

EARL CONEE

PEERAGE

ABSTRACT

Experts take sides in standing scholarly disagreements. They rely on the epistemic reasons favorable to their side to justify their position. It is argued here that no position actually has an overall balance of undefeated reasons in its favor. Candidates for such reasons include the objective strength of the rational support for one side, the special force of details in the case for one side, and a summary impression of truth. All such factors fail to justify any position.

EPISTEMIC REASONS AND MATURE EXPERT DISPUTES

Epistemic reasons are indications to us about what is true. They include the propositions that are justified premises in our arguments. They include our perceptual and memory experiences. They include the deliverances of our *a priori* reflections. They include any intuitions, intellectual seemings, revelations, or affective attitudes that indicate something to us about the truth.

Scholarly disciplines often have longstanding controversies. Each position is favored by some of the epistemic reasons involved. The experts rely on these reasons to justify their positions. It will be argued here that in this matter, the experts are mistaken. The undefeated epistemic reasons that they have from the controversy do not justify believing any thesis in contention.¹

Our topic can be described as “mature disputes among mutually recognized expert epistemic peers.” These terms can be defined as follows. We have an *epistemic peer, concerning a proposition*, when it is evident to us that someone is at least as well situated as we are to determine the truth-value of the proposition and at least as well-informed, competent and epistemically reasonable as we are at implementing this task. To be an *expert* about a disputed proposition in a scholarly community, someone must be among those who possess some approximation of the maximum knowledge relevant to the truth of the proposition that is prevalent in the scholarly community, including knowledge of the enduring controversy. In an expert *dispute*, there must be significant contingents of experts on each side. A few able renegades is not enough to be a significant contingent; a few leading experts are enough. A *mature* dispute is one that is *old* and *stable*. To be *old*, the issue must have existed for more than one scholarly generation—any dispute over a traditional issue is

Earl Conee

definitely *old*; to be *stable*, the issue must have no radically new data or arguments in the current scholarly generation.²

The maturity of these controversies leaves no room for a telling difference in expert information; the mutual recognition establishes to each side the matching epistemic potential of the opposing experts. The reasons on each side are rendered indecisive by cognizance of the conflicting inclinations of enduring contingents of expert peers.³

These disputes exist in many academic disciplines. Philosophy is rife with them. A particularly clear-cut example is the controversy in decision theory between one-box and two-box solutions to Newcomb's problem.⁴ In metaphysics there are classic issues like the existence of universals and the nature of personal identity, in epistemology the issue of foundationalism versus coherentism is an example; examples in ethics include the dispute over Kantian versus consequentialist moral theories.

SUBSTANCE

It might be acknowledged that some mature expert epistemic peer disputes exist. But it might also be noted, pointedly, that they have been rather narrowly specified. Suspicion might arise that the project has been trivialized: the disputes are specified so as to insure that no side has the balance of epistemic reasons, only to infer a lack of decisive support by those reasons for any side.

The present project is no such contrivance. In Peter van Inwagen's classic posing of the rational disagreement problem (van Inwagen 1996), he suggests that the free will dispute between David Lewis and him meets conditions of equal topical expertise and competence, full disclosure and stable disagreement. He further suggests that those conditions obtain in standing controversies on numerous other issues. The present characterization of mature expert disputes does little more than to elaborate on those conditions. Rational balance among competing positions is not built in. Assorted imbalances might exist in the epistemic reasons. It will be argued that the responses of opposing peers would defeat them. At the extreme, the argument allows one side to be better supported by incommunicable insights, actually stronger non-psychological reasons, attractive argumentative nuances, and summary impressions of truth, while the other sides do not really disagree. The responses of opposing peers would still rationally neutralize that support if the arguments here are correct.

THE X CONTROVERSY

Having opposing epistemic peers in a mature dispute casts into doubt our own doxastic response, and the doubt is insuperable. This can be seen by thinking about how we might be gradually informed about some such controversy.

