

Book Review

Disagreement, by Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (eds). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 291. H/b £55.00, P/b £21.00.

In this long-awaited volume, Feldman and Warfield bring together ten original essays on an increasingly prominent topic: the epistemology of disagreement. Nearly all of the recent discussion has concerned cases of disagreement between *epistemic peers*: roughly, thinkers who are aware of the same evidence and who are equally well disposed to respond to their evidence rationally.

Let's make this personal. Imagine you learn that you are party to a disagreement with an epistemic peer. What is the rational response to this evidence? Must you revise your belief in the direction of your peer — perhaps to the point of suspending judgement? Or can you rationally retain your belief? If you may rationally retain your belief when confronted with peer disagreement, can you do so with unaltered confidence? Or is at least some reduction in confidence rationally required?

Answers to these questions can be arranged along a spectrum. At one end are views on which awareness of peer disagreement always mandates significant belief revision in the direction of one's peer. Whenever one believes a proposition p and one's peer believes not- p , such views counsel both parties to move to withholding in light of the disagreement. At the other end of the spectrum are views on which awareness of peer disagreement does not always mandate any reduction in confidence. Moderate, middle-of-the-spectrum views hold that awareness of peer disagreement is always reason for belief revision, but that the revision need not always be significant.

The essays in the volume address in the main the problem of peer disagreement, but also raise a host of fascinating epistemological issues, including the epistemic import of higher-order evidence (evidence about one's evidence), the so-called Uniqueness Thesis, the relation between idealized and applied epistemology, the potential self-defeat of conciliatory epistemic principles, and the internalism-externalism debate. The volume is valuable not just because its main topic is significant, but also because it provides considerable instruction in general epistemology. The editors introduce the volume with brief summaries of each essay. Thus, we do not provide essay-by-essay precis here, referring the interested reader to the

volume itself. Instead, we comment on some of its recurring themes and arguments in the collection.

Discussion of peer disagreement normally centres on an argument from peer disagreement to scepticism. Roughly: (1) With respect to many beliefs concerning many topics (e.g. religion, ethics, politics, and science) we are aware of epistemic peers who disagree with us; (2) Whenever we are aware of peers who disagree with us, we should abandon the relevant beliefs; (C) So, with respect to many beliefs concerning many topics, we should abandon those beliefs. (For more details, see Hilary Kornblith's essay). As the editors note, (1) seems initially plausible — at least given the present-day intellectual climate and a pre-philosophical notion of epistemic peerhood. Thus, if (2) is correct, a wide-ranging and existentially disconcerting sort of scepticism threatens.

Most of the contributors to this volume focus their attention on epistemic principles like (2). We will refer here to those principles as 'conciliatory'. Arguably, an important consequence of conciliatory principles is the Uniqueness Thesis (UT): For a given body of evidence and a given proposition, there is some one attitude (or level of confidence) that it is uniquely rational to have in that proposition given that evidence. (Authors variously take UT either to concern all-or-nothing attitudes or degrees of confidence, but we set aside the distinction for now). If UT follows from commitment to conciliatory principles about peer disagreement, then one way to attack such principles is to attack UT itself. A key anti-UT strategy is to identify cases in which two thinkers possess the same body of evidence, hold incompatible attitudes on the basis of that evidence, and both remain rational nonetheless. The essays by Peter van Inwagen, Thomas Kelly, Earl Conee, and Alvin Goldman attempt to do just this.

Van Inwagen finds himself unable to accept UT. Recounting his long-standing philosophical disagreements with the late David Lewis, van Inwagen is sure that he and Lewis shared all of their evidence that *could* be shared. Although their persistent disagreement tempts van Inwagen to think that he himself enjoys some private, un-shareable evidence, he resists the temptation. For such an appeal to private evidence, if generalized, would imply that all of his dissenters are epistemic inferiors. Reluctant to deny that his dissenters are sometimes (at least) peers who are rational in their beliefs, van Inwagen finds himself pressed either to abandon UT or to embrace scepticism about controversial topics. In the end, he discards UT.

Van Inwagen's essay nicely captures what many will consider a pre-theoretical datum: reasonable thinkers sometimes disagree. Kelly, Conee, and Goldman lend additional theoretical support to this idea. Kelly, for instance, notes that UT is equivalent to the claim, put in Bayesian terms, that there is some single rational prior probability distribution, a claim that even so-called 'Hard Line' Bayesians will reject. In this way, Kelly exhibits what is plausibly a liability of UT. Conee argues against a version of UT by

