

# You Know Nothing About Philosophy, Jon Snow

David Mokriski

*Views and arguments advanced in this paper are not necessarily endorsed by the author, nor are they original to the author, nor are they meant to be consistent with other arguments advanced in this class. See the end for reflection questions and sources.*

## 1. Introduction

I'm going to argue that, in spite of everything we've covered this quarter, we all completely lack philosophical knowledge. That is, when it comes to philosophical questions, including those we've tried to address—questions about what really exists, what we can know, what's moral or immoral, and so on—we don't have any knowledge of the correct answers. Call this thesis 'metaphilosophical skepticism' (the 'meta' part means that it is skepticism *about* philosophical claims). I'll give two arguments for metaphilosophical skepticism: the Methodological Challenge and the Disagreement Challenge. The first argument relies on the fact that philosophical methodology involves just thinking and appealing to intuition, and yet there's no explanation of how this methodology could be reliable. The second argument relies on the fact that there is systematic peer disagreement about philosophical matters, and this gives us good reason to think that philosophical methodology is unreliable and hence not a source of knowledge.

After laying out and motivating these arguments (section 2), I will consider a number of objections: that philosophical methodology is no worse off than the methodologies of mathematics and logic (section 3), that philosophical truths are mind-dependent and so easily knowable (section 4), that the presence of systematic disagreement should not force us to doubt ourselves (section 5), that most philosophical

disputes are merely verbal and so not *genuine* disagreements (section 6), and that philosophical truth is relative and so disagreements do not imply that one side is incorrect (section 7). Finally, I'll close by considering whether the thesis defended in this paper is self-defeating (section 8)—after all, if we lack *all* philosophical knowledge, then that includes knowledge of the very claim that we lack philosophical knowledge.

## 2. The Methodological Challenge and the Disagreement Challenge

The first skeptical argument we will consider is based on worries about philosophical methodology and how it could possibly be reliable:

### **The Methodological Challenge**

(MC1) There is no explanation of how philosophical methodology could be reliable.

(MC2) If so, then we lack philosophical knowledge.

(MC3) So, we lack philosophical knowledge.

By 'reliable', I mean having a tendency to produce true beliefs more often than false ones. For instance, a thermometer is unreliable when it fails to accurately record the temperature a majority of the time. By analogy, a way of forming beliefs, such as doing philosophy, is unreliable if it fails to produce true beliefs a majority of the time.

The idea behind MC1 is that philosophical methodology involves just thinking carefully about its subject matter and making appeals to intuition. By 'intuition', I mean the mental reaction we have when considering a claim such as that only painful things can be bad for us, or that Jasmine does something wrong in the VIGILANTE case. Such claims often just *strike us* as true or false, and we take this as a reason to accept or reject them. But, upon reflection, it's simply not clear how this sort of mental reaction could be

a reliable indicator of the relevant facts. (As a certain political commentator likes to say, facts don't care about our feelings.)

Contrast intuition-based judgment about philosophical matters with perception-based judgment about the physical world around you. You're currently having an experience as of reading these words, and based on this experience, you judge there to really be some words on a paper or screen in front of you. What's the explanation of the reliability of this way of forming judgments? Well, there's a relatively straightforward causal relationship: light bounces off the paper (or emanates from the screen) and strikes your eyes, which transmits signals to your brain giving you the perceptual experience. The perceptual experience is *caused by* the physical objects in the world around you, and so there's a good explanation of how these experiences can reflect the way these physical objects really are. When it comes to scientific judgments, as opposed to ordinary perceptual ones, the story is more complicated but still quite similar. The physical world around us causally interacts with our measuring devices, our measuring devices causally interact with the perceptual systems of scientists, and these scientists write about their findings in textbooks and journal articles, which then causally interact with the perceptual systems of laypeople when we read them. Again, this gives us a more or less straightforward explanation of how we can know about the physical world around us (skepticism about the external world notwithstanding).

