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János Tőzsér, "The Failure of Philosophical Knowledge: Why Philosophers are not Entitled to their Beliefs"

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An interesting difference between science and philosophy is that philosophers may systematically investigate philosophy itself in an area called metaphilosophy. Metaphilosophy is an expanding area of research focusing on the aims, methods, and norms of the disciple. A vexing set of problems in metaphilosophy is connected to the so-called disagreement challenge—i.e. there is no agreement about most of the answers to philosophy's biggest questions—that pinpoints the lack of progress in almost every area in the first-order philosophical discourse. János Tőzsér's book, *The Failure of Philosophical Knowledge*, thoroughly examines the disagreement challenge and its consequences on our philosophical beliefs, providing a grim outlook on the situation.

The book has seven chapters organized into three larger parts. The first part provides an assessment of the disagreement challenge. In Chapter 1, Tőzsér presents the epistemic tradition of philosophy, a long-standing line of research that aims to seek the truth and create true theories about the world. Its prominent example, besides almost every great canonical philosopher, is contemporary analytic philosophy, which can be seen as the heritage of ancient Greek philosophy. Those who work in the epistemic tradition are ideally honestly interested in the problems and have substantive philosophical beliefs in their theories. Tőzsér acknowledges that other philosophical traditions have different aims—e.g. the more specialized conceptual engineering projects to support natural sciences—but he will exclude these movements from further investigations focusing only on the epistemic tradition.

After explaining and narrowing the field of interest, in Chapter 2, Tőzsér introduces the disagreement challenge. Although this issue has a considerable amount of literature now, nothing is taken for granted. The author presents a catalog of philosophical problems, a persuasive way to illustrate the pervasive nature of the issue: indeed, none of the important philosophical problems were solved. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that philosophy lacks any progress, but philosophers should stay humble about the developments because most of them are trivial—e.g. we have better arguments for (or against) certain theories—but these arguments are still not decisive. So, philosophers were not successful in providing knowledge claims, raising not just epistemological but also ethical questions about our beliefs in these theories.

The second part of the book examines four different reactions to this problem. Chapter 3

introduces a late Wittgensteinian approach—i.e. philosophical questions arise when 'language goes on holiday' and these are meaningless issues—so philosophical sentences do not express any propositions, which means that one's philosophical beliefs are also meaningless. The only purpose that philosophy may have is therapy in the sense that philosophers should reflect and constantly remind themselves of this meaninglessness to avoid engaging in philosophical discourse. The importance of therapy should not be underestimated, because endless thinking about philosophical problems can cause emotional damage to the individual. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein's proposal does not work in practice, Tőzsér illustrates this through three problems. First, this anti-philosophy account is self-defeating because the theory contains first-order philosophical theses about linguistic meaning. Second, Wittgenstein's arguments are not convincing: at least some philosophical issues are meaningful, and we clearly understand them. Third, the theory is undermotivated, as it would be more plausible to say that philosophical problems are meaningful (but unsolvable) than to say that they are meaningless.

In Chapter 4 Tőzsér moves on to the next proposal, which he calls sarcastically the 'I am the only one' view (or rather, attitude). 'I am the only one' philosophers are convinced that – despite the systematic peer disagreement in their field – they were capable to build true theories. They must think that their epistemic status is special compared to their peers, who unfortunately do not see the decisive force of their compelling arguments. Despite being a blunt approach—at least from a third-person point of view—the 'I am the only one' attitude is not rare in philosophy. Tőzsér cites great historical philosophers—Hume, Kant, Husserl, and others—who convinced themselves that they solved a certain philosophical issue, but time proved that they were wrong, since we still argue about their theories. Of course, this attitude is still present nowadays, many philosophers honestly believe in their theories, because they think that their theory is the true one, and everyone besides them is wrong. To defeat this view, Tőzsér uses a literary device and illustrates the problem through a fictive dialogue between Philonus, the 'I am the only one' philosopher, and Sophie, who can not be persuaded by his arguments. Tőzsér points out Philonus's epistemic blindness, which is his failure to reflect his very own position in the philosophical space from a third-person view. If his arguments were as brilliant and compelling as he thinks, then they should convince more people. Something is wrong, and, according to Tőzsér, the problem is with the 'I am the only one' philosopher, who—despite they unable to see—is not entitled to their philosophical beliefs.

