

Optimism for the Value of Philosophy under Equilibrism: Theoretical Acceptance, Critique, and Understanding

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Abstract:

In light of philosophical scepticism (scepticism about the possibility of philosophical knowledge), Beebe (2018) offers *equilibrism* as an alternative to knowledge as a conception of the aim of philosophy. This axiological thesis allows the philosophical sceptic to avoid metaphilosophical pessimism: the thesis that philosophy does not progress. However, in this paper, I scrutinise the value of philosophical work as it is conceived under *equilibrism*. I raise the ‘Challenge from the Epistemic and Pragmatic Inadequacy of *Equilibrist* Philosophy’ in order to emphasise the requirement for *equilibrism* to demonstrate the motivations for philosophical work as conceived under *equilibrism*. In response to this challenge, I locate two central features of *equilibrist* philosophical work (critique and formulating *equilibria*), and the epistemic and practical benefits they each confer, to defend an optimism about the value of philosophical work as conceived under *equilibrism*.

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Introduction: Philosophical Scepticism and Equilibrism

What is philosophy good for? For many naturalistic thinkers today, not much. We are familiar with the infamous opening lines of Stephen Hawking's *The Grand Design*:

Philosophy is dead. [...] Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.²

The Nobel laureate Francis Crick makes a similar gesture toward the displacement of philosophy's value by science:

Essentially philosophers often ask good questions, but they have no techniques for getting the answers. Therefore you should not pay too much attention to their discussions. And we can ask what progress they have made. A lot of problems which were once regarded as philosophical, such as what is an atom, are now regarded as part of physics. Some people have argued that the main purpose of a philosopher is to deal with the unsolved problems, but the problems eventually get solved, and they get solved in a scientific way. If you ask how many cases in the past has a philosopher been successful at solving a problem, as far as we can say there are no such cases.³

The inadequacy of philosophical methods—what Crick calls 'techniques'—has been referred to by Beebe as support for the metaphilosophical position she calls 'philosophical scepticism'.⁴ Beebe appeals to this inadequacy, along with the inadequacy of philosophical data and the systematic peer disagreement that

² Hawking, Stephen (2010) *The Grand Design*, Bantam Books, 5, quoted in Pigliucci, Massimo (2022) 'Scientism and Liberal Naturalism', in M. De Caro & D. Macarthur, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism*, Routledge, 374.

³ Blackmore, Susan (2005) *Conversations on Consciousness*. Oxford University Press, quoted in Stoljar, Daniel (2017) *Philosophical progress: In Defence of a Reasonable Optimism*, Oxford University Press, xvii.

⁴ Beebe, Helen (2018) 'Philosophical Scepticism and the Aims of Philosophy'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **118** (1), 1.

is widespread throughout the discipline, in order to sceptically rebut (what she takes to be) the widely held assumption that philosophers can *know* any of the substantive philosophical claims that they make or presume about the world. If one believes—or has hitherto presumed—that philosophy is predominantly good for *knowing* about the world, then following Beebe to her sceptical conclusion may incite despair.

Specifically, we might make two distinct, despairing inferences:

- (1) if philosophy cannot produce knowledge, then philosophy cannot make progress; and
- (2) if philosophy cannot produce knowledge, then philosophy has no value.⁵

Before we follow van Inwagen into pessimism about the ‘futility of philosophy’,⁶ or go so far as to abandon philosophy altogether in favour of the more successful techniques of science, we ought to scrutinise the position that philosophical progress and value should be evaluated by philosophy’s ability to produce knowledge. As we discover in this paper, our anxious reflection on philosophy’s progress and value is directed by the shadow cast down from the incredible success of science in its ability to create consensus and use independent data to find patterns in nature.

As recognised by Dellsén et al., philosophers’ optimism or pessimism about philosophical progress is often merely dictated by the standard one uses to evaluate philosophical success.⁷ Appropriating standards of progress used in

⁵ These are distinct inferences that seem to be conflated by many commentators. We may vindicate the value of philosophy, and have a concept of philosophical success, without any concept of philosophical progress. This is the view presented in Shan, Yafeng (2022) ‘Philosophy doesn’t need a Concept of Progress’, *Metaphilosophy*, **53(2-3)**.

⁶ van Inwagen, Peter (1996) ‘Review of Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry by Colin McGinn’, *The Philosophical Review*, **105(2)**, 253.