On the other hand, when it comes to making philosophical judgments about metaphysics, ethics, and so on by appealing to intuition, matters are quite mysterious. It doesn't seem like the things we study in philosophy—for instance, moral rightness, knowledge, and personal identity—straightforwardly causally interact with us. Such

things are highly abstract and not the sorts of things to physically impact our minds. How is it that our thoughts and intuitions, which are just mental reactions of a certain kind, are able to reliably reflect things like whether it's immoral for Jasmine to kidnap and extort her neighbors, or whether free will requires the ability to do otherwise? There seems to be no connection between our cognitive faculties and the abstract philosophical truths, and so there's no explanation of how the former could reliably track the latter.

MC2 expresses a necessary condition on knowledge: namely that there be an explanation of how the relevant belief-forming mechanisms could be reliable. Without such an explanation, knowledge is impossible. Why do we doubt that consulting "magic" 8-balls is a genuine source of knowledge about, say, whether there is life on mars or whether our favored candidate will win the next presidential election? Well, part of the reason is that, assuming we don't believe in magic, there's no explanation of how the "yes" or "no" answers could reliably reflect the relevant facts, about life on other planets or future presidential victories. Knowledge of any truths seems to require that there be *some* explanation of how our judgments could consistently align with those truths.

The second skeptical argument we will consider, based on disagreement, does not challenge the *possibility* of reliability but merely whether we are *actually* reliable:

**The Disagreement Challenge**

(DC1) There is systematic peer disagreement in philosophy.

(DC2) If so, then we lack philosophical knowledge.

(DC3) So, we lack philosophical knowledge.

By 'peer', I mean someone roughly equally intelligent, educated, and knowledgeable about the relevant arguments and evidence. By 'systematic', I mean quite widespread and over some very central matters, and not just over a few small details here and there.

DC1 is difficult to deny. There are countless distinct theories of morality, free will, knowledge, personal identity, and so on that seem to contradict each other. Philosophers disagree about applied matters, like whether eating meat is immoral or whether tables really exist, as well as more theoretical matters, like whether morality is just a function of promoting happiness or whether free will requires the ability to do otherwise. Furthermore, there's no good reason to doubt that such disagreement is really between *peers*. It's not as if it's typically undergrads and graduate students who hold one view and senior philosophy professors with many publications in top journals who hold the opposite view. Rather, there is systematic disagreement between equally intelligent, educated, and knowledgeable philosophers.

The idea behind DC2 is that, if you have equally competent people use some common method to form judgments and they form different and incompatible judgments, then that method is unreliable and hence not a source of knowledge. Suppose, for instance, that we pass around a simple thermometer to a bunch of people, each of whom stick it in the same bowl of water one right after the other, and the thermometer reports a different temperature each time. In that case, we'd have very good reason to doubt the thermometer's reliability and hence its capacity to produce knowledge. Similarly, if a group of equally competent graduate students in mathematics are trying to calculate in their heads an 18% tip on a large restaurant bill and they each get different answers, this should undermine each person's knowledge that she is correct. These cases demonstrate the way in which peer disagreement establishes an epistemic stalemate—a situation in which neither side has a better claim to getting at the truth—and this stalemate intuitively

undermines our claim to knowledge. So, systematic peer disagreement in philosophy poses a problem for philosophical knowledge.

The above two arguments, the Methodological Challenge and the Disagreement Challenge, make a worrying case against philosophical knowledge. At the very least, they should make philosophers nervous, insofar as we see ourselves as engaged in a practice whose goal is attaining knowledge. In what follows, I'll consider six ways that defenders of philosophy might respond to these challenges. The first two are objections to the Methodology Challenge, the next three are objections to the Disagreement Challenge, and the final one is an objection to the thesis of metaphilosophical skepticism itself (or the conclusion of both arguments). I'll argue that none of these objections succeed. There is no easy way out of metaphilosophical skepticism.

