

*Peer idealization, internal examples, and the meta-philosophy of genius in the epistemology of disagreement*

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Do you get worried when you discover that some of your philosophical colleagues disagree with your philosophical views? What if you know these colleagues to be *smarter*, and, with respect to the relevant issues, *better informed* than you? ...Despite having genuine respect for people you know to be your epistemic superiors with regard to the relevant topics, you continue to disagree with them on those very issues: you are an *epistemic renegade* (Bryan Frances, 2013, pp. 121-122).

The interesting cases of disagreement in contemporary epistemology of disagreement (EoD) are generally taken to be those arising between *epistemic peers*. Peerhood is sometimes cashed out just in terms of an equiprobability of making true assertions regarding a given domain (Konigsberg 2013, p. 97). But it is more often augmented with some more specific reference to the possession of the same evidence, and of equivalent reasoning capacities relative to that evidence.

In the stipulative sense of “peer” introduced, peers literally share all evidence and are equal with respect to their abilities and dispositions relevant to interpreting that evidence. Of course, in actual cases there will rarely, if ever, be exact equality of evidence and abilities. This leaves open questions about exactly how conclusions drawn about the idealized examples will extend to real-world cases of disagreement (Feldman and Warfield, p. 2).

Epistemic peerhood is an idea critical for contemporary EoD because it defines a puzzle or family of puzzles that has animated a considerable proportion of that literature. The puzzle is that of what to believe in a case where agents standing in an important sort of epistemic symmetry relative to some area of judgement nevertheless disagree about an issue falling within that area. Thinking in terms of epistemic peers could be a heuristic that helps us reason creatively about what, if anything, distinguishes our epistemic position from that of our interlocutors – it could help us to think about symmetry-breakers (Kenyon 2018). But that’s rarely how it’s been used. In fact EoD has tended not only to idealize epistemic peerhood in the ways noted by Feldman and Warfield, but to treat the satisfaction of known (sometimes “revealed” or “acknowledged”) epistemic peerhood as a background condition for the core phenomenon of interest. Jointly this raises the prospect that the core phenomenon of interest to EoD is virtually non-existent.

There is a lot to say about epistemic peerhood, and I am not going to attempt to say it here. It is enough to note that the idealized nature of epistemic peerhood in the EoD literature has

often been flagged as a concern, even if only to be set aside in many instances.<sup>1</sup> My interest in the following remarks is to follow up on one surprisingly common way to philosophize about peer disagreement through examples. After all, one might expect that looking at examples would be a reliable way to moderate the degree of idealization involved in theoretical discussions of peerhood. Dealing with examples should enable a rich, empirically informed analysis of the many, many ways that symmetry is broken—perhaps inevitably broken – between approximate peers in actual messy cases. This is why it strikes me as significant that a surprising number of those examples of peer disagreement are themselves drawn from contemporary philosophical debates.

I will argue that this choice of examples can facilitate the retention of a hyper-idealized notion of epistemic peers, by shaping discussions away from a full and frank consideration of the fact that experts can be not just wrong, but unreasonable; and that expertise can succeed or fail in surprisingly fine-grained ways. Underlying meta-philosophical views about the significance of smartness, genius, or The Right Stuff in doing philosophy well are a likely factor in making this use of examples seem reasonable. But that’s an unmotivated way of thinking about both philosophical expertise and the philosophical project, and those examples are a foreseeably distortive influence on our theorizing about the epistemology of disagreement.

## II.

First, just a bit more context on peerhood. If we do take known or revealed peerhood to define the core cases of the relevant phenomenon, we will find it very hard to operationalize in actual cases. In part this is due to the variations of definition of epistemic peerhood, into which weeds for simplicity’s sake I will not descend, and the related difficulties of making precise such notions as “all the same evidence,” and “equality of abilities” – the latter of which comes close to invoking an empirically dubious notion of general intelligence. Partly, too, it is because the role of epistemic peerhood in the literature often seems to presuppose that we have a way of carving up propositions into domains of disagreement, to allow that a peer with respect to domain  $D$  can remain a peer despite being *prima facie* wrong about  $p$ , where  $p \in D$ . And this must hold even though being wrong about  $p$  is virtually certain to involve being wrong about propositions  $\{r, q, \dots\} \in D$  that are inferential neighbours of  $p$ , and hence suggestive of some non-trivial disagreement over elements of  $D$ . If we disagree about whether olive oil or sunflower oil is better for frying up hash browns, we are at least pretty likely to disagree about which tastes better, what the appropriate maximum frying temperature is, and so forth. Noting this widening circle of disagreements, how obvious is it that we are strictly epistemically *symmetrical* with respect to the domain of fry-cooking? An account is owing of the tolerances for degrees of disagreement under peerhood.

