

Disagreement, Self-Refutation and the Minority Report of the Meta-Skeptics



TAMÁS PAÁR

Abstract

Those who I call meta-skeptics in my paper argue that one should suspend judgment about every philosophical question. Most often they use the argument from disagreement to show that the suspension of our philosophical beliefs is our epistemic obligation. In the present paper I argue against the main motivation for this view and show that since even the meta-skeptics' stance is a contested philosophical one, their argument cannot succeed without refuting itself. Various meta-skeptics proposed counter-objections to this self-refutation objection. I consider here Jason Brennan's quite simple and Bryan Frances's more sophisticated counter-objections. Their proposals are even more interesting because they differ from the typical points of meta-skeptics: Brennan argues for outsider skepticism, that is non-philosophers should suspend judgment about philosophical issues, and Frances relies on the notion of epistemic superior instead of epistemic peer. I consider their points in two ways: whether their counter-objections can help regular meta-skepticism and whether their skepticism can stand on its own. In my replies to these proposals I show why both are problematic in each of these two ways. Brennan says that widespread disagreement is a sign of philosophy's unreliability. Yet, he can only address the charge that his point is a philosophical one and not the objection that there can be disagreement about it. And since there is good reason to think that even his position is subject to disagreement, it is self-undermining. Furthermore, Brennan does not give any reason why any first-order philosophical theory must lack the virtues that his argument displays. Frances argues that even if the argument from disagreement is self-refuting and meta-skeptics have to suspend judgment about it, they might still remain skeptics after all. In my reply I show how Frances's defense of his position still relies on principles that could be the objects of further arguments from disagreement.

Keywords: *skepticism, self-refutation, disagreement*

There is a growing number of the advocates of meta-skepticism today. Those who I call meta-skeptics here argue that one should suspend judgment about every philosophical question. Most often these skeptics use the argument from disagreement to show that the suspension of our philosophical beliefs is our epistemic obligation. In the present paper I argue against the main motivation for this view and show that since even the meta-skeptics' stance is a contested philosophical one their argument cannot succeed without refuting itself. Various meta-skeptics proposed counter-objections to this self-refutation objection. In my answers to two counter-objections I show why both of them are problematic. I conclude that the self-refutation objection shows that philosophers do not have to adhere to the epistemic principle endorsed by meta-skeptics. Philosophers can safely disagree with their colleagues. My conclusion implies that avoiding every disagreement is not an option in philosophy: every one of us is entangled in deep philosophical disagreements.

1 The Template of Meta-Skepticism

Meta-skepticism comes in various versions. For the present purposes I think I can safely ignore some differences in various meta-skeptical proposals – I will introduce some of them below. What I am going to sketch in this section is a quite general template of the view that I think appropriately represents some current versions of meta-skepticism.

The gist of regular meta-skepticism is that our philosophical beliefs do not enjoy any positive epistemic status. They are epistemically irresponsible, blameworthy, unjustified, unwarranted, they do not constitute knowledge, it is irrational to believe in them, we have no entitlement to hold them. The main point that meta-skeptics usually emphasize is that we should suspend judgment about every philosophical question. They suggest that suspending judgment about philosophical views is the appropriate reaction to certain features of our situation.

They suggest this because they are attracted to the argument from disagreement and the principle of peer disagreement that features in that argument. The arguments of meta-skeptics may differ in some nuances, but I believe that the idea is correctly captured by the following version.¹

The Argument from Disagreement (AD):

AD1. Philosophers disagree about every philosophical question.

AD2. Philosophers are epistemic peers.

AD3. If disagreements prevail among epistemic peers they should suspend judgment.

AD4. Hence: Philosophers should suspend judgment about every philosophical question.

This argument seems to be the main motivation for meta-skepticism. The third premise here is an epistemic principle that tells us how we should organize our epistemic practice if a certain situation arises, i.e. if we happen to find ourselves disagreeing with peers. If we disagree with someone and we do believe that she is a peer of ours, then we accept that her belief in question could be right just as much as ours. According to the principle AD3, since both of us could just as well be right, we should acknowledge this fact by no longer endorsing our belief irrationally. That is, we should suspend judgment about the issue.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the case is that quite prestigious and well-informed philosophers disagree about the soundness of this argument and the validity of the epistemic principle on which the argument turns (AD3). Some philosophers would take it to be outrageous to give up the belief that (at least first-class) philosophers are epistemic peers. But some (first-class) philosophers, like Robert Audi in [1], do not agree with AD2. Some go as far as to deny AD1 and claim that philosophers do not disagree about every (non-trivial) philosophical question and point to some substantial consensus among philosophers. But the philosophers whom any list of the most important dissenters to AD should include are Thomas Kelly ([7], [8]), Alvin Plantinga ([10], [11]) and Peter van Inwagen ([14], [15]).

This disagreement points to problems about AD. The most important one is that in this situation, when it is a subject of peer disagreement we should suspend judgment about it. That is, it refutes itself. So, as we have seen, the question of the soundness of AD itself constitutes a deep philosophical disagreement. Let's see how this could be shown more formally.

