

DISAGREEMENT AND THE VALUE OF REFLECTION¹

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“The great impediment to action is, in our [i. e., Athenians] opinion, not discussion, but the want of that knowledge which is gained by discussion which is preparatory to action.”

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

I. INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM

1. The main aim of this paper is to propose that reflection is a performance that has epistemic value. This idea contains two parts: the first asserts that reflection has *instrumental value*. The second that reflective performance promotes an epistemic virtue that has *final value*. The first part is not controversial and most epistemologists would accept it. The second, however, asserts that there is a kind of epistemic good which can only be achieved through reflection. There is much controversy in this.

In general, investigations about the value of reflection discuss the nature of states and of the individual's capacities, whether the person has direct epistemic access to the content of their beliefs, whether reflection can guarantee the reliability of beliefs, whether an individual exercises some kind of doxastic voluntarism etc. Within the limits of this paper, reflection will be addressed from a little-explored angle in contemporary epistemology: the context of *skeptical dialectic scenarios*. These are skeptical scenarios in which individuals are challenged to evaluate and judge whether or not their beliefs are justified. As a rule, a person is presented with reasons to suspect the limitations of their subjective perspective about the *evidence* and reasons that dispose them to believe.

To be more precise, we are dealing with the value of reflection in *one* specific skeptical scenario, which we will call the *dialectical disagreement scenario*. Dialectical disagreement involves interlocutors who are epistemic peers and who, on the one hand, hold divergent beliefs about the same *matter* and, on the other, are challenged, in an argumentative confrontation, to reveal and justify their positions about this *matter*². The people who participate in this form of disagreement undertake an investigation whose object is their initial beliefs and justifications, which aims to decide what is epistemically fair.

Thus, we have deliberately shifted the discussion from the point of view of the individual's subjective states to that of a dialogical scene.

2. There are several disagreement scenarios: on the one hand, J could conceive K as an authority, a superior peer, an inferior peer, etc. (FRANCES, 2014, pp. 9-104). On the other, what is important is whether the object of the disagreement is a proposition in

¹ We would like to thank Plínio J. Smith and Eduardo Barrio for their criticisms, comments, suggestions and encouragement.

² We prefer to use the term *matter*, rather than *evidence*, in order to avoid the myriad difficulties and disputes regarding the status of *evidence* in the contemporary epistemology of disagreement.

logic, philosophy, politics or empirical events. In this paper, we are concerned with a *dialectical disagreement* in common life situations (which might include disputes about different propositions).

One of the central questions of the epistemology of disagreements (accepting that this is a rational disagreement) is: *what should be done when one is aware of disagreement - continue to believe the initial belief, renounce the belief or suspend judgment*³? However, the question that motivates this paper is otherwise: *independent of what should be done when one is aware of disagreement, what does this awareness promote, epistemically, in the subject?* Our hypothesis is that in skeptical scenarios of dialectical disagreement reflective performance promotes in the subject a virtue or intellectual ability to *judge* their own beliefs and establish *epistemic preferences*⁴. By epistemic preference we understand the epistemic ability of someone who, in the light of a skeptical-dialectic confrontation, decides to believe, not to believe or to suspend judgment keeping the rationality of her decision.

It is clear that, in the natural course of our lives, most of our beliefs are not a matter of preference or choice. If I believe it is raining, this is not because I prefer sunshine or rain. I believe it is raining, because I see that it is raining, or because someone tells me that it is raining. However, in dialectical contexts that involve a skeptical challenge between epistemic peers, the interlocutors are in a situation in which new *evidence* is not in play⁵, nor does one have better reasons than the other does, and both recognize that they are not in a better position to believe than their interlocutor is. In this context, to continue the dialogue requires a critical reflective examination of their initial beliefs (with their evidence and reasons) and, in the end, if the epistemic goal of reaching the truth is not achieved, it is possible at least to achieve a special epistemic state. This epistemic state allow the agent to perform an *epistemic change* with her rationality secured: the person can improve, expand, deepen, better understand, guarantee, confirm, renounce, or suspend their judgment, etc.

Here, reflection is understood as a performance, an activity in which the person examines the evidence, content and reliability of their own beliefs. This performance may lead to different results, but if someone is capable of critically reflecting on their own beliefs in skeptical-dialectic contexts, whatever the results, this performance will produce positive epistemic states⁶ – contrary to people who, in the face of skeptical challenges, simply decide to remain intellectually immobile, maintaining a cowardly, arrogant or dogmatic position.