⁷ Dellsén, Finnur, Lawler, Insa, & Norton, James. (2021). ‘Thinking about Progress: From Science to Philosophy’. *Noûs*.

the philosophy of science, Dellsén et al. introduce three other possible candidates that could account for philosophical progress: a truthlikeness account, a problem-solving account, and their noetic account.⁸

Drawing on Lewis' remarks on a 'reasonable goal' for philosophy,⁹ Beebee develops and defends her own alternative conception of philosophy's aim, what she calls '*equilibrism*'. For Beebee, whilst no philosophical theory is ever going to achieve philosophical *knowledge*, we can rule out many philosophical theories and collate a collection of defensible (although inevitably underdetermined) theories. On this view, philosophy aims toward establishing an 'equilibrium', whereby all the indefensible philosophical theories have been discarded and we have finalised the collection of philosophical views that can withstand philosophical examination. For example, philosophy ought not to hope to produce knowledge about free will, but it can create alternative, competing theories about free will, and, subsequently, distinguish the weak theories from our best. In light of Beebee's view that philosophy cannot produce knowledge, *equilibrism*—the point at which our best competing theories for a given phenomena are refined—is taken to be an achievable aim that can also be used as a standard for measuring philosophical progress.¹⁰ In this way, Beebee's *equilibrism* offers a salve to soothe the pangs of the first despairing inference I listed above.

In this paper, I will take it for granted that *equilibrism* provides an adequate and suitable standard upon which to measure philosophical progress. Instead, I will focus on scrutinising the adequacy of *equilibrism* as an explanation of the *value* of philosophy, and whether the *equilibrist* can diffuse the second despairing inference listed above. Does the *equilibrist* conception of philosophy help us

⁸ Dellsén et al., 14-18.

⁹ Lewis, David (1983) *Philosophical Papers, Volume I*. Oxford University Press, x, quoted in Beebee, 15-16.

¹⁰ Beebee, 15.

make sense of the philosophy's value; a value that the distinguished Hawking and Crick cannot see?

In **Section I**, I will formulate a challenge as to the value of philosophy as conceived under *equilibrism*: Challenge from the Epistemic and Pragmatic Inadequacy of *Equilibrist* Philosophy. This challenge contends that 'equilibrist philosophy' (philosophy as conceived under the aim *equilibrism* describes) can only tell us about different theories that we create, but it cannot help us know or understand anything about the world, nor does it have any practical value. In **Section II** and **Section III**, I respond to this challenge with two justifications for the epistemic and practical value of *equilibrist* philosophical work. *Equilibrist* philosophy operates in two ways.¹¹ Firstly, *equilibrist* philosophy places theories under scrutiny. I raise The Argument from the Inevitability of Philosophical Views (§2.1) in order to demonstrate how this critical role relieves us of philosophical blunders that we would otherwise inevitably make. Secondly, philosophy constructs alternative and varied theories about a given phenomena. Following Catherine Elgin's conception of understanding, I claim that by scrutinising and producing the best possible competing theories for a given phenomena, philosophy allows us to conceive how the world might reasonably be taken to be. Moreover, I offer that although this understanding might not have an obvious pragmatic value, it confers the practical benefit of better decision-making on issues that relate to philosophical subject matters.

Section I: Why Would the *Equilibrist* Keep Doing Philosophy?

1.1 Philosophy under Equilibrism

¹¹ These ways are related, as elaborated in §3.1.

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Before we articulate the challenge regarding the value of *equilibrist* philosophy, it is important to clarify the *equilibrist* picture of philosophical work. On a strict interpretation of philosophical scepticism, philosophical methodology will never be able to determine the justification for one particular philosophical theory for a given subject.¹² Two central motivations for this stance are: (1) the inadequacy of the data, and (2) the different weight philosophers assign to the theoretical virtues. On this view, philosophical methodology faces a serious underdetermination problem, and whilst philosophical examination may be able to refute indefensible philosophical views, there will always be multiple views that could reasonably be defended. *Equilibrism* contends that the aim of philosophy is to 'find out what *equilibria* there are that can withstand examination',¹³ where the *equilibria* are those theories that can reasonably be defended.

Beebe recognises that under an *equilibrist* conception of philosophy, philosophers may be able to better recognise that some arguments are unproductively intractable because they are working with different data, or weigh the theoretical virtues differently. For example, one significant portion of our philosophical data is our intuitions, which may not have the feature of independence in the way that empirical data does for scientific theories. As recognised by van Fraassen, empirical success in the sciences, and the consequent formation of consensus for successful scientific theories, is produced by science's methodological commitment to *independent* data.¹⁴

In science, independent data is that which can be observed by anybody (at least anybody with the requisite scientific training and background to comprehend

¹² A fallible philosophical scepticism might be preferable. It isn't clear why Beebe would have to insist that it is impossible that, on a rare occasion, our intuitions and assessment of the weight of the virtues could align for a particular topic. For example, Goedel's theorems of incompleteness are two theories in logic that have widespread consensus and seem to have been accepted as philosophical knowledge for half a century. This discussion, however, falls outside the scope of this paper.

