**Philosophy is a Great Success, and
We are Fooled into Thinking Otherwise**
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1. Introduction

Lycan (2022, n. 1) sums up his (2019a) *On Evidence in Philosophy* as a "dolorous" book. For the book offers a pessimistic view of philosophy, based on the following three observations:

> (L1) Philosophers are often influenced by non-rational socio-psychological forces (fads, biases, etc.) on whether to accept a conclusion;
> (L2) There is a persistent lack of consensus in the field;
> (L3) Philosophy can claim only limited methods of refutation; a theory can be refuted only by (a) internal contradiction, (b) contradiction with science,[1] or (c) contradiction with Moorean commonsense.

Although Lycan does not say so explicitly, each of these creates doubt on the *public* intellectual value of philosophy.[2] After all, no matter how much we philosophers benefit from doing philosophy, philosophy's lack of consensus and barriers to progress suggest that it has little value to the outside world. So I take Lycan's dolor to be, at minimum, incredulity about philosophy as a public good, informed by (L1)-(L3).

Do Lycan's reasons warrant such pessimism? I shall argue that they do not. Admittedly, however, I am unable to address (L3) here (but I hope to do so elsewhere). Also, my response to (L1) will be fairly brief. Accordingly, most of the paper will be spent countering (L2). And here, in attending carefully to Lycan's (2019a, b) work, we shall see that his metaphilosophical despair dies a death of 1000 qualifications. Further, it shall be revealed that some of the *most important* qualifications have been omitted. By attending to these, moreover, we shall appreciate that philosophy has much to be proud of. So while (L2) may be true to a significant extent, it still does not warrant metaphilosophical pessimism.

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[1] Stoljar (in conversation) inquires what is meant by 'science' in these sorts of discussions. Natural sciences are clearly included, but what about the psychology, sociology, or even historiography? I suspect that Lycan uses 'science' as a family resemblance concept (cf. item (8) below) which may mean that different fields qualify as science to different degrees. This makes the concept vague, but we can at least be clear about the vagueness, and the vagueness need not cause trouble for the specific issues that concern us.

[2] Lycan's own tendency is to doubt the value of philosophy as an "epistemic method" (see, e.g., p. 2). But I prefer to avoid the term 'epistemic' given its association with 'knowledge'. (It is tendentious to use 'knowledge' even in connection with many of the soft sciences.) Instead, I might like to speak of "rational belief that is widely shared among experts," but there is no short adjectival form for this. I thus speak of the "intellectual" value of the discipline, for want of a better term.

Despite my disagreement with Lycan's metaphilosophy, however, I hardly see myself as an antagonist. Reading Lycan (2019a) was disheartening on more than one level; I am anguished to think that my former Jedi master is retrospecting on his career with a sense of futility. My remarks are thus offered up not in the spirt of rivalry, but to bolster good cheer. I owe much to Lycan and my wish is that the following offers him something in return for his years of kindness and pedagogy.

But in full transparency, I ought to admit some dissatisfaction with philosophy as well. Briefly, I suspect the *summum bonum* of philosophical activity is moral virtue and psychological well-being (without requiring faith in absurdities). One should have serious doubts, however, on whether academic devotion to dialectics is an effective means to those goals. It *can* be an effective means to *other* things of worth—namely, intellectual goods—and this is an optimistic note that I shall sound repeatedly. But for the record, I wish to state that I am no metaphilosophical Panglossian.

2. Clarifying the Issue

Some focusing of the language is in order. The leading question is ostensibly about "philosophy," yet it turns out that Lycan (2019a) does not worry about large regions of philosophy.[3] For instance, he makes no pessimistic noises about philosophy in the educational curriculum. This is as it should be: The horizon-broadening and intellectual agility cultivated in the classroom is obvious and obviously valuable.

Moreover, when it comes to research, Lycan seems to spare from dolor 2 out of 4 branches of philosophy: logic and the history of philosophy.[4] Indeed, Lycan is on record as touting advances in formal and informal logic (pp. 94-95).[5] And while he dolorously appeals to history to show a lack of philosophical progress (p. 87), he says nothing to disparage historical research as such. This too seems right and proper. There are of course bloody battles on the details of What Kant Said, but there is consensus on what the general worldview is. ("We can know only objects as represented in our experience, never the things-in-themselves, etc.") Matters look even better for the exegesis of less ornate writers such as (say) G.E. Moore.

Yet the remaining two branches of philosophy, metaphysics/epistemology and ethics/politics are in significantly worse shape. That is so, even if we focus exclusively on research in the analytic tradition, as performed by highly competent, professional philosophers.[6] Even so, it is hard to

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[3] Unless otherwise specified, references to Lycan will be in relation to his (2019a).

[4] Also spared is research into philosophy as part of the academic appreciation of diverse cultures. (This need not refer to postmodern "cultural studies," but rather to a certain cultural focus which crops up in a variety of academic disciplines.)

[5] As Lycan (2019b, pp. 199-200) says, the mere fact that some sentences follow deductively from others in virtue of logical form is a lasting contribution of philosophy. Other lasting contributions in formal/informal logic include the idea that we can be mislead by a sentence's surface grammar (2019b, p. 204), and the positivist idea that "Some possibly profound-sounding utterances really do not mean anything, or rather not anything other than their obvious and false, truistic, or pointless compositional meanings" (ibid.). Still, Lycan regards developments in formal logic (e.g., quantifiers) as mathematical rather than distinctly philosophical achievements. However, I would not want to rely so heavily on distinctions between different academic disciplines.

