

## You Can't Trust a Philosopher<sup>1</sup>

And also, considering how many conflicting opinions there may be regarding the self-same matter, all supported by learned people, while there can never be more than one which is true, I esteemed it as well-nigh false all that went only so far as being probable.

Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

### *Introduction:*

On what is surely the classical approach to epistemology, each of us must build all of our knowledge and justified belief on a foundation of evidence to which we have a privileged access.<sup>2</sup> Still, even within such a framework, setting aside certain skeptical concerns, we can reason legitimately *from our egocentric perspective* that there are others who disagree with us concerning conclusions we have reached. Under what circumstances can such discoveries defeat whatever justification we might otherwise have had for believing some proposition? That knowledge of disagreement (conjoined with certain critical background evidence) does *sometimes* defeat prior justification seems obvious to me, and I'll begin this talk detailing what I take to be uncontroversial examples of such defeat. It seems equally obvious, however, that discovering other sorts of disagreement leaves my epistemic position with respect to what I believe relatively untouched. So I'll try to make a principled distinction between the cases in which the discovery of epistemic disagreement is, and the cases in which it is not, epistemically significant. I'll then try to apply the lessons learned to the question of whether the discovery of disagreement in such fields as philosophy and politics defeats whatever other justification one might have had for one's philosophical and political views.

### *Unproblematic Cases of Disagreement Leading to Epistemic Defeat:*

Case I: I carefully add up a column of figures, check my addition once, and reach the conclusion that the sum is 5,432. I surely justifiably believe this conclusion. I then discover that you just added the same column, checked your addition, and reached the conclusion that the sum is 5,433. I further have every reason to believe that you are at least as good at elementary math as I am and are just as careful as I am. With this background knowledge, my discovery that you reached a different conclusion than I surely weakens my justification—probably defeats it.

Case II: I remember fondly my days as a graduate student at Brown and, in particular, I sometimes think about the statue outside Maxcy Hall (once the home of the Philosophy Department), a statue I seemed to remember being of Mark Antony. I think I had reasonably good justification for believing that the statue was of Mark Antony. Reminiscing with Ernie Sosa, I'm told by him that the statue is actually of Marcus Aurelius. I surely just lost at least a great deal of the justification I might have had for

thinking that the statue was of Mark Antony. Again, I am no doubt relying on all sorts of relevant background information—that in general Ernie has at least as good a memory as I do, that he knows Brown’s campus at least as well as I do, and so on.

We must be careful in describing the way in which the above facts involving differing opinion defeat my justification. In particular, it should be obvious that it would be highly misleading to suggest that there is anything in the above examples that casts doubt on the traditional egocentric conception of justification. The epistemic status of my beliefs, before and after the discovery of disagreement, is a function of *my* evidence and what *it* supports. In Case I I had *at t1* justification E1 for believing a proposition about the sum of the numbers in the column (call that P). At a later time *t2* I added to E1 another body of evidence E2 (the evidence that gave me justification for believing the relevant propositions describing the nature and existence of disagreement) where my total body of evidence no longer justified me in believing P. In general, there is nothing odd about the fact that through accumulation of evidence the epistemic status of a belief changes. As soon as I find out that someone else came to a different conclusion about the sum of the numbers, someone I have every reason to trust as much as I trust myself, I then have reason to think I might well have made a mistake.

*Discovery of Disagreement but no Defeat:*

Not all discovery of disagreement leads to defeat of prior justification. The most unproblematic of such cases involve background knowledge that allows me to understand how the person with whom I disagree has reached a false conclusion. I’ve been told that our next department meeting will be this Friday at 3:00 p.m., and on the basis of this information take myself to have good reason to believe that the meeting will be at 3:00. Diane believes that the meeting is scheduled for Thursday at 7:00 a.m. (something about which she is vociferously complaining). But I also have evidence that another of my colleagues has played a practical joke on Diane and has deliberately misinformed her as to the time of the meeting. Diane and I disagree, and I know this, but my total body of evidence allows me to ignore the disagreement as epistemically irrelevant. It is not, of course, that I have reason to believe that Diane’s belief is unjustified. Indeed, I am justified in believing that she has perfectly good reason to believe what she does. But I have evidence that she lacks, and my additional evidence allows me to see the way in which Diane’s evidence is, in a sense, defective. My total body of evidence contains information that would defeat Diane’s justification were it added to her evidence base. Diane herself would regard her evidence as defeated should she acquire the additional information that I possess.

