

Jonathan Matheson. *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement*. Palgrave MacMillan 2015. 190 pp. \$100.00 USD (978-1-137-40089-5); \$95.00 USD (978-1-349-48622-9).

Disagreement is an important part of our everyday lives. Among other topics, we argue and disagree with others on politics and which party to vote for, about ethical values, about the validity of the latest scientific report on climate change, on whether a Picasso painting is beautiful, or on which is the best basketball team. Recently, philosophers have concentrated on disagreement among those who are equally likely to provide a correct answer to a question asked, people who can rightly be called ‘peers.’

Jonathan Matheson’s *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement* is a welcome addition to the growing literature on peer disagreement for at least three reasons. First, Matheson provides a good overview of the background terms and common assumptions in the literature while laying down the background of his argument. Second, he discusses some of the most crucial views and contributions to the literature. Examining these views is very helpful to those who have little background on peer disagreement. Third, he defends what is the default philosophical view on peer disagreement, the Equal Weight View (EWV). The main idea is that when two peers disagree about a question, their conflicting opinions should be given equal weight in reaching a conclusion. In many cases, this leads to the parties in the disagreement to suspend their judgment on the question. By defending the EWV, and at some points presenting novel arguments of his own, Matheson provides fruitful ground for critics of the default view to build their counterarguments on.

This is a clearly written, well-structured and ably argued work. It will benefit those who have little background on peer disagreement and be read with interest by those working on the subject. Below, I focus on some weaknesses in Matheson’s argument, criticisms that spring from his choice of using ideal epistemic conditions as the background framework for working out his theory.

Matheson chooses the idealized peer disagreement, peer disagreement in ideal conditions, as the methodological framework for his analysis for three reasons. He says that idealized peer disagreement allows improved precision, helps weed out irrelevant factors, and can serve as the baseline for further analysis as the assumptions inherent in the idealized framework are dropped to better approximate real life. While these are perfectly sound reasons for choosing an idealized methodological framework, there are other reasons for doing so. For instance, David Enoch argues that ‘what justifies the move to hypothetical, ideal, conditions ... would be to claim that the relevantly ideal conditions are the conditions needed for a reliable tracking of the relevant facts’ (‘Why Idealize?’, *Ethics* 115 (2005) 761-762).

It is telling for Matheson’s analysis and the current state of the debate on peer disagreement that reliable truth-tracking isn’t one of the reasons for the choice of methodology. The reason is that the debate on peer disagreement has moved away from seeking to find the ‘true’ or correct answer when parties disagree and rather focuses on what are the rational choices available to them. One of the epistemological conclusions of this debate is that one can be epistemically rational and still reach a wrong belief.

Per Matheson (29), two epistemic agents find themselves in circumstances of idealized peer disagreement about a proposition *p* if:

- a. They genuinely disagree about *p*
- b. They are qualified epistemic peers on *p*
- c. They have access to their own reasons for their epistemic attitude towards *p* (in this case, they have access to own evidence, their processing of that evidence and the resulting epistemic attitude) and the reasons of their peer for holding the contrary epistemic attitude
- d. They are not aware of other epistemic agents’ attitudes about *p*.

It is useful to make the following points. First, following Burge's analysis of understanding, Matheson sees genuine disagreement as disagreement that is not the result of misunderstanding or misapplication of terms (7). Second, Matheson defines epistemic peers as epistemic agents who 'are in an equally good epistemic condition' about the question at hand. Here he follows Adam Elga, who defines epistemic peers as epistemic agents that are equally likely to get the right answer to the question at hand. This is slightly different from the more standard definition of epistemic peerhood advanced by Thomas Kelly, who defines epistemic peers as those who possess the same evidence and are equally good in processing it. There is a difference in the two definitions and it has important ramifications, as Matheson admits (21-24).

Third, Matheson is vague about the level of epistemic competence granted to epistemic peers: '[what] we care about is disagreement between informed individuals who are good at processing their evidence – intellectually attentive people who are in general reasonable individuals' (24). As Elga has pointed out, though, there is an epistemic difference even between people with relatively high epistemic competence, between an expert and a guru. I add that their views can be different in crucial ways from the opinion of a qualified epistemic agent who is merely good in getting the question right. It is important to keep track whether we are talking about peer disagreement between experts, gurus, or merely qualified epistemic agents.

Fourth, Matheson claims that in idealized peer disagreement peers have access to the same evidence when forming their own beliefs and access to the reasons that their peer has reached a contradicting belief (26-29). When Ann believes proposition *p* based on evidence *E* while her peer Bob believes not-*p* based on evidence *E**, Ann also has access to Bob's reasons for holding not-*p* and Bob has access to Ann's reasons for holding that *p*. This reduces to the claim that the evidence one obtains by introspection of one's own beliefs is equally accessible to the testimony of another person processing the same evidence. Matheson recognizes the controversial nature of this claim but argues that it is a plausible assumption under the ideal epistemic conditions he is working with.

