Confidence, Evidence, and Disagreement

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Abstract Should learning we disagree about p lead you to reduce confidence in p? Some who think so want to except beliefs in which you are rationally highly confident. I argue that this is wrong; we should reject accounts that rely on this intuitive thought. I then show that quite the opposite holds: factors that justify low confidence in p also make disagreement about p less significant. I examine two such factors: your antecedent expectations about your peers' opinions and the difficulty of evaluating your evidence. I close by proposing how we should think about disagreement.

1 Introduction

Disagreements can be disturbing. And not just because they are typically unpleasant affairs. Disagreements can be *epistemically* disturbing. Learning that a respected peer disagrees with you can make you lose confidence in or altogether abandon your belief in the disputed proposition. But should it?

Most everyone now agrees that awareness of peer disagreement should sometimes lead you to revise your opinion.[1] Everyone also agrees that disagreement isn't always significant. In particular, some think that if you are really sure of what you believe (and you're right in being so sure), then you shouldn't revise it just because we disagree. We might cash this out more carefully as follows:

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[1] You take me to be your peer about p just in case you respect my opinion about p as much as your own. If someone were to inquire, "Whom should I ask about p?" you'd say, "Ask me or ask her. It doesn't matter. We are equally likely to be right." Cf. Elga (2007).

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27 **The Intuitive Thought.** How you ought to revise your opinion in the face of
28 disagreement depends on how rationally confident you are in that opinion. The
29 more rationally confident you are, the less you must revise.

30 In the most extreme case, when you are rationally maximally confident in some p,
31 your confidence in p needn't budge all in the face of disagreement.

32 The goal of this paper is twofold: to show that this *prima facie* plausible thought
33 is wrong, and to suggest another, better, way of thinking about disagreement. I will
34 first argue that even if you're really sure of what you believe and you're right in
35 being so sure, discovering peer disagreement can still require you to revise. So the
36 Intuitive Thought is false. I show even our most confidently held beliefs aren't safe
37 from disagreement. This is bad news for those who like the Intuitive Thought. But it
38 isn't just the letter of the Intuitive Thought that's wrong. It is also wrong in spirit.
39 To show this, I demonstrate how having a rational *low* confidence in p can make
40 disagreement about p less significant. I then show how this initially surprising result
41 can help us think about confidence, evidence, and disagreement.

42 ## 2 Background

43 Most everyone now agrees that disagreement is sometimes significant. Consider
44 following case:

45 **Math.** For years now, you have been meeting six friends for dinner every
46 fortnight. You always split the check evenly, tipping 18 % and rounding each
47 person's share to the nearest dollar. The task of figuring out how much each
48 person owes always falls on you and Smith. (You're the light drinkers in the
49 group.) Upon receiving the check, you both do the requisite calculations in
50 your head. Most of the time you agree. In the instances when you have
51 disagreed, you have checked with a calculator and have been right equally
52 often. Tonight you run the numbers and become quite confident that each
53 share is $43. But then Smith announces that she is quite confident that each
54 share is $44. Neither of you has had more wine or coffee, and you do not feel
55 (nor does Smith appear) especially tired or especially perky.[2]

56 How confident should you now be that the shares are $43? Less than you were
57 before you learned of this disagreement.

58 This is a widely shared intuition. I think that it is right, and assume it is for the
59 purposes of this paper. This is not a controversial assumption. Although few agree
60 on *why* disagreement is significant, there is consensus disagreement is often
61 significant in this way and in this type of case.

2FL01 [2] Christensen (2009), Feldman (2006), (2007) and Elga (2007) present similar examples. All three hold
2FL02 that disagreement is often epistemically significant in exactly this sort of case. But even opponents of the
2FL03 kind of conciliatory views of disagreement that Christensen et al. favor, agree that revision is required in
2FL04 cases like Math. Cf. Kelly (2010), (2013), Lackey (2010a, b), and Sosa (2010). Possible exceptions
2FL05 include Weatherson (ms) and Kelly (2005).

62 However, everyone also agrees that peer disagreement isn't always significant.
63 For example, you do not need to revise your opinion in cases like this:

64 **CrazyMath.** As before, but Smith says that your shares are $385.[3]

65 Consensus peters out as the cases become more complicated. Few agree on how to
66 accommodate peer disagreement about difficult empirical matters, like whether the
67 death penalty has deterrent effects, or controversial moral questions, like whether
68 abortion is permissible. We might want a theory of disagreement to provide a
69 plausible story about these more difficult cases. But such a theory should, at the very
70 least, give us a principled way of distinguishing between the easy cases. It should
71 rule that revision is required in cases like Math, but not in cases like CrazyMath.

