

Reasonable Disagreements

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I. Introduction

A. Some Apparent Examples of Reasonable Disagreements

1. A few years ago I co-taught a course to upper level undergraduates on “Rationality, Relativism, and Religion.” Some of the students, especially the religion majors, wanted things to work out in a friendly and supportive way: people around the world could have markedly different religious beliefs and all be “ok” in so believing. That’s intentionally put in an imprecise way. It wasn’t clear at the beginning, and hardly clearer at the end, just what favorable evaluation they wished to make of the various people around the world and their varying beliefs. Perhaps they thought that all the different beliefs were true (or “true for them”), or that they were all reasonable in their beliefs, or that they weren’t evil people for believing as they did. I tried in the course to sort these various things out. I said that unless we treated religious language in some non-straightforward way, it couldn’t be that all these competing beliefs were actually true.¹ But it could be, I said, that people with very different beliefs were quite reasonable in their respective beliefs. Their histories and experiences could be importantly different, making different beliefs justified. And, of course, the differing beliefs might well be morally ok. So, we were able to say some nice and conciliatory things about people around the world and even a stuffy analytic type like me could feel pretty good about it.

Of course, the students didn’t want to be nice only to people around the world. They wanted to be nice to people around the classroom. And here questions about the reasonableness of the competing beliefs puzzled me and continue to puzzle me. The point about differing experiences and life histories justifying different beliefs is all true enough. But how did that help in our classroom? No matter how isolated their upbringing, they weren’t isolated any more. They knew that there were all these smart kids in the room who believed very different things. Under those circumstances, could they reasonably maintain their own beliefs? Could each reasonably say, “With respect to the points about which we disagree, I’ve got it right and you’ve got it wrong.”? (I assume that belief requires this.) But could they acknowledge, as they wanted to, that the others were reasonable as well? These seemed to me to be a harder questions. They still do.

One might think that the attitude I just attributed to my students is some version or other of the rather mindless relativism, or whatever it is, that causes many undergraduates to get mushy headed when confronted with uncomfortable and controversial issues. But I think that would be a mistake. The attitude that my students displayed is more widespread than that. It’s not unusual for a public discussion of a controversial issue to end with the parties to the dispute agreeing that this is a topic about which reasonable people can disagree. (Think of *The News Hour* on PBS.) Somewhat the same view can be found in the writings of philosophers about whom I surely would not want to make any charge of mushy headedness. I turn next to them.

2. Consider the following passage from a recent paper by Gideon Rosen:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. Paleontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs. And while it is possible that most of the parties to this dispute are irrational, this need not be the case. To the contrary, it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators. (Phil. Perspectives 15, 2001)

Rosen suggests here that scientists and jurors who are confronted with the same evidence can come to different conclusions and be reasonable. He goes on to say that the same thing can occur with respect to philosophical views. Indeed, the central topic of Rosen's paper is Platonism in mathematics. His view is that reasonable people can disagree about that even though they are confronted with the same evidence.

3. In a recent paper Peter van Inwagen says that

It is hard to see how to avoid the conclusion that it is very common for scientists qua scientists to have beliefs that are vehemently rejected by other equally intelligent scientists who possess the same scientific qualifications and the same evidence. ("Is It Wrong Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone to Believe Anything on Insufficient Evidence?" in Jordan and Howard-Snyder, eds, *Faith Freedom and Rationality* 1996)

Earlier in his paper van Inwagen says that philosophy displays similar intractable disputes and he asks:

How can I believe (as I do) that free will is incompatible with determinism or that unrealized possibilities are not physical objects or that human beings are not four-dimensional things extended in time as well as in space, when David Lewis--a philosopher of truly formidable intelligence and insight and ability--rejects these things I believe and is already aware of and understands perfectly every argument that I could produce in their defense?

He then adds:

Well, I do believe these things. And I believe that I am justified in believing them. And I am confident that I am right.

Though it's not clear, I think he thinks that Lewis was justified in his competing beliefs as well. So, we seem to have another proponent of the existence of reasonable disagreements.

| 4. We find a somewhat similar theme in the writings of Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga acknowledges |

that his situation with respect to his own religious beliefs is importantly similar to the situations of others who hold very different beliefs. He writes:

Let's agree for purposes of argument that these beliefs are on an epistemic par in the sense that those of a different religious tradition have the same sort of internally available markers—evidence, phenomenology, and the like—for their beliefs as I have for [mine].(p. 181)

Since Plantinga thinks that his own beliefs get good grades, epistemically speaking, and that the beliefs of those who disagree with him are “on an epistemic par” with his own, we might conclude that those other beliefs are justified as well. We would have, then, another proponent of the idea that there can be reasonable disagreements. Actually, Plantinga's view is a little more complicated. More on that later.

5. In a recent paper Tom Kelly defends what he calls “The No Independent Weight View.” This holds that in disputes of the sort I've mentioned, a person is not rationally required to give any weight to the fact that other smart people have looked at the same arguments and come to different conclusions. He imagines a case in which he has examined all the evidence and thinks that it supports some conclusion, but also learns that you evaluate the matter differently. He writes:

Suppose I find that, on balance, this evidence does not adequately support the conclusion that you draw from it. In these circumstances, I might simply take myself as having evidence that defeats the admittedly defeasible assumption that you will correctly evaluate the evidence on this particular occasion. (“The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement,” unpublished.)

Presumably, however, you could equally do the same as I. So we could reasonably disagree.