But are the ideal conditions that Matheson postulates the best way to examine the epistemic consequences of peer disagreement? First, by idealizing the epistemic conditions surrounding disagreement, Matheson fails to investigate in depth some other interesting epistemic features of disagreement. Second, he runs the risk of not being equally charitable to competing views to EWV and reaching conclusions that don't reliably track truth. Third, the validity of the claim that the EWV is the epistemically appropriate response to idealized peer disagreement is diluted as we start dropping the assumptions of the ideal scenario and we move towards real-life disagreement. In real life, other responses may seem equally or even more appropriate to peer disagreement than EWV.

In a commonly used scenario, we are to imagine that you form a belief about a proposition *p* based on adequately processing the available evidence *E* about *p* that you as a good evaluator such as the circumstances possess. Let's say that you come to believe that *p*. You then learn that a peer, with the same evidence and ability to process it, forms the belief that not-*p*. The question that concerns Matheson is what is the epistemically rational thing to do in these epistemic circumstances. Under the idealized peer disagreement scenario, this is a normative question: a question about what you should epistemically do if the circumstances of idealized peer disagreement obtain. The relevant considerations here are related to knowledge or justification: Matheson looks for what is reasonable in terms of reaching a true or justified belief. Pragmatic or other considerations do not play a role here.

We then have:

t1: you form the belief that *p* based on processing evidence *E* and being a good evaluator of that evidence

t2: you learn that peer *S* formed the belief that not-*p* based on the same *E*

At t_2 , you gain additional evidence about p via the disagreement with your peer. This indicates that you may have been wrong in holding the belief that p , or in Matheson's preferred terms, your obtained reason that your belief that p is defeated. Let your evidence at t_1 be called first-order evidence. The evidence resulting from peer disagreement about your first-order evidence is called higher-order evidence. At the crux of the debate between proponents of 'steadfast' views, views that maintain that in some cases it is reasonable to continue holding your belief after realizing that a peer disagrees with you, and proponents of 'conciliatory' views, views that call for a change in your beliefs after disagreeing with a peer, is the extent to which higher-order evidence trumps first-order evidence.

According to the EWV, what is reasonable for you to do in the epistemic circumstances just described is to give equal weight to both yours and your peer's view. If you believe that p and your peer believes that not- p , then you should suspend your judgement. If your credence that t is 0.8 and your peer's 0.6, then you should revise your credence to the 0.7 level. These apply to your peer too.

Proponents of conciliatory views emphasize that humans are fallible epistemic agents: even with experts, there is always the possibility that a person has formed a wrong belief. For its proponents, EWV is the epistemically responsible thing to do in idealized peer disagreement due to our fallibility. They claim that a steadfast response to peer disagreement, one that puts more weight on one of the conflicting views, is unreasonable for at least two reasons. First, it is not called for epistemically by the circumstances: you should put equal weight on the opinions of two people who are equally likely to get a question right. Second, if you put more weight on one of them, you risk reaching a dogmatic or wrong conclusion.

My first criticism of Matheson is that by employing an idealized framework, he downplays important epistemological points about peer disagreement that steadfast views offer. Take private evidence. Some proponents of steadfast views, such as Peter van Inwagen, claim that in some cases we possess evidence that we cannot share with others. In the case of peer disagreement, this has the consequence that you may have evidence about proposition p that your peer does not. Therefore, you are in better epistemic conditions than your peer and the disagreement should not affect your being justified in holding p ; you are justified in continuing to believe that p despite the peer disagreement.

In response to this, Matheson reminds the reader of the third condition of idealized peer disagreement: there is a symmetry of information and evidence available and accessible to the parties of the disagreement. In addition to having the same evidence E about p and the same cognitive abilities in processing E , parties to an idealized peer disagreement have access to the reasons that their peers hold a conflicting view. This evidence is in the same way accessible as one's own evidence and this fact holds for all parties. This disqualifies the possibility of private evidence and allows for the response that private evidence does not have epistemological import under the stipulated ideal conditions.

By arguing in this manner, Matheson misses important insights that considerations of private evidence can offer. Ralph Wedgwood has discussed the idea that our moral beliefs are crucially dependent on our moral intuitions: we directly base our moral beliefs on our moral intuitions. Therefore, our moral intuitions merit what Wedgwood calls 'fundamental trust': 'even in the absence of any independent reason in favor of regarding one's beliefs as reliable, one should continue to rely on one's beliefs as reliable – at least as long as one does not have any special defeating reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are not reliable in the circumstances' ('The Moral Evil Demon,' in *Disagreement*, ed. R. Feldman and T. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 238). On the other hand, the moral intuitions of others cannot play the same role in the formation of our moral beliefs because they don't have the same type of relationship with our psychological states. The

conclusion is that the moral intuitions of others don't merit the same fundamental trust as our moral intuitions on the same question.

