

Disagreement and Skepticism

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There is a long history of using facts about disagreement to argue that many of our most precious beliefs are false in a way that can make a difference in our lives. In this essay I go over a series of such arguments, arguing that the best arguments target beliefs that meet two conditions: (i) they have been investigated and debated for a very long time by a great many very smart people who are your epistemic superiors on the matter and have worked very hard under optimal circumstances to figure out if the belief is true, and (ii) as far as you know these people have not come to any significant agreement on the belief and as far as you know those who agree with you are not, as a group, in a better position to judge the belief than those who disagree with you.

Odds are, you have some beliefs that you know full well to be fairly controversial. Perhaps you think God exists, we have free will, socialism is better than communism, affirmative action is unjust, and global warming is going to be catastrophic. Or think of beliefs that aren't out there in the public eye but are controversial none the less: your belief that father had an affair when you and your sister were ten years old (you believe it, your sister denies it), or your opinion that your son lied about stealing from the corner store (your spouse thinks he's innocent, you disagree). In each case, you are well aware that there are people who disagree with you—people who aren't foolish or evidentially challenged or any more biased than you are. And yet you think you're right and they're wrong; and you're holding fast to your view even though you know that the people who disagree with you have heard your side of the story, have understood it, and still think you're wrong. You're aware that your reasons, the ones that convinced you of the belief in question, have not impressed them enough to agree with you.

In such a scenario, your belief may well be the true one; good for you. But will it amount to *knowledge*? Will it be *wise* for you to stick to your belief in those circumstances? The disagreement skeptic thinks that awareness of disagreement provides one with a reason to think one's belief is false—a reason often strong enough to make one's epistemic position impoverished in the event that one retains one's belief in the face of recognized disagreement.

1. *Traditional Skepticism vs. Disagreement Skepticism*

Disagreement skepticism is importantly different from traditional skepticism, not only with regard to the supporting argument, which will be obvious, but with regard to what the conclusion comes to. To see this, ask yourself how much we should *worry* about whether traditional philosophical skepticism is true.

Consider the following standard argument for one traditional kind of philosophical skepticism:

1. If a person knows that she has hands, then she can know that she wasn't kidnapped by Santa and unwittingly made into a handless brain in a vat (BIV).
2. If she can know that she wasn't kidnapped by Santa and unwittingly made into a handless BIV, then she must have evidence, broadly construed, that rules out that BIV scenario.
3. But she doesn't have any such evidence.
4. Thus, she doesn't know that she has hands.

There are just five possibilities with respect to this argument.

Premise (1) is false. She knows she has hands but can't know that she isn't a handless BIV via Santa's lunacy. That's pretty odd: if she knows she has hands, then why can't she then deduce that she isn't a *handless* BIV?

Premise (2) is false. Our subject knows she isn't a Santa-induced handless BIV but she has no evidence that rules out that BIV possibility. That's odd too: how can someone know that X doesn't obtain unless she has some evidence that rules out X's obtaining?

Premise (3) is false. She has some evidence that rules out the BIV scenario. That's pretty odd too. For instance, it seems clear that there's nothing she can *do* to rule it out, like checking her hands carefully, pinching herself, or researching Santa Claus. Anything she can point to as evidence could easily be part of Santa's deception.

A fourth possibility is that the claims in the argument are ambiguous, different disambiguations have different truth-values, and different disambiguations will be "chosen" depending on subtle contextual factors (of the subject, the person asserting (1)-(4), or the person evaluating those assertions).

The fifth possibility is that the argument (1)-(4) is sound; this is a type of traditional philosophical skepticism.

What is interesting, and what makes much of this book worthwhile, is the fact that no matter which of the five theories is right about (1)-(4), the correct one says something interesting about knowledge, evidence, and perhaps related epistemic notions.

