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RESEARCH ARTICLES

CONTEXTUALISM AND CONTEXT VOLUNTARISM

David COSS

ABSTRACT: Contextualism is the view that the word ‘knows’ is context sensitive. While contextualism developed as a response to skepticism, there’s concern that it’s too easy for skeptics to undermine ordinary knowledge attributions. Once skeptical hypotheses are made salient, the skeptic seems to win. I first outline contextualism and its response to skepticism. I then explicate the resources contextualists have for protecting ordinary knowledge claims from skeptical worries. I argue that the dominate strains of contextualism naturally lend themselves to a restricted form of context voluntarism, according to which attributors (or subjects) can exercise a degree of voluntary control over the epistemically significant aspects of a conversational context, and consequently, ordinary knowledge attributions are true in a wide range of cases where skeptical hypotheses are entertained.

KEYWORDS: contextualism, Bank Cases, pragmatic encroachment

1. Contextualism¹

Contextualists argue that the truth of knowledge attributions shift with the relevant contextual standards in play. For example, contextualists maintain that when one entertains skeptical hypotheses, or even alternate possibilities, the epistemic threshold for knowledge shifts upward, making it more difficult for knowledge attributions to be true. However, in ordinary contexts—those that obtain outside of philosophical study, discussion and reflection—the standards of knowledge are usually lower. In this way, contextualists deny knowledge invariantism, the view that there’s only one standard of knowledge. Contextualists typically adhere to the following thesis about knowledge.

The Contextualist Thesis

Whether a knowledge attribution, ‘S knows that p,’ made by an attributor A, is true or false, depends upon whether A’s evidence (or, strength of epistemic position) is

¹ Portions of this section are borrowed from David Coss, “Contextualism and Context Internalism,” *Logos and Episteme* 8, 4 (2017): 417-425.

strong enough for knowledge relative to standards of knowledge in A's context.

As indicated above, a motivation for contextualism is the desire to articulate an effective and satisfying response to external world skepticism. The skeptical worry is that it's impossible to have external world knowledge given classical fallibilism.² This is puzzling, however, since ordinary people, as well as philosophers, take themselves to know many things about the external world.

The skeptical problem can be formulated as an argument which runs as follows. Let 'K' stand for the knowledge operator and 'BIV' any common brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, according to which all my external world experiences are generated by an evil scientist manipulating my perceptual experiences, and finally let 'hands' be a generic placeholder for any external world object.

P₁. $K(\text{hands}) \rightarrow K\sim\text{BIV}$

P₂. $\sim K\sim\text{BIV}$

C: $\sim K(\text{hands})$

While Dretske famously denied P₁ (the closure principle), maintaining that one can know that one has hands, even if one doesn't know the falsity of BIV hypotheses,³ contextualists are reluctant to abandon this principle. Rather, their answer to skepticism is a rejection of P₂, but only for ordinary conversational contexts.

The skeptic defends P₂ by claiming we are never in a strong enough epistemic position to deny this premise. If the BIV scenario is true, the skeptic argues that any envated subject S, and any non-envated subject S*, possess qualitatively indistinguishable evidence when considering propositions related to the external world. Since the quality of evidence is the same for both S and S*, and consequently indistinguishable by perceptual evidence alone, external world knowledge is impossible.

Contextualists draw attention to a conflict within our belief structure. On the one hand, skepticism seems convincing. The argument for skepticism is valid and

² Classical fallibilism is the view that knowledge doesn't require truth entailing evidence. In other words, subjects can know propositions even if they are not epistemically certain of its truth. Hence, S could know that p even if logical space affords her the possibility of being mistaken.

³ Epistemic closure is a principle whereby knowledge is closed under known entailment. The principle is as follows: $(sKp \ \& \ sK(p \rightarrow q)) \rightarrow sKq$. For more on the denial of closure, see Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," *Journal of Philosophy* 67, 24 (1970): 1007-1023, as well as Fred Dretske, "Conclusive Reasons," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 49, 1 (1971): 1-22.

appealing to one's epistemic intuitions, seems sound. However, the conclusion strikes many philosophers as unacceptable.

A virtue of the contextualist response to skepticism is twofold. First, viewing the word 'knows' as context-sensitive allows one to respond to skeptical worries without abandoning fallibilism.⁴ Second, while contextualists accept the conclusion of skeptical arguments in contexts when skeptical possibilities are entertained, they deny that skeptical arguments are infectious across all conversational contexts.⁵ In ordinary situations, when skeptical worries and alternative possibilities are not entertained, many 'S knows that p' statements come out true, assuming such true beliefs meet the less demanding epistemic standards for knowledge. In other words, contextualism responds to skepticism, while also appreciating the philosophical thrust of the problem.⁶

2. What Determines Contextual Shifts?

An epistemic context is a set of factors that determine the standards an attributor employs when making knowledge attributions. The attributor, not the subject of the attribution, is what matters for the context of an attribution. If the attributor is in a high stakes context, the epistemic standards required for her statement to be true are higher even if the subject of the attribution is in a low standard's context.

As stated previously, several factors raise and lower the contextual standards. The standard contextualist view is that attributors and subjects naturally find

⁴ One would like to adhere to fallibilism so as to avoid widespread Cartesian skepticism.

⁵ While this is the common characterization of the dialectic between contextualism and skepticism, a strong case will be made that contextualists are unwilling to capitulate this much to skepticism

⁶ One might be inclined to wonder how contextualism differs from an alternative approach called the "ambiguity theory of knowledge." According to this theory, there are multiple senses of the word 'knows.' While contextualism is similar to this view, there are marked differences which delineate the two. Perhaps the most important difference is the way in which each view the role context plays in determining the truth of knowledge attributions. For the ambiguity theory, one can simply stipulate which sense of the word 'knows' one is employing (much the same way as I can stipulate that I am talking about a financial institution when I use the term 'bank'). Context, therefore, plays either no role, or a marginal one, in determining true knowledge attributions. Contextualists, on the other hand, make the knowledge attributors slaves to context. Contextual features determine the evidential threshold, and therefore determine whether a knowledge attribution is true. In other words, the main difference is that for the ambiguity theorist, agents control which sense of 'knows' they employ, while contextualists depend upon context to determine whether a knowledge attribution is true.

themselves positioned within a low standards context (after all, this is how ordinary knowledge attributions escape the conclusions of skeptical arguments). Hence, unless something raises the contextual standards, attributors—and presumably subjects as well—remain in a less demanding epistemic context. Consequently, assuming skepticism is false, many “S knows that p” are able to meet or surpass the lower evidential threshold, and therefore come out true.

Although epistemic standards can be raised in several ways, contextualists emphasize salience of error possibilities. Suppose an attributor entertains external world skepticism. By entertaining a BIV hypothesis, the standards of knowledge rise, requiring epistemic certainty.⁷ Another way to raise contextual standards is if an attributor finds himself in a high stakes situation. Consider the classic bank cases presented by Keith DeRose.

Bank Case A. My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit out paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoon. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says ‘Maybe the bank won’t be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays.’ I reply, ‘No, I know it will be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It’s open until noon.’

Bank Case B. My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a *very* bad situation. And, of course, the bank will not be open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. Then she says, ‘Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?’ Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, ‘well, no, I don’t know. I’d better go in and make sure.’⁸

In the first version, since little, or nothing, is at stake if Keith is mistaken, he knows the bank will be open on Sunday. However, in the second iteration, if his

⁷ Epistemic certainty is understood as the claim that one can only know a proposition given truth entailing evidence.

⁸ Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-2

check isn't deposited by Monday morning, serious financial loss is incurred. While Keith remains in a less demanding epistemic context in Bank Case A, in the latter case, the standards of knowledge rise given his awareness of high stakes.

Consider another case employed by contextualists that strongly suggests contexts shift according to awareness.

The Airport Case

Mary and John are at the L.A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear someone ask a passenger Smith if he knows whether the flight stops in Chicago. Smith looks at the flight itinerary he got from the travel agent and respond, 'Yes I know—it does stop in Chicago.' It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, 'How reliable is that itinerary? It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.' Mary and John agree that Smith doesn't really *know* that the plane will stop in Chicago. They decide to check with the airline agent.⁹

In Stewart Cohen's Airport Case, contextual shifts happen in virtue of Mary making John aware of error possibilities. Arguably both John and Mary start off in a low standards epistemic context. However, once Mary makes error possibilities salient, the epistemic threshold rises, thus making the evidence they possess insufficient to meet or surpass the elevated epistemic threshold for knowledge.

One might object that in both Bank Case B as well as the Airport Case, contextual shifts could occur independently of awareness. For example, even if Keith's wife hadn't made him aware that banks sometimes change their hours, his epistemic threshold for knowledge would shift upward given the elevated cost of error. However, given the contextualist framework, there are plausible reasons for thinking that absent awareness, he would remain in a less demanding epistemic context. To counter this objection, it's worth exploring how contextualists and Interest-Relative Invariantists (IRI) provide divergent explanations of bank-style contrast cases.

In making the case that IRI provides a superior explanation of the cases contextualists employ, Stanley argues that IRI is able to explain the intuition behind traditional contrast cases, while also accounting for others he argues contextualists

⁹ Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism and the Structure of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, 13 (1999): 58

struggle with. In the following case, Sarah and Hannah arguably occupy a high stakes context, even though both are unaware of the consequences of being mistaken.

Ignorant High Stakes

Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. But neither Hannah nor Sarah is aware of the impending bill, nor the paucity of available funds. Looking at the lines, Hannah says to Sarah, ‘I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. So we can deposit our checks tomorrow morning.’¹⁰

Stanley claims that while IRI can explain the upward shift in the standards of knowledge for Hannah and Sarah, contextualists struggle providing a satisfactory explanation since salience of error is absent.

According to Stanley, contextualists struggle with ignorant high stakes cases since contextualism seems to rely on an intention-based account of contextual shifts. Stanley writes, “On this standard account of context-sensitive expressions, their semantic contents, relative to a context, are determined by facts about the intentions of the speaker using that expression.”¹¹ Since intentions play no role in Ignorant High Stakes, contextualists struggle accounting for cases where subjects lack awareness of high stakes.¹²

¹⁰ Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 5

¹¹ Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 25.

¹² One might object that I have unfairly characterized contextualism as being too committed to salience of error raising the epistemic threshold for knowledge. For example, one might point out that what partially fixes a context, even for contextualists, are mind-independent factors. Consider the following attribution made by subject S, “Jack knows carrots are orange.” Part of what fixes the context for S is the fact that carrots are orange (and this fact is, plausibly, independent of Jack’s awareness). I concede that many factors, both mental and non-mental, determine what context a subject or attributor is in. However, given what I have said about contextualism, such external factors fail to raise or lower the epistemic threshold for knowledge independent of awareness. Perhaps one is comfortable developing an externalist account of contextualism, but this faces at least two problems. First, it robs the cases contextualists use to support their arguments for contextualism. For example, in DeRose’s bank cases, external factors remain fixed across both situations, but the contextual content is different in B than in A. What shifts is Keith’s wife making Keith aware that banks sometimes change their hours. A more serious concern is externalist views of contextualism would fail to provide a solution to skepticism. Contextualism is largely motivated by its ability to account for how ordinary people have knowledge. Contextualists maintain that

While much of the contextualist literature emphasizes upward epistemic shifts, explaining how and why this happens, another question is worth entertaining: can contextual shifts work in the opposite direction? That is to say, can an attributor be in an epistemically demanding context, and shift to a less demanding one? While there is some controversy among contextualists over the correct answer to this question, my contention is that such shifts can happen. Consider the following case which provides a *prima facie* reason to think contextual shifts move in both directions: Frank thinks he needs to deposit his check by Monday otherwise he risks foreclosure. Frank looks at the payment schedule again and sees he has another week grace period before the payment is due. Excited, he tells his wife the good news. Though upon telling his wife, she informs him he's looking at the wrong month; there is no grace period. In this case, Frank moved from high, to low, back up to high again.

3. Contextualism and Context Voluntarism

Consider an uncontroversial claim: some things are under our control while others are not. While this section doesn't provide criteria for what constitutes voluntary control, it's worth pointing out several features and illustrating the difference. I have direct voluntary control over my choice of coffee over tea, though I cannot control who my parents are or whether I inherit male pattern baldness. I have indirect voluntary control over turning on a light switch or choosing which restaurant I go to, although such acts are executed in virtue of things I have direct control over—moving my hand or choosing to get in my car. On the contentious side of the spectrum is belief acquisition/selection.

While there is room for controversy over what is and isn't under a subject's control, I will not engage with those areas under controversy. Rather, the point of this section is to highlight what voluntary control is so we are better positioned to discuss the context voluntarism/involuntarism distinction.

As we've seen, responding to skepticism is a primary concern for contextualists, and they argue that under certain conditions, given that skepticism is false, attributors can know they are not BIV victims. The falsity of skepticism depends upon two things: a metaphysical condition and a contextual one. On the

since ordinary people are unaware of skeptical scenarios, they are naturally positioned in a lower epistemic position than those who are aware. If one externalizes contextual shifts, then it seems one is committed to skeptical worries undermining ordinary knowledge attributions, whether or not subjects or attributors were aware of them.

metaphysical side, it must be the case that the subject of an attribution isn't a BIV victim, whereas on the contextual side, an attributor claiming such scenarios are false must be in an appropriately low standards context where "S knows that skepticism is false" statements come out true. If the metaphysical condition is met, it's only in virtue of being placed in a high standards context that attributors fail to know the falsity of skepticism. Hence, while an epistemically low-standards garbage collector may know he has hands, a high standards epistemologist may not, even if the strength of their epistemic positions is identical.

Given that contextualists want to retain the truth of ordinary knowledge attributions, but respect the skeptic's challenge, it's worth asking: once the standards of knowledge become elevated to the point of entailing skeptical conclusions, can they ever be lowered? Logical space affords at least three responses.

- (i) **No.** One's epistemic context may become more demanding, but descent down the contextual standards of knowledge ladder is impossible.
- (ii) **Limited Approach.** Subjects can do certain things to prevent the standards from rising to skeptical levels, or if they become elevated, can perform things (i.e., conversational maneuvers) to reduce the standards of knowledge to their previous low standards state.
- (iii) **Unlimited Approach.** Attributors or subjects have full control over the context they're in.

The first view is involuntarism, the second restricted voluntarism, and the third unrestricted voluntarism. According to unrestricted voluntarism, subjects have full control over contexts and can therefore raise and lower the standards at will, as well as control all other contextual features associated with their situation. Contextualists would be unwise to defend (iii) for two reasons: it's implausible and inconsistent with ordinary empirical observations.

Although a case will be made that one can control certain aspects of a context, it's implausible that attributors—or subjects for that matter—have full control over all their contextual features. Often attributors and subjects have little or no control over the information presented to them. If S is in an epistemology classroom and the professor outlines skeptical possibilities, S cannot control *that* the skeptical argument was presented; at most, S can control her attitudes and judgments regarding skepticism. Given the implausibility of (iii), unrestricted voluntarism will not be entertained as a serious position.

Among contextualists, we find a diversity of opinion on (i) and (ii). One could read David Lewis, for example, as endorsing (i). Consider his rule of attention which

states that possibilities salient to a subject cannot properly be ignored. Once someone enters the epistemology classroom and learns about skepticism, this possibility—which was previously properly ignored—can no longer be neglected. With the elevated high standards, someone who entertains skepticism is immediately placed in a high standard’s context. As we will see later, it’s clear that for contextualists like Cohen or DeRose, one can switch between high and low standards contexts depending upon the situation; it’s less clear whether Lewis’ view affords such flexibility. Suppose S leaves the epistemology classroom and asserts “I know that P.” Is this statement true or false according to Lewis? Is skepticism properly ignored outside the conversational context of the epistemology classroom, or does it forever remain something not properly ignored? I suspect a strong case could be made for different responses, both dependent upon how one understands his rule of attention. While a detailed treatment of Lewis’ position regarding contextual control is warranted, presenting it here would take the paper too far astray. Moreover, while Lewis’ version of contextualism deserves discussion in its own right, I will not extensively engage with it here.¹³

While it’s controversial where Lewis stands on contextual control, contextualists like DeRose and Cohen, are friendly to context voluntarism, burrowing Lewis’ Scoreboard Semantics view (among others) in defense of non-skeptics’ ability to lower, or remain in, a low standards context. To understand DeRose’s voluntarism, we need to first familiarize ourselves with the semantic framework he employs.¹⁴

Imagine a skeptic engaged in an epistemological discussion with a non-skeptic. The non-skeptic starts out in a low standards epistemic context, whereas the skeptic’s epistemic standards are high. Through the course of the discussion, the skeptic presents several scenarios including Descartes’ Evil Demon, BIV and The Matrix. When the skeptic is finished presenting her case for skepticism, the non-skeptic responds “that’s absurd. There’s no way this is *really* possible,” to which the skeptic might respond, “listen, it’s logically possible. I’ve spelled out the structure of the argument. My inferences are valid and the premises are true, thus making it sound. You don’t know you have hands!” Suppose the discussion includes further

¹³ For those interested in his view, see David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 549-567. Since it’s unclear to me whether he would be a voluntarist or involuntarist regarding contextual control, I leave it up to reader to decide.

¹⁴ Consult David Lewis “Scorekeeping in a Language Game,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, 3 (1979): 339-359.

iterations along these lines, with the skeptic insisting the non-skeptic doesn't know she has hands, while the non-skeptic forcefully asserting the opposite. How could a contextualist interpret such an exchange?

If we return to the original question of this section, according to contextualism, can attributors or subjects exercise *some* control over contexts? In one sense, the answer is a trivial *yes*. After all, skeptics can choose to raise the contextual standards simply by making skeptical hypotheses salient.¹⁵ While this is right, a more nuanced question arises: suppose the skeptic successfully raises the epistemic standards, are there ways for non-skeptics to lower them?

In trying to respond to these questions, DeRose outlines several answers, one of which is 'single scoreboard semantics.'¹⁶ Consider the skeptic and non-skeptic engaged in a conversation where the standards of knowledge can be raised or lowered. Through the course of their discussion certain conversational maneuvers are available to manipulate epistemic thresholds. The skeptic might say, "c'mon, it's impossible for you to know you have hands!" While the non-skeptic could reply, "give me a break, brains-in-vats? Evil demons? This is utter nonsense!" if the non-skeptic is more sophisticated, she might say "I employ a courtroom standard of knowledge. I have knowledge when I can eliminate reasonable doubt, but skeptical hypotheses do not count as such. I would be utterly dismissed if I presented such scenarios in a courtroom." Utterances like these go on a single conversational scoreboard which raises or lowers the epistemic standards accordingly. At the start of the conversation, the standards might be fairly low, but throughout the conversation they will fluctuate proportionate to the various kinds of conversational maneuvers employed.¹⁷ At the end of the conversation, one presumably evaluates the scoreboard to determine first the state of the context, and then based on which side has the higher score, this determines the truth of each interlocutor's knowledge statement. The skeptic may win sometimes, while the non-skeptic others.

DeRose's presentation of this approach seems to imply that quantitative factors matter most for determining the standards of knowledge. If the skeptic employs three conversational maneuvers, while the non-skeptic only utters one,

¹⁵ Some contextualists might find even this concession controversial. However, I will not pursue that here.

¹⁶ DeRose also considers a "Multiple Scoreboard Semantics" where there are contextual scoreboards for each of the conversational participants. DeRose neither endorses, nor fleshes this view out in great detail, so I won't spend time on it here.

¹⁷ DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism*.

then the standards become elevated. Conversely, if the non-skeptic utters three statements lowering the standards, and the skeptic one, the standards are low. However, this understanding of Single Scoreboard Semantics gives a misleading picture of what is going on in these conversations. A purely quantitative approach fails to take into consideration the qualitative aspects of each utterance. Consider the following dialogue.

Skeptic: You don't know you have hands because you don't know you're not a BIV. Having hands entails you're not BIV. If you know you have hands, you know you're not a BIV. But you don't know you're not a BIV. So you don't know you have hands. This is a sound argument. Which premise is false?

Non-Skeptic: Look, I don't care about your scenarios or your arguments. I know I have hands. Look, I have hands. Everyone can see I have hands. No scenario can sway me from this position. After all, this is science fiction nonsense. Only a fool could reasonably take these statements seriously.

If we stop the iteration here, are the epistemic standards governing this conversation high or low? If we take a purely quantitative approach, then it looks like the standards are low since the skeptic uttered six propositions and the non-skeptic seven. The skeptic tried to elevate the standards for knowledge, but the non-skeptic rebuked his statements, lowering them (or, if they never were raised, kept them low). But this seems mistaken given the qualitative nature of conversations more generally. The skeptic—whatever the merits of her argument may be—has offered more sophisticated conversational maneuvers than the non-skeptic.¹⁸

The single scoreboard semantics view works well for closing the gap between two speakers' individual contextual usages of epistemic terms when the gulf between them is wide (as it is between a skeptic and non-skeptic). When the gap is small, DeRose ends up tentatively supporting what he calls a 'Gap View.' DeRose maintains that while single scoreboard semantics cannot explain small divergences within speaker contexts, the gap view can. The truth conditions for statements involving context sensitive words are as follows.

1. 'Frank is here' is true (and 'Frank is not here' is false) iff Frank is in the region that counts as 'here' according to both speakers personally

¹⁸ While DeRose doesn't spend much time on the qualitative aspect of utterances, instead focusing on the quantitative aspects, I suspect he would agree that the quality and sophistication of assertions ought to be factored into a scoreboard semantic account of raising and lowering standards for knowledge.

indicated context.

2. 'Frank is not here' is true (and 'Frank is here' is false) iff Frank is in the region that does not count as 'here' given each speakers' personally indicated content.
3. 'Frank is here' and 'Frank is not here' is neither true nor false if Frank is in the region that counts as 'here' according to at least one speaker's personally indicated content, but doesn't count as 'here' according to others.¹⁹

DeRose implicitly delineates between two senses of context: personal and shared. The single scoreboard semantics view take as a central assumption that public contexts take as their primary input the content from each speaker's private context. Consider the skeptic and non-skeptic before they met to discuss epistemology. The non-skeptic's context is one in which the standards of knowledge are low, whereas the skeptics standards of knowledge are high. When they meet to discuss epistemology, a public context is formed between them, and the standards of knowledge fluctuate according to certain conversational maneuvers.

What bearing does all of this have on voluntarism? By employing conversational maneuvers, both the skeptic and non-skeptic can exercise some control over the content of a context according to the single scoreboard view.²⁰

The above considerations suggest that there is sufficient fluidity and flexibility with contexts which allows for voluntary control within contextualism. According to DeRose's view, a non-skeptic can employ conversational maneuvers to manipulate contextual content, thereby lowering the standards of knowledge; such an individual is clearly exercising a degree of voluntary control over various contextual features of her situation.

¹⁹ DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism*.

²⁰ DeRose prefers what he calls a "Gap View," though for the sake of brevity I will not entertain it here. However, even on the Gap View, there's room for voluntary control over contexts. For a more in depth discussion of this approach, see DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism*, 144-151.

RELATIVISM, FAULTLESSNESS, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF DISAGREEMENT

Micah DUGAS

ABSTRACT: Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in relativism. Proponents have defended various accounts that seek to model the truth-conditions of certain propositions along the lines of standard possible world semantics. The central challenge for such views has been to explain what advantage they have over contextualist theories with regard to the possibility of disagreement. I will press this worry against Max Kölbel's account of faultless disagreement. My case will proceed along two distinct but connected lines. First, I will argue that the sense of faultlessness made possible by his relativism conflicts with our intuitive understanding of disagreement. And second, that his meta-epistemological commitments are at odds with the socio-epistemic function of disagreement. This latter problem for relativistic accounts of truth has thus far been largely ignored in the literature.

KEYWORDS: disagreement, faultlessness, epistemology, relativism, semantics

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in relativism. Proponents have defended various semantic accounts that seek to model the truth-conditions of certain propositions along the lines of standard possible world semantics. Taste predicates, knowledge ascriptions, epistemic modals, and future contingents have all been given relativistic treatments.¹ However, the central challenge for such views has been to explain what advantage they have over contextualist theories with regard to the possibility of disagreement.

