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Rational Disagreement Targets

Matjaž Potrč¹

ABSTRACT

There are two implicitly present views about the targets of rational disagreement. If one takes conciliation as a strategy concerning rational disagreement, then the target in the wide sense of the word is propositions. On the other hand, if one takes judgments to be targets of rational disagreement, then the accompanying strategy is that of non-conciliation. This last strategy is closer to the nature of rational disagreement in terms of its phenomenology and rationality.

Key words: rational disagreement, conciliation, non-conciliation, propositions, judgments

Predmeti razumnega nestrinjanja

POVZETEK

Glede predmetov razumnega nestrinjanja obstajata dve stališči. Če razumemo spravljivost kot strategijo pristopa k razumnemu nestrinjanju, so predmeti tega nestrinjanja – v najširšem pomenu te besede – propozicije. Če pa po drugi strani kot predmete razumnega nestrinjanja razumemo sodbe, je strategija, ki takšno nestrinjanje spremlja, odločnost. Zadnja strategija je bližje naravi razumnega nestrinjanja ter njegovi fenomenologiji in racionalnosti.

Ključne besede: razumno nestrinjanje, spravljivost, odločnost, propozicije, sodbe

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Rational disagreement

People often disagree. If arguments are involved, then the interesting ones are not emotionally heated squabbles, but an exchange of views that are rationally supported and involve the parties' respect for each other. When Putnam² mentions such a disagreement with his colleague, he says he holds him in great esteem as a human being and praises the qualities of his character. But he also states there are differences between them that cannot be bridged with respect to a certain issue. Before coming back to rational disagreements in philosophy, we will take a quick look at the area of jurisprudence. Rational disagreement seems to be the basis of procedure in legal practice. What are the cases in question like? A presumption is that your fellow lawyer in a dispute is rational, i.e. that both you and him follow objectively verifiable procedures. But the two of you disagree about the truth of p . The prosecutor in penal law argues for p , whereas the defence argues for $\neg p$. Both are rational, and they presume other parties to be rational as well. But once they have heard all the arguments of other parties, they still stick to their convictions. After having heard everything from the defence, the prosecutor continues to cling to their belief in p . Disagreement seems to be the basis of legal procedure. It also seems that non-conciliation – insisting on one's views or positions and not abandoning them in the face of a challenge from the opposite player – is the rational choice in that area. Whatever the move of the other party, it does not seem to be a suitable rational choice to abandon one's beliefs. On the contrary, a good lawyer has to stick to their guns and retain their beliefs, even though these may be shattered by the party that defends the opposite view in a procedural dispute. It also seems that legal procedure consists of assuming and playing roles so that deep down the judgment of the lawyer, if there is one, disciplines the situation where the opposing positions guide a given dialectics. That is how I see the situation with legal discourse, although my knowledge mostly comes from legal cases as portrayed in several TV series and in 'whodunnits'. I will now switch to the case of philosophy with which I am slightly better acquainted. But before embarking on this, I need to stress the procedural embracing of non-conciliation in legal practice, which seems to be a bird of a different feather than conciliation's

²H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge, 1981.

take on rationality that is mostly proposed by philosophers. How does this attitude come about in philosophy? I will consider this and then argue that non-conciliation is and should be a strategy appropriated by philosophers as well. Matters about rationality and about the phenomenology of peer disagreement will occupy the centre of the exercise. Cases of respectful philosophical disagreement, though, in contradistinction to legal cases, are not procedural and instead feature a commitment to one's beliefs that are not necessarily needed for the legal procedure to be satisfied.

Philosophical disagreements

In order to understand rational disagreement and given that I work in this area, I will concentrate on the case of philosophy. A characteristic of philosophical work is that people are in dispute about practically any specific topic you may choose. Let me mention just one example off the top of my head. Some people think that there are essences of things, while others dispute this. Those who subscribe to essences are again in disagreement about whether these are to be searched for in concrete entities, such as this cat and that other kitten. Their opponents dispute this and see essences in something such as the idea of a cat given that, as they say, each particular cat may perish and because a cat as an entity is vague. On the other hand, the idea of a cat persists all along and during conceptual and empirical changes. At each carving of the joints there will be disagreement about which route to take. This seems to be the basis of philosophical endeavour. In contradistinction to legal practice, disagreement in philosophical discussion involves a substantive commitment and is thus not merely procedural.

