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Progress and Pluralism in Philosophy*

von Trenton Merricks

The methods of Philosophy deliver a certain sort of philosophical understanding. But those methods are not able – not all on their own – to reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. This inability plays a key role in this paper's argument for the conclusion that Philosophy has made a lot of progress despite persisting disagreement among philosophers about substantive philosophical claims. Moreover – so this paper maintains – this disagreement constitutes a welcome intellectual pluralism, allowing those with a wide variety of philosophical views to fully participate in the discipline of Philosophy. This paper then applies the above points to the relation of metaphysics to theology.

1. The Discipline of Argument

This will end up being a paper about the academic discipline of Philosophy. But it starts out by describing a different academic discipline, the (made up by me) discipline of “Argument.” You are doing Argument if and only if you are building arguments. But not just any arguments. The arguments that should count as a contribution to Argument are exactly the arguments that should count as a contribution to Philosophy.

Arguments in Argument are just like arguments in Philosophy. So doing Argument also counts as doing Philosophy. Nevertheless, Philosophy differs from Argument. For doing Philosophy – unlike doing Argument – includes more than just building arguments. For example, making distinctions, clarifying ideas, engaging in thought experiments, and interpreting texts can all count as doing Philosophy. While each of these examples often involves building arguments, each can still count as doing Philosophy even when no arguments are involved.

Building arguments – on its own – can lead you to discover that each premise of an argument is the conclusion of a different argument, and so to discover that other premises lead to that premise. But building arguments – on its own – does not show you that any argument's premises are true. So if you know that an argument's premises are true, then you know this – at least in part – by way of some “method” other than the method of building arguments.

(Maybe the method of building arguments – on its own – could show that an argument's premises are true if you had arguments for each premise of that argument, and arguments for each premise of those arguments, and so on, ad infinitum. But none of us will ever have

an infinite amount of such arguments. So I shall continue to say that the method of argument does not show you – not all on its own – that any argument's premises are true.)

Again, building arguments – on its own – does not show you that any argument's premises are true. An argument shows you that its conclusion is true only if you know (or believe with justification) that its premises are true. So building arguments – on its own – is not a way to discover that any argument's conclusion is true. So building arguments in Argument is not – not all on its own – a way to discover the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims, not even when the conclusions of those arguments are themselves substantive philosophical claims.¹

The discipline of Argument has exactly one method: building arguments. The building of arguments in Argument is not – not all on its own – a way to discover the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. So the method of the discipline of Argument cannot – not all on its own – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims.

But the method of the discipline of Argument can – on its own – deliver something epistemically valuable. That method can deliver a sort of *understanding*. One can have this sort of understanding with regard to a philosophical claim if one knows some of the theses that that claim results from, and also knows some of the results that follow from that claim. In other words, if you discover arguments that have that claim as a conclusion, and also discover arguments that take that claim as a premise, you can often achieve a sort of understanding with regard to that philosophical claim.²

I say that the method of argument can – on its own – deliver the above sort of understanding, but cannot – not on its own – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. So I am not counting the above sort of understanding as itself a substantive philosophical claim. And I am not counting the claim that certain premises lead to a conclusion as a substantive philosophical claim. Perhaps the best way for me to explain how I am using ‘substantive philosophical claim’ is by offering the following paradigmatic examples:

- God exists.
- An action is morally right just in case it maximizes overall happiness.
- Each of us has psychological persistence conditions.

Again, the methods of Argument alone cannot reveal the truth-value of what I am here calling ‘substantive philosophical claims’. Nevertheless, many pursue Argument because they want to discover the truth-value of such claims, and in particular the truth-value of the claims that are the conclusions of the arguments they build. They might succeed. For they

¹ The conclusions of some arguments state that this or that substantive philosophical claim is false. Let us take such a conclusion to itself be a substantive philosophical claim.

I have assumed in the text that arguments have premises. But there can be arguments without premises. Such arguments are worth considering only when their conclusion is a tautology. A tautology is not (what I mean by) a substantive philosophical claim. So let us ignore arguments without premises.