But once you understand the reasoning behind the traditional skeptical thesis, that thesis gets robbed of a good portion of its oddness. All the skeptic is saying with her (1)-(4) is that the notion *knowledge* is a lot more peculiar than we thought it was: she is not saying that our ordinary beliefs are false or even that our overall evidence goes strongly against our ordinary beliefs. With some more detail:

- (a) The traditional skeptic is not saying that our belief B is false.
- (b) She is not saying that our overall evidence is strongly against B (so much so that we should disbelieve B).
- (c) She admits that everything we point to as evidence for B really does exist and is at least prudentially relevant to our holding B.
- (d) She admits that we haven't overlooked some new and powerful evidence against our belief.
- (e) She just says that technically speaking, all that stuff we *call* evidence for our belief doesn't actually support our true belief B enough to make it knowledge or justified: that "evidence" (e.g., our sensory experiences) provides much weaker support than we think it does. That is, according to her we have not so much missed out on some evidence (that's (d)) as badly misjudged the strength of the so-called evidence we already possess (that's (e)).
- (f) According to her it is simply *impossible* to discover whether B is true; so we might as well go on acting the way we did before, when we believed B.
- (g) Her skepticism is limited: it doesn't apply to beliefs about our own minds or mathematics.

Furthermore, although I won't argue for it I think the following is true as well:

- (h) Contextualism, pragmatic encroachment, relevant alternatives theory, reliabilism, and Gricean maneuvers each supply *prima facie* serious objections to her skeptical argument (see Rysiew 2011 and Goldman 2011 for explanations of these ideas).

This just doesn't strike me as a terribly worrisome kind of skepticism. Even if I become convinced that this traditional kind of skepticism is true, I won't be worried that my belief is false in any way that really matters. It's even tempting—we see undergraduates do this all the time—to think that *even if the skeptic is right* our belief is true “in our reality”, in the reality we are epistemically confined to. Sure, our belief might not be true “in the grand scheme of things”, from “the God's eye point of view of real truth”, but that fact only matters to philosophers.

Part of what makes disagreement skepticism so interesting is that (d)-(h) are false for it.

The phenomenon of disagreement supplies a kind of skepticism worth worrying about because it generates an argument for the conclusion that many of your most precious beliefs are *false in a way that can make a difference*. The traditional skeptic says that even if my belief is false, no one will ever know that it's false and there isn't a damn thing anyone can do about this lack of knowledge. The disagreement skeptic says none of that. This is a much more worrisome kind of skepticism.

In what follows I examine the cases of disagreement that generate what I take to be *the best* arguments for skeptical conclusions that have some bite in the sense that they generate skepticism for a *large* portion of our actual beliefs—especially ones we really *care* about.

2. *When Disagreement Does Not Generate Skepticism*

Clearly, just because you know of a bunch of people who disagree with you does not preclude you knowing that they are wrong and you are right. A group of children might think that so-and-so is the most famous person alive, but you could easily know that they are wrong.

Disagreement generates good skeptical arguments only when the disagreement meets more demanding conditions. However, it isn't easy to come up with an impressive skeptical argument based on disagreement.¹

We begin with some stipulations. Suppose you're faced with the question 'Is belief B true?' You have your view on the matter: you think B is true. If you are convinced that a certain person is clearly lacking compared to you on many epistemic factors when it comes to answering the question 'Is B true?'—factors such as general intelligence, relevant evidence, time spent thinking the evidence through, amount of distractions encountered while thinking about the

¹ For introductions to the epistemology of disagreement, see Christensen 2009, Frances 2010b, and Frances forthcoming A.

evidence, background knowledge—then you'll probably say that you are *more likely* than she is to answer the question correctly (provided there are no other factors that give her an advantage over you). If you are convinced that a certain person definitely surpasses you on many factors when it comes to answering 'Is B true?' then you'll probably say that you are *less likely* than she is to answer the question correctly (provided you think there are no factors that give you an advantage over her). In general, you can make judgments about how likely someone is compared to you when it comes to answering 'Is B true?' correctly. If you think she is more likely (e.g., the odds that she will answer it correctly are 90% whereas your odds are just 80%), then you think she is your *epistemic superior* on that question; if you think she is less likely, then you think she is your *epistemic inferior* on that question; if you think she is about equally likely, then you think she is your *epistemic peer* on that question.

