Scepticism about Philosophy

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Suppose a person who is agnostic about most philosophical issues wishes to have true philosophical beliefs but equally wishes to avoid false philosophical beliefs. I argue that this truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic would not have good grounds for pursuing philosophy. Widespread disagreement shows that pursuing philosophy is not a reliable method of discovering true answers to philosophical questions. More likely than not, pursuing philosophy leads to false belief. Many attempts to rebut this sceptical argument fail.

1. Insider and Outsider Scepticism about Philosophy

Philosophers disagree immensely in significant ways. Our best philosophers disagree over the doctrines, methods, and even the aims of philosophy. Experts in all fields disagree, but disagreement is more pervasive in philosophy than in most other fields. As Thomas Kelly says, 'Philosophy is notable for the extent to which disagreements with respect to even those most basic questions persist among its most able practitioners, despite the fact that the arguments thought relevant to the disputed questions are typically well-known to all parties to the dispute.'[1]

A sceptic might claim that radical dissensus shows that pursuing philosophy is not a good means for discovering true answers for philosophical questions. Dissensus shows that philosophical methods are unreliable instruments of truth. Suppose an uncommitted person comes to philosophy hoping to get true answers to her philosophical questions. She wants to know what that nature of causation is, what justification is, what rightness consists in, what justice is, and so on. She notices that philosophers have extensive disagreement about the answers to these questions and thus concludes that the probability of her getting the true answer by pursuing philosophy is low. So, she becomes a sceptic about the field of philosophy and walks away with her questions unanswered. Is she making a mistake?

In this paper, I consider scepticism of the sort that holds that there are true answers to philosophical questions, but none of us are in a good position to know these answers. This type of scepticism admits of two sub-types. 1) An *insider sceptic* holds that even the best philosophers lack good reasons to hold their views. So, the insider sceptic thinks that philosophers who are not agnostic about philosophical issues should become agnostic. 2) A person who is merely an *outsider sceptic*, on the other hand, might accept that many philosophers are justified in holding their views, despite widespread disagreement. The outsider sceptic need not hold that philosophers should change their beliefs or become agnostic. However, the outsider sceptic also holds that people not already committed to one philosophical position or another should stay uncommitted. So, the outsider sceptic holds that even if most philosophers are justified in accepting their different views, a person who lacks philosophical beliefs ought to refrain from using philosophical methodology and instead should remain agnostic.

Suppose an uncommitted person, one who is currently agnostic about basic philosophical questions, wishes to discover the true answers to these philosophical questions. She is also equally concerned to avoid false answers. She is thus willing to stop being agnostic and come to believe a doctrine provided she does so via a reliable method. For her, a reliable method is one that is at least more likely than not to give her true beliefs. If these are her goals, it is difficult to show that philosophy as we do it would be worth doing. She might as well remain agnostic. This is not to say that we philosophers must give up our doctrines and become agnostics ourselves, but merely that a truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic does not have good reason to pursue philosophy in the attempt to discover the truth about philosophical questions. This paper argues that the presence of

widespread dissensus makes it difficult to defend philosophy from outsider scepticism, if not insider scepticism.

There are many reasons why philosophy is worth doing. Yet, it would be disturbing if we cannot show the agnostic that philosophy gets her the right type of value - true answers to philosophical questions.

2. The Argument against Philosophy

Dissensus can be used in an argument against philosophy:

The Argument against Philosophy. The goal of philosophy is to uncover certain truths. Radical dissensus shows that philosophical methods are imprecise and inaccurate. Philosophy continually leads experts with the highest degree of epistemic virtue, doing the very best they can, to accept a wide array of incompatible doctrines. Therefore, philosophy is an *unreliable* instrument for finding truth. A person who enters the field is highly unlikely to arrive at true answers to philosophical questions.

This is a rough sketch of the argument. I will refine it as necessary as the paper proceeds. Note that Argument against Philosophy need not claim that no philosopher has found the truth. It is possible that Kant got everything right. Yet, philosophy also has arrived at hundreds of other incompatible doctrines. If philosophy leads to the truth, it is only because it leads almost everywhere.

