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Disagreement, Dogmatism, and the Bounds of Philosophy

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Edouard Machery is sceptical of the ambitions of philosophers.¹ They seek to uncover metaphysical necessities, and in order to do so they rely on judgements about far-fetched hypothetical cases. But recent empirical work has shown that our judgements about such cases are unreliable. Since they are unreliable, they cannot and should not be relied on. Knowledge of most metaphysical necessities of philosophical interest is out of our reach. The ambitions of philosophers should be curbed and redirected. Hence the title: *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds*.

Machery’s conclusion is bold: the methods of philosophy need to be radically overhauled. Is his argument for it compelling? I have reservations. I suspect that Machery will have to rely on the very methods he thinks we should reject to justify his conclusion. In that case, insofar as we accept the conclusion, we have no reason to accept the argument for it. Philosophical theorising can continue unbound.

The problem arises most clearly with Machery’s argument against the ‘dogmatist’. The dogmatist accepts that there is widespread conflict in judgements about philosophically interesting cases, but maintains that this presents no obstacle to legitimately theorising with such cases. In any conflict of judgements, where one party judges that P and the other judges that not-P, one of the parties must be on the right track. Whoever that is, the dogmatist argues, they are entitled to be dogmatic in the face of the disagreement and to continue theorising on the basis of their judgement.

If the dogmatist is correct, widespread conflicts of judgement about cases need not lead us to give up the method of cases – or at least, those of us who are right. But Machery doesn’t buy the dogmatist’s line. He offers the following argument in reply:

- (1) Most of the philosophical cases examined by experimental philosophers elicit disagreement.
- (2) This disagreement takes place amongst epistemic peers
- (3) If most of the philosophical cases examined by experimental philosophers elicit disagreement amongst peers, then most philosophical cases would plausibly elicit disagreement amongst peers.
- (4) If epistemic peers are likely to disagree about a philosophical case, they ought to suspend judgement about it.
- (5) Hence, except for those philosophical cases known not to elicit disagreement amongst peers, philosophers ought to suspend judgement about the situations described by philosophical cases.

The argument may well be sound: I do not propose to defend dogmatism here. What matters for my purposes is not whether dogmatism is a plausible view, but rather whether Machery, by his own lights, is in a position to reject it.

It is quite unclear to me that he is. Rejecting dogmatism requires adopting a position on the epistemology of disagreement. Anti-dogmatic views in the epistemology of disagreement are motivated by judgements about precisely the kinds of cases that Machery would have banished from philosophical theorising. Since, according to Machery, we shouldn't be relying on such judgements, insofar as we accept his view we lack justification for rejecting dogmatism.

This should be spelled out in more detail. Our interest is in premise (4) above. Why should we accept it? Machery's answer is: 'because ... [it] follows from the leading views in the epistemological literature on disagreement' (131).² When we turn to the literature in which these views have been developed, however, we find that it is rife with the kinds of appeals to judgements about cases that Machery would have us reject. Here is a small but representative sample:

Mental Math: You and your friend have been going out to dinner together regularly for many years. You always tip 20% and split the check (with each person's share rounded up to the nearest dollar), and you each do the requisite calculation in your head upon receiving the check. Most of the time you have agreed, but in the instances when you have not, you have taken out a calculator to check; over the years, you and your friend have been right in these situations equally often. Tonight, you figure out that your shares are \$43, and become quite confident of this. But then your friend announces that she is quite confident that your shares are \$45. Neither of you has had more wine or coffee, and you do not feel (nor does your friend appear) especially tired or especially perky. How confident should you now be that your shares are \$43? – Christensen (2009)

Extreme Restaurant: Consider an (admittedly unrealistic) variant on the restaurant case, in which my friend becomes confident that our shares of the check are \$450 – quite a bit over the whole tab. – Christensen (2007)

Snow: You are indoors, in a windowless room, and you rationally believe that it is snowing outside. You have no way to observe the scene outside (e.g. by looking at a video monitor connected to a surveillance camera focused on your house). A trustworthy source informs you that if you were to learn about the reliability of the grounds for your belief that it's snowing, then you very likely would have a defeater for that belief. – Ballantyne (2014)

Drug: You have worked through a logic problem and concluded that p. You then learn that your evil logic teacher flipped a coin. If the coin landed heads she did nothing but if it landed tails she slipped a reason-distorting drug in your coffee. People who reason through logic problems under the influence of this drug nearly always get the answer wrong. You wonder whether you ought to reduce confidence in p. – Schoenfield (2014)

Tom Grabit: Keith sees a man walk into the library and remove a book by concealing it beneath his coat. Keith is sure the man is Tom Grabit, whom he has often seen before when attending his classes. Consequently, Keith calls out Tom's name, which causes the thief to immediately run away. Being told of the incident, Keith's colleague Terence, who has seen Tom often in his own classes, disagrees that it was Tom. Terence avers to Keith that on the day in question Tom was not in the library. Indeed, Tom had told Terence that he'd be thousands of miles away at a conference, but Terence has also been told that Tom has an identical twin brother, John Grabit, and for all Terence knows, John may well have been in the library on the day in question. Prior to the disagreement, Keith and Terence would have considered each other as approximately on par with respect to the accuracy of their memories, their respective capacities to recognize Tom, and their knowledge of Tom's whereabouts. However, Keith remains just as confident that Tom Grabit removed the book despite Terence's testimony. – Besong (2017)

