

Chapter 1: Introduction

§1 A reasonable expectation about the question ‘Is there progress in philosophy?’ is that people who are *professional* philosophers will answer in the affirmative. Perhaps people who are not will incline to pessimism, but this (you might think) can be explained away on a number of grounds.

One is that, the current intellectual scene being what it is, many people who are not professional philosophers know very little about philosophy. It is not unusual to meet people who are able to say something about Charles Darwin and what he thought but are quite unable to say anything about (e.g.) Bertrand Russell or Immanuel Kant and what they thought.

Another is the issue of false friends. In ordinary usage, the word ‘philosophy’ commonly denotes, not some subject matter or field of inquiry, but rather one’s basic attitude or set of attitudes toward this or that. From this point of view, one can talk sensibly about one’s philosophy of cooking or teaching—in other words, about one’s basic attitudes toward cooking or teaching—but the idea that one can make progress in philosophy as such makes no clear sense. Can you make progress on your attitudes? If that question is hard to interpret so too one might think for the question of progress in philosophy.

So if people who are not professional philosophers suppose there is no progress, this is, while perhaps disappointing, hardly surprising. What then about professionals, i.e., those who are employed by universities and similar institutions to teach and do research in philosophy construed as a field of inquiry? Surely here we will find a community in general consensus that philosophy makes progress.

But in fact the contrary is the case. Many philosophers writing today are gripped, if not by outright pessimism, then at least by something close to it, which I will call *near pessimism*. They suppose—or at least take extremely seriously the supposition—that philosophy does not make progress. Indeed, for some this constitutes a constant, often unspoken, embarrassment for the discipline.

§2 Here are seven examples of what I have in mind. *Example 1* comes from Peter van Inwagen’s discussion of the traditional philosophical question of free will. He writes:

Philosophers are unable to agree about free will. Some are determinists who deny free will, some determinists who affirm free will. Some philosophers think that free will is incompatible with determinism *and* with indeterminism—and hence that free will is impossible—while others say that we are free and that our free actions are and must be undetermined; yet others say that we are free and that our free actions are and must be determined. (2004, 334)

Van Inwagen goes on to enumerate still further ways in which philosophers disagree on this issue and concludes “I could go on, but I trust I have made my point: the problem of free will is a typical philosophical problem”. More generally, he says, “...disagreement in philosophy is pervasive and irresolvable. There is almost no thesis in philosophy about which philosophers agree” (2004, 334). Van Inwagen himself does not draw a negative conclusion about progress from this—he presents an example of near pessimism, in the terminology just introduced. But his comments certainly tend in that direction.¹ If disagreement in philosophy is really as pervasive and irresolvable as he says, a natural conclusion is that there is no progress.

Example 2 is from Paul Horwich’s (2012) book, *Wittgenstein’s Metaphilosophy*. Horwich’s aim is to defend an account of philosophy inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely, that philosophical problems are not genuine problems but are rather pseudo- or mock-problems that arise because we have misunderstood the language in which they are expressed. Likewise his aim is to attack a conception of philosophy, which he calls “T-philosophy” that regards philosophical problems as of a sort that can eventually be solved via an application of the techniques used in the sciences and elsewhere, viz., experimentation, argument, detailed description and observation and so on. (The ‘T’ is intended to suggest both ‘traditional’ and ‘theoretical’.) The opposition between these two positions is interesting and will be of some relevance in what follows. But for the moment the more important thing is something Horwich takes to be fact, and indeed a fact that his own account can explain while the rival account cannot. This is that philosophy makes no progress: “our subject is notorious for its perennial controversies and lack of decisive

¹ Elsewhere, for example, he talks (1996, 253) of the “futility of philosophy.” See also van Inwagen 2009.

progress—for its embarrassing failure, after over two thousand years, to settle any of its central questions (2012, 34).”