But partly, too, peerhood is a vexed notion just because it’s really hard to individuate domains of knowledge and predict what false, or even frankly weird, things an expert can believe at the margins of such a domain.

To see this individuation problem in concrete terms, consider prospective disagreements between me and Nobel laureate Linus Pauling. (Setting aside that he is no longer living, that is.) Pauling was a brilliant award-winning molecular biologist, whereas I am... well, *made out of*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in addition to the Feldman and Warfield remark, see Christensen (2009) and King (2012).

biological molecules. It's no surprise that we wouldn't be peers on disagreements in that field. But it might be surprising to consider the complete reason for this. Pauling's knowledge and judgement are likely superior to mine on every molecular biology topic – *except* for the effects of large ascorbic acid doses on human health. On that topic, my knowledge and judgement are relevantly superior to his. Pauling became obsessed with what he saw as the health benefits of mega-doses of Vitamin C; but his claims had the character of zealotry even at the time, and have not stood up to empirical investigation. I've read through some of the studies regarding the effects of ascorbate mega-doses, and, though no expert myself, I have the cognitive and affective capacity for appropriate uptake of their key points. Pauling, it seems, had some motivated reasoning or other intellectual barrier that prevented his taking up such information. So he is my epistemic superior regarding the discipline, but not regarding a very thinly sliced topic within the discipline.

Similarly, although Andrew Wakefield is no longer licensed to practice medicine due to his utterly fraudulent medical research claiming a link between vaccinations and incidence of autism in children, he did qualify as a doctor after completing medical school, and was for a long time a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. By contrast, I have watched some episodes of *House*, and once gave chest compressions to a mannequin. If Wakefield and I disagreed about the presentations of cardiac arrest or symptoms of a hernia, we would not be epistemic peers; he would by far be my superior. Between the two of us, he's the one you would want next to you if you were choking on a gummy bear. But if we disagreed (and we do) about whether fear of autism should lead you not to vaccinate your child or yourself, I am without question his epistemic superior. I would give the consensus expert opinion – which I am emotionally willing and cognitively able to incorporate into my psychological economy, at an educated layperson's level – while Wakefield, unable or unwilling to do so, would say things about vaccination that virtually all medical researchers regard as sheer nonsense.

It is merely psychologically odd, and not theoretically paradoxical or puzzling, that Pauling was a great biochemist, but deeply unreliable on the biochemistry of ascorbic acid in human aging processes. And I can reason clearly and write directly about the symmetry-breaking factors explaining my disagreement with him. But that's largely because Pauling is deceased, and he and I don't share a discipline, and he's sort of a public figure. By contrast, when EoD has focused on applied cases, it has surprisingly often resorted to self-referential examples of philosophical disagreements between named interlocutors, often living. This feature of the literature steers EoD away from applicability to other cases because it favors silence about factors crucial to the practical evaluation of disagreements.

Case studies comprising philosophers talking to philosophers about philosophers talking to philosophers are inherently obscure, as roadmaps to general application go. More importantly, though, these examples comprise a methodology that skews the analyses of the phenomena, strongly discouraging empirically open contextual and theory-based explanations of disagreement.

These candidate explanations ought to include epistemic asymmetries arising from such factors as ignorance, bias, incapacity of some type and degree, and self-deception highly specific to the case at hand. The fondness for puzzles that drives the literature towards considering symmetrical scenarios as the defining cases of philosophical interest gets a boost from the suggestion that actual philosophical disputes count as instances of such symmetry (and sometimes even purport to find an asymmetry in the counterintuitive “wrong” direction to create

a sharper sense of puzzlement). But this suggestion, that interlocutors must be true peers on the topic in question, is buoyed by the intrusion of professional courtesy, personal modesty, collegiality, and friendship rather than frank empirical imagination about the cases.

Of course, from a collegiality perspective, it's quite right that professional courtesy, personal modesty, respectful communication, and friendship should constrain the conjectures one commits to print regarding other living philosophers' dispositions to believe claims that one rejects for good and articulable reasons. But an unconstrained set of such conjectures are important elements of fertile reasoning about the significance of disagreements. When our theorizing about disagreement is constrained by the treatment we can pro-socially give to our touchstone examples, it means we have chosen our examples uncarefully and risk drawing a distorted roadmap to the project.

