

# Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker in Disagreements

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## Abstract

When involved in a disagreement, a common reaction is to tell oneself that, given that the information about one's own epistemic standing is clearly superior in both amount and quality to the information about one's opponent's epistemic standing, one is justified in one's confidence that one's view is correct. In line with this natural reaction to disagreement, some contributors to the debate on its epistemic significance have claimed that one can stick to one's guns by relying in part on information about one's first-order evidence and the functioning of one's cognitive capacities. In this article, I argue that such a manoeuvre to settle controversies encounters the problem that both disputants can make use of it, the problem that one may be wrong about one's current conscious experience, and the problem that it is a live possibility that many of one's beliefs are the product of epistemically distorting factors. I also argue that, even if we grant that personal information is reliable, when it comes to real-life rather than idealized disagreements, the extent of the unpossessed information about one's opponent's epistemic standing provides a reason for doubting that personal information can function as a symmetry breaker.

## 1. Introduction

When involved in a disagreement, a common reaction is to tell oneself that one has reliable information about one's own epistemic standing: about one's own current phenomenology, cognitive capacities, track record, or performance in evaluating the evidence. By contrast, the information one possesses about one's opponent's epistemic standing is clearly inferior in both amount and quality. Such an epistemic asymmetry justifies one's confidence that one's view about the disputed matter is correct. Thus, from a first-person perspective, it seems that one is able to settle a considerable number of the disagreements to which one is a party, even if one cannot expect that from a third-person perspective an onlooker would be able to decide which of the parties is right. In line with this common reaction to disagreement, some contributors to the debate on its epistemic significance have claimed that, in many cases of disagreement, one can stick to one's guns by relying, at least in part, on the information one possesses about one's first-order evidence and the functioning

of one's cognitive capacities. In this article, I argue that there are strong reasons for suspecting that the appeal to personal information does not provide us with a reliable way of settling controversies from a first-person viewpoint.

In Section 2, I present and critically examine the positions of two of the authors who hold that we have enough information about ourselves to make accurate assessments of our own epistemic standing, and hence to decide whether we are entitled to privilege our own position on the disputed matter over our opponent's. I argue, first, that there is a dialectical-cum-epistemic parity between the disputants inasmuch as they can both have recourse to personal information as a symmetry breaker; second, that it is far from clear that we are entitled to regard ourselves as reliable judges of our own stream of conscious experience; and third, that awareness of our limited access to the evidence and reasons on the basis of which our judgments are formed should make us entertain the possibility that a great many of our beliefs are the product of epistemically distorting factors. I also express reservations about the appeal to epistemic externalism in the context of disagreement. In Section 3, I argue that, even if we set peer disagreement aside as being artificial or idealized and focus instead on real-life controversies, and even if one grants for argument's sake that one possesses much more reliable information about oneself than about one's dissenter, the amount of unpossessed information about the latter seems to raise a serious sceptical challenge. In Section 4, I offer some concluding remarks.

## **2. Personal Information and High Degree of Justified Confidence**

One of the reasons on which some authors base their rejection of conciliatory views on peer disagreement is the asymmetry between the information one possesses about one's own epistemic situation and the information one possesses about that of one's rival. The allegedly privileged introspective access one has to one's own mental states and to the functioning of one's own cognitive capacities enable one to avoid engaging in doxastic revision in most cases of peer disagreement.

Ernest Sosa (2010) rejects the principle of Independence defended by conciliationists<sup>1</sup> because, among other reasons, it cannot be

<sup>1</sup> One possible formulation of this principle is the following: in order to resolve a peer disagreement about a given issue, the disputants must appeal

## Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker

properly applied to those disagreements in which the evidence is the phenomenal or the rational given, since in these cases it is legitimate to downgrade one's opponent's ability to assess the evidence by appealing to the substance of the disagreement, even when there is no independent reason for doing so. Sosa remarks that such cases are not relevant to the epistemological problem posed by disagreement because the correctness of one of the sides is so obvious that no further reason in its favour is required and, hence, there is no real dispute. I will, however, consider the example he gives of a disagreement concerning the phenomenal given because it illustrates the personal and social facets of disagreement, and particularly our alleged privileged access to our own mental states:

