Preface

My interest in the phenomenon of disagreement and its epistemic implications has always gone hand in hand with a fascination with skepticism, particularly of a Pyrrhonian stripe. For this reason, the stance on the epistemic significance of disagreement adopted in the present Element is skeptical. Even though many academics examine the philosophical import of skepticism, very few are skeptics – let alone radical skeptics. Part of the modest value of the Element might then lie in its approaching disagreement from an unpopular perspective.

1 Introduction

Disagreement reigns in our lives. There is no escape from it even if we avoid interacting with others. For, in addition to being confronted with individuals who do not share our views or being onlookers to other people's disputes on a daily basis, we often disagree with our own past or present self. The inevitability of inter- or intrapersonal disagreement and the importance we assign to many controversial matters should be reason enough to explore the epistemic and practical implications of disagreement. This Element focuses exclusively on its epistemic significance.

With respect to interpersonal disagreement, even though we may feel quite confident that we are right vis-à-vis any specific controversial matter and even though we may regard such confidence as well-founded, we should start having serious doubts about the correctness of our views and the reasonability of our confidence if we consider the fact that we are involved in countless interpersonal disagreements. Otherwise, we should conclude that we are most of the time right about controversial matters and that our dissenters get things wrong with astonishing frequency. This would be plausible if we were highly reliable thinkers on a wide range of topics and were usually surrounded by fools. It is hard to accept that either case obtains, though. But even if we could legitimately claim that we are mostly right and our dissenters mostly wrong, disagreement would give us the opportunity to learn something of philosophical interest about the latter's epistemic standing: their incorrect views may be due, for example, to their being under the unconscious influence of cognitive or motivational biases or other epistemically distorting factors.

As for those interpersonal disputes to which we are onlookers, disagreement presents us with the challenge of coming up with a reliable way to decide which of the disagreeing parties, if any, is right. This is particularly demanding when all parties strike us as being intelligent and knowledgeable to roughly the same degree or when we are not in position to determine how intelligent and knowledgeable they are. Are there certain epistemic criteria that enable us to reliably make that kind of

decision? Are we trustworthy enough to discern which epistemic criteria are correct? Are any proposed criteria bound to fall prey to the problem of the regress of justification?

The view of a systematic epistemic asymmetry in our favor becomes irrelevant when we set aside our disagreement with others and focus on our own beliefs and the conflicts we detect among them; that is, when we focus on both synchronic and diachronic intrapersonal disagreements. For, first, we sometimes discover that, at the present time, we hold inconsistent beliefs about a given matter. Second, we sometimes disagree with our own past self, and although we typically claim that our present belief is the result of an improvement in our epistemic position, such an alleged improvement shows us that we are susceptible to being wrong about controversial issues – or at least that we were so susceptible, which raises the question of why that may not happen to us again. Third, from time to time we notice variability in our opinions and resulting decisions that cannot in good faith be explained by the consideration of epistemically relevant factors: we give money to a homeless person or refrain from doing so depending on our mood, we give low or high grades to exams and assignments depending on the time of the day, or we give mild or harsh sentences to a defendant depending on whether our basketball team lost last night. The question then arises: if we are susceptible to falling prey to such epistemically irrelevant and distorting factors when it comes to our own divergent opinions and decisions, why would we not be equally susceptible to falling prey to those factors when it comes to opinions and decisions of ours that are rejected by others?

In line with the social turn in general epistemology, over the past twenty years there has been an explosion of interest in the epistemic significance of disagreement – particularly disagreement between so-called epistemic peers. Upon discovering that someone disagrees with you, should you conciliate and considerably lower your degree of confidence in your belief or even adopt the other person's belief, or should you rather remain steadfast and retain your belief with the same, or a slightly decreased, degree of confidence? The present Element offers a brief critical overview of the debate on the significance of disagreement in analytic epistemology and argues that the prospects for resolving disagreements in a rational manner appear rather dim.[1] But before doing so, the Element looks at the treatment of disagreement both in ancient philosophy and in

