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Review: János Tőzsér's *The Failure of Philosophical Knowledge*

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János Tőzsér
The Failure of Philosophical Knowledge: Why Philosophers are not Entitled to their Beliefs
Bloomsbury Academic, 2023
240 pp.
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In this monograph on metaphilosophy, János Tőzsér reckons earnestly with a disturbing fact; that while many philosophers aspire to discover the truth, they can't seem to agree on anything. Ambitious in scope, careful in layout, impassioned and despairing in tone, the book's arguments are thought-provoking but rarely persuasive. But is this just a further illustration of the very predicament which gave rise to the work?

The Failure of Philosophical Knowledge (2023) is divided into three parts. Part I, consisting of two chapters, characterizes a major strand of philosophy as a failed epistemic enterprise; four chapters in Part II evaluate four responses to that failure; finally, a single-chapter Part III reflects on the experience, which Tőzsér calls "breakdown," of coming to believe that none of the responses are adequate. The author's train of thought is almost always easy to follow, and his arguments are lucid, though one might have wished for more concise writing and more idiomatic language. In the following, I shall summarize each chapter, and then, in closing, develop a few points of criticism.

Philosophy as an Epistemic Enterprise

Chapter 1 lays the foundation of the book by characterizing a prominent tradition of philosophy as an epistemic enterprise; that is, an attempt at establishing truths about philosophical matters, undergirded by compelling justification. These truths are meant to be substantive (nor merely hypothetical, expressing entailment or support relations among philosophical claims) and positive (not merely rejections of certain views). Much of the chapter is concerned with the nature of compelling justification. It is said to come (if and when it does) in two forms: knock-down arguments and "the phenomenological method."

Knock-down arguments are valid deductive arguments with premises that are all irrational to deny. This irrationality may stem from multiple sources: the premises might be indubitable, transcendentally unavoidable, or (perhaps) empirically well-supported. Regarding philosophy as an epistemic enterprise, Tőzsér claims that "most great dead philosophers were followers of this tradition … most of the great dead philosophers intended to assert compellingly justified substantive truths" (11, emphasis removed). The chapter closes with two important contentions: first, that understanding is at most a derivative goal of philosophy's epistemic tradition; and second, that philosophical problems should be seen as persisting throughout the history of philosophy despite variations.

A Failed Epistemic Enterprise

Still belonging to Part I, Chapter 2 argues that the epistemic tradition in philosophy is in fact a failed epistemic enterprise. Here, Tőzsér defends two claims, the first less controversial than the second: "There is no consensus among philosophers concerning the solutions of philosophical problems"; "No philosophical problems have ever been solved" (42) the latter meaning that "no philosophers have ever had compelling justification … for the truth of their substantive philosophical beliefs" (44, emphasis removed).

Tőzsér supports (1) by way of a catalog of illustrations and an appeal to the PhilPapers survey. He argues that (1) lends support for (2) since if compelling justification were available, we would expect it to establish consensus—unless one takes advocates of a certain view to be universally epistemically superior to advocates of alternative views. Much of the chapter is devoted to giving an account of philosophical progress that recognizes an accumulation of knowledge about philosophical problems, but not knowledge of the correct solutions to these problems.

Tőzsér then concludes with a taxonomy of four possible responses to the epistemic failure of philosophy. First, some argue that there are no substantive philosophical truths—philosophical problems arise out of confusions and ought to be dissolved. Second, others claim that compelling justification is available after all. Third, one might contend that there's nothing wrong with sticking to one's philosophical views even in the absence of compelling justification. Fourth and finally, others might argue that the failure of philosophy compels us to suspend our philosophical beliefs and abandon philosophical truth-seeking.

On Wittgenstein

Chapter 3 commences the examination of these four responses—to which Part II is devoted—by introducing the later Wittgenstein's solution. This involves denying the existence of substantive philosophical problems, and diagnosing the linguistic confusions deceiving people into thinking they're real. Tőzsér clearly explains and illustrates this so-called therapeutic approach, and develops three lines of criticism: self-defeat due to reliance on the philosophical theory of meaning as use; the meager convincing power of Wittgensteinian analyses of philosophical problems; and "undermotivation"—the general implausibility of the Wittgensteinian explanation of philosophy's epistemic failure given the availability of alternatives.

The concluding section sets the tone for Tőzsér's evaluations of the views he examines: he judges that, in light of the problem of self-defeat, Wittgenstein is either a charlatan (if deep down he recognizes the problem) or a fanatic (if he denies his reliance on a philosophical theory by claiming unique insight into ordinary language). By the end of this lucid and concise chapter, one is left wondering how Wittgenstein or his followers would respond to Tőzsér's objections, as engagement with secondary Wittgenstein scholarship is kept to a minimum.

