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Disagreement

In a dialogue written by the satirist Lucian, Menippus relates how he determined to abandon all worldly pursuits – wealth and office and power – and resolved to study science and the nature of things. At first he was overwhelmed by doubt and perplexity. In order to defeat the doubt and disentangle the perplexity, he sought out the best philosophers and scientists of the age – and he paid vast sums for his tuition. The fees, he complained, were wasted.

So far from releasing me from my original ignorance, they actually plunged me into greater perplexities, drowning me every day with principles and ends and atoms and voids and matters and ideas and the like. And what seemed hardest of all to me was that, although no one of them said the same thing as any other but all uttered conflicting and contrary statements, yet each thought to persuade me and tried to convert me to his own view.

To which Menippus' companion ironically replies:

How extraordinary that these wise men should fight with one another over the facts and not hold the same opinions on the same matters.
(Icaromenippus 5)

Faction and disagreement, conflict and dispute, were endemic among scientists and philosophers in the second century AD. *Plus ça change.*

Galen, Lucian's contemporary and the leading medical scientist of his age, was impressed and troubled by the disagreement he found among his fellow-scientists. He refers repeatedly to the disputes which exercised the doctors. His own technical writings often start by rehearsing a dispute, which they then attempt to

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resolve.¹ He composed separate essays about disagreements and about ways of solving disagreements.²

Disagreement – or *διαφωνία*, to use the commonest of several Greeks words for the phenomenon – was a normal feature of the medical world of Galen's day; indeed, it was an institutionalized feature. For medical men would usually belong to a sect or school (a *αἵρεσις*, whence the English 'heresy'); and the sects were distinguished one from another precisely by their doctrinal differences. Nor was that all: even within a sect there was likely to be interne-cine strife, and whatever school you subscribed to – whether you were a Pneumatic or an Erasistratean or a Herophilean or a Methodic – you would find enemies at home as well as abroad.³

If disagreement was normal among the scientists, it was notorious among the philosophers. And it was notorious a century before Galen complained. Philosophical *διαφωνία* was a commonplace in Seneca's day, and allowed him a little joke: *facilius inter philosophos quam inter horologia conveniet* – You're more likely to find two philosophers in agreement than two clocks (*apocol* II 2). Earlier still, this outrageous *dissensio* had encouraged a Roman proconsul who was passing through Athens to summon the disputing philosophers to a conference at which, whether ingenuously or disingenuously, he offered to arbitrate among their views and bring the scandal of philosophy to an end.⁴

As with the doctors, so with the philosophers, disagreement was institutionally enshrined. Most philosophers thought of themselves as belonging to a school or sect.⁵ The main schools, Stoics and Epicureans, Peripatetics and Academics, defined themselves by their doctrines. And their doctrines, of course, conflicted.

1 See e.g. *nat fac* II 93 K; *us part* III 17 K; *PHP* V 288 K; *alim fac* VI 454 K; *syn puls* IX 443 K.

2 See e.g. *lib prop* XIX 38 K (*On the Disagreement among the Empirics*, three Books; *Against the Objections to 'On the Disagreement among the Empirics' and the Summaries of Theodas*, three essays); 45 K (*On Judging between those who Disagree in their Doctrines*); *ord lib prop* XIX 55 K (*On Disagreement in Anatomy*). These works have not survived.

3 See e.g. *meth med* X 35, 53, 125 K, on disagreements among the Methodics; Soranus, *gyn* III 2.

4 The man was L. Gellius Poplicola, the date 93 BC: see Cicero, *leg* I XX 53.

5 See D.N. Sedley, 'Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World', in Miriam Griffin and Jonathan Barnes (edd.), *Philosophia Togata* (Oxford, 1989).

