

Long hair, beard, black leather jacket, psychedelic t-shirt and faded jeans – there was always something reassuringly subversive about David Chalmers’s unorthodox presence. At conferences, where he’s probably the keynote, he always stands out like a member of a rock band who took a wrong turn, sometimes to the visible distress of his tweed-wearing peers. So when our Skype connection is up and running and I see a clean-shaven Chalmers, sporting a short back and sides, I don’t quiz him on his claims about the hard problem of consciousness, his arguments for a kind of dualism, the extended mind thesis he developed with Andy Clark, his thoughts about artificial intelligence or his more recent views on the intelligibility of the universe. I want to know what gives with the haircut. Has Chalmers sold out or what?

He laughs, “I’ve had long hair for more than half my life, so I thought it was time for a change. I’d been talking about doing it for years, but I was writing a book at the time, and I got worried that I would lose my philosophical powers. So I thought I’d better wait until the book was finished. Then I cut the hair.”

His philosophical powers remain undiminished, and he’s now bringing them to bear on a touchy subject. Ask a physicist or chemist or biologist to explain the basic truths discovered and accepted in their disciplines, and you’ll be directed to a whole section of the library. Ask a philosopher for a list of philosophical truths discovered, progress made, even generally agreed-upon propositions, and you might well get a blank stare. We’ve been working on being, truth, beauty and goodness for the better part of two and a half thousand years. You’d think we’d have piled up some truths by now. But compared to the

progress made by the young upstarts in the hard and soft sciences, philosophy has a meta-problem in need of an explanation. Why isn’t there more progress in philosophy?

Chalmers tightens up these sorts of loose thoughts by advancing a single thesis: “there has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy”. What does he mean by “the big questions”, and anyway why think there’s not been convergence on true answers? Didn’t Thales think that all things were full of gods? We’ve made some strides since, haven’t we?

“It’s a pretty common observation that there’s a lot of disagreement in philosophy,” he begins. “We formalised this to some extent, when David Bourget and I took a survey of professional philosophers. We asked them about thirty major questions in philosophy, and kind of unsurprisingly we found pretty serious disagreement on all of them.”

The survey he mentions was sent to professional philosophers in ninety-nine philosophy departments in North America, Europe and Australasia, and about half of the 2,000 recipients responded. They were asked whether they accept or lean towards one philosophical position or whether they were drawn in another direction – maybe they’re unfamiliar with the topic or accept a view not listed.

Only one view, realism about the external world, got more than 80% support. (Turn that stat on its head, and you get the worrying proposition that 20% of those paid to think about such things aren’t too sure about having hands.) *A priori* knowledge, atheism and scientific realism attracted more than 70% support. A few more views managed to clear 60% acceptance, but