With those notions in mind, here is a simple rule to start us off looking at skeptical arguments from disagreement:

Rule 1: If before the discovery of disagreement you thought that a certain person is your epistemic peer/superior on the question whether belief B is true, then upon realizing that the two of you disagree if you stick with your belief B then it won't amount to knowledge.

The idea here in the case of peers is this: if you thought that the two of you were equally likely to judge B correctly, then when you find out she believes not-B while you believe B, you should conclude that there's a 50% she's right and a 50% chance you're right. So you're saying to yourself that there's just a 50% chance B is true. So you should suspend judgment on B. For the case of superiors, if you thought she was far and away your superior when it came to judging B, then you should probably move your opinion on B to be much closer to her view than your old view. If you don't give up your belief B, then in either case it won't be reasonable. And if it's not reasonable, then it won't amount to knowledge.

By that reasoning, if you discovered you had disagreeing peers or superiors on a *great many* of your beliefs, then a *great many* of your beliefs would fail to amount to knowledge even if they were true—or so says Rule 1. That would be a limited but significant kind of skepticism.

But many cases show why Rule 1 is contentious. Suppose Viktoriya is convinced that B is true, where B is 'Smoking causes cancer'. If asked, Viktoriya would say 'I am very confident that B is true'. Viktoriya is highly confident B is true because she is very well aware that virtually all of the many experts on the topic have long thought that it's true. She has excellent testimonial evidence backing up her belief in B. She knows, of course, that there are many people who

verbally deny the smoking-cancer connection, but she thinks those people are either ignorant, foolish, lying, or caught in self-deception. Viktoriya is also convinced that Willard is her peer on knowing whether B is true. The basis for this belief in peerhood isn't anything fancy or involved: she just supposes that Willard is about as intelligent and scientifically literate as she is, since he is a software engineer like she is and he seems generally knowledgeable about many scientific things in the news (e.g., he knew about the latest mission to Mars). Then she finds out that Willard genuinely thinks smoking doesn't cause cancer.

By my lights, when Viktoriya learns of Willard's opinion she will have acquired little or no reason to give up her belief that smoking causes cancer. When she learned of Willard's opinion she probably thought to herself 'Oh Jeez. He is one of *those* people, ones who have been brainwashed by the tobacco companies and their shells'. She already knew about "those people"; actually running into one won't matter to her overall evidence regarding smoking and cancer. And even if she didn't already know of those people, she did know that there's almost never 100% agreement among intelligent and informed people. So Rule 1 looks dubious. If we are going to find a powerful skeptical argument from disagreement, we will need a better rule to use.

Things don't change if the person you disagree with is a recognized superior on B. Even if Viktoriya thought that Willard was her superior on the issue (e.g., he is a doctor, or a medical researcher), she would be reasonable in sticking with B. She would just recall or perhaps conclude that even the experts are rarely 100% in agreement. She might think to herself 'He probably thinks he knows something all the many thousands of other experts missed. But the odds are really against him'. She might conclude that Willard must be biased or somehow emotionally invested in denying the smoking-cancer connection—or maybe she will just think to herself 'Well, something is definitely going on with that guy on this topic' (so she is open to the possibility that he isn't saying what he appears to be saying). She will implicitly think that even though he's smarter than her, knows all about her good testimonial evidence, has thought about the issue a lot more than she has, et cetera, there must be some explanation of why he went wrong.

One thing we can do in order to find a better skeptical rule is focus on groups instead of individual people:

Rule 2: If you think that the group you're disagreeing with is in a better/equal position than your group (the group of people who like you believe B) to judge belief B correctly, then sticking with B will be unreasonable and B won't amount to knowledge.

