

# **Cognitive peerhood, epistemic disdain, and affective polarisation: The perils of disagreeing deeply.**

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Victoria Lavorerio, Universidad de la República, Uruguay.

victoria.lavorerio@fic.edu.uy

## **Abstract**

Is it possible to disagree with someone without considering them cognitively flawed? The answer seems to be a resounding *yes*: disagreeing with someone doesn't entail thinking less of them. You can disagree with someone and not think that they are unreasonable. Deep disagreements, however, may challenge this assumption. A disagreement is deep when it involves many interrelated issues, including the proper way to resolve the disagreement, resulting in its persistence. The parties to a deep disagreement can hold neutral or even positive judgements of each other's epistemic character, as parties' judging each other's epistemic character negatively (i.e., *epistemic disdain*) is not a defining feature of deep disagreements. When analysing real-life cases, however, we find that epistemic disdain is typical of deep disagreements. In this article, I analyse why this is the case. Given that epistemic disdain undermines cognitive peerhood, the prospects of deep disagreements between epistemic peers seem bleak. Finally, it is discussed how the phenomenon of epistemic disdain, as it relates to deep disagreements, may increase affective polarisation.

**key words:** Deep Disagreements; Cognitive peerhood; Epistemic disdain; Affective polarisation; Crossed Disagreements.

## **Introduction**

Is it possible to disagree with someone without considering them cognitively flawed? The answer to this question seems to be a resounding *yes*: disagreeing with someone doesn't entail thinking less of them. That someone is mistaken about an issue doesn't mean that they are stupid, mean-spirited, or unable to reason. Presuming that our counterpart in a disagreement is wrong does not warrant a negative judgement of their epistemic character. The entire literature on peer disagreements rests on this assumption: people who are roughly on a par in their cognitive faculties and evidential situation, i.e., *epistemic peers*, can nevertheless disagree. I call the presumption that our interlocutor is roughly equally virtuous (and flawed) in their cognitive abilities as we are, *cognitive peerhood*. Attribution of cognitive peerhood to people we disagree with is not only plausible but desirable; that we can resolve disagreements respectfully and tolerate those with different opinions are pillars of our deliberative democracies. It seems clear, then, that two people with conflicting views on a topic can nevertheless have positive, or at least neutral, judgements about each other's epistemic character.

There is a kind of disagreement, however, that challenges this assumption: *deep disagreements*. In 1985, Robert Fogelin claimed that "there are disagreements, sometimes on important issues, which by their nature, are not subject to rational resolution" (Fogelin, 1985: 8). Ever since the publication of Fogelin's paper, argumentation theorists and epistemologists alike have debated both the precise nature of deep disagreements and the possibility of their resolution. Without endorsing any particular theory of deep disagreement, we can say that a disagreement is 'deep' when it is difficult to resolve because it involves

many interrelated issues, in what Ranalli has called a ‘ripple effect’ (Ranalli, 2021: 984). Because so much is contested between the parties, deep disagreements are often long-standing and can get heated.

*Epistemic disdain*, i.e., a party’s negative judgement of the other party’s epistemic character, is *not* a defining feature of deep disagreements. It is perfectly conceivable that the parties to a deep disagreement hold neutral or favourable judgements of each other’s epistemic character. However, when analysing real-life cases of deep disagreements, we often find that parties engage in name-calling, ad-hominem commentaries, and accusations of epistemic or moral vices. In other words, epistemic disdain is a common associate of deep disagreements.

In this paper, I analyse two case studies, ‘witness and heckle’ and infant vaccination, in order to explore how the depth of a disagreement leads to epistemic disdain and can thus be detrimental to cognitive peerhood. Then, I analyse the distinction between deep and crossed disagreements. Finally, the link between deep disagreements and affective polarisation is explored.

### **i. Cognitive peerhood**

In the last decades, a certain kind of epistemically interesting disagreement has gained considerable attention: disagreements between people who recognise each other as roughly equal regarding their evidence and epistemic virtues, i.e., *epistemic peers*. Although there are several versions of epistemic peerhood in the literature, the essence of the notion is that two people are epistemic peers when their respective epistemic authorities in a particular domain are roughly the same. For example, when two people are experts in a field with similar levels of experience and education, or likewise when they are non-experts to a similar degree. The role of peerhood, then, is to exclude from consideration cases where

lack of evidence or cognitive shortcomings explain the contradictory beliefs. As Jonathan Matheson puts it: “Peer disagreements are idealizations that control for a number of mitigating factors in hopes of isolating the epistemic effects of the evidence of the disagreement itself” (2021: 1026).

Although most examples of peer disagreements discussed in the literature are not deep, we could ask: *are deep peer disagreements possible?* Does the massive intellectual distance between the parties of a deep disagreement prevent them from considering each other epistemic peers? Or is it possible for them to recognise that their counterpart, although wrong, is an epistemic equal?