Suppose that at first, each of us is given the following information about a proposition, X. The truth-value of X is in longstanding dispute among experts, with some accepting X and some rejecting it. Their cognitive abilities on the topic of X are on a par and they are quite well informed regarding the issues concerning X. They are familiar with the reasons on which each side bases its position. These reasons – at least the communicable ones – have been thoroughly aired.

Clearly, from just this information we get no better reason to think that a proposition so characterized is true than to think that it is untrue.

Suppose that we learn that we know well one of the experts in the controversy, and that expert affirms X. Suppose also that the experts who are well known to us have no tendency that we are aware of either to be borne out in their disputed positions or to be refuted.

It remains clear that we have yet to be given good reason to affirm or to deny such a proposition. We happen to know a proponent of X. But as far as the truth of X is concerned, that fact seems just incidental.

Next we are each informed that the expert one knows well and who affirms X is oneself. Does this give us better reason to affirm X than to deny it?

No. Just learning the identity of the expert affirming X who is well known to us makes no difference. Suppose that we had been told instead that the expert affirming X who is well known to us is some former colleague or other. Clearly this new information by itself would not have given us any better reason to affirm such a proposition than to deny it. The same goes for oneself. Either way, we are justified in thinking that minds having equally good prospects of finding out the truth about X are on each side. In light of this, the reasons that we have been given for and against X remain in balance.

What else might we have in favor of X that could make it rational for us to believe it?

PRIVATE REASONS

Peter van Inwagen suggests a candidate. He suggests that we might have on our side “an insight that is incommunicable.” (van Inwagen 1996)

Eventually it will be worthwhile to investigate what an incommunicable insight might be. For now, we can take it for granted that whatever they are, they have some considerable rational force. We shall see that even having some such reason on our side is insufficient to make proposition X supported to us by better reasons overall.

Since these insights are incommunicable, this reason has not been communicated to our epistemic peers who deny proposition X. The lack of communication might seem to account for the failure of the dissenting experts to take our side. It might seem that this ignorance on their part neutralizes their dissent from X as a reason for us to doubt X. With that dissent neutralized, our balance of reasons favors X.

Earl Conee

If opposing experts purport to have their own supporting incommunicable insight, though, then we would need some distinguishing basis to regard ours as the genuine article. Otherwise, our reasons regarding insights would consist in a tie between conflicting apparent insights.

The outlook is poor for us to have good reason to take ours to be the genuine insight. We are in no position to discount reports of opposing apparent insights. In a mature expert dispute, it is not reasonable for us to suppose that the experts on the other side are persistently deceiving us or deluded about their having an apparent insight on their side.

So if epistemic peers do report an incommunicable insight in support of denying proposition X, then we know of two apparent insights that point in opposite directions, theirs and ours. Theirs rationally balances off ours. So our apparent insight does not give us an undefeated balance of reasons in favor of X.

Let's now consider whether we would have overall better reason to affirm X if those on the other side do not report a competing apparent insight. They report only not having a counterpart to ours. To think about this alternative, we should consider in more detail the nature of purported incommunicable insights.

SHOCKING DISSENT

Quite typically, when we think through considerations that strike us as supporting a proposition that we thereby believe, it seems to us that we are drawn to believe by the reasons themselves. We seem simply to observe a rational relationship. By responding with the corresponding doxastic attitude, we seem simply to comply with a dictate of reason. This sense of being a pure observer of a reason is a prime candidate for being the conscious character of an incommunicable insight. Let's suppose so. That is, let's suppose that the appearance of having such an insight is an impression of witnessing some rational relationship. This seems to be a maximally friendly supposition about the epistemic contribution of the appearance.

Having such an impression makes it quite difficult for us to question the rational acceptability of any belief that we acquire in this way. We are supposing, though, that we have learned that epistemic peers on the proposition have pondered our reasoning without any such sense of being drawn toward our conclusion.

