

Remarks on Kvanvig's 'Disagreement and Rationality'
Presented at the Stirling Conference on Social Epistemology
2. September 2007

By Klemens Kappel
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
kappel@hum.ku.dk

1. Mollificationism

Kvanvig opens his paper with a case of epistemic disagreement:

With saddles for pillows, staring up and contemplating the stars above, two cowboys converse on a warm summer night. Joe says, "What do you think happens when you die?" Billy reflects in silence for a moment and then says, "I think when you die, it's over. There's nothing." Joe ruminates on a stem of grass, top-hand taciturn in demeanor. Finally, "I guess I don't. I don't think it's over. But I don't know."

The main aim of Kvanvig's paper is to argue that there is, in a certain sense, nothing irrational or epistemically blameworthy about Joe and Billy. Epistemically speaking, neither need to worry about the other holding a view very different from their own. In his draft Kvanvig defines the position he criticizes as follows:

'Let us call the position that views disagreement as a sure sign of irrationality "mollificationism". Mollificationists see harmony as the equilibrium point in the theory of rationality. People should agree in attitude, and where they don't, there is a disturbance in the force that needs attention' (129)

'Mollificationism can be pleasingly put in terms of the language of compromise, involving the claim that when two cognizers disagree about some claim p, there is rational pressure for compromise' (131)

There are, however, in effect several interpretations of mollification. One particular interpretation of mollificationism seems to play a crucial role in Kvanvig's discussion. Although he doesn't say so, I think that the position discussed is the following:

Consensus. A and B should, other things being equal, strive to reach consensus regarding the epistemic attitudes they adopt towards p, since consensus as such is independently epistemically valuable.

Consensus has important implications for cases of disagreement, as Kvanvig notes. One of these implications I state as follows:

Whatever epistemic attitude B has to p, A has thereby some epistemic reason to adopt the same attitude to p, and vice versa.

Some difficulties ensue as a consequence of the coordination problem that follows, as Kvanvig notes. There are other difficulties, however. In my view the most important is the fact that Consensus urges us to adopt views or certain doxastic attitudes for what are not proper epistemic reasons. This may be brought out in by the following example (Kvanvig doesn't discuss this example or state the objection to Consensus in this way, though there is no question that he would agree in the criticism):

One subject A believes that there is no global warming, and there were OBL links to pre-war Irak. Another subject B denies both beliefs, and holds that global warming is indeed taking place, but that there were no OBL links to pre-war Irak. Now, according to consensus, A and B have some epistemic reason to reach consensus, since consensus as such is independently epistemically valuable. So, A and B strike a deal on what divides them. B gets it her way on global warming, but concedes to A on the question of pre-war OBL links to Irak. As a result, both reach a consensus that global warming is real, and that there were pre-war OBL links to Irak.

Obviously, something has gone completely wrong here, and a diagnosis is not hard to come by. Putting a prize on consensus *as such* is not truth conducive. Thus, the fact that one might achieve consensus by adopting a particular epistemic attitude is never *as such* an epistemic reason to adopt that particular attitude. For the same reason, lack of consensus *as such* is never a reason to change epistemic attitude. And in *this* sense, lack of consensus *as such* is not a sign of irrationality.

Kvanvig argues that mollificationism leads to cognitive self-alienation: a dissonance between one's higher order beliefs about one's cognitive abilities and first order epistemic attitudes adopted. We can see why Consensus is bound to lead to cognitive self-alienation. Cognitive self-alienation occurs when one knowingly tries to adopt beliefs for reasons that have nothing to do with their putative truth. Striving for consensus for its own sake is not truth conducive. Hence, cognitive self-alienation occurs when one adopts epistemic attitudes merely to bring about consensus.

2. The truism

My main comment to Kvanvig's paper, however, is that mollificationism need not be motivated by Consensus. I shall now briefly indicate how mollificationism (or views similar to it) may be motivated in an entirely different way. Consider what I shall call:

The truism

For any subjects S_1 and S_2 and proposition p , if (1) S_1 and S_2 possess the same evidence, and (2) S_1 and S_2 are equally good at assessing the evidence/forming beliefs on the basis of the evidence, then (3) S_1 and S_2 have the same epistemic attitude towards p .

Notice that the truism is weaker than Feldman's uniqueness: the truism does *not* imply that for any proposition p and set of evidence for p , there is one *unique* epistemic attitude to p that one ought to have. The truism merely implies that if two subjects have different

attitudes, this can in principle be traced to differences in evidence, or capacities of assessing the evidence.

It probably also follows from the truism there cannot be idealized disagreements in Lackey's sense: if A and B are epistemic peers in the sense of having the same evidence and being equally good at assessing it, then they do not hold different doxastic attitudes to p. But there can be ordinary disagreements in Lackey's sense: cases in which initially think that A and B are peers regarding p, until we discover that they adopt different doxastic attitudes. Indeed, the truism may indeed explain why the discussion of disagreement tend to focus on cases of ordinary disagreement, rather than on cases idealized disagreements: there are no such cases.

Notice also that the truism does not imply that it is easy to ascertain that two subjects possess the same evidence, or that their capacities for assessing the evidence are equally good, or that we often have beliefs of this sort about subjects. The truism doesn't even imply that there are any cases of such 'epistemic peerness'.

