



On Persistent Disagreement in Cases Concerning the Misattribution of Epistemic Peerhood

Sebastian Sierant

By reference to the work of Justin Kruger and David Dunning on individual incompetence, I will contend: that (a) persistent disagreement between epistemic peers is a lesser issue than that of disagreement between “epistemic rivals”; that (b) Catherine Elgin’s claim that belief is not a voluntary phenomenon is damaging to our attempts at solving the problem of persistent disagreement; and that (c) resoluteness in one’s beliefs is, perhaps, the only effective strategy for dealing with cases of persistent disagreement between “epistemic rivals”.

Keywords: Epistemology, Persistent Disagreement, Dunning- Kruger Effect, Resolute Stance.

As a result of our cognitive limitations, we are naturally inclined to disagree about any epistemic content. While, on the surface, disagreement presents itself as a temporary manifestation of the opposition between two related items of knowledge, its ability to persist for great lengths of time poses a challenge to our pursuit of “the facts” (assuming, of course, that everyone is interested in uncovering some measure of factual truth in the world). In our attempts to overcome this barrier, we can adopt a variety of stances on belief; either we can be resolute in our belief that P, willing to moderate our belief that P, or willing to fully suspend our belief in P (or we can, presumably, adopt a stance that falls somewhere along the spectrum in between these three landmark stances). Catherine Elgin believes that this evaluation of resoluteness, moderation and suspension is most relevant when we are faced with cases of disagreement between epistemic peers.¹ While I grant that it is important for us to develop a sophisticated theory for handling such matters of disagreement, I contend that, in the case of epistemic peers, this is a largely academic issue. I take it that either: both sides are knowledgeable enough to engage appropriately with the evidence that is relevant to their dispute such that they can adopt an appropriate stance for their respective beliefs; or, they lack sufficient knowledge of the issue to be able to engage with the relevant evidence appropriately such that their ability to adopt a rational stance for their respective beliefs, in light of the relevant evidence, is compromised. Thus, rather than in cases of persistent disagreement between epistemic peers, I believe that a more worrying problem manifests itself in the cases of persistent disagreement where there is a clear imbalance in

¹ Catherine Z. Elgin, “Persistent Disagreement” in *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield, Oxford University Press (2010), 53.

the epistemic aptitudes of the individuals involved; i.e., cases of epistemic superiority versus epistemic inferiority (for simplicity's sake, I shall henceforth refer to such cases as those of "epistemic rivalry"). This is made all the more worrying by Catherine Elgin's claim that: "Belief is not voluntary."² It is largely on account of this latter point that I must contend that (a) belief should be treated as a voluntary phenomenon, and, resultantly, that (b) Catherine Elgin's position (which is informed by the intuition that belief is involuntary) ultimately fails to provide us with a suitable solution to the problem of persistent disagreement (even in the cases of epistemic peerhood). This contention shall largely be informed by reference to the studies of David Dunning and Justin Kruger on the relationship between overconfidence and incompetence (the ones that led to the coining of the Dunning-Kruger Effect).

1. On Persistent Disagreement between Epistemic Peers:

In her paper *Persistent Disagreement*, Elgin begins with an evaluation of the merits of resoluteness of belief and moderation of belief. She notes that the immediate suspension of disbelief when faced with disagreement is usually a trivial matter as evidenced in the example of Fred and George vis-à-vis the spelling of the word *ignominious*.³ Resoluteness and moderation are, thus, most relevant in the cases where there is no obvious resolution or method of recourse for a given issue.⁴ Elgin makes the case that the resolute stance is ultimately unreasonable. She grounds this with the arguments (for either party in the dispute): that it is (a) seemingly impossible to determine the rationality of either party without an evaluation of which one is ultimately "right";⁵ that (b) the resolute stance "deprives epistemic agents of resources for correcting their mistakes";⁶ and that (c) both parties must pass a threshold of competence before a resolute stance can be deemed reasonable.⁷ Conversely, in the case where both parties adopt a moderate stance, Elgin claims that there will be a resultant convergence of opinion.⁸ The problem that arises in cases of symmetrical moderation of belief is that they are vulnerable to applications of wide-ranging skepticism.⁹ Thus, due to the interconnectivity of beliefs, we may be forced to address all the beliefs that are used to justify the disputed belief before we can arrive at a consensus.

We now arrive at the setup to Elgin's claim that belief is involuntary. Her first move is to introduce the David Lewis Problem (as posed by Peter van Inwagen).¹⁰ This raises the idea that we ought, perhaps, to defer our own judgement of a dispute to an epistemic superior/expert. Her next move is to introduce the intuition that, in spite of our recognition that the arguments of an epistemic superior are sound, an instinctual incredulity or inability

² Ibid., 60.

³ Ibid., 53.

⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 58.

to believe the claims of an epistemic superior provides us with sufficient warrant to disbelieve the claims of said epistemic superior.¹¹ Following this, Elgin formalizes the seemingly involuntary nature belief with reference to the claim that: "Being responsive or unresponsive to evidence, argument, or peer pressure is something that happens to [a subject]."¹² Resultantly, Elgin is forced to conclude that no external body of evidence/argument/peer pressure can sway one to change a belief that they hold. Thus, we are unable, not even through rational assessment, to speak of the retention, lowering, or suspension of belief.¹³ If this is to be the case, disagreement, instead, becomes a matter of the acceptance of belief, rather than a matter of the evaluation of belief.¹⁴

This is a problematic position to hold, primarily, because it describes belief as a phenomenological phenomenon as opposed to an epistemic phenomenon. Furthermore, it places a burden on the individual to "put [themselves] in a position to [either] be moved by [...] disagreement or put [themselves] in a position to stand fast in the face of it."¹⁵ As I shall argue in the next section, due to the disparity between an individual's ability to assess their own competence in a given domain and their actual level of competence within said domain, this burden of putting one's self in a position to accept a body of evidence, an argument, or peer pressure is very dangerous to epistemology and rationality. What's more, the aforementioned discrepancy also informs us as to why Elgin's conception of persistent disagreement in cases of epistemic peerhood is largely academic. This is on account of the fact that the only times when we are worried about the relative merits of resoluteness, moderation, or suspension of belief (and our willingness towards acceptance) in cases of epistemic peerhood are when we are dealing with epistemic peers of a sufficiently high level of competence. In the cases of epistemic peerhood between peers of too low a level of competence, the peers in question (as shall, again, be argued in the next section) are often unaware of their low level of competence, and any disagreement between them occurs within an epistemic echo-chamber; i.e., this is an epistemic "space" which results from an inadequate knowledge of the issue(s) at hand and, resultantly, admits only of the limited scope of ideas available to the peers in question. On a general note, it is not inconceivable to accuse highly knowledgeable epistemic peers of functioning within their own echo-chamber; one assumes, however, that the chamber is, in this case, sufficiently broad to allow for the introduction of new ideas; as shall be mentioned, the more knowledgeable one is, the less likely one is to overestimate their abilities (in fact, there is a tendency among the knowledgeable to underestimate themselves).

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Ibid., 61.

¹³ Ibid., 62.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63 – 64.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

2. On Incompetence and Overconfidence:

For brevity's sake, I shall not give an in-depth summary of every stage of the series of studies that David Dunning and Justin Kruger performed to prove the causal relation between the competence of an individual and their tendency to overestimate or underestimate their abilities within a domain where they are not sufficiently knowledgeable. I will, however, reiterate their predictions as they are confirmed within their paper and can, resultantly, be used as premises for argument:

"Prediction 1: Incompetent individuals, compared with their more competent peers, will dramatically overestimate their ability and performance relative to objective criteria.

Prediction 2: Incompetent individuals will suffer from deficient metacognitive skills, in that they will be less able than their more competent peers to recognize competence when they see it – be it their own or anyone else's.

Prediction 3: Incompetent individuals will be less able than their more competent peers to gain insight into their true level of performance by means of social comparison information. [On account of Prediction 2.]

Prediction 4: The incompetent can gain insight about their shortcomings, but this comes (paradoxically) by making them more competent, thus providing them the metacognitive skills necessary to be able to realize that they have performed poorly."¹⁶

Based on the confirmation of the predictions above, Dunning and Kruger explore why it is that incompetent individuals express this strong tendency towards overconfidence. The possibilities are: that (a) the individual did not get sufficient negative feedback vis-à-vis their skills or abilities from others; that (b) there are many situations that preclude an individual from receiving negative feedback when they are most in need of it (this need for negative feedback, unfortunately for the individual, occurs in advance of the situation when it is needed); that (c) despite receiving negative feedback about vis-à-vis their competence, the individual misattributes their failure to a factor or set of factors outside of themselves; and that (d) incompetent individuals are unable to compare themselves accurately against others due to their inability to recognize competence in themselves and others.¹⁷

Dunning and Kruger bring up two additional items of note. The first is that the individuals to whom we can objectively attribute a high degree of competence within a given

¹⁶ Justin Kruger and David Dunning, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments" in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 77, No. 6, American Psychological Association Inc. (1999), Pg. 1122.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Pg. 1131.

domain are more likely to underestimate their own degree of competence within said domain. The authors attribute this to a ‘false-consensus effect’. Essentially, this means that those who are competent within a given domain are more likely to believe that others are similarly competent, if not more competent than them, within that same domain.¹⁸ This is a direct inversion of the belief of the incompetent individual that they are more competent than those around them within a given domain. The second point of note is that there is a minimum threshold of knowledge that one must acquire before they can fall prey to this fallacious train of reasoning.¹⁹ If one possess a degree of knowledge that is insufficient to meet this minimum threshold vis-à-vis a given domain, that individual will not rate themselves as competent in that domain.²⁰ If they do meet this minimum threshold, however, one can expect such an individual to express an overconfidence in their ability within a given domain.

