Dialecticality and Deep Disagreement

Scott F. Aikin

Abstract: In this paper, I will argue for a complex of three theses. First, that the problem of deep disagreement is an instance of the regress problem of justification. Second, that the problem of deep disagreement, as a regress problem, depends on a dialecticality requirement for arguments. Third, that the dialecticality requirement is plausible and defensible.

Keywords: argumentation, deep disagreement, regress problem of justification, norms of dialectic.

1. Regresses and Deep Disagreements

Regress problems are familiar to anyone who's interacted with a small child. The question of '*why?*' can be asked again, and again, and again. This interaction yields series of reasons that not only test our patience, but test our understanding of what is at issue. For regresses to get started, with the '*why?*' questions, four requirements for reasons must be in place. Call this *the recipe for justification regresses:*

> **Iterated Backing Requirement**
> Only Justified Reasons can Justify
>
> **Non-Circularity Requirement**
> Only non-circular justifications can justify
>
> **The Fact of Cases**
> There are Justified Commitments
>
> **Finitism**
> Justifying reasons are finite

Once nice thing about the recipe, as stated, is that it gives us a handy roadmap for solutions to the regress problem for justification, since it is an *apory set* – a collection of independently plausible, yet inconsistent, propositions, and the solution to the problem (stated in this case as the inconsistency of the set) is to identify which proposition one eliminates or revises to mitigate the tension between the members of the set.[1] So Foundationalists and Externalists modify the Backing Requirement, Coherentists modify Non-Circularity, Skeptics reject the Fact of Cases, and Epistemic Infinitists reject Finitism.

Deep disagreements are argumentative circumstances wherein there is insufficient overlap of agreed commitments and epistemic resources to resolve

---

[1] See Nicolas Rescher 1985, 2006, and 2008 and Aikin and Talisse 2017 for developments of the aporetic method.

an issue between disputants. So, in normal disagreements, we can appeal to some fact we both believe that bears on the question, or we have some decision procedure to determine the right answer. So we may appeal to a mutually recognized authority or consult a source we both take as reliable. With deep disagreements, however, we do not share enough in common or provide enough information to cut the argumentative ice. As Robert Fogelin puts it:

> The possibility of arguments, the possibility of a genuine argumentative exchange, depends ... on the fact that together *we* accept many things. (Fogelin 1985, 4)

> We get a deep disagreement when the argument is generated by a clash of framework propositions. (Fogelin 1985, 5)

The takeaway from Fogelin's invocation of Wittgensteinian hinge propositions is that we have commitments that ground much of our system of belief, but for which we do not have further reasons. As Wittgenstein describes these framework propositions:

> [T]he *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, as if it were like hinges on which those turn. (Wittgenstein OC, 341)

The key, though, is that these propositions are not shared by all, and so those for whom some proposition is dubitable seem to be unintelligible to those who cannot doubt them. Because these hinges "form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language)" (Wittgenstein OC, 401), those who consider doing without them are not, from the perspective of those convinced, making sense at all. And so, given this hypothesis of *hinge commitments*, deep disagreements are instances where arguments are impossible, because these sides cannot see each others' reasons as reasons at all. This is why Fogelin holds, "deep disagreements cannot be resolved through the use of argument, for they undercut the conditions essential to arguing" (Fogelin 1985, 8).[2]

It is not difficult, given this description of deep disagreements, to see how the problem of deep disagreements is an instance of the problem of the regress of justification. Here is how the argument for the view should go:

1) Framework Propositions are (supposed) reason regress-enders only for those who believe them

2) If framework propositions are not believed, then they do not end a reasons regress

---

[2] For the current representation of what 'hinge epistemology,' see Pritchard (2015) and Schönbaumsfeld (2017). Further, see Siegel (forthcoming) for a critique of not only the hinge commitments in question. Additionally, a critique of the notion of 'depth' in deep disagreement, namely that it can be *gradable*, can be found in Duran (2016) and Aikin (forthcoming b).

3) Deep disagreements are defined by non-shared framework propositions

4) *Therefore:* Deep disagreements have no regress-ending reasons

What's needed, then, is a way to see that what I'd called the *recipe for the justification regress problem* to have a special instance for the problem of deep disagreements.[3] Here's what I see as the *recipe for deep disagreements:*

Backing
Only reasons acknowledged as good reasons can play proper role of backing

Non-Circularity
No reason can be in its own backing ancestry

Fact of Cases
Normal arguments: Yes – shared reasons
Deep disagreements: No shared backing reasons

Finitism
Arguments are finite endeavors

The key is that, given that backing in the case of deep disagreements, is driven by the fact of controversy – if your audience doesn't accept a premise or support relation essential to your argument, that is a problem with your argument. This thought about the deep disagreement instance of the backing requirement must be expanded.

