THE ARGUMENT FROM UNDECIDABLE DISSENSION

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Abstract.   The five modes of suspension of judgment outlined by Sextus Empiricus (HP XV 164-188) coordinate a complex argumentative strategy to prompt the general suspension of judgment. But modes (τρόπος) are general argument forms that can be deployed individually against the dogmatist, who is willing to accept that a certain answer to a question establishes how things *really* are. In this case, the aim of the modes is not the general suspension of judgment but the continuation of the investigation. I present a deductive version of the mode of undecidable dissension that pinpoints some principles and assumptions the skeptics requires to run their arguments.

Keywords: dissension • equipollence • principles of rationality • Pyrrhonian Skepticism • suspension of judgment • epistemic arbitrariness

1. Introduction

The five modes of suspension of judgment outlined by Sextus Empiricus (HP XV 164-188) coordinate a complex argumentative strategy to prompt the general suspension of judgment. In contemporary epistemology, the interest in Pyrrhonian argumentation has focused mainly on three modes: hypothesis, reciprocity, and regression *ad infinitum*. These modes articulate Agrippa's Trilemma or the Epistemic Regress Problem (Klein 2008), which calls into question the very nature of epistemic justification. Foundationalists, coherentists, and infinitists build their position under the assumption that there are some cases in which reasoning in a circle, going back to infinity, or taking some starting points for granted is epistemically permissible. Nonetheless, there is no standard argument underlying this discussion: Versions of the epistemic regress problem argument differ in essential features. Its form, conclusion, and assumptions reflect the epistemological commitments of those who use the argument to promote their agenda, but those versions are usually inconsistent with the skeptic's antidogmatic motivation. As Sánchez (2018, p.28) argues, a presentation of a philosophical problem is adequate only if it properly explains what is problematic about it by (a) explicitly offering the argument that gives rise to it, (b) presenting the principles to which it resorts, and (c) indicating the core assumptions on which it

depends. In this paper, I make an adequate presentation of the mode of undecidable dissension —also well known as the mode of dispute, disagreement, or discrepancy— by offering a deductive version that pinpoints some principles and assumptions the skeptic requires to run their arguments. I conclude that, taken individually, the argument from undecidable dissension motivates the continuation of the investigation, which is consistent with the Pyrrhonian character.

2. The mode of undecidable dissension

Skeptics are inquirers who promote the continuation of the investigation through rational means, that is, deploying arguments whose conclusions motivate the need for further inquiry.

Regarding a given dispute concerning a question, skeptics investigate which answers are true and which are false. Still, they do not declare that they have discovered the answer to the question or that it is inapprehensible—declarations which epitomize the dogmatic philosophers—but continue investigating (HP I 1). Confronting equipollent appearances and theoretical considerations, the skeptics suspend judgment about the matter at stake: They do not affirm, deny, believe, or disbelieve that an answer is correct (or not) (HP I 10). The skeptic hopes that living in this way fortuitously leads them to tranquility in matters of opinion (HP I 26).

The skeptical argumentative tools include five modes: the mode of regress *ad infinitum*, the hypothetical mode, the reciprocal mode, the relativity mode, and the mode deriving from dispute. I only consider the latter in this paper, but I think the logical analysis I offer can be applied to the other with similar results.

My reconstruction of the mode of undecidable dissension assumes two things. First, modes for the suspension of judgment (τρόπος) are general topic-neutral schematic arguments that the skeptic can deploy individually against the dogmatist— who is willing to accept that an answer to a question establishes how things really are. Second, skeptical arguments and the conclusions that follow from them align with the skeptical antidogmatic character and to skeptical purposes: To motivate the continuation of the investigation or the suspension of judgment. Thus, I will take the rather sparse and unelaborated discussion about the structure of the mode of undecidable dissension provided by Sextus Empiricus and develop an elaboration of it which specifies premises (principles and definitions) which are robust enough to use in deductive reasoning.

3. Stipulations

I take the following stipulations to ease reading the definitions and principles I will present in sections 4 and 5.

Propositional variables: $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \dots$ are variables for propositional contents.
Question variables: $Q_1 \dots Q_n$ stand for a question.
Answer variables: $A_1 \dots A_n$ are answers to a given question Q.
P is a participant in a discussion concerning Q.
s is a stage in a discussion concerning Q.