### III.

Once such examples are taken to involve unimpeachable interlocutors, the upshot tends to be diagnostic perplexity as to how such agents can persist in holding an opposing view.<sup>2</sup> Thus Peter van Inwagen is driven to extreme lengths to explain why David Lewis was unpersuaded by his arguments for incompatibilism about the will.

Consider, for example, the body of public evidence that I can appeal to in support of incompatibilism (arguments and other philosophical considerations that can be expressed in sentences or diagrams on a blackboard or other objects of intersubjective awareness). David Lewis "had" the same evidence (he had seen and he remembered and understood these objects) and was, nevertheless, a compatibilist. If I know, as I do, that David had these features (and this feature, too: he was a brilliant philosopher), that he had these features is itself evidence that is (or so it would seem to me) relevant to the truth of incompatibilism. Should this new evidence not, when I carefully consider it, lead me to *withdraw* my assent to incompatibilism, to retreat into agnosticism on the incompatibilism/compatibilism issue?

...The difficulty of finding anything to say in response to this argument, taken together with my unwillingness to concede either that I am irrational in being an incompatibilist or that David was irrational in being a compatibilist, tempts me to suppose that I have some sort of interior, incommunicable evidence (evidence David did not have) that supports incompatibilism" (van Inwagen 2010, p. 26).

Why must we propose an *incommunicable* body of evidence, possessed by van Inwagen and lacked by David Lewis, which would explain the former's favourable epistemic position? Here's one reason why: because so many other less exotic explanations are denied us by the choice of example.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kelly does say this much, to be fair: "Although I tend to find it somewhat unsettling that many disagree with my view, I am inclined to regard this psychological tendency as one that I would lack if I were more rational than I in fact am" (2005, p. 193).

Why move so quickly past the possibility that the relevant evidence was not merely communicable, but already communicated? Maybe it was just under-appreciated by Lewis upon uptake, initial conditions that gave rise to reasoning that was slightly path-dependent thereafter. Or maybe Lewis was, on this very, very specific question, very slightly less reflectively thorough than van Inwagen. These prospects are, perhaps rightly, left unsaid as a matter of social grace and collegiality.<sup>3</sup>

Nor do we, as critical audience to the example and not simply witnesses to autobiography, see van Inwagen taking very seriously the prospect that other potentially controversial commitments of his own are implicated in the disagreement. What philosophical labour might van Inwagen want his theory of free will to do, and how could this be motivating his own reasoning? He raises the example in a paper about religious disagreement, after all. A theory of praise and blame; a theodicy; an apologetic for the Problem of Evil; a particular conception of persons – these and many other open questions on which van Inwagen has preferred views could conceivably be putting a thumb or two on the scales of his rational evaluation of the free will disagreement with Lewis, in just the way that he would be unlikely to notice from his own perspective.

These are clear possibilities, bright with implication, from the perspective of an empirically-informed diagnosis of specific disagreements. The choice of example makes these possibilities hard to entertain, though, and harder still to discuss collegially. The case, van Inwagen writes, is one “in which neither philosopher labors under the burden of any cognitive deficiency from which the other is free. I know that David labored under no such deficiency. I like to think that I do not.” Notice that these are *empirical* claims of immunity from relevant biases. As empirical methodology, though, this is absolutely wretched: the impossibly blunt notion of cognitive deficiency; the gallant assumption of immunity to any such deficiency in one’s colleague; the optimistic assessment of oneself. Yet having raised this kind of example, what else could van Inwagen possibly have written about it?

Catherine Elgin also uses an example of a disagreement with a named philosopher in sketching her own view in EoD. Again it is a disagreement with David Lewis, this time over the reality of possible worlds. Elgin (rightly, I would say) describes Lewis as “incredibly smart, philosophically gifted, and intellectually responsible,” adding that

[i]t is no false modesty for me to say that David Lewis was a far better philosopher than I am. Nevertheless, I think he was wrong. I cannot refute his position; it is admirably well-defended. But, despite Lewis’s intelligence and arguments, I do not believe that there exist real possible worlds... But David Lewis thought otherwise. He was not my epistemological peer; he was my epistemological superior. So should I not revise my opinion to agree with him (p. 58)?

Elgin demurs from van Inwagen’s “incommunicable evidence” hypothesis, writing, “I cannot speak for van Inwagen. But speaking for myself, I think it is exceedingly unlikely that I enjoy any sort of philosophical insight that Lewis lacked” (p. 59). This observation helps to motivate

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<sup>3</sup> I am of course not saying that van Inwagen wrote this *merely* as a matter of showing social grace; I expect it’s a sincere but mistaken thought that the evidence at his disposal bears out a judgement of true symmetrical peerhood on the communicable elements of the free will debate.

