Philosophical Equilibrism, Rationality, and the Commitment Challenge

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Penultimate draft
Forthcoming in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *online first DOI: 10.1093/arisoc/aoy019*
Please refer to the published version

Abstract

Helen Beebee (2018) defends a view of the aims of philosophy she calls 'equilibrism'. Equilibrism denies that philosophy aims at knowledge and maintains that the collective aim of philosophy is 'to find what equilibria there are that can withstand examination' (Beebee 2018, p. 3). In this note, I probe equilibrism by focusing on how disagreement challenges our doxastic commitment to our own philosophical theories. Call this the *Commitment Challenge*. I argue that the Commitment Challenge comes in three varieties and that endorsing equilibrism provides us with an answer to one of them only.

I

Introduction. What Helen Beebee (2018, p. 2) calls the 'disagreement challenge' is the contention that systematic philosophical disagreement amongst epistemic peers shows that philosophers do not and cannot know many philosophical theses.[1]

This sceptical predicament poses 'a threat to our ability to make progress with respect to philosophy's aim' (Beebee 2018, p. 16). In order to overcome such threat, Beebee defends a view of the aims of philosophy she calls 'equilibrism'. Equilibrism denies that philosophy aims at knowledge and maintains that the collective aim of philosophy is 'to find what equilibria there are that can withstand examination' (Beebee 2018, p. 3). The correspondent individual aim of philosophers is 'to find an equilibrium position of our own […] at which [we] can come to rest' (Beebee 2018, pp. 16, 20).

[1] Beebee also motivates philosophical scepticism via the 'methodology challenge' (see Beebee 2018, §2). I won't deal with the methodology challenge here.

In this note, I probe equilibrism by elaborating on the disagreement challenge. I focus on how disagreement challenges our doxastic commitment to our own philosophical theories. Call this the *Commitment Challenge* (CC). I argue that (CC) comes in three varieties and that equilibrism provides us with an answer to one of them only.

II

The Additive Commitment Challenge. Beebee writes (2018, p. 2):

> Pretty much whatever your philosophical view, you'll find plenty of other philosophers who are just as good at philosophy and just as well informed as you are, who sincerely avow a view that's incompatible with your own.

To put it à la David Lewis (see Beebee 2018, p. 12): peer disagreement makes a philosophical theory T', which is an incompatible alternative to your theory T, epistemically relevant. Using standard epistemological terminology, this means that disagreement affects your belief that T by providing *additive* defeating evidence against it, where an additive defeater is such that it defeats the evidential support for your belief that T by being evidence for the truth of T', and T' entails not-T.

Let us now concede – as equilibrism, per the disagreement challenge, does – that such additive defeating evidence is undefeated. That is to say, let us assume that we cannot establish the falsity of T'. Let us also assume a prima facie plausible epistemological principle saying that if you acquire undefeated additive defeating evidence against your belief that T, you are not rationally permitted to be doxastically committed to T. This gives rise to the *additive commitment challenge* (ACC):

(1) Whenever you discover a disagreement with a philosophical peer, you acquire (undefeated) additive defeating evidence against your belief that T.

(2) Whenever you acquire (undefeated) additive defeating evidence against your belief that T, you are not rationally permitted to be doxastically committed to T.

Therefore:

(3) Whenever you discover a disagreement with a philosophical peer, you are not rationally permitted to be doxastically committed to T.

In my view, equilibrism can respond to (ACC), in that it contains the resources to reject (2).

First, since Beebee advocates the view that the individual aim of a philosopher is 'to come to rest at one or another [of the] equilibria […] that can withstand examination' (Beebee 2018, p. 16), pursuing this aim does not require showing that some theories are false. That is to say, if I pursue the aim to reach an equilibrium T that can withstand examination, such aim does not rationally require of me to take into account a different T' and argue for its falsity.

Secondly, however, given that 'in many cases we lack warrant for believing [philosophical] theses' (Beebee 2018, p. 3), it turns out that we are not rationally permitted to believe our own Ts. Hence, equilibrism has to specify the type of doxastically committed attitude one is rationally permitted to have after the discovery of a disagreement with one's epistemic peer.

Beebee proposes (Beebee 2018, pp. 20-1): (van Fraassen-style) *acceptance*. Acceptance of a theory amounts both to believing that the theory is in equilibrium and to being pragmatically committed to using the theory's conceptual resources, basic assumptions and methodological prescriptions.

We can now see how to block (ACC). If we endorse equilibrism, it follows that it is rational for one to be doxastically committed to T by *accepting* it. Hence, the principle constituting premise (2) of (ACC) is false, in that it relies on the mistaken assumption that one is rationally permitted to be doxastically committed to T *only if* one is rationally permitted to believe T.