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Again, there was disagreement within the schools. That the Stoics disagreed with one another was a commonplace. As for the Academics, Numenius wrote a petulant essay on their dissensions (Eusebius, *PE* xiv iv 16). Even the Epicureans, who were traditionally regarded as uncommonly harmonious and uniform in their views, indulged in domestic strife. The writings of Philodemus, preserved on the Herculaneum papyri, record several squabbles. Some members of the school, for example,

refuse to say that sophistic rhetoric is an art of other things, as it in fact is, and want to prove that it is an art of the useless, and on each point they disagree (διαφωνοῦντες) with the Masters. (*rhet* [PHerc 1674] xxix 13–21; cf. lii 19–21)

These renegades, as Philodemus characterizes them, were in their own eyes orthodox followers of the Masters of the Epicurean school.

Some philosophical disputes were no doubt trifling and terminological (or so Galen insists); but many were substantial and significant. Deep disagreement was a philosophical fact.

But if disagreement was a fact, what – if anything – did the fact imply? What attitude should a philosopher take to the disputes which certainly separated his school from other schools and which probably divided his own school within itself?

One attitude or reaction to dispute was an industrious resolve. Disagreement could be seen as a challenge and a spur. If you and I disagree we cannot both be right, so let us strive to determine who (if either of us) actually has truth on his side. In this way διαφωνία may stimulate philosophical research. A familiar aspect of Aristotle's philosophical procedure involves the collection of 'reputable opinions (ἐνδοξα)': these opinions will normally conflict with one another; but analysis and critical revision will eventually reveal the truths behind the disagreement and provide for the establishment of undisputed doctrine. And thus διαφωνία leads to knowledge.⁶

⁶ See e.g. Jonathan Barnes, 'Aristotle and the Methods of Ethics', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 133/134, 1980, 490–511. (For a later Peripatetic example see Jaap Mansfeld, 'Diaphonia: the Argument of Alexander *De Fato* Chs. 1–2', *Phronesis* 33, 1988, 181–207.)

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Galen, too, construed disagreement as a challenge – a challenge to uncover some reliable scientific and philosophical method.

Drowning in the sea of disagreement among doctors, I turned to judge the matter, and recognized that I must first train myself in the methods of proof. This I did for many years.
(meth med x 469 K)

Logic, for Galen, is the key to method (cf. *subfemp* 62.2–6 B), and it must be backed by arduous training. There is reason to think that it will succeed.

Do not be downcast by the mass of disputing doctors and philosophers. If they all possessed the wherewithal to learn the truth and yet did not discover it, then it would indeed be reasonable for us to renounce any hope of discovery. But some of the prerequisites they do not possess (as they themselves actually admit), and in the case of others it is unclear whether they possess them or not. As for us, if we are aware that we possess all the wherewithal, then we may tackle the enquiry with confidence. *(const art med 1 243–4 K)*

What are these prerequisites to discovery? They are seven: natural acumen; an early education in mathematics; submission to the best teachers of the age; indefatigable industry; a longing for the truth ('which very few have possessed'); a grasp of logical method; and constant practice in the method. 'If you possess all these things, what prevents you from enquiring into the truth with good hopes?' *(const art med 1 244–5 K)*.

Galen thought that knowledge was attainable. He was an epistemological optimist. But his optimism was not inordinate.

If we escape from the disagreements of the Dogmatists, we shall still be overcome on many matters; but on some issues we shall produce coherent theories, as the geometers and the arithmeticians do. *(subfemp 67.22–68.3 B)*

And he was decidedly less sanguine about philosophy than about medicine. For

in philosophical disagreements we have no sensory evidence – we cannot use sensory evidence to determine if the world is generated and destroyed, if there is void beyond it, if it is

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infinite . . . And so with many other philosophical enquiries too – some disputes we cannot decide at all, and others require much research. But when it comes to what helps or harms the sick, matters are different; yet even so discovery still requires much time – and men of exceptional talent.

(in Hipp morb acut xv 434–5 K; cf. PHP v 766 K)

But if Galen thought that philosophical disagreements were harder to resolve than medical disagreements, he was not wholly pessimistic even on the philosophical front; and he certainly did not hold that the existence of disagreement was in itself a sign that the discovery of truth is beyond us. On the contrary, he supposed, in Aristotelian fashion, that disagreement should be a spur to industry, that διαφωνία should be an incentive to φιλοπονία.

