

4: Disagreement

1. Higher Order Evidence & Peer Disagreement

Higher Order Evidence: Evidence about the evidence for P.

WEATHER: You don't know much about meteorology. You're presented with some meteorological data, and conclude that it probably won't rain tomorrow. You turn on BBC Breakfast and watch the forecast; Carol says that it will rain tomorrow.

LOGIC: You and a friend, Sasha, are asked to figure out whether an argument is valid. You each work through it separately. You come to the conclusion that it's invalid; Sasha concludes that it's valid. You've had extensive training in logic, and Sasha has not.

Epistemic Peers: X and Y are *epistemic peers* with respect to a question Q *iff*:

- (i) X and Y are equally well informed about Q (they're *evidential equals*).
- (ii) X and Y are equally competent at evaluating evidence about Q – equally experienced, qualified, free from bias etc. (they're *cognitive equals*).

Question: What is the rational response to finding that you disagree with an epistemic peer?

Two responses:

Conciliation: When epistemic peers disagree, both are rationally required to revise their beliefs/credences.

Agree to Disagree: One can rationally maintain one's beliefs/credences in the face of peer disagreement.

2. Motivating Conciliation

WATCHES: Bill and Ben have identical Casio watches; they set their watches at the same time to the same clock, and they get their batteries replaced at the same time. Their watches almost always agree; when they disagree, each is right half the time. Today they go out, and both check their watches. Bill's watch says 3.20, Ben's says 3.22.

How confident should Bill be that it's 3.20?

MENTAL MATHS: Bill & Ben go out regularly for lunch. They have a practice of splitting the bill evenly with a 20% tip. They both work out the bill in their heads each time. The majority of the time they agree; when they disagree, they're each right half the time. They're epistemic peers. Today they go for lunch, and each works out their share of the bill in their heads. Bill concludes that it's £24 each, Ben concludes that it's £22 each.

How confident should Bill be that each owes £24?

Each believes the other to be a peer. That means that prior to the disagreement, they each thought that *if* they disagreed, each was equally likely to be right: $P(X|D) = P(Y|D)$. Now that they've disagreed, they've no reason to think one's more likely to be right than the other: $P(X)=P(Y)$. So, each view should be given Equal Weight.

Independence: In evaluating the epistemic status of someone else's belief about P, in order to determine whether I should revise my own belief about P, I have to evaluate their belief in a way that's independent of my own reasoning about P.

If Independence is right, then all Bill has to go on is the fact that Ben is an epistemic peer. So how can he rationally ignore the disagreement?

3. Problems for Conciliation

MANY AGAINST ONE: Bill & Ben are out to dinner with 8 other friends, who are their epistemic peers with respect to mental arithmetic. They agree to split the bill in the usual way, with each working it out in their head. Bill and the 8 friends conclude that each owes £22; Ben concludes they each owe £24.

Should Bill & the 8 friends revise their confidence in their belief? What would be wrong with remaining almost certain that they're right?

SPINELESSNESS: I believe that each of us is essentially and most fundamentally an animal. Alex disagrees with me. We've both considered all the arguments, discussed it at length, and we both make a living doing philosophy. If Conciliation is right, we're both rationally required to suspend belief on the issue. As it goes for animalism, so it goes for anything controversial. As Elga puts it: 'Do you have any convictions on controversial political, philosophical or scientific matters? [Conciliation] seems to say: kiss them goodbye.'

Van Inwagen (1996): How can I believe (as I do) that free will is incompatible with determinism or that unrealised possibilities are not physical objects or that human beings are not four-dimensional things extended in time as well as space, when David Lewis – a philosopher of truly formidable intelligence and insight and ability – rejects these things I believe and is already aware of and understands perfectly every argument that I could produce in their defence?

This way lies massive scepticism – and this is a point against Conciliation. (Note: it doesn't lead to global scepticism – because we're mostly agreed about simple things. It only leads to scepticism for complicated, controversial issues.)

Response:

OPTION 1: Argue that you'll rarely disagree with an epistemic peer on a controversial issue.

- (1) Controversial issues are often hooked up into clusters of controversy. If you disagree about one part of the cluster, you probably disagree about other parts.
- (2) Independence only requires you to put aside your reasoning about the matter at hand.
- (3) So there's lots of disagreement left – things which from your perspective they've got wrong.
- (4) So you can think 'this person's wrong about a lot of these questions – so they're not my epistemic peer'.