Example 3 is a paper by two experimental philosophers, Justin Sytsma and Jonathan Livengood (2012). Sytsma and Livengood begin with this quotation from Nobel Laureate Francis Crick:

Essentially philosophers often ask good questions, but they have no techniques for getting the answers. Therefore you should not pay too much attention to their discussions. And we can ask what progress they have made. A lot of problems which were once regarded as philosophical, such as what is an atom, are now regarded as part of physics. Some people have argued that the main purpose of a philosopher is to deal with the unsolved problems, but the problems eventually get solved, and they get solved in a scientific way. If you ask how many cases in the past has a philosopher been successful at solving a problem, as far as we can say there are no such cases. (Blackmore 2005, 75, quoted in Sytsma and Livengood 2012, 145)

One idea contained in this passage is that philosophy is the discipline that deals with unsolved problems; turning this around, if you ever made progress on a philosophical problem, the problem would immediately fail to be philosophical strictly speaking. We will take up that idea at a later stage, under the label, ‘womb of disciplines’ argument. A different idea, and the one Sytsma and Livengood are more interested in, is that the methodology of philosophy is somehow mismatched to its questions: good questions, no techniques, to use Crick’s language.

Is Crick right? You might be tempted to dismiss what he says on the ground that, no matter how prominent Crick is in his own field, his credentials in philosophy are a bit meagre. But Sytsma and Livengood take a different view. Their view is that Crick is right—at least as regards philosophy in the last hundred years or so. For Sytsma and Livengood, in this period philosophy turned anti-experimentalist; that is, it became enamoured with intuition, conceptual analysis, and a priori reasoning modelled on logic and mathematics. It is not so much that these are intrinsically problematic (though they might be); it is that they are mismatched to the subject matter of philosophy. The subject matter is empirical, and for empirical questions

you need empirical or experimental techniques. Consequently, “as philosophy has moved away from the use of empirical methods, its ability to make progress has diminished” (Sytsma and Livengood 2012, 158).

Example 4 is Amie Thomasson’s (2015) response to physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow’s notorious remark that: “philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge” (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010, 5). Hawking and Mlodinow’s attitude here is similar to Crick’s and, like Crick, one might reject what they say on the ground that they have not kept up with philosophy.² But Thomasson takes a different view. Her view is that Hawking and Mlodinow are correct, *if* one assumes that philosophy is a factual discipline, that is, a discipline in which one tries to describe or get to the truth about various aspects of reality. Understand philosophy like this, she says, and you inevitably face a dilemma. On the one hand, you could hold “that there is nothing distinctive that philosophy can do, that it is ‘on a par’ with the natural sciences”, but then “you end up with an untethered proliferation of fanciful views that seem like either bad science or wild speculation, and no idea how to choose among them.” (2015, 20) On the other hand, you could insist that “philosophy’s role lies in conceptual work”, that is in describing how we are inclined to think about various topics, but then what emerges is “a rather parochial and limited conception of philosophy” (2015, 20), one that seems little more than an expression of a set of highly specific cultural views.

Thomasson herself does not accept this dilemma. In a series of works, she has argued that philosophy is not a factual discipline but is instead a normative or practical one in which we ask, for example, how we ought to understand the concepts of free will or knowledge or consciousness (Thomasson 2015, see also Thomasson 2016, 2009). Whether that is plausible is an interesting question I will take up later. But for the present the thing to notice is that, while Thomasson does not explicitly talk about progress, her discussion has a clear implication for it. For if philosophy is a factual discipline—which as we will see is something I assume in what follows—it is nothing more than wild speculation, and as such, it is hard to see it making progress.

² This is Tim Maudlin’s view for example, as reported in Anderson 2012

Example 5 is from a paper by Eric Dietrich (2011) called ‘There is no Progress in Philosophy,’ an admirably straightforward title. Dietrich’s main idea in the paper is that the relation of philosophy to its history is different from the relation of sciences such as physics to its history. He illustrates this with a thought experiment in which Aristotle—that is, the ancient Greek philosopher—somehow travels in time to a modern university. What will happen when Aristotle (after replacing his toga and sandals with modern garb) takes a course in physics? And what will happen when he takes a course in philosophy? In the first case, Dietrich says, he will be completely baffled; the physics taught today in university courses is unrecognizable from an ancient Greek point of view. In the second case, by contrast, he won’t be baffled. On the contrary, here the discussions in ethics or metaphysics will be similar to the ones he himself participated in. In fact, the person giving the course might even express sympathy with Aristotle’s own view—something no modern physics professor would dream of doing. Suppose then this would happen to Aristotle in the imagined circumstances; what does that show? Dietrich argues it shows that philosophy makes no progress; philosophy, he says, “does not move forward at all. It is the exactly the same today as it was 3000 years ago; indeed, as it was from the beginning” (2011, 332).

