

Realism v Equilibrism about Philosophy*

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Abstract: According to the *realist* about philosophy, the goal of philosophy is to come to know the truth about philosophical questions; according to what Helen Beebe calls *equilibrism*, by contrast, the goal is rather to place one's commitments in a coherent system. In this paper, I present a critique of equilibrism in the form Beebe defends it, paying particular attention to her suggestion that various meta-philosophical remarks made by David Lewis may be recruited to defend equilibrism. At the end of the paper, I point out that a realist about philosophy may also be a pluralist about philosophical culture, thus undermining one main motivation for equilibrism.

1. Realism about Philosophy

What is the goal of philosophy? According to *the realist*, the goal is to come to know the truth about philosophical questions. Do we have free will? Are morality and rationality objective? Is consciousness a fundamental feature of the world? From a realist point of view, there are truths that answer these questions, and what we are trying to do in philosophy is to come to know these truths.

Of course, nobody thinks it's easy, or at least nobody should. Looking over the history of philosophy, some people (I won't mention any names) seem to succumb to a kind of triumphalism. Perhaps a bit of logic or physics or psychology, or perhaps just a bit of clear thinking, is all you need to solve once and for all the problems philosophers are interested in. Whether those who apparently hold such views really do is a difficult question. But if so they are mistaken. At least since philosophy began as a professional discipline at the end of the 19th century, it has become increasingly clear that the subject is both extremely complicated and much more difficult than it appears at first. Progress, when it happens, is a 'one step forward two steps back' variety, and concerns issues that seem smaller than one might have hoped initially.¹

The realist attitude to philosophy is not that different from a more familiar attitude to other fields of inquiry. What is the goal of mathematics or archaeology or linguistics or history or physics? A realist will say that here too the goal is to find out the truth about the questions that animate these fields. At the limit, the realist is a realist about *Wissenschaft*, that is, systematic rational inquiry into any subject matter at all. Systematic rational inquiry into a

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¹ For an argument that there is progress in philosophy, see Daniel Stoljar, *Philosophical Progress: In Defence of a Reasonable Optimism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

given topic, according to the realist, has as its goal coming to know the truth on questions about that topic. Realism about philosophy is from this point of view realism about *Wissenschaft*—*Wissenschaftlicher Realismus*—where the topics in question are restricted to philosophical topics.

2. Equilibrism

Is realism about philosophy true? Not according to some philosophers. For them, the goal of philosophy is not to come to know the truth of philosophical questions, it is rather, as Richard Cartwright² once put it to “seek coherence—not only among philosophical opinions officially held but also between them and propositions which, outside the study, are irresistible objects of belief.” Helen Beebee³ has recently offered a detailed defence of this view, and has given it a good name, *equilibrism*. This paper is a response to equilibrism in the form Beebee defends it.

Equilibrism denies the realist view about philosophy, and so we may call it an anti-realist view. But equilibrism does not accept much of what goes along with that label. It does not say that philosophical claims lack truth values or that they fail to be truth evaluable. Nor does it say that philosophical theses are false, or that positive versions of such theses are false. It rather is a view about what the aim of philosophy is, and in fact a two-part view. The positive part is that the aim of philosophy is coherence, i.e., to produce theories or propositions that have the property of cohering with some designated set⁴ of propositions; the negative part is that the aim is not truth, i.e. not to produce true propositions. Clearly it is the second part which conflicts most directly with realism.

One might think that any claim along these lines, whether realist or equilibrist, has an obviously false presupposition. Why think philosophy *has* a unique (‘the’) aim or goal; why not multiple aims? For example, maybe it has one aim of producing theories that cohere and a quite different aim of producing theories that are true; indeed, maybe it has the first because it has the second.

However, while philosophy may have multiple aims, properly understood the dispute here concerns what might be called its *predominant* or *fundamental* aim. For the realist that

² Richard Cartwright, *Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).p. 10

³ Helen Beebee, "Philosophical Scepticism and the Aims of Philosophy," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 118, no. 1 (2018).

⁴ What set of propositions? In principle, different equilibrists may have different answers to this question, and nothing in what follows will turn on any particular answer. What I will mainly have in mind however is Cartwright’s suggestion quoted in the text that the set includes other philosophical views and propositions that “outside the study, are irresistible objects of belief”.

aim is to get to the truth, for the equilibrism it is something else. Admittedly, understood this way, the realism/equilibrism dispute *does* presuppose that philosophy has a predominant aim, and this might be denied. Still, it can hardly be said that this presupposition is obviously false, so I will let it stand here.

3. Belief v Acceptance

If equilibrism is true, what is it that philosophers are up to when they engage in the activity of philosophy? What are they doing when they apparently put forward theories, object to the claims of others, make arguments, and so on?

