

The book cover features a dark background with a decorative gold border at the top and sides. The border is composed of intricate, repeating patterns. A diagonal line, resembling a torn piece of paper, separates the dark upper section from a teal lower section. The teal section is overlaid with a network of white dots connected by thin lines, creating a web-like or neural network pattern. A small, ornate gold emblem is centered on the dark background, just above the diagonal line.

EDITED BY

RUSSELL  
BLACKFORD

AND

DAMIEN  
BRODERICK

# PHILOSOPHY'S FUTURE

THE  
**PROBLEM**  
OF  
**PHILOSOPHICAL  
PROGRESS**

WILEY Blackwell



**Philosophy's Future**



# **Philosophy's Future**

The Problem of Philosophical Progress

*Edited by Russell Blackford and Damien Broderick*

**WILEY** Blackwell

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*To Graham Oppy,  
for fellowship and support*

*—Russell Blackford*

*To the ghost of Hector Monro,  
Foundation Chair of Philosophy, 1961–1976, Monash University*  
*—Damien Broderick*





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## Introduction I: Philosophy and the Perils of Progress

Russell Blackford

### An Embarrassment for Philosophy?

Philosophy proceeds, supposedly, by way of rational inquiry and argument, yet, as Jonathan Glover has written, “philosophers persistently disagree” to such an extent that the “apparent lack of clear progress or of a body of established results is an embarrassment” (Glover 1988, 160–161). To outside observers, this may appear puzzling. Even professional philosophers sometimes worry about their discipline’s lack of consensus, continuing disagreement on standards and methods, and increasingly fragmented, hyperspecialized state of play.

In an article in the academic journal *Philosophy*, David Chalmers takes what he describes as a glass-half-empty view of the discipline, and his “central thesis” is rather pessimistic: “There has not been large collective consensus to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.” Among these “big questions,” he includes: “What is the relationship between mind and body? How do we know about the external world? What are the fundamental principles of morality? Is there a god? Do we have free will?” (Chalmers 2015, 5). Over hundreds of years, questions like these have provoked curiosity and anxiety, and they have inspired many efforts to obtain defensible answers. It seems reasonable to investigate them with whatever rigor we can muster for the task, but what if philosophers’ best efforts are currently getting nowhere?

In his 2014 book *Reinventing Philosophy of Religion*, Graham Oppy sets out a longer list of philosophical questions, employing it in a definition of philosophy itself:

[T]he study of deep and important questions that are not amenable to study by the methods of other disciplines. How ought one to live? What reason is there to be moral? What is the best political system? What are

our most reliable sources of information about our universe? Is there life after death? Do animals have souls? Is it morally permissible for human beings to eat meat? If numbers exist, what are they like? Is beauty all in the eye of the beholder? Are there objective moral truths?

(Oppy 2014, 2)

Philosophy is notoriously difficult to define, and Oppy's definition is as good as any, even though it prompts additional questions: What is meant here by "deep" and, indeed, by "important"? What do the questions on the list have in common, apart from being deep and important (whatever that amounts to)? Are all these questions *really* so resistant to investigation by the methods of other disciplines? Such cavils notwithstanding, the items on Oppy's list are familiar and evocative enough to suit his purpose, and Oppy goes on to identify even more questions studied by philosophy's various sub-disciplines, especially (but by no means solely) philosophy of religion. In all, he provides a usefully thorough account of the questions that philosophy aims to answer through the use of reason. The glaring problem, alas, is that most or all of them remain unanswered. Individual philosophers have offered answers, of course, usually supported by pages of elaborate reasoning and argument. Some of their arguments may be cogent, and some of their answers may be correct – yet there is no academic consensus about them.

This appearance of persistent and intractable disagreement enables Chalmers to offer the following argument for his central thesis:

- 1) Empirical premise: There has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy.
- 2) Bridging premise: If there has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy, there has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.
- 3) Conclusion: There has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.