Example 6 is Philip Kitcher’s (2011) call for a “renewal of philosophy” inspired by the 20th century pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. In developing his position, Kitcher compares what he calls the “predicament of Anglophone philosophy in the early twenty-first century” with that of an imagined community of musicians:

Once upon a time, in a country not too far away, the most prominent musicians decided to become serious about their profession. They encouraged their promising students to devote hours to special exercises designed to strengthen fingers, shape lips, and extend breath control. Within a few years, conservatories began to hold exciting competitions, at which the most rigorous etudes would be performed in public. For a while, these contests went on side by side with concerts devoted to the traditional repertoire. Gradually, however, interest in the compositions of the past—and virtually all those of the present—began to wane. Serious pianists found the studies composed by Chopin, Liszt, Debussy, and Ligeti insufficiently taxing, and they dismissed the suites, concertos, and

sonatas of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Prokofiev as worthy of performance only by second-raters. (2011, 248)

The comparison Kitcher makes here between philosophy and music is certainly intriguing. (The comparison is pursued in a different way in Tymoczko 2000). No one acquainted with classical music in the 20th and 21st centuries can fail to notice that, while it attracts and absorbs hugely intelligent people, it also appears extremely formal, somewhat inward looking and perhaps disjoint from the ordinary experience of music. (And if this is not true of modern music, it is certainly true of Kitcher's imagined community.) Kitcher thinks that the situation as regards philosophy is the same, or at any rate that the question "is worth taking very seriously" (2011, 249). The strong suggestion of his paper is that the technical nature of philosophy is a bar to its making progress.

Example 7 is David Chalmers's paper "Why is there not more Progress in Philosophy?" Here Chalmers defends on empirical grounds what he calls a "central thesis" about philosophy: that "there has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy". (The empirical support for this thesis comes from a well-known empirical survey called 'the *Philpapers* survey'; see Bourget and Chalmers 2014). Chalmers too is an example of near pessimism rather than outright pessimism. He points out, for example, that the issue has a "glass half-full, glass half-empty" quality, and elsewhere he says somewhat strikingly "philosophy is still young, and the human capacity for reasoning is strong" (2012, xxiii). Still, the negativity in the background of Chalmers's paper is hard to miss. In oral presentations of his paper that have appeared on the Internet, for example, Chalmers says that the issue of progress in philosophy is the "dirty laundry" of the discipline (Chalmers 2013a).

§3 These examples differ from each other in various ways. They come from people whose approach to philosophy is otherwise different; we have, among other things, the metaphysician (1), the Wittgensteinian (2), the neo-pragmatist (6) and two experimentalists (3). Some focus on relatively recent philosophy (3,7), others take a longer view (4,5). Some emphasize disagreement and failure of convergence (1,7), others do not (2, 3). Finally, while in some cases pessimism is presented as a symptom of something essential to the discipline (5), in other cases we have a clear suggestion (3,4,6) that progress is possible—so long as we change course.

Nevertheless the overall picture they present is a disturbing one to anyone paid to teach and research the subject in a university. It is of a community with a history of failure, mired in constant and unending disagreement, cut off from its *raison d'être*, and trying to deal with its various problems with the wrong sort of tools. It is, in short, the picture of a discipline in trouble.

My aim is to paint a different picture. I will defend a position on philosophical progress that is optimistic though in a nuanced or qualified way—reasonable optimism, as I will call it. What then is reasonable optimism?

§4 One way to introduce the position I have in mind is to contrast it with positions in the literature that, while optimistic, are also (as I see things) unreasonable or exaggerated. In the preface to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein says “the truth of the thoughts communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am therefore of the opinion that the problems have essentially been finally solved” (see Wittgenstein 1922). Of course, as always with Wittgenstein, interpretive issues are subtle. For one thing, he goes on immediately to note “how little is done when these problems are finally solved”, and as we have already seen in connection with the Horwich example above, it is unclear to what extent Wittgenstein views philosophical problems as genuine in the first place. Still, the preface of the *Tractatus* is certainly very naturally read as proposing a profoundly optimistic view about philosophy. So let me say straightaway that the position I have in mind is not like this. I am *not* of the opinion that the problems have essentially been finally solved. Rather I am of the opinion that some problems have been solved, and we have a reasonable expectation that more (though not all) will be solved in the future.