When epistemologists have addressed the question of deep peer disagreements, they tend to say they are impossible. For instance, Harvey Siegel (2013) argues that the parties to a deep disagreement are not epistemic peers because they do not share enough evidence<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, Duncan Pritchard (2011) and Klemens Kappel (2012) argue that parties to a deep disagreement cannot see each other as peers. This is because parties’ beliefs about the issue are so different that they could hardly consider each other equally likely to get true beliefs about it. Leaning in the opposite direction, Martin Kusch (2011, 2021) defends the possibility that some deep disagreements allow for the proper attribution of epistemic peerhood. Chief among these are religious and scientific disagreements, as well as disputes between parties of very dissimilar cultures<sup>2</sup>.

The possibility of deep peer disagreements hinges on our definition of ‘epistemic peerhood.’ The notion of epistemic peerhood in the literature is admittedly vague, as it varies from author to author. Still, we can distinguish two dimensions of epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> However, for him, “there aren’t any deep disagreements” (Siegel, 2013: 169). Thus, the question of the possibility of deep peer disagreements is ultimately moot.

<sup>2</sup> Kusch doesn’t talk about the deep disagreements specifically, as he does not discuss Fogelin’s theses, but the later Wittgenstein’s work on disagreement in *On Certainty* (Kusch, 2021) and *Lectures on Religious Belief* (Kusch, 2011).

peerhood: equality of epistemic virtuousness, on the one hand, and familiarity of, or access to, the same evidence, on the other. Following Graham Oppy (2010), I refer to the former as “cognitive peerhood” and the latter as “evidential peerhood.” Leaving aside the question of evidential peerhood<sup>3</sup>, I examine the relationship between deep disagreements and cognitive peerhood by addressing the question: can the parties to a deep disagreement see each other as equally intelligent, thoughtful, and free from bias?

Two people are cognitive peers when they are (roughly) equally capable, open-minded, intelligent, attentive, motivated to find the truth, and willing to react appropriately to the evidence. There are a few points about this characterization to discuss. Firstly, there seem to be different “components” to this judgement of cognitive peerhood, like attentiveness, intelligence, and so on. This list is not fixed, as it seems impossible to list necessary and sufficient conditions for cognitive peerhood. For instance, is a feature like “attentiveness” necessary to list? Or is a more-encompassing attribute like “capable” enough? Thus, various amalgamations of assorted positive adjectives regarding someone’s intellectual standing are to be expected from attempts to refine this notion.

Moreover, most of these attributes (if not all) come in degrees, e.g., you can be more attentive the second time you read a paper than the first. Furthermore, these components must be judged against one another and probably weighted differently. These combined problems make the judgement of cognitive peerhood exceedingly complex and hard to pin down. For instance, are A and B cognitive peers if A is more intelligent, but B is more attentive? What if A is more capable of analysing the evidence, but B is more motivated to find the truth?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Because what counts as evidence is part of what the parties disagree about, it’s hard to imagine that evidential peerhood can be achieved in a deep disagreement. However, the matter is more complex than space allows me to explore in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

However, the way I use the notion does not face this problem, as my concern here is not whether two parties are actually cognitive peers. When I refer to the judgement of cognitive peerhood, I do not mean a calculation of degrees of intellectual attributes weighed upon the relative value of one another to arrive at a result of objective equality (I doubt such endeavour is possible). To me, taking your counterpart in a disagreement to be your cognitive peer is not an objective judgement but an *attitude*, the attitude of *assuming you are talking to an equal*. Therefore, taking your counterpart to be your cognitive peer is not a judgement on their objective epistemic character but a disposition to take them seriously and listen to what they have to say.

The fact that some people are mistaken does not entail that they are stupid, mean-spirited, or unable to reason. The upside of cognitive peerhood is that it is relatively independent of the specific issues the disagreement is about (unlike evidential peerhood, which is directly dependent on the topic). Considerations of cognitive peerhood focus on the *character* of the disputant rather than the epistemic strength of her position. This subject-centred feature allows us to disentangle what we think of our counterpart's opinion from what we think of her epistemic character. We can think that she is intelligent, thoughtful, and fair-minded, but wrong nonetheless. For example, an anti-vaccination activist can take a vaccination-promoting scientist to be highly competent in her field and genuinely concerned with public health. Likewise, a pro-vaccination scientist can take a vaccination sceptic to be genuinely preoccupied with her children's health and competent in assessing evidence. If this is correct, parties to a deep disagreement can see each other as cognitive peers. However, close examinations of real cases of deep disagreements tell us a different story.

## **ii. The Epistemic Dimension of Deep Disagreements**

Before we examine the tension between cognitive peerhood and deep disagreements, we must focus on the question: *what are deep disagreements?* The literature on deep disagreements rarely tries to define the phenomenon. Rather, most authors offer characteristics that could serve as signposts to identify it, akin to a checklist of symptoms that could be used to diagnose a pathology (Ranalli, 2021; Lavorerio, 2021). Among these features, we find that deep disagreements are *genuine* in the sense that there is a proposition towards which the parties have conflicting doxastic attitudes. Deep disagreements are also *argumentative*; the parties offer reasons and evidence to their counterpart to convince them rationally of their position. Furthermore, deep disagreements are *persistent*; they are not resolved easily or quickly. Finally, deep disagreements are *systematic*, as they are not about a single issue but usually revolve around a host of issues about which the parties also disagree. These interrelated points of disagreement tend to include which epistemic standards are to be used, what constitutes evidence, which epistemic principles and methods to follow, and other epistemic considerations. Hence, I call this the *epistemic dimension of deep disagreement*<sup>5</sup>.

