Disagreement and the Ethics of Belief

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The question at the center of the debate concerning the epistemic significance of disagreement is the question how does evidence that another (or others) disagree with me affect the justificatory status of my beliefs (if at all)? Conciliatory views of disagreement maintain that such evidence is (or at least can be) a defeater for the justification that I have for my disputed beliefs. If undefeated, such a defeater renders my disputed beliefs less justified, if not entirely unjustified. Strong conciliatory views, such as the Equal Weight View, appear to have the consequence that none of our controversial beliefs are epistemically justified.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is perhaps best seen by looking at an idealized two-person case of peer disagreement. Two individuals are *epistemic peers* with respect to a proposition p at a time t, just in case both individuals are in an equally good epistemic position with respect to p at t – both are equally likely to be correct about p at t. According to the Equal Weight View, peer opinions are to be given equal weight. If two peers disagree about a proposition, say one believes it and the other disbelieves it, the disagreement is not better explained by positing an error with either one of the peers over and above the other. Since the disagreement is equally well explained by one party having made an error as by the other party having made an error, the Equal Weight View claims that both parties are rationally mandated to revise their opinions to an attitude that ‘splits the difference’ between the two original attitudes – in this case suspension of judgment. It is worth noting that having followed the prescriptions of the Equal Weight View, the original disagreement disappears – having split the difference, both parties now adopt the very same doxastic attitude toward the originally disputed proposition.

However, the idea that we should abandon controversial beliefs and eliminate the disagreements surrounding them is challenged by psychological evidence about group inquiry. In brief, there is evidence that groups with members who genuinely disagree about a proposition, do better with respect to determining whether that proposition is true. This evidence is evidence that the elimination of disagreements is bad – and not just any kind of bad, it is *epistemically* bad. So, the prescriptions of the Equal Weight View appear to be in tension with psychological findings regarding group inquiry. This tension is motivated by Jeff Dunn in his forthcoming paper “Peer Disagreement and Group Inquiry”.

In this paper, I will explain this challenge to the Equal Weight View coming from the psychology of group inquiry, and evaluate its merits. We will see that while this evidence does not give us a reason to reject the Equal Weight View, it does require making some clarifications regarding what the view does and does not entail, as well as a revisiting the ethics of belief.

1. *The Psychology of Group Inquiry*

Dunn puts forward a number of related theses here that have considerable empirical support. I will only briefly lay them out here since my primary goal is not to evaluate the legitimacy of these findings, but rather what import they have on the epistemology of disagreement and questions concerning what we ought to believe.

1. Groups reach more accurate conclusions when there is dissent and debate within the group.

First, groups do better than individuals in performing reasoning tasks. Some evidence for this is given by Moshman & Geil (1998). In their study, participants were asked to solve the Wason Selection Task in one of three ways: individually, interactively, or individually & interactively. Subjects who solved the task individually only relied on their own reasoning. Subjects who solved the task interactively encountered the task as a group and worked through it together. Subjects who solved the task individually & interactively first relied on their own reasoning to come to a conclusion, and then discussed and debated their individual findings in a group before coming to a final conclusion. The success rates for the various groups were 9.4%, 70%, and 80% respectively. This indicates that reasoning together is more fruitful.

Further evidence suggests that debate and not merely discussion increases the accuracy of group inquiry. Sunstein (2002) provides evidence that like-minded groups tend to increase their confidence in their shared views, and that group discussion in such contexts only tends to further establish the held view, what Sunstein calls the ‘law of group polarization”. So, there are also dangers with like-minded groups.

1. Groups reach more accurate conclusions when dissenting parties genuinely hold their dissenting beliefs in the debate.

Evidence for B comes from Mercier (2012) who suggests that we tend to seek out arguments that confirm our antecedently held beliefs. Such confirmation bias is a detriment to both individuals and like-minded groups. In addition, Dawson *et al.* (2002) provide evidence that we are better at finding falsifying data regarding arguments and opinions with which we disagree. So, groups with genuinely dissenting parties will do better in terms of placing appropriate checks and balances on the reasoning and arguments deployed in the group. This conclusion is confirmed with work by Schulz-Hardt *et al.* (2002). They found that groups with genuine disagreement performed better than those where the disagreement was merely contrived by using various ‘devil’s advocate’ techniques. Evidence suggests that we reason better with respect to beliefs that we actually have, then we do with respect to ‘devil’s advocate’ beliefs. So, groups with genuine dissent do better at avoiding both belief bias and confirmation bias[[2]](#footnote-2). So, diversity in opinion amongst members of a group helps to both uncover a more balanced body of evidence as well as to properly evaluate that evidence.