¹³ Lewis, x, quoted in Beebe, 15-16.

¹⁴ van Fraassen, Bas C. (2002) *The Empirical Stance*, Yale University Press, 159.

the observation). For example, Perrin was able to conduct fruitful experiments into Brownian motion (the movement of tiny granules suspended in water), and sway the scientific community into consensus concerning the existence of atoms, due to his measurement of data specified by a demarcated parameter: the mean kinetic energy of the granules.¹⁵ By measuring the behaviour of these granules on this particular parameter, Perrin was able to confirm Einstein's predictions of the mean displacement of the granules and their rotation energy,¹⁶ and, consequently, cite thirteen different ways of precisely calculating the same quantity for Avogadro's number (N); the number of particles in a unit known as a mole (*mol*).¹⁷ The measurements relating to the granules' mean kinetic energy are *independent* to the extent that they could have been observed by any of Perrin's trained colleagues had they wanted to follow Perrin around the laboratory, checking Perrin's microscopes and taking their own photographs. In this sense, these measurements are independent data.

For Beebe, in philosophy we generally find a different story associated with the appeal to data. A philosopher may invite their colleague to recognise an intuition by means of a thought experiment. However, as we are well aware, oftentimes their trained colleague looks through the metaphorical "lens" of the thought experiment, only to make a completely contradictory observation. Of course, if philosophy is aimed toward knowledge, then the philosophers can only ensure the reliability of the data by disputing what each other "observe" about their own intuitions, and concoct tactics to compel each other to see the intuition which they simply do not have. *Equilibrism* provides philosophers with a conception of their activity that relieves them of the necessity for further

¹⁵ Psillos, Stathis (2011) 'Moving Molecules above the Scientific Horizon: On Perrin's Case for Realism', *Journal for General Philosophy of Science*, **42(2)**, 353; Chalmers, Alan (2020) 'Drawing Philosophical Lessons from Perrin's Experiments on Brownian Motion: A Response to van Fraassen'. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, **62**, 722.

¹⁶ Einstein, Albert (1905) 'On the Motion of Small Particles Suspended in Liquids at Rest Required by the Molecular-Kinetic Theory of Heat', in A. D. Fürth, ed, *Investigations on the Theory of the Brownian Movement*, Dover Publications, 17.

¹⁷ Psillos, Stathis (1999) *Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth*. Routledge, 19.

table-thumping and foot-stomping disputes where it is no longer fruitful for the *equilibrist* aim. However, whilst this is a good motivation for preferring an *equilibrist* conception of the aim of philosophy over philosophy conceived under the aim of knowledge, I will now raise the problem of understanding why an *equilibrist* philosopher would bother undertaking philosophical work at all.

1.2 Challenge from the Epistemic and Pragmatic Inadequacy of Equilibrist Philosophy

One feature of philosophy, as it is conceived under *equilibrism*, is that philosophers ought not to *believe* the philosophical views that they accept and commit to. Beebee, a metaphilosophical sceptic, appropriates van Fraassen's anti-realist account of scientific *acceptance* as an alternative to belief. For Beebee, the philosopher can accept a certain philosophical theory about free will without actually believing in the theory. Here, acceptance of a theory merely amounts to a pragmatic commitment to:

- 1) Confront any future phenomena by means of the conceptual resources of this theory,
- 2) Be willing to answer questions *ex cathedra*, and
- 3) Assume the role of the explainer.

By accepting a theory 'one commits to speak and write and act as though the theory is true',¹⁸ without believing it is so. Beebee contends that:

This attitude can be applied to the working philosopher no less than to the working scientists.¹⁹

¹⁸ Beebee, 21.

¹⁹ Beebee.

Beebe, however, overlooks one significant feature of van Fraassen's account of the acceptance of scientific theories.

On van Fraassen's account, our acceptance of scientific theories is pragmatically connected to practical concerns. For van Fraassen, even though scientific theories are not taken to be completely true, he does acknowledge that science uncovers the 'actual regularities' that are to be found in nature.²⁰ Practically equipped with knowledge of these regularities, we can predict and thereby manipulate phenomena in order to develop technologies, take photos on Mars, and immunise ourselves against certain viruses. Therefore, even on van Fraassen's anti-realist interpretation of scientific activity, our scientific acceptance can be justified with reference to practical concerns.

