

Commentary on Jennifer Lackey's 'A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance'*

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1 Summary

At the beginning of her paper, Jennifer says that she will discuss

‘The question . . . what is the significance of disagreement between those who are epistemic peers? In particular, what is the rational response to disagreement where there are no relevant epistemic asymmetries between the members involved in the dispute?’ (p. 2)

What does it take for two individuals *A* and *B* to be epistemic peers?

Suppose that *A* and *B* hold different doxastic attitudes with respect to the question whether *P*. Then they are epistemic peers in an idealized sense (relative to the question whether *P*) if the following conditions are met (p. 6):

Evidential equality: *A* and *B* are equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *P*.

* This is a slightly modified version of the comments given at the conference. Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers refer to the version of Jennifer's paper posted at the conference web-site: <http://www.philosophy.stir.ac.uk/postgraduate/SocialEpistemologyConference.php>

Cognitive equality: *A* and *B* are equally competent, intelligent, and fair-minded in their assessment of the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *P*.

Situation of full disclosure: *A* and *B* have knowingly shared with one another all of their evidence and arguments relative to the question whether *P*.

Idealized disagreement should be distinguished from disagreement in an ordinary sense which is to be understood as follows:

‘A and B disagree in an ordinary sense if and only if, relative to the question whether *p*, A and B hold differing doxastic attitudes and, prior to recognizing that this is so, A and B take themselves to be epistemic peers with respect to this question.’ (p. 7)

Jennifer centers her discussion around disagreement conceived in the this second way and gives a number of reasons why one should do so.

There are various views on which response is appropriate when one disagrees with an epistemic peer. *Non-conformists* hold that ‘one can continue to rationally believe that *p* despite the fact that one’s epistemic peer explicitly believes that not-*p*, even when one does not have a reason independent of the disagreement itself to prefer one’s own belief.’ (p. 2) *Conformists*, on the other hand, hold that ‘unless one has a reason that is independent of the disagreement itself to prefer one’s own belief, one cannot continue to rationally believe that *p* when one is faced with an epistemic peer who explicitly believes that not-*p*.’ (p. 4) According to the non-conformist, there can be reasonable disagreement between epistemic peers. The conformist denies this.

Jennifer rejects both conformism and non-conformism, maintaining that conformism delivers the right verdict in some cases, while non-conformism gets it right in others. She offers her own alternative account – the justificationist view – which explains why this is so. According to the justificationist view, whether a subject can rationally maintain her belief that *P* in the face of disagreement with an epistemic peer is determined by what degree of justified confidence she has in *P*. The cases that non-conformism gets right are those in which the subject’s degree of justified confidence in the relevant proposition is

sufficiently high, due to certain pieces of information about her own epistemic situation that – when combined with a high degree of confidence – provides a so-called ‘symmetry breaker’ (where ‘A symmetry breaker is something that indicates that the epistemic position of one of the parties to the disagreement in question is superior to the other’s.’ (p. 15)) Conformism delivers the correct verdict in cases where the subject’s belief enjoys a ‘relatively low degree of justified confidence’ and, consequently, is not sufficient to yield a symmetry breaker when joined with personal information.

2 Preliminary observation

A noticeable difference between idealized disagreement and ordinary agreement is that for the former to obtain A and B have to be epistemic peers *at the time of their disagreement* while what, for the latter, what is relevant is whether A and B take themselves to be epistemic peers *prior* to recognizing the disagreement. One nice thing about idealized agreement is that it seems to provide a good basis for discussion of the question that Jennifer announced would be the focus at the outset of the paper, *viz.* ‘what is the rational response to disagreement in situations where there are no relevant epistemic asymmetries between the members involved in the dispute?’ It does so, because A and B are, when disagreeing in an idealized way, are epistemic peers the time they do so, and thus, there are no epistemic asymmetries between them at the time of their disagreement.

On the other hand, when A and B disagree in an ordinary sense, they might well *not* take each other to be epistemic peers when they recognize the disagreement. Indeed, this is so in the cases where Jennifer sides with the non-conformist (Section 1), because the presence of personal information yields a symmetry breaker (paired with a sufficiently high degree of justified confidence). This, in turn, gives the gives the subject a reason to think that the interlocutor is no longer an epistemic peer. Hence, in these cases the question that has been answered is really this: what is the rational response in light of disagreement with someone who *used to be taken* to be an epistemic peer, but no longer is? Jennifer herself acknowledges this (p. 19), but it is worth high-lighting again since it does seem vastly different from the initial question.

