I Feel Like You're Wrong:
Why Affect Matters to Disagreement, and How a Jamesean Approach Helps

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will argue that recent work on the affective dimension of information-processing poses a serious challenge to mainstream accounts of disagreement found in contemporary social epistemology. In short, the challenge is this: Negatively-valenced information results in asymmetric updating of beliefs such that we are both strongly predisposed to maintain our confidence in our own belief-forming capabilities on one hand, and equally strongly predisposed to overemphasize the fact of disagreement in our consideration of the belief under dispute on the other. These predispositions strongly motivate our belief-forming processes, but which predisposition is the strongest motivator in any given situation is highly contextual—and beyond our control. Traditional accounts of disagreement thus assume a degree of control over our response to disagreements that we simply do not have, rendering their normative claims inappropriate. In their place I will sketch an account of disagreement, inspired by the work of William James, that holds that the most rational response to disagreement is neither conciliationist nor steadfastness, but rather receptivity to contrary evidence.

This paper shall proceed in the following manner. In the next section, I will give a brief sketch of the two main strands of thought in the scholarship on disagreement. In section three, I will consider how contemporary cognitive science on the asymmetrical updating of beliefs problematizes these accounts. In section four, I provide a sketch of a James-inspired account of disagreement that eschews

a global, normative account of disagreement, instead calling for agents to cultivate an awareness of how they typically respond to disagreement and the mental fortitude to resist this impulse under certain conditions.

II. DISAGREEMENTS

The standard example of a disagreement is Christensen's 'Restaurant Case' (193). Suppose you and some friends go out to dinner and decide to split the bill equally. You and a friend typically calculate the totals, and always agree. However, on this instance, that is not the case. You are highly confident that each person's share is $43; however, a friend is equally confident that each person's share is $45. How should you react? Answers have generally taken one of two tacks, which I shall take in turn.

The first tack is to say that both you and your friend should revise the confidence in your beliefs downward significantly. After all, you know that your friend is generally good at calculating shares and has done so successfully in the past. Out of respect for your friend's reasoning abilities ('epistemic modesty'), and their respect for yours ('epistemic symmetry'), both of you must become less confident in your beliefs.

The second tack denies that you or your peer are in any sense *required* to revise your beliefs in light of the disagreement. 'Steadfastness' accounts emphasize the special access that you have to your own thought processes. You know how well you typically do such operations and have no *prima facie* reason to believe that you were incorrect in this instance (apart from the very fact of disagreement); indeed, granting epistemic symmetry, it is equally likely that your peer is incorrect. As such, it would be irrational to modify your belief until it is shown to be in error.

Although exceedingly brief, this sketch of the two positions is sufficient for the present purpose. I should note that many accounts fall somewhere between the two positions, advocating steadfastness in some cases and conciliation in others.

III. THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF DISAGREEMENT

Although they disagree about how to disagree, both accounts agree about what it means to disagree: two people look at the same evidence, draw conflicting conclusions, and are aware that they have drawn conflicting conclusions. Yet a growing body of literature suggests that this is inaccurate or at least incomplete, as there is a significant *affective* dimension to how beliefs are formed, maintained, and revised that this definition overlooks.

Tali Sharot and Neil Garrett recently observed widespread 'asymmetrical updating' with respect to "self-relevant beliefs"—beliefs that involve a person's

self-image or their future—based on the valence of new information relevant to those beliefs (25). If the new information reinforces or improves someone's self-image, then people are quick to revise their beliefs to incorporate the new evidence. At the same time, negatively-valenced information is systematically underweighted and usually results in little-to-no revision of prior beliefs (Sharot and Garrett 26). This pattern holds for a wide variety of self-relevant beliefs and across the vast majority of the population, even when controlled for country of origin, gender, and other variables (Sharot and Garrett "Forming Beliefs" 26).

Discovering that you disagree with your peer could threaten many self-relevant beliefs, as the possibility of being wrong calls into question your ability (at least at that time) to draw the appropriate conclusion from the given premises. Consider the Restaurant Case. Many different self-relevant beliefs could be in play: you could believe yourself to be an excellent mental-mathematician; you could believe that your social standing in some small way depends on your impeccable record of calculating shares; or, you could believe that being wrong would wreck your romantic chances with another member of the group. Each of these are negatively-valenced and will lead to a general, *prima facie* unwillingness to revise your beliefs about yourself, which in turn will lead to an unwillingness to revise the beliefs that would entail a revision of your self-relevant beliefs. While perhaps trivial for the Restaurant Case, consider how this effect might be amplified when learning that your peer disagrees with you about the existence of God, the permissibility of capital punishment, or that she likes Hegel.