[1] By "resolving a disagreement in a rational manner," I mean that, by sharing and weighing the reasons for the conflicting views on *p*, (i) the disputants rationally reach a consensus on where the truth about whether *p* (probably) lies, or (ii) from a first-person perspective, one rationally decides where the truth about whether *p* (probably) lies, even if one's opponent is unable to see it, or (iii) an onlooker rationally decides where the truth about whether *p* (probably) lies, even if the disputants themselves fail to recognize it. In the case of (ii) or (iii), there is no resolution of the disagreement in the sense that the disputants have not reached a shared view, but there is

contemporary ethics and philosophy of religion. The reason is that therein we find stances that are philosophically worth exploring and that are relevant to the connection between disagreement and skepticism, which is the focus of this Element. In addition, the immediate antecedent of the extensive discussion of disagreement in general epistemology is to be found in the discussion of disagreement in religious epistemology.

Here is a bird's-eye view of the Element. Section 2 is devoted to the discussion of disagreement in ancient skepticism. I first present, in Section 2.1, the disagreement-based skepticism of the ancient Pyrrhonists. An important part of the Pyrrhonian strategy consisted in appealing to the so-called Agrippan trilemma to show that the disagreeing parties are epistemically on a par. One reason why considering the Pyrrhonists' strategy is useful for the current debate on the epistemic significance of disagreement is that, although the Pyrrhonists typically used Agrippa's trilemma in combination with the mode from disagreement, most present-day epistemological discussions of disagreement make no reference to the trilemma; and, conversely, in most current analyses of the Agrippan trilemma, disagreement is set aside. In Section 2.2, I examine the views on disagreement of Academic skeptics and medical Empiricists. The importance of their discussion of disagreement lies in the fact that both groups drew a second-order epistemological conclusion from the existence of unresolvable disputes, a conclusion we do not find among those drawn in current epistemological analyses of disagreement.

Sections 3 and 4 deal, respectively, with moral and religious disagreement, focusing on both arguments for a negative ontological conclusion and arguments for an agnostic epistemological conclusion. In epistemological parlance, the first type of argument intends to provide a rebutting defeater, while the second intends to provide an undercutting defeater.[2] With regard to religious disagreement, two other topics that are addressed are the debate between exclusivists, pluralists, and inclusivists, and the epistemic significance of religious experience.

Section 5 focuses on the discussion of disagreement in contemporary analytic epistemology. Section 5.1 presents the notion of epistemic peerhood. Section 5.2 offers an overview of the current debate between conciliationists and steadfasters. Section 5.3 presents two related strategies that have been proposed for resolving disagreements: the appeal to the inevitability of the first-person perspective and the self-trust that comes with it; and the appeal to the information one possesses about one's own epistemic situation and the high degree of justified confidence in one's own belief. A problem faced by such

resolution in the sense that a rational decision about whether *p* has been made (cf. Barnes 1990: 30–31).

[2] Succinctly put, while a rebutting defeater for *p* is a reason to disbelieve *p*, an undercutting defeater for *p* is a reason that undermines the connection between *p* and one's evidence for *p*.

strategies is that, from a first-person perspective, there seems to be a dialectical-cum-epistemic symmetry between the disputants. Sections 5.4 and 5.5 argue that another problem faced by those two strategies concerns the limited or misleading information we possess both about ourselves and about our dissenters, which prevents us from determining who is in a better epistemic position with regard to the disputed issue. Section 5.4 reviews part of the abundant evidence provided by cognitive psychology to the effect that our self-knowledge is limited and to a large extent inaccurate: we often overestimate our cognitive capacities, we tend to confabulate about the reasons for our judgments and decisions, we mistakenly believe that others are more susceptible to bias than we are, we often fall prey to confirmation bias, and there is a non-negligible amount of occasion noise in our judgments. Section 5.5 argues that, in real-life disputes, one usually lacks information about the quality of one's opponent's evidence, the general reliability of his cognitive capacities, and the functioning of those capacities in the specific circumstance of the disagreement. Finally, Section 5.6 briefly discusses a *sui generis* view, "skeptical dogmatism," that has recently been defended in the epistemology of disagreement literature.

Section 6 draws the Element to a close by summarizing the various ways in which acknowledged disagreement may be epistemically significant.

