Disagreement, Skepticism, and the Dialectical Conception of Justification

Markus Lammenranta
University of Helsinki
markus.lammenranta@helsinki.fi

Abstract
It is a common intuition that at least in some cases disagreement has skeptical consequences: the participants are not justified in persisting in their beliefs. I will argue that the currently popular non-dialectical and individualistic accounts of justification, such as evidentialism and reliabilism, cannot explain this intuition and defend the dialectical conception of justification that can explain it. I will also argue that this sort of justification is a necessary condition of knowledge by relying on Craig's genealogy of the concept of knowledge. I will then respond to the accusation that the dialectical conception leads to radical skepticism. My response is partly concessive. It does lead to skepticism in areas where controversy prevails, such as philosophy, politics and religion, but this sort of skepticism is quite intuitive. Finally, I deal with the objection that my defense of skepticism about philosophy is self-refuting.

Keywords
disagreement; dialectic; genealogy; justification; skepticism

Ancient skeptics argued that people should suspend belief if they disagree and cannot rationally resolve their disagreements. In doing so, they seemed to understand justification dialectically and socially (Lammenranta 2008, forthcoming). The received view of justification in contemporary analytical epistemology, in contrast, is non-dialectical and individualistic. That is why it is no surprise that epistemologists have not paid much attention to disagreement. The reason why it became a hot topic quite recently seems to be that we do have the intuition that disagreement has at least in some cases skeptical consequences while non-dialectical and individualistic accounts of justification have difficulties in explaining this – or so I claim.

In order to defend my claim, I will discuss a typical case in which we have the intuition that disagreement prevents justification and knowledge and argue that the received individualistic views cannot explain the intuition. This speaks for the dialectical and social view. I will also defend my diagnosis of this
case and the dialectical conception of justification by relying on Edward Craig's genealogy of the concept of knowledge. I will argue that Craig's hypothesis about the point of the concept supports the view that dialectical justification is a necessary condition of knowledge. I will then respond to the objection that the dialectical conception leads to radical skepticism. I will try to show that it leads at most to urbane skepticism,¹ a form of skepticism that is restricted to controversial issues in philosophy, science and religion. This is not a problem because this sort of skepticism is quite intuitive and plausible. Finally, I deal with the objection that my defense of skepticism about philosophy is self-refuting.

1. Epistemic Peerage

Initially, it may seem that the standard non-dialectical accounts give no epistemic significance to disagreement. This is because they are individualistic, and disagreement is a social phenomenon. They make the conditions of justification concern the individual subject, restricting the justifying factors to the subject’s mental states or the causal sources of those states. For example, evidentialism takes justification to be a function of the subject’s experiences and beliefs, and reliabilism takes it to be a function of the causal origin of those beliefs.² So it may seem that what other people believe – whether they disagree or not – is irrelevant to justification.

The matter is not so simple. It is true that disagreement as such has no epistemic significance according to these individualistic accounts. What is relevant are the subject’s beliefs about disagreement. Both evidentialism and reliabilism allow that beliefs about disagreement may affect the justification of other beliefs: they can defeat the justification of these other beliefs.

Let us take an example of a typical case, Adam Elga’s horse race, about which we do have the intuition that disagreement prevents the participants from having justification for their beliefs:

We are to judge the same contest, a race between horse A and horse B. Initially, I think that you are as good as me at judging such races, and you think in the same

1 On the distinction between rustic Pyrrhonism and urbane Pyrrhonism, see Barnes (1997, 61–2).
2 It might be pointed out that the etiology of belief can extend to other people and their beliefs. However, reliabilists typically identify the sources of belief individualistically with the psychological processes (Goldman), intellectual faculties (Sosa) or introspectively accessible grounds (Alston) of the subject whose belief is epistemically evaluated.