

Evidence vs. Virtues in Epistemic Disagreement

MARINA BAKALOVA

Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge. Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
Moskovska Str., 13A. 1000 Sofia. Bulgaria
marina.bakalova@gmail.com

RECEIVED: 21-10-2014 • ACCEPTED: 16-07-2015

ABSTRACT: In situations of peer disagreement there are two kinds of factors that matter. These are the factors internal to the discussion, such as evidence exposed and arguments presented by both sides and there are also factors external to the discussion, also called “independent factors”. The external factors include mainly virtues and competences of the participants. There are two main theories about epistemic disagreement, “the steadfast view” and “the conciliationism”, and each of them stresses the importance of one group of these factors over the other. This paper is a defense of the greater epistemic significance of independent factors over internal factors. However, it is not a defense of the conciliationism which takes independent factors to be systematically the ultimate arbiter in situations of peer disagreement. The argument in the paper goes like this. Although the steadfast view receives strong intuitive support from two cases presented by Thomas Kelly: “Right and Wrong” and “Wrong and Wronger”, I argue that the view is undermined by Timothy Williamson’s recent “Very Improbable Knowing” argument. This argument shows that for some basic type of evidence *E* when *S* uses it in favor of *p*, it is very improbable that *S* knows that *S* knows that *p*. Therefore, in situations of peer disagreement, *S* is unjustified to push her evidence in support of her side. There are arguably some exceptions, e.g. when one claims to have knowledge based on a priori evidence and on holistic evidence, but these are not sufficient to save the day for the steadfast view. In contrast to that, the reflective knowledge of one’s first order competences and virtues (i.e. external factors) is not vulnerable by Williamson’s argument. One reason for that is because we know about independent factors on the basis of holistic evidence. I claim that our epistemic goal in the face of peer disagreement is to end up on the side that is non-accidentally closer to truth. In accordance with achieving this goal, it is safer to stick to independent factors in resolving peer disagreement situations than to

follow one's nose concerning first-order evidence disclosed by the opponents. This might seem a counterintuitive result, which makes it worthy of further discussion.

KEYWORDS: Disagreement – evidence – knowledge attribution – social epistemology – virtue epistemology.

Disagreements, overt or hidden, are widely spread. I may disagree with you about lifestyle, scientific presuppositions, marketing strategies, moral considerations and religious beliefs, whether we should take the right or the left path on our mountain trip, etc. However, some possible disagreements are strange and inapt. For instance, normally it would be inadequate to disagree whether Ana is here with us in the room or not, or whether $1+1=2$, or for that matter to disagree about the directions that a sober and competent passerby gives you on the street when you are lost and need them.

This article is about the epistemological problem of disagreement. The problem arises from the following sort of situations. Imagine that two people, A and B, who are equally competent in p -relevant domain and share nearly the same evidence for the issue at hand, overtly disagree about p . In the most extreme case A would believe that p and B would believe that non- p . Is rational disagreement in such cases possible and how an awareness of disagreement should affect the beliefs of each side?

Much of the contemporary debate on disagreement, I think, draws from the insight that a peer's opinion could boost or lower our confidence in believing something. Take the famous example by David Christensen:

Mental Math: After a nice restaurant meal, my friend and I decide to tip 20% and split the check, rounding up to the nearest dollar. As we have done many times, we do the math in our heads. We have long and equally good track records at this (in the cases where we've disagreed, checking with a calculator has shown us right equally frequently); and I have no reason (such as those involving alertness or tiredness, or differential consumption of coffee or wine) for suspecting one of us to be especially good, or bad, at the current reasoning task. I come up with \$43; but then my friend announces that she got \$45. (Christensen 2011, 2)

Mental Math shows that if both I and my reliable friend got \$43, this should make me more convinced in my answer. But if I got \$43 and my

friend got \$45 – this should make me less confident in my answer. This intuitively shows that psychological reports about others (assuming that they sincerely express their minds) serve as a kind of epistemic resource or evidence. On the other hand, psychological reports about me almost never serve as such a resource. I do not take into account the fact that I believe that p as further evidence in favor of p .