On the other hand, what motivation is there for an equilibrist philosopher to accept their philosophical theories in the way that the scientific anti-realist accepts scientific theories? If, on the *equilibrist* account, philosophers do not *believe* any philosophical theory, then what is the point of philosophical work? As discussed above, van Fraassen gives reasons as to why a scientist is rightly still willing to commit herself to a theory. It is not immediately obvious what motivates a philosopher to commit themselves to a theory. Does *equilibrist* philosophical activity have either any epistemic value (for understanding the world) or any practical value (for helping us navigate our way through life)? This is the Challenge from the Epistemic and Pragmatic Inadequacy of Equilibrist Philosophy. If Beebe's thesis does not capture the value of philosophy, then this may be grounds for resisting *equilibrism* as an adequate conceptualisation of philosophy's aim.

²⁰ van Fraassen, Bas C. (1980) *The Scientific Image*. Oxford University Press, 40.

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Equilibrist philosophy needs a justificatory story if we are going to conceive of philosophy as a worthwhile exercise. Whilst *equilibrism* might equip philosophers with a response to pessimism about philosophical progress, they aren't equipped to respond to those naturalistic thinkers, in the vein of Hawking and Crick, who might continue to assert that philosophy is dead and has nothing to really offer us in the wake of the success of science. In **Section II** and **Section III**, I will give two motivations for optimism about the value of *equilibrist* philosophical work.

Section II: *Equilibrist* Philosophy and the Value of Critique

Recalling the account of equilibrism offered in §1.1, we can identify two central features of *equilibrist* philosophy:

- 1) the process of examining and critiquing philosophical views; and
- 2) the process of developing and improving philosophical views as possible candidates for *equilibria*.

In the following two sections, I will expand on these two features, and reveal how they can direct us toward understanding how philosophy is valuable and worthwhile, even if it does not produce knowledge. Hopefully, by the end of **Sections II** and **III**, the equilibrist will be equipped to address the Challenge from the Epistemic and Pragmatic Inadequacy of Equilibrist Philosophy.

2.1 The Argument from the Inevitability of Philosophical Views

Philosophical views are not as dispensable as the comments from Hawking and Crick imply. Philosophical commentators on these passages are often quick to

recognise that both Crick and Hawking are themselves expounding philosophical views in their critique of philosophy.²¹ Pigliucci is right to suggest that Hawking's dismissal of philosophy's adequacy can be seen as self-defeating when Hawking's entire *The Grand Design* (2010) is itself 'best characterised as a popular treatise on the philosophy of cosmology'.²²

Although we might not notice it, we take on philosophical views all the time. Moreover, our beliefs and actions often imply certain philosophical assumptions which may not be consciously held. Alternatively, we may hold beliefs that on their face don't seem philosophical which have controversial philosophical corollaries. As recognised in the philosophy of science, if we believe that the entities described by our best scientific theories are true, which very many people do (whether or not they have philosophically deliberated about it), then we are implicated in the belief that the theoretical criteria for theory preference—the theoretical virtues—are in some sense 'truth conducive'. The view that a simpler theory is a better candidate for truth than a more complex theory (*ceteris paribus*) seems difficult to justify without some underlying metaphysical presupposition (or faith) that the world is, in some sense, simple.²³ In this way, what may seem like ordinary views to many people are either themselves philosophical, or they entail ones that are philosophical.

Not only do we find ourselves assuming, implying, or taking on philosophical views in our ordinary lives (let alone in crucial moments of our lives), but we can also see how the human intellect has a positive tendency to interpret the world by means of philosophical theories and explanations. As noted by van Fraassen, the history of philosophy reveals the human impulse to explain empirical phenomena by reference to some further, theoretical entity. It seems human beings cannot merely accept what they experience at face value without

²¹ See Pigliucci 2019, 374 and Stoljar 2017, 3.

²² Pigliucci 2019, 374.