B. Some Questions

The passages just quoted ask or provoke several connected but different questions. Some terminology will help me to formulate them.

Let's say that two people have a *disagreement* when one believes a proposition and the other denies (i.e., disbelieves) that proposition. Let's say that two people have a *reasonable disagreement* when they have a disagreement and each is epistemically reasonable (or justified) in his or her belief. I'm not assuming that they each must have knowledge level justification. Some weaker standard is at work here. Another, and murkier, idea will be helpful as well: *epistemic peers*. I borrow this term from Tom Kelly. The idea is that epistemic peers are people who are roughly equal with respect to intelligence, reasoning powers, background information, etc. There's looseness here, but I'll proceed anyway. Finally, suppose that some epistemic peers had a full discussion of the topic about which they disagree. There's been full disclosure. We will

say that they have *shared their evidence*.

It will be useful in what follows to have one other concept to work with, that of an *apparently reasonable disagreement*. I cannot define this idea precisely. But what I have in mind are cases such as those discussed so far. They are cases in which people who have differing points of view on some topic share their evidence so far as that is possible. Each person is at least generally reasonable, is trying to be reasonable in the case at hand, and there is no obvious reason for thinking that one person is crazy, thoroughly confused, deluded, or defective.

With these ideas at hand, I can pose the questions that interest me.

Q1) Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence (by having a thorough discussion of the topic) have reasonable disagreements? If so, how is this possible?

Q2) Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence reasonably think that they are having a reasonable disagreement? That is, can they think that both parties to the disagreement are reasonable? In other words, is the view suggested by the phrase, "Reasonable people can disagree about this" applicable in these cases.

There are other, related, questions, that will surface from time to time. One is this:

Q3) Suppose one learns that an epistemic peer with whom one has shared one's evidence has beliefs that conflict with one's own. Does this fact of disagreement have any epistemic impact? Should one adjust one's belief in any way in light of the fact that there is this disagreement?

There need not be any universal answer to this. It may be that it depends. But what does it depend on? A *prima facie* case that learning of a disagreement should make a difference is the fact that testimonial evidence typically does matter. Knowing that there is disagreement is something like having testimonial evidence for a competing view.

There's another question that interests me, but I need to say a little more to set it up clearly.

C. Reasonable Disagreements and Evidentialism

My epistemological starting point is evidentialism. That is, I think that epistemic justification is a matter of conforming one's beliefs to one's evidence. This view can be contrasted with a variety of other approaches, notably reliabilism and causal theories. I won't defend evidentialism here, nor will I elaborate on its implications. I'll take it that we have some reasonable understanding of the idea and I'll say only a little more to clarify it.

The evidentialist idea can be expressed in terms of epistemic oughts: if your evidence supports some proposition, then you ought to believe it; if your evidence does not support a proposition, then you ought not believe it; if your evidence is neutral, then you ought to suspend judgment. There are complications about ought and voluntary belief, but I will completely ignore them here. I do not make any assumptions about belief being voluntary. I don't take "ought to believe" talk to imply otherwise. If you do, and you also have doubts about the voluntariness of belief, then translate all such talk into something you find acceptable.

Evidentialism resembles a well known view found in the writings of William K. Clifford. He's famous for claiming that

- C. It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.

It's not my intention here to get into debates about Clifford scholarship. But I think that we can avoid some confusions by clearing away one point. I think that if we impose contemporary terminology on Clifford's thinking, then it's best to say that Clifford thought that it was *morally* wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. (See Susan Haack for discussion. She suggests he didn't have the various kinds of evaluations sorted out clearly.)

The examples he gives, and the reasons he advances, suggest this. He says that by believing on insufficient evidence we violate a duty we owe to others. Any failure, he says, increases our tendency toward "credulity." He seems to think that much of our social structure rests on our avoiding credulity. He thinks that this applies even in cases of seemingly trivial beliefs. There are, in his view, no exceptions. All this talk about the social implications of believing on insufficient evidence and of duties to others suggests that the moral status of such beliefs is at issue.

One can make a case for the view that there is some harmful social consequence that comes from believing on insufficient evidence. You could be in a situation in which acting on the belief makes a real difference. And you would then do a thing that you are not justified in believing is best. And, further, if justified beliefs are mostly true, then you increase the chances that you'll do something that will in fact make matters less good than they otherwise might have been. Believing on insufficient evidence does run a risk. So, perhaps there is something on the negative side of the moral scorecard in all cases of believing on insufficient evidence.

Still, the claim that believing on insufficient evidence is always morally wrong strikes me as over the top. If beliefs have moral status at all, then I think some that lack sufficient evidence are morally fine. If an evidentially unsupported belief enables someone to make it through a difficult and unpromising situation, I'd would not condemn the belief as morally wrong. For example, if a hostage's optimistic and unsupported belief that he'll get out of his awful situation helps him to endure, I wouldn't want to be committed to any view that labels him, or that belief, immoral. On the lighter side, if an athlete's confident belief in her success helps her to succeed in a key situation, I wouldn't condemn the optimism, or confidence, as immoral even if it is evidentially unsupported. So, if Clifford was asserting a thesis about morality, and that the thesis is that it is always overall morally wrong to believe on weak or insufficient evidence, I don't accept it. (Question: *insufficient* for what?)

