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Introduction

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Disagreement is a familiar part of our lives. We often find ourselves faced with people who have beliefs that conflict with our own on everything from the existence of God and the morality of abortion to the location of a local restaurant. Much of the recent work in the literature on the epistemology of disagreement has centered on how much belief-revision, if any, is required in order for belief to be rational in light of this disagreement.

Some philosophers advocate positions toward what might be called the "conciliatory" (or "conformist") end of the spectrum. On their views, many of the beliefs people hold on a wide range of disputed issues—from the controversial to the mundane—need to be either substantially revised or altogether abandoned. Other philosophers advocate positions toward what might be called the "steadfast" (or "non-conformist") end of the spectrum. On their views, most of those holding opinions on disputed issues need not lower their confidence in the face of disagreement, unless there are non-disagreement- related reasons for doing so. Of course, this vastly oversimplifies the discussion. Most epistemologists hold that conciliatory responses are appropriate in some cases and stead- fast responses in others. But there still seem to be clear differences in the overall degree of belief-revision various philosophers' positions require.

Naturally, a given philosopher's general placement on the conciliatory-steadfast spec- trum will often be determined by her theoretical understanding of how, if ever, finding out about disagreement calls for adjusting one's confidence on the disputed topic. There are two central factors that play theoretically important roles here.

Perhaps most obviously, the degree of belief-revision called for by an agent's learning of the disagreement of others will depend on what the agent believes—or, perhaps better, what the agent has good reason to believe—about the epistemic credentials of those others with whom she disagrees. Two dimensions of epistemic appraisal stand out here. The first dimension concerns the other person's familiarity with the evidence and arguments bearing on the disputed issue. Much of the literature concentrates on cases where the agent has reason to think that the other person is roughly equally well-acquainted with the relevant evidence and arguments. In fact, in cases where an agent reasonably takes there to be significant disparities between her acquaintance with relevant evidence and the other person's acquaintance, it's much less clear that interesting epistemological issues arise.

The second obviously important dimension of epistemic appraisal has to do with the other person's competence at correctly evaluating evidence and arguments of the rele- vant sort. This dimension of assessment may address not only the other person's general cognitive abilities, but also the likelihood that the other person's general competences are impaired in the current instance. Here again, the literature has often concentrated on cases where the agent has good reason to believe that the other person is approximately her equal. When two people are roughly equal along both dimensions, they are said to be epistemic peers.

Another theoretical factor that figures into many discussions of disagreement is whether, and to what extent, an agent assessing the epistemic credentials of those who disagree with her must make this assessment in a way that is independent of her own reasoning on the disputed issue. Philosophers whose positions fall toward the conciliatory end of the spectrum tend to think that the agent's assessments must be independent in this way. The idea is roughly that, insofar as disagreement of an equally-informed per- son suggests that the agent may have misevaluated the evidence or arguments, it would be illegitimate for her to reject this possibility by relying on the very reasoning that the disagreement called into question. It has also been argued that violating independence would enable an agent to employ illegitimate bootstrapping-style reasoning for the conclusion that she was better than her apparent peer at assessing the evidence.

On the other hand, philosophers whose positions fall more toward the steadfast end of the spectrum tend to reject any such demand for independent assessment of the other's epistemic credentials. Their idea is roughly that doing so would prevent certain agents—for instance, those who can see perfectly well what the evidence and arguments support—from using the evidence and arguments to support their belief in the very claim that the evidence and arguments actually do support.

Some of the papers in the present book enter directly into the debate between conciliatory and steadfast views. John Hawthorne and Amia Srinivasan, Thomas Kelly, and Brian Weatherson all weigh in with attacks on conciliatory views or defenses of steadfastness.

Hawthorne and Srinivasan, approaching the disagreement issue from the perspective of "knowledge-first" epistemology, develop difficulties for views according to which a subject who knows that P should stop believing that P when confronted by disagreement (even by apparent epistemic superiors).They argue that no completely satisfying solution to the disagreement problem is likely to be forthcoming. Kelly rejects the conciliationist-friendly claim that an agent's assessment of the other person's epistemic credentials must be independent of her reasoning on the disputed issue. And Weatherson attacks a highly conciliatory view of disagreement on the grounds that it is self-undermining: it cannot coherently be believed, given the disagreement of others.

The papers by David Christensen and Stewart Cohen defend controversial aspects of conciliationist positions. Christensen argues that the sort of self-undermining that characterizes conciliatory views affects many plausible epistemic principles, and is not, in the end, a defect. Cohen defends a conciliatory view of disagreement from the charge, due mainly to Kelly, that it prevents an agent from taking correct account of the original evidence and arguments bearing on the disputed issue. The other papers are aimed not so much at exploring the question of how much beliefs should be revised in the face of disagreement, but at developing or extending our theoretical understanding of the epistemology of disagreement in other ways. (Of course, some of these papers approach their topic from a perspective that takes a stand on the question of how much revision is required.) Three papers—by Bryan Frances, Sanford Goldberg, and Ernest Sosa—are especially concerned with a kind of disagreement that will be of particular concern to most readers of this book: disagreement about philosophy.

Frances, from the perspective of a conciliatory view, argues that disagreement with philosophical superiors serves to undermine a large number of our ordinary beliefs about the world—unless large parts of philosophy are bunk. Goldberg argues that the broad, systematic sort of disagreement we see in philosophy renders our philosophical beliefs unjustified, and that this would seem to show typical philosophical assertions are unwarranted—unless we can break the link between warranted assertion and justified belief. And Sosa writes to defend philosophical practice—in particular, the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of armchair judgments—against recent criticisms by experimental philosophers who cite apparently intractable disagreements between different philosophers' armchair judgments.

Finally, Robert Audi, Jonathan Kvanvig, and Jennifer Lackey tackle some general theoretical issues that bear on disagreement.

Audi explores dimensions along which agents can exhibit cognitive disparities in their attitudes toward various propositions, and applies some of the distinctions he draws to the disagreement issue. Kvanvig locates the epistemology of disagreement within a broader normative framework that is fallibilist without requiring special norms of excusability, and that makes room for rational disagreement. And Lackey argues against an assumption made by many: that when an agent is disagreeing with a number of epistemic peers, their disagreement counts for more than the disagreement of a single peer only if their beliefs are independent from one another.

The philosophers represented here include some who have contributed actively to the disagreement literature already, as well as some who are exploring the issue for the first time. With one exception (Sosa's paper), all of the essays are new. It is our hope that this volume will help deepen and expand our understanding of some epistemic phenomena that are central to any thoughtful believer's engagement with other believers.