²³ See Bueno 2015, 674.

giving some account of it. For van Fraassen, we specifically go astray when we insist on an inference method he refers to as 'explanations that proceed by postulation'.²⁴ This is the inference method of explaining a phenomenon by appealing to the reality of certain entities or aspects of the world not already evident in experience. On van Fraassen's account of empiricism, the empiricist philosopher stands in negative opposition to this 'theoretical tendency':

That is why we are ready to call Aristotle more of an empiricist than Plato and speak of an empiricist turn at that point. Aristotle called Plato's followers back from high theory to empirical inquiry. That is also why we think of the late fourteenth-century nominalists as the parents of British empiricism: they staged a rebellion against an Aristotelian tradition that had wandered far away from Aristotle's empirical focus ... Similarly, the [logical] positivists and later empiricists staged yet another new beginning for empiricism, in their critical opposition to the metaphysics of their day.²⁵

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche provides a comparable commentary on the history of philosophy as a flight from one's actual life (and experience of the world) toward another theoretically constructed world. On Nietzsche's assessment, Plato is unable to accept the world in which we live, the '*rerum concordia discors*' (discordant concord of things).²⁶ Following Nietzsche's provocative commentary, Plato constructs the theoretical world of the forms, a theoretical world that explains the world of appearances and purports to be more fundamental to it, as a way of escaping from and 'denying' the reality of the world of appearances. Across the history of human thought (as thought of by Nietzsche) we fall prey to a metaphysical impulse, whether it is the divine world contemplated by Christians or the objective world of laws described by

²⁴ van Fraassen 2002, 37.

²⁵ van Fraassen 2002, 36.

²⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich (1887) *The Gay Science*, W. Kaufmann, trans, Vintage, 30.

science. This is the impulse—a ‘metaphysical need’²⁷—to construct a theoretical explanation of what we experience.

The indispensability of philosophy, and the human tendency to fall prey to theoretical thinking, calls for philosophical examination of those philosophical views that we find ourselves accepting or implicating ourselves in. Philosophical examination involves revealing the philosophical assumptions or implications of certain scientific, political, religious (or other ordinary) beliefs that we might hold or entertain. It also involves evaluating those philosophical views and determining whether they are outright untenable, or whether they are defensible. This is completely commensurate with the *equilibrist* vision of philosophy offered by Beebe.

In this fashion, *equilibrist* philosophy is valuable as a way of relieving us of indefensible philosophical views we might unwittingly accept or imply. Of course, philosophy already performs this function. We know this with reference to our own life as philosophers. We have disembarrassed ourselves of disastrous philosophical blunders due to our study of philosophy and uncovered dubious philosophical assumptions that underpinned the way that we were thinking. Hopefully, we have also helped relieve others of the burden of an unexamined philosophical assumption, even if only in our personal (as opposed to academic) lives. The Argument from the Inevitability of Philosophical Views shows that philosophy is valuable, even essential, for examining the views that we inevitably take or implicate ourselves in. Even if philosophy dispenses with knowledge as its aim, it has a critical value: one that dismissive remarks like Hawking’s and Crick’s overlook.

²⁷ Nietzsche, 131.

2.2 Philosophy as the Discipline of Critique

The defence of *equilibrist* philosophy has revealed a distinctive feature of philosophy as a discipline. This feature is its commitment to critiquing and examining philosophical views. Of course, one might respond by pointing out that philosophy is not the only discipline that is willing to take on a critical attitude. Literary critics scrupulously dissect each others' assessments in order to expose a misreading or an oversight. Experimental scientists will expend vast quantities of resources to meticulously construct elaborate or intricate experimental apparatus, just so they can assess whether the theories of their theoretical colleagues stand up to the test.²⁸ However, following Priest, philosophy is distinctive for its 'unbridled' willingness to examine and critique any view whatsoever:

Anything is a fit topic for critical scrutiny and potential rejection [...] even the efficacy of critical reasoning itself.²⁹

The philosophical interlocutors of Beebee's paper (Argle, Bargle, Cargle, Dargle, Fargle) are absorbed in seeking ways to scrutinise each others' views about various different topics. In these discussions, there may be no shared theoretical bedrock that the interlocutors share: nothing is taken for granted. What's more, as emphasised by Beebee, they might not even agree on what makes a theory good, weighing the value of different theoretical virtues differently to each other.³⁰ Philosophy's insistence on examining every element of each other's views is one distinctive feature of philosophical critique. Priest recognises that although scientists are encouraged to scrutinise and test novel theories, ideas,

²⁸ Priest, Graham (2006) 'What is philosophy? Philosophy', **81(2)**, 201.

²⁹ Priest, 201.