(Chalmers 2015, 7)

Perhaps surprisingly, Chalmers does not maintain that (2) is a *logical* truth. The truth values of conditional statements are notoriously tricky (indeed, Frank Jackson touches on this in Chapter 4 in this volume), and in any event Chalmers defines the concept of large collective convergence in a specific way: as the sort of convergence that has obtained in science. He describes situations where the bridging premise might turn out to be technically false. Nonetheless, he considers it true in our actual circumstances, and I'm inclined to agree.

Odd situations and technical hair-splitting aside, if philosophy has not converged in a suitably "large" and "collective" way on *any* set of claims relating to its "big questions," it seems clear enough that it has not converged in that way



on a *true* set of such claims. Furthermore, although philosophers have achieved agreement on smaller issues, it appears plain that they have not done so on such topics as the true relationship between mind and body, how we know (assuming we do) about the external world, what (if any) is the true morality, whether or not there are any divine beings such as the Abrahamic God, and whether we possess free will in one sense or another. For whatever combination of reasons, philosophers go on wrangling about these questions and many more, with no end in sight. In the upshot, Chalmers' premises (1) and (2) appear plausible, as does his conclusion.

The argument does not stand above all possible criticism, and indeed Stuart Brock offers a critique in Chapter 9. Still, a suspicion lingers that something has gone wrong with contemporary philosophy, and Chalmers' argument should at least give us pause. It formalizes the impression that philosophy is not moving toward consensus in the way we often observe in the sciences. In short, philosophy may not be a discipline in crisis ... but there's at least a sense of unease in its rooms and corridors.

## The Problem(s) of Philosophical Progress

In response, we might claim that philosophy has, historically, included many questions for which answers have been found. In that case, philosophy has evidently progressed. After all, ancient Greek philosophy included ideas about the structure and composition of the universe, speculation about human origins (and the origins of life more generally), and some impressive analysis of logic, rhetoric, poetics, and politics. There has been progress with much of this, and not only that part of it now falling within the hard sciences. For example, we know far more than we once did about logic and about various features of language (such as semantics and pragmatics). Chalmers addresses the question of whether physics was once part of philosophy, in which case philosophy has progressed insofar as there has been progress in physics (Chalmers 2015, 10–11). He wonders, however, whether philosophy as we understand it today should get any credit for that, since “what was called philosophy in the past was arguably a different and broader field” (2015, 11).

Yes, but its greater breadth may have been precisely because it included questions that it hived off as they became empirically and theoretically tractable. They could then be assigned to separate academic disciplines where their ramifications could be studied using more reliable and precise methods. According to this picture, philosophers had much to do with the development of new methods, and the more constrained discipline of academic philosophy that we now observe is continuous with the “different and broader field” that first took shape in classical antiquity. In all, *pace* Chalmers, we may have a legitimately inspiring story to tell about philosophy's history and record of progress. Still, is this really enough to settle the unease?

In Chapter 2, James Ladyman offers some plausible responses to the question: “What has philosophy ever done for us?” As he sees things, philosophy has actually done quite a lot, thank you very much, for our understanding of the world and the improvement of human civilizations. Surely he has a point: ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophy helped give birth to the sciences, and to some extent to the specialized humanities. John Locke and other European philosophers made immense contributions to political and constitutional theory, providing a rationale for the rights and freedoms that we enjoy today in liberal democratic societies. “Let us grant”, Ladyman says, “that both natural philosophy and practical philosophy have been of value up to now.” Fine. He accepts, however, that we’re entitled to ask what they have done for us *lately* and whether the future “might be different.”

There could, of course, have been some convergence and progress in the rather distant past, but little convergence on the philosophical questions that remained after the hard sciences went their separate way. Even if philosophy can take credit for further splits, relating to “psychology, linguistics, and economics, for example,” this might seem like only small progress toward answering its big questions as they were understood in, say, 1809 or 1909 (Chalmers 2015, 11). The point is not that philosophy has made no recent progress at all, but it seems far from producing consensus on its big questions – at least as they’ve been widely understood since the rise of the specialized sciences.

