

Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield, eds.

Disagreement.

London and New York: Oxford University Press 2010.

291 pages

US\$99.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-922607-8);

US\$35.00 (paper ISBN 978-0-19-922608-5)

What has come to be known as *peer disagreement* is a common but somewhat disconcerting phenomenon. In its simplest (and somewhat idealized) form, it involves two individuals who are *epistemic peers*: they have access to the same evidence and are equal in their abilities to interpret and reason from that evidence. But despite their evidential and cognitive equivalency, one of them accepts a proposition that the other denies. This sort of situation—which regularly occurs in science, politics, ethics, religion, and philosophy—gives rise to several questions. Must at least one of them abandon, weaken, or revise her belief on pain of irrationality? If one of them must revise, doesn't symmetry require they both revise? Most responses to the problem of peer disagreement fall somewhere on a line between *skepticism*—that disagreement requires at least one (or probably both) to weaken, modify, or abandon the belief—and *resoluteness* (to use Catherine Z. Elgin's term)—that peer disagreement has no general epistemological consequences, and thus one can justifiably retain one's beliefs in situations of peer disagreement.

Peter van Inwagen's lead essay introduces many of the main issues regarding peer disagreement. He uses as an example his disagreement with David Lewis about Compatibilism. Both are experts regarding this issue and are thoroughly familiar with the arguments and evidence for the other side. In this sort of situation van Inwagen says it's tempting to suppose that he has some sort of incommunicable evidence or insight that Lewis lacks. But of course it would seem like a lucky coincidence that of all the peer disagreements (philosophical, political, religious) he's involved in, that it is he—and not his peers—who has the incommunicable evidence, and thus occupies a superior epistemic position. Van Inwagen therefore rejects that proposal, but then he has to choose between saying that both he and Lewis are rational or that they are both irrational. He is unable to accept the latter and become an agnostic about all but empirically verifiable matters of fact, and so he has to say both he and Lewis are rational. But as he acknowledges, this position is deeply problematic: if two philosophers can rationally and justifiably reach contradictory conclusions based on the same evidence, then the factors that lead one to assent to a proposition are not factors that track the truth—one might as well just flip a coin.

Of all of the contributors to this collection, Hilary Kornblith is probably the closest to the skeptical end of the spectrum, at least when it comes to philosophy. Unlike the disputes in science and mathematics, those in philosophy seem to be especially

intractable, and there isn't the same sort of consensus-building and convergence that one finds in the more formal or empirical areas of inquiry. When we survey the history of philosophy, we just don't find the progress we find in science and mathematics. It is therefore reasonable to infer that even the experts in philosophy have usually been wrong. But since there is no real reason to think that the philosophers today are more reliable than those of the past, it seems to Kornblith that the only reasonable view is epistemic modesty and the conclusion that neither party in a peer dispute has a justified belief.

In her chapter, Catherine Z. Elgin offers two reasons for rejecting skepticism. The first is based on the idea that belief is not voluntary and the principle that 'ought implies can': if the parties in a peer dispute (normatively) should suspend judgment about the matter at issue, then it must be the case that they are capable of suspending judgment. But in many cases they are not able to suspend judgment. Elgin uses the example of David Lewis' view that there are infinitely many possible worlds each of which is as real as the actual world. Elgin acknowledges Lewis as her philosophical equal (or superior) but she is simply unable to give up her belief that the actual world has a unique status. Her other reason for resisting skepticism is that disagreement and the adversarial method promotes progress in philosophy and other disciplines.

Earl Conee attempts to defuse the skeptical implications of peer disagreement. The skeptical view that peer disagreement implies that at least one of the participants has an unjustified belief depends on some version of a 'rational uniqueness' principle to the effect that if two peers have access to the same evidence for a proposition, then they must have the same doxastic attitude toward that proposition. Conee's main move is to point out that peers could rationally believe of themselves that they differ in such a way that it's rationally for one of them to believe the proposition and equally rational for the other to not believe it. For example, suppose they both accept the principle that intuitions offer essentially private rational support for propositions. Now if one of them has the intuition that the proposition in question is true while the other does not, then despite disagreeing about the disputed proposition, they would reasonably agree that the disagreement they're having is rational.