"I'm the only one"

In Chapter 4, Tőzsér discusses the view according to which compelling justification is

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both required for responsible philosophical belief and available to philosophers. He argues that, given philosophy's track record of failing to move toward consensus on substantive matters, this position involves thinking of oneself as one of—at most—a few recent innovators. Therefore, the name Tőzsér gives this view is "I'm the only one"; he also adduces quotations from several prominent historical philosophers—Descartes, Hume, Kant, Husserl and Schlick—exhibiting this very attitude. The chapter's critique of this position emerges from a philosophical dialogue, wherein the "I'm the only one" philosopher (Philonous) is characterized by an exclusive focus on first-order arguments and a disregard for the higher-order weight of disagreement. While Philonous explains the persuasive failure of his favored arguments with the epistemic inferiority of his interlocutors, his dialogue partner (Sophie) explains Philonous's disregard for higher-order matters with his inability to self-reflect—his "epistemic blindness."

Tőzsér concludes that while Philonous cannot be conclusively refuted, we can nevertheless see from the outside that the "I'm the only one" attitude is both epistemically defective and morally wrong. The impassioned rhetoric resurfaces: "Philonous is a sick fanatic, an epistemic narcissist … *I don't want to be a man like Philonous*" (115–116, original emphasis). The irony is hard to miss, as Tőzsér exhibits the very same attitude toward "I'm the only one" philosophers which they exhibit towards their colleagues, and for which Tőzsér condemns them.

Equilibrism

The significantly longer Chapter 5 treats equilibrism, the metaphilosophical vision according to which the goal of philosophy is to develop consistent philosophical theories invulnerable to compelling objections, though lacking in compelling justification (i.e., "equilibria"). In this chapter, Tőzsér engages with ideas from Gary Gutting, David Lewis, Peter van Inwagen, and Helen Beebee. For philosophers collectively, equilibrism sets the goal of "populating the logical space" (120) through developing many equilibria, while individual philosophers may do well to adopt and defend a single position. Tőzsér distinguishes two importantly different versions of equilibrism. "Human-faced" equilibrism contends that one's belief in a philosophical view can be justified if it is invulnerable to compelling objections and it lines up with one's pre-philosophical beliefs. "No belief, no cry" equilibrism, on the other hand, recommends that philosophers refrain from believing philosophical theories, and instead merely accept some of them for purposes of philosophical research. Perhaps this is the right place to note that Tőzsér's names for the various views are both imaginative and impractical.

Tőzsér's critique of "human-faced" equilibrism comes down to two points: justification must be truth-conducive, but the equilibrist combination of (a) fit with (unjustified) pre-philosophical convictions and (b) invulnerability to compelling objections isn't; and widespread peer disagreement is best explained by bias in our choice of philosophical beliefs, and this should cause us to doubt them (cf. Bernáth and Tőzsér 2021) Tőzsér charges equilirists trying to hold on to their views in the face of these problems with insincerity and "epistemic schizophrenia." On the other hand, Tőzsér rejects "no belief, no cry" equilibrism essentially because he finds it unappealing: it requires that one give up one's

cherished philosophical beliefs, "downgrades doing philosophy to a lightweight, no-stakes intellectual game" (154) and is thus "superficial and unprincipled opportunism" (155).

Meta-skepticism

Chapter 6, the longest in the book, discusses meta-skepticism. Remarkably, no philosophers are cited as representatives of this position—however, Tőzsér himself used to espouse it (Tőzsér 2018). Meta-skepticism is characterized as the claim that philosophers should abandon the epistemic enterprise and suspend their beliefs about substantive philosophical matters. Thus, the meta-skeptic is committed to doxastic deontology, which as Tőzsér insists does not entail doxastic voluntarism. Meta-skepticism is distinguished from Pyrrhonian skepticism in the following way: while the latter stems from a momentary individual judgment that a dispute cannot be decided, the former aspires to a final, certain assessment of philosophy.

Tőzsér's argument for meta-skepticism contends that the best explanation of philosophy's epistemic failure is that its tools and methods are unsuitable for its task, and therefore we shouldn't base our beliefs on them. Tőzsér insists that the recognition of the inadequacy of philosophy's tools and methods comes not just by way of yet another philosophical argument, but rather through an insight gained by self-reflection, whereby one comes to see one's philosophical position as merely "one among many." The chapter develops several objections to meta-skepticism: (1) it is a substantive philosophical thesis and is therefore self-defeating; (2) it claims to be the uniquely rational reaction to the epistemic failure of philosophy and thus exhibits the "I'm the only one" sentiment; (3) it objectionably encourages apathy to philosophical questions; and (4) its recommendation that philosophers abandon the epistemic enterprise assumes unjustifiably that philosophers won't be able to solve philosophical problems in the foreseeable future.

No Redemption

The final, seventh, chapter is a somber, even desperate recapitulation of the author's takeaways from the previous chapters. He alludes to the concluding assessments of Socrates in Plato's early dialogues: "Just as Socrates and his interlocutors conclude that they've come up against aporias in the end, I also conclude that I've come up against an aporia—my intellect has broken down" (210, emphasis removed). On the one hand, Tőzsér agrees with the meta-skeptic and the "no belief, no cry" equilibrist that philosophy's truth-seeking methods are unreliable, and that one therefore cannot take epistemic responsibility for one's philosophical beliefs. On the other hand, he does not think that meta-skepticism is compelling; moreover, he finds it psychologically impossible to suspend his philosophical beliefs or to abandon philosophical truth-seeking. He concludes with a characterization of this experience of "breakdown," and with the insistence that the question of how philosophy should be done in its wake is "*inconsequential and insubstantial*" (217, original emphasis). This is the note on which the book ends—no redemption is offered to the reader.