### **3. The Math and Logic Defense**

The first objection I'll consider targets MC1 of the Methodological Challenge. Recall that MC1 states that there's no explanation of how philosophical methodology could be reliable. This objection maintains that the methodologies of other domains, in particular mathematics and logic, are relevantly similar to that of philosophy, and surely there must be *some* explanation of why those are reliable. In the form of an argument:

#### **The Math and Logic Defense**

- (ML1) If there is some explanation of how the methodologies of mathematics and logic could be reliable, then there is some explanation of how philosophical methodology could be reliable.
- (ML2) There is some explanation of how the methodologies of mathematics and logic could be reliable.
- (ML3) So, there is some explanation of how philosophical methodology could be reliable.

This is an argument by analogy: surely the methodologies of math and logic allow for the possibility of knowledge, so why not philosophical methodology as well?

The idea behind ML1 is that the methodologies of math, logic, and philosophy are relevantly similar. In each case, the methodology involves thinking very carefully about claims and drawing out the logical implications of various intuitive assumptions. Unlike the methodologies of the natural sciences, or ordinary reasoning about the external world, we don't make empirical observations or conduct actual physical experiments. If there's an explanation of how the pure reasoning that takes place in math and logic could be reliable, there must also be an explanation of how philosophical reasoning could be reliable.

The idea behind ML2 is that, surely the methodologies of math and logic *are* in fact reliable, and there must be some explanation for why that is, even if we are currently unable to put our finger on it. After all, we tend to see math and logic as being in relatively good standing as branches of inquiry. We rarely worry about whether mathematicians and logicians really *know* what they're talking about. Of course, we *could* be lead to embrace skepticism about those fields as well, but that seems like an absurd position to be in. Can we really doubt that we *know* that  $2+2=4$  or that  $Q$  follows from  $P$  and *if  $P$  then  $Q$* ?

However, I think this defense of philosophical methodology fails. In particular, we should reject ML1 due to the presence of a relevant disanalogy between math and logic on the one hand and philosophy on the other. The difference is that there's a plausible explanation of how our reasoning in math and logic could be reliable that doesn't carry over to philosophical reasoning. While developing reasoning faculties over

the course of evolution, the capacity to reliably reason about math and logic would confer a significant advantage to organisms that had it, and thus these reliable faculties would tend to replicate themselves. Having a tendency to reason *accurately* about quantitative matters, and being able to *correctly* deduce the logical implications of our other beliefs, drastically improves creatures' ability to navigate the world. Here are two very simple examples. A creature who knows that she currently has twenty coconuts and that she eats two per day will be much better off if she can figure out how many days the coconuts will last her. Similarly, a creature who knows that a certain place has drinkable water *if but only if* it rained that day will be much better off if he can logically deduce whether there is water there on a certain day given that it rained. In these ways, the ability to *reliably* do logic and math confers significant advantages.

On the other hand, there's no reason to think that the tendency to reliably form philosophical beliefs would confer any benefit. It's true that forming *certain* moral judgments, such as that it's wrong to harm our own children, or *certain* metaphysical judgments, such as that five-year-old Sally and twenty-five-year-old Sally are numerically the same person, will confer advantages, but there's no need to assume these philosophical judgments are actually *true*. Having the tendency to believe that we have an obligation to feed our children confers an advantage to us and to our society as a whole, but this is *independent of* whether or not it's really true that we have such an obligation. (Just imagine that it were actually false that we have this obligation. It would still clearly be beneficial for people and society if we all *believed* it to be true.) In general, the benefit of forming certain philosophical judgments, unlike the benefit of forming mathematical and logical judgments, is independent of their accuracy. Thus there's a stark disanalogy

between the methodologies of math and logic and that of philosophy: only the former domains have a good explanation of why we have the capacity to reliably form judgments about them.

I conclude, therefore, that one cannot appeal to the methodologies of math and logic to try to save us from metaphilosophical skepticism. While there are undeniable similarities between math and logic on the one hand and philosophy on the other, there is also a crucial difference, one that undermines the argument by analogy. Hence the defender of philosophy must look elsewhere for a defense against the Methodological Challenge.

#### **4. The Subjectivist Defense**

The second objection also targets premise MC1 of the Methodology Challenge. It alleges that philosophical truths are somehow mind-dependent, and hence there *is* a good explanation of how our minds could reliably track them:

##### **The Subjectivist Defense**

(SJ1) Philosophical truths are mind-dependent.

