

To agree or to *agree to disagree*: that is the question

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Abstract The goal of the paper is to offer a characterisation of different ways of using the terms agreement and disagreement and to assess disagreements where subjects take themselves to instantiate the epistemic peerage relation. A distinction between merely verbal and substantive disagreement is put forth. A criticism of two popular solutions to the problem of epistemic peer disagreement is advanced.

Keywords: Substantive disagreement, merely verbal disagreement, epistemic peerage, rationality, conciliationism.

1. Introduction

We disagree with our friends, colleagues, supervisors and parents about all sorts of things. These disagreements affect our disputes in various ways: chief among them, the discovery of disagreement may lead us to reflect on whether we'd better find a common point of agreement with our opponent, or we should stick to our guns and persist in disagreement.

In this paper I shall tackle the relationship between agreement and disagreement by focusing on a family of disputes in which speakers take themselves to be *epistemic peers*, that is, they have access to the same evidence and are equals in reasoning, thoughtfulness and other intellectual-epistemic virtues. After having clarified the targeted notions of agreement and disagreement in sections 2-2.2, in section 3 I shall emphasise the peculiarity of peer disagreement; in sections 4-4.2 I shall discuss whether the peers ought to agree or to *agree to disagree* after the discovery of disagreement. I shall take up two popular approaches to this question and point out some weaknesses that make them ultimately unappealing.

2. Agreement and disagreement: some varieties

I deem useful to start off with a characterisation of what agreement and disagreement are. The aim of this part of the paper is twofold: to distinguish between two interpretations of verbs *agree* and *disagree*; to draw a distinction between *merely verbal* and *substantive* disagreement. This discussion will allow me to circumscribe the notions of agreement and disagreement that will be the target of the second part of the paper.

2.1. Activity and state

In *Relativism and monadic truth*, Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne offer the following definition of the verb *agree*:

The verb ‘agree’ has a use according to which it picks out a state of some plurality of individuals – where some individuals agree that P if they all believe the proposition that P. There is also a different use according to which it denotes an activity, where agreeing that P is the endpoint of a debate, argument, discussion or negotiation. On this use, ‘agreeing that P’ marks an event. (CAPPELEN & HAWTHORNE 2009: 60)

John MacFarlane claims that the same holds for disagreement.¹ That is to say, there is a distinction between *having* a disagreement, and *being* in disagreement. Let us see what this distinction amounts to. As far as active disagreement is concerned, disagreement is marked by various patterns of verbal and physical behaviour. When I am having a disagreement with someone I use expressions of denials such as *Nuh-uh*, *No*, and so on, and I can explicitly say *I disagree*. Moreover, I can express my disagreement by shaking my head, by reacting with an angry look, and so on. It must be stressed that these behaviours do not always result in a disagreement involving doxastic attitudes, e.g. beliefs. Consider the following case:

(DOWNLOAD)

Before downloading any software, one has to agree (or disagree) with the terms and conditions of use.

In (DOWNLOAD), one typically does not pay any attention to what terms and conditions of use are and does not read the entire file specifying them. However, one decides to agree or disagree with such conditions. And yet, one does not come to believe all propositions expressed by the sentences forming the file. Hence, since one doesn’t form beliefs about what terms and conditions of use say, the activity sense of disagreement does not impose doxastic constraints on disagreement. To put it differently, cases like (DOWNLOAD) show that the activity sense of disagreement does not necessarily target the doxastic states of individuals, for it can only concern their being committed to certain practices or behaviours, i.e. the behaviour of agreeing with the terms and conditions of use without taking any doxastic stance towards them in order to download the software.

Having said that, there are cases, e.g. disputes, where one conveys disagreement with the belief expressed by one’s friend by using expressions of denial. In such cases, being in disagreement and having a disagreement are indistinguishable. And yet, being in disagreement doesn’t *ipso facto* amount to having a disagreement. For having a disagreement seems to require certain physical constraints that are typically met in conversations and disputes. To put it differently, in order to have a disagreement with X one has to have an exchange with X. However, consider the following case:

(NUMBERS)

Consider Paula, who is a current undergraduate student in philosophy with

¹ See MACFARLANE (2009). In the following, for ease of exposition, I will concentrate on disagreement. However, my analysis applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to agreement as well.

interests in philosophy of maths. She is in disagreement with Gottlob Frege's famous thesis that numbers are objects.