2 *The Self-Refutation Objection*

There are two versions of the argument that show the self-refuting nature of AD (or AD3) and meta-skepticism. The first one is this.

The Argument from the Scope of Philosophy (SP):

- SP1. Meta-skeptics suggest that we should suspend judgment about every philosophical issue.
- SP2. Meta-skepticism and its motivations (AD, AD3) are themselves philosophical issues.
- SP3. Hence: According to their suggestion, meta-skeptics should suspend judgment about meta-skepticism.

So far so good. But it might be a cause for alarm that the boundaries of philosophy seem to be quite vague. And certainly, there are some kind of limits to it, even if the line between philosophy and non-philosophy is not clear-cut and there might be grey areas. So maybe one could argue that meta-skepticism and its motivations are not parts of philosophy. But in the previous section I did not only say that meta-skepticism is a philosophical problem. I also emphasized that it is a philosophical problem about which quite many philosophers currently disagree. So probably if we disregard the question concerning the scope of philosophy and only take into account this fact of dissensus around meta-skepticism, we can get a stronger argument that has the same effect as SP.

The Argument from the Dissensus around Meta-Skepticism (DM):

- DM1. Meta-skeptics suggest that we should suspend judgment about every question that is a subject of peer disagreement.
- DM2. There is peer disagreement about the question whether we should suspend judgment about every question that is a subject of peer disagreement.
- DM3. Hence: Meta-skeptics should suspend judgment about the question whether we should suspend judgment about every question that is a subject of peer disagreement.

A plausible interpretation of the conclusions of these arguments (SP3 and DM3) is that the meta-skeptic, after she suspended her judgment about meta-skepticism and AD3, does not have any reason not to believe any philosophical propositions that are endorsed by some peers but disagreed by others. She does not have any obstacle anymore that would stand in the way of believing any philosophical theories.

3 *Counter-Objections and Replies*

Of course, these objections have occurred to meta-skeptics as well and they have tried to counter them. In this part I set out to reply to two of the counter-objections proposed by meta-skeptics. While the less typical meta-skeptic, Jason Brennan, regards these objections apparently as un-serious challenges, the more typical meta-skeptic, Bryan Frances, accepts that they are indeed challenging for a skeptic like him. Their proposals are even more interesting because they differ from the typical points of meta-skeptics. I consider their points simultaneously in two ways therefore: whether they can aid regular meta-skepticism with lending their counter-objections to regular meta-skeptics and whether they can stand on their own. I show below why their solutions are inadequate in both respects.

3.1 *Brennan's counter-objection*

Jason Brennan is not a regular meta-skeptic, though his argument influences many (not necessarily professional) meta-skeptics today. His main agenda is somewhat different from that of the others. Whereas other meta-skeptics want to show that philosophers should suspend judgment about their views, what he tries to show is that a person free of any philosophical commitments should not pursue or study philosophy and has no reason to believe any philosophical theories (he dubs this view 'outsider skepticism').² Nevertheless, he too has to face the self-refutation objection in both of its forms. He too relies on the point that widespread dissensus is a sign of philosophy not being a reliable method for discovering truth. And his argument is *prima facie* a philosophical one.

Let's consider first what leads him to outsider skepticism. What he takes to be the decisive case for his position is a thought-experiment featuring someone who is neither committed to any philosophical beliefs nor disposed towards one philosophical theory or another (cf. [2, 5]) and who is equally truth-seeking and error-avoiding.³ Brennan claims that since philosophy is an unreliable method in leading one to truth – as it is shown by the amount of disagreement in this field – this person should stay away from philosophy: they should abstain from using philosophical methodology and remain agnostic about philosophical issues. Sometimes, however, he seems to claim more. His thesis is sometimes misleadingly exaggerated and generalized in a way that it implies that 'people not already committed to one philosophical position or another should stay uncommitted. So [...], a person who lacks philosophical be-

liefs ought to refrain from using philosophical methodology and instead should remain agnostic.’ [2, 2]. Nevertheless, this claim about all philosophically uncommitted persons is not sustained by his argument, so I interpret him as making the more modest claim only about those who completely lack any dispositions towards any philosophical claims and who are equally truth-seeking and error-avoiding.

To see why the more general claim about philosophically uncommitted people would be unsupported by Brennan’s points, consider the following. Not every uncommitted person is like the one in his thought-experiment, some are halfway between committed philosophers and complete agnostics. To many among them, some philosophical claims (even if not entire, systematic positions) might seem to be plausible while some other, incompatible propositions might seem to them equally or less plausible (cf. [2, 5]). In both cases they may have a strong inclination to believe the plausible claims and to make their beliefs coherent. In order to harmonize their beliefs, they would need philosophical methodology.

