Submission to “Disagreement Beyond Ethics and Epistemology”

**Disagreement and Progress in Philosophy and in Empirical Sciences**

Discussions regarding philosophical progress, defined as philosophers’ convergence on true answers to central philosophical questions, often involve contrasting the progress in natural sciences with progress in philosophy, and the bleak state of progress in philosophy is pointed out with the help of this contrast. In response to this, some philosophers have argued that the state of progress in philosophy is not much different than the state of progress in sciences. Balcerak Jackson (2013) suggests that philosophy nevertheless arrives at partial and approximate solutions for problems, an aim that is shared with the sciences. Frances (2017) claims that there has been a lot of agreement on smaller questions in philosophy, and the situation is similar in the sciences, where there is a lot of progress amid disagreement on bigger questions. Olson (2019) similarly argues that there is less convergence than we think on answers to scientific questions.

In response to this deflationist view, I will argue that sciences have indeed progressed more than philosophy. I will point out that there is more substantive agreement among scientists compared to philosophers, and the claim that there is no agreement on many central scientific questions results from a misleading comparison between the two fields in the context of the “centrality” of the questions asked. I will claim that a scientific question can have two types of significance, philosophical and non-philosophical. The mistake of Frances and others is to pick up examples from unresolved questions in sciences that have philosophical import (e.g. questions regarding fundamental physics or origins of life), which gives the impression that sciences have also not solved their “big” questions, and distracts us from seeing the immense amount of progress sciences have made on questions that are significant but that do not have philosophical import. Moreover, most “small” questions in sciences have intrinsic significance, while the value of such questions in philosophy are parasitic on bigger ones.

I will also try to demonstrate that while genuine scientific disagreements often result from the lack of clear evidence, persistent philosophical disagreements result from factors at the intersection of sociology of academic philosophy and philosophical methodology, which I call “professional factors”. I will briefly present fours factors, which are (1) a lack of explicit agreement about what counts as clear philosophical evidence and what are the steps to resolve a disagreement; (2) philosophical research being conducted in a solitary manner rather than in large research teams; (3) slow pace of philosophical exchange that leads to loss of philosophical data; and (4) factors such as publication pressure that promote disagreement for its own sake. Coupled with the fact that the falsity of a philosophical theory cannot be straightforwardly demonstrated and the related fact that a philosophical view’s being wrong has no immediate practical consequences, these four factors enable philosophers to easily disagree with their peers. My overall aim is not to arrive at a pessimistic picture of philosophical progress, but to help identify the factors that prevent philosophy from progressing in a more robust manner.

**References**

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Frances, B. (2017) Extensive philosophical agreement and progress. *Metaphilosophy* 48 (1-2):47-57.

Olson, D. (2019) Epistemic progress despite systematic disagreement. *Epistemology & Philosophy of Science* 56 (2):77–94.