[6] The analytic tradition here can be loosely characterized by a common textual tradition, where graduate training includes study of Russell, Quine, Rawls, Kripke, and the like.

miss that Lycan's despair focuses on M&E rather than E&P. This is natural, given that his career has been dedicated much more to the former. Also, ethics/politics often have *unmistakable value* even if there is a lack of consensus. They bear on matters which affect people very concretely, and any clarifications here seems worth celebrating, however modest. And there have been such clarifications.[7] In contrast, the semantics of belief ascription, the metaphysics of holes, and post-Gettier analyses of knowing seem to have negligible worth in the practical sphere.[8]

Thus, I read Lycan as primarily doubting the public value of research in M&E (broadly construed), even as performed by A-1 professionals in the analytic tradition. Now unfortunately, there remains an aggravating vagueness in talk about "the value of X." This is because value comes in degrees, and so, a debate about the value of X is really a debate about the *degree* to which X is valuable. Yet how can we get a clear fix on the different degrees of value? Phrases like 'a lot', 'somewhat', or 'a little' are informationally thin.

I propose to settle the vagueness indexically. Prior to hearing a word of Lycan's metaphilosophy, suppose *you* assessed first-class M&E research as having degree *n* of public intellectual value. Now regardless of whether you antecedently believed (L1) and (L2), there is a familiar phenomenology where reflecting on recognizable flaws of X often causes one to lower one's valuation of X. Thus, suppose contemplating (L1) and (L2) causes you to lower your evaluation *k* degrees. Our question, then, is whether you are correct to do so. With (L1) and (L2) in view, should you demote M&E to the degree that you did? Or are there other considerations which you should keep in mind, which would push your evaluation in the other direction? My answer to that question is *yes*.

However, there may seem to be something trite in this. Lycan and I appear caught in the see-saw debate of "glass half empty, glass half full," cf. Chalmers (2015, pp. 3-4), and the obvious resolution is to agree that the glass is half empty and half full. But it is more accurate to say that our debate concerns *how empty* the glass is: If we assume that (L1) and (L2) are true, how empty is M&E of public value? My response is that "however bad it seems in light of (L1) and (L2), it is not as bad as that. A more *complete* grasp of the situation warrants greater optimism."

Does this way of framing things make my job too easy? It might now seem that victory only requires that I highlight *some*thing good about M&E. Well, since victory is a type of valuation, victory comes in degrees as well. And my aim is not simply to achieve a modicum of victory, but to lift us out of Lycanthropic dolorousness as much as is justifiable. There may be some see-sawing in the debate, but I aim for an equilibrium which maximizes optimistic feelings, within the limits of reason.

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[7] E.g., Chalmers (2015, n.2) reports an informal survey of philosophers on which arguments are widely seen as warranting their conclusions. In ethics, these include the Euthyphro objection to divine command theory, the forced-organ-donation objection to simple utilitarianism, and Moore's open-question argument.
Consider also that in the 2020 philpapers survey, 81.7% of professionals support first-trimester abortion, 75.1% tend against capital punishment, 69.3% favor moral cognitivism, and 76.6% are disinclined to enter Nozick's experience machine (Bourget & Chalmers, forthcoming). In the 2009 survey, 68% of professionals also favored "switch" in the trolley problem. This dropped to 63.4% in 2020, though it remained at 66.2% within "top 100" departments (ibid).
[8] Of course, metaphysical research sometimes has practical bearing. The metaphysics of free will and of race and gender come to mind. But these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

3. Countering (L1)

Lycan's basis for dolorousness is formidable. And his expression of (L1) is one for the ages: Research in M&E is largely "a mess of squabbling, inconclusion, dogma and counter-dogma, trendy patois, fashionable but actually groundless assumptions, vacillation from one paradigm to another, mere speculation, and sheer abuse" (p. 87). Any temporary period of agreement is "far more the result of zeitgeist, fad, fashion, and careerism than of accumulation of probative argument" (ibid). The eight "cynical-sociological observations" of chapter 5 are also not to be missed.

My counter to (L1) can be said relatively quickly. (L1) undeniably shows that M&E-research is flawed; however, it does not establish that it has little public intellectual value. Indeed, one could rationally accept (L1) while insisting that philosophy bears much fruit. The analogous situation is what we see in natural science. Plenty of research there is also driven by fashion and bias, with some scientists displaying the worst vices of irrationality. And yet, things still get done. Of course, it would be better if research in science and in M&E were free of human foibles—but things being what they are, it does not follow that either is largely barren.

The stark difference, of course, is that science *achieves progress* in a way that M&E does not. Yet that is a different reason for despair. It is a supremely important reason, to be sure, and we shall consider it post haste. Regardless, if a field is infected by non-rational socio-psychological forces, that alone does not justify belittling its public intellectual value. (Once the point is properly understood, I'm sure Lycan would agree, but it is worth setting the matter straight.)

4. A Bouquet of Caveats on (L2)

So (L2) is the heart of the matter. Does the lack of consensus show that M&E research does not have much to offer society? I shall assume here that 'consensus' in (L2) means something like what Chalmers (2015) calls "large, collective consensus." This concerns a *great amount* of agreement on philosophical conclusions, among the *entire collective* of professional philosophers. After all, as Chalmers notes (pp. 12-13) and Lycan concurs (p. 87), there has been agreement among smaller groups of philosophers, and perhaps a few scattered, transient agreements among the entire profession. But neither of these counts as "large, collective consensus."

Understood thus, (L2) highlights that M&E research appears mired in endless debate. Nevertheless: The attentive reader will see that Lycan (2019a, b) records a veritable litany of exceptions, which I recap below. Note well, some of these might not cases where *consensus* has occurred, but they at least give reason for hope in progress. And although consensus may be the clearest sign, I take it that intellectual progress is the real concern, for that is what can justify the public value of M&E.

Naturally, some of the items below might be contested as illusory—but since Lycan grants them, it at least motivates asking why *he* regards M&E with such despair. Yet to keep matters clear, I divide the list into two parts: Less controversial optimistic signs vs. additional optimistic signs according to Lycan. (Again, "optimistic signs" are evidences of past or future intellectual

progress.) Also, following Lycan, the list shall make reference to "philosophy"—though again, our primary concern is with M&E-research, as performed by the best in the analytic tradition.

