

WHY THE HECK WOULD YOU DO PHILOSOPHY? A PRACTICAL CHALLENGE TO PHILOSOPHIZING

Jimmy Alfonso LICON

ABSTRACT: Philosophy plausibly aims at knowledge; it would thus be tempting to hold that much of the value of doing philosophy turns on securing knowledge. Enter the agnostic challenge: suppose that a philosophical agnostic (named ‘Betsy’) wants to discover only fundamental philosophical truths. However, the intractable disagreement among philosophical experts gives her pause. After reflecting on expert disagreement, she decides that doing philosophy, *for her truth-seeking error-avoiding purposes*, is irrational. In this paper, I argue that the agnostic challenge isn’t easily overcome. Although there are many reasons to do philosophy, the agnostic challenge implies there is less value to doing philosophy than many philosophers may have believed.

KEYWORDS: agnostic challenge, the intractable disagreement,
philosophical experts

[Philosophers] are not honest enough in their work, although they make a lot of virtuous noise when the problem of truthfulness is touched even remotely. They all pose as if they had discovered and reached their real opinions through the self-development of a cold, pure, divinely unconcerned dialectic [...]; while at bottom it is an assumption, a hunch, indeed a kind of “inspiration” [...]—that they defend with reasons they have sought after the fact.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

1. Introduction¹

There is a serious *prima facie* challenge to the practical value of doing philosophy: intractable disagreement among philosophical experts² exists over answers to

¹ Thanks to Julius Schoenherr, Jake Sheen, and a referee for helpful feedback on prior drafts.

² Someone might worry that this appraisal of disagreement among philosophers is too strong: it might not be that *all* parties, or *even most parties*, in the dispute are informed about the arguments relevant to the dispute. However, it is sufficient for my purposes that there are *some*

fundamental philosophical questions despite the fact that ‘... arguments thought relevant to the disputed questions are... [often] well-known to all parties to the dispute’ (Kelly 2005, 173). Such experts hold numerous, mutually exclusive answers to fundamental philosophical questions. It is thus reasonable that truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostics should be disturbed by intractable disagreement.

The phenomenon of intractable disagreement among philosophers is striking, especially since many philosophers hold that ‘philosophy, like all other studies, aims primarily at knowledge’ (Russell 2001 [1912], 90). Wilfred Sellars once wrote that the aim of philosophy ‘is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term’ (2007, 369). Even many contemporary philosophers implicitly take the value of doing philosophy to be, in part, a truth-finding, error-avoiding enterprise. It is difficult to suppose that if such philosophers took seriously the prospect that doing philosophy would be an unreliable, or perhaps dubious approach, to securing fundamental philosophical truths that they would continue to see the value of doing philosophy as intact.

Enter the philosophical agnostic: after weighing this omnipresent and apparently intractable disagreement, we may imagine that our agnostic (call her ‘Betsy’) would conclude that she isn’t better situated epistemically, to find answers to such questions, than philosophical experts. And she concludes that she should remain agnostic about philosophical matters. The philosophical literature backs up Betsy’s impulse: many skeptical challenges to the epistemic credentials of philosophical claims have been well defended by philosophers (Goldberg 2009, 2013; Licon 2012, 2013; Kornblith 2013; Frances 2016).

Barriers to the epistemic credentials of philosophical claims, along with plausible means-ends reasoning, implies that the agnostic³ has good reason to conclude that doing philosophy *for the purposes of seeking truth and avoiding falsehood to an equal degree* is irrational (i.e., it would be a waste of time). By implication, doing philosophy *ceteris paribus* is less valuable than we might have otherwise supposed, if one holds that there value of doing philosophy is, at least to a large degree, a product of discovering philosophical truths. If philosophizing isn’t a viable means of finding philosophical truths, the value of doing philosophy is partly undermined.⁴ Call this *the agnostic challenge*. We can illustrate the agnostic challenge with the following story:

parties in the dispute who are familiar enough with the arguments on all sides of the dispute who still disagree with each other.

³ The focus on agnostics should not be confused with a focus on philosophical *novices*.