The backing requirement, given this description of invoking not only a further supporting reason, but one that is acceptable to an audience, brings the *dialecticality* of the backing element into sharp focus. This should be contrasted with the demand of epistemic backing, which is only that a proposition can justify only if it itself is justified. In the case of dialecticality, not only must the justification be transmitted for a good argument, but that support must be *mutually recognized.* So, the contrast can be captured as follows:

Epistemic Backing:
P may justify Q only if P is *justified*

Dialectical Backing:
P may serve as a premise supporting Q only if P's acceptability is *shared*

Take 'shared' in these cases to be roughly that the claim's status is recognized as having a positive status, endorsed as at least a *prima facie* reason without a clear defeater, and one that has achieved either explicit or tacit approval in the exchange. This yields the following complex norm for argument:

Dialecticality Requirement:
An argument is good only if it is *dialectically adequate* to its audience

---

[3] Elsewhere (Aikin, forthcoming a), I have argued that the problem of deep disagreement is a special instance of the problem of the criterion, which I argue is a regress problem.

> An argument is dialectically adequate to its audience only if its illative core (the premises and their support for the conclusion) is *accepted* or *acceptable* to its audience

The core thought behind the dialecticality requirement is the idea that arguments are occasions wherein we are exchanging reasons, our objective is to come to a mutual accord, one reached not only by the best reasons, but on our shared regard for those reasons as best.

The dialecticality requirement is a pretty demanding norm, one that takes on not only a commitment to being an exercise of our shared rationality, but an exercise of our *recognizing* that shared rationality as such. It is an exercise of what Ralph Johnson calls *manifest rationality:*

> What is distinctive of argumentation is that it is an exercise in *manifest rationality*, by which I mean not only that a good argument is itself a rational product [...] but that it is part of the nature of the enterprise that *this product appear as rational* as well. (Johnson 2000, 144)

The point of manifest rationality is that we be committed to not only ways that are *good* for resolving our differences, but to ways that we *actually see as good*. It is ruinous, on analogy, for a just decision to nevertheless *appear unjust* to those affected, or for a fair decision to have the *air of improper partiality*. Arguments, like these other shared social goods and ends, have their purchase only if, in our living up to their norms, not only live up to the norms, but also *appear as doing so, too*.

Manifestness is a norm undergirded by two appealing thoughts. The first is a norm of rational respect, one of recognition. Here is a way to capture it: Following the Dialecticality Norm… is a norm of *rational respect*.

> With argument, we are trying to engage someone's reason, so that they see the world in a way we can share. Rational resolution requires that the rationality of the reasons be manifest.

Not caring what others, with whom one disputes, see as decisive reason is a failure to see them as having the moral and cognitive standing of regard. We must live our lives from the inside, and not being moved by this thought when taking up with what others see from their instances of 'inside' is to refuse to appreciate and respect those with whom one disagrees and argues. If one doesn't have that respect, then why *argue* in the first place?

A second reason supporting the manifestness commitment behind the dialecticality requirement is simply that it is good pragmatic policy. Arguments are more effective and durable if we live by the dialecticality norm. Here is how to capture the thought:

> With argument, we are trying to resolve an issue in a way that is quick and durable. Were we not to respect the dialecticality norm, we'd make the argument drag out longer and have more easily rejected resolutions.

The lesson is, if we go for dialectical arguments, our conclusions are more likely to stick.

2. Dialecticality and its Discontents

So far, what I've done is argue for two theses – that the problem of deep disagreement is a particular form of the problem of the regress of justification, and that instances of the regress-generating backing requirement for arguments in the recipe for the deep disagreement problem is a norm roughly captured by the dialecticality requirement for arguments. The question, then, is whether, if the regress problem can be mitigated by rejecting a proposition in 'the recipe' (and the backing requirement, in particular), then the dialecticality requirement can and should be rejected to solve the problem of deep disagreement. The most prominent critic of the dialecticality requirement for arguments is Richard Feldman. He holds that the consequence of accepting dialecticality is a form of audience-relativism for argument-quality. In particular, if one requires dialecticality, "there is no such thing as the simple quality of an argument" (Feldman 1994, 172). In support of this thought, Feldman proposes two cases:

Case 1: The Blackboard

[I]f I walk into a classroom and see an argument written on the blackboard, I can evaluate it without knowing for whom it was intended. I don't ask, 'Are there premises justified for the intended audience?' Instead, I consider the merits of the premises and their connection to the conclusion. (Feldman 1994, 172)

Case 2: The Newspaper

[Y]ou come across an argument [...] in the local newspaper. You know most of the readers of the paper are not justified in accepting some of the premises, although you know that the premises are in fact true [....] You'd be forced to say, using the acceptability theory, that the argument is no good. It seems clear to me, however, that it would be a mistake simply to leave one's evaluation at that. If you know the premises are true and that they support the conclusion, **then there is surely something good about the argument**, even if its intended audience lacks knowledge. (Feldman 1994, 172-173; emphasis added)