<u>Less controversial optimistic signs:</u>

(1)   Philosophy can hope to achieve a felicitous coordination between science and commonsense (pp. 2-3, p. 88, p. 132). [I take this in the spirit of Sellars (1962); see also the preamble to Parent (2017). Though Lycan himself mentions Locke's philosophical "underlaborer" in this connection; see p. 132.]

(2)   Philosophy succeeds in drawing out the consequences of extreme positions, and creating firm awareness of the space of possibilities (p. 64, p. 90, p. 102)[9]

(3)   There are (rare) arguments from commonsense premises to surprising conclusions, as per Russell's famous remark (p. 65).[10]

(4)   Some philosophical arguments turn conjectures into defensible albeit defeasible hypotheses (p. 66).

(5)   There are intriguing philosophical extrapolations from science, e.g., physical objects do not really have colors but only reflect certain wavelengths of colorless electromagnetism (p. 68, n. 11). [However, Lycan himself seems unfriendly to such extrapolations, apparently on Moorean commonsense grounds.]

(6)   Consensus is achievable in phenomenology (p. 87n.)

(7)   Philosophy can enable reasonable belief in the individual (pp. 88, 88-89n.) [This is why metaphilosophical despair is not self-undermining.]

(8)   We know from Wittgenstein that many concepts are "family resemblance" concepts and do not admit of definition (confirmed in Fodor et al. 1980) (p. 92).

(9)   Lewis (1968) explained how it is possible for a convention to exist even "when there is no thought of convening" (p. 92, n. 11).

(10)   Philosophical ground-clearing has led to the establishment of sciences (p. 93). [Chalmers' useful term is 'disciplinary speciation'; see his 2015, p. 25.]

(11)   Philosophy leads us to ask better questions (p. 93)

(12)   The general trend toward naturalizing mind, language, knowledge, etc., is a positive development (p. 94).

(13)   Philosophical method has undergone refinement and improvement (p. 94-95).

(14)   Philosophy has identified the pragmatic virtues of theories (simplicity, scope, conservativeness, falsifiability, etc.); these inform the best available solutions to the Raven paradox, the Grue puzzle, and related problems (p. 102, n. 13).[11]

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[9] The second conjunct of (2) is not an endorsement philosophical projects that merely "fill out logical space." Lycan's point (on p. 102) is more that philosophers are highly skilled at sussing out counterexamples, which in turn, acts as a check on generalizations supported by intuitions. (For an exquisite satire of logical-space filling, see David Faraci's thread at https://twitter.com/possibleviews.)

[10] Bertrand Russell (1919/1956, p. 193): "the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it." Lycan does not actually identify examples of such arguments, yet his phrasing on p. 65 suggests that they exist.

[11] Lycan (pp. 19-20) doubts that guidelines such as simplicity, fruitfulness, etc., are best seen as propositions (*afortiori*, philosophical propositions). But while the *use* of these guidelines is more "knowing how" than "knowing that," philosophers such as Carnap (1950), Quine (1951) and Kuhn (1973/1977) should still get credit for bolstering *explicit* knowledge of them.

(15)   Austin (1962/1975) showed that linguistic utterances do not just have semantic content but also illocutionary force (2019b, p. 205).

(16)   Grice (1961, 1975) showed that acts of utterances often implicate something different than the literal meaning of the sentence (2019b, p. 206).

(17)   More broadly, Wittgenstein shows that linguistic expressions have an "endless variety of uses" (ibid.). Austin similarly showed that "linguistic utterances are subject to a great variety of infelicities, of dramatically different types, with differing sorts of consequences" (ibid.). Of particular use to philosophers, Austin illustrated that "many terms that figure in philosophical issues are purpose- or otherwise context-relative" (ibid).

Lycan's additional optimistic signs

(18)   Philosophy can theoretically overturn commonsense (p. 3). (And n.b., it is unclear if science overturns commonsense either, strictly speaking; see p. 20, pp. 45-46.)

(19)   Moorean argumentation is a potent philosophical strategem:
    i)   Moorean arguments successfully discredit positions like McTaggart's anti-realism about time (p. 10), epistemic skepticism (ch. 2), eliminativism (ch. 3), and hard determinism (ch. 4).
    ii)   Moorean arguments pave the way for a useful positive epistemology, of the sort given in Harman (1973) (p. 27).

(20)   There is an unrefuted analysis of knowing (p. 92).

(21)   Philosophical conclusions can be justified by intuitions in a veritistic sense (pp. 102ff.)

Let me first say that Lycan has done a service to our profession, by diligently registering many deliverables of M&E. Though again, it motivates asking how much dolor (L2) warrants.

5. Hidden Gems

Admittedly, some of the listed items may seem unfair. Item (20), for example, is a reference to Lycan's own (2006) proposed solution to the Gettier problem. And while he may sincerely believe in his solution, this need not amount to his conceding that M&E has made *real progress*. That is so, especially given that the "unrefuted" status of Lycan's solution may just reflect that it has been (alas) given insufficient attention in the existing literature. Similarly, items under (19) reflect Lycan's own views and should not be seen as deep concessions to optimism. Like all philosophers, his success in converting others to his views is limited, certainly short of instituting consensus. (Actually, my sense is that some version of his 1987, ch. 4 homuncular functionalism *is* widely accepted among philosophers of mind, but waive that.)

Nonetheless, the "unrefuted" status of many philosophical views is worth mulling over a bit. Granted, this likely reflects that a lot of views are not worth the time to refute. But it may also reflect that several are refuted only with great difficulty. A case study: One of my favorite pieces by Lycan is chapter 8 of his (1994), where he not only explicates the notion of "relative modality" in a compelling way, but also illustrates several applications in resolving philosophical conundrums. Regardless, I have never cited the chapter, nor do I have plans to. (Ignore that just

cited it.) This is because that I cannot imagine any half-interesting objections to it, and Lycan's chapter already sketches the major applications. The piece thus receives a lack of attention *because* it is such a well-developed piece of philosophy.