My aims in this paper are fairly modest. I will press the worry about disagreement against the work of Max Kölbel, who offers an account of truth relativism as an explanation of 'faultless disagreement.' For ease of exposition, I will confine my discussion to claims of what is tasty, though the arguments here presented are readily generalizable to other domains. My case against Kölbel will

¹ For example, see Max Kölbel, "The Evidence for Relativism," *Synthese* 166 (2009): 375-395, John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Micah Dugas

proceed along two distinct but connected lines. First, I will argue that the sense of faultlessness made possible by his relativism conflicts with our intuitive understanding of disagreement. And second, that his meta-epistemological commitments are at odds with the socio-epistemic function of disagreement. This latter problem for relativistic accounts of truth has thus far been largely ignored in the literature. We will consider these matters in turn.

2. Varieties of Disagreement and Objectivity

There are several distinct senses in which speakers may disagree, and it is important to start by clarifying which are relevant for our purposes. According to what we may label ‘attitudinal disagreement,’ A and B disagree by adopting incompatible non-doxastic attitudes towards some object or state of affairs. Examples include cases in which one person hopes for, fears, admires, or prefers something that another does not. Although interesting, these are not the sorts of disagreements with which we are here concerned.²

I will limit discussion to doxastic disagreements, which are cases in which A and B hold incompatible beliefs. Simple cases will involve A believing p and B believing not- p . Strictly speaking, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for doxastic disagreement that the content of A’s belief contradicts that of B’s.³ However, since Kölbel frames his account of faultless disagreement in terms of contradictory content, I will ignore such additional qualifications.

Following Cappelen and Hawthorne, we will also distinguish a state from an activity sense of disagreement. State disagreement arises between individuals holding inconsistent beliefs toward p , even if they are unaware of this fact or even of each other’s existence. For example, Plato and I may be in disagreement over his view of government in spite of the fact that there can be no interaction between us. Activity disagreement, on the other hand, “is the endpoint of a debate, argument, discussion, or negotiation.”⁴ Unlike state disagreement, it is necessary for activity disagreement that A and B are capable of interacting with each other in some way.

² For additional discussion of attitudinal disagreement, see Torfinn Huvenes, “Disagreement without Error,” *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 143-154.

³ See Teresa Marques, “Doxastic Disagreement,” *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 121-142 for a helpful discussion of this point.

⁴ Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60.

We can naturally express state disagreement by saying that A and B are ‘in’ disagreement, and activity disagreement by saying they are ‘having’ a disagreement.⁵

Although distinct from each other, the recognition that one is in a state of disagreement may naturally precipitate having a disagreement. The fact that A and B hold inconsistent beliefs will sometimes lead them to engage in an argumentative process in which they exchange reasons with the intention of persuading each other. I will return to the epistemic function of activity disagreement in Sect. 5, but for now we will focus on state disagreement.

Kölbel seeks to preserve the intuition that two people can disagree over whether, e.g.

(L) ‘Licorice is tasty.’

while simultaneously recognizing that neither’s belief is false. He offers the following account:

A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (content of judgment) *p*, such that:

(a) A believes (judges) that *p* and B believes (judges) that *not-p* and

(b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault).⁶

The first condition specifies what it means for two people to disagree. It is necessary for disagreement that the same proposition asserted or believed by one person is the negation of that asserted or believed by the other.⁷ The second condition specifies the relevant sense of faultlessness. On Kölbel’s view, faultlessness requires that neither person has made the mistake of believing something false.⁸ Truth thus plays its traditional role as a normative constraint on our beliefs.

If cases of faultless disagreement are possible, they do not arise in objective domains of discourse. For example, if I disagree with my wife over the amount of money in our bank account, presumably at most one of us can be right. Rightness is here a ‘zero-sum’ affair in the sense that if one of us is right, then the other must be wrong. Disagreement in objective domains signals that someone has a false belief.

⁵ I will maintain this usage in what follows.

⁶ Max Kölbel, “Faultless Disagreement,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2003): 53-54.

⁷ For simplicity, I will assume that speakers sincerely assert those contents that they believe to be true, and will therefore treat things like belief, assertion, and judgement interchangeably.

⁸ For an alternative account of faultless disagreement that relativizes justification rather than truth, see Duncan Pritchard, “Defusing Epistemic Relativism,” *Synthese* 166 (2009): 397-412.

But these sorts of cases contrast with those that Kölbel labels ‘non-objective.’ Claims regarding what is tasty in particular seem to depend not only on the properties of the items in question, but also on certain responses and features of experiencing subjects. With regard to a claim like (L), we may not be so quick to accept the idea that one person’s being right implies that anyone holding a contradictory belief is wrong. Kölbel thus takes the question of whether A and B can faultlessly disagree as a defining feature of his account of objectivity.

One initial worry is that Kölbel has defined objectivity in such a way that he is able to get faultless disagreement too easily. Arguably, he has simply built the notion of faultless disagreement into his account of what it means for some content to be non-objective. It should then come as no surprise that if we accept his account of objectivity, we are also committed to faultless disagreement. Since non-objective domains are those in which disagreement does not indicate the presence of anyone’s error, his characterization of objectivity presupposes faultless disagreement rather than offers independent support for it. But the existence of faultless disagreement requires argumentation, and not a definition of objectivity that entails it.

Were Kölbel to pick a more traditional conception of objectivity, his route to faultless disagreement would be less direct. For example, Rescher has offered a view of objectivity that is characterized by impartiality, freedom from personal biases and predilections, and universality.⁹ There is no direct step from this view of objectivity to the existence of faultless disagreement. But without reason to reject a more traditional view, Kölbel’s own view of objectivity appears objectionably *ad hoc*.

3. Contextualism versus Relativism

We will waive the above worry regarding Kölbel’s account of objectivity, and provisionally grant for the sake of argument that faultless disagreement in subjective domains is sometimes possible. The question then arises as to how we are to account for such disagreements.

One semantic theory rejected by relativists like Kölbel is contextualism. Contextualists treat claims containing taste predicates along the lines of Kaplan’s treatment of indexicals.¹⁰ In Kaplan’s two-dimensional framework, which content, i.e. proposition, is expressed by sentences containing indexical components varies

⁹ Nicholas Rescher, *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

¹⁰ David Kaplan, “Demonstratives,” in *Themes from Kaplan*, eds. Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 481-563.

with features of the context of use. For example, which proposition is expressed by an assertion of 'I have a headache' depends on a speaker and a time of utterance.

On a contextualist treatment of taste predicates, such claims make subtle indexical references to the speaker or to the speaker's standards. This means that A's assertion of (L) really expresses something to the effect of, 'According to my standard of taste, licorice is tasty.' The actual content expressed by our assertions that something is tasty therefore diverges from our surface grammar.

The standard objection to contextualism – which Kölbel endorses – is that it fails to preserve an intuitive sense of disagreement. In a straightforward use of indexicals, A's assertion that 'I have a headache' is compatible with B's assertion that 'I do not have a headache.' Since each speaker takes herself as the intended referent of 'I,' the contents of their assertions are distinct and may both be true. This possibility of mutual rightness undermines an intuitive sense of disagreement. And the same considerations apply *mutatis mutandis* to claims like (L). While A's assertion of (L) *appears* to be the semantic negation of B's assertion of not-(L), in fact both assertions may be true due to the posited shift in content.

Kölbel presents this argument against contextualism as well, noting that it fails to preserve "the sense in which we intuitively think that we contradict one another."¹¹ The specific sense he has in mind is classical: "I am here interested in a semantic notion of contradiction: roughly, contradictory contents cannot both be true at once."¹² Since contextualism makes it possible for both of their beliefs to be true, A and B simply talk past each other. But the possibility of such mutual rightness prevents them from genuinely disagreeing with each other.

Kölbel's solution is to relativize the truth, rather than the content, to an individual's standard of taste. An assertion of (L) will express the same content for all speakers in all contexts. However, its truth will vary with different standards. In Kaplan's semantics, the truth-value of a contingent proposition expressed by a sentence is determined by a circumstance of evaluation, taken as an ordered pair $\langle w, t \rangle$, where w is a possible world and t is a time. Kölbel proposes an analogous treatment, in which we replace t in the circumstance of evaluation with some standard of taste s . And just as we can shift from one world or time to another, Kölbel introduces the "FOR" operator, which has the function of shifting from one person's

¹¹ Max Kölbel, "Indexical Relativism versus Genuine Relativism," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, 3 (2004): 305.

¹² Max Kölbel, "Agreement and Communication," *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 104.

standard of taste to another's within the same world.¹³ Use of this operator in English is supported by our use of sentences like 'For Mae, licorice is delicious.' – formally, $\ulcorner \text{FOR } s, p \urcorner$. The distinctly semantic nature of Kölbel's relativism is now apparent. He states that

The relativist has in mind a variation in truth value that goes beyond relativity to possible worlds. The relativist claims that even once we hold the possible world fixed, the value of the proposition ...still varies with a standard of evaluation. We might call this the "standard of taste parameter" in the circumstances of evaluation...The relativist proposal is a natural extension of Kaplan's semantic framework.¹⁴

Relativism is then supposed to explain the existence of faultless disagreement in the following way. Both A and B are subject to the normative requirement that they ought not to believe or assert what is false relative to their own standard. Faultlessness consists in adherence to this relativized truth norm. And since the content of their beliefs and assertions is invariant, it is now possible for A and B to contradict each other in the way necessary for disagreement. I will challenge this proposal in the next section, but first I want to say something about Kölbel's reliance on standard semantics.

Kölbel's claim that his relativistic semantics is a natural and modest extension of Kaplan's framework is controversial.¹⁵ Although Kaplan's framework leaves open the possibility of adding features beyond worlds to the circumstance of evaluation, there is a determinate answer to the question of which circumstance is privileged for the assessment of a contingent claim: that of the context of use.¹⁶ Kölbel's framework, on the other hand, offers no uniquely privileged standard of taste relative to which the truth of claims like (L) can be assessed.¹⁷ (L)'s truth can thus be variously assessed relative to a potentially infinite number of standards, including those of A, B, C, or D. However, standards themselves cannot be objectively or neutrally compared to each other. Indeed, privileging certain standards over others

¹³ Such an operator requires us to countenance contents that are taste neutral, but we will not consider their plausibility here.

¹⁴ Max Kölbel, "The Evidence for Relativism," *Synthese* 166 (2009): 383.

¹⁵ For a fuller critique of the relativist's attempt to pattern their view on standard semantics, see Michael Glanzberg, "Semantics and Truth Relative to a World," *Synthese* 166 (2009): 281-307.

¹⁶ What Kaplan calls "the circumstance of the context." See Kaplan, "Demonstratives," 522.

¹⁷ In Kölbel's words, "None of these ways of evaluating the utterance seems to be clearly privileged, in the way the actual world is privileged in the evaluation of contingent utterances." Kölbel, "The Evidence for Relativism," 287.

“goes against the basic commitments of the relativist.”¹⁸ It is this inability to evaluate our standards that, I will argue, poses fundamental problems for disagreement.

4. Against the Possibility of Faultless Disagreement

We will start by considering whether Kölbel’s framework can account for a state sense of disagreement. Before presenting my own response to Kölbel, I want to consider a few existing objections. Rosenkranz presents the following dilemma for Kölbel’s account of faultless disagreement:

Either A and B are said to merely present P and $\sim P$, respectively, as being true relative to their own perspective, in which case the relative truth of P and $\sim P$ ensures that their assertions are correct but there is no longer any genuine disagreement between them. Or else, they are said to present these propositions as being true *simpliciter* (true absolutely, true relative to all perspectives), in which case they do indeed disagree but relativism fails to show that their disagreement is faultless.¹⁹

For obvious reasons, the relativist will reject as question-begging an account whereby the very act of asserting a claim requires a commitment to its absolute truth.²⁰ But neither will she accept Rosenkranz’s claim that “in asserting P , A presents P as being true relative to A ’s perspective.”²¹ The substance of his objection is essentially that the relativist’s semantics collapses into contextualism. But as we have seen, Kölbel is clear to distinguish his view from contextualism. For Kölbel, while standards play a truth-determinative role with regard to our assertions and beliefs, reference to them does *not* form part of the content of what is asserted. While the relativist does bear the explanatory burden of clarifying her aims in making assertions, Kölbel can borrow the following response from MacFarlane:

The relativist need not, and should not, hold that to put p forward as true for oneself is to put forward the claim *that p is true for oneself*. The point of “for oneself” is not to characterize the *content* that is asserted, but to characterize what the

¹⁸ Max Kölbel, “Global Relativism and Self-Refutation,” in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven Hales (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 23.

¹⁹ Sven Rosenkranz, “Frege, Relativism and Faultless Disagreement,” in *Relative Truth*, eds. Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Max Kölbel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 231.

²⁰ This sort of objection to relativism is familiar from John Mackie, “Self-Refutation – A Formal Analysis,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1964): 193-203, and Miles Burnyeat, “Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato’s *Theaetetus*,” *The Philosophical Review* 85 (1976): 172-195.

²¹ Rosenkranz, “Frege, Relativism and Faultless Disagreement,” 228.

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relativist is *doing* in making her assertion: putting its content forward as *true for herself* [italics in original].²²

I therefore do not think that Rosenkranz's objection is ultimately successful. Boghossian offers a different objection, one that challenges the idea that the disagreement can be faultless.

The Argument from (Perspectival) Immersion:

- (1) The content (p) is at best relatively true. (Alethic Relativism)
- (2) If D judges validly that p, it will also be valid for D to judge that *It's true that p*. (Truth is Disquotational within a perspective)
- (3) If D judges that *It's true that p* then D must, on pain of incoherence, judge that *It's false that not-p*.
- (4) If D judges that *It's false that not-p*, then D must, on pain of incoherence, judge that anyone who judges *not-p* (e.g., N) is making a *mistake*.
- (5) Therefore, D must judge that N is making a mistake and so cannot regard the disagreement with N as faultless.
- (6) Therefore, the disagreement between D and N is not faultless.²³

The problem with Boghossian's argument is that it saddles the relativist with an absolutist account of faultlessness. Recall that for Kölbel, faultlessness consists in not violating any norm to which one is subject, meaning that D and N have not judged anything false relative to *their own* perspective. If D faultlessly judges that *It's false that not-p*, then he will have correctly judged relative to his perspective that *not-p* is false.²⁴ However, this does not entail that D must judge that N (who judges that *not-p* is true) has made a mistake *simpliciter*, since relative to N's perspective her contradictory judgment may also be faultless.

For Kölbel, judgments of faultlessness, like truth, depend on the standards in question. Relative to D's standards, N's judgment is false, and *vice versa*. But relative to the standards for each *that matter*, i.e. their own, neither has made a mistake. Boghossian's argument seems to ignore this fact, leaving room for the relativist to respond that D's judgement that N has made a mistake *simpliciter* illegitimately treats her judgement as subject to *his* standards, rather than to her own.

²² MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, 33.

²³ Paul Boghossian, "Three Kinds of Relativism," in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven Hales (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 62.

²⁴ We must remember that relativizing clauses will not form part of the content of a thinker's judgement. As discussed above, this reading of the relativist's semantics would slide back into contextualism.

In fairness to Boghossian, there is something odd about the relativist's sense of faultlessness, a point to which I will return in the next section. But here I want to challenge the idea that thinkers can genuinely disagree over claims like (L), all the while taking seriously Kölbel's view that their truth (rather than content) varies with standards. Consider the following argument, which I will refer to as

The Argument against Genuine Disagreement:

- (7) If A and B are in genuine disagreement regarding p , then A and B contradict each other—A believes p while B believes not- p . (assumption)
- (8) If A and B contradict each other, then it cannot be the case that A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p are simultaneously true. (assumption)
- (9) If A and B are in genuine disagreement regarding p , then it cannot be the case that A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p are simultaneously true. (by 7 and 8)
- (10) Suppose that truth is relativized to standards. (assumption)
- (11) If truth is relativized to standards, then it can be the case that A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p are simultaneously true—A and B are faultless. (assumption)
- (12) It can be the case that A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p are simultaneously true. (by 10 and 11)
- (13) It's not the case that A and B contradict each other. (by 8 and 12)
- (14) It's not the case that A and B are in genuine disagreement regarding p . (by 7 and 13)
- (15) Therefore, it's not the case that A and B are in faultless disagreement regarding p . (*a fortiori*, from 14).

This argument, if successful, would show that faultless disagreement is impossible regardless of distinctions we might draw between objective and subjective domains of discourse. Since it is valid, we must examine the premises in light of Kölbel's commitments.

The key premises are (7), (8), (10), and (11). According to (7), contradiction is a necessary condition of disagreement. Kölbel could reject this premise, but this move would conflict with his earlier acceptance of it in his definition of faultless disagreement – see his condition (a). Further, recall that it was the fact that contextualism prevented the parties to the dispute from contradicting each other that motivated his rejection of this view. To drop contradiction as a necessary condition of disagreement would therefore undermine his primary reason for rejecting contextualism.²⁵ Additionally, Kölbel has explicitly defended (10) and (11).

²⁵ To clarify, I am not committed to a view of disagreement in which parties hold contradictory beliefs. However, since Kölbel holds this view, *he* is committed to this premise.

The pivotal premise, and the one Kölbel must reject if he is to block the conclusion, is (8). However, Kölbel explicitly accepts this standard view of a contradiction.²⁶ There is a puzzling tension at the heart of Kölbel's account of faultless disagreement. Relativizing truth to parameters beyond possible worlds is supposed to allow A and B's contradictory beliefs to be simultaneously true, and thus for their disagreement to be faultless. But the possibility of mutual correctness required for faultless disagreement lies in tension with the condition that p and not- p contradict each other. The fact that possible worlds are free of contradictions is in the most general sense why we take them to be *possible* in the first place. It is definitional that if two propositions are contradictory, then they *cannot* be simultaneously true at any world w .²⁷

Kölbel tries to avoid formal inconsistency by emphasizing that p and not- p are true *relative to different perspectives*. But this qualification does not address the fundamental problem that his view entails the existence of contradictions within what he claims are standard possible worlds.

Assume for the sake of argument that we can reconcile such contradictions with possible worlds. There is still the problem of accounting for genuine disagreement. To see this, consider a case in which A and B occupy different possible worlds. A correctly judges that the contingent proposition 'Trump won the 2016 Presidential election' is true, while B correctly judges this same proposition to be false. Since their beliefs concern different worlds, A and B do not contradict each other and thus on Kölbel's account they do not disagree.²⁸ Intuitively, this seems to be the right result. The reason there does not seem to be any disagreement is that both propositions may be true relative to the worlds relevant to their evaluation.

There are independent reasons to extend an account of disagreement beyond cases involving contradictions, but there are limits to how far we can extend such an account. At the very least, cases of genuine disagreement require that the claims in question are in some sense incompatible with each other.²⁹ Ordinarily, once we recognize such incompatibility, the natural move is to abandon the "disagreement"

²⁶ Recall his earlier quote that "contradictory contents cannot both be true at once." Kölbel, "Agreement and Communication," 104.

²⁷ Formally, $w \models \neg A$ iff $w \not\models A$.

²⁸ The distinction between what a proposition is about and what it concerns is due to John Perry, "Thought without Representation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60, (1986): 137-151. A claim is *about* what it explicitly refers to, and *concerns* those objects to which its truth is relative.

²⁹ For additional discussion, see Carl Baker, "The Role of Disagreement in Semantic Theory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92 (2014): 37-54.

as only apparent. The relativist may respond that although this holds in objective domains, things are otherwise in subjective domains such as taste.

But this response seems *ad hoc*, since the requirement of incompatibility underwrites philosophical discussions of disagreement outside of semantics. For example, much has been written recently about how one should rationally respond to cases of recognized peer disagreement.³⁰ These are cases in which one recognizes that someone else just as competent and epistemically well-situated with regard to the matter at hand nevertheless holds an incompatible belief. The best explanation of why such cases are thought to present epistemic challenges to one's continued belief is surely that it cannot be the case that both your own and your peer's belief are true. Given the fact that at most one of you can be right, the epistemic challenge consists in explaining what reason there is to think that it is one's peer rather than oneself that is mistaken.

If we carry the above considerations from worlds to taste standards, the right result in cases in which the content of A and B's belief are compatible is that they are not in disagreement with each other. Since both propositions may be true relative to the standards which are relevant for the assessment of each's belief, any apparent disagreement is only that, i.e. apparent. So, even if we grant Kölbel that possible world semantics presents us with a kind of relativism, the right conclusion is that there is no disagreement.

So far I have presented challenges for the idea that Kölbel can account for doxastic state disagreement. We will now consider whether he can account for doxastic activity disagreement.

5. The Socio-Epistemic Role of Disagreement

In addition to wanting our semantic theories to harmonize with an intuitively plausible account of state disagreement, we should also consider how well they

³⁰ For a sample of what has become a substantial body of literature, see Jennifer Lackey, "A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance," in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 145-154, David Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 187-217, Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology, Vol. 1*, eds. John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167-196, and Richard Feldman, "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement," in *Epistemological Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216-236.

comply with the epistemic norms governing our argumentative practices. These are interesting questions that lie at the intersection of our semantics and epistemology. But so far, the epistemic implications of relativism have not been given adequate treatment in the literature.³¹ The focus of this section is to consider how well the relativist can preserve the socio-epistemic role of disagreement.

Disagreement may serve many different functions. But within the context of social epistemology, its primary role is to rationally guide the formation, revision, and evaluation of our beliefs. Through disagreement, we are able to collectively engage in the pursuit of knowledge by using each other as epistemic resources.³² The recognition that we are in doxastic disagreement with someone often motivates us to engage in an argumentative activity in which we exchange reasons with the goal of convincing each other to change our minds. The specific kinds of reasons of interest to us in these disagreements are those that provide epistemic justification for our beliefs. And as Vahid points out,

However we think of epistemic justification, it is its intimate link with truth – in terms of our concern for believing what is true and not believing what is false – that is said to set it apart from other (purported) species of justification.³³

Disagreements conceived as a socio-epistemic activity thus involve the exchange of reasons relevant to a belief's truth. As seen, relativists like Kölbel have not abandoned the normative requirement to believe what is true. Rather, they have sought to relativize it. Accordingly, individuals are rationally required to believe what is true relative to their own standard. To borrow a nice phrase from Rovane, thinkers with different standards are “normatively insulated” from each other, since what is true and justified for one carries no epistemic force for the other.³⁴

Consider the application of these norms to a concrete example in which A and B recognize their state disagreement over (L), and are then motivated to persuade each other that they have a false belief. Since they are having a disagreement over a

³¹ J. A. Carter has also noted this deficiency, and gone some way toward addressing it. In particular, see his “Disagreement, Relativism and Doxastic Revision,” *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 155-172.

³² Alvin Goldman presents a very helpful discussion of the aims and norms governing our socio-epistemic practices. See his “Argumentation and Social Epistemology,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 27-49.

³³ Hamid Vahid, “Rationalizing Beliefs: Epistemic vs. Pragmatic Reasons,” *Synthese* 176, (2010): 449.

³⁴ Carol Rovane, “Relativism Requires Alternatives, not Disagreement or Relative Truth,” in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven Hales (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 37.

claim's truth, they should proceed by exchanging epistemic reasons. A can try to show B that he has mistakenly assessed (L)'s truth relative to B's own standard of taste (and *vice versa*), but we can stipulate that neither has committed this error. But A cannot legitimately offer reasons for B to change his mind based on the truth (falsity) of (L) relative to A's standards. This is simply because B is not subject to the norm to believe what is true relative to A's standards, but rather what is true relative to his own. His response to A's challenge will therefore consist in showing that (L) is true (false) relative to his own standard.

The upshot is that once A and B recognize these facts, continued attempts to change each other's mind would be inappropriate, since success would mean getting the other to violate an epistemic norm to which they are subject. This much is straightforward. But it also makes the prospects of exchanging forceful epistemic reasons, and hence the possibility of engaging in a genuine disagreement, look rather dim. Since they are normatively shielded, they must recognize the fact that the continued exchange of reasons is futile. In a revealing moment of candor, MacFarlane admits this much:

The challenger thinks (rightly) that he has absolutely compelling grounds for thinking that the assertion was not accurate. But the original asserter thinks (also rightly, from her point of view) that the challenger's grounds do nothing to call in question the accuracy of the assertion. The asserter's vindication will seem to the challenger not to show that the assertion was accurate, and the challenger will continue to press his claim. (Until the game gets boring.) *Thus we have all the normative trappings of real disagreement*, but without the possibility of resolution except by a relevant change in one or both parties' contexts of assessment [my italics].³⁵

This is problem enough, but there is a deeper worry. Ordinarily, individuals who have reached the above impasse can proceed with the disagreement by shifting attention to their evaluative standards. For example, suppose that A and B are epistemic contextualists, and disagree over the justificatory status of the claim that A has hands. A's belief that he does is justified relative to ordinary standards, but unjustified relative to B's more demanding standards.