The issue gets muddier when we consider the long and distinguished body of literature that demonstrates that, self-relevant beliefs aside, people tend to weigh negatively-valenced information disproportionately high, and consequently afford that information greater motivational force in their belief-forming processes. (Kahneman and Tversky 280-284) Despite this being a widespread phenomenon, psychologists have observed that the extent to which people demonstrate this tendency can vary depending on factors including (but not limited to): their core personality traits (Norris, et al. 107-110); the functioning of their behaviour-activation and behaviour-inhibition systems (Grey*The Psychology of Fear and Stress* 256-263); and, their temperaments vis-à-vis risk-seeking or loss-preventing behaviour (Elliot & Thrash "Approach-Avoidance Motivation in Personality 804-818). Further, Pietri, Fazio, and Shook argue that individuals "vary in the extent to which they weigh positives and negatives when making evaluative judgments of *novel* situations…" ("Weighting Positive Versus Negative" 196) Thus, not only does the response to negatively-valenced information vary from person to person, but putting someone into a novel situation makes it harder to predict how much of a response to expect from someone, proportionate to the degree of novelty in the situation.

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This is problematic for traditional accounts of disagreement if one considers the fact of disagreement to be evidence for revising one's beliefs or confidence in one's beliefs, as the fact of disagreement is itself negatively-valenced information. Disagreements can be unpleasant and disruptive. Discovering that someone for whom you have tremendous respect disagrees with you on some fundamental topic can be upsetting; indeed, this shock lies at the heart of many accounts of disagreement. If we consider the fact of disagreement about p as evidence for the truth of p, then the fact of disagreement's negative valence would cause it to be overemphasized in our consideration of whether p, leading to asymmetrical updating in favour of conciliation with one's peer. How much someone overemphasizes the fact of disagreement, and the magnitude of the subsequent asymmetrical updating, is influenced by a host of factors outside of their immediate control. For example, someone who has more of a loss-averse temperament will be more inclined to overemphasise the fact of disagreement than someone who has a more gain-seeking temperament. This will lead to a greater asymmetry in belief-updating than the gain-seeker, even if both consciously favour conciliation. That is, even if both types of personalities favour conciliation, the loss-averse person will have a lower floor and higher ceiling for belief revision than the gain-seeking person.

The novelty of the situation is the most important variable of the situation, as the difficulty of predicting how someone will respond to a disagreement is directly in proportion to how novel the disagreement is. It is true that in some sense disagreement is to be expected; a cursory look at the state of society is enough to show that. But a key feature of the Restaurant Case and similar examples in the literature is that the disagreement with your peer is somehow novel. Disagreeing with someone with whom you *always* disagree is nothing new. It is only when you disagree with someone with whom you typically agree that the problem of disagreement emerges. As such, even if we manage to fully account for how the factors outside of one's control relate to one's response to disagreement, we will never be able to fully predict how much the fact of disagreement will be overemphasized in one's consideration of the belief under dispute, and thus how much one will be motivated towards conciliation by the non-rational features of our belief-formation processes that are beyond our control.

The situation is thus as follows: Faced with disagreement, our affective responses to negatively-valenced information pulls us in two competing directions. Disagreeing with your peer will threaten some self-relevant beliefs, which generally causes people to resist updating their beliefs (pulling towards steadfastness), but, being bad news in and of itself, will generally cause people to overemphasize the fact of disagreement as a motivation for changing their beliefs (pulling towards conciliation). The wild card in all of this is the novelty of the

disagreement, as it means that we cannot confidently say how much someone's response is motivated by these psychological traits, as someone's history of responses becomes of little value for determining how they will respond. Both mainstream accounts of disagreement thus presume that we have some choice in the manner of how we respond, but it really is a matter of for our pre-reflective processes. Thus, our response is largely motivated by factors outside our control, and largely *before* we get to the slow, deliberative stage of information processing.[1]

This point reinforces an issue flagged by Catherine Elgin. Elgin notes that both approaches to disagreement assume that we possess the ability to revise (or not revise) our beliefs in various ways (Elgin "Persistent Disagreement" 59-63). For example, Christensen assumes that we have the ability to modify our levels of confidence in a belief ("Epistemology of Disagreement" 194-199), while Feldman assumes that we can suspend judgement on a belief at will ("Reasonable Religious Disagreements" 155-156). Elgin argues that this smacks of epistemic voluntarism; and, if true, would sever the connection between truth and belief, as the salient feature of whether we believe that p would no longer be the force of evidence for p, but whether we assent to our belief that p—which can exist in the absence of evidence (60-61).