Wittgenstein wrote these words about a century ago, but optimism in some ways reminiscent of his can be found in our own day too. A good example is the version of materialism—that is, a materialistic world-view—defended by David Lewis. Lewis held that contemporary physics was very nearly complete and that it provided a complete explanation of the basic physical facts of the world, and Lewis also held that every truth about the world follows a priori from basic physical truths (e.g. Lewis 1983b, 2009). It is hard to overstate what an optimistic view this is (see, e.g., Jackson 1982). Consider for example, the claims that we are free or conscious or know moral or mathematical truths—to pick some phenomena of philosophical interest. It follows from Lewis’s materialism that there are physical facts currently

(or almost currently) knowable by us that entail a priori that we are free or conscious or know moral or mathematical truths. Lewis does not say of course that all the problems have been solved; he is no Wittgenstein. But it is a consequence of his view that we are currently in, or at least will very soon be in, an epistemic position to answer all philosophical questions, and indeed all questions whatsoever.³ Let me emphasize once again that this is not the sort of optimism I have in mind. I don't think that we are in a position in principle to answer every question. On the contrary it seems to me quite obvious that, whatever exactly our world-view is, it had better include the fact that we are inquirers who have partial knowledge of fundamental aspects of the world around us. If Lewis's version of materialism is inconsistent with this, that is, I think, a serious objection against it.

§5 Another way to introduce reasonable optimism is to compare philosophy with other fields such as history, natural or social science, or mathematics. It would be bizarre in these cases to say à la the *Tractatus* that “the problems have essentially been finally solved.” A more plausible position is that here we find ourselves in the middle of an enormous manifold of questions. Some have been answered; some remain to be answered; others may have been set aside as unanswerable either at present or in the long run; and answering any particular question raises new lines of inquiry. A more plausible position, to put it differently, is to say that in history (science, etc.) reasonably many problems have been solved, and in consequence we should expect reasonably many to be solved in the future. It is that kind of position I want to recommend in philosophy. Here too we should suppose that reasonably many problems have been solved, and in consequence we should expect reasonably many to be solved in the future.

To compare philosophy in this way with other fields is not to deny that there are controversies about progress there too. A reasonable optimism about history or science is often associated with a position known as ‘scientific realism.’ Scientific realism—to put it roughly but serviceably for our purposes—is a position that has two parts. The first part is that, in the sciences and in history, we aim to acquire knowledge, and so aim to get to the truth of the matters that we are interested in; the

³ In interpreting Lewis's materialism as having this consequence I follow Jackson 1982. One might explore ways of interpreting Lewis so that his view does not have this consequence but I will set that aside here.

second part is that we have indeed achieved that aim in the past and therefore have a reasonable hope of achieving it in the future. But scientific realism is sometimes criticized on the ground that science is an enterprise whose goal is not knowledge or truth but is instead something else, for example, organizing or predicting observable data or developing more complex machines or advancing some (perhaps problematic) social goal (see e.g. Kuhn 1970, Laudan 1977). If these criticisms of scientific realism are correct, our position might seem to have a false presupposition. Perhaps progress in philosophy is impossible because progress in any sort of inquiry is impossible?

It will be important later (in chapter 6) to say a little more about scientific realism, but I will operate throughout on the assumption that it is correct, rather than defend it. Partly my reasons for this are that I am sympathetic to what others have said in support of it (see, e.g., Bird 2007, Devitt 2010, Psillos 1999). But my reasons are also tactical. Philosophy is sometimes thought of as a very ‘peculiar’ or ‘exceptional’ discipline, a discipline that is in some hard to specify way quite different from mathematics or history or natural science.⁴ And when people say that philosophy makes no progress they typically do not mean this to follow from a general position that progress is impossible anywhere. They mean rather that there is some peculiar or exceptional feature of philosophy that makes progress impossible here. As I have said, my own view is that this is mistaken and there is no such feature. But whether that is right or not, a good way to frame the issues is to suppose (at least provisionally) that there is progress in the way that scientific realists suggest and then discuss the contrast between science and history on the one hand and philosophy on the other. That, at any rate, will be my procedure.⁵

§6 At this point you might suspect that the dispute I have been describing—between the optimist and the pessimist about philosophical progress—may easily be settled in favour of the optimist. After all, it is hard to believe that there is no progress *at all* in philosophy. To illustrate, consider Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument (see Jackson 1982; see also Ludlow et. al. 2004), which is one of the most

⁴ For ‘peculiar’ see Williams 2006, who attributes it to Wittgenstein. For ‘exceptional’ see Williamson 2007, though notice that Williamson himself does not think that philosophy is exceptional.