Although a thorough examination of the epistemic dimension of deep disagreements cannot be done in the context of this paper, I can lay out its bones, especially as it pertains to aspects that will come up in the rest of the paper. The backbone of the epistemic dimension of deep disagreement is that, as many authors pointed out, parties in a deep disagreement are often at odds about what they consider to be the relevant *evidence* in the debate. This is connected to the fact that, as Fogelin (1985) pointed out, parties do not agree on what procedure would adjudicate the debate. Furthermore, because they have different views on what counts as evidence in the disagreement, they will judge very differently which types of arguments are

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<sup>5</sup> By indicating that there is an epistemic dimension of deep disagreements, I insinuate that deep disagreements exceed this specific dimension. As I see it, the depth of a disagreement is manifested in many ways.

compelling and what the proper response to those arguments is. All of this combined seems to, at least partially, delineate the standards of rationality that each party will uphold and expect *vis a vis* their disagreement (we will see this at play in the case studies examined in the next sections).

Although there seems to be a consensus around what deep disagreements look like, the matter of what exactly is at issue in a deep disagreement, that is, *why* they arise, is highly contended. Of the many theories that attempt to account for the nature of deep disagreements, two big camps can be recognized: the *fundamental epistemic principles view* (Kappel, 2012; Lynch, 2010, 2016) and the *hinge view* (Pritchard, 2018, 2021; Ranalli, 2020). The former conceptualizes deep disagreements as clashes between the fundamental epistemic principles of each party, where *fundamental* means that they can only be defended by assuming them, i.e., circularly. Alternatively, the hinge view is inspired by Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and locates the source of deep disagreements in the different hinge propositions to which the parties are committed. In the context of this paper, I will leave open the question of which of these kinds of theories is better, as what I say here is compatible with both<sup>6</sup>.

### **iii. Epistemic disdain**

When analysing the alt-right's rhetoric against what they call "cultural Marxism," Scott Aikin argues that negatively judging our counterpart is characteristic of deep disagreements:

And when the disagreements are widespread and seemingly intractable, the hypothesis that some destructive non-rational factor has perverted the

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<sup>6</sup> I argued before (Lavorerio, 2021) that both kinds of theories face significant problems.



judgment of too many in the discussion begins to look more and more plausible (Aikin, 2019: 428).

When we become aware of a disagreement, Aikin argues, we usually discuss the issue the dispute is about. We present our positions and share our reasons for holding them. In deep disagreements, however, we shift from debating the issue to discussing the issue *and* why we disagree about it so profoundly; “we turn from reasoning about the issue to reasoning *about each other*” (ibid). Then, diagnosis ensues, invoking non-epistemic factors to explain why the other party has so vastly departed from our view, which we see as rational. “So deep disagreements,” Aikin concludes, “as they turn to mutual regard, become occasions for diagnosing false consciousness, and ultimately become self-sealing programs” (ibid).

When we investigate how real-life deep disagreements unfold, Aikin’s conclusions seem highly plausible. Looking at controversies around abortion, vaccination, or Aikin’s example of the alt-right, we find that parties often engage in name-calling and ad hominem accusations. Nevertheless, judging the other party’s character and motivations instead of the force of their arguments is *not* a defining feature of deep disagreements. It is perfectly conceivable that a deep disagreement, even about a controversial and dividing issue, never gets to the “reasoning about each other” stage. But when we analyse cases of deep disagreement, we find that *epistemic disdain*, though not necessary, is likely. By ‘epistemic disdain,’ I refer to the parties’ negative judgements about each other’s epistemic character. It is not unusual in controversial issues to see a party accusing the other of epistemic vices (‘anti-vaxxers just don’t understand science’) or moral ones (‘scientists promoting vaccination are in Big Pharma’s pocket’).

This behaviour fits into what Ian James Kidd calls *vice-charging*, “the critical practice of charging other persons with epistemic vice” (Kidd, 2016: 181). Thus, epistemic disdain is connected to epistemic vices because a negative judgement of the other side usually comes

as accusations of epistemic vices, like close-mindedness, dogmatism, or arrogance (Lynch, 2020; Aberdein, 2020). But is epistemic disdain itself an epistemic vice? I don't think so. Epistemic vices are either character traits, ways of thinking, or attitudes, depending on which specific vice we are talking about (Cassam, 2018). What I call epistemic disdain, in contrast, is a *judgement* that is specific in its context and object. In other words, epistemic disdain is not a general attitude or trait of thinking poorly of people with whom we disagree. Rather, it refers to negatively judging another person's epistemic character as a consequence of a disagreement.