(SJ2) If so, then there is some explanation of how philosophical methodology could be reliable.

(SJ3) So, there is some explanation of how philosophical methodology could be reliable.

By ‘mind-dependent’, I mean that philosophical truths are somehow *made true* by the attitudes, judgments, or other mental states that people have. The relevant mental states may be our individual ones or our shared collective ones.

SJ1 may be somewhat plausible when we consider certain philosophical truths, such as moral ones or other truths about value. If there were no people around, it seems as though the universe would be completely amoral and valueless. Similarly, without

people, it seems like there would be no truths about knowledge, persons, or free will. Just as there would be no truths about whether sunsets are prettier than waterfalls without people and their preferences around, perhaps philosophical truths also depend on our minds in a similar way.

The idea behind SJ2 is that we have very secure access to our own mental states; we can easily know the contents of our own minds. If philosophical truths depend on our minds, then it's no surprise how simply thinking or appealing our intuitions could tell us something about these truths. In order to know whether, from my perspective, chocolate is better than vanilla or jazz is better than country, all I have to do is think carefully about it and consult my own attitudes. If philosophical truths depend on our individual attitudes, then all we need to do is simple introspection. If, on the other hand, philosophical truths depend on our collective attitudes, then we can learn them by sharing our intuitions with each other and engaging in debate or discussion. Either way, philosophical methodology as it is currently practiced, in which we carefully reflect on our own and each other's intuitions, makes perfect sense as a reliable method.

However, I think this objection fails, since we have good reason to reject SJ1. Truths that are mind-dependent in the way this objection suggests should display a sort of counterfactual variance with our attitudes—in other words, what's true should change when our opinions change. Even if, as it stands, sunsets *are* actually prettier than swamps, if all of our tastes and preferences on the matter were to be reversed, then swamps would be prettier than sunsets. If philosophical truths depend on our attitudes, then they should display this same sort of counterfactual variation with our attitudes. If our attitudes were to be changed, then that should change the philosophical truths.

However, this is quite implausible. Suppose it is true that torture *really is* wrong. If people were to change their minds or preferences regarding it, it would still be wrong. Likewise, if free will *really is* incompatible with determinism, this would not change if everyone just changed their opinions on the matter. Thus philosophical truths do not, in general, display the sort of counterfactual dependence on our mental states that they should if they were truly mind-dependent.

I conclude, then, that appealing to the alleged mind-dependence of philosophical truths will not save us from skepticism about philosophy. Even if mind-dependence *would* provide us with a good explanation of how philosophical methodology could be reliable, philosophical truths simply do not display the features of mind-dependence. Once again, we have failed to find a satisfactory response to the Methodological Challenge.

## **5. The First-Person Defense**

The third defense of philosophical knowledge that I'll consider is an objection that targets premise DC2 of the Disagreement Challenge. Recall that DC2 says that if there is systematic peer disagreement in philosophy, then we lack philosophical knowledge. This objection argues that an individual can still have knowledge in the face of systematic peer disagreement by appealing to the unique features of the first-person perspective:

### **The First-Person Defense**

(FP1) Each individual has privileged access to her own reasoning process from her first-person perspective.

(FP2) If so, then an individual can still have knowledge in the face of systematic peer disagreement.

(FP3) So, an individual can still have knowledge in the face of systematic peer disagreement.

Although this conclusion does not entail that any particular individual actually has knowledge, it at least allows for the possibility of knowledge in the face of peer disagreement, thus undermining DC2.

The idea behind FP1 is that, although peers in the relevant disagreement generally share most of the evidence—for instance, the various arguments, thought experiments, and publically acknowledged intuitions—there is a certain bit of evidence to which each individual has unique access. In particular, each individual has introspective access to her own mental states and is directly aware of every step she takes in the reasoning process. None of her peers have the same access to this information, and she has no access to their experiences of the reasoning process they go through.