2 Ancient Skepticism

The discussion of the ancient skeptics' treatment of disagreement is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus and the second with so-called Academic skepticism and with medical Empiricism.

2.1 Pyrrhonism

Sextus was a skeptical doctor whose *floruit* seems to have been in the early third century CE. His substantial extant writings are our main source for ancient Pyrrhonism. This brand of skepticism is defined by the following attitudes, practices, and problems: wide-ranging suspension of judgment, engagement in open-minded inquiry into truth, emphasis on the existence of widespread and entrenched disagreements, the problem of the criterion of truth and that of the regress of justification, and taking what appears (or the way one is appeared to) as the guide to practical decisions and philosophical investigation.[3]

In the first book of his *Pyrrhonian Outlines* (henceforth *PH*, the initials of the Greek title in transliteration), Sextus expounds three sets of "modes" of

[3] I do not include in this list the pursuit and the attainment of undisturbedness for reasons laid out in Machuca (2006, 2020).

argumentation by means of which suspension of judgment is supposed to be induced: the Ten Modes (*PH* I 35–163), the Five Modes (*PH* I 164–177), and the Two Modes (*PH* I 178–179). The Five Modes are attributed to Agrippa by Diogenes Laertius (DL IX 88) and are the most lethal weapons of the skeptical arsenal due to their apparent intuitiveness and universal scope. They are disagreement, infinite regress, relativity, hypothesis, and reciprocity. Sextus expounds them as follows:

> The mode deriving from disagreement is that by means of which we discover that, with regard to the matter proposed, there has arisen, both in ordinary life and among philosophers, an undecidable dispute owing to which we end up with suspension of judgment, since we are not able to choose or to reject anything. The mode deriving from regress *ad infinitum* is that in which we say that what is offered as a warrant for the matter proposed needs another warrant, and this latter needs another, and so on *ad infinitum*, so that, given that we have nowhere from which to begin to establish it, suspension of judgment follows. The mode deriving from relativity, as we said before, is that in which the underlying object appears thus and so relative to what does the judging and to the things observed together with it, but we suspend judgment about what it is like in relation to nature. The mode deriving from hypothesis is that which arises whenever the dogmatists, being thrown back *ad infinitum*, begin from something that they do not establish, but that they deem worthy to assume simply and without proof by virtue of a concession. The reciprocal mode arises whenever that which ought to be confirmatory of the matter investigated needs a warrant from what is investigated. In this case, as we are not able to take either to establish the other, we suspend judgment about both. (*PH* I 165–169; my translation.)

The modes of hypothesis, reciprocity, and infinite regress constitute what in contemporary philosophy is known as "Agrippa's trilemma." Much of recent epistemology is devoted to responding to the trilemma – mainly under the label "the epistemic regress problem" or "the problem of the regress of justification." Each of those three modes targets a specific justificatory strategy: the mode of hypothesis targets the view that some beliefs are basic or self-justifying; the mode of reciprocity targets the view that a belief is justified provided it is part of a system of mutually supporting beliefs; and the mode of infinite regress targets the view that a belief is justified provided it is supported by an infinite chain of non-repeating reasons. Although Sextus says or implies that each of the three modes can induce suspension separately, the immediately following passage (*PH* I 170–177) – in which he explains the way the Agrippan modes bring about suspension regarding every object of investigation – makes it clear that suspension can be induced more effectively when they work in tandem (see Barnes 1990). This is reasonable because, although one can imagine that someone

adopting one of the above strategies may suspend judgment after being confronted with the corresponding mode, he will more probably appeal to the other strategies to find an alternative way to justify his beliefs.

With respect to the mode from disagreement, the mere existence of a disagreement does not of course justify suspending judgment, because one may come to the conclusion that one of the conflicting views is to be preferred to the others due to its superior epistemic credentials. This is why, when presenting that mode, Sextus speaks of "undecidable" or "unresolvable" dispute: it is the fact that one has so far been unable to resolve the dispute about whether *p* that leads one to suspend judgment about whether *p*.[4] Now, it may be argued that one's inability to resolve the dispute about whether *p* is the result of the use of the Agrippan trilemma to show that any attempt to rationally justify one of conflicting views on *p* fails. If that were the case, the disagreement mode should be regarded as a two-step strategy: (i) presentation of a dispute and (ii) application of the trilemma to show that the dispute cannot be settled. When applied to a disagreement, the modes of hypothesis, reciprocity, and infinite regress work in tandem: when someone attempts to escape from one of those modes in his effort to justify his view on the disputed matter, he falls into one of the other two. The trilemma shows that the conflicting views fare equally badly as far as their justificatory standing is concerned. Since all the disagreeing parties get caught in the trap set by those modes, one must suspend judgment about which of the conflicting views, if any, is correct.