1. *Sharpening the Problem: The Ethics of Belief*

The ethics of belief concerns the central question what should I believe? However, this question plausibly has many senses. One issue within the ethics of belief is whether this question is univocal or multiply ambiguous. After all, our beliefs have consequences in a number of areas of our lives, and in the lives of others. So, we can at least identify several more specific questions in the neighborhood such as:

* From the moral point of view, what should I believe?
* From the prudential point of view, what should I believe?
* From the epistemic point of view, what should I believe?
* Etc.

So, an issue in the ethics of belief is whether there is one central unified question ‘what should I believe?’ that comes from the *all-things-considered* perspective.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, regardless of whether there is such a perspective, it should be clear that there are versions of this question from these more fine-grained perspectives. Of interest to us here, is our question when asked from the epistemic perspective. It doesn’t matter here whether or how an answer to this question informs an answer to the questions from the all-things-considered perspective.

Two goals are apparent from the epistemic perspective: to believe truths and to disbelieve falsehoods. Each of these epistemic goals holds the other in check, preventing the epistemic maladies brought about by either an overly cautious or an overly careless doxastic life. Maximizing one’s chances of success with respect to one of these goals comes only by way of subjecting oneself to grave risk with respect to the other goal. So, while being an indiscriminate believer may increase the likelihood of my having true beliefs, such a strategy also makes it likely that I will have many false beliefs. Similarly, while refusing to have any beliefs at all (if even possible) would avoid even the potential for a false belief, it would also thwart my having any true beliefs. So, we can more clearly formulate the epistemic version of our question as *with the interest of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods, what should I believe*?[[4]](#footnote-4),[[5]](#footnote-5)

With this formulation of the epistemic perspective, we can see that both the Equal Weight View and the recommendations coming from the psychology of group inquiry are concerned with our doxastic lives from the epistemic perspective. Each is concerned with the goals of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods. For each, the goal is to arrive at true conclusions and to avoid false one. Further, each is concerned with what I should believe *right* *now*, with respect to these epistemic goals. Neither is concerned with beliefs I may or may not have had in the past, and neither makes prescriptions for what I should believe in the future. Further still, each is concerned with what I should believe now *regarding the disputed proposition in question*, and with respect to the goal of believing it if it is true and disbelieving it if it is false. Each has the same target proposition in mind.

On the one hand, there is powerful evidence that abandoning one’s dissenting belief upon discovering a disagreement has quite negative effects. Further, these negative effects are not psychological or aesthetic; they are *epistemic*. They are negative epistemic consequences since abandoning one’s dissenting opinion actually hinders one’s likelihood of having a true belief on the matter in the end. On the other hand, the Equal Weight View claims that we should abandon controversial beliefs. This norm too is properly seen as epistemic – it is with the goal of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods that it claims that we should be agnostic about the controversial. So, with respect to the epistemic goal of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods, the prescriptions of the Equal Weight View are in tension with the prescriptions of the psychological research. According to the Equal Weight View, we ought to abandon our controversial beliefs, but according to the psychological data, we ought to keep them. We clearly cannot both keep them and abandon them, so what are we to do?

1. *A first pass: Instrumental and Intrinsic Value*

One potential way to resolve the tension is to claim that the Equal Weight View and the psychological data are simply talking about different things. According to this line of response, the tension is merely apparent and the result of an equivocation. For instance, one might note that the psychological data is being deployed in a form of epistemic consequentialism where the belief in question is valued for its *instrumental* epistemic value – *what it can get you* – whereas the Equal Weight View can be thought to concern the *intrinsic* epistemic value of the belief in question – what it has going for it *in and of itself*. This distinction can be used to address the puzzle in multiple ways.

First, it may be claimed that such epistemic instrumental value is simply not an epistemic notion. Here is Christensen (2004) on the topic:

… suppose it turns out that those who systematically overestimate their own intelligence, attractiveness, and future prospects are actually more successful in life than those whose assessments are more accurate. And suppose that this increased level of success is actually caused by the overblown self-assessments, and that the success includes general success in epistemic endeavors such as science, or history, or just attaining ordinary knowledge of the world. If that is the case, the psychological mechanisms responsible for the overblown self-assessments would certainly seem to be well adapted for the attainment of our epistemic ends. But it seems to me that this would hardly show that the distorted beliefs about one’s self produced by the mechanism were epistemically rational. (173)

While there are may complaints that we may raise about the overblown self-assessments mentioned above, it is worth noting that they are importantly different than the beliefs recommended by the psychological research. For one thing, the psychological research does not prescribe that we adopt some belief so as to better attain true beliefs about *some other* propositions. Rather, the research advocates for believing/disbelieving p (amidst dissent) in order to increase your likelihood of having a true belief *about p* *itself* – the very proposition you are believing/disbelieving. So, unlike in Christensen’s case, your belief/disbelief that p is not being used merely as a means to gain true beliefs about some other proposition(s).