Not everyone agreed with Galen. There was – not unexpectedly – disagreement about the proper attitude to disagreement. Thus Galen believed that we could discover the composition of the non-organic parts of the body. But

we see the philosophers who embark on these enquiries – and some doctors too – differing widely among themselves. That, I think, is why most doctors seem to have given up such enquiries, supposing that what they are investigating cannot be discovered – and some have abandoned them on the grounds that they are not only impossible but also useless.

(const art med I 243 K)

The doctors who abandoned such enquiries were the Empirics, members of the medical school which denounced all theorizing and rejected any investigation into things imperceptible, and which maintained that medical science required nothing but perception and the collation of perceptions.⁷ For the Empirics observed that

from the same phenomena different people infer different conclusions. And here they lay hold of the undecided disagreement (ἀνεπίκριτος διαφωνία) which they say is a sign of unknowability . . . Unknowability, they say, is a cause of undecided disagreement, and conversely disagreement is a sign of unknowability. It is disagreement about unclear

⁷ On the Empirics see e.g. the introduction to Michael Frede, *Galen: Three Treatises on the Nature of Science* (Indianapolis, 1985).

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things, not about the phenomena, which is undecided. For with the phenomena, each thing appears as it is and bears witness to those whose views are true, refuting those whose views are false.
 (sect *ingred* 1 78–9 K)

The same report can be read, a century before Galen, in the medical writer Celsus.

Those who are called Empirics . . . claim that enquiry into hidden causes and natural activities is pointless, since nature is not knowable. That it cannot be known is plain from the disagreements among those who have disputed over it – for on these points there is agreement neither among philosophers nor among the doctors themselves.

(*med* proem 27–8)

Thus the Empirics in effect regarded διαφωνία as a sort of disease, and (rather against their own theoretical position) they proposed an explanation or aetiology for it. If there is undecided disagreement, then that is a sign of unknowability: if there is undecided disagreement over some question (over the eternity of the universe, or the composition of the blood, or the physiological location of psychological functions), then we cannot possibly know the answer to the question. The disagreement thus points to the unknowability. And the unknowability in turn is the cause of the disagreement. That is the aetiology of the disease. And the therapy? Ignore the thing: if you can't know the answer to a question, then don't bother to ask it. The disagreement will not disappear but it will cease to irritate you.

A similar reaction to philosophical διαφωνία is found in a writer of a different profession and character. The disagreement of the pagan philosophers is a theme which runs through Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel*. Early in the work, Eusebius draws attention to 'their opposition to one another – for they agree in nothing and have filled everything with conflict and disagreement' (*PE* I viii 14); and at the end of Book xv he closes with tart references to 'their massive disagreement', to 'their rivalry with one another and their conflicts and their dissensions' (xv lxii 13, 15). The disagreement or διαφωνία among the Greeks and their philosophies contrasts with the agreement or συμφωνία of the Hebrews and their scriptures (e.g. XIV ii 1 ≈ iii 1). The moral is plain.

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Since the pagans themselves stood in diametrical opposition to one another and kindled useless conflicts and wars against themselves, surely absolutely anyone would reasonably allow that for us suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) about these matters is the prudent course. (xv xxxii 9)

The medical Empirics were sceptics in matters hidden to perception. Eusebius urges ἐποχή or suspension of judgement in matters philosophical. In each case, disagreement has generated a sceptical conclusion.