The critical spirit with which someone discusses opinions in the context of dialectical disagreement, submitting them to the scrutiny of reason (that is, to the arguments for or

³ The main publications that provide an overview of this discussion are Feldman & Warfield (2010), Machuca (2013), Lackey & Christensen (2013), Frances (2014), and Matheson (2015).

⁴ The notion of preference has been discussed in several disciplines, such as Decision Theory, Moral Psychology and Economics. Some literature is dedicated to the formal and logical aspects of preference, our approach, however, does not address these perspectives. For more on the literature of preference logic, see von Wright (1963), Fehige & Wessels (1998) and Hansson & Grüne-Yanoff (2011).

⁵ Except the evidence of the existence of the disagreement itself, which is considered a new evidence by some philosophers. We don't believe that considering the disagreement itself as an evidence can affect the results we are aiming for. Then, we are going to remain neutral about if the disagreement itself can be considered an evidence or not.

⁶ On this context, there are two positive epistemic states that can be produced: reaching the truth and the epistemic preference. We are going to describe the later in more details on the sections that follow.

against), is virtuous and has epistemic value. The consequence of this performance, the *epistemic preference*, has a *final value*, since deliberations based on free judgment have *final value*.

II. REFLECTION AND THE OBJECTIVE OF DISAGREEMENT

3. The most common argument that sustains the idea that reflection does *not have epistemic value* asserts that through reflection, the formation of second-order beliefs does not affect knowledge attribution nor does it establish the reliability of the process of the formation of first-order beliefs. We remain neutral in relation to this argument.

We consider that, from the point of view of the individual's mental life in non-dialectical contexts, it may be irrelevant whether a person needs to reflect in order to know. It does not make sense, without a specific reason, to ask an individual who asserts that it is raining whether she has reflected on the nature of this belief, whether she has carefully confirmed that their sources of information are reliable, whether she is justified in believing that it is raining. Why would we do this? As Thomas Reid asserts, our human condition is based on the supposition that people speak the truth. Not only is it false to say that reflection is a requisite for knowledge, it is irrelevant. Although it seems to be clear that on some ordinary contexts reflection seems to be irrelevant, there are good arguments on the literature that states that there are ordinary contexts on which reflection seems to be necessary. As it was said, we remain neutral in relation to this debate.

In the meantime, there are cases in which one does ask whether the person is justified in their belief – including whether or not they are justified in saying that it is raining: this occurs when another person provides a reason to challenge that position. In this situation, reflection is indispensable and, furthermore, should produce something that is valuable.

4. The initial objective of those who enter a disagreement, as in all investigations, is to discover the truth. All investigations aim for the truth. The problem is that each of the interlocutors involved in a disagreement assume that their initial beliefs are correct, but are obliged to recognize that their interlocutor also has reasons to support opposing beliefs.

The contemporary epistemology of disagreement almost always expects the peers in disagreement to provide the same evidence and reasons – and for this reason a major part of the debate is concerned with the possibility of a legitimate disagreement. In contrast, the meaning of disagreement between ancient skeptics assumes that peers may provide different evidence and reasons. Sextus Empiricus (SEXTUS HP I, 164-169) presents disagreement in a specific situation: if a person sustains the belief *that p* and not the belief *that ¬p*, she *must* have a reason for this. Before the dialectical confrontation, the person may only have an inclination to believe or not. But, in the face of disagreement, she must justify her opinion and if she does not have such a reason “her bare assertion is worthless” (SMITH, 2016). If this person declares that they have such a reason, then the Pyrrhonian demands that they present and defend the three objections: infinite regress (if the reason refers to another reason which, in turn, refers to another reason, *ad infinitum*), vicious circularity (if this reason is sustained on a

previously presented reason), and arbitrary assumption (if the reason is not sustained on anything)⁷.

5. In skeptical dialectical scenarios, people investigate whether or not their own beliefs, or those of their interlocutor, are justified, and whether or not their reasons are good reasons. The general schemata is:

(DSD) *Disagreement Scenarios or Dialectical Disputes*⁸: about an object, happening, idea, concepts, any f phenomenon

- (A) J believes that a
- (B) K believes that $\neg a$
- (C) K challenges J to explain why J believes a and not $\neg a$
- (D) J challenges K to explain why K believes $\neg a$ and not a

When only (A) and (B) occur, we imagine that both J and K refuse to continue the dialogue. If we do not consider an idealized individual, whose rationalism requires them to remain in a permanent arena of consistent arguments, their willingness to continue the dialogue is not only an epistemic requirement, but also a moral one. We then imagine that, for some reason, the distinction between a and $\neg a$ is relevant to both J and K; that for both J and K it is not a matter of indifference whether they believe a or $\neg a$, since this distinction affects the epistemic position of these individuals in relation to the world, to themselves and to other individuals.