Although epistemic disdain is not itself an epistemic vice, it can interact with epistemic vices in possibly harmful ways. For instance, an arrogant person who "has an intellectual superiority complex and is dismissive of the views and perspectives of other people" (Cassam, 2018: 8) might be more predisposed to epistemic disdain. Furthermore, a party can be an arrogant arguer if she shows "disrespect toward other speakers" and "an unwillingness to submit one-self to the norms governing ordinary conversation and rational debate" (Tanesini, 2016: 85). Andrew Aberdein (2020) argues that the presence of an arrogant arguer in an argumentative disagreement is problematic because she can make a disagreement seem deeper than it is. This is because the struggle to settle a dispute with an arrogant arguer can be confused with the difficulties inherent to resolving deep disagreements.

Although Aberdein's point seems right, it differs from the point I defend in this paper. I argue that epistemic disdain results from some inherent features of the disagreement, not from the vices of the arguers. That is, the depth of the disagreement pushes the parties towards epistemic disdain, even if they are acting in good faith and cannot be said to be exhibiting any epistemic vice. Of course, I do not want to imply that the parties in the cases I analyse are without epistemic vices (that seems implausible). I aim to show, however, that

epistemic disdain does not arise *because of* these vices. In other words, epistemic vices like arrogance or close-mindedness would worsen the epistemic disdain that results from a deep disagreement, but they would not cause it.

#### **iv. ‘Witness and heckle.’**

An instance where we can see epistemic disdain at work is the case of ‘witness and heckle’ analysed by Frans Van Eemeren and colleagues (Eemeren et al. 1993: 142–169). In the seventies, preacher Jed Smock toured college campuses around America and was met with relentless ridicule by students. According to the records, each party, preacher and followers on one side, and college students on the other, engaged in name-calling. For the students, the preacher was ‘crazy,’ a ‘zealot,’ ‘out of it,’ and an ‘egomaniac’ (1993: 151). While for the preacher and his followers, the students were ‘fornicators,’ ‘drunkards,’ and ‘sinners’ (1993: 155). Both parties also attributed irrationality to the other. The preacher saw the heckling as “proof that the audience [the students] has no rational response to his position” (1993: 162). For Smock, because the students did not know the Bible, they could not rationally engage with him: “you’ve got to know something about the Bible to reason against it” (1993: 165). On the other side, the students took Smock’s reluctance to offer arguments for the authority and truth of the Bible as an unwillingness to engage in rational discussion. According to the students, Smock “doesn’t know logic” (1993: 150). Whenever they tried to engage in argumentation with him, it got nowhere; “I’d show logical contradictions, and he’d just deny them” (ibid), one student recalls.

The extreme divergence in the parties’ standards of rationality prompts explanations of why the other party departs so greatly from (what they take to be) the basic tenets of rationality. The students construed Smock’s witnessing as “an ego trip” (1993: 154) motivated by self-righteousness and “perverse psychological needs” (1993: 153). Whereas the

fundamentalists (Smock and his followers) interpreted the students' rejection of Smock's message as an attempt of the sinful, driven by the Devil, to protect their ways of living (1993: 162).

In this example, we can see the interplay between the two features of deep disagreements that Aikin mentions: attribution of bad faith to the other party and the tendency for the parties' positions to become self-sealing. The self-sealing of a position is a result of attributing bad faith to the other party: 'Since Smock is a bigot, I won't engage with him rationally, but mock him'; 'since college students are sinful, I don't have to listen to them, but call them out.' Normally, Eemeren et al. notice, "open, sustained, and intense conflict would pose a powerful challenge to the assumed objectivity of one's own perspective" (1993: 160). But the attribution of bad faith prevents the parties from seeing their disagreement as challenging their perspective. Worse even, the parties take the confrontation as *confirmation* of their own perspective. When Smock calls women 'whores' and atheists 'sinners,' it reinforces the college students' views that without tolerant liberalism, we would all be bigots and fanatics. On the other side, Smock interprets the students' heckling as a defensive reaction to the Bible's message reinforcing his belief in its truth. Therefore, and contrary to what may appear at first glance, attribution of bad faith and self-sealing of positions *are not the causes of the persistence of a deep disagreement but its consequences*. To see the link between epistemic disdain and the persistence of deep disagreement, I turn to a less extreme case than 'heckle and witness': the polemic over infant vaccination.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For my discussion of the vaccination debate, I follow Goldenberg (2016) and Koerth-Baker (2016). Also, Cassam (2021) argues that we should not be so quick in judging vaccine hesitant parents as being gullible or dogmatic. See Dare (2014) for an analysis of the controversy over vaccination as a deep disagreement.

## **v. Infant Vaccination Hesitancy**

Imagine you are a doctor and a couple of parents ask you about children's vaccines. You have no reason to doubt that they are fair-minded, rational, and genuinely preoccupied with their child's health, as well as capable of understanding the basic science behind inoculation. You reassure them that vaccination is generally safe and necessary for herd immunity. Later on, you find out that not only have they not vaccinated their child but are researching vaccination-sceptic literature. You think it's your fault for not thoroughly explaining why they should vaccinate their child. You reach out to them and explain as best you can how inoculation works and why it is crucial. Nevertheless, you later find out that not only have they still not inoculated their child, but they have joined an anti-vaccination group. You conclude that they don't understand basic facts about the immune system and have been brainwashed by anti-science campaigners.

