

The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement. By JONATHAN MATHESON. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. Pp. xii + 190. Price \$100.)

Suppose you and I are equally well informed on some factual issue and equally competent in forming beliefs on the basis of the information we possess. Having evaluated this information, each of us independently forms a belief on the issue. However, since neither of us is infallible, we may end up with contrary beliefs. How should I react if I discover that we disagree in this way? According to *conciliatory views* in the epistemology of disagreement, I should modify my original opinion by moving closer to your opinion. According to *steadfast views*, I should not.

In the past decade or so, this issue has been addressed in hundreds of journal articles and a number of edited collections. The literature has grown so fast that it has become hard to keep up with even just the major developments. In *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement*, Jonathan Matheson has provided us with an excellent overview of some of the most prominent positions and arguments in the literature so far. Matheson's discussion is clear and organized thematically in a way that makes it well suited as an introductory text on the epistemology of disagreement.

Matheson's book is not only intended to provide an overview of the existing debate about disagreement; it is also meant to contribute to that debate by mounting a systematic defense of a conciliatory view, the *Equal Weight View* (EWV). EWV holds that you should give your epistemic peer's opinion just as much weight as you give your own. Matheson argues that – in the absence of other considerations, such as information about the opinions of yet other people – this means that you should adopt a doxastic attitude that is halfway between your peer's opinion and your own opinion prior to discovering the disagreement. For the most part, Matheson's case for EWV is indirect in that it attacks alternative views of disagreement and responds to various objections to the view. Although many of Matheson's arguments are worthy of careful study, other arguments struck me as somewhat flawed or incomplete. Let me briefly mention my misgivings with three of these arguments.

First, Matheson at one point considers an argument for steadfast views based on *the Underdetermination Thesis*, which he characterizes as the claim that “for any body of evidence there are multiple competitor theories that are all equally well confirmed

by that evidence” (p. 53). Matheson goes on to argue against this claim by arguing for another thesis that he says “stands in direct conflict with” (p. 54) the Underdetermination Thesis, viz. *the Uniqueness Thesis*. The latter states that a given body of evidence justifies only one competing doxastic attitude towards a given proposition. So, for example, if some evidence E justifies placing a 0.7 credence in a proposition P, then E does not also justify placing a 0.8 or 0.6 credence in P. However, it is not hard to see that the Uniqueness Thesis and the Underdetermination Thesis are perfectly compatible. The Underdetermination Thesis claims that for any theory T and any evidence E, there will always be a competing theory T* that is *equally well* confirmed as T, but it doesn’t say that T and T* will be sufficiently well confirmed to be believed (or to be assigned any particular credence). Nor does the Underdetermination Thesis say or imply that E could justify adopting more than one competing doxastic attitude towards either T or T*.

Second, Matheson considers an objection to EWV due to Thomas Kelly (2005, 2010) according to which EWV ignores the first-order evidence E on the basis of which both parties to a disagreement formed their original conflicting doxastic attitudes to a proposition P. To see Kelly’s point, suppose that as a matter of fact, E strongly supports believing P. Suppose further that, on the basis of E, I believe P while my epistemic peer disbelieves P (i.e. believes not-P). According to Matheson’s EWV, we should both move halfway towards each other’s opinion, presumably by suspending judgment on P. Notice, however, that the effect of E on what it is rational for me and my peer to believe regarding P has completely disappeared at this point. According to Kelly, this is an unacceptable consequence of EWV since it fails to take into account the *total evidence* relevant to P.

Matheson responds to this argument by pointing out that the information that you are in a disagreement with an epistemic peer is a kind of *higher-order evidence* about the evidential import of the first-order evidence E on the proposition P. According to Matheson, this higher-order evidence “brings into question” whether E supports P, so that E’s support for P “washes out of the justificatory equation” (p. 86). In support of this, Matheson says that “[t]here is something very unstable if not incoherent about being justified in suspending judgment about what your evidence supports about [P] but nevertheless being justified in believing (or disbelieving) [P]” (p. 87). At this crucial point in the argument, I was left wanting to know much more about what the relevant

kind of ‘instability’ amounts to, and why we should think that the alleged instability isn’t worth the cost of being able to take the total evidence into account as per Kelly’s argument. After all, one might think that what makes cases of peer disagreement unusual and discomfoting is precisely that they illustrate that one’s total evidence can sometimes provide justification that is ‘unstable’ in Matheson’s sense.

A third and final point concerns the issue of whether EWV allows for agents to gain justification via an illegitimate kind of ‘bootstrapping’ (Kelly 2010, 2014). Suppose that my evidence *E* strongly undermines a proposition *P*, e.g. so that it is rational to assign a credence of at most 0.1 to *P*. Suppose further that I mistakenly think that *E* strongly supports *P*, and accordingly place a far too high credence in *P*, e.g. 0.8. My epistemic peer (who has access to the same evidence *E*) is even more mistaken in this respect, and accordingly places a 0.9 credence in *P*. Notice, however that according to Matheson’s EWV I should now increase my credence in *P* from 0.8 to 0.85 – I should go from a mistaken credence to what is intuitively an even more mistaken credence. Furthermore, my new credence of 0.85 would be rational according to EWV while my original credence of 0.8 presumably was not. Needless to say, these are very odd consequences.

One of Matheson’s responses to bootstrapping arguments of this type is that the cases to which the argument appeals involve a level of idealization that makes them unlike the sorts of cases we would encounter in realistic circumstances (pp. 136-139). In real life, we would have additional higher-order evidence pertaining to other agents who place a less mistaken credence in *P*, which in turn would lower the credence recommended by EWV. Hence, argues Matheson, EWV’s odd verdicts in these cases should be taken to be artifacts of the idealizations rather than liabilities of the theory. However, appealing to idealized cases is extremely common in many areas of philosophy, especially in epistemology, and Matheson does not say why we should think that idealizing is more likely to produce artifacts in Kelly’s bootstrapping cases than elsewhere. Indeed, Matheson himself appeals to plenty of highly idealized cases in his defense of EWV earlier in his book, and moreover takes great pains to explain that, strictly speaking, his own EWV only applies to highly idealized cases.¹

¹ I am grateful to Jonathan Matheson for valuable feedback on a draft of this review. This work was supported by a New Horizons’ Research Project Grant from the Irish Research Council (Project ID: REPRO/2015/89).

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