³⁰ Beebee, 8.

and results, 'no one is encouraged to question well entrenched and established parts of the scientific corpus'.³¹

Following Kuhn, science's success and efficiency is facilitated by an element of dogmatism. For Kuhn, the dogmatic element of science is typified by the scientific textbook.³² Science is not taught critically. However, due to this pedagogical dogmatism, science is able to produce specialists quickly and efficiently because they have been trained to work within an underlying general theory, or, in Kuhnian terms, a 'paradigm'. Scientists are not trained to *question* the general theory, but to try to solve its specific problems. In Shapin's sociological account of the intricate networks of trust upon which science operates, he emphasises that to take a sceptical attitude to the presumptions that underpin normal (specialist) experimental science would be enormously costly and time-consuming. As Shapin comically recognises, one would have to set up "counter-laboratories" to negatively match each laboratory we have today.³³

However, one must acknowledge that science will, from time to time, challenge the well-entrenched foundations within its paradigm. However, these moments of conceptual revolution are exactly where the boundaries between philosophy and science begin to blur. Priest recognises that when a scientist engages in critiques 'that go beyond the bounds of what is normally permitted, they are engaging in philosophy'.³⁴ This view is commensurate with Kuhn's characterisation of scientific revolutions, where research transitions from 'normal' science to 'extraordinary' research, and scientists must have 'recourse to philosophy and [...] debate over fundamentals'.³⁵

³¹ Priest, 201-02.

³² Kuhn, Thomas (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press, 136-40.

³³ Shapin, Steven (1994) *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*, University of Chicago Press, 19.

³⁴ Priest, 202.

³⁵ Kuhn, 91.

Philosophy has a distinctive role in our epistemic projects. It is the discipline where any view is liable to receive examination. Whether in religion, politics, or features of our social interactions, philosophy has been distinctively invaluable for scrutinising views that we take for granted, or wouldn't think to countenance rejecting.

Section III: The Value of *Equilibria*

The positive counterpart—to the negative value of philosophical critique outlined in **Section II**—is the value of collating candidates for defensible *equilibria*. An important part of philosophical critique is the creative construction of alternative or improved versions of a view. In this final **Section III**, I will introduce the importance of the constructive aspect of *equilibrist* philosophy by demonstrating its relationship with the critical aspect of philosophy (§3.1). Appropriating discussions of understanding from Elgin's recent *True Enough*,³⁶ I will then argue that *equilibrist* philosophy offers us the value of non-factive “modal understanding” of its subject matter (§3.1).

3.1 Critique and Construction

It is important to recognise that the two features of *equilibrist* philosophy I have located— its critical and its constructive—are not totally distinct from each other. Critique is most forceful when it is coupled with the proposal of a competing theory.

Every view has its problems. This is true for philosophical views as well as views generally, including scientific views. As recognised by Larry Laudan:

³⁶ Elgin, Catherine (2017). *True Enough*, MIT Press.

Almost every [scientific] theory in history has had some anomalies or refuting instances; indeed, no one has ever been able to point to a single major theory which did not exhibit some anomalies.³⁷

Even our best contemporary science is known to have serious problems which it must overcome.³⁸

Let's consider, for instance, the rotation problem for spiral galaxies as an example of an inconsistency in our best science. There is a known contradiction between the predictions of how spiral galaxies rotate under Newtonian gravitational theory ('NTG') and what we actually observe of spiral galaxies.³⁹ Assuming that galaxies have a greater concentration of mass as you move toward the centre (which is indicated by astronomical observations), then the centre will spin faster than the spiral arms, and there will be a decline in the radial speed as you move away from the centre. This means that we ought to observe that the inside of the galaxy is spinning a lot faster than the outside. In 1959, it was discovered that the Triangulum Galaxy, M33, did not exhibit the decline in radial speed predicted by NTG. M33's rotation curve was found to be flat: the outer part of the galaxy was spinning at much the same radial speed as the centre. However, this observation did not amount to a refutation of NTG. Rather than give up the theory, scientists are instead experimentally looking for evidence for dark matter, a theoretical entity that would account for the contradictions between the observations and NTG.

³⁷ Laudan, Larry (1977) *Progress and its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth*, Routledge, 27.

³⁸ Consider the winners of the 2022 Nobel Prize for Physics—Alain Aspect, John Clauser and Anton Zeilinger—whose experimental work has highlighted the inconsistencies between our best theory of space and time (relativity theory) and our best theory of particulate matter. See, for an overview, Aspect, Alain (2015) 'Closing the Door on Einstein and Bohr's Quantum Debate'. *Physics*, **8**, 123.

³⁹ See Colyvan, Mark (2008) The Ontological Commitments of Inconsistent Theories. *Philosophical Studies*, **141**, 166.