It cannot be that they are expressing beliefs. For if they did they would be aiming at the truth, since to believe something is to aim at the truth, or so I will assume. Rather, philosophical activity must be understood as being organized around a different mental state—not belief but something else. Different philosophers have different views about what this mental state is.⁵ Beebe herself says that philosophers *accept* their views, rather than believe them, much as, according to Bas van Fraassen, scientists accept theories about unobservables rather than believe them.⁶

What is it to accept a proposition, rather than believe it? In general, mental states may be distinguished from one another on the basis of their different functional, normative or phenomenal roles. Perception and imagination, for example, are similar in some ways but differ normatively: perception justifies belief about the local contingent world around us, imagination does not.

The same sort of thing is true in respect of belief and acceptance. These are similar as regards elements of their functional role. Both believing and accepting some claim, for example, will other things being equal dispose you to defend the claim against criticism. But belief and acceptance are normatively different, since they are correct under different conditions. Believing that *p* is correct, or so I will assume here, only if the believed proposition, *p*, is true. Accepting that *p*, by contrast, is correct if the accepted proposition, *p*, coheres with some designated system or set of propositions. To bring out the difference, consider a case in which some proposition coheres in the relevant way. If, in that case, you accept the proposition, the issue of correctness is settled: you have done what you ought to

⁵ See, e.g., S Goldberg, "Defending Philosophy in the Face of Systematic Disagreement," in *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. D.E. Machuca (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁶ See Bas Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Bas Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

do. By contrast, if you believe the proposition in that case, it remains open whether you have done what you ought to, since it remains open whether it is true.⁷

The distinctive claim of the equilibrist is not simply that there is a distinction between belief and acceptance. That is unobjectionable, at least if the distinction is understood in the way indicated. Nor is the claim that philosophers sometimes accept their views rather than believe them. That is unobjectionable too. In philosophy as in other fields, people may sometimes be concerned with coherence rather than truth. The suggestion of equilibrism is rather that this is nevertheless the right attitude, and belief is not the right attitude, as regards philosophical propositions.

As Beebe's discussion brings out effectively, a position of this sort might be understood at a collective or at an individual level. Suppose a particular philosopher in advancing some thesis aims at the truth. It doesn't follow that the collective of which the philosopher is a part—the community of philosophers distributed in time and space—is doing likewise, at any rate if we can make sense of communities having aims of this sort; nor does it follow that it is not doing likewise. Similarly, suppose the community of philosophers is aiming at the truth. It doesn't follow that any given philosopher is doing so or that they are not. In what follows, I will for the most part be considering equilibrism at the individual level, but what I will say should naturally apply to the collective level as well.

4. Descriptive v Normative

Taken as a thesis about individual philosophers, one might think there is a swift refutation of equilibrism, and in fact two swift refutations.

To see the first, recall the opening sentence of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will."⁸ Don't ask: is this true? Ask instead: did Kant believe it? Of course. Nobody who has even a passing acquaintance with Kant can say he didn't believe what he said. The same point applies to many philosophical theses and many philosophers. So an objection to equilibrism is that it has the false consequence that Kant and many others do not believe their views.

⁷ In distinguishing belief and acceptance in this way, I am assuming that the coherence theory of truth is false, where, on that theory, a proposition *p* is true if and only if it coheres with a designated set of propositions. Nevertheless, equilibrism is a cousin of the coherence theory. Equibrism says that a proposition *p* is (not true but) correctly accepted if it coheres with a designated set of propositions.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. H.J.Paton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1785; repr., 1964). p.61

One might respond by appealing to the fallibility of introspection. Maybe Kant believed he believed this but didn't really? That is unlikely. It is true that introspection is fallible, and that even uber-rational people like Kant may believe things and not believe they do.⁹ But the suggestion that, when he consciously wrote the first sentence of the *Groundwork*, he was not expressing a belief at all is implausible just as an interpretation of what the man was doing.

The better move is to clarify that equilibrism is a normative rather than a descriptive thesis. We saw earlier it is a theory, not simply about the aim of philosophy, but about its predominant aim. We should now add that it is a claim, not about what that aim *is* but about what it *ought* to be; that is, about what the *proper* predominant aim of philosophy is. So, in particular, what equilibrism entails is that the proper predominant aim is coherence rather than truth; hence, when it comes to philosophical propositions, the proper attitude—that is, the rationally appropriate attitude—is acceptance rather than belief. This thesis entails that Kant was not rational in *believing* his view, but it does not entail the obvious falsehood that he did not believe his view.

5. Is Equilibrism Incoherent?

Maybe it avoids the problem about Kant, but isn't there a second problem for equilibrism that is just as devastating? Philosophy is a subject in which self-reflection is central to the enterprise. Meta-philosophy is a branch of philosophy just like ethics, logic, epistemology and so forth. It follows that equilibrism is itself a philosophical thesis. But now let's ask: does the equilibrist believe it? If they do, they contradict themselves. If they don't, why should we believe what they say?