This case is rightly described as disagreement, though Paula never discussed with Frege. Thus, it is plausible to maintain that being in disagreement and having a disagreement can come apart. The example just proposed emphasises two features of disagreement. First, the phenomenon of disagreement is not circumscribed to conversational cases. Second, disagreement does not entail symmetrical awareness of disagreement. For Frege cannot be aware of Paula's disagreement. Having clarified this, let us delve a little more into the usage of the verb disagree.

2.2. Merely verbal vs. substantive disagreement

We may use the verb disagree to characterise various cases that, so long as we consider their syntactic surface, appear to be very similar. To illustrate.

- (1). (a) Syd: The bank is big.
(b) Roger: Oh, no, you're wrong. The bank is not big!
- (2). (a) John (by pointing something in the street): This is funny.
(b) Jason (by following John's pointing): Why did you say that? This is not funny.
- (3). (a) Mark (speaking with Julie about their common friend Carl): What are the best skills of Carl as a student?
(b) Julie: He has a good hand writing.
(c) Mark: No, that's false, he has a bad hand writing!

What the surveyed cases have in common is that, in each of them, the disputants are - seemingly - in disagreement. Thus, according to a naïve grasp of the phenomenon of disagreement, it is plausible to say that it is conceived as extensionally equivalent to the phenomenon of the superficial contrast: if we look at the surface of utterances and we notice that they seem to express a deep contrast, there is disagreement. And yet, I shall contend that this approach isn't a reliable guide to disagreement. To illustrate, consider the alleged disagreement cases just presented.

In (1a)-(1b), the contrast between Syd and Roger seems to be a contrast about the application of the gradable adjective *big* to the bank. According to Syd, the bank falls into the objects satisfying the predicate *big*, whereas Roger denies that application. But there is another aspect of Syd and Roger's case deserving further attention. Notice that the word *bank* can make reference to a financial institution that invests money deposited by customers, makes loans at interest and so on, as well as to the land alongside or sloping down to a river. That is to say, the word *bank* is ambiguous. As John Perry pointed it out,² ambiguity can affect sentences at three different levels: the *pre-semantic*, the *semantic* and the *pragmatic* level. The pre-semantic level is the one relevant to our case, since Syd's and Roger's utterances are ambiguous in the sense that if we want to figure out what the meaning of the word *bank* is we have to contextually disambiguate it.

Imagine now that Syd replies to Roger's deny of his claim by saying:

² PERRY (1999).

(1c) Why do you think so? There are 15 counters!

Roger, suddenly, grasps that there is a misunderstanding and says:

(1d) Oh, sorry, I was inattentive. I was talking about the river bank.

This licenses the claim that (1a)-(1b) is a case of disagreement only if we have run all pre-semantic disambiguations and clarified the meaning of the terms involved.

Let us turn now to John and Jason in (2a)-(2b). They are uttering two contradictory evaluative sentences about the goodness of a thing indicated by the demonstrative *this*. Suppose now that John's utterance is directed to some kids playing hide and seek in the street and indeed he is pointing the kids with his hand. Unfortunately, when Jason hears John's utterance and follows the direction of John's pointing he sees that in the same street, but just beyond the kids playing, some teens bully other teens, and he says that *this*, i.e. the fact that some teens bully other teens, is not funny at all. Thus, we have another kind a misunderstanding, due this time to a mistaken interpretation of the act of the pointing: instead of speaking of a genuine case of disagreement, we have to characterise this case as a case of a demonstrative misunderstanding. That is to say, we mistakenly think that John and Jason are disagreement because we did not operate a disambiguation at the *semantic* level.