This raises a question of how often this occurs. *Is there a good deal of solid philosophy ignored because it is solid?* My guess is that there is. After all, one writes about someone's idea either to criticize it, or to utilize it in elaborating some new idea. In philosophy, the former is far more common. In fact, if an idea spawns sufficiently many new lines of inquiry, then it starts to look less like philosophy and more like a *research program*, on the road to becoming a science. One thinks of Chomsky's (1957) and (1965) as theoretical books which, because of such fecundity, launched modern syntactic theory. But the point here is not to restate (10); it is rather to suggest that a lot of compelling philosophy likely gets lost in the squabble. If it is solid, it won't afford easy opportunities for critique, and if it is *philosophy*, it won't have the fecundity of a proto-science. In which case, it goes unheralded. And thus, we philosophers trod over buried treasure, not realizing what lies beneath our feet.

By the way, this also underscore the enormous incentive which philosophers have to disagree with each other. With philosophers, unlike scientists, publishing "failures of replication" is a principal way of advancing one's career. The consequence is ubiquitous, unceasing disagreement.[12] Correlatively, there arises a question of how much disagreement is sincere. Much of the uproar is possibly feigned or illusory. But this too suggests that there are many hidden convergences, lost in the roar of our quarrels.[13]

So one group of caveats to pessimism, which Lycan seems to miss, is that many philosophical mountaintops are neglected in some fashion or other. Either they offer little opportunity for further development or are simply ignored due to mercenary aspect of the profession.

6. Gutting's Optimism

Even so, there are further optimistic signs for M&E which Lycan is aware of, although he disputes their optimistic meaning. But I wish to dispute Lycan's disputations. The items in question are touted by Gutting (2009):

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> (22)   We know which sorts of philosophical "pictures" are viable or defensible.
> (23)   We know "qualified" generalizations, e.g., in the normal cases, knowledge is justified true belief; we also know what commonly holds of the abnormal cases (viz., accidental truth/justification).

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[12] I once read an online post, I believe on dailynous.com, where the author made a similar point. Unfortunately, I am now unable to sleuth out the piece. My apologies to the author.
[13] One possible example: Compatibilism in the freewill debate. At least one use of 'free' in English is demonstrably neutral on determinist metaphysics (check any dictionary). Hence, in that sense, the existence of "free action" is demonstrably compatible with determinism. I cannot sincerely believe that any competent professional disagrees with this. That is so, even though *of course* there is the further question of whether "free action" in this sense is enough, re: moral responsibility. But one who presses that issue is not denying the demonstrable sense in which compatibilism is true; they are rather concerned to say that such compatibilism is importantly *incomplete.*

(24)   There is broad consensus on some philosophically significant intuitions.[14]

(25)   We know about philosophically important distinctions, such as the analytic/synthetic distinction and Kripke's rigid/non-rigid distinction.[15]

We should elaborate on (25) a bit further, taking a cue from Frances (2017, p. 53). Frances emphasizes that much philosophical progress consists in making distinctions between the meanings of key terms, e.g., the different meanings of 'freewill', 'physical', 'intention', 'consciousness', etc. One excellent example of this is from ch. 1 of Lycan (1996) where Lycan— I want to say *famously*— identifies no less than eight different senses of the term 'conscious' and *seventeen* different precisifications of "the" problem of consciousness. (I also hold up Lycan 1986 as an exemplar with his six-way distinction in uses of '*de re*'.) This I would suggest is important philosophical work with real staying-power.

Nevertheless, Gutting's choice to use the word 'know' in connection with (22)-(25) is tendentious, at least in the present context. My preference is to replace talk of knowledge with talk of reasonable belief that is widely shared in the profession, as per note 2. (And recall that the existence of reasonable philosophical belief was granted earlier at (7).)

Be that as it may, Lycan would apparently protest that (22)-(25) mostly concern agreement on historical-sociological propositions rather than philosophical ones (see pp. 90-91). For example, his inclination would be to take the "viability" of Non-Reductive Physicalism as indicating that the *social stratum* of academic philosophers have *historically* regarded NRP as a view worth taking seriously.

But in any field, it takes time for a belief to become established—an idea must survive scrutiny before it enjoys widespread acceptance among its practitioners. This does not mean that what gets established is a historical or sociological proposition.[16] Perhaps the language of 'viable' or 'defensible' in (22) muddies this, but one could instead talk of our agreement that NRP is *more likely* than, say, Malebranchean Occasionalism.[17]

(Lycan also doubts Gutting's "knowledge" on the grounds that some such agreements have their detractors. Yet established propositions in any field can tolerate some critics, as long as the critics remain in the clear minority.)

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[14] I would include Frances' (2017) "basic claims" as among these consensus-intuitions, e.g., "Some beliefs are true and some beliefs are false;" "Evidence can be positive or negative;" "A belief can be reasonable but false," "A belief can be reasonable and true but not count as knowledge," etc.)

[15] Gutting treats separately the analytic/synthetic distinction and the rigid/non-rigid distinction, given that the latter is in much better standing than the former. Yet he thinks, correctly, that we have learned much about what is at stake in the putative analytic/synthetic distinction. For our purposes, I have not bothered to distinguish the distinctions.

[16] In a similar dialectical move, Lycan prefers to classify some "gold standard" intuitions in (24) as linguistic or logical rather than as philosophical—even though some such intuitions were "brought to our attention by philosophers" (p. 92). But this seems like a fight over the word 'philosophical'. I am happy to concede this fight, as long as philosophers still get credit for uncovering such intuitions. If pressed, my real concern is not so much with the public value of "philosophy" as with the public value of the research done by those in philosophy departments.