Suppose you have a headache. What reason do you have for thinking that you do? The important reason is, quite plausibly, simply *that* you do! Is this a reason that enables you reasonably to sustain your side of a disagreement when an employer believes you to be a malingering faker, with no headache at all? If so, then you can after all demote an opponent by relying on the substance of your disagreement. A huge part of your reason for rejecting the employer's claim that you're faking it is the very fact that gives content to your belief, the fact of the headache itself. Here then one has a conclusive reason that makes one's belief a certainty, even if that reason will be useless in a public dispute. It will not much advance your cause to just assert against your employer that you *do* have a headache, even if this is in fact the reason that makes you certain that you do. (Sosa, 2010, p. 286)

If I say that I have a terrible headache and ask my boss to let me leave early from work, but he says that I do not really have a headache or that he is not sure that I do, then for me the disagreement is immediately settled inasmuch as I know that I have a headache. But it is not settled publicly, since my boss may have reasons for suspecting: he knows that I have lied in the past, someone whom he trusts has told him that I am lying, or he may have doubts about the reliability of people's testimony in general. Nor is the disagreement easily settled from the viewpoint of an external observer, since he needs to assess both the reasons put forward by the person who claims to have a headache and those given by the one who distrusts the latter's testimony. The fact that the dispute is not resolved from a social or

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to reasons that are independent of both their beliefs about the disputed issue and the considerations on the basis of which such beliefs are formed.

public point of view has of course important practical consequences, since I may not get the permission to leave and, if I nonetheless leave, I may get fired. Whether a disagreement has in fact been resolved will at least often depend on whether we are considering the personal or the public standpoint from which the dispute is looked at. It will also depend on what conception of justification one is working with. If one espouses a dialectical conception of justification, then one will require that each side of the disagreement be able to articulate the reasons for upholding their position on the disputed matter. For present purposes, what is of particular interest about the quoted passage is the fact that Sosa seems to rely on the view that, at least in normal circumstances or in the case of ‘any obstreperous enough mental state’ (2010, p. 286), we cannot be mistaken about our own ongoing conscious phenomenology, which is precisely what enables us to easily resolve certain disagreements. There are mental states about which our information is accurate inasmuch as we have access to them through a reliable introspective process. However, it is far from clear that we are entitled to regard ourselves as reliable judges of our own stream of conscious experience, even in circumstances we consider normal or regarding mental states we deem transparent. Eric Schwitzgebel (2011), for one, has taken issue with the view that our ongoing conscious experience is immune to doubt or easily and infallibly knowable. He offers persuasive and empirically informed arguments to the effect that we err or are confused about our stream of conscious experience – emphasizing along the way the disagreements among both laypersons and researchers: we do not know whether we dream in colour or black-and-white; we are not accurate judges of our visual experience of depth, our eyes-closed visual experience, our visual imagery, or our auditory experience of echolocation; we are in the dark about whether we see things double or single and whether consciousness is abundant or sparse; we are prone to go wrong in judging our ongoing emotional phenomenology; and we are at a loss whether there is a distinctive phenomenology of thinking. For instance, over a few decades there have been profound changes in people’s opinions about the coloration or lack thereof of dreams, which do not seem to correspond to equally profound changes in the dreams themselves (Schwitzgebel 2011, chap. 1). Or most people (me included) seem unaware of the fact that they are capable of echolocating objects and deny that they have auditory echoic experience of silent objects, thus failing to appreciate an introspectively discoverable aspect of their phenomenology (Schwitzgebel, 2011, chap. 4). Schwitzgebel expresses his scepticism about the reliability of introspection quite bluntly:

## Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker

The introspection of current conscious experience, far from being secure, nearly infallible, is faulty, untrustworthy, and misleading, not just sometimes a little mistaken, but frequently and massively mistaken, about a great variety of issues. If you stop and introspect now, there probably is very little you should confidently say you know about your own current phenomenology. (2011, p. 129)

Other philosophers, such as D. M. Armstrong (1963), Gregory Sheridan (1969), and David Palmer (1975), have also called into question the view that introspection provides us with privileged access, of one sort or another, to our own current sensations and feelings.<sup>2</sup> And psychologist Timothy Wilson shares Schwitzgebel's position as far as sensations and feelings are concerned, for he rejects what he calls 'the incorrigibility argument', i.e., the view that people's introspective reports about their sensations and feelings are incorrigible or cannot be doubted (2002, pp. 117–25). There are thus at least several philosophers and one psychologist who believe that introspective reports about one's own phenomenology in general, or about one's own sensations and feelings in particular, are not infallible, indubitable, or incorrigible, or who believe that there may be mental states (such as pains and visual sensations) of which we are not aware. If these authors' views about our allegedly privileged access to our ongoing conscious experience is at least *prima facie* plausible, we have a reason to be cautious regarding the appeal to the phenomenal given or to our own current phenomenology as solid rock upon which we can construct a case for remaining steadfast in the face of certain kinds of disagreement.