² This is just one species of understanding that is epistemically valuable. See for discussion of more such species, e. g., John Bengson; Terence Cuneo; Russ Shafer-Landau, *Philosophical Methodology: From Data to Theory*, Oxford 2020; Linda T. Zagzebski, *Recovering Understanding*, in: Linda T. Zagzebski (Ed.), *Epistemic Values*, Oxford 2020, 57–77; Stephen Grimm (Ed.), *Making Sense of the World: New Essays in the Philosophy of Understanding*, Oxford 2018.

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might know that the premises of their arguments are true. But if so, they did not come to know this by pursuing Argument alone.

2. Some Norms in Argument

I am going to describe some norms in the discipline of Argument. And I am going to say why these norms make sense for this discipline.

It would violate the norms in the discipline of Argument to grade students in a class in Argument on the truth-value they assign to each of the following:

- God exists.
- An action is morally right just in case it maximizes overall happiness.
- Each of us has psychological persistence conditions.

It makes sense that grading students in this way would not be appropriate in a class in Argument. For the method of the discipline of Argument does not reveal the truth-value of any of the above three claims.

Depending on what was covered in class, it could be appropriate to ask the students to present an argument for the conclusion that each of us has psychological persistence conditions; and then to ask them to select one of that argument's premises, and present an argument against that premise. And it could be appropriate to ask parallel questions about arguments for utilitarianism, or arguments for the existence of God. For these are questions about the sort of arguments that constitute the discipline of Argument. But it would not be appropriate to ask – and grade – those students on what they take the truth-value of the conclusion of any of those arguments to be.

Students about to take their first class in the department of Argument are sometimes confused about what they will be taught. Some students show up hoping to be taught whether God exists, or whether utilitarianism is true, or whether they would enjoy “digital immortality” if their memories were downloaded to a computer that will always exist, or at least exist long after their bodies are gone. But to teach students that God exists, or that utilitarianism is true, or that they could enjoy digital immortality would violate the norms in the discipline of Argument. These norms make sense. This is because teaching (for example) that utilitarianism is true would be to teach something that goes beyond what can be shown by the method of the discipline of Argument. So teachers of Argument explain that rather than be taught whether utilitarianism is true, students will instead be taught how to reason about utilitarianism and related topics in a rigorous and explicit way.

The norms in the discipline of Argument are not restricted to norms about teaching. They also include norms about research. For example, it would violate the norms in the discipline of Argument to say: “We should not hire this person because this person's research is not good enough; it is not good enough because it includes a lot of arguments with utilitarianism as a conclusion, and utilitarianism is false.” It would also violate the norms in the discipline for a journal referee to say: “Dear Editor, my verdict is that you should not publish this paper. You should not publish this paper because it has the false conclusion that persons have psychological persistence conditions.” These disciplinary norms make sense.

For the truth-value of philosophical claims cannot be revealed by the method of the discipline of Argument on its own, not even when those claims are the conclusions of arguments.

But decisions do have to be made about hiring in departments of Argument and publication in Argument journals. Such decisions involve evaluating research. We have just seen a couple of ways of evaluating research that would violate the norms in Argument. But there are also ways of evaluating research that conform to those norms. For example, negatively evaluating a researcher's argument because its conclusion clearly does not follow from its premises conforms to those norms. And positively evaluating a researcher's arguments for the following reasons – among others – conforms to those norms: their conclusions follow from (but are not presupposed by) their respective premises; there is a lot of “epistemic distance” between their premises and their respective conclusions; and they are mutually supporting and move in a comprehensive way through a philosophical topic.

Recall from Section 1. that the method of the discipline of Argument – that is, building arguments – delivers a certain sort of understanding. And as the arguments around a philosophical topic become more mutually supporting and more comprehensive, the understanding that those arguments deliver becomes deeper and so more epistemically valuable. So it makes sense that it conforms to the norms of Argument to positively evaluate a researcher's arguments for being mutually supporting and for moving in a comprehensive way through a philosophical topic.

In building mutually supporting arguments, researchers in Argument often build new arguments based on their earlier arguments. That is, they often build an argument with a premise that is the conclusion of some other argument (or arguments) that they have built. So they often build arguments with a premise that is itself a substantive philosophical claim. The truth-value of such a premise cannot be revealed by the method of the discipline of Argument (see § 1). So it makes sense that the following referee report violates the norms in Argument: “You should not publish this paper because it has a false premise, the premise that each adult human animal is a person.”