We note that in order to follow our reasoning, we are dealing with disagreement from the perspective of a dialogue, which involves a second person. We believe that maybe some of our results can be generalized to a perspective where a subject disagree with her past or future self, but we are going to remain neutral at this moment about this. Similarly, we avoid the third person perspective or that of the *omniscient narrator*. In the end, whether or not proposition a is true or false does not matter to us; what matter to us is that, having reflected, the person's epistemic state will be attained virtuously.

At the outset, the interlocutors do *not* assume what the contemporary epistemology of disagreement calls the *Position of Equality*. If J believes a and rejects $\neg a$ (while K believes vice versa), she obviously thinks she is in a superior position. It is necessary to show her, skeptically, that she is not in the superior position that she thinks she is. Following the dialogue is a skeptical requirement and the dialogue norms are imposed by the condition that J and K are rational, if fallible, agents. For this reason, the fact that J and K start out with beliefs that they accept as the truth does not prevent them, at the outset, from attributing the condition of epistemic peer to their interlocutors and

⁷ Epistemologists generally address this subject, Agrippa's Trilemma, in an entirely idealized manner, thinking of ideal individual S who believes that p ; this individual immediately begins to list reasons for their reasons and then falls into *regression*, *infinetism* and *arbitrariness*. This is a common practice in philosophy and appears established and authorized in order to understand how our cognitive systems function in general. From this point of view, our cognitive system appears to be a sub-system of the even more general cognitive system of a being fully guided by the laws of logic (like an artificial intelligence super-system).

⁸ The ideal model of dialectical disagreement may be found in certain of Plato's dialogues in which Socrates is the protagonist. Socratic strategies have heavily influenced skepticism (VOGT, 2012).

assuming the *Principle of Humanity* or the *Principle of Charity*. As Davidson reminds us, this principle is the precondition for two people to be able to talk and disagree about something: in order for an individual to be able to understand the meaning of the utterances of the other, she must suppose that this individual is a rational being who formulates utterances with meaning, which are (in most cases) true (DAVIDSON, 1974).

In the epistemology of disagreement, discussions frequently address idealized scenarios and involve hyper-rational beings who strictly obey the laws of classical logic⁹. Here, we restrict our considerations to epistemic disagreements in daily life. From this perspective, agents are fallible beings and have an incomplete understanding of cognitive content, only have access to a partial set of information and may be influenced by feelings and emotions. In this sense, there are no perfect symmetries between J's and K's positions and their doxastic differences, it is difficult for the two subjects to have the *same* evidence – at most, they may only have *similar evidence*. This does not compromise our argument, since even when they are not hyper-rational beings, it is not hard to imagine that two people might be sincerely interested in finding out the truth and might be sincerely self-critical.

6. It is assumed that the dialogue participants have a “meta-cognitive capacity” (PROUST, 2013): in their own time, J and K have the capacity to access and evaluate their own epistemic states and list reasons in favor of their beliefs. But they must each be able to understand and assess the reasons against their beliefs, even if they do not accept them. This is why they have to investigate. This “reflective capacity” makes us expect that J and K will realize that their own reasons may not be sufficient to support a or $\neg a$.

We then imagine a situation in which both assess their own reasons as sufficiently formed to present to their interlocutors, in order to convince them of the truth. From the point of view of *dialectical disagreement*, justification is a matter of *defensibility*, not of the subject with herself (as some theories of knowledge suggests), but defensible in relation to other people¹⁰. Even if we accept that knowledge attribution does not require reflection, but only true belief reliably formed, in the context of dialectical challenges, when subjects disagree in relation to a belief about which, in principle, they should not disagree, something else is required. It is the nature of disagreement to imply, at the outset, that an individual does not have access to the justification and reliability of the formation of another individual's belief, and requires better explications. When I say that the other person is justified in their beliefs, I am saying, in other words, that they have reasons to believe and to try and convince me. In the same way, in the same context, when I say that I am justified, I am saying that I have reasons to believe and to try to convince the other. Clearly, none of this makes people immune to error or false beliefs. Justification, as we know, is no guarantee of truth and knowledge. However, reflective work puts people in a position that deserves praise and credit: it avoids precipitation, arrogance, dogmatism and epistemic injustice.

⁹ Frances (2014) and Matheson (2015) see this as a difficulty for theories about the epistemology of disagreement.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that *justification* is defined in many different ways on the debate of epistemic internalism vs epistemic externalism. Since we are not talking about justification on the context of knowledge attribution, our notion can be understood slightly different from the (ambiguous) way it is on other debates.