This rule is better in part because it matches well with the worrisome disagreements we find ourselves in: often the most intriguing disagreements hold among very large groups of people, some of whom are experts. Focusing on one-on-one disagreements is useful mainly for theorizing, not for applying to real life.

The smoking-cancer case isn't a counterexample to Rule 2 because Viktoriya did not think that when it came to judging B the group of deniers of B was in a better/equal position than the group of affirmers of B. Indeed, it was precisely because her group contains almost all the relevant experts that she was reasonable in sticking with B.

However, Rule 2 is doubtful as well. Suppose that in a college class the students break into two groups of ten students in order to independently investigate some complicated matter. Student Stu thinks the groups are evenly matched, based on his modest knowledge of their abilities and what he knows about how much work each group has put into the project (pretend this is a small college and Stu knows a great many of his fellow students). After a week of work the two groups have representatives give oral progress reports to the whole class. The representative from the other group says that her group has figured out several things regarding the topic of investigation (college resources), including the idea that there are about 113 student computers in the college's main library. But this strikes Stu as way too low: he was 100% confident in his belief B 'The number of computers in the main library is at least 140'. He briefly wonders whether the student in question is accurately presenting the verdict of her group, but when he sees the members of her group nodding their heads he knows that his group definitely disagrees with their group. Stu is extremely confident the number is quite a bit more than 113, as he and his group members have scoured the library to count the computers. He sticks with his belief B and starts to doubt whether he was right to think the other group had done about as much work on the project as his group did.

I suspect that the factor that secures the protagonist's rationality (in an evidential sense of 'rational') in the above peer stories is the fact that *she has much better overall evidence for B than for her belief in peerhood*. In the first smoking-cancer story Viktoriya had much more evidence for the belief that smoking causes cancer than for the belief that Willard is her peer when it comes to judging whether smoking causes cancer; a similar point holds for Stu and his belief in the peerhood of the two groups of students.

We can use the college student case to cast doubt on the 'superior' part of Rule 2 as well. Suppose Stu started out, before hearing their view on B, with *mildly* good evidence that the other group was *mildly better* positioned to answer 'How many student computers are in the

main library?' Suppose further that he learns that although the other group believes not-B, they do not do so with extreme conviction: they believe it, but not vehemently. For what it's worth, in my judgment he is reasonable if he sticks with his belief B and just concludes that despite their mild superiority the other group just got things wrong this time around. Stu knows they were more likely than his group to judge B correctly, but that doesn't mean that they were guaranteed to judge B correctly. The main thing that secures his reasonability is his extremely powerful overall evidence for B coupled with his comparatively mild evidence for the other group's mild superiority and mild belief in not-B.

Considerations like the ones above show that it's no small matter to construct a skeptical argument that centers on disagreement. So what are the troublesome cases, the ones that do generate a worrisome kind of skepticism?

3. *Controversy and Knowledge*

When one knows that one's belief is highly controversial, then one has *available* a good if potentially defeasible reason for serious doubt. However, once again it's tricky to formulate the skeptical argument, as there may be flaws lying in wait.²

For the sake of argument I will assume that controversial beliefs very often start out epistemically rational and even overall justified (in any of several senses of those terms). Roughly put, the disagreement skeptic thinks that even if a controversial belief starts out as knowledge, once one appreciates the controversy one's belief will no longer amount to knowledge.

Just because someone learns that his belief is highly controversial doesn't *guarantee* that his belief will no longer amount to knowledge. For instance, he might be the only living soul who knows that Oswald assassinated Kennedy, as he is Oswald.

In ordinary life, the cases of disagreement that generate powerful arguments for types of skepticism that have real bite *typically* satisfy the following conditions.