This objection sounds good at first but in fact peters out quite quickly. Yes, equilibrism is a philosophical thesis, and that means that the consistent equilibrist will accept it rather than believe it. Likewise the consistent equilibrist will encourage us to accept, rather than believe, what they say. But that by itself is no objection to them, it is simply accusing them of holding (or accepting) their view.

Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra has offered (personal communication) a separate but related objection. Given the equilibrist's own notion of acceptance, you can't accept a

⁹ It might be, for example, that Kant had completely false beliefs about his own racist beliefs; for some discussion of Kant's racism, see Lucy Allais, "Kant's Racism," *Philosophical Papers* 45, no. 1-2 (2016); Charles Mills, "Kant's *Untermenschen*" in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

philosophical claim unless that claim coheres with others. What is it for one claim to cohere with another? Presumably it is at least for these claims to be consistent. But—and this is Rodriguez-Pereyra's point—to establish that two things are consistent is *itself* to hold a philosophical theory, at any rate a logical one. For example, perhaps theory T is inconsistent with theory T* on one view of entailment but not on another. If so, it looks impossible to accept a philosophical claim without believing some other philosophical claims.

If Rodriguez-Pereyra is right, equilibrium would be self-defeating in a subtler way than the one we just considered. Nevertheless, I think equilibrists may resist what he says. For one thing, the aim of philosophy on their view is coherence, not *believed* coherence. It is correct to accept a philosophical thesis if it coheres with other things; it is not required in addition that you *believe* it coheres with other things. Moreover, the equilibrist may again say that it is acceptance all the way; they may insist, that is, that claims about consistency of the sort Rodriguez-Pereyra points out are likewise proper objects of acceptance rather than belief.

6. Entanglement

Equilibrium may avoid the two objections just set out, but there is a further problem that I think is sufficient to reject it—and here the notion of 'rejection' may be understood either according to the realist or the equilibrist.

The problem is that there is no way to separate philosophical claims from other claims from an epistemological point of view; philosophical propositions and other propositions, as we might put it, are entirely entangled. This makes it impossible, I think, to hold equilibrium about philosophy without holding it about everything else.

Let me give some examples of the sort of entanglement I have in mind taken from my own area of expertise, philosophy of mind. The first example is physicalism—the thesis, roughly, that everything in the world is either physical or grounded in the physical. That thesis is usually intended to be contingent and empirical if true, an abstract claim about the world, epistemologically speaking like the theory of evolution or the theory of continental drift. Those who deny it, like the classical dualist and vitalist, hold views that might be true, even if, as a matter of fact, they are not. That is not to deny that physicalism is a philosophical doctrine. On the contrary, large parts of philosophy of mind are devoted to whether various arguments for its truth or falsity are any good.

If equilibrium is true, one should not believe physicalism, not because it is false, but because it is a piece of philosophy. But if one should not believe physicalism, by parity of reasoning, one should not believe theses that are epistemologically akin to it, such as the

theory of evolution or of continental drift. But the suggestion that we should not believe these theories is extremely implausible, and in any case is not at all what the equilibrismist wants to say.¹⁰

For a slightly different illustration of the phenomenon of entanglement, consider the recently widely discussed doctrine of illusionism in philosophy of mind.¹¹ The illusionist says that it is an illusion that you are in pain. The point is not that you might feel the way that you do and yet not have a pain in your leg. If you lacked a leg but felt the way you do, there is a good sense in which you may be under the illusion that you have a pain in your leg. The point is rather that it is always a mistake to think or represent yourself in introspection as feeling as you do when you have a pain in your leg. Perhaps you *believe* you feel this way in introspection, but, according to illusionists, beliefs like this are always false. Critics of illusionism often respond¹² with what has been called a Moorean argument—the name alludes to G.E. Moore's famous argument about the external world—that goes as follows. Premise 1: I am in pain. Premise 2: If I am in pain, then illusionism is false. Conclusion: illusionism is false.

There are several interesting issues that arise in connection with this argument. Here I want to notice that, while the claim that illusionism is false is presumably a philosophical thesis, and so the conclusion of the Moorean argument is philosophical, its premises are not, at least not in the relevant sense. The second premise simply follows from the definition of illusionism, and the first premise is just the claim that you are in pain. Hence, according to equilibrism, you should (or at any rate you may) believe the premises of the argument but you should not believe the conclusion.

What does it matter that, according to equilibrism, you should not believe the conclusion of the Moorean argument? In general, it is a requirement of rationality that if you believe some proposition p and you consciously and competently draw the conclusion that some other proposition q is true, then you should believe q . But not in this case—if equilibrism is true. The equilibrismist is saying that, while you might believe the premises of the

¹⁰ At one point, Beebe (p.5) expresses puzzlement about Lewis's attitude to Humean supervenience. Lewis says that he is interested in the tenability of this doctrine not its truth. But I think Lewis's attitude here is similar to a common attitude to physicalism: he means he is concerned with its philosophical tenability, not its empirical truth. See Beebe.

¹¹ See, e.g., Keith Frankish, *Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness* (London: Imprint Academic, 2017).

