

# REVIEWS

**Kirk Loughheed, *The Epistemic Benefits of Disagreement*. Series: Studies in Applied Philosophy, Epistemology and Rational Ethics (Cham: Springer, 2020).**

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The epistemology of disagreement focuses on two views on how agents should respond epistemically to disagreement: conciliationism and non-conciliationism. The first view requires agents to revise their beliefs in the face of disagreement, while the second view allows agents to remain steadfast in their beliefs in the face of disagreement. Loughheed's *The Epistemic Benefits of Disagreement* (2020) offers a context-sensitive non-conciliationist view on the epistemic response that agents should have in the face of disagreement. It aims to avoid the consequences of the less fine-grained views on how agents should respond to disagreement, and it recommends non-conciliationism in complex research disagreement contexts and conciliationism in simple cases of disagreement. Loughheed concludes that agents are reasonable to remain steadfast in a belief in complex research disagreement scenarios if there are future epistemic benefits that result from steadfastness. For instance, if a researcher holds a belief *P*, and that belief *P* has future epistemic benefits, as producing more true beliefs, then the researcher can rationally remain steadfast in that belief in the face of disagreement.

Loughheed's (80) Benefits of Inquiry Argument (BIA):

1. If agent *S* reasonably believes that there are future epistemic benefits to be gained from continuing to believe proposition *P* in the face of epistemic peer disagreement within a research context *R*, then *S* is rational to be a non-conciliationist about *P* in the context of *R*.
2. *S* believes *P* within the context of *R*.
3. There is at least one epistemic peer of *S*'s who believes *not-P* within the context of *R*.
4. *S* reasonably believes that there are future epistemic benefits to be gained from continuing to believe *P* in the context *R*.

Therefore,

5. *S* is rational to be a non-conciliationist about *P* within the context of *R*.

BIA's soundness requires Loughheed to deny that simple and complex disagreements have the same epistemic conditions. Then, Loughheed rejects the standard account of epistemic peerhood because of its stringent requirements to hold a looser notion of peerhood that applies to complex disagreement scenarios. To hold that it is reasonable for agents to remain steadfast in their beliefs, Loughheed must embrace epistemic consequentialism, the thesis that future epistemic benefits justify agents' current beliefs. Finally, Loughheed posits the Giving Up Principle (GUP) to avoid dogmatic non-conciliationist stances (64).

First, Loughheed (19) argues that much of the literature on disagreement focuses on simple cases of disagreement and erroneously draws lessons from simple cases of disagreement for complex cases of disagreement. Yet, simple and complex cases of disagreement have different traits that yield different epistemic properties. First, simple disagreements are about individual propositions that have straightforward methods of confirmation. Second, parties to simple disagreements are alethic experts assessed by truth-tracking records that share expertise. Third, propositions in simple disagreements are marginal or central to our web of beliefs. Hence, simple disagreement cases yield clear conciliationist or non-conciliationist verdicts depending on how easy it is to check the belief in dispute and whether the belief has a marginal or central place in our web of beliefs. For instance, if one disagrees on  $2+2=4$ , one is disagreeing about an individual proposition central to our web of beliefs that is easy to check. In this case, one ought to remain steadfast in one's belief. Otherwise, belief revision would undermine our entire web of beliefs. In the same way, disagreement on which horse won a head to head race yields a clear conciliationist verdict, for it is about an individual proposition marginal our web of beliefs that is easy to check.

Meanwhile, complex disagreement cases yield unclear verdicts because disagreement is about several beliefs in the middle of our web of beliefs which are not easy to check. First, beliefs in complex disagreements are in the middle of our web of beliefs since they are not mathematical nor perceptual, so it is not easy to have a unanimous verdict on them because they are not marginal enough to be easy to give up nor central enough to jeopardize our web of beliefs. Second, disputed beliefs in complex disagreements are not liable to clear confirmation because both parties' credences are so close that slight differences between them will not confirm one position or another, considering that there are no agreed criteria on what would constitute definitive evidence. Hence, parties to complex disagreement are non-alethic experts since there are no truth-tracking criteria to assess them. For instance, disagreement about the meteorological forecast is not marginal nor central to our web of beliefs. It is in its middle since it depends on mathematical models and

perceptual evidence. So, it is not clear that agents should revise their beliefs or not in the face of disagreement. Also, there is no clear-cut method to confirm meteorological forecasts as in disagreement on perceptual or mathematical beliefs. Finally, there are no clear criteria on what is decisive evidence since both meteorologists' credences would be so close that truth-tracking assessment is not possible, making them non-alethic experts.