Interesting is better than boring. So it makes sense that another norm in the discipline of Argument is that a researcher's arguments should be interesting. An argument is interesting only if its premises are motivated. Here are just two of the ways that premises can count as motivated in Argument: enough practitioners of Argument believe them; or the Argument literature includes interesting arguments that have those premises as conclusions. A premise and its denial can both be motivated in the two ways just noted. But a premise and its denial cannot both be true. So being motivated is not the same as being true.

There is more to being interesting than having motivated premises. For example – and everything else being equal – the more philosophically important an argument's conclusion is, the more interesting that argument is. A conclusion and its denial can both be important. But a conclusion and its denial cannot both be true. So being important is not the same thing as being true.

Practitioners of the discipline of Argument build arguments for philosophical conclusions. But the point of those arguments – as far as that discipline is concerned – is not revealing the truth of their conclusions. So an argument can be a valuable contribution to the discipline of Argument even if we already know that its conclusion is true, at least if

that argument is interesting and delivers understanding of the sort described above. So it is no surprise that practitioners of Argument often build arguments for conclusions that we already know are true. Here is how Peter van Inwagen describes this phenomenon, albeit as it occurs in a discipline other than Argument:

“... there are [practitioners of this discipline] who have devoted a great deal of time and care to arguments for conclusions that almost everyone was going to accept in any case. Arguments for the existence of an external world, for other minds, for the mathematical or physical possibility of one runner’s overtaking another...”³

Someone gives a talk in the Argument Department. The speaker’s talk presents an argument whose conclusion is a metaphysical claim. But then a member of the Argument Department who has no opinion at all on the truth (or falsity) of that metaphysical claim – this member’s research concerns arguments for conclusions in political philosophy – raises a serious objection to the speaker’s argument, and also suggests a way to improve that argument. This illustrates another norm in the discipline of Argument: a practitioner of Argument should be able to contribute to the question-and-answer session after a talk even if that practitioner has no opinion on the truth-values of the claims defended in that talk. This norm makes sense. For everyone in Argument has received the same training, namely, how to build arguments – as opposed to training in the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims.

Practitioners of Argument often think well of another practitioner’s research even when they think that many of that practitioner’s arguments have some false premises and a false conclusion. This makes sense. This is because being good at doing Argument is a matter of building arguments that are evaluated positively in ways that conform to the norms in the discipline. For example, you are good at Argument if you build mutually supporting arguments for important conclusions that have motivated premises and that constitute a comprehensive way of moving through a philosophical topic. And you can be good at Argument for this reason even if many of your arguments have some false premises and a false conclusion.

3. Some Norms in Philosophy

Pretend that there is an infallible Oracle that occasionally announces that this or that substantive philosophical claim is true. Add that it conforms to a particular discipline’s norms to give true/false quizzes with regard to Oracle-announced claims. Finally, add that this discipline is in other ways – ways unrelated to the Oracle – a lot like Philosophy as we know it. Perhaps this discipline would even count as Philosophy. But none of this matters here. This is because I am here interested in the actual methods of Philosophy, and deferring to an Oracle is not one of them.

There are norms in academia as a whole. Consider, for example, the norm that a student should not be given extra credit for flattering a professor. This is a norm in the discipline of Philosophy too. But I do not think that academia-wide norms give us insight into anything distinctive about the discipline of Philosophy. So I do not think that academia-wide norms give us insight into the methods of Philosophy. On the other hand, I do think that some of the norms in Philosophy pertaining to substantive philosophical claims can give us insight into the methods of Philosophy. And, again, I am here interested in the (actual) methods of Philosophy.

The relevant norms in Philosophy are exactly the same as the norms in Argument that were described in the preceding section. For example, it would violate the norms in Philosophy no less than it would violate the norms in Argument for a journal referee to say: “Dear Editor, my verdict is that you should not publish this paper. You should not publish this paper because it has the false conclusion that persons have psychological persistence conditions.” Here is another example. It would violate the norms in Philosophy no less than it would violate the norms in Argument to grade students on the truth-value they assign to each of the following:

- God exists.
- An action is morally right just in case it maximizes overall happiness.
- Each of us has psychological persistence conditions.