The idea behind FP2 is that, this privileged access that each individual has to the experience of her own reasoning process provides her with a unique piece of evidence and thus a way of attaining knowledge in the face of peer disagreement. She is directly aware of the steps she has taken when thinking through the arguments and thought experiments, and she has direct access to the fact (if it is a fact) that she has not made any mistakes along the way. This is a crucial piece of evidence that must be taken into account along with all of the other evidence at hand. Furthermore, since she does not have the same direct access to the experiences of her peers, she does not have any evidence regarding whether they similarly made no mistakes. Thus, from her first-person perspective, she has a way to break the apparent epistemic stalemate of peer disagreement that threatened to undermine her claim to knowledge.

However, I think we should ultimately reject FP2, since this alleged way of breaking the epistemic stalemate is illusory. While each individual has privileged access to her own experience of the reasoning process, each of her peers also has privileged access to *his* experience of the reasoning process, and given that the disagreement persists, he must be equally certain that he has not made any mistakes along the way. After all, they are all *peers*, so they are all equally capable of double-checking themselves, reflecting on their own biases and possible sources of errors, and being extra careful to be fair and charitable to opposing points of view. The fact that the systematic peer disagreement remains suggests that all of the parties have consulted their unique pieces of evidence—namely their experiences of the reasoning process they take—and determined that they have not erred. Thus, even with the extra bit of personal evidence, each individual has no good reason to suggest that she is in a unique position to get things right, and this should undermine all of our claims to knowledge.

I conclude, then, that this appeal to the first-person perspective does not undermine the argument for metaphilosophical skepticism. While it initially seemed like we had a way to break the knowledge-undermining stalemate of peer disagreement, namely by appealing to the privileged access to introspective evidence that each of us has, the stalemate has ultimately remained intact. This objection thus fails to undermine the Disagreement Challenge.

## **6. The Verbal Defense**

Another possible objection to DC2 of the Disagreement Challenge is based on the idea that most philosophical disagreements are not *genuine* disputes, but instead merely verbal:

**The Verbal Defense**

(VB1) Most of the systematic peer disagreement in philosophy is merely verbal.

(VB2) If so, then philosophers can still have knowledge in the face of systematic peer disagreement.

(VB3) So, philosophers can still have knowledge in the face of systematic disagreement.

By ‘merely verbal’, I mean disagreements over, or resulting from, the usage of language as opposed to the way the world really is. For instance, imagine a dispute between two people over whether a hotdog is really a sandwich. Both sides agree on all the features of a hotdog—that it contains a piece of meat in a bun, typically has condiments on it, and tends to be eaten with your hands. They just disagree about whether it deserves to be called ‘a sandwich’.

VB1 may be plausible when we consider that there are a lot of philosophical terms floating around, some of them highly technical, and this introduces a legitimate risk of different philosophers misunderstanding each other. Furthermore, the hypothesis that most philosophical disputes are merely verbal could explain why equally intelligent, educated, and knowledgeable philosophers nevertheless keep disagreeing. When disputes are merely verbal, both sides can be correct, given the different ways they’re using language.

The idea behind VB2 is that, since each side in a merely verbal dispute can be correct, such disagreements do not threaten to undermine knowledge. To see this, suppose Lisa and Tom are engaged in the following dispute:

Lisa: *There’s a Taco Bell next to the bank.*

Tom: *No, there's no Taco Bell next to the bank.*

Lisa: *Yes there is. It's right next to it on the north side.*

Tom: *No, there's nothing next to the bank other than a couple of bushes and that family of geese.*

Assuming Lisa and Tom are equally knowledgeable about the layout of the city they're in, should we conclude from this disagreement that neither actually knows whether there's a Taco Bell next to the bank? Well, not necessarily. It seems quite likely that this is a merely verbal dispute that turns on the ambiguity of the word 'bank'. Perhaps Lisa means *financial institution building*, while Tom means *riverbank*. If we interpret each person's usage of 'bank' differently, then each side can be correct and so may still know what they purport to know. It can be both true that there is a Taco Bell next to the financial institution building and false that there is a Taco Bell next to the riverbank. If they were to clarify what they mean by 'bank', they might agree on all the facts that are not about language—in particular, on the facts about what is located next to what. Thus peer disagreements do not undermine knowledge when those disagreements are merely verbal.