Richard Fumerton argues in 'You Can't Trust a Philosopher' that while peer disagreement does have a tendency to undermine one's justification for a philosophical belief, it does not immediately follow that skepticism is correct. Since philosophers disagree about most philosophical issues, it follows that most philosophers have false philosophical beliefs and so are not reliable. But if philosophers are unreliable in general, then the philosopher who disagrees with one's philosophical belief is probably unreliable, and thus the threat is neutralized. But, as Fumerton notes, his solution creates a new problem—since he's a philosopher, he's almost certainly unreliable! And, as he admits, the prospects of constructing a convincing argument that he has somehow avoided the defects that make others unreliable are not promising.

Thomas Kelly's defense of resoluteness is based on his view that we are not rationally required to give equal weight to the opinions of our peers. Rather, one's belief should be shaped by both one's 'first-order evidence' for the proposition in question, but also by the higher-order evidence one acquires in virtue of being involved in the peer disagreement. Sometimes the higher-order evidence will be significant and more compelling than one's first-order evidence, and in these cases one should weaken or suspend belief. But in other cases, it will be the first-order evidence that is more compelling. Now which of these is the case is highly context-sensitive, and thus there isn't a general answer to whether one should weaken or suspend belief in peer disagreement situations. But he thinks there will be clear cases of rational peer disagreement.

While Adam Elga is generally sympathetic to skepticism or epistemic modesty—an attitude he calls 'conciliatory'—he acknowledges that being conciliatory about *everything* is self-undermining: if an epistemic peer objects to the conciliatory view, the view itself would seem to require her to weaken or abandon her conciliatory view. Elga responds to this problem by arguing that there is a principled way of exempting the conciliatory view from the conciliatory attitude it recommends. His key idea is that peer disagreements about disagreement are about how to assess and respond to evidence—that is, about fundamental rules, policies, or methodological principles—and as such, must be dogmatic about their own correctness.

Alvin I. Goldman attempts to show that peer disagreement is reasonable by articulating a non-nihilistic version of epistemological relativism. The basic idea is that while there is a just one correct system of epistemic norms and standards governing when a person is justified given evidence of a certain sort, people in different communities can reasonably (though not correctly) accept different systems of epistemic norms and standards. This then allows for situations where two individuals presented with the same evidence for a proposition can reasonably disagree about what conclusions should be drawn from that evidence.

Ralph Wedgwood's concern is to account for rational moral disagreement while maintaining anti-relativist stance. His central claim is that it is rational to trust your own moral intuitions more than those of others because it is possible to base moral beliefs *directly* on one's own moral intuitions, something that can't be done with anyone else's moral intuitions. And thus, in cases of moral disagreement, it can be rational for both parties to stick with their beliefs, even though only one of the beliefs can be true.

The last chapter by Andy Egan deals with disagreements concerning matters of taste and aesthetic judgment. While some these disagreements are clearly defective and not worth pursuing, others do seem to be about something that can rationally discussed. Egan's interest is in what is what makes some disputes about taste defective and others not. His answer is based on his analysis of aesthetic judgments and judgments of taste. To assert 'Vegemite is tasty' is to attribute to one's self the property of being disposed to

enjoy Vegemite. A dispute about taste will be defective if the participants are unlikely to share the relevant dispositional property, and a dispute will be worthwhile if the participants are similar enough to make it likely that they might share the relevant property. The dispute will be resolved if each individual ends up attributing to himself the property in question.

This is an excellent collection on a fascinating topic. Everyone interested in recent developments in epistemology will want to read it.

David Haugen

Western Illinois University