However, Loughheed fixes the epistemic significance of disagreement by appealing to a broad notion of peerhood in complex disagreements. Loughheed (52-53) argues that one can have the conciliationist verdicts in complex disagreement scenarios without relying on the standard notion of peerhood through Ballantyne's Meta-Defeater Argument.<sup>1</sup> Ballantyne argues that evidence of the existence of a defeater for believing  $P$  relying on a body of evidence  $E$  provides a defeater for believing  $P$ , and if one has evidence of the existence of a defeater for believing  $P$  relying on a body of unpossessed evidence and one has no defeater for that defeater, then one has an undefeated defeater for believing  $P$ . This argument applies to complex disagreement for two reasons. First, disputed views in complex disagreements are not particularly strong. Second, disputant parties to complex disagreements are not aware of all defeater defeaters because there are several propositions in dispute.

Furthermore, Ballantyne's Doubtful Fairness Argument<sup>2</sup> states that if the existence of unpossessed evidence shows that the sample of evidence one has is unfair, then one should decrease one's confidence in  $P$ . This argument relies on having reasons to disbelieve that evidence one has is a fair sample, or to have reasons to suspend one's judgment on the fairness of the sample one has. The outcome of this argument is that parties to complex disagreement do not have reasons to believe that their evidence is superior to their opponent's evidence. This outcome is stronger against worldviews since agents do not gather evidence for worldviews in ways that ensure sample fairness. Both arguments make it unnecessary that both parties share the same evidence to produce conciliationist verdicts.

Then, Loughheed posits the Skeptical Epistemic Peerhood (SEP), which is a broader concept of peerhood that applies to real-world disagreements composed of isolated propositions or complex disagreements deeply tied to an agent's worldviews. SEP states that two agents are peers if and only if (a) each agent lacks some dispute independent reason to think that each of their bodies of evidence is superior to that of each other of their opponents and (b) each agent lacks a dispute independent

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Ballantyne, "The Significance of Unpossessed Evidence," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 65, 260 (2015): 315-335.

<sup>2</sup> Ballantyne, "The Significance of Unpossessed Evidence," 326-330.

reason to think they have assessed their body of evidence more accurately than each of their opponents. Ballantyne's Meta-Defeater Argument and Doubtful Fairness Argument support (a), while the lack of positive reasons an agent party to a disagreement has to believe that she is better at assessing evidence than her opponent supports (b). This view on disagreement preserves the conciliationist challenge to disagreements in complex scenarios without relying on the strict notion of peerhood and on the assumption that simple and complex disagreements have the same epistemic traits and hence the same epistemic properties.

Given the differences between complex and simple disagreements and the replacement of a strict notion of peerhood for SEP, Loughheed (96) recognizes that BIA requires a consequentialist conception of justification that states that "if believing a proposition leads to true beliefs, regardless of whether or not that proposition is true, then the belief in the proposition in question is epistemically justified." Talbot's argument to support the consequentialist conception of justification is that "epistemic oughts are normative, epistemic oughts have a source, and the source of epistemic oughts is an end that has true beliefs as a necessary component."<sup>3</sup> Hence, regardless of true beliefs being in the future, they provide epistemic oughts. In this way, Loughheed argues that future epistemic benefits, as true beliefs, can make non-conciliationist reasonable in the face of complex research context disagreements. Here, Loughheed uses a crucial distinction between synchronic epistemic reasons and diachronic epistemic reasons. Synchronic epistemic reasons are reasons currently held by agents to believe *P*, while diachronic epistemic reasons are epistemic reasons derived from future epistemic benefits, as future true beliefs, that justify agents to believe *P*. For instance, current evidence that increases the probability of *P* being true is a synchronic reason to believe *P*. Meanwhile, future epistemic benefits, as the probability of gaining more true beliefs, is a diachronic reason to believe *P*. BIA relies on this distinction to preserve a non-conciliationist verdict in complex research disagreement contexts, for agents can reasonably hold their beliefs in such scenarios if they have diachronic epistemic reasons.