<sup>2</sup> It is here useful to bear in mind William Alston's (1989) illuminating distinction between different ways in which one can be taken to have privileged access to one's own mental states: infallibility (one's beliefs about one's mental states cannot be false or mistaken), indubitability (one has no grounds for doubting those beliefs), incorrigibility (no one else can show that those beliefs are mistaken), omniscience (every feature of one's mental states is represented in those beliefs), truth-sufficiency (one's true beliefs about one's mental states are justified simply by virtue of the fact that they are true), and self-warrant (one's beliefs about one's mental states are justified just by virtue of the fact that they are held). Armstrong (1963) – who employs 'incorrigible' and 'indubitable' interchangeably to refer to what is infallible and 'privileged access' to refer to incorrigibility – targets infallibility, indubitability, and omniscience. Sheridan (1969) rejects infallibility – for which he uses 'incorrigibility' – while Palmer (1975) rejects omniscience.

## Diego E. Machuca

If I interpret Sosa (2010, p. 293) correctly, in the case of controversial issues that have no obvious resolutions but regarding which one can nonetheless hold one's ground and demote one's opponent, there is from a first-person perspective a key disparity between the disputants: one has different degrees of confidence in the reliable exercise of one's cognitive competence and in the reliable exercise of one's opponent's cognitive competence. Referring to those who disagree about highly controversial issues, Sosa points out:

None of them is privy to the backing for their opponents' contrary belief, *not fully*. Yet each might be quite reasonably confident of the competence they themselves exercise, or at least each may have no sufficient independent basis for thinking the other to be a relevant peer. And this is why they might properly downgrade their opponents based essentially on the substance of their disagreement. (2010, p. 295)

Setting aside for the moment the possibility that each party's confidence in the competence they exercise may be wholly unwarranted given the limits of self-knowledge, the fact that each proceeds in the same way in their attempt to justify the reasonability of retaining their belief in the face of known disagreement calls for suspension of judgment – or so it appears to me. Consider, first, that from the third-person vantage point of an external observer, it does not seem possible to resolve the dispute inasmuch as each party claims to know that they have competently evaluated the relevant evidence and to lack independent reasons for taking their rival as an epistemic peer. But secondly, and more importantly, if each party becomes aware of Sosa's line of reasoning and, hence, comes to the conclusion that, from their own first-person perspective, they are both reasonable in holding their ground, should this not lead them to withhold their assent? If I am reasonably confident that my cognitive faculties are functioning properly and that I have competently applied them to the examination of the matter under dispute, I then become aware that my opponent is reasonably confident on both counts, and I believe that at most one of us can be right, what is so special about myself that I can simply discard the possibility that I am the one who is wrong? If my rival can be wrong despite his confidence in his correct assessment of the available evidence bearing on the disputed matter, why can I not be wrong despite my confidence in my own correct assessment of that evidence? It seems to me that if, when analysing things from my own first-person perspective, I incorporate information about the way my rival views things from his own first-person perspective, I may gain a weighty reason for significantly

## Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker

lowering my confidence in the correctness of my belief about the disputed matter. There is a dialectical parity between the disputants that has epistemic implications: the information I gain about the symmetric line of reasoning that my rival employs to demote me should make me wonder whether that line of reasoning is as effective to demote him as I think it is. The need to reduce my confidence will be stronger if, in my analysis of the disagreement from a first-person vantage point, I incorporate as well empirical evidence about the limits of introspective knowledge of the reasons for our beliefs and decisions, and about the functioning of our cognitive processes. For example, in their famous article 'Telling More than We Can Know' (1977), Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson review empirical evidence suggesting that we have little or no introspective access to the higher-order cognitive processes underlying our choices, judgments, inferences, and behaviour. As they put it in a subsequent article, the evidence indicates that 'whatever capacity for direct introspection on cognitive processes may exist, it is insufficient to produce generally accurate verbal reports about the effects of stimuli on one's own behavior' (1978, p. 118). They claim that sometimes people are unaware of the existence of a stimulus that has influenced a higher-order, inference-based response, sometimes they are unaware of the existence of the response, and sometimes they are unaware that an inferential process of any kind has taken place.<sup>3</sup> Thus, to one's first-order evidence about the disputed matter, one would then have to add the higher-order evidence consisting in the fact of the disagreement, the dialectical-cum-epistemic parity between the disputants, and the empirical findings provided by psychological research. When one incorporates such additional information, suspension of judgment seems called for.