The difference between rational disagreement in the practice of law and in the practice of philosophy is that the practice of penal law opts for the irreducible difference of views to be maintained, whereas the now widely practiced and almost official procedure of philosophy also argues in defence of each particular view, but then mainly opts to give way to the peer with whom one is engaged in dispute so that the differences can be smoothed out. Philosophers tend to believe that this is required so that the demands of rationality are taken care of. I will argue that, as matters stand, the practice of rational disagreement in philosophy actual-

ly does not end up in agreement but that the philosopher's real work is to fight for their view, following their own best take on the epistemic evidential basis available to them.³ This is supported by the dialectics of the philosopher's judgment, which is rooted in benign incoherence. Judgment, and especially philosophical judgment, namely comes from a tension that arises between several forces producing it. Given that these forces are active from the background which is not transparent to the judger, and which is not explicitly there before their consciousness, there is some support for this judgment that is not completely accessible to the judger. This applies to both of the parties involved in a rational disagreement. So the rationality of philosophical argumentation rests upon an insight hidden in the background that forms the judgment of each of the parties. The insight that supports each party's judgment thus disciplines explicit argumentation which happens in a philosophical debate. Notice that philosophical disagreements are to some extent similar to moral disagreements where people feel they are involved in a procedure where quite a lot seems to be at stake.

Conciliation

The main approach to the phenomenon of rational disagreement encountered today is that of *conciliation*. The presupposition is that, if parties to a dispute are rational, they have to realise that no party has an advantage with respect to the opposite party. Accordingly, they will be happy to abandon their original beliefs in order for objective rationality requirements to be satisfied so that one does not end up in the subjective arbitrariness of one's belief or again in an outright contradiction with respect to the other party. The example that is usually given⁴ involves two of us having lunch together, trying to calculate the amount of cash we are due to pay the waiter. I appreciate you as being rational and fairly good in matters of practical maths. You have the same respect for me. Now, we engage in the calculation. My result is \$42, and your result is \$46. We are ready to reconcile our views

³T. Horgan and M. Potrč, Nonconciliation in Peer Disagreement: Its Phenomenology and Its Rationality, (forthcoming).

⁴D. Christensen, Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy, *Philosophy Compass*, 2009, 4/5, 756-75; D. Christensen and J. Lackey, *The Epistemology of Disagreement*, Oxford 2013.

in view of our former opinions. However, we do not conclude that the right result would lie in the middle, namely \$44. Instead, we abandon the initial results we arrived at and start calculating again. This is the form of *conciliation* that, as it seems, rationality requires from us. The idea is then that rationality further requires us to embrace the tactics of *conciliation* in other disputes as well, such as typical philosophical disputes such as the one mentioned about the essence of a cat. Rationality requires us, the reasoning goes, to abandon our beliefs and to reconcile. Here we see the surrounding symmetrical challenge: recognising you as a peer, I implicitly allow for my view not to be any better with respect to yours. And something similar goes for your view. Hence rationality requires us, as already stated, to reconcile by abandoning our original beliefs.