One explanation of this asymmetry is that, since every person believes for reason, I assume that under certain conditions my opponent's belief expresses reasons bearing upon the question at hand which I do not possess. This suspicion is based on my knowledge of my opponent's competences or epistemic virtues. Some people *aim* at forming their beliefs upon correct reasons on regular basis. When a person is epistemically virtuous, that person in normal circumstances is trustworthy. When I know that my opponent is reliable and trustworthy, especially on the question at hand, it is reasonable for me to assume that her belief expresses reasons. Since my reasons are not always reflectively accessible, I do not have to expect that my opponent will be able to formulate and utter her precise reasons outright. I just take her belief to be a hallmark of reasons that could, in case of disagreement, defeat my side.

This paper will focus on factors that should be taken into account when we make a decision of how to behave in the face of disagreement. There are two groups of relevant factors in disagreement situations: factors internal to the discussion, such as disclosed evidence and arguments of the two opponents, and factors external to the discussion, such as their general reliability and virtues. The two groups of factors are weakly related to each other. What is going on in the concrete case is only weakly determined by our competences, but is not entailed by them. This is so, because one can be very competent but wrong in the concrete case if one's claimed opinion is based on misleading evidence.

My aim here is to show that in relation to achieving our cognitive goal in situations of peer disagreement external factors are surprisingly more reliable to take into account than internal ones.

1. Epistemic peerhood

The traditionally used notion of epistemic peerhood is the first thing that matches the distinction between internal and external factors and shows their

importance in the debate of epistemic disagreement. It is generally agreed that an epistemic peer of S is somebody who is roughly symmetrical with S in certain relevant aspects. Here is a more precise definition.

Epistemic Peers: A and B are **epistemic peers** regarding p if they are roughly symmetrical with each other in certain aspects related to p .

Which are the relevant aspects of the required symmetry? Two main aspects are most often taken into account. These are cognitive and evidential equality:

Cognitive equality: A and B are **cognitive equals** regarding p if A and B have equal competence, expertise, or virtues in the p -relevant domain.

Evidential equality: A and B are **evidential equals** regarding p if A and B have equal grasp of p -relevant evidence.

We acquire knowledge about each of these two aspects in different ways. On the one hand, we get to know cognitive equality through second-order considerations concerning track record of our opponent, her reputation, her behavior in the debate etc. These are what we initially called “external factors” or “independent reasons”. On the other hand, for judging the relevance of our opponent’s exposed evidence and the quality of her arguments based on that evidence (what we initially called “internal factors”), we use our abilities to gather, select and interpret evidence for building up arguments. We can sometimes reason from cognitive to evidential equality. For example, we can reason from virtues to quality of one’s arguments, but we cannot reason from virtue to correctness of her evidence. In other words, if my opponent is very competent, I can safely conclude that she cannot end up with a clumsy argument, but I cannot conclude that she has not been using misleading evidence in forming her argument, so I cannot ultimately judge about the quality of her evidence from her virtues. So, the two components are only partially related.

2. Theories of epistemic disagreement

There are two main theories that provide answers to the question what ought one to do, epistemically speaking, in the face of disagreement. They

are standardly called: “conciliationism” and “the steadfast view”. Each of them stresses on either internal or external factors in dispense of the opposite group of factors as normatively determining our epistemic behavior in the face of peer disagreement.