Let us assess (3a)-(3c) and describe the features of this conversational exchange. Suppose that Mark and Julie are two undergraduate students, and they are speaking about their common friend Carl; Julie and Carl are students of philosophy, whereas Mark studies physics. Mark is wondering about Carl's student life, and he then asks Julie to say something about this argument. Julie's answer is a case of conversational implicature: she asserts *p*, viz. that Carl has a good hand writing, to implicate *q*, viz. that Carl is not a good student. Now, Mark does not calculate the implicature because he is thoughtless and, since he knows very well Carl, he denies Julie's assertion by saying that Carl has a bad hand writing. Do we count this case as a case of disagreement? It seems to me that the answer is negative: once we *pragmatically* disambiguate, we realize that we are facing a failure of conversational exchange.

These three cases are meant to show that it is a pre-condition of disagreement that speakers share, case by case and implicitly or explicitly, a conversational-perceptual-linguistic background. If the incompatibility of their views is beyond misunderstandings, cooperative laziness, perceptual mistakes, and the like, we have made a decisive step towards what we may call *substantive disagreement*. The idea is that (1)-(3) can just be *merely verbal* cases of disagreement, namely apparent cases of disagreement due to some conversational or interpretative mistake of one or both parties. I propose the following characterisation of merely verbal disagreement:

A and B are in a merely verbal disagreement about *p* if and only if their utterances or inscriptions are apparently in disagreement and this appearance is due either to a divergent use of some expression, or to a misunderstanding of some pre-semantic (i.e. contextual), semantic (i.e. perceptual) or pragmatic (i.e. conversational) aspects of the disagreement situation.

As far as I can see, an intuitive strategy for unmasking merely verbal disagreement is to replace the expressions that are allegedly responsible for the disagreement with different expressions preserving the original intended meaning. By way of example,

in (1a)-(1b) if we replaced *bank* with *river bank* and *financial institution*, disagreement would disappear, and this may hold for other cases as well.

It must be noticed, though, that the label *verbal* might cover also deep disagreements about language. Indeed, if two people are discussing about the correct meaning of an expression, this disagreement should not be taken as non-substantive or verbal in the sense just clarified. To forestall misunderstandings, I shall dub all genuine disagreements about language *linguistic disagreements*, and all putative non-substantive cases of disagreement as *merely verbal disagreements*.

Having clarified what substantive disagreement is not, let me offer a definition of what *substantive* disagreement is. Here is the definition I'll rely on:

A and B are in disagreement iff, for two semantic contents φ and ψ , the accuracy condition of A's acceptance are such that, if they were fulfilled, this would *ipso facto* make B's acceptance of ψ inaccurate, or vice-versa.

To exemplify the definition, consider A, who accepts "It's raining" of Barcelona at 12 pm. In Paris, at noon, B accepts "It's not raining in Barcelona now". According to definition just stated, A and B are in disagreement to the extent that A's acceptance of "It's raining", concerning Barcelona and 12 pm has accuracy conditions which guarantee the inaccuracy conditions of B's acceptance.

I defend this definition elsewhere,³ and I won't reconstruct the arguments in its favour. I shall instead concentrate on the relationship between substantive agreement and disagreement in disputes that enjoy some peculiar epistemic features.

3. Disagreeing in a dispute: the case of epistemic peers

The discovery of substantive disagreement with another party certainly affects the way in which the dispute unfolds. In this section I shall focus on the idea that the discovery of disagreement could lead us to a reflection on whether we'd better find a common point of agreement with our opponent, or stick to our guns and persist in disagreement. Let us introduce this issue by the following example.

Suppose that an undergraduate student disagrees with his (or her) teacher about the proof of a theorem; the undergraduate says that the proof is unsound, whereas the teacher says that the proof is sound. Furthermore, the teacher recognizes where his (or her) student gets things wrong: he (or she) is not considering a particular rule of derivation that is employed in the proof. Hence, the teacher has more evidence than his (or her) student has. An explanation of their disagreement could appeal to the fact that the student is saying something wrong because he (or she) lacks some evidence the teacher has. In such a case, the discovery of disagreement doesn't seem to be relevant for the rationality of the teacher's beliefs; he (or she) can simply stick to his (or her) guns, for his (or her) opponent lacks relevant information. By contrast, the undergraduate should revise his (or her) belief on the soundness of the proof because he (or she) gets to know new conclusive evidence on this issue. In this case, it seems rational for the disputants to agree on the issue under analysis.