BUT: (i) 'Ostrich policy'; (ii) Doesn't generalise; (iii) Not independent enough.

OPTION 2: Argue based on Independence that it's impossible to independently evaluate others' beliefs on these questions – so there's no fact of the matter about whether someone's an epistemic peer with respect to them.

OPTION 3: Bite the bullet.

4. Motivating Agree to Disagree

MAD MATHS: Bill and Ben are out to lunch again. As before, each does his own calculations.

Bill comes to the conclusion that each owes £22; Ben concludes that each owes £53 – an amount somewhat larger than the entire bill.

Should Bill revise his belief about the bill?

Response from Conciliation – Bill's reason for thinking Ben is wrong is not merely that they disagree. It's a belief that one person's share can't be more than the entire bill. The advance judgment that they're equally likely to be right is not unconditional.

Question: How far does this generalise? What about this case?

DIRECTIONS: I've lived in Cambridge for 7 years. One of my favourite pubs is the Elm Tree on Orchard Street. My colleague Mat has lived in Cambridge for just as long as me, and is just as familiar with it. We have been to the Elm Tree together. Today I see Mat and tell him I'm going to the Elm Tree on Orchard Street; he responds, 'The Elm Tree's not on Orchard Street – it's on Clarendon Street.'

Should I revise my belief about the Elm Tree?

Response from Conciliation – In this case, the best explanation of the disagreement is that something's gone wrong with Mat. It's just so unlikely that two people in our position would disagree about this unless something was wrong with one of us. But I have information about myself which makes the 'something wrong with Mat' explanation better than the 'something wrong with me' explanation.

Question: How convincing is this? Why can't the same be said in the original case?

EVIDENCE: Philosophers in the actual world, @, disagree on a lot of issues. E.g. about 50% accept physicalism about the mind; the rest are divided among alternative views. Assume all philosophers are epistemic peers. Now imagine a world, W1, where 100% of the philosophers accept physicalism. The arguments for and against are just the same; and the philosophers are just as clever as the philosophers at @. So the philosophers at W1 are epistemic peers of the philosophers at @.

Should the philosophers at W1 be more confident in physicalism than the philosophers at @?

Actual disagreement is contingent. What matters is possible disagreement. But possible disagreement is determined by the state of the evidence. The evidence is what matters.

5. Problems for Agree to Disagree

ONE AGAINST MANY: I am at lunch with 99 people who have all lived in Cambridge for 7 years and been to the Elm Tree. I say I'm going to the Elm Tree on Orchard Street, and they all respond 'The Elm Tree's not on Orchard Street, it's on Clarendon Street'.

Surely I should revise my opinion here! But according to ATD, disagreement is just not a factor – so how can this be accommodated?

BOOTSTRAPPING: Ant and Dec rightly take each other to be epistemic peers with respect to who Ant's granny will vote for each week on *Britain's got the X-factor*. Every week, Ant predicts she'll vote for Mr Stevens, and Dec predicts she'll vote for Mrs Badcrumble. Mr Stevens & Mrs Badcrumble make it through each week, and at no point does Ant's granny reveal to Ant and/or Dec who she voted for. According to ATD, Ant is not required to revise his predictions in the face of their disagreement – he can rationally remain confident that he is right and Dec is wrong. After a few weeks, he reasons as follows:

“In week 1, I predicted that Granny would vote for Mr Stevens, as this was best supported by the evidence. Dec predicted that she'd vote for Mrs Badcrumble – he sure misjudged the evidence there. In week 2, I again predicted that Granny would vote for Mr Stevens, as this was best supported by the evidence. And Dec predicted that she'd vote for Mrs Badcrumble, misjudging the evidence again! Actually, this has been going on for the last 63 weeks now... So it turns out, Dec is really not a good evaluator of the evidence after all! I am his epistemic superior with respect to this issue.”

Hold on Ant! You can't rationally end up thinking you're someone's epistemic superior just because you keep disagreeing with them!

Suggested Reading

David Christensen (2009), 'Disagreement as evidence: the epistemology of controversy', *Philosophy Compass* 4/5, 756-767

Adam Elga (2007), 'Reflection and disagreement', *Nous* 41, 478-502

Thomas Kelly (2005), 'The epistemic significance of disagreement', *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 1, 167-96

Jennifer Lackey (2008), 'What should we do when we disagree?' in Tamar Gendler & John Hawthorne (eds.) *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*