⁵ In fact, much of what I will say could I think be expressed in a framework that rejects scientific realism, but I will set that aside here.

discussed arguments in philosophy of mind. The aim of this argument is to show that materialism is false on the ground that it is possible to know all the physical facts and what follows from those facts, and yet not know certain facts about human psychology, particularly as regards perception and sensation. (Roughly, materialism is the thesis that every fact is either a physical fact or is necessitated by a physical fact; as we saw above, Lewis holds a distinctive version of it.)

Now when Jackson first set out the argument, some philosophers thought that he was making a well known type of mistake called an intensional fallacy; in this case, this is the mistake of inferring from ‘*S* knows that *a* is *F*’ and ‘*a* = *b*’ to ‘*S* knows that *b* is *F*’. Since it commits an intensional fallacy, they said, the knowledge argument is invalid (see e.g. Churchland 1981, 1985). Is this suggestion right? No—the field of philosophy of mind has conclusively rejected it. Whether or not the knowledge argument is sound, it definitely commits no intensional fallacy.⁶ So here (you might think) is a clear example of philosophical progress: the question of whether Jackson’s argument commits this fallacy has been decisively answered, and moreover everyone agrees on the answer. Doesn’t the pessimist therefore stand refuted? Equivalently, isn’t the optimist obviously right?

The answer is no. For the pessimist will say that this argument for optimism misses a distinction. On the one hand, there are questions that are, in an intuitive sense, big, central, and significant—big questions, as I will call them for short.⁷ On the other hand, there are questions that are, in an intuitive sense, small, peripheral, and not so significant—small questions, as I will call them. When pessimists say there is no progress in philosophy, what they have in mind, or should have in mind, is progress on the big questions. They needn’t (or shouldn’t) have in mind progress on the small questions. (Admittedly, while some philosophers mentioned above certainly draw this distinction—e.g. Chalmers—not all do, but I think we should be charitable in those cases.) Hence the point that Jackson’s argument is not fallacious in this way does not threaten pessimism. For while this issue no doubt loomed large for

⁶ Good evidence for this is that when Peter Ludlow, Yujin Nagasawa and I put together a volume gathering together the main responses to the knowledge argument, we found no need to focus on that one; nor has any commentator on that book ever suggested we should have. See Ludlow, Nagasawa and Stoljar 2004.

⁷ Or big *problems*, as I will also say—throughout our discussion I will draw no distinction between questions and problems.

the people directly involved, it is fair to say that in the scheme of things it is a small question rather than a big one, in the terms just introduced.

Of course the distinction between big and small questions is pretty rough and ready. It is surely vague, admitting of borderline cases. It may also be interest-relative, being to some extent in the eye of the beholder. But while this is so, I will accept it in what follows. One reason is that a distinction like this applies in many fields not just in philosophy. Another is that the distinction does not prejudice the issues either way: if we accept that there is progress on small problems, it does not follow that there is progress on big ones, but equally it does not follow that there is not. A third is that without it, it hard to see how we may understand the pessimist's position in way that does not make it obviously false, and equally how we may understand the optimist's position in way that does not make it obviously true.

§7 At this point you might suspect that the dispute may be settled easily in the opposite direction, that is, in favour of the pessimist. For suppose there is a distinction between big and small questions, and now take the big question that is at issue in Jackson's paper. Surely that question is: what is the relation between the mental and the physical? And doesn't that question have a famous name, viz., 'the mind-body problem'? Moreover, isn't that problem precisely the one that was at issue in such classical discussions from the past as Descartes' *Meditations*? Isn't therefore the dispute between Jackson and (say) Churchland over the mind-body problem in the 20th and 21st centuries the same as that between Descartes and (say) Hobbes in the 17th? So here (you might think) is a clear example of *lack* of progress; moreover this example is typical of big questions in philosophy. Does the optimist not therefore stand refuted? Equivalently, isn't the pessimist obviously right?

Once again the answer is no. For the optimist will say that this argument for pessimism misses a distinction too. On the one hand, there are questions that—to put it a bit vaguely—introduce or define or constitute a *topic* or *subject matter*—topic questions, as I will call them for short. On the other hand, there are questions that outline particular lines of inquiry (whether big or small) within a given topic. To illustrate the distinction, historians are still interested in the fall of the Roman empire as they were 300 years ago and physicists are still discussing the origin of the universe, but contemporary historians or physicists are asking different big questions about these topics from the ones their forebears asked.

