

## DISAGREEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE: THE CASE OF PLATO'S *ALCIBIADES*

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**Abstract.** If there is widespread disagreement in an intellectual community, are its members in some sense failing epistemically? In this paper, I will offer a reconstruction of the first sustained attempt to answer this question. The attempt is made in the *Alcibiades*, a dialogue attributed to Plato. There, Socrates argues that the disagreeing parties lack knowledge. I will offer a reconstruction of this argument. Socrates relies on a controversial premiss according to which systematic and persistent disagreement within a group is an indication that its individual members lack knowledge. This claim rests on an optimistic assumption, explicit in the *Alcibiades*, that a person who possesses knowledge in a domain is able to *persuade* the audience and bring it to an agreement with the speaker. Knowledge, if present, spreads within the community unobstructed.

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### 1. Introduction

If there is widespread disagreement in an intellectual community, is the community or its members in some sense failing epistemically? This question has recently been debated specifically in relation to the lack of consensus within the community of philosophers (see, e.g. Cappelen 2017, Chalmers 2015, Stoljar 2017). Although philosophy is perhaps especially prone to disagreement, the question itself is perfectly general. Assuming that most members of an intellectual community are not biased and are motivated to find out the truth, what epistemically valuable feature(s), if any, is the disagreeing community or its members lacking?

In what follows, I will offer a reconstruction of the first sustained attempt to answer this question. The attempt is made in the *Alcibiades*, a dialogue attributed

to Plato.<sup>1</sup> The answer to the question Socrates (the character in the dialogue) offers is straightforward – the members of a disagreeing intellectual community lack *knowledge*. Socrates argues (*Alc.* 110D3-112D7) that the fact that people (*hoi polloi*, people in general, ‘the Many’, the multitude) disagree about justice is strong evidence for the claim that the people lack knowledge of justice. This argument has received almost no scholarly attention, since it looks like the argument from disagreement (henceforth DA) is either so obvious as to be uninteresting or simply unsound. Which one it is seems to depend on what we take the argument’s conclusion to be.<sup>2</sup> If we construe DA as proving that some people are ignorant of justice, then DA appears to rely on a premise according to which genuine disagreement shows that (at least) one party to the disagreement is mistaken. That is not terribly interesting, since it is a truism that when it comes to genuine disagreements, conflicting statements cannot be simultaneously true. If we construe the argument as aiming to prove that no member of ‘the people in general’ has knowledge of justice, then it looks like DA relies on a premise which says that disagreement shows that *neither* party of the disagreement possess knowledge. But that premise is simply false. So, it can easily seem that DA is either unsound or uninteresting.

The aim of this paper is to argue that, contrary to appearances, DA is an interesting argument that deserves to be taken seriously. According to the reconstruction that I will offer, DA relies on a controversial premiss according to which *systematic and persistent* disagreement within a group is an indication that its each individual member lacks knowledge. This is a remarkable claim. I will argue that the claim rests on an optimistic assumption, explicit in the *Alcibiades*, that a person who possesses knowledge is able to *persuade* their audience and bring the audience to an agreement with the speaker. Knowledge, if present, spreads within the community unobstructed. Consequently, systematic, persistent, and widespread disagreement shows that the parties of the disagreement are ignorant.

Plato does sometimes hint that he takes disagreement to be epistemically significant (*Phdr.* 263A-C) and sometimes even suggests that disagreement indicates ignorance (see, e.g. *Meno* 96A-C, *Hip. Min.* 372B-C). Yet, these considerations are offered in passing and no sustained discussion is provided. *Alcibiades*, however, provides an *explicit* argument from disagreement to ignorance. By offering a reconstruction of the argument, I hope to shed some new light on the argument and add another consideration to the growing pile of reasons for viewing the historically influential *Alcibiades* worthy of careful study, regardless of whether it is written by Plato himself or not.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I will remain agnostic as to whether the *Alcibiades* is written by Plato or rather a near-contemporary Platonic author. I will be assuming that it is Platonic ‘enough’ to warrant a discussion of it within the framework of Plato’s (other) dialogues. For a recent argument for the *Alcibiades* being by Plato, see Denyer (2001). For a case against, see Smith (2004).

<sup>2</sup> The scholars that explicitly discuss DA include Proclus (in O’Neill 1962), Olympiodorus (in Griffin 2015), Denyer (2001), Mintoff (2012), and Döring (2015).

<sup>3</sup> According to Iamblichus (Proclus, *in Alc.* 11), the students of philosophy ought to read the *Alcibiades* at the very the beginning of their studies of Plato (for a discussion of the ancient reception of the *Alcibiades*, see Renaud and Tarrant 2015). Ever since Schleiermacher made an influential case (in the Introduction to his *Platon’s Werke*, dated 1809) against the *Alcibiades* being authentic, scholars have paid less attention to the dialogue than it deserves. In recent years, this has changed (for recent readings of the *Alcibiades* that focus on the epistemological issues, see Ferguson 2019 and Leigh forthcoming).

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I will place DA in its context and give an overview of the target passage, i.e. *Alcibiades* 110D3-112D7. I will also present the main available options of interpretation and show why they are problematic. In section 3, I will offer my own reconstruction of DA and compare it with other Platonic sources. I will end by suggesting that DA poses a genuine philosophical challenge for communities where disagreement is rampant.

