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## The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays

By DAVID CHRISTENSEN and JENNIFER LACKEY

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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 defending 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 judgments 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 ruminations on epistemology as an advice-generating enterprise, and an argument (elaborating 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 armchaired experts. Sanford Goldberg defends a sceptical argument much like Frances’s (and a bit like Ballantyne’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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