While VB2 is correct, I think we should ultimately reject VB1. None of the usual evidence of verbal disputes is there in the case of most philosophical disagreements. In particular, when disputes are verbal, they should be resolvable simply by clarifying the terms in question or by banning their usage. If we forced Lisa and Tom to clarify what they mean by 'bank', or to stop using the word 'bank' entirely and express their claims differently, it would become clear right away that the dispute is verbal (if it really is verbal). But this does not seem to be the case in most philosophical disputes. When two philosophers disagree about, for instance, whether eating meat is wrong, this dispute would not be resolved by asking them to clarify or refrain from using the term 'wrong'.

More than likely, they would both agree that they intend to use the term ‘wrong’ in its ordinary, intuitive sense, and they would be unable to define it in other terms or continue having the dispute without using that term. While there might be a few philosophical disputes here and there that can be dissolved by clarifying or banning certain terms, this doesn’t seem to be the case for the majority of them. Thus, upon reflection, we should reject VB1.

So, appealing to verbal disputes will not block the argument for skepticism about philosophy. If the assumption that most philosophical disputes are merely verbal were true, then that might save our knowledge about philosophy from the threat posed by systematic peer disagreement. However, this assumption seems false on reflection. So this objection to the Disagreement Challenge fails.

## **7. The Relativist Defense**

The next objection I’ll consider is once again an objection to DC2 of the Disagreement Challenge. This objection claims that systematic peer disagreement in philosophy does not undermine knowledge because truth in philosophy is relative:

### **The Relativist Defense**

(RL1) Philosophical truths are relative.

(RL2) If so, then philosophers can still have knowledge in the face of systematic peer disagreement.

(RL3) So, philosophers can still have knowledge in the face of systematic peer disagreement.

By ‘relative’, I mean that they are only true or false from a particular perspective, and so they are capable of being true from one perspective and false from another. Just as I can be on your left from one perspective and not on your left from another, this objection suggests that, for example, an action can be wrong from one perspective and not wrong

from another. These perspectives can be those of individuals or larger groups, such as cultures or societies.

One motivation for RL1 is that it provides a good explanation of the fact that there is such a diversity of views in philosophy, and that multiple incompatible views often all seem reasonable. If the moral theory of utilitarianism is true from one perspective but false from another, that could explain why there are very compelling arguments both for and against it—arguments that its proponents and opponents respectively take to be decisive. From the perspective of its proponents, the arguments for it genuinely succeed in establishing its truth, while from the perspective of its opponents, the arguments for it genuinely fail.

The idea behind RL2 is that, if philosophical truths are relative, different sides in the philosophical peer disagreements can all be correct. If you and I disagree on the phone about whether Jerry's house is on the left, when we're unsure if we share the same perspective, then this shouldn't worry us or make us doubt our beliefs. After all, we all know that the truth about what things are on the left of what other things is relative to a perspective, so disagreement here doesn't imply that anyone is incorrect or unreliable.

However, I think we should ultimately reject RL1. If philosophical truths were relative, then it would be difficult to account for several intuitive phenomena: the possibility of being convinced and changing our mind in philosophy, the possibility of our making progress overall on a philosophical issue, and the possibility of making correct criticisms of a philosophical view from any perspective. First, when we become convinced that it's wrong to eat meat, it doesn't seem like we've simply swapped from a perspective in which it's not wrong to one in which it is wrong—rather it seems like we

used to be mistaken and now we're correct. Second, it seems as though our society made genuine progress on the issue of justice when we finally recognized that women should be allowed the right to vote. It does not seem as though we simply adopted a new perspective that changed the truth about justice. Finally, it seems possible to *correctly* criticize one's own philosophical views or those of one's society, and yet if philosophical truth were relative to the perspective of that individual or society, such criticisms could never be correct, since whatever view the individual or society happens to hold is the one that is correct (from that perspective).