3 Ordinary disagreement

Let me proceed to make two minor points regarding Jennifer's characterization of ordinary disagreement.

3.1 Ordinary disagreement and philosophical sophistication

According to the characterization offered, in order for ordinary disagreement to occur the involved parties have to *take themselves to be epistemic peers* (at least prior to disagreeing; I will allow myself to leave this qualification out for the remainder of this subsection).

In general, in order for S to take it that P , S is required to have the concepts that figure in P . Given the characterization of epistemic peers this means that any two individuals are required to have the concepts of evidential equality, cognitive equality, and full disclosure to qualify as epistemic peers in the ordinary sense. However, this makes ordinary disagreement something that can only arise between individuals with at least some philosophical sophistication. For ordinary individuals do not have the concepts of evidential equality, cognitive equality, and full disclosure – yet, if an individual fails to have the concepts that figure in the definitions of evidential and cognitive equality and full disclosure, she cannot take herself and someone else to be epistemic peers, and so, cannot enter into ordinary disagreement. Thus, as stated, the characterization of ordinary disagreement is not an entirely happy one. At least not if I am in right in assuming that such disagreement is not meant to be a phenomenon that only occurs among the philosophically sophisticated.

The problem at hand can be easily avoided, I think. (This, of course, is why it strikes me as being a minor one ...) Just reformulate the characterization of ordinary disagreement so it reads as follows: A and B disagree in an ordinary sense if and only if, relative to the question whether p , A and B hold differing doxastic attitudes and, prior to recognizing that this is so, A and B would take themselves to be epistemic peers with respect to this question if they possessed the relevant concepts. Thus defined ordinary disagreement does not involve an *actual* conceptual requirement, but merely a counterfactual one.

3.2 Prior to ...

Let me make another minor point about the characterization of ordinary disagreement.¹

What I want to take issue with is the idea that individuals have to take themselves to be epistemic peers *prior* to recognizing their disagreement in order for ordinary disagreement to arise between them.² (I will leave aside the issue raised in the previous subsection.) The reason I want to take issue with this idea is that, in many cases of what would seem to be cases of ordinary disagreement, the individuals involved do not take a view on whether or not the other party is an epistemic peer prior to disagreeing.

Suppose that Bob and I are having a conversation. At some point during our conversation, we both turn towards a table located behind us. Bob says, ‘Wow! Look at the big chocolate cake on the table!’ – to which I immediately respond, ‘Bob, there’s no cake on the table!’ Bob believes that there is a cake on the table, while I believe that there is no such thing on the table. We disagree, that is. It can be supposed that immediately when the disagreement arises, Bob and I start to consider the question whether the other person is an epistemic peer. It may be further supposed that we had not considered this question prior to the emergence of our disagreement, but would have taken each other to be such peers had we done so. (Indeed, for a wide range of matters that involve no special skills or capacities (like perception and simple arithmetic), it seems plausible that the default position when it comes to the question whether someone is an epistemic peer is that she is.)

This case strikes me as one that should count as an instance of ordinary disagreement. However, it cannot do so since, by assumption, both Bob and I have no explicit view on whether or not the other person is an epistemic peer prior to our disagreement – yet, this is required by the characterization of ordinary disagreement. It has, of course, been built into the example that Bob and I fail to have a view on whether the other person is an epistemic peer. Granted, but it seems somewhat plausible to me that this also happens in a wide range of actual cases of disagreement – including the kinds of cases that Jennifer considers in her discussion of non-conformism.

Consequently, ordinary disagreement, as conceived in the paper, excludes a wide

¹ This point came up in discussion with Lars Gundersen.

² Jennifer here follows Elga, Christensen and others.

range of cases that, if anything, would seem to be naturally counted as ordinary disagreement. There is a straightforward way to address the point, though. Instead of requiring that the parties involved in the disagreement take each other to be epistemic peers prior to the disagreement, one can impose the weaker requirement that they would take each to be epistemic peers if they considered the matter explicitly. By adopting this weakened requirement, many cases that would otherwise not have qualified as instances of ordinary disagreement – although they seem to be such cases – will qualify as such.