A person concerned only to get the truth would at the very least try to believe some randomly chosen doctrine rather than be agnostic, since there is at least some possibility that a random doctrine happens to be correct. She might even pursue philosophical methods if they increase the probability of being correct, as it is possible they do. Perhaps philosophers are twice as likely to have true answers to philosophical questions than non-philosophers are. However, if this same person is equally concerned to avoid false beliefs about philosophical issues, then she would want to pursue philosophy only if it gave her a greater than 50% chance of getting a true belief. Given the degree of dissensus in most fields of philosophy, it seems unlikely that philosophy offers her this great a chance.

Here is an analogy. Suppose, thousands of people, each of whom wants to go to São Paulo, randomly board all flights departing Dallas-Fort Worth. Suppose they fill all departing seats, but are not told where they are going. Of these thousands, a few hundred in fact will land in São Paulo. Most will arrive somewhere else. Philosophy seems like this in many respects. It may bring some people to the proper destination, but it dumps most somewhere else. Actually, matters are worse than that. Travellers will know whether they have arrived in São Paulo. In philosophy's case, some may indeed arrive at truth. However, they will not have discernibly better grounds for believing this than their mistaken peers. They may believe themselves to have better grounds, and their peers believe this about themselves as well. However, from the outsider’s perspective, they look the same. They are smart people doing the best they can, and they disagree. The outsider has little reason to think one philosopher is closer to the truth than the next, and little reason to think that if she became a philosopher, she would do any better.

Here is another way of making the unreliability argument. Suppose that there are 10 competing doctrines in the field of philosophy of mind, each of which is accepted by 10 percent of the members of the American Philosophical Association. Suppose, optimistically, that on the nature of consciousness 10 percent of the members of the APA have the right theory.

Suppose also that we can regard all members of the APA as epistemic peers, where two people are epistemic peers just in case they are equals with respect to their degree of epistemic virtue (thoughtfulness, freedom from bias, etc.) and their access to evidence.[2] An uncommitted person, looking at the field from the outside, would worry that if she pursues philosophy, she will have something like a 1 in 10 chance of getting the right answer to the questions of the philosophy of mind. She sees that philosophical methodology—studying arguments, making new arguments, creating new distinctions, reading texts, debating, etc.—generally leads people to accept some theory or other of the nature of consciousness. (Let us assume that everyone who studies the philosophy of mind ends up accepting 1 of the 10 theories.) So, she knows that philosophical methodology will result in her accepting some theory, but from her standpoint, it is more likely than not that it will be the false theory. The greater the degree of disagreement among epistemic peers, the lower the probability that philosophizing will get her to the truth.

This argument assumes than an agnostic outsider who ends up pursuing philosophical methods will have either a random or proportional chance of accepting any theory. I.e., I am working on the assumption that she will either accept a theory at random or with a probability proportional to the percentage of her epistemic peers that accept any given theory. Real people probably do not have a random chance due to their background starting beliefs. A person who comes to philosophy as a Christian is probably more likely to end up being a moral realist and a natural law theorist than his atheist counterpart. A graduate student who studies ethics at Harvard University is probably more likely than a student at Australian National University to become a Kantian. People have dispositions towards one theory or another, and (in certain respects) non-random factors such as the people with whom they study philosophy affect the probability they will adopt any particular theory. Suppose, however, that our truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic has no such dispositions and manages to have even exposure to all competing doctrines. Will pursuing philosophy assign her to a set of beliefs randomly or in a probability proportional to the positions of her epistemic peers? Perhaps the agnostic will remain agnostic since she has no dispositions. Without a good empirical account of the mechanisms of belief formation, I cannot be sure whether she has a random chance of adopting any particular theory, adopting a theory with a probability proportionate to the percentage of comparably virtuous philosophers accepting that theory, or has some different probability altogether. From her viewpoint, the process will seem random in some way. So, I use randomness here as a hopefully good-enough substitute for the actual mechanism that assigns beliefs.[3]

Under some circumstances, it could be reasonable for the outsider to think she has a better chance than others do of getting things right. For example, consider a an exceptional person with an IQ many times greater than that of the average philosopher, with an exceptional memory, who lived long enough to read every philosophy book ever written, and who exhibited the epistemic virtues far better than Kant or Hume did. This

person could legitimately conclude that she might do better than other philosophers have. However, no real agnostic will be this exceptional. A good response to the sceptical worry should provide reason to pursue philosophy for a truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic with epistemic virtue comparable to a typical philosopher's.