72 ### 3 The Intuitive Thought: What it is and Why it Fails

73 The Intuitive Thought suggests one way to do this. The proposal is that you needn't
74 revise your confidence in p just in case you are *rationally highly confident* in p,
75 where:

76 To be **rationally highly confident** in p is:

77 (a) to be highly confident in p, and
78 (b) for that to be the rational level of confidence to have in p given the evidence.[4]

82 This thought provides some hope of explaining CrazyMath. After all, you are
80 rationally highly confident in your belief that we each owe $43—or at least
84 something in that ballpark. This is why you can ignore Smith's insane suggestion
85 that you each owe $385. It also gives us some hope of distinguishing CrazyMath
86 from Math. Perhaps the case can be made that you aren't as rationally highly
87 confident in your belief that your shares are $43 in Math. This would explain why,
88 in that case, you cannot ignore your peer's opinion.
89 But even if this *prima facie* plausible proposal could handle the easy cases, it
90 ultimately fails.[5] I will present two counterexamples to the Intuitive Thought. In the

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91 first, you are *not* rationally highly confident in your belief, and yet you *can* maintain
92 confidence in the face of disagreement. In the second, you *are* rationally highly
93 confident in your belief and yet you *cannot* maintain confidence in the face of
94 disagreement. Together, these cases show that the letter of the Intuitive Thought is
95 wrong. Rational high confidence does not protect against disagreement.
96   Consider the following version of Math:

97 **BadMath.** As before, but you are bad at math—especially percentages. Also,
98 you are paranoid about undertipping servers. You get nervous when you have
99 to calculate tips, which makes you even more prone to error. But you have
100 finished your meal, and must calculate what you owe. You and your friend
101 disagree: you say it's $43, she says it's $385.

102 As in CrazyMath, you should dismiss your friend's opinion and maintain your
103 confidence. Of course, given how bad you are at math, you shouldn't be very confident
104 that the right answer is $43 to begin with. Still, this disagreement should not have much
105 effect on whatever low confidence you do have. Notice that this is plausible even if you
106 take your friend to be your epistemic superior—even if Smith is a mathematical genius
107 who shares none of your financial neuroses. You are bad at math, yes, but isn't it more
108 likely that Smith is joking or drunk, than that you each owe $385?[6] This case shows
109 that, contra the Intuitive Thought, you can sometimes dismiss peer disagreement about
110 *p* even though your antecedent confidence in *p* is quite low.
111   But maybe this isn't the right version of the Intuitive Thought. Even if you're not
112 rationally highly confident that you each owe $43, you might be rationally highly
113 confident in some related proposition; perhaps the proposition that you don't each
114 owe hundreds of dollars, or the proposition that what you owe is much closer to $43
115 than $385. I think this much is right: you are more highly confident in these
116 propositions and this is relevant to how you should respond to evidence of
117 disagreement. Why not then amend the Intuitive Thought so that it picks out
118 something like these propositions in which you are rationally highly confident?
119   I'm afraid this won't do, and here's why. Any version of the Intuitive Thought
120 that affirms a direct relationship between some particular proposition (or kind of
121 proposition) and the undermining effect of disagreement will either be false or a true
122 but watered down, ad-hoc version of the original proposal. This is because, as I will
123 show shortly, there is no straightforward relationship between how highly confident
124 you are in some proposition and how much you ought to revise when you discover
125 that there is disagreement (perhaps about some other proposition). Your rational
126 confidence in the proposition that the right answer is not $385 is grounded in a
127 number of other factors essential to the explanation of why you can maintain
128 confidence in the face of this disagreement. A true version of something resembling
129 the Intuitive Thought would have to take all those factors into account. It would at
130 best be a long, convoluted, and unhelpful claim.
131   I have now shown that having a rational low confidence in *p* is compatible with
132 rationally maintaining confidence in the face of disagreement about *p*. Now I will

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133 show how having a rational high confidence in p cannot protect p from undermining
134 by disagreement. Consider:

135 **SuperMath.** You are super at math. You are especially good at calculating
136 percentages. You eat out a lot and rarely err at determining how much you
137 owe. (Same for your friend; you are peers.) You crunch the numbers and
138 disagree: you say $43, she says $44.

139 However reliable you might be, you are still fallible. Learning that your friend
140 thinks half of the bill is $44 rather than $43 does not, in this case, give you any
141 reason to think she is joking or drunk. SuperMath and Math are analogous in all
142 respects except your level of confidence. Yet this does not make a difference:
143 maintaining confidence seems wrong in both cases. SuperMath thus shows that
144 disagreement can be undermining even when you are rationally highly confident in
145 your belief.