Our imagined doctor takes vaccination to be a scientific issue, with scientific evidence being the critical factor to consider. Therefore, when she encounters hesitant parents, she assumes they lack relevant (i.e., scientific) information. This allows her to see the parents as her cognitive peers (but not her evidential peers) when she's first aware of their hesitancy. She regards them as intelligent and fair-minded truth-seekers who are just uninformed about the issue. (It should be noted that the latter does not affect the former. It is not a cognitive flaw or an epistemic vice to be insufficiently informed about issues on which one is not supposed to be an expert).

In a similar vein, scientific illiteracy has been the prevalent explanation for vaccination hesitancy within the scientific community, relevant governmental agencies, and science journalism (Goldenberg, 2016; Koerth-Baker, 2016). Viewing the problem according to this 'deficit model,' the response has been to disseminate scientific information in an effort to educate the general public about vaccination. This strategy, however, has proven

unsuccessful in reducing vaccination hesitancy. The scientific community explains this failure by attributing non-epistemic factors clouding the reluctant parents' judgement. Fear, manipulation, ideology, a political agenda, or a combination of these become the most common explanations for the persistence of the disagreement (Cassam, 2021).

The analysis of the cases, vaccination hesitancy and 'witness and heckle' leads me to think that the persistence of the disagreement explains why epistemic disdain is so prevalent in deep disagreements. By persistence, however, I don't mean the time elapsed. Rather, what prompts the attribution of bad faith is *the perceived unresponsiveness to the cogent arguments presented*. In other words, a party can see the other as a cognitive peer in the early stages of a discussion because she has no reason to doubt the other is reasonable (or better, *if* she has no reason to doubt). After the party presents a variety of arguments and evidence, however, the perceived unwillingness or incapacity to react appropriately to the evidence overrules the initial presumption of rationality. Thus, the depth of the disagreement tends towards epistemic disdain, which precludes parties from regarding each other as cognitive peers.

Imagine now that you are a concerned parent of an infant. You choose to inform yourself about the issue before deciding whether to vaccinate your child. You go to a doctor to seek her expert advice; she tells you that vaccines are generally safe and that herd immunity is important. You judge her opinion to be accurate and valuable. You have no reason to doubt that she's genuinely invested in public health, highly competent in her field, and impartial in her judgement. You continue your research by speaking with other parents and listening to why they've decided not to vaccinate their children. You learn that, though rare, adverse reactions to vaccines can be deadly. Besides, unvaccinated people don't get ill because of the protection afforded by herd immunisation. Now you want to know whether your child will likely have an adverse reaction to the vaccine. While gathering further information,

you postpone your child's vaccination schedule. You return to the doctor to determine whether vaccines are safe *for your child*. She explains the same things she did before but with more details and a condescending tone: vaccines are *generally* safe, and herd immunisation is essential. You don't doubt that what she says is true, but she's not really answering your question; worse, she's not listening to you. You inquire further and find groups of concerned parents who tell you that they have tried unsuccessfully to make the scientific community listen to their concerns and investigate the rare adverse reactions to vaccines. Now you have become convinced that there must be something wrong with the scientific community if they systematically ignore the public's health concerns and refuse to investigate vaccination safety (perhaps they are paid by Big Pharma).<sup>8</sup>

Just as the doctor does not begin the exchange by thinking that the parents have non-epistemic factors influencing their judgement but only lack information, the concerned parents need not start the debate with scepticism towards the scientific community. Likewise, the perception that the other side is not listening to their arguments and not responding to the evidence presented drives them to attribute bad faith to the other party.

But why do parties perceive each other as unresponsive to the evidence? Part of the answer is that they may not see everything that the other party presents as evidence *as evidence* (see Lavorerio, 2021; 2020). This is because what counts as evidence is also in dispute in deep disagreements. But in the examples shown here, the exchanges fail at an earlier stage.

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<sup>8</sup> I do not mean to imply that this story is representative of all cases of vaccination scepticism. The controversy over vaccination is complex and encompasses many positions. I do not doubt that many (if not most) anti-vaxxers are epistemically vicious, e.g., have not researched enough, do not adequately understand the science behind vaccination, are prejudiced against scientists, etc. Regardless, I believe an anti-vaxxer position along the lines presented here is possible.

Furthermore, given the polarized state of the controversy, parents are likely to approach the issue from a more sceptical starting point than in previous generations; that is, not from the assumption that what the doctor says goes. Meanwhile, scientists, especially those working directly with parents, are likely to be more assertive in their rhetoric to counter vaccination scepticism. This assertiveness, however, can be counter-productive, as it can be confused with dogmatism.