If we distinguish the topics or subject matter of philosophy from the big questions that can be asked about those topics, it is certainly very hard to deny that philosophers in the 20th and 21st century are in many cases discussing the same topics or subject matters as those in the 17th.⁸ Both Jackson and Descartes, for example, are (in the relevant parts of their works) concerned with the relation of the mental to the physical; they are not making a contribution to mathematics, after all, or trying to compose a symphony. But it doesn't follow that they are asking the same big questions about that subject matter. And indeed, if we pay only a small amount of attention to what they say it becomes quite implausible to suppose that they are.⁹

For example, when Descartes talked of 'matter' or 'body'—when we talked of the physical, as we would put it—he explicitly had in mind what he called *res extensa*—roughly, things that have extension in space. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, he says (1985a, 210) “extension...constitutes the nature of corporeal substance,” and in *Meditations VI*, which contains his main argument for dualism, he writes (1985b, 54) that he has a “clear idea of body in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking, thing”. Moreover, what he is concerned with in these works is the relation between *res extensa* and (what he called) *res cogitans*, that is, things that think, where thinking in turn is a very broad psychological category.

Jackson, by contrast, definitely does not think that matter is extension and shows no interest in a broad category of thinking (at least not when he is discussing the knowledge argument). Rather he assumes that the physical, or “physical information” as he puts it, is just the information present in contemporary physical sciences, viz., physics, chemistry and biology, plus “anything that automatically follows from it” (Jackson 1982, 127). And what he is interested in is whether a world completely described by physical sciences of that sort can also contain, not thought in general, but rather various quite specific features of sensory and perceptual capacities of human beings, features he referred to in that paper as ‘qualia’. In the light of these differences, the argument for pessimism just considered is implausible. While we can and should agree that the topics in philosophy of mind have often remained the same,

⁸ Likewise, it is very hard to deny that different cultures have been interested in these topics.

⁹ I emphasize that this is only paying a *small* amount of attention to what Descartes is saying. As I explain in more detail in chapter 4, while I will make historical remarks here and throughout, and while I believe these claims to be defensible, the following is by no means a serious historical discussion, and strictly speaking the truth of these claims is incidental to the main line of argument.

the big questions raised about those topics by contemporary philosophers are distinct from those raised by their predecessors.

Like the distinction between big and small questions, the distinction between questions that introduce a topic and questions within or about a topic is also rough and ready. But again I will accept it in what follows.¹⁰ One reason is what we have here may be two applications of a single distinction rather than two different distinctions; that is, topic questions may simply *be* big questions of a certain sort. If so, we cannot accept one distinction without accepting the other. A second reason is that, whether these distinctions are the same or not—and this is a difficult question I won't try to resolve here—the topic/non-topic distinction is no *more* rough and ready than the big/small distinction. If so, again, we cannot accept one distinction without accepting the other. A third reason is that parallel considerations apply here as applied in the previous case: it is a distinction that applies in many fields, it does not prejudice the issues either way, and it allows us to formulate optimism in a way that does not make it obviously false.

§8 Bringing together the points made so far, it emerges that to properly appreciate the issue of progress in philosophy, it is necessary to employ a tri-partite distinction.

At the highest level are topic questions, questions that introduce or define or constitute different topics. At the intermediate level are big questions within or about a given topic. At the lowest level are small questions, questions that are highly specific to a particular discussion on a big question. The dispute between the optimist and the pessimist does not concern topic questions, for both sides can agree (or so I will assume) that the topics discussed today are in many cases the topics discussed in the past. Nor does it concern small questions, for both sides can agree (or so I will also assume) that small questions can in many cases be conclusively answered, and so progress here is possible. Rather the issue concerns big questions within philosophical topics.

From this point of view, the key theses we will be concerned with may be summarized as follows. Optimism in general is the thesis that there is progress on all

¹⁰ For some formal discussions of the notion of a topic or subject matter—I will treat these as the same—see Lewis 1988a, 1988b, and Yablo 2014. An intuitive understanding is sufficient for present purposes.

or reasonably many of the big questions of philosophy. Unreasonable optimism is the thesis that there is progress on *all* of the big questions of philosophy. Reasonable optimism is the thesis that there is progress on *reasonably many* of the big questions of philosophy. It is reasonable optimism that I want to defend in this book.

