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Philosophical Disagreement and Skepticism

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Abstract: *Disagreement is ubiquitous in philosophy. Although this disagreement is sometimes easily explained, other times we find more difficult disagreement arising between epistemic peers. There are a few different ways we can react to peer disagreement in philosophy. Following Hilary Kornblith, I argue that we should suspend judgment in the face of such disagreement. Although I think this is the most rational choice, it eventually leads to an uncomfortable skepticism towards philosophical methods. I conclude that when we examine the reliability of philosophy based on its usual defenses, we find that philosophy is indeed unreliable.*

“Metaphilosophy is the investigation of the nature of philosophy, with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments” – Morris Lazerowitz

There are many kinds of disagreement, some which are less problematic than others. Kevin may disagree with Heather about whether *You've Got Mail* is a good movie. A young math student may disagree with his tutor about whether $7 + 5 = 12$. Both of these cases are relatively unproblematic. In the first case, one can say that whether you believe *You've Got Mail* is a good movie is strictly a matter of taste. There is no deciding factor one way or the other. Additionally, not much hinges on your preference of that particular (and in my opinion, rather terrible) Tom Hanks movie. We might call this *disagreement about taste*¹.

¹ Although there is an extensive literature on disagreement in aesthetics, I'm not trying to address that literature in this example. Also, disagreement about taste could be construed as faulted disagreement (see below) if, for instance, Kevin had not seen the movie or if Heather was a well-known movie critic.

The case with the math student is a type of *faulted disagreement*. Faulted disagreement arises when a disparity of information or intelligence is found between the conflicting parties. For example, the young math student might disagree with his tutor about whether $7 + 5 = 12$. He might think that $7 + 5 = 13$. But the fact that he disagrees with his tutor is no reason for us, who are mathematically competent, to doubt whether $7 + 5 = 12$. The student is young and ill-informed, and thus the disagreement arises from the fact that the student lacks the proper information or intelligence.

Many cases of disagreement would disappear if both parties came to have the same level of information. In the above example, if the student came to know all of the relevant facts about addition and quantities, he would thereby agree with his tutor that $7 + 5 = 12$. Another example is if someone believed that the capital of Australia is Sydney. Those who have the relevant information know that the Australia's capital is Canberra. Simply consulting a map would alleviate disagreement in this case.

The above cases of disagreement are relatively mundane. There is a more interesting type of disagreement called *peer disagreement*. Peer disagreement is disagreement that arises between two epistemic peers: understanding, knowledge, and expertise are equally distributed among both parties. But epistemic equality is not enough for the kind of disagreement I want to examine, for both parties might be equally *ill-informed*; they may both be equally and incredibly stupid about a certain topic. What we want are equally informed *and* well-informed peers. Although this is an additional

Expertise is commonly thought of as a factor in deciding whether the disagreement is faulted or faultless. However in this example, Kevin and Heather are normal movie-goers.

qualification, it is not an outrageous one. In fact, we can find such disagreement within philosophy.

Here is the layout of the paper. In the next section, I'll examine peer disagreement in philosophy and some qualities that I think differentiate disagreement in philosophy from disagreement in other fields. From there I will address different reactions towards this disagreement and why I think peer disagreement in philosophy should be met with suspension of belief. However, given that disagreement is almost everywhere in philosophy, philosophy as an epistemic activity seems to be in jeopardy. I will conclude the paper with some common defenses philosophy might have to justify itself as a reliable method. Ultimately, I will put forth the main thesis that philosophy lacks the proper epistemic justification needed in order to be a reliable method towards truth or something reasonably truth-like.

1. Peer disagreement in philosophy

Those outside of professional philosophy might find it surprising that there is widespread disagreement in philosophy. After all, philosophers are usually smart, well-informed, and charitable people, albeit a little strange sometimes. However, anyone who has had training in philosophy or has attended a philosophy conference will know that disagreement is ubiquitous². Philosophers disagree on all types of things. And recently, some philosophers have been worried about how serious we should take this

² Although philosophers disagree on many things, I would be surprised to find someone who disagrees that there is disagreement in the field of philosophy. The fact of disagreement, it seems, is the one thing on which we all can agree. However, and not surprisingly, how *serious* we should take this disagreement and whether this disagreement is *rational* are contested.

disagreement. Unsurprisingly, philosophers have disagreed on how we should react to disagreement.

Before I get into the reactions to disagreement, there are a few qualities of philosophical disagreement that distinguish it from disagreement in other fields. First, it is *persistent*. Philosophy has been around for over 2500 years, and we are still grappling with the same questions Plato and Aristotle did in ancient Greece. Second, it is *pervasive*. We find disagreement not only across fields in philosophy (interdepartmental), but also within very specialized sub-fields (intradepartmental). There seems to be nothing on which philosophers can agree. Last, it is often *fundamental*. Philosophers disagree not only on the answers to philosophical questions, but also on the fundamentals of philosophy like what constitutes a philosophical question, how one should do philosophy, what philosophy is for, and even what philosophy is³. It is for these reasons that disagreement in philosophy is particularly problematic (Plant 570).