highlighting cases where peers have rational beliefs about their different ‘perspectives on reasons and evidence’ (p. 87). Conee contends that, possibly, two peers rationally think that it is rational for one peer to believe p and not rational for the other to believe p . Such cases defeat his version of UT, which implies that peers must have the same attitude toward p ‘when they have a thoroughly shared basis and capacity for reasonable doxastic attitudes’ (p. 71). Peers may rationally hold conflicting attitudes toward p when they rationally take themselves to have differences in reasons and evidence. In a similar spirit, Goldman defends the possibility of rational disagreement by appeal to a ‘non-nihilistic’ form of epistemic relativism. Unlike nihilistic epistemic relativists, Goldman affirms that there is a uniquely correct ‘epistemic system’ that prescribes what thinkers in certain circumstances and with certain evidence should think. But his view does not imply that thinkers recognize what the correct system is. Goldman endorses epistemic relativism in this sense: objectivity about the correct epistemic system does not preclude rational differences in thinker’s views about the system’s prescriptions. Goldman notes that, given this relativism, ‘disagreement among evidentially equal agents is compatible with each agent possessing *second-order* justifiedness’ (p. 204) and then resists UT by arguing that two thinkers might arrive at different rational first-order attitudes because of their different rational second-order attitudes. Second-order justifiedness ‘can ensure, or at least make a positive contribution toward, the reasonability of a first-order belief’ (p. 204). On Goldman’s view, UT is false and this is enough to guarantee certain kinds of rational peer disagreements.

Supposing that there is a close connection between conciliatory principles and UT, rejecting UT represents one way to avoid disagreement-based scepticism. Is there another way? Ralph Wedgwood and Thomas Kelly offer up relevant arguments; we will note a few details from Kelly’s essay. Kelly’s widely-discussed arguments rely on a crucial distinction between first-order evidence and higher-order evidence. First-order evidence is evidence that bears directly on the disputed proposition. Higher-order evidence is evidence about one’s first-order evidence, or about one’s capacity for, or performance in, evaluating it. Several of Kelly’s arguments against conciliatory principles turn on this distinction. Those principles, he thinks, wrongly accentuate one important kind of evidence (the higher-order evidence of peer disagreement) to the exclusion of first-order evidence. That is, some conciliatory principles fail to account for the actual performance of dissenting peers in evaluating their shared evidence. Kelly suggests at least two problems that result. First, conciliatory principles seem to make rationality *too easy*. Suppose two peers botch their assessment of some body of evidence, E . E in fact supports a credence level of .3 in some target proposition, p . But the peers judge that E makes p much more probable than this. One thus accords p a credence level of .7, and the other of .9. Kelly argues that conciliatory principles imply that both peers should move toward a credence of .8, and that this credence is

rational. But this seems wrong. Merely revising one's confidence in the direction of a peer does not suffice for rationality where one's original belief is irrational. Given that worry, Kelly suggests, the conciliationist might regard her principles as stating a merely *necessary* condition for rational belief revision. This, says Kelly, leaves a second problem: conciliatory principles apparently require comparable belief revision from dissenting peers even when one has in fact evaluated the shared evidence well, and the other poorly. Kelly develops cases in which this result is implausible, and buttresses the intuitive verdicts of these cases with additional theoretical support. He concludes that conciliatory principles are false, even if UT is true. Despite all this, Kelly underlines the importance of higher-order evidence. Such evidence is a relevant part of one's total evidence that determines what rational attitude one may take in the face of disagreement. According to Kelly, it is just not *all* that is relevant.

Though we cannot detail them here, the essays by Andy Egan, Adam Elga, Catherine Elgin, Richard Fumerton, and Hilary Kornblith all investigate important themes. Egan reflects on disputes regarding matters of taste. Elga addresses an important objection to conciliatory principles—that such principles self-defeat in contexts where the principles themselves are controversial. Elgin argues that recent discussions of disagreement contain the implicit (and illicit) assumption of doxastic voluntarism. Finally, in addition to their discussions of the problem of peer disagreement, Fumerton and Kornblith consider the epistemic significance of disagreement for philosophy as a discipline. Briefly, rampant disagreement in a discipline is evidence that its practitioners are not generally reliable in the field. This sort of evidence, which does not require the assumption of *peer* disagreement, calls for continued attention.

All of the essays in this volume repay careful study. It is essential reading for those interested in epistemology. And inasmuch as disagreement is part and parcel of philosophy itself, we expect the book to make an impact in other sub-disciplines as well. To close, let us share a brief 'wish list' for upcoming work, in light of the volume. Ideally, participants in disagreement debates will settle on an epistemic status. It is unclear at moments whether everyone is talking about the same issues, given the wide variation in normative talk. (Goldman's essay is sensitive to this very issue: see p. 199, n. 9 and p. 204, n. 12). And, as the editors mention, we should not assume idealized cases of peer disagreement are like the typical disagreements we find ourselves in. Theorists should keep an eye on our actual situation, lest they lose an opportunity to impart good epistemic advice. Finally, peer disagreement has drawn attention to higher-order evidence and epistemologists should continue to study it in its own right. There are also relatively unexplored varieties of higher-order evidence. One example among many: the evidence of systematic unreliability in human judgement, delivered by cognitive and social psychologists. This type of evidence tells us something about

our evidence, and understanding its rational significance may prove to be instructive, especially for discussions of the possibility of rational disagreement.

*Fordham University
Philosophy Department
Collins Hall 101
441 East Fordham Road
Bronx, NY 10458
USA*

NATHAN BALLANTYNE

*Whitworth University, Philosophy Department
Lindaman Center
300 W. Hawthorne Road
Spokane, WA 99251
USA*

NATHAN L. KING

doi:10.1093/mind/fzs086