## 2. The Argument from Disagreement

I will begin by giving a brief overview of the target passage in its context within the *Alcibiades*. Self-assured Alcibiades has admitted to Socrates that his goal is to take part in the political life of Athens as soon as possible (by giving a speech at the Assembly). Alcibiades' long-term ambitions are nothing short of becoming the most influential man in Europe and Asia, so that his "reputation and influence saturates all mankind"<sup>4</sup> (105C). Socrates' goal is to curb Alcibiades' enthusiasm by bringing him to admit that he lacks expertise<sup>5</sup> (*epistêmê*, *eidenai*) that is required for a successful political career, i.e. for speaking and advice-giving at the Assembly. The expertise in question concerns justice (*to dikaion*). In Plato's so-called Socratic dialogues Socrates often brings his interlocutors to contradict themselves in order to exhibit their lack of expertise in the subject matter discussed. In the *Alcibiades*, however, Socrates proceeds differently. He does not focus on the *content* of Alcibiades' presumed expertise, but rather on its *sources*. Socrates argues that if Alcibiades does indeed possess knowledge of justice, he can only have acquired it from two sources: either he has discovered it himself or learned it from others. After some prodding, Alcibiades admits that he has not discovered this knowledge himself and claims that he has acquired this expertise by learning it from 'people' (*hoi polloi*).

Alcibiades echoes widespread view in classical Athens that is expressed by a diverse group of Socratic interlocutors, e.g. Protagoras (esp. *Prot.* 325D-328A), Callicles (*Gorg.* 483B-484A), Anytus, (*Meno* 92E-93A), and Meletus (*Ap.* 24D-25A). According to this view, young Athenians are expected to acquire their moral education from the community because all and every Athenian citizen is able to teach virtuous behavior to the young. In the *Alcibiades*, the term 'people' (*hoi polloi*) is used in a very general sense, it covers Athenians and Spartans, and even Trojans (who were barbarians), i.e. everyone who does not have specialized knowledge in a subject matter under discussion (for some discussion of the term '*hoi polloi*' in Greek ethics, see Garrett 1993). Throughout Plato's dialogues, Socrates is skeptical of the idea that

<sup>4</sup> All the translations of the Platonic dialogues derive from Cooper's (1997) "Collected works" with slight modifications. For the Greek text of the *Alcibiades*, I will be relying on Denyer's (2001) edition.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout the *Alcibiades*, *eidenai* and *epistasthai* are used interchangeably. There is a longstanding debate whether these terms ought to be translated as to 'know' or to 'understand'. In this paper, I will translate both verbs as 'to know'. Nothing of importance will depend on the translation. I will translate the noun *epistêmê* as either 'expertise' or 'knowledge'. For some recent discussion of this issue, see Schwab (2015).

people (in general) have moral expertise (cf. *Crito* 44B) and in the *Alcibiades*, too, he points out that people cannot even teach checkers, let alone justice – it is unlikely that those who are unable to educate in matters so trivial can teach something much more complicated (110E). Alcibiades retorts that people have been perfectly able to teach him Greek which *is* an important skill. Socrates agrees and adds that people have the ability to teach Greek, because in order to teach something, one must first know it oneself, and people do indeed possess this knowledge. An indication that people know a subject matter is that they *agree* with one another. Socrates goes on to claim that *disagreement*, on the other hand, is an indication that the disagreeing parties do *not* have the requisite knowledge for teaching: “If people disagree about something, would you say that they know it? – Of course not. – Then how could they be teachers of it? – They couldn’t possibly” (111B). People agree, both privately and publicly, about what a stone or wood is, since they give the same answers when asked about them and reach for the same things when they want to grasp a piece of wood or a piece of stone (111C).

It is worth pausing here to consider what Socrates means by ‘knowledge’, ‘agreement’, and ‘teaching’. In fact, the target passage is somewhat vague about what these concepts are meant to capture. In the Platonic context, knowledge is a loaded word with a variety of meanings, ranging from every-day humdrum acquaintance with a person (e.g. *Meno* 71B) to the elevated grasp of the Platonic Forms (e.g. the discussion of knowledge in *Rep.* V-VII). The concept of knowledge operative in the target passage seems to fall between these extremes and entail the *ability to recognize* instances of *F*-ness: one knows what a horse or a human being is like (*poion*) when one reliably recognizes horses and people. By parity of reasoning, the same should apply to justice, too: one knows justice only if one is able to reliably recognize just actions and people.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the notion of teaching *F*-ness implicit in the target passage should be taken as conferring the ability to reliably recognize instances of *F*-ness from one person to another. Socrates’ point is that one can confer the ability only if one has it oneself. Finally, how should we understand the notion of ‘agreement’ (*homologeîn*) and disagreement (*diapheresthai*) in the target passage? Socrates emphasizes that people agree when they are disposed to speak and act in similar ways in situations where *F*-ness is concerned: “If you ask them, don’t they give the same answers (*homologousin*)? Don’t they reach (*hormousin*) for the same things when they want to get some wood or some stone?” (111B-C) The most straightforward manner to construe agreement about *F*-ness (and in what follows, I will assume that this is indeed what Socrates has in mind) is that people agree about *F*-ness not only when they say the same things but when they hold the same *beliefs* about *F*-ness, i.e. when they believe (either in a dispositional sense or in an occurrent sense) about the same things that these things are *F*.<sup>7</sup> Disagreement, on

<sup>6</sup> This ability to recognize just actions and people is only a necessary condition for knowing, because Socrates points out later (117A-B) that knowing *F*-ness (e.g. justice) also requires the ability to tell whether all instances of *F* are also instances of *G* (e.g. whether admirable things are also beneficial).

<sup>7</sup> I am using the concept of ‘belief’ in a generic sense to cover beliefs (in the technical sense), opinions, acceptances, and judgments. An important feature of belief is that it is often dispositional. For an excellent discussion about whether the contemporary technical notion of ‘belief’ is applicable to Plato’s epistemology, see Moss and Schwab (2019).

the other hand, occurs in situations where people believe about different things that these things are *F* or when some people believe about the same things that they are *F* and others believe that they are not-*F*.