The parties in these controversies do not regard what they are doing in the same light; they have wildly divergent interpretations of what is going on in the first place. For instance, the college students see the preacher's unwillingness to present arguments as a failure in the game of convincing others to believe in the Bible. However, Smock's intentions are not to convince but *to witness*; his actions are not directed primarily at the students but at God. Meanwhile, the fundamentalists construe the heckling as a defence mechanism of the sinners in the audience. But the students are not defending their lifestyle but their liberal rationalist perspective.

We can also find this incongruence in how the parties see the disagreement in the controversy over vaccination. For scientists, mass inoculation is a scientific issue where the relevant evidence includes randomised studies and large-population statistics. In contrast, vaccination is a high-stakes personal issue for the parents, where scientific evidence is only part of the equation. The two parties represent two different perspectives on personal health decisions: 'doctor knows best' versus 'parents know best.'<sup>9</sup>

My analysis so far attests to a noteworthy feature of the relationship between epistemic disdain and deep disagreements. When the parties become aware of the conflict, they frame it in a certain way ('the preacher is trying to convince people of the truth of Christianity'; 'parents lack information about the safety of vaccines'). But engaging with the other party shows that their behaviour is incongruent with the framing projected onto them ('Smock is not presenting arguments; thus, he will convince no one'; 'facts do not move parents; thus, they are not behaving rationally'). Therefore, attributing bad faith and irrationality results from the perceived failure of the other party to engage in the dispute *as we frame it*. The

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<sup>9</sup> Ironically, parents who shifted from the former to the latter were nudged by the very health governmental agencies that recommend them to vaccinate their children: "current expert parenting advice in both European and American contexts promotes 'active, child-centred, and personalized approaches for improved child health and developmental outcomes'... with the exception of the "vaccine question," ...In asking for active parents and compliant vaccinators, Public Health seems to want to have it both ways" (Goldenberg, 2016: 566-567).



perceived lack of good intentions or rationality is thus a consequence of attributing the wrong intention to the other party. These supposed breaches of rationality or civility preclude the recognition of the counterpart's cognitive peerhood.

## **vi. Crossed Disagreements**

The cases examined in this paper can also be read as examples of *crossed disagreements*. According to Javier Osorio and Neftali Villanueva, crossed disagreements are “instances of public discourse where two opposing parties conceive the debate in significantly different terms” (Osorio & Villanueva, 2019: 111). More precisely, a crossed disagreement is detected when the parties show signs that they interpret their dispute as being of a different kind. The authors present three types of disagreements:

“Type A. Disagreements in which there is a presumption of commonality with respect to the standards of both parts. Roughly, fact-dependent disagreements.

Type B. Disagreements that become about the standards, once it becomes obvious that both parties have different standards. Roughly, deep disagreements.

Type C. Disagreements that neither disappear nor become about the standards, once it becomes obvious that both parties have different standards.

Evaluative disagreements” (Osorio & Villanueva, 2019: 118).

The vaccination case seems to be a perfect example of a crossed disagreement. The paediatrician views the dispute as a type A disagreement because she assumes that the parents use the same standard as her to judge the issue, i.e., scientific consensus. Meanwhile, the parents see their dispute as a type B or C (depending on how the discussion unfolds)

because they use a different standard to judge the issue. In other words, while one party sees the issue as solely factual, it is (also) a normative issue for the other. Diagnosing a case as a crossed disagreement is not trivial. Osorio & Villanueva (2019) (as well as Almagro, Osorio & Villanueva, 2021) argue that crossed disagreements are pernicious for political deliberation because when parties view their dispute as being of different kinds, they don't engage with the other party's arguments. For instance, if one sees an issue as straightforwardly factual, one is unlikely to consider the arguments from the other side which discuss values or standards, as the normative issue is presumed to be settled or irrelevant. On the other hand, if one views an issue as normative at its core (e.g., whether a certain practice is morally reprehensible), then the figures and graphs the other party may show seem inappropriate.

Are the cases explored in this article instances of crossed or deep disagreements? For Almagro, Osorio, and Villanueva, a deep disagreement is a type B and can thus be a part of a crossed disagreement if a party sees the dispute as deep while the other doesn't. Hence, for these authors, deep and crossed disagreements are distinct kinds. In my view, in contrast, the fact that the parties see their dispute under different lights is a clear sign that their disagreement is considerably deep. A possible explanation of this incongruence is that Almagro, Osorio, and Villanueva's research is marked by an interest in language and discourse, while my angle has been firmly epistemological. They define deep disagreements as "disagreements that become about the standards" (Osorio & Villanueva, 2019: 118). In my example of infant vaccination, although the parties use different standards to judge the issue, their dialogue may never revolve around those standards, hence, not becoming deep. For me, however, it doesn't really matter whether they actually discuss the fact that they use different standards; it matters that they do.

Furthermore, although I pointed out that the parties view their disagreement under different lights (for one a scientific issue, for the other a personal one), it isn't quite right to say that for one, it is a purely factual issue while for the other it's a normative one, as these dimensions can never be completely severed from each other. The doctor can present evidence for her view, which is generally grounded in facts. Still, her position is also grounded in several normative stances, like the role science must play in modern medicine, human experimentation ethics, large-scale clinical trials' accuracy, and so on. Alternatively, although the vaccine-sceptic community seems to engage more often with ethical and political arguments, they also appeal to facts and empirical evidence for their views (even though their information tends to be false and their interpretation of the evidence misleading).