There are other cases, however, in which the path from disagreement to agreement can't be so easily covered as in the undergraduate case. The aim of this second part of the paper is to deal with a family of controversial disagreements that exhibit peculiar epistemic features. The disputes I'm interested in are those in which subjects

³ See BELLERI & PALMIRA (2012).

have access to the same evidence and display roughly the same thoughtfulness, carefulness, logical skills and reasoning abilities. That is to say, disputants take themselves to be *epistemic peers*. Two individuals are epistemic peers with respect to some question if and only if they satisfy the following two conditions:⁴

- (i) *Evidential equality*: they are equals with respect to the evidence and information which bear on that question;
- (ii) *Intellectual equipment equality*: they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, honesty, impartiality, and freedom from bias.

Let me briefly explain why, in my view, disagreements among epistemic peers deserve attention in the project of getting clear about the relations between agreement and disagreement in an argumentative scenario.

I submit that when disputants take themselves to be epistemic peers, disagreement raises a peculiar question concerning the rationality of subjects' doxastic attitudes. For, the very fact of learning that someone is reaching a different conclusion on the basis of equal evidence, and equal intellectual skills may lead subjects to reflect on this situation in a more careful way than they do in situations when they disagree with someone who is in a totally different epistemic situation, e.g. the undergraduate student case. That is to say, while in the undergraduate student case is not disagreement *per se* that forces the undergraduate student to revise his (or her) belief, viz. it's the acquisition of new evidence on the problem that leads him (or her) to agree with the professor, in epistemic peer disagreements there is an epistemic symmetry between subjects that doesn't admit of the same resolution of disagreement. To put it differently, we can't reach agreement by simply acknowledging that one of the two disputants got things right because he (or she) has conclusive evidence in favour of his (or her) conclusion that the other lacks. Our decision to retain or revise our beliefs is not uniquely determined by evidential or intellectual factors, e.g. as in the undergraduate case, for we are equals with respect to them. This strikes me as a glaring asymmetry between the undergraduate case and the case of epistemic peer disagreement. The very fact of disagreeing with a peer is another epistemic datum that could play a role in deciding what epistemic conduct we have to follow in this scenario. The question is: what is rational to do when confronted with epistemic peer disagreement?

4. To agree or to agree to disagree?

The debate on this topic largely focuses on two opposite lines of responses to the question of what is rational to do when confronted with peer disagreement. On the one hand, there's the idea that epistemic weight of peer disagreement leads us to change our beliefs in order to agree with our opponent says; on the other, one could contend that the epistemic situation doesn't threaten the rationality of our beliefs and we are thus entitled to stick to our guns and *agree to disagree*.

Before going on, let me point out that in the literature there is little discussion of how the notion of rationality should be taken in the problem at stake. Let me try to say something about this issue.

The notion of rationality in place is *epistemic*. To say this amounts to saying that the

⁴ See KELLY (2005: 173-4).

problem has to do with what doxastic attitude is *epistemically justified* after the discovery of disagreement. As I see it, the relevant notion of justification should be conceived of along *internalist* lines.⁵ Internalism about justification is the thesis that the justification of one's belief that *p* is completely determined by one's internal states that are accessible to one upon reflection. These states are what we may call the *evidence* that a subject has in favour of believing a certain proposition. Therefore, a subject is rational if he (or she) correctly responds to the evidence, i.e. if his (or her) belief is epistemically justified.