I haven't, of course, offered anything by way of an argument for the truism, and nor have I tried to make it precise. To be plausible it, may have to be restricted in scope, and obviously we need some specification of what is meant by evidence and epistemic competency. Despite this, I think that the truism has enough intuitive plausibility to consider a defence of mollificationism based upon it:

- (1) It follows from the truism that if two subjects adopt different epistemic attitudes to some proposition, then either they do not possess the same evidence, or they are not equally good at assessing it.
- (2) Hence if A knows that B adopts a different epistemic attitude to p than A does, then A should infer that *either* A or B do not possess the same evidence, or they are not equally good at assessing the evidence (or both).
- (3) But in general, in cases of disagreement, the evidence one has for a proposition p will not allow one to form a justified belief regarding the cause of a disagreement of this nature concerning p. The evidence I have that the time is now nearly 11 pm stems from looking at my watch. But while this evidence allows me competently to form the belief that the time is now nearly 11 pm, that same evidence surely does not allow me simply to infer that my wife's watch, which happens to read 11.30 pm, is wrong (at least, this is not how my wife sees things).
- (4) Hence, if A knows that she disagrees with B concerning p, A is thereby in a position to know either that A's and B's evidence regarding p is different, or that they differ in their competency in assessing the evidence. But A's evidence for p normally does not permit A to decide which is the case. As far as A's evidence for p is concerned, it might be that A herself got it wrong, and A will need additional evidence to decide which of the options provided by the truism is more likely or reasonably to opt for.

Mollificationism thus motivated holds that disagreement *always* provides an initial epistemic reason to worry. One can *never* merely stick to one's belief, although the extra

evidence that some dissenter regarding p must be wrong may not be hard to come by. Notice that mullificationism thus motivated is compatible with recommending just the set of possible reasoned reactions to epistemic disagreement that Kvanvig also mentions in his paper: deferring, desisting, demurring. But note that on Kvanvig's interpretation of mullificationism, demurring is never an option. This may be true for mollificationism motivated by Consensus. Yet, mollificationism motivated by the truism suggests a somewhat weaker and more realistic view: demurring may be an option, but only provided one has extra evidence. Demurring for no good reason is never an option.

Consider now a case in which A and B adopt different epistemic attitudes regarding p , and where A can find no additional evidence that this is due to relative insufficiencies in B's evidence or capabilities of assessing the evidence rather than her own. In such cases, how can A insist that she is right, and that the mistake is located in B's evidence or reasoning? How can A reasonably downgrade B? I find this hard to see. It is sometimes suggested that a perspective on oneself can break the perceived symmetry. But how? We cannot but regard our beliefs as true, but there mere fact that a belief is mine *rather* than someone else's is not a proper reason to regard it as true or likely to be true. Indeed, it would seem to lead to cognitive self-alienation if A resorted to downgrading B on this basis. Doing so would be an instance of A's adopting a view on B's evidence or capacities that is not supported by A's view on herself and her cognitive capacities. Hence, in cases of disagreement between A and B concerning a proposition p where A posses no additional evidence that permits A to downgrade B, A should adjust her own attitude regarding the proposition at stake. And, if the case is symmetrical, B should also adjust her attitude.

This is not, of course, because consensus as such is epistemically valuable. It is for an entirely different reason relating to the truism. Note moreover that this doesn't lead to cognitive self-alienation. It is not that one abandons one's beliefs or one's trust in one's own cognitive capacities for no good reason, or for reasons which are not epistemic in nature.

3. Should we accept the truism?

Obviously, given this way of motivating mollificationism, a crucial question is whether one should accept the truism. Perhaps Kvanvig wants to reject the truism generally. At least may be suggested by his remarks on the introductory case and similar cases of disagreement:

'I doubt, however, that after reading the introductory paragraph, any scent of irrationality was detected. The scene is completely innocuous from an epistemic point of view' (127)

'Disputation and disagreement abound at every turn; suspicions of irrationality are rare' (128)

Kvanvig's general point, I take it, is that many cases of disagreement intuitively does not seem to involve any form of irrationality.

Though Kvanvig does not discuss this (as he doesn't discuss what I have called the truism at all), it is worth pointing out that the truism doesn't imply that any particular

epistemic attitude is irrational. As such, the truism requires or sanctions no particular doxastic attitude. The truism doesn't even imply that *differences* in epistemic attitudes as such are *signs* of irrationality. In cases of disagreement each agent might be rational in the sense of not falling short of acceptable minimal standards of epistemic rationality. The truism only implies that, in cases of disagreement, there must be some differences regarding evidence and competency in dealing with the evidence. And if one accepts the steps outlines above, failing to respond to known disagreement by considering the options provided by the truism may be irrational. So, I tend to think that one can hold on to the truism, and yet accept the remarks Kvanvig offers about the lacking 'scent of irrationality' concerning the cases of disagreement.

4. Is mollificationism contingently self-defeating?

Kvanvig considers and partially endorses the objection that mollificationism is self-defeating. Clearly, as Kvanvig points out, mollificationism is not self-defeating in the sense that it somehow undermines its own truth. If this were the case, it would be a strong objection. But mollificationism is contingently self-defeating: in conjunction with the fact that we competently disagree about its truth, mollificationism is self-defeating, in a sense. But if we focus on mollificationism motivated by the truism, what this comes down to is just the following: mollificationism together with certain contingent facts (that we competently disagree about its truth) implies that one should at least initially not fully *believe* mollificationism. For a while, pending further evidence, this might be the proper response to known disagreement about mollificationism. Clearly, mollificationism applies to itself. However, I fail to see why this is an objection to a properly motivated mollificationism.

5. Summary

Let me sum up my four main points. First, mollificationism shouldn't be motivated by viewing consensus as epistemically valuable as such. Putting a prize on consensus as such is highly implausible. Second, mollificationism (or something like it) can be motivated by the truism, and plausible assumptions about our epistemic situation when facing epistemic disagreements. Third, the truism is not rendered intuitively implausible by the kind of cases considered by Kvanvig. Fourth, properly motivated mollificationism applies to itself, but this not an objection.