146   If disagreement about p can be significant despite your high confidence in p, and
147 if it can be insignificant despite your low confidence in p, then the Intuitive Thought
148 is wrong. Although your degree of rational confidence is one determinant of the
149 degree to which you should revise in light of disagreement, it is not the only one and
150 its relevance is not as straightforward as the Intuitive Thought suggests.
151 Furthermore, even if we did manage to identify other, less-than-straightforward
152 ways in which level of confidence is relevant, there are, as we will now see, may
153 other relevant factors too. The Intuitive Thought is the wrong way to think about
154 disagreement. It oversimplifies matters and overstates the significance of rational
155 confidence.

156   The same holds for principles like the Intuitive Thought, which try to distill a
157 relation between the epistemic significance of disagreement and some one particular
158 factor (be it rational high confidence or something else). These principles are
159 analogous to the following claim: in response to evidence of cats, you should
160 believe such-and-such. This suggestion is blatantly incomplete and shortsighted as a
161 story about how to accommodate evidence of cats. Yet there is a temptation to make
162 similar proposals with respect to evidence of disagreement. What I will show now is
163 that we should resist this temptation. Things just aren't that simple when it comes to
164 evidence and disagreement.

165 ## 4 How We Should Think About Evidence and Disagreement

166 In the previous section I showed that the Intuitive Thought, as stated, is false. In this
167 section I will show that nothing like it can be salvaged. The epistemic significance
168 of disagreement depends on much more than rational confidence. In particular, it
169 depends on, at least, our antecedent expectations about our peer's opinions and the
170 difficulty of evaluating our evidence. Understanding how these factors affect the
171 epistemic significance of disagreement can both show why simple principles like the
172 Intuitive Thought are misguided and provide a better way of thinking about
173 disagreement.

4.1 Evidence

I'll begin with some nearly trivial points about evidence. I will then focus on evidence of disagreement.

> **Marbles.** You have an urn filled with 100 marbles—some white, some black. You have some belief about the proportion of white to black marbles in the urn. You reach in and pick a random marble. It is black.

How surprised should you be that you picked a black marble on the first try? How should this discovery affect your belief about the contents of the urn?

It depends. If you antecedently believed that the urn contained only black marbles, then picking one on the first try should neither surprise you nor affect your belief about the contents of the urn (except, perhaps, to confirm it slightly). If instead you thought that the urn contained only white marbles, you should be shocked to discover a black marble, and must revise your belief about the urn's contents. Notice that this holds even if you were antecedently rationally highly confident that there were no black marbles in the urn. You should still revise if you pick a black marble, for you were obviously wrong about the urn's contents.

Suppose, instead, that you were antecedently confident that the urn contains more white marbles. Pulling a black one should surprise you. How much depends on further details of the case. But compare: if you had been confident that the urn contains an equal number of both black and white marbles, you wouldn't have been surprised whatever you had gotten. There was a 50 % chance that you would pick a marble of that color.

The upshot is this: the more black marbles you antecedently believe are in the urn, the less surprised you will be to randomly pull one on the first try, and the less doing so should affect your opinion about the proportion of black marbles in the urn.

4.2 Evidence of Disagreement

Just as your shock at picking a black marble depends on your expectation about the proportion of black marbles, so your shock at discovering we disagree depends on your expectations about the proportion of disagreeing peers. Consider:

> **Peers.** You believe p and have 100 peers about p. You call a random peer. She says not-p.

Should you revise your opinion? That depends in part on how surprised you are to hear that your peer disagrees with you. And that depends on whether you expected to disagree at all and whether you expected to disagree like this.

Suppose that, before the disagreement, you were reasonably confident that all 100 of your peers would agree with you. (Perhaps you had data from the reputable Peer Survey Group.) If you are confident that all of your peers agree with you, you should be *shocked* to discover that the first person you randomly call disagrees. You should be shocked just as you were shocked to pull a black marble out of an urn supposedly full of white marbles. And you should revise your belief about the proportion of

214 agreeing and disagreeing peers, just as you revised your belief about the proportion
215 of black and white marbles.

