

Review: Diego E. Machuca (ed.): Disagreement and Skepticism*

Routledge: New York, 2013, xi+297 pp.

ISBN 978-01941553283-9, GBP 76.00 (Hardback)

People disagree with each other all the time, both about ordinary day-to-day matters and about philosophical theories. The fact that there is so much disagreement—that for so many of your beliefs, there is probably someone as well informed as you that disagrees with you—seems to give you reason to reassess your confidence in what you believe. Put another way, it seems to create skeptical doubt. This volume consists in thirteen new essays (plus a nice scene-setting piece from the editor) on the subject of the connection between disagreement and skepticism. The essays are organised around four themes: Pyrrhonian approaches to disagreement, the implications of disagreement for philosophical knowledge, the question of how one should respond to discovering disagreement with one’s epistemic peer, and the implications of disagreement for the moral realism/anti-realism debate.

On the face of it, the latter category appears a surprising inclusion. Given the book’s aim to differentiate itself from other collections on disagreement by tightly focusing on the relationship between disagreement and skepticism, one might question the inclusion of the significance of disagreement for a debate that is about anti-realism rather than skepticism. Folke Tersman examines whether actual disagreement is more significant than possible disagreement in this domain and Zed Adams discusses both realist and anti-realist arguments from moral disagreement, arguing that each is onto something, but each misses something important. There is an analogous non-moral discussion elsewhere, in which Crispin Wright (1989) seeks to argue that possible disagreement about modal claims indicates that there

*Thanks to Diego Machuca and Jonathan Parry.

are no objective facts about modality, but this is separate to the general debate surrounding peer disagreement. One might think that the inclusion of pieces specifically addressing realism and anti-realism requires some justification.

Tersman goes some way towards providing one, by pointing out that there is a sense in which moral anti-realism is a skeptical position, since it implies certain 'epistemological claims of the type that are more traditionally associated with skepticism, such as the view that there is no moral knowledge' (p. 94). Insofar as this is true, however, the sense in which it renders knowledge unavailable is the same as the sense in which Berkeley's anti-realism renders knowledge of the external world unavailable. In the same way that a traditional skeptic would not want to suggest that we lack knowledge of the external world because there are no suitably external facts to be known, a moral skeptic might thus also be reluctant to hold that the reason that we lack moral knowledge is because there are no moral facts. The skeptic Tersman identifies is thus importantly different to the skeptic involved in the discussions of non-moral disagreement.

To be clear, the thought is not that treating the putative implications of disagreement in the moral domain as skeptical is either unheard of or incomprehensible. This much is transparently false, as both Tersman and Adams point out. Rather, the idea is that the implications of disagreement in debate surrounding moral realism is strikingly different to the debate around the implication of disagreement in more ordinary matters. Whilst this does not alter the overall quality of the book, it is worth observing that the inclusion of the pieces on moral disagreement deal with skeptical implications that are significantly different to the discussions of disagreement that have been the catalyst for the subject's current prominence.

Otávio Bueno begins by considering the question of whether or not disagreement by itself is sufficient to license suspension of judgement, in the style of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Bueno argues that it can, since the available evidence might favour neither of the disagreeing parties, thus engendering suspension of judgement. In a similar spirit, Markus Lammenranta uses skeptical arguments (both Cartesian and Pyrrhonian) deriving from the phenomenon of disagreement to motivate an internalist conception of epistemic justification. According to Lammenranta, only an internalist account of justification can make sense of the intuitive appeal of such arguments. Machuca's own piece rounds off the discussions of disagreement

and Pyrrhonian skepticism by applying Pyrrhonian strategies to three important topics in the contemporary discussion of disagreement's epistemic significance, namely the question of whether most disagreements concern objective facts, whether those involved possess theory-neutral evidence and whether or not peer disagreements are resolved *asymmetrically* (in favour of one individual over the other). In neo-Pyrrhonian style, Machuca argues that, with regard to this final issue, there is a symmetry between those involved in disagreements that licenses the suspension of judgement.

A question that has been at the centre of the recent epistemological debate concerning disagreement concerns how seriously you should take the fact that your epistemic peer disagrees with you. According to *conciliationalist* theories, you should take it very seriously and according to the *Equal Weight View* you should give equal weight to the beliefs of each independent disagreeing party (absent reasons to think the party less well-informed than you). A common objection to the Equal Weight View is that the pervasiveness of disagreement means that it leads to skepticism in the form of the suspension of judgement on an unacceptably high number of matters. In their contribution, Brandon Carey and Jonathan Matheson argue that the Equal Weight View does have skeptical implications, but not for the reasons that many people think. In their view, it is not because the Equal Weight View overestimates the awareness of actual or merely possible disagreement, but rather it is because we generally lack information about the epistemic positions of disagreeing parties. By contrast, Clayton Littlejohn goes some way towards offering a defence of the Equal Weight View by rejecting two arguments against it and offering an argument that seems to offer it some intuitive support.

