, unlike science, contemporary philosophy still takes seriously ideas from its distant past, which fall in and out of vogue in an endlessly repeating cycle of change without improvement (Lovejoy, 1917, Nagel, 1986, Sterba, 2004, Jones, 2017, Slezak, 2018). Finally, yet another source of pessimism stems from the historical turnover of theories and the much-discussed *pessimistic meta-induction* (Hesse, 1976, Laudan, 1981). This argument concludes, from the track record of discarded false theories, that currently accepted theories will eventually face the same fate.[4]

Some have tackled these arguments head-on. For instance, the claim that agreement or convergence is required for progress has been resisted (Brock, 2017, Bengson, Cuneo, and

[4]While the pessimistic meta-induction has been primarily discussed in the context of scientific theories, it appears just as applicable to philosophical theories (Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton, 2023).

Shafer-Landau, 2019, 2022, Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton, 2023). However, the more popular response to such pessimistic concerns is to allege that pessimists are setting the bar for what counts as philosophical progress too high. For instance, while Chalmers (2015, 13) expresses concerns about the fact that convergence is only observed with regard to less significant questions, such as "negative theses that rule out certain specific views", and "conditional theses, asserting conditional connections between views", optimists see agreement on these less substantive issues as supporting optimism.[5] Indeed, it is built into Stoljar's (2017) account that a 'negative' solution to a boundary problem – e.g., concluding that some philosophical theory is false – is *equally as progressive* as a 'positive' solution – e.g., concluding that some philosophical theory is true – since reaching either conclusion would resolve the problem. This is a surprising feature of the account, for while Stoljar is right to insist that 'negative' solutions are progressive, they are surely less progressive than 'positive' ones, at least generally speaking.

Beebee's (2018) equilibrist account (see §2.3) provides a different response to pessimistic concerns by allowing that adopting entirely false answers to philosophical questions can constitute progress, and indeed that progress might be exhibited by episodes in which our philosophical theories become radically less accurate. In our view, this move to a non-factive account throws the baby out with the bathwater. We are not alone in thinking this. According to the results of the 2020 PhilPapers survey, an overwhelming majority of philosophers think the discipline aims at truth, knowledge, or understanding (Bourget and Chalmers, 2023) – where truth and knowledge are clearly factive notions, and understanding is generally taken to require at least some basis in facts, i.e., some degree of accuracy.

Finally, some forms of pluralism have resources with which to resist pessimistic arguments. Take Brake's (2017) highly pluralistic account, according to which, *inter alia*, developing new thought experiments can constitute progress in and of itself, regardless of whether they lead to better theories. Brake points out that her inclusive notion of progress readily lends itself to optimism, and argues that this counts in its favor. However, those of a more pessimistic bent might point out that new thought experiments with the virtues Brake describes are a dime a dozen, so if there are no further restrictions on *which* thought experiments count as progressive, the progress Brake describes is often trivial. Arguably, such a trivially positive answer to the question of whether philosophy makes progress doesn't square with the gravity of the question.

Let us take a step back from the trees to look at the forest. One concern about the debate between optimists and pessimists is that these positions might be disproportionately driven by different initial intuitions about the prevalence of progress. For many optimists, for example, it seems to be a datum that philosophy makes progress. From this starting point, the relevant theorizing in this space is a matter of determining which, of the many achievements that have emerged from the discipline of philosophy, constitute progress. On the other hand, when pessimists argue that philosophy doesn't make (enough) progress because it fails to satisfy some benchmark, we might worry that the benchmark was chosen to retrospectively vindicate kneejerk pessimism. The worry, here, is that those predisposed to optimism might

[5]See, e.g., Cappelen, 2017, Frances, 2017. Along similar lines, Gutting (2009) celebrates the articulation of widely utilized distinctions.

be inclined to identify progress with whichever achievements they are confident we in fact accomplish, in a way that fails to do justice to the gravity of the question of how much progress is made in philosophy. Similarly, those predisposed towards pessimism might be so concerned about those things we have *not* achieved that they are blind to less sensational instances of progress.

The problem with developing accounts of progress congenial to one's intuitions about the prevalence of progress is that such accounts will not be acceptable to one's opponents, and the result is a dialectical impasse. For example, the underlying worry behind the view that philosophy fails to make progress does not simply go away once optimists assert that adopting false answers or rejecting philosophical theses are often progressive achievements. To be sure, with philosophical progress thus (re)defined, even the staunchest pessimist would have to agree that progress is ubiquitous. But now the pessimist's worry resurfaces in a new guise: Why care about philosophical 'progress', thus (re)defined, if the value of these achievements remains in question? Indeed, to press this point, the pessimist may simply concede the terminological point that 'progress' *simpliciter* refers to something ubiquitous for which the bar is low, and instead argue that philosophy fails to make enough of the more clearly valuable *factive, positive* progress of the sort we arguably see in the natural sciences. Thus the debate would simply re-emerge, stated in new terms, rather than being settled in the optimists' favor in any substantive way.

Thus, when building an account of philosophical progress, we should begin from a point that is neutral regarding the prevalence of progress, and identify progress with achievements we have independent reason to deem valuable.

2.5. Summarizing the Desiderata

We have proposed the following four desiderata:

> **Diversity of Achievements:** An account of philosophical progress must account for the variety of ways in which philosophical research plausibly contributes to progress.
>
> **Informativeness:** An account of philosophical progress must be sufficiently informative to enable us, at least in principle, to evaluate claims regarding the prevalence of progress, the value of philosophical research, and different philosophical methods.
>
> **Science vs Philosophy:** An account of philosophical progress must accommodate the differences between how progress is made in science versus philosophy, without implying that science and philosophy are completely separable and non-entangled.
>
> **Progress Worth Making:** An account of philosophical progress must identify progress with achievements we have independent reasons to think are genuinely valuable, regardless of whether, or the extent to which, philosophers are in fact making such achievements.

With these desiderata identified, our plan in what follows is to build an account that satisfies each. Our approach thus differs from that of others seeking to analyze the nature of philosophical progress. Instead of focusing on what philosophers, as a matter of fact, are aiming to achieve (or are motivated by), we will propose an account of what philosophers *should* be aiming to achieve in order to make progress. This normative claim is quite independent of whether any philosophers explicitly aim at the achievement we articulate below.

By proceeding in this way, we are opening ourselves up to criticism on two different fronts. The first concerns the desiderata themselves. As we have noted, there is scope for disagreement on the characteristics that an account of progress ought to have, i.e., disagreement regarding the desiderata. The second kind of criticism concerns the extent to which our account can satisfy the desiderata. To provide this second kind of critic with a clear target, the next section presents our account.