If A and B are to continue disagreeing after recognizing these facts, they must shift their disagreement to the question of whose standards are relevant in the present context. Unless they share the presupposition that there is some fact of the matter about whose standards are relevant, there is no point in continuing to

³⁵ John MacFarlane, "Relativism and Disagreement," *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007): 29.

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disagree. They may not resolve the matter, but there is at least the necessary common ground that makes such higher-order disagreement possible.

Unfortunately, this same move is not available for relativists like Kölbel. The reason is that he rejects the thought that our evaluative standards are themselves subject to rational evaluation. A's standard of taste relative to which (L) is true is no better (or worse) than B's relative to which (L) is false. And both thinkers can of course recognize this fact. Unlike the case in the preceding paragraph, here there will not even be a shared assumption that *someone's* standards are uniquely relevant. Each standard is relevant for its possessor.

We may now return to MacFarlane's concluding remark that resolution of disagreement is impossible unless at least one person changes their standards. Given the fact that such standards are not subject to rational evaluation, it will not be possible for someone to change standards on the basis of rational disagreement and the exchange of epistemic reasons. They may of course do so for other reasons, but not for the sorts of reasons considered relevant to the epistemology of disagreement. Relativistic views like Kölbel's thus represent a significant departure from the role of disagreement in other philosophical contexts.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that Kölbel's relativistic framework faces significant challenges. In spite of his repeated attempts to account for disagreement, purported cases neither look nor function like disagreement in other philosophical contexts. Additionally, his account of truth fails to carry the usual normative weight that we attach to it. Kölbel offers us an outward form of truth while ultimately denying its epistemic power.

THE BASIS-ACCESS DILEMMA FOR EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISJUNCTIVISM

Tammo LOSSAU

ABSTRACT: Epistemological disjunctivists such as Duncan Pritchard claim that in paradigmatic cases of knowledge the rational support for the known propositions is both factive and reflectively accessible. This position faces some problems, including the basis problem – how can our knowledge be *based on* such strong reasons that seem to leave no room for non-knowledge and therefore presuppose knowledge? – and the access problem – can disjunctivists avoid the implausible claim that we can achieve knowledge through inference from our introspective awareness of those reasons? I argue that disjunctivists cannot solve both of these problems at the same time by posing the dilemma question whether we can have factive and reflectively accessible reasons without knowledge. While I focus on Pritchard throughout most of the paper, I argue in the last section that other anti-skeptical versions of disjunctivism face the same dilemma.

KEYWORDS: epistemological disjunctivism, basis problem, access problem, underdetermination problem

Epistemological disjunctivism is the claim that in certain cases of knowledge, the rational support for the known propositions is both *factive* and *reflectively accessible*. Most advocates take this position to address skepticism, in particular what Duncan Pritchard calls the *underdetermination problem*, which arises from the claim that we have no rational grounds that would favor our everyday beliefs over corresponding skeptical hypotheses. His point is that when and if our beliefs in such propositions are true, we can have factive reflectively accessible reasons that support them, but given they are false, it is impossible to have such factive reasons.

While it may seem attractive that epistemological disjunctivism (henceforth I will drop “epistemological”) can provide such a treatment of skepticism, there are also important problems. Pritchard notes three “core problems:” first, the *basis problem*, which arises because the reasons the disjunctivist claims may seem to presuppose or be substantially equivalent to knowing, and thus not be considered a possible basis for knowledge. Thus, the disjunctivist needs to provide conceptual room for such reasons without knowledge. Second, the *access problem*: it seems that if our factive reasons are reflectively accessible, we can infer from having those

reasons that the corresponding proposition is true. But that would mean that whenever we have such reasons, we can achieve knowledge that what they suggest is true just by reflection alone. This seems obviously false. And third, the *distinguishability problem*, which arises because one cannot plausibly be capable of distinguishing between the truth of a common sense proposition and a skeptical scenario in which this proposition is false. But it may seem that when one has a factive reflectively accessible reason, one is actually able to distinguish these two cases, which would be a repugnant conclusion.

I wish to argue here that disjunctivism cannot be defended against all of these problems, at least not insofar as it is understood as a position that can address skepticism. The rough idea is that once the disjunctivist has avoided the basis problem by making room for cases of reflectively accessible factive reasons without knowledge, she also has to accept that in such cases there is a reflective route to knowing the relevant propositions. This reinforces the access problem and also leads to complications with the disjunctivist response to the underdetermination problem. I will begin to lay out this line of argument in greater detail by discussing skepticism and the underdetermination problem. Next I will discuss Pritchard's influential version of disjunctivism and review his discussion of the three problems mentioned above. I will try to show that not only do we have to reject at least one of Pritchard's responses to these problems, but also that there is a more general dilemma for anti-skeptical brands of disjunctivism making it impossible to address both problems in a consistent way. Finally, I will discuss the implication for two different versions of disjunctivism. I will there argue that other versions of disjunctivism are under the same pressure as Pritchard's to answer whether there are reflectively accessible factive reasons without knowledge, although the contextualized version has a somewhat better outlook to overcome the dilemma.

I. Skepticism and Underdetermination

Pritchard points out that an important virtue of disjunctivism is that it can address a particular strand of skepticism, namely what he calls the *underdetermination problem*. He distinguishes this problem from another problem of Cartesian skepticism, the *closure-based skeptical paradox*. Both types of skepticism are Cartesian in the sense that they are both motivated by reference to skeptical scenarios. I will here use Descartes' original Evil Demon scenario: while we interpret our perceptual appearances as being caused by an external world that is in line with most of our beliefs, we might also be the victims of a deception by an evil demon

who has been supplying these appearances directly to us.¹ In such a case, all our empirical beliefs might turn out to be false.

The skeptical problem I will be more concerned with here is the *underdetermination problem*. The underlying idea was introduced by Keith Lehrer and Stewart Cohen:² compare two subjects, S_1 who is in a world roughly as we assume the world really is, and S_2 , who is in a skeptical scenario. Suppose both have the exact same perceptual experience and the same beliefs. Suppose both have (in an epistemically unobjectionable manner) formed the empirical belief that p , but while S_1 's belief is true, S_2 is mistaken about p due to deception. Both appear to be justified in their belief that p *in the same way*.³ But this suggests that our justification is disconnected from the truth of p .

Pritchard turns this worry into a more precise skeptical argument that aims to actually establish a skeptical conclusion.⁴ The starting point of this argument derives from the line above and states that a subject such as S_1 must have the same rational support for believing any given proposition as S_2 . Thus we cannot have such rational support that *favors* the hypothesis that we are a subject like S_1 over the hypothesis that we are a subject like S_2 . The skeptical allegation then is that we cannot have knowledge of any proposition for which we lack rational support that favors it over a skeptical scenario.

The most powerful version of underdetermination-based skepticism is, as Pritchard argues, a version concerned with *rationally grounded empirical knowledge*. He formulates this type of skepticism as based on the *underdetermination_{rk} principle*.

If S knows that p and q describe incompatible scenarios, and yet S lacks a rational basis that favors p over q , then S lacks rationally grounded knowledge that p .⁵

This principle gives rise to an “inconsistent triad:”

(I) One cannot have rational support that favors one's belief in an everyday

¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, transl. Donald Cress, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1993), AT VII 21-3.

² Keith Lehrer and Stewart Cohen, “Justification, Truth, and Coherence,” *Synthese* 55 (1983): 191-207.

³ Cf. Ram Neta and Duncan Pritchard, “McDowell and the New Evil Genius,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 381-96.

⁴ Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 29-32.

⁵ Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 34.

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proposition over an incompatible radical skeptical hypothesis.

(II) The underdetermination_{RR} principle.

(III) One has widespread rationally grounded everyday knowledge.⁶

Given that (III) is supposed to apply to subjects who know about incompatible skeptical scenarios to their beliefs, we face an inconsistency and will have to give up one of these three claims.

The above formulation of the underdetermination_{RR} principle is especially powerful because it even leaves the epistemic externalist without any special resources to deny it: the notion of rationally grounded knowledge is directly tied to the notion of a rational basis. In fact, the only way of denying the underdetermination_{RR} principle is to say that one may, at least in some cases, not need a rational basis that favors one's beliefs *over skeptical hypotheses*. The challenge then is to say under which conditions we do not need rational grounds counting against such skeptical hypotheses. *Epistemic contextualists* try to give such conditions (or sometimes just claim that there are such conditions), but discussing these proposals is beyond my scope here.

The other option to avoid the skeptical paradoxes of course is to deny (I). The difficulty in denying this is that rational support is apparently an internalistic notion. But there is no apparent internal difference between subjects in a regular scenario and subjects in a corresponding skeptical scenario. The disjunctivist strategy is to include an external element in the notion of rational support while retaining the internalistic features, in particular the idea that we have reflective access to our rational support. I will discuss this position in the next section.

II. Epistemological Disjunctivism

The basic idea of epistemological disjunctivism is traced back to John McDowell,⁷ or at least his interpretation by Ram Neta and Pritchard.⁸ Pritchard has later adapted a modification of this, namely:

In paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge an agent, *S*, has perceptual knowledge that *Φ* in virtue of being in possession of rational support, *R*, for her

⁶ Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 35, my enumeration.

⁷ John McDowell, "Knowledge and the Internal," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (1995): 877–893.

⁸ Neta and Pritchard, "McDowell and the New Evil Genius".

belief that Φ which is both *factive* [...] and *reflectively accessible* to S .⁹

He thinks that such factive and reflectively accessible rational support can simply consist in “seeing that Φ .” This gives him grounds for denying (I), thereby avoiding the problem mentioned above. Pritchard has confined himself to defending specifically our perceptual knowledge against skepticism, although he does not rule out that the same lines of reasoning apply elsewhere, too.

A clarification about the nature of our reflective access is in order. Although this statement of disjunctivism does not make it unambiguously clear here, Pritchard later says that he considers having reflective access to a factive reason to entail that we can know by reflection alone that this is a factive reason.¹⁰ This is important because it means that he is not merely claiming that our reflective access might just consist in being able to recognize that we have *a reason for p* without being able to see the factive nature of that reason. Such a kind of reflective access would indeed give us a powerful resource against skepticism, whereas the much weaker alternative would not serve as well.

A natural question is what Pritchard means when he writes of “paradigmatic cases” of perceptual knowledge. He later introduces a taxonomy of “good” and “bad” cases of perception, and mentions that the disjunctivist has the best category, the “good+” cases, “in mind.” These are cases that are both (a) objectively and (b) subjectively good, meaning that the agent is in an environment in which her perception is functioning properly and is in possession of sufficient grounds for accepting the target proposition, including the absence of “defeaters” that prevent her from believing it. A “good+” case also requires (c) that the subject has veridical belief of the target proposition. Given this, the subject can be described as both “seeing that p ” and “knowing that p .”¹¹

If one takes this as an explanation of what constitutes a “paradigmatic case” of perceptual knowledge, then it is irritating that “good+” cases are the only ones which allow knowledge. It is unclear then why the restriction to “good+” cases would be of any help to explaining what constitutes a “paradigmatic case” of perceptual knowledge, for any case of knowledge is a “good+” case.¹² The issue of what counts as a paradigmatic case will be relevant later on.

⁹ Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 13.

¹⁰ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 46.

¹¹ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 29-31.

¹² An important problem which I will not discuss here is that it is open to the skeptic to debate whether there are any “good+” cases.

I have already mentioned that epistemological disjunctivism promises a treatment of skepticism, at least of the kind of skepticism that arises from any version of the underdetermination problem. Pritchard mentions another motivation for his position: when we are challenged to provide reasons for our beliefs, or self-acclaimed knowledge, we often invoke factive locutions such as “I (can) see that...”¹³ As mentioned, for Pritchard the fact that *I see that p* simply *is* my reason for believing that *p*, which, as he points out, matches a common way of talking in ordinary discourse. He argues that this naturalness should give disjunctivism the status of a “default position.”

III. Problems for Disjunctivism

So far, I have mainly been outlining the positive claims of disjunctivism and how they are motivated. But there are serious problems for this position. In particular, Pritchard recognizes three “core problems” internal to the position, which I will discuss below. To begin with, it is also worth mentioning that Pritchard accepts a more general problem: while disjunctivism has a straightforward way of rejecting underdetermination-based skepticism, it is not so clear how disjunctivists should handle closure-based skepticism. He points out that they *can* just claim that we even have knowledge that we are not in an Evil Demon scenario for we can have reflectively accessible factive rational support for not being in such a scenario, e.g. by seeing that we have hands.¹⁴ This would avoid the problem at the heart of closure-based skepticism, namely the intuition that we can know certain empirical propositions but not the denials of skeptical hypotheses, even if the latter immediately follow from the former. However, the claim that we do actually know that we are not in an Evil Demon scenario seems too strong to Pritchard. If that is right, disjunctivists face the challenge to provide an explanation of this intuition. Pritchard’s own approach is to instead accept this intuition and embrace a neo-Wittgensteinian theory of *hinge propositions* and denying that these can be rationally evaluated in the same way as other propositions.¹⁵ The idea is that we can

¹³ Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 17-8. This applies to perceptual knowledge as well as to other forms of knowledge, which we may provide reasons for by claiming that “I remember that...” or “I can show that...” “I see that...” also has a reading on which it does not state a perceptual position, but that I understand a certain argument or the like.

¹⁴ Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 157-63.

¹⁵ Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 173-9. Other than pointing out that we need something like this to address closure-based skepticism, Pritchard offers no reason to accept this combination of two

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assume these hinge propositions in our evaluation of other propositions so that those will often count as known, but we need not say that we also know the hinge propositions. I will here only discuss disjunctivism not amended in this way, but the problems discussed below apply to the amended version just as well.

The general problem of skepticism aside, Pritchard discusses these three “core problems” for disjunctivism:¹⁶

1. The *basis problem*. Intuitively, we would say that seeing that p can serve as a *basis* for knowing that p . But on the disjunctivist conception, seeing that p is understood in a particularly strong way, requiring the truth of p and reflective access to the fact that one sees that p . The worry then is that seeing that p is in fact something so strong that it already *presupposes* knowing that p . This would prevent us from saying that it constitutes a *basis* for knowing that p .
2. The *access problem*. A general problem for semantic externalists is that they have to carefully state the privileged access one has to one’s mental states in order not to commit themselves to claiming that one can come to know facts about one’s environment by mere reflection.¹⁷ A similar problem applies to disjunctivism: if we can reflectively access our reasons and some of these reasons imply the truth of the embedded proposition, then, in these cases, it seems that one can by reflection alone come to know that proposition. But then positing reflective access to empirical reasons leads to the claim that we can come to know empirical proposition based on reflection alone, which seems wrong.
3. The *distinguishability problem*. The disjunctivist reply to underdetermination-based skepticism is to say that the factive reasons we have in support of many everyday propositions are different from the reasons a corresponding subject in a skeptical scenario that is internally indistinguishable has. But then, because the non-deceived subject is supposed to have access to her reasons, she should be able to distinguish her reasons from a deceived subject’s reasons. But this would mean that she can distinguish her situation from a situation in a skeptical scenario. This would be denying the fundamental intuition underlying Cartesian skepticism that we can *not* distinguish between being the victim of an evil demon and being in a world that is roughly as we expect it, which just

views that are in a fundamental tension. Wittgensteinians believe that rational evaluation is essentially local because we need hinge propositions in the background to be able to conduct such evaluations. But disjunctivism posits reasons that are so strong that there is no longer any reason to claim that we would need such hinges in the background of our local evaluations.

¹⁶ See Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 19-22; Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 127-32.

¹⁷ Michael McKinsey, “Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access,” *Analysis* 51 (1991), 9–16.

seems undeniably true.

Ultimately, I wish to argue that the disjunctivist cannot respond to both the basis problem (at least in a slightly revised version) and the access problem at the same time. I do not take any stance on whether each of the three problems may by itself be addressed by the disjunctivist in a satisfactory way. To make my point, let me run through these problems and discuss which options are open to the disjunctivist and which route Pritchard is recommending.

First the basis problem. This problem is related to what Pritchard calls the *entailment thesis*, namely that seeing that p entails knowing that p .¹⁸ His own approach is to deny the entailment thesis and argue for the possibility of cases in which we see that p without knowing that p . Let me first briefly discuss whether the disjunctivist can retain the entailment thesis in the face of the basis problem.

It might seem that a possible strategy was to claim that knowledge can be based on seeing *because* it entails knowing. Alan Millar defends a version of disjunctivism on which the relevant reasons are *explanatory* or *motivating*, i.e. they explain why the subject has that knowledge.¹⁹ The idea would be to say that our seeing that p provides an *explanans* of our knowing that p that is strong enough to entail the truth of the *explanandum*. This is correct in one sense: when we discuss the epistemic situation of a subject S , we may well use the fact that S sees that p to argue for and explain the fact that S knows that p . However, this explanation cannot be an explanation of the way S arrived at her knowledge that p . S must have gone through some process (however simple) of forming a belief that p when first seeing that p . But we cannot claim that such a psychological process is *logically guaranteed* to take place. Note that any non-disjunctivist position can allow a contingent process either by saying that one has only access to non-factive reasons or by saying that there are no factive reasons, and thus a further step of assessing or weighing the reasons we do have access to would be required to arrive at belief.

Millar escapes this problem by understanding motivating reasons as reasons for which I believe something. On this conception, a reason can only become a motivating reason once I believe the relevant proposition, so there is no need for me to a process of belief-formation anymore. This does indeed avoid the problem, but, as Millar notes, it also gives up on any ambition to address underdetermination-

¹⁸ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 25.

¹⁹ Alan Millar, "Reasons for Belief, Perception, and Reflective Knowledge," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 88 (2014): 1-19, and "Perceptual Knowledge and Well-Founded Belief," *Episteme* 31 (2016): 43-59.

based skepticism: Millar's motivating reasons are not sources of *justification*, and invoking them as such would invoke our knowledge to justify the very same knowledge.²⁰ This points out an important qualification of the basis problem: it is a problem for those who want our reasons to be a basis that *justifies* our beliefs. And only if one allows this justificatory role of reasons can one employ the disjunctivist's trademark move of invoking one's reasons as rational support that favors our beliefs over skeptical hypotheses.

So insofar as disjunctivism aims at a response to skepticism, Pritchard is right to approach the basis problem by offering reasons to deny the entailment thesis and thus making conceptual space for states of seeing that *p* without knowing that *p*. His strategy is to claim that seeing that *p* merely "*guarantees that one is in a good position to gain knowledge,*" but that there are cases in which one is "unable to exploit this opportunity."²¹ He motivates this claim with a version of Goldman's 'fake barn' case:²²

Suppose [...] that one is in a situation where one is genuinely visually presented with a barn and circumstances are in fact epistemically good (there's no deception in play, one's faculties are functioning properly, and so on). But now suppose further that one has been told, by an otherwise reliable informant, that one is presently being deceived (that one is in barn façade county, say), even though this is in fact not the case. Clearly, in such a case one ought not believe the target proposition, and hence one cannot know this proposition either. [...] Does it follow that one does not see that the target proposition obtains? I suggest not.²³

As Pritchard explains, the situation here is one in which one is presented with a *misleading defeater* which prevents knowledge.²⁴ He argues that one still counts as seeing that *p* because we would intuitively describe this case as an instance of seeing that *p* once we recognize that the defeater was indeed misleading. The general claim is that such defeaters prevent knowledge, but may not always prevent the possession of factive reasons. Note that Pritchard is not merely arguing that in the scenario described one counts as *seeing a barn* (a highly intuitive claim), but that one also

²⁰ Millar, "Perceptual Knowledge," 56.

²¹ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 26.

²² Alvin Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 771–791.

²³ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 26.

²⁴ See also Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 127–129.

counts as *seeing that there is a barn*. Once we enforce this distinction, it is less clear whether Pritchard's claim is indeed intuitively plausible.²⁵

But let us accept the example here just for the sake of the argument. A noteworthy aspect of it then is this: while we are presented an alleged case of having a factive reason for *p* without knowing that *p*, Pritchard later clarifies that he does not consider this a case of a reflectively accessible reason, for the defeater obstructs our reflective access to our factive reason.²⁶ That is to say, as long as one believes that one is or might well be deceived by a barn façade, one would not and could not be aware that one sees that there is a barn, but only that one appears to be seeing a barn. But note that he has initially stated that seeing that *p simply is* a type of reflectively accessible reason,²⁷ and he has used it as his go-to example for such reasons. This would have seemed to commit him to not accepting the barn case as an instance of genuinely seeing that *p*. Note also that the presence of a defeater is something that, according to Pritchard's taxonomy discussed above, rules out counting such a case as a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge (although, of course, there is no knowledge in this case anyway).

But what if we accept that the subject in the barn case sees that there is a barn without having reflective access to that reason? Of course, the existence of cases of seeing that *p* without knowing that *p* would be a counterexample against the entailment thesis as formulated by Pritchard. This would solve the version of the basis problem arising from the entailment thesis. But one should then also worry about the relation between *reflectively accessible* factive reasons and knowledge. Consider this modification of the entailment thesis:

The entailment thesis:*

Having a reflectively accessible factive reason that *p* entails knowing that *p*.

If the entailment* thesis is true, a version of the basis problem remains pressing: if one has a reflectively accessible factive reason, one should not be logically guaranteed to also have knowledge, for this leaves no room for a contingent

²⁵ Craig French, "The Formulation of Epistemological Disjunctivism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 92 (2016): 86-104, takes this line of criticism.

²⁶ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 50. The same is true of Pritchard's other type of examples of seeing that *p* without knowing that *p* (ibid., 32). These are cases in which one believes that *p* on another basis than perception, e.g. wishful thinking. These cases, too, only seem to count as not involving knowledge as long as the subject does not have rational access to her factive reason for *p*.

²⁷ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 14.

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process of forming a belief on the basis of one's reasons. Intuitively, one would need to *actually access* one's reason to arrive at knowledge – otherwise, we cannot say that our knowledge is based on and justified by our reason. But we cannot make this work if by having such a reason one is logically guaranteed to already have knowledge. If the entailment* thesis were true, there could not be any reflectively *accessible* factive reasons that are not already *accessed*. Let me call this the *basis* problem*.

In fact, we do not even need a notion as strong as logical entailment to generate the basis* problem. Here is a general version:

The necessity thesis:

Necessarily: If S has a reflectively accessible factive reason that *p*, then S knows that *p*.

This thesis leaves open the notion of necessity involved. Let me here work with *epistemic* or *a priori* necessity, i.e. the claim that we can infer *a priori* from *S*s having a rationally accessible factive reason for *p* that *S* knows that *p*. This would then mean that in any *a priori* possible case in which *S* has a reflectively accessible factive reason that *p*, *S* knows that *p*. Thus the disjunctivist could still not make sense of a contingent process of forming a belief on the basis of a reason if one is necessarily to have knowledge. The strongest version of a necessity thesis that disjunctivists might be able to accept would be a version which claims that having a reflectively accessible reason is followed by knowledge with “psychological necessity.” This would still be contentious, but at least disjunctivists could posit some kind of laws of belief-formation which could cite the possession of reasons as a basis of knowledge.

What the disjunctivist would need to refute her commitment to the entailment* thesis and the necessity thesis is a possible case in which a subject has a reflectively accessible factive reason for *p*, but lacks knowledge that *p*. Pritchard arguably does not offer such an example, for in his examples the subjects in question seem to lack reflective access to their reasons. In addition to this, his taxonomy of cases only allows one type of “paradigmatic” cases of perception in which one has reflectively accessible factive reasons – the “good+” cases –, and these cases are branded as cases of knowledge.²⁸ But maybe such cases still are possible. My argument later will be that we do not need to decide on the question whether such cases are possible (in any relevant sense), because either answer leads to trouble for disjunctivism.

²⁸ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 29.

To be able to do this, I need to discuss the access problem. From the discussion of the basis* problem above it is apparent that the two problems are related, for both arise from the danger of positing too close a link between our reasons and our actual beliefs. However, while the basis* problem problematizes the claim that our reasons *guarantee* knowledge, the access problem problematizes the idea that we can *achieve* knowledge from our reasons without external input.