Philosophers do seem to aim for truth. Philosophy's state of dissensus may show us that philosophy is not worth doing if truth is our goal. Pursuing philosophy is not a reliable method of finding to the truth about philosophical issues.

3. What Type of Defence Do We Want?

Suppose that accepting a philosophical theory cures tooth decay. This would make the theory a good *thing*, but not a good *theory*. Similarly, a good hammer is good at driving nails. If it is bad at driving nails but using it cures tooth decay, this makes the hammer a good thing, but not a good hammer.

So, what is the nail to which philosophy is the hammer? We have sets of questions we want theories to answer. We want philosophy to get us the truth. We want it to answer our questions or to show us that the questions were mistakes (because they represent pseudoproblems).

There are a number of types of defences 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- *Aretaic*: Philosophy is good for fostering wisdom, good character, or various intellectual virtues.

Aretaic defences could be considered a subset of instrumental defences. When academic philosophers defend philosophy, e.g., by explaining its value on the 'Why Study Philosophy?' webpages many departments post for prospective majors, they often list defences of types 2, 3, and 4. Each of these are good defences, and conjoined they might be excellent reasons to study philosophy or to pursue a philosophical career. They might be excellent non-epistemic reasons for becoming an insider rather than an outsider, or for coming to accept some philosophical doctrines rather than remaining agnostic. Yet, ultimately we want a defence of type 1. If we do not get that, there is something disappointing about the philosophical enterprise.

It is not enough that philosophy leads to some truths; it needs to lead to truths about philosophical issues. If philosophical theories helped us learn the truth about physics, that would not quite be the target value. There are some distinctly philosophical questions we want philosophy to answer.[4] Ultimately, we need 1*.

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

Below, I will consider a number of defences of philosophy. In the next section, I consider common defences and explain why they are inadequate. Many of them fail because they do not provide a proper epistemic defence of philosophy, but simply show it to be of instrumental or aretaic value. In the section following the next, I consider more pressing objections that hold that there is reasonable disagreement among philosophers who are epistemic peers. If reasonable disagreement is possible, this implies that at least some philosophers can justifiedly say to themselves, 'Even though my epistemic peers disagree with the theory I believe, my theory is true and I am justified in believing that it is true.' I will argue that even this sort of defence is not enough to satisfy the truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic. This defence at

best explains why insider scepticism is unwarranted, but does not explain why outsider scepticism is unwarranted. That is, the possibility of rational disagreement can explain why we philosophers who have views are not required to give them up in light of disagreement, but it does not explain why a truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic should pursue philosophy and come to adopt any views.

4. Some Inadequate Defences

In this section, I discuss some anti-sceptical defences of philosophy I have encountered. The defences are individually and collectively unsatisfactory. Each defence captures something important, and collectively they may justify pursuing philosophy. However, they do not show that we can regard philosophy as producing the right sort of value—true answers to philosophical questions. It is not necessary to go into much depth with these defences, because it can be shown rather quickly that they are not the right type of defence.

Recall that the agnostic about philosophical issues is considering pursuing philosophy with the goal of getting true answers to philosophical questions. This outsider sees the degree of dissensus and thinks to herself, 'At most one of these theories for any given issues is correct. It's possible that if I study philosophy, I will produce a new theory that competes with these others. Each of these philosophers thinks her own theory is more likely to be true than her competitors' theories. I realize that if I study philosophy, I will come to think that way about whatever theories I come to accept as well. However, from my standpoint now, I have to regard each of the competing theories as something like equally likely to be true, or perhaps likely to be true in proportion to how many good philosophers accept the theory. It's possible none of them are true. If so, then much more likely than not, I will end up accepting a false theory. So, I should remain an outsider and an agnostic.' The general problem with the defences listed below is that even if they give this outsider good reasons to study philosophy and to accept doctrines rather than be agnostic, these defences do not give the right kind of reason. I.e., they do not give *proper epistemic defences* of philosophy. Some of the other defences fail because they rest on bad arguments, even if are attempts at proper epistemic defences.