⁴ These issues relate to whether philosophy makes progress (Stoljar 2017; Chalmers 2015).

Why the Heck Would You Do Philosophy? A Practical Challenge to Philosophizing

Betsy is a sincere philosophical agnostic who wants to find truths, and avoid falsehoods, about fundamental philosophical issues. However, Betsy recognizes that philosophical experts hold a many incompatible answers to such questions. Betsy concludes that such intractable dissensus is good evidence that she would be no better epistemically situated to find true answers herself. But if so, doing philosophy to find truths and avoid falsehoods about fundamental philosophical issues would be seemingly intractable. Betsy concludes that this seemingly intractability makes doing philosophy, *for her purposes*, practically irrational (e.g., it would be a waste of time).

In this paper, I argue that there are no obviously satisfactory answers to the agnostic challenge. I take Betsy as my paradigm agnostic. In a nutshell, the agnostic challenge traffics in skepticism about the value of doing philosophy to find fundamental truths, and avoid falsehoods, about philosophical questions—the agnostic challenge doesn't target the value of doing philosophy *simpliciter*. There are a number of reasons doing philosophy may be valuable (e.g., philosophical inquiry might be intrinsically valuable) that are compatible with the agnostic challenge. There may be philosophical experts who find that reasonable disagreement with their colleagues is sufficiently valuable such that doing philosophy is worthwhile. Even still, it would be worrying if we cannot convince a reasonable agnostic like Betsy that doing philosophy *for the purposes of finding truth and avoiding falsehood* is a worthwhile pursuit. Such a failure should significantly diminish the value of doing philosophy.

2. The Agnostic Challenge

The agnostic challenge has two facets: worries that settling philosophical disputes is intractable that tie into the prudential worry that attempting to solve an intractable philosophical dispute, for the sake of trying to solve it, is practically irrational. And in section (A), I briefly defend the practical claim. Then in sections (B) and (C), I defend the claim that philosophizing in order to find philosophical truths and avoid error is likely an intractable task, especially with respect to fundamental⁵ philosophical issues. Finally, I address possible answers to the agnostic challenge and find them (mostly) wanting.

A. IRRATIONALITY AND INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS

At the heart of the agnostic challenge is the following prudential claim:

⁵ Agnostics like Betsy might accept that doing philosophy allows one to discover certain kinds of philosophical truths—e.g., justification cannot transform true belief into knowledge—but this concession wouldn't satisfy the agnostic challenge.

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

WASTE If F is an intractable problem, trying to solve F, *for the sake of solving* F, is irrational (Bratman 1998, 61–7; Finkelstein 2007).

By way of motivating WASTE, we need to briefly think about the irrationality of trying to solve intractable problems: it is irrational to attempt solving a problem we take to be intractable solely for the sake of trying to solve it. The point is not that trying to solve an intractable problem *for enjoyment* is irrational, otherwise playing Tetris would be pointless. Instead, it is trying to solve an intractable problem that one has good reason to believe is intractable, solely for the sake of trying to solve the problem, is practically irrational.

There are eccentric individuals with different prudential values who will fail to feel the pull of WASTE. Peter enjoys feeling frustrated by the process of problem solving; he is never satisfied by the prospect of solving a problem, not to mention *actually* solving it. In order to enhance his frustration, and thus his enjoyment, he inhibits his ability to solve problems. Peter enjoys trying to solve a problem without making progress toward solving it⁶. Even if one fails to find WASTE plausible, Betsy is rational to accept it—WASTE might not be rationally compelling, but it is rationally acceptable. It seems reasonable to hold that trying to solve an apparently intractable problem, solely for the sake of solving the apparently intractable problem, is irrational.