Pritchard offers the following setup of the access problem:

(AP1) *S* can know by reflection alone that her reason for believing the specific empirical proposition *p* is the factive reason *R*. [Premise]

(AP2) *S* can know by reflection alone that *R* entails *p*. [Premise]

(APC) *S* can know by reflection alone the specific empirical proposition *p*. [From (AP1), (AP2)]²⁹

Pritchard points out that the argument actually not deductively valid, for *S* will not have come to be “in possession” of *R* by mere reflection, and thus it would not be by reflection alone that *S* knows that *p*.³⁰ Indeed, in the case of vision I can only come to be seeing that *p* given the right empirical circumstances, and thus there is an empirical element in the course of my coming to believe and know that *p*. Therefore *S*'s belief that *p* is not *a priori*, as Pritchard insist, but it is rather belief *based on an empirical reason*.³¹

He recognizes that this response assumes that the possession of a reflectively accessible reason led up to belief. But what about cases in which a subject is in possession of such a reason, but this reason does not lead to a belief? The subject might here believe that *p* for a different (non-empirical) reason, or she might not believe that *p* at all. Pritchard discusses this as a revised setup of the problem:

(AP1') *S* can know by reflection alone that she is in possession of the factive reason *R* for believing the specific empirical proposition *p* (although she does not believe *p* on that basis, or any other empirical basis). [Premise]

(AP2) *S* can know by reflection alone that *R* entails *p*. [Premise]

²⁹ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 46.

³⁰ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 47. Note also that given the entailment* thesis, in this setup *S* would already count as knowing that *p* given her true belief on the basis of a factive reflectively accessible reason.

³¹ Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 129.

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(APC) *S* can know by reflection alone the specific empirical proposition *p*. [From (AP1'), (AP2)]³²

The idea here is that *S* can come to know *p* by reflection alone, i.e. she could move from a state of disbelief or poorly justified belief to a state of knowledge just by reflecting on the kind of reasons she possesses. Here, Pritchard's response is to deny that (AP1') can be the case. While he admits that "seeing that *p* can come apart from believing that *p*," he thinks that instances of this such as the barn case do not support (AP1'):

In such a case there seems no reason at all for the epistemological disjunctivist to concede that the agent concerned has reflective access to the factive reason. Their claim, after all, is only that the rational basis for your beliefs – i.e. the reasons on which one's beliefs are based – needs to be reflectively accessible. [...] Moreover, although the epistemological disjunctivist is willing to part company with the philosophical herd and claim that one's seeing that *p* can³³ be reflectively accessible to one in cases where one has paradigmatic perceptual knowledge that *p* (such that one believes that *p* on the basis of seeing that *p*), it does not follow from this trail-blazing stance that they are thereby committed to supposing that in *every* case where one sees that *p* it is reflectively accessible to one that this is so.³⁴

In this passage, Pritchard explicitly denies that one needs to have reflective access to one's seeing that *p*. As mentioned, this is curious, for he initially introduced seeing that *p* as an instance of a reflectively accessible factive reason.³⁵ Be the notion of seeing that *p* as it may, it should be beginning to become apparent that I think his denial of the possibility of (AP1') is in tension with a full treatment of the basis* problem, specifically the version of it arising from the necessity thesis. Let me therefore look at the question whether the disjunctivist could instead accept the possibility of (AP1').

The formulation above is still not quite a logically valid argument. But consider the following reformulation, the gist of which I borrow from Tim Kraft.³⁶ Let *R* be a factive reason for the specific empirical proposition *p*. Then the problem arises in this setup:

³² Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 49, my enumeration.

³³ To be clear, Pritchard has introduced epistemological disjunctivism as the claim that one has reflectively accessible factive reasons in *all paradigmatic cases* of perceptual knowledge.

³⁴ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 50.

³⁵ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 14, see above.

³⁶ Tim Kraft, "Epistemological Disjunctivism's Genuine Access Problem," *Theoria* 81 (2015): 311–332, here 316–317.

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(AP1*) S can know by reflection alone that S is in possession of R .

(AP2*) S can know by reflection alone that S being in possession of R entails p .

(APC*) S can know by reflection alone that p .

Kraft points out that the validity of this argument depends on the closure of reflective knowledge under reflectively known entailment.³⁷ The relevant principle here would be:

If S can know by reflection alone that Φ and S can know by reflection alone that Φ entails Ψ , then S can know by reflection alone that Ψ .

This is, as Kraft notes, a highly plausible principle, and should be accepted especially by someone like Pritchard who is interested in retaining a version of the closure principle for knowledge. Given such a closure principle, the above argument is indeed logically valid. Accepting (AP1') means that there is a true instance of (AP1*) in which S does not know that p .

(AP2*) and (APC*) straightforwardly capture the intent of (AP2) and (APC), so given this version of closure of reflective knowledge the disjunctivist either has to deny (AP2) or accept (APC). (AP2) seems to follow from any reasonably strong statement of epistemological disjunctivism: if by reflective accessibility we mean that it is reflectively accessible that the reason in question is factive, then it is clear that reflecting on that reason will allow a subject to derive that her possessing that reason entails that the target proposition is true.

This would leave the disjunctivist with the only remaining option of "biting the bullet" and accepting (APC). Maybe, one might argue, this is not such a meaningful concession, for the setup of the access problem required that S already has an empirical factive reason R , so S can know that p *only given she has an empirical reason for this*. In that sense, such knowledge would not be *a priori* but rather *grounded* in empirical reasons, for it is only possible given the right empirical

³⁷ Three points are noteworthy: first, Neta and Pritchard, "McDowell and the New Evil Genius," 389, draw this inference under closure of just knowledge under known entailment, which is not quite the same. Second, the closure of possible reflective knowledge under reflectively known entailment, which is at work here (" S can know...") and which I introduce above, follows from the closure of (actual) reflective knowledge under reflectively known entailment. Third, we do not have to demand possible *reflective* knowledge of the entailment in question to allow the validity of the argument, but a principle of the closure of possible reflective knowledge under just any knowable entailment (maybe due to testimony from a logician) is less plausible – we should not be willing to say that the thusly deduced proposition is still reflectively known.

circumstances and indeed some kind of perception or other empirical input. A problem, however, is that in such cases, as Pritchard notes, the *route* from the state of not knowing that p to knowing that p would be entirely reflective.³⁸ This would again put us under pressure to allow for an empirical basis of our knowledge: instead of believing or knowing that p based on the empirical reasons we have, we would come to know that p *based on reflection on the fact that we have p -entailing reasons* (but no p -entailing beliefs). Sure enough, our reasoning would involve empirical reasons, but only to the extent that we recognize that we have them and that they are factive. They would not be our reasons for believing and knowing that p , but rather what gave rise to our actual reasons, which would be entirely introspective in nature.

Perhaps the epistemological disjunctivist can actually bite that last bullet and claim that sometimes this simply is how we arrive at beliefs or knowledge. Maybe more troublesome is that such a kind of knowledge would lead to problems with the disjunctivist reply to underdetermination-based skepticism related to the distinguishability problem. Let me therefore briefly discuss this problem.

Pritchard introduces a distinction between *favoring* and *discriminating epistemic support*. Favoring epistemic support is such that it favors a proposition p over its rivals in that it gives us *better evidence* for p , but does not entail its truth nor rule out all other hypotheses. Discriminating epistemic support, on the other hand, consists in the possession of *discriminatory capacities* that allow us to actually rule out certain scenarios or hypotheses.³⁹ Of course, underdetermination-based skepticism seeks to exploit the fact that we typically lack discriminating epistemic support for our empirical beliefs.

This distinction allows Pritchard to formulate a response to the distinguishability problem. Consider again the two subjects S_1 , who is in a scenario where most of her everyday beliefs are true, and S_2 , who is in an indistinguishable skeptical scenario. Clearly, both lack discriminating capacities to distinguish between their situations, for both scenarios by hypothesis present them with indistinguishable evidence. Still, both have favoring epistemic support for their beliefs: their perception, or other empirical sources, suggest that their beliefs are true; they can also rule out, among others, cases of “poor deception” in which their beliefs were false in an easily recognizable way. Pritchard argues that S_1 is in a better epistemic position insofar as she is in possession of factive reflectively accessible

³⁸ Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 130.

³⁹ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 77-81.

reasons for her paradigmatic perceptual beliefs. He claims that S_1 actually can exploit this by recognizing the factivity of her reasons and deducing that her belief supported by this reason must be true. This is a capacity that S_2 lacks: her reasons are neither factive nor are they reflectively accessible. The latter is important, for it explains why S_2 can think that she has the exact reasons that S_1 actually has. From a disjunctivist perspective she is ignorant about the non-factive nature of her reasons, and this explains her deception.⁴⁰

I will not discuss this response to the distinguishability problem in greater depth, although that would be necessary to evaluate it. But note the fact that Pritchard thinks that if we have reflective access to our reasons, we *can* recognize the factive nature of our reasons and deduce from this that our beliefs are true. Of course, he commits himself only to the claim that we can have such reasons in instances where we *already have* knowledge, which is an important restriction for his response to the access problem. But this brings us back to the question whether it is open to the disjunctivist to accept (APC) and say that we can recognize our factive reasons and deduce the truth of the target proposition p in a case where we did not already know that p .

I think that the disjunctivist cannot take that route because it would make her response to underdetermination-based skepticism question-begging. Suppose that S_1 takes a route to knowledge that p by recognition of her factive reason R_1 . Suppose again a subject S_2 who is in an indistinguishable skeptical scenario. For the scenarios to be indistinguishable, S_2 must mistakenly think (or be in a position to come to think) that she has R_1 , although she in fact only has the non-factive misleading reason R_2 . If S_2 reflects on her R_2 , she will (by the reasoning discussed above) be led to think mistakenly that R_2 is factive and also infer that p is true. We can here see that the subjects cannot discriminate between R_1 and R_2 .

But this is where underdetermination-based skepticism comes in again. The skeptic may now argue that S_1 cannot gain knowledge by reflecting on R_1 because she cannot discriminate R_1 from R_2 . After all, what better evidence does S_1 have for thinking that she is in possession of R_1 than S_2 ? Here, the disjunctivist cannot appeal to the reflective accessibility of R_1 without begging the question because the skeptic is *disputing* the claim that S_1 can know that she *has* R_1 given that she cannot discriminate between R_1 and R_2 . That is to say, if the disjunctivist claims that R_1 is somehow self-presenting as a factive reason, the skeptic will (justifiedly) object that this is exactly what the underdetermination problem questions, for how can R_1 be

⁴⁰ Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 91-100.

self-presenting if it is indistinguishable from R_2 ? S_1 needs some other grounds for knowing that she has R_1 .

The question then is: what could be the basis for S_1 knowing that she has R_1 ? Obviously, it is an introspective basis, but as we have just seen the kind of introspection relevant here is fallible. The disjunctivist now could try to apply her basic strategy again and claim that S_1 has a factive and reflectively accessible introspective reason R_3 for believing that she is in possession of R_1 , whereas S_2 merely has a misleading non-factive reason R_4 for believing the same thing. R_3 , the disjunctivist could argue, is better rational support than R_4 because it is factive and reflectively accessible. But, of course, R_3 and R_4 are also indistinguishable, giving rise to a new underdetermination-based skeptical problem: Can S_1 know that she has R_3 ? The skeptic here could force the disjunctivist into an infinite regress of reasons. Crucially, this type of regress would be vicious, for the disjunctivist would at no level be able to fully address underdetermination-based skepticism. Therefore, the disjunctivist would also beg the skeptic's question by deferring to higher-order reasons.

To avoid this problem, the disjunctivist needs to deny (APC), thereby not allowing the possibility of *achieving* knowledge by reflection on one's factive reasons. Again, this is not a problem for Pritchard, for he only allows this type of recognition and deduction of the target proposition in cases where one *already has* knowledge of it. It is, however, a serious problem for disjunctivists wishing to "bite the bullet" on the access problem.

IV. A Dilemma for Disjunctivism

The above considerations put us in a position to formulate a dilemma for epistemological disjunctivism. The description of this dilemma will, at this point, largely be a summary of what has already been said, so I can be brief. Let us begin with the disjunctivist premise of the dilemma:

Premise:

In some cases of knowledge, we have reflectively accessible factive empirical reasons for our empirical beliefs in the sense that we can recognize by reflection that our reasons are factive.

This is then followed by this question:

Question:

Is it (a priori) possible that a subject S possesses a reflectively accessible factive

empirical reason R for the empirical proposition p , but S does not know that p ?

First horn: No. The disjunctivist can claim that such a case is not possible, i.e. can be ruled out *a priori*. This, as we have seen, will then subject her to the basis* problem: how can our (empirical) knowledge be plausibly based on reflectively accessible reasons if such reasons *guarantee* knowledge? The basing relation should be understood as some kind of cognitive process – otherwise it disqualifies itself from serving as an explication of our justification. But such a process cannot be assumed to take place necessarily, i.e. we cannot plausibly know *a priori* that if S has a reflectively accessible factive reason R that S underwent a cognitive process *following* her possession of R , for such a process can only take place contingently. It thus seems that the possession of R *presupposes* that S knows that p , leaving no room for the kind of basing relation most disjunctivists are looking for.

Second horn: Yes. The disjunctivist can answer affirmatively and thereby say that there is a possible case C in which S possesses a reflectively accessible empirical reason R for the empirical proposition p but does not know that p . But this will make C a problem case with respect to the access problem: S here has a path to knowing that p by just reflecting on R , for S can recognize that R is factive and then deduce that therefore p must be true. Although this is only possible given that S has the empirical reason R , this kind of route to knowledge is by itself problematic. Worse, however, is the fact that admitting this route to knowledge in C will deprive the disjunctivist of a satisfactory response to underdetermination-based skepticism. Because S 's knowledge in C would not be directly based on R , but on the recognition of R 's factivity, the skeptic can now object to S knowing that R is factive by pointing to the fact that S cannot distinguish R from a non-factive reason in a corresponding skeptical scenario. The disjunctivist here will either beg the question by pointing to R 's factivity (which the skeptic claims S is ignorant about), or she will need to open up an infinite regress of reflectively accessible factive reasons: a reason for the fact that she is in possession of R , a reason for the fact that she possesses that reason and so on. This regress, besides being highly implausible, will at no point satisfy the skeptic, either.

It is not quite clear, which of the horns Pritchard is picking, but he seems to lean towards the first one. The fact that he describes the barn case as one in which one lacks reflective access to one's seeing a barn clarifies that at least the example he provides is not one in which one has reflective access to a factive reason. Apparently, he understands the basis problem as a problem that only applies to seeing (that p)

and arises due to the entailment thesis; but he glosses over the version of the problem that arises out of the entailment* thesis or the necessity thesis.

V. The Dilemma and Other Versions of Epistemological Disjunctivism

So far, I have only discussed Pritchard's particular version of epistemological disjunctivism. Let me end by briefly commenting on the question to what extent the dilemma formulated above applies to other versions of epistemological disjunctivism that have the same ambition to address skepticism (omitting views such as Millar's which have no such ambition). I will comment on a version of disjunctivism that replaces "propositional" perception ("seeing that...") with object perception, and on a contextualized version of disjunctivism.

Let me begin with non-propositional epistemological disjunctivism. The idea is that instead of claiming that in paradigmatic cases of perception, we have a factive and reflectively accessible *propositional attitude* with respect to what we perceive, one merely claims that in such cases we have reflectively accessible factive perception of the objects we perceive. This view is most explicitly advocated by Craig French, but has also been alluded to by Charles Travis.⁴¹

French developed this view in response to the basis problem. Remember that to rebut the entailment thesis Pritchard claimed that in the barn case one sees *that there is a barn*. French quite convincingly argues that this is intuitively not the case. However, it is very plausible that in this example one *sees a barn*.⁴² The idea here is that Pritchard cannot provide a plausible case of propositional seeing without knowing, but it is easy to provide a case of object perception without knowing that there is such an object – the barn case already counts as such an example. French therefore suggests that we instead claim that in paradigmatic cases of perception our rational support consists in *seeing x* or *seeing an F thing*. This is, of course, compatible with the disjunctivist thesis that we have reflective access to this support. These locutions are also factive, i.e. seeing an *x* or an *F* thing implies that there actually is an *x* or an *F* thing.⁴³

⁴¹ French, "The Formulation," Charles Travis, "The Silences of the Senses," in his *Perception: Essays After Frege* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23-58, here 29-33.

⁴² French, "The Formulation," 91-93.

⁴³ French, "The Formulation," 96-102. French points out that this is actually just a specification of Pritchard's formulation of the core thesis of disjunctivism (see above) which only states that the rational support in paradigmatic cases of perception is factive and reflectively accessible, but does not incorporate any commitment to propositionality (*ibid.*, 95).

On this view it is clear that there are many cases like the barn case in which one sees an object without knowing that there is such an object. What is again unclear, though, is whether there are (possible) cases in which one has *reflectively accessible* factive perceptual reasons without knowledge. It may be easier for advocates of this strand of epistemological disjunctivism to claim that there are, but either way the dilemma arises as above. If there are no such cases possible, then it seems dubious how these reasons can serve as a basis for our beliefs and knowledge, which is supposedly to arise through a contingent process out of them, and yet also necessarily guarantee this knowledge. If there are such cases, then in these cases one has a purely reflective path to knowing that, say, there is a barn by recognizing the factive nature of one's seeing a barn and simply deducing that there is a barn. Also, just like above, if one just accepts that this is possible, cases like these seem to beg the question against the skeptic: one cannot simply claim that seeing that there is a barn just is a self-presenting reason when the skeptic is arguing that we cannot discriminate between seeing a barn and seeing a barn façade. Alternatively, the *recognition* of the fact that one is seeing a barn could itself be construed as a factive reason, but this would lead to an implausible infinite regress that would not provide a response to the skeptic, either.

Let me now turn to the idea of a contextualized version of epistemological disjunctivism. This view has been suggested, although not fully endorsed by Ram Neta.⁴⁴ Neta champions a version of epistemological disjunctivism that is open to both propositional and non-propositional reasons.⁴⁵ In his earlier work, Neta has argued that the extent to which we have evidence (and we might here read: reasons) may depend on context. In most "contexts of epistemic appraisal," our evidence does

⁴⁴ Ram Neta, "Contextualism and the Problem of the External World," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56 (2003): 1-31 and "A Refutation of Cartesian Fallibilism," *Noûs* 45 (2011): 658-695; see also Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 147-52. In "Contextualism and the Problem," Neta develops the idea that our evidence depends on the context, but does not yet defend a disjunctivist account of it. In "A Refutation," along with other papers, he endorses such an account but does no longer elaborate on the context-sensitivity of the accessibility of evidence or reasons. He does, however, make an exception for circumstances where a question asked "defeats [his] justification" (Neta, "A Refutation," 665), and he later writes this (*ibid.*, 669):

According to the Cartesian Infallibilist view that I am describing, to have empirical knowledge, we must have reflective access to infallible empirical reasons. Fortunately, I claim, we *often* have this.

⁴⁵ Neta, "A Refutation," 686.

support conclusions about the external world, but in skeptical contexts, it does not. He argues that *S* has evidence *E* for *p* only if *E* favors *p* over some alternatives relevant in the context of epistemic appraisal, which for him means that *E* allows *S* to discriminate between *p* and a relevant alternative. He further argues that when we raise a (skeptical) hypothesis *H* that is not ruled out by *S*'s evidence, we restrict *S*'s evidence to those mental states that *S* would also have in *H*. Connecting this with disjunctivism, this would mean that when the skeptic brings up, say, the Evil Demon scenario (which we cannot rule out in the sense that we cannot discriminate between it and the world as we ordinarily think it is), she restricts our evidence – or let us say reasons – and rules out any factive reasons we might have that we would not have in the Evil Demon scenario. Our reasons would then mainly consist of “seemings” and phenomenal appearances. Thus, in such a context, we have no definitive reasons to believe that we have hands, but in ordinary contexts, we have such reasons.⁴⁶ The view here is that it depends on the context which reasons we *have*. A maybe even more plausible version of this position would be one according to which it depends on the context which reasons we *have access to*.

This position is attractive because it can address both skeptical problems, whereas unqualified Pritchard-style disjunctivism fails to address the closure-based problem. But what about the dilemma I posed above? It seems that with respect to the first horn, the situation is roughly the same: if there are no (possible) cases in which one has reflectively accessible factive reasons without knowledge, then the basis* problem will be just as pressing. However, if one allows such cases – and Neta's openness to object perception as a factive reflectively accessible reason suggests exactly that – the situation is somewhat different. There remains the worry that in such cases, there is a reflective path to knowledge, which one may find psychologically implausible. What does not arise, however, is the concern about begging the question against skepticism. One can argue that those reasons are just self-presenting in an ordinary context, but not so in a skeptical context. In such a skeptical context, we would not have access to, or not even have, factive reasons that, say, we have hands; but in an ordinary context, there are such reasons available. If the contextualist disjunctivist thus is willing to “bite the bullet” and accept that there is a purely reflective path to knowledge in cases of reflectively accessible factive reasons, then she will be able to hold this position in the face of the dilemma I have raised.

⁴⁶ Neta, “Contextualism and the Problem,” 21-25. See also Jessica Brown, “Contextualism about Evidential Support,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 92 (2016), 329-354.

Conclusion

I have posed a dilemma for epistemological disjunctivism purporting to show that while it may be able to address some of the three “core problems” Pritchard discusses, it cannot address all of them at the same time. While I have focused on Pritchard’s version of disjunctivism, the dilemma also applies to versions that replace propositional perception with object perception. The contextualized version of epistemological disjunctivism fares better: if one claims that there are cases of reflectively accessible factive reasons without knowledge, one is still committed to a perhaps implausible reflective path to knowledge in such cases, but at least one should then not be charged with begging the question against skepticism.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ I would like to thank Michael Williams for useful conversations about some ideas in this paper and three anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback on earlier versions of it.

IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT?

Kirk LOUGHEED

ABSTRACT: Many religious believers do not appear to take the existence of epistemic peer disagreement as a serious challenge to the rationality of their religious beliefs. They seem to think they have different evidence for their religious beliefs and hence aren't really epistemic peers with their opponents. One underexplored potential evidential asymmetry in religious disagreements is based on investigations of religious experience attempting to offer relevant evidence for religious claims in objective and public terms. I conclude that private religious experience can provide a relevant evidential asymmetry between opponents in cases of religious disagreement. I further conclude that if a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer, at least if they were epistemic peers prior to the experience.

KEYWORDS: epistemology of disagreement, religious disagreement, peer disagreement, conciliationism

1. Introduction

The contemporary literature on the epistemology of disagreement helps to refine the challenge disagreement poses to the rationality of religious belief. The literature generally confines itself to the following problem: Suppose that after an agent comes to believe proposition P she finds out that there is an epistemic peer – someone of equal intelligence and ability – who has evaluated the same body of evidence and come to believe $not-P$. What should her reaction be upon discovering peer disagreement? Does the existence of peer disagreement constitute a (partial) defeater to her original belief that P ? Or is she rationally permitted to maintain her belief that P even in the face of peer disagreement? *Conciliationism* (revisionism, conformism) holds that when an agent encounters peer disagreement, a certain amount of weight must be given to both views and hence the agent should revise her belief that P .¹ This could require lowering her confidence in P or withholding

¹ See Nathan Ballantyne, "Counterfactual Philosophers," *Philosophy and Phenomenological LOGOS & EPISTEME*, IX, 2 (2018): 173-197

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belief in *P*. *Non-Conciliationism* (anti-revisionism, non-conformism, steadfast views) claims that there are cases in which an agent's awareness of her peer's belief that *not-P* does not require changing her belief that *P*.² Thus, the conciliationist denies that there can be rational disagreement between epistemic peers, whereas the non-conciliationist claims that epistemic peers can rationally disagree.³ There is a recent large and technical literature on disagreement that I do not have space to outline here. But with respect to disagreement about religious belief this much seems clear: if conciliationism is true then a serious challenge is levelled against the rationality of religious belief. When faced with epistemic peer disagreement over her religious beliefs the religious believer is forced to revise them in order for those beliefs to remain rational. The problem can be standardized as the following:

The Problem

1. Agent A and agent B are epistemic peers with respect to whether proposition *P* if they share the same evidence *E* (with respect to *P*) and are equally reliable with respect to accurately evaluating relevantly similar propositions to *P* (on the basis of relevantly similar evidence to *E*).
[Approximate statement of epistemic peerhood]

Research 88 (2014): 368–387; David Christensen “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 187–217; Adam Elga, “Reflection and Disagreement,” *Noûs* 41 (2007): 478–502; Richard Feldman “Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement,” in *Epistemology Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216–236; Jonathan Matheson, *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

² See Peter van Inwagen, “It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,” in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of Religion Today*, eds. J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Thomas Kelly, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement,” in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, eds. John Hawthorne and Tamar Szabó Gendler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167–196; Michael Bergmann, “Rational Disagreement after Full Disclosure,” *Episteme* 6 (2009): 336–353.