4. Principles of rationality

I assume Sextus Empiricus depicts an *ideal rational discussion* when he deploys the modes for suspension of judgment against the dogmatist. I use the following principles of rationality to put some flesh in the bones of this assumption.

Principles of non-arbitrariness (PNA). If S believes that α arbitrarily, then S is not rational in believing α.
Principle of equipollence (PE). If α and β are equipollent for P in s, then it would be arbitrary for S to have (not have) the doxastic attitude Δ toward α and not have (have) that attitude toward β.
Principle of plenitude (PP). If S is rational, then it is not the case that S is not rational in believing α.
Principle of consistency (PC). If α is a conjunction of incompatible statements, then it is not the case that S (qua ideal rational agent) believes α.

The idea that avoiding arbitrariness is necessary for justification is accepted widely in epistemology (Klein 1999, p.299; Howard-Sydney 2005, p.21). And it can be argued that epistemic arbitrariness precludes rationality (Sánchez 2018). Thus, the presence of PNA in the discussion between the skeptic and the dogmatist establishes a minimum condition for the rationality of the participants.

The equipollence principle can be considered an epistemological instance of a general principle of rationality commonly invoked in the domain of practical reason: the moral requirement of universalizability formulated by Hare (1965, pp.7–16) and that he considers to be a "logical thesis" (pp.30–1). To see this, we can put this principle in the following schematic form:

Principle of universality (PU). If S makes a moral judgment about the action ϕ, and ϕ^* is an action relevantly similar to ϕ, then S ought to make the same moral judgment about ϕ^*.

In the case of PE, the action in question is entertaining a doxastic attitude (like believing or suspending assent about a proposition), and the relevant similarity is that

of having an equipollent epistemic standing. Thus, if we accept PU as a principle of rationality, we must accept PE in the same terms.

The principle of plenitude expresses that a rational epistemic subject is not cognitively fragmented, so the possibility of he is having some subsets of beliefs that are not rationally maintained is excluded.

Finally, the principle of consistency depicts skeptical inquiry participants as consistent reasoners who do not believe simultaneously two propositions that cannot be true together. PC is a non-formal and weaker version of the doxastic reading of the axiom D in modal logic:

Doxastic axiom D (D): $B_S(\alpha) \to \sim B_S(\sim\alpha)$

D is equivalent to saying that it is not the case that subject S believes that α and S believes that $\sim\alpha$. We know that it is provable in doxastic logic that B distributes over conjunction.

Distribution B over & (DISTB$_\&$). $B_S(\alpha)\&B_S(\beta) \dashv\vdash B_S(\alpha\&\beta)$

Hence, D is equivalent to affirming that it is not the case that S believes in a contradiction. Sometimes D is read as saying that S does not believe what is false, but this is different from believing what is necessarily false. This can lead to misinterpretations. To avoid them, I prefer the principle of consistency, which can be read as saying that a rational subject does not believe contradictory or contrary statements.

5. Definitions

Sextus Empiricus presents the mode deriving from dispute —we call it mode from the undecidable dissension here— in the following lines:

> According to the mode deriving from dispute, we find that undecidable dissension about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers. Because of this we are not able either to choose or to rule out anything, and we end up with suspension of judgment (HP I, 165).

The core concepts in the presentation of the mode of dispute are *equipollence* and *undecidable dissension*.

Sextus takes 'equipollence' (ἰσοσθένεια) as a property of accounts or arguments (λογος) and defines it as the "equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing" (HP I 10), or "equality in what appears plausible to us" (HP I 190). If two arguments are equipollent, none takes precedence over the other as more convincing or plausible. I decided to present the definition of equipollence following the standard interpretation of ἰσοσθένεια and ἐποχή (Eichorn 2020, p.190). Thus, I define equipollence in terms of epistemic justification instead of conviction or plausibility to

avoid the psychological and subjective connotation of these terms —which I consider are associated with the suspension of judgment— and to tie it to rationality.

> Equipollence (EQ): α and β are *equipollent* for P in s if and only if the available justification that P has for α in s is as strong as that for β in s.