¹² See, e.g., see, e.g. Martine Nida-Rümelin, "The Illusion of Illusionism," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 23, no. 11-12 (2016); David J. Chalmers, "The Meta-Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 25, no. 9-10 (2018).

Moorean argument against illusionism, you should not believe the conclusion; rather you should only accept it. But that is implausible.

Could one reply by saying that the premises of the argument should be accepted rather than believed? In the case of the first premise at least, that is an exceedingly difficult thing to say. When you go to the doctor and tell her you are in pain, on the face of it you are expressing your knowledge (and so expressing your belief) that you are in pain, and you expect her to believe you and act on your belief. If she didn't, you could initiate a malpractice suit.¹³ In the case of the second, definitional, premise, it is perhaps marginally easier to insist on acceptance rather than belief, but even here it is difficult. If we can't believe this definitional claim, how can we believe definitional claims anywhere, e.g., in the law or in mathematics? And in any case, the Moorean argument could be reformulated as a one-premise argument, as follows. Premise 1: I am in pain. Conclusion: Illusionism is false if it is the thesis that pain is an illusion. That argument is valid too, and while the conclusion is a piece of philosophy, the premise is not.

The point of these examples is to bring out how much philosophy and non-philosophy are a package deal. Some philosophical theses (like physicalism) are epistemologically equivalent to empirical scientific theses; some philosophical arguments (like the Moorean argument against illusionism) move from non-philosophical premises to philosophical conclusions. To the extent that these examples are typical, as I think they are, it is impossible to hold equilibrium for philosophical theses and reject it for non-philosophical ones.

Could the equilibrist respond by going whole hog and say that their thesis applies to all claims, not just philosophical ones? I think this would be extremely implausible, but it is not necessary to establish this larger claim to show what's wrong with generalizing equilibrium in this way. For doing so robs equilibrium of its meta-philosophical point. The point of equilibrium is not that you shouldn't aim at the truth in philosophy because you shouldn't aim at it anywhere. It is rather that there is something special about philosophy such that you should not aim at the truth here. What the entanglement problem brings out, however, is that there is nothing special, from an epistemological point of view, about philosophy. If so, equilibrium in the intended sense should be rejected.

7. Cartwright v Lewis

¹³ Indeed, the proposition that you are in pain in such a case is, as Cartwright would say, an irresistible object of belief.

While the entanglement problem provides a good reason to reject equilibrism, I would not go so far as to say it constitutes a refutation—indeed, we are about to see that it is controversial whether any philosophical view is ever refuted. But I do think the problem is powerful enough to put the equilibrist on the defensive: if equilibrism is going to be plausible, it will need some serious arguments to support it.

What then are these arguments? Beebee offers two main arguments for equilibrism, or “challenges” for realism, as she prefers to describe them: one from methodology and another from disagreement. I will turn to what she says about these in a moment, but first I want to consider a line of thought that, at least as I read her, exhibits more influence on her paper than either of these official arguments. This arises from a well-known philosophical dispute between two very famous twentieth-century philosophers, Richard Cartwright and David Lewis.

The story of Cartwright and Lewis is the story of two sets of collected papers. In the introduction to the first volume of his *Philosophical Papers*, Lewis makes a number of remarks about the nature of philosophy.¹⁴ One thing he says—this explains the cautious attitude to the entanglement problem expressed at the beginning of this section—is that “philosophical theories are never refuted conclusively. (Or hardly ever. Gödel and Gettier may have done it)”. He goes on:

Our philosophical theories are just opinions. Some are commonsensical, some are sophisticated, some are particular, some general; some are more firmly held, some less. But they are all opinions, and a reasonable goal for a philosopher is to bring them into equilibrium. Our common task is to find out what equilibria there are that can withstand examination, but it remains for each of us to come to rest at one or another of them...Once the menu of well-worked out theories is before us, philosophy is a matter of opinion.

In the introduction to his own collection of papers, Cartwright responds to these remarks. He takes Lewis here to be expressing a commitment to equilibrism of the kind Beebee describes (though of course he was writing long before her and so does not use that term); indeed, it is in this context that he makes the remark I quoted at the outset. What Cartwright then sets out to do in his introduction is criticize Lewis’s view so understood.

What does this dispute have to do with Beebee’s contemporary defence of equilibrism? Like Cartwright, Beebee takes Lewis to be committed to, or at least to be very sympathetic to, equilibrism. Unlike Cartwright, however, she accepts equilibrism. Hence she

¹⁴ David Lewis, *Philosophical Papers: Volume I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). p.ix

presents her view as supported by Lewis himself. Of course, that a philosopher of the stature of Lewis endorsed, or came close to endorsing, equilibrium doesn't *entail* that it is true, but it at least means that it should be taken extremely seriously.