4 Known *vs.* subjectively warranted personal information, degree of justified confidence and symmetry breakers

Let me move on to discuss the PERCEPTION case. I would like to add some more detail about Edwin and ask Jennifer for her take on what should be said about her and Edwin once this extra detail has been added. I do not think that what I will say amounts to an objection to anything Jennifer has said. It is more of an invitation to say more about the relationship between some of the concepts that are central to her paper. (Detail can be added in a similar fashion to the ELEMENTARY MATH and DIRECTIONS cases.)

The description – and subsequent discussion of – the PERCEPTION case involves frequent use of factive terminology. For instance, it is part of the set up that Estelle, Edwin, and Jennifer ‘were eating lunch together’ (p. 11) and that Jennifer has access to certain pieces of personal information – that she *knows* of herself that she has never in her life hallucinated an object, that she has not been drinking or taking any drugs, has her contact lenses in, and that she has ample evidence of her eyesight’s functioning properly when her shortsightedness is corrected (see p. 12).

I do not have a problem with the use of factive terminology – indeed, I am happy to grant it. I am also happy to grant that Jennifer’s access to the personal information in question together with her high degree of justified confidence that Estelle is present provides a symmetry breaker. The question I would like to raise is how strong a positive epistemic standing personal information needs to enjoy in order to provide a symmetry breaker when combined with a belief held with a high degree of justified confidence. In particular, does it have to be *known*?

Let me approach the question by making a number of assumptions about Edwin. It seems to me that, given certain assumptions, his situation can be regarded as being symmetrical to Jennifer's, or almost so.³

Suppose that Edwin has, as matter of fact, been drugged and that his belief that Estelle is not present is based on his hallucinating. However, suppose, additionally, that Edwin has been drugged unbeknownst to him and that, while the drug used does make him hallucinate, there are no external indications that he is under the influence of a drug and there is no way for him to tell by introspection.

Like Jennifer, Edwin holds various beliefs about himself, and, indeed, it can be supposed that he *knows* that he has not been drinking, that he is wearing his glasses, and that he has ample evidence that his eyesight functions properly when his shortsightedness is corrected. Now, given the set up, it cannot coherently be assumed that he knows that he is not hallucinating and that he has not been drugged. However, I do think that it can reasonably be supposed that he is *subjectively* warranted in believing these things. After all, by assumption, no amount of external checking or introspection will give him a (subjective) reason to believe anything to the contrary. Everything seems normal to him.

There is a connection between the epistemic status of Jennifer's personal evidence and the degree to which her confidence that Estelle is present is justified. The degree is high, because (in part at least) all the personal information involved is known. But what about Edwin? Recall that all of his personal information enjoys a positive epistemic standing – some of it is known, some of it subjectively warranted. In light of this I would be inclined to say that the degree to which his confidence that Estelle is not present is high. Maybe not as high as Jennifer's, but still fairly high.

As seen, the combination of Jennifer's personal information and her high degree of justified confidence that Estelle is present provides a symmetry breaker that enables her to sustain her belief rationally. However, what about Edwin – does he have a symmetry

³ By changing the details of the case slightly it seems to me that one could obtain a case with complete symmetry between Jennifer and Edwin in the sense that the degree of justified confidence in their respective beliefs and the epistemic standing of their personal information is the same – so that whatever is said about Jennifer should be said about Edwin as well. However, I stick to an example with slight asymmetries here, because these slight asymmetries raise a number of interesting issues.

breaker that will enable him to rationally maintain his belief that Estelle is not present?

I am inclined to think that the answer to the question should be affirmative. After all, his situation is almost symmetrical to Jennifer's. If this is right, a body of personal information – some of which is merely subjectively warranted rather than known – can yield a symmetry breaker when combined with a degree of justified confidence that is sufficiently high. Applied to the present case this means, among other things, that both parties involved in ordinary disagreement can have a symmetry breaker and each of them can rationally maintain their incompatible beliefs.

As said earlier, this does not amount to an objection to anything Jennifer has said. However, getting her take on the case just presented will shed some further light on the nature and connections between a number of concepts central to her paper.