Since pessimism is the strict denial of optimism—or so I will assume—and since there are at least two varieties of optimism, there are also at least two varieties of pessimism. One variety denies unreasonable optimism, and so denies there is progress on *all* of the problems. Another variety denies reasonable optimism, and so denies that there is progress on reasonably many. I have no quarrel with the first variety of pessimism; I too deny unreasonable optimism. Rather it is the second variety, which denies reasonable optimism, I want to oppose.

§9 Of course, there remain unclear elements in reasonable optimism beyond those already remarked upon. I will turn to some of these in the next chapter, and deal with others as the discussion proceeds. Meanwhile, let me end this chapter by introducing two of the main lines of thought I want to develop in what follows in support of reasonable optimism.

The first is indirect, in that it defeats what is perhaps the key argument for pessimism. What is that key argument? Well, the examples of philosophers attracted to pessimism or near pessimism considered above already suggest various different arguments for pessimism, and we will go through those in detail later (see chapters 7 and 8). However, while these arguments are different from one another, it is also plausible to detect underneath them, or at least underneath many of them, a single argument in favour of pessimism.

The main premise of this argument is that, even granting the points about topics that we have just made, it nevertheless *is* the case that the very same big questions in philosophy have been discussed and debated in philosophy for centuries; the conclusion is that pessimism is true. Does the premise entail the conclusion? I think it does, at least if we make a further reasonable assumption. For consider some big philosophical problem that is currently the subject of debate (it doesn't matter what it is)—call it Q. Surely we can assume—this is the reasonable assumption I mentioned—that Q is an open question, otherwise it would not currently be the subject of debate. And now consider some problem R that was debated long ago; and suppose, in accordance with the main premise, that Q is identical to R. If Q is

identical to R, and if Q is open, it follows by logic that R is open too. (The underlying logical principle here is Leibniz's Law which says that if *a* is identical to *b*, then every property of *a* is a property of *b*.) But if R is open, the history of Q (a.k.a. R) is the history of an unsolved problem. Moreover, since Q is just a stand in for any philosophical problem, pessimism about philosophy in general is true.

What is wrong with this key argument? That is a question I will take up in a number of ways in the following discussion. But the material we have considered so far is already enough to show it is unpersuasive. For the argument itself provides no reason to suppose the very same big questions in philosophy *have* been discussed and debated for centuries; equivalently, it provides no reason to suppose that Q *is* identical to R. Moreover, when we look at concrete cases nothing like this appears to be true. For example, suppose Q is the big question raised by Jackson when he discusses the knowledge argument, and R is the big question raised by Descartes when he discusses the real distinction between mind and body. Then, as we have seen, Q is not the same as R. For R is a question about the relations of thought to extension, while Q is not; and Q is a question about the relations of perceptual and sensory capacities to properties mentioned in the contemporary physical sciences, while R is not. Of course we might agree that Q is on the same topic or subject matter as R, since both are concerned in a broad sense with the relation of the mental to the physical. But, as we have also seen, that does not show that Q and R are identical. More generally, if the big questions debated now are distinct from the big questions debated in the past, this key argument for pessimism collapses.

§10 So the first line of thought I want to develop in what follows is indirect, in that it undermines the key argument for pessimism. The second line I want to develop, by contrast, is direct, in that it constitutes a straightforward reason for believing reasonable optimism.

The starting point of the argument is the idea we have just been exploring: that the big questions that philosophers currently ask are *not* the same as the ones they asked in the past. If we accept this, it is natural to go on to consider the status of those earlier questions, and in particular to ask whether they have been solved. After all, *if* those earlier questions are distinct from the ones currently at issue, the possibility opens up that *they* have been solved even it is also true that the current big problems have not been. Once we focus on this possibility, however, what emerges

is that in reasonably many cases those earlier problems *have* been solved, and this gives us a good historical reason for supposing that optimism is true.

Why suppose that reasonably many earlier problems have been solved? This too is a question I will take up in different ways in the following discussion. But again the material we have introduced suggests an answer. For consider again the problem that Descartes raised about the mental and the physical. While of course the interpretative issues here are difficult too, I think it is fair to say that this problem has been solved, though perhaps not in the way that he himself would have anticipated. There are two important points to make.