Non-conciliation

However, from the practice of philosophical disputes we can see that people do not go for conciliation. They respect each other as able reasoners, that is true. But they do not move in the direction of conciliation. Instead, they go for non-conciliation, namely, they stick to their guns. In philosophy, you will very rarely see someone asserting that the essence is in specific cats then embracing the view that the essence of a cat resides in the idea of a cat. In most cases, people would prefer to stay with their former beliefs and try to provide further arguments in support of their views in the face of a challenge by a peer. Their beliefs in the thesis they started with may be weakened as they listen to counter arguments. Yet, after a while, they search for their own arguments in defence of their thesis and so the strength of their belief increases. It is also quite unusual and not in line with the bulk of philosophical practice to opt for a middle-of-the-road solution: just what could someone who believes the essence is in particulars and someone else who believes the essence is in ideas find as a basis for common ground? One may say that a non-conciliation strategy that guides philosophical cases of rational disagreement opts for a version of rationality that does not embrace exclusionary choices, and that it instead puts the stress on the ethics of belief⁵ based on

⁵W.K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief* [1877]. In: T. Madigan, ed., *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*, Amherst 1999, 70–96; P. Van Inwagen, *It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe*

one's evidential take on the matters at hand. It is a rationality deeply rooted in epistemological sensibility, leaning upon evidential, first-person commitments as the basis of this sensibility. Note that a commitment to some basic beliefs in the case of rational disagreement occurs in philosophically respectful disputes which does not happen in either procedural disagreements such as those illustrated by legal practices, nor in the case of differing estimates concerning a restaurant bill. No deep commitment to the content which is argued for is present in these cases, and that is exactly what usually happens in philosophical disagreements.

Phenomenology

What happens in a dispute involving rational disagreement? In order to consider the situation, one may have to take recourse to *phenomenology*, i.e. to the qualitative what-it's-like take upon the practice of rational disagreement. A fact is that one treats one's peer with whom one engages in a dispute as one's *global* peer, i.e. as someone rationally respectable in the wide area under dispute. The same applies to the other party: they treat you as their global peer as well. This is part of the phenomenology of rational disagreement. Another part is that, by treating one's adversary as a global peer, one does not treat them as one's *local* peer. Namely, one is in disagreement with the party in relation to this specific question, although one respects them concerning their rationality and their expertise in the wide area under dispute. Yet, in fact, one tends to treat the other party as one's *local inferior*, and with respect to them, one experiences the feeling of one's own *local superiority*. This is the *phenomenology* of peer disagreement, i.e. how one feels as one engages in rational disagreement in philosophy. I treat you as an able philosopher, and thus as my global peer. But because I accept that the essence of entities resides in concrete tokens, and realising that you see the essence inhabiting the abstract realm of ideas, I treat you as my *local inferior*. I have respect for you concerning the overall question of rationality. However, concerning this specific question, you appear to me to be locally skewed. Phenomenology, as it seems, supports the non-conciliation strategy in rational disagreement. Each of us conti-

Something upon Insufficient Evidence. In J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder, eds., *Faith, Freedom and Rationality*, Lanham, 1996, 137–153.

nues to stick to our guns, although all the arguments have been made and mutually fully considered. This is different from how conciliation views this area. The phenomenology is then that of local peerhood: one is supposed to treat one's adversary in a philosophical dispute not simply as one's global peer, but also as a local peer. This then gives one a reason to abandon one's belief, and the same applies to one's adversary as well. Yet such a conciliatory strategy does not seem to be supported by one's phenomenology for the case of respectful philosophical disputes, contrary to differences in the restaurant bill maths case. In this last case, there is indeed no dispute that is committed to, the trait that enables conciliation and the abandoning of one's belief, inviting both parties to go back to the drawing board and newly start their practices.

The target of rational disagreement: propositions

The main target of rational disagreement – does it centre on propositions or on judgments? The answer is that two deeply different approaches are involved here. In short, the usual approach, aiming to justify beliefs that are supposedly involved in a rational disagreement, centres on *propositions* as its target. You and I then disagree about the *proposition* in question. As already mentioned, you assert p and I assert $\neg p$. What are propositions? A range of interpretations is available. They may be whatever is common to sentences of a kind, or again they may be material, or ideal. Further, they may reside in the mind, or in some objective state outside the mind. Whatever they are though, propositions have the following properties: they do not involve phenomenology, the rationality in accordance with them subscribes to explicit tractable reasoning and considers a breach of this as a case of a hard, malign contradiction. The propositional perspective is objective, proceeding from the third-person point of view. The embraced strategy is then that of conciliation. The beliefs involved are measured according to a probabilistic quantitative approach, they are supposed to come in degrees and they are then given the name of credences. Epistemic justification is mainly that of beliefs with externalist reliabilism as a justificatory strategy. A justificatory environment is wide, local or global. The epistemic basis is explicit propositional content without any background involved. If principles are involved in the exercise, their mode and effectiveness are explicit.