3. Building Enabling Noeticism

As our discussion above intimates, different philosophers make different assumptions about what must occur in order for there to be philosophical progress. Some assume the crucial factor to be convergence upon the truth. Others suggest that what really matters is that we solve certain problems, or that we bring our views into greater equilibrium. Another idea that has often been hinted at, and has more recently been developed in increasing detail, is that philosophical progress revolves around increasing *understanding*.[6] This is the approach we will take, and we consider the resulting account to be broadly 'Sellarsian' (Sellars, 1962), in that it substantiates his claim that the aim of philosophy "is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term." According to our account, philosophical progress on a given phenomenon is made precisely when, and to the extent that, people are put in a position to increase their understanding of that phenomenon. An account along these lines has been sketched – but not developed

[6] A number of philosophers have claimed that either philosophy or philosophers *aim* at understanding (Sellars, 1962, Nozick, 1983, Hacker, 2009, Brandom, 2017, Dummett, 2010, Williamson, 2018, Pigliucci, 2017). More recently, several philosophers have proposed that there is a link between understanding and philosophical progress in particular, though there is no uniformity in how they characterize the notion of understanding. For instance, Hannon and Nguyen, in a recent article arguing for the claim that if philosophy has a primary aim, that aim is increased understanding, decline to endorse "any specific way of explicating the concept" (2022, 8). While Keren (2023, 44) likewise operates with "a fairly intuitive grasp" of understanding, he argues that philosophical progress consists in greater understanding of philosophical *problems* themselves. This approach is in line with Graham's (2017) characterization of progress in terms of greater understanding of philosophical *issues*. Finally, Bengson, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2022; see also 2019) argue at length that philosophy makes progress by constructing theories that provide what they call *theoretical understanding*, which consists in them being reason-based, robust, coherent, orderly, illuminating and to a high degree accurate. Despite the increasing popularity of characterizing progress in terms of the word 'understanding', then, there is no single understanding-based account that is being defended by these various authors. Instead, there is a collection of distinct proposals about the nature of progress, and the apparent similarities between them are primarily terminological. Crucially, none of these proposals draws upon the notion of understanding which we articulate in §3.2; moreover, in §3.2 we spell out the connection between progress and increased understanding in a way, and at a level of detail, that is unprecedented in the literature on philosophical progress.

– by Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2023) and we follow their lead in dubbing it *Enabling Noeticism*.

The account draws upon three primary pillars, each of which is discussed in a separate subsection below. The first is a framework of concepts, definitions, and distinctions, with related background assumptions, crucial for thinking clearly about progress in general (see §3.1). The second is a detailed explication of the notion of understanding to which our account appeals, both its epistemology and its connection to related concepts like explanation and truth (§3.2). The third pillar is a precise account of how increased understanding relates to progress. We argue that it is not *de facto* increases in people's understanding, but rather putting people *in a position* to increase their understanding, that is the achievement that is constitutive of philosophical progress (§3.3).

3.1. The Conceptual Framework and Background Assumptions

In what follows, it will become apparent that our account of philosophical progress is inspired by, and continuous with, an independently-motivated account of scientific progress: the noetic account of scientific progress (Dellsén, 2016, 2021, 2022). (With that said, the account developed here may still be adopted as an account of philosophical progress in particular – what we above called an exceptionalist account – even by those who prefer other accounts of scientific progress.) As noted by Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (2022, 2023), looking to the literature on scientific progress brings us not only several accounts of scientific progress from which to derive inspiration, but an entire framework of helpful concepts, definitions, and distinctions. In particular, the following four points will be crucial in the articulation of our account.

The first point is that *progress* is a partly evaluative concept – a so-called 'thick concept' (Väyrynen, 2021). When we ask whether there has been philosophical progress, we are asking whether there has been *improvement* over time, not merely whether there has been *change*. It follows from this elementary point that it is a mistake to infer from the mere fact that some particular type of development has occurred, or is occurring, in philosophy, that this type of development is therefore progressive. It is possible, after all, that some, most, or even all of the developments that have actually occurred in philosophy were not instances of progress.

The second point concerns the scope of accounts of philosophical progress. Neither Enabling Noeticism, nor rival accounts of philosophical progress, are intended to capture all the ways in which philosophy can be said to improve over time. Instead, our account is an attempt to answer the question of what constitutes *cognitive* philosophical progress, which is typically understood broadly to include improvements in cognitive attitudes, such as beliefs or knowledge, or representational devices, such as theories or models. In other words, our account is entirely consistent with the obvious fact that philosophy would in some sense improve by becoming better funded, by adopting better methods for teaching, by becoming more inclusive to underprivileged groups, and so forth. These are no doubt examples of other forms of philosophical progress, and anyone attempting to develop an exhaustive account of all of the senses in which philosophy might improve must also consider economic progress, educational progress, social progress, methodological progress, and so forth (see Niiniluoto, 2019, §2.1). In this paper, however, we restrict our focus to the substantial and pressing task of building an account of what it is for philosophy to make cognitive progress.

The third, related, point is that Enabling Noeticism is an account of what it would be for the *discipline* of philosophy, rather than some or all of the *individuals* within the discipline, to make (cognitive) progress. To explain, consider that whenever an individual undergoes some cognitive improvement, such as accumulating knowledge or increasing their understanding, there is a clear sense in which that person is making cognitive progress *for themselves*. This type of individual progress might occur, for example, via various forms of education, or as a result of reading insightful philosophy papers (Frances, 2017). This is clearly not the sort of progress with which anyone in the debate about philosophical progress, or indeed scientific progress, is concerned. Rather, the debate concerns – roughly speaking[7] – the extent to which the *discipline of philosophy* has made progress with respect to the phenomena on which individuals can become better informed in various ways.

The fourth point concerns the distinction between that which *constitutes* and that which *promotes* progress. Roughly following Bird (2008), those achievements which are *in themselves progressive* are said to constitute progress, while activities which *cause or probabilify* progressive achievements are said to promote progress. (Of course, the very same event can both constitute and promote progress.) In discussions of scientific progress, this distinction has been used to clarify that accounts of scientific progress are meant to be accounts of what constitutes progress. For example, although experimentation is clearly crucial to scientific progress, no extant account of scientific progress directly identifies progress with experimentation. Instead, proponents of these accounts typically suggest that the role of experimentation is to promote some other scientific achievement, such as the development of more accurate theories.[8] Similarly, what we propose below should be read as an account of what constitutes progress rather than of what promotes it – although we shall also draw out some plausible implications regarding what would promote progress given this account.

3.2. An Explication of Understanding

Enabling Noeticism explicates philosophical progress in terms of *understanding*. On the face of it, this is a popular idea, for several other authors connect progress with some notion of 'understanding' (see fn. 6). However, over the last few decades, a bewildering array of different accounts of understanding have been proposed which are fundamentally at odds with each other on central issues, such as how understanding relates to explanation, truth, justification, and knowledge (for a recent overview, see Grimm, 2021). This has pushed most of those seeking to develop understanding-based accounts of philosophical progress into adopting highly non-specific notions of understanding, where such central issues are left open.[9] This will *not* be our approach.

Instead, mindful of the need for an *informative* account fit for the purposes to which it is intended, we will adopt a highly specific notion of understanding, inspired by Dellsén (2020),

[7] A rough statement will have to be sufficient at this stage, since being more precise here would prejudge some of the issues we consider below.

[8] Although accounts of what constitutes progress have implications for what promotes progress – roughly since what is being promoted is precisely the achievement with which such accounts identify progress – it becomes an empirical question whether a given type of development promotes progress according to a given account of what constitutes progress.

[9] See, e.g., Hannon and Nguyen, 2022, Keren, 2023. As we discuss in §4, the result is that these accounts cannot fully satisfy the desideratum of Informativeness.

with which to substantiate the idea that philosophical progress is connected to understanding. To be clear, our aim is not to capture the meaning of the term 'understanding' as it is commonly used, by philosophers or others, but to explicate it in a way that makes it suitable for being deployed in an account of philosophical progress. Our explication focuses on two important aspects of understanding. The first aspect concerns the ways in which one's mental representations must match the world in order to have understanding. On our explication, the degree to which one understands a phenomenon is determined by the accuracy and comprehensiveness of one's representation of the network of dependence relations surrounding that phenomenon. The value of understanding, thus conceived, is clear: the better we understand some phenomenon, the better our capacity to manipulate, explain, and make predictions regarding that phenomenon. The second aspect concerns the epistemology of understanding. On our explication, understanding is epistemically undemanding, in that it does not imply knowledge, justification, or outright belief (as those notions are traditionally defined within epistemology). This rough sketch of an explication needs some unpacking, and the main aim of this subsection is to articulate and exemplify the notion of understanding we have in mind.