You know that the belief B in question has been investigated and debated (i) for a very long time by (ii) a great many (iii) very smart people who (iv) are your epistemic superiors on the matter and (v) have worked very hard (vi) under optimal circumstances to figure out if B is true. But (vii) as far as you know these people have not come to any significant agreement

² Fumerton 2010, Kornblith 2010, Goldberg 2009, Frances 2010a, Frances 2013, and Christensen forthcoming each address the epistemology of controversial belief. Feldman 2007, Frances forthcoming B, Kraft 2012, Oppy 2010, and Thune 2011 each address the specific case of religious controversy.

on B and (viii) as far as you know those who agree with you are not, as a group, in a better position to judge B than those who disagree with you.

We typically come to know (i)-(vi) through testimony: these are just brute facts about society that we are well aware of. For instance, I might have some opinion regarding free will or capital punishment or affirmative action or spiritual experience or the causes of World War II. I know full well that these matters have been debated by an enormous number of really smart people for a very long time—in some cases, for centuries. I also know that I'm no expert on any of these topics. I also know that there are genuine experts on those topics—at least, they have thought about those topics *much* longer than I have, with a great deal more awareness of relevant considerations, etc. It's no contest: I know I'm just an amateur compared to them. Part of being reflective is coming to know about your comparative epistemic status on controversial subjects.

However, in many cases despite knowing (i)-(vi) I will be under the strong *but mistaken* impression that the experts have come to no significant agreement. For instance, there is serious agreement among experts that there is no place we go after we die in which we are given new bodies and suffer eternal physical torture or divine bliss. Only a very small percentage of the smartest people who have thought long and hard about religion and philosophy believe that claim (even philosophers who are theists). But this fact about expert consensus is often completely unknown to outsiders. They know that the topic of the afterlife has been debated forever and there are loads of smart people on each side of the debate. What they don't know, very often, is that amongst the people who have thought the longest and most critically on the matter there is significant agreement. Other times, of course, the judgments in (vii) and (viii) are really true.

Regardless of the truth-value of the judgments in (vii) and (viii), the person in question is robbed of the reasonableness of several comforting responses to the disagreement. She realizes that she can't just say, at least with high confidence, anything like the following remarks (or anything similar):

- a) Well, the people who agree with me are smarter than the people who disagree with me.
- b) We have crucial evidence they don't have.
- c) We have studied the key issue a great deal more than they have.
- d) They are a lot more biased than we are.

This phenomenon is particularly prevalent with regard to religion, politics, morality, and philosophy. Recall college student Stu. When he learned that the other group disagreed with him, he could easily say to himself ‘Well, I guess they didn’t do as much work on the issue as I thought’ or ‘Maybe they aren’t as smart as I thought’ or ‘Perhaps they just screwed up the count of the computers or made some other slip, even though they’re just as smart and thorough as we are’. But when it comes to debates about free will, capital punishment, affirmative action, and many other standard controversial topics a great many of us—not all of us, but many—either know that such responses are false or, if we do embrace them, we do so irrationally. If when it comes to the question of whether we have free will you say to yourself ‘Those people just don’t understand the issues’, ‘They aren’t very smart’, ‘They haven’t thought about it much’, et cetera, then you are doing so irrationally in the sense that *you should know better* than to say that, at least if you’re honest with informed yourself.

Now for the disagreement skeptical argument:

1. Suppose you believe B.
2. Then you become aware of the controversial nature of B: you know (i)-(vi) from before and (vii) and (viii) are true of you as well.
3. If (2) is true of you, then your retained belief in B is epistemically second-rate in a significant manner—and this is true even if B is true, you previously (before the discovery of disagreement) had a propositionally and doxastically justified belief in B, and your belief was not Gettiered.
4. Thus, for any belief that makes (2) true, that belief will be epistemically second-rate in a significant manner.

This argument concludes that even if your belief B is optimal in key epistemic respects (true, previously propositionally and doxastically justified, not Gettiered) it still faces a hurdle in order to attain high levels of epistemic goodness—a hurdle it does not clear.

