The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays

By David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey


Back in 2009, over lunch at a conference on the epistemology of disagreement, a huddle of nervous graduate students wondered, ‘Has this literature run its course?’ The present volume proves it had not and has not. This topic that launched a thousand dissertations is flourishing: here, familiar issues are clarified and new questions explored. This collection is worth your attention, but newcomers may struggle to fit the pieces together. Let us help.

How much belief revision, if any, is rationally required by the wild sea of disagreement around us? Simplifying, conformists say: very often very much. Non-conformists disagree. Do you see a problem? Brian Weatherson argues that conformism is self-defeating given all the non-conformists. Weatherson’s essay combines a widely cited 2007 blog-post-turned-manuscript with some formal afterthoughts. See also Plantinga (2000) for an earlier statement of the objection. David Christensen works out a novel ‘conflicting-ideals’ response: don’t worry if conformism self-immolates in some conflicts with other epistemic ideals; such may be inevitable for many epistemic ideals which are nevertheless all correct. For example, suppose your evidence E (‘Land-ho! bellows the lookout’) leads you to a proposition p through some plausible epistemic rule like entailment (p might be that there’s a lookout) or inference to the best explanation (p might be that there’s land). Suppose you then learn E is misleading, as often happens (the lookout’s drunk again). According to Christensen, respecting that ‘higher-order’ evidence by downgrading your confidence in p will require flouting the plausible rule linking E to p, the route you followed to p in the first place, e.g. entailment or IBE. We’re not so sure – it’s unclear how this goes with entailment (must I doubt there’s a lookout when I learn he’s drunk?), and wouldn’t IBE switch verdicts given your expanded evidence? Christensen’s brief yet crucial argument invites further development. But suppose he’s right: for many plausible epistemic ideals, sometimes we cannot satisfy them all. Then, yes, that’s no reason to reject any ideal, even conformism. The problem for conformists, though, is that apparently this is one
of those times: they’re right now disappointing their own conformist ideals by de-
fending and recommending them. That’s awkward at best. Conformism’s self-defeat
problem persists.

Earlier, Christensen (2011) offered this principle as dividing conformists from non-
conformists:

Independence: In evaluating a disagreeing subject’s epistemic credentials, one
may use only dispute-independent reasons.

Independence, he argues, explains our conciliatory intuitions in a wide range of cases.
In this collection, Thomas Kelly offers a counterexample: Independence forbids
dismissing a Holocaust denier on the ground that he’s ignorant of many relevant
facts, facts on which your disputed judgment depends. This counterexample improves
earlier attempts (see Frances 2010, Lackey 2010, and Sosa 2010), but a response like
Christensen’s (2011) may serve again: even if Kelly’s steadfast reasoning violates
Independence here, the principle permits many non-conformist responses within a
lamb’s leap, responses so general that they could’ve been formulated before meeting
the Holocaust denier, e.g. ‘If someone has only a subset of my evidence (whatever
it is), I can stand fast’. That’s good enough, the conformist could say, and leave it
there.

Stewart Cohen says more, arguing contra Kelly that conformist views do not suffer
the embarrassment of psychological, higher-order evidence about peerhood
‘swamping’ pertinent first-order facts, e.g. my judgment is rational on the evidence
and my peer’s is not (call that ‘q’). According to Cohen, q can license my steadfastness
only if the evidence supports q. And the evidence doesn’t even bear on q, claims
Cohen, since the relationship is obscure between evidence and the rationality of judg-
ments on that evidence. We worry Cohen confuses evidence’s supporting something
with seeing that it does. True, we often can’t see whose judgment is rational. But
supposing, as he himself asks us to, that the evidence supports my credence and not
my peer’s, couldn’t that evidential asymmetry – perhaps unbeknownst to me – license
my steadfastness? Our intuitions pull in both directions, and Kelly’s non-conformism
outruns Cohen’s objection.