B. FUNDAMENTAL PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

We may wonder how to characterize a fundamental philosophical issue. Philosophers entertain lots of questions, many of which look piecemeal (e.g., how best to characterize Fregean senses). It may be unclear how to distinguish between *fundamental* and *non-fundamental* philosophical questions. However, it is not vital to precisely capture the nature of fundamental philosophical questions for a couple of reasons—though we should be able to *roughly* characterize them as a rough characterization is what is minimally needed to motivate the agnostic challenge. First, we can characterize them *operationally*; and second, much of what philosophy itself purports to do involves answering questions fundamental to the concerns of agnostics like Betsy, e.g., how we could have knowledge of abstract objects? Along with Chalmers (2015), I frame fundamental philosophical questions as,

[Questions] of philosophy [...] like: What is the relationship between mind and body? How do we know about the external world? What are the fundamental

⁶ If one supposes that such cases aren't possible (i.e. trying to phi, while trying not to succeed at phi-ing, is not a coherent possibility), then all the better for the agnostic challenge.

Why the Heck Would You Do Philosophy? A Practical Challenge to Philosophizing

principles of morality? Is there a god? Do we have free will? [...] any philosopher can come up with a list of 10 or so big questions fairly easily, and I suspect that there would be a lot of overlap between these lists. We could even use these lists to operationally define the big questions: the big questions of a field at time t are those that members of that field would count as the big questions of the field at time t (5).

Someone might worry that if we characterize fundamental problems operationally, then what counts as a fundamental problem might change from generation of philosophers to the next; in such a short time, it might be unreasonable to expect that finding true answers to fundamental philosophical questions would be intractable. While one would be right to press this point, it will only take us so far: many questions in contemporary philosophers would no doubt count as *fundamental* bear a striking similarity to many questions that have occupied many philosophers since Plato and Aristotle (even if many questions *don't* possess this resemblance). For example, questions about the evil of death, the nature of right and wrong, the nature of knowledge, the relationship between mind and body, etc., are questions philosophers still strive to answer. It is fundamental philosophical questions of broadly this sort that interest agnostics like Betsy.

C. INTRACTABLE DISAGREEMENT AMONG PHILOSOPHERS

Why think finding truths about fundamental philosophical issues is intractable? One answer to this question involves appealing to apparently intractable philosophical disagreement. Though disagreement *per se* isn't epistemically worrisome—otherwise, we should be skeptical about nearly everything we believe, as there are undoubtedly folks somewhere who would disagree—certain kinds of disagreement are epistemically worrisome: mutually inconsistent positions held by philosophical experts is reason to worry about the reliability of philosophical methods.

If we assume philosophical experts are (roughly) equally competent using such methods, then their intractable disagreement is reason to doubt the reliability of such methods. If the methods were used correctly, and they were reliable, then we should expect plenty more convergence among philosophers than we find. Either some experts are inept with regard to philosophical methods—such a possibility doesn't help since Betsy doesn't have good reason to suppose she would be more competent than experts—or philosophical methods are unreliable. Either way then, agnostics like Betsy have a serious *prima facie* reason not to suppose that doing philosophy is not a reliable means of arriving at the truth. However, the epistemic situation gets worse: we need not hold that philosophical methods are

unreliable to produce a defeater for philosophical beliefs. Even if philosophical methods are reliable, we would still have a reason to suppose that they aren't reliable in cases of intractable disagreement, and those cases are omnipresent among philosophers (Goldberg 2009, 109-11; Kornblith 2013; Barnett 2017).

Agnostics like Betsy lack good reason to think that they would be better epistemically situated to find truths and avoid falsehoods about fundamental philosophical issues than philosophical experts. A truth-seeking, error-avoiding philosophical *novice* would have no reason to invest the time and energy required to become a philosophical expert if she'll be no better epistemically situated to find answers than the current experts. She would likely end up disagreeing with her colleagues, but without a means to fruitfully resolve the disagreement.

Although there isn't nearly as much empirical evidence, regarding the extent of disagreement among philosophical experts, as we might like, there is enough to strongly suggest that experts are deeply divided: out of the thirty questions that contemporary philosophers answered, there was at least *weak* convergence (roughly sixty percent) on seven out of the thirty questions (e.g., normative ethics is almost perfectly divided between the consequentialists, deontologists, virtue ethicists, and others: Bourget and Chalmers 2014). Not every question on the survey cited are *fundamental* philosophical questions; however, it is striking how little agreement there is among philosophers, compared to the sciences or math, on questions that are central to the discipline, especially in light of the lifetime of effort philosophers that devote to these questions (Goldberg 2013; Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2015, 2012; Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009).

