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Debating the Significance of Disagreement: A Review of John Pittard's *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*

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*Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*  
John Pittard  
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360 pp.

Richard Feldman’s “Reasonable Religious Disagreements” launched debates about the epistemic significance of disagreement that have been a dominant point of discussion in epistemology as of late. While most of these debates have been concerned with disagreement more generally, Feldman’s original focus was religious disagreement, and John Pittard returns the focus to religious disagreement in *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*. Pittard’s book delves deeply into debates about the significance of disagreement with a foot in both epistemology and philosophy of religion. It is the first book to look at these issues as they are being addressed within each of these sub-disciplines and is sure to be a significant contribution to the debates in both sub-fields.

### **General Structure**

The book is divided into two sections. In the first section (chapters 1-5), Pittard makes his case for weak conciliationism—the view that while significant conciliation is called for in standard disagreement cases, it can be rational to remain steadfast in deep disagreements (like religious disagreements). In the second section of the book (chapters 6 and 7), Pittard examines the implications that strong conciliationism (the view that disagreement calls for significant conciliation across the board) has for religious commitment, and argues that there are more significant costs for religious commitment than there are typically thought to be.

Pittard argues that strong conciliationism not only has it religious *belief* is irrational, it also makes religious *commitment* non-rational. In doing so, Pittard seeks to carve away any middle option for strong conciliationists who wish to maintain some kind of rational religious commitment. This starker contrast is meant to provide greater support for weak conciliationism. In what follows, I will give a brief description of each chapter and proceed to raise some critical concerns.

### **Section 1**

#### **Chapter 1**

In Chapter 1, Pittard lays out the master argument that is the backdrop of the book:

1. S’s religious outlook is justified only if S has justification for believing that most of her religious beliefs are the result of a reliable process.
2. In light of S’s knowledge of systematic religious disagreement, S should believe that the processes that (otherwise) epistemically qualified people rely on to form their religious beliefs are, taken as a whole, very unreliable.

3. S lacks justification for believing that her process of religious belief formation is significantly more reliable than the collective reliability of the processes that (otherwise) epistemically qualified people use to form religious beliefs.
4. If (2) and (3), then S lacks justification for believing that most of her religious beliefs are the result of a reliable process.
5. Thus, S lacks justification for believing that most of her beliefs are the result of a reliable process (2, 3, 4).
6. Therefore, S's religious outlook is not justified (1, 5) (Pittard, 19).

Pittard identifies premise (3) as the argument's critical premise and focuses almost all of his discussion on this premise. Pittard dubs (3) 'Equal Estimated Reliability', where

EQUAL ESTIMATED RELIABILITY: S lacks justification for believing SUPERIOR.

and

SUPERIOR: S's process of religious belief formation is significantly more reliable than the collective reliability of the processes that (otherwise) epistemically qualified people use to form religious beliefs (28).

In discussing the motivation for (3), Pittard identifies what he sees as three central commitments of the defender of (3):

INTERNAL REASONS CONSTRAINT: S has justification for believing SUPERIOR only if S has good *internal* (accessible) reasons for believing SUPERIOR (35).

AGENT IMPARTIALITY CONSTRAINT: S has good internal reasons for believing SUPERIOR only if S has a good *agent-neutral* internal reason for believing SUPERIOR (38).

REASONS IMPARTIALITY CONSTRAINT: S has a good agent-neutral internal reason for believing SUPERIOR only if S has a good *dispute-independent* agent-neutral reason for believing SUPERIOR (46).

The first constraint requires that there be something *from the subject's perspective* that gives her a reason to believing SUPERIOR. The second constraint prevents first-person reasons from counting for more simply because they are one's own. The third constraint prevents one from relying on self-trust to navigate out of the effects of disagreement.

## Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, Pittard tries to demotivate reasons impartiality by looking at the cases for it made by both Christensen (2007; 2011) and Schellenberg (2007). Pittard argues that the cases

that motivate reasons impartiality (or independence), can be better explained by less radical, and independently plausible principles. (53) Christensen's motivation for reasons impartiality comes by way of his case for independence.