Taken together, both traditional accounts of disagreement assume a level of control over aspects of our belief-forming processes that we quite simply do not have.[2] As an alternative, I submit that we understand disagreement through the lens of someone who understood the deep connection between affect and cognition: William James.

IV. A Jamesean Account of Disagreement

James always afforded affect a significant place in his broader account of cognition. This is no more evident than in his paper "The Sentiment of Rationality." In that essay, James argues that much of our philosophical outlook is governed by the balance of two cravings: a craving for 'simplicity,' which is roughly the desire to unify seemingly disparate phenomena into a common term; and second, a craving for 'clearness,' which is roughly the desire to understand a phenomenon in fine-grained and minute detail (*Will to Believe* 59). Satisfying these cravings generate the 'sentiment of rationality'; any conception that generates this sentiment will be deemed rational (*Will to Believe* 62-63).

Affect plays a crucial role in this system. The reason for this is evolutionary: We need a system to quickly assess novel elements of our experience and sort between potential threats and potential boons, and our affective processes serve that function. We experience our continued need for further investigation into a phenomenon by the existence of these cravings and feel tangible relief when we

satisfy them (*Will to Believe* 63).[3] The balance of these cravings, which is a relative and inscrutable feature of someone's psychology, will exert substantial motivational force towards which philosophical positions someone will ultimately come to accept (*Will to Believe* 66). James observed in his day that those with a deeper craving for simplicity tend towards rationalistic explanations of the world that show a deeper unity behind all things, while those with a deeper craving for clearness tend towards empiricist explanations with ultimate division between all things (*Will to Believe* 66-67). While each camp will give an impassioned defence of their disposition on rational grounds, their approach was decided long before they opened a philosophical text.

The first feature of a Jamesian account of disagreement is to recognize that one's response to disagreement is more dependent on one's psychological traits than it is a conclusion that is arrived at through dialectic. As we have seen in this paper, the same balance of forces is present in cases of disagreement. On one hand, our affective response to negatively-valenced information that threaten self-relevant beliefs will compel us towards steadfastness; on the other, our affective response to the negatively-valenced fact of disagreement will compel us towards conciliation. As we have also seen, responses vary between people, and different people will treat these affective responses differently. There are some people whose instinctive response to disagreement will be steadfastness rather than conciliation. Such people find such a response more reasonable because they find the threat of self-relevant beliefs more intolerable than the shock of discovering that they disagree with their peer. Conversely, there are those for whom conciliation will be the natural reaction to disagreement; such people find the shock of the fact of disagreement more intolerable than the implications of disagreement on their self-relevant beliefs. By missing this connection, traditional accounts demand more of some people than others, as a person who is naturally inclined towards steadfastness must put exert more cognitive effort to act in a conciliationist manner, and vice versa. A Jamesean approach to disagreement thus rejects the possibility of a global, normative account of disagreement that places equal cognitive demands on all parties.

The second feature of a Jamesean account of disagreement is to reconceptualize the epistemic work along lines consistent with the nature of the problem. Even if a global, normative account of disagreement is impossible, it is still possible to approach disagreement in a particularist or contextualist manner. The impulses behind both steadfastness and conciliationism serve useful functions. The impulse towards steadfastness is the consequence of trusting your cognitive abilities; such trust is crucial for navigating future experiences. The impulse towards conciliationism acknowledges the limitations of your own point of view and incorporates other sources of information into your considerations, potentially

leading to more accurate beliefs. In similar circumstances, James advocates "*mak[ing] our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy*" by acknowledging our tendencies and bringing that into our considerations of how to respond to a particular disagreement at hand. (*Principles of Psychology* 126). You may not be able to control whether you respond to disagreement in a manner that favours steadfastness, but your awareness of this tendency could help you resist it should resistance be appropriate. The same goes for conciliation: If you are aware that you typically overweigh the fact of disagreement, you can resist your impulse towards self-doubt. In sum, this approach calls for a certain receptivity towards evidence and awareness of one's dispositions rather than prescribing a particular response at any given point. Aware of her own predispositions, the rational epistemic agent takes care to not let those predispositions dominate her responses to disagreement.[4]