Or consider a slightly more subtle example. You are probably all familiar with the Monty Hall Puzzle. As I’ve heard the story, Hall himself was genuinely puzzled by a phenomenon he reported. In his game show, contestants hoping for a prize were asked to choose from three doors (call them 1, 2, and 3), only one of which hides a prize. After making a choice the contestant was typically shown a door (say 3) behind which there was no prize. The contestant was then given the opportunity either to stay with his or her original choice or switch. Which course of action is most likely to lead to success—stay or switch? When the question was first posed to me, I was absolutely sure that it didn’t

make any difference—that relative to the contestant’s new epistemic position there is a .5 probability that the prize is behind door 1 and a .5 probability that it is behind door 2. The person presenting the puzzle to me assured me that I was wrong. Monty Hall himself, while sharing my intuitions, told various probability experts that “switchers” won more often than “stayers”. Eventually, I figured out how and why my strong “intuitions” led me astray. But it took awhile. When I subsequently explain the puzzle to others (who haven’t heard of it) the vast majority vehemently disagree with the conclusion that switching doubles the chances of winning. They are as sure as I was that that’s a false, almost absurdly false, conclusion. But their vehement disagreement with me does nothing to weaken my justification for believing what I do. I have very good reason to believe that I have improved on the epistemic position in which they find themselves. This case is interestingly different from the earlier one, because it is not as if there is *available* to me evidence that wasn’t available to those who disagree with me. Rather, there is a process which I now understand involving the *appreciation* of available evidence, a process that I have gone through and that I have good reason to believe (based on analogy) they have not gone through. Further, I have good reason to believe that should those who disagree with me go through the process, they would end up agreeing with my conclusions.

So we have at least two general sorts of cases in which the discovery of disagreement poses no particular threat to the justification I have for believing a given proposition. One involves cases where I know that I have quite different and, importantly, better evidence upon which to base my conclusions. The other, subtly different, involves cases where I know (or have good reason to believe) that I have taken into account available evidence in ways in which my critic has not. But there are still other cases, I think, in which my justification can withstand the discovery of disagreement.

Consider the following cases, superficially similar to I and II above, situations in which I’m not the least bit inclined to think that the discovery of apparent disagreement defeats my justification. If I am justified in believing anything, I’m justified in believing that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . My hitherto trusted colleague, a person I always respected, assures me today, however, that  $2 + 2$  does not equal 4. Does this rather surprising discovery of my colleague’s odd assertion defeat my justification for believing that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ? Hardly. But this time we must be careful how we describe the relevant situation. When confronted by my colleague, my first (and probably last) reaction will be that he isn’t serious, that he doesn’t believe what he says, and thus, that there is no real disagreement between him and me. He can swear up and down on a stack of bibles that he is serious, and I’ll still probably conclude that he is lying. I’ll think that it is some kind of weird experiment or joke.

Alternatively, I might eventually conclude that he does believe what he says, but that there is some sort of verbal dispute interfering with communication.<sup>3</sup> My colleague is a philosopher, after all, and perhaps he is advancing some controversial thesis about the meaning of the identity sign. He might think that numbers are properties and that the property of being  $2 + 2$  isn’t identical with the property of being 4 (though there might be some sort of synthetic necessary connection between the two properties). But it will be almost impossible to convince me that he really believes a contrary of what I believe. *Almost*. To be sure, the crazier my colleague begins to behave more generally, the more

likely it is that I'll start entertaining the hypothesis that he really was serious in denying that  $2 + 2 = 4$  (in the ordinary sense in which people make such claims). But that's just the point. To convince myself that he really is disagreeing with me, I'd have to convince myself that he is crazy. And as soon as I become convinced that he is as crazy I won't and shouldn't pay any attention to what he believes. My justification for believing that he has lost his mind neutralizes whatever epistemic significance his disagreement with me might otherwise have had.

This last case is a bit different from the Monty Hall example we considered earlier. There, I had reason (based on analogy) to believe that the person with whom I was arguing hadn't successfully taken into account available evidence. I understood, or at least had good reason to believe that I understood, the reasons for his cognitive failure. In this last example, I don't understand what's up with my colleague. To be sure, the hypothesis that someone has gone mad is a *kind* of explanation of odd behavior, but it's a bit like explaining the ease with which an object shattered by pointing out that it was highly fragile. I don't know or understand what *in particular* is going through my colleague's mind—his mind has become a kind of mystery to me. But my general reason for thinking that it is a *defective* mind, is a good enough reason for discounting the epistemic significance of his beliefs.

