

Comments on Ballantyne's 'Verbal Disagreements and Philosophical Skepticism'

David James Barnett, 10/17/15

1. The problem

Philosophers disagree! This raises unpleasant possibilities:

skepticism: Informed philosophers cannot be justified in their philosophical beliefs.

pessimism: Philosophical inquiry does not strongly tend towards truth.

But consider the "verbal disagreement response". It holds:

- (1) merely verbal disagreement is common (aka, the "Strong Thesis")
- (2) this helps us avoid skepticism and pessimism

For comparison: steadfast views only respond to skepticism.

But Ballantyne rejects (2) and is skeptical of (1). I'll focus on his criticisms of (2).

2. Merely verbal agreement

If merely verbal disagreement is common, then merely verbal agreement is *possible*. But...

(i) Should we think that merely verbal agreement is common?

Perhaps apparent agreement *alone* is not strong evidence of genuine agreement.

But *given optimism*, it is. For apparent agreement will be less likely than apparent disagreement to be merely verbal.

Is our dialectical situation: (a) trying to establish optimism based on apparent agreement?, or (b) trying to explain away apparent evidence for pessimism?

(ii) Even if merely verbal agreement is common, does that support skepticism and/or pessimism?

...only supports skepticism if you need positive evidence from agreement for optimism, rather than absence of underminers.

...does support pessimism about *consensus*, but perhaps not about *truth*.

3. A nasty remaining problem

Ballantyne: The Strong Thesis implies that philosophers are terrible at distinguishing real from verbal disagreement. Why think they are better at first-order philosophy?

Reply: [crickets]