The idea that understanding is centrally concerned with representing dependence relations dates back to Kim (1994). For Kim, dependence relations are the ontological correlates of explanation – they are the worldly relations that make it true that something explains something else. In much of empirical science, the paradigmatic dependence relation is causation, which is the ontological correlate of causal explanation in the sense that if we can appeal to X in order to causally explain Y, then Y must causally depend on X. It is a matter of contention which other relations are genuine dependence relations, but they may include constitution, grounding, mereological dependence, truthmaking, conceptual containment, and/or supervenience. Like Kim himself, we will not take a stand on which dependence relations there are, and instead assume that understanding is a matter of representing those dependence relations that do obtain (whatever they may be).

Kim's idea is developed by Dellsén (2020), who argues that understanding some X is not simply a matter of accurately representing how X depends on various other phenomena (or aspects thereof), and thus that understanding X is not simply a matter of having some or all explanations of X. Rather, argues Dellsén, understanding X is a matter of representing both how X depends on various other phenomena, *and* how further phenomena depend on X itself. In other words, the extent to which one understands X is a matter of how one represents the network of dependence relations running both to, and from, X.[10] Furthermore, the relevant representations concern not only 'positive' facts about whether (and if so, how) X depends on other phenomena, or how other phenomena depend on X. Rather, they also concern 'negative' facts like X's lack of dependence on specific other phenomena, or indeed on any phenomena (Dellsén, 2020, 170-182).

Understanding is taken by many to be a gradable notion, in that one may understand X to a greater or lesser extent (rather than just fully or not at all). By contrast, knowledge is

[10]With that said, if and insofar as phenomena have intrinsic properties or natures not captured by situating them in networks of dependence relations, understanding of X would also be increased by correctly representing its intrinsic properties and the intrinsic properties of the phenomena which stand in dependence relations to it.

usually taken to be non-gradable, in the sense that there are no degrees of knowing a given proposition P; an agent either knows P or doesn't know P. We will follow Dellsén in supposing that the extent to which one understands X is determined by two separate criteria, *accuracy* and *comprehensiveness*. Accuracy concerns the extent to which one's representation *correctly* represents that X does or does not depend on various other phenomena (and how), and that various other phenomena do or do not depend on X (and how). Comprehensiveness concerns the extent to which one's representation includes all the phenomena on which X does and does not depend, and which do or do not depend on X. As Dellsén (2020, 167) notes, these criteria may come into conflict in certain cases, leading to idealization (sacrificing accuracy for comprehensiveness) or abstraction (sacrificing comprehensiveness for accuracy).

To illustrate this account of understanding (see also §4), consider the justified true belief theory of knowledge. This theory can be viewed as an attempt at understanding a general phenomenon, viz. propositional knowledge, by depicting a model in which a given agent S's having or lacking knowledge of a proposition P depends on (i) whether P is true, (ii) whether S believes that P, and (iii) whether S is justified in believing that P; and, moreover, (iv) S's having or lacking knowledge of P does not depend on anything else. Note that the final clause (iv) is crucial in describing the model, since many – perhaps most – attempts to respond to Gettier cases have conceded that knowledge does depend on (i)-(iii), arguing that what Gettier cases show is that this list of factors is not exhaustive, contrary to (iv). According to Dellsén's account, the degree of understanding gained by coming to represent knowledge in this way is determined by the extent to which the dependencies described in clauses (i)-(iii), and lack thereof described in clause (iv), accurately and comprehensively capture what propositional knowledge really does and doesn't depend on.

For now, let us turn to the other aspect of understanding with which our explication is concerned, namely its epistemology. Some have argued that understanding is reducible to some form of knowledge (e.g., Sliwa, 2015); others that understanding merely shares certain components of knowledge, such as belief (e.g., Kvanvig, 2003); and yet others argue that understanding differs radically from knowledge in that it shares few if any of its characteristic features (e.g., Elgin, 2017). The explication of understanding with which we operate is closer to the latter category than to the former; it will emerge in what follows that there are strong reasons for an account of philosophical progress to appeal to a state quite different from knowledge. In particular, on the explication of understanding with which we will operate, understanding X does not imply having the type of epistemic justification that is required for knowing any particular proposition about X.This is in line with arguments to the effect that justification for propositions involved in understanding can be absent, defeated, or undermined in various ways (Hills, 2015, Dellsén, 2017). More importantly for our purposes, an explication of understanding that does not imply justification is arguably better suited for spelling out a plausible understanding-based account of philosophical progress. As Dellsén, Lawler and Norton (2023) have argued, justification is best seen as something that promotes, rather than constitutes, progress – e.g, in the way that argumentation and evidence frequently leads us to accept better theories.[11]

[11]For what it is worth, most prominent accounts of scientific progress agree with this verdict and do not consider justification to be constitutive of progress (see, e.g., Niiniluoto, 2019).

One might worry that an account that appeals to such an epistemically undemanding notion of understanding will set a counter-intuitively low bar for progress. Specifically, isn't it intuitive that genuine cognitive progress would require us to have *justification* for, or even to *know*, propositions about the phenomena on which we make progress? Well, first of all, it is not at all clear what ordinary people's intuitions are on this issue; if anything, the available data points in the opposite direction (see Rowbottom, 2015, 105, referring to Mizrahi and Buckwalter, 2014). More importantly in our view, there are reasons to be skeptical that untrained intuitions cut any ice on this issue: as emphasized above, even if having justification (or knowledge) doesn't constitute progress on Enabling Noeticism, it nevertheless greatly *promotes* progress in all but the most outlandish circumstances. Put differently, justification is instrumental for progress – so much so, indeed, that it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that justification is *the instrument* for achieving progress. From Enabling Noeticism's point of view, then, it is entirely natural that it would seem unintuitive, at first glance, to say that justification is not required for progress, for surely our untrained intuitions are not so precise as to reliably distinguish the claim that justification *greatly promotes* progress, from the claim that it *partly constitutes* it. Once that distinction has been made, however, we would be surprised if our readers genuinely find it intuitive to suppose that the thing that greatly promotes progress also simultaneously constitutes it, i.e., that justification would be playing this double role as progress is being made.

In sum, then, on our explication of understanding, an agent S understands X to the extent that S accurately and comprehensively represents the network of dependence relations in which X stands, or fails to stand, to other things. This need not include having any specific beliefs about X or its associated network of dependence relations, nor does it require S to have epistemic justification for their doxastic attitudes towards X or its associated network of dependence relations. In this respect, our explication of understanding is epistemically undemanding. On the other hand, our explication of understanding is robustly factive, in that the extent to which one understands is determined not just by how accurately, but also by how comprehensively one represents these dependence relations.

At this point, one might object that we are assuming various contentious theses about the nature of understanding without argument; so, the objection goes, the resulting account of philosophical progress is bound to be at least as contentious. This objection misunderstands the role that our explication of understanding plays in our account. To reiterate, we are not purporting to provide the 'one true analysis' of the notion of understanding as it is commonly used, e.g., in science and everyday life. Rather, our focus is on clearly defining a notion to be deployed in an account of something else, viz. philosophical progress. Readers who find it implausible that this notion captures a common meaning of 'understanding' may simply mentally replace every instance of 'understanding' (both above and below) with, e.g., 'understanding*', and think of Enabling Noeticism as an understanding*-based account of philosophical progress.