III

The Higher-Order Commitment Challenge. Let us now distinguish between *first-* and *higher-order* evidence. First-order evidence is evidence that bears directly on the question at stake. Higher-order evidence, by contrast, is evidence that bears on the status of your belief about the question at stake. When one acquires defeating evidence of the higher-order kind, one acquires evidence that one's belief is the output of a flawed cognitive process (see Christensen 2010 and Lasonen-Aarnio 2014). Such evidence comes in many varieties. Lasonen-Aarnio writes (2014, p. 315): 'It may be evidence that one is subject to a deep but undetectable cognitive malfunction; that one has made a simple calculation error; that one has failed to appreciate the import of one's evidence; or even that the epistemic rules one follows are incorrect'. All these instances of higher-order defeating evidence raise a doubt about our ability to assess the first-order evidence bearing on the matter at hand. Importantly, higher-order defeating evidence has

a retrospective import: it is evidence that one's belief was never rational to begin with, as opposed to standard cases of first-order defeating evidence (for example additive defeaters) telling that one's belief is not rational at the time at which one acquires such evidence.

Most epistemologists of disagreement (Barnett forthcoming and Goldberg 2013 cited in Beebee 2018, as well as – among others – Christensen 2010, Feldman 2006, Lasonen-Aarnio 2014) understand the epistemic significance of disagreement in terms of higher-order defeating evidence. This gives rise to the *higher-order commitment challenge* (HCC):[2]

(i) Whenever you discover a disagreement with a philosophical peer, you acquire (undefeated) higher-order defeating evidence against your belief that T.

(ii) Whenever you acquire (undefeated) higher-order defeating evidence against your belief that T, you are not rationally permitted to be doxastically committed to T.[3]

Therefore:

(iii) Whenever you discover a disagreement with a philosophical peer, you are not rationally permitted to be doxastically committed to T.

Equilibrism's answer to (ACC) suggests a similar response to the challenge raised by (HCC). That is, the principle encapsulated in (ii) turns out to be false since one is rationally permitted to accept T and ignore higher-order evidence against it.

However, there is a difference between (ACC) and (HCC). (ACC) presents one with an *external* challenge to one's doxastic commitment to T: it raises the possibility that there is *another* theory T', incompatible with T, which is true. (HCC), by contrast, presents one with an *internal* challenge to one's doxastic commitment to T: it raises the possibility that one's own

[2] In order for (HCC) to arise, it must be the case that two individuals agree that they share the same first-order evidence but draw different conclusions from it. This is so since (HCC) gets off the ground only if the disagreement is amongst *acknowledged epistemic peers*, namely individuals who take themselves to have the same evidence (and reasoning powers) about the question at hand. Surely there are cases in which two philosophers end up accepting different theories about a philosophical question since they admit different bodies of evidence about it. In such cases, equilibrism can certainly maintain that both acceptances are rational and that the disagreement can be ignored. However, insofar as the two philosophers explicitly rely on different bodies of evidence, they do not acknowledge themselves as epistemic peers. So, these cases are not relevant to (HCC). I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

[3] The rationale for premise (ii) is the same as the one for premise (2) of (ACC).

assessment and elaboration of the first-order evidence bearing on the question at stake – to which T is one's answer – is botched.

To see why this difference matters, notice that Beebee maintains that there is a 'common set of very general methodological standards in philosophy' (Beebee 2018, p. 17). So, it makes sense to wonder if, amongst the general methodological standards in philosophy acknowledged by equilibrism, there is also the idea that philosophers should consider and address the possibility that their assessment of the first-order evidence is botched, whenever this possibility becomes relevant. To put it more generally: Even if equilibrism entitles one to ignore external challenges to one's own T, shouldn't one deal with the internal challenges to it in order for one's equilibrium position to 'withstand examination' (Beebee 2018, p. 3)?

Answering these questions in the affirmative means that equilibrism does not countenance rational insensitivity to disagreement qua higher-order defeating evidence.

I submit that philosophical equilibrism has to answer the foregoing questions in the affirmative. Suppose that I accept T regarding the philosophical question PQ. It seems perfectly legitimate to ask – even granting the equilibrium of my position – how I got to T in light of the available evidence and the methods of reasoning I have adopted in my inquiry. Furthermore, consider a scenario in which a doubt about my assessment and elaboration of the evidence is raised. I ignore such a doubt, whereas my opponent – who accepts T' about PQ – does not. My opponent would certainly be deemed to be a better inquirer than I am. Both verdicts, I contend, are best explained by the fact that taking into account the evidence that one's assessment of the first-order evidence is flawed is one of the common methodological standards of philosophy.

The foregoing indicates that equilibrism does not rationally permit us to ignore disagreement qua higher-order defeating evidence. Therefore, equilibrism does not provide us with an answer to (HCC).

IV

The Persistent Commitment Challenge. Epistemologists of disagreement sometimes say that peer disagreement challenges the rationality of *persisting* in a peer disagreement (see for example Conee 2010, Feldman 2006). This gives rise to the *persistent disagreement challenge* (PCC):

(A) Whenever you discover a disagreement with a philosophical peer, you acquire (undefeated) defeating evidence for your belief that T about PQ.