³ Conciliationism and non-conciliationism are the two main positions in the literature. But there are hybrid views which recommend sometimes revising and sometimes remaining steadfast in the face of disagreement. See Thomas Kelly, “Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence,” in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111–174; Jennifer Lackey, “What Should We Do When We Disagree?” in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, eds. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 274–293; Jennifer Lackey, “A Justificationist View of Disagreement’s Epistemic Significance,” in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010).

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2. If agent A believes proposition P and agent B believes not- P and they are epistemic peers with respect to whether P , then both A and B must revise their beliefs that P and not- P , respectively.
[Approximate statement of conciliationism]
3. Agent A believes religious proposition R and agent B believes not- R (and they are epistemic peers with respect to whether R).

Therefore,

4. A and B both must revise their belief that R and not- R , respectively. [The Problem]

Admittedly, there are many different ways to understand epistemic peerhood, evidence, and hence the rational requirements for belief revision in the face of disagreement. But the problem I focus on here is that on most, if not all, conceptions of conciliationism a serious sceptical threat has been posed to religious belief.

Many religious believers, however, do not appear to take the existence of religious disagreement as a serious threat to the rationality of their beliefs.⁴ Bryan Frances notes that “in an enormous number of cases people think, at least implicitly, that their [religious] group is in a better position to judge [the truth about religious claims]. I will think my group knows something the critics have missed.”⁵ Perhaps, at least implicitly, religious believers tend to dismiss worries based on peer disagreement by appealing to the fact that they have different evidence that their opponents do not possess. This evidence constitutes a relevant epistemic asymmetry between the two opponents who would otherwise be epistemic peers. The religious believer can remain steadfast in the face of disagreement, then, because she enjoys additional evidence that her opponent does not also enjoy, implying that they aren’t really epistemic peers about religious matters. Notice that employing this strategy does not deny the existence of a genuine disagreement.⁶ Rather, it denies that the religious believer and her opponent are genuinely epistemic peers because they have different evidence. So with respect to the Problem outlined above, the religious

⁴ This is ultimately an empirical sociological fact that could be checked, at least in principle.

⁵ Bryan Frances, *Disagreement* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 143.

⁶ For more on verbal disagreement see: Nathan Ballantyne, “Verbal Disagreements and Philosophical Scepticism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94 (2016): 752-776; David J. Chalmers, “Verbal Disputes,” *The Philosophical Review* 120 (2011): 515-566; Andrew Graham, “On the Very Idea of a Verbal Dispute,” *Dialogue* 53 (2014): 299-314; Brendan Balcerak Jackson, “Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness,” *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 31-54; Carrie Jenkins, “Merely Verbal Disputes,” *Erkenntnis* 49 (2014): 11-30.

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believer would simply deny that A and B are epistemic peers with respect to whether R. In such a case the problem of religious disagreement evaporates before getting off the ground.

There are a number of different strategies that could be used to explain epistemic asymmetries in cases of religious disagreement. Specifically, potential candidates to explain the evidential asymmetry include self-trust, immediacy, and introspection. But there are at least two worries with appealing to these in cases of religious disagreement: (i) in many cases these explanations will be equally available to both opponents in the dispute. So they won't be able to be used to justify an evidential asymmetry; (ii) these don't appear to be what the religious believer has in mind when denying that her opponents are genuine epistemic peers. Nothing about these two worries precludes self-trust, immediacy, and introspection from being the basis of an evidential asymmetry in disputes, including religious disputes. It's just that we're looking for an explanation that appears to be a more likely candidate in cases of religious disagreements.

Religious believers who don't want to appeal to self-trust, immediacy, or introspection need to do more work to explain the relevant evidential difference between themselves and their non-religious opponents. I suggest that potential explanation may lie in investigations of religious experience that attempt to explain such experiences in objective and public terms. However, in his work on religious experience Phillip H. Wiebe speculates that while certain religious experiences might be objective, they are private rather than public. This differs significantly from scientific evidence which is both objective and public.

My examination of Wiebe's work will culminate in a defense of the following thesis:

The Private Religious Experience Thesis: Private religious experience can provide a relevant evidential asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement.

After that, I will show that in certain scenarios reports of private religious experiences should cause the religious sceptic to doubt her scepticism. So to conclude I will defend the following:

The Religious Experience Peer Pressure Thesis: If a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer (if they were peers prior to the experience).

The former does not entail the latter and vice versa. However, the first thesis does entail the second in cases where two opponents are peers up until the point at

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which one of them has a religious experience (on the assumption that testimony is reliable and the religious experience is subsequently reported to the other person).

2. Three Possible Explanations of Special Insight

Before examining religious experience as a possible evidential asymmetry in disputes I want to first examine a number of other different ways to explain it and show why the religious believer may often not be entitled to them. Peter van Inwagen's provocative essay titled after W.K. Clifford's "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence" is one of the earliest non-conciliationist responses to peer disagreement (1996). van Inwagen insists that in the face of disagreement he is reasonable to remain steadfast in his beliefs. The most plausible asymmetry that van Inwagen can identify between himself and any of his opponents is simply that he must enjoy a special kind of insight that his opponents necessarily lack. Regarding his disagreement about the incompatibility of free will and determinism with David Lewis van Inwagen explains that:

[M]y best guess is that I enjoy some sort of philosophical insight... that, for all his merits, is somehow denied to Lewis. And this would have to be an insight that is incommunicable – at least *I* don't know how to communicate it – for I have done all I can to communicate it to Lewis, and he has understood perfectly everything I have said, and he has not come to share my conclusions... not only do my beliefs about these question seem to me to be undeniably *true*, but (quite independent of any consideration of which theses it is that seem to me to be true), I don't want to be forced into a position in which I can't see my way clear to accepting any philosophical thesis of any consequence.⁷

van Inwagen's response often seems echoed by religious believers when they encounter disagreement. Many religious believers fail to give *any* epistemic significance to the fact of widespread religious disagreement, even though they are aware of such disagreement.⁸ The most plausible way to understand the special insight is that it creates an evidential asymmetry between opponents in cases of disagreement. So special insight somehow constitutes additional evidence. Three ways special insight could be explicated are in terms of self-trust, immediacy, and from the reliability of introspection.

⁷ van Inwagen, "It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone," 139.

⁸ Frances, *Disagreement*, 165.

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2.1. Self-Trust

From a third-person perspective to a peer disagreement perhaps there is no reason to prefer one agent's belief to her opponent's belief. But considerations about self-trust may justify an agent in the dispute herself remaining steadfast in the face of peer disagreement. According to Richard Foley, self-trust is reliable inasmuch as the agent is unable to offer a successful critique of the belief she holds which is under dispute.⁹ She must also be unable to offer a critique of the reliability of the process which produced the disputed belief. On this view that "[o]ne does not privilege one's own opinion merely because it is one's own; indeed, in general, one does not privilege one's own opinion. But one can privilege one's own opinion when one has self-trust in it."¹⁰

However, Foley's account of self-trust is supposed to undermine more general worries about scepticism, for example, regarding the veracity of perception. But Foley's account can apply to sceptical worries about perception without necessarily applying to scepticism formulated on the basis of disagreement.¹¹ This is because disagreement involves the existence of another mind. The existence of disagreement must be understood as distinct from the first-person perspective otherwise it is not a disagreement at all. Importantly, the disagreement is not only based on another mind, but on the *judgments* formed by another mind.¹²

Finally, this strategy is potentially equally available to both opponents in a disagreement. If in a case of religious disagreement self-trust is appealed to only by one opponent in the dispute, then it could constitute an evidential asymmetry in those cases. But it's far from clear that self-trust is very often what the religious believer has in mind when appealing to additional evidence. Likewise, there's nothing uniquely religious about self-trust such that one would think it constitutes additional positive evidence for religious beliefs as opposed to evidence against it. If that's right, then this is a response which is equally available to both opponents in any given dispute, even ones about religious matters.

⁹ Gurpreet Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," *Analytic Philosophy* 55 (2014): 39.

¹⁰ Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 39.

¹¹ Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 40.

¹² Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 41. See also Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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2.2. Immediacy

Another way of explaining why the first-person perspective constitutes additional evidence in disputes is based on the idea that an agent's first-person beliefs are immediate while her beliefs about others are mediated. Ralph Wedgwood argues for non-conciliationism based on an egocentric bias which justifies an agent preferring her own intuitions. Without a special reason to do otherwise, an agent ought to hold that her intuitions are *prima facie* justified. Wedgwood calls this type of justification *primitive trust*.¹³ He argues that there is a "general requirement of rationality' that one minimize the sources in which one has primitive trust and for this reason, primitive trust is reserved for one's own, and not extended to other's intuitions. This is [a justified] egocentric epistemic bias."¹⁴ The immediacy of such intuitions can therefore serve as the basis for a relevant epistemic asymmetry between two parties who are otherwise epistemic peers.¹⁵

Disagreement, however, is supposed to be a relevant reason that causes an agent to lose confidence in her intuitions, even if those intuitions enjoy *prima facie* justification. Wedgwood fails to show why primitive trust wouldn't be defeated once one became aware of peer disagreement.¹⁶ In cases of religious disagreement where primitive trust constitutes part of one's total evidence for one's religious beliefs it could constitute additional evidence which explains an evidential asymmetry. But this is only the case if one's opponent doesn't also have primitive self-trust. And it seems that on Wedgwood's account *everyone* should have (*prima facie*) primitive self-trust. So it's not clear how this could constitute a relevant asymmetry in cases of disagreement in general, let alone in cases of religious disagreement. Plus, it's doubtful that this is what many, if any, religious believers have in mind when they claim there's an evidential difference between themselves and their opponents.

3.3. Introspection

Finally, introspection might constitute additional evidence that a religious believer possesses and her opponent does not. For an agent cannot introspect her opponent's phenomenological experience. Since she is only able to introspect her own

¹³ Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 41-42.

¹⁴ Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 42.

¹⁵ See also Ralph Wedgwood, "The Moral Evil Demons," in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216-246

¹⁶ Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 43.

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phenomenological experiences, she has a reason – all else being equal – to favour her own beliefs.

Brie Gertler explains:

The term ‘introspection’ – literally, ‘looking within’ – captures a traditional way of conceiving how we grasp our own mental states. This term expresses, in spatial language, a divide between an ‘inner’ world and an ‘outer’ or ‘external’ world. For most philosophers, the spatial connotations of this language are purely metaphorical: to say that a state or entity is internal to the mind is not to say that it falls within a given spatial boundary. The term ‘introspection’ is standardly used to denote a method of knowing unique to self-knowledge, one that differs from the method we use to grasp the ‘outer’ world, namely, perception.¹⁷

Eric Schwitzgebel provocatively argues that while “current conscious experience is... possible, important, necessary for a full life, and central to the development of a full scientific understanding of the mind... [that it is also] highly untrustworthy.”¹⁸

Many are tempted to construe doubts about introspection in terms of an agent’s (in)ability to identify nonconscious mental states such as motivations, hidden beliefs and desires, the basis for decisions, etc. Thus, many assume that thoughtful and careful introspection is generally reliable. Schwitzgebel argues that even this slightly weaker version of fallibilism about introspection is not nearly weak enough.¹⁹

Consider that emotions – whatever they may be – can at least sometimes involve or be accompanied by conscious experience. Think of an emotion such as joy or anger. Is it a short or long experience? Is it a feeling throughout the body, or is it located in the brain? Does being angry involve literally seeing red? Or “is joy sometimes in the head, sometimes more visceral, sometimes a thrill, sometimes an expansiveness – or, instead, does joy have a single, consistent core, a distinctive, identifiable, unique experiential character?”²⁰ The inconsistency in descriptions does not amount to a deficiency in the language available to describe phenomenological experience. Schwitzgebel suggests that it is the very phenomenology itself that is

¹⁷ Brie Gertler “Self-Knowledge,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2014).

¹⁸ Eric Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” *The Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 246.

¹⁹ Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” 247-248.

²⁰ Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” 249.

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incredibly difficult to accurately describe. That is, either “[r]eflection doesn’t remove our ignorance, or it delivers haphazard results.”²¹

Assessing Schwitzgebel’s scepticism towards introspection is not my focus here. His critique of introspection is controversial and there is a body of literature on it that I will refrain from exploring here.²² My point here is that a lot of work needs to be done by anyone, including the religious believer, who wants to appeal to introspection as part of the evidential basis for her belief(s). It’s an open question whether introspection is reliable. If it is reliable, then it could be used to establish an evidential asymmetry in cases where one opponent has it and the other does not. But it’s not obvious that this will be a strategy frequently available to the religious believer. It’s again also doubtful that introspection is what religious believers typically have in mind when claiming that there’s an evidential difference between herself and her opponents.²³

²¹ Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” 250.

²² For an excellent introductory resource on introspection see Eric Schwitzgebel, “Introspection,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2014). For a very informative introduction to self-knowledge see Gertler, “Self-Knowledge.”

²³ Michael Thune argues that van Inwagen’s argument is best understood as an argument against widespread scepticism. Since there is widespread disagreement on many topics, if revisionism is true it implies widespread scepticism (See also Hilary Kornblith, “Belief in the Face of Controversy,” in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29-52.). Thune argues that van Inwagen implicitly endorses a distinction between internal and external parity with respect to peers. Internal parity is about the evidence, arguments, judgments, and perhaps even the felt attractiveness that two peers cite as relevant to forming the belief under dispute. External parity concerns facts that they might not be aware of such as the subjects overall epistemic situation (e.g. whether the belief was formed by a reliable process) (Michael Thune, “Religious Belief and Epistemology of Disagreement,” *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010): 715). Thune claims that “[d]isagreements that involve internal parity but not external parity obviously do not admit of parity *all things considered* and thus, van Inwagen seems to say, need not result in a defeater” (*Ibidem*, 715). The external asymmetry can plausibly be explained by the fact that one agent enjoys a special insight that her opponent lacks. But the very fact that van Inwagen felt compelled to write a response about disagreement suggests that the correct conclusions are far from obvious. There are two points worth considering. First, as noted earlier this response is equally available to van Inwagen’s opponents. Second, it does not offer an explanation of what constitutes special insight that I have been searching for so far. It simply maintains that such an insight exists, but at the cost of begging-the-question against conciliationism.

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3. Religious Experience as Evidence

Thus far I have examined self-trust, immediacy, and the reliability of introspection as potential explanations of epistemic asymmetry in cases of religious disagreements. I argued that in many cases it seems that they are equally available to both opponents in a dispute. There's nothing uniquely religious about them. Likewise it's doubtful that they are what the religious believer has in mind when claiming she has an evidential advantage over her opponent. In what follows, I argue that religious experience is a better explanation of this alleged asymmetry, at least for those religious believers who (partially) base their religious beliefs on such experiences. That is, religious experience provides additional evidence for religious beliefs. Such evidence could serve to create an evidential asymmetry between a religious believer and her opponent who would otherwise be her epistemic peer (or are in fact peers up until the experience occurs). To begin this section I'm going to show why externalist understandings of religious experience cannot provide the relevant evidential asymmetry in religious disputes that we're attempting to uncover. After that, I explain why understanding religious experience as intuitive knowing is a better candidate than externalist options. I conclude by defending the idea that if a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer (if they were peers prior to the experience).

3.1 Externalist or Reformed Approaches to Religious Experience

Externalists about justification, particularly those sympathetic to reformed epistemology, might wonder whether the problem of religious disagreement is as significant as I suggest. For instance, following Alvin Plantinga it's possible that a religious believer holds that if her religious experience: (1) has been produced in [an agent] by cognitive faculties that are working properly (functioning as they ought to, subject to no cognitive dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for [her] kinds of cognitive faculties; (2) the segment of the design plan governing the production of that belief is aimed at the production of true beliefs; (3) there is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true;²⁴ and (4) that she has thought sufficiently about objections and the

²⁴ This is modified from Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (USA: Pearson. 2002), 100. See also Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15 (1981): 41-51 and Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Justification," *Nous* 2 (1986): 3-18. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York:

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nature of religious disagreement, then she's internally rational and hence requires no (subjective) defeater based on disagreement. For instance, in explicitly addressing the question of whether reasonable disagreement is possible, Michael Bergmann writes that "[i]n a case where two people of roughly equal intellectual virtue... continue knowingly to disagree even after full disclosure, it is possible that both parties are externally rational in continuing to disagree and in thinking that the other may well be externally rational in continuing to disagree."²⁵

The problem with this response to religious disagreement is that (i) it is equally available to both parties in a dispute and; (ii) it fails to establish an epistemic asymmetry which is independent of the dispute itself. The great pumpkin objection is a well-worn objection to Plantinga's reformed epistemology. The objection is that any belief can be well-justified, and in particular, any belief can be properly basic. If the appropriate external conditions have been met, then almost *any* belief could turn out to be justified, even beliefs that are obviously absurd.

In the context of disagreement, the great pumpkin objection highlights the fact that an externalist or reformed approach is equally available to both parties in a dispute. Two opponents could have *the same* justification (i.e. internal rationality) that supports contradictory religious claims. The pressure from conciliationism comes from the fact that there needs to be a way of establishing an epistemic asymmetry that is independent of the dispute itself in order for the agent in question to be rational in remaining steadfast. Otherwise both parties need to conciliate in the face of disagreement. The reformed approach doesn't offer any such independent reason and hence isn't helpful, at least not in the context disagreement.²⁶

Another way of understanding the problem with this solution is that it's difficult to see how two opponents could be properly functioning and yet arrive at competing, or even logically contradictory positions. This is especially so if as

Oxford University Press, 2000) for a detailed development of an externalist religious epistemology.

²⁵ Michael Bergmann, "Rational Disagreement after Full Disclosure," *Episteme* 6 (2009): 341. The literature on reformed epistemology is enormous and the literature on externalism simpliciter is even larger. But I take this statement to be representative of what an externalist might say about religious disagreement. See Michael Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness: A Defense of Epistemic Externalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) for more on the externalist/internalist debate.

²⁶ The disagreement literature typically remains neutral between the internalist/externalist debate about justification (or knowledge). I don't believe that my rejection of externalist solutions to religious disagreement constitutes a rejection of externalism simpliciter. But if it does, then what follows can be understood as a response to religious disagreement for internalists.

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Bergmann contends, there has been full disclosure of the evidence, and hence both opponents have identical evidence with respect to the religious dispute. For instance, it's difficult to understand how one body of evidence could support the conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead, while that very same body of evidence supports the opposite conclusion that Jesus did not rise from the dead.²⁷ Externalist understandings of religious experience therefore do not help us identify an evidential asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement.

3.2 Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience

The nature of religious experience is highly contentious, and includes questions about what constitutes religious experience and how much epistemic weight should be accorded such experiences. Additional questions include what evidential status hearers of testimony of such experiences should accord them. In this section I explore a recent study of religious experience by Phillip H. Wiebe found in his 2015 book *Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience*. Referring to Wiebe's project will help offer potential answers regarding the nature and epistemic significance of religious experience. While there are different ways of construing religious experience, the conception I will focus on is what Wiebe calls *intuitive knowing*. He explains that the concept of intuitive knowing can be found in ancient Greek thought.²⁸ He says that "[t]he power of the intellect to grasp concepts and truths intuitively that are neither derivable from sense perception, such as the concept of infinity, nor justifiable by empirical evidence, such as inviolable principles of ethics, has been widely considered a characteristic that sets humans apart from all other earthly creatures."²⁹

Plato and Aristotle both held that intuitive knowing was knowledge pertaining to matters that are eternal. That is, "[t]he intellect came to be seen as capable not only of intuiting the reality of natural laws, a moral order, and an ontological order that includes God, but also of proving our immortality."³⁰ Augustine thought that intuitive knowing existed in intellectual visions; these are

²⁷ I don't think this response needs to assume something as strong as the Uniqueness Thesis, though maybe it needs it needs a similar weaker principle to be true. See Roger White, "Epistemic Permissiveness." *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (2005): 445–459 for more on Uniqueness.

²⁸ Phillip H. Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

²⁹ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 1.

³⁰ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 2-3.

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the visions that Wiebe examines in his study.³¹ These are distinct from corporeal visions (apparitions or ghost sightings).³² My reasons for focusing on intellectual visions are threefold. First, religious experience is such a large field that it is impossible to survey every type here. Second, historically it has been held that intellectual visions are superior to other types of visions.³³ Third, intuitive knowledge provides a unique solution to the problem of religious disagreement that might not be available to other types of religious experience.

Perhaps the best way to understand intuitive knowing is by exploring specific examples. Wiebe gathers many of his examples from the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Center. By way of contrast, the first example is an intersubjective sensory experience previously studied by Emma Heathcote-James, and hence *not* an example of intuitive knowing:

Example 1:

Suddenly there was a man in white standing in front of the [baptismal] font about eighteen inches away. He was a man but he was totally, utterly different from the rest of us. He was wearing something long, like a robe, but it was so white it was almost transparent... He was just looking at us. It was the most wondering feeling. Not a word was spoken; various people began to touch their arms because it felt like having warm oiled poured over you. The children came forward with their mouths wide open. Then all of a sudden – I suppose it was a few seconds, but time seemed to stop – the angel was gone. Everyone who was there was quite convinced that an angel came to encourage us.³⁴

This example is a sensory experience of an apparition, not of intuitive knowing. The following two cases are examples of intuitive knowing:

Example 2:

Amelia: “It all began one spring morning when, as a little girl, I ran out of the house before breakfast and to the end of the garden which led to the orchard. In the night a miracle had been wrought, and the grass was carpeted with golden celandines. I stood still and looked, and clasped my hands and in wonder at the beauty I said

³¹ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 2-3.

³² For a study of corporeal visions see Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). I will say more about this later.

³³ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 5.

³⁴ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 47. See also Emma Heathcote-James, *Seeing Angels: True Contemporary Accounts of Hundreds of Angelic Experiences* (London: John Blake, 2002), 46-47.

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'God.' I knew from that moment that everything that existed was just part of 'that sustaining life which burns bright or dim as each are mirrors of the fire for which all things thirst.' Of course, I didn't put it in those words, but I did know that I and everything were one in the life. When I grew older and read philosophy I thought of all creation as the Shadow of Beauty unbeheld, and felt that Beauty was God." Amelia remarks that even in the inevitable changes that life brings, she has felt certain that "God is there, and in it all, and part of it all. So I could rest in Him."³⁵

Example 3:

Carol: "I looked up at the snows, but immediately lost all normal consciousness and became engulfed as it were in a great cloud of light and ecstasy of knowing and understanding all the secrets of the universe, and sense of goodness of the Being in whom it seemed all were finally enclosed, and yet in that enclosure utterly liberated. I 'saw' nothing in the physical sense... it was as if I were blinded by an internal light. And yet I was 'looking outward.' It was *not* a 'dream,' but utterly different, in that the content was of the utmost significance to me and in universal terms. Gradually this sense of ecstasy faded and slowly I came to my ordinary sense and perceived I was sitting as usual and the mountains were as usual in daily beauty." Carol says that the aftermath of the experience was in the form of a wonderful mental and spiritual glow, and then adds: "I became convinced later that a spiritual Reality underlay all earthy reality, and the ultimate ground of the universe was benevolent in a positive way, surpassing our temporal understanding. This conviction has remained with me, but in an intellectual form; it has not, however, prevented me from feeling acute personal depression and disappointment time and again, throughout my life." She also relates that later in life in she developed a strong interest in Buddhism, but after that felt that it was founded on a negative premise, whereas the universe seemed to her to be positive.³⁶

3.3 Public Knowledge versus Private Knowledge

The distinction between experiential and experimental is significant since I am considering whether intuitive knowing can be used as a potential asymmetry in religious disagreements. Wiebe speculates that possibly "a central difference between science and spirituality is that scientific knowledge is objective and public, whereas spiritual knowledge is also of an 'objective reality,' but not generally public."³⁷ In this context the best way to understand the distinction between public knowledge and private knowledge is that the former is testable and repeatable (i.e.