Socrates goes on to argue in the following manner. People agree about and know whether this animal over there is a horse. However, people do not know, and so they are not able to teach to others, what kind of horse is able to run well or which human is healthy. Alcibiades immediately agrees with this, presumably because this is something that only *experts* are capable of doing (although this assumption is not spelled out). Socrates continues by emphasizing that the fact that people “disagree with each other about these things is a sufficient indication (*hikanon tekmerion*) that they don’t have knowledge of them, and are not ‘four-square teachers’ of them?” (111D-E) and Alcibiades agrees. Socrates takes disagreement between the people to be *conclusive* evidence of their ignorance.<sup>8</sup> Next, Socrates points out that people disagree over *justice* much more strongly (*sphodra*) than they disagree over other matters – they dispute each other to the point of fighting and killing each other in wars and battles. And this is where Socrates clinches the argument. If the parties are engaged in such an intense disagreement, they cannot be said that to *know* the subject matter, justice:

Are we to say that people have knowledge of something if they disagree so much about it that in their disputes with each other they resort to such extreme measures? – Obviously not. – But aren’t you giving credit to teachers of this sort who, as you yourself admit, have no knowledge? (112C-D).

With this, Socrates has concluded the argument – it cannot be the case that Alcibiades has learned about justice from the people, since the people do not have knowledge they can pass on. But what exactly has Socrates managed to prove? In what sense do people lack knowledge of justice and how does the presence of disagreement indicate that they lack it? I will now discuss the main interpretive options for reconstructing DA that have been covered in the literature. Although, as I will argue, none of these options is ultimately plausible, they all have valuable features that help me reconstruct my own version of the argument in the next section. It is useful to have the general structure of the argument before us:

The Argument from Disagreement (DA):

- (1) People disagree about justice (111E-112D);
- (2) Those who disagree about *F*-ness do not have knowledge of *F*-ness (111B);
- (3) People do not have knowledge of justice (112C-D, from 1, 2);
- (4) Only those who have knowledge of *F*-ness are able to teach *F*-ness (111A);
- (5) People have not been able to teach Alcibiades justice (112D, from 3, 4);
- (6) One can only learn from those who can teach (implicit);
- (7) Alcibiades has not learned about justice from people (112D).

<sup>8</sup> That the expression *hikanon tekmerion* should be taken as offering strong commendation for evidence is argued in Denyer (2001: 125-6).

One of the main interpretative issues about AD is how to understand the scope of ‘*hoi polloi*’ or ‘people’. More precisely, is this term used collectively or distributively, i.e. is it the case that *each person* is shown to be ignorant, or is it rather the case that people are ignorant collectively, as a group? In the target passage ‘*hoi polloi*’ is ambiguous between these two readings. The first available option reads ‘*hoi polloi*’ collectively, whereas the remaining two options read ‘*hoi polloi*’ distributively. The first option, gestured at by Denyer (2001: 122) can be formulated in the following manner:

- DA, Option A: (1<sub>A</sub>) People (read collectively, i.e. viewed as a group) disagree about justice;
- (2<sub>A</sub>) If there is disagreement about *F*-ness, then the community consisting of disagreeing parties does not have knowledge of *F*-ness;
- (3<sub>A</sub>) Therefore, people (read collectively) do not have knowledge of justice;
- (4<sub>A</sub>) Only those who have knowledge of *F*-ness are able to teach *F*-ness;
- (5<sub>A</sub>) Therefore, people (read collectively) have not been able to teach Alcibiades justice.

Option A has a basis in the Platonic corpus. When Socrates speaks in the Platonic corpus about the democratic *hoi polloi*, he sometimes conceives of it as a kind of super-individual, as a mass of people capable of feelings and beliefs. The *hoi polloi* are prone to expressing these feelings and beliefs loudly at the assembly, or in a theater, or in court thus influencing the moral development of a young person (see, esp. *Rep.* 492B-C, a passage which in all likelihood implicitly refers to Alcibiades, see Wilburn 2015). Picking up beliefs from an anonymous set of people parallels the example of language-learning that Alcibiades has proposed earlier (111A). One cannot (in most cases) pinpoint the person from whom one has picked up a particular word. In that case, it is natural to point to the linguistic community as the source. Similarly, if one is unable to point to the source of one’s basic beliefs about justice, one is perhaps entitled to fall back on the community as a source. Thus, DA can be read as picking out *hoi polloi* as a community or as a group. Socrates’ point would then be that if individual people disagree about *F*-ness, then the group to which they belong cannot be said to have knowledge of *F*-ness.

According to Option A, people as a community cannot be said to know, since the beliefs of individual people form an inconsistent set within the community as a kind of super-individual and, consequently, the beliefs of this super-individual cannot count as knowledge (for some contemporary accounts of group epistemic agents, see essays in Lackey 2014). This harmonizes well with the Socratic conception of knowledge, according to which an agent with knowledge minimally holds a consistent set of beliefs (see, for example Benson 2000). This reading also captures the anonymity involved in being taught ‘by the people’ and the conclusion (5<sub>A</sub>) validly follows from the premises.

However, Option A cannot be right. First, Option A relies on a sophisticated conceptual framework involving group epistemic agents – it is difficult to see how a relatively naïve Alcibiades would be able to actually follow this argument. Later in the dialogue Alcibiades admits (116E) he does not even understand the conceptual connections between inconsistency in belief and ignorance. If Option A were the correct reconstruction of DA, we would be entitled to expect Socrates to do more explanatory work than he does.