[17] Gutting (2013) replies to Lycan in along similar lines, although I believe I have clarified the reply with the proposed rewording of 'viability' in terms of likelihood. Unlike myself, moreover, Gutting insists on retaining the term 'knowledge'. In this, his reply also seems less forceful than it should be.

7. Yes, There's More

There are further points of convergence in M&E which might improve Lycan's mood. For instance, Chalmers (2015), following van Inwagen (2004), observes that:

(26)   There is wide agreement on many negative conclusions (granting that the negative/positive distinction is not clear cut). E.g., "Mental state types are not the same as physical state types," "Scientific progress is not simply additive but rather undergoes 'paradigm shifts' (whatever those are)".[18]

(27)   There is wide agreement on many conditional conclusions. E.g., "If modal realism is true, then we do not know about mere possibilities via causal interaction;" "If content externalism is true, then covert slow-switching is possible."

Later, I shall hoot and holler about (26) quite a bit. But let me also mention other consensuses gestured at by Wheeler (n.d.), regarding broad swaths of agreement needed for the discipline to have a minimal sort of unity. I assume Wheeler has in mind points such as:

(28)   There is wide agreement on which questions are interesting ("Are actions causally determined or free?", *yes*; "How are we made in God's image?", *no*).

(29)   There is wide agreement on how the interesting questions can be sharpened, what the main proposed answers are, and what the main arguments are for/against those answers; see Figure 1. [But this point overlaps with (2), (11), (22) and (25).][19]

(30)   There is wide agreement on which methods of investigation are permitted (thought-experiments, logical regimentation, appeals to linguistic evidence, *yes*; appeals to tradition, to divine revelation, *no*).

(31)   There is wide agreement which premises can normally be left undefended in a paper (modus ponens, *yes*; Fodorian nativism, *no*). [Chalmers (2015, p. 17) notes such agreement as well; he calls the relevant premises "consensus premises."]

(32)   There is wide agreement on which texts should be part of the graduate curriculum (Kripke's major works, *yes*; anything by Ayn Rand or Jerry Falwell, *no*).

(33)   There is wide agreement on which are the most prestigious journals and departments (where such agreement has some association with quality, though of course not invariably so).

These agreements are not universal, but they still seem criterial for "mainstream" M&E in the analytic tradition. So they stand as fairly uncontroversial indicators of intellectual achievement.

8. *Centuria Mirabilis*

Yet even granting all these optimistic signs, there remains the "plain historical fact" (Lycan, p. 2) that "[t]here has not been large collective convergence…on the big questions" (Chalmers 2015, p. 5). Chalmers' qualifier 'big' is helpful, for it clarifies that the above exceptions may be

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[18] Unlike in his (2019a), Lycan (2019b) acknowledges negative progress and adds his own examples, to wit, "the project of Socratic definition is generally misguided" and "Outside of mathematics, there is no such thing as absolute precision" (p. 205).

[19] See also Frances (n.d.) on philosophy's value in its sharp and compelling formulations of problems.
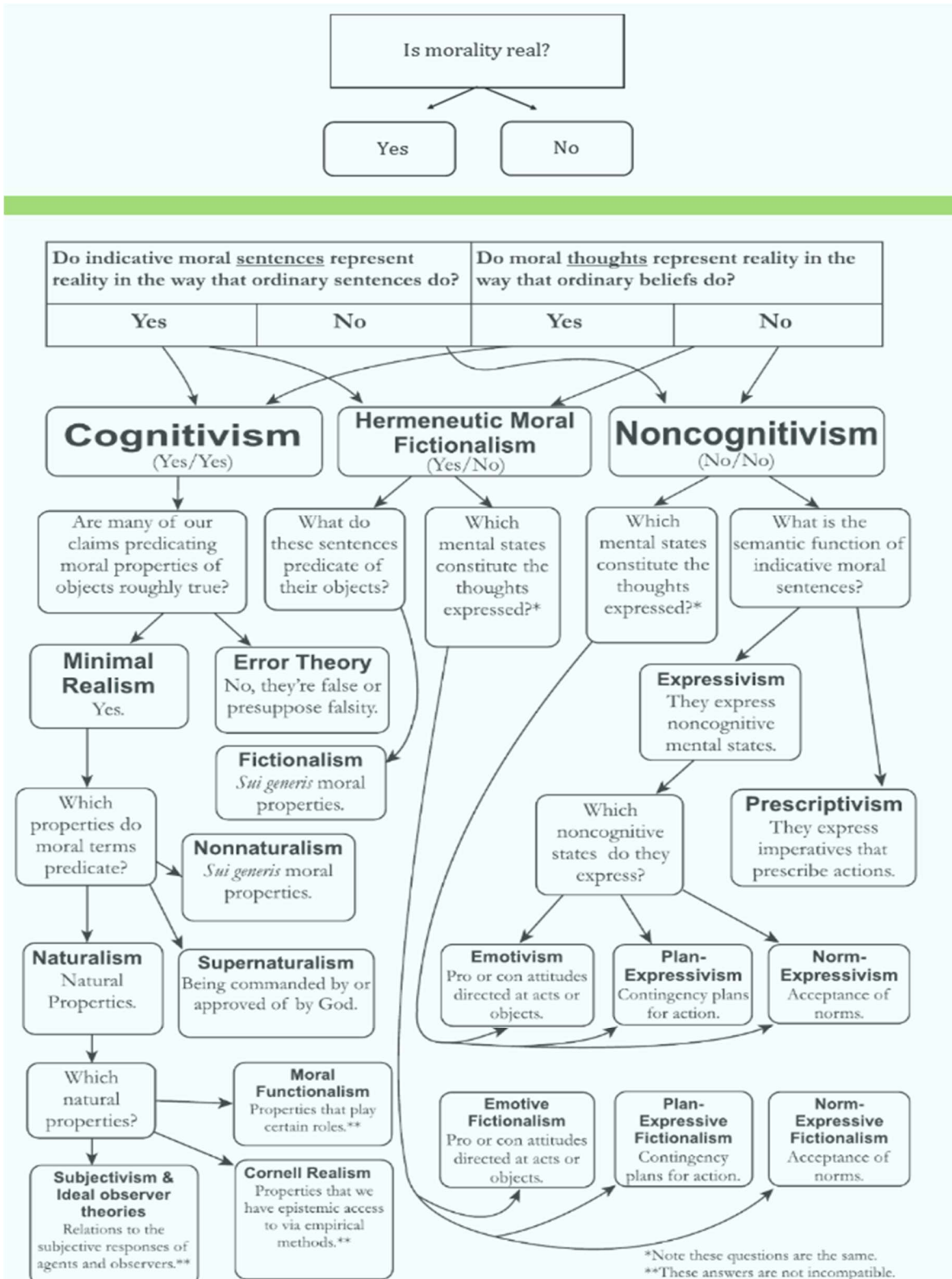
Figure 1: Below the green line: Philosophy's shared stock of sharpened metaethics questions and proposed answers, from van Roojen (2015). (I credit Weinberg 2017 for drawing attention to the metaphilosophical aspect of van Roojen's chart.) I suspect parallel flowcharts could be given on questions about the reality of meaning, mind, modality, and mathematics. On the kinship between such ontological debates, see Price (2013).