However, it seems to me that one can interpret Clifford's words in way that makes them express a truth. According to this view, it is *epistemically* wrong to believe contrary to one's evidence. I'd say that the hostage and the athlete in my recent examples have epistemically unjustified beliefs (epistemically wrong beliefs) that are morally or prudentially valuable. I take evidentialism to be a thesis about epistemic evaluations. It holds that a belief is epistemically wrong (i.e., unjustified) iff it is unsupported by one's evidence. [There are details to worry about. I won't worry about them here.] So, I am committed to something "C-ish", properly interpreted.

Thus, the questions under discussion here are about whether epistemic peers who disagree can be epistemically reasonable (or justified). If they can, then reasonable disagreements look like a threat to evidentialism. If there are any reasonable disagreements, then two people can review the same evidence, believe different things, and both be reasonable in their beliefs. But then, it seems, evidence does not determine what's reasonable, and evidentialism is false. It looks like I have to either abandon evidentialism or deny that there can be reasonable disagreements of the sort we've described. Thus, another question running through this paper is this:

Q4) Are reasonable disagreements a threat to evidentialism?

Rosen and van Inwagen seem to think they are.

II. Easy Cases of Reasonable Disagreement

In this section I'll describe several situations that might be described as cases of reasonable disagreement. But none are at all threatening to evidentialism. And none turn out to be reasonable disagreements in the sense I had in mind. You can think of this section as further clarifying the issues. (If all goes well, when I'm done clarifying the issues, my time will be up and I won't have to defend any answers.)

1. A reasonable person is one who has a general tendency to have reasonable beliefs. Just as an honest person might tell an infrequent lie, a reasonable person might have an occasional unreasonable belief. When he has such a belief, the reasonable person would disagree with another reasonable person who has similar evidence but is not suffering from this lapse of rationality. There is a hint of this idea in the quotation from Rosen. He says that "a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and *otherwise rational investigators*." (Emphasis added.)

True, but not relevant to the point under discussion here. The issue is whether both points of view are reasonable in the same circumstances. It's not about whether generally reasonable people can disagree.

Set aside cases involving departures from rationality in otherwise reasonable people

2. A belief can matter more to one person than it does to another. This can make the benefits of the belief enough to affect its status. A variation on an example already mentioned shows why. A hostage and a neutral reporter on the scene may have the same evidence about the prospects for the hostage's release. The hostage has a motive for believing he will be released. We might say that he's reasonable in so believing, given the value the belief has for him. The reporter is not. But this is not an epistemic evaluation. I am committed to division between epistemic evaluations and prudential evaluations.

Along the same lines, you might note that it's a good thing for science that the various scientists pursue their respective theories. And it might be true that they'd be unable to pursue their research effectively without actually believing in their theories. Lacking the motivation that provides, they wouldn't work so hard. Again, true but irrelevant. That, too, is about the practical

benefits of believing, not its epistemic reasonableness.

Set aside cases involving disagreements arising from prudential considerations.

3. Suppose that by having an unsupported belief now, I will get many more true or reasonable beliefs in the future. Perhaps this is true of me, but not of you, even as we consider the same proposition for which we have shared our evidence. This shows there can be a kind of long run *epistemic* benefit to a belief. We might say that it is a reasonable belief in some broadly epistemic sense. But it's the short run judgment that evidentialism is about. So there's a kind reasonable disagreement here, but nothing that threatens evidentialism. The reasonable disagreements of concern are not like this.

Set aside disagreements arising from differences in the long term epistemic benefits of believing.

4. Suppose you and I have the same evidence about the time of our flight to Los Angeles. We have pretty good reason to think that it gets in at 5PM, local time. This was what we were told when we bought the tickets. However, we know that flights are sometimes rescheduled and we haven't recently checked into this one. But you have an urgent meeting at dinner time and I have nothing scheduled until the next day. One might think that it's reasonable for me to believe that the flight gets in at 5, but not you. You should check further. More turns on it for you than for me, so the standards change. We have the same evidence, but I'm justified in believing and you are not.

But that's a mistake, I'd say. What's reasonable to believe is the same for both of us. It's just that, under the circumstances, it makes more sense for you to check to see if there's been a change. What strikes me as convincing proof that we should have the same beliefs about the topic comes from thinking about what it would be reasonable for us to predict will be the outcome of your further checking. It seems clear to me that we'd be equally reasonable in predicting that you will be told that the flight arrives at 5PM. The significance of the issue for you does not affect the reasonableness of this prediction. It just affects what precautions it would be prudent for you to take.

There are other cases in which people with similar evidence reasonably behave differently. Suppose that we are traveling together and we come to a fork in the road. The map shows no fork and we have no way to get more information about which way to go. We have to choose. You choose the left path and I choose the right path. Each of us may be entirely reasonable in choosing as we did. Of course, we would have been reasonable in choosing otherwise. But, as you go left and I go right, neither of us should believe that we've chosen the correct path. Believing differs from acting in a case like this. We should suspend judgment about which is best, while picking one since, as I envision the case, not taking either path would be the worst choice of all. In this case, there is no good behavioral analogue to suspending judgement.

Set aside cases in which the reasonable differences are only in some behavior somehow related to beliefs.

[An aside: some of what motivates contextualism may be relevant here. Maybe saying "I know" implicates "There's no need to check."]

5. Consider again Rosen's jurors who disagree after hearing all the same evidence. It may well be that differences in background evidence make enough difference to justify them in drawing different conclusions. But assume that the background evidence is also shared.