Conciliationism is the view that peer disagreement has a significant epistemic bearing, and we should revise our beliefs in every case of peer disagreement. The strongest version of conciliationism is the so called *equal weight view*, according to which when two peers find themselves disagreeing with each other they should split the difference in half, absent reasons that are independent of the debate to do otherwise. The trigger for this view is avoiding begging the question against your opponent. More precisely, the view does so by being committed to the principle of independence:

Principle of 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 about p , which is independent of the very disagreement between the parties. (Christensen 2009, 758)

What these independent reasons amount to is not always explicitly mentioned in the literature. It seems that these are higher-order considerations such as the fact that my opponent believes that p , her epistemic virtues (competence, expertise), and no indications that she is drunk or under the influence of drugs, that she is joking, or that she is not sincere etc. Note that these independent reasons do not concern an assessment of the evidence or arguments of my opponent since they are a part of the disagreement. I take the central one of them to be competence or virtue and I will hereafter refer to virtues or competences only when I talk about external or independent factors.

Although conciliationism accounts for our warning behavior in the case of Mental Math, there is one very intuitive problem with the view. This is the problem that in most cases one side of the disagreement is closer to truth than the other.¹ Hence in the default case and therefore, in general, it is highly irra-

¹ Of course, we can imagine a version of the Mental Math example in which one side of the disagreement comes to the result \$43 and the other side comes to the result \$47, while the true result is \$45. In such case none of the sides is closer to truth than the other. But such cases would be surprisingly accidental and we are justified in tak-

tional for that side to revise her belief by splitting the difference. The problem is well formulated by Christensen in two examples taken from Thomas Kelly:

Right and Wrong: Right and Wrong are mutually acknowledged peers considering whether P. At t_0 , Right forms 0.2 credence in P, and Wrong forms a 0.8 credence in P. The evidence available to both of them actually supports a 0.2 credence in P. Right and Wrong then compare notes, and realize they disagree. (Christensen 2011, 2)

If Right and Wrong are to split the difference, each must end up with credence 0.5. But this is counterintuitive.

The other example given by Kelly is the following:

Wrong and Wronger: Wrong and Wronger are mutually acknowledged peers considering whether P. At t_0 , Wrong forms 0.7 credence in P, and Wronger forms a 0.9 credence in P. The evidence available to both of them actually supports a 0.2 credence in P. Wrong and Wronger then compare notes, and realize they disagree. They follow the dictates of Equal Weight, and at t_1 they compromise at 0.8. (Kelly 2010, 3)

The problem in this second example is that by compromising according to the dictates of equal weight view Wronger made his belief more rational. But as Kelly rightly points out, “it is dubious that rational belief is so easy to come by” (Kelly 2010, 126).

Another argument against conciliationism in general is that in certain cases it does not make sense to revise our belief(s) in the face of disagreement because of the compelling justification that favors our side. Ernest Sosa provides four kinds of reasons that, when involved in justification of our beliefs, could make them resistant to opposition (see Sosa 2010). First, these are *a priori* reasons; second, these are phenomenal reasons concerning my own mental states such as “I have a headache”; third, these are holistic reasons such as Moore’s total evidence against the skeptic; and finally reliance on one’s epistemic community can serve as such a compelling reason. Arguably some of these reasons entail knowledge such as phenomenal reasons, and *a priori* reasons. This suggests that there are exceptions from the conciliationist rule in which it would be clearly irrational to follow it.

ing them as exceptional. The default cases are not like that because the actual probability of equal distance from truth is very low.

On the other camp, the steadfast theorists suggest that external factors are not of much epistemic significance and that we should rather focus on improving our own beliefs when faced with disagreement. For this we should focus on factors internal to the discussion such as evidence and arguments. Kelly writes: “Once I thoroughly scrutinize the evidence about p , the fact of someone else’s disagreement cannot undermine the rationality of my belief” (Kelly 2005, 192).

The steadfast view is supported by the frequent epistemic asymmetry of the opponents revealed by the examples of Right and Wrong and Wrong and Wronger, and also by the privileged access to one’s own mental states. Lackey calls the referent of privileged access “personal information”. On the one hand, I have direct access to the grounds of my belief, like for instance vivid phenomenological experience, and on the other hand, I have personal information about the normal functioning of my own cognitive faculties, while lacking such information about my opponent. In certain cases, as Lackey argues (for instance in Sosa’s cases mentioned above), personal information can provide a symmetry breaker in favor of my side (see Lackey 2010).

