

# The Epistemology of Disagreement Meets Varieties of Disagreement

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## 0. Introduction

In a recent paper, Richard Feldman asks some very good questions about disagreement.<sup>1</sup> Suppose a peer disagrees with you on some issue in which you're both apprised of the same relevant evidence.<sup>2</sup> Is there a unique doxastic attitude warranted by the evidence even in isolation from your peer? What's the appropriate way to update belief once you learn of the disagreement? Can you both be rational in maintaining belief? Can you each rationally admit that the other is rational? These are challenging and interesting questions, and Feldman was right to raise them. They will not be my main focus here.

In his discussion of the epistemological puzzles surrounding peer disagreement Feldman operationalizes disagreements in a highly particular way.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Feldman, Richard, "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement" In Stephen Hetherington (ed.), *Epistemology Futures*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> By 'peer' in this context, I mean 'epistemic peer'. This notion may be somewhat idealized, but roughly it is a person just as smart as you, informed as you, reliable as you, etc. Please see Feldman *op cit* for the full-dress formulation of peerhood.

<sup>3</sup> *Op cit*. Other writers on the peer disagreement puzzles follow Feldman here. See Feldman and Warfield's *Disagreement*, Oxford University Press.

Disagreement occurs, Feldman says, when “one person affirms a proposition that the other denies.”<sup>4</sup> This is a perfectly acceptable model of some disagreements, and it works well for understanding them. But only some of them.

Using John MacFarlane and Charles Stevenson as my foils, in this paper I will argue that (what I’ll call) Feldman’s Simple Model of Disagreement (SMD) is insufficient to understand what’s going on in a whole raft of cases we’re intuitively inclined to count as disagreements.<sup>5</sup> This is not to impugn SMD; it works well for the narrowly circumscribed set of cases it’s designed to cover. But there is more under the sun than is dreamed of in Feldman’s philosophy.

The argument that I will present does not touch Feldman’s arguments about the narrowly circumscribed realm of (what I’ll call) simple disagreements. This is as it should be. I maintain, however, that careful attention to disagreements that fall outside the scope of SMD illuminates our understanding of the puzzles about peer disagreement.

I shall present the following argument. Rationality requires adjusting our doxastic attitudes in light of peer disagreement. The pattern of adjustment, however, is a (perhaps non-linear) function of the sort of disagreement involved. This argument will appear highly conjectural. It is. My conclusion, therefore, must be tempered by an understanding of the conjectural nature of my premises. I will present evidence for these premises, but I will not maintain them in the fullness of

4 *Op cit.*

5 MacFarlane “Varieties of Disagreement” <http://johnmacfarlane.net/varieties.pdf>, 2009; Stevenson *Facts and Values*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963.

assertion; rather I offer them as highly motivated and well-supported conjectures. I hope this does not offend.

## 1. SMD and Agnosticism

Let' formulate SMD as follows:

SMD: A and B disagree iff, for some proposition  $p$ , A believes  $p$  and B believes not- $p$ .

This model is adequate for many disagreements. But it founders on cases involving believers and agnostics as follows.

Let Theo be a theist, Atheo be an atheist, and Agno be an agnostic. Theo believes that God exists ( $p$ ); Atheo believes that God does not exist (not- $p$ ). Agno's doxastic attitude is more complex; he neither believes that God exists, nor does he disbelieve this. But, in a perfectly serviceable ordinary language sense of 'disagree', Agno disagrees with both Theo and Atheo. SMD cannot capture this disagreement.

Maybe what's going on here is that there *is* a simple disagreement that Agno has with Theo and Atheo. Here's the disagreement, both Theo and Atheo affirm, while Agno rejects, the following proposition:

EVIDENCE: the mutually available evidence is sufficient to warrant a belief either in God's existence or His non-existence.

Now we have the real locus of the disagreement. This is mistaken.

Agnosticism is not a belief about evidence. It's a doxastic attitude that people take up towards the proposition that God exists. True, agnosticism is sometimes coupled with a view about evidence, but it needn't be. It is purely the attitude of suspending judgment about the theistic and atheistic claim. Call the conjunction of agnosticism and EVIDENCE 'Agnosticism Plus'. To be an agnostic, one needn't accept Agnosticism Plus, but to be an Agnostic Plus, one needs to accept agnosticism. This is as it should be. The two views are, in a sense, separable.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. SMD and Disagreements in Attitude

Charles Stevenson directs our attention to what he calls 'disagreements in attitude'.<sup>7</sup> An example will serve to illustrate such disagreements. Cinema makes the following proposal, "Let's go to the cinema," Stick-in-the-Mud rejects this proposal, "Let's not." Cinema and Stick-in-the-Mud disagree. SMD fails to capture this.