What, then, is he saying they disagree about? Is it about whether the defendant committed the crime, or is it their votes on whether to convict the defendant. If it's the latter, it could be that they have different standards for conviction. And maybe those views about standards are reasonably held (on the basis of different evidence). So their different votes might be reasonable. They might not even have different beliefs about who committed the crime. Nothing in the example suggests that they could reasonably differ on that.

Set aside cases in which it is only the recently acquired evidence that is shared.

All of the cases described so far are cases in which one might plausibly say that epistemic peers who have shared their evidence about a proposition can reasonably disagree. But they all involve uses of the word "reasonable" other than the one I have in mind. They are not cases of reasonable disagreement of the sort I'm interested in. And they do not threaten evidentialism.

III. Hard Cases and An Argument for Skepticism

The harder cases are like the ones van Inwagen discusses. He describes a variety of philosophical, political, and scientific controversies in which there is disagreement among epistemic peers who have shared their evidence. The parties to the dispute know this. (Call the facts just described (D).) And he seems to say that strict adherence to Clifford's principle would force these people to become skeptics of a sort. Not epistemological skeptics who deny the possibility of knowledge, but rather people who do not form beliefs about these controverted matters. He writes:

Everyone who is intellectually honest will admit ... that there are interminable political debates with highly intelligent and well-informed people on both sides. And yet few will react to this state of affairs by becoming political skeptics, by declining to have any political beliefs that are disputed by highly intelligent and well-informed people. But how can this rejection of political skepticism be defended?

The same is true of our philosophical beliefs. So the idea seems to be that Clifford's principle, plus the existence of disagreement among epistemic peers who have shared their evidence, implies this kind of skepticism. There's a key assumption needed here. Here's a way to formulate it:

- E. If you know that your epistemic peers with whom you have shared all your evidence sincerely deny P (while you are inclined to affirm P), then you do not have sufficient evidence to believe P.

You might want to strengthen the antecedent here, to get it to include something about the

intractable disagreements. But I hope that this will be good enough.

In the case of the major disputes, the antecedent of (E) is true. In effect, (D) affirms it with respect to a range of major issues. Its consequent, together with Clifford's principle, imply that it is epistemically wrong to believe P in these cases. So, (D), (E), and Clifford's principle imply having beliefs in all these cases is epistemically wrong, i.e., unjustified.

We can put this together as an argument, reformulating our principles slightly:

- (D) There are disagreements about philosophical, political, scientific matters among epistemic peers who have shared all their evidence, etc. and these peers know that there are these disagreements.
- (E) If one knows that one's epistemic peers with whom one has shared all one's evidence sincerely deny P (while one is inclined to affirm P), then one does not have sufficient evidence to believe P.
- (C) If one does not have sufficient evidence for P, then it is epistemically wrong to believe P (i.e., one is not justified in believing P)

The skeptical conclusion follows:

- (S) The epistemic peers described in (D) are not justified in believing any of the philosophical, political, and scientific theses that are in dispute.

(S) is a depressing conclusion. It seems to imply that all, or many, of *your* deeply held, well-thought out, carefully considered positions on controversial issues are not justified. Worse, it implies that *my* beliefs on those topics are not justified. Worse still, given that Rosen and van Inwagen are at least my peers and they disagree with me about the things I'll assert later in this paper, it applies to the claims I make here. The premises of the argument look pretty good: (D) seems to describe our situation. (E) looks plausible. And (C) is my beloved evidentialism. The unwelcome conclusion, (S), seems to follow.

What can we say?

IV. Evidentialism and The Uniqueness Thesis

I believe that our thinking so far has relied on what I will call "The Uniqueness Thesis". This is the idea that

- U. A body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions (e.g., one theory out of a bunch of exclusive alternatives) and that it justifies at most one attitude toward any particular proposition.

Rejecting the uniqueness thesis may enable us to reject (E).

I will consider here two lines of thought that oppose (U). The first concerns vagueness. I've been thinking of our options in any case as believing, disbelieving, or suspending judgment. You might wonder where the evidential line is between when it's ok to believe and when it's ok to suspend judgment. There might be a grey area. There might be vagueness. And if that's the

case, then it might be that either attitude is ok. Thus, you and I could have the same evidence for a proposition, and you believe it and I suspend judgment about it. We justifiably hold different attitudes.

Even if vagueness considerations provide a basis for rejecting (U), they do not get us all the way to cases of what I described as disagreement, cases where I believe p and you believe $\sim p$ (and perhaps believe some rival of p , something incompatible with p). All we've got so far is a case where both suspending judgment and believing are justified. This allows only for a lesser kind of disagreement. I can't see how to get the stronger sort of justified disagreement out of any vagueness in where to draw the line between when to believe and when to suspend judgment. And that's the sort of disagreement involved in (D). Thus, I don't see how vagueness issues enable us to deny (E).

There's a second way one might deny the uniqueness thesis. In effect, this involves adopting weak evidential standards. We often say that a good case can be made for each of two incompatible propositions. For example, a detective might have strong evidence incriminating Lefty and also have strong evidence incriminating Righty of the same crime. Assume that the detective knows that only one could be guilty. One might think that since a case could be made for either suspect, one could reasonably believe that Lefty did it and Righty did not, but one could also reasonably believe that Righty did it and Lefty did not. You get to choose.