Eusebius was not a philosophical sceptic; nor were the Empirics philosophers by profession (though there were interesting links, both theoretical and historical, between medical Empiricism and philosophical scepticism). But both the Christian bishop and the pagan quacks were prepared to infer a sceptical conclusion from the διαφωνία they observed. Now the inference from διαφωνία to scepticism was held to be especially characteristic of the Pyrrhonian philosophers. In the following passage, Galen addresses Julianus, a Methodic doctor who claimed to be Stoic in philosophical matters but who professed scepticism about the chemical composition of bodies. Galen asks:

Why should we not have precise knowledge of this, so long as we can provide a proof of the thesis and so long as the best philosophers – whom you yourself admire – agree with Hippocrates and with one another? Unless, of course, you think that the disagreement (διαφωνία) is sufficient evidence of our ignorance of the thesis, thus suddenly becoming a sceptic (ἀπορητικός) instead of a Stoic. For then you accept a theory which says that nothing which is a subject of disagreement among all the philosophers can possibly be available for human knowledge. (*adv Iul* xviii 268 K)

If Julianus bases his confession of ignorance on the fact of διαφωνία, then he shows himself a sceptic. (The word ἀπορητικός is a standard denomination of the Pyrrhonian sceptic: Sextus, *PH* I 7.) For the idea that disagreement is a sign of ignorance and a reason for suspension of judgement, is, according to Galen, the characteristic mark of Pyrrhonian scepticism.

And Galen is right. Διαφωνία are referred to on countless

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occasions⁸ in the writings of Sextus Empiricus. For Sextus, disagreement is a fount and origin of scepticism, and this use and understanding of disagreement is utterly characteristic of Pyrrhonism. It is the Pyrrhonian use of διαφωνία which I want to discuss. If I have none the less begun this chapter by citing Galen and the Empirics and Eusebius, that is because I also want to insist that the argument from disagreement is not *peculiar* to Pyrrhonism. Some moderns regard the ancient sceptics as philosophical lightweights or dilettantes – as men whose arguments are profoundly superficial. Their outlandish views may amuse us, but they cannot enlighten us and they should not engage us. On one point at least – namely, the argument from disagreement – the Pyrrhonians developed a line of thought which commended itself to men of bottom: to sober doctors and to reverend bishops. Let us dare to treat Pyrrhonism seriously (which is no reason why it should not also be diverting).

The main question is this: What is the connexion between disagreement on the one hand and sceptical suspension of judgement on the other? What is the connexion between διαφωνία and ἐποχή? Before tackling the question, I had better say a little more about the two concepts which it links.

Ἐποχή was a term of art in ancient Pyrrhonism. Sextus explains it formally as follows:

8 'Countless occasions'? Well, I have counted about 120 uses of διαφωνία and its cognates; in addition, Sextus often uses στάσις or διάστασις and their cognates, or ἀμφισβήτησις and its cognates, or ἀνωμαλία and its cognates. There are occasional uses of μάχη and πόλεμος, and the like. Often the positive counterparts of διαφωνία (viz. συμφωνία, ὁμοφωνία, ὁμολογία etc.) indicate the presence of an argument from disagreement. (See Karel Janáček, *Sextus Empiricus' Sceptical Methods* (Prague, 1972), pp.73–80. Throughout this invaluable study, Janáček emphasizes Sextus' predilection for *variatio* in his choice of words. I suppose that in Sextus, and also in Galen (who is another lover of variety), the predilection is not *merely* stylistic: Sextus, like Galen, insists that it is fatuous to fuss over words – οὐ φωνομαχοῦμεν.) In all, there are more than 200 references, direct or oblique, to disagreement in Sextus' works; and there must be several hundred sections (i.e. numbered paragraphs in the modern editions) which are specifically concerned with using disagreement to sceptical ends. I have generally tried to give comprehensive documentation for my remarks about Sextus. Here I have been content with a sample set of references. Those who want more should turn to one of the most useful books yet written on ancient Pyrrhonism, viz. Karel Janáček, *Sexti Empirici Opera: IV Indices* (Leipzig, 1962²).

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Suspension of judgement is a standstill of the intellect, because of which we neither reject nor accept anything.
 (PH I 10)

Thus:

We take 'I suspend judgement' in the sense of 'I cannot say which of the offered views I should believe or disbelieve', thus showing that the matters seem equal to us with regard to warranty and lack of warranty.
 (PH I 195)

In other words, I suspend judgement on, say, the immortality of the soul if, having considered the matter, I neither reject nor accept the soul's immortality, if I neither believe nor disbelieve that the soul is immortal. (Why add the qualification 'having considered the matter'? Well, Sextus knew nothing about the fauna of South America. He neither believed nor disbelieved that there are pangolins in Patagonia. Did he then suspend judgement on the matter? No: ἐποχή is something which comes about 'after the enquiry' (PH I 7), and Sextus has not – could not have – made any investigation of the fauna of the Americas.)