Now, what is this philosophical methodology Brennan refers to? Although he admits that there is disagreement about the methods of philosophy [2, 1], he takes it that we can have a good grip of what philosophical methodology is. He does not give us a definition, only a non-exhaustive list of what he takes to be the methodology of philosophy: ‘studying arguments, making new arguments, creating new distinctions, reading texts, debating’ [2, 4]. It must be obvious that he relies on many, if not all of these in his paper. He makes arguments, distinguishes two kinds of skepticism, makes use of existing literature, discusses objections, employs thought-experiments, etc. That is, while he criticizes philosophical methodology, he uses this very methodology to arrive at his criticism. So, after all, doesn’t this create a case against his own account?

Everything points in the direction that it does, but he counters this problem. I have to quote here his counter-objection to what he calls ‘the argument undermines itself’ defense in full length to demonstrate its weaknesses. Brennan here only considers SP which he phrases this way:

The general position that philosophy is irrational fails to pass self-inspection. ‘Philosophy is irrational’ is a philosophical position. If philosophy is irrational, so is the view that philosophy is irrational. If philosophical argumentation never establishes any position, then the anti-philosophy position cannot be justified by philosophical argumentation. The Argument against Philosophy refutes the Argument against Philosophy.

He counters this by arguing the following way:

Even if this defence works, it is embarrassing if this is the best defence philosophy has. Yet, it is not obvious that the defence succeeds. It may just be that all philosophy is unreliable except anti-philosophy philosophy. The outsider sceptic's position is that philosophical methodology is unlikely to bring her to the truth about philosophical questions. One might argue that the sceptic used philosophical reasoning to arrive at this conclusion, and so the sceptic cannot consistently be a sceptic. However, it may just be that a small set of philosophical issues is answered and that philosophical methodology works reliably on a small set of issues, i.e., just in the areas needed to make the sceptic's argument. For instance, perhaps the sceptic needs probability, an account of the notion of an epistemic peer, some notion of reliability, and not much else. [2, 8–9]

The first sentence in this reply might be nothing more than name-calling. It is quite clear from this that he thinks this objection to be unimportant. But of course, if it turns out to be a serious challenge, the case is even more embarrassing for meta-skeptics.

Why does Brennan say at all that it is embarrassing if the self-refutation objection is the best defense philosophy has? This might constitute a hint to a further counter-objection that is not present in the rest of the text. That is, it might be a little more than just name-calling. Possibly, what he tries to express is that he holds this defense to be too simple. It depends only on the scope of philosophy – on labeling things as philosophy. If one arbitrarily labels anti-philosophy as philosophy, then she wins the debate too easily. But one should be aware that Brennan does not give any reasons why we should not regard anti-philosophy as philosophy. And unless we are given any explicit justification for labeling anti-philosophy as philosophical or non-philosophical we can judge that there is equal arbitrariness on both sides. Brennan is not in a better position than someone who dares to employ SP against him. That is, even if the first sentence in this quote constitutes a separate counter-objection, it fails to be a successful one. So we can turn to the rest of the passage where Brennan, instead of countering it more directly, tries to evade the problem of SP.

Brennan goes on to argue that maybe anti-philosophy (meta-skepticism, in my terminology) is the only reliable philosophy. Perhaps

only the theoretical tools to arrive at anti-philosophy are reliable and nothing else in philosophy. I think this very reformulation of his point makes it apparent that, in itself, it holds no water. The same could be claimed by anyone who is relying on any method with the same force. So in order to be more charitable to Brennan, let's look for arguments that could substantiate his point.

In support of this claim he seems to point out that not many things are needed for meta-skepticism to work: his kind of skepticism needs to answer only 'a small set' of philosophical questions and it needs 'not much' to work. But that is a quite puzzling point too. Many philosophers also want to rely on just few, simple and common-sense premises and concepts or propositions that are intuitively plausible in themselves in making their arguments, even if they argue for something radical; Or, as John Searle once said⁴, philosophical argument often tends to oscillate between the trivial and the apocalyptic. Bertrand Russell ([13, 20]) himself remarked that 'the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.' Given that he believed the theory he was arguing for in this manner (i.e., logical atomism), the last part is surely an overstatement. Needless to say, philosophers do not always succeed in the former aspiration, to start from something evidently true. But there are rather moderate and also rather radical philosophers who do succeed.⁵

Concerning simplicity, even opposing philosophical agendas use it as a sign of their truth. The best example might be the debate in philosophy of religion: theists argue that theism is simple, atheists argue that atheism is simple. I am inclined to think that they are both quite simple, but from different perspectives. That is not my point though. My point is that simplicity is not something that (all) first-order philosophical arguments and theories lack. And then any philosophers whose theories achieve the virtue of simplicity might argue just like Brennan does: 'it may just be that a small set of philosophical issues is answered and that philosophical methodology works reliably on a small set of issues, i.e. just in the areas needed to make my argument'. Therefore, simplicity is not necessarily a sign of reliability. Nor does it safeguard us from disagreements. (Not to mention SP that is way too simple according to a possible interpretation of Brennan's claim about the embarrassing nature of SP.)