Now, it might be just that the work to be done in philosophy is on those areas where there is disagreement. No one need to write about those matters that are settled, such as whether certain obvious logical fallacies are indeed fallacies, or on other obvious truths that no one would deny. One might argue that we do have some agreement – that’s what makes argumentation possible – but we focus as a discipline on the work that needs to be done. And that’s why, at conferences and in philosophy generally, it appears that disagreement is the norm.⁴

³ In this paper, I will not address the question of what “philosophy” is. For now, my arguments will only apply to analytic philosophy.

⁴ Thanks to John Brunero for this point.

I think this is an overly optimistic view of agreement in philosophy. It seems that no truth is sacred in philosophy; what one philosopher holds as an obvious truth may be held by another philosopher as an absurdity. This may be in part because it is one of the jobs of philosophy to raise doubt on “obvious truths that no one would deny” like, e.g., whether there is a material world. Even the basic method of deduction, a primary tool of philosophy, has been brought into question⁵. This is why I characterize disagreement in philosophy as pervasive and fundamental.

Getting back to disagreement, not all disagreement in philosophy can be construed as peer disagreement. Sometimes conflicts do arise out of misunderstanding or lack of information. However, it cannot be denied that we do find in philosophy the kind of disagreement between peers, both of whom have incredible knowledge and intelligence. A paradigm case of peer disagreement in philosophy is the disagreement found between two well-respected philosophers, Peter van Inwagen and David Lewis. Van Inwagen writes:

How can I believe (as I do) that free will is incompatible with determinism or that unrealized possibilities are not physical objects or that human beings are not four-dimensional things extended in time as well as in space, when David Lewis--a philosopher of truly formidable intelligence and insight and ability--rejects these things I believe and is already aware of and understands perfectly every argument that I could produce in their defense? (273)

I think this can reasonably be seen as a case of peer disagreement⁶. We see van Inwagen puzzled by this apparent case of peer disagreement of which he find himself a part. He

⁵ See Carroll, Lewis. 1895. What the tortoise said to Achilles. *Mind* 4 (14):278-280.

⁶ One question, which is outside the scope of my paper, is how “pure” such peer disagreement can be. It cannot be the case that van Inwagen and Lewis have the exact same understanding. But if that is true, the

knows Lewis was just as smart as he is. And if that is the case, maybe he has reason to suspect that his own thinking has gone wrong somewhere. However, van Inwagen eventually goes on to say that he *must* have some special epistemic access that Lewis lacks. He writes, “I suppose my best guess is that I enjoy some sort of philosophical insight that, for all his merits, is somehow denied to Lewis” (van Inwagen 274). This special insight is incommunicable to Lewis; van Inwagen notes that he has tried on many occasions to explain to Lewis why he is wrong. Lewis did the same to van Inwagen. Both have failed to sway each other towards their own philosophical views.

2. Reactions to disagreement

In the face of disagreement we have two options: we can either revise our belief or not. Revising belief is called the conformist or conciliatory view (CV). Not revising belief is called the nonconformist or steadfast view (SV). CV can take a couple forms, because we can revise our belief in different ways. One way might be to simply concede to our opponent’s view. However, unless we have some good reason to do this, admitting to your opponent’s position will not have any better epistemic justification than holding your own view. Another way to revise your belief is to suspend or withhold judgment. I will argue for this form of CV which entails withholding judgment when faced with peer disagreement in philosophy. Peer disagreement should be taken so seriously that we should suspend belief altogether. Although I will spend some time in this paper trying to

question then becomes, “How can someone be *equally* knowledgeable and intelligent as someone else on a certain topic?” Shouldn’t we assume that the fact that they disagree is reason enough for us to suspect that they are *not* epistemic peers? I think we attribute peerage more loosely in philosophy between two reasonably smart individuals who have read and understand the same material. In van Inwagen and Lewis’ case, they have most likely read and understand *almost all* of the material available on these issues. Not only that, but they are both regarded as extremely intelligent. Philosophers may call Lewis’ arguments incredulous, but they do not call them dumb.

understand what this would mean for our doxastic actions like belief formation and retention, in the face of disagreement it is unclear exactly how one can simply become agnostic towards a held position. Some authors advocate the adoption of “epistemic modesty”, but I have suspicions that modesty will not help us solve the problem of disagreement. Rather, I think a strong and more global skepticism can be our only epistemically justified reaction to CV.

2.1 Deflating disagreement

If it can be shown that the fact of disagreement should not be taken seriously, then we might have reason to keep our philosophical beliefs. One possible way to do this, argued by Thomas Kelly, is to ignore the *fact* of disagreement and instead focus on the *reasons* for disagreement. The reasoning here is as follows: It is possible that anyone can disagree with me on just about anything. Does this mean I should suspend belief on everything? Of course not. There is an important asymmetry between merely possible disagreement and actual disagreement. The fact that anyone can disagree with me on just about anything is reason to think that the fact of disagreement should not be taken seriously – for if we did take it seriously, we would have to suspend judgment on everything. Accordingly, Kelly argues that the threat of disagreement might just reduce to the arguments and reasons for disagreement, and therefore the fact of disagreement itself should not be taken as seriously important. What is more significant to Kelly is *how* we disagree. The presence of disagreement is not relevant in any way to the formation and retention of our beliefs. Rather, we should just look at the reasons for how we disagree and leave it at that.