Philosophy is like Argument with regard to the norms described in the preceding section. I assume that these norms in Philosophy make sense. As I noted in the preceding section, these norms in Argument make sense in large part because the method of the discipline of Argument cannot – not all on its own – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. I think that these norms in Philosophy make sense for the same reason. So I conclude that the methods of the discipline of Philosophy cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-value of (most) substantive philosophical claims.⁴

My reasoning for this conclusion is compelling only if there is not an equally good, or better, competing explanation of the relevant norms in Philosophy making sense. Let us consider what might be the most obvious competitor. According to this competitor, the controversial nature of most substantive philosophical claims explains why the relevant norms in Philosophy make sense. For example, it is controversial whether God exists; and – according to this competitor – this explains why it would not be appropriate to ask on a quiz in a Philosophy class for the truth-value of the claim that God exists.

I deny that the controversial nature of most substantive philosophical claims explains why the relevant norms in Philosophy make sense. One reason that I deny this begins with the following observation. It would violate the norms in Philosophy to lower a student’s grade if the student marked one of the following as true on a quiz:

- I am a brain in a vat.
- Oysters are persons.
- Telling one lie to save the whole world is not morally permissible.

⁴ Maybe the methods of Philosophy have, all on their own, revealed the truth-value (most likely the falsity) of a few substantive philosophical claims. That is fine. That is why I have included ‘(most)’ in the sentence in the text. But I shall leave the qualification ‘(most)’ implicit in most of what follows.

³ Peter Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford 2006, 40.

But the truth-value of none of these three claims is controversial. That is, almost everyone would agree that each of these three claims is false.

Again, I think that it would violate the norms in Philosophy to lower a student's quiz grade if the student marked as true one of the above uncontroversially false claims. So I conclude that there are norms in Philosophy against giving true/false quizzes with regard to philosophical claims with uncontroversial truth-values. These norms making sense is not explained by the controversial nature of most substantive philosophical claims.

There is another reason to deny that the controversial nature of most substantive philosophical claims explains why the relevant norms in Philosophy make sense. That reason begins by noting that the following referee report would violate the norms in Philosophy:

The journal should reject this paper because its conclusion is that only The One exists, and this conclusion is false, and uncontroversially so. There is no point in offering the author the opportunity to revise and resubmit. For this paper cannot be fixed by motivating its premises or by being made more rigorous. This is because this paper's premises are very well motivated – indeed, almost everyone believes all those premises – and those premises clearly entail (but do not presuppose) the conclusion that only The One exists.

Again, this report would violate the norms in Philosophy. I think this illustrates that it would violate the norms in Philosophy to disvalue philosophical research simply because that research supports claims that are false, and uncontroversially so. The controversial nature of most substantive philosophical claims does not explain why these norms make sense.

The above two examples illustrate a general point. This is the point that the norms in Philosophy pertaining to substantive philosophical claims pertain to substantive philosophical claims as a whole, not just to the controversial ones. I deny that the controversial nature of most substantive philosophical claims explains why these norms – again, norms that pertain even to uncontroversial substantive philosophical claims – make sense.

Let me summarize the reasoning of this section. There are certain norms in Philosophy pertaining to substantive philosophical claims, norms that Philosophy shares with Argument. Let us assume that these norms in Philosophy make sense. I think that the best explanation of these norms making sense is that the methods of the discipline of Philosophy – whatever those methods turn out to be – cannot reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims, not all on their own. So I conclude that the methods of Philosophy cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims.

4. The Methods of Philosophy

This section's conclusion is the same as the conclusion of the preceding section. This is the conclusion that the methods of Philosophy cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. The preceding section defended this conclusion without saying what those methods are. But this section begins by pointing out that one method of Philosophy is building arguments.