In Chapter 5, Tőzsér introduces two versions of equilibirism. In general, equilibrism is a 'live

and let live' type of approach, which permissively accepts that everyone can defend their theories despite systematic peer disagreement. Equilibrism reaches this state by making a distinction between the aims of philosophy and the aims of individual philosophers. The former is to support people who seek answers with a broad taxonomy of different solutions, so everyone can choose the right answer. The latter is to reach an ideal state of 'equilibrium,' or, an optimal selection of different philosophical theories, so the philosophers' beliefs are coherent with each other and with the philosopher's pre-philosophical intuitions. The difference between the two versions of equilibrism is the propositional attitude that philosophers should bear towards propositions in the philosophical discourse. The original version of equilibrism, proposed by David Lewis, is based on belief, making it the ultimate candidate for those who are worried about the disagreement challenge but not willing to give up their beliefs. Unfortunately, this approach is flawed: at least some of the philosophical questions require objectively true or false answers, whose justification should be more, something external, than the mere coherence with other beliefs. A better version of equilibrism was originally proposed by Helen Beebee, and it requires only accepting, instead of believing, philosophical theories. Tőzsér is not able to defeat this improved 'no belief, no cry' type of equilibrism. However, he is still unable to accept it due to his personal views on the ideal way of philosophical conduct. To illustrate the problem with Beebee's equilibrism, he describes a cold, almost industrial atmosphere, that he calls the phalanstery of philosophers, where people uncompassionately produce theories that nobody can believe. Tőzsér thinks this is a miserable way to continue philosophical work, so, in Chapter 6, he moves on to meta-skepticism, the last proposal to solve the disagreement challenge.

Meta-skepticism is a well-developed normative metaphilosophical account with an imperative to suspend our philosophical beliefs because we can not believe in them rationally. Tőzsér thoroughly defines the notion of rational belief, as well as the argumentative strategies for meta-skepticism. After presenting a detailed meta-skeptical theory, Tőzsér examines different problems including self-defeat, the problem that the meta-skeptic can not know that philosophical problems are unsolvable, and the threat of intellectual apathy, that is, losing interest in philosophy. At the end of the chapter, Tőzsér rejects the meta-skeptic view too.

In Chapter 7, the author concludes that philosophy cannot be conducted with serious and honest beliefs in philosophical theories, but, on the other hand, it is not worth doing without any belief. The investigation ends in aporia. Tőzsér finds himself in an uncomfortable position: he

acknowledges that it would be rational to suspend his philosophical beliefs, but he is not capable of doing that. This breakdown of intellect is a painful experience, and the author sees no way out to solve the issue of philosophical beliefs in a way that is serious, honest, and also matches his character.

To sum up, the book provides a new, interesting approach to the topic. The author earnestly confronts the issue of disagreement in philosophy and rigorously pursues its arguments to their ultimate conclusions. The narrative is easy to follow yet substantial, and its biggest virtue is the substantial number of examples that Tőzsér utilizes to support his views. Even though equilibrism and meta-skepticism were not new theories, the author develops them further. The book also utilizes a spectrum of fictive dialogues between proponents of different metaphilosophical approaches and Sophie, who should serve as an objective, unbiased, rational philosopher—or, as the author puts it, she impersonated his Socratic daemon—to ask questions to illustrate the character of each proponent. This format may not be everyone's cup of tea, and some readers may find these segments bothersome, but they balance out the heavier analytic argumentation well. The book has a general focus, so I recommend it not just for those who are interested in narrower metaphilosophical problems, but for everyone interested in the ethics and epistemology of their philosophical beliefs.

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