Worse still, to the limited extent that there is consensus in philosophy, we might worry that this is sometimes due to epistemically irrelevant factors. For instance, Ballantyne (2014) and Licon (2013) argue that the fact that there are philosophers in nearby possible worlds who disagree with us may pose a skeptical challenge to the justificatory standing of our philosophical beliefs. They are, roughly, cases of disagreement between actual and merely modal philosophers, in which the mere fact that such philosophers aren't actual is epistemically irrelevant, and this ties into the literature on irrelevant influences on belief (Vavova 2018; White 2010). The subject is too developed to properly survey here; we need only appreciate that even given convergence, agnostics like Betsy may still grapple with the agnostic challenge for counterfactual reasons—disagreement is epistemically worrying, but agreement isn't always reassuring.

Even if experts hold reasonable, but incompatible positions (Feldman 2007, Decker 2012) such a prospect doesn't answer the agnostic challenge. Agnostics like Betsy aren't doing philosophy simply to find reasonable answers to fundamental

Why the Heck Would You Do Philosophy? A Practical Challenge to Philosophizing philosophical questions; they could accept that there are many instances of reasonable disagreement, without supposing that such cases settle the agnostic challenge. Betsy might even grant that experts reasonably disagree with each other—the worry here, though, is that reasonable belief doesn't preclude false belief, and thus doesn't address the (equally important for agnostics) issue of avoiding falsehoods.

3. Answering the Challenge

In this section, we'll examine a few answers to the agnostic challenge. However, as I will argue, such answers are unsatisfactory either individually or together in that they should fail to satisfy Betsy's primary concerns. While such answers sometimes capture the value of philosophizing, e.g., the intrinsic value of weighing philosophical reasons, their failure to answer the agnostic challenge should worry professional philosophers and agnostics alike. If philosophizing cannot uncover truths to fundamental questions, then doing philosophy is less valuable than many philosophers would have otherwise supposed.

A. THE SELF-DEFEAT ANSWER

There is an obvious worry that the agnostic challenge is self-defeating. Although the agnostic challenge isn't a fundamental philosophical question, it relies on philosophical methods which appear, given apparently intractable disagreement, to have questionable epistemic credentials. If Betsy has reason to worry that philosophical methods are epistemically suspect, we should worry that the philosophical methods used to motivate the agnostic challenge are epistemically suspect, thereby casting doubt on the agnostic challenge itself. However, despite the initial look of plausibility, there are a few problems with this answer to the agnostic challenge.

First, suppose for the sake argument that the agnostic challenge is right: we have good reason to worry that philosophical methods are poorly equipped to deliver fundamental philosophical truths. An implication would be that one couldn't motivate the agnostic challenge as that would be self-defeating. However, if philosophy cannot muster the resources to motivate the agnostic challenge, then we should find that as troubling as the failure to answer the agnostic challenge to begin with—if philosophical methods are so unreliable, they can't even motivate the agnostic, then the epistemic credentials of those methods are in worse epistemic shape than we originally supposed. This suggests that the self-defeat answer faces the following dilemma:

Either philosophical methods are enough to motivate the agnostic challenge, even

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

if they cannot satisfactorily answer that challenge; Or, such methods aren't sufficient to motivate the agnostic challenge—but then, Betsy should remain an agnostic with regard to philosophical issues, since philosophical methods are too facile to mount a challenge to philosophical practices.

On the first horn of the dilemma, philosophical methods are sufficient to produce reasonable⁷ beliefs, and that in turn is sufficient to get the agnostic challenge off the ground. Agnostics like Betsy aren't worried about reasonable philosophical beliefs. She is worried that it is the task of attempting to find truths, and avoid falsehoods, about fundamental philosophical questions is irrational. On the first horn of the dilemma, agnostics like Betsy can use philosophical methods to pose a viable challenge to the practical value of doing philosophy by appealing to reasonable philosophical beliefs. On the other horn: philosophical methods cannot even justify reasonable philosophical beliefs. And this should be more worrying than the agnostic challenge itself since it appears that philosophical methods are even feebler than originally supposed.