A. *The Argument Undermines Itself.* There is a facile defence: The Argument against Philosophy undermines itself. The general position that philosophy is irrational fails to pass self-inspection. 'Philosophy is irrational' is a philosophical position. If philosophy is irrational, so is the view that philosophy is irrational. If philosophical argumentation never establishes any position, then the anti-philosophy position cannot be justified by philosophical argumentation. The Argument against Philosophy refutes the Argument against Philosophy. Even if this defence works, it is embarrassing if this is the best defence philosophy has. Yet, it is not obvious that the defence succeeds. It may just be that all philosophy is unreliable except anti-philosophy philosophy.

The outsider sceptic's position is that philosophical methodology is unlikely to bring her to the truth about philosophical questions. One might argue that the sceptic used philosophical reasoning to arrive at this conclusion, and so the sceptic cannot consistently be a sceptic. However, it may just be that a small set of philosophical issues is answered and that philosophical methodology works reliably on a small set of issues, i.e., just in the areas needed to make the sceptic's argument. For instance, perhaps the sceptic needs probability, an account of the notion of an epistemic peer, some notion of reliability, and not much else.

B. *Disunity of Science.* One could argue that science is less unified than commonly thought. Thomas Kuhn claims that the appearance of unity is largely a myth propagated by ahistorical science textbooks.[5] It may also be that philosophy only appears to have more disagreement to us philosophers because we are most familiar with philosophy. If we were better informed, we would realize that there is just as extensive disagreement in biology and physics over fundamental issues as there is in philosophy. This approach may deflate science, making philosophy seem less inferior in comparison, but it does not show us that philosophy is truth-tracking. Our truth-seeking outsider is not impressed. Also, deflating science also improves the comparative position of astrology, phrenology, and creationism.

C. *Lists of Accomplishments.* Another type of defence is that offered by Wilbur Urban, former president of the American Philosophical Association. In 1925, Urban attempted to validate the rationality and progressiveness of philosophy by listing its recent accomplishments.[6] Urban's list looks strange. Much of it is hard to understand, so it is unclear whether the claims of progress are worth much. The clearer items are problematic. For one, he claims that philosophy has made progress because there is no movement back toward Kant. However, eighty years later, we see numerous defenders of forms of transcendental idealism, Kantian constructivism, and the like. He also claims that philosophers have shown that value cannot be reduced to something else and that evolution cannot fully explain values. However, eighty years of neo-naturalist metaethics and sociobiology shows that this claim is not obviously true. Though I agree with Urban, I have many epistemic peers who disagree. Third, he cites the growth of logic as a formal discipline. This is one of philosophy's major accomplishments, but it is not clear that this helps. Formal logic may have less disagreement than other fields, but it is also the place where philosophy comes closest to being mathematics.

Any list will be contentious. Probably, if I were to make a list of philosophy's recent accomplishments, it would seem esoteric, strange, irrelevant, wrong, and/or silly to philosophers eighty years from now.

The outsider remains unimpressed. She can look at such lists and ask, do we yet know what right action is, what justification is, what knowledge is, what justice is, and so on? There remains extensive disagreement over these fundamental issues, and she remains worried that philosophy is unlikely to deliver her the truth.

D. *Progress as Destruction.*[7] Some philosophers defend philosophy by saying that our work at least shows what theories are false. For instance, Gettier demolished the justified true belief analysis of knowledge. Quine, Putnam, and others eradicated logical positivism. Gödel showed us that *Principia Mathematica* did not axiomatise arithmetic. If this is progress toward truth, it must be progress by elimination.

Refuting inadequate past theories clears the path for good answers, but does not thereby give us good answers. (Even negative 'progress' tends to be reversed, as once dead doctrines, such as Ross' moral theory, are resurrected, albeit in better forms.[8]) Often, there are potentially infinite numbers of possible theories in any sub-field. So, even if over the past 2500

years of philosophy, we have managed to show that a few thousand theories are inadequate, that does not show us we are any closer to the truth. On the other hand, suppose there are a finite number of theories. If so, permanently refuting a theory increases the probability one will accept the correct theory. In this case, the agnostic might have reason to pursue philosophy, but only if enough theories had been or could refuted that she were more likely than not going to accept the true one. But this is not the case.