We have, therefore, good reason to reject RL1, and so we cannot appeal to relativism to avoid skepticism about philosophy. The main problem with relativism is that it pushes us too far into the opposite extreme as skepticism—it makes it difficult to account for the possibility of being *incorrect*. If philosophical truths are relative to a perspective, then whatever claims are made from that perspective are simply correct. And yet, it certainly seems possible for people to make mistakes in philosophy. Hence, once again, our objection to the Disagreement Challenge fails.

## **8. Self-Defeat**

The final objection I'll consider does not target either of our skeptical arguments but instead the thesis of metaphilosophical skepticism itself. This objection argues that the thesis has an uncomfortable implication: namely, it entails that we don't know it's true. After all, the claim that we completely lack knowledge about philosophy is itself a philosophical claim, and so if it's true, it follows that we don't know it's true. In this way, skepticism about philosophy is *self-defeating*.

However, the problem with this objection is that the fact that a claim is self-defeating does *not* entail that it's false. Thus it's difficult to see how this objection can be used to *argue against* the thesis of metaphilosophical skepticism. Indeed I think skeptics about philosophy should accept this implication and thus concede that they don't know their position is true. This may be somewhat of an uncomfortable position to be in—to accept a claim as true while also accepting that you don't (and perhaps even *can't*) know it's true—but we should not reject a compelling thesis simply due to its being uncomfortable. Hence, once again, our objection to metaphilosophical skepticism fails.

## **9. Conclusion**

In this paper, I've argued for the thesis that we lack all knowledge about philosophy. The two arguments for this position are based on the mysterious methodology of philosophy and the fact that there is systematic peer disagreement among philosophers. I've considered and rejected several objections to this thesis. If, as I've argued, metaphilosophical skepticism is correct, you will have gained no knowledge from reading this paper.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. Is it a mistake to lump all philosophical claims together under one label? Could some of my arguments be resisted by distinguishing between, for example, claims in metaphysics and epistemology, or claims about value and non-evaluative matters?
2. Could the Subjectivist Defense avoid my objections if we adopt a more complex and sophisticated form of subjectivism? For instance, could philosophical truths be mind-dependent, but not depend on the opinions we actually have at the moment but instead on the opinions we would have if we were idealized in certain ways (e.g. given full information, made unbiased, etc.)? Could a similar strategy help with the

Relativist Defense, making it possible for people to sometimes be incorrect even assuming relativism?

3. Could the Disagreement Challenge be resisted by challenging the idea that those disagreeing are really *peers* after all? Do we have sufficient evidence that our philosophical opponents are really equally educated on the relevant issues?
4. Could the self-defeat objection be turned into an argument that the thesis of metaphilosophical skepticism is actually false? Could we defend a principle that states that a necessary condition on knowledge is that it not rule out the possibility of knowing that very principle?

### Sources

Both the Methodological Challenge and the Disagreement Challenge appear, by name, in Helen Beebe's "The Presidential Address: Philosophical Scepticism and the Aims of Philosophy". J. L. Mackie makes similar arguments, though specifically targeting moral knowledge, in his *Inventing Right and Wrong*. Sharon Street also gives a version of the Methodological Challenge for moral knowledge, and explains why mind-dependent views are in a good position to resist it, in her "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value". According to Miles Burnyeat's "Plato on Why Mathematics is Good For the Soul", the idea of comparing ethics and mathematics traces all the way back to Plato (and perhaps earlier). Nathan Ballantyne's "Verbal Disagreements and Philosophical Scepticism" discusses the idea of appealing to verbal disputes to address the problem of systematic peer disagreement. Here are some additional resources:

Maria Bagrahmian and Adam J. Carter: Relativism  
Justin Clarke-Doane: The Ethics-Mathematics Analogy  
Christopher Cowie: Companions in Guilt Arguments  
Bryan Frances and Jonathan Matheson: Disagreement  
Dan Korman: Debunking Arguments  
Gurpreet Rattan: Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective

(Thanks to Dan Korman, Alex LeBrun, and Dylan Abney for helpful feedback.)