And I'd probably say just the same thing about a friend who assures me that I haven't existed for more than a day or two—that I just popped into existence *ex nihilo* replete with inexplicable vivid and detailed memories of a long past. When asked to explain this odd view, he tells me that he can't—it's top secret, he says, and he has sworn an oath not to disclose his evidence. Again, initially, I almost certainly wouldn't believe that there is genuine disagreement between him and me and I'd retain that position until I become convinced that he is nuts. And when I become justified in believing that he is insane, I'll also be justified in discounting the epistemic significance of beliefs he has that contradict mine.

Both of these examples invoke the possibility of an *extreme* cognitive defect. But, as I shall point out later, there are continua of cognitive defects. Bias, wishful thinking, stubbornness, intellectual competitiveness, all can affect one's ability to assess properly one's evidence, and it may be possible to reject the significance of another's belief when there is reason to suspect that the belief in question results from one of these. I'll eventually argue that whether or not one can reasonably believe that one's philosophical and political opponents have some *specific* cognitive defect, there is almost always available a *prima facie* powerful reason to think that they are at least unreliable and, in that sense, defective when it comes to arriving at philosophical and political truth. The good news is that appreciating this fact blunts the discovered disagreement as a defeater for one's justification. The bad news is that the very reason for discounting the epistemic relevance of the disagreement is potentially a different sort of defeater for one's justification.

#### *Some Tentative Preliminary Conclusions:*

My justification gets defeated in cases I and II because I add to my initial evidence for reaching the respective conclusions new evidence that justifies me in believing that other people probably have evidence that would give them good reason to

believe their respective conclusions. Furthermore, (and crucially) I have no more reason to think that their evidence is any worse than the evidence upon which I relied in believing my initial conclusion, *nor is their ability to process the relevant evidence*. I also realize, in effect, that there is a perfect *symmetry* in our epistemic situations with respect to one another. In Case I, by hypothesis, my careful addition gives me the same *sort* of evidence (no better and no worse) than your careful addition gives you. To be sure, the results of my attempt at addition cast doubt on the success of your attempt at addition. But then, by parity of reasoning, the result of your attempt at addition equally casts doubt on the success of my attempt. *Indeed, if I really do have good reason to believe that you are in general just as reliable as I am when it comes to adding columns of numbers, discovering the results of your addition would have precisely the same significance as doing the addition again myself and coming to a different conclusion*. We've all done just that. We check our figures and come to a different sum. At that point, we have no more reason to trust our present self than our prior self. All we can do is check a few more times in an effort to break the epistemic stalemate.

It is precisely the same in Case II. My apparent memory (at least when it used to be half-decent) might cast doubt on the veridicality of Sosa's apparent memory, but no more than his apparent memory casts doubt on the veridicality of my apparent memory. Unless I have some reason to believe that one of us has a better memory than the other the discovery that there is disconfirming evidence of equal strength will defeat our respective justification. Again, it is just as if I myself had conflicting memories. Such inconsistent memories would deprive me of whatever justification I might otherwise have had for believing some proposition about the past.

In discussing cases I and II, I did ignore some very real complications, complications to which I shall return later in this paper. I have presupposed that there is no real difficulty getting myself justification for believing the relevant propositions describing the fact that there is someone who disagrees with me, who has evidence just as good as mine, and is just as reliable as I am in processing that evidence. When thinking about such matters we would do well to keep in mind traditional epistemological problems. There really *are* genuine epistemological problems concerned with knowledge and justified belief about other minds. We really *do* have better access to what goes on in our own minds than we do to what goes on in the minds of others. I'll almost always have better knowledge of *my* thought processes than I will of *yours*. It was probably too hasty to conclude that my justification would *automatically* get defeated by accumulation of the additional evidence described in Cases I and II. In *my* case, the defeat *would* probably occur, but that's only because I seem to remember being pretty bad at adding long columns of figures. I have some reason to believe that there are all kinds of people who are better, who are more reliable, at this than I am. And, sadly, I now also seem to remember seeming to remember all sorts of things that didn't happen. My memory is turning on itself leaving me in a precarious position with respect to the character of statues encountered long ago. The truth is that I trust Sosa's memory about such matters more than I trust my own. Were it not for these apparent defects in my own cognitive structure, I suspect that the disagreements I encountered in Cases I and II would leave me with a *weakened* justification for believing what I do, but still with more reason to retain my belief than to abandon it. By the time I very carefully add the figures in the column three, four, five, or six times, it will start approaching the

case in which my crazed colleague starts ranting about  $2 + 2$  not equaling 4, and I will be unmoved by the fact that there is another who disagrees with me about the sum. Again, the relevant thought experiment involves imaginatively adding to one's own evidence the evidence that the other person possesses to see whether or not that would defeat my justification.

