

PHILOSOPHY, FAMINE RELIEF, AND THE SCEPTICAL CHALLENGE FROM DISAGREEMENT

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Abstract: Disagreement has been grist to the mills of sceptics throughout the history of philosophy. Recently, though, some philosophers have argued that widespread philosophical disagreement supports a broad scepticism about philosophy itself. In this paper, I argue that the task for sceptics of philosophy is considerably more complex than commonly thought. The mere fact that philosophical methods fail to generate true majority views is not enough to support the sceptical challenge from disagreement. To avoid demanding something that human reasoning cannot supply, sceptics must show that philosophers have sufficient overlap to resolve their disagreements in particular concrete cases.

1. Scepticism about Philosophy

‘If you ask...any other man of learning, what definite body of truths has been ascertained by his science, his answer will last as long as you are willing to listen. But if you put the same question to a philosopher, he will, if he is candid, have to confess that his study has not achieved positive results such as have been achieved by other sciences.’¹ With this quote, Bertrand Russell calls attention to the failure of philosophers to secure true answers to philosophical questions. Although Russell was writing before the start of the First World War, surprisingly little has changed in the past one hundred years. Despite decades of intellectual labor, philosophers continue to disagree about even the most basic philosophical issues.

Such disagreement has been grist to the mills of sceptics throughout the history of philosophy. Recently, though, some philosophers have argued that the existence of deep and widespread disagreement about fundamental philosophical matters supports a broad scepticism about philosophy itself. My aim in the present essay is to consider one recent attempt to defend a version of this type of scepticism. In particular, I will examine Jason Brennan’s recent claim that an outsider who is currently agnostic about philosophical issues does not have good grounds to study philosophy, or to endorse any particular philosophical doctrines, because philosophical methods are a poor means for arriving at true beliefs.²

Brennan supports his scepticism about philosophy with the help of an analogy. Imagine that thousands of people are trying to get to São Paulo. Everyone boards a plane leaving from Dallas-Fort Worth, but no one knows the destination of his or her particular plane. Although some people make it to São Paulo, most land in some other city. Something similar, Brennan suggests, is true of philosophy. The goal of philosophical theorizing is to reach true beliefs. Of all the people who pursue philosophy, it is possible that some get things right. However, most fail to arrive at the truth. Worse, says Brennan: ‘travellers will know whether they have arrived in São Paulo. In philosophy’s case...the outsider has little reason to think one philosopher is closer to the truth than the next, and little reason to think if she became a philosopher, she would

¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 154-155.

² Jason Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, *Ratio* 23 (2010), pp. 1-16.

do any better.’³ Thus, given that the aim of philosophy is truth, it seems that outsiders should eschew philosophical methods altogether.

In what follows, I do not dispute the claim that there is widespread disagreement in many areas of philosophy. Nor do I deny that outsiders are unlikely to have a better chance of getting things right than their predecessors. But I will argue that the task for sceptics of philosophy is considerably more complex than commonly thought. The mere fact that philosophical methods fail to generate true majority views is not enough to support the sceptical challenge from disagreement. Unless sceptics are to demand something that human reasoning cannot supply, they must defend their criterion of success in particular concrete cases.

2. The Unreliability Argument against Philosophy

Brennan begins his essay by distinguishing between two different types of scepticism about philosophy. Insider scepticism is a claim about philosophers. Roughly speaking, it is the view that philosophers should become agnostic about philosophical questions because they do not have sufficient evidence for their beliefs. Outsider scepticism, by contrast, is a claim about outsiders, that is, people who do not pursue philosophy or espouse any philosophical theories. Scepticism of this second sort is compatible with the view that philosophers have justified beliefs and so need not renounce their commitments. Nonetheless, outsider sceptics maintain that ‘even if most philosophers are justified in accepting their different views, a person who lacks philosophical beliefs ought to refrain from using philosophical methodology and should instead remain agnostic.’⁴

Most arguments for scepticism have both a factual part and a normative part. In the normative part, sceptics defend a criterion of success. In the factual part, they attempt to show that we fail to meet the criterion.⁵ Brennan’s outsider scepticism is no different in this regard. Support for his view comes from the unreliability argument against philosophy. The factual premise of the argument is the ongoing lack of consensus among philosophers. For ease of expression, I will call this the disagreement thesis.⁶ The normative premise is the claim that an outsider should abandon agnosticism and begin to pursue philosophy only if her beliefs are based on a reliable method. I will refer to this as the reliability requirement. By ‘reliable,’ Brennan means a method that is more likely to get things right than wrong. Philosophical methods are reliable in this sense just in case they have a better than 50% chance of giving the outsider true answers to her philosophical questions.⁷ For Brennan, the methods of philosophy include supplying new arguments, making distinctions, debating, studying texts, and so on.⁸