When Matheson considers different ways in which ideal epistemic conditions can be relaxed, he notes that while you may have private evidence that your peer may be lacking, due to the symmetry of the situation, she may have private evidence you are lacking (118-120). To favor your private evidence, you would need a reason to think that your private evidence is more reliable than your peer's. For Matheson, the fact that it is private does not epistemically favor your evidence *independent* of the epistemic circumstances that gave rise to the disagreement. I deal with this argument below. However, the idealized assumptions in Matheson's account hinder a complete discussion of trusting our moral intuitions and their import to peer disagreement by disqualifying the possibility of them factoring in.

David Christensen has argued that we should evaluate different explanations of peer disagreement in a way that is independent from our original thinking about the subject of the disagreement. Otherwise, we would be guilty either of double-counting evidence or of question-begging against our disagreeing peer, leading to a dogmatic view. This is known as the *independence thesis* (IT). One of the thoughts behind Matheson's treatment of private evidence is the thesis that when we evaluate the epistemic purport of peer disagreement, we cannot rely on elements that were part of the reasons we formed our original belief. If private evidence was part of the web of epistemic factors leading to us holding the belief that p, then the fact that we have this private evidence should be discounted when evaluating different explanations of peer disagreement. That is, in evaluating whether higher-order evidence trumps first-order evidence, we cannot use any factor that was part of the first-order evidence such as private evidence.

While intuitively plausible, this thesis is controversial. Kelly has argued that it is too strong: one of its consequences would be to start doubting accepted facts like the occurrence of the Holocaust when someone confronts us with contradicting arguments against its occurrence. Kelly goes on to show that there are weaker epistemic principles that can protect us against double-counting, question-begging and dogmatism. One of them is his Total Evidence View (TEV), the idea that 'what is reasonable to believe depends on both the original, first-order, evidence as well as on the higher-order evidence that is afforded by the fact that one's peers believe as they do' ('Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence,' in *Disagreement*, 201).

Matheson responds to Kelly's challenge by arguing that while IT would not allow one to use first-order evidence against the Holocaust denier, it does allow one to use second-order evidence (95-96). If I have evidence that my evidence is superior to the Holocaust denier's, then I can conclude that my belief is not defeated by the denier's claims. I leave the debate here and note that Matheson provides an illuminating discussion of this crucial issue although I don't think he adequately addresses Kelly's claim.

My point against the IT is twofold. First, in Matheson's ideal framework IT practically eliminates the possibility of another reasonable action when disagreeing with a peer but to give equal weight to your peer's view. To see this, remember that after the realization that as your peer I disagree with you about hypothesis H, you have in your disposal the following kinds of evidence:

- (i) Your original evidence E
- (ii) The fact that you are quite confident that H is true
- (iii) The fact that I am quite confident that H is false

Now, remember that under the ideal epistemic conditions that Matheson works with, this is a perfectly symmetrical epistemic situation regarding first-order evidence: peers are equally likely to get their beliefs right, they have the same evidence, including evidence about how their peer reached their belief, and the same ability to process that evidence.

IT ensures that higher-order evidence is equally symmetrical: when considering higher-order evidence any evidential factor from the original disagreement such as private evidence is disqualified. The only factor you can consider is the fact that peer disagreement obtained. In these perfectly symmetrical circumstances, it would be irrational to favor any type of evidence or to prefer one or the other party to the disagreement for one would not have any epistemic reasons to do so. Any reason to prefer one of the peers would be countered by its symmetrical counterpart. Therefore, EWV is the only rational alternative. Indeed, part of the debate about peer disagreement can be framed as an attempt by proponents of steadfast views to move beyond ideal conditions that favor EWV by pointing to cases and epistemic circumstances that merit attention outside this framework.

Matheson's response is that the stipulation of ideal epistemic circumstances is an argumentative tool with the goals identified above: precision in analysis, weeding out irrelevant factors, and establishing a standard basis for analyzing epistemic disagreement. Yet, these ideal conditions seem to limit the possibilities of theoretical exploration and treat criticisms of EWV uncharitably. Since they are not conducive to the analysis of all possible alternatives, the stipulated ideal epistemic conditions may not be reliable enough to track truth, another virtue that theoretical idealization should strive for. In addition, these goals may directly conflict with truth-tracking. For instance, by aiming to weed out irrelevant factors to the analysis, Matheson may be discounting factors that are crucial for a complete examination of peer disagreement such as private evidence.