Therefore, although diagnosing an instance of public discourse as a crossed disagreement may be illuminating, it is important to note that it only concerns the specific part of discourse we are analysing. Just because a party behaves as if the disagreement is straightforwardly factual (type A) at a particular time of their debate, it doesn't mean there isn't a normative dimension to the disagreement. And just because their discussion doesn't revolve around the different standards they use to assess the issue doesn't mean that they don't have these different standards.

### **vii. Affective Polarisation**

From the cases analysed above, I concluded that a disagreement's depth can negatively impact a judgement of cognitive peerhood. In a nutshell, one party may perceive that the other is not responding reasonably to (what they see as) cogent reasons and valid evidence presented, resulting in a negative judgement of their epistemic character, i.e., epistemic disdain. In this final section, I focus on how this phenomenon is connected to polarisation.

This, however, is no easy task, as the term ‘polarisation’ designates not a single phenomenon but an array of distinct but easily confounded phenomena (Bramson et al. 2017). Added to that difficulty is the fact that deep disagreements can present significant variations from one another. Consequently, my reflections here will be coarse and incomplete, mere broad strokes for more detailed future research.

The phenomenon on which we will focus our attention is *affective polarisation*. Affective polarisation refers to a population’s heightened negative feelings for an out-group and heightened positive associations with the in-group (Iyengar et al. 2012; 2019). In other words, we tend to dislike people considered members of ‘the other camp’ while generally liking people from our own.

We can see two distinct components of affective polarisation: animosity and radicalism. By radicalism, we mean “people’s high level of credence in the core beliefs of the political group that they identify with” (Almagro, 2021: 26). Based on the interaction between these, Almagro distinguishes four kinds of affective polarisation:

- 1) *Affective polarisation with animosity*: “members of a group dislike and hate those who belong to the opposing group simply because they are from that particular opposing group.”
- 2) *Affective polarisation with animosity and radicalism*: “members of a group dislike and hate those who belong to the opposing group essentially because they have a high level of confidence in certain beliefs that are central to the identity of their group.”
- 3) *Affective polarisation via sympathy*: “members of a group do not dislike or hate those who belong to the opposing group, but simply have a high level of sympathy and support toward people that belong to their own group.”

- 4) *Affective polarisation with radicalism*: “there is no animosity but radicalism between two groups somehow at odds” (Almagro, 2021: 68-9).

This taxonomy shows that animosity is not necessary for affective polarisation, at least from Almagro’s perspective. In the last two kinds of affective polarisation, we find scenarios where two groups’ opinions are at odds, but there’s no animosity between them. Almagro’s example of the *Black Lives Matter* movement as a case of affective polarisation via sympathy shows that ideological tenets can serve as positive identification of an in-group without the need to display animosity towards the out-group. Meanwhile, an example of affective polarisation with radicalism (type 4) is the divide between the scientific community and groups defending fringe views, like flat-earthers.

Since parties to a deep disagreement do not always show animosity towards each other, one could think that deep disagreements beget affective polarisation with radicalism (type 4). In this case, the groups that disagree deeply about an issue (e.g., the shape of the Earth) would not dislike each other but just ignore the arguments from the other side. Although this scenario is possible, I find it quite unlikely that there is no animosity whatsoever between parties of a deep disagreement. Why would one ignore a contrary position if one did not judge it completely meritless? And wouldn’t one judge poorly a party who defends a position one deems meritless? The considerations of the first part of the paper lead me to think that there is at least one form of animosity the parties of deep disagreements tend to develop: epistemic disdain. If epistemic disdain is a kind of animosity, and I think it is, then the type of affective polarisation that deep disagreements tend to foster cannot be type 4.

Of the two types of affective polarisation with animosity, I believe type 2 fits the bill. As I argued in the first part of the paper, parties to a deep disagreement tend to develop epistemic disdain towards each other. But this is not (necessarily) because they recognize each other as members of an out-group (type 1). Rather, parties develop epistemic disdain because they

hold such confidence in their own way of framing the debate that they cannot but see the other as unreasonable. For instance, the doctor is utterly convinced that the issue of vaccination is to be settled solely on scientific merit. Hence, when the parents consider other kinds of evidence (e.g., anecdotal), she refuses to see them as rational epistemic subjects but instead thinks of them as brainwashed passive receivers of misinformation (Cassam, 2021).

This idea - that deep disagreements tend towards affective polarisation with animosity and radicalism- has a feature that is, in my mind, a plus: it doesn't necessitate previously established in and out-groups. The parties entering an argumentative exchange may not recognise each other as members of opposite groups; they might not even be aware that there are different groups to begin with. The animosity (epistemic disdain) does not necessarily come from recognising the other as a member of an 'out-group.' The perceived unresponsiveness to cogent reasons and valid evidence prompts negative judgements of epistemic character, not the thought that 'she is one of *those*.' Therefore, deep disagreements do not necessitate the recognition of an out-group to generate epistemic disdain and hence, animosity. A troubling corollary to this idea is that the depth of a disagreement can create an out-group based on opposition to deeply-held convictions if this epistemic disdain is generalised.