**INDEPENDENCE:** In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another's expressed belief about  $p$ , in order to determine how (or whether) to modify my own belief about  $p$ , I should do so in a way that doesn't rely on the reasoning behind my initial belief that  $p$ .<sup>1</sup>

Christensen's case for independence comes from considering the restaurant check case. In the restaurant check case, two epistemic peers do mental math to calculate the shares. Upon discovering their disagreement about the shares, it seems that (i) they should reduce their confidence (and suspend judgment about the shares), and (ii) they cannot reason to the conclusion that the other party is mistaken simply since they have a different conclusion. Pittard claims that Bayesianism can capture these verdicts without appealing to Independence. The reason why it is wrong for a party in the restaurant check case to appeal to their own reasoning is *not* simply that it is their own reasoning, but rather that those reasons are *no longer discernable* from the subject's perspective and thus are not available as reasons to be used.

Schellenberg's case for reason independence comes by way of his argument for doxastic minimalism—the claim that we should minimize the role of default trust in our lives as inquirers. Schellenberg argues that we should only have default trust in doxastic practices that are both universal and unavoidable. Pittard offers a Jamesian critique of Schellenberg's argument, claiming that Schellenberg presupposes that avoiding false beliefs is more important than acquiring true beliefs. Pittard claims that when proper value is put on each epistemic goal, doxastic practices that permit one to take a stance on some issues requires additional doxastic practices (like belief based on religious experience).

### Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, Pittard examines instrumentalist arguments for conciliationism. According to instrumentalism, you should, at least as far as possible, treat the deliverances of your cognitive faculties like the readouts of an instrument (e.g. a thermometer). Pittard argues that instrumentalism supports conciliationism regarding 'superficial' disagreements but fails to support conciliationism regarding fundamental disagreements (or deep disagreements) that stem from different epistemic starting points (or fundamental plausibility judgments). Pittard calls this view 'weak conciliationism'.

Pittard argues that instrumentalism has been misapplied in the core 'superficial' cases in the disagreement literature and that it fails to apply in deep disagreements. Regarding the first, Pittard argues that instrumentalists (calibrationists) have ignored the importance of one's prior probabilities and that the degree to which one should trust an instrument is a function

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<sup>1</sup> Christensen (2011), 2.

of *both* its reliability and your prior probabilities.<sup>2</sup> Pittard argues that the ‘splitting the difference’ verdict only obtains when one’s prior probabilities fail to support either of the resulting views. Regarding the second, Pittard argues that at the most fundamental level it is impossible to treat one’s outputs instrumentally since some starting point must be presupposed. Fundamental disagreements do not allow for an antecedent perspective that both parties share and from which the disagreement can be assessed. Given this, the lessons from the easy cases of disagreement (horse races and check calculations) do not naturally extend to the hard cases (moral and religious disagreement).

In making his positive case for weak conciliationism, Pittard argues that at least some fundamental plausibility judgments (ur-priors) are justified on ‘partisan’ grounds.<sup>3</sup> Since there is no rationally antecedent perspective from which to judge one’s fundamental plausibility judgments, people are justified in adopting the fundamental judgments that they are inclined to adopt, otherwise an infinite regress and skepticism looms. Since many deep disagreements (disagreements in ethics, philosophy, and religion) are due to differences in fundamental plausibility judgments, the rational response to such disagreements is different than the standard conciliationist response, though some mitigated conciliation is still called for. Pittard closes the chapter by defending weak conciliation from the objections that it is less accurate than strong conciliationism and that it collapses into strong conciliationism.

## Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, Pittard puts forward his rationalist account of partisan justification, after surveying some alternatives, and applies it to religious belief. Pittard argues that the most plausible way to deny the Reasons Impartiality Constraint is to embrace his form of rationalism. On Pittard’s rationalist view, people sometimes have *a priori* rational insights into the plausibility of some claims. When one’s fundamental plausibility judgments (or ur-priors) are based on such rational insight, this creates an important epistemic asymmetry which mitigates the skeptical force of disagreement allowing one to rationally remain steadfast or at least make much more minimal conciliation. Such an appeal to rational insight in the face of disagreement is reminiscent of Bogardus (2009) and van Inwagen (1996), but Pittard’s version utilizes a Bayesian framework. Pittard also argues that his rationalist account better comports with common sense verdicts about cases and views about the nature of rationality than the other accounts of partisan justification.

## Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, Pittard makes the case that his rationalist account isn’t only available to the analytically sophisticated. In defending ‘affective rationalism,’ Pittard attempts to make room for emotional experiences (like religious experience) to provide (or at least enable) the requisite insights to avoid the skeptical consequences of disagreement. Insightful experience, as Pittard understands them, involve a rational improvement in one’s fundamental plausibility judgments, making them a kind of ‘deep experience’ in ways that typical

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<sup>2</sup> This bears some similarity of Lackey’s (2008; 2010) Justificationist view, according to which one’s antecedent justification for believing a proposition can mitigate the impact of a discovered disagreement.

<sup>3</sup> Someone has partisan justification for a credence when their justification for that credence is not based on third-person, neutral reasons for believing they are reliable on the matter (118).

perceptual experiences are not (185). Insightful religious experiences can act like the earlier described rational insights in the face of disagreement, providing a reason to favor one's own perspective. Affective rationalism makes room for individuals to have insights that do not stem from philosophical accomplishment, but rather from an affective response to something. For instance, he claims that one's fundamental plausibility judgments about Christianity will depend upon how beautiful and excellent one finds the life of Jesus and other such 'worthiness judgments'. (195) Value judgments inform such plausibility judgments, and affections have an essential role in the formation of value judgments and can do so by providing genuine insights. Further, such experiences may equip one with requisite concepts to make sense of an outlook or to have a particular insight.

## **Section 2**

### **Chapter 6**

Pittard begins the second section of the book in Chapter 6. In this chapter, Pittard argues that in deep disagreements, like religious disagreements, epistemic impartiality is elusive. Because of this, Pittard claims that there is good reason to doubt that the pursuit of epistemic impartiality leads to skepticism in such contexts. One of the reasons Pittard thinks that epistemic impartiality is elusive is the self-undermining problem for strong conciliationism. Here, drawing on previously published work, Pittard argues that the conciliationist who remains resolute about their conciliationism in the face of disagreement is no less committed to impartiality than the conciliationist who is conciliatory about their conciliationism—one is deferential in their credence, the other in their reasoning. So, Pittard maintains that his resolute conciliationism is a viable response to the self-undermining problem.

Pittard then extends this response into the religious domain. Since some religious outlooks conflict with strong conciliationism, impartiality can ground remaining resolute in those disagreements as well. Pittard then turns to examining how one might impartially navigate religious disagreement and finds all such prospects bleak. Messy real-world deep disagreements don't give a clear impartial answer in terms of what credence to have in the disputed propositions, and the prospects for an imprecise credence aren't much better. Religious impartiality is elusive since judgments about the epistemic credentials of others will themselves be informed by one's religious outlook. This makes an impartial ground from which to navigate the disagreement elusive.

### **Chapter 7**

In the final chapter, Pittard argues that the effects of religious skepticism are not purely doxastic. In contrast to other philosophers of religion, Pittard argues that the rationality of religious commitment is also threatened by disagreement skepticism, even if such commitment is non-doxastic. In this chapter, Pittard assumes that religious disagreement skepticism is correct in order to examine its consequences for religious commitment. The centerpiece of this chapter is Pittard's 'Nowhere to Stand Argument.' Pittard argues that disagreement skepticism results not only in uncertainty regarding first-order norms

governing religious decision-making, but also higher-order norms about how we should act in the face of first-order uncertainty. Given these levels of uncertainty, he claims that the very possibility of rational decision-making is undermined. (290) This, according to Pittard, is because rational action requires certainty (or at least justification for certainty) for a principle on at least one of these normative levels. Since disagreement skepticism prevents certainty (or justification for it) regarding any such principle, Pittard's 'Nowhere to Stand Argument' claims that disagreement skepticism also makes rational action impossible. Pittard sees this consequence as yet another reason to dismiss strong conciliationism.

