

## Lecture 17: Can We (Reasonably) Agree to Disagree?

David Boylan

*db1082@philosophy.rutgers.edu*

---

### *Agreeing to Disagree*

On lots of questions, we say reasonable people can agree to disagree, that people can disagree but rationally stick to their beliefs.

Particularly controversial subjects.

- For example, smart people argue with each other about whether God exists. And much of the time they are not convinced by each others arguments and stick to their previous views. They simply agree to disagree.
- Other examples?

Call this *reasonable disagreement*.

Richard Feldman argues that it's hard to see how reasonable disagreement could be make sense.

- He argues that the best arguments for thinking there *can* be reasonable disagreement actually show the opposite.
- In most cases, he thinks, *both* people should give up their beliefs.

This is a special kind of *skeptical challenge*.

### *Sharpening the Question*

Let's first define the concept of a reasonable disagreement.

- Two people *disagree* about the claim that  $p$  just in case one thinks  $p$  is true and the other thinks  $p$  is false.
- A belief that  $p$  is *justified* just in case it's what you *should* believe given all the evidence you have.
- Two people *reasonably disagree* about  $p$  just in case they disagree about  $p$  and both are justified in their belief in  $p$ /not  $p$ .

Are all justified beliefs *true*?

For the moment we're going to focus on reasonable disagreement between *epistemic peers* who have *shared their evidence*:

Why are we asking about disagreement among epistemic peers and not people generally?

- An *epistemic peer* to you is someone of roughly equal intelligence/reasoning powers who has the same background evidence as you.
- Two people have *shared their evidence* when they have had a full discussion of that topic and not withheld any of their relevant evidence.

Here is our question:

- Suppose some epistemic peers have shared their evidence about  $p$  but learn that they disagree about  $p$ . Can they continue reasonably disagree? Or should they suspend judgement?

You *suspend judgement* about  $p$  just in case you neither believe  $p$  nor do you believe not  $p$ .

### *First Argument. Same evidence warrants different conclusions?*

One argument focuses on *ambiguous* evidence:

- **The Murder.** There has been a murder and Jones is a detective investigating the case. Righty and Lefty are the two main suspects, but the evidence for guilt is very different in each case. The case against Lefty involves the fact that there is DNA evidence at the scene of the crime; the case against Righty involves the fact that the eyewitnesses saw Righty (and not Lefty) at the scene of the crime. Jones knows only one suspect could be guilty.
- Here you might think that either point of view is reasonable: you can think Lefty did it; or you can think Righty did it.

So you might use ambiguous evidence to argue for reasonable disagreement:

Sometimes the same body of evidence can support multiple different conclusions.

So, two epistemic peers could reasonably disagree.

But is the premise of the argument really true? Feldman says *no*.

- Feldman thinks there is exactly one rational response: suspend judgement about whether Lefty/Right is guilty.

It is *irrational* to believe that Lefty is guilty or to believe that Righty is guilty.

Moreover, it would be incoherent to think:

- Why? Because any piece of evidence that Lefty is guilty is also a piece of evidence that Righty is *not* guilty!

(1) Righty is guilty but it's also reasonable to think Right is not guilty.

In fact, Feldman thinks it looks like even this case supports exactly the *opposite* of the premise:

- *Uniqueness Thesis.* A given body of evidence justifies at most one attitude toward any particular conclusion.

If the Uniqueness Thesis were true, this would make it harder to say there is reasonable disagreement. Why?

### *Second Argument. Different starting points?*

Crucially the case above involved just *one* person. But maybe *different* people can react to the same evidence differently?

- Same case as before except suppose there are *two* detectives who have shared their evidence. Jones thinks that DNA evidence is more reliable; Smith thinks eyewitness evidence is.

- Maybe *Jones* is justified in thinking Lefty is guilty; and *Smith* is justified in thinking Righty is guilty.

So we might push back against Feldman like this:

Sometimes different people *weigh* evidence differently.

So, the same body of evidence can support *different people* coming to different conclusions.

So, two epistemic peers could reasonably disagree.

*Feldman's Response.* The detectives cannot both continue to maintain their opinions about how to weigh evidence and so cannot reasonably disagree.

- Once the detectives realise they disagree about how to weigh evidence, then they should start arguing about who is doing so correctly.
- And there are only two possibilities here, Feldman thinks:
  - \* One of them has better evidence that they are weighing the evidence correctly, in which case the other has to give up their belief;
  - \* Or both should suspend judgement on whether they are weighing the evidence correctly.

Because, just as before, evidence *for* one way to weigh evidence is evidence *against* another.

In either case, we do *not* have reasonable disagreement.

### *Argument 3. Evidence is not fully shared?*

Maybe the problem is that we're over-simplifying: maybe on some important questions people *cannot* share all of their evidence.

- Maybe the theist has a strong insight or intuition that the shared evidence supports theism, one that they cannot communicate to the atheist.
- And the atheist has a similar strong insight or intuition that the shared evidence supports atheism.
- So each person has a piece of evidence the other lacks, namely their intuition/insight.

So here is our final argument for reasonable disagreement:

On certain questions we disagree about, we have *different* evidence which cannot be shared.

If two people have evidence about *p* that cannot be shared, then one person can justifiably believe *p* while the other justifiably believes not *p*.

So, we can reasonably disagree when we cannot share our evidence.

*Feldman's Response.* The second premise is *false* because *evidence of evidence is evidence*.

- Feldman claims that if I know that someone at least as intelligent as me has good reason for believing *p*, then that alone is some evidence for *me* that *p*, even if I don't know what those reasons are
- Example. Suppose I learn that the experts have good evidence that drug X cures diabetes. But I haven't read the studies. (Nor will I ever.)  
The mere fact that I know the experts have this evidence seems to like a reason for me to believe the drug is effective.

How does this relate to reasonable disagreement?

- When you learn that an epistemic peer's evidence favours the opposite conclusion to yours, Feldman thinks, that is evidence against your view *even if you don't learn what that evidence is*.
- Suppose Jones has enough evidence to believe that Lefty is guilty and Smith has enough to believe that Righty is guilty.  
But now suppose that each learns just that the other has enough evidence for the opposite conclusion. Seems like each should revise their beliefs.
- So when the theist learns about the atheist's insight, they get *new* evidence against their own conclusion. Likewise for the atheist.  
And it doesn't seem like they have reason to weigh their *own* insight more heavily than the other's. So they should both suspend judgement.

### *The remaining options*

So what should we if reasonable disagreement isn't possible?

- The hard line: stick by what we believe and conclude the other person is not an epistemic peer.
  - \* But often this doesn't look rational. What about when, e.g., experts disagree with each other?
- The moderately skeptical line: one of us must be making a mistake; I have no reason to think it's my interlocutor rather than me; so I should suspend judgement.
  - \* This leaves us with a disturbing skeptical consequence. What is that consequence?