The second question that we might ask besides whether first-order philosophical positions might be quite simple is the following: is Bren-

nan's case as simple as he takes it to be? Even if enough simplicity would shield theories from being unreliable, one might doubt that Brennan's one is simple in that degree. Some of its features lend it some complications. I will examine these again in the light of disagreements.

For example, his account of philosophical methodology is quite vague and one surely might want to narrow it. Possibly until the point where a particular method leads only to one particular answer, and say that her method avoids the problems stated by Brennan.⁶ That would not necessarily be a good methodology but the point is that one might want to distinguish one's own method from the rest of those of the other philosophers who disagree about the particular issue in question. (In case someone is not as charitable towards Brennan as I try to be by attributing to him an argument concerning simplicity, one can argue that by claiming that 'it may just be' that only anti-philosophy philosophy is reliable and no other philosophy Brennan did just this.)

The attitude towards truth of the person who featured in the thought-experiment cited above might also seem to be problematic. Brennan himself refers to the point made by Nicholas Rescher ([12, 95–115]) who observes that philosophers weigh cognitive values differently, and who argues that their differences in this respect cannot be fully resolved. Now, if there are philosophers who weigh cognitive values in a different way in contrast with our truth-seeking, error-avoiding agnostic, then, assuming Brennan's main point about dissensus to be correct, their difference is also a warrant to suspect a problem here. Are there any philosophers who are unlike Brennan's agnostic in this respect? William James ([6, 28–29]) surely seems to be one and he suggests that there are others who accompany him in this. Furthermore, Brennan construes his whole thought-experiment because he thinks that the proper aim of philosophy is truth. But he noted in the first place that there is disagreement about philosophy's goals [2, 1].

So Brennan's case needs not only an account of probability, a notion of an epistemic peer and of reliability as he suggests, but also a conception of philosophical methodology, a set of cognitive values presupposed, an adequate account of the aim of the philosophical enterprise and probably other things as well.⁷ He needs to make theoretical decisions about all these issues and that in turn increases the complexity of his argument. This means that his brand of skepticism is not as simple as it might appear.

No matter how simple meta-skepticism or Brennan's own peculiar brand of skepticism is, it also leads to disagreements. Brennan himself

considers some objections that could be raised (and some that were in fact raised) by others as defenses of philosophy. He provides us with replies, but he should be aware that he is immersed in philosophical disagreements now. Different philosophers draw different conclusions when it comes to meta-skepticism. But if peer disagreement shows unreliability, then surely our method in answering the meta-level question of philosophy's reliability and the epistemic status of our philosophical theories is also unreliable. If we investigate it with his standards, Brennan's anti-philosophy strategy also displays the same vices as the whole of philosophy.

To wrap it up: SP is not answered by Brennan, even if he only considers this version of the self-refutation objection. But even if SP failed here, the substance of DM would stand still. By basing his criticism of philosophy on peer disagreement within the field, Brennan implicitly criticizes his own approach that is also disagreed by peers. So his meta-skepticism seems to be self-undermining.

3.2 *Frances's counter-objection*

Unlike Brennan, Frances is quite a typical meta-skeptic. In contrast to Brennan, Frances only considers DM and takes the self-refutation strategy seriously. Nevertheless, he still tries to evade it. He argues that even if an argument like DM is conclusive evidence against arguments like AD, he might remain meta-skeptic anyway. He might still have his philosophical beliefs suspended. He relies on the notion of epistemic superiors and not so much on the notion of peers. I will concentrate on that at the end of this section, but for the time being let me translate what he says into my terms. I could represent him as saying the following.

AD3 advises us – including him – to suspend judgment about it, since there is peer disagreement about AD3. But suspending judgment about AD3 because of itself seems to be incoherent [4, 458]. And following that incoherent path appears to be problematic for Frances. So to avoid the incoherence, he cites another epistemic principle that leads him to suspend judgment about AD3.⁸ This is the following rule of thumb, to which he has a long-standing commitment (I will call it LSC for this reason):

If you are inclined to agree with a philosophical principle, but then you realize that it's pretty ambitious, worrisomely self-applying, and confusing (for you), then you should suspend judgment on it. [4, 458]

After using this as a reason to suspend judgment about AD3, he goes on to explain why he remains a meta-skeptic. I will return to that part in a minute, but let me first point out why his strategy that invokes LSC is fundamentally flawed.

As we have seen, LSC tells against AD3 in Frances's case. And he takes the advice of LSC and suspends judgment about it. Yet – as I will prove in a second –, even LSC is disagreed by epistemic peers. If I am right about this, Frances sticks to a principle here about which there is peer disagreement. Thus, not only LSC tells against AD3, but also AD3 tells against believing LSC: the two principles clash. But if a principle like LSC is disagreed by peers and one might still stick to it, then what is it that tells us which disagreed commitment of ours we might keep and which others we should discard? All we are told is that LSC is a long-standing commitment: but that of course does not help, others can have very different long-standing commitments. So, if I am right in thinking that LSC is a subject of peer disagreement, then Frances's case does not seem to be a well-supported one. His choice to keep LSC and discard AD3 is arbitrary and that is bad enough. If one might arbitrarily stick to something that is in conflict with AD3, then one might keep any philosophical beliefs in the same arbitrary manner. Frances does not provide us with a decisive case for meta-skepticism.

