

Disagreement and Evidence

Stephen Wright

University of Sheffield

1 Introduction: Two Disputes

1.1 Evidence

Suppose that two agents share the same body of evidence. Can these two agents take different doxastic attitudes towards the evidence whilst both being maximally rational?

UNIQUENESS: No.

PERMISSIVISM: Yes.

1.2 Disagreement

Suppose you believe that ϕ is true and later someone you take to be your epistemic peer tells you that she thinks that ϕ is false.¹ The question: *Are you rationally obliged to be less confident in your belief that ϕ having found out about this disagreement?*

CONCILIATIONISM: Yes.

STEADFASTNESS: No.

1.3 How They Connect

(1) Conciliationism implies Uniqueness.²

¹Your epistemic peer is someone who has all the same evidence as you and is equally good at processing it.

²Richard Feldman (2007) and Thomas Kelly (2010) argue for this.

Obviously, this can be turned into:

(2) If Permissivism implies Steadfastness.

So it might be tempting to ground a commitment to Steadfastness in the claim that Permissivism is true. A good argument for Permissivism is thus a good argument for Steadfastness. I'll **argue** that this is unwise for two reasons:

Firstly, because there are ways of endorsing permissivism that might lead you to deny steadfastness.

Secondly, because grounding Steadfastness in Permissivism removes two of the other major motivations for Steadfastness.

2 Does Permissivism Imply Steadfastness?

2.1 An Argument for Permissivism

Uniqueness is a *very* strong statement – what about the inhabitants of Alpha Centauri who disagree about whether the probability of it raining tomorrow is 0.37656 or 0.37655? Does the evidence *really* decide between these two doxastic states?³

2.2 What About Steadfastness?

This doesn't give us the right steadfast theory – it gives us one that applies to the inhabitants of Alpha Centauri.

Both disputes above concern quantified statements and there's trouble with moving from changing the scope of the quantifier.

So one of the better arguments for thinking Permissivism true doesn't get us to the kind of Steadfastness we want.

2.3 Limited Permissivism

Suppose you think there's *one* or *very few* permissive cases.

³This is from Thomas Kelly (forthcoming).

It doesn't seem like this provides justification for being steadfast.

So you should only be steadfast on permissivist grounds if your permissivism makes it likely that your disagreement is explained by permissive evidence.

3 Scepticism, Evidence and Permissivism

- Steadfast theories charge that Conciliationism leads to scepticism. Disagreement is so widespread that if we have to give ground in the face of disagreement, we're going to have virtually no beliefs left.⁴
- At least in the case of steadfast theories, we can make sense of the idea that we don't have to abandon nearly all of our beliefs.
- You might think that steadfast theories fare no better – finding out that your evidence for thinking that ϕ is true actually supports the conclusion that ϕ is false to the same extent seems to suggest that it actually supports *neither*.
- The idea is that it's evidence for the disjunction, but where the disjunction is $(\phi \vee \neg\phi)$ it's hard to see how it's evidence that justifies belief in either disjunct.
- It's also hard to see how it could raise the probability (in whatever sense) of either disjunct to be greater than mere chance.

4 Disagreement About Disagreement

- Another line of attack on conciliationist theories suggests that they cannot maintain their theory.
- One of the things that people disagree about is whether or not conciliationism is right. By their own lights, conciliationist theories should become less confident about conciliationism because of this.⁵
- This is a more specific instance of the sceptical problem above.

⁴Van Inwagen (1999) makes this point.

⁵Adam Elga (2010) considers this argument.

- Again, though, it's questionable whether or not steadfast theories do any better.
- If Permissivism is the reason for Steadfastness, it needs to be the case the evidence speaks equally well *against* Steadfastness.
- So there's no good reason for holding Steadfastness in the first place.

5 Conclusions

- There are ways of rationally denying steadfastness whilst endorsing permissivism.
- Grounding steadfast theories in an appropriately interesting Permissivism faces problems similar to those faced by conciliationist theories.

References

- Elga, Adam. 2010. "How to Disagree About How to Disagree." In Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*, 175–187. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feldman, Richard. 2007. "Reasonable Religious Disagreements." In Louise Antony (ed.), *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, 194–214. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelly, Thomas. 2010. "Peer Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence." In Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*, 111–174. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . forthcoming. "How to Be an Epistemic Permissivist." In Matthias Steup, Ernest Sosa, and John Turri (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2nd edition edition.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 1999. "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone to Believe Anything on Insufficient Evidence." In Eleanor Stump and Michael J. Murray (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*. New York: Blackwell.