

The Problem of Disagreement and Social Epistemology
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In his contribution to this Collective Vision series, Patrick Reider (12 May, 2014) writes: “[Social epistemologists] are a group of individuals whose primary focus is the relation between knowledge and society” (53). In the following I will try to locate the problem of disagreement into the general picture of social epistemology. I will then give my own take on the problem, although for reasons of space I will have to leave much of that explanation to references to my own and others’ work. I will, at the end of this piece, explain how working on the problem of disagreement can help improve a collective vision in social epistemology.

The relation between knowledge and society is also a relation between individuals—as active knowledge seekers and sources of knowledge—to other individuals who are also active knowledge seekers and sources of knowledge. Typical characterizations of knowledge, on both ends of the individualistic epistemology vs. social epistemology distinction, tend to characterize the relation of knowing as the relation between the subject of the verb ‘know’, with a passive object—the “known” or the “knowable”. But we often relate ourselves as “knowers”, not only to a passive object-world, but rather in relation to other active agents and bearers of knowledge. How individuals, as knowers, act in relation to other knowers is, in a nutshell, the problem of how we relate to other epistemic agents while developing our personal world view, while gathering information, and so on. This is the problem of disagreement: what should we do, from an epistemic viewpoint, when we relate to someone, also a knower, whose opinion differs from ours? And how does that relation affect the way we develop our epistemic worldview.

The problem of disagreement becomes all the more pressing if we accept the fact that a large part of our beliefs do not come from direct experience (perception, introspection, etc.), but rather from testimonial sources. In other words, most of our beliefs originate from our agreeing or disagreeing with a certain source of knowledge, typically another knower, like us, but possible also an institution, a research team, etc. Hardwig (1985) has made the case for the domain of science, in which most of our knowledge is derived from other knowers, rather than from contact with the object of knowledge. A fundamental part of a scientist’s work is about deciding whom to believe; about agreeing or disagreeing, rather than experimenting and theorizing. If that is the case, most of our knowledge is “knowledge by agreement” (see Kusch 2002). So what should we do, when we encounter someone, whom we think is roughly as intellectually endowed as we are, but who disagrees with us on a given statement.

In his contribution Jonathan Matheson (March 3, 2014) provides a very thorough description of the terms of the debate on disagreement. He highlights the fact that there is a puzzle between two equally defensible stances on disagreement. The first one is the Conciliatorists’ stance according to which “discovering that an epistemic peer disagrees with you about a proposition provides you with a defeater for your justification for holding the doxastic attitude you have toward that proposition” (1). The second stance is supported by psychological research, which shows that “groups with dissenting members

are more successful in their inquiry with respect to the disputed propositions”. It seems as if, on the one hand, we should rationally lower our confidence in a certain belief, once we discover our peers disagree with us, but on the other hand, psychology seems to instruct us of the fact that holding on to our beliefs in the face of disagreement is more valuable, epistemically, because it promotes diversity in a group, and hence, epistemic accuracy.

In my contribution for the Collective Vision series, I have to disagree with Matheson on the claim that the Conciliatorist view holds water, and can thus be taken as one horn of the dilemma. Here I can only provide the short version of the argument, while a full analysis is partly published (Martini 2013), and partly work-in-progress. Imagine the following situation: You are sitting at a restaurant with your friend Karl after dinner. You both calculated the bill independently but you disagree: you think it amounts to 60 euros, whereas Karl thinks the correct sum is 65. Assuming we are only considering factual disagreements, certainly one of you made a mistake, but who is wrong? Being both you and Karl well-educated in arithmetics, the chances that both of you made a mistake are lower than the chances that only one of you did. This is just probabilistic reasoning. Yet, Conciliatorists defend the thesis that you and Karl should both believe in the rationality of the belief that the correct amount lies somewhere between 60 and 65.¹ Clearly Conciliatorist views are of many sorts, and a full analysis cannot be given in the short space of this contribution, but it is in general on open issue whether disagreement really constitutes evidence on which to change one’s beliefs, even when we are disagreeing with epistemic peers. Conciliatorists have not settled the problem, and in fact, as I argued (Martini 2013), at least one of the possible interpretations of the Conciliatorist view is not a rational answer to the problem of disagreement.

While the definite answer, if any is available, has to wait for more contributions to the problem of disagreement, I side with Rescher (1993) on the point that “when we disagree with another with respect to a certain thesis *p*, it is usually illuminating to examine the nature of the disagreement and to explore just what it is in this context that we do agree on.” Of course it may be the case that we have investigated all the putative causes for disagreement that we could possibly examine, and yet we haven’t been able to come to a consensus. In that case, disagreement should not be eliminated “by averaging”, as it were, but it should rather be preserved as a justification for investigating more possible causes for that disagreement. To reiterate, consensus is not a matter of averaging across beliefs: as Francis Bacon wrote in his *Novum Organum*, “A true consensus is one which (after examination of the matter) consists in liberty of judgement converging on the same point” (Bacon I, 77).

I conclude this contribution with some remarks that are related to Steve Fuller’s own contribution to the Collective Vision (10 September, 2013). There, he states that intellectuals are dangerous because “they develop keen powers of discrimination that enable them to spot what economists [...] would call ‘path dependencies’ in academic thought” (18). To use Fuller’s terminology, there is a danger for intellectuals to become endangered if they stop spotting and making public the path dependencies in academic

¹ The argument can be made stronger if you assume, for example, that both you and Karl are aware of the fact that all items in the menu cost either 5 euros or multiples of 5 euros

thought, an operation which requires a certain amount of epistemic steadfastness on one's positions even in the light of a (possibly majoritarian) disagreeing position. The role of intellectuals in relation to disagreement ought to be a steadfast position: not to average in the light of disagreeing parties, but rather to be steadfast on one's own beliefs until new information, research, inquiry might lead into agreement.

The foregoing remarks must be taken with a grain of salt. Of course, in our day-to-day knowledge-seeking there are not only epistemic needs, but practical ones as well. If we think about knowledge production in terms of processes and constraints (see Fabien Medvecky's contribution, December 9, 2013), it might well be that, from a collective viewpoint, an efficient way of gaining reliable information is to aggregate. The field of judgment aggregation (whose touchstone remains the Condorcet Jury Theorem), contains many examples of cases in which we are epistemically better off averaging our beliefs on a given matter, if, for example, we want to estimate as accurately as possible the weight of an ox by just looking at it (see Galton 1907). There are areas in which the average knower must certainly aim at efficiency. In that sense, even the intellectual will most likely not take an intellectual stance for most of the beliefs he entertains. But preserving the ability to exercise the critical ability to look for the causes of disagreement requires throwing away the idea that we should lower our confidence in some beliefs whenever we find an epistemic peer who disagrees on that belief, unless we have important non-epistemic reasons for doing so. Clearly the criteria for deciding when to exercise our critical ability and when to favor efficiency, or other desiderata, should be part of our social epistemology.

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