³⁵ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 66.

³⁶ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 71.

³⁷ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 8.

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subject to the scrutiny of the scientific method), whereas the latter is not.³⁸ Wiebe suggests that:

If I am accurate in thinking that science and spirituality differ in the degree to which they are public, the justificatory stance adopted by science will not generally apply to spirituality. Only those features of spirituality that are public will satisfy the criteria for evidence articulated in the sciences. Science, by its very nature, advances claims that many people are able to corroborate or verify. If spirituality fails to exhibit this public face, we should not wonder that communities that are committed to scientific inquiry find spiritual claims problematic.³⁹

On this view intuitive knowledge might be a plausible explanation of a relevant asymmetry in religious disputes, since such experiences constitute an additional piece of evidence for those who have had such experiences.⁴⁰ But since they are private any evidence they provide for a religious believer will not be able to be conveyed to an opponent who has not had the experience herself. The private nature of religious experiences explains why appealing to them in disputes will often not be satisfying to opponents since unlike scientific knowledge they will have no access to the justification they purport to offer.⁴¹ But without a principled reason to exclude private knowledge, religious experience can thus constitute an explanation of the special insight view, and thus serve to justify reasonable religious disagreement.⁴² The solution to religious disagreement I propose here can be standardized as the following:

³⁸ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 138.

³⁹ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 151.

⁴⁰ It is worth mentioning that in discussing the epistemic significance of such experiences I am not committing to the veracity of such experiences. I am simply giving an account of what I take to be the best description of an epistemic asymmetry which is by appealing to religious experience. I make no claims about whether such experiences are veridical.

⁴¹ Wiebe says that “[d]etailed accounts of spiritual experience show that it is too complex and variable to justify the blanket generalization that it has significance only for those who undergo it” (Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 8). I do not contest this claim. However, in a disagreement between two peers where one has had an experience of intuitive knowing and other has not, intuitive knowing will only count as evidence for the peer who has had the specific experience. This is the sort of case I have in view in this project. Whether or not enough reports of intuitive knowing (and other religious experiences) taken together could be begin to constitute public evidence is an open question. For more on this see Travis Dumsday, “Evidentially Compelling Religious Experiences and the Moral Status of Naturalism,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8 (2016): 123-144.

⁴² Perhaps it could be argued that disagreements are only meaningful if the evidence is public and

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The Solution

5. Religious experiences of intuitive knowing are perceptually or phenomenologically unique.
6. Agent A experiences intuitive knowing K and it constitutes additional evidence for R .

Therefore,

7. A and B are no longer epistemic peers with respect to whether R .

Therefore,

8. (4) is false. A need not revise her belief that R [The Solution]

Intuitive knowing constitutes a relevant asymmetry in the disagreement because it constitutes additional evidence. Hence A and B are no longer epistemic peers. So the problem of religious disagreement evaporates, at least for believers who (partially) base their religious beliefs on intuitive knowledge. At this point the following thesis has been defended:

The Private Religious Experience Thesis: Private religious experience can provide a relevant evidential asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement.

The thesis is qualified by ‘can’ because it only applies to cases where the religious believer in question basis her religious beliefs (at least in part) on what she takes to be evidence from religious experience. Also, if the religious experience is not perceptually or phenomenally unique it couldn’t be used to create an asymmetry. I make no claims about whether or how often the Private Religious Experience Thesis obtains in the real world.⁴³

4. Religious Experience and the Religious Sceptic

4.1 The Pressure of Intuitive Knowing for the Sceptic

Thus far I have framed this debate as a solution to disagreement *for the religious believer*. But the underlying reason the arguments for conciliationism do not apply in such cases is because epistemic peerhood does not obtain in cases of religious

can be shared. But it is an open question whether evidence can ever be fully shared. See Ernest Sosa, “The Epistemology of Disagreement,” in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Alan Haddock, Adrian Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 278-297.

⁴³ My suspicion is that it occurs quite frequently, but nothing in my argument depends upon this being true.

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disagreement where one party's evidence is (at least partly) private religious experience.⁴⁴ Sceptical worries based on the existence of disagreement only get under way when two opponents are epistemic peers. If they have different bodies of evidence or their accuracy in assessing the evidence varies, then it is possible to identify a relevant epistemic difference that can justify reasonable disagreement. The disagreement literature focuses on cases where such differences do not exist. This fact raises interesting questions to the degree to which epistemic peerhood ever obtains in real-life cases of disagreement on *any topic*.⁴⁵ With respect to the religious beliefs (partly) based on private religious experience it has been observed that:

[I]n very many cases, parties to a religious disagreement do not form their judgments on a shared body of evidence. I'm thinking especially of religious believers who based their beliefs at least in part on private religious experiences they've had. The Equal-Weight View glides silently over the vast ocean of cases. So, for all the View says, it's reasonable to maintain one's religious beliefs in such cases of disagreement.⁴⁶

But at this point it might be objected that religious experiences can be *reported* and thus made public and objective (even if they are not repeatable like experiments in science). If such reports are trustworthy, then the testimony is sufficient to bring the opponents in a religious dispute to evidential parity. This implies that (i) religious experiences are not necessarily private in the way described in Section III, 2 and; (ii) religious experience cannot be used to explain the alleged asymmetry since opponents could gain the same insights via testimony.⁴⁷ Thus, it is possible to envisage a situation of epistemic peer disagreement over religious belief where religious experience is indeed part of the shared evidence. Once epistemic parity re-emerges due to testimony of the experience, the problem of disagreement for the religious believer also re-emerges.

In reply, it is true that perhaps apparitions and auditions had through normal sensory perceptions can be reported and hence made public. But intuitive knowing

⁴⁴ Stefan Reining, "Peerhood in Deep Religious Disagreements," *Religious Studies* 52 (2016): 403-419.

⁴⁵ Nathan L. King, "Disagreement: What's the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXXV (2012): 249-272.

⁴⁶ Thomas Bogardus, quoted in Reining, "Peerhood in Deep Religious Disagreements," 406. See also Tomas Bogardus, "Disagreeing with the (Religious) Skeptic," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 (2013): 5-17.

⁴⁷ There is a growing literature in social epistemology on the nature of testimony that I will not examine here.

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would not fall into this category since there is something uniquely *felt* about such experiences that is often described as being had through a faculty entirely distinct from normal sense perception.⁴⁸ Stefan Reining explains that “[o]bviously this difference between the two cases [normal perception and intuitive knowing] is due to the fact that in the second case, the experience in question is being had through a perceptual channel allegedly foreign to those who did not have experiences of the same peculiar kind.”⁴⁹ Such experiences are perceptually or phenomenological unique. So a relevant epistemic asymmetry can be maintained in cases where the religious experience is one of intuitive knowing.

Not only does this response satisfy the above worry, but Reining shows that it can begin to put epistemic pressure on the sceptic if her opponent reports such experiences. Imagine two sceptics about religious belief who are epistemic peers. One has a religious experience of intuitive knowing and comes to form religious beliefs (partly) on the basis of that unique experience. Up until the point of the experience the two sceptics were epistemic peers, and therefore had the same evidence. Reining explains that:

[T]hey regard each other as equally competent in recognizing relevant evidence regarding religious matters when having the evidence. Even though, right before getting to know about the disagreement, they already know that they now base their religious views on different bodies of evidence, and therefore no longer regard each other as peers, the fact just stated still constitutes a relation of similar epistemic significance. That is, even though, right before getting to know about the disagreement, they no longer regard each other as peers, they still have no reason not to regard the other as equally competent at the meta-level of recognizing relevant evidence when having it.⁵⁰

In such a scenario the sceptic is forced to acknowledge that if she had had a similar experience of intuitive knowing that she would have also come to hold religious beliefs. After all, she would assess such an experience in the same way as her opponent since they were epistemic peers up until the experience.⁵¹ Thus, the existence of private religious experiences such as intuitive knowing can form a conciliationist challenge for the sceptic when a scenario like the one described here occurs. This turns the challenge of religious disagreement against the sceptic rather

⁴⁸ Reining hints at this distinction but in different terminology (“Peerhood in Deep Religious Disagreements,” 407).

⁴⁹ Reining, “Peerhood in Deep Religious Disagreements,” 407.

⁵⁰ Reining, “Peerhood in Deep Religious Disagreements,” 409.

⁵¹ Reining, “Peerhood in Deep Religious Disagreements,” 410.

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than against the religious believer, at least when private religious experiences are part of the religious believer's total evidence. This discussion supports the following thesis:

The Religious Experience Peer Pressure Thesis: If a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer (if they were peers prior to the experience).

Of course, the Religious Experience Pressure Thesis doesn't imply that the sceptic must always conciliate when such experiences are reported. Experiences can be misleading and there are sometimes good reason to reject them. For example, one could recognize that she would believe an absurd proposition if she were hypnotised, but that does not mean she ought to revise if her opponent has been hypnotised and come to believe an absurd proposition.⁵² Part of the appropriate reaction may depend on the sceptic's initial beliefs about the legitimacy of such experiences in the first place.⁵³

Suppose someone like David Koresh claims to be the final prophet on the basis of intuitive knowledge. He claims that there's an evidential asymmetry between himself and his (many) opponents. Intuitive knowledge provides him with additional evidence his opponents simply lack. Not only is this epistemically problematic, but misleading experiences can ultimately cause harm and even death just as it did in the real Koresh case. It's true that in the account I've presented there is no in principle way to be sure of avoiding misleading experiences and the potentially problematic results that come with them. But this just makes the account I've offered here a fallibilistic one.

It's important to keep in mind the context in which we're discussing intuitive knowing. Intuitive knowing is a plausible evidential asymmetry in cases between opponents who are otherwise peers. Nothing in this means that we should exclude other evidence in favour of intuitive knowing. I don't have to conciliate with David Koresh, even if he reports intuitive knowing that I can't access, because we aren't epistemic peers at any time before his experience. In fact, I have better evidence and cognitive abilities than Koresh such that there aren't many, if any, topics that I need to be concerned about if I find myself in disagreement with him. So it's not as if intuitive knowing is evidence that swamps all other evidence. It's just evidence that one has *in addition* to all the other evidence that may very well be fully shareable

⁵² Reining, "Peerhood in Deep Religious Disagreements," 410.

⁵³ Reining, "Peerhood in Deep Religious Disagreements," 411.

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between the two opponents. Thus, while there's no in principle way to avoid misleading cases of intuitive knowing, there are reasons to think one won't frequently encounter such cases.⁵⁴

Finally, in cases where two opponents are epistemic peers up to the point of a private religious experience, the burden of proof is on the sceptic to explain why her opponent is mistaken. It's doubtful that many cases like Koresh will have this initial set-up between two peers. If at the time when the opponents are epistemic peers neither hold that religious experiences are necessarily non-veridical, then it is genuinely possible that the report of such an experience could require conciliation on the part of the sceptic. To assume otherwise would be to beg-the-question against the religious believer. What I have said here can be standardized as the following:

The Pressure

9. If B had experienced K then she would have additional evidence for *R*.
[True given they were peers until (7)]
10. Testimony of experience is reliable. [Assumption]
11. A testifies about K to B.

Therefore,

12. B has additional evidence for *R*. [The Pressure]

5. An Objection

The religious sceptic might object that intellectual visions aren't evidence because they can't be fully shared. This objection doesn't depend on denying the reliability of testimony. Rather, this objection is that whatever is testified about has to be in principle accessible to both peers. An intellectual vision isn't evidence because there is no way for that experience to ever be accessed by the peer who does not experience it. Intellectual visions can't be used to create an evidential asymmetry in a dispute since they aren't evidence.

This idea is an objection to both the Solution and the Pressure. It poses a challenge for the Solution because while (5) might be true in that intellectual visions are unique (6) is false because K doesn't constitute additional evidence for *R*. Thus,

⁵⁴ I suppose one could object that all of Koresh's followers were (epistemically) rightly misled if they had the same or worse evidence than him prior to Koresh having the experience. But I find it hard to believe that none of them simply failed to accurately assess the evidence accessible to them, even if for psychological reasons they aren't culpable for that.

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(7) and (8) don't follow. A and B are still epistemic peers with respect to whether *R*. So it's still the case that agent A needs to revise her belief that *R*. The success of the Solution is at risk. This implies that the success of the Pressure is also comprised. Even if (10) and (11) are true, (9) is still false since K isn't additional evidence for *R*. Thus, (12) is false and agent B does not have additional evidence for *R*.

Reply: Part of the focus of the disagreement literature is to figure out whether (i) higher-order considerations are evidence and; (ii) if it is evidence what weight, if any, should be accorded to it. But notice that in this project I have been assuming that conciliationism is true. I have therefore been assuming that the higher-order fact of disagreement is indeed evidence and however much weight should be accorded to it, it is enough to generate a sceptical worry for religious belief. The above objection assumes that there is a meaningful evidential distinction to be drawn between testimony of an experience and the experience itself. But I'm assuming that higher-order considerations are indeed evidence.

More to the point, what about the claim that evidence needs to be in principle fully shareable? Only a justified prima facie scepticism about the legitimacy of the reporter of the evidence or content of the report itself could justify this objection. Consider the following example: Consider the reports of transgender experience. Transgender persons often report that there is something uniquely *felt* about their experience. A person may have been born as a biological male but their experience of the world and themselves lead them to believe that they are a woman. Now, there a number of ways to understand the transgender phenomena. Some of these understandings have become increasingly or decreasingly morally or politically acceptable. One might think that transgendered are born with and hence predisposed to understand themselves as the opposite gender of their biology. Others might tell an explanatory story that involves free choice or sociological facts to explain the phenomena. Finally, others might understand this phenomena as a mental illness that should be treated as such.⁵⁵ But notice that on all of these interpretations the felt experience of the individual in question is not denied. The evidential import of the felt experience is just interpreted differently.⁵⁶ But no one denies that the experience occurs and that it constitutes evidence for *something*. A main part of the debate, then, is over what the evidence of such uniquely felt

⁵⁵ I take it that even this understanding is compatible with using surgery to transition.

⁵⁶ I do not claim that these are the only three possible interpretations. I make no argument for which interpretation is correct since doing so is not relevant to my argument here.

experiences are purported to support. So there is precedent for counting uniquely felt experiences as evidence.⁵⁷

One might argue that this response plays right into the hands of the objector. Why not think that an intuitive vision is the result of mental illness? Likewise, haven't people on LSD also reported experiences similar to that of intuitive knowing? Again, this type of response implies that *something* is occurring. This response is about what an intuitive vision is purported to support. But more noteworthy is the fact that scepticism about the intellectual vision begs-the-question about the religious believer. We don't expect evidence to be fully available or sharable in a whole host of other cases. It would therefore be unprincipled to expect the evidence of an intellectual vision to be fully shareable. This is especially clear in cases where the two opponents are epistemic peers right up until the vision.

A strategy that attempts to debunk the purported experiences may be similar to Hume's objection to miracles. According to Hume, only an unintelligent and uneducated person could possibly make the mistake of believing in the veracity of a miracle. Since all reports of miracles come from such people the reports aren't reliable. At the very least we ought to be more sure in the truth of the laws of nature than the veracity of such reports. And of course, testimony is always second-rate to actual sense experience.⁵⁸ I think that Hume's treatment of miracles is problematic for a variety of reasons I don't have space to consider here.⁵⁹ But even if one is more inclined than I am to agree with Hume's arguments for the implausibility of miracles this strategy simply isn't available to the religious sceptic in the scenario I'm examining in this paper.⁶⁰ Why? Because within the dialectical context we're exploring the religious believer reporting the experience is the religious sceptic's *epistemic peer*, at least right up until the intellectual vision occurs. Dismissing the religious believer's testimony on account of her being unintelligent and uneducated just isn't available to the sceptic in this case. The believer is just as intelligent and educated as the religious sceptic.

⁵⁷ It is open question how closely a religious experience of an intellectual visions is similar to what L.A. Paul calls a 'transformative experience.' See L.A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Also consider that over half of the results reported in the social science aren't repeatable.

⁵⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007 [1748]): Section X.

⁵⁹ Hume's scepticism about miracles has hardly been met with universal praise.

⁶⁰ Assume Hume's assessment of intellectual visions is the same as his assessment of miracles.

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With these thoughts in mind, it becomes difficult to see how the religious sceptic can reject the intellectual vision as evidence without begging-the-question against the religious believer. Unless the sceptic has a countervailing reason to think her opponent is unreliable (e.g. she took LSD prior to the experience) she has to take seriously the report as evidence. The sceptic can't even appeal to her prior commitment in ontological naturalism, for example, to justify rejecting the experience. For part of the very disagreement between the religious believer and religious sceptic is over the question of whether naturalism is true.⁶¹

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it's worth noticing that in cases of religious experience that are not cases of intuitive knowing and hence not perceptually or phenomenologically unique, that while two agents can be brought to evidential symmetry (assuming that testimony is reliable) the disagreement isn't straightforwardly a problem only for the religious believer. Here's the type of scenario I have in mind: Suppose there is a disagreement over religion between a religious believer and a religious sceptic. Religious experience such as a vision, audition, or near-death experience, or miraculous healing makes up part of the evidence about the dispute it question.⁶² Suppose the religious believer has had such an experience and that the religious sceptic has the testimony of the experience. Admittedly, if the two opponents really are epistemic peers and conciliationism is true then a sceptical threat has indeed been posed to religious belief. *But a threat has also been posed to the religious sceptic.* In such a scenario the sceptic must lower her credence or suspend judgment about her religious scepticism (depending on what version of conciliationism to which one subscribes). Therefore, in cases where religious experience does *not* constitute an evidential asymmetry in a disagreement between two opponents who

⁶¹ Assume that R entails supernaturalism and not-R entails ontological naturalism. This is also why one can't appeal to Hume's claim that we ought to be more sure of the laws of nature than the possibility of miracles in order to dismiss the report.

⁶² See Dumsday, "Evidentially Compelling Religious Experiences;" Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Heathcote-James, *Seeing Angels*; Meg Maxwell and Verena Tschudin, eds., *Seeing the Invisible: Modern Religious and Other Transcendent Experiences* (London: Penguin, 1990); Pirm van Lommel, Ruud van Wees, Vincent Meyers, and Ingrid Elfferich, "Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands," *The Lancet* 358 (2001): 2039-2045; John White, *When the Spirit Comes with Power: Signs and Wonders Among God's People* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998); Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus*.

are otherwise peers, the existence of religious experience may pose a challenge to the sceptic even if it offers no help to the believer.⁶³ This is represented by the fact that (4) includes belief revision for B's denial of *R*.

We saw that a common response to conciliationism in religious disputes is to allege an epistemic asymmetry between the religious believer and the religious sceptic. Self-trust, immediacy, and the reliability of introspection are not good candidates to explain this alleged asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement. A better explanation, at least in religious disputes, can be found in investigations of religious experience since such studies will be able to offer a potential relevant epistemic asymmetry in objective and public terms. But if intellectual visions are private, it can potentially justify a religious believer remaining steadfast in the face of disagreement. At the very least, it constitutes an additional piece of evidence that might only be available to the people who have had such experiences. But the private nature of such experience also helps to explain why appealing to it may not be satisfying to opponents. While many further questions remain about the epistemic value, if any, of (alleged) religious experience, intuitive knowing is a plausible way to understand the religious believer's claim to a special insight that her non-religious opponent lacks. So we have good reason to think that the Private Religious Experience Thesis is true. Namely, private religious experience can provide a relevant evidential asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement.

We also saw that in cases where two opponents are epistemic peers right up until the point of one having religious experience, the religious sceptic must deal with the testimonial report of her opponent's experience. Thus, the existence of private religious experiences such as intuitive knowing can form a conciliationist challenge for the sceptic when such disagreement occurs. This turns the challenge of religious disagreement against the sceptic rather than the religious believer, at least when private religious experiences are part of the religious believer's total evidence. I concluded that the burden of proof is on the objector to explain why the evidence needs to be in principle fully sharable, rather than merely reported, since

⁶³ In his article, "Evidentially Compelling Religious Experiences and the Moral Status of Naturalism," Travis Dumsday has argued that the pervasiveness of religious experiences where the content and context imply supernaturalism should force a settled metaphysical naturalist into a tentative metaphysical naturalist. Otherwise she immorally calls those reporting such experiences liars (on the assumption other naturalistic explanations can be ruled out) without just cause. Or she irrationally dismisses evidence against metaphysical naturalism. Dumsday's argument is stronger than what I claim here but is an excellent resource to help grasp how religious experience could constitute evidence in a peer disagreement.

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we don't use this standard with respect to other types of evidence. Finally, it's difficult to see how the objector could respond by rejecting the evidential import of an intellectual vision up front without begging-the-question against the religious believer. The evidential value of the intellectual vision is precisely what's under dispute. So we have evidence for the Religious Experience Peer Pressure Thesis. Namely, if a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer (if they were peers prior to the experience).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the *Theology and Philosophy of Science: Analytic, Scholastic, and Historical Perspectives* Conference held at Concordia University (Edmonton, October 2016) and at the *Disagreement, Higher-Order Evidence, and New Arguments for Scepticism* Symposium held at the *Canadian Philosophical Association, Annual Congress* (Ryerson University, June 2017). This paper benefited from comments and/or discussion with Travis Dumsday, Kate Elgin, Nick Griffin, Tim Kenyon, Klaas J. Kraay, and Phillip H. Wiebe. This paper was made possible, in part, by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

VALUES AND CREDIBILITY IN SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: Understanding science requires appreciating the values it presupposes and its social context. Both the values that scientists hold and their social context can affect scientific communication. Philosophers of science have recently begun studying scientific communication, especially as it relates to public policy. Some have proposed “guiding principles for communicating scientific findings” to promote trust and objectivity. This paper contributes to this line of research in a novel way using behavioural experimentation. We report results from three experiments testing judgments about the trustworthiness, competence and objectivity of scientists. More specifically, we tested whether such judgments are affected by three factors: consulting or not consulting non-scientists, conducting research under a restrictive or non-restrictive governmental communication policy, and the source of a lab’s funding (i.e., government funding, private funding, or a combination of the two). We found that each of these factors affects ordinary judgments of trustworthiness, competence and objectivity. These findings support several recommendations that could help improve scientific communication and communication policies.

KEYWORDS: socially relevant philosophy of science, values in science, experimental philosophy

Introduction

Science communication is integral to our society and its development. Timely access to important scientific information can improve citizens’ decision-making and, therefore, their lives. Not only should citizens have access to this information, but they should also have the opportunity to assess it and its relevance.¹ By contrast, limited or distorted information can degrade decision-making and cause serious harm, as has happened recently with renewed outbreaks of the measles and whooping cough in areas of North America where parents choose not to vaccinate

¹ Elizabeth Anderson, "Uses of Value Judgments in Science: A General Argument, with Lessons from a Case Study of Feminist Research on Divorce," *Hypatia* 19, 1 (2004): 1-24.

their children based on inaccurate information.² Similarly, there have been outbreaks of other vaccine-preventable diseases such as polio, mumps, and tuberculosis in other regions as the result of not vaccinating.³ According to science communicators, many scientists are motivated to not only discover the truth about their research questions, but also to share their findings with as wide an audience as possible and to make a positive contribution to society. Accordingly, they care about effective science communication because it is essential to achieving these goals.⁴ The perceived credibility of scientists is an essential part of effective science communication.

Philosophers of science have recently begun studying scientific communication, especially as it relates to values and public policy.⁵ Some have proposed “guiding principles for communicating scientific findings” to promote trust and objectivity.⁶ Others list principles for effective citizen assessment of scientific information.⁷ This takes place in the context of a more general recent debate over whether science is, or should be, “value-free.”

While value-free proponents argue that non-epistemic values have no role in the scientific process, many now recognize scientific practice as value-laden.⁸ Some

² Varun K. Phadke, Robert A. Bednarczyk, Daniel A. Salmon, and Saad B. Omer, "Association Between Vaccine Refusal and Vaccine-Preventable Diseases in the United States: A Review of Measles and Pertussis," *Jama* 315, 11 (2016): 1149-1158.