real, yet constitute mere "dribs and drabs" of progress, as Lycan puts it (p. 93). Remarkably, however, Stoljar (2017a) argues powerfully against the alleged history: He carefully identifies several overlooked yet major victories on "big" questions such as the mind-body problem, the problem of freewill, the problem of induction, and others. Ultimately, Stoljar's book might not persuade you, but I recommend a close reading; it at least puts one in a better humor.[20]

Regardless, assume that there is no large, collective consensus on big philosophical questions. 'Large' and 'big' are relative terms, however, and in Lycan, science is used as the benchmark whereby (1)-(33) count as mere "dribs and drabs." So the claim is really more like: There has not been large convergence on big questions *compared to what is seen in the sciences*.

But why should it be news that *philosophy* does not attain science-levels of success? No one would dream otherwise (or at least, they shouldn't). Certainly, it would be great of M&E could accomplish more—but this is true regardless of what "more" might signify. That sort of thought does not warrant despair.

Let me add that it is only natural that one should want contemporary M&E to do better than it has in the past. Yet that is a different standard of evaluation. We are now comparing M&E not to science but to past-M&E. And happily, using that scale, M&E does quite well. Indeed, inspection will reveal that *most of (1)-(33) concern achievements of the past 100 years*. Or at least, the main examples are lifted from that period.

The point is worth rubbing in, for there is a strong tendency to see philosophy as repeating the same conversations since ancient Greece. Dietrich (2011), for example, offers a thought experiment where Aristotle quantum-leaps to a present-day Anglophone department.[21] The story goes that Aristotle finds himself surprisingly comfortable in the conversations he encounters (having magically acquired English during the leap). In contrast, he is at sea when he visits a physics classroom. But the thought-experiment is utterly prejudicial. A class on metaethics, for example, will normally be in the thick of the forest represented in Figure 1, and Aristotle would be lost there too. In fact, he would likely experience even greater bewilderment in a more paradigmatically "M&E" course, such as a course on mental content. He would have no explicit understanding of what a *definite description* is,[22] much less of functionalism. (Another test case is to imagine Aristotle sweating through the more technical chapters of Boër & Lycan's 1986 *Knowing Who*.) More broadly, each of (1)-(33) may well stand as prerequisite background to some graduate courses, even though these mostly reflect 20th and 21st century innovations.[23]

Further, unlike in ancient Greece, the discipline now exists as a large, international community of professionals. Frances (as reported in Weinberg 2016) adds that philosophical inquiry has

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[20] Stoljar (2017b) is an article-length version of his case, but in abridged form it feels less persuasive. Read the book.
[21] The same thought-experiment is also found in Leaman (1998).
[22] Let us also impress on ourselves that Russell's theory of descriptions is another major philosophical accomplishment ("that paradigm of philosophy," Ramsey 1929, p. 1). This is so, even granting Lycan's (2019b) claim that the Russellian descriptive analysis of *names* was debunked decisively by Kripke (1972/1980).
[23] Dietrich, moreover, flouts a basic rule of fair play when he engages in psychological diagnostics of his optimistic opponents, accusing them of "anosognosia." Inasmuch as philosophical knowledge exists, we know that such a thing is an abusive *ad hominem* which has no place in philosophical debate. (It may have interest as a piece of empirical psychology, if it is justifiable, but Dietrich offers no independent support for it.)

improved by our adopting more of a "group approach." (Contrast with the lone genius cloistered in the philosophical study.) For this reason, as Frances says, it is especially key that the group now enjoys wide-open lines of communication thanks to *the internet*. In contemporary philosophy, the web has kicked social epistemology into high gear.[24]

It now becomes especially impressive that our large, cosmopolitan community has achieved a *two-thirds supermajority* on several "big" questions in M&E. Thus, according to Bourget & Chalmers (forthcoming), the 2020 philpapers survey shows that 79.5% of professional philosophers worldwide favor non-skeptic realism about the external world (and I would guess a similar percentage favor fallibilism); also, 72.4% favor scientific realism, 66.9% favor atheism, and 72.8% tend toward some sort of apriori knowledge.[25] These are sizeable chunks of a worldview which, apparently, are common coin in the discipline. Putting them together, we might call the result "naturalism" or "the science-based worldview" (not to be confused with "scientism" as a view that rejects the apriori). This is readily recognizable as something widely shared and hence significantly warranted by the social reflective equilibrium.[26] (But n.b., this point overlaps with (12).)