Besides, there is no problem with the steadfast view that mirrors that of conciliationism. While conciliationism loses plausibility by certain cases of disagreement in which it is more rational to stick to our guns, the fact of occasional belief-revisions does not pose a problem for the steadfast theory. The view does not explicitly forbid belief-revisions, at least when I realize an imperfection in my argument as a result of peer disagreement. The steadfast view allows for belief revision in the face of opponent’s arguments, since these are not independent of the discussion. The Mental Math example is of this sort – it provokes the thought that my own argument could be improved as a result of double checking.

At this point it seems that the steadfast view has some advantages. I am now going to start with my original discussion which is supposed to reveal a strong objection to the view.

3. Our goal in the face of disagreement

So far, we saw some pluses and minuses of the theories favoring either internal or external factors. Now I want to focus more closely on the epis-

temic bearing that each of these factors has in resolving cases of peer disagreement.

As a starting point, though, we need to have a clear grasp of what our goal is in the face of peer disagreement. What do we want to achieve, epistemically speaking, in the face of disagreement? Some philosophers think that our natural goal in such situations is to acquire knowledge. John Hawthorne and Amia Srinivasan propose and discuss a knowledge based norm for disagreement, which they call “Knowledge Disagreement Norm” (KDN). According to KDN, in a case of disagreement about whether p , where S believes that p and H believes that not- p :

- KDN: (i) S ought to trust H and believe that not- p iff were S to trust H , this would result in S 's knowing not- p
 (ii) S ought to dismiss H and continue to believe that p iff were S to stick to her guns this would result in S 's knowing p , and (iii) in all other cases, S ought to suspend judgment about whether p . (Hawthorne – Srinivasan 2013, 11-12)

It is certainly desirable to be on the knowing side. However this demand seems to be too strong. We can acquire knowledge in the way described by KDN only if we stick to the side which is correct. But there are cases of disagreement in which A has got it wrong and B even wronger. Sometimes it is epistemically better to end up on the side which is closer to truth and yet in absence of knowledge than sticking to the wronger side. It is epistemically better if one's progress towards the truth is non-accidental. But KDN cannot grasp the kind of progress in such occasions; it works only for cases in which one side has got it right and the other wrong. For the general case though, I think, the goal of disagreement should be defined differently from KDN, namely as getting closer to truth in a non-accidental way. Call this “Closer to Truth Disagreement Norm” or CTDN for short.

- CTDN: (i) S ought to trust H and believe that p iff were S to trust H , this would result in S 's getting closer to truth in a non-accidental way;
 (ii) S ought to dismiss H and continue to believe that q iff were S to stick to her guns this would result in S 's staying non-accidentally closer to truth, and;
 (iii) in all other cases, S ought to suspend judgment about whether p or q .

By “getting closer to the truth non-accidentally” one can mean different things, but for the sake of clarity I will mean here “getting closer to truth in a reliable way”, reliability condition of course includes also reliable reasoning. Having this formulation in mind, we can return to our main question: to what extent my ending up non-accidentally on the side which is closer to the truth depends on factors internal to the discussion, and to what extent it depends on independent factors? I want to suggest, based on probabilities, that looking at our virtues or competences relevant to the field of the debate could be epistemically more profitable than looking at our first-order evidence internal to the discussion. In what follows, I will use an argument by Timothy Williamson to show this. My aim is to throw a glove for further discussion along this track.