Sextus points out that undecidable dissension makes it impossible to choose or rule out any answer to a question affected by it. Unfortunately, he does not detail what feature of this kind of dissension leads to that result. I use the concept of equipollence to define it.

> Undecidable dissension (UD). There is *undecidable dissension* about Q if and only if there are at least two (possible) incompatible answers to Q, say A_1 and A_2, and they are equipollent.

Finally, I define suspension of judgment pretty much in the same way that Sextus does: "Suspension of judgment is a standstill of the intellect, owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything" (HP I 10):

> Suspension of judgment (SJ): S suspends judgment about α when S neither believes α nor believes $\sim\alpha$.

6. The argument from undecidable dissension

In this section, I present my reconstruction of the mode from dispute using the definitions and principles presented in sections 4 and 5. I do not present the argument in formal language, but I do it in an easily formalized way. All rules of inferences belong to classical logic and are named by standard conventions.

1. Let's Q_1 be a question about which there is undecidable dissension, and let's be P a rational participant in the discussion concerning it.   /Assumption
2. If Q_1 is a question about which there is undecidable dissension, then there are at least two (possible) incompatible and equipollent answers to Q_1.   / MPP (UD,1)
3. There are at least two (possible) incompatible and equipollent answers to Q_1, say A_1 and A_2.   /MPP (2,3)
4. P believes A_1.   /Assumption for reductio.
5. A_1 and A_2 are equipollent.   / Simplification (3)
6. It is not the case that P believes A_2 /Assumption for reductio.
7. P believes arbitrarily that A_2 /PE (4,6)
8. P is not rational in believing A_2.   /MPP (PNA,7)
9. P is rational.   /Simplification (1)
10. It is not the case that P is not rational in believing A_2.   /MPP(PP,9)

11. P is not rational in believing A_2 & It is not the case that P is not rational in believing A_2 /Conjunction (8,10)
12. $\perp$ /Int$\perp$ (11)
13. P believes A_2 /Reductio (6-12)
14. P believes A_1 & P believes A_2.   /Conjunction (4,13)
15. P believes $(A_1 \& A_2)$ /DISTB&(14)
16. A_1 and A_2 are incompatible.   /Simplification (3)
17. $A_1 \& A_2$ is an incompatible statement.   /From (16)
18. It is not the case that P believes $(A_1 \& A_2)$ /PC (17)
19. P believes $(A_1 \& A_2)$ & It is not the case that P believes $(A_1 \& A_2)$ /Conjunction (15,18)
20. $\perp$ /Int$\perp$(19)
21. It is not the case that P believes A_1.   /Reductio (4-20)
22. P believes A_2.   /Assumption for reductio.
23. A_1 and A_2 are equipollent.   / Simplification (3)
24. P believes arbitrarily that A_2 /PE (21,22)
25. P is not rational in believing A_2.   /MPP (PNA,24)
26. P is rational.   /Simplification (1)
27. It is not the case that P is not rational in believing A_2.   /MPP(PP,26)
28. P is not rational in believing A_2 & It is not the case that P is not rational in believing A_2.   /Conjunction (25,27)
29. $\perp$ /Int$\perp$(28)
30. It is not the case that P believes A_2.   Reductio (22-29)
31. It is not the case that P believes A_1 & It is not the case that P believes A_2. /Conjunction (21,30)

7. Concluding remarks

The argument from undecidable dissension concludes that P neither believes A_1 nor believes A_2. The skeptics can continue their argumentation, pointing out that, by stipulation, A_1 *and* A_2 are incompatible answers to Q. So, there are two possibilities. First, A_1 *and* A_2 are contradictoryf. In this case $A_1 \equiv \sim A_2$, and, equivalently, $\sim A_1 \equiv A_2$. Thus, from the fact that P neither believes A_1 nor believes A_2 we can conclude that P neither believes A_1 nor believes $\sim A_1$. And so, by definition, S suspends judgment about A_1. Second, A_1 and A_2 are contrary. Therefore, it is not possible that both are true, but both can be false. Which of these possibilities instantiates? The argument from undecidable dissension tells us that P does not believe that A_1 and A_2 are correct answers but does not tell us that P believes that they are false. To answer this question,

the participants in the discussion should continue the investigation. In any case, the argument from undecidable dissension is consistent with the skeptics' investigative practice.

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