Additionally, this defence does not explain philosophers' actual behaviour. Suppose philosophy is progressive because it can show, at least, which theories are false, and the point is to arrive at the truth though elimination. This would justify constructing, debating, examining, and attacking theories, but not *accepting* a theory. It would not give the agnostic reason to believe anything.

E. *Consensus Just Around the Corner.* One could concede that current dissensus shows that philosophical methods are ineffective, but then assert that philosophy could become effective in the future. Philosophers use the wrong methods. We need to continue working until we discover the right methods. Then agreement will follow. Indeed, we could even take agreement as a sign that we have discovered the right methods.

The natural sciences began making progress when a change in methods was adopted. Scientists dropped the Aristotelian paradigm; i.e., they began doing extensive 'artificial' experiments rather than just making observations. Also, they accepted mathematics as a tool for modelling nature. Could there be similar methodological revolutions for philosophy?

Philosophers have made this claim before and tried to introduce new methods. Hobbes argued that progress could be made and agreement would be possible if philosophers would just start with clearly stated, sensible definitions. David Hume called the *Treatise* an attempt to introduce empirical methods into philosophy. Kant's Copernican Revolution meant to resolve the rationalist-empiricist debates by exposing an unnoticed, mistaken common assumption. Thus, seeking consensus by finding the right methods has been tried and has not yet worked. After twenty five hundred years, the claim that consensus is going to appear once we get the right methods is implausible.

We are more inclined to think disagreement is a permanent fixture. In fact, it seems that widespread philosophical consensus is more likely to come from irrationality and intellectual corruption than from honest inquiry. The very best philosophers throughout history have produced radically different doctrines. (Part of what makes philosophers great is that they do an excellent job defending novel doctrines.) Thus, it seems that we should not expect convergence as philosophers become more rational. On the contrary, our best philosophers tend to diverge rather than converge.

F. *Philosophy as Maieutic.* Philosophy gives birth to new fields. Philosophers invented economics, political science, sociology, physics, biology, etc. If we take a realist view of theories in these fields, then philosophy is indirectly truth-tracking, as it produces other fields that find the truth.

However, there are two worries with this sort of defence. First, even if it is an epistemic defence of philosophy, it is not a proper epistemic defence. We want philosophy to find answers to philosophical questions, such as whether God exists, what the nature of knowledge is, what is right and wrong, and so on. There is a view that philosophy is the field of residual speculation, and perhaps over time philosophy will self-destruct as it gives birth to special sciences capable of answering its questions. However, arguably, there is a common core of questions that cannot be made non-philosophical. (This point is, of course, subject to contention.) Though, looking backward, we can see how some questions were mistakenly treated as philosophical, this does not give us good reason to think that all questions will one day be turned over to other fields. So, insofar as we legitimately believe that there will always be philosophical questions, the maieutic defence of philosophy is not enough.

Worse, the birth rate appears to be dropping. Philosophy is not founding new fields as often as it used to. At least when viewed in isolation, the maieutic defence suggests that pretty soon we should stop practicing philosophy, because the expected utility (in terms of founding new fields) is too low.

G. *Developing Critical Thinking Skills*. Another unsatisfactory defence of philosophy is the claim that it develops critical thinking skills and various intellectual virtues. No doubt philosophy does foster such virtues, but the defence is still unsatisfactory because it is an aretaic rather than a proper epistemic defence. That philosophy develops such skills is an excellent reason for undergraduates planning to work in other fields to major in it. Still, the outsider sceptic is not impressed, as this defence not explain how applying philosophical skills to philosophical questions reliably generates true answers. In addition, this aretaic defence is somewhat embarrassing, in that it does not do much to differentiate philosophy from playing logic games or Sudoku.

5. Rational Disagreement

Here I consider at greater length the possibility of rational disagreement as a response to the problem. Consider two or more epistemic peers holding contrary views on the same issue. Can they each justifiedly believe either A or B?