4.1. Achieving agreement

As has emerged previously, the debate on peer disagreement hinges on two main strategies of response. The first strategy consists of the claim that the rational behaviour in a dispute with an epistemic peer is to reach a point of agreement with the opponent. This thesis rests on the claim that the discovery of disagreement counts as evidence bearing on the object of disagreement among epistemic peers. More to the point, the fact that a reasonable agent responds to evidence in a certain way constitutes psychological evidence, that is, evidence about people's beliefs. A way of looking at this kind of evidence is to maintain that disagreement is evidence on what first-order evidence supports; that is, the doxastic attitudes of a reasonable epistemic agent towards the hypothesis *H* constitute *higher-order defeating evidence* about the character of his (or her) first-order evidence.⁶ Hence, the discovery of disagreement with an epistemic peer gives rise to the following situation. If two subjects are epistemic peers, then they satisfy the evidential equality condition; to put it roughly, they have the same first-order evidence *e*. However, they reach two opposite conclusions on the basis of *e*, and their different responses to this shared evidence are evidence, i.e. higher-order evidence, on what the shared first-order evidence supports. So, on the one hand, peers gain higher-order evidence HOE1 that first-order evidence *e* supports the hypothesis *H*; on the other, the peers gain higher-order evidence HOE2 that first-order evidence *e* supports the hypothesis not-*H*. Is there a way of saying that HOE1 is stronger than HOE2? The core insight of the first option I'm considering is that since what constitutes higher-order evidence is an agent's doxastic attitude, and since the agents are epistemic peers, HOE1 and HOE2 have the same evidential strength. The *Equal Weight View* tells us what the epistemic weight of peer disagreement is:

(EWV) In cases of peer disagreement, one should give equal weight to the opinion of a peer and to one's own opinion.

Christensen, Elga and Feldman endorse the Equal Weight View.⁷

The idea that disagreement counts as evidence fosters the thesis that the peers had better change a little bit their doxastic attitudes, for if evidence acts as a defeater then it lowers the confidence one has towards *H*. Hence, the Equal Weight View is compatible with belief revision, and belief revision is needed if the epistemic weight of disagreement is such that we should achieve agreement.

⁵ For the same contention, see WEDGWOOD (2010: 230).

⁶ An epistemic defeater, e.g. a mental state like a belief or an experience, lowers the degree of confidence one has towards a certain hypothesis *H*.

⁷ See CHRISTENSEN (2007), ELGA (2007), FELDMAN (2006).

This way of resolving disagreement is possible if we provide a model that allows one to take into account the following three facts. First: disagreement is symmetrical defeating evidence, that is, both peers' opinions are defeated by it. Second: paradigmatic cases of defeating evidence suggest that one has to update one's beliefs in light of the impact of the defeater by, for instance, lowering one's confidence towards the truth of H. Third: to the extent that I am in an epistemic peer disagreement, I must revise my doxastic attitudes in the direction of my opponent's. This amounts either to *updating* or to withholding my doxastic attitude in order to find a point of agreement with my opponent.⁸ To illustrate the strategy, consider the following case proposed by David Christensen:⁹

(RESTAURANT)

Mary is dining with her friend Lucy. After having looked at the bill, Mary asserts with confidence that she has carefully calculated in her head that they each owe \$43 and Lucy says with the same degree of confidence that she has calculated in her head that they each owe \$45.

Suppose that Mary and Lucy are epistemic peers. The thesis that peer disagreement is evidence that affects both speakers' beliefs says that Mary and Lucy ought to find a common point of agreement by coming close to what the other says. Agreement can be achieved in different ways, i.e. by updating their beliefs or by suspending judgment about the issue.

This is the general conciliationist strategy to the effect that two epistemic peers should end up with agreeing on the targeted issue in order to be rational. Although it seems plausible to give considerable epistemic weight to disagreement among peers because of the epistemic symmetry established by the peerage relation, and although this prediction seems correct in cases like (RESTAURANT), this view has various hurdles to face. In this paper, I wish to concentrate on the following objection:

*The Spinelessness Objection*¹⁰

If the strategy here outlined were valid, we would be forced to tone down our views by coming close to what our opponent says. And yet, to adopt a middle stance on every controversial political, ethical, religious and philosophical issue amounts to being spineless, for we would too easily give up our political convictions, ethical principles and philosophical views.

This objection is particularly enlightening because it emphasises the cost of resolving disagreement. The cost is precisely that of being spineless with respect to many disagreements we care about.

Adam Elga, a proponent of the idea that rationality requires us to revise our opinions in cases of peer disagreement, offers a response to this objection that leads us to discuss the issue of which disputes calls for a conciliationist solution. Elga defends a distinction between *clean and pure* and *messy real-world* disagreements.¹¹

(ABORTION)

Luc is discussing with her friend Lucy about abortion. In their previous political

⁸ Christensen and Elga support the former strategy, Feldman the latter.