Let me emphasize again that in order for my discovery of the results of your addition to defeat my justification, I must have good reason to believe that you are at least as reliable at addition as I am. Of course, it is often not that easy to reconstruct the evidence that would allow me to reach such a conclusion. When it comes to relatively simple arithmetic, however, it is probably nothing more exotic than an inductive generalization upon which I rely. Most educated people are fairly good at summing numbers—at least as good as I am. I infer from this that you are just as likely to be coming up with the truth as I am. And most people have relatively decent memory and are fairly reliable when it comes to arriving at true conclusions about the past based on that memory.

We can encounter disagreement without losing justification when 1) we have good reason to believe that we have a different and better evidence base than the person with whom we disagree, 2) we have good reason to believe that we have engaged a common evidence base more successfully than the person with whom we disagree, 3) we have good reason to believe that the person with whom we disagree is cognitively defective.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Philosophical and Political Disagreement:*

There are a host of cases that are particularly difficult and interesting for those of us in academics, particularly in fields like philosophy. When in his *Discourse on Method* Descartes remarked that “there is nothing imaginable so strange or so little credible that it has not been maintained by some philosopher or other” (p.13), he didn't overstate his case much. Famous, respected, apparently intelligent and sane philosophers have taken diametrically opposed positions with respect to a host of issues with which they are concerned. I've thought long and hard about issues in the philosophy of mind and am a confirmed property dualist. Most of the philosophers I know reject the view. Indeed, most of the philosophers I know reject *most* of my views, and I nevertheless think quite highly of many of those philosophers. What epistemic significance, if any, should my knowledge of the relevant disagreement have for the epistemic status of my philosophical beliefs?

The existence of radical disagreement among philosophers is, of course, hardly unique to our field. There is just as much disagreement among economists, religious theorists, and political theorists, to consider just a few. Take the last. Most academics would view my political views as slightly to the right of Attila the Hun. For example, I think that the foreign policy of the United States over the last hundred years or so has been something of which we should be on the whole proud. In general, the wars we fought were the right wars to fight, and even when they weren't, we fought for admirable reasons. I believe, if anything, we ought to be far more aggressive in confronting hostile nations in the Middle East and elsewhere. I know, of course, that many, indeed most, well-educated and intelligent people disagree with me. I've seen Noam Chomsky, for

example, ranting on television about the evil of American foreign policy, and people in linguistics seem to think that he is, in general, a knowledgeable and intelligent person. What is the epistemic significance, if any, of my knowledge that Chomsky and his ilk vehemently disagree with me? Should I take whatever justification I might have had for my beliefs to be seriously threatened by knowledge of our difference of opinion?

Well, can I discount the relevance of philosophical or political disagreement in any of the ways that we discussed above? First, can I legitimately conclude that I have access to better or more complete evidence for my philosophical or political views than those with whom I disagree? It's obviously a difficult question. It is more difficult in the case of philosophy, probably, than in the case of politics. Part of the difficulty in philosophy stems from the fact that it is not all that easy to characterize the evidence upon which we do rely in reaching our philosophical conclusions. But it is surely the case that on a *superficial* characterization of our respective evidence, most of the philosophers with whom I disagree on various issues have *available* to them the same, or better evidence than I have. They have certainly typically read just as much as I have. They have carefully considered the same sorts of arguments that I have. They probably have more *empirical* knowledge than I have on a host of issues. To be sure, I have argued elsewhere (1999) that one almost never settles a genuinely *philosophical* controversy through the accumulation of empirical evidence. That, however, is yet another point on which I disagree with many of my colleagues. In any event, it is going to be an uphill climb to convince myself or others that I am in a privileged position with respect to access to evidence that bears on philosophical problems.