The first thing to note is that the asymmetry between possible and actual disagreement weakens when we incorporate peerhood. It is possible that a young child might disagree with me on whether $2 + 2 = 4$. We should not be dismayed by this disagreement. However, it is possible that philosophers of equally incredible intelligence and insight may disagree on the best philosophical explanation of consciousness. In fact, it is possible that these philosophers may disagree on virtually every philosophical topic. This should give us greater pause than the young child possibly disagreeing with us about whether $2 + 2 = 4$.

Another thing to note that is the Kelly's suggestion of looking at the reasons for disagreement is what is already done in philosophy. Haven't we already been looking at the reasons for disagreement in, say, the debate between internalists and externalists in epistemology? The arguments given in this debate can be found in all sorts of papers and talks, but we still have yet to come to something conclusive about the matter. So it seems strange to say that we should simply disregard the fact of disagreement and look at the reasons for disagreement, when we have already been doing this and it has not solved the problem of disagreement for us.

Additionally, Hilary Kornblith says that Kelly does not accurately describe disagreement. Although Kornblith agrees that his belief is not threatened if he knows your contrary opinion to be unreasonable, Kornblith says that if he holds you to be a reasonable and epistemic peer, then the fact of disagreement itself is usually troublesome regardless of whether he knows the specifics of your disagreement or not. For example, if you and a friend were dividing up a restaurant bill into two equal parts and came to different conclusions, and if you both held each other to be equally competent in basic

arithmetic, then you immediately have reason to suspect that either you or your friend is wrong without even knowing what your friend's calculated amount is. The fact that disagreement is present is reason enough to suspect that something has gone wrong.

In the case above, Kornblith notes that it would not be wise to simply stand your ground. Given the fact that you hold your friend to be an epistemic peer in regards to mathematical skill, along with the fact both of you came up with different amounts, what justification do you have in holding steadfast to your belief that the correct amount is yours? In this case, we do not have enough reason to keep to our beliefs. Rather, we should simply suspend judgment and recalculate.

Kelly might respond in saying that the above example does not transfer well to philosophical disagreement. Disagreement in philosophy arises precisely because contrary arguments are put forth (or at least available) against a philosophical view. Kelly argues that we should just look at the arguments themselves, and let it go at that. Note that this is not "merely pragmatic advice". Kelly's point is that the *arguments* are the relevant evidence. The fact of disagreement is irrelevant.

Kornblith is puzzled by this view when it is applied to peer disagreement in philosophy. Although the arguments themselves are important, it should be taken into consideration that both parties are familiar with the arguments, and both parties are (usually) equally intelligent. It is hard to see how this should not be taken into consideration when trying to decide what one should believe "at that very moment" of such disagreement.

Additionally, Kornblith argues that if disagreement itself is not important, then neither is agreement. Consensus, Kelly says, is “an extremely contingent and fragile matter” (qtd. in Kornblith 41). But Kornblith thinks this view of consensus is disingenuous to the fields of formal philosophy. Consensus in fields like logic, decision theory, or philosophy of mathematics is not like consensus in, say, the aesthetics of clothing. Most of the time, when we start to reach consensus on certain problems in decision theory, they tend to stick around. Such is not the case with fashion, which is usually updated every 5-10 years. Thus, “consensus in the mathematical community, except in rare cases, is not a fragile thing at all” (Kornblith 42). So Kornblith argues that, in the case of peer disagreement, the fact of disagreement itself should be taken seriously.

One problem with Kornblith’s view of consensus is that he does not address the softer fields of philosophy like ethics, social-political philosophy, or epistemology. None of these fields has enjoyed something like consensus. Philosophical views become *popular* but they never enjoy consensus. For example, Rawlsian political philosophy became very popular in the 1970s and 80s. However, by the 1990s, its popularity was waning. Rawlsian political philosophy may have been *popular*, but it was never ubiquitously agreed upon.

The fact that the softer fields of philosophy do not enjoy ubiquitous, long-lasting consensus is no reason to disregard the fact of disagreement. We are simply taken back to square one: either we show this disagreement to be trivial, or we accept its importance and suspend judgment.

There might be another way to deny the importance of disagreement. In the case of the restaurant check, our disagreement is highly isolated. Our mathematical computation does not much affect any of our other beliefs we might hold. However, philosophical topics are not isolated in this way. They tend to overlap. Taking a stance on one view, say the morality of abortion, usually entails a commitment to a host of other views. The complexity of these cases like the morality of abortion may allow us to “avoid the unwanted and widespread change in our bodies of belief to which the general principle seems to lead” (Kornblith 47). Adam Elga in particular defends this view.

Elga’s argument looks like this. In cases of complex disagreement, the disagreement is not isolated to one particular case. Rather complex disagreement ranges over a host of related but separate issues. If we are to meet disagreement with suspension of belief, it seems in cases of complex disagreement we would have to suspend *many* beliefs. But because we want to avoid widespread suspension of belief (i.e. global skepticism), we are therefore allowed to think of our epistemic peers as unreliable. We may acknowledge that the opinions of our epistemic peers weigh just as much as our own. Yet because this disagreement in complex cases would spread out to many other related issues, we may disregard their reliability and therefore preserve our own judgments.

One might be tempted to think that in cases of complex disagreement, we can derive the reliability of a peer from sources outside the realm of the complex case (e.g. from issues outside the cluster of abortion). Elga denies this because he says there is no fact of the matter about one’s opinion of one’s epistemic peer in such a case. “Once so much has been set aside,” Elga writes, “there is no determinate fact about what

opinion...remains” (qtd. in Kornblith 49). Given the fact that abortion is a very complex case, if we set aside *all* issues that link with abortion, then we have too little information to make an informed judgment on the reliability of an epistemic peer.