Elgin's *doxastic involuntarism* perspective on disagreement. According to Elgin, she doesn't conciliate her view with Lewis's simply because she can't *choose* to do so. If she could so choose, then rationally she would have to conciliate, because Lewis is at least her epistemic peer, and probably her epistemic superior on the question.

#### IV.

In Elgin's case, too, I submit that irrelevant features of the example are apt to distort the theorizing drawn from it. But now we can perhaps start to see something deeper at work. Part of what is happening in examples of this sort, I suggest, is the unusual tendency of academic philosophy to be heavily driven by assumptions about the role of philosophy-specific intelligence, or even *genius*, in doing philosophy well (Leslie et al 2015). The idea that philosophical insights flow from pure philosophical intellectual horsepower (plus scholarly knowledge, of course) makes it much less natural to think that someone could deliver amazing insights on some philosophical issues, and yet be significantly wide of the mark on closely related issues. Because how could undifferentiated philosophical genius be so unpredictably and fine-grainedly gappy in its effects? But this conception of philosophical insight, and its associated conception of what it is to *do philosophy* more generally, are deeply flawed meta-philosophical oversimplifications, and here they are spilling over into social epistemology methodology.

Now, of the many things that comprise doing philosophy, it may very well be that David Lewis did some better than Catherine Elgin (thus far). Maybe there's a notion of "better" that would allow us to say this of the data. I am confident, though, that Catherine Elgin does some of the many things that comprise doing philosophy better than David Lewis did. Think of the number of things that comprise doing philosophy, and the number of different ways of doing each of *those* things felicitously or effectively! Philosophy is too many things – topics, sub-topics, problems and sub-problems, scholarly bodies of knowledge and cross-classified interdisciplinary bodies of knowledge, research techniques, discursive techniques, application techniques, cognitive skills, social skills, linguistic skills, teaching skills, emotional skills, and meta-skills yoking all this stuff together – for any one competent and experienced philosophy professor to do uniformly better in all domains and at all times than another competent and experienced philosophy professor. If we don't somehow know in advance which elements (and complexes of elements, and subsets of elements) are relevant and which irrelevant to a specific philosophical disagreement in context – and really, how could we? – then blanket claims about who is stronger in The Force and therefore epistemically superior for current purposes are *at best* unrevealing.

We can moreover note that Elgin clearly does think she enjoys a "philosophical insight that Lewis lacked." She thinks he was just plain wrong about possible worlds. And this is – in the relevant sense! – no different than my thinking that Linus Pauling was just plain wrong about vitamin C, even though he knew a lot more about biochemistry than I do; or, for that matter, that Andrew Wakefield is just plain wrong about vaccines, even though he trained as a doctor and was for many years a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. Again, obviously, there are many key differences between these cases as well. Again, people who are generally epistemically reliable, even expert, in a topic at one level of granularity can be definitely, even notoriously, wrong on some matter at a more fine-grained level within that field. Even a luminous, gifted scholar can be a victim of their own biases, outsized commitments, failures of

attention, and ignorance, when it comes to specific propositions or issues falling squarely within their field of expertise –perhaps for broadly holistic reasons stemming from beliefs or commitments far beyond their field of expertise.

Whether that is happening to me or to my interlocutor in a disagreement is a critical consideration in real contexts. Our theorizing about disagreement must take seriously the factors that indicate local failures or reversals of expertise and intellectual excellence, helping explain them rather than constructing them as paradoxical or puzzle-defining. Theory-informing examples that discourage our reviewing those factors explicitly are barriers to sound theorizing. In practice this means that examples of disagreements in philosophy, between named living (or recently living) philosophers, are liable to distort our thinking about the epistemology of disagreement.

Even to discuss the matter in this way, naming names and considering specific people, has a vaguely uncollegial or crass feel to it – not in the original examples, of course, but once we abandon the imperative to attribute unbroken expert reliability and practical immunity to bias to the people in question. But we do have to talk about them, because these are influential examples leveraged to some effect in the literature. If it seems wrong now to speak realistically about the prospect that the interlocutors in these cases, their usual expertise notwithstanding, could be wrong for identifiable, even potentially embarrassing, symmetry-breaking reasons – the kind of reasons for which we know experts can be wrong about things *all the time* – that is really my point. In thinking about disagreement and its epistemological significance, we need to speak directly of the prospects of ignorance, bias, carelessness, insensitivity to evidence, or otherwise infelicitous reasoning on the part of otherwise reliable or expert agents. Examples that discourage realistic discussion will predictably facilitate over-idealized theorizing, a failure of methodology that generates skewed theory.

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