³ Eve Dube, Maryline Vivion, and Noni E. MacDonald, "Vaccine Hesitancy, Vaccine Refusal and the Anti-Vaccine Movement: Influence, Impact and Implications," *Expert Review of Vaccines* 14, 1 (2015): 99-117; Saad B. Omer, Daniel A. Salmon, Walter A. Orenstein, M. Patricia Dehart, and Neal Halsey, "Vaccine Refusal, Mandatory Immunization, and the Risks of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases," *New England Journal of Medicine* 360, 19 (2009): 1981-1988.

⁴ Anthony Dudo, "Toward a Model of Scientists' Public Communication Activity. The Case of Biomedical Researchers," *Science Communication* 35, 4 (2013): 476-501.

⁵ Anderson, "Uses of Value Judgments in Science," 1-24; Kevin Elliott and Daniel J. McKaughan, "Non-Epistemic Values and the Multiple Goals of Science," *Philosophy of Science* 81, 1 (2014): 1-21; Kyle Powys Whyte and Robert P. Crease, "Trust, Expertise, and the Philosophy of Science," *Synthese* 177, 3 (2010): 411-425.

⁶ Kevin C. Elliott and David B. Resnik, "Science, Policy, and the Transparency of Values," *Environmental Health Perspectives* 122, 7 (2014): 647-650.

⁷ Anderson, "Uses of Value Judgments in Science," 1-24; Heidi Grasswick, "Climate Change Science and Responsible Trust: A Situated Approach," *Hypatia* 29, 3 (2014): 541-557.

⁸ Kevin C. Elliott, "Direct and Indirect Roles for Values in Science," *Philosophy of Science* 78, 2 (2011): 303-324; Gillian Einstein, "Situated Neuroscience: Exploring. Biologies of Diversity," in *Neurofeminism: Issues at the Intersection of Feminist Theory and Cognitive Science*, eds. Robyn Bluhm, Anne Jaap Jacobson, and Heidi Lene Maibom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 145-

claim that non-epistemic values can legitimately play a direct role in the earlier stages of the scientific process, such as deciding which projects to pursue or how to fund them, but that they should have only an indirect role in the later stages, such as deciding which empirical claims to make.⁹ Others argue that because people are unavoidably situated in a particular social context, non-epistemic values may have a legitimate role in all stages of their research. On this approach, we should neither ignore nor proscribe the role of values, but instead embrace those values and manage them in ways that improve scientific practice.¹⁰

Relatedly, science communication is rife with non-epistemic values that play a role in the uptake of scientific information. Some researchers argue that philosophical research on values in science largely ignores the important role that collaboration plays in the scientific process.¹¹ Collaboration and communication between scientists, among scientific communities and, in some cases, relevant publics, often helps promote progress in science and philosophy of science.¹² Furthermore, research has shown that science communication and the uptake of information can be highly influenced by cultural predispositions.¹³ Therefore, the relationship between values in science and science communication warrants further investigation.

This paper contributes to our understanding of these issues in a novel way, by using behavioural experimentation. We report results from three experiments

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⁹ Heather Douglas, "Inductive Risk and Values in Science," *Philosophy of science* 67, 4 (2000): 559-579; Heather Douglas, *Science, Policy, and the Value-Free Ideal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Heather Douglas, "The Role of Values in Expert Reasoning," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 22, 1 (2008): 1-18.

¹⁰ Ingo Brigandt, "The Dynamics of Scientific Concepts: The Relevance of Epistemic Aims and Values," *Scientific Concepts and Investigative Practice* 3 (2012): 75; Sarah S. Richardson, *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Daniel Steel and Kyle Powys Whyte, "Environmental Justice, Values, and Scientific Expertise," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 22, 2 (2012): 163-182.

¹¹ Kristina Rolin, "Values in Science: The Case of Scientific Collaboration," *Philosophy of Science* 82, 2 (2015): 157-177.

¹² Heather Douglas, "Inserting the Public Into Science," In *Democratization of Expertise? Exploring Novel Forms of Scientific Advice in Political Decision-Making*, eds. Sabine Maassen and Peter Weingart, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 153-169; Carla Fehr and Kathryn S. Plaisance, "Socially Relevant Philosophy of Science: An Introduction," *Synthese* 177, 3 (2010): 301-316.

¹³ Dan M. Kahan, Hank Jenkins-Smith, and Donald Braman, "Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus," *Journal of Risk Research* 14, 2 (2011): 147-174.

testing judgments about the credibility of scientific research. More specifically, we tested whether such judgments were affected by three factors: whether scientists consult with non-scientists, whether scientists conduct research under a restrictive government communication policy, and the source of a lab's funding. We found that each of these factors affected ordinary judgments about credibility. Our findings support several recommendations to improve science communication.

Experiment 1

Some social scientists and philosophers of science have argued that communication from relevant publics is a critical part of the scientific research process.¹⁴ In particular, some argue that relevant publics have knowledge that can help improve scientific research, and that communicating with these publics and learning from them can improve scientific practice. However, it has also been argued that this part of the research process often gets overlooked and that scientists should pay more attention to it.¹⁵

Our goal in this experiment was to test people's judgments about the importance of consulting with relevant publics about scientific research. This experiment is modelled after a well-known case about a group of biologists in the United Kingdom who were studying the cause of high radiation levels found in lamb meat.¹⁶ These scientists were successful in their investigation only after consulting with sheep farmers in the area and learning about the sheep's grazing and drinking patterns. Our research question asked whether consulting with a relevant public increases the perceived credibility of scientific research.

¹⁴ Karin Bäckstrand, "Civic Science for Sustainability: Reframing the Role of Experts, Policy-Makers and Citizens in Environmental Governance," *Global Environmental Politics* 3, 4 (2003): 24-41; Dan Kahan, "What is the 'Science of Science Communication'?" *Journal of Science Communication* 14, 03 (2015): 1-12; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman, "Cultural Cognition;" Douglas, "Inserting the Public;" Whyte and Crease, "Trust, Expertise," 411-425.

¹⁵ Brian Wynne, "May the Sheep Safely Graze? A Reflexive View of the Expert-Lay Knowledge Divide," in *Risk, Environment and Modernity: Towards a New Ecology* eds. Scott Lash, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Brian Wynne (London: Sage, 1996): 44; Whyte and Crease, "Trust, Expertise," 411-425; Heidi E. Grasswick, "Scientific and Lay Communities: Earning Epistemic Trust through Knowledge-Sharing," *Synthese* 177, 3 (2010): 387-409.

¹⁶ Alan Irwin and Brian Wynne, eds. *Misunderstanding Science?: The Public Reconstruction of Science and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Wynne, "A Reflexive View," 44.

Method

Participants

One hundred forty-four participants were tested (aged 19-60, mean age = 32 years; 57 female; 94% reporting English as a native language). Participants were U.S. residents, recruited and tested online using Amazon Mechanical Turk and Qualtrics, and compensated \$0.35 for approximately 2 minutes of their time. The same recruitment and compensation procedures were used for all experiments reported in this paper. Repeat participation was prevented.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Consultation: extensive/none) \times 2 (Outcome: success/failure) between-subjects design. Each participant read one version of a story about scientists who are testing for radiation levels on sheep farms. The Consultation factor manipulated whether the scientists consulted with local sheep farmers before testing began. The Outcome factor manipulated whether the scientists ultimately discovered the radiation's cause. We included the Outcome factor to detect whether lack of consultation affected credibility only when the scientists failed (i.e. whether there was a Consultation \times Outcome interaction on credibility judgments). This is the story (with the manipulations separated by a slash in brackets):

Dangerous radiation was recently found in the lamb meat from a certain country. A group of scientists were then sent to test the radiation levels on sheep farms in the area. Before the scientists began testing, they [consulted extensively/did not consult] with the local sheep farmers and so [did/didn't] take into account their perspective on what happened to the sheep. After the testing was complete, the scientists [discovered/failed to discover] that the sheep were irradiated because they ate contaminated grass.

After reading the story, participants rated their agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

1. The scientists conducted the tests competently.
2. The scientists were objective.
3. The scientists are trustworthy.
4. The scientists should have consulted more with the local sheep farmers.

Each statement appeared on a separate screen while the story remained atop the screen. The statements were always presented in the same order. Participants could not return to a previous screen to change an answer. Responses were collected using a standard 6-point likert scale, 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 6 (“strongly agree”).

Participants then advanced to a new screen and answered a comprehension question from memory (response options rotated randomly):

5. The scientists _____ with the local sheep farmers. [consulted extensively/did not consult]

The correct response depended on the version of the story that the participant read. After testing, participants advanced to a new screen to complete brief demographic questionnaire.

Results

Ninety percent of participants (129 of 144) participants passed the comprehension check. We excluded from the analysis participants who failed, but including them results in the same basic pattern reported below. The same is true in all other experiments reported here. Preliminary regression analyses revealed that participant gender and age did not affect response to any of the dependent measures. The same is true for all the other experiments reported here. These demographic factors will not be discussed further.

For the purposes of analyzing the results, we calculated a “credibility score” based on the first three probes, about competence, objectivity and trust. It is prima facie plausible that these probes measure the same conceptual variable, and responses to the probes were highly internally consistent (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .858$), strongly suggesting that they measure the same underlying construct. For each participant, their credibility score was the mean of their response to the three items.

A univariate analysis of variance revealed that credibility score was affected by Consultation, $F(1, 125) = 11.25$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .083$, and by Outcome, $F(1, 125) = 47.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .277$, but not by their interaction, $p = .425$, n.s. (See Fig. 1.) Follow-up independent samples t-tests compared credibility scores between the Consultation conditions for both the success and failure conditions. In success conditions, credibility scores were higher when the scientists consulted ($N = 34$, $M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.81$) than when they did not consult ($N = 31$, $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(47.16) = 2.69$, $p = 0.10$. The size of the mean difference was medium-to-large, $MD = 0.78$, 95% CI [0.19, 1.35], $d = 0.78$. In failure conditions, credibility scores were higher when the scientists consulted ($N = 29$, $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.04$) than when they did not

consult (N = 35, M = 2.79, SD = 0.89), $t(62) = 1.95$, $p = .055$. The size of the mean difference was medium, MD = 0.47, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.96], $d = 0.50$.

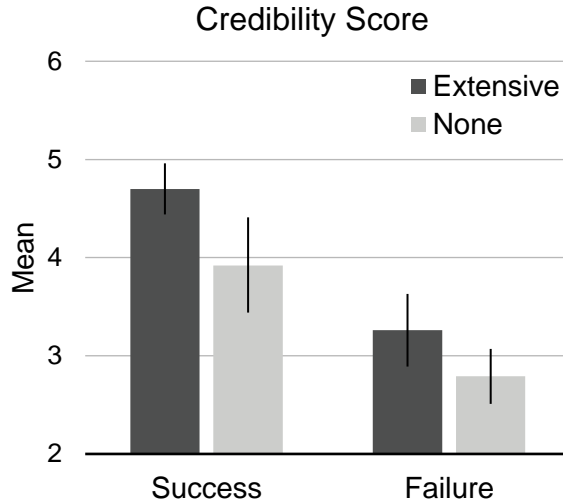


Fig. 1. Mean credibility scores in the four conditions. The scale ran 1 (low) - 6 (high). Error bars represent 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

A univariate analysis revealed that response to whether the scientists should have consulted more was affected by Consultation, $F(1, 125) = 84.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .403$, Outcome, $F(1, 125) = 6.01$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2 = .046$, but not by their interaction, $p = .544$, n.s. Follow-up independent samples t-tests revealed that in both success and failure conditions, when the scientists did not consult the locals, participants were more likely to agree that the scientists should have consulted more with the locals: success conditions, none/extensive, $M = 4.87/3.15$, $SD = 1.28, 1.02$, $t(63) = 6.02$, $p < .001$, MD = 1.72, 95% CI [1.15, 2.30], $d = 1.52$ (very large effect size); failure conditions, $M = 5.49/3.52$, $SD = 0.70/1.48$, $t(38.32) = 6.58$, $p < .001$, MD = 1.97, 95% CI [1.36, 2.57], $d = 2.13$ (very large effect size).

Discussion

This experiment tested whether people’s judgments about trustworthiness, competence and objectivity were affected by a scientist’s willingness to consult with non-scientists with relevant expertise. We found that consultation significantly affected all three sorts of judgment. More specifically, we found that when scientists

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consulted with relevant non-scientists about the research, participants perceived the scientists as more trustworthy, competent and objective. When scientists didn't consult with others, participants perceived them as less trustworthy, competent and objective. This suggests an important practical lesson for scientists: building consultation with non-scientists into the research process can make research more credible.

Having observed that scientists' perceived credibility can be affected by whether they consult non-scientists, we next investigated another factor we thought might influence perceived credibility: the official communication policy in a scientist's home nation.

Experiment 2

Researchers have recently criticized rules requiring government scientists to receive prior governmental approval before publishing research or communicating with journalists about findings.¹⁷ The criticisms have been based on general principles concerning the appropriate role of scientific research in modern democratic and industrialized societies. First, if the public is paying for research, then it should have access to the results. Second, if scientific communication is restricted, then relevant findings are less likely to inform policy decisions, thus degrading the quality of those decisions. Researchers argue that citizens should care about this because the consequences of restrictive communication policies can be, and already are, serious.

Without in any way disputing the relevance and importance of these criticisms or arguments, we are interested in studying another dimension of this critical issue. It is possible that people tend to mistrust scientific research produced in a nation with restrictive rules about science communication. That is, even before the consequences of the restrictions are pointed out to them, people might mistrust scientific research conducted under such a regime. Mere awareness of the restrictions might diminish the perceived credibility of scientific research. We designed a second experiment to test this possibility.

¹⁷ Heather Douglas, "The Value of Cognitive Values," *Philosophy of Science* 80, 5 (2013): 796-806; Thomas Homer-Dixon, Heather Douglas, and Lucie Edwards, "Fix the Link Where Science and Policy Meet," *The Globe and Mail*, June 23, 2014.

Method

Participants

One hundred forty new participants were tested (aged 18-68, mean age = 32 years; 51 female; 96% reporting English as a native language).

Materials and Procedure

The testing procedures were basically the same as in Experiment 1. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Policy: restrictive/unrestrictive) \times 2 (Outcome: help/harm) between-subjects design. Each participant read a single version of a story about government-employed scientists trying to communicate the results of their research. The Policy factor manipulated whether the scientists worked in a country where government scientists are required to receive permission from the government before publicizing results. The Outcome factor manipulated whether the scientists concluded that a certain development would help or harm the environment. This is the story (with the manipulations separated by a slash in brackets):

A corporation recently built a large facility near a major city. Scientists conducted tests around the facility, which suggest that its operation [helps/harms] the local environment. The scientists are currently writing up their conclusions. In their country, government scientists [are/are not] required to receive permission from the government before publishing papers or speaking to journalists about their research.

After reading the story, participants responded to four test statements and a comprehension question in the exact same way as in Experiment 1:

1. The scientists conducted the tests competently.
2. The scientists were objective.
3. The scientists are trustworthy.
4. The scientists should have to receive government permission before publishing their results.
5. In the country discussed, government scientists _____ required to receive permission before publishing results. [are/are not]

Results

Ninety-four percent of participants (131 of 140) passed the comprehension check. We calculated a “credibility score” for each participant in the same way as in Experiment 1 (i.e. the mean of the first three probes, about competence, objectivity and trust). Responses to the three probes again formed a highly reliable scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .837$).

A univariate analysis of variance revealed that credibility score was affected by Policy, $F(1, 127) = 8.42, p = .004, \eta^2 = .062$, but not by Outcome, $p = .407, n.s.$, or their interaction, $p = .254, n.s.$ (See Fig. 2.) A follow-up independent samples t-test revealed that credibility scores were lower when the communication policy was restrictive ($N = 66, M = 4.07, SD = 1.03$) than when it was unrestrictive ($N = 65, M = 4.57, SD = 0.89$), $t(129) = -3.03, p = .003$. The size of the mean difference was medium, $MD = -0.51, 95\% CI [-0.84, -0.17], d = 0.53$.

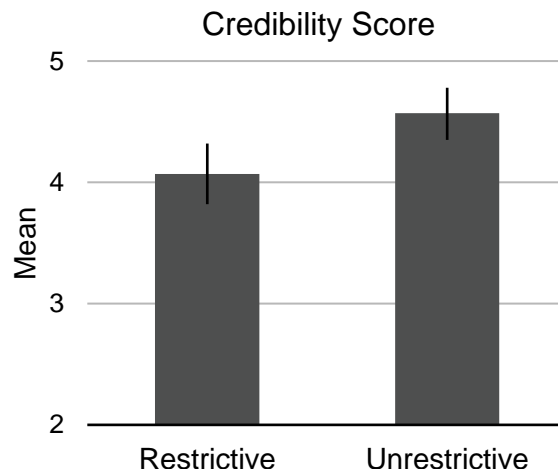


Fig. 2. Mean credibility scores when the communication policy was restrictive or unrestrictive (collapsing across good/bad outcome). The scale ran 1 (low) - 6 (high). Error bars represent 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

A univariate analysis revealed that response to whether scientists should have to receive government permission was unaffected by Policy, $p = .110, n.s.$, Outcome, $p = .752, n.s.$, or their interaction, $p = .335, n.s.$

Discussion

This experiment tested whether people's judgments about scientific credibility are affected by restrictive government policies for communicating scientific results. We found that restrictive policies diminished perceived credibility. More specifically, we found that when government scientists weren't constrained by government policy and were able to communicate their findings to the public, people perceived scientific research as more credible. This suggests an important practical lessons for scientists: having restrictive policies in place that prevent or make it difficult for scientists to communicate their findings to the public makes research less credible. Being aware of this in the earlier stages of scientific practice may help scientists deal with the problems this poses for their research in the later stages. It also suggests that policy changes may be in order if the government wants to improve the credibility of government-funded science.

Having observed that scientists' perceived credibility can be affected by their government's communication policies, we next investigated a third factor we thought might influence perceived credibility: government funding-cuts to important scientific research departments.

Experiment 3

Critics have recently suggested that government bodies are (at least in part) responsible for financially supporting various types of scientific research that is important to their development and prosperity. Moreover, they suggest that the government's financial support is a crucial part of advancing science for individual research labs as well.¹⁸ In other words, government funding plays a large role in the advancement of scientific research both for the scientists and for society, and government funds can be a helpful indicator of socially relevant science.

We are interested in studying the impact of government funding on the credibility of scientific research. For instance, it is possible that the source of a lab's funding, in particular whether it receives government funds, can affect the perceived credibility of that research. We designed an experiment to test this possibility.

¹⁸ Homer-Dixon, Douglas, and Edwards, "Fix the Link."

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Method

Participants

Two hundred and forty-two new participants were tested (aged 18-65, mean age = 32 years; 98 female; 94% reporting English as a native language).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 (Funding Source: government/corporate/both) x 2 (Recommendation: change/no change) between-subjects design. Each participant read a single version of a story about an independent meteorological lab conducting research about air traffic quality. The Funding factor manipulated whether the lab was funded by the government, a corporation, or both. The Recommendation factor manipulated whether the lab recommended no changes or major changes to current traffic infrastructure. This is the story (with the manipulations separated by a slash in brackets):

Atmospheric Labs is a meteorological lab that studies how traffic patterns affect air quality. The lab has a contract to investigate high levels of air pollution in the country. Atmospheric Labs is funded by [the federal government/the corporation Fuel Inc./both the federal government and the corporation Fuel Inc.]. After conducting a series of tests, the lab's scientists recommended [no changes at all/major changes] to the current traffic infrastructure.

After reading the story, participants responded to four test statements and a comprehension question in the exact same way as in Experiments 1 and 2:

1. The scientists conducted the tests competently.
2. The scientists were objective.
3. The scientists are trustworthy.
4. The scientists' recommendation should be implemented.
5. Atmospheric Labs is funded by _____. [government funds/corporate funds/government and corporate funds].

Results

Eighty-three percent of participants (202 of 242) passed the comprehension check. We calculated a "credibility score" for each participant in the same way as in Experiment 1 (i.e. the mean of the first three probes, about competence, objectivity

and trust). Responses to the three probes again formed a highly reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .902$).

A univariate analysis of variance revealed that credibility score was affected by Funding, $F(2, 196) = 8.20, p < .001, \eta^2 = .077$, and by Recommendation, $F(1, 196) = 50.48, p < .001, \eta^2 = .205$, but not by their interaction, $p = .524, n.s.$ (See Fig. 3.) We conducted a series of planned pairwise comparisons within each type of recommendation, using independent samples t -tests. When the lab recommended no changes, credibility scores did not differ between government funding ($N = 39, M = 3.71, SD = 1.08$) or dual government-corporate funding ($N = 34, M = 3.37, SD = 1.04$), $t(71) = 1.34, p = .182, n.s.$; credibility scores were higher for government funding than for corporate funding ($N = 29, M = 2.91, SD = 1.17$), $t(66) = 2.92, p = .005, MD = 0.80, 95\% CI [0.25, 1.35], d = 0.72$ (medium effect size); and credibility scores were marginally higher for dual government-corporate funding than for corporate funding, $t(61) = 1.66, p = .10, MD = 0.47, 95\% CI [-0.09, 1.02], d = 0.43$ (small effect size). When the lab recommended changes, credibility scores did not differ between government funding ($N = 38, M = 4.46, SD = 0.82$) and dual government-corporate ($N = 35, M = 4.47, SD = 0.67$), $t(71) = 0.01, p = .992, n.s.$; credibility scores were higher for government funding than for corporate funding ($N = 27, M = 3.94, SD = 0.84$), $t(63) = 2.52, p = .014, MD = 0.53, 95\% CI [0.11, 0.94], d = 0.64$ (medium effect size); credibility scores were higher for dual government-corporate funding than form corporate funding, $t(60) = 2.75, p = .008, MD = 0.53, 95\% CI [0.14, 0.91], d = 0.71$ (medium effect size).

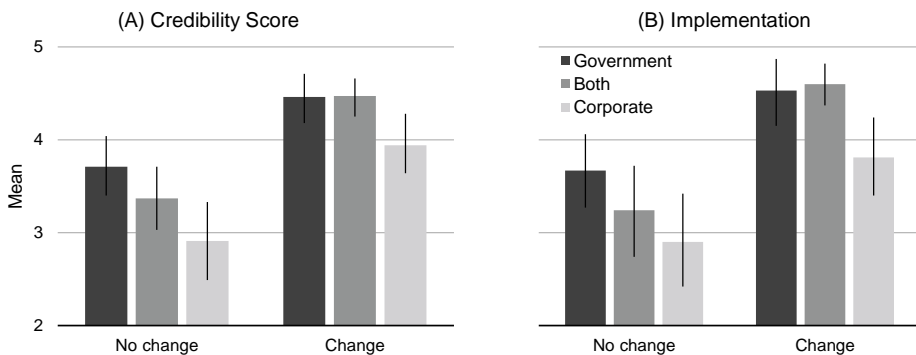


Fig. 3. Panel A: Mean credibility scores in the six conditions. Panel B: mean agreement that the policy recommendation should be implemented. Scales ran 1 (low) - 6 (high). Error bars represent 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

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A univariate analysis revealed that response to whether the lab's recommendation should be implemented was affected by Funding, $F(2, 196) = 6.47$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .062$, and by Recommendation, $F(1, 196) = 37.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .162$, but not by their interaction, $p = .399$, n.s. Judgments about implementation were very strongly positively correlated with credibility scores, $r = .842$, $n = 202$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

This experiment tested whether people's credibility judgments were affected by the source of a lab's funding in three cases: government funding, corporate funding and a mixture of government and corporate funding. We found that the funding source affected credibility judgments. More specifically, we found that people view a lab as more credible when it receives government funding, regardless of whether the lab also receives corporate funding. When a lab received only corporate funding, it diminished the lab's perceived credibility.

General Discussion

An important part of the scientific process is communicating results to interested publics. When scientific results are important for current policy debates and matters of public interest, perceptions of scientific credibility will affect public uptake of science. Nowhere is this more evident than in the recent controversies over the status of evolutionary theory in the science curriculum and the safety of childhood vaccines. It is no surprise, then, that researchers have begun considering the role that values play in the perceived credibility of scientific research and the effectiveness of science communication. For example, some researchers have recently argued that scientific results should be communicated with complete transparency about the values and background assumptions underlying the research, in an effort to promote trust and effective uptake.¹⁹ This is part of an important recent discussion, in science studies and the philosophy of science, about the role that values do and should play in scientific research.²⁰

¹⁹ Elliott and Resnik, "Science, Policy, and the Transparency of Values," 647-650.