4.3 Confidence, Evidence, and Disagreement

217 I have argued that disagreement's shock value correlates with whether you expect it.
218 And the less you expect it the more you will have to revise your expectations when
219 you get it. But the epistemic significance of disagreement depends on more than
220 these expectations. It also depends on your evaluation of the state of your evidence.
221   To simplify, suppose there are just two reactions you might have to the evidence:
222 you might think that it is *clear* or *murky*. Say you think it is clear. Then you can
223 reasonably be fairly confident in whatever you conclude on its basis and you should
224 expect agreement among peers. The evidence is clear, after all. Suppose instead you
225 decide that the evidence is murky. Then you probably shouldn't be as confident in
226 whatever you conclude on its basis and you should expect peer disagreement. After
227 all, the evidence is murky.
228   This suggests a correlation among (at least) the following:

229 1.   You evaluation of the state of evidence with respect to p.
230 2.   Your estimate of the proportion of peers who believe that p.
231 3.   The appropriate confidence to have in p.

232   If you discover that there is more disagreement than you expected, and are forced
233 to revise your estimate of the proportion of peer disagreement, then you will also
234 have to revise your opinion about the state of the evidence. (Probably, you
235 overestimated its clarity.) And if you have to revise your opinion about the state of
236 the evidence, you will have to revise the level of confidence you have in
237 p. Likewise, if you get evidence that you are overconfident in p, you will have to
238 revise your evaluation of the evidence as well as your antecedent estimate.
239   What this shows is that, contra the Intuitive Thought, your level of rational
240 confidence is just one factor that feeds into how you ought to respond to evidence of
241 disagreement. It also matters what your antecedent expectations are about the
242 amount of agreement and the state of the original evidence. Of course, this isn't a
243 complete story either. There are bound to be other factors that affect the epistemic
244 significance of a piece of evidence. (Consider, for example, your level of rational
245 confidence about these other factors: how sure are you that the evidence is clear?
246 How sure are you that all your peers will agree with you?) I won't provide a
247 complete list here of what factors are relevant to the epistemic significance of
248 disagreement. Doing so would be akin to providing a list of what factors are relevant
249 to the epistemic significance of a piece of evidence in general. It would be to give a
250 theory of evidence. And I did not set out to complete such an ambitious task. What I
251 have accomplished, however, can set us on the right track when thinking about
252 disagreement, so that we can come up with some general heuristics to distinguish
253 between the different sorts of cases with which we began.

5 How This Helps

A theory of disagreement should explain why disagreement is significant when it is, and why it isn't when it isn't. It should also provide a principled way of dealing with our toy cases and a plausible account of the more realistic and difficult cases. I think evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant, when it is, because it is evidence of error. But I have not argued for that here.[7] My aim has not been to provide a theory of disagreement. It has been to dislodge an intuitive but mistaken way of thinking about disagreement. By going back to the original cases, we can see how focusing on antecedent expectations rather than confidence alone gives us a better way of approaching evidence of disagreement.

5.1 How to Handle the Cases

We are now in a position see how an approach like the one I advocate here might help get what we want out of a theory of disagreement. Such a theory should say that, in general, revision is required in cases like Math but not in cases like CrazyMath. Such a theory should also tell a plausible story about the more difficult cases of disagreement about controversial matters like abortion or the death penalty. Consider the easy cases first.

Why are you required to revise your opinion that half of the bill is $43 when Smith says it's $44 but not when she says it's $385? Before you disagree, you conclude that each person owes $43. The calculation was easy and you are confident in your answer. Since you take Smith to be your peer, you don't expect disagreement. Rightly so: if you are both good at math, and equally so, then disagreement is unlikely.

You should be surprised to learn that Smith's answer is $44, but you should be *shocked* to learn that my answer is $385. I have argued that disagreement can be more significant when it is more surprising. But the most surprising disagreement here seems to be the least significant. Is this a problem for what I have argued? No. This is the right result because the element of surprise is only part of the story about the epistemic significance of disagreement. The general lesson so far has been that the epistemic significance of disagreement depends, in part, on your antecedent expectations. I have focused mostly on the expectation of disagreement. But you have other expectations too. Crucially, you expect some ways of disagreeing more than others. You aren't shocked to learn that you and your friend's calculations were a couple of numbers off; you are shocked to learn that hers is in the 100 s and yours is in the 10 s. You reasonably assume that such extreme disagreement is unlikely between peers.

Notice, however, that you don't think it is unlikely because you are highly confident in your answer, but because you think that it is more likely that your friend is joking, lying, or drunk, than that she would actually arrive at an answer so far out of your ballpark. This is your doxastic state before you ever walk into the restaurant and take your first bite. Once you calculate and compare answers, you are rational in

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295 thinking that she is pulling your leg.[8] Notice that the same cannot be said about
296 Math. You are initially confident in your answer, you don't expect disagreement,
297 and you are surprised to find it. But you cannot explain it away as in CrazyMath.
298 The disagreement in Math is newsworthy and the news isn't that your peer has lost
299 it. It is that you might be wrong.