Outsider sceptics appeal to current dissensus in order to show that the reliability requirement is not satisfied. The mere existence of disagreement, though, is not enough by itself to establish the unreliability of philosophical methodology. For example, some intractable disputes in philosophy may be attributable to a rational defect on the part of one or both of the parties involved. To avoid this worry, Brennan draws on the familiar notion of an epistemic peer.

³ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, pp. 3-4.

⁴ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, p. 2.

⁵ See Peter Graham, ‘The Relativist Response to Radical Scepticism’, in John Greco (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 395.

⁶ I borrow this phrase from Christopher W. Gowans, ‘*A Priori* Refutations of Disagreement Arguments against Moral Objectivity: Why Experience Matters’, *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 38 (2004), p. 143.

⁷ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, p. 3.

⁸ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, p. 4.

He characterizes epistemic peerhood in the following terms: ‘two people are epistemic peers just in case they are equal with respect to their degree of epistemic virtue (thoughtfulness, freedom from bias, etc.) and their access to evidence.’⁹ You and I are epistemic peers, in other words, if and only if we have shared relevant evidence, and neither of us suffers from a rational defect such as carelessness or dogmatism. The disagreement thesis is a claim about widespread disagreement among epistemic peers.

To reach outsider scepticism from this claim and the reliability requirement, Brennan must simply add a bridge premise to the effect that the probability of philosophical methods giving the outsider true beliefs is inversely proportional to the amount of disagreement in philosophy. Here the idea is straightforward: because philosophers are epistemic peers and yet still disagree, the outsider has few grounds for believing that any one particular philosopher has privileged access to the truth. Although some philosophers may think that they are closer to the truth than others, there is no difference between them as far as she can tell. ‘From the outsider’s perspective,’ says Brennan, ‘they look the same.’¹⁰ Hence, the likelihood that philosophical methodology will lead her to the truth is a function of the amount of disagreement between philosophers who are epistemic peers. Taken together with the disagreement thesis and reliability requirement, the implication of this premise is that philosophical methodology is unreliable and so outsider scepticism is true.

To see this, Brennan suggests that we consider the following example. Suppose that we have ten rival theories in the philosophy of mind. Each theory has roughly the same number of supporters but only one of the ten theories is correct and we know that the supporters of the various theories are epistemic peers. In this kind of situation, the outsider who pursues philosophy will have an approximately 10% chance of arriving at the right view. Although she will eventually come to endorse a theory in the philosophy of mind, it is unlikely that employing philosophical methods will lead her to endorse a true one. Hence, given the reliability requirement, she should refrain from espousing any theory in the philosophy of mind.

3. The Disagreement Thesis

Two obvious options for attacking the unreliability argument against philosophy are to deny Brennan’s assumption about epistemic peerness or to reject the bridge premise. Neither of these options seems particularly promising, however. As the outsider sees it, the probability that philosophical methodology will give her true beliefs is low unless she has reason to think that some philosophers are nearer to the truth. Yet, as Brennan quite rightly argues, there is little evidence for this if philosophers are typically epistemic peers. Moreover, there is reason to believe that the opposing camps in many philosophical debates have roughly the same degree of epistemic virtue and are equally well-informed. For example, it is commonly thought that the testimony of experts provides support for the conclusion that many ongoing disputes in philosophy are peer disagreements.¹¹

⁹ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, p. 4.

¹⁰ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, p. 4.

¹¹ See for example Thomas Grundmann, ‘Doubts about Philosophy? The Alleged Challenge from Disagreement’, in Tim Henning and David P. Schweikard (eds.), *Knowledge, Virtue, and Action* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p. 75. For a different view, see Nathan L. King, ‘Disagreement: What’s the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85 (2012), pp. 249-272.