The rational effect on us of learning this sort of thing is profound. It appeared to us that we were simply observing and heeding an objective rational relationship. Now it has become evident to us that someone here is failing simply to witness the true nature of the relation. We have become justified in thinking nothing more conclusive than that some who have our epistemic credentials take a certain rational relationship to exist. Our sense of having an insight into the proposition's truth has become for us a datum in an inductive argument about where reason actually points. The premises state the known instances of responses, by minds that we rationally regard as being epistemic equals, to the common body of reasons concerning the proposition at issue. One datum, our own response, is a case of

seeming insight; the other known datum, our peers' response, senses no such rational connection. From our current perspective, then, it is as reasonable to think the impression presents us with an illusion of support for the proposition as to believe it actually supports the proposition.

Still, our apparent insight might be genuine. Our knowledge of peers who fail to have the insight makes it equally credible to us that our impression is an illusion. Nonetheless, we have the impression as a candidate good reason.

SPURIOUS INSIGHTS

Even supposing that the insight is genuine and it supports X to us, it does not yet definitely give us reasons that favor X. It might still be defeated because our most reasonable explanation of it does not count it as a genuine insight.

Such explanations do suggest themselves. For instance, we may have been drawn to an affirmation of X early in our investigations of the issue. We may have found the intellectual resources that defend X to be congenial and ready at hand. We may have found it satisfying and otherwise rewarding to affirm X. We may have found that any subsequent grounds we discovered for doubting X eventually met with responses that struck us as adequate rebuttals. Cognizance of this sort of history gives us strong inductive backing for the rectitude of our inclination to affirm X. An awareness of some such history might well generate a confident inclination.

The same goes for the opposing experts, though. It is most reasonable for us to think that they have the same sort of history in support of their contrary inclination that issues in their denial of X. We incline to affirm X and in so doing, we count ourselves as having an insight; they incline to deny X and do not count anything in the process as an insight. Under the circumstances, opposing peers are best thought by us to differ just in *not* deciding to classify an inclination as an insight. Our inductively supported trust in our judgment is counterbalanced by our recognition that opposing peers have an equal supporting background for deferring to an inclination toward the opposing conclusion.

The thought that some such background considerations give rise to our inclination to affirm X competes with the hypothesis that the inclination arises from a genuine incommunicable insight. This competitor offers a better account. It avoids the mystery of why a genuine insight would not be presented to our opposing expert peers.

INSIGHTS FROM THE INSIDE

The rival account is better, unless we have some sufficient further reason to take our response to be a genuine insight. Might we have some overriding reason to do so? Let's consider what this reason could be.

Incommunicable insights would have to present their contents in some phenomenologically distinctive way. The alternative is that the nature of the insight

Earl Conee

is purely intellectual. What could that be like? The one widely credited method for acquiring purely intellectual reasons is the method of apprehending self-evidence. If the ostensible insights were apprehensions of self-evidence, our procedure to acquire them would be this: We would ponder the content proposition. We would thereby discern some verifying relationship that exists among its constituents.

In the case of a mature expert dispute, it is not reasonable to suppose that any support that is available to just one side arises from an appreciation of propositional content. That hypothesis allows no good way to understand how opposing experts, who have thought about the proposition with equal comprehension, have failed to notice the verifying conceptual relationship. Self-evidence is too conspicuously manifested to explain durably differing expert responses. It is thus not promising as a basis on which some experts might have a reason that others lack. Something other than the content of the ostensible insight must supply the reason.

The remaining possibility is that something in the *way* that the contents of incommunicable insights are consciously presented makes for the reasons that they provide. This could not be a sensory mode of presentation.⁵ There would be no good reason for relevant sensory experience to differ between enduring contingents of experts. Other familiar sorts of presentational modes that give reasons, such as memory impressions and emotive responses, are plainly irrelevant.

Possibly some proposition in the dispute is apprehended with some *sui generis* phenomenology. But this alternative renders obscure how the mode could have the needed epistemic force. Some subjectively striking modes of presentation have no positive bearing on truth of their contents, such as astonishment and mystification.⁶ What could make the *sui generis* phenomenology indicate to its bearer that the content is true?

