Against Consensus as an Epistemology

Paul Mayer

November 2023

1 Introduction

In this paper, I wish to criticize the notion that consensus is an epistemology. While I have never seen it explicitly claimed that "consensus is an epistemology," I have nonetheless seen it implied in many scholarly (and layperson) articles. This occurs whenever articles cite, "a majority of scholars agree that..." or "most scientists/researchers think..." In our democratic, individualistic society, we put a value on high value votes and the quantification of majority viewpoints, whether it be in political polls (due to living in a democracy), online on websites with ranking or voting systems such as Reddit, YouTube, or Instagram. The danger here is we may defer too much to the consensus view without appropriate justification. I will give several reasons why we should be skeptical of appeals to consensus (including a consensus of experts), which include its non-obvious link to ontology, the fact that consensus changes, and a lack of specificity of who counts as an "expert," the lack of specificity on how to handle consensus (if it does occur), and epistemic undercutting defeaters from evolutionary epistemology. While an appeal to consensus may not tell us much about whether a theory is true, they can give us practical or pragmatic reasons for trusting a position.

2 The Argument from Consensus

An argument from consensus can be valid when it makes an appeal to an epistemically justified (i.e. truth-tracking) process. Perhaps what is meant is something like the following:

- P1: If a majority of people believe P, then P is likely true

- P2: A majority of people believe P

- C: Therefore, P is likely true

This argument rests on an assumed relationship between belief in P and the truth of P that is not explicit or necessarily true. For instance we can imagine

that many people used to believe things we now believe are false, such as the non-existence of black swans [4]. To make this argument compelling, this connection will need to be made more explicit.

- P1: A majority of people have reliable cognitive faculties about X

- P2: If a majority of people believe some proposition P related to X, then P is likely true.

- P3: A majority of people believe P

- C: Therefore, P is likely true

This will not do either. The reason is that the majority of people with reliable cognitive faculties about X are not necessarily the same as the majority of people who believe P. For instance if 51% of the population have reliable cognitive faculties about X and 51% of the population believe P, it may only be 2% of the population that have reliable cognitive faculties about X *and* believe P. With this in mind, we arrive at our final version of the argument.

- P1: If a majority of people have reliable cognitive faculties about X believe some proposition P related to X, then P is likely true.

- P2: A majority of people have reliable cognitive faculties about X and believe P

- C: Therefore, P is likely true

3 Why Consensus is untrustworthy as an Epistemology

3.1 Reason 1: Consensus has no clear link to Ontology

While much ink has been spilled about the relationship of truth to knowledge, I believe it is reasonable to see truth as a necessary condition for knowledge (i.e. one cannot have "knowledge" of an untrue statement)[1]. My argument in this section is that because there is no necessary link between consensus and truth (as an ontological principle), then there is no necessary connection between consensus and knowledge (as an epistemic principle). In other words, consensus itself does not necessarily "track truth," and thus an appeal to consensus is not an appeal to a knowledge/truth producing mechanism. Obviously, someone who does not a priori accept consensus as an epistemic principle would want to hear arguments for why it *should* be accepted (and why such an argument is implicitly offered in so many scholarly articles). These reasons would need to avoid the bandwagon fallacy/ad-populum argument. Note that I am not claiming that

---

[1]As Plantinga comments, the justified true belief (JTB) criterion may be approximately true [3].

we need good reasons for everything we believe, as this claim is self-defeating. However, as someone skeptical of the epistemic virtue of consensus, I am puzzled what the argument "a majority of scholars believe x" is meant to argue (outside of the reasons these scholars have for believing x). It seems the argument is that a majority of scholars will only believe x if they have good reasons to believe x. However, as I will argue later, we can have reasons to be skeptical that the scholars themselves arrived at a given position due to good reasons.

3.2 Reason 2: Consensus Changes

The next reason I believe we should be skeptical of consensus is that consensus changes. As a result, if consensus was an epistemic principle, people would be justified believing things that we now know to be false. This creates a dilemma: either what is "true;; becomes relative to the prevailing cultural consensus (which makes one wonder how or if epistemic progress would be possible), or people are only justified believing in prevailing consensus (which would imply people would be justified believing things we now believe to be true, such as a flat earth or a geocentric model). I find both options to be unacceptable. I will have more to say about the specific problem of changing consensus in section (later).

3.3 Reason 3: Who Counts as an Expert?

To avoid the bandwagon fallacy/argument ad populum, many try to rescue consensus by arguing such an appeal is only fallacious when the consensus in question involves laypeople, and not experts in their field. However, this distinction is only useful insofar as we can delineate between who counts as an "expert" and who counts as a "layperson." My argument is this distinction is too fuzzy and arbitrary to be useful. Often, an expert in a field refers to one who has a certain credential to speak on behalf of a certain topic. In addition to the political and sociological pressures of who has access to get such credentials, there is also the issue of specificity. While it may be easy to accept that a scientist is a layperson (and not an expert) when it comes to literature, is a biologist a layperson when it comes to chemistry? What about specifically origin-of-life chemistry or biology? What about areas outside of their specific area(s) of published research? In other words, the question is what level of specificity is required for one to qualify as an "expert," and how can we know this? We certainly cannot know this by appealing to consensus, because this would be arguing in a circle for consensus. Indeed, many scholars gatekeep the ability of others to speak for their field by attempting to discredit perspectives they deem deviant [1, 5]. Outside of a clear and obvious demarcating criterion for determining experts, appealing to experts seems to be simply an appeal to the dominant cultural language.