300   So it goes for the easy cases. It is easy to evaluate the evidence in these cases. It
301 is also clear, what the evidence is, how to evaluate it, and how to assess our requisite
302 abilities required for evaluating it. The fewer of these conditions that hold, the
303 harder it will be to be confident in our opinions about the disputed matter. But, and
304 this is the surprising result, it will also be easier to maintain whatever low
305 confidence we do have.

306   What about the more difficult and realistic cases? Consider the question of
307 whether the death penalty has deterrent effects. Maybe it is clear what the relevant
308 evidence is: graphs and charts of crime rates in various States. Maybe it is also clear
309 how to evaluate it: using statistics. It may even be clear how to assess the requisite
310 abilities: there are better and worse statisticians. It may nevertheless be difficult to
311 evaluate the evidence. Maybe there are too many charts and graphs. Or maybe our
312 political leanings blind and bias us.

313   It gets worse for even more difficult moral questions. The evidence will typically
314 be murky in hard cases like these; so we should expect to have a lower confidence
315 and less agreement. Thus in the difficult cases, disagreement will typically be *old*
316 *news*. Those who are aware of the murky evidential situations, and have
317 appropriately revised their confidence, will not need to revise *further* upon meeting
318 a disagreeing peer. They have already accommodated the evidence of error that they
319 would have gotten from disagreement.

320   In the easy cases, on the other hand, the evidence will typically be clear. So we
321 should expect to have both a high confidence and considerable peer agreement.
322 Disagreement will thus typically be newsworthy and revision will usually be
323 required. Disagreement can be evidence of our own error in the easy cases partly
324 because we sometimes make simple mistakes about easy matters. That's when it is
325 most helpful to use peers as "checks" on our thinking.[9] If, on the other hand, our
326 confidence is already low as in the difficult cases, if we are appropriately humble,
327 we will may already checked our own thinking. And if so, then we won't have to
328 revise further.

329   It is crucial to notice that the considerations that allow disagreement to be less
330 epistemically significant in the difficult cases are the same considerations that
331 mandate that the belief in question can only be maintained very weakly. A theory of
332 disagreement that appropriately takes into account these insights is one that requires
333 being *already* humble with respect to the *difficult cases*. It mandates a kind of
334 humility about many a difficult questions and it does so antecedently to any actual
335 disagreement. I think that this has significant independent plausibility. Most of us
336 are irrationally overconfident in our beliefs about difficult factual, political, moral,

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8FL01   [8] Christensen (2007) develops this kind of response to the CrazyMath case. What I say here helps buttress
8FL02   that approach.

9FL01   [9] Cf. Christensen (2007).

337 and philosophical issues—in other words, about issues with *murky* evidential
338 situations. There is epistemic work for disagreement in those areas where we are
339 overconfident. There, disagreement is newsworthy, and there, it can indirectly lead
340 us to revise our beliefs. But it need not do so for the already humble. For them,
341 disagreement is old news.
342   An important implication of these results is that we might be able to mitigate
343 some of the skeptical consequences often thought to result from taking evidence of
344 disagreement seriously.[10] The worry is that there is a lot of disagreement out there:
345 if it is epistemically significant, then it will turn out that we aren't rational in
346 believing much of anything. But, as I have argued, some of those beliefs about
347 which there is most disagreement are also those beliefs in which we should already
348 have low confidence. Since in such cases, the disagreement will be old news, it
349 won't require further revision. Disagreement has greater undermining potential for
350 those beliefs in which we are most rationally confident. But we rarely encounter
351 disagreement about these sorts of beliefs. So the skeptical consequences of taking
352 disagreement seriously aren't so radical after all.

6 Conclusion

354 I have argued that having a low confidence in *p* can make your opinion about *p* more
355 resilient in the face of disagreement. This is a surprising claim that seems at odds
356 with the Intuitive Thought that being rationally highly confident in *p* can make your
357 opinion immune to undermining by disagreement. But I have shown, on
358 independent grounds, that the Intuitive Thought is false. And I have told a fairly
359 uncontroversial story about the epistemic significance of a piece of evidence—any
360 piece of evidence—that points the way toward a better way to think about the
361 epistemic significance of disagreement. I have also shown how embracing this more
362 nuanced way of thinking about disagreement can help mitigate the worry that taking
363 disagreement seriously will lead to skepticism. There is room, then, after all, for
364 humble belief in the face of controversy.

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10FL01 [10] Cf. Kornblith (2010).

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