⁹ See CHRISTENSEN (2007).

¹⁰ I borrow the label from ELGA (2007).

¹¹ See ELGA (2007: 492).

and ethical discussions they have always had totally different opinions. In this case, Luc says that abortion is permissible, whereas she says that it is not.

(RESTAURANT)

Mary is dining with her friend Lucy. After having looked at the bill, Mary asserts with confidence that she has carefully calculated in her head that they each owe \$43 and Lucy says with the same degree of confidence that she has calculated in his head that they each owe \$45.

Elga maintains that (RESTAURANT) counts as a *clean and pure case* of disagreement. For we can say that Lucy and Mary regard each other another as peers where calculations are concerned. By contrast, (ABORTION) counts as a *messy-real world* case of disagreement since it's very hard to establish peerage, for the issue is tangled up with one's reasoning and stance on other related matters. The general idea, roughly put, is the following. In messy cases of disagreement the epistemic peerage relation can't be instantiated because when we disagree on a single messy issue, we also disagree on many related issues. According to Elga, these frequent disagreements lead both speakers to think that, since one believes that the other has held wrong views about all these related issues, the other is more likely to be mistaken. Hence, they wouldn't count the other as an epistemic peer.

I think that two pitfalls lay in wait for Elga's distinction. The first jeopardises the plausibility of the claim that when we deal with controversial case of disagreement about, say, the moral permissibility of abortion, we have to face a disagreement on a network of beliefs that are dependent each other. This claim entails that in controversial cases, the area of disagreement is wider than it appears to the parties engaged in the conversation. Since Elga's reasoning is meant to establish that there is no room for epistemic peerage in controversial areas of discourse at all, it's sufficient to single out a case in which two subjects, although in vast agreement about various religious, political and social issues, are nonetheless in disagreement about a specific moral issue. I think that there is nothing weird in setting up a case in which two subjects are in broad agreement on a lot of issues that could be connected to a controversial issue on which they disagree. This something that can easily happen in real-world scenarios. As far as I can see, Elga underestimates the possibility of having convergent moral beliefs and disagreeing about a single issue. Thus, the idea that when we are confronted with controversial disagreements we always disagree on a whole cluster of issues linked to the targeted issue isn't so solid as Elga suggests it is. So, the support for the general strategy Elga advocates is weakened.

Thomas Kelly has noticed another wrinkle in Elga's distinction.¹² Consider two cases, A and B. In A, we first discover all of the related issues on which we disagree. Then, I'm entitled to conclude that you are not my peer. However, later on, it emerges that we also agree on many moral issues. Case B proceeds conversely: firstly, we find out agreement on many moral issues; secondly, we discover disagreement on other issues. The only difference between A and B is the order in which we learn our respective opinions. And yet, Elga's distinction would predict that in case A I'm rationally entitled to downgrade your epistemic condition, viz. you are not my peer. By contrast, in case B we start off with a large amount of shared opinions, so there are no reasons for discounting your opinion. This asymmetry emphasises that Elga's distinction is not substantial, for a simple change in the

¹² KELLY (2010: 166-7).

temporal order of events crucially affects the satisfaction of the epistemic peerage condition.

In my view, the foregoing analysis weakens Elga's case against an extended application of epistemic peerage. That is to say, I found his reply to the Spinelessness Objection wanting, for nothing seems to prevent us from applying this concept in various areas of discourse.¹³

The Spinelessness Objection undermines the plausibility of responding to peer disagreement by reaching consensus. In the next section I will focus on the opposite strategy to the effect that peer disagreement is rationally sustainable.