Another appeal to something incommunicable is possible. This would wrap the mystery of its manifestation in the enigma of its epistemic effect. The reality of any ineffable sort of support for a position in a mature expert disagreement is highly suspect when only partisans of that position claim access to it. Rival hypotheses involving wishful thinking or mistaking a trusted inclination to believe for rational support have the explanatory advantage. They invoke familiar errors rather than exotic, privately appreciated, one-sided success. For those with no good account of how the putative incommunicable insights give their bearers some non-derivative epistemic reason, the evident durable existence of expert peers who do not share them defeats whatever support they might actually provide.⁷

PRIVATE CASES

Let's turn away from incommunicable insights and toward other candidates for what might give our side a favorable balance of reasons in a mature expert dispute. It is tempting to argue that we have no thoroughgoing peers in the dispute. Instead, unshared details of our case—nuances that have not made their way into any canonical defense of our position—tip the balance our way. For instance, in the

course of our teaching and research, we may well have developed attractive ways of formulating and assembling reasons for our side against its denial. Opponents have not really seen the power of these arguments as well as we do. Perhaps we have also devised a point that has not been circulated that provides a modicum of supplemental support. So, when opposing peers fail to find sufficient support in the canonical case for our side, they do not fully share our reasons.⁸ We might conclude that the full strength of our position is not defeated by resistance to it from our peers.

The trouble is that the same goes for the opposing positions. Their experts are equally competent. We have ample reason to think that we have yet to appreciate some unshared attractive details of their cases, including various modest supplemental considerations in their favor. We have ample reason to think that these details are as strong in opposition to our position as is the support from the unshared details of our case. Thus, in the end we have here no good ground to regard our side as better supported than are the opposing positions.

ACTUALLY BETTER REASONS

Let's consider another sort of candidate better reason. For any proposition that is the topic of a mature peer dispute, our reasons divide into two classes. One class contains our psychological information pertaining to credence. It contains our information about the doxastic attitudes and inclinations among our peers and ourselves concerning the proposition, X: the relevant beliefs, denials, and suspensions of judgment, the inclinations to these attitudes, and the strengths of these things. Let's call these our *psychological reasons* concerning X.⁹ The other class of our reasons contains the rest of our indications regarding the truth of the matter—arguments pertaining to X, any insights on the topic, any explanatory considerations involving X, and so forth. These are our *non-psychological reasons* concerning X.

Suppose that the balance of our non-psychological reasons concerning X actually supports X. Opposing expert peers share these reasons with us, but they mistakenly judge that the reasons do not support X. Under these circumstances, it is highly plausible that this actual support for X by our non-psychological reasons makes some important positive contribution to the rationality of our position of affirming X. After all, these are the reasons that directly address whether or not X is true. In contrast, the psychological reasons that we have result from the processing of these directly relevant points through fallible cognitive mechanisms and through other psychological factors that are not even truth-oriented. These things lead to the doxastic responses by us and by those of our peers whose reactions are evident to us. It might well seem that in these circumstances, the actual support of X by our non-psychological reasons gives our affirmation of X a favorable balance of reasons, even after we duly allow for the doubts of opposing peers.¹⁰

Earl Conee

A preliminary problem for applying this idea to mature epistemic disputes is that there need not be a determinate balance of the non-psychological reasons. The very tenacity of these disputes argues against this. One faction of experts would have persistently to miss the force of some rational consideration that is regularly recognized by some otherwise comparable experts. That pattern of rational obliviousness and discernment among expert peers is too mysterious to be credible. Instead, vagueness or incomparability may well affect many mature disputes.

Thus, the non-psychological reasons in mature disputes may well not favor any position. But perhaps sometimes they do. We can leave open the question of whether or not such actual favoring occurs. We can assume that whenever it does occur, it is a weighty factor. Still, in a particular mature expert peer controversy, could participants most reasonably regard one side's non-psychological reasons as decisive?

The more mature the dispute is, and the more expert its participants are, the less credible it is that the actual strength of one side's non-psychological reasons is rationally decisive. The credibility of any candidate decisive non-psychological reason is destroyed by the fact that the opposing experts have duly considered it. They do not find the hypothesized support in it.