More importantly, premise (2<sub>A</sub>) leaves open the possibility that the community could, in fact, hold several (or even many) individual members who do possess knowledge of justice. The argument has shown us that the *group* cannot be said to have knowledge, but we are not entitled to infer from this anything about the *individual* members of the group (or about some sub-groups, for that matter). And that means that (5<sub>A</sub>) cannot support (7) – Alcibiades could easily have learned about justice from individual people (or from some sub-group of ‘the people’). Protagoras, for one, claims about Athens that “everyone here is a teacher of virtue” (*Prot.* 327E). Moral education of the young Athenians consisted both of a group effort and of individual guidance (as recognized in *Alc.* 118E, *Prot.* 319E-320B, 325C-326C, see also Marrou 1982: chapter 2, Hadot 1995: 32ff) In this context, for DA to be dialectically effective, it needs to show that disagreement undermines *individual* claims to knowledge. As Proclus puts it: “Hereupon, Socrates, like some Hercules cutting off the heads of the Hydra, shows that none of the multitude is worthy of credit as regards the knowledge of what is just and unjust” (Proclus *in Alc.* 243, transl. O’Neill). And it is certainly more natural to read ‘*hoi polloi*’ in the target passage distributively (see Denyer 2001: 123). But the problem is that it is unclear how Socrates goes about this Herculean task of showing that individual people are ignorant.

There are two possible readings available in the literature that enable DA to reach a conclusion about ignorance of individual people. Both readings take Socrates’ use of ‘*hoi polloi*’ to be distributive. A Neo-Platonic commentator Olympiodorus suggests the following reconstruction:<sup>9</sup>

- DA, Option B:
- (1<sub>B</sub>) People (read distributively, i.e. as individuals) disagree about justice;
  - (2<sub>B</sub>) If there is disagreement about *F*-ness, then at least one of the parties to disagreement has no knowledge of *F*-ness;
  - (3<sub>B</sub>) Therefore, at least some people do not have knowledge of justice.
  - (4<sub>B</sub>) Only those who have knowledge of *F*-ness are able to teach *F*-ness;
  - (5<sub>B</sub>) Therefore, people (read distributively, i.e. as individuals) have not been able to teach Alcibiades justice.

<sup>9</sup> “Now, it is not always the case that people who agree with one another [about a subject] know it (consider the case of Democriteans, who agree among themselves that the void exist, but are mistaken for this very reason, because in fact it does not); but those who do know do agree with one another, as we can see by the conversion by contraposition of the following premiss, that those who do not agree are ignorant” (Olympiodorus, *in Alc.* 92,1-10, transl. Griffin).

(1<sub>B</sub>) claims that every member of the *hoi polloi* disagrees about justice with some other member(s) of the community. This is plausible. Option B also has the upside that (2<sub>B</sub>) is a conceptual truth. Knowledge is factive, i.e. if someone knows that *p* then this entails that *p* is true (see, e.g. *Tht.* 186C-E). Given the factivity of knowledge and that disagreement involves accepting contrary claims (that cannot both be true) by the disagreeing parties, it follows that at least one party to the disagreement is necessarily mistaken and consequently cannot be said to know (which is compatible with neither of the parties to disagreement possessing knowledge). However, the problem is that all that one can conclude from (2<sub>B</sub>) is that at least *some* people are ignorant about justice. But this is in tension with (5<sub>B</sub>). Why should Alcibiades accept that the people *he has learned from* are ignorant? All that DA can show, according to Option B, is that Alcibiades cannot be sure that he has not learned about justice from those who know. But Socrates aims for more than that: he is clearly trying to get Alcibiades to admit that he has not acquired knowledge of justice from people, and not that Alcibiades cannot be *sure* that he has acquired it. In other words, (5<sub>B</sub>) ignores the possibility of there being people that *do* possess knowledge of justice. From the claim that some people do not possess knowledge of justice, it does not follow that Alcibiades could not have learned from some other people. On this reading, the argument is invalid. Option B fails as a possible reconstruction of DA.

The reconstruction of DA that has the support of most scholars is the following. Commentators (e.g. Proclus (*in Alc.* 267,20-268,18), Denyer 2001) have pointed out that Socrates appears to speak not only of people disagreeing with each other but also of people disagreeing within *themselves* individually.<sup>10</sup> Now, Socrates of the Plato's Socratic dialogues sometimes does refer to an agent with an inconsistent set of beliefs as an agent disagreeing with herself (e.g. *Gorg.* 482B). Socrates also takes the inconsistency within an agent's framework of beliefs to be a sufficient condition for an agent's ignorance (see Benson 2000). So, at least on a first glance, this proposal is textually well supported. In laying out the premises for DA, Socrates does say that "So they [people] agree with each other (*allêloi*) in these cases, as we said, and with themselves (*autoi heautoi*) when acting privately. But don't they also agree in public?" (111E8) and then, later "does it seem to you people in general actually agree among themselves (*autoi heautoi*) or with each other (*allêloi*) about just and unjust people and actions?" (112A2). Both Proclus (*In Alc.* 267-268) and Denyer (2001: 124) take the expression "with themselves" to refer to individual, intra-personal disagreement, i.e. to a person holding inconsistent beliefs. The corresponding reconstruction is the following:

<sup>10</sup> Here is Proclus' take on the passage: "We must also pay close attention to the accuracy of this premiss. For it is those who agree neither "with themselves" nor "with each other" whom he denies possess knowledge, and these are the ignorant since those who know agree with themselves, so that both forms of disagreement apply only those who are ignorant, but in no way to those who know. But the knowledgeable do not disagree with the ignorant (since on the contrary they are perfect and regulate them and recall them to their own condition); it is the ignorant who separate themselves from those who know; because of the disagreement within themselves, they differ even with their betters. So those who know and those who don't even differ with each other, consequently the knowledgeable do not differ at all" (Proclus, *In Alc.* 267,20-268,18, trans. O'Neill).