Kornblith thinks Elga gets this wrong. The two epistemic peers most likely *do* respect each other on the issues outside the cluster of a complex case. They “regard each other as basically decent, caring, thoughtful individuals whose opinions on a very wide range of moral matters, outside the sphere of issues most closely related to abortion, are trustworthy and insightful” (Kornblith 50). They do not think of each other as, say, homicidal sociopaths, whose views can be dismissed offhand. This is why peers are usually so particularly disturbed by contrary views: *because* they hold their epistemic peers to be in some way reliable.

Such is the case in philosophy as well. Internalists disagree with externalists about a debate in epistemology and possibly a whole host of other issues in philosophy. Does this mean the internalist should think of the externalist as unreliable? No, and the fact of the matter is they don’t think that way. Therefore, Kornblith argues that the only rational thing to do is to withhold opinion on contentious matters in philosophy.

2.2 The Inconsistency Argument

There is a further concern about the conciliatory view: it refutes itself. David Christensen addresses this concern in his talk “Epistemic Modesty Defended”. Here is the worry. It cannot be denied that there is a lot of disagreement on how we should react to disagreement. Therefore, if we take our opponents to be epistemic peers, and we practice what we preach, then we should suspend judgment on how we should react to

disagreement. Based on this argument, CV is inconsistent. Let's call this the Inconsistency Argument. I take this to be a strong argument against CV. Furthermore, I think it is right. However, I also think the argument applies in other cases that most would take to be epistemically justified. And if that is the case, then we may have reason to think that the Inconsistency Argument should not be a decisive objection to CV.

First, let us examine the argument's power and scope. If we allow for disagreement to affect our level of rational confidence in any way, the Inconsistency Argument applies. For example Thomas Kelly, who defends a moderate view of SV, still thinks that disagreement should have some effect on our confidence level – just not nearly as much as CV. However, adopting any principle that allows disagreement to affect our level of confidence will be subject to itself when that very principle encounters disagreement. As Christensen says, “If disagreement has any power to reduce one's credences in general, it will presumably have that power to reduce one's credence in one's moderately steadfast view of disagreement” (Christensen). So it seems the Inconsistency Argument applies to all views concerning disagreement except those who hold an extremely steadfast view.

Christensen poses a scenario that helps show how one could be wary of the Inconsistency Argument. Suppose you have found out that you have been subject to very sophisticated brain-washing techniques which have led to you to believe a certain philosophical belief (P). Furthermore, you have been given special drugs to increase your susceptibility to the brain-washing while leaving you feeling mentally clear and confident. Upon discovering this fact, do you now have a reason to diminish your confidence in (P)? It seems so. “But,” as Christensen notes, “any general principle that

would mandate this response would seem to require it as well when the philosophical view in question is that very principle” (Christensen). That is to say, if (P) happens to be the philosophical position that we should lower our confidence in a certain belief when we have evidence suggesting that we may be wrong about that belief, then our knowledge of the brain-washing techniques seems to be undermined by the very principle we were brain-washed into believing. This scenario and the above examination of the Inconsistency Argument’s scope lead Christensen to suggest that we should not take the abstract possibility of self-undermining to be a decisive objection to CV.

Another way around the Inconsistency Argument may be to adopt a self-exempting conciliatory view, called the Partially Conciliatory View (PCV):

PCV: We should suspend judgment in the face of peer disagreement except in the case of disagreement itself.

PCV, admittedly, looks ad hoc. It looks thrown together because there was an inconsistency in CV and it needed to be addressed somehow. However, Christensen assures us that PCV is not ad hoc. PCV relies on a more general rule about rules: that every given rule must take itself to be epistemically justified. As he puts it, “any basic epistemic rule must be dogmatic with respect to its own correctness” (Christensen). Since all rules must follow this meta-rule, it does not seem that the ad hoc objection is justified.

Elga illustrates this idea with the example of a magazine called *Consumer Reports*. “The magazine *Consumer Reports* rates appliances, and gives recommendations on which ones to buy... [It] also rates and recommends consumer ratings magazines” (Elga 180). In order for the magazine to be consistent in its reports, *Consumer Reports*

would always need to recommend itself as the top consumer rating magazine. If it did not, then we could not trust its rates on appliances. However, a “picky reader” might bring up that fact even though the magazine's rates on appliances and cars seem to be reliable, they provide an ad hoc exception to their standards for consumer magazines.

Consumer Reports, Elga imagines, might reply with the following:

To put forward our recommendations about toasters and cars is to put them forward as good recommendations. And we can't consistently do that while also claiming that contrary recommendations are superior. So our always rating ourselves #1 does not result from an arbitrary or ad hoc exception to our standards. We are forced to rate ourselves #1 in order to be consistent with our other ratings (Elga 185).

Such is the case with a partially conciliatory view as well. Although the self-exempting clause may be argued against in other ways, one cannot call it ad hoc.