One method of Philosophy is building arguments, and in particular the same arguments as are built in Argument. Building these arguments does not – not all by itself – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims, not even the philosophical claims that are the conclusions of those arguments (see § 1). Nor do I think that the other methods of Philosophy – such as, for example, making distinctions, clarifying ideas, engaging in thought experiments, and interpreting texts – reveal the truth-value of (most) substantive philosophical claims, not even when working in concert with building arguments.

Suppose that just seeing that a substantive philosophical claim has a particular truth-value was a method of Philosophy. This method would reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. But I deny this method is a method of Philosophy. Here are two reasons that I deny this.

First, suppose that I think that I just see that a certain substantive philosophical claim is true, and you think that you just see that that claim is false. If just seeing that a substantive philosophical claim has a particular truth-value were a method of Philosophy, then we would have evidence here that one of us is, *ceteris paribus*, better at doing Philosophy than the other. But I think we have no evidence of this at all. What we have, instead, is merely clashing intuitions about a philosophical claim.

Here is a second reason for denying that just seeing that a substantive philosophical claim has a particular truth-value is a method of Philosophy. We teach our students how to do Philosophy. So we teach them how to pursue the methods of Philosophy. But we do not teach our students to just see the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. And any philosopher who seemed to be teaching this would not really be teaching students how to do Philosophy. This philosopher would, instead, be making philosophical disciples.

Philosophers *qua* philosophers have expertise in the discipline of Philosophy, and so have expertise in employing the methods of Philosophy. That is what makes them philosophers. Such expertise includes, for example, expertise with regard to the arguments for and against various substantive philosophical claims. But philosophers *qua* philosophers do not have expertise with regard to the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. All this further supports the conclusion that the methods of Philosophy cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims.

The methods of Philosophy cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. But those methods can – on their own – deliver something epistemically valuable. In particular, the method of building arguments can – on its own – deliver a sort of understanding. For if you discover arguments that have a philosophical claim as a conclusion, and also discover arguments that take that claim as a premise, you can often achieve a sort of understanding with respect to that philosophical claim.

Suppose that one reason that Philosophers build arguments is to achieve this sort of understanding. This would explain why philosophers – the actual subject of van Inwagen's comment in Section 2. – join practitioners of Argument in building arguments for conclusions that we already know are true. This would also explain why we can – and often do – admire the work of philosophers whose views we do not accept.

For example, the twentieth-century philosopher who is almost certainly held in the highest esteem nowadays among anglophone metaphysicians is David Lewis. A significant portion of Lewis's work⁵ trades on his view of the nature of possible worlds, a view that almost everyone thinks is false. But that portion of Lewis's work is widely admired. I think that this work is widely admired because it is full of interesting arguments that are mutually supporting and constitute a comprehensive way of moving through a philosophical topic. Lewis's work delivers understanding of the sort described in this paper.

5. Progress and Convergence

Colin McGinn takes "the magnitude and intractability of much philosophical disagreement"⁶ to be evidence of (or perhaps to constitute) "the chronic lack of progress that seems endemic to [Philosophy]."⁷ Eric Dietrich says that Philosophy "has not progressed one iota"⁸ because – according to Dietrich – philosophers have not come to agree on any substantive philosophical claims. And of course many others take persisting disagreement about substantive philosophical claims to somehow show that Philosophy has made little or no progress, including, for example, William Lycan.⁹

David Chalmers takes persisting disagreement on many of (what he calls) "the big questions of philosophy" to show that there is an important way in which Philosophy has failed to make much progress.¹⁰ But Chalmers is less pessimistic than McGinn or Dietrich or Lycan. For Chalmers also recognizes that there are other ways in which Philosophy has made progress, and perhaps even a lot of progress. He says that there is "often convergence on conditional theses, asserting conditional connections between views"¹¹ He adds: "We better understand the reasons for accepting and rejecting key philosophical theses."¹² And "we have developed ... better arguments."¹³

We have developed better arguments. We do this all the time. I shall argue that this implies that Philosophy has made a lot of progress, and not just a second-rate sort of progress. Rather, I shall argue that this implies that Philosophy has made a lot of paradigmatic progress.

My argument starts by changing the subject. So set aside (for the moment) the question of whether developing better arguments would deliver paradigmatic progress in Philosophy. Let us instead focus on the fact that developing better arguments would deliver paradigmatic progress in a discipline whose only method was building arguments. So developing better arguments would deliver – indeed, would constitute – paradigmatic progress in the discipline of Argument.