Point 1 is that Descartes' assumption that matter is extension is not merely an historical detail, unrelated to the underlying plausibility of his position. For the argument against materialism and for dualism that he gave in *Meditation VI*, relies crucially on there being available, as he put it, a clear and distinct understanding of what matter is—the basic point being, to put it very roughly, that enough is known about matter to know that thought is distinct from it. In turn, if matter is extension, this assumption is *prima facie* plausible. For it is plausible to think that, courtesy of geometry, there was available to Descartes (and available to us for that matter) a clear and distinct understanding of what extension is, at any rate as Descartes intended that notion. Indeed, the centrality of the idea that matter is extension is something that Descartes himself insisted on. For example, one of his main critics, Antoine Arnauld, pointed out in commentaries on the *Meditations* that the argument Descartes gives is implausible if we take seriously the suggestion that there are unknown but relevant features of either matter or thought. Descartes's answer in effect is that there are no such features; in particular, matter is extension and there is available a clear and distinct idea of what that is.¹¹

Point 2 is that, while Descartes himself assumed that matter is extension, and while this is crucial to his argument against materialism, this assumption is something

¹¹ At one point, for example, Arnauld says you may “maintain that the conception you have of yourself as a thinking non-extended thing is an inadequate one; and the same may be true of your conception of yourself as an extended non-thinking thing” (1985b; 141). In response, Descartes as I understand him does two things (at least): first, he separates ‘complete’ knowledge (his own notion) from Arnauld’s ‘adequate’ knowledge; second—in response to the point that Arnauld’s objection could be rephrased in terms of complete knowledge—he insists that we have complete knowledge in the relevant sense of both mind and body. For some further discussion, see Yablo 1990.

that was subsequently rejected by the philosophical and scientific community.¹² Instead of supposing that matter is extension, philosophical and scientific opinion after Descartes's death converged on the idea that matter—that is, the brains and bodies of sentient creatures, and the cells that make up those brains and bodies, and the atoms that make up those cells—is something that fills in space, rather than being something that is space. But if that is so, we may well regard ourselves as not knowing exactly what its properties are, still less what the properties of its properties are. In turn, it becomes plausible to suggest against Descartes that we do not have a clear and distinct idea of matter.

If these points are correct, the answer to Descartes' question is surprisingly straightforward. We might perhaps agree with him that thought is not a function of extension as he understood it, and for precisely the reasons he gave. But that gives us no reason to suppose that thought is not a function of matter, since matter is not extension. Hence it gives us no reason to deny materialism, which is precisely Descartes's intended conclusion. Likewise it gives us no reason to endorse dualism, at least if that is understood (as dualism is usually understood) as entailing that thought or consciousness is a fundamental feature of reality, perhaps like space or time or gravity, something not derivative on anything else. After all, even if thought is not a function of extension, it doesn't follow that it is not a function of anything; hence it doesn't follow it is fundamental.

In sum, so long as we maintain our focus on the question raised by Descartes, we seem here to have a solved problem, rather than an unsolved one. Moreover, since Descartes' question is surely a big philosophical question—indeed, it is a good candidate for being the biggest ever; it is nothing less than the mind-body problem as formulated by the so-called father of modern philosophy—what we have arrived at is the idea that at least one big philosophical question has been solved.

Of course many questions can be raised about this idea. Has the mind-body problem as Descartes formulated it *really* been solved? Is there not a successor question that can be formulated? Isn't the successor problem even harder than the original? I will address these and other concerns in due course. But for the moment the thing to emphasize is this. Suppose it *is* true that this big philosophical question

¹² This is a point that has been greatly emphasized by Chomsky in a number of his works, though he tends to focus on the argument of the *Discourse on Method* rather than the *Meditations*. See Chomsky 1966, 2000, 2009; for some further discussion, see Stoljar 2006, 123-34, and Stoljar 2010.

has been solved; and suppose that what is true here is true also in the case of reasonably many other big problems raised in the past—this is something I will also argue for later. Then reasonably many big philosophical questions have been solved in the past, and we should expect on general grounds the same thing to be true in the future. In short, an optimistic picture of philosophical progress emerges that is quite different from the pessimistic picture we started with. According to the pessimistic picture, philosophy is a peculiar or exceptional discipline in that here we have same big questions endlessly and fruitlessly debated over time. By contrast, according to the optimistic picture, philosophy is rather like other disciplines in at least this sense: while the topics that originally animated the discipline are in many cases still with us, the big questions currently raised about those topics are distinct from those raised earlier, and moreover those earlier questions have often been solved.