- DA, Option C: (1<sub>C</sub>) People (read distributively) disagree about justice, both (i) with each other inter-personally and (ii) within themselves intra-personally;
- (2<sub>C</sub>) If the parties to disagreement are involved in both (i) inter-personal and (ii) intra-personal disagreement about *F*-ness, then none of the parties to disagreement has knowledge of *F*-ness;
- (3<sub>C</sub>) Therefore, people (read distributively) do not have knowledge of justice;
- (4<sub>C</sub>) Only those who have knowledge of *F*-ness are able to teach *F*-ness;
- (5<sub>C</sub>) Therefore, people (read distributively) have not been able to teach Alcibiades justice.

As mentioned above, option C has a solid basis in Socratic epistemology. The *Alcibiades* itself provides a vivid example of inconsistency within someone's framework of beliefs: after Socrates has convinced Alcibiades that the admirable and beneficial are identical (contrary to what Alcibiades initially thought), Alcibiades exclaims: "I swear by the gods, Socrates, I have no idea what I mean – I must be in some absolutely bizarre condition! When you ask me questions, first I think one thing, and then I think something else" (116E). Socrates then says that this moving back and forth indicates Alcibiades' *ignorance*. Option C thus gets us to the desired conclusion: if no one single person of 'people in general' knows justice (since all people hold inconsistent set of beliefs about justice), then it follows of necessity (given the ancillary premises) that Alcibiades could not have learned about justice from *hoi polloi*.

However, there are serious problems with Option C. First, if intra-personal disagreement conclusively shows that people do not possess knowledge, then inter-personal disagreement becomes simply redundant. In other words, the worry is that (2<sub>C</sub>) would get Socrates to his desired conclusion without the inclusion of clause (i). But this goes against the spirit of the entire passage where the emphasis is manifestly on intersubjective disagreement (disagreements *between* people are mentioned at *Alc.* 111B3-4, 111B11-C3, 111E3, 111E9-10, 112A6-7, 112B4-D6). And indeed, there is a more natural translation of the expression '*autoi heautois*' where the disagreement simply refers to *private* disputes, and not disputes *within* an individual agent. Socrates' depictions of disagreements over justice invariably invoke large groups like Athenians and Spartans. When Socrates asks Alcibiades whether it seems to him that people actually "agree among themselves or with others", he can easily be read as referring to the inner disputes over justice within, e.g. the Athenian camp, and not the intra-personal disagreement within individual Athenians.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Denyer takes the expression "ἀλλήλοις τε ὁμολογοῦσι καὶ αὐτοὶ ἑαυτοῖς ἰδίᾳ" at 111C7-8 to mean "agree both with one another and themselves, as individuals" (Denyer 2001: 124). However, for ἰδίᾳ to function as an apposition, as he appears to read it (together with Proclus), ἰδίᾳ would need to be in masculine plural, not feminine singular, as it stands in the received text. Consequently, the adverbial reading 'privately' is a more natural way of rendering the Greek. Moreover, the expression αὐτοὶ ἑαυτοῖς is, in Plato, commonly used to refer to groups of people, rather than individuals (see, for example, *Gorg.* 465C and 492B).

Secondly, according to Option C, the incompatibility between intra-personal disagreement and knowledge forms a crucial premise of the argument. However, Socrates does not, in the target passage, argue for this premise, and does not explain what it means. It is only later in the dialogue (at 116E<sub>ff</sub>), when Socrates asks Alcibiades whether the latter understands what his ‘bizarre condition’ of going back and forth indicates. And, importantly, Alcibiades responds to Socrates’ question by saying that he does *not at all* understand this. Thus, Socrates cannot expect Alcibiades to be able to *follow* AD in the target passage as Option C represents it, since Alcibiades has not yet been explained the connection between inconsistent beliefs and ignorance. On the reading presented by Option C, Socrates would be violating a central requirement of Socratic conversation (see, esp. the discussion that immediately follows the target passage, i.e. *Alc.* 112E-113C), namely that the interlocutor ought to be able to understand the premises of the arguments and be able draw the inferences himself (for a statement of the related “dialectical requirement”, see *Meno* 75D, and Fine 2015: 47-68 for some recent discussion). Option C suggests that important clauses of (1<sub>C</sub>) and (2<sub>C</sub>) are surreptitiously dropped into the conversation without Alcibiades noticing and realizing their importance. These two major drawbacks of Option C outweigh its benefits.

### 3. Knowledge and persuasion

Given that the existing proposals for reconstructing DA fail to make sense of the text, we have good reasons to look for an alternative. In what follows, I will present my own reconstruction of DA. Here is how Socrates expresses premise (2) in the target passage: “Isn’t the fact that they [the people] disagree with each other about these things enough to show you that they don’t understand them, and are not ‘four-square teachers’ of them?” (111D-E) and, in an immediately following passage: “And if you saw them [the people] disagreeing about it, that would show you that they were bad teachers of it?” (111E) The most straightforward reading of these passages surely is that Socrates proposes that disagreement undermines the knowledge claims of *both* parties of the disagreement:

- DA, Option D:
- (1<sub>D</sub>) People (read distributively) disagree about justice;
  - (2<sub>D</sub>) If there is disagreement about *F*-ness, then it cannot be the case that any of the parties to the disagreement has knowledge of *F*-ness;
  - (3<sub>D</sub>) Therefore, people (read distributively) do not have knowledge of justice.
  - (4<sub>D</sub>) Only those who have knowledge of *F*-ness are able to teach *F*-ness;
  - (5<sub>D</sub>) Therefore, people (read distributively) have not been able to teach Alcibiades justice.