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As recognised by Laudan, issues with a theory are only taken to be devastating for a theory when they are made in conjunction with a positive, and competing alternative. For example, the perihelion precession of Mercury was known to be inconsistent with Newtonian mechanics well before Einstein's relativity theory. However, when Einstein developed relativity theory, he appealed to the perihelion precession as an observation that classical mechanics could not account for, one that is consistent with his competing candidate (general relativity). This is one of the central pieces of evidence that were decisive for the rejection of classical mechanics in favour of relativity theory.

It is for this reason that Laudan generalises:

Unsolved problems ... count as genuine problems only when they are no longer unsolved. Until solved by some theory in a domain they are generally only "potential" problems rather than actual ones.⁴⁰

Critique finds its force with the construction of theoretical alternatives, one that can better account for the problems of the accepted theory. This is a feature of how philosophers can provide compelling critiques. Bargle claims that Argle's theory of holes is inconsistent with common sense, and this critique *really* gets Argle's attention because Bargle has formulated a competing, alternative theory of holes that is commensurate with common sense. Similarly, in the philosophy of science, contemporary resistance to scientific realism is not simply due to the issues with Inference to the Best Explanation and the 'No Miracles Argument' raised by van Fraassen,⁴¹ but also his development of a strong alternative that can account for those limits: constructive empiricism.

⁴⁰ Laudan, 18.

⁴¹ van Fraassen (1980), 19-22.

3.2 *Equilibria and Understanding*

Possibility is higher than actuality.

— Heidegger, *Being and Time*.⁴²

Equilibria are not only important for their role in giving force to philosophical critique, but I will also offer an argument in this final subsection that they give us a positive epistemic understanding (as opposed to knowledge) of their subject matter. This argument relies upon a non-factive view of understanding. That is, the view that understanding is a kind of cognitive achievement that cannot be merely reduced to knowledge. Of course, if the understanding were reducible to knowledge, the equilibrist would have to concede that philosophy cannot give us understanding of its subject matter.

Supposing the adequacy of the characterisation of knowledge as justified, true belief (with the exceptions being those of the kind raised by Gettier),⁴³ philosophers have defended the reductionist view that understanding can only be thought of as a justified, true belief about a certain subject matter. Following Aristotle, we might say we understand a given subject matter merely when we have *knowledge* of its causes. In this way, understanding a phenomenon is a certain, specific kind of knowledge.

However, these accounts overlook how we also use the concept of understanding to refer to a 'non-factive' cognitive achievement. Following Catherine Elgin, we need not believe *true* propositions in order to have an understanding of a given subject matter. For Elgin, this is typified by how we conceive of scientific understanding, which regularly uses 'idealisations' as

⁴² Quoted in Sheehan, Thomas (1993) 'Reading a Life: Heidegger and Hard Times', in C. Guignon, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, Cambridge University Press, 93.

⁴³ Gettier, Edmund (1963) 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' in D. Pritchard & R. Neta, eds, *Arguing about Knowledge*, Routledge.

vehicles for grasping a subject matter that would be otherwise difficult to 'grasp' by merely referring to true propositions. For Elgin:

Models and idealizations are ... more than heuristics. They are ineliminable and epistemically valuable components of the understanding science supplies.⁴⁴

For example, light can be modelled as a wave or as a particle. Both models exemplify certain features of how light behaves, and are thereby helpful vehicles for grasping those features. In this way, they are helpful but not exactly true ways ('idealisations') of conceiving of the phenomena of light. Understanding, in this sense, refers to more than merely knowing certain facts about light, it is a capacity for being able to locate and grasp various *connections* between the body of information (models of light) and the actual subject matter (light). Another compelling and comparable argument is developed by Ivanova, who recognises that

If truth is a necessary condition for understanding, it would follow that past scientists lacked understanding of phenomena for which they had advanced empirically successful (but from our perspective false) theories.⁴⁵

By showing that we have a concept of the understanding that is not dependent on truth, and thereby not reducible to knowledge (where knowledge is defined as justified, *true* belief), understanding becomes a cognitive achievement which the equilibrist philosophy might hope to achieve.

Elgin refers to the concept of a 'tether' in order to refer to those connections between a body of information and the subject matter. As Elgin recognises,

⁴⁴ Elgin, 1.