Trent Dougherty argues that whilst you should take the discovery of peer disagreement seriously, it does not lead to skepticism. Rather, you are rationally entitled to maintain your belief because you have introspective evidence about your own position that you lack about your opponent. Nathan Ballantyne considers *historical variability*, the idea that your beliefs are (at least to some extent) the product of your history and produces two skeptical arguments from this observation.

Nathan King continues the discussion of the skeptical implications of conciliationalist theories of disagreement by arguing that conciliationalist principles are highly contentious, but not because they have skeptical implications. Rather, they are contentious because it is difficult for the conciliationalist to give an adequate account of the kind of cases that motivated the

opposing *steadfast* theories in the first place. According to steadfast theories, you need not take much notice of the fact that someone disagrees with you unless you have reason to think her your epistemic superior. Duncan Pritchard also discusses steadfast theories, arguing that they do not face the same skeptical problems that conciliationist theories do and furthermore, can avoid the charge of dogmatism by holding that an individual may rationally retain her prior degree of confidence in her belief only if she is able to reflectively conclude that the epistemic basis of her belief is sound.

Lastly, the contributions from Hilary Kornblith and Sanford Goldberg respectively consider the impact of disagreement for beliefs in philosophical theses. Both suggest that the widespread “expert” disagreement amongst philosophers has skeptical implications. Kornblith argues that disagreement in philosophy is more problematic than disagreement in the sciences. There are two reasons for this. The first is that scientific disagreements, unlike philosophical ones, tend to be settled by convergence over time and the second is that it is clearer that specialists and laypeople should defer to experts in the sciences than it is that such people should do so in philosophy. Goldberg examines the skepticism that follows from thinking that the scope and nature of philosophical disagreement make knowledge or justified belief in such matters impossible. Even if this kind of skepticism is the right thing to think, Goldberg maintains that this does not show that we ought to abandon philosophical beliefs, nor that we ought to refrain from making assertions about them, nor that making such assertions is necessarily insincere.

Questions about the legitimacy of its inclusion aside, Tersman’s discussion of the relative philosophical importance of actual and possible disagreement is one of the volume’s most interesting papers. Tersman argues that the actual fact of moral disagreement provides a problem for moral realists that merely possible disagreement does not, because one argument for moral realism comes from the premise that people generally share moral convictions and an appeal to merely possible disagreement cannot do the same work in undermining this claim. Tersman then goes on to consider the question of whether merely possible disagreement might do the same work against the realist. It is clear that some possible disagreements matter, where others do not. Tersman suggests that what matters for the question of what matters is closeness; disagreement in a possible world threatens moral realism in the actual world only if the possible world is sufficiently close. Showing that a possible disagreement could have the same significance as actual disagree-

ment thus involves showing that there is some possible world in which the right disagreement takes place and that the world in question is sufficiently close. Showing this, however, means antecedently showing that the best explanation of actual agreement does not appeal to realism; which removes any need for an appeal to disagreement.

One might think, however, that this observation is friendly to the realist. Even if the actual world is one in which people disagree, provided there is another sufficiently close possible world that features the kind of agreement the realist is looking for, the realist argument seems to get going again. For the realist just suggests that realism provides the best explanation of the agreement in that world and showing that there is no such available possible world faces the same prospects that Tersman identifies for showing that there is no sufficiently close possible world in which there is the kind of disagreement the anti-realist appeals to.

The reason that Tersman's contribution is particularly interesting in the context of this volume then is not because it is about moral disagreement. Rather, it is because it makes arguments that can be applied to disagreements more generally. The question of whether or not actual disagreement has more skeptical importance than merely possible disagreement is an interesting one that deserves further consideration, regardless of its connection to the dispute between moral realists and moral anti-realists. Including the significance of disagreement for the dispute between moral realists and moral anti-realists given the volume's stated theme thus remains surprising but this point notwithstanding, *Disagreement and Skepticism* is a fine collection of interesting essays that connects two distinct themes and offers interesting insights into this connection.

References

- Wright, Crispin. 1989. "Necessity, Caution and Scepticism." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63:203–238.