3.3. Progress as Putting People in a Position to Understand

The question we are concerned with in this paper is the question of what it is for *the discipline of philosophy* to make progress. The previous subsection focused on the notion of understanding at play in our account. This subsection aims to spell out exactly how disciplinary philosophical progress is linked to understanding, by considering questions such

as *whose* understanding is at issue, and whether the agents in question must *actually* gain understanding in order for there to be philosophical progress.

A *prima facie* plausible suggestion is that philosophy makes progress when individual members of the discipline actually increase their understanding. On this view, any instance of a philosopher's representations of dependencies becoming more accurate and/or comprehensive would be an instance of philosophical progress (assuming other philosophers' respective degrees of understanding do not simultaneously decrease). Measuring the prevalence of philosophical progress, then, would be a matter of determining whether philosophers' degrees of understanding have increased over time or not. This strategy for answering the question of what disciplinary progress would be (and how to measure it) should sound familiar to anyone versed in the debate on philosophical progress. Insofar as they take a stand on the issue at all, almost every account offered so far identifies progress with actual cognitive changes in philosophers themselves, such as convergence on true answers to philosophical questions (e.g., Chalmers 2015). Indeed, the assumption that it is philosophers' cognitive states that matters for progress plays a crucial role in debates about expert disagreement and progress, in which experts having certain attitudes to certain propositions is often taken to be necessary for progress.

There are, however, reasons to avoid defining progress in terms of actual changes in philosophers' cognitive states. Consider a thought experiment due to Bird (2010), initially used to illustrate that a group's having knowledge does not supervene on facts about whether the individuals in the group have knowledge. More recently, the thought experiment has also played a key role in discussions on how intellectual communities progress (Ross, 2020, Dellsén, 2023). Here's the case:

> Dr N. is working in mainstream science, but in a field that currently attracts only a little interest. He makes a discovery, writes it up and sends his paper to the *Journal of X-ology*, which publishes the paper after the normal peer-review process. A few years later, at time t, Dr N. has died. All the referees of the paper for the journal and its editors have also died or forgotten all about the paper. The same is true of the small handful of people who read the paper when it appeared. A few years later yet, Professor O. is engaged in research that needs to draw on results in Dr N.'s field. She carries out a search in the indexes and comes across Dr N.'s discovery in the *Journal of X-ology*. She cites Dr N.'s work in her own widely-read research and because of its importance to the new field, Dr N.'s paper is now read and cited by many more scientists. (Bird, 2010, 32)

On Bird's view, there is no time at which the scientific community loses knowledge in this scenario. The scientific community, considered as a collective subject, knows about Dr N.'s discovery even throughout the intermediate period during which no individual scientists know about it. Now, we think that this conclusion is probably too strong. Instead, we are inclined to say that members of the scientific community are simply *in a position to know* about Dr N.'s discovery during the intermediate period (cf. Lackey, 2014). For our purposes here, however, it doesn't matter whether Bird is right to attribute knowledge to a collective subject or whether scientists are simply in a position to know. Instead, we take Bird's thought experiment to highlight two important points.

First, the case illustrates that disciplinary progress is plausibly taken to be determined not only by changes in people's actual cognitive states.[12] If it was, the case of Dr N. would be an example of disciplinary progress followed by *regress*, for the field of X-ology, in the intermediate period in which no individual scientist is aware of the discovery. This seems highly implausible. After all, note for example that Dr N.'s colleague in a related field, Professor O., is significantly better placed to conduct her research than she would have been had Dr N. never published his discovery. There is an important sense, then, in which progress in a discipline does not simply depend on facts about the actual mental states of the discipline's members.

Second, the case illustrates that some sort of *availability* matters for disciplinary progress. A crucial reason why the discipline of X-ology did not regress or lose progress is that Dr N.'s discovery was made available in the *Journal of X-ology*. This suggests that disciplinary progress is somehow a matter of improving the information or ideas that are *publicly* available, e.g., via academic journals or other sorts of public facing media.

Another reason not to focus on philosophers' individual cognitive states is normative. As noted above, an account of philosophical progress should be an account of something genuinely worth striving for. Now, if philosophical progress is something that is limited to what takes place in the heads of philosophers themselves, then it is not clear that it has value for anyone else, or that the time, effort, and resources that are in fact devoted to philosophical research are warranted. This is best illustrated by way of example. Consider the question of what moral obligations parents have to their children, and suppose that some philosophers successfully increase their understanding of the nature of these obligations. If the information enabling these philosophers to increase their understanding is not made publicly available, this development would only be of value to a very limited number of people – the philosophers in question, and perhaps their better-cared-for children. Non-philosophers who look to philosophy hoping to improve their understanding of the nature of parental obligations would have nothing to gain from this development in the discipline. In such a scenario, it would be a mistake, we think, to say that *philosophy* (as opposed to the particular philosophers involved) has made progress worth making on the phenomenon of parental duties. To put the same point another way, while there is a sense in which these philosophers have made a kind of *individualized* philosophical progress, philosophers making that kind of progress is insufficient for *the discipline* to have made progress worth making. Philosophical progress worth making should be an achievement that gives something back to the broader community, and if non-philosophers cannot benefit from philosophers' individual cognitive achievements, then philosophy is not making progress in the sense that matters.While our view on this issue may be surprising to some readers, we think that tacit appreciation of this point explains and underlies the recent push towards more public-facing philosophy, mirroring the important role of science communication in disseminating scientific discoveries to the public. Likewise for the apparent frustration and dissatisfaction, from those outside the discipline, with the kind of philosophy that is impenetrable to the uninitiated and confined to the ivory tower.

Borrowing terminology from the debate on scientific progress, we can re-frame this nor-

[12]On this point, see Ross, 2020 and Dellsén, 2023; see also Harris, 2023 for a closely related discussion.

mative point as a reason for developing a *for-whom* rather than a *by-whom* conception of philosophical progress (Dellsén, 2023). This paper defends a view of philosophical progress defined in terms of the cognitive states of those *for whom* progress is made as opposed to those *by whom* progress is made. Now, there seem to be at least two ways of developing such a for-whom account of philosophical progress. One way would be to define progress in terms of the cognitive changes of a more inclusive group of agents. We could, for instance, identify progress with episodes in which people in general (philosophers and non-philosophers alike) increase their understanding. However, the case of Dr N. tells against this approach, since it seems that the progress achieved by Dr N. is not undone even when no individual whatsoever is aware of Dr N.'s discovery.

A second way of developing a for-whom conception of philosophical progress would be to abandon the idea of defining progress in terms of *actual increases* in understanding, and instead identify progress with changes that put people in general *in a position* to increase their understanding. We take this approach here. On our account, philosophical progress is a matter of putting people in a position to increase their understanding. In practice, this will normally consist in making publicly available various philosophical ideas, such as arguments, theories, distinctions, and thought experiments, e.g., via the publication of books and journal articles, additions to research repositories, and online blog posts and videos.

One might object to this approach by pointing out that even if our notion of understanding is well-defined, the notion of people in general *being in a position to increase their understanding* is vague, and thus admits of borderline cases. What about ideas in widely circulated philosophical works that are not (yet) publicly available, such as Parfit's *Climbing the Mountain* before it was published as *On what Matters* (Parfit, 2011)? What about articles that are buried in the bowels of some library, or behind an impossibly expensive paywall? (And so on.) We offer three related responses:

First, the alternative of defining progress in terms of *actual increases* in understanding faces problems of its own with borderline cases, regarding exactly which group of people, and how many people within that group, must come to increase their understanding in order for philosophy to make progress.