(B) Whenever you acquire (undefeated) defeating evidence for your belief that T, you are not rationally permitted to persist in disagreeing about PQ.

Therefore:

(C) Whenever you discover a disagreement with a philosophical peer, you are not rationally permitted to persist in disagreeing about PQ.

In order for equilibrism to meet (PCC) and guarantee the possibility of reasonable and substantive peer disagreement, it must ensure that the peers, after the discovery of their disagreement, are rationally permitted to accept two different theories T, T' *and still disagree*. We should therefore focus on what it takes for two individuals to *disagree in acceptance*.

A fruitful and widely endorsed (see for example Belleri and Palmira 2013, MacFarlane 2014, Palmira 2018, Rieppel 2011) approach to the question of what disagreement is recommends looking at some relevant normative property enjoyed by the target attitudes held by two individuals. To illustrate, take belief and assume that it is subject to a truth norm to the effect that it is *accurate* to believe a proposition just in case it is true. The approach under consideration leads us to define *disagreement in belief* as the instantiation of a particular relation involving the accuracy of the individuals' beliefs. MacFarlane (2014, p. 126) takes disagreement to involve a 'preclusion of joint accuracy'. Belleri and Palmira (2013) and Palmira (2018) unpack the 'preclusion' talk as follows:

> X and Y disagree[4] if and only if the accuracy conditions of X's belief are such that, if they were fulfilled, this would ipso facto make Y's belief inaccurate, or vice versa.

Let us now extend this approach to Beebee's notion of acceptance. Bear in mind that equilibrism denies that truth is relevant to the normative status of acceptance. So, instead of focusing on accuracy, let us focus on what makes one's acceptance of T rational and define

[4] This abbreviates the following: X disagrees with Y's ϕ-ing in context c, where 'ϕ' is replaced here by the verb 'believe' or 'disbelieve'. See MacFarlane (2014).

disagreement in acceptance as follows:

> X and Y disagree if and only if the rationality conditions of X's acceptance are such that, if they were fulfilled, this would ipso facto make Y's acceptance irrational, or vice versa.

Let us now look at the case of Argle and Bargle (Beebee 2018, p. 7), who disagree about whether or not holes are material objects. Equilibrism holds that, after the discovery of their disagreement, they are rational to accept (respectively) *that holes are material objects* and *that holes are not material objects*. Are the conditions that make an acceptance of the proposition *that holes are material objects* rational such that, if they were fulfilled, this would ipso facto make an acceptance of the proposition *that holes are not material objects* irrational?

Equilibrism is committed to answering this question in the negative. If it is rational for Argle to accept *that holes are material objects*, then his position is in an equilibrium that can withstand examination. And yet, this fact would not in any way prevent Bargle's position from being in an equilibrium that can withstand examination. Thus, by the definition of disagreement in acceptance provided above, it follows that Argle and Bargle do not disagree. Therefore, equilibrism does not respond to (PCC).

One might wonder whether equilibrism has to meet (PCC) head on, or whether it can blithely embrace its conclusion and rest content with regarding rational philosophical disputes as mere differences of opinion which do not give rise to any substantive disagreement. To address this question, let me firstly draw the reader's attention to the following passage in Beebee (2018, p. 17): 'equilibrism does not in the least undermine the philosopher's stock-in-trade of argument and counter-argument'. Yet, what would be the point of arguing over mere (and equally rational) differences of opinion? This suggests that equilibrism should be seen as favourably disposed towards a vindication of the rational sustainability of substantive disagreement. Relatedly, it must be noticed that regarding philosophical disputes as merely verbal and non-substantive disagreements would commit equilibrism to a massive and controversial error-theoretic approach to philosophical talk and thought. Disagreeing with some philosophers (and agreeing with others) is part and parcel of the practice of first-order philosophy. (For instance, I expect that Beebee will substantively disagree with the critical points of this note.) Since equilibrism promises to be conservative over such practice (see Beebee 2018, p. 17), I submit that failing to meet (PCC) should be regarded as a problem, and not simply as a harmless consequence of equilibrism.

To conclude. I have distinguished three ways in which disagreement challenges our doxastic commitment to our own philosophical theories, namely (ACC), (HCC), and (PCC). I have argued that endorsing equilibrism still leaves us without an answer to (HCC) and (PCC). This brings into sharper focus how challenging disagreement is for philosophy.[5]

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[5] I would like to thank Samuele Chilovi, Hichem Naar, Sven Rosenkranz and two anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions on earlier drafts. Work on this article has received funding from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme under grant agreement H2020-MSCA-ITN-2015-675415, the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (MINECO), under grant agreement: FFI2016-80588-R and the Beatriu de Pinós postdoctoral fellowship programme, under agreement 2016BP-00132.

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