As against both Beebee and Cartwright, however, I don't think Lewis *is* committed to equilibrium; nor do I think he is sympathetic to it. Indeed, in a letter written to Cartwright about his (Cartwright's) introduction, which Beebee mentions, Lewis says as much.¹⁵ "Dear Professor Cartwright", he writes, "I have been reading the introduction to your *Φ essays*. I think we may disagree less than you think. Let me try on a couple of irenic additions to what I said." But the curious thing about Lewis's letter is that, in making his irenic suggestions, he does not (to me at least) bring out the shape of the agreement and disagreement all that clearly. What he does is point out things that at least implicitly are in Cartwright's discussion. And that leaves us at a somewhat unsatisfactory juncture. Do Cartwright and Lewis agree or not? Over what do they disagree? And what does this tell us about equilibrium?

8. The Peircean Limit Argument

I think we may move forward here by seeing underneath the dispute between Cartwright and Lewis a particular argument for equilibrium that I will call the *Peircean Limit Argument*. The argument exploits the idea of an ideal epistemic limit—the Peircean limit, so-called in honour of C.S. Peirce who discussed this in connection with an epistemic notion of truth. We are in the Peircean limit with respect to some proposition *p*, just in case we are in possession of *all* the evidence or rational grounds that we may have for and against *p*.

The first premise of this argument is a modal claim, namely, that for any philosophical proposition *p*, the following is possible: (a) one is in the Peircean limit with respect to *p*; (b) it is appropriate in that situation to accept *p*; and yet (c) *p* is false. So, for example, suppose that physicalism is the proposition in question. What this premise suggests is this: one can be in the Peircean limit with respect to physicalism, that is, one has considered all the evidence pro and con, all the arguments in its favour and all the arguments against; it is in that situation appropriate to accept physicalism, where 'accept' is to be understood in the way indicated above; and finally, what you accept is false, that is, it is not the case that physicalism is true.

The second premise of this argument is that, if this is possible with respect to a proposition *p*, then it is also possible for *two* people to be in the Peircean limit with respect to

¹⁵See David Lewis, *Letter to Richard Cartwright* (1989).

p , and yet disagree over it. Such people would be in a situation both Lewis and Cartwright describe as an ‘ultimate impasse’, that is, a disagreement between two agents both of whom are in the Peircean limit.

The third premise of the argument is that, if you are one of a pair of agents in an ultimate impasse with respect to some proposition p , then it is not rational for you to believe p . Suppose you are in the Peircean limit and you believe p . And suppose now you confront another agent, also in the limit, who believes *not-p*. At least according to some philosophers, it would be wrong in that circumstance to believe p .¹⁶ Nevertheless, it remains appropriate for you to accept p ; indeed, both you and your opponent in this situation are within your epistemic rights to accept p .

The final premise of the argument is that, if it is not appropriate to believe some proposition in the ideal limit, it is not appropriate to believe it at all. What this premise does is generalize from the ideal to the non-ideal case, and via that, to every case. The underlying idea is that, if one should not believe a proposition when epistemic conditions are ideal, one should not believe it when they are not ideal; and, since epistemic conditions are always either ideal or not, one should not believe it at all.

These premises entail equilibration. The first says that, for any philosophical proposition, a certain possibility obtains; the second says that, if this possibility obtains, it is possible to be in an ultimate impasse with respect to this proposition; the third says that, if one is in an ultimate impasse, it is not rational to believe the relevant proposition; the final premise says that, if it is not rational to believe the proposition in the ideal limit, it is not rational to believe it at all. It follows that for any philosophical proposition, one should not believe it but should merely accept it—and that just is what the equilibrationist is saying.

9. Cartwright’s Response

These premises jointly support equilibration, so what can be said for or against them? Cartwright in his introduction says a number of things relevant to the assessment of this argument, but his main idea, I think, is to reject the possibility whose existence the first premise asserts. If you *really* were in the epistemically ideal limit with respect to some philosophical proposition, he wants to say, you would *know* that it’s true; hence it is impossible to be in the limit without its being true. Related to this, Cartwright also denies the

¹⁶ I have in mind here philosophers that nowadays are called ‘conciliationists’ in the epistemology of disagreement. See, for example, Adam Elga, “Reflection and Disagreement,” *Nous* 41, no. 3 (2007). David Christensen, “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” *The Philosophical Review* 116, no. 2 (2007).

possibility described in the second premise: that it is possible to be in an ultimate impasse with respect to this proposition.

What is Cartwright's reason to reject the first premise? The key consideration concerns a point we made earlier, namely that meta-philosophy is itself a sort of philosophy. Take a case in which "the disputants are apparently at an ultimate impasse" over some first-order issue in philosophy. For Cartwright, while such a thing might perhaps occur, that simply means "more work for the philosopher," though of a meta-philosophical nature. In turn this means that we are not in the Peircean limit we imagined ourselves to be, since we would not be in a situation in which all the arguments and evidence have been considered. He concludes: "If a disagreement persists even though everything that could possibly influence the intellect is already in, and known to both sides, can it be a disagreement of *opinion*? I think not".¹⁷

One might object that this way of dealing with the Peircean limit argument is not open to the realist, and so not to Cartwright qua realist. In our terminology, what Cartwright is saying is that it is not possible that p is acceptable in the ideal limit and yet be false. But doesn't this by itself compromise realism? After all, Peirce himself is associated with an epistemic theory of truth according to which p is true if and only if p is acceptable in the ideal limit. And that sort of theory is usually thought of as in opposition to realism.