Second, it seems to us that the borderline cases of putting people in a position to increase their understanding are also borderline cases of philosophical progress. For example, it seems plausibly borderline whether the circulation of *Climbing the Mountain* genuinely constituted progress, or whether it merely promoted *inter alia* the progress that was eventually made with the publication of *On what Matters*.[13] If the borderline cases of *putting people in a position to increase their understanding* are also plausibly borderline cases of *constituting philosophical progress*, such that the vagueness of the former mirrors the vagueness of the latter, that speaks in favor of using the former in an explication of the latter.

Third, we acknowledge that the vagueness of putting people in a position to increase their understanding does raise several interesting issues about how the term may be made

[13]Note that on our view, it is not a tricky borderline case whether circulating *Climbing the Mountain* promoted philosophical progress. To the extent that doing so caused Parfit and/or his readers to refine their ideas in such a way that the material that later on was made publicly available did put people in a position to increase their understanding, circulating the manuscript promoted progress. The difficult – and possibly intractable – question is whether circulating *Climbing the Mountain* also constituted philosophical progress.

more precise for theoretical purposes. For instance, it is plausible that two different bodies of information might put people in a position to have precisely the same degree of understanding of a given phenomenon, but one might allow this understanding to be gained much more easily than the other (e.g., due to the accessibility of the relevant work, the clarity and concision of its presentation, and so on). Capturing how improvements regarding *the ease with which* interested parties can come to understand might factor into the notion of progress would be a valuable supplement to the account of progress we have developed here. However, since these issues are largely orthogonal to our current concerns, and deserve an extensive discussion in their own right, we leave them for future work.

3.4. Summarizing the Account

In this section, we have discussed the three primary pillars supporting our account of philosophical progress: (i) a framework for investigating the topic of philosophical progress, (ii) a detailed explication of the notion of understanding to which our account appeals, and (iii) a 'for whom' conception of what type of cognitive change constitutes philosophical progress. The resulting account can be briefly summarized as follows:

> **Enabling Noeticism:** The discipline of philosophy makes progress regarding some phenomenon to the extent that philosophical research puts people in a position to increase their understanding of that phenomenon.

It bears reiterating that although this is an account of what *constitutes* philosophical progress, it has implications for what *promotes* philosophical progress. Specifically, Enabling Noeticism implies that progress on some phenomenon is promoted by any philosophical research that causes, (or probabilifies) the release of publicly available information which puts people in a position to increase their understanding of that phenomenon.

4. Revisiting the Desiderata

In section §2, we identified four desiderata for an account of philosophical progress. A general theme that emerged was that these desiderata appear to pull in different directions, making it difficult for any single account to satisfy all four. For example, Diversity of Achievements provides apparent support for pluralistic and/or non-factive accounts, while Informativeness pushes towards monistic accounts and Progress Worth Making motivates factive accounts. In this section, we argue that Enabling Noeticism satisfies all four desiderata in an effortless way, revealing that the apparent tension between them can be dissolved with the correct account of what philosophical progress consists in.

4.1. Diversity of Achievements

Enabling Noeticism is a *monistic* account, in the sense that it holds that it is a single cognitive achievement, namely putting people in a position to increase their understanding, that is constitutive of progress. As such, it may seem that our account is unable to accommodate the diverse ways in which philosophical research plausibly contributes to progress. This conclusion is premature, however, for two reasons. For one thing, various sorts of achievements can *put people in a position* to increase their understanding; for another, an even greater

range of achievements can *promote* philosophical progress, even if they do not also *constitute* such progress, as we detail in what follows.

Importantly, putting people in a position to increase their understanding is a *broad category* of achievement that can be realized in a number of distinct ways. A paradigmatic example is the publication of a theory of some phenomenon that puts people in a position to more accurately and/or comprehensively grasp the dependence relations in which that phenomenon stands to other phenomena. Less obvious, perhaps, is that making new *arguments* for an existing theory publicly available can constitute progress. A published argument puts people in a position to increase their understanding of a phenomenon to the extent that the argument facilitates more accurate or comprehensive representations of how the phenomenon depends on various other phenomena. For example, the argument from evil – if successful – evidently shows that whether or not great evils exist *depends* – at least in part – on the whether or not there exists an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being.

Relatedly, making new *counterexamples* to a theory publicly available can put people in a position to increase their understanding of a phenomenon. As mentioned in §3.2, Gettier's famous counterexamples to the tripartite theory of knowledge did not show what knowledge *is*. Rather, they illustrated that knowledge is not (merely) justified true belief. Nevertheless, Gettier's publication put people in a position to represent more accurately and comprehensively the dependence relations between knowledge and other phenomena. In particular, people were put in a position to (accurately) represent that someone's having knowledge does not merely depend on them having a true, justified belief, and thus were put in a position to increase their understanding of the phenomenon of knowledge.

This illustrates an attractive feature of Enabling Noeticism, namely that the account has the resources with which to shed light on the pessimistic worries, discussed in §2.4, concerning 'negative theses' that merely reject theories, and Stoljar's view that whether solutions to philosophical problems are negative or positive is irrelevant to the degree of progress made. Gettier's counterexamples show how a 'negative' thesis can constitute progress by putting people in a position to update some inaccurate representations of dependencies, thereby putting them in a position to increase their understanding of the phenomenon in question. With that said, if Gettier had also blessed us with a new, positive, account of everything on which knowledge depends, that would have been even more progressive, as people would have been in an even better position to understand knowledge (Norton, 2023). But Gettier's 'merely negative' contribution was progressive nonetheless. For precisely the same reason, Stoljar's claim that 'negative' solutions to boundary problems are progressive is vindicated by Enabling Noeticism. However, our account departs from Stoljar's by judging that a 'positive' solution to a boundary problem would normally be more progressive than a 'negative' one, e.g., in the way that the imagined account of everything on which knowledge depends would be more progressive than Gettier's counterexamples. Ultimately, then, our account illustrates how appealing to a dichotomy between 'positive' and 'negative' theses or solutions blurs the fact that the differences merely amount to different *degrees* of progress, thus constituting a continuum rather than dichotomy between different kinds of progress.

Furthermore, making new *distinctions* publicly available can put people in a better position to understand by enabling them to represent the distinguished phenomena not as a single node in the network of dependence relations, but (more accurately) as two distinct nodes which may depend on different phenomena. Similarly, various other phenomena may

then be taken to depend only on one of the two disentangled phenomena rather than on both simultaneously. In the other direction, publishing the discovery of *identities* – such as the mind-brain identity theory, if it is true – also constitutes progress, by enabling people to update their representations of dependencies in a way that conjoins two nodes that before were (inaccurately) represented to be distinct.

Of course, it is not always the case that making a new theory, argument, counterexample, or thought experiment publicly available constitutes progress; not every instance of every achievement discussed in §2.1 constitutes progress on our account. For example, devising new questions, developing new tools, and formulating conditional theses, might not immediately put people in a position to increase their understanding, even when these things are made publicly available. However, such achievements can nonetheless be valuable, according to Enabling Noeticism. Recall that achievements promote progress if and only if they cause or probabilify the achievement(s) constitutive of progress. Developing new questions, tools, and conditional theses may promote philosophical progress, by causing the generation of publicly available content which puts people in a position to gain an increased understanding. Similarly, exploring the conceptual space of possible theories for a given phenomenon promotes progress to the extent that it causes or probabilifies the generation of publicly available information which puts people in a position to gain a greater understanding of the target of those theories, e.g., by contributing to a more informed and productive debate. Each of these achievements can, say, direct someone's attention such that they develop and publicly defend a new, more accurate or comprehensive representation of the relevant dependence relations.