III. PREFERENCE AND THE VALUE OF REFLECTION

7. As a result of a rational disagreement, a person may believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment. These options are normatively established by the conditions required to be a rational being. The person must remain convinced of those beliefs for which there is evidence and reasons; and they must renounce beliefs when they recognize that there is no evidence or reasons; and, finally, they must suspend judgment about those beliefs for which both they and their interlocutor have reason but not evidence, when there is no way to decide for or against believing.

If we accept this, there are at least three possibilities:

- a) Even when we do *not* assume a stubborn or arrogant attitude, we *can* preserve our beliefs;
- b) Even when we are *not* intellectual or moral cowards, we *can* change our opinion, forming a new belief, and
- c) Even when we do *not* retreat to find better reasons, we *can* suspend judgment.

Can we say that in “a”, “b”, or “c” we remain rational agents? What justifies the notion of remaining (epistemically) rational in both preserving and renouncing our beliefs? What makes our performance virtuous and the result of our activity *finally valuable*?

Carl Ginet (2001, 63) presents a situation in which one person judges that another “was not justified in coming to have a particular belief” because “given what she was aware of at the time, she ought not to have adopted the belief”. Everything leads to a belief that this judgment only makes sense because “[we] suppose that a person might come to believe something simply by deciding to do so”. In the process of disagreement through critical reflection, the person does not form new knowledge or a new belief, but forms a virtuous attitude of judging and establishing an *epistemic preference*.

8. Reflection is a performance that may provide different results. Clearly, a critical reflective performance does not make people immune to error or false beliefs: to evaluate reasons and present justifications is no guarantee of truth and knowledge. However, reflective work puts people in a position that deserves praise and credit: it avoids precipitation, arrogance, dogmatism and epistemic injustice.

If a person is capable of critically reflecting on their own beliefs and the beliefs of interlocutors who have opposing beliefs, whatever the result, this appears to us to be something positive and valuable. The critical spirit with which a person discusses opinions, subjecting themselves to the scrutiny of arguments for or against, is something virtuous. The gain may be direct: when the person discards unsatisfactory reasons and finds guarantees to believe or disbelieve; but it may also be indirect: leading to a more demanding attitude, mistrustful of certain claims, while curiously, at the same time, becoming more capable of understanding positions different from their own.

This form of disagreement may be found in both daily life and in philosophy. In daily life, in which practical decisions must be made, judging following the exercise of reflection, such as that described, is a gain, even though the belief may be fallible, defensible, etc. In the case of philosophy, whose object is categorically not based on

evidence, the suspension of judgment may be a gain – even if people, including dogmatists, think that only justifying a belief is a gain and that suspending judgment is a loss.

9. When at the dialectical disagreement the truth is not reached, both of the persons now have as a disposition an ability that is called *epistemic preference*. Epistemic preference is not like an ordinary preference, where there is value being attributable to objects. An ordinary preference is a relation between a subject and any object. For example, John prefers watching Games of Throne to watching a baseball game. This is so because John attribute more value to Games of Throne than to a baseball game. In general, ordinary preferences can be organized with a scale of values. Some people have the things they prefer more, the more valuable things for then while the less valuable things are the things they prefer less. Moreover, the kind of value that is attributable on ordinary preference is an instrumental value: John feels more pleasure watching Games of Throne than watching a baseball game. We are always attributing instrumental value to things we prefer because it is thru these things that we achieve what can be our goals, as for example, pleasure, healthy, happiness, and so on.

This relation between value and preference does not exists when we talk about epistemic preference. At the very end of a dialectical disagreement, the subject has three option. At this moment, she has available also this ability to choose any of the options (believe, disbelieve or suspend judgment) without any prejudice to rationality. The matter here is not which option is *the more rational*, but that all options are rational. In addition, that it is only in the end of a dialectical disagreement that an epistemic agent can freely decide what to believe. That is why epistemic preference is not related to the attribution of value, since at first, the three options available are equally valuable. The kind of valuable that is present here is a different kind of value. It is a final value. This is so because the ability to epistemically prefer is an ability to freely decide what to believe. It is an ability that is based on freedom. And freedom is something that is valuable by itself. It has final value. That is why epistemic preference has final value.

The main aim of this paper was to sketch the idea that in one special context – the context of dialectical disagreement – reflection is a performance that promotes an instrumental value when after the disagreement, the agents reach the truth and also promotes an intellectual virtue, the epistemic preference, that has final value, when the disagreement does not reach the truth. On that sense, no matter the results of a dialectical disagreement, reflection has always an important instrumental value, because it always leads to two paths finally valuable: the truth and epistemic preference.