Second, the self-defeat answer misapprehends the agnostic challenge: the challenge doesn't take a stance on whether philosophical methods can yield reasonable philosophical beliefs (Feldman 2007; Decker 2012). The agnostic challenge is about *truth and falsehood*. Agnostics like Betsy do not claim that the agnostic challenge is true, but instead that the agnostic challenge is *reasonable*. Betsy and her agnostic ilk can consistently hold that the agnostic challenge is *reasonable* while holding it offers reason to avoid do philosophy. The challenge neither denies the value of doing philosophy simpliciter, nor that one can hold reasonable philosophical beliefs given informed disagreement. Betsy holding that the agnostic challenge is philosophically reasonable isn't self-defeating⁸ (especially given meta-philosophical disagreement: Kornblith 2013).

B. THE BIRTHING ANSWER

Philosophy has (allegedly) birthed scientific disciplines instrumental in unearthing answers to questions that were once thought philosophical in nature. If so, then doing philosophy might allow philosophers to indirectly find true answers to questions formerly thought philosophical. On this answer, only philosophical

⁷ Philosophical methods may provide *justified* philosophical beliefs; but Betsy worries that there is too much space between justified and truths about fundamental philosophical issues for that to be a satisfying answer to the agnostic challenge (Lehrer and Cohen 1983).

⁸ The apparent self-defeat may not by itself be reason to reject an argument (Matheson 2015; Lammenranta 2011). Those who want to defend the self-defeat answer must say more about the alleged self-defeating nature of the agnostic challenge, even if we grant it is self-defeating.

Why the Heck Would You Do Philosophy? A Practical Challenge to Philosophizing

questions that remain intractable would be the purview of philosophy, while tractable questions would be taken over by science (Chalmers 2015, 25-6). If agnostics like Betsy want to uncover fundamental philosophical truths, then they should do philosophy to birth novel that indirectly reveal where to find fundamental philosophical truths. And while there is passing plausibility to this answer, there are a few reasons that Betsy should be dissatisfied with it.

First, the birthing answer is as contentious as answers to fundamental philosophical questions. Although philosophers often pay lip service to the idea that philosophy has given birth to new disciplines throughout its history—e.g., physics and economics—they rarely say why we should accept this claim⁹. It isn't that Betsy must *know* that the birthing answer is right, but if she wants to avoid falsehoods and find truths about fundamental philosophical questions equally, then she would be susceptible to false answers to fundamental philosophical questions, and also to wasting her time and energy, if the birthing answer is false. And worse still, many fundamental philosophical questions are unanswered despite philosophy birthing disciplines like economics, psychology, and physics. Agnostics like Betsy shouldn't hold their breath, even if the birthing answer is broadly correct.

Second, even if the birthing answer is broadly right, it only tells us that it is *possible* that doing philosophy could birth a new discipline that could indirectly answer fundamental philosophical questions. But if the odds of an agnostic like Betsy birthing a new discipline that would help find true answers to such questions were five million-to-one, where she would only succeed once out of five million attempts, she would *still* have good reason to suppose that doing philosophy is irrational: she seriously risks wasting her time without anything to show for it. Even if doing philosophy to birth new disciplines would be fruitful in answering such questions is *possible*, this insufficient to hold that doing philosophy is a good bet for birthing disciplines—even if philosophy births new disciplines, it only happens rarely.

Third, the birthing answer must assume that fundamental philosophical questions are disguised *non-philosophical* questions—philosophers devised them, and scientists answer them. If either (a) some fundamental philosophical questions must be answered using philosophical methods, or (b) some questions are not amenable to philosophical methods, even if they are philosophical in nature, then at best, agnostics Betsy should be partially satisfied. The birthing answer would only give her reason to hold that some fundamental philosophical questions will be

⁹ The paucity of literature on this question should itself be troubling (especially given how often philosophers pay lip service to the claim).