Given the data above, we can turn now to a more substantive argument against the involuntariness of belief as well as the problems with epistemic peerhood.

3. On Epistemic Rivalry:

In light of the evidence gathered in Stage 2 of Dunning and Kruger’s 3rd Study into the relationship between incompetence and overconfidence, we have reason to believe that belief is, in fact, a voluntary phenomenon.²¹ Setting aside the matter of truth, we can observe that with sufficient justification (in this case, providing the incompetent with the tools to recognize their own incompetence) we can choose to change our beliefs in relation to some given domain. From the Dunning and Kruger studies, we were also shown that we cannot rely on the intuition that others are able to position themselves to be moved by disagreement. Thus, we cannot reduce the matter of peer disagreement down to an individual’s willingness to accept a body of evidence, or argument, or peer pressure. Not only is acceptance reliant on a phenomenological approach to epistemic items, it is also a slave to subjective self-assessment which has been proven to be unreliable (on both ends of the competence spectrum). It is for this reason that an evaluation of persistent disagreement within the confines of epistemic peerhood is vulnerable to failure; we speak only of disagreement between epistemic peers of sufficient competency while casting aside the disagreement between epistemic peers of low competency as epistemologically irrelevant (on account of their low competency).

This attitude of indifference towards the epistemic value of disagreement between peers of low-competency carries with it several practical problems; ones which manifest themselves most worryingly in cases of persistent disagreement between epistemic rivals (individuals of varying competence; specifically, in a relation where one is superior to the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., Pg. 1132.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., Pg. 1128 – 1129.

other). This relationship of epistemic rivalry must be evaluated objectively such that we may determine which of the opposing sides is more competent; given that we cannot rely on the ability of either side to self-evaluate. If such measures are not taken, we can expect that the less competent of the opposing parties will dramatically overestimate their ability to reason which will result in a reflexive misattribution of epistemic peerhood with an objectively superior party. It is on these grounds that gross misunderstandings and discrimination can be taken to arise. These misunderstandings and discriminations are also furthered by the feedback loop that results from the echo-chamber-like nature of disagreement between epistemic peers of low competency. One of the strongest case examples of an overestimation of an individual's ability to reason can, perhaps, be evidenced by the hard-lining Creationist; an individual who is so firmly irrational that they are unable to admit any body of evidence against their theory that some all-powerful entity created the cosmos in an improbably low span of time.

4. Conclusion:

The solution to this dilemma is twofold: firstly, we must emphasize that Elgin's solution for persistent disagreement between epistemic peers can potentially be applied only by highly competent peers; secondly, in the case of persistent disagreement between epistemic rivals, our only recourse seems to be the adoption of a resolute stance. Many problems inevitably arise when one decides to hold such a position. Because the resolute stance is an inherently divisive stance, all parties that are locked into a disagreement are necessarily waging an implicit war of epistemic attrition. The easiest thing to do in such a situation is to cut one's self off from any external voice (peer, rival, or otherwise) and to commit one's self to a given epistemic cause. Thus, the resolute stance must be tempered with an openness to new ideas which must exist in tandem with the bulwark that supports the foundations of one's belief(s). While it may be difficult to prove which of any side is correct about a given issue, one side must be in the right when all is said and done.

The efforts of epistemic rivals should, instead, focus on honest, open discourse as well as patience. In the cases where an individual/party can be made aware of their error, honesty and openness will help the epistemic rivals reach a point where they can establish how to bring the relatively incompetent party up to par such that the rivals may stand on equal footing; whereupon they would be rivals no longer. Unfortunately, such cases are rare and, often, an impasse results from the unwillingness of either party to compromise their position. This impasse may occur as a result of the lesser party's inability to gauge their own abilities or as a result of the greater party's inability to gauge the abilities of their (lesser) rival. Alternatively, this impasse may occur because the stakes of the issue at hand are so great that any attempt at establishing a common ground may bring about disaster for some or all that are involved in the disagreement. Again, honesty and openness can be employed to ease the tension, but it may be the case that the only reasonable option is to hold one's ground and wait patiently. Resultantly, one must hope that the incompetent party will

recognize their lack of aptitude and make attempts at self-correction. If this cannot be accomplished however, then the party that holds the epistemic high ground must resign itself to wage a war of epistemic attrition lest they denigrate their own position by yielding ground to a party which does not understand that it is holding the worse position. In closing, the virtues of de-escalation in such situations must be stressed. It is incumbent on all parties engaged in a persisting disagreement to aim at a reasonable resolution; let us leave the principles that govern the survival of the fittest in the wild where they belong.

Bibliography:

Elgin, Catherine Z. "Persistent Disagreement." In *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 53 – 68.

Kruger, Justin and David Dunning. "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments." In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 77, No. 6. American Psychological Association, Inc., 1999. 1121 – 1134.