Judgments

The *judgmental* approach is contrary to the propositional approach to rational disagreement. It is strange that this approach has not recently been appreciated for it goes along with the separation between the objective, propositional and psychologically rooted judgmental ways to proceed. However, if you think about it for a while, judgment is really the stuff involved in the phenomenon of rational disagreement. The target of disagreement is then the judgment. A phenomenology is involved here, which as we have explained comes in local and global peerhood variants whereby the local variant is the feeling of one's superiority. The rationality involved accepts the implicit background effectiveness of principles/attitudes and their benign constitutive incoherence. The perspective taken is the evidential, first-person kind. The strategy embraced is non-conciliation. The beliefs involved are measured according to their quality so that we talk about the strength of a belief, which comes down to one or zero beliefs, not to grades of beliefs. Epistemic justification goes along with judgments, and a justificatory strategy is evidentialism. The justificatory environment is narrow and transglobal. The epistemic basis is the implicit morphological content and background. The mode of the effectiveness of principles is indirect and implicit via chromatic illumination from the morphological background. Here is a summary of the differences between the propositional and judgmental approaches to rational disagreement:

the target of disagreement	proposition	judgment
phenomenology	none	global and local peerhood, with their combinations
rationality	explicit tractable reasoning or a hard, maligned contradiction	implicit background effectiveness of principles/attitudes and benign incoherence
perspective taken	third-person objective	first-person subjective, evidential
strategy embraced	conciliation	non-conciliation

beliefs	quantitative probabilistic estimation of belief, credences	strength of belief; quality
epistemic justification of	beliefs	judgments
justification strategy	reliabilism	evidentialism
justificatory environment	wide: local, global	narrow: transglobal
explicit or implicit epistemic basis	propositional content, explicit, no background	morphological content, background
mode of effectiveness	principles are present explicitly, their mode of effectiveness is explicit	chromatic illumination by principles from the background, implicit

Propositions or judgments

The target of disagreement: propositions or judgments. The main issue here concerns the target of disagreement: are these propositions or are we dealing with judgments? However they may be interpreted, *propositions* are independent of mind: they may be Platonic ideal entities or even symbols of language of thought. In any case, they differ from judgments in that they will not involve any psychological background implicit forces. We take it that rational disagreement deals with *judgments*: the parties involved differ in their judgments on which propositions are correct or true, not with respect to the propositions. The main reason that we regard the target of rational disagreement, especially in philosophy, to be judgments is that these not only involve beliefs but beliefs that one is committed to, in some deep sense of the word. The question is whether the beliefs that are central to the discussion here go together with the propositions. The answer is that beliefs may be well centred in propositions, yet this would succeed without any deep commitment, and this then puts the intrinsic relation of belief into question as well, allowing for conciliation and therewith the related abandoning of a belief. If a belief appears in a judgment, then the commitment to it and a non-conciliation strategy offers itself.

Phenomenology: none, or once again local and global peerhood with their combinations

A *proposition*-centred approach concerning rational disagreement will not really involve any phenomenology. This may be easily understood given that propositions, as already noted, do not involve any psychological ingredients. There may indeed be an attitude to a proposition. But, if one takes this route, a dispute in a rational disagreement is not about the attitude and more about the proposition. Conversely, if *judgments* are the target of a rational disagreement then psychological ingredients are constitutively involved in whatever is under consideration. In this case, it is natural that phenomenology will be present. And phenomenology is indeed involved, one considers the opponent as a global peer (which applies to both conciliation and non-conciliation strategies), or as a local inferior (this applies to the non-conciliation strategy only).

