

There has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy

his keyboard. “If you asked physicists a hundred years ago what are the big questions, I predict that right now there’d be quite a lot of agreement on the big questions of physics from 100 years ago. There would be convergence over time. In mathematics David Hilbert proposed twenty-three big questions in 1900, and now just over a century later more than half of them are solved, and half of the rest are well on their way.

“If on the other hand you look at Bertrand Russell’s *Problems of Philosophy*, published in 1912, and ask, what’s the status of those problems now, they’re mostly wide open. There hasn’t been a whole lot of convergence towards agreement on the big questions of philosophy.”

A standard move made by philosophy’s apologists in response to questions about progress goes like this: whenever philosophy starts solving problems, that branch of philosophy hives off and becomes a new discipline in its own right. Natural philosophers with an interest in physics became physicists, and the same sort of thing happened with mathematics, astronomy, psychology, economics, linguistics and logic. Philosophy has made lots of progress, it just doesn’t get credit for it because the new disciplines that philosophy spawns go their own way, ungratefully leaving philosophy with all the insoluble stuff. Why shouldn’t disciplinary speciation count as a kind of progress?

“I think it is a kind of progress,” he says. “There was a field, once upon a time, called ‘philosophy’ which is quite different from what we now call ‘philosophy’, on whose questions quite a lot of

progress has been made. The flipside of that is that if you look at what philosophy is now, what we’re left with isn’t dross, but we now have questions on which there’s been very little progress. The questions we now regard as philosophical are the ones on which progress is particularly difficult. Maybe the living off is a kind of explanation of where we are now, but it does raise the further question, what is it about these questions, the ones we now consider philosophical, what is it about them? Why is it so hard to make progress on them?”

But is convergence to the truth the right measure of progress? Philosophers have had other ideas. I’m thinking of Peter Hacker, who argues that philosophy tries to make a contribution to understanding, not to the store of human knowledge. It’s a conceptual exercise, and through it we try to understand how our concepts and our commitments hang together. That view of philosophy would save the phenomena, would give us a way to understand why there’s no convergence on the truth – but we’d still be able to say there’s progress in philosophy, progress of a different sort. Each generation has its own mess to sort out, has to figure things out for itself. Doesn’t philosophy progress by deepening our understanding of the world we find ourselves in, even if we don’t as a group converge on the truth?

“Hacker has a point,” Chalmers concedes. “The word ‘philosophy’ means love of wisdom, and it would be hard to say that wisdom isn’t one goal of philosophy. I’m a pluralist about what counts as progress in philosophy. I think we’re