

# Review: *Disagreement and Skepticism* edited by Diego E. Machuca

Guy Longworth  
University of Warwick

To a first approximation, a disagreement is a case in which at least one individual believes that  $p$  and at least one individual believes that  $\text{not-}p$ ; and a pair of individuals are one another's peers, with respect to whether  $p$ , when and only when they have available to them the same evidence whether  $p$  and they possess equivalent epistemic virtues. Suppose that one is involved in a peer dispute. What responses are rationally permitted or required?

According to one version of what is known as the *Equal Weight View*, if one believes that one is involved in such a peer dispute, one is rationally required to give equal weight to (what one knows or believes to be) any of the disputed beliefs that one lacks independent reason to discount. For example, if one believes that  $p$ , one knows that one's peer believes that  $\text{not-}p$ , and one's only reason for discounting their belief is one's own belief that  $p$ , then one is rationally required to suspend belief. One question discussed in the collection is whether one or another form of the View is correct. Another concerns what would follow from endorsing the View. Would its acceptance, combined with the prevalence of disagreement in various domains of inquiry, lead to one or another form of scepticism?

In recent years, there have been a slew of articles on this theme and two collections of essays. (Christensen and Lackey 2013; Feldman and Warfield 2010.) It would be natural to wonder whether there was a need for this volume. The essays are uniformly lucid and the argumentative moves that are considered are well handled. But I'd like to have seen more reflection on the basic assumptions guiding the various extant discussions. How are participants in the discussions thinking about evidence or reasons, and their bearing on what rationality demands? Are one's reasons exhausted by what one knows or believes, or can they outstrip both? Is there an operative distinction between genuine reasons and what merely seem to be reasons? If there is, how does it figure in principles governing the dynamics of rationality?

In what follows, I'll briefly summarise what I took, on reading the collection, to be some central problems surrounding the View and its exploitation for sceptical purposes.

Let me begin with problems surrounding the view. It's plausible to assume that one's reasons for belief supervene on one's evidence together, perhaps, with one's epistemic capacity to exploit that evidence. Now suppose that a peer is someone with the same evidence and epistemic capacity, and that one is in disagreement with such a peer. It seems that at least one disputant must be going beyond the evidence, at least on the assumption that the evidence can't determine that it's the case that  $p$  and determine that it's the case that  $\text{not-}p$ . Suppose that the evidence decides in favour of only one of the disputant's beliefs. In that case, the

other disputant must have inferior epistemic capacity, contra our opening assumption. It seems to follow that both parties are going beyond the evidence in forming their respective beliefs. But in that case, there are grounds independent of the disagreement for thinking that both parties should suppress (/weaken) belief pending further evidence.

Alternatively, suppose that the View is less demanding and allows that one of the parties may have superior evidence. Suppose one is in the better position. Suppose, indeed, that one knows that  $p$ , and knows in ordinary ways that one knows that  $p$ . Still, one's knowing that  $p$  is consistent with its being the case that (independently of the dispute) one believes that the other party is one's peer and lacks independent evidence that their opinion can in this case be discounted. In such a case, one might lose one's nerve, suppress one's belief, and thereby lose knowledge. But is it plausible that one is rationally *required* to suppress the belief?

Assume that the disagreement provides evidence that at least one of you has gone beyond the evidence. Although one knows that  $p$  and knows that one knows that  $p$ , one has no *independent* evidence that the other party's view is to be discounted. If one were to bracket one's knowledge that  $p$  and one's knowledge that one knows that  $p$ , it's plausible that it would then be rational to believe that one might have gone beyond the evidence in forming the belief that  $p$ . Should one bracket some of one's attitudes? (Notice that if we think that one should, the issue is liable to spread: someone prepared to disagree whether  $p$  may equally be ready to disagree that there are independent grounds to believe that their belief should be discounted.) One way of proceeding would be to bracket whether one knows, and to appeal instead to one's relevant beliefs: one's belief that  $p$  and one's belief that one knows that  $p$ . Suppose that one's seeming evidence that one might not know that  $p$  cancels out one's belief that one knows that  $p$ . Still, it's not clear that that precludes one from retaining knowledge that  $p$ . And it's not clear that we should proceed in that way. For so proceeding depends upon assuming that principles of rationality must give knowledge and belief equal weight. Unless we are provided with reason to endorse that assumption, then our knowledge that we know that  $p$  might well trump our seeming evidence that we might not know that  $p$ . In that case, it might be rational to retain our initial knowledge that  $p$  *and* our initial knowledge that we know that  $p$ .

It becomes pressing, therefore, to know what grounds there might be for taking instead the third route, recommended by the View, of bracketing some of what one believes. The View seems to depend on a general principle to the effect that seeming evidence that one's belief that  $p$  might not be dictated by one's evidence rationally requires one to treat one's evidence as merely seeming evidence. The general principle differs from principles driving standard sceptical arguments only in that it takes as input seeming evidence that one's belief might not be dictated by the evidence—in the form of a peer's conflicting opinion—rather than the mere possibility that one's belief might not be dictated by the evidence. The underlying motivation seems to be the same: a yearning for reasons that we couldn't mistakenly take to obtain.

Bracket that issue. In order for the View to have sceptical consequences, we must have reason to believe that its antecedent conditions are met. Here there are two main hurdles. First, it must be determined that we face a genuine

disagreement. One question here concerns the nature of disagreement: do we have one when, and only when, one party believes that  $p$  and the other believes that *not- $p$* ? Adams suggests some reasons for hesitance. Suppose the issue decided in favour of the belief-based account. We must then assure ourselves that the participants' have beliefs with the required contents, and not non-conflicting attitudes other than belief (Goldberg raises this issue), or beliefs with non-conflicting contents (Tersman and Dougherty raise this issue).

Second, we need to assure ourselves that we disagree with a peer. The difficulty can be presented in the form of a dilemma. On the first horn, one makes the View as plausible as possible by imposing high demands on peerage—for instance, sameness of evidence and epistemic capacities. At best, disagreements meeting that condition are rare, and will be independently problematic given that they must apparently involve both parties taking a leap of epistemic faith, as per the discussion above. Disagreements in which it's reasonable for either party to believe that the condition is met will be even less common. Moreover, such cases would seem problematically to involve one believing that  $p$  while also believing that that belief is not uniquely well grounded in the evidence. On the other horn, one weakens the demands on peerage so as to make somewhat plausible that recognisable cases occur. But in doing that, one makes the resultant form of the View implausible: why should loose similarity in epistemic situation make it rational to take someone's opinions as seriously as one's own? (Here, I'm in broad agreement with King.)

Kornblith argues that the extent of disagreement in philosophy, by comparison with the natural sciences, provides grounds for scepticism about its cognitive significance. He provides only anecdotal evidence for the unfavourable comparison. Some relevant evidence, bearing also on the permeability of the distinction between philosophy and natural science, is presented in Schlosshauer, Kofler, and Zeilinger 2013.

### *References*

- Christensen, D., and Lackey, J. 2013. *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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