⁴⁵ Ivanova, Milena (2020) 'Beauty, Truth, and Understanding', in Ivanova and French, eds, *The Aesthetics of Science*, 98, citing De Regt, Henk (2015) 'Scientific Understanding: Truth or Dare?', *Synthese*, **192**: 3781–3797.

some bodies of information may not have any tethers to their subject matter whatsoever. For example,

Even if astrology offers a comprehensive, internally coherent account of the cosmos, it yields no understanding because it lacks a suitable tether.⁴⁶

However, Elgin clarifies that we can understand astrology as a body of information to be understood. When we say 'Paul understands mythology', we are not referring to Paul's ability to see and use connections between mythology and actual historical events. Rather, we refer to Paul's account of mythology and his ability to locate its connections as it is tethered to mythology as a body of knowledge itself. In the same sense, we can have a better or worse understanding of astrology, and, in turn, a better or worse understanding of philosophy.

It is important to recognise that we want more than merely this kind of understanding out of philosophy. We don't engage with philosophy merely out of a historical interest of understanding what the body information, but with a hope or confidence that it will give us some benefit or insight in our project of understanding and engaging with the world. In response to this, we ought to recognise that philosophy, as a body of knowledge, does not completely lack tethers to the world. These tethers are just of a different kind than we are used to in areas of knowledge (like the natural sciences). On the *equilibrist* account of philosophy, we cannot extrapolate any knowledge of the world from this body of information. We can, however, have an understanding of what philosophical views are indefensible, and, therefore, could not be rationally considered to have any tethers to the world. These are the views that fall by the wayside in the *equilibrist* project for philosophy.

⁴⁶ Elgin, 45.

On the other hand, we can also have an understanding, and locate, how our *equilibria* would be tethered to the world *if* they were true. In this sense, *equilibrist* philosophy can offer what we might call a ‘modal understanding’ of its subject matter: that is, an understanding of different ways of rationally conceiving how the phenomena might be. On this view, we ought to conceive of *equilibria* as tied to the world by modal tethers.

To illustrate with an example, let’s suppose that we have reached philosophical ‘equilibrium’ with regard to the problem of free will. In this instance, we have rejected all those indefensible philosophical views on free will, and we have arrived at three different defensible *equilibria*. Those *equilibrist* philosophers have worked scrupulously in assessing, improving, and refuting all different kinds of views and arguments relating to free will. They know the surviving *equilibria* front-to-back, and they have all done their best at attempting to knock down at least one of those remaining *equilibria*. I contend that those *equilibrist* philosophers will have a valuable modal understanding of how the phenomena, ‘free will’, might reasonable be taken to be. This understanding is also one of practical importance. I’d claim that government and legal institutions ought to defer to these *equilibrist* philosophers’ assessments in creating policy, legislation, or giving judicial decisions in matters relating to free will (or accountability, and responsibility). After all, those institutions may be basing their policy, law, or judgement on a view of free will that those *equilibrist* philosophers have shown to be disastrously indefensible. As insisted by Blackburn, if we don’t have the appetite to engage with the problems of philosophy, we may choose to shrug them off.⁴⁷ However, he warns that ‘difficulties have a way of biting back ... while we don’t know our way about, our practices will risk being muddled and unjust’.⁴⁸ Ofcourse, the *equilibrist* philosopher does not claim to know her way about, but she can tell us which

⁴⁷ Blackburn, Simon (2006) *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Penguin. 112.

⁴⁸ Blackburn.

paths are blunders, and which are defensible. By deferring to philosophers, institutions may be able to take into account those *equilibria* for free will, and make decisions that are sensitive to them. Even where these equilibria are diametrically opposed, the equilibrist philosopher can assist in developing a more balanced institutional or policy approach to a given issue where reasonable minds may simply disagree. In this sense, the 'modal understanding' offered by *equilibrist* philosophy offers important epistemic and practical value that vindicates the philosophical work done under an *equilibrist* conception of philosophy.

Conclusion

In §1.2, I noted that to make sense of philosophical 'acceptance' as developed by Beebe (in light of van Fraassen's concept of scientific acceptance), the *equilibrist* needs to show that philosophers will have a motivation to commit themselves to philosophical work as conceived under *equilibrism*. In this essay, I have endeavoured to answer the question: if philosophy must dispense with knowledge as its aim, then what motivates the value of philosophical work? In so doing, I have, in part, uncovered two significant aspects of philosophy's value. In **Section II**, I discussed philosophy's value as critiquing those philosophical views we seem to inevitably find ourselves taking on or implicating ourselves in. In **Section III**, I offered 'modal understanding' as a way of conceiving of the epistemic and practical value of *equilibria*, which need not be true to give us insight into the world, specifically, how the world *might* reasonably be taken to be.

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