However, it might be maintained that while the instrumental value of these beliefs is not bad in *this* way, that nevertheless there is an important intrinsic/instrumental value distinction, and that even though the target proposition is the same proposition you set out believing/disbelieving, the *kind* of epistemic value held by the beliefs is a fundamentally different kind of value.

Dunn, however, questions that this distinction can do what his opponent wants it to. While we can distinguish intrinsic value from instrumental value, Dunn claims that such a distinction cannot get us out of the problem. Dunn notes that things have instrumental value due to their bringing about states of affairs that have intrinsic value. If we are concerned about epistemic value, then we are concerned about both kinds of epistemic value, and to be concerned with instrumental value is *not* to fail to be concerned with intrinsic value, for nothing could have instrumental value without there being something related to it of intrinsic value. Instrumental value cannot simply be divorced from intrinsic value.

Analogies with ethics can help here. If we are concerned with the value of the consequences of an action, while we can distinguish the instrumental and intrinsic value of various consequences, what we should care about is the total intrinsic value achieved. Dunn gives the following example:

Suppose you have to choose between (a) spending time with your friend or (b) studying for the medical school entrance exam. It might be that (a) has more intrinsic value than (b)—because spending time with a friend is valuable in itself—even though (b) has more instrumental value than (a)—say, because you will be able to save many lives if you become a successful doctor and (b) is an integral part of realizing this goal. In this case, the ultimate source of (b)’s value is unrelated to the value in (a). But we can modify the example slightly so that it is analogous to the epistemic case discussed in this paper. Let it be the case that (b) has more instrumental value than (a) speciﬁcally because you will be able to save your friend’s life in the future, and so be able to spend even more time with him. If that’s the case, then the values of (a) and (b) are related. They both derive their value, ultimately, from the value of spending time with your friend. Further, it is pretty clear that the correct choice is (b). Given that the ultimate source of value for (a) and (b) is the same, the values are commensurable and one should go with the option that leads to the greater amount of value.

Applied to the epistemic case, while adopting a doxastic attitude toward p that fits your evidence at the time may have intrinsic epistemic value, knowing whether p does so as well. In fact, it is plausible that knowing p is of even more intrinsic epistemic value than suspending about p (even when suspending fits your evidence at the time). Believing/disbelieving p in the midst of controversy may lack intrinsic value, but have instrumental value in that it increases the likelihood that one will come to know whether p. So, the psychological data can recommend believing/disbelieving p in the midst of controversy ultimately for reasons of intrinsic epistemic value. Here it will matter how likely the prospects for success are, but in principle there is nothing that prevents there from being greater epistemic value realized by the intrinsically valuable epistemic state obtaining in the future.

So, while we can distinguish these kinds of value, such a distinction does not itself dissolve our puzzle. We are still left asking what should I believe *now* about controversial proposition p, given my epistemic goals? And we are still left with two incompatible prescriptions regarding controversial propositions, with the Equal Weight View calling for agnosticism and the psychological data recommending remaining steadfast.

1. *A second pass: Synchronic and Diachronic Justification*

While appealing to the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value may not suffice to solve our problem, it may nevertheless seem that there is something right about such a response. I think that it is plausible that our puzzle rests on a confusion and that this confusion arises by confusing two kinds of epistemic goods. However, rather than using the instrumental/intrinsic value distinction to bring this out, I believe that this is better done by appealing to the distinction between synchronic and diachronic epistemic norms or goals.[[6]](#footnote-6)

While we have identified the epistemic version of the question ‘what should I believe?” with the question “from the goal of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods, what should I believe?” and while we have seen both the Equal Weight View and the evidence from the psychology of group inquiry as providing answers to this very question, nevertheless, the respective epistemic motivations in question are distinct. However, we can account for the distinctiveness of these motivations without classifying either pursuit as non-epistemic and without putting the instrumental/intrinsic value distinction to too much work. I suggest that we do this by distinguishing between synchronic and diachronic epistemic norms, and thus by distinguishing synchronic and diachronic versions of the question ‘from the epistemic point of view, what should I believe?’