If anything like this is right, then there can be reasonable disagreements in the stronger sense. Just as with the first way to deny (U), we can retain the idea the evidence determines what's justified. So denying uniqueness does not require abandoning the general evidentialist line. You could retain (C). It's just to say that the evidence is more permissive than some, like me, have thought. The view just described is something like epistemological conservatism. It has the advantages of allowing for full reasonable disagreements and preserving evidentialism. It denies (E) in the argument. (It could be redescribed so that it denies (C).)

However, evidentialism of the sort I favor would not permit this. And I don't find this sort of case the least bit persuasive. It seems clear to me that you should suspend judgment in this sort of case (given only 2 possible candidates for guilt). The evidence for Lefty is evidence against Righty. Believing is simply not reasonable.

I haven't really argued for this view, or against conservatism, here. And I grant that there can be practical considerations that make retaining one's belief a good idea. But I find nothing here that enables us plausibly to avoid (S).

V. The Hard Line

If (U) is true, then a body of the evidence supports just one attitude. If two people have the same evidence, yet they have competing beliefs, then at least one of them has an unjustified belief. There cannot be reasonable disagreements, and, (presumably) participants in disagreements should not think that they are having a reasonable disagreement. The answers to (Q1) and (Q2) are "No."

Evidentialists are not thereby committed to the skeptical argument. They can say that one side has it right. That is, one side is believing reasonably and the other side is not. This is to deny (E) in the argument. The idea, then, is that in each dispute where the evidence is shared, there is a proper conclusion to draw from that evidence, one side (at most) is properly drawing that

conclusion, and they are justified in their beliefs while those on the other side are not. It's easy to see how this applies to our various examples.

The hard line has some appeal in cases in which the two believers have not discussed the issue with one another. Suppose that two people independently consider the same body of evidence and the same arguments. One is more moved by the arguments on one side and the other by those on the other side. You might think that one of them is making a mistake here, and that the one who is mistakenly evaluating the arguments is not justified in the resulting belief. The hard line makes some sense before the sharing of evidence. However, sticking with the hard line after they have confronted one another is much more difficult. For once they discuss the topic and their evidence, they are forced to consider both the object level proposition and a higher level proposition. For example, the students in my class about religion and relativism were forced to consider both

1. God exists.
2. Our shared evidence supports (1).

Notice that after their discussion their evidence includes not only the arguments themselves and their own reactions to them, but also the fact the other person - an epistemic peer - assesses the evidence differently. So consider the theist in the dispute. To stick to his guns, he has to think as follows: "The atheist and I have shared our evidence. After looking at this evidence, it seems to me that (1) and (2) are both true. It seems to her that both are false. I am right and she is wrong." The atheist will, of course, have comparable beliefs. I find it very difficult to see why one of them is better justified with respect to (2) than the other. But it also seems pretty clear that for each of them, (1) and (2) sink or swim together. That is, it is hard to imagine it being the case that, say, the theist is justified in believing (1) but should suspend judgment about (2). Analogous remarks apply to the atheist. It looks like both should suspend judgment. It's difficult to maintain the hard line position once the parties to the dispute are reflective about their situations.²

I do not have a decisive argument against the hard line position. But I am not persuaded by it. Some of the considerations that will arise in the next section also incline me not to accept it.

VI. Shared Evidence?

There's something admittedly unrealistic about the discussion so far. It has turned on the idea of people sharing all their evidence. There are at least two ways in which, in any realistic case, the evidence isn't all shared. In this section, I will discuss this fact and see if it gets us out of the skeptical argument and provides answers to our questions.

The first way in which evidence is not fully shared is suggested by something van Inwagen says, though he does not defend the view I am about to discuss. I'll use his discussion of the free will problem with Lewis as my example here. At first glance, it looks like van Inwagen and Lewis have the same evidence, yet they believe different things. van Inwagen wants to say that at least his own belief is justified. He writes:

I am inclined to think that the evidence and arguments I can adduce in support of

my beliefs do not constitute the totality of my justification for these beliefs.

In an effort to explain how this could be, he writes:

I suppose my 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.

I'm going to assume that van Inwagen's philosophical insight constitutes a kind of evidence. He was not decisive about this, and this may be a purely terminological matter. I take it that his suggestion (advanced very cautiously, I should emphasize) is that something in his take on the situation, something about how he sees the matter, adds to his justification, and it does this by adding to his evidence.

Rosen says something similar. But instead of insight he talks of the "obviousness" of the proposition under discussion. He writes:

... if the obviousness of the contested claim survives the encounter with the Other, then one still has some reason to hold it: the reason provided by the seeming. If, after reflecting on the rational tenability of an ethos that prizes cruelty, cruelty continues to strike me as self-evidently reprehensible, then my conviction that it is reprehensible has a powerful and cogent ground, despite my recognition that others who lack this ground may be fully justified in thinking otherwise. (p. 88)

One could say that the special insight or seeming obviousness is a non-evidential factor that affects justification. Then we would reject (C), and perhaps evidentialism. van Inwagen seems to suggest this. But I'd prefer to take it to be extra evidence that van Inwagen, Rosen, and others have. In that case, perhaps, the thing to say is that the truth in (D) is that the parties to the dispute have shared all their public evidence or all their communicable evidence. But then that's not all of their evidence. People who share public evidence can differ with respect to private evidence. So (E) is false, assuming its antecedent is interpreted to be about public evidence. Or, better, (D) is false: people haven't shared *all* their evidence.

However exactly one wants to think about this, I think it won't do as a response to the argument for (S) (or a slightly revised version of it). Here's why.