I am not the first to note the link between deep disagreements and affective polarization (e.g., De Ridder, 2021). In fact, Michael P. Lynch refers to the phenomenon analysed in this paper:

When one is involved in an epistemic disagreement over an absolute or relatively fundamental epistemic principle, it can be rational, relative to your own principles, to perceive the other side in a certain way. In particular, it can be subjectively rational to (a) identify one's interlocutor as question-begging, and on that basis, perceive them as epistemically vicious: that is,

as irrational, dogmatic, closeminded and possibly even arrogant (Lynch, 2020: 152-3).

Why exactly can it be rational to perceive the other side in such a negative light? Lynch's answer appeals directly to his conception of deep disagreements: because the parties' disagreement lies in their clashing (relatively) fundamental epistemic principles. Because the conflicting principles the disagreement is grounded in are fundamental, the parties argue for their validity circularly. This, though not *epistemically* problematic (it is not unjustified to rely on fundamental epistemic principles), is argumentatively unsatisfying: "defending one's principles by appeals to those very principles will in all likelihood seem irrational, dogmatic, and closed-minded to those questioning those principles" (Lynch, 2020: 153).

My diagnosis, however, differs from Lynch's. Take Jed Smock, for instance. Plausibly, the preacher relies on an epistemic principle in the neighbourhood of *the Bible is the revealed word of God*. This principle, Lynch is right, would be very hard to defend without assuming it, i.e., in a non-circular matter. Smock's audience, however, does not lose their patience with him because he doesn't justify his appeal to the Bible in a non-circular way (at least not according to Eemeren et al.'s analysis). Presumably, many of the audience members are religious themselves (the incident taking place in the United States) hence, familiar with the kind of fundamental role holy texts play in religious beliefs. Rather, I submit, the students judged negatively the fact that Smock didn't offer *any* arguments to defend his position (at least not what *they* would take to be arguments). Similarly, the vaccination-hesitant parents in my story consider that the kind of arguments presented by the doctor, and the medical community in general, do not answer their questions and that their concerns are not taken seriously. In my view, the parties conceive of their disagreement, and the issue the disagreement is about, in such different ways that the arguments presented by their

counterpart are interpreted as inappropriate in a wide variety of ways, not just question-begging.

### Conclusions

Can we disagree deeply with people we deem equally reasonable and motivated for the truth? Although we would want to answer this question positively, our analysis of two case studies, ‘witness and heckle’ and infant vaccination, give us a more troubling scenario. Parties to a deep disagreement can see each other as equally rational, fair-minded, and motivated to find the truth (i.e., *cognitive peers*) when they first become aware of the dispute. Parties can explain their counterpart’s beliefs by attributing a lack of information or insight (‘they don’t know what I know’). Because of their deeply held beliefs on the matter, the parties tend to frame their deep disagreement in a certain way, allowing for only certain kinds of evidence to be legitimate and only certain kinds of arguments to be pertinent. However, when they start to argue with the other party, they soon realise that their interlocutor’s position remains unchanged despite the compelling arguments and decisive evidence presented. These perceived breaches in rationality demand a diagnosis that often comes in the form of attributing epistemic and/or moral vices. Thus, the failed argumentative exchange conspires against the initial attribution of cognitive peerhood, often replaced by epistemic disdain (‘I thought I was talking with a reasonable person, now I realise I’m not’).

The parties have high confidence in the beliefs which shape how they conceive of the issue under discussion. Consequently, the argumentative exchanges of deep disagreements can foster affective polarisation with animosity in the form of epistemic disdain. Affective polarisation, in turn, makes a judgement of cognitive peerhood even more unlikely, dissuading people from engaging with ‘the other side’ (‘why bother?’). Therefore, deep



disagreements foster affective polarisation, which motivates disengagement and further radicalism. It becomes a vicious circle from which it is hard to escape.

So, what can we do? Contrary to what may appear, I do not think this situation is hopeless. The depth of a disagreement does not necessarily result in epistemic disdain, nor is a vicious circle unavoidable. When our interlocutors do not behave in the way we would expect from ‘reasonable people,’ we have a choice: we charge them with an intellectual vice (dogmatism, gullibility, bias, etc.), or we pause and wonder: why would an otherwise reasonable and fair-minded person think this way? In Quassim Cassam’s (2021) words, we stop vice-charging and start the *Verstehen*; “to acquire *Verstehen* of another human being is to be able to see things from their point of view, in terms of their reasons and categories of thought” (Cassam, 2021: 9). In other words, instead of judging, we can try to understand their position, which is often more complex than we had initially thought. We may still disagree with them, even deeply (no amount of *Verstehen* changes the fact that the Earth is round). We may not be able to avoid deep disagreements, but we can certainly mitigate the epistemic disdain and affective polarisation they beget.

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