We are all fallible. None of us is purely cognitive in our processing of reasons. It is possible that durable factions of peers in some mature expert dispute are making crucial mistakes about the non-psychological reasons, while those on one side are getting them right. But this is a bare possibility. There is no reasonable way to sustain such a hypothesis in any particular case. All of the significant errors in reasoning are best thought to have been disclosed and discredited. A better hypothesis is that the balance of non-psychological reasons favors neither side. In these disputes, the most defensible view of the non-psychological reasons is that the determinate ones are at a standoff.

SPURIOUS DISAGREEMENT

Another sort of basis for finding ourselves peerless in mature expert controversies is more ecumenical. The new thought is that these clashes are actually misunderstandings rather than disputes. Though participants appear to have dissenting epistemic peers, there are actually subtle but sufficient differences in thought contents. The experts' conclusions are actually compatible.

There are two serious problems for this idea. The first is semantic. The key terms in developed disputes get their contributions to truth conditions partly from the aim of the participants in the controversy to take part in the traditional dispute. This aim makes the key terms in the dispute share the relevant content. In the absence of a special stipulation, disputing a traditional issue includes deferring to what the issue has been. This deference determines the content in dispute. If this semantic view is correct, then there is genuine disagreement.

For present purposes, though, the semantic view need not be correct. Suppose instead that there are subtle but sufficient differences in contents among the disputing factions. Still, apparently opposing expert peers exist. The disputants quite reasonably take the claims to be in conflict. In mature controversies the issues have been aired sufficiently to leave no evident room for misunderstanding. Under such conditions of extensive intended communication, the fact that a disputant knows of an expert peer who dissents from what both take to be the same claim is sufficient to give the disputant a defeater. Any difference in actual content is rationally hidden. The peers have no good reason to believe it exists. So its existence would not reduce the defeating effect of what they are justified in believing to be dissent by epistemic peers.

SUMMARY IMPRESSIONS

Let's consider one last arguably justifying factor in mature expert disputes. It is suggested by a rhetorical question of Alvin Plantinga's. The question in effect asserts a basis for rationally justifying belief that apparently does not require having better reason to believe. Or perhaps it is a sort of reason, but one that we have yet to investigate. In any case, the basis is our summary impression of the entire dispute. Plantinga asks:

[H]ow can you do better than believe and withhold according to what, after serious and responsible consideration, seems to you to be the right pattern of belief and withholding? (1995, 183)

The sort of "better" believing that Plantinga is explicitly addressing is an ethical evaluation. But there is an epistemic version of his point. Suppose that when we reflect on X in light of every reason we have, including the doxastic inclinations of opposing peers, it seems to us that X is true. Suppose that otherwise, our epistemic reasons concerning X are in balance. Still, this summary impression we have that X is true might be thought to justify our believing X. In the spirit of Plantinga's question it can be asked: How could it be epistemically wrong for us to be guided by this summary impression and believe accordingly?

If this believing is not wrong but justified, and if these impressions are not reasons, then something else can help to justify belief. But in the broad view of epistemic reasons employed here from the outset, our summary appearances do qualify. They are impressions of overall support for X's truth. So they indicate to us something about the truth and thus are epistemic reasons in the present view.

In any case, our summary impressions do not justify partisan belief in a mature expert dispute. Whether or not they are new reasons, they are not the last of our considerations that bear on X's justification. It is evident to us that the opposing summary appearance presents itself to opposing peers. We have no better basis for discounting the opposing summary impressions than we do our own. Since this is so, we can do epistemically better in our doxastic response than to follow

Earl Conee

our own summary impression. We are rationally required to take our summary impressions as just one of two doxastic responses induced in minds with at least our epistemic capacities on the issue. Our impressions become just data on the topic of what is supported. Beyond the other balanced reasons, we have only this conflicting response data. They defend no particular conclusion. They do not justify our position.