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

answered once there are new, better equipped disciplines to answer such questions have. And, putting all that aside, it still wouldn't be a sufficient reason *to do philosophy* as a means to find truths about fundamental philosophical questions.

Finally, even where established sciences interact with philosophical questions, this is at most, a partial interaction (Chalmers 2015, 10-11): the sciences may constrain answers that philosophers may plausibly defend but without resolving the philosophical aspects of the issue (Mele 2014; Carruthers 2009). Philosophical aspects of fundamental questions often stay intractable, despite advances in the salient sciences. Though the sciences inform and constrain plausible answers to fundamental philosophical questions, such questions frequently retain philosophical aspects that remain susceptible to intractable disagreement among philosophers.

Here a critic may object that whether the birthing answer is correct is likely an empirical issue, and thus isn't a fundamental philosophical question. And if it is an empirical matter, agnostics like Betsy would be better off waiting for the empirical evidence to settle the issue, instead of treating the lack of resolution as reason to stay philosophically agnostic. However, the problem with this objection is that the birthing answer isn't simply resolvable empirically, and likely has philosophical and conceptual issues intertwined with the empirical side of the issue such that Betsy may still find herself facing intractable disagreement with philosophical colleagues.

C. THE SPECTRUM ANSWER

This Quinean viewpoint is that philosophy is on the same spectrum as the sciences, except more abstract and general than the sciences (Quine 1981, 67). However, if that is correct, the agnostic challenge wrongly focuses on one part of the intellectual spectrum that includes philosophy, while discounting the enormous success of the science part of the spectrum, then concludes that given intractable disagreement on the *philosophical part of the spectrum*, it would be irrational for agnostics like Betsy to do philosophy. In a nutshell, it appears that the agnostic challenge might require arbitrarily dividing up the academic spectrum, then pointing to the many failures by philosophers to find truths about fundamental philosophical issues in fashion that is arbitrary—if philosophy is on the same spectrum as science, then shouldn't the successes of science count (at least indirectly) for something with regard to philosophy? And despite the initial plausibility of this answer, it should be less than convincing to agnostics like Betsy for several reasons.

Why the Heck Would You Do Philosophy? A Practical Challenge to Philosophizing

First, even if philosophy is on the same intellectual spectrum as science, this is beside the point with regard to the agnostic challenge. To see why, consider that we could rephrase the agnostic challenge: from the perspective of agnostics like Betsy, segments of the intellectual spectrum do better (the science end of the spectrum) than others (the philosophy end of the spectrum) with regard to finding truths to fundamental questions such disciplines investigate¹⁰. So, if anything, the spectrum answer gives one a reason to do science if they want to make progress on certain kinds of questions. But that doesn't give Betsy reason to do *philosophy* to find the truths about fundamental questions in philosophy. Though it may be that the scientific end of the intellectual spectrum would be a place to make progress in answering certain kinds of questions, it is not clear how this would help agnostics like Betsy.

Second, we should doubt the assumption that underlies the spectrum answer: many methods used by philosophers are *prima facie* distinct from methods used by scientists. This isn't to doubt that there could be some methodological overlap: e.g., philosophers and scientists use thought experiments. Despite some similarities though, philosophical and scientific methods are distinct in many areas. Philosophical tools include intuitions, counterexamples, reflective equilibrium and so on, while scientific tools include qualitative, statistical, and so on. This doesn't deny the distinction between disciplines is a bit fuzzy; however, it is reason to deny that belonging on the same spectrum means that philosophy should get credit for the successes of science.

Third, the spectrum answer is nearly as controversial as answers to fundamental philosophical questions. Suppose that Betsy adopted the spectrum answer: she still would have no idea which part of the spectrum to focus on. While there is seemingly a great deal of progress on the hard sciences end of the spectrum, physics doesn't appear concerned with fundamental *philosophical* questions. Perhaps this is because philosophical questions are disguised scientific questions, for instance. From Betsy's epistemic vantage point, though, physics doesn't appear better placed to help her uncover truths to such questions than accounting (with perhaps a few exceptions). On the other hand, if Betsy adopts philosophical methods to such questions, she will engage with questions that concern her, but at the expense of finding answers she can have confidence are true. Betsy can either get results to questions that do not appear philosophy, or she can work on philosophical questions with good reason to doubt that she would

¹⁰ Even this claim is dubious: many philosophical questions that are not *prima facie* amenable to scientific inquiry. Of course, this might be a false impression, but it is a plausible one.