4. Evidence vs. virtues

In his paper “Very Improbable Knowing”, Timothy Williamson presents the following case, a simplified and more ordinary version of which is this (see Williamson 2011). Imagine a minimalist clock with two pointers showing approximately that it is 8:00. When S looks at the clock from certain distance in normal perceptual conditions, S can easily take it to be 8:00 o’clock, when the minute’s pointer is in position 7:58, or 7:59, or 8:01, or 8:02. These positions form a field H, which we can call: “margin of error field” or “margin of error set of positions”. There are three basic elements in H as well as along the whole clock: endpoints (when the pointer is in positions 7:58, 7:59, etc.), intervals between endpoints, and midpoints – when the pointer is between two endpoints. Assume that the pointer is in position 0 when it is exactly 8:00. S knows that it is 8:00 *iff* it is in position 0, but not in a position from the margin of error field H. By dividing the space-time intervals within H as much as we want, we can reduce the probability of S knowing that p to 0.

The idea of the example is to show that given our margins of error, the probability of S knowing that she knows that p (that it is 8:00), based on the evidence that she possesses, is very low. The same holds for S’s knowing that she is non-accidentally closer to the truth of p . The implication of this case for our discussion so far is the following. In majority of cases in which S thinks that she possesses good evidence in favor of p , she cannot be sure that

she knows that p . This is bad for the steadfast view, because one is not justified to remain steadfast in the absence of good evidence supporting her certainty. Note that the more sophisticated the debate is in terms of evidence, the greater the risk of error given our margins of error, and the more destructive Williamson's argument would be for the steadfast view.

Williamson's case is not equally applicable to any kind of evidence or evidence gathering. When we refer to *a priori* and *holistic* evidence the situation would be slightly different. It is hard to imagine how our *a priori* intuition would be a subject to margins or error argument. The same holds for holistic evidence, more precisely holistic evidence about the reliability of our faculties. If this evidence were leading to improbable knowledge, then Williamson's argument would not go through because he is using this kind of evidence to build up his case. More importantly, we use evidence of this sort when it comes to assessing external factors relevant to peer disagreement situations. We keep track of the cognitive success of our cognitive faculties as well as of the competences and virtues of other people by using holistic evidence based on coherence. If holistic evidence is not vulnerable to the very improbable knowing argument, this naturally puts external factor in better position than internal factors.

To what extent this argument favors conciliationism? It shows, though only in a negative way, that our evidence of external factors is more truth-conducive than the kind of evidence usually associated with internal factors. However, it does not follow that in all cases reconciliation is called for. There are some exceptions in which our first-order evidence is more than reliable. Possible such cases relate to *a priori*, holistic, and phenomenal evidence. So, although the argument presented here is a defense of independent factors, it does not favor conciliationism. The acquired result that independent factors could be a better guide to truth in peer disagreement situations than the internal first-order evidence heating up the discussion might seem counterintuitive, and I think it is worthy of further discussion.

References

- CHRISTENSEN, D. (2009): Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy. *Philosophy Compass* 4, No. 5, 756-767.
- CHRISTENSEN, D. (2011): Disagreement, Question-Begging and Epistemic Self-Criticism. *Philosophers' Imprint* 11, No. 6, 1-22.

- HAWTHORNE, J. – SRINIVASAN, A. (2013): Disagreement without Transparency: Some Bleak Thoughts. In: Lackey, J. – Christensen, D. (eds.): *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 9-31.
- KELLY, T. (2005): The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement. In: Hawthorne, J. – Gendler, T. S. (eds.): *Oxford Studies in Epistemology. Vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 167-197.
- KELLY, T. (2010): Peer Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence. In: Feldman, R. – Warfield, T. (eds.): *Disagreement*. New York: Oxford University Press, 111-174.
- LACKEY, J. (2010): A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance. In: Haddock, A. – Millar, A. – Pritchard, D. (eds.): *Social Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 298-325.
- SOSA, E. (2010): The Epistemology of Disagreement. In: Haddock, A. – Millar, A. – Pritchard, D. (eds.): *Social Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 286-294.
- WILLIAMSON, T. (2011): Improbable Knowing. In: Dougherty, T. (ed.): *Evidentialism and its Discontents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 147-165.