Chalmers (2015, 16–29) considers several possible explanations for philosophy’s seemingly limited progress. He devotes a lengthy discussion to the difficulty in finding undeniable premises for philosophical arguments. He considers the “speciation thesis” that philosophy hives off new disciplines (and thus retains only those questions that cannot yet be addressed decisively). He discusses the merits of anti-realism in certain philosophical fields, the problems created by merely verbal disputes, the distance of philosophical arguments and conclusions from relevant data, and various sociological, psychological, and evolutionary explanations for philosophers’ inability to reach consensus. Though all of these explanations have problems, and none seems to tell the whole story, he concludes that each probably contains some truth. However, he says, it remains unclear what is distinctive about philosophical questions that interacts with this mix of factors to account for the lack of convergence in philosophy (Chalmers 2015, 28–29).

In addition to such considerations, philosophy’s record and ability to make effective progress come under attack from other quarters. Some scientists evidently believe that widely debated philosophical questions, such as those relating to the existence of deities, objective morality, and free will, are better answered by people like themselves than by philosophers. Conversely, as Christopher Norris elaborates in Chapter 13 (and in many other publications), a motley crew of cultural relativists, social constructionists, postmodernists, and others question the entire idea of intellectual progress, whether in

philosophy, the sciences, or elsewhere. Although this radically skeptical approach to knowledge, objectivity, and progress may be less prominent in the academy than it seemed a couple of decades ago, its proponents remain influential and should not be underestimated. Their critiques provoke continued examination and defenses of the concepts of knowledge, objectivity, and progress.

Norris has been a leading figure in this debate since the 1980s, and we are pleased to include an important new piece by him in *Philosophy's Future*.

## Philosophers Write Back

Damien Broderick and I asked a varied and distinguished group of philosophers whether there is genuine progress in their discipline, what forms it takes if it exists, and what explains the apparent lack of progress compared to other disciplines, especially the sciences. We sought comment on whether an inability to make progress undermines philosophy's value, what intellectual authority philosophy now carries, and how it should develop in the future.

While most contributors to *Philosophy's Future* replied in defense of philosophy, there were also expressions of concern and suggestions for change. Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay (Chapter 5) put the case strongly that the discipline has lost its way in hyperspecialization and self-absorption, retreating from the rest of the world's concerns. Much contemporary philosophy, they urge, is of little intellectual or social value, focusing on esoteric and hypothetical questions. Boghossian and Lindsay don't deny that philosophers solve problems and make progress within their specialized fields, but they seek to call philosophy back to topics of more personal and public relevance.

Karen Green, in Chapter 15, is critical of contemporary philosophy from a different perspective. She examines how philosophy misrepresents its own history by excluding texts written by women. The immediate effect is to sideline an important body of work, dating back at least as far as Christine de Pizan in the fifteenth century, that could inform philosophical reflection on individual and political life. As a result, she argues, the tradition of Western philosophy is typically presented in a one-sided and incomplete way, and the resources that philosophers draw upon are unnecessarily restricted. On Green's approach, the way forward must involve inclusion and reconsideration of women's philosophical thought.

Like Boghossian and Lindsay, Massimo Pigliucci worries that philosophy can become too self-involved and esoteric. He argues, however, for a relatively optimistic set of ideas (Chapter 6). In particular, Pigliucci defends the notion (adapted from Nicholas Rescher) of "aporetic clusters": families of alternative solutions to problems. These can be developed in ways that are more or less internally consistent and otherwise intellectually attractive, even though this

does not settle – at least in any decisive manner – which solutions are actually true. For example, we can make progress in developing a combination of positions that includes utilitarianism as our favored moral theory, or alternatively we can develop positions that favor virtue ethics. Over time, our account of utilitarianism – or, alternatively, of virtue ethics – might become deeper, more nuanced, and generally more impressive. We cannot, however, show decisively that one of these moral theories is the true account of morality while the other is false. On Pigliucci's approach, philosophical accounts are not merely explorations of imaginary space; they are answerable to our observations of the world, which means that some can eventually be rejected as not measuring up. Nonetheless, there is seldom the same opportunity for convergence on the truth as we find in the sciences.