⁵ See esp. *David Lewis, On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford 1986.

⁶ *Colin McGinn, Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry*, Oxford 1993, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ *Eric Dietrich, There Is No Progress in Philosophy*, in: *Essays in Philosophy* 12 (2011) 330–345, 334.

⁹ Cf. *William Lycan, On Evidence in Philosophy*, Oxford 2019, 87 f.

¹⁰ *David Chalmers, Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?* In: John Keller (Ed.). *Being, Freedom, and Method: Themes from the Philosophy of Peter van Inwagen*, Oxford 2017, 277–298.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹² *Ibid.*, 284 f.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 285.

The method of Argument cannot – not all on its own – reveal the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims (see § 1). So developing better arguments for substantive philosophical claims is consistent with persisting disagreement about substantive philosophical claims among practitioners of Argument. Moreover, we can explain why such disagreement persists even in the face of better arguments: first, better arguments lead to agreement on conclusions only given agreement on premises; and, second, practitioners of Argument disagree about premises, especially those premises that are themselves substantive philosophical claims.

So developing better arguments for substantive philosophical claims does not automatically lead to agreement about substantive philosophical claims. On the contrary, developing better arguments can even lead to new disagreement. For suppose everyone starts out agreeing that a certain philosophically substantive claim is true. Then a new and better argument for a controversial and philosophically substantive conclusion comes along, an argument that takes the heretofore agreed-on substantive claim as a premise. Some – but not all – will respond by rejecting that substantive premise, as opposed to accepting that controversial conclusion. Thus our new and better argument leads to new disagreement about whether that premise is true, and so to new disagreement about a substantive philosophical claim.

Philosophers and practitioners of Argument build the same arguments. Moreover, Philosophy is like Argument in that its methods deliver a certain sort of understanding, but do not – not all on their own – reveal the truth-value of (most) substantive philosophical claims (§§ 3–4). So successfully pursuing the methods of Philosophy – like successfully pursuing the method of Argument – is consistent with persisting disagreement about substantive philosophical claims. This is especially clear with the method of Philosophy that is building arguments. For, again, we can explain why building better arguments does not lead to agreement about substantive philosophical claims, and even see that building better arguments can lead to new disagreement.

Because Philosophy is like Argument in these ways, I think that what would count as paradigmatic progress in Argument should also count as paradigmatic progress in Philosophy. I agree with Chalmers that philosophers better understand the reasons for accepting and rejecting key philosophical theses, and that we have developed better arguments. I think that we are building better arguments, and as a result gaining more understanding, all the time. So I conclude that Philosophy has made a lot of progress that would count as paradigmatic progress in Argument. So I conclude that Philosophy has made a lot of paradigmatic progress.

Philosophy has made a lot of paradigmatic progress. But there is persisting disagreement among philosophers about substantive philosophical claims. So persisting disagreement about substantive philosophical claims does not imply that Philosophy has not made a lot of paradigmatic progress. (From now on, let 'progress' mean *paradigmatic progress*.) So it is false that convergence on substantive philosophical claims is necessary for progress in Philosophy. Let me now add that it is also false that convergence on substantive philosophical claims is sufficient for progress in Philosophy.

To begin to see why I say that such convergence is not sufficient for progress in Philosophy, consider the following remark from Chalmers:

"In questions about god there appears to have been major convergence toward atheism ... Of course, whether one counts this convergence as convergence to the truth will depend on one's own philosophical views. Theists ... will hold that the convergence constitutes regress rather than progress. But if we assume optimistically that the convergence is indeed convergence to the truth ... that is a sort of progress."¹⁴

Chalmers thinks that "convergence toward atheism" counts as progress in Philosophy if atheism is true. But I disagree. For example, suppose both that atheism is true and also that this convergence is not the result of philosophical arguments for atheism. Moreover, suppose that this convergence is not the result of any other achievements within the discipline of Philosophy. (Suppose – just for example – that this convergence is the result of atheism being more culturally acceptable now than it was three hundred years ago.) Then such convergence does not count as – and is not sufficient for – progress in Philosophy.