The case isn't much different with respect to, for example, political disagreement. Here, however, it should be fairly obvious that the rationality of political means/ends calculations *is* often held hostage to empirical information. But if we are trying to decide whether or not we acted rationally in going to war with Iraq, say, it is highly doubtful that reasonable, informed people are led to different conclusions by possessing interestingly and importantly different evidence. Every educated person knows the sad history of Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler. Every educated person knows the sad history of our futile intervention in Viet Nam. Almost every educated person knows full well that some wars succeed in accomplishing noble ends and that some wars have devastatingly bad results. Just about everyone (but the odd conspiracy theorist) knows that the U.S. had fairly good reason to believe that Iraq had, or could easily develop again, an assortment of chemical weapons, and had long-term ambitions to develop nuclear weapons. Just about everyone knows that successfully promoting democracy in the Middle East is, at best, a long shot. It's hard to believe that there is a significant difference in the kind of evidence available to reasonable, well-educated people who nevertheless dramatically disagree about the wisdom of going to war with Iraq.

So it is going to be a hard sell to convince myself, let alone others, that I have reached different conclusions on philosophical and political matters from many others because there is available to me evidence that is hidden from them. Nor is it, at least *initially*, much more plausible to suppose that I can invoke the third of the strategies discussed above to discount the epistemic relevance of disagreement. While I am sorely tempted, occasionally, to view my philosophical and political opponents as suffering from some sort of madness, in my more cautious moments I am disinclined to embrace that conclusion. There are exceptions. Eliminative materialists—philosophers who

seriously maintain that there are no such states as belief, being in pain, being in fear, and so on—really do present a puzzle for me. They really do strike me a bit the same way my hypothetical colleague did who professed to have discovered that  $2 + 2$  does not equal 4. When Paul Churchland (1981) appears to embrace eliminative materialism, my first instinct is to suspect that he isn't really serious—that he is just messing around a bit trying to provoke an interesting discussion. When I begin to suspect that Churchland and other eliminativists are serious, I'm genuinely puzzled as to what is going on in their minds. They become a mystery to me. They become the kind of enigma about which I can make neither heads nor tails, and at such time, I discount completely the epistemic significance of what they apparently believe (beliefs they are officially committed to disavowing—disavowals they are officially committed to disavowing...). But the proponents of eliminative materialism are in a world of their own. In general, I don't take such extreme and pessimistic views about the cognitive abilities of my colleagues.

In our earlier discussion of having reason to believe that others are cognitively defective, however, I focused on extreme cases. On all such matters there is, of course, a continuum. Do I have reason to suspect that some of my colleagues are plagued by more subtle defects? Perhaps I have some reason to believe, for example, that they are the victims of various biases that cause them to believe what they want to believe, or ignore evidence or arguments that they find inconvenient. Indeed, I suspect that *I do* have reason to believe that others are afflicted in such ways, though at this point I'm going to stop identifying particular philosophers whose particular alleged problems cause their mistakes--many of these people are, after all, my friends. What kind of cognitive defects do I seem to find in people whose intellectual abilities I generally respect? Well it doesn't take a genius to notice that many, if not most, philosophers are heavily influenced by their philosophical environment. It is surely not a coincidence that many of Sellars's students are very sympathetic to Sellars's views, that many of Bergmann's students are Bergmannians, that Harvard philosophers aren't all that fond of the analytic/synthetic distinction, that the East and West coasts are awash with externalists in the philosophy of mind. The connection between intellectual environment and political views is even more pronounced. A significant majority of registered Republicans are children of registered Republicans and a significant majority of registered Democrats are children of registered Democrats.

But so what? Why would that even *suggest* a cognitive defect on the part of people who were influenced by others whom they respect? One can be initially caused to believe a view by factors that may not have much connection to epistemic justification, but as we've been taught in our first logic course, the genesis of a belief must surely be distinguished from its epistemic status. Before I let my suspicion that a colleague has a belief that was causally influenced by his or her intellectual environment cast doubt on the epistemic rationality of that belief, I would surely need to know a whole lot more about my colleague's present epistemic situation. Furthermore, why should I think that *I* am any better at detecting and fighting *my* philosophical and political biases than the others upon whom I am casting aspersions? I'm a confirmed foundationalist and I studied at Brown—just a coincidence?