Myisha Cherry is another contributor who sees contemporary academic philosophy as flawed by self-involvement and obscurantism – often resulting from an obsession with the mere trappings of intellectual rigor. She argues in Chapter 1 that philosophers should “come out of the shade” – that is, they should do more to engage with other disciplines and the social world outside the academy. This advice is not always easy to accept, but perhaps most philosophers could do more with little downside to the effort. Cherry's contribution is a defense of public philosophy, accessible language, and the use of a wide range of communications media.

Jessica Wilson (Chapter 7) suggests that philosophy is plagued not only by disagreement over substantive findings, but also by disagreed and fuzzy standards. She sees this as producing a number of outcomes that hinder progress: intra-disciplinary siloing, institutional inertia (including undue deference to elite researchers), and bias against the contributions of (among other groups) women. As a result, Wilson argues, we see reinvention of wheels (even by high-profile philosophy professors who ought to know better), inadequate attention to quality work, and neglect of good ideas.

Frank Jackson likewise takes a stand against intra-disciplinary silos, joining in the concerns about hyperspecialization in Chapter 4. He echoes the sentiment that philosophers must look beyond their narrowly defined fields. Jackson's chapter is, however, optimistic in tone. Relying on three carefully described case studies, he suggests that we look for connections between topics within philosophy as one way to make progress.

Timothy Williamson (Chapter 12) explains that recent progress in science may take the form, more often than we suppose, of devising successively better models rather than discovering general, exceptionless principles. This also applies, he suggests, to progress in philosophy. Williamson urges that philosophy can do better than it has to date by applying formal model-building approaches more systematically and self-consciously. Though this should not become the sole or primary method employed by philosophers, it could clarify philosophical thinking and enhance philosophical progress.

As I noted in the previous section, James Ladyman defends philosophy's historical contributions. However, he warns against a trend among many professional philosophers to engage in metaphysics while ignoring relevant findings from the sciences. Ladyman emphasizes that much contemporary philosophy of science is informed by extensive scientific knowledge and by productive relationships between philosophers and scientists – a reality that is overlooked by many of philosophy's detractors.

In Chapter 10, Richard Kamber distinguishes between philosophy's undoubted successes in areas such as logic and semantics and its less impressive record of answers to its big questions. In considering the current state of the discipline, Kamber observes little progress in moral improvement, understanding of the world (how things “hang together”), or solving traditional philosophical problems. He sees hope, however, for current developments in *experimental* philosophy that borrow the methods of the behavioral sciences to examine people's concepts and intuitions.

Also emphasizing practical issues, and with her focus on the much-discussed relationship between philosophy and the sciences, Noretta Koertge points to advances in logic and linguistic analysis (contemporary semantics and pragmatics) in Chapter 3. These are, she thinks, clear-cut evidence of progress. Koertge identifies an ongoing need for *all* disciplines to engage in the forms of conceptual clarification and critique often associated with philosophy, and she commends philosophers' contributions to practical controversies, such as those arising in research ethics.

Mark Walker (Chapter 11) is more skeptical than any of his fellow contributors about the success of science itself. He argues that the appearance of progress even in the sciences may be largely wishful thinking – making science and philosophy partners in crime, with philosophy at least displaying a bit more epistemic humility. Walker raises skeptical doubts about the ability of human beings to discover the truth, given that we have limited cognitive capacities.

In contrast to such skeptical musings, and especially to the pessimism about academic philosophy expressed by Boghossian and Lindsay, Stuart Brock argues in Chapter 9 that philosophy can – and actually does – make significant, and appropriately speedy, progress. In doing so, he seeks to refute a number of well-worn arguments. Notably, he includes a detailed reply to Chalmers' argument from persistent disagreement over big questions. Brock's is, perhaps, the most optimistic chapter in this collection, providing detailed reasons to think that philosophy should not be embarrassed after all.

Similarly, Daniel Stoljar argues (Chapter 8), with detailed examples, that philosophy has, indeed, made progress. This can be seen, he says, in the solutions to specific problems that troubled earlier philosophers – such as Descartes and Hume – and in our improved understanding of the constitutive structure of the world (including such elusive phenomena as morality and consciousness). Stoljar also notes that philosophy is relatively new as an organized academic discipline,

despite the extensive tradition of ideas and arguments that it draws upon. Thus we can ask how much progress it is reasonable to expect at this stage.