If Alcibiades accepts (2<sub>D</sub>) and (3<sub>D</sub>) he would have to admit that Athenians cannot

have been his teachers of justice, since no one within this group has the requisite knowledge. There is a reason, however, why not a single commentator has supported this reading. The problem with Option D is that  $(2_D)$  is *very* implausible. A knower can perfectly well disagree with someone who is ignorant (see, e.g., *Tht.* 170D-E, also see Proclus 267,20-268,18) and consequently disagreement cannot plausibly be seen as an indication of the ignorance of both parties (Plato also implicitly acknowledges this in the *Laches* 186D-B).

Option D does not get off the ground. However, I will argue that a *version* of Option D is, in fact, a perfectly reasonable reconstruction of the argument. Option D can be adjusted in a way that is both philosophically interesting and textually well-founded.

We get a better handle on DA if we reflect on what *kind* of disagreement Socrates and Alcibiades have in mind. To be sure,  $(2_D)$  is implausible when it refers to two parties simply holding contrary opinions. The first thing to notice is, however, that when discussing disagreements about justice, Socrates mentions the notion of *disputing* (*amphisbeteo*, 111E9 and esp. 112D2). The people are not simply disagreeing about justice; they are vehemently disputing (and sometimes fighting and killing) over their positions. Consequently, the disagreements about justice that Socrates and Alcibiades have in mind have been made explicit and both of the disagreeing parties are *aware* of their disagreement and are also aware of the other party's reasons for holding on to the opposing belief, i.e. the disagreements Socrates are discussing are *disclosed*. Secondly, although the disagreements about justice may concern a particular proposition, they usually take place against the background of *entrenched* and deep back-ground disagreements. This is presumably the reason why the disagreements that Socrates mentions cause decades-long wars (the Trojan War and the First Peloponnesian War). Moreover, the disagreements over justice are very difficult to resolve since they could not be solved by relying on observable events. If the parties are disagreeing over whether a particular horse is able to run well (111D7), this disagreement could easily be resolved on a racetrack. Issues concerning justice are not like that – no matter what events transpire, both parties to disagreement could still hold on to their position. This makes disagreements over justice *persistent* (for some discussion of epistemological issues related to disagreement that is framed in these terms, see Goldberg 2015).

Disagreements about justice are thus disclosed, entrenched, and persistent. This is what Socrates is getting at in the final stretch of the target passage, when he puts a clear emphasis on the protracted nature and intensity of the debates that result in war and killing:

I suppose the same is true of those Athenians and Spartans and Boeotians who died at Tanagra, and later at Coronea, including your own father. The disagreement that caused those battles and those deaths was none other than a disagreement over justice and injustice, wasn't it? – You're right. – Are we to say that people know something if they disagree so intensely (*sphodra*, see also 112A3, A6) about it that in their disputes (*amphisbetousin*) with each other they resort to such extreme measures? (112C-D3).

I propose to adjust option D so that it includes the idea that Socrates and Alcibiades have in mind *systematic disagreements*. A disagreement is systematic if (i) the disagreement is disclosed, i.e. both sides are aware of the disagreement and of each other's reasons for disagreeing; (ii) the disagreement about something is entrenched, i.e. it is part of a wider and deeper disagreement (it does not concern just one proposition); and (iii) the disagreement has persisted for at least some time, in the face of challenges from the other side. This suggests the following version of the argument, a version that I take to be the most plausible reconstruction of DA:

- DA, Option E:
- (1<sub>E</sub>) People (read distributively) systematically disagree about justice;
  - (2<sub>E</sub>) If there is systematic disagreement about *F*-ness, then none of the parties to disagreement has knowledge of *F*-ness;
  - (3<sub>E</sub>) Therefore, people (read distributively) do not have knowledge of justice;
  - (4<sub>E</sub>) Only those who have knowledge of *F*-ness are able to teach *F*-ness;
  - (5<sub>E</sub>) Therefore, people (read distributively) have not been able to teach Alcibiades justice.

The idea behind (2<sub>E</sub>) is the following: if two parties are locked in a disagreement that has gone on long enough for both parties to have had the chance to present their reasons and if the disagreement still persists (and may easily spill over into violent conflict), i.e. if the disagreement is systematic, then this indicates that *neither* of the parties possesses knowledge about the matter at hand.

It is worth noting that this reconstruction yields the desired conclusion: if people systematically disagree about justice, Alcibiades cannot consistently hold that he has acquired his presumed knowledge from any of the disagreeing parties. Moreover, on the internalist assumption that knowledge requires *some* access to one's reasons and that this access enables one to *some extent* share these reasons, then it is not unreasonable to think that systematic disagreement indicates that both parties to disagreement lack knowledge. However, even though (2<sub>E</sub>) is more plausible than (2<sub>D</sub>), it posits a very tight conceptual connection between the lack of knowledge and systematic disagreement. Can that be justified? Does the *Alcibiades* contain explicit reasons why Socrates would be inclined to accept (2<sub>E</sub>)?

I propose that Socrates of the *Alcibiades* is in fact committed to (2<sub>E</sub>) since he assumes that expertise can always be passed on (either by means of convincing or by means of teaching). Shortly after our target passage, Socrates will argue:

If somebody knows something, don't you think he can persuade people about it one by one, as well as all together? Take the schoolteacher – don't you think he persuades people about letters individually, as well as collectively? – Yes. – And won't the same person be able to persuade people about numbers individually, as well as in groups? – Yes. – He would

be a mathematician, someone who knows numbers. – Certainly. – So won't you also be able to persuade an individual person about the things you can persuade a group of people about? – Probably. – Obviously these are things you know. – Yes. (*Alc.* 114B-D).

Here Socrates makes a very strong claim about the relationship between being persuasive and being an expert. He argues that those with knowledge of a particular subject area are always able to convince the audience – be it just one person or several – of the truth of the propositions belonging to this subject area. This entails that an expert is able to bring the non-expert audience into agreement with her, at least when the issue at question concerns her area of expertise. A few Stephanus pages later, Socrates goes on to make a similar-sounding statement about *teaching*.