4.2. Sustaining disagreement

In the 11 chapter of his 2007 book *The nature of normativity* and in the 2010 paper «The moral evil demons», Ralph Wedgwood argues in favour of the thesis that it is rational to have a special sort of *fundamental trust* in one's own opinions that allows one to give more confidence in the proposition one believes than in the incompatible proposition believed by one's peers. I will dub his view the *Egocentric Bias View*.¹⁴ This view is meant to argue against a version of the thesis that disagreement is evidence and support the contention that peer disagreement is rationally sustainable. Wedgwood explicitly targets what he calls *Sidgwick's principle*,¹⁵ that is, the principle to the effect that in cases of peer disagreement one should reach a state of agreement and suspend judgment about the targeted issue. The Sidgwick principle complies with conciliationist strategies. Wedgwood seeks to undermine the principle by putting into question the very idea that other's opinions deserve special epistemic attention that should lead us to suspend judgment. In Wedgwood's view, the thesis that my opponent's opinion acts as a defeater for my own opinion needs a rationale. The reason is that Sidgwick's principle puts special weight on the other's opinion. By contrast, there could be other explanations of the significance of information about other's beliefs that do not commit themselves to the idea that the opponent's opinion is defeating evidence.¹⁶ To put it briefly, since Sidgwick's Principle is special, it needs special motivations. At this point, Wedgwood invokes the view, put forward by Allan Gibbard, that every thinker has a fundamental trust in her (or his) own intellectual abilities. This self-trust should be generalized as a fundamental trust in all minds and thus in all others' opinions for two reasons. First: our self-trust doesn't spring from the fact that these beliefs are ours. Second: a large part of our beliefs have been acquired by trusting what the others (parents, relatives, teachers, supervisors and so on) told us. But if those beliefs were not to be trusted, then it would be very hard to reconstruct our whole belief systems without taking into account the beliefs that we've acquired by trusting the others' opinions.¹⁷

Wedgwood contends that Gibbard's idea fails to provide a rationale for the thesis that disagreement is defeating evidence because it doesn't vindicate an asymmetry that

¹³ As an aside, it's worth noticing that supporters of the thesis that disagreement is evidence like Feldman explicitly acknowledge the force of the Spinelessness Objection and accept its sceptical consequences. See FELDMAN (2006).

¹⁴ I borrow the label from WEDGWOOD (2007: chapter 11).

¹⁵ Henry Sidgwick, in *The methods of ethics*, put the matter as follows: «If I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own, reflective comparison between the two judgments necessarily reduces me to a state of neutrality». (SIDGWICK 1907: 342).

¹⁶ WEDGWOOD (2010: 233-7) gives some details on how such an explanation can be articulated.

¹⁷ (Ivi: 238).

must be accounted for. Wedgwood makes the case for this asymmetry by discussing the case of moral intuitions, but he clearly states that the argument can be extended to beliefs, experiences, memories, and so on. Wedgwood thinks that it's certainly true that there is a certain self-trust when our intuitions are concerned, for they can directly guide the formation of the correspondent moral belief. However, I cannot have the same trust in your moral intuitions because I cannot directly base the process of belief-formation on these intuitions. To put it in a more general fashion, Wedgwood maintains that my mental states can guide my cognitive behaviour in a way that is simply unavailable to your mental states. So, it's the fact that they are my own mental states that guarantee makes them to be more trustable than your mental states. This asymmetry can be put in a different fashion by taking into account reliability. Wedgwood contends that although I can trust my own intuitions although I don't have an antecedent or independent reason to regard them as reliable, it's rational for me to trust your intuitions only if I have antecedent reasons to regard them as reliable.¹⁸ According to Wedgwood, Gibbard's view neglects this first-personal perspective and the epistemic asymmetry stemming from it. So, it doesn't give us a plausible motivation for the thesis that the other's opinion counts as defeating evidence.

That being said, let us move on to Wedgwood's proposal on how a dispute should unfold in order to attain rationality.

Wedgwood maintains that when you discover disagreement with an epistemic peer, it's rational to think as follows:

At least probably, p ; but he believes that it is not the case that p : so he's probably wrong. (WEDGWOOD 2010: 243)

Thus, it must be noticed that the Egocentric Bias View doesn't absurdly claim something like the following: "I believe that p . Since it's my belief, then I'm right and my peer is mistaken". For Wedgwood acknowledges that peer disagreement can often require us to weaken our degree of confidence in our doxastic attitudes. However, to weaken our confidence doesn't amount to completely throwing our view away by suspending judgment. For the fundamental trust we have in our beliefs still allows us to give more confidence to what we believe than in what our opponents' believe. That is to say, two epistemic peers can *agree to disagree* because they are entitled to give more confidence to what they believe. Disputes involving peer disagreement cases are thus rationally sustainable.