For example, inventing the concept of 'moral luck' showed that the thesis that an agent is only morally blame- or praise-worthy for the actions they have full control over is less self-evident than it seems at first glance. Imagine that a drunk driver accidentally hurts somebody, while another drunk driver luckily ends up hurting nobody. That we do not blame the second driver as much as we blame the first driver cannot be fully cashed out in terms of what the agents have control over. Cases like this one inspired an ongoing publicly available debate about how (if at all) moral luck should affect our moral judgments (see, e.g., Nelkin, 2023) – or, to put it differently, whether (and if so how) moral judgments depend on moral luck. In this sense, inventing the concept of moral luck clearly promoted philosophical progress, according to Enabling Noeticism.

Moreover, the very same achievement can both constitute and promote progress. For instance, Gettier's contribution was not only progressive in itself, but also promoted progress to the extent that the resulting explosion of new theories of knowledge, when made publicly available, put people in a position to increase their understanding of knowledge.

Finally, an interesting class of cases is *defenses of radically mistaken views*.[14] Our account does not give a unified verdict regarding such cases; the devil is in the details. For example, a defense of a mistaken view may feature one of the achievements outlined above – perhaps a counterexample to the received view, or a helpful distinction. In this way, even if the view defended is radically mistaken, its defense will constitute progress. More typically, perhaps, defending a mistaken view will not constitute but will rather serve to promote progress. A careful presentation of the view, showing the commitments and baggage that come along

[14]We are grateful to a reviewer for this journal for suggesting that we consider this class of cases.

with it and the moves that have to be made in response to various objections (and so on), may serve to reveal the implausibility of the view, thereby paving the way for further work that puts people in a position to increase their understanding of the phenomenon in question.

These are just a few examples of how a philosophical achievement can constitute or promote progress, and they do not demonstrate that our account accommodates all philosophical achievements that have been associated with philosophical progress as either constituting or promoting progress. Indeed, our account will determinately classify some instances of the activities listed in §2.1 as failing to either constitute or promote progress, or even as regressive developments. A new question can be so ill-formed that it would have been better had it never been asked at all; a new distinction can be opaque or confused to the point of being a red herring; a new concept may be inconsistent or completely inapplicable; a defense of a mistaken view can be so confused as to hinder progress; and so forth. No plausible account of philosophical progress should indiscriminately count every instance of such 'achievements' as progressive; and our account definitively does not.

To sum up: By utilizing the distinction between constituting and promoting progress, and by showing how a variety of philosophical achievements can, when made publicly available, constitute progress, Enabling Noeticism finds a promising middle ground between flatfooted monism – which simply identifies one of these achievements as progressive – and unsophisticated pluralism – which simply grants that a variety of achievements are progressive without showing how they can all be seen as making progress *in the same way*. Both the motivation to single out a primary achievement that defines progress and the need to correctly classify other progressive achievements are thus satisfied.

4.2. Informativeness

We argued above that an account of philosophical progress should be informative enough to help address three questions – concerning the prevalence of philosophical progress, the value of philosophical research, and the suitability of philosophical methods.

Enabling Noeticism provides a precise necessary and sufficient condition for philosophical progress on some phenomenon, namely that people are put in a position to increase their understanding of said phenomenon. Because this condition is both necessary and sufficient, it can, in principle, be used to classify any given period as progressive, or not, regarding some specific phenomenon. Although we cannot generally say with certainty whether a given episode is progressive – because it might be epistemically elusive whether people are put in the desired position – we can say with certainty what it would be for a given episode to be progressive. Unlike other prominent accounts (e.g. Stoljar, 2017), our account enables us to specify which periods are *not* progressive, and even those which are *regressive*. As we argued in §2.2, this is a crucial feature of an informative account of progress.

Furthermore, Enabling Noeticism provides an indication of the *degree* to which a given episode is progressive, facilitating comparisons in how much progress has been made in one episode versus another. Due to our precise account of understanding, we can meaningfully speak of how a given development put people in a position to understand *to a greater degree*, by appealing to the degrees of accuracy and comprehensiveness of the representation of dependencies that people are put in a position to adopt. Naturally, if one development puts people in a position to understand to a much greater degree than before, whereas another development only puts people in a position to ever-so-slightly increase their understanding,

the former development is more progressive than the latter. As a result, Enabling Noeticism may be used to determine the expected value of a given philosophical research project in terms of how much progress it can be expected to achieve or promote.Furthermore, Enabling Noeticism helps inform our debates about philosophical methodology by making clear that we should favor the methods that more effectively put people in a position to understand, and the methods that promote this achievement.Of course, it is a substantial question – too substantial to be addressed adequately here (although we hope to do so in future work) – exactly what sort of methods are most suitable for this purpose.

It is worth noting that Enabling Noeticism is able to satisfy the desideratum of Informativeness because it features a precise explication of understanding. We can say what makes a period progressive and how degrees of progress are measured because our account precisely defines understanding and degrees thereof, rather than following Hannon and Nguyen (2022) and Keren (2023) in adopting a non-specific notion of understanding. While a generic notion of understanding is sufficient for making a plausible case that philosophy aims at understanding (as per Hannon and Nguyen (2022, 8)) or arguing against against disagreement-based pessimism (as per Keren (2023, 44)), in order to build an understanding-based account of philosophical progress that meets the Informativeness desideratum, a precise explication of understanding is required, because only by drawing upon a precise notion can we reasonably expect to measure how much progress has been made in a given period (if any).

4.3. Science vs Philosophy

We have argued that an account of philosophical progress must undertake the balancing act of accounting for the differences between scientific progress and philosophical progress without implying that science and philosophy are completely separable and non-entangled.

Our account is in line with the noetic account of scientific progress defended by Dellsén (2016, 2021, 2022) and thus allows for a *unified* account of philosophical and scientific progress, according to which both consist in putting people in a position to increase their understanding. Thus this desideratum can be satisfied by supposing that there is complete continuity between scientific progress and philosophical progress, due to a common achievement that constitutes progress.

One motivation for this unified approach stems from skepticism about attempts to demarcate philosophy from other cognitive pursuits, including the cognitive pursuits of other academic disciplines such as the natural sciences (see §2.3). By adopting a unified account of progress, one avoids incurring any burden of demarcating science from philosophy in a principled way, or of separating 'philosophical' claims from 'scientific' claims. On the contrary, the unified understanding-based approach allows that instances of philosophical progress often build on instances of scientific progress, and *vice versa*. In particular, this allows that progress may consist in joining together representations of dependence relations proposed in philosophy and some scientific discipline(s) into a unified representation of a phenomenon studied by both, such as in a combination of a (philosophical) functionalism about mental states and various (scientific) theories about what exactly those functions are.

Another motivation for this unified understanding-based approach to progress across science and philosophy comes from frequent comparisons of the extent to which there has been philosophical and scientific progress. It makes little sense to say both (i) that science has made more progress than philosophy and (ii) that making progress in science is somehow

qualitatively different than making philosophical progress. After all, (i) implies, while (ii) effectively denies, that there is some common measure of progress on which science does better than philosophy.

Importantly, however, this does not mean that the unified understanding-based approach to progress obscures the differences between science and philosophy. Differences between how progress is made across different disciplines can be explained in terms of how progress on their respective research topics is typically promoted. For example, while natural scientists commonly draw upon empirical observations, experiments, and simulations to gain understanding of the phenomena they study, philosophers more often use conceptual clarifications, thought experiments, and introspection for the same purpose. Of course, scientists sometimes use conceptual clarifications or thought experiments, and some philosophers undertake empirical research or run simulations. But there is undoubtedly a difference in the typical methodological approach in philosophy versus the natural sciences. Such methodological differences are best explained in terms of differences in those activities that best *promote* progress on the phenomena that are the foci of the respective disciplines, rather than by supposing that different achievements *constitute* progress in these disciplines.