We must remember that we adopt a conciliatory view because we know ourselves to be epistemically imperfect. That we are fallible thinkers is not a philosophical position. It is a well-known fact. Even though we can be careful and conscientious in our research and argumentation, we still make mistakes. That is to say, we still get things wrong. And even if PCV is wrong, which I admit could be the case, that does not mean we should become more steadfast in our views. What PCV does do is help us understand the proper modesty needed to address philosophical (and other controversial) problems without unnecessary dogmatism. And denying epistemic modesty does not solve the problem of disagreement, nor does it solve the problem of our fallibility.

Although Christensen and Kornblith advocate epistemic modesty, they don't have much to say about what it actually entails. In the next section, I will examine what these authors could mean by the term. Eventually, I think the modesty proposed by these authors lead to a more global skepticism about philosophical thoughts.

3. Philosophy and Metaphilosophy

Things are starting to look somewhat different from our usual understanding of the philosophical enterprise. Usually propositions are asserted, demanded, argued, and fought for. So how is epistemic modesty supposed to inform our daily practice of philosophy? Do we simply adopt some humility? Humility, however, does not seem to solve the problem of disagreement. It is not exactly clear what Kornblith and Christensen mean by epistemic modesty. If we suspend our belief in the face of peer disagreement, what are we to do after that? Given that almost all (if not all) philosophical beliefs encounter peer disagreement, should we just give up doing philosophy? No, Kornblith says, we can still continue to do philosophy. Even if we were supposed to give up philosophy, he “very much doubts that philosophers will stop forming views about the subjects they think about for so long and with such care” (Kornblith 52).

Kornblith is still optimistic about the field of philosophy. However his optimism derives from two beliefs: his naturalistic belief that science will eventually have something to say in philosophical matters and his understanding of metaphilosophy's relationship to philosophy. In correspondence with Bob Plant, he writes the following about his naturalism:

I do think that naturalistic approaches offer some hope of real progress on many issues in philosophy. I do think that, for example, in philosophy of mind, many questions which were traditionally approached by philosophers in ways that led to many misunderstandings have now been profitably addressed by naturalists. I don't think this means in all cases that philosophical issues simply get handed over to scientists, but I do think that scientific work is deeply relevant to philosophical questions, and when we draw on the understanding from the sciences—at least in the fields I know best such as philosophy of mind and epistemology—real progress and consensus become possible. But I recognize, of course, that there is as yet no consensus on this in philosophy, so I can't pretend that this simply solves the problem of disagreement (qtd. in Plant 580-1).

Plant firstly notes that we can share Kornblith's optimism if we agree with his naturalistic metaphilosophy. But as Kornblith himself says, there is no consensus on this matter, so if we do not share his naturalism, what are we to do? If all of our philosophical arguments are undermined by peer disagreement, why go on thinking about, reflecting on, criticizing in, and engaging with philosophy at all? In this case, it might be best to think of philosophy as Heather and Kevin think of *You've Got Mail* –a disagreement about taste. As Plant says, we can still engage in philosophy as an interesting logic game or as distraction from real problems. And these reasons need not be trivial. However, these reasons are “patently not the sort of things philosophers commonly evoke in order to explain or justify their intellectual activities” (Plant 581). We do not think of philosophy as a game in the same sense as chess or Sudoku.⁷

Secondly and more importantly, Plant thinks that Kornblith's optimism also rests on a misunderstanding of the relationship between philosophy and metaphilosophy.

⁷ What we do expect from philosophy, I address in the next section.

There are two views we can take on this matter. First is the ‘first-order’ construal, where metaphilosophy is simply “the application of philosophy to philosophy” (Joll, *IEP*).

According to the first-order view, metaphilosophy is not above philosophy in some way, looking down on philosophy from some extra-philosophical view. Rather it is viewed more humbly as simply one sub-field of philosophy among others. Philosophers such as Timothy Williamson adopt this view⁸ and reject the second view. The second view is the ‘second-order’ construal, where metaphilosophy is patently apart from philosophy. It can be removed from philosophy in such a way that we can hold metaphilosophical views that do not (and perhaps should not) inform our regular philosophical views. In this sense, metaphilosophy really is “above” or “outside of” philosophy.

Kornblith assumes the second-order view of metaphilosophy, and this is evident when he talks about its relationship to philosophy. “*When we stand back*, however, and reflect on our practice and on the beliefs which that practice generates... epistemic modesty [is] the only rational position available” (Kornblith 52, Plant’s emphasis). And again: “[M]uch as we all find ourselves forming beliefs about disputed philosophical questions when we immerse ourselves in the arguments, we should acknowledge *in quiet moments of reflection* that these views we form are ones that are not epistemically justified” (Kornblith 45, Plant’s emphasis). To rephrase this: we are justified in forming philosophical beliefs and even arguing with those who disagree with us only when we practice first-order philosophy. However, when we reflect on the nature of the formation of our philosophical beliefs, arguments, and disagreements, we find ourselves not

⁸ Williamson: “I also rejected the word ‘metaphilosophy.’ The philosophy of philosophy is automatically part of philosophy, just as the philosophy of anything else is, whereas metaphilosophy sounds as though it might try to look down on philosophy from above, or beyond.” From the preface of *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. 2007 (Blackwell), p. ix.

justified in those doxastic actions. Metaphilosophy, according to Kornblith, leads to philosophical skepticism. Therefore if we want to avoid skepticism, then we should distance metaphilosophy from philosophy. According to Kornblith we are allowed to do this without much worry.