The argument leaves open what the conclusion amounts to. By ‘epistemically second-rate’ it might be meant that it fails to amount to knowledge. Then again, maybe it fails to be doxastically and/or propositionally justified. Perhaps both. Then again, it might mean that although the retained belief is justified and amounts to knowledge it still suffers from a serious epistemic defect. Perhaps we can be *unwise* in keeping a belief even when it amounts to knowledge; this might be true if the standard for knowledge is significantly lower than most epistemologists have thought.

4. *Two Objections to the Disagreement Skeptical Argument*

First, the skeptical argument appears to have a very limited scope, as there are quite a few conditions in (i)-(viii)! If we take some of the conditions out, we can increase the applicability of the argument but then there will be more *prima facie* ways (3) can be false. For instance, one may falsely think that one has some key evidence that the disagreeers lack; that's response (b) from before. In such a case, one might have a fully justified belief in (b), which would probably make the retaining of the controversial belief reasonable. And even if one had an unreasonable belief in (b), there is the key question of whether that epistemic sin in unjustifiably believing (b) negatively affects the epistemic status of the retained controversial belief.

Even without the alternation, the argument is vulnerable to objections to (3). Pretend that Pat thinks little boys are just naturally more violent than little girls. He thinks this because he is father of two boys and two girls, he has run a daycare for little kids for twenty-five years, and he has talked about the issue with many other experienced daycare workers over many years. He is not, however, a child psychologist or anything related; neither has he read any studies on the issue. Suppose further that he's exactly right: little boys are definitely naturally more violent than little girls, no matter how you construe 'natural', 'little', 'violent', 'boy', or 'girl'. Assume that the experts on child behavior—at least, the ones doing the research with PhDs—have for a very long time been stubbornly divided on the question of whether little boys are naturally more violent than little girls. They are well aware of the observational evidence that has suggested that boys are naturally more violent—they know all about the kinds of evidence Pat has—but for a decade now they have had studies that collectively strongly suggest the exact opposite. In this story the question of natural violence and gender has long been one of the outstanding questions in child psychology.

Might Pat's belief amount to knowledge provided (a) he obtained and holds the belief on the basis of his experiences, experiences that gave him plenty of justification for his true belief; (b) the evidence the experts have that suggests otherwise is unknown to him; and (c) although he is vaguely aware that there have been some studies that go against his view, he just shrugged his shoulders and never really dwelled on this fact? Would the epistemic sin involved in that shrug—if it is such—be so bad as to ruin his chance at knowledge?

I don't know. Perhaps it matters what knowledge comes to. Over the centuries many philosophers have thought that knowledge is something pretty special, something that has to be fought for with real cognitive power. Others have thought that any two year old child has loads of knowledge: if she is minimally functioning, then she will know an enormous number of mundane facts. It's not entirely clear that anyone is wrong in that debate. We use the words

'know' and 'knowledge' quite a bit in life, but that doesn't mean that our use has fastened on to an epistemic joint in nature, as 'water', 'gold', and 'shark' have marked objectively existing joints in nature. Perhaps 'knowledge' is polysemous, which would go some way towards explaining why we can never agree on the analysis of "the" notion *knowledge* (because there is no such singular notion).

Thus, even when one is aware that (i) one's belief is controversial among the experts, (ii) one is an amateur in many respects compared to them, and (iii) one has no evidence that they have missed, it isn't clear that this will mean that one's belief fails to amount to knowledge.

The disagreement skeptic may well protest that Pat was in an unusual situation: he knew P due to extensive experience, the experts had generated large amounts of misleading evidence, Pat had none of that misleading evidence, and although Pat knew the issue was controversial, he didn't think about it much and it more or less slipped from his consciousness. The objection here is that even if Pat is in a position to have knowledge, for the vast number of controversial beliefs this position is rare.

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