Well, here it's easy to sound a bit like an egomaniac. I do in fact think that I've got more self-knowledge than a great many other academics I know, and I think that self-knowledge gives me a better and more neutral perspective on a host of philosophical and

political issues. I suspect that it is in part the fact that I take this belief of mine to be justified that I do think that I can sometimes discount to some extent the fact that well-known and respected intellectuals disagree with me. But I would also stress that it seems to me that I should take each controversy on a case by case basis. I'm subjectively confident, for example, that space and time aren't finite—indeed that the hypothesis that they are is essentially unintelligible, that Euclidean geometry is not only true, but necessarily true. I'm inclined to believe that there are no universals, substances, bare particulars, or objective values. I've got arguments supporting these sundry beliefs, but I wouldn't bet huge amounts of money on any of them being sound. *One* reason for this is the suspicion that equally rational people reflecting on the relevant evidence could reach quite different conclusions. But I'm not sure that it is the existence of disagreement that is, in the final analysis, doing much work. It seems to me that the real justification for a kind of epistemic modesty on these matters lies no further than my own realization that the arguments I put forth in support of my views are hardly conclusive. I can often see the attraction of alternative positions, and I understand that often I defend a position primarily to see how far I can get defending it. I'm inclined to think I can get an ontology with which I'm comfortable relying heavily on tropes, for example, but I often get confused thinking about the issue. I often start wondering if I even truly understand all of the terms of the debate.

Philosophy is by its very nature difficult. As I indicated earlier, I am committed to a radical foundationalism that puts me at true epistemic ease only when I have traced my justification back to a secure foundation. And that's very hard to do. Despite my commitment to foundationalism, however, it's not hard to see philosophers proceeding as if their primary goal was a kind of grand *coherence* among their philosophical views. In practice, I suspect, we often simply start somewhere that seems half-way plausible and see whether we can embed this starting point in a consistent big picture that incorporates others things that seem plausible.<sup>5</sup> By the time we've published a few articles or a book we have a reputation to defend and we sound like we're willing to die in the trenches defending our positions. Reflecting on all this might well incline one to the view that in philosophy at least, something like a *coherence* theory of justification provides the standards by which philosophical ingenuity, skill and success is judged. Indeed, I think there is more than a grain of truth in all of this. We tell our students, for example, that two classmates can provide diametrically opposed critical evaluations of a position and each get an A+ for their efforts. Something like an emphasis on the value of presenting a plausible coherent story must be part of that upon which we base such positive evaluations. But it is important to realize that at least some versions of the coherence theory of justification are anathema to the idea that we should give weight to disagreement. As long as we view the justification of a person's belief as a function of that belief's coherence with the rest of *that person's* beliefs,<sup>6</sup> it should become immediately obvious that the existence of another (perhaps rational) person with whom I disagree is no real threat to the justification I possess for my beliefs.

Again, let me stress that I don't subscribe to a coherence theory of justification. Coherence is neither a sufficient nor even a *necessary* condition for the justification of a belief. I'm merely pointing out that insofar as philosophers often proceed the way I described above, I wouldn't take the fact that a perfectly rational philosopher incorporates into his or her theory elements that contradict my beliefs to be an indicator

that the philosopher has any real justification for those beliefs. And absent that conclusion, of course, my knowledge that the philosopher in question disagrees with me has no epistemic significance. Of course, to the extent that I can conclude that I myself just choose positions and run with them, I should be equally cautious about claiming a positive epistemic status for my own beliefs. But again that has nothing to do with the existence of disagreement. The appropriate modest epistemic conclusion should be derived from the problematic nature of the data upon which my philosophical “system” is built.

If it is reasonable to conclude that others often have biases that interfere with their reasoning in philosophy, it is even more obvious, I think, that biases corrupt reasoning in politics. The trouble, of course, is that I can’t illustrate the claim without making controversial claims that most of you will reject. But consider for a moment the overheated rhetoric employed by intelligent people taking opposed positions on controversial political issues. I’ve heard intelligent people—people who *obviously* know better—claim that Bush *lied* to get us into a war with Iraq and offer as their *evidence* that he made claims that turned out to be false. Bush may have lied, of course, but even a reasonably intelligent child can see that asserting a falsehood and lying are entirely different matters. Or consider the many who praise or criticize foreign policy decisions based on *actual* consequences. If intervention in Iraq goes badly, this is taken to be proof that such intervention was a mistake. Again, I’ve heard many intelligent people make this kind of argument despite the fact that in other contexts they would be perfectly capable of making the commonsense distinction between wise decisions and successful decisions. Everyone understands that a rational gamble can cost one dearly. Almost everyone surely understands that a rational gamble can even be such that it is *likely* to cost one dearly. To be clear, I’m not arguing that it is obvious that the decision to use force in Iraq was correct. I am pointing out only that people who clearly are in a position to know better use arguments that they would never endorse but for a desire to reach a certain conclusion.