A different tack is to reject the disagreement thesis. This thesis says, remember, that there is widespread and deep disagreement among epistemic peers about the true answers to philosophical questions. Maybe Brennan is wrong about this. For example, it seems to be true as a matter of empirical fact that the vast majority of philosophers no longer believe in the existence of God. In a recent survey of philosophy faculty members, PhDs, and graduate students, 69.7% of people reported accepting or leaning towards atheism, while only 16.4% claimed to accept or lean towards theism. These are also other majority views in philosophy, including scientific realism (75.1%) and the solution to the Trolley problem (68.2% of respondents were in favor of throwing the switch in order to save five people at the cost of killing one).¹²

Fortunately, Brennan need not deny that there is a high level of consensus on some philosophical issues. It is one thing, after all, to maintain that there is considerable disagreement in philosophy, quite another to claim that there are no agreements among philosophers whatsoever. Brennan's point is just that philosophical disagreement is radical or extensive. Thus, he can admit that there are some majority views in philosophy. To refute the disagreement thesis, critics of outsider scepticism would need to show that the agreements between philosophers outweigh their disagreements. But it is hard to see that they can meet this challenge.

Especially telling in this regard is the fact that disagreement persists even in respect of the most basic philosophical questions. As Brennan points out, there is no consensus about what justification is, what knowledge is, what justice is, what the nature of causation is, what right action is, and the like.¹³ Experts routinely endorse conflicting views about many other issues as well: 34.9% internalists about moral motivation as opposed to 29.8% externalists; 36.3% Platonists as opposed to 40.8% nominalists; 25.9% deontologists as opposed to 23.6% consequentialists and 18.2% virtue ethicists; 40.5% objectivists about aesthetic value as opposed to 36.2% subjectivists; and 38.1% empiricists as opposed to 26% rationalists.¹⁴ Thus, despite a high level of consensus about some issues, philosophers continue to disagree about the true answers to a wide range of fundamental philosophical questions.

In light of this evidence, it seems reasonable to suppose that outsiders have good reason to worry about whether philosophy is likely to give them true beliefs. Does that mean they should refrain from studying philosophy? To answer this question, we must examine the reliability requirement. It is to this task that I now turn.

4. Some Inadequate Objections to the Reliability Requirement

Recall that the reliability requirement says that an agnostic outsider should pursue philosophy just in case philosophical methodology has a more than 50% chance of giving her true answers to her philosophical questions. Maybe this standard for judging the success of philosophy is too high. Perhaps we should be willing to take greater risks to discover the truth. That is one possible way of replying to the reliability requirement.

However, this response successfully defuses the sceptical challenge from disagreement only if we are willing to admit that philosophical methods need not be precise. It is difficult to imagine many people finding this response tempting. For one, a primary goal of philosophical

¹² Philpapers Surveys, 'Preliminary survey results', <http://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl> [accessed 07/02/2013].

¹³ Brennan, 'Scepticism about Philosophy', p. 1

¹⁴ Philpapers Surveys, 'Preliminary survey results.' Grundmann ('Doubts about Philosophy?', p. 75) also cites these survey results as supporting something like the disagreement thesis.

theorizing is to arrive at the truth about important philosophical matters. For another, it seems reasonable as well as natural to think that philosophical methodology ought to be able to lead us to true answers to our questions. Other methods in non-philosophical fields of inquiry appear to be reliable, after all. Why should we think it is wrong to hold the methods of philosophy to a similar standard?

A second worry is based on an objection raised by Brennan. It is the worry that the reliability requirement runs aground on an anti-sceptical dilemma. Since the question of whether agnostic outsiders should refrain from pursuing philosophy is itself a philosophical question, it must be answered by means of philosophical methodology. However, if the methods of philosophy are unreliable, then we have no reason to accept the reliability requirement. Indeed, it is more likely than not that this requirement is mistaken. Alternatively, if the methods of philosophy are reliable, then we have good reason to think that the requirement is correct, but little reason to think that the outsider sceptic should remain agnostic. So either way, it looks as though outsider scepticism is untenable.

We can avoid this problem if we consider the possibility that the reliability requirement is exempt from the outsider sceptic's critique. Brennan appears to endorse a position along these lines when he says: '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.'¹⁵ A critic might urge that this position is hopelessly ad hoc. But that need not trouble us very much, as it provides only an extremely weak defense of philosophy. Outsider sceptics claim that philosophy is not worth pursuing if it is a poor instrument for finding truth. We might still wonder whether it is worth pursuing even if there is no way for them to defend this claim without assuming that philosophical methods are sometimes reliable.

