

Expertise and Fundamental Controversy

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Research Topics

Over the centuries philosophers have discovered apparently intractable problems with our most fundamental concepts: *time, space, parthood, meaning, truth, goodness, color, knowledge*, and others. These problems are so intractable and fundamental as to throw the legitimacy of those concepts into doubt. Recent advances in logic and science have done little or nothing to erase the disputes. Given these centuries-old controversies, it is doubtful that we can have knowledge concerning these disputed concepts since even the best and most open-minded experts are locked in sustained disagreement.

Take this for an example: many philosophers and color scientists hold that commonsensical beliefs about color are false. They think that scientific facts about color—such as facts about how our experiences of color are strongly effected by the composition of air, the relevant lighting, and details about our eyes, brains, and even emotions—show that ordinary objects such as tomatoes, scarves, and pumpkins are not colored at all, and hence many of our ordinary beliefs about colors are false.

A second example: some philosophers who specialize in metaphysics and the philosophy of physics think that the physical universe is just a swarm of elementary particles and fields, and commonsensical beliefs about macroscopic objects, such as the belief that there are many trees in North America, are all false even though they are good enough to rely on for practical and even scientific purposes.

Finally, some philosophers of logic and logicians think that the fact that after two millennia of intensive investigation into the paradoxes of truth, there is nothing even approaching consensus of solution, shows that truth is an inconsistent notion, almost like the notion of a naked person with jeans on, and hence there are no truths at all.

What is interesting is that the disagreement often crosses from the abstract to commonsensical ideas, such as these:

- Twice two is four.
- Some tomatoes are in at least partially red.
- There are trees in the backyard.
- Some claims are true.
- That's the car I bought three years ago.

Influenced by the fundamental paradoxes of philosophy, some philosophers think that those claims are actually false even though they are useful to rely on in virtually all contexts.

On the other hand, there seems to be great progress in philosophy over the last century, especially with the philosophical use of logic and science. But how can there be all this progress if the intractable expert disagreement robs us of even the most commonsensical knowledge? Our project investigates these issues regarding expert disagreement, controversy, and progress. The primary goal is to understand the epistemology of expertise and controversy, in philosophy and science.

Hypotheses Under Investigation

- H1:** There is genuine belief amongst philosophical experts in anti-commonsensical theories (e.g. epistemicism, compositional nihilism, the inconsistency theory of truth, and color nihilism)--where 'genuine belief' means that the attitudes in question are akin to ordinary beliefs, such as the belief that millions of people watch the World Cup.
- H2:** There is genuine belief amongst philosophical experts in commonsensical claims apparently inconsistent with the anti-commonsensical theories mentioned in H1 (e.g. the commonsensical beliefs that bananas are yellow, that my desk has many parts, we know many truths about the human eye, etc.).
- H3:** The apparent inconsistency mentioned in H2 is real. So, there is pervasive, sustained, genuine disagreement amongst philosophical experts regarding those commonsensical claims--where genuine disagreement entails that one person is right while the other is wrong.
- H4:** If after many years of expert reflection a large number and large percentage of philosophical experts genuinely deny a claim of commonsense, then there is strong evidence against that claim (otherwise the experts wouldn't have come to deny the claim for so many years and under extended reflection).
- H5:** If a philosopher is aware that there is strong evidence against one of her beliefs, then in many cases she no longer knows it's true, even if it is true.
- H6:** If H4 is false, then long-term and large-scale endorsement by philosophers for a claim that was reached via philosophical argument doesn't indicate the existence of strong evidence for that claim. And that means that philosophical argument doesn't produce strong evidence.
- H7:** If philosophical argument doesn't produce strong evidence, then there is little philosophical progress in producing knowledge.
- H8:** If there is little philosophical progress in producing knowledge, then there is little philosophical progress in improving understanding.
- H9:** In the 2009 PhilPapers survey only somewhere between 45 and 70% of firm answers to the survey questions are true (this hypothesis comes from statistical analysis plus hypotheses akin to H1-H3).

H10: Because of H9, for the typical philosopher only about 45-70% of her firm philosophical beliefs are true.

H11: If a philosopher is aware of the truth of H10, then she should suspend judgment on her previously firm philosophical beliefs--or she should know that she is exceptional in some relevant way (e.g., she is much more expert on her research areas than other philosophers are).

H12: Philosophers are typically not exceptional in a relevant way.

H13: There is a great deal of agreement amongst philosophers on substantive philosophical claims.

Expected Outcomes

The research project aims to increase our understanding of the nature of *progress, expertise, and controversy*--in philosophy and science. In more detail, we will increase our understanding of the following:

- The relation of expertise to knowledge and understanding, especially regarding topics that call into question commonsensical beliefs
- The relation of apparently anti-commonsensical theories (in philosophy and science) to commonsensical beliefs (e.g., whether the conflict between the two is genuine)
- The reasonableness of sticking with a belief when you know it is controversial amongst the relevant community of experts
- The relation of higher-order evidence to the reasonableness of belief (e.g., learning that you are a typical member of a group with a relatively low percentage of true beliefs about some domain)
- The nature and extent of agreement and disagreement amongst philosophers regarding substantive philosophical claims
- The relation of philosophical progress to increased knowledge and/or understanding as well as disagreement/agreement

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