According to the synchronic version of this question, what matters is how well I succeed at believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods *right now*. According to the diachronic version of the question, what matters is how well I succeed at believing truths and disbelieving falsehood *in the long run*. While they both concern what I should believe right now in terms of fulfilling these goals, and while they are both concerned with epistemic goals (the twin epistemic projects of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods), the times of appraisal differ. That is, the synchronic and diachronic versions of the question differ with respect to when my epistemic goals are achieved. The synchronic version of the question concerns how well I am doing at my epistemic projects *right now*, while the diachronic version of the question concerns how well I am doing right now with regard to my *long-term* epistemic goals. These questions differ in *where*, or better *when*, they locate the relevant success and failure conditions, even if they both offer doxastic prescriptions for the agent *right now*, and even if those prescriptions are both properly conceived of as epistemic.

This distinction between synchronic and diachronic rationality is not a novel one. For instance, Richard Feldman (2000) deploys it in defending evidentialism from the objection that it overlooks important epistemic oughts – in particular oughts regarding proper inquiry. According to Feldman, while evidentialism does not give verdicts about what to do right now (regarding inquiry), this is not a liability since the question ‘what should I do?’ is not an epistemic question. According to Feldman, choices about what to do are not to be made on epistemic grounds. Rather, such questions are better suited for the deployment of moral and prudential reasons. So, according to Feldman:

What topics you ought to investigate depend upon what topics are of interest to you, what investigations can help you to make your own life or the lives of others better, and other such matters. Evidentialism is silent on those moral and prudential issues, and I don't see why it should address them. (690)

While we shouldn’t confuse epistemology with morality or prudential matters, it is not clear why action, such as inquiry, would be under the exclusive domain of morality and prudence. After all, properly epistemic goals as well can also be achieved or thwarted by the actions that we take on. Some actions help us attain true beliefs and avoid false ones. Epistemic norms should recommend such actions for us regardless of any moral or prudential considerations. For this reason, it seems plausible that we can assess such actions as epistemically rational or irrational – as epistemically justified or epistemically unjustified.

Clearly, when we claim this, we are not claiming that they have the same epistemic status that beliefs which amount to knowledge have. Allowing for distinct epistemic goals allows for the possibility that these goals can get conflated, but the conflation is not inevitable, and it seems better to do the extra work while allowing for such an ‘expansion’ of the epistemic domain. So, while Feldman is right to distinguish between synchronic and diachronic rationality, we can do so without dismissing diachronic rationality as being inherently non-epistemic. This is perhaps more in line with Conee (1987).

Returning to the issue at hand, the Equal Weight View (like evidentialism) is best seen as giving us an answer to the synchronic version of our question. It claims that abandoning controversial beliefs is the best way to be synchronically rational. The data coming from the psychology of group inquiry is best seen as giving an answer to the diachronic version of our question. It supports the claim that maintaining controversial beliefs is the best way to be diachronically rational. So, rather than motivating a prescription that conflicts with the Equal Weight View, the evidence from the psychology of group inquiry motivates a distinct answer to a distinct question – a question that the Equal Weight View simply offers no answer to. So, the psychological research is best seen as engaging in a different (though related) question than the question that the Equal Weight View is addressing. The conciliatory answer to the synchronic question places no pressure on a steadfast answer to the diachronic question, and a steadfast answer to the diachronic question places no pressure on a conciliatory answer to the synchronic question. Puzzle dissolved.

1. *A Worry Emerges*

While the response on offer may resolve the initial puzzle, it can be thought to only make matters worse! After all, one of the things we may have thought we would get, and something we wanted, from the Equal Weight View (and other views of the epistemic significance of disagreement) is a prescription regarding what we should believe, or minimally what we should believe from the epistemic perspective. However, if the question ‘from the epistemic perspective, what should I believe?’ is ambiguous and the Equal Weight View only offers an answer to one of the disambiguated questions (the synchronic version), then it simply fails to tells us what to believe (even from the epistemic perspective). It fails to give an answer to the *all-epistemic-things-considered* version of our question since it does not tell us how to weigh answers to the synchronic version of the question with the answers to the diachronic version of the question, and it is compatible with there being no way of combining these answers at all. That is, it may be that there simply is no all-epistemic-things-considered perspective, but only the disambiguated epistemic perspectives. This parallels the thought that there is no all-things-considered answer to the ‘what should I believe?’ question, but only answers to the moral, prudential, and epistemic disambiguated questions.