A third objection concerns the phrase 'true answers to our philosophical questions.' Recent years have seen a number of philosophers challenge the notion that the aim of philosophy is to accumulate a body of timeless truths. On this view, we should not expect philosophical methodology to provide us with once-and-for-all true answers to our philosophical questions. Instead, our goal should be to achieve a kind of philosophical understanding that is, as Ian James Kidd remarks, 'not...something that can be discovered once—in ancient Greece or India, say—and then simply transmitted to the future' but rather must be 'gained anew by each generation.'¹⁶ In other words, the aim of philosophy should be for each generation to attain its own understanding of fundamental philosophical questions. Must we abandon outsider scepticism if this view is correct?

I do not think so. Suppose that understanding is the goal of philosophical inquiry and must be achieved by each new generation. Suppose also that there is considerable disagreement among members of the outsider's generation about the understanding of many philosophical questions. Finally, suppose that we reformulate the reliability requirement to say that outsiders should remain agnostic unless philosophical methodology is more likely than not to give them understanding of those questions. In this kind of situation, an outsider should still refrain from pursuing philosophy. For it would follow from existing diversity that most people who study philosophy fail to achieve the end of inquiry, namely, their generation's understanding of basic philosophical issues. Hence, assuming that the outsider is unlikely to do any better, she will have every reason as before to think that she has a less than 50% chance of success and so should remain agnostic. In what follows I will understand the reliability requirement as a claim about

¹⁵ Brennan, 'Scepticism about Philosophy', p. 9.

¹⁶ Ian James Kidd, 'Humane Philosophy and the Question of Progress', *Ratio* 25 (2012), pp. 286-7.

truth. It should be clear from these remarks, though, that outsider scepticism is not inextricably tied to this assumption.¹⁷

Brennan grants that it is possible to defend philosophy on the grounds that philosophical theorizing is interesting or perhaps simply a good outlet for expression. However, these reasons are not properly epistemic in the sense that concerns him.¹⁸ Thus, to grant that they are only kind of reasons we can give in defense of philosophy is just to concede that the outsider should not bother engaging in philosophical inquiry in order to arrive at true beliefs. Is there a more compelling objection to outsider scepticism? This question is the focus of the next section.

5. Responding to the Reliability Requirement

A different way of responding to the unreliability argument is to assert that philosophical methods might become reliable in the long run. However, Brennan does not believe that this reply is convincing. On the basis of past failures to achieve agreement by finding the right methods, he infers that philosophers are unlikely to discover the right methods in the future. This leads him to conclude that disagreement in philosophy is most likely a ‘permanent fixture.’¹⁹

But Brennan never stops to consider whether the narrow focus on methodology reflected in this exchange may actually be part of the problem. An important aspect of the temptation to scepticism about philosophy comes from the success of the natural sciences. As Brennan himself points out, scientific investigation did not really begin to advance until new methods of discovery and experimentation were developed and old methods were set aside.²⁰ In philosophy, the historical experience of the sciences has led to an overriding emphasis on methodology. Indeed, it is precisely this emphasis that appears to inform the reliability requirement. By appealing to the familiar idea that what philosophy needs is a successful methodology, Brennan is able to infer his pessimistic conclusion about philosophical inquiry. But his argument overlooks the crucial point that there are limits to how far methods can take us in particular concrete cases.

Consider the moral question of whether people have an obligation to donate their surplus resources to distant strangers in extreme need. In a classic article entitled ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality,’ Peter Singer argues that the following principle is part of commonsense morality: ‘If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything else morally significant, we ought, morally, to do so.’²¹ For example, there is nearly universal consensus that we ought to save a child from drowning in a shallow pond even if we cannot do so without ruining our clothes. From this principle, Singer goes on to derive the conclusion that we have a duty to give far more to famine victims in the developing world than most of us currently do.

Implicit in Singer’s approach to the problem of famine relief is the assumption that we have sufficient overlap in values to support a particular position on our duties to distant starving strangers. However, this assumption is questionable. To be sure, it is possible to identify a compelling conviction in the case of the drowning child. But Singer’s principle is not perfectly compatible with ordinary morality, as he appeals to it in order to show that discretionary spending on luxury goods is wrong. Recognizing this, many critics of Singer have rejected the

¹⁷ An anonymous referee helpfully pressed me to clarify this response.

¹⁸ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, p. 7.

¹⁹ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, p. 11.

²⁰ Brennan, ‘Scepticism about Philosophy’, p. 11.

²¹ Peter Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), p. 241, 231.

principle on the grounds that it is simply ‘too demanding.’²² Often motivating these critics is the thought that we should adjust the principle in order to achieve a better fit with commonsense morality.