My epistemic peers disagree with me on this issue. I am right, but they are each wrong. I am justified in holding my view, but they are not justified in holding theirs.

My epistemic peers disagree with me on this issue. I am right, but they are each wrong. I am justified in holding my view, and they are also justified in holding theirs.

If rational disagreement is possible, then sometimes it is justifiable for more than one member of a dispute to accept A, B, or something similar.

In current epistemology, there is disagreement about whether rational disagreement is possible. E.g., Richard Feldman argues that reasonable disagreement between peers is not possible under common circumstances, because there is generally at most a uniquely justified belief in light of a given set of evidence.[9] Adam Elga holds that when one discovers that one disagrees with an epistemic peer, one should give the peers' views equal weight as one's own.[10] David Christenson argues that when on has disagreement with peers, this typically should occasion belief-revision towards the views of one's peers and vice versa.[11] In contrast, Thomas Kelly holds that one often need not revise one's views in light of discovering disagreement with one's peers because one believes they have misjudged the evidence.[12] Gideon Rosen holds that rationality is permissive and that sometimes one is permitted to choose among competing theories when given a set of evidence.[13]

Nicholas Rescher explicitly addresses the problem of philosophical dissensus. He argues that philosophers choose to reject different theses—and thus establish conflicting schools of thought—because they accept different *cognitive values* or weigh the cognitive values differently.[14] Cognitive values are the epistemic traits by which we assess a doctrine, e.g., coherence, plausibility, generality, importance, informativeness, elegance, etc. A philosopher who more strongly values plausibility and intuitiveness is likely to accept different doctrines from those a philosopher who more strongly values systematicity would accept. Rescher argues that differences over the relative weights of cognitive values cannot fully be resolved. According to Rescher, rational theory acceptance means accepting a theory that does justice to one's cognitive values. Different theorists can reasonably accept different values to different degrees. So, rational disagreement is possible.

It might be thought that the possibility of rational disagreement will bear on whether outsider scepticism is warranted in light of philosophical dissensus. For instance, Peter van Inwagen discusses people who have heard philosophical debates but have remained agnostic. He then says,

I think that any philosophy who does not wish to be a philosophical sceptic…must agree with me that…it must be possible for one to be justified in accepting a philosophical thesis when there are philosophers

who, by *all* objective and external criteria, are at least as equally well qualified to pronounce on that thesis and who reject it.[15]

However, it is possible that whether the agnostic should become a sceptic and whether the non-agnostic philosopher should become an agnostic sceptic are distinct problems. Perhaps rational disagreement is possible among peers, and this excuses non-agnostic philosophers from having to become agnostic sceptics. However, as I will argue in this section, even if this is so, this does not give reason for the truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic to become a non-agnostic. Rather, she should be a sceptic about philosophy.

Note that if rational disagreement were impossible, this would serve my thesis, as it would bolster the case for outsider scepticism. If rational disagreement is impossible, then insiders (non-agnostic philosophers) should become sceptics. Presumably this means that outsiders (agnostics who have not studied philosophy) should become sceptics as well, once they learn that all the insiders are rationally obligated to become sceptics. However, I will assume for the sake of argument that rational disagreement among epistemic peers is possible. I will argue that even if it is possible, this will not be enough to show the truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic that she ought to pursue philosophy and adopt any views. The possibility of rational disagreement does not defeat outsider scepticism.

Since I am granting that rational disagreement is possible, I need not consider Rosen's, Kelly's, or others' arguments for rational disagreement at length or with much precision. I need only consider their conclusion: rational disagreement is possible. If so, then it follows that when I recognize that my epistemic peers disagree with me on some issue, sometimes I may still justifiedly believe that my view is true. (I take it that believing that X and believing that X is true are the same thing.) In addition, depending on one's view of rational disagreement, this might mean I am justified in believing I am justified, and perhaps even in believing that my peers are justified in having similar attitudes toward themselves.

So, what rational disagreement arguments deliver us, at the end, is something like B: 'Even though my epistemic peers disagree with me on this issue, I am right, they are all wrong, I am justified in holding my view, and they are also justified in holding theirs.' If I am justified in holding B, then insider scepticism is defeated. I am not required to become an agnostic and a sceptic.