But this is a mistaken way to view the situation. The theory that p is true if and only if p is acceptable in the ideal limit has by itself no bearing on realism. What has a bearing on realism, if anything, is the stronger thesis that p is true if and only if, *and because*, p is acceptable in the ideal limit. This is stronger because it entails, not merely that the truth of p is *necessarily equivalent* with its being acceptable in the ideal limit, but that the truth of p *consists in* its being acceptable in the ideal limit. But Cartwright doesn't endorse this stronger claim; at least, nothing in what he says suggests that he endorses it or that he is required to do so.

10. Lewis's Response

So Cartwright resists the Peircean limit argument by rejecting its first premise—what about Lewis?

¹⁷ Does Cartwright's point about meta-philosophy run into the problem noted earlier? No; he is not saying that to accept a philosophical theory coheres you must know or believe some other philosophical claim. He is rather saying that it is impossible to be in the Peircean limit with respect to a philosophical thesis without its being true.

Lewis accepts the first premise of the argument. At any rate he accepts it with a few exceptions. The remark about Gödel and Gettier quoted earlier suggests that there may be some philosophical claims which are such that there is a knock-down argument for their truth, an argument which would be available in the Peircean limit. But such cases are (Lewis thinks) unusual, and the premise is true for the large majority of philosophical claims even if not for all. And that is almost as good as far as the Peircean limit argument goes.

Lewis also accepts the second and fourth premises. At the beginning of his letter, he says that he and Cartwright “probably disagree on how often an apparently ultimate impasse really is one.” He goes on to describe a dispute between himself and Graham Priest over the possible truth of contradictions as an ultimate impasse. This strongly suggests that he thinks we are reasonably often in the ideal situation, and reasonably often disagree in such cases; if so, there is no motivation to think what is true in the ideal situation is interestingly different from that which obtains in our own.¹⁸

Instead Lewis rejects the third premise. Suppose you are in the ideal limit and accept some proposition p . Should you believe p ? Lewis says yes. It doesn’t matter that no evidence or argument you have available to you that strictly entails p . Nor does it matter that you might in principle confront someone who disagrees with you. His position is that you should nevertheless stick to your guns and hold your belief.

While Lewis thinks you should believe the relevant proposition in that situation, he doesn’t say outright that in such a case your belief will amount to knowledge. Instead, in his letter to Cartwright, he points out that his well-known contextualism regarding sentences of the form ‘ S knows that p ’ means that, in certain cases, knowledge claims of this structure in the ideal limit will be false. That is because there may be contexts in which a relevant possibility has not been ruled out, in which case the knowledge-attributing sentence will not express a true proposition.

Beebe says something about this issue that, if I understand it, seems to me mistaken. She interprets Lewis here as appealing to contextualism to *defend* realism about philosophy, writing, for example, of “Lewis’s contextualist solution to the problem of philosophical scepticism.”¹⁹ She goes on to argue that there is a weakness in any such contextualist solution, namely, that, while it might work in the case of individual subjects of knowledge, it would not

¹⁸ Indeed, this aspect of Lewis’s position seems to me quite typical of his philosophy, in which he often assumes that we are in an ideal or very close to an ideal situation. This is the case in his discussion of physicalism, for example.

¹⁹ Beebe. p.13.

work in the case of collective subjects, i.e., if the question under discussion is what *we* know, rather than what *I* know.

But I don't think Lewis's remarks about contextualism are intended to be a response to philosophical scepticism or, to transpose what he says to our discussion, to help in the defence of realism against equilibrism. For one thing, Lewis is a contextualist about sentences attributing *knowledge* not sentences attributing *belief*; nothing in his contextualism undermines the idea that it is rational to believe what one does in the ideal limit, even if one confronts an ultimate impasse. Moreover, Lewis mentions contextualism not as part of his defence of his realism about philosophy, but as a possible objection to it. As we have seen, he wants to say that, even if one is in the ideal limit there may be contexts in which one's claim to know a certain proposition is false. As I read him, Lewis accepts this, but does not think it undermines realism, in part at least because the same is true for many knowledge claims, ideal or not, philosophical or not.

11. Where We Are

Now that we have the Peircean limit argument before us, we are in a better position to understand the dispute between Lewis and Cartwright than we were before. It is not that Lewis is an equilibrist and Cartwright is a realist. In fact, Lewis and Cartwright agree that equilibrism is false and that realism is true. They also agree that the Peircean limit argument for equilibrism is mistaken, as indeed they must given that they reject its conclusion. Where they disagree is how precisely the argument is mistaken. Cartwright rejects the first premise. Lewis rejects the third.