Finally—and with a glimmer of hope that one might not need to join Tőzsér in his predicament—I would like briefly to develop three lines of criticism, mostly relating to chapters 4 and 5.

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Three Lines of Criticism

First, though the author displays deep familiarity with much of the historical and contemporary philosophical scene, he does not really engage other authors. He quotes passages from others to introduce views or perspectives, and refers to philosophical debates for illustrative purposes—but his own substantive arguments are developed largely in isolation from literature that may well contain relevant objections. Specifically, Tőzsér's critique of the "I'm the only one" view relies on the wrongness of Independence-violating demotion, while his critique of equilibrism involves a rejection epistemic permissivism. His arguments are expressed in colorful, moralizing prose, but containing little engagement with sophisticated defenses of these theses in the social epistemology literature. Granted, Tőzsér's argumentation might contain allusions to contrary positions and germs of his responses to them, but a more explicit discussion would have been instructive.

Detailed engagement with Tőzsér's peers might have helped him avoid another problem as well (this is my second criticism). Recall that he aspires his fourfold taxonomy of responses to be comprehensive. However, it seems to me that his characterization of the "I'm the only one" and the equilibrist position is idealized and extreme in a way which leaves room for intermediate positions. "I'm the only one" philosophers are said to be "certain" of their views (100, 105); Philonous, the paradigmatic illustration of this perspective takes his arguments to establish their conclusion "beyond all doubts" and his objections to other views to be "irrefutable" (108). On the other hand, the only kind of justification equilibrists have is fit with unjustified pre-philosophical convictions plus a lack of knock-down objections (122–123, 138); they recognize that many equilibria are "epistemically *equivalent* they stand an equal chance of being true" (139, original emphasis).

What's missing is a recognition of degrees: degrees of force when it comes to arguments and degrees of confidence when it comes to doxastic attitudes toward philosophical views. In Tőzsér's typology, there's no room for a philosopher who is confident in his preferred solution to a philosophical problem based on arguments that he judges, on balance, to be stronger than the counterarguments. Curiously, Tőzsér and a coauthor did recognize the importance of this stance in a piece written about two decades ago:

> [T]he overwhelming majority of contemporary analytic philosophers do not believe that there can be final, universally acceptable, universally satisfying solutions to philosophical problems. But—and this is the crucial point—from the fact that they do not believe that there is a final, universally acceptable solution, analytic philosophers do not conclude that pursuing the perennial questions is not worthwhile or pointless. For just because there are no final, universally satisfying solutions in philosophy, there can still be good and less good, bad and less bad solutions (Eszes and Tőzsér 2005, 71).

I suspect Tőzsér would now have strong objections to such an outlook. But I also suspect that (as the quoted passage says) many contemporary philosophers would identify with it, and so its omission is glaring. (Perhaps, if it is to be tenable, this view requires

pre-philosophical convictions [or at least intuitions, if those are distinct] to be justified, or to be able to confer truth-conducive justification. But that they aren't and that they can't is an assumption on Tőzsér's part, baked into the definition of equilibrism, which many contemporary philosophers would dispute.)

Third and finally, a question that arises for any meta-work: what happens if we apply its contentions to itself? Tőzsér proffers many arguments against the four metaphilosophical outlooks; are these meant to be compelling, or merely in harmony with his own pre-philosophical convictions? (They are clearly not linguistic dissolutions [cf. the Wittgensteinian perspective], nor are they seen as completely worthless [cf. the metaskeptical perspective].) Apparently, Tőzsér recognizes that his arguments against Wittgensteinianism, "I'm the only one" philosophy, and "no belief, no cry" equilibrism are not compelling (how he views his objections to "human-faced" equilibrism and meta-skepticism is less clear). Moreover, his objections are sometimes formulated in an almost confessional tone, indicating that his standard and goal are equilibrium with his prior convictions: "I reject the "I'm the only one" view as a reaction to philosophy's epistemic failure because I don't want to be a man like Philonous"; "I've analyzed these answers as metaphilosophical visions in detail. … *I cannot identify with any of them* with a clear intellectual conscience" (116, 211, original emphases).

Tőzsér, then, faces a dilemma. Either he adopts "human-faced" equilibrism so that he may base his (meta)philosophical beliefs on non-compelling arguments—but then he has to reject equilibrism in light of his own critique. Or he doesn't adopt "human-faced" equilibrism; but then it's unclear by his own standards why anyone else should be worried about his non-compelling arguments whose only virtues (again, by his own standards) are consistency with his pre-philosophical convictions and resistance to compelling counterarguments.

Tőzsér's call to reckon honestly with the apparent epistemic failure of philosophy should be taken seriously, and his book includes many creative and provocative insights to illuminate that journey. But there's reason to question whether one needs to follow his specific steps into despair.

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