Really? Have you ever seen any expert who is unable to make others expert in what he knows? The person who taught you how to read and write – he had expertise in his field, and he made you and anybody else he wanted expert as well, didn't he? – Yes. – And will you, having learned from him, be able to teach somebody else? – Yes. – And isn't it the same with the music teacher and the gymnastics teacher? – Certainly. – I think we can be pretty sure that someone knows something when he can show that he has made someone else know it. – I agree. (*Alc.* 118C- D).

Elsewhere in Plato's Socratic dialogues, too, Socrates is often relying on the assumption that an expert is capable of making other people experts. For example, in the *Clitophon* (409B) he goes so far as to suggest that each craft has two results (*erga*): the products of a particular craft (e.g. health for medicine), and the experts of the same craft (e.g. doctors). The principle of teachability of expertise is a central feature of the Socratic thought (for discussion, see Bjelde ms.). However, the *Alcibiades* defends an especially strong version of this principle. Socrates unambiguously claims that experts are able to make "anyone they want" an expert and – since experts agree (see, e.g. *Meno* 95C) – thereby to produce agreement. And he goes on to point out that those who have become experts are, in turn, able to pass on *their* expertise, enabling the expertise to spread.

It is important to note that the above two passages express slightly different principles. Being convinced by an expert does not mean that one becomes an expert oneself – one simply acquires true beliefs from the expert. But both convincing and teaching result in persuasion which in turn leads to being in agreement with the expert, inasmuch as one results in true belief and other in knowledge (cf. *Gorg.* 454D-E). Consequently, the two above passages add up to what we may call the Assumption of the Persuasiveness of expertise (AP).

(AP): a person with genuine knowledge is always able either (i) to convince or (ii) to teach the audience about *F*-ness, if *F*-ness belongs to the person's area of expertise.

Athenians saw themselves as being under the obligation to teach the young (e.g. *Ap.* 24E-25D), and this, in conjunction with AP, assures that knowledge will spread

among the ‘people in general’ in a way that produces agreement. Moreover, if the experts are always able to convince their audience (as AP requires), this guarantees that by means of (e.g.) Assembly meetings which were usually held about thirty times a year and had the audience of approximately one third of the whole citizenry (see Yunis 1993: 12), the experts are able to produce agreement on a massive scale. It is easy to see how Socrates’ and Alcibiades’ willingness to accept ( $2_E$ ) follows from their commitment to AP: if experts are able to persuade (either by convincing or by teaching) and thereby produce agreement, then a long and entrenched disagreement between people indicates that the community lacks experts. And since *hoi polloi* have not been able to resolve their systematic disagreements about justice, it follows that none of them has the required knowledge.

This construal of DA successfully yields the conclusion that Alcibiades has not learned his presumed expertise of justice from people as a collection of individuals. Further, it attributes to Socrates an interesting conception of how and why systematic and persistent disagreement in a community is an indication of the lack of knowledge for the individual members of that community. Also, the argument, so construed, is relying on version of an assumption that many ancient philosophers would have been inclined to accept, namely, that knowledge is intimately connected with the ability to pass it on (*Meno* 87B-C, *Prot.* 3621A-C, Aristotle, *Met.* I, 981b, *Pr. An.* II.25, 69a, and Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 21). The *Alcibiades* formulates, based on this assumption, an argument that differs in important respects from other ancient reactions to disagreement. The sophists tended to view truths, in the domains where disagreement was widespread, as relative (for a classic treatment, see Guthrie 1971: 165ff, and Chapter 2 in de Romilly 1992). The Pyrrhonian skeptics, on the other hand, treated disagreement about an issue within expert community as a reason to suspend one’s judgment about that issue (see Barnes 1990). In this context, the argument from disagreement in the *Alcibiades* is novel: it is the first account that treats disagreement as undermining knowledge claims of the disagreeing parties.<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, this interpretation rests on an optimistic picture of how knowledge functions within a social setting: if knowledge is present, it spreads unobstructed. I would now like to consider briefly whether it harmonizes with what Plato says elsewhere. Although Plato thinks knowledge can be taught, he makes it clear that acquiring knowledge requires a great deal of effort and motivation (*Rep.* 494D) and talent (e.g. *Parm.* 135A-B) on the part of the student, as well as recognition of one’s ignorance, which is something that many of Socrates’ interlocutors find difficult. We may also wonder whether Plato is committed to the claim that that experts are

<sup>12</sup> There is a passage in the Hippocratic corpus that makes a point similar to DA. The author argues that philosophers who present their theses in front of an audience ought to be able to convince the audience. Their failure to do so indicates that they are ignorant. The passage (Hippocrates, *Nature of Man*, 164.8-166.11=6.32-34 L.) concludes in this manner: “Given the same debaters and the same audience, the same man never wins in the discussion three times in succession, but now one is victor, now another, now he who happens to have the most glib tongue in the face of the crowd. Yet it is right that a man who claims correct knowledge about the facts should maintain his own argument victorious always, if his knowledge be knowledge of reality and if he set it forth correctly” (transl. Jones). Discussing this passage and its relation to DA falls outside the scope of this paper.

capable of convincing all audiences. He is acutely aware of the factors that hamper the acceptance of expert opinion. He indicates that sometimes individuals find it very difficult to extricate themselves from the beliefs that they have already acquired (see esp. *Rep.* 377A-B, 378D-E, *Prot.* 313D-314A, *Gorg.* 513C; for some discussion, see Scott 1999). He also recognizes that many of our beliefs are formed on the basis of what one finds pleasant or what one desires to be true (e.g. *Gorg.* 481D-E). Because of this, he thinks that these kinds of beliefs are usually not amenable to rational persuasion and in these cases a professional orator is more successful in convincing the audience than an expert (*Gorg.* 458E-459B, see Moss 2007). In such very real scenarios (both at Plato's and at our times), knowledge hardly spreads unimpeded in the way that AP requires.