But is LSC really a subject of peer disagreement? I promised to demonstrate that, since it will seem to many as a dissent-proof principle. Frances does not make it explicit that he wants to make this principle free of any significant disagreements, but he needs to do that to avoid the problem introduced above. He builds quite much into LSC, so it seems that he is aware of this requirement of anything he wants to retain that might fly in the face of AD3. For goodness's sake, who would want to believe anything that is pretty ambitious, worrisomely self-applying and even confusing? Certain philosophers, I would say. Frances's epistemic peers and superiors, that is. First of all, a great many philosophers have no worries about ambitiousness. Think of any philosophical extremists here, whoever you prefer. What about worrisomely self-applying and confusing beliefs and principles? Why would philosophers want to keep these? I think at least some philosophers do keep these kinds of beliefs and with a reason. Suppose there is a philosopher who is aware of the problems of her theory: its worrisomely self-applying and confusing nature, nevertheless she sees no better alternatives around. In the field she is working on, every theory put forward by others seem to her to be burdened by much greater problems. They are not only self-applying

and confusing, but have very weak foundations, are incoherent and even incomparably counterintuitive. In addition, though she thinks that the problems of her theory are somewhat worrisome, she believes she can address each of these in a relatively reassuring way. A philosopher like the one in my example could keep her belief in the correctness of her theory. For example, though Brennan expresses his doubt about the self-refutation objection, he might accept that it is a bit worrisome and he could even admit that his kind of skepticism is quite ambitious and somewhat confusing. But that is not necessarily decisive: he thinks that these worries are just of a minor kind compared to the problems any (other) philosophical theory faces. I conclude that philosophers could disagree about LSC and some of them actually do disagree about it with Frances – even his companions in meta-skepticism might want to object to his principle.⁹¹⁰

And there are other things in Frances's formulation of his counter-objection to the self-refutation objection that other philosophers would disagree about. Some of them are of immediate importance here, since he could use them as a defense against what I said about the problems of LSC.

First, he says he only endorses LSC as a rule of thumb. He also says that (because of LSC) he endorses AD3 only as a rule of thumb as well and he adds that 'endorsing a rule of thumb doesn't mean endorsing its truth' [4, 459]. I believe that this point is unsatisfactory. Other philosophers do not endorse AD3 and LSC, not even as rules of thumb. This means that even if Frances does not believe in the truth of these principles, his attitude toward them is endangered: its appropriateness is subject to peer disagreement. And there is nowhere to hide from that: according to his standards he should not endorse them as rules of thumb because of the dissenters.

Secondly, Frances also says this: 'what I base my decision on, and have confidence in, is the idea that [AD3] is in the *vicinity* of an important truth' [4, 459]. This is why he does endorse it as a rule of thumb. But this reasoning faces the same objection as the last one. Let me shortly restate my problem with that point, applying it to this claim. AD3 as a rule of thumb and it being in the neighborhood of an important truth are controversial commitments. Other philosophers, unlike Frances, are not committed to these claims and they do not base their decisions on either AD3 or LSC. So Frances is at odds with them when he does just that. And that is a problem in the light of his meta-skepticism.

Thirdly, Frances explicitly admits that even if someone asked him 'Is

AD3 true?', he would answer that he does not know. Furthermore, he would answer the same way the question 'How much credence do you put in AD3?' [4, 458]. Later, he admits explicitly that he does not believe AD3 is true [4, 459]. It seems to me that his confessions cannot answer the problems raised above: if one would ask *whether* he is committed to LSC and whether he is confident in thinking that there is truth in the vicinity of AD3 he would have to say 'yes' and this would reveal that his position in this regard clashes with those of other philosophers. But the point in question now is whether these confessions might constitute a good defense if we take it in itself and we disregard the other statements of Frances. Probably what he wants to express with this is that he takes no position with regard to AD3's truth-value. And if he takes no position, then obviously his position cannot be a controversial one – because he does not have one. Yet, this is even harder to swallow than the last two points and for two reasons.

The first reason is this. Even if he tells us he does not *know* the answer to the questions raised, he may have beliefs regarding them while thinking that these beliefs do not amount to knowledge. This would lead to the same problems raised above. So suppose we accept that he cannot tell how much credence he puts in AD3 because he does not know the answer to this question. But in that case too there is an answer to it. To illustrate this, you might think of latent racists. They may say they don't know whether they hate colored people or not. Even more probably, they would deny that they hate them. Nevertheless, they can be subjects of self-deception and they may have beliefs that are relatively hidden from them that cause them to discriminate colored people. This might be analogous to Frances's case, yet I don't think he is necessarily a subject of self-deception. Plausibly, there is indeed an amount of credence he puts in AD3 (whatever the exact amount might be, from 0 to 1), and since he can't tell this, he is necessarily ignorant about the fact regarding his degree of belief even though there is a fact of the matter. So even if Frances doesn't know and cannot tell how much credence he puts in AD3, there is an answer to that. Let's say, he puts .5 credence in AD3. (I guess it should be over .4 since he bases some decisions on it, but this is not so important and I am definitely not implying that we are able to assign to someone a degree of credence in a given proposition that he himself seems unable to assign herself.) Yet, others put more credence in it (some meta-skeptics) and still others put less (non-meta-skeptics). So he is in a contested situation, even if he does not know all the facts about that. He can know enough to see that whatever amount of credence he

puts in AD3, his position is subject of disagreement in any case.