I think that we will all agree that Lewis could have said just what van Inwagen said. That is, he could equally well have claimed a special insight that justified his belief. I suppose that one can deny that the case goes this way, but I find that completely mysterious. I think that van Inwagen would agree. In a brief discussion of disputes that he finds unlike those that are his main focus, he mentions astrology. He thinks that someone who believes in astrology believes something that is just indefensible. But rejecting in the same way the views of those who dispute the central issues in philosophy, politics, and science is, he says, "ludicrous." Now, saying that the beliefs of the others are not ludicrous is not the same as saying that they are justified. However, it is hard to see how the two people are not in comparable positions. Rosen seems to

agree. But if this is right, then I think this way to avoid the skeptical conclusion is in trouble.

Compare a more straightforward case of regular sight, rather than insight.

Suppose you and I are standing by the window looking out on the quad. We have comparable vision, know each other to be honest. I seem to see what looks to me like the Dean standing out in the middle of the quad. (Assume that this is not something odd. He's out there a fair amount.) I believe that the dean is standing on the quad. Meanwhile, you seem to see nothing of the kind there. You think that no one, and thus not the Dean, is standing in the middle of the quad. We disagree. Prior to our saying anything, each of us believes reasonably. We are epistemic peers, or at least we have every reason to think that we are epistemic peers. There's no track record to lead us to think otherwise. Then I say something about the Dean being on the quad, and we find out about our situation. In my view, once that happens, each of us should suspend judgment. We each know that something weird is going on, but we have no idea which of us has the problem. I wouldn't be reasonable in thinking that the problem is in your head.

Similarly, I think, van Inwagen's situation is that his evidence is not exactly the same as Lewis's. He has his own insight and Lewis has his. But van Inwagen also knows that Lewis has such an insight and Lewis knew the same about van Inwagen. Each knows that this insight has evidential force. And now I see no basis for either of them justifying his own belief simply because the one insight happens to occur inside of him. A point about evidence that plays a role here is: evidence of evidence is evidence. More carefully, evidence that there is evidence for p is evidence for p. Knowing that Lewis has his insight provides van Inwagen with evidence.

The point is not that one cannot justifiably maintain a belief when one admits that others have a justified belief in a competing proposition. One can. But only in cases of asymmetry. You might know more than the other person, and thus be able to say of them that they are justified, and have additional reasons to think that they are nevertheless mistaken. These will be cases in which crucial parts of the evidence are not shared. Consider a variation of our example about Lefty and Righty a few paragraphs back. There might be two detectives, one who has the evidence about Lefty and one who has the evidence incriminating Righty. They each justifiably believe in their man's guilt. And then they share their evidence. If things are on a par, then suspension of judgment is called for. But one detective might be able to identify some flaw in the other's case, a flaw that the other has no way of knowing about and does not involve errors of reasoning. He might then acknowledge to himself that the other is justified but mistaken in his belief. Thus, when you can explain away the conflicting results, you can have good reasons for your belief, know that other people have equally good reasons for their competing belief, and still be justified in retaining your own. (We can say that the ancients had justified but false astronomical beliefs.)

But suppose the one detective has no reason at all to think that the other evidence is inferior to hers. If, in this situation, she continues to believe that Lefty is guilty, she would be unjustified. She is giving special status to her own evidence with no reason to do so, and this is an epistemic error. This really is a failure to treat like cases alike. She knows that there are two bodies of equally good evidence for incompatible propositions, and she is favoring the one that happens to have been hers originally.

When one has one's own evidence supporting a proposition, knows that another person has comparable evidence supporting a competing proposition, and no reason to think that one's

own reason is the non-defective one, one can't reasonably think, "Well, it's really seeming to me that my belief is true. So, even though it seems to you that your competing belief is true, your appearance (or seeming, or insight) is deceptive." I need some reason to think you are the one with the problem rather than me. The detective needs a reason to think it is the other's evidence, and not her own, that is flawed. van Inwagen and Rosen need reasons to think that their own insights or seemings are accurate rather than the other guy's. To think otherwise is to think something like this: "You have an insight according to which $\sim P$ is true. I have one according to which P is true. It's reasonable for me to believe P in light of all this because, gosh darn it, *my* insight supports P ." If one's conviction survives the "confrontation with the other," to use Rosen's phrase, this seems more a sign of tenacity and stubbornness than anything else.

If these insights and seemings make an evidential difference, it can't be that the mere fact that one of them happens to be mine makes that difference. Thus, I can't see how the special insights help. More precisely, I can't see how they help if it is granted that the people on the other side of the issue have comparable insights. And I don't see any basis for denying that they do have comparable insights, at least in the cases so far discussed.

Thus, even if we have apparent insights, and these count as evidence, and this shows that evidence is never completely shared, I don't see that this avoids the skeptical problem.

I will discuss very briefly a second way in which evidence is never completely shared. Our total evidence for any proposition may be extremely complex and detailed, involving memories and experiences that are difficult to articulate. There may be general propositions about the world that play a role, and our reasons for these involve still further beliefs. There's a complex network. Perhaps Rosen's jurors illustrate the idea, since in fact there will lots of background beliefs that play a role, and they can't really share all of them, nor can they share all the evidence they have for all of them. Thus, maybe these differences provide a way to avoid the problem. I suppose that this line of thought amounts to denying (D) in the argument. With respect to our questions, it may grant that there can be no reasonable disagreements among peers who have shared all their evidence. But it denies that any of the cases of apparent reasonable disagreements are actual cases of reasonable disagreement.