As mentioned, Christopher Norris argues against various kinds of progress-deniers: postmodernists, social constructionists, cultural relativists and the like. Such deniers challenge the idea of progress not only in philosophy but also in other academic disciplines, including the sciences. In response, Norris develops the case that philosophy and other disciplines make progress in a familiar sense. That is, we see undeniable intellectual advances, marked by improvements in our ability to understand, clarify, and solve problems.

In Chapter 16 Benj Hellie questions whether we can assess change or progress in the discipline of philosophy without detailed empirical investigation based on objective data. His chapter has a light-hearted side (you have to love his Kangaroo and Platypus graphics!), but is a careful analysis of one philosopher's intellectual development. In this case, the philosopher is David Lewis, one of the most cited and influential figures in recent analytic philosophy.

Ward Jones's contribution (Chapter 17) asks us to understand philosophy (or at least Western philosophy) as a community carrying on an intergenerational conversation over the course of history. Jones also emphasizes philosophy's relationship to beliefs that are "identity-conferring" – that is, they have a role in our lives that goes beyond merely representing how we take the world to be. These identity-conferring beliefs are, according to his account, strongly held commitments that make us, or reveal us as, people of a certain kind: people who understand the world in a particular way.

Given what is at stake with conferral of identity, perhaps Stefan Lorenz Sorgner is correct to see philosophy as an "intellectual war of values." Might philosophy be more a struggle between rival ideas than a cooperative project where the point is to reach agreement on a set of facts? For his part, Sorgner (Chapter 14) expresses commitment to certain ethico-political principles, such as those relating to negative freedom, but he does not claim to demonstrate that they are the objectively true ones. He attempts, rather, to show his values and principles in an attractive light, and he takes satisfaction in the knowledge that many others concur with them.

## What Should We Expect (From Philosophy)?

Some of our contributors maintain that philosophy has progressed at an appropriate rate, and David Chalmers in his *Philosophy* article freely concedes that philosophers now know more than they did 50 or 100 years ago. He does, however, suggest that the collective knowledge that philosophers have gained does not typically include answers to the discipline's big questions:

It is mainly knowledge of the answers to smaller questions, of negative and conditional theses, of frameworks available to answer questions, of

connections between ideas, of the ways that arguments bear for and against conclusions, and so on. In the absence of convergence on the big questions, collective answers to those questions elude us.

*(Chalmers 2015, 16)*

Viewed from my particular academic tower, this declaration appears to contain some truth. The questions on which philosophers persistently disagree include very large ones for which educated and thoughtful people might look to philosophy for answers: questions such as whether there are divine beings, objective moral requirements, and some kind of free will. Are there compelling reasons why these questions cannot be answered definitively? Is it unreasonable to expect philosophers to do so?

Well, philosophy confronts a problem that affects all science and scholarship. There is always (or nearly always) an element of freedom in how we interpret evidence. In reflecting on the nature of philosophical progress, Jonathan Glover observes that this freedom can be exploited by anybody who is sufficiently committed to a pet belief:

No matter how absurd, any belief *can* be preserved if you are prepared to make sufficient adjustments to the rest of the system. The flat earth can be preserved if you are prepared to postulate a radically different physics, and to explain away satellite pictures as a conspiracy, or as the result of distortions of light in space.

*(Glover 1988, 155–156)*

The required “adjustments” to save a cherished belief may be so extreme that they needn’t be taken seriously by interlocutors. Glover adduces the widespread resistance to evolutionary theory as an example: one radical defense against evidence from the fossil record is the possibility that, as a test of our faith, God “arranged fossils to look as if evolution had happened” (Glover 1988, 156). Indeed, even without this desperately ad hoc gambit Young Earth Creationists have a boundless store of contrived arguments. Glover concludes that people with a “really rigid belief in Creationism” will be prepared to “pay the price” in whatever other adjustments are needed in their worldviews, and at that stage “we cannot argue with them further” (1988, 157).