Convergence with regard to atheism or any other philosophical claim does not – in and of itself – imply that Philosophy has made progress, not even if that claim is true. But convergence with regard to a philosophical claim that is the result of new philosophical achievements would imply that Philosophy has made progress. For example, suppose that there has been convergence on a philosophical claim as a result of new and better arguments for that claim. This implies that Philosophy has made progress.

Convergence on a philosophical claim as a result of new and better arguments for that claim implies that Philosophy has made progress because it implies that there are new and better arguments for a philosophical claim. This sort of progress in Philosophy would also count as progress in Argument. But convergence on a philosophical claim as a result of new and better arguments for that claim need not – and I think usually does not – imply any further progress in Philosophy, that is, any progress beyond what would count as progress in Argument.

To see why I say this, suppose that we start with what would count as progress in Argument. So suppose we start with convergence with regard to certain premises entailing a substantive philosophical claim. This convergence will result in agreement on the truth of that claim only if there is agreement on the truth of those premises.

Agreement on those premises implies progress in Philosophy only if the agreement on those premises is the result of philosophical achievements. Some of those premises might not be substantive philosophical claims; I do not think that agreement on such premises is usually the result of philosophical achievements. Some of those premises might be substantive philosophical claims; but the methods of Philosophy do not – not all on their own – reveal the truth-value of (most) substantive philosophical claims (see §§ 3–4).

So I think that agreement on the truth of the relevant premises need not, and usually does not, imply progress in Philosophy. As a result, convergence on the truth of a substantive philosophical claim because it is entailed by those premises need not, and usually does not,

¹⁴ Ibid., 284.

imply progress in Philosophy. Moreover, and as already noted, convergence on a philosophical claim definitely does not – in and of itself – imply progress in Philosophy, since such convergence might not be the result of philosophical achievements.

It is false that convergence on substantive philosophical claims is sufficient for progress in Philosophy. And, as we saw above, it is false that convergence on substantive philosophical claims is necessary for progress in Philosophy. Progress in Philosophy is one thing, and convergence on substantive philosophical claims is something else.

So I think that McGinn (among others) is mistaken when he takes persisting disagreement among philosophers about substantive philosophical claims to imply that there is little progress in Philosophy. Relatedly, I think that McGinn is mistaken when he says: "We make so little progress in philosophy for the same kind of reason we make so little progress in unassisted flying: we lack the requisite equipment."¹⁵ Of course, I agree that we lack the requisite equipment to fly without assistance. But I deny that we lack the requisite equipment to do Philosophy.

The equipment required to do Philosophy depends on what the methods of Philosophy are. One such method – perhaps even the central method – is building arguments. And I think we have the requisite equipment to build arguments, including arguments for substantive philosophical claims. Our having this equipment is consistent with our disagreeing about substantive philosophical claims. For, as we saw above, building better arguments does not automatically bring about agreement on the conclusions of those arguments.¹⁶

Disagreement about substantive philosophical claims does not imply that we lack the requisite equipment to build arguments. Nor does such disagreement imply that we lack the requisite equipment to make distinctions or to clarify ideas or to engage in thought experiments or to interpret texts. And I doubt that disagreement on substantive philosophical claims implies that we lack the requisite equipment to pursue any other method of Philosophy.

I do recognize that widespread disagreement about substantive philosophical claims shows that we lack the requisite equipment to just see the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims. But I deny that such widespread disagreement shows that there is a method of Philosophy that we lack the requisite equipment to pursue. This is because – as we saw in Section 4. – I deny that just seeing the truth-value of substantive philosophical claims is a method of Philosophy.

6. Metaphysical Arguments and Theological Convictions

Let me close this paper by applying some of the points defended above to the topic of this issue of the *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift*: the relation of metaphysics to theology.

¹⁵ McGinn, Problems (see fn. 6), 13.

¹⁶ Philosophy makes paradigmatic progress because philosophers build arguments, including arguments for substantive philosophical claims. So it would be misleading to say that no argument in Philosophy for a substantive philosophical claim is successful. So any definition of 'successful argument' that implies that no argument in Philosophy for a substantive philosophical claim is successful is a misleading definition. So van Inwagen's definition of 'successful argument' is misleading, cf. *Van Inwagen, Evil* (see fn. 3), 47–54.