The second reason why one should not accept this defense of Frances is the following. Suppose that my previous point is misguided and he really does not take a position about AD3, there is no answer to the question how much credence he puts in AD3. But in that case he is still surrounded by disagreement that makes his case a self-refuting one. He is not in the position like someone who has never considered AD3: he did consider it and then took no position. He withheld judgment – his belief is suspended, just like his belief is suspended with regard to any other philosophical proposition he encountered after this one. But others reacted differently. Some came to believe AD3 (and suspended judgment about philosophical theories), other people came to believe that AD3 is false (and they retained their philosophical beliefs). Frances arrived at another solution (if we might call it that way): he did not believe in AD3, nor did he believe in its falseness. He suspended judgment about it. But this reaction is anything but an object of consensus: both of the other parties dissent to it. They may have arguments for that, or they may not: either case, they do not share the meta-skeptic's attitude.

A point made by Plantinga seems to be highly applicable here. He defines disagreement as 'adopting conflicting propositional attitudes with respect to a given proposition' [10, 177]. What Frances's strategy amounts to is what Plantinga labels 'dissenting' which is nothing else but a sub-category of disagreement.¹¹ After all, it is quite obvious that Frances does not *agree* with any adherents of first-order philosophical theories... Or does he?

There might be one way out. It depends on the way we understand 'suspending judgment'. Meta-skeptics are not very clear about this, but the most plausible interpretation of this is that suspending judgment means that one believes in the disjunction of the controversial claims. Let's say various philosophers believe in one or the other of the following mutually exclusive theories: *A*, *B* and *C*. For example, adherents of theory *A* believe this proposition: '*A* and not-*B* and not-*C*'. If this is a case of peer disagreement, meta-skeptics suspend judgment about the question. They come to believe in the disjunction of these views. That is, they believe this: '*A* or *B* or *C*'. Notice that this way they seem to agree with all of the disagreeing parties: all three groups agree that this proposition is in fact true! Let's pretend for a moment that this might be a correct evaluation of the case.

In the context of philosophy, perhaps all parties participating in the controversy have access to the same evidence. And supporters of theory

A are committed to think that the evidence supports *A*'s truth and *B*'s and *C*'s falseness. The meta-skeptic might or might not be an epistemic peer of these parties. In case she is a peer, in believing only in the disjunction of the controversial propositions, she is committed to think that based on the evidence, *A* could just as well be true as *B* or *C*. That implies that we do not have a decisive case for *A*'s truth. And this is disagreed by *A*-ists.

What if adherents of *A*, *B* and *C* are – to use Frances's term that is central to his argument – epistemic superiors of the meta-skeptic? That is a more difficult situation but at least there are some cases where the skeptic knows about the popular arguments for *A* and *B* and *C*. And adherents of these theories – let's say *A*'s most prominent adherent – might believe that only the familiarity with the popular arguments for these views constitutes a decisive case for *A*. This philosopher believes that even someone who is epistemically inferior in this question, has every reason to believe *A*. This *A*-ist might say that the most well-known argument in favor of *A* beats all the other theories. A *B*-ist might say that the epistemically inferior agents should believe *B*, and a *C*-ist might say that they should suspend judgment. In this case, the epistemically inferior meta-skeptic is in the same situation as in the case she is an epistemic peer of the three contending parties. I admitted that this is a somewhat complicated case and it is not obvious whether it does obtain in a particular situation or not. But I think it does quite often. The case I have in mind is most similar to the question of Moorean arguments: adherents of these think that the most familiar versions of some arguments defeat all the other competing views (cf. [5, 115–117]).

We can develop this point further. It should be evident that experts in epistemic questions have a distinguished role to play in this debate, not only as participants but also as superiors whose opinion has a special significance here. Either if someone is or is not a peer of them, the position they take regarding this question might be the last word on the issue. As I noted above, there is no unanimous consensus among them. The situation is far from that. And it is most improbable that an agreement is going to take shape around Frances's most crucial claims. And what about those who are epistemic inferiors in the very question of meta-skepticism? Should they withhold judgment about it or not? In their case, similarly to the one fleshed out above, not committing themselves to follow either Frances or the non-meta-skeptics in this general question seems to be incoherent or, rather, impossible: that would mean they follow Frances indeed. Let's consider the case of the out-

sider presented by Brennan. She faces now with the differences of her superiors: some believe that AD3 is true (regular meta-skeptics), others believe AD3 is false (anti-meta-skeptics), still others withhold judgment (Frances). Taking any of the three paths apparently open to her seem to be fraught with troubling discordance, they lead to differences, and I would say even to dissent in Plantinga's sense. And this is not even a point that is necessary to refute Frances himself: this is only a response to a quite charitable interpretation of one of his claims, and I have already showed that investigating other statements made by him reveals that his argument is in a bad shape.