## Commentary

Now to the critical commentary.

The first issue I want to raise concerns the master argument that Pittard is addressing. Pittard sets up the argument for disagreement skepticism in a way that makes it focused on the reliability of belief-forming processes, particularly those giving rise to religious beliefs. For one thing, this forces the discussion into thorny issues brought about by the generality problem. While Pittard gestures at the generality problem early on, much of the subsequent discussion involves identifying reliable/unreliable process types with insufficient caution. The bigger problem here, however, is that in making the disagreement skeptic's argument about belief-forming processes, the master argument fails to get at the heart of the issue. To show that a belief was the product of an unreliable process might show that this *belief* is unjustified, that the subject is not *doxastically justified* in holding the belief (although generality worries again), but it will not show that the subject is not *propositionally justified* in believing the relevant proposition.

Put differently, attacks on the formation of a belief may show that the belief itself is not good, but they cannot show that the proposition in question should not be believed by the subject. Subject S can have a belief that is produced by an unreliable process, yet the content of that belief is propositionally justified for S. This occurs when S has good reasons to believe p but happens to believe p on the basis of some other reasons, or perhaps using some unreliable process. This characterization of the issue is a problem since the disagreement skeptic isn't simply after the grounding of various religious beliefs (and other controversial beliefs) but is attacking the idea that such propositions should can be rationally believed at all given the controversy surrounding them. The issue is one of propositional justification.

We can further see that the problem of disagreement is distinct from a problem of unreliable processes, since the skeptical threat from disagreement arises even when we stipulate that the disagreeing parties have both formed their respective beliefs using reliable belief-forming processes (of whatever the relevant level of generality is). In Christensen's familiar restaurant check case, both parties are good at doing the mental math of splitting the check. They both utilize reliable belief-forming processes in forming their respective beliefs (or so we can stipulate). Neither party needs to charge the other with deploying an unreliable belief-forming process. Reliable processes are often still fallible processes, so the fact that both parties use reliable belief-forming processes does not ensure that a mistake has not been made. The discovery of disagreement shows that *something* has gone wrong. Using a bad belief-forming process is *one thing* that may have gone wrong, but it is not the only thing.

Sometimes reliable processes misfire and sometimes good evaluators of the evidence make a mistaken evaluation. The skeptical threat of disagreement results from an inability to better explain the disagreement by positing a mistake to the other party. This skeptical threat can be appreciated without appeal to belief-formation process types and their reliability. So, for these reasons, Pittard's characterization of the master argument fails to get at the heart of the skeptical threat from disagreement.

### **On Pittard's Positive Proposal**

But that's just about setting up the issue. What about Pittard's positive proposal? Here, there are several issues that I want to briefly sketch.

First, there is Pittard's defense of partisan justification. Pittard defends the legitimacy of partisan justification by showing that a denial of its existence has skeptical consequences. Here, I think he is right that some justification must be partisan.<sup>4</sup> However, the problem comes when Pittard takes this defense of the *existence* of partisan justification to show that partisan justification *persists* in the face of disagreement. There is an important difference here. The skeptical challenge isn't a defeat challenge. The external world skeptic presents the possibility of error, but fails to provide any reason to believe that we are in fact mistaken about our external world beliefs. In contrast, the challenge from disagreement is a defeat challenge.<sup>5</sup>

When confronted with disagreement, we *are* given a reason to think that we have made a mistake. Someone has made a mistake, at if the set-up is right, then it is no more likely that it is the other person than that it is me. The fact that partisan justification can exist in the absence of a challenge gives us no reason to believe that it can be used to fend off challenges. This mistake is particularly curious since Pittard utilizes this very distinction to dismiss proper functionalist accounts of the rationality of religious belief. Regarding proper functionalist accounts, Pittard notes that even if designed belief-forming processes produce rational beliefs, once we encounter a defeater for those beliefs, we need something more. This is correct, but the same is true of partisan justification.