In schematic terms, I suspend judgement with regard to a proposition P if, having considered the matter, I neither believe that P nor believe that not-P. More generally, I suspend judgement with regard to the question ?Q if, having considered the matter, I neither accept nor reject any answer to ?Q. My scepticism can be, of course, more or less extensive. Every rational being is sceptical on some issues ('When exactly was Sextus born?'). Some rational beings are sceptical with regard to general areas of enquiry (as the Empirics were sceptical about the underlying causes of diseases). In the most extreme case, I might suspend judgement on every question I consider: I shall then have no considered beliefs or disbeliefs; I shall be – as we may put it – a radical sceptic.

Ἐποχή is the heart of Pyrrhonian scepticism. It is clear that Pyrrhonian scepticism is somewhat different from the scepticism which Galen ascribes to the Empirical doctors. For the Empirics hold that nothing can be known, they aver unknowability or ἀκαταληψία. There is a difference between unknowability and suspension of judgement. Since I am in a state of unknowability with regard to ?Q if I hold that the answer to ?Q is not and cannot be known, it is evident that I may suspend judgement over ?Q

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without being in an attitude of ἀκαταληψία towards ?Q. For I may neither believe that ?Q is answerable nor believe that ?Q is not answerable. (I may – and, of course, a radical sceptic must – suspend judgement over the question of ἀκαταληψία.) Thus ἐποχή with regard to ?Q does not imply ἀκαταληψία with regard to ?Q. Nor, in the other direction, does ἀκαταληψία imply ἐποχή; for I may *believe* that P is the answer to ?Q while holding that no one can *know* the answer to ?Q. (Perhaps we cannot *know* whether Galen had read Sextus; but I myself believe that he had not.) Thus the difference between suspension and unknowability is clear in principle. Moreover, Sextus himself, whether rightly or wrongly,⁹ distinguishes Pyrrhonian from Academic scepticism (and also from the philosophy of the Cyrenaics) precisely by the fact that Pyrrhonians stick with suspension while Academics (and also Cyrenaics) maintain unknowability (*PH* I 1–3 and 215; cf. 226). Often, it is true, Sextus says – or seems to say – that Pyrrhonism embraces ἀκαταληψία.¹⁰ These passages are admittedly puzzling. But most of them can, I think, be explained away (Sextus does not actually mean what he appears to say); and the rest may be put down to carelessness. However that may be, I shall speak as though Sextus consistently took suspension to be the sceptic's state of mind.

Thus the Pyrrhonists did not, officially, infer from διαφωνία to the particular sceptical conclusion which we have seen in the Empirics. Indeed, Sextus' official view is closer, in a way, to Galen's; for he insists that the sceptics continue to investigate (*PH* I 3). The Greek word σκεπτικός, which I translate as 'sceptical', means literally 'enquiring'; and Sextus explains that

the enquiring (σκεπτική) school of thought is also called
 investigative (ζητητική) from the activity of investigating and
 enquiring. (*PH* I 7)

And he often remarks that the sceptic's ἐποχή holds good only 'up to now (μέχρι or ἄχρι νῦν)',¹¹ thereby hinting that future resolution of the doubt and future knowledge are not formally excluded.

9 On this see Gisela Stricker, 'Ueber den Unterschied zwischen den Pyrrhoneern und den Akademikern', *Phronesis* 26, 1981, 153–71.

10 See e.g. *M* I 320: 'what is disagreed upon without decision is unknowable (ἀκατάληπτου)'; and cf. Janáček, *Methods*, pp.27–8.

11 See e.g. *PH* I 25, 200, 201; III 70; *M* VII 380; VIII 118, 257, 401, 427/8; XI 229.