After these intricate-looking arguments it is perhaps adequate to shortly repeat the morals of the present section in which I tackled Frances's interesting approach to DM – with apologies for some rehearsal. Though he follows AD3, Frances suspends judgment about it to avoid controversial beliefs. I pointed out that he does this for reasons that amount to his controversial commitments (e.g., he endorses AD3 as a rule of thumb while others do not). So he does not succeed in avoiding controversy. Disregarding these controversial commitments and considering a possible reply by him that he actually takes no position regarding the truth-value of these or at least that he does not know exactly what attitude he takes toward them, I judged that his replies are inadequate. I finished up this line of thought by pointing to the definition of disagreement by Plantinga (a top-notch epistemologist). He seems to be correct in pointing out that disagreement happens not only when someone believes p and someone else disbelieves p . The kind of disagreement he calls dissenting does obtain between Frances and those who take different propositional attitudes regarding AD3, so Frances's suspension of judgment does not save him from being a dissenter. The main point of my last arguments could be captured as follows. Epistemic superiors in philosophy disagree about all kinds of issues. Some of them might very well hold that based on the evidence an average person has, one should conclude as she, the superior with access to more relevant evidence does. Since these are obviously epistemic questions, epistemologists' propositional attitudes are likely to have the final word on the whole issue: epistemologists are the superiors of superiors, that is, the ultimate superiors here. So let's apply the last point to their inferiors. A minor philosopher or a layman could claim all the experts of the epistemology of disagreement to be her superiors, including anti-skeptics and Frances himself. Now, these superiors shall take different stances towards issues regarding disagreement. Which one should the epistem-

ically inferior person follow in her doxastic practices? Since Frances's account is unable to provide a decisive answer for this person, she might safely choose to follow a different superior instead of him. This means that suspension of judgment is not the default best reaction to cases like that; therefore meta-skepticism is not a privileged option that is free of the problems it raises. Just like Brennan's answer to the self-refutation objection, Frances's falls apart too. Or, at least, so I conclude.

4 Conclusion

Many people don't like to disagree. As the social psychologist Joseph Forgas ([3, ch. 14]) suggested, people often behave as if they had a spontaneous inclination to agree with others. In the present paper I argued that avoiding every disagreement is not an option in philosophy, we can't find a theoretical position that would make our situation so convenient. I pointed out that even meta-skeptics, who want to avoid every problem coming from disagreements, fail in this endeavor. They end up disagreeing with non-skeptics and with other skeptics. Their epistemic attitudes often seem to be arbitrary ones and are not met with general acceptance. The upshot is that there are way too many disagreements in philosophy and this very fact blocks the road leading to the triumph of skeptical arguments from disagreement. If I am right, my treatment of the problem of dissensus attributes even more weight to it than meta-skeptics usually do.

I have to add one restriction to my criticism of meta-skeptics here. There are other kinds of skeptics who are less similar to, say, Frances. For example, more moderate skeptics could argue that we do not have positive reason to believe in any philosophical proposition, but they may not claim that we should suspend judgment about philosophy and they may not claim that supporting any philosophical theory is blameworthy. This kind of skepticism might have similar problems like the ones scrutinized here, but I did not show that above. A skeptic like that might accept that she believes this with no positive or decisive reason. But she believes in no obligation to suspend beliefs that have no positive case behind them, and that way she does not seem to undermine her own claim.¹² Maybe she does not even believe in its authority. But at least a prominent kind of (meta-)skepticism is well represented by AD and I take it that I proved the untenable nature of that position.

My conclusion still seems to imply that we are all entangled in quite deep philosophical disagreements – even ordinary non-philosophers are,

since they are committed to some philosophical and epistemic views and often they are also familiar with some simple arguments that play a role in academic philosophy and which are unfavorable to their views. Philosophy is a land of disagreements and it is impossible to break free from dissensus. If you want to agree with everyone, you actually agree with no one. If you think you should avoid every disagreement by suspending judgment – you end up disagreeing with everyone who has any contested beliefs. By taking this route, you quite likely immerse yourself in the greatest dissensus possible.