It is worth mentioning two further responses to the argument, distinct from those offered by Cartwright and Lewis. The first rejects the fourth premise. One might argue that, even if one should not believe some proposition in the ideal limit, it does not follow that you should not believe the proposition here and now, in the non-ideal case. If you disagree with someone in the Peircean limit, that may be a reason to give up your belief, but it doesn't follow that you should do the same thing when you disagree with someone not in the Peircean limit. Mere disagreement with someone is not a reason to give up your belief, but disagreement with someone in the Peircean limit might be.

The second alternative response is that the argument proves too much. We have formulated the first premise in terms of philosophical theses, but an analogous premise will be true for many propositions, philosophical or not. Take propositions about the future, e.g., that I will have dinner tonight. If I were in the Peircean limit, that proposition may well be

acceptable. Does it follow that it is true? No, I have very good evidence that it is true but the evidence doesn't entail that it's true. But then, if the Peircean limit argument were successful, it would seem to establish equilibrium not just about philosophy but about everything—and again that is not part of the bargain.

Where does this leave us with respect to Beebee's defence of equilibrium? If both she and Cartwright interpret Lewis as endorsing equilibrium, they are mistaken. Hence equilibrium cannot be motivated by the fact that Lewis endorsed it or even discussed it sympathetically; he didn't. And if she relies on the Peircean limit argument to establish equilibrium, Beebee is also mistaken—as indeed both Lewis and Cartwright would agree. What Lewis and Cartwright disagree about is not realism—that is why Lewis makes the irenic suggestions he does—it is rather about which premise in an argument for equilibrium is mistaken.

12. Disagreement and Methodology

I have suggested that equilibrium is implausible and the Peircean limit argument for it is unpersuasive. But as I mentioned earlier, the considerations arising from the Lewis-Cartwright debate are not the explicit reasons Beebee offers for equilibrium. For her, the main considerations concern disagreement and methodology. I have criticized arguments of this type in some detail elsewhere, and won't try to re-litigate these issues here.²⁰ What I will do, however, is briefly point out that the discussion we have been having about the Peircean limit argument is enough to show that Beebee's explicit arguments are unpersuasive.

Turning first to the disagreement challenge, this starts, Beebee²¹ says, “from the obvious and undeniable fact of pervasive systematic peer disagreement.” From this starting point the challenge is to explain how we can “claim to know or be justified in believing our philosophical views, when we know that equally capable and well-informed philosophers disagree with us.”

This line of thought obviously raises themes that are present also in the Peircean limit argument. The main difference is that, for Beebee, the disagreements at issue are ordinary non-ideal ones, whereas, in the Peircean limit argument, the disagreements obtain in the ideal case—they are ultimate impasses, as Lewis and Cartwright call them. In the light of this, the first thing to say in response to Beebee's disagreement argument is that, while it may be an obvious fact that there are disagreements of the kind she describes in philosophy, it is an

²⁰ Stoljar. see chapter 7

²¹ Beebee. p.11

equally obvious fact that there are such disagreements in many fields. Should we therefore be equilibrists in these other fields as well? As we noted before, this is not what the equilibrist wants to say. The point is to be an equilibrist about philosophy, not about everything. If so, and if this argument from disagreement is going to have any force, it must be that ordinary disagreements in philosophy are somehow different from ordinary disagreements in other fields.

But it is not at all clear what this difference might consist in. One suggestion might be that philosophical disagreements would persist even in the ideal limit. If so, Beebee's argument becomes very similar to the Peircean limit argument, and would be subject to the same sorts of criticisms. Another suggestion is that, while there are disagreements in contemporary philosophy, these are perennial in a way that disagreements in other fields are not. As I have argued elsewhere, however, it is quite unclear this is so; it is true perhaps that there are perennial disagreements over the topics of philosophy, but the questions themselves change over time.²² Moreover, Beebee offers no historical evidence of the kind that would be required if one really wanted to establish that disagreements in philosophy are perennial.

Turning now to the methodology argument, the main problem with any attempt to argue from a premise about methodology in philosophy to a conclusion about equilibrium is that philosophy lacks a distinctive methodology in the first place—as indeed, Beebee herself mentions. To say that it lacks a distinctive methodology is not to say that it lacks a methodology *at all*; on the contrary, at least from the realist point of view, philosophy is simply the application of the techniques of rational inquiry to philosophical topics. But once again then, if the argument from methodology is to have any force, we need to be told what the difference is between philosophical topics and other topics such that the techniques of rational inquiry are up to answering questions about the second but not about the first.