The key to a reply to Feldman's cases is that with both, Feldman has inserted *himself* as the target audience for the arguments at issue. I believe this is easy to see when we consider the fact that arguments, as arguments, are both *processes* and *products* – that is, they are both diachronic exchanges between people, and they are structural relations between propositions. And just as we can evaluate the exchanges in terms of the structural relations between propositions, the structural relations can be evaluated in terms of how they are produced in the exchanges. Consider Feldman's Blackboard case. Let Feldman view the argument on the blackboard, from where he sits, as a *false dilemma*. Perhaps between A and B (with B eliminated). He may agree that B should be

eliminated, but he holds that C is also a relevant option, but in the argument given, it's neglected. But imagine, further, that the argument as assessed (*A or B, not B; so A*) is itself the product of a longer process, one stage of which has the trilemma, with A, B, and C as options and C eliminated. For the participants in the longer dialogue, the argument that Feldman would see as a false dilemma is not – this is because the *tertium quid* has already been eliminated. Insofar as we think that the dialogical history of an argument as a product is relevant to its quality, the audience-indexing for the dialecticality requirement must be a component of evaluation.

The relativism Feldman worries about needn't follow. One reason is that Feldman is right that we can still acknowledge, for example in the Newspaper case, that there are elements of arguments that can be successful, independent of audience and their assessment. In the newspaper case, Feldman still holds that "there is something good" about the argument that dialecticality doesn't capture, and this is correct. But the dialecticality requirement is only *one necessary condition among many*, and so cannot capture *all* the norms of argument. So, for example, a valid argument will still have something good about it, regardless of audience capacity to detect it, but for the argument yet to completely perform its function, the audience still must be able to assent to that validity. The same, the reasoning should go, for Feldman's Newspaper case where the argument, were the audience more scientifically literate they would see that it is scientifically well-founded.

The dialecticality requirement, as stated, is only a necessary condition for argumentative success. Being properly hooked up with the argumentative process, that the argument is a relevant contribution to the discussion, and is one that adds to the progress toward resolution or clarification of an issue, is what this requirement identifies. And it, alongside other structural and purely epistemic matters, identifies the aim of argument improving our cognitive position on a matter in question.

3. Conclusion

I've argued here for a complex of theses. The primary is that the problem of deep disagreement is an instance of the regress problem of justification, but it is one with a particular version of the backing requirement – what I've called the *dialecticality requirement.* In particular, given the notion of a deep disagreement on offer, the problem is best captured by the thought that arguments about hinge propositions can never be dialectically successful. One way to resolve the theoretical problem of deep disagreements is to reject the dialecticality requirement, but I've argued here that the norm is very appealing on both recognitional and pragmatic grounds. And further, I've argued that the case for rejecting the dialecticality requirement, as we see with Feldman's two cases, is not well-founded.

The lesson, as I take it, is that if we are to have a solution to the problem of deep disagreement, given that it is a dialectical form of the regress problem for justification, it must be (a) consistent with the dialecticality requirement, and (b) be a recognizable solution to the regress problem for justification. Classically, the prospects for a program of reply to the problem have been very dim. Sextus Empiricus's Five Modes is founded on the notion of dialectical regresses, and his solution is skepticism (see PH 1:175). That said, everything about the problem of deep disagreement depends on its description of being a clash between hinge propositions, and perhaps there is reason to be skeptical about the prospects of hinge epistemology.

References

Aikin, Scott F. Forthcoming a. "Deep Disagreement and the Problem of the Criterion." *Topoi.*

Aikin, Scott F. Forthcoming b. "Deep Disagreement, the Dark Enlightenment, and the Rhetoric of Red Pills." *The Journal of Applied Philosophy.*

Aikin, Scott F. and Robert B. Talisse. 2017. "Pragmatism and Metaphilosophy." In *Pragmatism and Objectivity,* edited by Sami Pihlström, 31-45. New York: Routledge.

Duran, Claudio. 2016. "Levels of Depth in Deep Disagreement." In *Argumentation, Objectivity, and Bias: Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation.* OSSA Paper Archive, Paper 109.

Feldman, Richard. 1994. "Good Arguments." In *Knowledge and the Social*, edited by Fred Schmitt, 155-188. Rowman and Littlefield.

Fogelin, Robert. 1985. "The Logic of Deep Disagreements." *Informal Logic.* 7(1): 3-11.

Johnson, Ralph H. 2000. *Manifest Rationality.* London: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Pritchard, Duncan. 2015. *Epistemic Angst.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rescher, Nicholas. 1985. *The Strife of Systems.* Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press.

Rescher, Nicholas. 2006. *Philosophical Dialectics.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Rescher, Nicholas. 2008. *Aporetics.* Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press.

Schönbaumsfeld, Gina. 2017. *The Illusion of Doubt.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Siegel, Harvey. Forthcoming. "Hinges, Disagreements, and Arguments." *Proceedings of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation – 2018.*

Sextus Empiricus. 1990. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Trans. R. G. Bury. Amherst: Prometheus Books. Referenced as: (PH Book#.Page#).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On Certainty.* Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. New York: Basil Blackwell. Referenced as: (OC, Section#).