John Hawthorne and Amia Srinivasan (H&S) uncover a new way forward in this
debate by attending to the context sensitivity of modals like ‘must’ and ‘can’ (H&S are
fuzzy on the details, so see e.g. Kratzer 1977). What must one do, epistemically
speaking, when faced with a disagreement? It depends on what facts are assumed
in the conversational context, the facts ‘in view of which’ we evaluate the question.
H&S don’t note this, but this may explain away the apparent disagreement between
conformists and non-conformists. In light of which judgment the evidence supports,
non-conformist principles follow. In light of what facts are reasonably believed by the
subject, facts palpable ‘from the inside’, one reaches conformist principles. This debate
may be merely verbal, a result of shifting domains of discourse, a disagreement based
on ‘the illusion of shared questions’, as Ernest Sosa puts it (199). That’s an intriguing
possibility, but one not pursued in this collection. Here, H&S offer satisfying rumin-
ations on epistemology as an advice-generating enterprise, and an argument (elabor-
ating one from Hawthorne and Stanley 2008) for pessimism about formulating
epistemic norms: we want norms that track our intuitions about blameworthy and
praiseworthy conduct. But no (non-trivial?) condition is ‘transparent’; for any, one could be justifiably mistaken about whether it obtains. And any norm will tie its ought to some condition(s). So, any norm will admit cases of problematic ‘normative divergence’: blameworthy rightdoing and virtuous wrongdoing.

We’re concerned that either H&S’s argument has self-defeating implications (‘You shouldn’t accept any norm – including this one!’) or H&S point out a problem for everyone – and so no one in particular. But, in his essay, Jonathan Kvanvig argues that normative divergence isn’t a problem for him. Take a seeming case of blameless irrationality: affirming the consequent while drugged, e.g. Is this really normative divergence? Not for Kvanvig: either we have an excuse but our irrationality is not excusable or our inference is fully excusable but also rational. (‘This is a hard teaching,’ we say.) The intelligent paranoid schizophrenic prunes his delusions like a banzai. Virtuous wrongdoing? No, says Kvanvig: not every epistemic defect – e.g. delusion, disconnection from reality – counts as irrational. (He closes with lessons on when disagreement requires deference, arguing against Independence above.) It’s left murky just which step of H&S’s argument Kvanvig rejects, though, and his discussions of illicitly evaluating someone’s ‘rationality’ from the perspective of another as well as his talk of different senses of ‘ought’ seem – like H&S’s discussion – to be searching on hands and knees for what Kratzer (1977) already found. We sense a breakthrough on the horizon, waiting.

Recently, doubts about recognized peer disagreement have spread to disagreements where it’s unclear whether one is better positioned (see King 2012) and cases where it’s clear one is less well positioned. Here, Bryan Frances considers the latter: ‘philosophical renegades’ (like you, most likely) who hold opinions outside their specializations, knowing full well ‘a large number and percentage’ of experts disagree. Do you know of evidence to justify your mutiny, evidence that wouldn’t melt under the experts’ gaze like so much dirty snow? No, Frances assumes in the eighth premise of his sceptical argument. But that can’t be right even by his own lights. For – unless the expert consensus is quite complete – one knows of the minority of dissenting experts and their evidence, evidence that obviously wouldn’t be ‘nearly and universally rejected’ by the community of experts. The minority of experts who agree with you may, therefore, parry Frances’s sceptical thrust – if they reached their opinions independently, at least. And perhaps even if they haven’t, as Jennifer Lackey argues in her contribution. Here’s the received wisdom: disagreement with two peers requires more doxastic revision than disagreement with just one only if their opinions are in some sense independent of each other. But Lackey examines various senses in which two people’s judgments might be ‘independent’, and compellingly argues against each interpretation.

Finally, the collection opens up new vistas for the epistemology of disagreement. Ernest Sosa’s essay connects themes from the disagreement literature with the nature and use of intuition as evidence in philosophy, and offers responses to experimental philosophy’s intuition-shaming in light of apparently disagreeing answers given to their surveys (see also Bengson 2013), the alleged untestability of intuition, and the disagreement among armchair experts. Sanford Goldberg defends a sceptical argument much like Frances’s (and a bit like Ballantine’s 2014), but commingles his discussion with norms of assertion, arguing that we’re still justified in asserting
contested theses in philosophical contexts where knowledge is so valuable yet rare that the standards for assertion open wide like nets to catch what little knowledge drifts by. Robert Audi situates disagreement within a broader genus of what he calls ‘cognitive disparities’, hoping that lessons from the genus will illuminate the species, and argues that there must be a middle ground of ‘cognitive fluidity’ between conformism and non-conformism. That legendary middle ground is this literature’s Avalon and its contours and coordinates are left to be mapped.

There is much to love in these essays, and much work still deserves to be done. Read this important collection and put your hands to the oars.

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References