However, notice that B is *not* what truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic wants. She comes to philosophy hoping to obtain true answers to philosophical questions while avoiding error. If rational disagreement is possible, then philosophical inquiry can get her justified belief in various philosophical doctrines even in the presence of disagreement, but that was not what she asked for. A justified belief that one has the truth on some issue is a great thing to have - I certainly would like to have that - but it is a poor substitute for bona fide truth. The truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic is not interested in this substitute.

She might be impressed to learn (depending on what the standards are for rational disagreement) that many or perhaps all philosophers are justified in their beliefs. With some good fortune, we might discover that *all* actual philosophical disagreements among members of the APA are reasonable ones, and so no philosopher must do any belief revision or become a sceptic. However, this still does not give the truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic reason to become a believer. She wants a greater than not chance of getting true beliefs about most philosophical issues. Even a 100% chance of getting *a justified belief that one has the truth about philosophical issues* or (more simply) a 100% chance of getting *justified beliefs about philosophical issues* will not motivate her, because there are not the same things as a true beliefs about most philosophical issues. They are poor surrogates.

Rescher's defence of philosophy is particularly clear in how it fails to satisfy this sort of agnostic. (This is not to say his defence is bad, but just that it is not what I called a proper epistemic defence.) Rescher holds that it can instrumentally rational to accept a theory based on one's cognitive values. There is a plurality of reasonable stances on the weights of these cognitive values. So, for Rescher, rational disagreement rests precisely on these cognitive values rather than on truth. But our agnostic is not interested in these cognitive unless they reliably get her to the truth. Apparently, they do not, because ex hypothesi the pursuit of theories by different people with different cognitive values or weights for these values results in dissensus.

The agnostic asks us if we can get her the truth. In light of dissensus, apparently we have to say no. All we can offer is justified belief.

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Notes

1 Thomas Kelly, 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement', in John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler, eds., *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 173.

2 Kelly, 'Epistemic Significance of Disagreement', p. 10.

3 Thus, one possible way to defeat outsider scepticism would be to show that a truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic is actually more likely than the rest of us to arrive at true doctrines. Perhaps her lack of prior commitments makes philosophical methodology reliable for her, if not for us. Whether this counter-argument will work depends on empirical points about the mechanism of belief formation as well. Note also that this type of response attributes our disagreements to bias. However, suppose it can be show that the true agnostic has a good chance of getting the truth. There will still be a sort of leftover outsider scepticism. The outsider who is not an agnostic might still regard philosophy as unreliable, as having too great a tendency to allow people to rationalize their prior beliefs, etc.

4 Questions that were once thought to be philosophical have a tendency to become questions for the social or natural sciences. The border between philosophical and nonphilosophical questions is fuzzy. However, without saying how to make the distinction, I will assume there is something like a core of questions that we reasonably can expect to remain part of philosophy.

5 T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 136-138.

6 Wilbur M. Urban, 'Progress in Philosophy in the Last Quarter Century', *The Philosophical Review* 35:2 (1926), pp. 93-123.

7 This phrase comes from Toni Vogel Carey, 'Is Philosophy Progressive', *Philosophy Now* 59 (2007), accessed online (3/15/07) at http://www.philosophynow.org/issue59/59carey.html

8 E.g., Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

9 See Richard Feldman, 'Reasonable Religious Disagreements', in Louise Antony. ed., *Philosophers Without Gods*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Richard Feldman, 'Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement', in Stephen Hetherington (ed.), *Epistemology Futures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

10 Adam Elga, 'Reflection and Disagreement', *Noûs* 41 (2007), pp. 478-502.

11 David Christensen, 'Epistemology of Disagreement: the Good News', *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007), pp. 187-217.

12 Kelly, 'Epistemic Significance of Disagreement'.

13 Gideon Rosen, 'Nominalism, Naturalism, Philosophical Relativism', *Philosophical Perspectives* 15 (2001), pp 69-91.

14 Nicholas Rescher, *The Strife of Systems* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), pp. 95-115.

15 Peter van Inwagen, 'It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence', in Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray, eds., *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 275.