Some beliefs are psychologically difficult to abandon (Glover 1988, 157–158). As with many religious doctrines and many passionately held political commitments, they may be central to how we understand and describe ourselves. They may be closely tied to how we have lived our lives; we may have been converted to them at times of personal crisis; or we may share them with people we love. In all these cases, we may be rigidly resistant to changing our minds. If so, our favored beliefs might survive any amount of philosophical (or any other) criticism. After a brief discussion of persistent disagreement within philosophy, Glover sums up: “In philosophy, there are discoveries; there is progress” (1988, 161). But, he adds,

the discoveries are about the logical relations between beliefs, and they cannot force someone to abandon the beliefs she started with. She may be willing to accept any “absurd” implications of her beliefs. Thus, philosophical discoveries “do not force you to give up beliefs, though they often show that retaining them has an unexpectedly high cost” (Glover 1988, 161).

We might add at this point that the “price” to be paid for resisting a philosopher’s answer to a big philosophical question – about, say, the existence of God, free will, or objective morality – is unlikely to be anything as steep as the price for resisting robust scientific findings. Chalmers observes, I think fairly, that the great majority of arguments for answers to big philosophical questions contain premises that can be denied without too much mental discomfort; as a result, argument in philosophy leads not to philosophical consensus but to increasingly sophisticated disagreement (Chalmers 2015, 16–18).

There’s a related consideration that ought to be made more explicit. Many claims that have been put forward by twentieth-century and current philosophers are challenging and (for very many people) disconcerting. In my own case, I’ve argued against the existence of objective moral requirements (Blackford 2016) and (in collaboration with Udo Schüklenk) for the intellectual attractions of atheism (Blackford and Schüklenk 2013, esp. 187–235). I hope and believe that I’ve presented good arguments, but even if my conclusions could be denied only on pain of believing absurdities it’s hardly surprising when similar views are resisted – with much ingenuity – by some smart, committed, well-trained people.

In respect of the question about objective moral requirements, I’ve argued in *The Mystery of Moral Authority* that we are now in a position to answer definitively: if we’re employing the standard metaethical sense of “objective,” then no such requirements exist. That is, there are no requirements of morality that are binding on us in a way that transcends human desires and social institutions. Instead, the mores of various cultures and societies are best understood as a technology whose point can be summarized as facilitating social cooperation. However, human societies tend to view their moral systems as grounded in something more metaphysical, involving concepts such as sin, *tapu*,<sup>1</sup> or objective rightness and wrongness. If this picture, developed with appropriate nuance and detail, were widely accepted by philosophers and others with an interest, we could place the study of morality on something more like a scientific basis: not in the sense of using controlled experiments, scientific instruments, and mathematical models, but at least in the sense that we could work, thereafter, within an agreed framework.

My purpose here, however, is not to defend my approach to metaethics or (more generally) to the study of morality. Instead, I offer it as an example of why it may not be realistic to expect consensus on big philosophical questions. On one hand, I’d like to see my views on moral philosophy obtain widespread agreement (and not merely out of vanity; I think there would be social benefits).



On the other hand, there might be legitimate cause for concern if any such set of answers to a big philosophical question became the quasi-official view of the discipline of philosophy. I would hesitate to teach my own account of morality as established fact, even though I have no qualms when, for example, evolutionary theory is taught as fact to students in the biological sciences.

There's room here for further thought about what we should reasonably expect from academic philosophy. There would be, it seems to me, a kind of claustrophobia – a new source of unease – if the biggest, most identity-conferring, philosophical questions were settled more or less *officially*. Why? Perhaps because the idea smells too much of past situations when certain doctrines were orthodox and everything else was heretical.

## The Future for Philosophy?

As a group or “profession,” philosophers are wary of declaring an orthodoxy or of branding ideas as heretical. That being so, they should avoid too many quasi-official pronouncements and encourage more dissent than would be acceptable in most academic disciplines. For better or worse, its wariness of orthodoxy hinders philosophy's ability to answer big questions with anything resembling a scientific consensus. That might sometimes be frustrating, while also having practical value. Philosophy will seldom speak with a single voice, though some ideas may prevail at certain times among philosophers and with the educated public. Others may eventually be marginalized.