So understood, the Equal Weight View does not claim that balance of epistemic reasons point to agnosticism about controversial propositions. Rather, it only claims that the balance of epistemic reasons *of a certain sort*, point toward agnosticism about controversial propositions. It makes no claims about how significant this sort of epistemic reasons are, or how (if at all) they figure in to what one has all-epistemic-reasons-considered on balance reason to believe or what one has all-things-considered on balance reason to believe. So, on this view, the Equal Weight View does not mandate agnosticism about the controversial, it does not even mandate agnosticism about the controversial from the epistemic perspective. Rather, it merely mandates agnosticism about the controversial from the synchronic epistemic perspective, but as we have seen there is more to the epistemic perspective than this.

Having paired down what the Equal Weight View is up to, it is worth noting why this consequence of the Equal Weight View is still significant. First, the synchronic version of our question is one that is intrinsically interesting. It is worth considering what we should believe right now, with the goals of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods right now. Even if this question was novel, it is a question worthy of our consideration – a question of the type philosophers should consider. Second, this question is not novel. Plausibly this is the very question that we have been asking when we have asked what beliefs are epistemically justified. While ‘justification’, ‘rational’, and their cognates are far from univocal, it is plausible that (at least historically) epistemologists have been examining epistemic justification (at least when seen as what helps put us in a position to know at the time in question) have been concerned with answering the synchronic version of our question. Perhaps this is why Christensen dismisses the diachronic version as not being about what is “epistemically rational” and why Feldman dismisses such questions are merely moral or prudential.[[7]](#footnote-7) While we can see that both versions of the question are properly epistemic, and both are concerned with what is epistemically rational or justified for me to believe now, the diachronic answer does not provide the type of epistemic justification required for knowledge – at least not knowledge at the time in question. While remaining steadfast in one’s controversial belief may best lead to knowledge about the matter in the long run, it does not supply the type of epistemic justification required for knowledge at the earlier time. But to say this is not to say that there is not some real sense in which those steadfast beliefs are epistemically justified. I think that plausibly they are, it is just that this is not the sense of epistemic justification that traditional epistemologists have been concerned with. And to say that, is not to denigrate it in any way. To say that it is a separate question is not to say that it is a less interesting or less important question – it is simply a different question.

1. *So How Skeptical is the Equal Weight View?*

Given all of this, the skeptical implications of the Equal Weight View must be reassessed. Exactly how skeptical is the Equal Weight View? I have argued elsewhere that the skeptical ramifications of the view are quite vast, however, the considerations here may seem to undermine those arguments. So long as we understand ‘skeptical consequences’ as consequences that our beliefs lack the kind of justification required for knowledge (note it is the kind of justification here, not the amount of justification), the Equal Weight View does have quite skeptical consequences. After all, according to the Equal Weight View our controversial beliefs lack that kind of justification. However, if we understand ‘skeptical consequences’ as consequences that our beliefs lack *all* kinds of epistemic justification or that they are not on balance supported from the all-epistemic-things-considered point of view, then the Equal Weight View simply does not have skeptical consequences. Just as the Equal Weight View did not address whether there are any moral, prudential, or religious reasons why we may hold on to some controversial beliefs it similarly did not take on any diachronic epistemic reasons why we may hold on to our controversial beliefs. So, if one was looking for a more wide-reaching prescription from the Equal Weight View, it is simply not there to be found. The consequence that our controversial beliefs lack the kind of epistemic justification required for knowledge is still striking and significant, but we should not be so quick as to extrapolate from this to any conclusions about what the epistemic perspective requires or what the all-things-considered perspective requires.

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1. See Carey and Matheson (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on confirmation bias, see Nickerson (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For reasons to doubt the coherence of this question, see Feldman (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The representativeness of this view of the epistemological perspective can be seen in David’s “Truth as Epistemic Goal.” David provides an extensive list of quotations to this end including epistemologists such as Alston, BonJour, Chisholm, Descartes, Foley, Goldman, Lehrer, Moser, Plantinga, and Sosa. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is not to say that truth is the *only* thing of value from the epistemic perspective, only that everything that has value from the epistemic perspective has it due to its relation to truth. For a nice discussion of this and related issues, see Pritchard (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For one thing, appealing to the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value is only playing within the epistemic consequentialist framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Foley (2004) also appears to share this diagnosis. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)