²⁰ Anderson, "Uses of Value Judgments in Science," 1-24; Brigandt, "The Dynamics of Scientific Concepts," 75; Douglas, "Inductive Risk," 559-579; Douglas, "The Role of Values," 1-18; Douglas, *Science, Policy, and the Value-Free Ideal*; Einstein, "Situated Neuroscience," 145-174; Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Helen Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Helen E. Longino, *Studying Human Behavior: How Scientists*

In this paper we reported the results of three experiments testing people's judgments of scientific credibility. More specifically, we tested judgments about the trustworthiness, competence and objectivity of scientists and their research. We tested whether these judgments were affected by three factors: whether scientists consulted with non-scientists, whether scientists conducted research under a restrictive government communication policy, and the source of the lab's funding (government funding, private funding, or a combination of both). We found that perceived scientific credibility was increased by consulting with non-scientists (Experiment 1), by working in a nation with unrestrictive science communication policies (Experiment 2), and by receiving government funding (Experiment 3). We also found that perceived credibility was, unsurprisingly, strongly positively correlated with people's willingness to support a policy recommended by scientists (Experiment 3).

These findings suggest some recommendations for scientists interested in communicating their research to the public, or having their research affect debates or public policy. First, when feasible, scientists could build into their research programs consultation with interested non-scientists. For instance, a lab working to develop a vaccine could consult with local parent associations and inquire into concerns that parents might have about vaccines. Then, when communicating the results, the lab can report that parents were consulted and explain how the research directly addresses those concerns. Second, scientists could, either individually or through their professional associations, advocate for unrestrictive government communication policies for scientific research. Our findings suggest that a scientist's credibility can be affected by simply living and working in a country whose government imposes prior restrictions on scientific communication. This should be alarming to all scientists. Indeed, as the recent uproar in Canada over the Harper administration's science communication policy shows, retrograde communication policies can suddenly afflict even advanced democratic societies.²¹ Third, scientists should keep in mind the potential cost in credibility of restricting themselves to private funding for their research, because receiving government funding increases a scientist's credibility. To increase the perceived credibility of their research, they could seek support from government agencies and grant sources.

Investigate Aggression and Sexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Richardson, *Sex Itself*; Whyte and Crease, "Trust, Expertise," 411-425.

²¹ Homer-Dixon, Douglas, and Edwards, "Fix the Link."

Future work on this set of issues could take many directions, in addition to investigating limitations or weaknesses in any of the findings reported here. One direction is to explore the effect of other factors on people's credibility judgments. For instance, perhaps having a demographically and epistemically diverse research team or working in a nation that has recently cut funding for scientific research affects perceived credibility. Another direction is to investigate credibility judgments among more specific populations. Although public uptake of science is a worthy goal and, in many cases, integral to a research team's mission, it is not always a goal. But scientists are almost always concerned with communicating their results to other scientists, either for publication or for securing funding. It is an open question whether the same factors that affect ordinary people's credibility judgments also affect professional scientists' credibility judgments. Accordingly, it would be worth exploring investigating these same questions among a population of scientists. Finally, whereas we investigated these issues by having people read information about scientific research, different factors might be relevant for assessing the credibility of scientific research communicated in other media, such as radio, podcasts, or television.^{22,23}

²² *Acknowledgments* — This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, an Early Researcher Award from the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Innovation, and the Canada Research Chairs Program. Thanks to audiences at the Canadian Society for the History and Philosophy of Science (Ottawa, Ontario, 2015) and a meeting of Socially Relevant Philosophy of/in Science and Engineering (Detroit, Michigan, 2015).

²³ All the data reported in this paper is openly available at the following Open Science Foundation project: Janet Michaud John Turri (2018, June 15). Values and credibility in science communication. Retrieved from osf.io/v2udm.

SAFETY AND THE PREFACE PARADOX

Michael J. SHAFFER

ABSTRACT: In the preface paradox the posited author is supposed to know both that every sentence in a book is true and that not every sentence in that book is true. But, this result is paradoxically contradictory. The paradoxicality exhibited in such cases arises chiefly out of the recognition that large-scale and difficult tasks like verifying the truth of large sets of sentences typically involve errors even given our best efforts to be epistemically diligent. This paper introduces an argument designed to resolve the preface paradox so understood by appeal to the safety condition on knowledge

KEYWORDS: safety, the Preface Paradox, truth, knowledge

1. Introduction

David Makinson discovered the preface paradox and it arises out of a story of the following sort, although there are some variations in the details.¹ Suppose there is an author of a significantly long non-fiction book and that that author is especially diligent in having carefully attempted to establish the truth of every sentence in the book in question. So, on this basis, the author claims to know that every individual sentence in the book is true. The author then reasons, by agglomeration, that she knows that the conjunction of every sentence in the book is true. Suppose further, however, that, based on past experience of error involving non-fiction books composed of large sets of sentences, the author knows also that it is overwhelmingly likely that she has made a mistake somewhere in the book. So, it seems to be the case that the author knows that at least one of the sentences in the book is false. She knows that the disjunction of the denials of every sentence in the book is true. As a result, the author is supposed to know both that every sentence in the book is true

¹ See David Makinson, "The Paradox of the Preface," *Analysis* 25 (1965): 205-207, Doris Olin, *Paradox* (Montreal: Queens-McGill University Press, 2003), ch. 4 and Roy Sorensen, "Epistemic Paradoxes," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/epistemic-paradoxes/>> (2011).

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and that not every sentence in the book is true. But, this result is paradoxically contradictory. The paradoxicality exhibited in such cases arises chiefly out of the recognition that large-scale and difficult tasks like verifying the truth of large sets of sentences typically involve errors even given our best efforts to be epistemically diligent. This paper introduces an argument designed to resolve the preface paradox so understood by appeal to the safety condition on knowledge.²

2. Knowledge and Safety

The safety condition on knowledge is a necessary condition for knowing that has been most systematically defended by Williamson, Sosa and Pritchard.³ It is supposed to reflect the basic idea of the sort of reliability associated with bona fide knowledge that notably distinguishes it from accidentally true belief. The safety condition can be understood simply as follows:

If A knows that p , then A could not easily have falsely believed that p .

This relatively non-technical gloss on safety and it can be made more precise as follows:

(Safety) $(w_i \models K_A p) \rightarrow \neg [\langle w_i \rangle \models (B_A p \& \neg p)]$.

Here ' $\langle w_i \rangle$ ' is the set of world sufficiently close to w_i and ' $B_A p$ ' represents that A believes that p . So understood, the safety condition is the claim that if A knows that p at w_i , then A does not believe that p when p is false in worlds sufficiently

² This is the so-called "knowledge" version of the paradox, but there are other related paradoxes involving states other than outright knowledge. The most prominent of these other versions involve rational belief that does not rise to the level of knowledge, where rational belief is defined in a qualitative way (as opposed to involving a fixed probability threshold). Clearly then, the knowledge version of the paradox is a restricted case of the rational belief version where the rationality of belief rises to the level of knowledge. This is important because if safety or some weekend correlate of safety applies to rational belief in addition to knowledge, then the solution offered here (or something very like it) may have broader application to the mere rational belief versions of the paradox.

³ Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Ernest Sosa, "How to Defeat Opposition to Moore," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 141-154, Duncan Pritchard, "Anti-Luck Epistemology," *Synthese* 158 (2007): 277-298, Duncan Pritchard, "Knowledge, Luck, and Lotteries," in *New Waves in Epistemology*, eds. Vincent Hendricks and Duncan Pritchard (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 28-51, Duncan Pritchard, "Safety-Based Epistemology: Whither Now?" *Journal of Philosophical Research* 34 (2009): 33-45, and Duncan Pritchard, *Knowledge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

similar to w_i . This regimentation captures the core idea of the safety condition well. What is useful here is the contrapositive of safety:

$$\text{(Contrapositive Safety)} [\langle w_i \rangle \models (B_A p \ \& \ \neg p)] \rightarrow \neg(w_i \models K_A p).$$

This version of safety essentially is the assertion that if A could easily have falsely believed that p , then A does not know that p . More technically, it is the claim that if in worlds sufficiently similar to w_i A believes that p and p is false, then A does not know that p at w_i . As noted above, safety has independent merit as a condition on knowledge as it reflects a primitive notion of reliability. One compelling way to deal with what is going on in preface cases is then to appeal to the safety condition on knowledge and to argue that—despite appearances to the contrary—the author in preface case does not, in point of fact, know that the conjunction of every sentence in the book she authored is true. What will ultimately be shown here is that if safety is a necessary condition on knowledge, then there is a clear way out of the preface paradox that does not involve anything radical at all (e.g. subscriptions to dialethism and the like). That is to say, it offers a short path to a straight solution to the paradox by showing that one of the paradox constituting propositions that seems to be true, is, in fact, false.

3. The Safety Solution to the Preface Paradox

Let us then make the presentation of the knowledge version of the preface paradox more precise and see how attention to the safety condition results in this sort of straight resolution of that paradox. Where b_1, b_2, \dots, b_n are the sentences that constitute a non-fiction book authored by A and where n is sufficiently large we can generate the preface paradox as follows:

$$\text{(PP1) for all } n, K_A(b_n).^4$$

This is simply the claim that A knows that every sentences in the book is true. This amounts to the following claim for a book with n sentences:

$$\text{(PP2) } K_A b_1 \ \& \ K_A b_2 \ \& \dots \ \& \ K_A b_n.$$

By agglomeration this implies:

$$\text{(PP3) } K_A(b_1 \ \& \ b_2 \ \& \dots \ \& \ b_n).$$

⁴ Of course, what is really known are the propositions expressed by these sentences. For the purposes of fidelity to typical presentations of the paradox we can ignore this little complication.

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In other words, A knows that every individual sentence in the book is true and so knows that the conjunction of sentences constituting the book is true. On the other hand, based on good evidence about our fallibility in general and specifically about our fallibility in preface-like cases involving such complex tasks, we also have the following principle:

(PP4) $K_A(\neg b_1 \vee \neg b_2 \vee \dots \vee \neg b_n)$.

In other words, based on A 's past performance with respect to tasks like the one in question, A knows that there is at least one false sentence in the book. But, PP3 and PP4 are contradictory and so we have a paradox.

As Olin points out, the basic nature of a paradox is that it involves a set of propositions A each of which is *prima facie* reasonable to endorse, but where (in the context of background knowledge Σ) the set A appears to imply a contradiction.⁵ So paradoxes are essentially sets of propositions that appear to be individually rationally endorsable but which cannot collectively be endorsed. This can be because the set A is itself internally inconsistent or because A appears to imply some proposition p and Σ implies $\neg p$. Let us refer to a given set A_i as the *paradox constituting propositions* of paradox i . We can then also present paradoxes as deductive arguments where the members $\lambda_1, \lambda_2, \dots, \lambda_n$ of a given set A are the premises and where they either appear to directly imply ($p \& \neg p$) or where A appears to imply p and Σ implies $\neg p$. So in this case {PP3, PP4} is a paradox generated by the preface paradox story. Safety is part of our background theory of knowledge and in order to resolve the paradox in a straight manner one or more of PP3 and PP4 has to be given up.

The safety solution to the knowledge version of the preface paradox then involves the recognition that we ought to accept safety and PP4 but reject PP3, thus resolving the paradox. Safety helps to explain why it is not the case that $K_A(b_1 \& b_2 \& \dots \& b_n)$ even where the author has been diligent in checking each sentence in the book. This is because A could easily have falsely believed that $(b_1 \& b_2 \& \dots \& b_n)$ where n is large, and so A does not really know that $(b_1 \& b_2 \& \dots \& b_n)$. This is easily seen by noting that there are clearly many conceivable close possible worlds where the author believes $(b_1 \& b_2 \& \dots \& b_n)$ on the basis of her careful and diligent attempts to verify each b_n but where, nevertheless, $(b_1 \& b_2 \& \dots \& b_n)$ is false because one or more of the sentences in the book is false as per PP4. This is simply because we are fallible knowers, especially in the case of complex tasks like verifying

⁵ See Olin, *Paradox*.

the truth of large bodies of sentences. But that means that the author A does not in fact know the conjunction of the set of sentences that constitute the book in question despite her best efforts to verify every sentence individually. The belief that $(b_1 \& b_2 \& \dots \& b_n)$ is unsafe and, again, this will be true for every such preface case where n is sufficiently large.

PEER DISAGREEMENT: SPECIAL CASES

Eric WILAND

ABSTRACT: When you discover that an epistemic peer disagrees with you about some matter, does rationality require you to alter your views? Concessivists answer in the affirmative, but their view faces a problem in special cases. As others have noted, if concessivism itself is what's under dispute, then concessivism seems to undermine itself. But there are other unexplored special cases too. This article identifies three such special cases, and argues that concessivists in fact face no special problem.

KEYWORDS: disagreement, rationality, epistemic peerhood

Suppose you believe that 1) p , that 2) Z is your epistemic peer in domain D , and that 3) p is in domain D . Then you come to believe that 4) Z believes not- p . For example, it could be that Z = your office neighbor, D = meteorology, and p = it will snow tomorrow. Does rationality require you, upon coming to believe 4, to revise anything you believe? I think that it does. Here, I will defend the concessive view against several objections arising from special cases, only one of which has yet been widely discussed.

If rationality does require you to revise what you believe, there are several options. Of course, faced with peer disagreement you may stop believing p , or at least lower your confidence that p . That is, you could modify your belief in 1. That's one option.

A second option is to revise your belief that Z is your epistemic peer. Upon learning that Z believes not- p , you might conclude that you are epistemically superior to Z , or at least lower your confidence in the claim that you two are epistemic peers about this domain. Whether you take the first or the second option would seem to depend upon how comparatively confident you were in 1 and in 2 to begin with. If you were very confident in 1, you might give up believing in 2. If you were very confident in 2, you might give up believing in 1.

Although these are the two most natural options, there are others. You might lose confidence in 3. That is, you might have thought that p was in the domain of facts about which you and Z are epistemic peers. But perhaps that's not true. Perhaps

p falls outside of that domain. You might conclude that D is narrower than you had realized, or you might just see now that matters like whether p fall outside of domain D.

The final option I'll consider is to revise your belief in 4. You come to think that Z believes not-p, but now you might be unsure whether that really is true. Perhaps you misheard or misunderstood Z. Perhaps Z misspoke. Perhaps Z was speaking sarcastically. Perhaps you are just dreaming that Z said not-p. Such things are possible. And so there are occasions where you might be less confident that Z believes not-p than you are in matters 1-3.

The lesson, here, is that if you revise your views in the face of peer disagreement, there are several different views you could revise. Often, you'll concede on the matter under dispute, but not always. You might change your view about one or other of the related matters. Different disagreements in different contexts will call for different kinds of adjustments.

Suppose that in the face of peer disagreement rationality does require you to modify your beliefs *in some way or another*. Some have tried to show that this supposition has a problem: if epistemic peers disagree specifically about whether rationality requires you to revise what you believe in the face of peer disagreement, then the peer who follows his concessive view will thus give up his concessive view, a move which in retrospect can make no sense to him.¹

I suggest that fans of the concessive view remember their own view: in the face of apparent peer disagreement about the concessive view itself, you are rationally required to revise only either 1 and/or 2 and/or 3 and/or 4. Rationality does require you to change at least *one* of these views, but is itself silent about which. If you are concessive and you give up 1, you will be giving up your view about what to do in the face of apparent peer disagreement, thereby undercutting your grounds for your change in view. That *does* seem irrational.

But to embrace a concessive view need not require that you give up your belief in the very matter under dispute. You might instead give up your belief in either 2, 3, or 4. All the concessive view requires is that you modify *one* of your several relevant beliefs. But it does not tell you which of these several beliefs to give up. Rationality is thus in a sense wide-scoped. In the case of apparent peer disagreement, where the disputed issue is specifically what rationality requires in the face of apparent peer disagreement, this concessive view leaves you with options.

¹ The locus classicus is Adam Elga, "How to Disagree about How to Disagree," in *Disagreement*, eds. Ted Warfield and Richard Feldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 175-186.

The concessive view so understood does not require you to reject *itself* in the face of apparent peer disagreement. That *would* be crazy. It requires only that you make some relevant adjustment or other. As long as your confidence in the concessive view exceeds your confidence in one of your other relevant beliefs, you will not find yourself in a situation where following the concessive view is self-defeating.

This is not a merely ad hoc response to the problem arising from peer disagreement about what rationality requires in the face of peer disagreement. One way to motivate modifying your belief in 2 rather than 1 is that belief in 2 is always a posteriori, while belief in 1 (in the special case where p = the concessivist view) is plausibly a priori. A posteriori beliefs are more sensitive to the acquisition of new a posteriori beliefs, such as 4, than a priori beliefs are. Now I don't want to endorse the view that we should *always* be more confident in our a priori beliefs than our a posteriori beliefs. That view is too crude. But it's no surprise that coming to learn 4 should alter some other a posteriori belief of ours, instead of altering our view about the very nature of rationality.

Avoiding the sort of self-defeat that arises from peer disagreement about peer disagreement is not the only problem that special cases pose for the concessive view. I now want to investigate *other* special cases that, to my knowledge, have not received similar attention.

Consider briefly first the case where $1=4$, where $p = Z$ believes not- p . Z 's belief is thus self-referential. But this does not appear to be a coherent possibility. Spelling things out, $p = Z$ believes that it is not the case that Z believes that it is not the case that Z believes that...ad infinitum. I seriously doubt it is *possible* for anyone to believe such a thing. At best, it's crazy to believe it. But if Z does believe it, you would again do best to revise your belief in 2, for Z no longer seems rational enough to be your epistemic peer. Thus this special case poses no problem for the concessive view. We can set this case aside.

Next consider the case where $1=3$, where the matter under dispute is whether p is part of some domain D . You believe that you and Z are epistemic peers with respect to domain D . The statement p , which *you* believe, is, again, self-referential. $p =$ this (very) statement is in D . It's a bit tough to imagine what domain D could even plausibly be. (The domain of self-referential expressions?) But it's not completely incoherent, as with the previous case.

Suppose first that in cases of peer disagreement you are never concessive. Then this case — the case where $1=3$ — presents no new problem for you.

Suppose next that in cases of peer disagreement you are typically somewhat concessive. In the case where $1=3$, you then will be tempted to be concessive too. So that means that you will be tempted to modify your belief that p is in D . But your grounds for being concessive *depends* upon p in fact being in D . Modifying your belief that p is in D on the grounds that p is in D just makes no sense. This special case seems to pose a problem for the concessive view.

Note the asymmetry in this case. Z does not believe that p ; that is, Z does not believe that this (very) statement is in D . So the fact that *you* initially believe otherwise does not move him, because even if he thinks that you are an epistemic peer with respect to matters in D , he is not inclined to think that you are an epistemic peer on p itself. Z can thus coherently stand his ground. You, however, seem to have no coherent place to stand.

Perhaps you can escape this trap by giving up 2 or 4. The situations in which it is plausible to give up 4 are few. That is not a good general strategy. Better to think about giving up 2, the thought that Z is your epistemic peer. In fact, this now is a sensible move. Best of all, it does not seem ad hoc. For if Z doesn't agree with you about what falls under the domain in question, it seems rational to conclude that Z is not your epistemic peer in that domain after all. Thus as with the last special case, this one too poses little problem for the concessive view. We can set this special case aside too.

Consider finally the case where $1=2$, the claim that Z is your epistemic peer. This is the most interesting case. You believe p : that Z is your epistemic peer in D . But Z does not believe this. Unlike with the other special cases, the matter under dispute is *not* self-referential. 2 makes no explicit mention of p .

There are multiple ways Z might disagree with you about whether you two are epistemic peers with respect to domain D . Suppose first Z believes that Z is epistemically superior to you. It seems that if you were willing to be at all concessive before, then you should be even more concessive now. You think Z is an epistemic peer, but Z disagrees, thinking he is superior to you. This does not undercut your inclination to concede; on the contrary, if anything it should strengthen it. So you change your mind and agree with Z that Z is epistemically superior to you (although perhaps not *as* superior as Z thinks). The concessive view has no trouble handling this possibility.

Suppose instead that Z believes that Z is epistemically inferior to you. If you weren't willing to be concessive before, nothing changes. But if you *were* willing to be concessive before, you have a problem. Do you concede, either by believing that

you are indeed at least a little superior (as Z thinks), or alternatively by simply suspending judgment about whether you are epistemic peers? But if you *are* superior, why were you conceding to (now, by your lights) your epistemic inferior about the matter in the first place? It would seem that if Z were right, such that you are in fact epistemically superior with respect to judgments like this, you should have been sticking to your guns, and hanging on to your original view.

This appears to be a big problem for concessivist views. As we saw earlier, many philosophers are worried about how to cope with the fact that philosophers disagree about what rationality requires in the face of peer disagreement. But that is a very parochial concern. A much more widespread concern is that ordinary people disagree with each other all the time about whether they are epistemic peers in the first place. And when you disagree with someone whom you regard as a peer, but who regards you as a superior, trouble emerges.

Here is one way a concessivist might try to escape this problem. Think about *when* the rules of peer disagreement apply. Do rules about what to do in cases of peer disagreement apply to you only if you *both* agree about whether you are epistemic peers? Or do they apply to you even if *only you* think that you two are epistemic peers? Those who answer the latter affirmatively will immediately run into the vicious paradox described above. But if rationality requires concessiveness only once both parties agree that they are peers, the above problem can be sidestepped.

One might wonder whether this move merely exchanges one problem for another. For it may seem objectionably ad hoc to limit concessiveness only to cases where both parties agree that they are epistemic peers. Is it really objectionably ad hoc? No. It is perfectly rational for you to take into account what Z thinks about who is his epistemic peer as you are determining whether Z is your epistemic peer *about matters of epistemic peerhood*. It is not ad hoc to base your decision upon such factors. What Z thinks about who counts as his epistemic peer is not merely relevant *higher-order* evidence. It is *direct* evidence. It would be wrong to ignore it.

To see this, suppose that before knowing Z's specific opinion about how the two of you compare, you regard Z as an epistemic peer about matters like judging epistemic competence. You already have some evidence for this view. Then you learn that Z believes that Z is inferior to you. You might rationally revise your view about whether Z is your epistemic peer about epistemic competence, but not because you are applying some view about what to do in the face of peer disagreement, but because Z's opinion here is itself *direct* evidence about whether Z is an epistemic

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peer about judging epistemic competence. And since Z's opinion fails to match yours, you will revise your opinion of Z downwards. Z's opinion here affects your assessment of his judgment, but not because his opinion is specifically about *you*. Rather, it's just another piece of evidence for you to use to determine how good of a judge of epistemic competence Z is. And so you will think that Z is not as good as you had previously thought. Such a train of thought is not objectionably ad hoc.

A concessivist might bolster her defense by also adopting a partners-in-guilt approach. Consider a case where you are wondering whether to defer, not to your epistemic peer, but to someone you deem to be your epistemic superior. Even opponents of concessivist views of peer disagreement will acknowledge that it is appropriate to believe *superiors*. Now suppose that you have evidence that leads you to think that Z is your epistemic superior about epistemic competence. You are thus strongly inclined to trust what Z says about matters of epistemic competence. To your surprise, Z tells you that you and Z are epistemic peers about epistemic competence. You might then question whether Z is quite as good a judge of epistemic competence as you had been thinking! The fact that Z thinks you are as good as he is makes your doubt his abilities. And, of course, since you trust(ed) his judgement, you might accept his opinion here too. The force of both of these points is the same. Both points lead you to accept (or to move closer to the judgment) that Z is your epistemic peer, not superior, about matters of epistemic competence. So it is not only the concessivist who finds herself in the sort of predicament identified above. *Anyone* who thinks it is sometimes wise to defer to others can face this problem. The concessivist faces no *special* problem here.

The only way I see to avoid this problem entirely is to hold that no one else is as good at judging epistemic competence as you yourself are. That way, you'll never be committed to defer to someone who tells you that you are better at judging epistemic competence than you thought you were. Call this *the know-it-all response*. While the know-it-all response does not run in to the problem we have been exploring, it is patently unattractive on other grounds.

I conclude, then, that the special cases considered here pose no specific problem for the concessive view about peer disagreement.

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