Maybe what's going on is that there is a proposition that Cinema accepts and Stick-in-the-Mud rejects. Maybe it's something like this:

PLAN: The thing to do is to go to the cinema.

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<sup>6</sup> MacFarlane is also aware of this point. MacFarlane 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson 1963. MacFarlane also mentions these, MacFarlane 2009.

Cinema and Stick-in-the-Mud have a simple disagreement about PLAN. SMD captures this. No problem.

This is unsatisfying. Just as in the case of agnosticism, rejecting a proposal does not essentially involve having a belief with a content like that of PLAN. True, when we reject a proposal, we often do have such a belief, but we needn't. To reject a proposal is essentially neither to advocate it nor to advocate something incompatible with it. So, one can reject a proposal without accepting a proposition with a content similar to that of PLAN.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps this doesn't convince. An example from ordinary life should suffice to demonstrate the point. Suppose that Zoo advocates the proposal that we go to the zoo, and Nozoo is not convinced. She rejects this proposal. When asked, "What should we do instead," Nozoo answers, "Well, I don't know, but I don't want to go to the zoo." This piece of data militates in favor of the view that rejecting a proposal is not identical to proposing a conflicting proposal. The two often go hand in hand, but they are at least partially separable in a way analogous to the way in which agnosticism is partially separable from Agnosticism Plus.

### 3. SMD and Affective Attitudes

SMD runs afoul of disagreements in affective attitudes. Let Pro be someone who likes Bill and Con be someone who does not like Bill (do not read 'does not like' as

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<sup>8</sup> I am using 'reject' here in a non-ordinary, quasi-technical sense analogous to the one Mark Richard deploys in his book *When Truth Gives Out*, Oxford University Press, 2008. By 'reject' in this sense I mean (roughly): neither accept or deny.

'dislikes'). Pro says, "I like Bill"; Con says, "I do not" (again, don't read 'I do not' as 'I dislike him'). Pro and Con disagree. They disagree about Bill.

SMD cannot capture their disagreement about Bill. Perhaps this doesn't convince. What's really going on is that Pro and Con have a simple disagreement about the following proposition:

LIKEABLE: Bill is a likeable guy.

Pro affirms it and Con does not. Even if Pro and Con differ with respect to their doxastic attitude towards LIKEABLE, they do not have a simple disagreement. For Con is agnostic towards likeable, while Pro is not. In our case Con does not affirm nor does she deny LIKEABLE; she is just silent with respect to it. And yet she disagrees with Pro.

Perhaps this does not convince. What's happening in the Pro-Con case? I maintain that what's going on is that Pro has a certain pro-affective attitude towards Bill that is responsive to reasons about Bill. Con lacks either this attitude or one that is outright contradictory with it.<sup>9</sup> Pro and Con can have all the same reasons about Bill, but fail to be motivated to take up the same affective attitude towards him, for whatever reason. Maybe Con just doesn't have the same affective structure as Pro, and is not moved by the same reasons to have pro attitudes as Pro is. Whatever the explanation for the difference in attitude, however, one thing seems clear: Pro and

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<sup>9</sup> Tamar Gendler's work on Alief is relevant here; perhaps the content of Pro's pro attitude is alief-like: "Bill...like that guy." See Gendler Alief and Belief. *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (10):634-663, 2008.

Con can agree on all the facts about Bill while nevertheless rationally disagreeing in their affective attitudes. Perhaps this does not convince.

