

# How Would Disagreement Undermine Progress (in Philosophy)?

## Abstract

In recent years, several prominent philosophers have worried that their discipline makes no progress, or not enough in comparison to the ‘hard sciences’ (e.g., Dietrich 2011; Rescher 2014; Chalmers 2015). A central argument for this pessimistic position appeals to the empirical claim that philosophers widely and systematically disagree on most major philosophical issues (e.g., Horwich 2012; Chalmers 2015; Beebe 2018). Optimists typically respond by disputing how widespread these disagreements really are, or by emphasizing that philosophers in fact widely agree on many other substantial issues (e.g., Cappelen 2015; Stoljar 2017; Frances 2017). Nearly all parties to these debates, however, seem to agree that widespread and systematic disagreement on philosophical issues would undermine progress.

In this paper, our aim is to investigate whether—and, if so, how—disagreement undermines progress. We will initially take a step back from the debate about progress and disagreement in philosophy and ask the more general question: *How (if at all) does disagreement within a given discipline (or with respect to a given topic) undermine that discipline’s progress (on that topic)?* Answering this question is valuable in its own right, in part because philosophy is far from being the only academic discipline in which there are persistent disagreements. Moreover, by discussing the general question of the relationship between progress and disagreement first, we can more easily draw lessons for philosophical progress that are independent of the truth or falsity of the empirical claims about the prevalence of philosophical disagreement. Having addressed the general question about the connection between disagreement and progress, we then turn our attention to the more specific question about how (if at all) philosophical disagreements undermine philosophical progress.

Our conclusions—regarding both the general question and the more specific one—are moderately optimistic in one regard and moderately pessimistic in another. The (somewhat) good news is that on a plausible understanding of what progress (in philosophy or elsewhere) consists in, disagreement is not inconsistent with progress, even when it’s widespread and systematic. Although there are limits to how much progress can be made in the presence of disagreement, progress can be made despite

disagreement. Indeed, progress can (and often does) occur even as disagreement increases. The (somewhat) bad news, however, is that in the presence of disagreement we will often be unable to tell which developments are progressive and which ones not (some of which will be regressive!). Although this is indeed bad news, it is not quite as bad as one might think since we should not confuse whether we've made progress and whether we can tell when progress has been made.

430 words

### References

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