Note that, even if there is no disagreement about whether *p*, one may ask how the shared belief that *p* (or that not-*p*) is justified and then attack, by means of the trilemma, the different strategies purporting to provide the desired justification. If one realizes that one is unable to justify the belief that *p*, then one is (rationally or psychologically) constrained to suspend judgment about whether *p*. The interpretation of the mode from disagreement as a complex argumentative strategy discussed in the previous paragraph already presented the Agrippan trilemma as the core of that strategy, with disagreement only providing the material upon which the trilemma works. The point made in this paragraph is stronger inasmuch as it calls attention to the fact that suspension can be induced in the absence of a dispute. This may lead one to view disagreement

[4] It should be emphasized that the Pyrrhonist does not claim that a disagreement is unresolvable because the disputants would not resolve it even if, e.g., they were to turn to all available evidence or even if they were to use all available means to enhance their reasoning abilities and discover and eliminate whatever biases might infect their ability to assess evidence. Rather, he limits himself to reporting that the parties to the disagreement about whether *p* have so far been unable to reach a consensus on which attitude towards the question whether *p* is epistemically rational, and that he himself has so far been unable to decide which attitude is epistemically rational by weighing the reasons for and against *p*.

"as a psychologically useful aid to the sceptic" rather than as "an epistemologically necessary condition for the generation of scepticism" (Barnes 1990: 116). In the absence of disagreement, one might erroneously think that "there was no room or reason for doubt, that [one was] justified in assenting to the opinion insofar as there was no dissentient voice. Hence the observation of disagreement is pertinent to Pyrrhonism: it draws attention to the fact that assent should not be given without ado – doubt *might* be raised because doubts *have* been raised" (Barnes 1990: 116, italics in the original).

Even though I agree that Agrippa's trilemma can induce suspension independently of the existence of a dispute, I do not think that disagreement is merely a psychological aid. There are at least three reasons to view disagreement as one of the keys to the generation of skepticism. First, for some epistemologists, one is under no obligation to give reasons for one's belief that *p* in the absence of a concrete challenge to its epistemic credentials. The existence of a disagreement about whether *p* can be taken to constitute such a challenge. For example, if two persons who take themselves to be roughly evidential and cognitive equals with respect to whether *p* discover that they disagree about whether *p*, they can take this disagreement as higher-order evidence that they may have made a mistake when assessing the first-order evidence bearing on whether *p* (more on this in Section 5). The disagreement can then be taken as a challenge for the disputants to provide reasons for their conflicting beliefs about whether *p*. In such a scenario, one can have recourse to the Agrippan trilemma to show that, in the end, neither disputant can justify his belief about whether *p* and, hence, that their beliefs are epistemically on a par.

Second, the mode from disagreement can lead to suspension without the application of the trilemma. Faced with the disagreement about whether *p*, a person may assess the arguments for and against *p* and find them equally strong, thereby suspending judgment about whether *p*, without realizing that both the attempt to justify belief in *p* and the attempt to justify belief in not-*p* lead to the epistemic regress problem. In several passages in which he does not appeal to the trilemma, Sextus says that the Pyrrhonist is compelled to suspend judgment in the face of an unresolvable disagreement. For example, in concluding his exposition of the Tenth Mode, which deals mainly with moral disagreements, Sextus remarks that, given that we are unable to say what each object is like in its nature but only how it appears in relation to various factors, we must suspend judgment about what things are really like (*PH* I 145–163). The mode from disagreement should not therefore be deemed to be a complex argumentative strategy that necessarily relies on the Agrippan trilemma – contrary to the interpretation sketched above.