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

find truths about such issues. Either avenue would be equally unsatisfying to agnostics like Betsy.

D. THE DESTRUCTION ANSWER

Perhaps philosophical methods uncover truths about fundamental questions indirectly via the process of elimination. On this view, philosophical progress would occur by elimination: once we identify wrong views, then we can know by elimination which answers are true based on whatever answers remain. For example, if we have solid reason to believe that God existence is impossible,¹¹ then by the process of elimination we have good reason to adopt atheism. If we could do philosophy in a fashion that would reliably eliminate falsehoods, where only truths remain, Betsy would have good reason to pursue philosophy: it would uncover truths about fundamental philosophical questions via evolutionary pressures. And while there is something plausible to this answer, there are a couple reasons Betsy shouldn't buy it.

First, philosophy doesn't viably shorten the list of viable answers to fundamental philosophical questions to a single answer, even though that would seem to be a prerequisite to satisfying the agnostic challenge. If philosophical methods reliably eliminated all but several viable answers, then philosophers would have little to disagree about. We often reject positions in philosophy, but we rarely get a single viable answer. So, Betsy would have to settle for plausible answers to such questions. However, this is insufficient to answer the agnostic challenge.

Second, even if philosophy shortened the list of viable answers to fundamental philosophical questions to a single answer, we should worry that this destruction only makes room for more sophisticated versions of previously discarded positions. For example, the moral skeptic doesn't convince the moral realist to disavow her metaethical realism, but instead motivates the moral realist to devise a more sophisticated position. As Lycan (2013) notes:

Philosophical consensus is far more the result of *Zeitgeist*, fad, fashion, and careerism than of accumulation of probative argument [...] as a game, I was once challenged by Red Watson to exhibit the arguments that refuted sense-datum theory. I spent an hour or two marshalling them. He swiftly and decisively pointed out that each of them either begs the question or at least has a premise that would not impress an actual sense-datum theorist in the slightest. And *not because the sense-datum theorist was being dogmatic* (116-7, emphasis mine).

¹¹ Some philosophers have made this argument, but with little success: Martin and Monnier (2003).

Why the Heck Would You Do Philosophy? A Practical Challenge to Philosophizing

The same could be claimed of most debates in philosophy: they pressure interlocutors to devise more sophisticated versions of their position to respond to criticism. However, this doesn't help agnostics like Betsy. It is inadequate to merely discredit answers to fundamental philosophical questions unless the product is a single viable answer, while precluding the possibility of more sophisticated competing answers arising as a result. For example, many philosophers hold that there are definitive objections to substance dualism; however, other philosophers, in response, have devised more sophisticated defenses of the view (Lycan 2009; Molyneux 2015).

4. Conclusion

The agnostic challenge is a serious challenge to the practical value of doing philosophy: if one is a truth seeking, error-avoiding agnostic, then doing philosophy for the sake of finding answers to fundamental philosophical questions is irrational. Agnostics like Betsy have little reason to hold that they would be more likely to find truths and avoid falsehoods about fundamental philosophical issues, than philosophical experts. The agnostic challenge is weighty reason for philosophers to worry that doing philosophy isn't as valuable as they may have otherwise believed, especially since many philosophers hold that philosophical inquiry is valuable as an avenue to truth. If doing philosophy isn't a viable means of finding fundamental philosophical truths, then much of the value of doing philosophy is undermined.

