

**Title:** What Philosophical Consensus Can Tell Us About Philosophical Progress

**Abstract:** Expert consensus is often taken as a proxy for progress within a discipline. In a recent collection of papers on the topic of philosophical progress, for example, a large proportion of the contributions address the question of whether there are any philosophical questions that are widely agreed by philosophers to have been settled (Blackford & Broderick, 2017). The (sometimes implicit) assumption behind the thought that agreement represents progress is that the existence of consensus among philosophers on the most important questions of their discipline would be a consensus to the *truth*.

This assumption can be defended using Condorcet's jury theorem. According to this theorem, in a group of independent thinkers each of whom have a greater than 50% chance of getting the answer to a question right, the chance of the majority being right will approach 100% as the group size increases (Young, 1988). So, there is good reason for treating broad agreement about the answers to philosophical questions as an indication of the correctness of those answers: so long as philosophers achieve the relevant kind of independence in their thought and so long as each one has a better than even chance at getting at the truth, the majority opinion will be a reliable indicator of the correct answers to philosophical questions (more reliable, at least, than the opinion of any individual philosopher). According to this line of thought, majority agreement on some philosophical view gives us *prima facie* reason to think that that view is true.

This paper challenges this picture of the relationship between agreement among professional philosophers and the truth of philosophical positions. I argue that for many philosophical questions, the existence of a majority opinion about the correct answer to that question by itself gives us no reason to believe the majority opinion is correct. That is, within the domain of philosophy, expert agreement is generally *epistemically uninformative*: by itself, it tells us nothing about which views are true.

I argue for this thesis by identifying an alternative explanation of majority agreement (such as it is) on some of the big questions of philosophy. This explanation appeals to the fact that the subject matter of philosophy often (but not always) presents us with *genuine options* (James, 1956). For James, a genuine option is a choice between *live* hypotheses (i.e. hypotheses that both possess some antecedent plausibility) that is both *momentous* (i.e. of great significance to the course of one's life) and *forced* (i.e. unavoidable). I argue that when we face genuine options, the beliefs we end up with are more likely to be susceptible to influence by factors—such as our desires and epistemic preferences—that bear no connection with the strength of the evidence for and against the position in question. Thus, with respect to philosophical views that are responses to *genuine options*, we should not expect agreement among professional philosophers to accurately reflect the relative strength of the evidence for and against the view in question.

Although this conclusion might at first appear pessimistic, I argue that it has positive consequences for discussions of progress in philosophy. If the nature of the subject matter of philosophy is such that we should not expect consensus on many philosophical questions, then

we should not be troubled by that lack of consensus. This frees us to measure philosophical progress in other ways.

## References

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