Yet since pretheoretical intuitions are sometimes mistaken, it is open to supporters of Singer to deny that the principle should be forced to accommodate prevailing intuition in this way. So the dialectic swings back and forth. Followers of Singer insist upon revising our intuitions in order to shield their principle from logical refutation. Critics of Singer argue that we should revise the principle in order to protect our intuitions. At issue is the question of whether ordinary moral thinking about discretionary spending is correct. Precisely because that is the case, the parties to the debate must identify a more secure shared conviction in order to bring their disagreement to a successful conclusion. Only by doing so will one of the parties be able to generate arguments that members of the other party will recognize as providing them with compelling reasons to change their view.

And yet, in modern societies, there are profound differences in initial belief between the opposing camps in the famine debate. Those who deny any obligation to aid distant starving strangers tend to have strong views about private property rights, wealth, and personal freedom. On the other hand, those who support such an obligation tend to be committed to ideals of impartiality, equality, and social justice. For people on both sides of the debate, moreover, the matter at issue is closely connected to, and often has a central place in, their overall conception of the human good. Given this, it should come as no surprise if future attempts to resolve the famine debate through dialectical investigation prove unsuccessful. Certainly no value of sufficient force to settle the debate has yet been found, and after nearly half a century of intellectual labor, our prospects for hitting on one seem increasingly remote.

Contrast this situation with that in the following passage cited by Singer as also supporting his conclusion.²³ Reflecting on the question of whether or not we owe our surplus resources to strangers in extreme need, Saint Thomas Aquinas writes:

Things which are of human right cannot derogate from natural right or Divine right. Now according to the natural order established by Divine Providence, inferior things are ordained for the purpose of succoring man's needs by their means. Wherefore the division and appropriation of things which are based on human law, do not preclude the fact that man's needs have to be remedied by means of these very things. Hence whatever certain people have in superabundance is due, by natural law, to the purpose of succoring the poor.²⁴

Here the idea is that since God gives material goods to the entire human race, we should use those goods to help those who do not have adequate resources to meet their basic needs.

Granted, this line of reasoning is unlikely to find many contemporary supporters. Yet the basic point I have in mind should be uncontroversial: commitment to a broad background of substantive agreements facilitates rational inquiry. Within Aquinas's preferred tradition of Catholic Christianity, it is reasonable to expect agreement about what we owe to people in extreme need because presupposed consensus on matters of substance provides considerable rational resources for argument: that God created the universe; that God intended for material

²² See for example Richard W. Miller, ‘Beneficence, Duty and Distance’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32 (2004), p. 371.

²³ Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, pp. 238-239

²⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), II-II 66.7.

resources to benefit all human beings; that we should follow God's commands; and so on. Without a rich body of shared rational resources, by contrast, we might find that we cannot achieve convergence towards the truth no matter what methods we use.

Something similar is also true in the established sciences. For example, scientists cannot defend continental drift to people without any true beliefs about geology, glacial striation, or the fossil record. Nor is it reasonable to require them to do so.²⁵ Unless we are to demand more than human reasoning is capable of supplying, the failure of scientific methodology to lead to convergence in this case does not show that outsiders should refrain from using scientific methods or endorsing scientific beliefs. What it reflects instead is that some people are simply not in a good position to engage in scientific research.

Unfortunately, contemporary academic philosophers often overlook the philosophical significance of presupposed prior consensus. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, the transition from the preliberal to the modern liberal university was motivated by two related sets of claims. The first had to do with injustices committed in preliberal universities against particular people (e.g., Hume) as well as entire groups (e.g., Jews). The second was the idea that given enough time, reasonable and well-informed people should be able to come to a rational consensus about the true answers to philosophical questions. Thus, by removing constraints on inquiry, says MacIntyre, it was assumed that 'human rationality is such and the methods and procedures which it has devised and in which it has embodied itself are such that...it will produce not only progress in enquiry, but also agreement among all rational persons as to what the rationally justified conclusions of such enquiry are.'²⁶

That obviously has not happened. From the failure of philosophical methodology to produce general and lasting consensus, Brennan infers that outsiders should refrain from pursuing philosophy. Yet why should we think that? Given that contemporary philosophers need not share the same initial starting point, Brennan's reliability requirement is tenable only on the assumption that it is reasonable to expect current philosophical methodology to produce true majority views regardless of antecedent commitments. Once we grant that assumption, the temptation to outsider scepticism is undeniable. After all, philosophical methods continually lead experts to espouse a wide variety of alternative and incompatible positions. But human rationality is not like that. Convincing someone of the truth requires prior agreement on matters of substance as well as agreement on matters of technique. Without a sufficient background of presupposed consensus, philosophers cannot attain, and should not be expected to be able to achieve, a high level of agreement about the true answers to fundamental philosophical questions.