CONCLUSION

Finally, experts in mature peer disputes have no undefeated balance of reasons in favor of their own views.¹¹ This can seem to be a gloomy outcome. But longstanding issues need not be intractable. What we need to progress toward their rational resolution are fundamentally new contributions. We do sometimes get these from significant new empirical findings or abstract results.

Meanwhile, experts have an instrumental sort of intellectual justification to take a side: to argue for it, to seek further reasons for it, and to object to its rivals. These activities often lead to real cognitive advances. If the activities are best sustained by partisan belief, then these beliefs also have this instrumental justification. Meanwhile, no position is favored by a balance of the reasons the experts have that indicate something to them about the truth of the matter.¹²

REFERENCES

- Conee, Earl.** Forthcoming. "Rational Disagreement Defended." In R. Feldman and T. Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelly, Thomas.** 2005. "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement." In T. S. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 1, pp. 167–96. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelly, Thomas.** Forthcoming. "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence." In R. Feldman and T. Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, Alvin.** 1995. "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism." In T. D. Senior (ed.), *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- van Inwagen, Peter.** 1996. "Is It Wrong Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone to Believe Anything on Insufficient Evidence?" In J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. Retrieved July 5, 2009, from <http://comp.uark.edu/~senor/wrong.html>

NOTES

- 1 Separately from the reasons arising from the dispute, an expert might happen to have support for accepting some egoistic epistemic view. It might be, for instance, the view that we are better justified in believing what our own experiences support than what we know peer experiences support. I argue (Conee forthcoming) that having this sort of

- evidence about what our reasons justify can affect what is in fact justified for us. But the focus here is on the epistemic reasons that the dispute provides.
- 2 As soon as an expert has a radically new contribution to make, the dispute is no longer stable. Thanks to Stew Cohen for a question that prompted this clarification.
 - 3 Known trends in the proportions of opposing factions may make a rational difference, though not always – some trends are best regarded as intellectual fashions. We'll assume that the experts do not know of any telling trend in faction proportions. Thanks to Hilary Kornblith for a comment that prompted this clarification.
 - 4 Thanks to Dan Dennett for suggesting this example.
 - 5 It might be thought that some perceptual analog to ordinary sensory modes is how some incommunicable insights are experienced. The problem discussed below for non-sensory modes carries over to purported sensory analogs. See also note 7.
 - 6 Astonishment and mystification are cognitive attitudes. But clearly the cognition of their contents obtains in spite of these recalcitrant presentational modes.
 - 7 In the case of some purported analog to a sensory mode, the problem is that of how it could be best thought to be a phenomenal quality of some particular attribute, rather than some non-perceptual sort of qualitative state.
 - 8 The idea is that the novelties are small points that tip the balance modestly our way, in contrast to some radically new contribution that would render the dispute no longer stable. Thanks to David Christensen for a comment that prompted this clarification.
 - 9 Only broadly doxastic information is included, though, not information about psychological indications consisting in insights, intellectual seemings, or the like.
 - 10 Tom Kelly very helpfully defends this sort of thought about actual non-psychological support in (Kelly 2005) and, with modifications, in (Kelly forthcoming). Thanks to Jim Pryor for suggesting that this idea be discussed.
 - 11 In many mature controversies the experts defend several competing theories. In such cases, the balance of reasons that each expert has favors the negation of the expert's own position. The non-psychological reasons are best thought not to favor any side, and beyond these, each expert has a good inductive argument for the disjunction of the rival theses. That disjunction is supported by what each expert knows to be the preponderance of expert peer opinion on the issue. When that disjunction is clearly not exhaustive of the possibilities, support for the negation is even stronger.
 - 12 I am grateful for comments on earlier drafts from participants in the *Episteme* Conference on Rational Disagreement, the Princeton Workshop on Rational Disagreement, the Rochester, Cornell, and Syracuse Epistemology Workshop, and a colloquium at Tufts University.

Earl Conee is a professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester. His research is mainly in epistemology and ethics. His publications include *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (with Richard Feldman) and *Riddles of Existence: A Guided Tour of Metaphysics* (with Ted Sider).