Seeking consensus, and how to account for dissent in the meantime.

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Abstract

Different types of organizations, e.g. National Institute of Health (NIH), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Canadian Association of Gastroenterology (CAG), aspire to establish scientific consensus in different ways, through different processes. By drawing on these examples from scientific practice, this paper scrutinizes the actual practice of consensus-making with two goals: (a) develop clear criteria/concepts/tools to compare different ways of consensus-making, and (b) apply this ‘toolbox’ to reevaluate existing claims on consensus versus dissent in science.

First, we introduce a rudimentary continuum to deal with consensus-seeking organizations, arguing that the continuum ranges from consensus conferences to systematic review. The ground for comparison are the structural characteristics of the procedures and the functions they serve. As understood today, one deciding factor for the place of consensus-seeking organizations on the continuum is the extent to which they appeal to, what we will call, deliberative interaction, consisting of inter- and intralevel deliberation among different types/layers of participants, and deliberation after direct confrontation.

Second, we use these insights to shape further philosophical discussion on the aim of aspiring consensus versus the need for uptake of dissent. On the one hand, when push comes to shove, establishing a scientific consensus is imperative to solve controversies, such as global warming. Establishing a consensus on the causes and the extent of global warming could facilitate policymaking and, moreover, send a convincing signal that doing nothing will have dire consequences. On the other hand, studies carrying attention for plurality and heterodoxy have raised questions concerning the ideal of the scientific consensus, and, connected to it, the neglect of dissent (Longino, 2002; Solomon, 2006; Van Bouwel, 2009). In solving this tension between plurality and consensus, which is not always made explicit in knowledge-based accounts of consensus (Gilbert, 1987; Miller, 2013), we point at the meta-consensus or meta-agreement in play. Thus, instead of focusing on consensus on the simple level (that is, as the result of alternative theories/models tested against one another eventually leading to some consensus outcome) we shift to analyzing the meta-consensus that stipulates the procedure to be followed in consensus-making.

A meta-consensus can guarantee, on the one hand, that divergent opinions are heard (without having to endorse a group consensus) and that consensus (in the absolute sense of the term) is no longer regarded as an end in itself. On the other hand, this approach allows us to maximize consensus (understood here in a relative sense) by going through the established procedure and afterwards portraying the present consensus through known democratic methods (such as majority rule, voting, aggregation and negotiation). The underlying account of consensus will thus be a social-procedural one (not stipulating the characteristics the outcome should have, but stipulating the social procedure that has to be followed).
The two parts taken together imply that consensus comes in degrees, depending on the extent to which a procedure has been followed, repeated, etc. Moreover, combined they enable us to reinvestigate current claims on consensus-making in consensus conferences as not bringing about rational consensus (Solomon, 2007 & 2011).

References