The methods of the discipline of Philosophy cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-value of (most) substantive philosophical claims (see §§ 3 – 4). So it is no surprise that there is a lot of disagreement among philosophers with regard to substantive philosophical claims. Here is another way to describe this disagreement: the discipline of Philosophy is intellectually pluralistic.

One good thing about this pluralism is that it allows those with controversial philosophical views to fully participate in the discipline of Philosophy, and in particular in the part of Philosophy that is building arguments. So utilitarians can participate by building arguments that have utilitarianism as a premise, even though utilitarianism is controversial. Others can participate by building arguments that have the controversial premise that persons have psychological persistence conditions. And so on.

The methods of metaphysics just are the methods of Philosophy. Those methods cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-values of substantive metaphysical claims. So it is no surprise that there is a lot of disagreement among bona fide metaphysicians about metaphysics. In other words, metaphysics is intellectually pluralistic.

One good thing about this pluralism is that you can fully participate in metaphysics even if your metaphysical views are controversial. In particular, you can fully participate in metaphysics by building arguments that have premises that are controversial metaphysical claims. The claim that *God exists* is a *metaphysical* claim. And of course many other theological claims are also metaphysical claims. So you can fully participate in metaphysics by building arguments that have premises that are theological claims, even though those claims are controversial.

Suppose that the metaphysical arguments you build with theological premises ultimately lead to a conclusion that you reject. Then you might end up rejecting – or at least reinterpreting – a theological premise that you started with. So even if your metaphysical arguments start with theological premises, those very arguments might lead you to revise your theological starting points. Moreover, if you build enough arguments with theological premises – and you build those arguments because you want to discover the truth – then you will almost certainly come to believe new, additional, theological claims, namely, those theological claims that are the conclusions of your arguments.

Again, the methods of Philosophy cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-values of substantive metaphysical claims. Relatedly, those methods cannot – not all on their own – reveal the truth-values of all the premises of the arguments for substantive metaphysical conclusions. So metaphysics must ultimately get its premises from *something other* than Philosophy in general or metaphysics in particular. I think that metaphysics should take some of its premises from theology. Not everyone will agree. But everyone should agree that metaphysics must take some of its premises from somewhere other than Philosophy, some combination or other of theology, science, untutored common sense, tutored common sense, and so on.

Suppose that you build an argument in the hopes of discovering the truth of a substantive philosophical claim. For you to succeed, that argument's premises must ultimately be known, or believed with justification, for reasons other than (or at least in addition to) philosophical argument itself. So building arguments is not an independent way to discover

the truth of substantive philosophical claims. Building arguments is, instead, an auxiliary way to discover the truth of substantive philosophical claims.

An auxiliary way to discover the truth of substantive philosophical claims is still a way to discover the truth of substantive philosophical claims. And the truth of many substantive philosophical claims would surely remain undiscovered if we stopped building arguments. So I think that wanting to discover the truth of substantive philosophical claims is an excellent reason for building arguments in Philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular.

Die Methoden der Philosophie erlauben es, eine bestimmte Art des philosophischen Verstehens zu entwickeln. Aber diese Methoden sind – allein und für sich – nicht in der Lage, die Wahrheitswerte gehaltvoller philosophischer Aussagen offenzulegen. Diese Einschränkung spielt für die These des vorliegenden Artikels eine Schlüsselrolle insofern, als die Philosophie beachtliche Fortschritte gemacht hat – trotz der Tatsache, dass Philosoph:innen über zahlreiche gehaltvolle philosophische Behauptungen nicht einig sind. Darüber hinaus – so arbeitet dieser Artikel heraus – präsentiert die genannte Nichtübereinstimmung einen willkommenen intellektuellen Pluralismus, der es denen, die ein weites Spektrum von philosophischen Ansichten repräsentieren, gestattet, an der akademischen Philosophie teilzunehmen. Der Aufsatz konkretisiert die skizzierten Überlegungen schlussendlich auch am Verhältnis von Theologie und Metaphysik.