When I argue this way, I again risk sounding like a bit of a jerk. Do I really suppose that I am justified in thinking that there is an asymmetry between myself and others when it comes to various epistemic defects? Am I any less likely to be blinded to what is reasonable to believe by antecedent views or desires? Well again to be perfectly honest I suppose that I think that I am. And this brings me to the sort of considerations we considered in discussing the Monty Hall puzzle and the way in which reflection on my own thought processes leads me to dismiss the epistemic significance of those who disagree with me when I have reason to believe that they haven’t gone through the same progression of thought. One of the things that moves me strongly to ignore the relevant disagreement in the example of the Monty Hall puzzle, you will recall, is my confidence that if I lead those who reject my conclusion through the progression of thought I went through that they will eventually end up agreeing with me. And when I am confident of my philosophical or political views, I believe I have good reason to think that with enough time and patience I can bring my opponents around—at least those I take to be genuinely reasonable. But notice how careful I was to restrict my claim to those philosophical or political views about which I am reasonably confident. I stress again that I lack such confidence with respect to a great many of the views I assert and defend. Williamson aside, knowledge isn’t even *close* to being the norm of assertion for

philosophy and politics. I am not even sure that *belief* is the norm of assertion for philosophy and politics. Much of what we are trying to do is get as clear as we can about issues that concern us, and often the best way to arrive at the truth is to get argument started with assertion.

In those situations in which I retain the confidence that with enough time and energy I can turn my opponents into allies, I probably do rely on a point made earlier. I do know how I reason better than I know how others reason. It is important to keep firmly in mind that in the final analysis there really is no alternative to the egocentric perspective. Even when my discoveries about what others believe defeat the justification I had prior to those discoveries, it is *my* discoveries that are doing the defeating. I can only use the discovery of disagreement to weaken my justification insofar as I trust *my* reasoning. Without such trust, there is no access even to what others believe. That is not to deny that trust in my reasoning ability can turn on itself—can lead me to doubt the very faculties that I trust. But when that hasn't happened, and when I can't understand exactly what is going on in the minds of others, I'll always turn back to the reasoning I understand best—my own.

*A Global Reason for Suspecting that Intellectuals Suffer from Cognitive Defects:*

In the discussion above I focused primarily on reasons to suspect that my philosophical and political opponents might have some specific cognitive defect—that they might suffer from bias, or stubbornness, for example. I want to conclude, however, by briefly discussing a more abstract reason for suspecting that intellectuals with whom I disagree suffer from a cognitive defect. I'll focus on philosophy, but my comments will apply *mutatis mutandis* to political theory, and indeed to a host of other fields in which intellectuals struggle to retain justified beliefs in the face of disagreement.

In cases I and II, cases where the discovery of disagreement clearly defeated my justification, I pointed out that I needed the background evidence that the person with whom I disagreed not only had the same kind of evidence as I, but was just as good at processing that evidence. In short, I needed a justified belief that the person with whom I disagreed was just as reliable as I am when it comes to addition in Case I and memory in Case II. I also know that reliability is very much relative to a field or even a sub-field. There are people in physics I trust to give me information about the physical constitution of various kinds of things. I think that I have good reason to believe that they are more or less reliable when it comes to information in their fields. But it doesn't take long to discover that even brilliant physicists are often hopeless philosophers. When they stray beyond the boundaries of their expertise, they are not to be trusted. So before I take the fact that another philosopher disagrees with me to be counter-evidence to what I believe, I would need good reason to believe that the philosopher in question is reliable when it comes to the discovery of philosophical truth. And how would I get that evidence?

I suppose I could try an induction of the sort I discussed with respect to reliability at addition. I could employ the premise that most philosophers are reliable when it comes to arriving at philosophical truth. But that premise is obviously false. We need only remind ourselves of Descartes's observation about philosophers. If you get ten philosophers in a room discussing any of the *fundamental* issues in philosophy you are likely to get ten different and incompatible positions. If there is one thing I can be

virtually certain of, it is that most philosophers are *not* reliable when it comes to arriving at interesting philosophical truth. And it doesn't help much to turn to "brilliant" philosophers. I would readily admit that many of the philosophers whose work I respect disagree with me. Surely, I can't think of *these* philosophers as exceptionally good without thinking of them as reliable. But obviously the problem noted above hasn't gone away. The philosophers I respect also disagree with each other, often quite radically. So it can't even be true that most of *them* are reliable when it comes to the subject matter upon which they disagree. My respect cannot rationally be based on a rational judgment about their reliability. It has more to do with the considerations of coherence that I discussed earlier. Whether we are grading students or evaluating colleagues, we obviously don't do so by trying to determine what percentage of their arguments are sound.