As before, however, it is unclear what this difference consists in. Beebee herself notes in several places that there are open issues about rational inquiry, for example, the way in which it relies on theoretical virtues and intuition are currently matters of controversy. But these issues are quite general and would cause a problem for the application of rational inquiry to any field, not just philosophy. A more plausible way to develop the methodology argument is to emphasize again the nature of disagreement in philosophy. Perhaps, as Beebee puts it at one point, “we have no grounds for trusting our intuitions...when they conflict with those of our philosophical peers.” If this is how the argument is to be developed, however, it

²² See Stoljar.

is not distinct from the disagreement arguments we have looked at already and may be dealt with in the same way.

13. Pluralism about Philosophical Culture

My conclusion is that, in the dispute between realism and equilibrism about philosophy, realism is the better option. Not only does equilibrism face problems that realism does not, there is no persuasive argument for equilibrism. But what explains the appeal of equilibrism? I will end by briefly considering one line of thought I suspect is lying behind it.

The idea is roughly that realism is an intolerant view. Suppose I'm right (by my lights) and you're wrong—shouldn't I then seek to silence you? Why not if realism is true? After all, if my goal is to arrive at the truth, wouldn't that goal be thwarted if there are people around who disagree with me? And what about if our common goal is to arrive at the truth; surely in that case we should aim to stamp out falsehood! In sum, the realist about philosophy must reject a pluralist attitude about philosophical culture.

Equilibrism by contrast looks a tolerant view. Since, on that view, we are not aiming at the truth in the first place, there is no reason for me to seek to silence you or for each of us to attempt to silence each other. That leaves us free to be pluralists about philosophical culture. In this sense, equilibrism is rather like its cousin, the coherence theory of truth, according to which there might be different equivalent sets of coherent propositions, each of which are true in their own way.

One response for the realist is to try to live with this consequence. Perhaps intolerance is simply an inevitable by-product of a steely-eyed focus on the truth? But to think this is to ignore that there are powerful epistemic and moral reasons for encouraging toleration in philosophical culture. As regards the epistemic reasons, the classic line of argument here has been offered by John Stuart Mill;²³ Mill doesn't have philosophy in mind in particular but we can adapt what he says to this case.²⁴ The Millian argument (to put it very roughly) is that if your aim is to get to the truth, and if you are part of a collective whose joint aim is to get to the truth, the best way of achieving that aim is to encourage opposing views, perhaps as a test for your own view, perhaps to discourage dogma, or perhaps as an example of how a view can go wrong.²⁵

²³ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1859).

²⁴ For a recent general discussion of toleration in the context of religion, see Brian Leiter, *Why Tolerate Religion?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁵ Lewis himself thought this Millian defence of toleration was inadequate and offered a different epistemic argument for it, and for pluralism about philosophical culture, which turns on the idea that pluralism is the only

As regards moral reasons, at least one motivation for encouraging pluralism may be extracted from recent discussion about the demographic facts about philosophy, namely, that the discipline is at the moment extremely non-diverse, with far fewer women and minorities than comparable disciplines. How did this sociological situation come about? One plausible answer, defended by Kristie Dotson,²⁶ is that philosophy at present exhibits what she calls a ‘culture of justification’ rather than a ‘culture of praxis.’ As I understand Dotson, a culture of justification is among other things an intolerant culture. It is a culture that implicitly or explicitly continually asks the question that is the title of her paper, namely, ‘How is this paper philosophy?’ where one effect of asking this question in this manner is to impose a single set of standards on members of the culture. A culture of praxis by contrast is pluralist, not only about particular theses within philosophy but about what philosophy might be in the first place. If Dotson is right that the exclusionary features of philosophy are owing to its culture of justification, we seem to have a powerful moral reason to adopt a culture of praxis: in order to encourage a more inclusive version of contemporary philosophy, we should encourage a more pluralist version of philosophical culture.

There is much to say about the detail of these arguments, of course, but for my part I accept their underlying impulse: from both a moral and an epistemic point of view, we should be pluralists about philosophical culture. The important point for our purposes, however, is that it is a mistake to see any problem here for the realist. The situation as regards philosophy is akin to the situation as regards religion. Consider the realist about religion who thinks that religious claims are true or false, depending on what the facts are, and that people properly believe their religious views, rather than merely accept them. Such a realist may nevertheless agree that as a matter of fact there is no prospect of overcoming disagreements about religion. If so, there is no problem with them believing, perhaps on Mills’ ground or on a variation of Dotson’s, that one should be a pluralist about religious culture.

What is true in the case of religion is true in the case of philosophy. The issue about realism is an issue about the nature of the activity of philosophy: is it an activity that aims at the truth or not? The issue about pluralism is an issue about what sort of epistemic community we should construct: should we aim for a pluralist community, and if so of what

way to avoid the risk of being dominated by falsehood; see David Lewis, "Academic Appointments: Why Ignore the Advantage of Being Right?," in *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy*, ed. David Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David Lewis, "Mill and Milquetoast," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 67, no. 2 (1989).

²⁶ Kristie Dotson, "How Is This Paper Philosophy?," *Comparative Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2013).

sort? But there is no reason why a realist about philosophy need not also be a pluralist about philosophical culture.

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