Science and philosophy also seem to differ in terms of the prevalence of progress, with science often being taken to make significantly more progress (see §2.3). However, this is not a reason to think that philosophical progress is somehow different in kind from scientific progress, for the view that science and philosophy aim to make the same kind of progress is not the view that the same *amount* of progress is made in each. Moreover, the aforementioned methodological differences between science and philosophy suffice to explain at least some purported differences in the prevalence of progress. In philosophy, it is arguably less common to be able to use empirical data to guide theorizing, and so progress happens more slowly (or not at all). Moreover, differences in the prevalence of progress can also be partially explained by the fact that philosophy and science typically study different kinds of phenomena. For example, it might be easier to put people in a position to understand empirical rather than non-empirical phenomena, because only the former can be physically manipulated in a way that often generates understanding (Woodward, 2003).

4.4. Progress Worth Making

We have argued that an account of philosophical progress should identify progress with an achievement that we have independent reasons to think is genuinely valuable, thus only classifying as progressive those achievements that are worth our time and effort, and the receipt of public funding.

Enabling Noeticism explicates progress in terms of a *systematic* and broadly *factive* notion of understanding.[15] Regarding systematicity, consider that one can know a lot about a phenomenon by possessing multiple completely unrelated bits of knowledge about it. By contrast, understanding a phenomenon – and, in particular, having a high degree of understanding – involves a representation of a much broader structure that captures how the target phenomenon is connected to a plethora of other phenomena (see, e.g., Elgin 2007,

[15]We say that Enabling Noeticism is 'broadly' factive because it allows for departures from truth in some cases of idealizations, i.e., when doing so is necessary to substantially increase the comprehensiveness of one's representation of the relevant dependencies (see §3.2).

Zagzebski 2019). To put it in Sellarsian terms: to understand is to see how things *hang together*. Regarding factivity, when understanding of some phenomenon is increased, we represent the dependence relations in which that phenomenon stands to other phenomena more accurately and/or more comprehensively. On our account, then, one's degree of understanding is determined by the extent to which one represents how things, *as a matter of fact*, hang together.

This combination of systematicity and factivity makes a high degree of understanding a particularly valuable state to pursue. By increasing our understanding of some phenomenon, we are better placed to, *inter alia*, correctly explain various aspects of the phenomenon, manipulate it in various ways – e.g., via intervening on some other phenomenon on which it depends – and predict what it will be like – or would be like, in various counterfactual circumstances. For instance, better understanding the phenomenon of *justice* would enable us to better explain why one society is more just than another, and empower us to intervene on those aspects of a society in virtue of which it is not just (or is less just than it could be). Moreover, because understanding is concerned specifically with *dependence* relations (and their relata), Enabling Noeticism excludes from being progressive those episodes in which we merely come to know, or more accurately represent, trivial aspects of some phenomenon. For example, we would presumably not increase our understanding of *knowledge* by learning the exact number of people who know some particular proposition, because that information would presumably fail to tell us anything about what having knowledge does or doesn't depend on, or indeed what does or doesn't depend on having knowledge.

We take these features of understanding to show that philosophical progress, explicated in terms of understanding, is progress worth making: it is a state of sufficient value to be what is at issue in debates about philosophical progress. Moreover, these ways in which understanding is clearly valuable gives Enabling Noeticism an immediate advantage compared to accounts that identify progress with something the value of which is less clear. Consider, in particular, accounts on which factivity plays no role in determining whether developments in one's set of philosophical views are progressive, such as Beebee (2018)'s equilibrist account of progress. Such accounts will count as progressive a variety of cognitive changes of dubious value. For instance, a philosopher might make a lot of headway bringing their account of justice into equilibrium with their other philosophical commitments, but if – as a result of being wildly inaccurate – the resulting account of justice doesn't provide anyone with the resources to make society more just, the value of this achievement is doubtful.

Whether or not a development is progress worth making also depends on what the potential or actual understanding is of. In other words, it matters what it is that we are put in a position to better understand. Here, it is worth stressing a difference between Enabling Noeticism and other understanding-based accounts of philosophical progress according to which philosophy only aims at understanding *what we already know* (Hacker, 2009, Dummett, 2010, Pigliucci, 2017), or understanding *philosophical problems themselves* and the myriad potential solutions thereof (Keren, 2023). On our account, the phenomena that philosophy should put people in a position to understand are not merely our own representations, or problems or theories formulated by us. For example, making philosophical progress on free will would consist in more accurately or comprehensively representing what individual agents' having free will depends on (such as whether it depends on them being able to do otherwise, and indeed what the phenomenon of being able to do otherwise depends on); it would not be

merely a matter of understanding what we already know about free will, or understanding what the problems of free will are.[16] On the kind of view from which we are distancing ourselves, philosophical progress would never get us closer to understanding any part of the world that we haven't ourselves created, ruling out progress on phenomena that go beyond our own inventions.

Finally, another attractive aspect of Enabling Noeticism is that progress is not identified with changes in *philosophers' own* cognitive states. Rather, progress occurs when people in general are put in a position to increase their understanding. As we argued in §3.3, such progress is evidently worth making because it would be of value to the broader community, as opposed to a narrow subsection thereof constituted of those who happen to have been the most direct causal contributors to progress. Moreover, the *enabling* aspect of our account suggests two further ways in which the progress we describe is progress worth making. First, philosophical progress would, on our account, be an achievement unlikely to have an imminent expiration date. Once something is made publicly available, e.g., in the form of an academic article, it is very unlikely to disappear in the near future. By contrast, individual philosophers or even entire communities of philosophers might at any point lose an epistemic attitude, such as knowledge or understanding, which would constitute regress on an account of philosophical progress that subscribes to the standard by-whom conception (see §3.3). Relatedly, the achievement with which we identify progress can greatly benefit future research. Once something is made publicly available, it may promote yet more progress on the same or related topics. As the case of Dr N. illustrates, this social role of progress is quite independent of any individual's cognitive progress (or regress). Put differently, whether or not current philosophers can see further than their predecessors does not only depend on facts about the mental states of current philosophers. If they can see further, it is largely because they stand on shoulders built from publicly available philosophical ideas.

5. Implications and Concluding Remarks

In this final section, we first consider some implications of Enabling Noeticism for the much-discussed issue of the prevalence of philosophical progress, and then summarize the key points of the paper.

5.1. Implications regarding the Prevalence of Philosophical Progress

Although Enabling Noeticism is an account of the nature, rather than the prevalence, of philosophical progress, there are reasons to think it sits naturally with a moderately optimistic view of the latter. In particular, Enabling Noeticism provides at least four reasons for optimism about philosophical progress (although, as we'll see, this is tempered by at least one reason for pessimism).

A first reason stems from the *degreed* notion of understanding to which Enabling Noeticism appeals. This allows for progress even in cases in which philosophers have not yet formulated fully, or even approximately, true theories. Instead, philosophical progress can

[16] This is not to say that understanding what we know, or understanding problems themselves, is irrelevant to progress; but, in our view, the value of understanding those sorts of things is best thought of promoting, rather than constituting, philosophical progress.

come via the formulation and dissemination of a theory that is merely 'less wrong' than its predecessor. Insofar as pessimism stems from the concern that we have not yet found *the truth* (or an approximation thereof), then, Enabling Noeticism facilitates a new perspective on our achievements, according to which we can make incremental progress by ever-so-slightly improving the extent to which we are in a position to understand the phenomena that interest us. We are, for example, in a better position now than a century ago to grasp what having knowledge depends on, or at least what it doesn't depend on, e.g., that it doesn't merely depend on having justified true beliefs. We may not yet have the full story of what knowledge does and doesn't depend on – and perhaps we never will – but our account helps illustrate why that is no reason to think we haven't made any progress whatsoever.