Question: Is a two-thirds supermajority too low a standard? Well, it is two-thirds of an unmitigated success. But in all seriousness, suppose that philosophy will not yield science-level consensus on the "big" questions. Two-thirds may then be a good alternative for marking when the discipline has reached an intellectual high point. As in the U.S. Senate, it may be unreasonable to demand more for a win. That is especially so, given our earlier remarks that there is massive incentive to disagree, and that convergence will not be sustained by the fecundity of anyone's philosophical program.

It might be rebutted that the supermajority is due more to the power of contemporary science rather than of contemporary metaphysics. But it is unclear why this is damaging to optimism. Yes, naturalistic M&E is more powerful now *because* it is backed by more powerful science.[27] E.g., the "success of science" argument for scientific realism becomes increasingly forceful, the more successes that science achieves. This, in turn, means a greater impetus for naturalistic

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[24] Gary Gutting elaborates in an interview with 3:AM: "There are countless blogs that facilitate professional interactions, and *PhilPapers* has become an essential gathering of current work in all areas. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*… could not publish so many reviews so quickly if it weren't online. And, of course, [3:AM] has been one of the best ways we philosophers have of learning about one another" (Marshall 2014, p. 278). Gutting adds that online outreach also benefits the field: "I've also found that writing philosophy for a nonprofessional adult audience demands a focus and clarity that improves my own philosophical thinking and writing" (ibid.).

[25] These results are consistent with the 2009 philpapers survey as well. Chalmers (2015) reports there that 82% favor non-skeptical realism, 75% are for scientific realism, 73% are for atheism, and 71% tend toward the apriori.
In the 2020 survey, a few other supermajorities exist, albeit on questions that are arguably not as "big." Viz., 70.2% allow rational disagreement between evidential equals, 71.4% disincline toward true contradictions, and 67.1% favor that the Chinese room does not understand Chinese.

　　　In conversation, Lycan replies that such convergences merely represent the "fashion and bias" of which he lamented in (L1). For he predicts that the pendulum will eventually swing in the other direction. Yet paradigm shifts also occur in the sciences, and they do not show that that science has little value. The convergences may be shorter-lived in philosophy; however, I would still regard the current supermajorities as driven by serious arguments rather than groundless fads.

[26] I say this even though I myself depart from naturalism to some extent. But that is irrelevant to the point above about social justification.

[27] Frances (as reported in Weinberg 2016) makes a similar point.

views of mind and language, and current science offers us more details by which we may fill out these naturalisms. All this, I might add, is a further reason why the contemporary philosophical scene is quite different from the scene at the Lyceum or even at Cambridge c. 1920. (A book like Maudlin 2007 would be impenetrable in either context.)

9. A Foundry of Heresies

We raised the question of whether (1)-(33) constitute mere "dribs and drabs" of progress. We just saw that they at least reveal the *increased success rate* of M&E in recent decades. This is some reason to be hopeful about the future.

But the line about "dribs and drabs" ought to be resisted directly. For starters, (1) and (7) are hardly trifling, and (29) shows there is much to learn from contemporary M&E. Also, since the gargantuan value of science is a given, the disciplinary speciation indicated by (10) is *extremely* important. But apart from (10), *the most socially valuable convergences are still implicit*. These are among the "negative" conclusions in (26)—yet despite the deflationary connotation of 'negative', they are tremendous in political-cultural import. Ironically, however, professional philosophers might gloss them over as platitudes. But what is platitudinous for us is *not* so in wider society; in fact, many of these so called "platitudes" are resisted by legions. And this is unfortunate, for it means that the minds of fellow citizens are influenced by philosophically discredited ideas, to their owners' detriment and to the detriment of public policy.

I refer to the discipline's convergence against ideologies of organized religions, sometimes in combination with so-called folk wisdom. I have little doubt that a supermajority of professionals would agree, for example, that:

> (26.1) Not everything happens for a reason (in the sense of *telos*).
> (26.2) Personal hardship is not meant to be a test.
> (26.3) There's no such thing as eternal damnation.
> (26.4) Virgin birth is impossible (barring IVF or other non-miraculous semen transfer).
> (26.5) Astrology, palmistry, tarot, etc., are pseudo-sciences.
> (26.6) Evolutionary theory undercuts the traditional Design Argument (though evolution is compatible with Intelligent Design).

The reader can certainly identify more examples. Yet these contradict prevailing beliefs in large segments of the population. And they indeed bear on "big" epistemic-metaphysical questions: Is there a God? What happens when we die? Does science give us the truth? Is there a hidden meaning or order to our lives? What is the nature of the universe?

Given their philosophical and social significance, why do professional philosophers largely neglect these convergences? The neglect is likely not intentional; indeed, they are plausibly further cases where rock-solid philosophy offers little opportunity for additional discussion. And thus, rock-solid M&E escapes attention.

The situation is like what is seen in the discipline of history. I once witnessed much hand-wringing at a talk by a historian, concerning widespread disagreement about what occurred

during major historical events.[28] He then queried whether the historical record was just a matter of "interpretation" and whether research in history has any serious public value. But in truth, historians agree on several all-important matters—e.g., that the Holocaust really happened. In such instances, the public value of historical expertise is palpable. Such convergences are not dwelt upon in the historical journals, but nor would one expect that. The research is instead targeting what historians *don't* know; the focus is on filling in those gaps, as is right and proper.

Similarly, our work in M&E focuses on what is less understood, meaning that items such as (26.1)-(26.6) are often not noted, as is appropriate to the purpose. But when we ask about the public intellectual value of our work, these points should be placed front and center. Several are natural concomitants of rejecting a traditional God, thus threatening the basic normative-existential orientation of the masses. And that orientation *should* be threatened. It feeds cultural norms and practices like the teaching of "creation science" in public schools, the "thoughts and prayers" response to school shootings, the Madonna-whore dichotomy, the "leaving it in God's hands" response to climate change, not to mention the occasional suicide bombing.[29]

Soapboxing does not come naturally, but the situation forces my hand. And lest you confuse me with Christopher Hitchens, I am not condemning all religiosity. Indeed, the value of M&E also manifests in its development of *alternative* ("heretical") worldviews, many of which feature a spiritual component. A principal example is Spinoza's monistic-theistic worldview, famously championed by Einstein, though of course the naturalistic-atheistic worldview is an important competitor. And yes, there is no consensus on which positive conception is correct. Though I can easily see it as better, for reasons of intellectual autonomy, if philosophical experts do not decree a basic existential orientation for us all. (One hardly wishes to make philosophers into the new clergy.) And now, the variety of philosophical pictures start to look *beneficial* in enabling a choice, providing different worldviews to those with different priorities and intuitions. (The point should not be exaggerated, however. Sometimes the number of options is overwhelming.)