Plant rejects this thought for a couple reasons. First, even if we assume that metaphilosophy is just a small sub-discipline outside of philosophy, a niche which most philosophers do not care to investigate, what are we to say to those who *are* metaphilosophically inclined? “[S]uch philosophers,” Plant writes, “would find themselves in a very peculiar situation” (583). They would require holding a dual-perspective. They would feel justified in holding ordinary philosophical beliefs. However, if they reflected on the epistemic justification for those beliefs, they would find themselves doubtful of their epistemic status. Plant thinks this would result in a kind of “metaphilosophical bad faith” (584), where we simply ignore our metaphilosophical stance in order to do ordinary philosophy. Metaphilosophical bad faith would resolve the worry of skepticism about philosophy. If we break the level-connections between philosophy and metaphilosophy, we can hold metaphilosophical beliefs, some of which may be skeptical of the entire enterprise of philosophy, while still being epistemically justified in holding first-order philosophical beliefs. However, given that breaking this level-connection results is itself not epistemically justified, there seems to be no reason to allow for it.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, Plant has so far been treating metaphilosophy as optional. But it is not clear that we should treat metaphilosophy in this way. For one, Plant notes that Kornblith’s view of metaphilosophy’s relation to

philosophy is itself a substantial metaphilosophical view. It should not be taken as a given that the second-order construal of metaphilosophy is the best one to adopt. And indeed, it seems if we do take that stance, we allow for metaphilosophical bad faith. Additionally, it could be seen that metaphilosophical assumptions lie right at the heart of any philosophical belief. That is to say, anytime we are “doing philosophy”, we might also implicitly be “doing metaphilosophy”. In this sense, metaphilosophy is somehow embedded in all of regular first-order philosophy.

Van Inwagen, Kornblith, and Christensen seem to want to avoid philosophical skepticism at all costs. This leads them to adopt notions of special epistemic access, naturalism, and epistemic modesty, respectively. However, none of these positions can hold all of the weight of philosophy. The views either are too contentious or lack the proper epistemic justification needed to support philosophy in a robust way. If this is the case, then it seems we may place at least one foot in the waters of skepticism. In the following section, I will address what exactly this entails.

5. Philosophical Skepticism

Let’s take stock. There is disagreement in philosophy, and it can be a particular kind of disagreement called peer disagreement. In reaction to this disagreement, I argued that we lack the epistemic justification necessary to either hold our ground or adopt our opponent’s view. Therefore, we should suspend belief altogether. However, if we do not allow for a separation of metaphilosophy from philosophy, that is if we do not allow for a break in connection between these two levels of thought, then we seem forced to adopt a kind of skepticism towards philosophy. However, this skepticism is only warranted if

philosophy has somehow failed to live up to its expectations, and I have said nothing about what we expect from philosophy. I want to now examine what those expectations might be and what it would look like if we fulfilled them. In this section, I will address three things. First, I will look at what expectations we usually hold for philosophy and how philosophy fails one in particular. Second, I will consider different defenses philosophy might take against skepticism. Last, I will address how skepticism, if tenable, should inform our philosophical thought.

5.1 Brennan's philosophical agnostic

Jason Brennan asks us to imagine a philosophical agnostic: she holds no prior philosophical views but is cautiously curious about what philosophy might have to offer. She wants two things: to avoid false beliefs and to believe true beliefs. After some careful thought (which I will go into below), she decides to walk away from philosophy. Is she making a mistake?

Brennan argues that no, she isn't making a mistake. Consequently, she becomes a skeptic towards philosophy. There are two ways someone could be a skeptic of this sort. There is the *insider skeptic* who believes that philosophers should become agnostic towards philosophical views, if they are not already. The *outsider skeptic* might accept that philosophers are justified in holding their views they already believe, despite widespread disagreement. However, the outsider skeptic holds that those who lack philosophical beliefs should not adopt new philosophical beliefs: if one is not already committed towards one view or another in philosophy, then one should stay uncommitted.

Upon entering the philosophical world, the agnostic will probably note the amount of disagreement or dissensus in philosophy. The widespread dissensus in philosophy leads her to the Argument against Philosophy: “The goal of philosophy is to uncover certain truths. Radical dissensus shows that philosophical methods are imprecise and inaccurate... Therefore, philosophy is an *unreliable* instrument for finding truth” (Brennan 3). The Argument against Philosophy does not mean that no philosopher has found the truth. What it does mean is that if we have already found a philosophical truth, then we are bad at recognizing it. “If philosophy leads to the truth, it is only because it leads almost everywhere” (Brennan 3).

Suppose the agnostic goes to an APA meeting on consciousness. At this meeting there are 10 different theories of consciousness, each of which is incompatible with the others. Suppose (“optimistically”) that 1 of these 10 views is correct. To the agnostic, looking at the field from the outside, she will have something like a 1 in 10 chance of getting the right answer to the questions of the philosophy of mind. It is far more likely that she will adopt a false view. “The greater the degree of disagreement among epistemic peers, the lower the probability that philosophizing will get her to the truth” (Brennan 4). Brennan notes that this scenario adopts a random choosing of a philosophical view, and that most people come to philosophy with lots of background beliefs. In reality we have dispositions towards one view or another based on our

upbringing, where we go to school, who we study under, etc. However, these biases most likely hinder our search for truth, not help it⁹.