Malfunction: Suppose for the sake of argument that in the disagreement between Pro and Con, one of them is suffering from some sort of malfunction. One is failing to see a truth that a properly functioning human mind would see. – Feldman (2006)

Thermometers: Suppose you have two thermometers in the reliability of which you (justifiably) have equal trust. On a specific occasion you want to know the temperature outside, and you use both thermometers, which give different readings, say one indicating it is 65 degrees Fahrenheit and the other 70. You have, let us assume, no further evidence on the matter, and in particular it does not 'feel' to you more like 70 than like 65, or the other way around. – Enoch (2010)

With the possible exception of *Mental Maths*, all of these cases have the kinds of ‘disturbing characteristics’ that, according to Machery, make them unsuitable as bases for philosophical theorising. But if, as it seems, we can only come to conclusions about the epistemically correct response to disagreement by appealing to judgements about cases like these then by Machery’s lights we shouldn’t be in the business of having opinions about the epistemology of disagreement – the correct response to disagreement is beyond our ken. If that’s right, then we lack reasons to think that there is anything wrong with the dogmatic view. And if, for all we know, the dogmatist may be correct, we do not yet have sufficient reason to reject the method of cases. Put another way: if we accept the conclusion of Machery’s argument in *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds*, we lack the resources needed to defend it.

How might Machery respond to this objection? As I see it, there are two main options.³

Firstly, he might appeal to the fact that his goal is to show that we cannot have knowledge of metaphysical necessities of philosophical interest and argue that work in the epistemology of disagreement hasn’t been concerned with establishing metaphysical necessities about how we ought to respond to disagreement. Rather, it has been concerned with how we ought to respond to disagreement in the actual world. And as Machery himself says, this kind of project is not the target of his argument.⁴

It’s true that those working in the epistemology of disagreement haven’t had much to say about the modal status of their conclusions. It’s not that they’ve explicitly denied that they are seeking to establish metaphysical necessities; they simply haven’t said anything about the matter in the first place. In the interest of giving this response a fair shout, let’s assume that establishing metaphysical necessities isn’t part of the plan. Does the response have force?

I don’t think it will get us very far. The problem is that even if epistemologists are only interested in the correct response to disagreement in the actual world, they have nevertheless found it necessary to appeal to judgements about cases with disturbing features, as the survey in the last section shows. And according to Machery the problem is not with relying on these judgements to establish metaphysical necessities *per se*. Rather, it is with relying on these judgements in theorising *full stop*. So, unless it can be shown that we don’t need to rely on judgements about disturbing cases in order to refute the dogmatist we are, by Machery’s lights, not even in a position to know what the correct response to disagreement is in the actual world, and this response does nothing to blunt the force of the objection.

This brings us to the second option. Machery might argue that we don’t need to appeal to cases with disturbing features in order to rule out dogmatism, perhaps because (it is claimed) *all* of the major views about peer disagreement support his conclusion.

I think this is doubtful. To show why, let me sketch an approach to disagreement that has some plausibility and doesn't support Machery's conclusion. First, we take a knowledge-centric epistemology of disagreement of the kind developed by Hawthorne and Srinivasan (2013). According to this view:

The Knowledge Disagreement Norm (KDN): In a case of disagreement about whether P, where S believes that P and H believes that not-P:

- (i) S ought to trust H and believe that not-P iff were S to trust H, this would result in S's knowing not-P
- (ii) S ought to dismiss H and continue to believe that P iff were S to stick to her guns this would result in S's knowing P, and
- (iii) In all other cases, S ought to suspend judgement about whether P

We then combine *KDN* with an anti-defeatist approach to knowledge, of the kind developed by Lasonen-Aarnio (2010). According to this view S may continue to know that P, even in the face of disagreement, provided that S's belief was formed (and is maintained) on the basis of a safe method.

When we combine these two theses, we get the result that one can know that P even if one's epistemic peers disagree, and, if one does know that P, one ought to stick to one's guns and continue to believe that P.⁵ It may seem that the empirical data showing people to be generally unreliable in their judgements about cases with disturbing features undercuts the possibility of their making knowledgeable judgements about such cases. But that is not true. What the data shows is that *collectively*, people are unreliable about cases. It does not follow individuals are unreliable – some people may be exceptions to the general trend. For all the data shows, then, there may be people who are able to make knowledgeable judgements about some cases with disturbing features. And if *KDN* is correct, they are entitled to remain dogmatic in the face of disagreement.

As before, what's important for our purposes is not whether this view is correct, but whether Machery has the resources available to rule it out. I predict that any attempt to rule it out will end up relying on judgements about cases with disturbing features.

Notes

1. Machery (2017).
2. The views he has in mind are Elga's 'Equal Weight' view (2007), Sosa's 'Partial Steadfastness' view (2010), and Kelly's 'Total-Evidence' view (2010). He also remarks that 'Whilst some other views about disagreement may lead to another conclusion, if one accepts any of these leading views, one should concede premise 4.' (131).
3. They're not the only options, but there is no space here to cover all the possibilities.

4. He writes: 'It is true that some philosophers do not purport to identify metaphysical necessities. In particular, some ethicists and political philosophers have explicitly rejected the need to identify principles that would determine, e.g. the permissible or the mandatory in every possible situation; instead they settle for principles applying to choices and situations occurring in the actual world . . . Such philosophical projects, which do not require knowing metaphysical necessities, are not the target of the present argument.' (189).
5. Note that this is slightly different from the dogmatic thesis mentioned earlier – the condition of appropriate dogmatism here is knowledge rather than correctness.

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