But, on the other hand, Plato's Socrates insists that non-experts are very often willing to listen to the experts and form their opinions based on what the experts think (see, e.g. *Prot.* 319B, *Lys.* 208A-210C, *Alc.* 117C-D, *Charm.* 171E-172A, *Tht.* 170A-B). Socrates also emphasizes that proper methods of measurement can bring about agreement (*Eut.* 7B-D) and identifies this ability to apply the methods of measurement with expertise (*Prot.* 357A). In addition, as pointed out above, Plato's Socrates lays great stress on teachability of knowledge and puts forth arguments that use this principle as one of the premises. For example, in the *Meno* Socrates argues that virtue is not knowledge, since virtuous men have not been able to teach their virtue to their sons (*Meno* 92E-95A). In his later work, Plato also speaks of the expert dialecticians as having the expertise to convince all kinds of souls (e.g. *Phdr.* 271D, perhaps also *Rep.* 534B) and of the expert statesmen as having the ability to produce harmony and agreement within the state (*Pol.* 308D). Thus, it could be argued that a *true* expert really is able to convince and teach all comers (see Proclus in *Alc.* 309-310). To adjudicate to what extent DA is consistent with Plato's commitments throughout his career would require a separate paper. The above considerations point towards the proposed reconstruction of DA being at least *Socratic*, as it relies on optimistic assumptions about knowledge that Plato is willing to seriously entertain in his Socratic dialogues.<sup>13</sup>

In closing, I would like to briefly consider what might be the relevance of DA for contemporary discussions of disagreement. Of course, there are many ways in which the spread of knowledge can break down. Motivated reasoning and different types of biases can and do severely restrict the acceptance of expert opinion in domains where accepting the expert opinion comes at a cost (see, e.g. Kahan and Braman 2006). However, it is quite plausible to think that a widespread and systematic disagreement within an unbiased and motivated community is an indication that the community itself and its members lack something epistemically valuable.

On most contemporary accounts, knowledge is an unlikely candidate for the role of this epistemically valuable feature: many agents to whom one can justifiably

<sup>13</sup> A much later expression of a similar argument can be found in Descartes: "Whenever two persons make opposite judgments about the same thing, it is certain that at least one of them is deceived, and it seems that neither has *scientia*. For if the reasoning of one of them were certain and evident, he would be able to lay it before the other in such a way as eventually to convince the other's intellect as well" (Descartes, *Rules* 2; X:363, quoted in Pasnau 2017: 331).

attribute knowledge of  $p$  are incapable of convincing others. However, several authors (for an overview of the debate, see Schwab 2015) have noted that *epistêmê* is in many ways closer to the concept of *understanding* than to that of knowledge. On some contemporary theories of understanding, to understand why  $p$  is to have an ability to (among other things) offer an explanation of  $p$  (Hills 2015), to cite reasons favoring  $p$ , and to defend  $p$  in the face of counterarguments (Bengson, Cuneo, Shafer-Landau 2019). If understanding entails this other-directed ability to convince the members of one's epistemic community, then it seems natural to think that a widespread disagreement within an unbiased and motivated epistemic community is an indication of the lack of genuine understanding within that community.<sup>14</sup>

If one rejects this notion of understanding, there is perhaps another perspective from which DA might seem plausible. The Greek philosophers discussed *epistêmê* as an *ideal* cognitive state (Pasnau 2013, 2017, Schwab 2019), as the best possible cognitive state an agent can achieve. A cognitive state can approach the epistemic ideal along several dimensions: reliability, explanatory depth, (internalist) justification, etc. Seen from the perspective of the *Alcibiades*, it is plausible to think that *persuasiveness* is another dimension along which the cognitive states can be evaluated. A version of DA would then conclude that the widespread and systematic disagreement within, say, the community of philosophers, is an indication that the members of this community are falling short of the cognitive ideal along a certain dimension. Members of other communities, where disagreement is less widespread, are doing better, at least when evaluated along this particular dimension. It is an open question whether persuasiveness is an independent dimension of evaluation of cognitive states or whether it can be reduced to other dimensions (e.g. explanatory depth and internalist justification). Considering this question is a promising avenue for future research.

Be that as it may, DA gestures towards an important insight: if there is pervasive and widespread disagreement within an epistemic community, we may tentatively conclude that the community is not doing as well as it could be, epistemically speaking.<sup>15</sup> If we draw this conclusion, then we are feeling the pull of a principle that was widespread in ancient thought, a principle according to which persons with genuine expertise can pass their expertise on to others.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth pointing out that DA differs from some superficially similar positions in contemporary debates. There are several authors who think that the fact of disagreement undermines knowledge claims made by the parties of the disagreement (see, for example McGrath 2008 and Goldberg 2015). Disagreement, on these accounts, is understood as *evidence* or as a *defeater* that undermines knowledge. DA involves a different approach: systematic disagreement is an *indication* that neither of the parties possessed understanding from the outset. Ignorance manifests itself in systematic disagreement.

<sup>15</sup> It is, of course, possible to deny this. Williamson, for example, rejects what he calls 'evidence neutrality', the idea that "a community of inquirers can always in principle achieve common knowledge as to whether any given proposition constitutes evidence for the inquiry" and claims that "Having good evidence for a belief does not require being able to persuade all comers, however strange their views, that you have such good evidence" (Williamson 2008: 210). The fact, however, that Williamson feels the need to discuss and reject this (by his lights mistaken) idea shows that it is still very much alive. For a critique of Williamson, see Weatherson (2009).



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