Rationality: explicit tractable reasoning or a hard, malign contradiction on one side, and again the implicit background effectiveness of principles/attitudes and benign incoherence on the other

If the target of rational disagreement is a *proposition*, then the rationality involved tends to be conceived in the manner of explicit tractable reasoning. Disputed propositions are an outcome of an inferential process. If the reasoning has some bumps in it, it is supposed that rationality is not really being pursued anymore so that one ends up with a hard, malign contradiction that tears the positions involved apart. Indeed, given that you argue for p and that your opponent argues for $\neg p$, this seems to be an outright contradiction. Accordingly, proposition-centred rationality is exclusivist: either you follow the rules or you end up in contradiction. However, if you decide *judgment* is the target of rational disagreement you will allow for a kind of incoherence given that the judgment is a result of several incompatible forces that end up being there in a unique hopper. But then you can take this incoherence to be of a weak and benign nature, and for that one allows for the assertive nature of a judgment. Further, a judgment

does not require the explicit following of rules since it rests upon the implicit background effectiveness of principles and rules that find themselves in the judgment-producing hopper. A judgment is actually rooted in weak benign incoherence because without the tension of several forces in the background it would be unable to enter the scene.

The perspective taken: third-person objective or first-person subjective, evidential

If a *proposition* is the target of rational disagreement, then the perspective taken is objective and from the point of view of a third person, say, who is not directly involved in the dispute. If a *judgment* is the target of rational disagreement, the perspective involved will instead be a subjective, first-person view. A judgment namely involves you directly, it is not made from an objective distance. In fact, your judgment's evidential support follows normative justificatory perspective contextual parameters.⁶ Moreover, on the other hand there are the normative justificatory perspective parameters of your peer. This pushes the situation in the direction of non-conciliation.

The strategy embraced: conciliation or non-conciliation

If a *proposition* is the target of rational disagreement, you will embrace a strategy of conciliation since you will try to avoid a malign kind of contradiction. If a *judgment* is your target, you will instead lean towards the strategy of non-conciliation. It is finally your judgment and you will normally try to adhere to it. This is especially important in view of the epistemic justification of your judgment because once an epistemic justification comes from the evidential sensitivity it will be difficult for you to share this epistemic sensitivity with your peer.

⁶M. Potrč and V. Strahovnik, Justification in Context, *Acta Analytica*, 2005, 2, 91–104.

Beliefs: quantitative probabilistic estimation of belief, credences, or the strength of belief with its quality

The propositional approach views propositions as being assessed by beliefs. But these beliefs are assessed through probabilistic estimation procedures so that beliefs themselves appear as partial beliefs, with the name of credences. In contrast, the *judgmental* approach takes beliefs to be one or zero matters. It does not allow for grades of belief, and instead goes with the strength of a belief. The strength depends upon *evidence*. We all believe that Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander the Great, and that Bled is a town in Slovenia. Our belief in this latter assertion is stronger than that in the former assertion given that we have much more evidential support for the latter one. Strength of belief is a qualitative notion that cannot be reduced to quantitative degrees of belief.

Epistemic justification of beliefs or of judgments

Epistemic justification may target beliefs if we take the *propositional* approach. Epistemic justification may also be that of *judgments*. There will be different strategies for each of these. If a proposition is the target of rational disagreement, then justification of the belief involved may be offered as coming in degrees. The belief will not be primarily evidentially committed to as happens in a judgment, and will instead come as a probability estimation of the matter involved. The justification of a belief in the case of a judgment will be more a matter of yes or no. One either judges p to be the case or one judges p not to be the case. Then one does not lean on estimated quantitative degrees of one's belief. The belief that happens in judgments, as we have claimed, is a matter of one's commitment.