3.4 Reason 4: Handling Consensus

The specificity problem also comes up when we decide how to handle consensus. Suppose consensus was an epistemic principle, and we found that 60% of "relevant scholars" thought $2 + 2 = 4$ and 40% thought $2 + 2 = 6$. Should we decide that $2 + 2 = 4$, because this option is what a majority of relevant scholars think? Should we think it is 5, because this number is somewhere between the two? Or, using Bayesian reasoning, should we take it to be $(4 \cdot 0.6 + 6 \cdot 0.4) = 4.8$? There seems to be a common-sense notion that if consensus is an epistemic principle, then the strength of said consensus should factor into our confidence trusting it. However, if knowledge is found by appealing to consensus, how should we consider the strength (and proportion) of dissent, if at all? My contention is this question needs to be clarified if an appeal to consensus is used. Because we can achieve contradictory answers depending on how we "treat" consensus, it seems consensus cannot handle dissent about itself.

3.5 Reason 5: Evolutionary Debunking Argument

The last reason to be skeptical of consensus is that we have evolutionary debunking arguments that provide undercutting defeaters for our trust of consensus. The sketch of the argument goes that due to non-rational factors such as groupthink [2] and social pressure, we often defer to the majority opinion, (even if majority is wrong). This provides an undercutting defeater for both the beliefs we accept based on consensus and for our trust in consensus itself. Suppose humans are likely to believe things because others (especially influential or powerful people) believe them, not necessarily because they are true or have rational warrant. This would mean that ideas gain consensus due to non-truth tracking processes such a ploy for political power or social control.

4 Common Replies

4.1 Reply 1: Our Cognitive Faculties are Generally Reliable

One argument for appeals to consensus is that our cognitive faculties are generally reliable given how they developed. In the case of natural selection, for instance, the argument goes that having true beliefs is more conducive to survival than false beliefs, so natural selection selected for true beliefs. I find this reply inadequate because it fails to distinguish between falsehoods conducive to survival and falsehoods that are not. Obviously, failing to see a predator is a case where having a "true" belief that there is a predator is better for one's survival. Furthermore, we would expect those who hallucinate "falsities" are not as likely to survive than those who see the world as it is. However, this argument only works in cases where the truth in question is conducive to survival. There are many areas where false beliefs may be more conducive to

survival than true beliefs - In fact, literature abounds with EDAs (Evolutionary Debunking Arguments) against widely held beliefs like the supernatural, moral realism, free will, and more. Furthermore, fallacious and illogical reasoning may have survival value despite the fact that scholars belief such reasoning often leads to false conclusions. For this argument to succeed, it needs to argue that our cognitive faculties go beyond "approximately true" or "true enough for survival" to selecting truths that are "metaphysically/absolutely true." It may be equally beneficial for survival to have thought that the earth was flat, because pragmatically, it generally is or can be approximated as such.

4.2   Rescuing Consensus

In this section, I wish to "rescue" our trust in consensus, even if it is not an epistemic principle. A group of scholars agreeing on a specific topic may give us a practical reason for trusting their assent – especially if we assume they independently reasoned their way to the same result. One way this can be argued is that people generally have reliable cognitive faculties (either due to God as Locke argued, due to Natural Selection, or some combination of the two), and thus epistemic probability that a large majority of rational individuals could be "tricked" into believing false propositions is relatively low. While this is not immune to possible defeaters, such as the role of propaganda and ideology, this provides a prima face reason for trusting consensus. As Michael Huemer remarked in personal correspondence, "$P(A|\text{most people believe } A)$ is generally $> P(A)$" . As a result, if most individuals believe X, and especially if a majority of individuals and a majority of experts believe X, we have practical reasons for trusting this consensus under the assumption that our cognitive faculties are generally reliable. A sketch of an argument would go like this:

1. P1: Humans have generally reliable cognitive faculties

2. P2: As a result, it is more difficult to convince a large majority of people to believe in a false proposition than to believe in a true proposition

3. C: Therefore, a consensus of views for a proposition p provides general epistemic support for p.

This argument for the general reliability of our cognitive faculties is especially effective for giving us justification for believing things that consensus has never changed on. In the case where consensus has shifted from one position to another, I believe we need to be careful assuming this shift in consensus is evidence for epistemic progress as opposed to social or ideological pressures.

4.3   Defeater Defeaters

Evolutionary debunking arguments for beliefs such as moral realism, religion, and even the general reliability of our cognitive faculties offer undercutting defeaters for our views on these topics [6]. However, these defeaters are only

compelling if one assumes naturalism. Considering that naturalism is not a consensus position itself, this gives us a reason for being skeptical of naturalism, or in the words of Huemer, epistemic justification for disbelief in naturalism. If the lack of consensus around naturalism is a defeater for naturalism, then we now have a defeater for the defeaters offered by naturalism; hence we have defeater-defeaters.

References

[1] James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky. *Science and the Good*. Yale University Press, 2018.

[2] Irving L Janis. Groupthink. *IEEE Engineering Management Review*, 36(1): 36, 2008.

[3] Alvin Plantinga. *Warrant: The Current Debate*. Oxford University Press, 1993. ISBN 978-0-19-507862-6.

[4] Nassim Nicholas Taleb. *The Black Swan: Second Edition: The Impact of the Highly Improbable: With a new section: "On Robustness and Fragility"*. Random House Publishing Group, May 2010. ISBN 978-0-8129-7381-5. Google-Books-ID: h2WMDQAAQBAJ.

[5] Marcello Truzzi. Zetetic rumlnatrons on skepticism and anomalies in science. *Zetetic Scholar*, 12-13:7–21, 1987.

[6] John S Wilkins and Paul E Griffiths. Evolutionary debunking arguments in three domains. *A new science of religion*, 23:133–146, 2012.