Another requirement of Loughheed's BIA is to claim that epistemic values of avoiding false beliefs and holding true beliefs must be in equilibrium. There are four epistemic values at stake. The first one does not allow trade-offs between true and false beliefs, and it requires that agents always avoid false beliefs. The second one does allow trade-offs between true beliefs and trivial false beliefs, so agents can embrace trivial false beliefs to gain important true beliefs. The third one allows

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Talbot, "Truth Promoting Non-Evidential Reasons for Belief," *Philosophical Studies* 168, 3 (2013): 599–618, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-013-0139-1>.

trade-offs between non-trivial false beliefs and valuable true beliefs. Yet, trade-offs are not allowed between non-trivial false beliefs and inconsequential true beliefs. The fourth one allows trade-offs between non-trivial false beliefs and valuable true beliefs. BIA falls under the third view on epistemic values since it admits trade-offs between trivial false beliefs to gain valuable true beliefs. In this way, future epistemic benefits, in the form of valuable true beliefs, justify steadfastness on current beliefs in the face of complex research disagreement contexts since valuable true beliefs give agents diachronic reasons to maintain their views even if agents face peer disagreement.

Finally, BIA requires a restriction to beliefs to avoid dogmatism and epistemic harms in the face of complex research disagreement. Loughheed (64) advances the Giving Up Principle (GUP) that states that “an agent is irrational to continue to believe P when reasons she is aware of ought to convince her that her belief P is mistaken.” What are good reasons to believe that she is mistaken depend on whether the disagreement is complex or simple. Also, the rationality of the researcher facing disagreement depends on the rationality of believing in the probability of the epistemic benefits and not on the actual epistemic benefits.

One can object that there is no reason to think that there are future epistemic benefits that follow from remaining steadfast in one’s position in complex research disagreement contexts because of the pessimistic induction argument.<sup>4</sup> Even if Laudan’s argument attacks the notion of successfulness in the scientific realism/antirealism debate, one can apply his argument to argue against the thesis that scientific theories are true. It would undermine Loughheed’s argument since it requires the existence of future epistemic benefits being available in complex research disagreement contexts so agents can reasonably remain steadfast in their beliefs in disagreement contexts. However, Laudan’s argument shows that we have no reason to believe that future epistemic benefits exist since most scientific theories are false.

First, Laudan argues that a realist about science must hold that reference is a necessary condition for the truth of scientific theories. For instance, if there is nothing like genes, then the genetic theory cannot be true. In the next step, Laudan puts forward a list of theories that failed to refer, that is, theories that were false and that were once well confirmed and successful. Laudan’s list of theories that failed to refer shows that many theories we believed were true turned out false. In conclusion, current theories we believe are true will be regarded as false in some future time by enumerative induction. Even if this argument aims to show that the

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Laudan, “A Confutation of Convergent Realism,” *Philosophy of Science* 48, 1 (1981): 19–49, <https://doi.org/10.1086/288975>.

reference requirement is not a necessary condition for scientific theories to be confirmed and successful, it also can be interpreted as an argument that shows by enumerative induction that theories that we regard as true nowadays will be false in the future. If this argument is sound, then future epistemic benefits are not guaranteed, and remaining steadfast in one's beliefs in a complex research context disagreement is not reasonable.

Second, one can explain this by arguing that the role future epistemic consequences play in epistemic rationality is asymmetrical. Future epistemic consequences can undermine agents' justification for current beliefs, yet it is not clear that future epistemic consequences can justify agents' current beliefs. First, agents have cognitive and evidential limited resources when it comes to knowing truths. Hence, all truths agents know now will turn out to be falsehoods because of the cognitive and evidential limited resources. So, future epistemic benefits, as true beliefs, will turn out to be false beliefs. And if future true beliefs will turn to be false beliefs, then there is no reason to believe that future epistemic consequences can justify steadfastness in one's beliefs in a complex research disagreement context. Loughheed's argument requires future epistemic benefits to be true in a dogmatic way. Otherwise, they could not provide reasons for non-conciliationism in the face of complex research disagreement contexts.