Justification strategy: reliabilism or evidentialism

The justification strategy that goes hand in hand with *propositions* will normally involve reliability, which is an externalist way to proceed. On the other hand, the justification strategy for a *jud-*

gment will tend to embrace evidentialism.⁷ Evidence is namely the justification you have for your judgment. If a belief targets a proposition, then it seems natural that the *relation* between that belief and proposition – that proposition being either an abstract entity or a concrete fact of the matter – will be externalist. This means that a belief will naturally target some external, causally or in some similar manner accessible reality. The justification will then follow that externalist route. If a belief is basically involved in a judgment, then the justification relation in question will be evidentialist for one's commitment will move into the centre of attention. Justification in the case of a judgment relies on evidence, on whatever seems reliable to the one who is judging.

The justificatory environment: wide local or global, or again narrow and transglobal

The justificatory environment for *propositions* will be externalist and thus wide. It will happen in the local environment first. Given that there will be counterexample cases such as fake barns, the external environment will then be taken more broadly as the global environment. If *judgment* is our departure, then the environment involved will be narrow and transglobal. This all goes well with *evidence* as the justificatory departure. One may start with reliabilism as an externalist justification. Justification will then come through the direct relation to proposition as something objective – there will be an objective relation between the belief and proposition as a form of an objective entity or state. However, once reliability encounters counterexamples the environment involved needs to be extended to the global and, further, to the transglobal one.⁸ We started with a wide externalist relation, and finished up with a narrow qualitative evidentialist relation.

⁷D. Henderson, T. Horgan and M. Potrč, Transglobal Evidentialism-Reliabilism, *Acta Analytica*, 2007, 22, 281–300.

⁸D. Henderson and T. Horgan, *The Epistemological Spectrum: At the Interface of Cognitive Science and Conceptual Analysis*, Oxford, 2011, M. Potrč, Justification Having and Morphological Content, *Acta Analytica*, 2000, 24, 151–173.

Explicit or implicit epistemic basis: propositional content, explicit, with no background; or again morphological content with the background involved

Propositions require an explicitly present epistemic basis where the content involved is the propositional content without any background playing a major role in supporting it. If *judgment* is our departure, then the epistemic basis will be implicit. It will involve background morphological content.⁹ This is indeed what seems to go together with the nature of a judgment. Notice that a judgment, as we have claimed, proceeds from a tension and this is the tension between several principles that prompt its coming into existence. The conflict between these principles, of which there are several, so that pluralism is involved, does not succeed in a judgment in a direct, explicit manner. The plurality of principles involved is effective from the psychological and normative background that constitutes the judgment.

Mode of effectiveness: principles are present explicitly, their mode of effectiveness is explicit; or again the chromatic illumination by principles from the background is implicit

Propositions will be supported by principles that need to be explicitly present. If they are to be effective in embracing propositions, principles must be explicitly present. Belief then seems to centre on some independent reality in a direct manner, which then involves an estimation of degrees in which belief encounters this reality. If *judgment* is our departure, then principles will be involved in an implicit manner. They will be effective from the background so they will chromatically illuminate the holistic judgmental situation. We have claimed that a judgment is rooted in a tension between several principles that find themselves in a situation. These principles are effective from the background of the

⁹T. Horgan and M. Potrč, The Epistemic Relevance of Morphological Content, *Acta Analytica*, 2010, 25, 155–173; M. Potrč, Morphological Content, *Acta Analytica*, 1999, 22, 133–149; T. Horgan and J. Tienson, *Connectionism and the Philosophy of Psychology*, Cambridge, MA, 1996.

judge's cognitive ability and normative sensibility¹⁰ (Foley 1993, Horgan and Potrč 2006), such that they provide the force in direction towards the judgment by illuminating it from that background. In fact, if beliefs are taken to be targeting propositions then it is hard to understand just what leads to the phenomenon of rational disagreement. We take it that this phenomenon is rooted in the background implicit knowledge of the judge, with his tendency to remain with his initial view and to refine it.

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¹⁰ R. Foley, *Working Without a Net: A Study of Egocentric Epistemology*, Oxford, 1993; T. Horgan and M. Potrč, Particularist Semantic Normativity, *Acta Analytica*, 2006, 21, 45–61.