My second point regarding IT is that there are some cases when it is not possible to evaluate a disagreement with a peer *independent* of the epistemic factors of the disagreement itself. Proponents of EWV concentrate on mathematical or perceptual examples. In these cases, one can separate the mental processes that lead to the disagreement in the first place (mathematical calculation and perception) compared to the mental processes involved in higher-order evidence, the doxastic mental state that one is in fact in disagreement with a peer.

Nevertheless, there are cases of disagreement when the separation between epistemic factors affecting first and higher-order evidence is difficult or impossible. Take for instance disagreement about capital punishment. There are non-moral facts about capital punishment such as how often it is used and its effectiveness, polls on public opinion, and others. In addition, in the arguments for and against capital punishment, one is bound to use arguments about the justification of punishment (desert, retribution or reform) and whether wrongdoers forfeit certain rights when committing a crime. These, call them moral arguments, coupled with the non-moral facts will lead one to support or reject capital punishment.

When one hears that a peer has a conflicting view on capital punishment, one is provided higher-order evidence. Nevertheless, this type of evidence is very difficult to evaluate unless one looks at the first-order evidence and the moral arguments that led one to one's position. In the perceptual case, my perception of the dean is contradicted by the doxastic state about another's contradicting belief. These two mental states are clearly different. In capital punishment, we have a belief that is contradicted by our belief about another's beliefs. Here, it is very difficult to untangle and individuate the epistemic elements and mental states that factor into the first and higher-order evidence. I don't see how one could cleanly separate first and higher-order evidence in this case. This makes Matheson's dependence on IT problematic. Perhaps the best counter to this would be to claim IT is part of the idealized epistemic circumstances and is useful insofar as it ensures that these circumstances hold. I deal with this below.

In chapter 6, Matheson tries to show that EWV is the rational response to peer disagreement even if some of the assumptions of the idealized epistemic circumstances are dropped, gradually approaching real-life circumstances. An important element in his argument is the following.

Imagine that we drop the assumptions that parties of the peer disagreement have the same evidence and they are aware of the fact: for Matheson (116-117), this leaves the parties of the disagreement uncertain about the epistemic reasons that led their peers to conflicting beliefs. The difference here is that parties to the disagreement evidence do not have the same evidence or they are not aware of the reasons for the disagreeing party to hold a conflicting belief. Matheson claims that absent any other additional evidence, you don't have reason to believe that you are in better epistemic circumstances than your peer. Also, your peer doesn't have reason to think that she is in better epistemic position than you. Matheson claims that even when it is not clear who is more likely to get the question right, the rational thing to do is to split the difference.

This conclusion seems to be result of adhering to IT. In these asymmetric epistemic conditions, Matheson is asking for a reason to think that you or your peer are in better epistemic position. Reasons that are part of first-order evidence E, such as private evidence, one's first person perspective, self-trust, and others, are disqualified due to IT. Since there is uncertainty about whether one of the parties in the peer disagreement is in better epistemic position and higher-order evidence is limited to the fact of peer disagreement, the only alternative remaining is EWV.

My counter to this line of thought is that while Matheson gradually drops all the assumptions of the idealized peer disagreement, he never considers what would be the effect of dropping IT. As I showed above, IT is a controversial assumption and it seems that it isn't applicable to all cases of peer disagreement. One of the ways to counter this criticism is to argue that IT is part of the idealized epistemic conditions. If Matheson goes that way, then he should consider dropping it as well when he drops the rest of the ideal assumptions. This would lead to examining cases of peer disagreement that are even closer to real-life conditions.

Nevertheless, the consequence of dropping IT would be damaging for conciliatory views. The reason is that the moment that IT is dropped, proponents of steadfast views can claim that there are epistemic factors that are part of the first-order evidence favoring one's own view. Take private evidence. When Wedgewood discusses 'fundamental trust,' he reaches the conclusion that there are cases when one is justified in trusting one's own moral intuition in a manner that one cannot trust others' moral intuitions. The conclusion is that showing 'egocentric bias' in cases of peer disagreement maybe justified in certain circumstances.

Proponents of steadfast views can focus on cases in which epistemic factors that are part of first-order evidence favor one's own views. This allows them to argue that, while their positions may be in a disadvantage in idealized peer disagreement, when we drop some of the assumptions in the idealized peer disagreement (including IT) and approach real-life conditions, steadfast views are better in handling peer disagreement. Therefore, they should be preferred. While this is not a knock-down argument against conciliatory views, it is a counter that needs to be considered for peer disagreement is a crucial element of everyday discourse, especially in philosophy.

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