The second reason for optimism stems from the variety of kinds of publicly available information that can constitute progress. As we discussed in §4.1, progress can be made via a publicly accessible successful counterexample, argument, distinction, and so on. By making clear the sense in which philosophical progress can be made via achievements other than building (true) theories, Enabling Noeticism opens up the space of philosophical contributions that may constitute progress.

Third, since the notion of understanding we are operating with does not require justification or knowledge, Enabling Noeticism sidesteps a challenge mentioned in §2.4. This challenge is analogous to the pessimistic meta-induction and appeals to the empirical fact that many of the philosophical ideas that were widely accepted in the past, e.g., idealism, verificationism, and Plato's theory of forms, are almost universally rejected today. From this it could reasonably be inferred that philosophical ideas that are widely accepted today, e.g., external world realism, truth-conditional semantics, and physicalism, might well similarly be rejected in the not-too-distant future. So even if these more recently popular ideas are in fact substantially correct, our awareness of the historical record would plausibly undermine or defeat our epistemic reasons for believing them to be so. This line of thought would thus undermine our justification for believing, and our ability to know, even the most widely accepted philosophical ideas on offer today. However, if progress does not require justification or knowledge – as Enabling Noeticism dictates – then this argument cannot get off the ground, since lacking (undefeated) epistemic reasons to believe current philosophical ideas would not imply that formulating, developing and arguing for those ideas is non-progressive.

Fourth, and relatedly, not requiring justification or knowledge for progress allows Enabling Noeticism to avoid what is perhaps the most influential argument for pessimism. As noted above (see §2), several philosophers have argued that progress is rare or even non-existent by appealing to the empirical fact that there is widespread disagreement among professional philosophers, even amongst those who specialize on a particular topic (Bourget and Chalmers, 2014, 2023). According to an influential set of views in the epistemology of disagreement, this sort of widespread expert disagreement is incompatible with the philosophers in question having justification or knowledge. However, if understanding, and thus progress, does not require justification or knowledge, this argumentative path from disagreement to lack of progress is blocked at a crucial juncture.

With that said, Enabling Noeticisim implies that there is a kernel of truth in the idea that the prevalence of disagreements among professional philosophers is a reason to be pessimistic about philosophical progress (Dellsén, Lawler and Norton 2023, 165-166). Consider cases where the philosophers who specialize on a particular topic – i.e., the philosophical

experts on that topic – strongly and publicly disagree in a way that makes it difficult or even impossible for non-experts to tell which side is right. In such cases, given the factive notion of understanding with which Enabling Noeticism operates, there may be no realistic way for non-experts to reliably increase their understanding of the relevant phenomenon by consulting the publicly available resources produced by these philosophical experts. In particular, if there are two or more conflicting views that enjoy similar levels of popularity among the philosophical experts, and no other ways for non-experts to adjudicate the issue than to consult these experts, then these non-experts have arguably not been put in much of a position to increase their understanding. At the very least, they have been put in less of a position to increase their understanding as compared to a situation in which there was no public disagreement among the experts. Note that this holds even if some of the philosophical experts in question espouse entirely correct views about the relevant dependence relations; the problem is that sufficiently many other experts publicly advocate wrong views, thus creating confusion among non-experts that may prevent them from gaining understanding.[17]

For this reason, the idea that philosophical disagreement is a threat to progress cannot be entirely dismissed, even on a view like Enabling Noeticism that eschews a justification requirement on progress. In our view, this lends further plausibility to Enabling Noeticism, since it would be surprising if this common idea was entirely without merit. With that said, it is important to realize that the way in which disagreement threatens progress on Enabling Noeticism does not imply a wholesale skepticism about philosophical progress, since it is really only a special kind of philosophical disagreement that leads non-experts to fail to be in a position to increase their understanding, viz. disagreement in which (i) relevant philosophical experts are more or less evenly distributed among two or more most popular views, and (ii) there is no realistic way for non-experts to adjudicate between these views. To be sure, these two conditions may well hold for many philosophical issues that are considered central to the discipline, but there also seem to be countless issues on which one or both of them fail. Of course, this is ultimately an empirical issue. Depending on how it gets resolved, Enabling Noeticism may be shown to imply a more or less optimistic view of the prevalence of philosophical progress.

5.2. Concluding remarks

The question of what constitutes philosophical progress is normally only addressed *en route* to a conclusion about the prevalence of philosophical progress. Perhaps predictably, pessimists have tended to impose comparatively strong requirements for philosophical progress – and proceeded to argue that they fail to be satisfied in most or all cases – while optimists have generally imposed considerably weaker requirements – and proceeded to argue that they are commonly satisfied. Partly in order to break this stalemate, we have taken quite a different approach in this paper. In particular, we have identified four broad desiderata that an account of philosophical progress should plausibly satisfy by anyone's lights, i.e., regardless of one's prior opinions about the prevalence of philosophical progress. Guided by these desiderata,

[17] As Dellsén, Lawler and Norton (2023, 170-171) point out, there might remain *other* ways in which disagreement is a cause for concern, e.g., in that widespread disagreement makes it hard to tell whether an episode is progressive or not. Disagreements might also lead people away from investigating the most accurate position currently on offer, and can in this way be a causal impediment to progress.

we have developed a detailed account of philosophical progress, on which it roughly consists in putting people in a position to increase their understanding of a phenomenon – where *understanding*, in turn, is a matter of more accurately or comprehensively representing the network of dependence relations between phenomena. While Enabling Noeticism is strictly speaking compatible with any view about the prevalence of philosophical progress, it is arguably congenial to a moderately optimistic view, insofar as it blocks certain common argumentative paths towards radically pessimistic views.

While we have argued that Enabling Noeticism meets the desiderata in a particularly satisfying way, we acknowledge that the account is merely one among many that could be, or indeed have been, developed, and that some aspects of the account may not be immediately appealing to some of our readers. In response, we ask only that our account be compared to an alternative account that has been fleshed at the same level of detail – as opposed to, e.g., a vague sketch of an account that succeeds in avoiding potential objections only by virtue of being sufficiently non-committal. For example, while it may initially seem plausible to say that scientific and philosophical progress are entirely different beasts, any further development of this idea will have to grapple with the entanglement of scientific and philosophical claims, the apparent failure of attempts to demarcate 'science' (and, indeed, 'philosophy'), and the question of how to meaningfully compare quantities of different kinds of progress. With that said, we cannot rule out that such an 'exceptionalist' account can be made to work unless and until such an account has been properly developed. Indeed, by formulating and defending Enabling Noeticism and the associated desiderata, we hope to invite the development of rival accounts, as well as discussions about the desiderata against which such accounts should be evaluated.[18]

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[18]For valuable feedback on earlier versions of this paper, we are grateful to Sam Baron, David Braddon-Mitchell, Helen Beebee, Torfinn Huvenes, Victor Magnússon, Nate Sharadin, Ylwa Sjölin Wirling, Daniel Stoljar, as well as audiences at Hong Kong University, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, the Australasian Association of Philosophy conference at ACU Melbourne, the Institute for Future Studies in Stockholm, the Serious Metaphysics Reading Group in Cambridge, and the Philosophical Progress Lab Workshop at the University of Iceland.

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