In other words, the failure of current philosophical methodology to lead to convergence on certain philosophical questions does not by itself license an inference to the conclusion that philosophy is a disappointment, at least not if we are to expect only what human reasoning can achieve. In any particular case, the failure of these methods may simply indicate the limits of our ability to persuade others through rational means. So, if outsider sceptics are to avoid imposing an unreasonably high criterion of success on philosophical theorizing, we need grounds to believe that philosophers have adequate overlap to resolve their disagreements in specific instances. But that is a large hurdle and proponents of the sceptical challenge from disagreement have provided no such grounds in the existing literature.

²⁵ For a similar point, see David O. Brink, 'Moral Disagreement', Christopher W. Gowans (ed.), *Moral Disagreements* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), p. 158

²⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 225.

6. Objections and Replies

That is a first pass at a reply to the reliability requirement. I now want to consider a number of objections to my proposal.

Objection 1: Philosophical debate always occurs against a background of agreement. As Anthony O’Hear remarks: ‘Aquinas is often criticized for having very explicit commitments which his philosophy would not be allowed to challenge in a serious way; but all philosophers and all philosophies start from some framework of belief.’²⁷ Thus, it looks as though the claim that rational inquiry requires presupposed consensus is trivial.

Reply: Sure enough, disagreement always presupposes at least some background of prior consensus in concepts and beliefs: otherwise the parties to a given dispute would have no way of knowing that they are speaking about the same phenomenon. But the objection is that convincing someone of the truth requires a higher degree of substantive agreement. Because dialectical investigation depends on shared assumptions, there are limits to our powers of rational argument in particular situations. In some cases, we may find that it is extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, to achieve rational consensus regardless of the methods we employ.

Objection 2: Suppose that the disagreement about our duties to the global poor is intractable. Much of the contemporary debate about famine relief relies on the method of reflective equilibrium, an argumentative strategy that calls for us to work toward a coherent set of moral principles, theories, and commonsense intuitions. Why should we think that this example poses a threat to scepticism about philosophy? Perhaps our inability to arrive at a true majority view about what we owe to people in extreme need simply reflects the fact that moral philosophers use unreliable methods.

Reply: The objection to outsider scepticism is not limited to modern moral methodology; it concerns the limits of human rationality as such. An initial step in any attempt to settle a dispute is to identify overlapping assumptions. Such assumptions are crucial because they not only limit the number of possible difficulties at the beginning of inquiry but also provide us with rational resources for assessing rival claims. Because we depend on them for rational conflict resolution, we are unable to get very far when these assumptions become limited in number or superficial in significance, as may very well be the case in the ongoing debate about famine relief. Here, the problem is not that we rely on reflective equilibrium methodology. It is rather that dialectical investigation is only as effective as the shared resources we have on hand to engage in it and our resources appear to be rather limited in this particular case.

Objection 3: Maybe the mistake is to think that a disagreement is intractable unless we can resolve it on the basis of shared commitments. Here is a partial list of other argumentative strategies we might employ: clarifying ideas, uncovering previously unknown strengths or weaknesses of a view, examining assumptions, and evaluating rival proposals.²⁸

Reply: This is a tempting thought, but the trouble is that the effectiveness of these strategies depends on the existence of shared substantive assumptions. Consider the suggestion that we may change people’s minds by demonstrating the previously unknown weaknesses of a view.²⁹ Suppose that you endorse moral relativism. One way for me to convince you to abandon

²⁷ Anthony O’Hear, ‘Philosophy – Wisdom or Technique?’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 65 (2009), p. 352.

²⁸ This list comes from Andrew Lugg, ‘Deep Disagreement and Informal Logic: No Cause for Alarm’, *Informal Logic* 8 (1986), p. 49.