References

- Ballantyne, N. 2014. "Counterfactual Philosophers." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88 (2): 368-387.
- Barnett, Z. 2017. "Philosophy without Belief." *Mind* 128 (509): 109-138 <doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzw076>
- Bergmann, M. 1997. "Internalism, Externalism and the No-Defeater Condition." *Synthese* 110 (3): 399-417.
- Bourget, D. & D.J. Chalmers. 2014. "What do Philosophers Believe?" *Philosophical Studies* 170 (3): 465-500.
- Bratman, M. E. 1998. "Toxin, Temptation, and the Stability of Intention." In *Rational Commitment and Social Justice*, eds. J. L. Coleman and C. W. Morris, 59-83. Cambridge University Press.
- Carruthers, P. 2009. "How We Know Our Own Minds: The Relationship Between Mindreading and Metacognition." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32 (2): 121-138.

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

- Chalmers, D. J. 2015. "Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?" *Philosophy* 90 (1): 3-31.
- Decker, J. 2012. "Disagreement, Evidence, and Agnosticism." *Synthese* 187 (2): 753-783.
- Earlenbaugh, J. & B. Molyneux. 2009. "Intuitions are Inclinations to Believe." *Philosophical Studies* 145 (1): 89-109.
- Feldman, R. 2007. "Reasonable Religious Disagreements." In *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise Antony, 194-214. Oxford University Press.
- Finkelstein, C. 2007. "Rational Temptation." In *Practical Rationality and Preference*, eds. Christopher W. Morris and Arthur Ripstein, 56-80. Cambridge University Press.
- Frances, B. 2016. "Worrisome Skepticism about Philosophy." *Episteme* 13 (3): 289-303.
- Goldberg, S. 2009. "Reliabilism in Philosophy." *Philosophical Studies* 142 (1): 105-117.
- . 2013. "Defending Philosophy in the Face of Systematic Disagreement." In *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Diego E. Machuca, 277-294. Routledge.
- Kelly, T. 2005. "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement." In *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Vol. 1, eds. John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler, 167-196. Oxford University Press.
- Kornblith, H. 2013. "Is Philosophical Knowledge Possible?" In *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Diego E. Machuca, 260-276. Routledge.
- Lammenranta, M. 2011. "Disagreement, Skepticism, and the Dialectical Conception of Justification." *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 1 (1): 3-17.
- Lehrer, K. & S. Cohen. 1983. "Justification, Truth, and Coherence." *Synthese* 55 (2): 191-207.
- Licon, J.A. 2012. "Sceptical Thoughts on Philosophical Expertise." *Logos and Episteme* 3 (3): 449—458.
- . 2013. "On Merely Modal Epistemic Peers: Challenging the Equal-Weight View." *Philosophia* 41 (3): 809-823.
- Lycan, W. G. 2009. "Giving Dualism Its Due." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87 (4): 551-563.
- . 2013. "On Two Main Themes in Gutting's What Philosophers Know." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51 (1): 112-120.
- Martin, M. & R. Monnier. 2003. *The Impossibility of God*. Prometheus Books.

- Why the Heck Would You Do Philosophy? A Practical Challenge to Philosophizing
- Matheson, J. 2015. "Are Conciliatory Views of Disagreement Self-Defeating?" *Social Epistemology* 29 (2): 145-159.
- Mele, A. R. 2014. *Free: Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will*. Oxford University Press USA.
- Molyneux, B. 2015. "Zombies and Probability: A Stochastic Approach to the Dualist's Problems." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 52 (3): 201-213.
- Quine, W. V. (ed.). 1981. *Theories and Things*. Harvard University Press.
- Russell, B. 2001 [1912]. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Schwitzgebel, E. & F. Cushman. 2012. "Expertise in Moral Reasoning? Order Effects on Moral Judgment in Professional Philosophers and Non-Philosophers." *Mind and Language* 27 (2): 135-153.
- . 2015. "Philosophers' Biased Judgments Persist Despite Training, Expertise and Reflection." *Cognition* (141): 127-137.
- Stoljar, D. 2017. *Philosophical Progress: In Defence of a Reasonable Optimism*. Oxford University Press.
- Vavova, K. 2018. "Irrelevant Influences." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96 (1):134-152.
- White, R. 2010. "You just believe that because..." *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (1): 573-615.