Let us move on to evaluate Wedgwood's proposal. As to the contention that since the view that disagreement is defeating evidence is a special view that deserves special motivation, I think that the theorist of the Equal Weight View would reply that the special motivation comes from the instantiation of the epistemic peerage relation. Disagreement becomes epistemically threatening when subjects are in a position of evidential and intellectual equality. The satisfaction of these conditions is a non-trivial question. For the epistemic peerage condition is, to put it in Wedgwood's lingo, an epistemically special situation. So this epistemically special situation motivates the thesis that disagreement is evidence. That is, it's the instantiation of the epistemic peerage relation provides a rationale for the claim that disagreement is evidence. Therefore, I believe that a supporter of the Equal Weight View has room for rebutting Wedgwood's suggestion to the effect that supporters of the Equal

¹⁸ See WEDGWOOD (2007: chapter 11).

Weight View should endorse the argument on the fundamental trust of other's opinions. For the fact that I should consider other's opinions as defeating evidence isn't due to the fundamental trust in others' opinions. Rather, it's the fact that my opponent has the same evidence and intellectual abilities that I have that should lead me to give epistemic weight to what he (or she) says. Thus, I believe that Wedgwood's criticism to the effect that the Equal Weight View lacks motivation is unwarranted.

Let us now move on to Wedgwood's positive proposal. It is worth emphasising how the symmetry breaker is produced. In Wedgwood's Egocentric Bias View, it's a first-personal consideration, i.e. the self-trust we have in our doxastic attitudes, that breaks the epistemic symmetry. Thus, this first-personal, subjective consideration has to be stronger than the very fact of disagreement. Consider now the following case put forward by Thomas Kelly:¹⁹

(CONJECTURE)

You are a professional mathematician. Within the mathematics community, there is interest in a certain mathematical conjecture. One day, alone in your study, you succeed in proving The Conjecture. On the basis of your proof, you become extremely confident that The Conjecture is true. Because your high degree of confidence is based on a genuine proof that you correctly recognize as such, it is fully justified. Later, you show the proof to a great numbers of colleagues whose judgment you respect. Each colleague, after carefully examining the proof, says that it is unsound. Subsequently, you show the proof to another colleague, and then to a third, and then to a fourth, and so on and so forth. So, the entire mathematical community is united in its conviction that it is unsound.

As far as I can see, if the attitude suggested by Wedgwood's view were correct, we should be ready to accept that in cases like (CONJECTURE) self-trust trumps the massive amount of higher-order evidence one has collected. And yet, this strikes me as an exceedingly strong and unpalatable prediction.

To put the point in a more general way, the Egocentric Bias View seems to appeal to a far too subjective way of breaking the epistemic symmetry established by the instantiation of the epistemic peerage relation. More to the point, I contend that Egocentric Bias View allows us to get rationality for cheap by positing an extra epistemic weight to our self-trust. In certain cases, e.g. (CONJECTURE), this solution seems utterly implausible.

5. Conclusion

After having clarified the notions of agreement and disagreement relevant for the discussion, I've undertaken an analysis of a family of disputes where subjects enjoy a particular epistemic condition, i.e. the epistemic peerage condition. These cases raise a challenging issue about the relationship between agreement and disagreement since they foster a reflection on how a dispute involving two epistemic peers should unfold in order to preserve rationality. I've scrutinized two opposite options: the first has it that the peers ought revise their beliefs and find a compromise; the second maintains that insofar as subjects can *agree to disagree*. I've argued that both approaches are

¹⁹ KELLY (2010: 137). To forestall misunderstandings, Kelly doesn't use the example against Wedgwood's view.

unappealing for different reasons. The conciliationist approach has to face the Spinelessness Objection; the steadfast response defended by Wedgwood, by contrast, seems to offer far too subjectivist a solution whose awkwardness is illustrated by cases like (CONJECTURE).

To agree or to *agree to disagree*: that *still* is the question.

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