²⁹ The following argument is indebted to Peter Davson-Galle, ‘Arguing, Arguments, and Deep Disagreements’, *Informal Logic* 14 (1992), pp. 149-150.

this view is to point out that relativism prevents us from criticizing the views of other cultures.³⁰ Such an approach will either work or not. If it works, then I will have succeeded in changing your mind. But this is just a matter of uncovering an underlying consensus. It is not independent of our shared beliefs about such issues as the importance of cross-cultural critique. On the other hand, if the approach does not work, then I could try to persuade you by giving an argument. Yet this persuasion will be effective only if it is based on premises that you accept. If you do not recognize the force of the premises, or if no premises that you do recognize have sufficient force to establish the conclusion, then the appeal to a previously unrecognized weakness of your view is a nonstarter.

Objection 4: I have been assuming that we must actually endorse the considerations we employ in arguing against rival theories or views. Maybe I am mistaken about this. Perhaps we may persuade our interlocutors to change their minds by drawing on considerations that they recognize as reasons, regardless of whether those considerations count as reasons for us. In other words, perhaps we may convince others to accept a conclusion we endorse on the basis of premises we reject.

Reply: This objection looks promising because it appeals to a strategy that would work even if we shared very few antecedent beliefs with our interlocutors. However, the strategy runs into trouble on a number of points. First, changing people's minds by relying on commitments that they already accept requires us to uncover an inconsistency in their commitments. Assuming the laws of logic, incoherence of this sort provides compelling reason to revise one's overall position. Yet it is often no easy matter to prove that a set of commitments is inconsistent. A second point comes from the familiar notion of epistemic underdetermination: although the ideal of internal coherence requires us to do something upon coming across an inconsistency in our beliefs, it does not and cannot tell us which belief to revise. In other words, people can reasonably respond to a charge of incoherence in more than one way. Third, and finally, it is important to note that consistency does not by itself imply agreement: our interlocutors could have perfectly consistent beliefs and yet we might still disagree with them. Thus, even if we may argue on the basis of beliefs that we do not endorse, we still need good reason for thinking that we should accept the reliability requirement in particular cases.

Objection 5: Granting that reaching true majority views through the use of argument requires a background of shared commitments, we can still maintain that philosophy is a poor instrument for finding truth if we do not have reason to believe that consensus is near at hand. No such reason has been provided. Worse, the implication of the present proposal is that, at least on some issues, we should not expect philosophers to converge anytime soon. Maybe the reliability requirement could be reformulated to generate outsider scepticism from this result.

Reply: If seeking true majority views requires prior agreement in belief, and if philosophers sometimes have very different starting points, it is not hard to see why an outsider might want to refrain from studying philosophy. But the fact that some philosophers begin far apart in belief is at best a contingent feature of the present dialectical environment. It does not license an inference to the rather grim conclusion that we should never expect convergence among philosophers. Once we reject Brennan's narrow focus on methodology, we can substitute his pessimism with a kind of tough optimism that refuses to see agreement about the true answers to fundamental philosophical questions as permanently beyond our grasp.

³⁰ For this, see James Rachels, 'The Challenge of Cultural Relativism', in Steven M. Cahn (ed.), *Exploring Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 34-46.

Objection 6: Perhaps someone who starts relatively close to the truth cannot convince someone who starts far away. To deny that disagreements are rationally decidable is to endorse relativism. Hence, it looks as though we avoid becoming outsider sceptics only at the cost of becoming relativists. That is a rather steep price to pay.

Reply: This objection is mistaken. To be sure, the need for common ground blocks any guarantee that we will always be able to settle our differences by argument. In any given situation, our capacity to win over others may be limited. However, as Michael Williams quite rightly points out, these limitations can change over time: they are ‘contingent and variable’ and do not amount to ‘imprisonment in permanently incommensurable world-views.’³¹ Combined with ongoing reflection, novel circumstances and new experiences can sometimes result in fundamental change.³² Because such change is possible, we need not accept relativism.

7. Conclusion

In sum: the onus is on Brennan and other proponents of the sceptical challenge from disagreement to defend the reliability requirement in particular instances. It is not enough that philosophical methods fail to generate true majority views on the big questions of philosophy. To show that outsiders should remain agnostic, sceptics of philosophy must establish that it is reasonable to expect convergence towards the truth on particular philosophical questions. Otherwise they risk demanding too much of current philosophical methodology.

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³¹ Michael Williams, ‘Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism’, *Episteme* 4 (2007), pp. 108-109.

³² For an example of such change in the medieval tradition, see Christopher Toner, ‘Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory’, *Metaphilosophy* 39 (2008), pp. 244-245.