Surely philosophy is good for something. Brennan lists four types of defenses of philosophy:

1. *Epistemic*: Philosophy is good because it gets us to the truth, or something reasonably truth-like (such as understanding).
2. *Intrinsic*: Philosophy is good as an end in itself.
3. *Instrumental*: Philosophy is good for getting some values other than truth.
4. *Aesthetic*: Philosophy is good for fostering wisdom, good character, or various intellectual virtues (6).

We often find something like 2, 3, and 4 on philosophical department websites, under the heading “Why Study Philosophy?” However it is 1, the epistemic claim, which seems to need further justification. We could easily admit to 1 if we see philosophy as maieutic: philosophy since its conception has branched out into various scientific fields which do get us to the truth or something reasonably truth-like. Unfortunately this is not exactly what we are looking for in philosophy. Rather, we want something like 1*.

- 1*. *Proper Epistemic*: Philosophy is good because it gets us to the truth (or something reasonably truth-like) about philosophical issues (Brennan 7).

It is now up to philosophy to prove that 1* is true, or defend itself in some other way.

Given that it is not clear at all that 1* is true, there must be some other defenses

⁹ For more on the importance of background philosophical assumptions and their relevance in shaping our philosophical views, see Rescher, Nicholas. 1985. *The Strife of Systems: An Essay on the Grounds and Implications of Philosophical Diversity*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

philosophy can hold in order to justify itself. Brennan then goes through a number of common defenses of philosophy. The general problem with each defense is that it lacks proper epistemic defenses of philosophy. That is, these defenses do not give the right kind of reason to reject skepticism. I will briefly summarize the relevant defenses and Brennan's responses below:

A. *The Argument against Philosophy Undermines Itself. The claim "Philosophy is irrational" is itself a philosophical position, and therefore fails to pass self-inspection.*

Brennan call this a "facile" and "embarrassing" defense. It is embarrassing because it would be disconcerting if an argument from self-refutation was the only epistemic defense philosophy could make for itself¹⁰. It is facile because it is not obvious that it succeeds, for it may be that "all philosophy is unreliable except anti-philosophy philosophy" (8). Even if the outsider skeptic is using philosophy to arrive at her conclusion, that does not entail that *all* philosophy is somehow defended. It may just be that the skeptic defends a small set of philosophical issues, like probability, an account of an epistemic peer, and a notion of reliability (Brennan 8).

B. *Disunity of Science: Philosophy may seem rife with disagreement because we are familiar with it. If we were more familiar with science, we would find comparable amounts of disagreement. Therefore, science does not fare much better than philosophy.*

Although this approach deflates science, it does not prove that philosophy is truth-

¹⁰ Also, see section 5.2 below.

tracking. Our outsider skeptic is not impressed (Brennan 9). Additionally, I don't think it is completely true. Remember the three qualities of philosophical disagreement: persistence, pervasiveness, and fundamentality. It does not seem that scientific disagreement is subject to these qualities except in very limited cases (and in those cases, the disagreement would appear more philosophical than scientific).

C. Progress as Destruction: It must be admitted that philosophy shows us which theories are false. Gettier demolished the idea of knowledge as justified true belief. Logical positivism crumbled under its own weight. Gödel showed us that Whitehead's attempt to axiomatize arithmetic failed. We are progressing towards truth by elimination.

This only satisfies one condition of the skeptic's: avoiding false beliefs.

Potentially, there are an infinite number of possible theories in any sub-field. And infinity minus any real number is still infinity. Suppose however that there are a finite number of possible theories. Permanently refuting a theory increases the probability of accepting a true theory. However, to satisfy the skeptic, we would need to refute more theories than are possible (above 50% chance). As of right now and in the predictable future, this is unlikely to be the case (Brennan 9). Also, it seems to be that most philosophical theories are never permanently abandoned. Only those with very egregious logical errors are never picked up and reconsidered at a later time¹¹.

¹¹ However, we do seem to study previous philosophical theories, many of which we might believe to be wrong, simply to foster our own philosophical capabilities. This is another peculiarity of philosophy; no other field scrutinizes outdated theories as much as philosophy does.

D. *Consensus Just Around the Corner: Philosophers may use the wrong methods now, but perhaps we can discover the right methods. Modern science successfully abandoned Aristotelian science by creating artificial experiments and accepting mathematics as a tool for modeling nature. Philosophy might have a similar revolution soon.*

One worry with this defense is that philosophers have already tried to accomplish this. Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and others have all tried to introduce methods for eradicating disagreement from philosophy. We are more inclined to think of disagreement as a permanent fixture. After 2500 years, the claim that consensus will appear has lost its optimism (Brennan 10).

Brennan concludes by addressing rational disagreement as a response to this problem. Disagreement, he writes, can come in two forms:

Irrational: My epistemic peer disagrees with me. I am justified in holding my view and they are not.

Rational: My epistemic peer disagrees with me. I am justified in holding my view and they are also justified in holding theirs (Brennan 12).

Of course, philosophers disagree on whether rational disagreement is even possible. But ultimately, Brennan notes, it does not matter much to the agnostic whether rational disagreement is possible or not. If rational disagreement is impossible, then that fact will further serve her thesis by bolstering the case for skepticism. If philosophers cannot disagree rationally, then insider skepticism seems to be the appropriate response. We

should just disregard our current philosophical beliefs because we lack the proper epistemic justification needed to disagree (Brennan 15).