When we can't rely on a generalization to reach a conclusion about the reliability of someone with respect to a given subject, how would we proceed? Well one way, of course, is to ascertain independently various truths in the field, and see how often the person in question is able to discover them. But how would I do this in philosophy? My only way of discovering independently the relevant philosophical truths is to figure out myself what is true. But then the only philosophers I would deem reliable employing this method are those who end up agreeing with me (at least most of the time). And since we can divide philosophy into sub fields, and those sub fields into even smaller fields, there is nothing to stop me from reaching the conclusion that a philosopher who is reliable when it comes to matters epistemological, is decidedly unreliable when it comes to ethical theory. And a philosopher who is reliable when it comes to normative ethical theory might be unreliable when it comes to metaethical theory. Again, in so far as I think I'm getting at the truth in my philosophical inquiry, I'll be reaching the conclusion that other (perhaps very bright people) are unreliable when they often disagree with me.

So in the final analysis there does seem to be a really significant difference between Cases I and II and the kind of disagreement I discover between my philosophical views and the philosophical views of others I respect. Without some basis for thinking that other philosophers are reliable when it comes to reaching philosophical conclusions, my discovery that they disagree with me can't defeat my justification. But I have strong evidence to believe that philosophers are in general *unreliable*. There are so many different and incompatible answers posed to philosophical questions by even really intelligent philosophers that we can *deduce* that most philosophers, even most intelligent philosophers, have false beliefs about the correct answers to any interesting philosophical question. If I try to check the reliability of a philosopher with respect to a given area of philosophy by presupposing my own reliability, I'll obviously reach the conclusion that the only philosophers who are reliable are those who generally agree with me. Again, I won't need to worry about the discovery that others disagree with me. The fact that they do is evidence of their unreliability.

### *Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire:*

It doesn't take long to see that we have traded one problem for another. We have discovered a plausible defeater for the potential defeater presented by the discovery of disagreement over philosophical (and other highly contested intellectual) propositions. I

can discount the fact that another philosopher, for example, disagrees with me by reasonably concluding that that philosopher is probably unreliable when it comes to philosophical truth. If I have reason to believe that you are unreliable when it comes to adding numbers, I won't take the fact that you came to a different sum to present much counter-evidence to my belief that I have added the figures correctly. I have overwhelming evidence that most philosophers, even most really good philosophers, are unreliable when it comes to arriving at philosophical truth. I know that most of them have false beliefs. I know that because I know that, at least typically, most philosophical views are minority opinions. Each positive philosophical view is usually such that most philosophers think that it is false and there is typically nothing approaching a consensus on the correct alternative. I can therefore infer that most philosophical views are false. This is a strong reason for me to think that philosophers are not reliable even if I'm not sure precisely what the cognitive defect is that leads to their unreliability. The difficulty, of course, is that I also know that I'm one of those philosophers whose reliability is under attack. The reason for thinking that my opponents are probably cognitively defective is also a reason for thinking that I am probably cognitively defective. And now I face again the task of trying to argue plausibly that I am an exception to the rule. To do so, I'm back to the task of trying to convince you that you (and others) suffer from specific defects that explain your unreliability, defects I have somehow managed to avoid.

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<sup>2</sup> The privileged access might not involve infallible justification—it might just be truths about which we have better justification than anyone else could have.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, I sometimes worry that verbal dispute might be more common than philosophers like to realize. The internalism/externalism debate in epistemology, for example, sometimes strikes me as partially verbal. I understand perfectly well, I think, the concept the externalist is interested in analyzing—I can even help with suggestions concerning how to avoid counterexamples. But I'm also convinced that there is another different concept that is, and always has been, of paramount importance to many epistemologists. And I suspect that at least some externalists are willing to admit that this other concept might exist. Goldman (1988), for example, was finally willing to distinguish between what he called strong and weak justification (though I am not suggesting that I would agree with his analysis of weak justification).

<sup>4</sup> Where as we shall see, cognitive defects come in degrees.

<sup>5</sup> If some version of epistemic conservatism were plausible, the fact that something seems to me to be true might give me foundational justification for believing it. I don't believe, however, that epistemic conservatism is plausible. See Fumerton (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Where the contrast is to some sort of "social" coherence theory that requires coherence of beliefs among members of a community. A social coherence theory applied to the community of philosophers pretty much precludes any justified beliefs.