Within these constraints, if we choose to accept them, there remain opportunities to influence philosophy's future. Although – surprise! – the contributions to this collection do not display anything like a consensus, they touch on some common themes. Among them are the past contributions by philosophy to science, and to liberal democratic principles; the discipline's ongoing practical role (for example, in many specialized areas of ethics); the achievements of philosophers in such fields as logic and formal semantics; the need to avoid disciplinary and intra-disciplinary silos; and the imperative to encourage diverse voices, not only those of a well-connected and gendered elite. Some contributors point to benefits from a sophisticated engagement with science and its methods. James Ladyman, in particular, emphasizes, that there is already much in philosophy of science that can be helpful to science students, working scientists, and the public's understanding of science. Richard Kamber persuasively advocates the potential of experimental philosophy.

Though philosophy hesitates to speak with one voice, it can endorse and teach values to do with intellectual rigor and honesty, charity to opponents, and openness to evidence. If these are passed down effectively from teachers to students, we might hope that philosophers will bring their characteristic skills and values to some of the great practical questions of our age, not least those

relating to global injustice and risks to humanity's future. All too often, the debates that surround these questions are dominated by tribalism, dogma, and emotional manipulation. With dedication, and perhaps a bit of good luck, philosophical training might provide something of a corrective. If philosophy fails in that respect by not living up to its ideals, that's a situation we can identify and try to alter.

More generally, philosophy's discontents have no single, obvious, or magically effective solution. To some extent, they reveal a tension between seeking demonstrable wisdom and avoiding the curse of orthodoxy. All the same, the contributors to this volume offer serious arguments about what philosophy has been doing well or not so well. Their arguments merit consideration. In the pages that follow, you'll find thoughtful ideas for improving the effectiveness of the discipline, reasons for breaking down academic silos, and exhortations to engage in outreach. Above all, our contributors provide models for thinking about philosophy's discontents, as well as its successes and its potential, with fitting scholarly care.

A book like this cannot provide the last word on its subject, but it can provoke reflection and dialogue. We look forward to seeing others' thoughts and encourage more dialogue on philosophy's future.

## Note

1 This Polynesian concept is the origin, of course, of the more familiar word "taboo."

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## Introduction II: Philosophy on the Inclined Plane

Damien Broderick

**SIMPLICIO:** Let's talk a bit about this thing called *philosophy*. I get the impression that people at large – not the professional academic philosophers, who have too much skin in the game for us to be sure their assessment is entirely unbiased – offer two skeptical responses to philosophy as we know it today.

One is that philosophy's the dregs left over after all the hard sciences have done what they can, so far, to explain us and the world.

And the other view, even more dismissive, is that it's a huge shell game, a Brainiac sport played hard just for the fun and posturing of it.

Neither of these dark suspicions is newly minted. The sociologist Ernest Gellner caused a ruckus back in 1959 with his attack on the language philosophers of the mid-century in *Words and Things*. Still, radical criticism seems to be gathering force. Look at Peter Unger's 2014 book with its scathingly revealing title: *Empty Ideas: A Critique of Analytic Philosophy*.

**SAGREDO:** I'm no expert, but that surprises me. Are you saying that philosophy is now hopelessly in the doldrums? It isn't making any new discoveries? I mean, okay, the philosophers might be biased, but what do they think about this attack on their life's work?

**SALVIATI:** My friend here is going too far, but I have to admit there's been a recent turn in that direction. Let me Google this on my phone—Right, the philosopher Brian Leiter did an informal survey on his blog in 2015. He got 661 responses saying that philosophy is, indeed, in the doldrums. That's nearly half of his respondents. Only a bit over a third, 36 percent, felt philosophy was in good shape; 16 percent couldn't decide, which isn't very encouraging. I have to admit that's rather disturbing. But let's not get carried away. The doubters were not necessarily saying philosophic inquiry is *useless*, just that its progress seems to have stalled.

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