It may be complained that, at best, this vindicates only a small portion of M&E, viz., certain areas of philosophy of religion. Many research lines in M&E are of course not directly addressing our basic "existential" orientation. Yet I do not claim to defend everything under the M&E rubric. Nonetheless, I would emphasize how the entire naturalist program furthers the cause against traditional religion. Granted, the naturalist program divides and sub-divides into issues of ever greater remove. Research into the semantics of counterfactuals has only a distant relation to questions about our basic worldview. Yet even this has some bearing. Counterfactual objects and situations are things which do not seem "locatable" in the natural order,[30] and if naturalism is to be a live option, there must at least be a respectable chance of explaining (/away) such phenomena. In this respect, numerous fractals within the naturalistic program concern the viability of the naturalistic-atheistic worldview. Thus, we have van Fraassen's remark that

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[28] See also Stoljar (forthcoming) for related comparisons between history and philosophy.
[29] Yes, there is empirical evidence that philosophical education is associated with a decrease in extremist ideologies of the sort that lead to terrorism. See U.K. Dept. of Education (2015)
[30] Cf. Jackson's (1998) discussion of "location problems."

"analytic philosophy sometimes looks like…a sustained attempt at a consistency proof for materialism." (2009, p. 105).[31]

It is one illustration of how M&E is charged with the weighty task of crafting new and better worldviews. In the philosopher's study, we face the "big" questions anew, without shepherding from religious tradition. This, by the way, is remarkable from an anthropological point of view, utterly divergent from what is seen human history. It is a positive sign for the moral and intellectual development of the species.

10. Closing Remarks

Our discussion began with the recognition that much of philosophy has significant public intellectual value:

- Formal and informal logic
- The history of philosophy
- Ethical and political philosophy
- Philosophical pedagogy

That is, we validated 3 out of 4 branches of philosophy, plus its general educational value. M&E research, however, was singled out as the problem child. Yet besides keeping (L1) in check, I have offered *four* observations to put (L2) in perspective:

- (L2) in itself does not overtly recognize the exceptions at (1)-(33).
- There are probably many other epistemic-metaphysical successes that do not garner attention, and still others obscured by feigned disagreement.
- (L2) does not acknowledge that M&E in the past 100 years has substantially improved. This last point breaks down into four:
    - (i) The progress-indicators (1)-(33) are most prominent in that period;
    - (ii) current M&E is informed by a more powerful body of science,
    - (iii) The internet has enabled social epistemics to operate to a great degree, and
    - (iv) on some of the "big" questions, our worldwide-cosmopolitan profession has achieved a two-thirds supermajority.
- The successes at (1)-(33) are not uniformly "dribs and drabs;" in fact, negative results such as (26.1)-(26.6) are instrumental to the moral and intellectual advancement of the human race.

Upon reflection, Lycan might be willing to grant these points. But the acknowledgement of such things, I think, will result in greater optimism.[32]

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[31] I do not mean to excuse an excessive "scholasticism," which is present in much of contemporary analytic philosophy. The field would benefit if we all re-evaluated the worth of our existing research programs, by asking in earnest whether our philosophical efforts would be best exercised elsewhere. Scrutinizing minutiae is sometimes worthwhile, but the trick is not to lose the forest for the cellular structure of each tree. I talk more about this in the comments section at https://dailynous.com/2021/11/23/in-defense-of-the-details-guest-post/.

[32] One more panegyric to the world wide web: It is also a powerful tool for *disseminating* results like (1)-(33) to the general public. Gary Gutting confirms and suggests that this creates added value: "The internet has allowed a much

Another motif of the preceding has been an explanation of why philosophy's successes are often missed. Philosophy is critical thinking *par excellence*, and when an idea admits of no noticeable critique, it gets passed over. Thus, the problems occupy our attention, to the exclusion of the solutions.[33] I do not claim that this is the only (or even the primary) cause why M&E appears to lag. For instance, Stoljar's (2017a) "Marxian" observation is crucial that "the institutional setting of philosophy encourages the [mistaken] idea that philosophy makes no progress" (p. 167). Regardless, the fact that the *disagreements* command our attention, rather than the agreements, is another part of the explanation.

Finally, although it has been said before, the value of philosophy should not be seen exclusively in terms of its successes. On pain of vicious regress, some things must be valuable in themselves, and philosophical activity is plausibly one of those things. This is perhaps the most important truth about philosophy's value.[34] Unfortunately, the most important truths are not necessarily the most persuasive, and so I have focused my arguments elsewhere. But the pursuit of philosophical questions is something that connects in a deep way to who we are and what we want. Or as I like to say to my intro students, philosophy is important because it is the unfettered study of reality and reality is important.

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wider range of people access to philosophical discussions and revealed, beneath the crust of anti-intellectualism, a substantial popular interest in philosophy… Internet philosophy is rapidly making obsolete the old saw that philosophy has no meaningful presence in the general culture" (Marshall 2014, p. 278). But while the internet is a game-changer, I do not wish to overemphasize its role in the case for optimism. The reader can verify that almost all of the bullet-points above make no reference to the internet.

[33] Frances (2017, p. 51) makes a similar observation.

[34] For elaboration, see the preamble chapter of Parent (2017), especially the appendix to the chapter.

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