Perhaps Con's lack of the appropriate affective attitude given her evidence is irrational. I do not think it need be; she just has a different affective structure from Con. This structure needn't be defective; it is just different. Perhaps this doesn't convince. Maybe something akin to the Uniqueness Principle is at play here.<sup>10</sup>

However plausible Uniqueness may be when it comes to the doxastic attitudes of belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment, I do not think it is at all plausible when it comes to the affective attitudes of liking, disliking, and being indifferent (Con is indeed indifferent to Bill in our example). Why not? While rational affective attitudes should be responsive to reasons, I maintain they are not responsive to reasons in precisely the same way in which doxastic attitudes are. My beliefs, if they are rational, cannot float free of my evidence any more than my affective attitudes, if they are rational, can. But my beliefs must be structured in response to my evidence in ways that conform to a community standard, otherwise I am an irrational outsider. My affective structure, while it must conform to some extent to a community standard for rationality, lest I be deemed an irrational outsider, this conformity is looser.<sup>11</sup> There is room for rational disagreements in affective attitudes. I just like what I like, dislike what I dislike, and am indifferent to what I'm indifferent. These are not arbitrary attitudes; they flow from my affective structure.

<sup>10</sup> For a formulation of and stimulating discussion of the doxastic uniqueness principle see Warfield and Feldman's *Disagreement*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> For example, while the community standard might pronounce a pro affective attitude towards excrement as irrational, it does not seem to make a similar pronouncement about an indifferent affective attitude towards Bill.

But so long as they are not completely insane, I should be tolerated if I deviate slightly from the community standard. At least, this is my view.

We should not underestimate the importance of this observation for the puzzles about peer disagreement. Making this observation opens up a logical space for rational peer disagreements in attitude.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. The Upshot

What does this teach us about peer disagreement. I maintain that the looser community standards for affective attitudes entail that there are rational peer disagreements in attitude in isolation. For the evidence does not mandate a unique affective attitude. More that this follows.

Pro and Con can also both maintain their affective attitudes after full disclosure. This is because there is an additional piece of evidence that Pro and Con get (provided they are both rational in isolation) once they meet up and discuss their feelings for Bill and their reasons for having those feelings:

DIFFERENCE: Pro and Con have a difference in affective structure.

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<sup>12</sup> Note: we needn't accept relativism about affective attitudes in order to accept this claim about them. It is instructive to look at Philippa Foot's work on disagreements in attitude ("Moral Arguments," in Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 96–109 1978 and "Moral Beliefs," in Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 110–31, 1978) as well as Stevenson's, *op cit*, and Gendler's work on alief, *op cit*.

This additional piece of evidence makes it rational for Pro to believe that Con is rational in taking the affective attitude she takes and for Con to believe it is rational for taking the affective attitude he takes.

Even more follows, however. Mutually recognized rational disagreements in attitude are possible. For Pro and Con can appreciate fully the probative force of DIFFERENCE and each recognize that the other does.

We've answered Feldman's questions about the rationality of peer disagreements in attitude in the affirmative: all three kinds of disagreements in attitude are possible.

## 5. Conclusion

Why does this result matter? Aren't we concerned, when we're concerned about the epistemological puzzles involving disagreement, with disagreements in *doxastic* attitude? Why care if mutually recognized rational peer disagreements in attitude are possible?

Here's why we should care. Our attitudes are affectively laden. If Gendler is right, a lot of our behavior is motivated by such attitudes. When we disagree, therefore, we often disagree affectively. Some empirical work on belief formation suggests that our overt beliefs and evidence seeking behavior are often guided by our affective structures.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a summary of some of this research, see Gendler 2008.

If I am right about this, then there is an opening in logical space even for mutually recognized rational peer disagreement in doxastic attitudes. How does this work? I do not have a well-worked out theory, but here's an adumbration of one. Affective attitudes, when rational, are responsive to reasons and evidence. Affective attitudes drive belief formation and evidence seeking behavior.<sup>14</sup> Disagreements in doxastic attitudes are, primary, differences in belief formation and, secondarily, differences in second-order attitudes towards the probative force of the available evidence. If mutually recognized rational peer disagreements in attitude are possible, then there is a non-zero epistemic probability that they can follow this chain of belief formation and evidence seeking behavior in order to culminate in rational disagreements in doxastic attitude of every variety.

To make this chain-reaction argument work, some serious philosophical effort must be applied. This effort is beyond the scope of the present paper. But I hope to have paved the way to a unique and fruitful research program in the epistemology of peer disagreement. I leave this further work to another paper or in the hands of those more competent at this kind of argumentation than I am.

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<sup>14</sup> The attentive reader will want to know what I mean by 'drives' here. Is this driving merely descriptive (this in fact how we do it) or is it prescriptive (this is how we should do it). I think it's prescriptive. But this argument must be given in another paper.