The starting point for this response is correct, I think. People cannot really share their evidence fully. But I do not think that this effectively does away with the puzzles. The reasons are essentially the same as those that I discussed in connection with the idea that the differing insights provided evidence. Think first about cases in which the parties to a dispute want to say that each side is reasonable, as, for example, the students in my class did. Under those circumstances, a person must think something that could be put this way:

My disputant has a body of background beliefs and unshared evidence that, when conjoined with what is shared, justifies believing $\sim P$. My background information, when conjoined with that shared evidence, justifies believing P . So, we are both justified in our competing beliefs.

Evidence of evidence is evidence. If you think that the other person's background beliefs and information do justify the competing belief, then you think that there is evidence that supports a view that denies your own. And if that's a reasonable belief on your part, then you have a reason that in effect cancels out your own evidence. You know that there are two bodies of evidence,

one supports P and one supports ~P. You are sticking with P simply because the evidence supporting it was initially yours. I can't see why that's justified.

There are, of course, cases of asymmetry in which something like this is right. van Inwagen is right to dismiss defenders of astrology. But, as he says, the hard cases are not like this.

Much more needs to be said about this matter, and especially about what distinguishes the hard cases from the not so hard cases. That is, more needs to be said about what the difference is between genuinely puzzling cases of apparent reasonable disagreement and cases that are asymmetrical, in that one side is justified in thinking either that the other party is not justified (astrology case) or in maintaining belief even though there is disagreement (us and the ancients on the shape of the earth, experts and novices). Nevertheless, I think that the genuinely hard cases are not explained away by citing differences in background evidence.

It's especially clear that these considerations about unshared evidence do not provide a basis for thinking that their can be reasonable disagreements in which the parties to the dispute agree that the other side is also reasonable. If this acknowledgment of the other side's rationality is based on the reasonable admission that the other person has unshared evidence supporting that side of the issue, then to acknowledge this is to admit that the overall evidence includes evidence that supports that side. And this counterbalances one's own evidence. So it is especially clear that the answer to (Q2), which asked about the possibility of reasonable disagreements in which there is this mutual acknowledging of reasonable, must be "no." The verdict on (Q1) may be a little less clear, but to say that there can be unacknowledged reasonable disagreements of the sort under discussion is to say that both sides are reasonable in maintaining their own beliefs in the face of an apparent stand-off. It seems to be somehow dismissing the merits of the other person's unshared evidence without any basis for that dismissal. I don't see how that could be reasonable. So I don't see how unshared evidence is supposed to help here.

VII. External Epistemic Factors

Plantinga says that the person who maintains his religious beliefs in the light of disagreement

doesn't really think the beliefs in question are on a relevant epistemic par. She may agree that she and those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their belief, and even they that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar, or relevantly similar. But she must still think that there is an important epistemic difference: she thinks that somehow the other person has made a mistake, or has a blind spot, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate. (p. 182)

van Inwagen, in an email message to me, said something similar. The idea is that there are external epistemic factors, and even though there is internal parity, there's an external difference.

It's not clear to me exactly how this is supposed to affect the argument for (S). If it has any bearing at all, I guess it's an objection to (C). The idea would be that these non-evidential

factors can make it not wrong to maintain one's belief.

Notice what Plantinga says here: the person will (or must) think that the other person has made a mistake or has a blind spot, or is epistemically less well off in virtue of some other external epistemic factor. This is to say that he will discount the other person's reasons and favor his own. That may be true. But what we will think is not crucial here. What matters is whether there is any reason to think this. I don't think Plantinga has argued that he does have a reason to discount the equally well supported rival views.

To be justified in maintaining one's belief in these situations, one needs reason to think that those on the other side are in fact failing with respect to some external epistemic factor. Here's one way to think about things. In the situations under discussion, we know that the parties to the dispute are on an internal epistemic par. Since their beliefs conflict, one is right and one is wrong (provided the example is set up properly). So we know that there's an external difference between them. It must be that one of them is deceived, has a blind spot, etc. This is just what we saw in the example about seeing the Dean on the quad. But if they really are on an internal par, then neither has an internal reason think that it's the other one who must have the external defect.

I don't think I'm relying on my own internalist conception of epistemic justification here. The question is not about whether justification should be conceived along reliabilist lines or other externalist lines. The question is about whether we can reasonably maintain our beliefs in cases of disagreement. Suppose we became externalists about justification. I don't see how that would make any difference. We are then in a situation in which we know that the people on one side of the dispute have an external epistemic defect. But we have no reason to make a judgment about which side the error is on.

If you want to be an externalist about things, you can say that only one party to the dispute is externally justified. You can insist that you are the one. But, for one thing, it is far from clear what externalist account of justification would justify that belief. Would the insistence that the mistake is in the other person result from a reliable process? Would that belief actually have some other external virtue? I see no reason to think so. Furthermore, something along the lines of (S) remains true. You don't have any good reason to believe as you do. It's just that you get say, somehow, that you are externally justified. Thus, I don't find in all of this any good response to the argument for (S).

VIII. The Significance of Disagreement

I want to turn now to the epistemic significance of disagreement.