Notes

- ¹ I owe this version of the argument to János Tózsér.
- ² Nevertheless, traces of regular meta-skepticism actually lurk in Brennan's paper. He states that 'the presence of widespread dissensus makes it difficult to defend philosophy from outsider scepticism [his brand of skepticism], if not insider scepticism [regular meta-skepticism, that is]' [2, 2], and he only allows the possibility of rational disagreement (which is the only way out for those who oppose meta-skepticism according to him) for the sake of argument [2, 15].
- ³ Notice that Brennan's thought-experiment works just as well with people who are more error-avoiding than truth-seeking.
- ⁴ Searle made this remark in his lecture series *The Philosophy of Mind*, published as audio cassettes by The Teaching Company, 1996.
- ⁵ *Par excellence* examples include Zeno's paradoxes (his arguments for the non-existence of motion), Diogenes's rebuttal of these arguments (by walking), and a kind of argument for skepticism about the external world (that rely on plausible claims like that if you don't know that you are not a brain-in-a-vat, then you don't know that you are sitting in a chair), and Moorean rebuttals of these arguments.
- ⁶ This seems to be the same problem as the so-called generality problem of the reliabilist position in epistemology. Let me elaborate the problem raised in the main text with using reliabilism as an example. Suppose that reliabilism is actually true and that reliabilists can identify a 'reliabilist method' that reliably leads one to reliabilism: it leads those who employ it much more often to believe reliabilism than to not believe its truth. (Perhaps this is going to be something like being exposed to reliabilist arguments more frequently than anti-reliabilist views, reading reliabilists' papers less critically than papers that argue for different epistemical positions, etc. For the present purposes no vices of methods are relevant but leading to doxastic divergence.) We could say that, unlike the 'philosophical methodology' Brennan refers to, the 'reliabilist method' is a safe one in the respect that Brennan is concerned with. This is because it does not lead to disagreements, unlike philosophical methodology. From the perspective of Brennan's proposal, the latter is to be praised instead of the former.
- ⁷ E.g., answers to questions like what it means to believe something or what truth is, and perhaps Brennan needs to settle the issues raised at the end of section 1. He indicates that he needs the notions of reliability and epistemic peerage, but he does not acknowledge that these are also sometimes subjects of dispute.

- 8 Actually, the ‘I’ in Frances’s paper is rather elusive. He says that it is ‘somewhat fictional’ [4, 426] and when this partially fictional protagonist discusses the DM, he steps in for an imaginary character, Frank, and argues instead of him [4, 458]. Most of the time it is quite clear what views the reader might attribute to Frances, but this situation complicates things in such a way that I have to note that anything I claim about Frances here refers to the somewhat fictional narrator of his paper.
- 9 It is not easy to give good concrete examples of philosophers who reasonably and explicitly disagree with LSC, since an epistemic principle akin to it is seldom addressed in the literature. Nevertheless, I am rather confident in saying that there is a non-insignificant number of philosophers who believe things that go against LSC and that many philosophers would follow the imaginary person in the case that I used above, which is, though fictional, not unrealistic – and this should create enough uneasiness for Frances.
- 10 The main reason why I am not investigating whether Frances might be in one of the exception cases he lists (where someone disagrees with her superiors and is still epistemically blameless) is that we are talking here about a case where he stipulates that none of the exception cases hold. The other reason is more general. To tell the truth, I can’t take seriously many of Frances’s claims. This is because superiors might very well disagree about them. Let’s treat ‘epistemic superior’ as an intuitive concept: then our superiors can disagree about its relevance, its content and its scope. They can disagree whether only actual disagreements count or hypothetical disagreements count too. About what percent of dissenters there should be among superiors to make one’s belief blameworthy or unjustified. Whether one might be blameless in holding argumentatively undefended assumptions (or rather: intuitions) that contradict beliefs of superiors that are just as undefended, whether superiors need to be familiar with all the arguments the inferior has, and so on. If someone sides with a particular answer for these dilemmas and still endorses an argument from disagreement with superiors, then she has put herself into a questionable position – as did Frances, in my opinion. (In fact, these problems are what motivate me in considering his initially promising strategy to evade the self-refutation objection.) The last argument in the section about Frances sums up this worry. Another claim of Frances that seems to me impossible to take seriously is this: ‘almost no one has ever even considered’ AD3 with respect to epistemic superiors instead of epistemic peers [4, 458]. I think there are virtually no important philosophers (at least today) who have failed to consider a principle like that. A splendid example is a philosopher from the past, Aurel Kolnai, who noted the following: ‘is not St Thomas a definitely greater mind than I am? Assuredly he is. And so are Plato and Scotus, Hume and Russell, Nietzsche and Heidegger, to omit a few others. Yet I cannot help rejecting some of their opinions, if only because they are not always consistent with one another.’ [9, 40] (In order to fully appreciate this quote, one needs to know that Kolnai was the contemporary of both Russell and Heidegger.) This suggests an argument from the disagreement between superiors instead of the argument from disagreement between inferiors and superiors: since your superiors disagree among themselves, you have no other option but to sort out for yourself what attitude you are going to take towards these issues.
- 11 Plantinga ([10, 178]) also notes that going further and further with withholding judgment about evermore issues seem to deprive the meta-skeptic of being able to hold that there is a problem with not following her or that her choice is better

compared to other possibilities.

12 Compare this to [10, 189].

Tamás Paár

Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Szentkirályi Str. 28

1088 Budapest, Hungary

<paar.tamas@gmail.com>

<<https://ppke.academia.edu/Tam%C3%A1sPa%C3%A1r/>>

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