Pittard's weak conciliationism relies on genuine rational insights to mitigate the skeptical threat of disagreement. Pittard's claims that having a rational insight is often directly discernable to the subject, and thus the rational response to disagreement differs in cases where one has a rational insight and when one does not. This brings up a second issue.

This account does not seem to divide the cases in the way that Pittard wants (or at least pictures). The rational insight/non-insight divide is not the same as the fundamental/superficial disagreement divide. Some 'superficial' disagreements, like the restaurant check case, can be seen as cases involving genuine rational insight (though Pittard agrees that significant conciliation is called for in the restaurant case). Further, some 'fundamental' disagreements needn't involve any rational insights at all, since having an

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<sup>4</sup> See Matheson (2018a) for more on this point.

<sup>5</sup> See Pryor (2000), Huemer (2001), and Matheson (2015) for more on this point.



insight is a success. Given that whether one party is having an insight is entirely independent of whether the disagreement is deep or superficial, it does not seem that Pittard's account delivers his anticipated verdicts regarding when significant conciliation is called for. Further, since a genuine insight could be had in the restaurant check case, it seems that his account also simply delivers the wrong verdicts about cases.

In addition, Pittard's appeal to insights does not seem to be up to the task. The problem is that it is typically not apparent to us whether we are having an insight or not. Sometimes we have genuine insights and sometimes we have merely apparent insights. Further, even if we are having a genuine insight, it is still possible that we misunderstand or misapply that insight (something Pittard notes in the text). Our mere fallibility here is not the problem. The problem is that in the face of disagreement, we would need to have an *undefeated* reason to believe that we are having the genuine insight (and not our disagreeing interlocutor). The mere *fact* that we are having an insight cannot be used as such a reason, since that would violate the Internal Reasons Constraint (which Pittard agrees should not be done). So long as there can be a good case and a bad case, we can only mitigate the effects of disagreement if we have an undefeated reason to think that we are in the good case. It's hard to see how a rational insight can do this.<sup>6</sup>

### A Final Concern

One final worry concerns Pittard's argument against rational religious commitment on the supposition that strong conciliationism is true. Here Pittard's argument relies on the fact that strong conciliationism would prevent one from being justifiably certain in principles guiding action, which results in corresponding actions being non-rational. However, if a lack of justified certainty in action-guiding principles is all that is required for actions to be non-rational, then the problem here affects far more than strong conciliationism. A justified certainty in action-guiding principles looks implausible independent of worries about disagreement. This gives good reason to believe the reasoning is faulty here. What might that problem be?

For one thing, Pittard assumes a close parallel between epistemic reasons and practical reasons (that we must be aware of each to possess them and that they each can be defeated by our being justified in believing that they do not exist). However, unlike epistemic reasons, pragmatic reasons appear to exist independent of our awareness of them, and they are not defeated by our uncertainty of their existence.<sup>7</sup> For instance, if Pascal is right that it is rational to wager on God's existence, then there is good pragmatic reason to believe that God exists. If he is right, then that reason to believe God exists is not simply there for those who have thought about Pascal's wager. It is a reason for everyone to so believe. Similarly, while the goodness of Pascal's wager is controversial, and thus the strong conciliationist will have us suspend judgment as to whether it is successful argument, a justified suspension of

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<sup>6</sup> Pittard does claim that rational insights involve aspects that are discernable to the subject. However, this does not entail that *the fact that the subject is having an insight* is itself discernable to the subject. It seems implausible to insist that insights are discernable in this way. So, the possibility of error remains. There is a parallel with memory here. Veridical memory involves discernable aspects to the subject, but the fact that the memory is veridical need not itself be discernable (particularly in the face of disagreement).

<sup>7</sup> For more detailed arguments concerning the existences of reasons independent of our awareness of them, see Littlejohn (2019) and Sepielli (forthcoming).

judgment about the successfulness of the wager would not prevent us from having those pragmatic reasons to believe (if Pascal is indeed correct).<sup>8</sup> On this line of thought, pragmatic reasons work very differently than epistemic reasons, but we needn't be committed to treating every normative domain the same.

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<sup>8</sup> See Matheson (2018b) for more on this argument.