Granting that rational disagreement is possible does not help our agnostic either. Suppose we accept that something like rational disagreement is the proper stance towards disagreement; we allow philosophers to be justified in hold their views, even if they oppose our own. In this case, Brennan notes that we are not closer towards any *true* philosophical belief. We are just not unjustified in holding our beliefs in the face of disagreement. But this is not the agnostic is looking for. “She comes to philosophy hoping to obtain true answers to philosophical questions while avoiding error. If rational disagreement is possible, then philosophical inquiry can [only] get her justified belief [but not true belief]” (Brennan 16). Justified belief is a poor substitute for true belief. Therefore, regardless of whether rational disagreement is possible or not, our agnostic will not be swayed to accept philosophy as a reliable method for finding philosophical truths.

Although our agnostic will be not swayed (accepting outsider skepticism), there may be some hope for philosophers who currently hold philosophical beliefs (rejecting insider skepticism). If rational disagreement is possible, then philosophers may be justified in holding their current philosophical beliefs. However, in the above sections I gave some reason to think that this disagreement should be met with suspension of belief.

5.2 What does it mean to be a philosophical skeptic?

What exactly is philosophical skepticism? Van Inwagen writes the following:

[P]hilosophical skepticism is not a thesis--if it were, it's hard to see how it could be accepted without pragmatic contradiction--but a state: philosophical skeptics are people who can't see their way clear to being nominalists or realists, dualists or monists, ordinary-language philosophers or phenomenologists; people, in short, who are aware of many philosophical options but take none of them, people who have listened to many philosophical debates but have never once declared a winner (274).

This gives us a better idea of what philosophical skepticism is and how it can be tenable without immediate self-defeat. He goes on to insist that all philosophers who want to avoid this “unattractive position” must insist that there are answers to philosophical questions. So according to van Inwagen, one can never be a philosophical skeptic and a realist about a philosophical truth¹².

If we are to take philosophical skepticism seriously, how should we react to philosophical arguments? I think that if we adopt philosophical skepticism, then we adopt a kind of mistrust for philosophy. It would be the same type of mistrust an agnostic would have towards religious belief. For example, I think most people are generally skeptical of those who stand on soapboxes on the street corner proclaiming the end times. These speakers might say something like, “The apocalypse will come next year!” We would, of course, scoff at such a statement for a few reasons. Firstly, it goes against our dogmatic belief that we will not be (and do not want to be) around for the end times. Secondly, we have heard many religious thinkers make similar claims, so we have become skeptical of *any* proclamation of knowledge of the end times. Thirdly, it seems like the speaker has an incommunicable knowledge source. If the religious speaker told

¹² However, see McGinn, Colin. 1993. *Problems in Philosophy: the Limits of Inquiry*. Blackwell.

us that he knows the correct date of the apocalypse because God told him so, or even if he said something like “I just *know* it,” we are denied direct access to the origin of this knowledge.

Similarly, if we adopt philosophical skepticism, we should be skeptical of anyone who claims to have true, positive philosophical belief. If we go to a philosophy conference¹³ and hear someone giving an explanation of consciousness, we should come to believe that they are probably misguided or in fact wrong. Barring the first dogmatic reason above, I think the other two reasons for skepticism towards the religious thinker fit well within this philosophical example. We have heard many philosophical thinkers make similar claims about consciousness, all of which have been ultimately unsatisfactory. Also, if pressed hard enough for *how* their claims could be true, I think we would get a response that is similar to van Inwagen’s. Remember that van Inwagen thinks he has some special epistemic access to information which Lewis did not. Although he has tried many times to communicate this information to Lewis, Lewis still did not understand van Inwagen’s reasoning (or he did understand it, and simply disagreed with it for further reasons). Of course, philosophers do not (usually) rant and rave like a crazed apocalypticist. But van Inwagen’s point was that philosophical thinking does not fare much better than political or religious thinking in regards to epistemic justification.

6. Conclusion

I started this essay with an uncontroversial notion that disagreement is almost everywhere in philosophy. From there, I argued that we should suspend judgment in the

¹³ Although attending a philosophy conference while adopting philosophical skepticism could not be construed as anything more than masochism.

face of a particular kind of disagreement, namely peer disagreement. As I said, I don't think we have good enough reasons to think we should not take disagreement seriously. However if we are to take this disagreement in philosophy seriously, what hope can we have that philosophy will ever come to a conclusion? We can only entertain this hope if we think science will eventually have something to say about philosophical issues (naturalism) or if we distance ourselves from our philosophical skepticism by adopting a second-order view of metaphilosophy. Neither of these options seem like good ones, so I embraced what a global philosophical skepticism would entail.

However, it does not seem right that we would come to disregard our hope for philosophy via one argument from disagreement. In the previous section above, I outlined some other defenses philosophy might have for its reliability. I have shown that these defenses are insubstantial and do not satisfy the epistemic condition. At best, philosophy leads us to justified belief. But justified belief is a poor substitute for true belief. So, philosophy is unreliable.

One might ask why I would argue for such a thing. Why even begin to outline the skepticism that van Inwagen, Kornblith, and others have attempted to avoid? Because philosophy is not about salvation – it is about coming to grips with what we hold to be true.

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