The first thing to note is that the actual existence of people who disagree with you about something is not in its own right the key thing. Here's why. Suppose you believe something on the basis of a body of shared evidence. Others believe otherwise on the basis of that same evidence. Perhaps there are some insights or whatever that complicate the picture a little. It can't be that the key epistemological fact here - the one that potentially undermines your justification for your belief - is that there actually are people who don't draw the same conclusion as you. If that were the key fact, you might too readily have a way to deal with that. You could justify your belief by eliminating the opposition. That's not right, in any relevant sense. For similar reasons, polling participants to the dispute doesn't make much sense. Reliabilists could win the day -

make accepting their theory justified - by seizing control of the tenure committees. (Tom Kelly makes a point along these lines.)

Second, there's another reason to think that actual disagreement isn't the key issue. Suppose that the existence of disagreement makes a difference. And suppose that one side in some dispute is in fact less intransigent in their beliefs. Suppose that in light of their disagreements, the evidentialists all suspend judgment while the reliabilists unreasonably stick to their guns. And then, remarkably, the reliabilists no longer have any opposition. At least they no longer have anyone saying that they are wrong. If disagreement matters, it can't be that one somehow makes one's beliefs reasonable by improperly ignoring its existence while those with whom one disagrees respond properly. Getting the other side to suspend judgment does not make it reasonable to persist in your belief. (Perhaps this point can be avoided by saying that there still is a disagreement when one side believes and the other side suspends judgment.)

Third, yet another example will bring out something about when disagreement does make a difference. As I've noted my favorite epistemological theory is evidentialism. Suppose I receive an email message from a bright and trusted friend with the subject heading: "Five Objections to Evidentialism". Prior to getting this message, let us suppose I am justified in believing that evidentialism is true. (OK, if you don't like the example, change it to one that you like better.) Upon receiving this message, I do the only sensible thing: I immediately delete it. I surely don't want evidence like that. I continue to believe that evidentialism is true on the basis of my old reasons.

Surely my conduct in this case is reprehensible. But just as surely, I have acquired evidence against evidentialism and my belief loses some considerable support the moment I see the subject matter of my bright and trusted friend's message. It gives me good reason to think that there are objections to the theory, even if I'm not yet in a position to say what they are. That significantly alters the evidential status of the proposition for me. Given the credibility of the message sender, most likely my evidence no longer supports my belief. I no longer ought to believe in my theory. Evidence of evidence is evidence.

Variations on the example are possible. The message might come from someone entirely unknown to me, from someone I know to be nearly always seriously confused about epistemological issues, or the heading might be something neutral such as "Some Thoughts About Evidentialism". Again I delete the message. Again, assume that it contains the same devastating objections. (I'm willing to play along here, even though the phrase "devastating objection to evidentialism" strikes me as contradictory.) In this case, the mere awareness of the existence of the message has much less evidential force.

What I take from all this is that the existence of disagreement sometimes makes an evidential, and thus epistemic, difference. But it does this because it is evidence of there being reasons to believe something contrary to what you previously believed. That's what I learn when I receive my trusted friend's message. Thus, disagreement in itself is not reason for doubt. Rather, when that disagreement provides you with reasons to think that there is evidence against your view. Learning this existential fact has evidential import in its own right. It's almost like getting the evidence itself. It could be that you have reason to think that this evidence is misleading. It could be that you don't. Cases will vary. Depending upon the details, you may, or you may not, be reasonable in maintaining your belief in the light of this disagreement. What

matters is not whether someone disagrees, but rather whether you have reason to think that there is some good evidence against what you believe.

This, in fact, is exactly what goes on in many of the examples we've considered. I don't get your visual impression of there being no one on the quad, but I do get virtually as compelling evidence that there is such an impression in a person who I have no reason to believe to be functioning less well than I. The same is true when van Inwagen learns that Lewis has different intuitions.

I conclude that I should adjust my views in the light of disagreement, at least in any cases in which it leads me to think that there is evidence indicating a conclusion contrary to my own. The existence of disagreement can be evidence of the existence of evidence, and this matters. I take this to be support for (E), or something like it.

IX. Conclusions

1. I have not found a good response to the argument for (S).
2. I think that (E) and (C), or close cousins, are true.
3. I don't think that there can be acknowledged reasonable disagreements. That is, the answer to (Q2) is "No."
4. I think that the answer to (Q1) is also "No," though I am less confident of this.
5. I think that, under suitable conditions, the existence of disagreement does make an epistemic difference. That is, sometimes, learning of disagreement involves learning that there is evidence on the other side of an issue. And this can matter.
6. I think that (D) deserves closer scrutiny than I've given it. Not all the cases that initially seem to fall under it really do. Some of the real world disagreements are of the sort I set aside in section II. Some are cases in which important parts of the evidence are not shared. I suspect that some of the cases of apparent disagreement are actually cases in which people are talking past one another. I don't quite know what to make of this, but I think the reasonable conclusion to draw in some cases is that the other person means something different from what I mean.
7. I'm more of a skeptic than others, such as van Inwagen. In fact, like many people, I am in fact shaken when I learn of disagreement. I don't have such confident views about lot of topics. Or, if I do, I don't see them as justified. Suspending judgment is the right attitude in a lot of cases, I think. More often, I suspect, than many would say. I would, and do suspend, judgment about a lot.
8. I see no threat to evidentialism in any of this.
9. Reasonable people could disagree with all of these conclusions. (!??)

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Endnotes

1. As some people do. Or they try to say there really is no disagreement. John Hick.
2. There is a difficulty here. Consider students (mis)taught by skeptics.