A Jamesean account of disagreement thus calls for the development of a certain type of intellectual character rather than insisting that one response is appropriate in all circumstances. We may not be able to change our response at the time of disagreement, but we can cultivate, over time, the mental agility required to respond appropriately to environmental cues. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to press this point much further, such an account ought to be of interest to virtue epistemologists.

V. CONCLUSION

A central assumption of the literature on disagreement is that we have the requisite level of control over our belief-formation processes to provide a general, normative account of disagreement prior to, or independent of, any actual case of disagreement. The central goal of this paper has been to demonstrate, by appealing to contemporary cognitive science, that such an assumption is unwarranted. Mainstream accounts of disagreement ignore the significant influence that negatively-valenced information has on our decision-making and belief-formation processes. Our response to negatively-valenced information takes one of two tacks. If negatively-valenced information threatens self-relevant beliefs, we asymmetrically update our beliefs in a manner that preserves those beliefs. In a disagreement, this means acting in a manner that favours steadfastness. Other negatively-valenced information—in this case, the very fact of disagreement— tends to be overemphasized in our decision-making processes, leading to asymmetrical belief updating that favours conciliationism. Our actual response to disagreement depends greatly on features beyond our control; as such, both steadfastness and conciliationism are unfit for purpose. My James-inspired alternative is to limit the solution to the problem of disagreement to the level of meta-habits of thought: the most we can do is develop the mental agility necessary

to respond appropriately, be it conciliation or steadfastness, in the manner most likely to generate effective beliefs in particular instances.

NOTES

1.   The saving grace of the restaurant case is that there actually is an identifiable answer to the question of each person's share that is easily discernible through further work: the restaurant staff will not tolerate indefinite suspension of belief while the group of philosophers ponders the nature of disagreement. As such, whoever is wrong *will* have to change their belief when they are shown to be wrong. But this is not the kind of disagreement that really matters. Discovering that a colleague is a Hegelian is not as easily overcome as discovering that they miscalculated everyone's share of the cheque.

2.   I foresee two responses to these challenges. First, traditional theorists might deny that how we revise beliefs in the face of disagreement has any bearing on how we ought to revise beliefs. In this line of thought, articulating the affective element of information-processing and its role in belief-formation, at best, gives us a clearer picture of what we are trying to overcome through dispassionate philosophical enterprise. The issue with this sort of response is that insisting that people ought to overcome our natural propensity to act in one way over another requires, or at least implies, that it is possible to overcome those propensities. As demonstrated by the examples given above, this is an inextricable part of our information-making, decision-making, and belief-formation processes. The central problem with respect to disagreement is how little time there often is between the discovery of the disagreement and the need to respond to the disagreement. We do not have the ability to avoid having an affective response to new information, and as such it is unreasonable to demand that we avoid such a response.

Second, mainstream theorists might bracket the affective dimension of disagreement and positioning their accounts as holding *ceteris paribus*, as most people experience asymmetrical updating, and that the extent to which it occurs varies so heavily. However, it is not at all obvious that the extent or amount of affective content experienced by either peer in a disagreement will be equal, or even roughly equal. For example, if you put stock into how you are perceived by your social group vis-à-vis your mental calculation ability, and your friend does not, then there will be a difference in the amount and valence of the self-relevant information present in the restaurant case. We cannot make a *ceteris paribus* claim when we are unsure that the elements involved will ever be at or near equal.

3.   While it is beyond the scope of the present paper, I should note that my case is aided by the work of Daniel Brunson, who argues that James's work in "The Sentiment of Rationality" is best understood as an early articulation of what is now called 'processing fluency' (Brunson 33-36). In short, the more familiar we are with a particular stimulus, the quicker we process the information, leading us to consider it rational.

4.   This point puts a Jamesean account clearly in line with that of Elgin, who advocated a similar receptivity by rejecting the voluntarism on which traditional accounts are based. See Elgin, 64-8. I do not wish to claim or imply that Elgin has this sort of connection in mind, or that Elgin was inspired by James on this point.

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