It is worth noting that Sosa is aware of the fact that, just as I have incomplete access to my opponent's evidence and reasons, so too do I have partial access to the evidence and reasons on the basis of which my judgments are formed. He observes that hardly ever do we have reflective access to the total body of evidence on the basis of which we form our beliefs, since much of that evidence was acquired by means of various sources, is hidden in the past, and can only be retrieved through retentive memory (cf. Lackey, 2010, p. 312). If so, then full disclosure is not possible. Consider the following passages:

<sup>3</sup> See also Wilson (2002), Wilson and Dunn (2004), Kahneman (2011), and Haidt (2001; 2013).

## Diego E. Machuca

Moore's reasoning suggests a way to handle disagreements commonly encountered in fields where controversy abounds. In Moore's case we are unsure of having fully expounded our evidence. Normal cases of deep, important controversy share relevant features that make this comparison interesting. The evidence on which we base belief in our side of a controversy need only be inscrutable, for whatever reason, or at least sufficiently hard to uncover. For it cannot then be displayed for reflection on how well it supports the content of our belief. (Sosa, 2010, p. 290)

If we can't spot our operative evidence ... then we cannot disclose it, so as to share it. And this will apply to our opinions on complex and controversial topics no less than to our belief about our teacher's name or the touchiness of our friend or the stars in the sky. On all these matters we are in the position that Moore takes himself to be in on the question whether he is awake. We have reasons ... that, acting in concert, across time, have motivated our present beliefs, but we are in no position to detail these reasons fully. This may be so, finally, as Moore also thought, even in cases where the reasons are in combination quite conclusive. (Sosa, 2010, p. 291)

Even though I agree with Sosa about how much of the evidence and reasons on which we base our beliefs appears to be beyond our ken, I cannot see how awareness of that fact does not lead us to take a sceptical stance, unless we have an extraordinarily strong faith in the reliability of our cognitive processes. Our ignorance of the sources of our beliefs is so extensive that, to my mind, epistemologists should be much more worried about the possibility that a great many of our beliefs are the product of epistemically distorting factors. This possibility is by itself serious enough to raise a sceptical challenge, but there appears to be ample empirical evidence that it is not a mere possibility, but a common phenomenon, which makes the challenge more pressing (see the references in n. 3 above). Sosa does not share my worries, though, since he claims that although the fact that we cannot fully disclose our evidence may mean that we cannot convince our opponents – may mean, in other words, that our reasons may be *dialectically* ineffective – they can be *epistemically* effective (2010, p. 296). À la Moore, he maintains:

Our inability to defeat an opponent in public debate need not rationally require us to abandon our beliefs. For various powerful reasons, our beliefs can be grounded adequately in reasons that



## Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker

give us no dialectical advantage, either because they offer no dialectically persuasive leverage, or because they are undisclosably beyond our reach. While appealing to this fact, finally, we must avoid a dispiriting obscurantism, but we need to recognize also that it *is* a fact... (Sosa, 2010, pp. 295–96)

Sosa defines the obscurantism in question as the ‘position that our reasons, far removed in our past, or deeply lodged in our subconscious, cannot be uncovered for critical inspection’ (2010, pp. 291–92). Despite his exhortation not to fall into such a position, it seems to be precisely the one that accurately describes the fact he asks us to recognize. Be that as it may, we saw above that studies in cognitive psychology provide us with evidence that seems to indicate that a great deal of our reasons cannot be disclosed for critical scrutiny. Now, in the kind of disagreement Sosa has in mind, the correctness of the position one advocates is not obvious, so that one needs further reasons, which nonetheless one cannot (fully) disclose. However, he claims that, even though one cannot fully explain those reasons either to others or to oneself, one’s position is adequately grounded in them. He also claims that one can reasonably continue to hold a given opinion in the face of known disagreement provided one is confident that one has exercised one’s competence in evaluating the available evidence or provided one has no independent reason for thinking that one’s rival is a peer on the matter under consideration. Dialectical unpersuasiveness may have important practical effects, but this by itself does not undermine the epistemic justification of a given position unless one adopts a dialectical conception of justification. Though I think that, at least in certain contexts such as the philosophical arena, one is expected to be able to articulate one’s reasons, I claim no strong preference for any view of justification. What I do find problematic, and surprising, about Sosa’s view is that he does not seem to realize that our dramatically limited access to the reasons for our beliefs and the processes that lie behind our belief-formation should make us wonder *also* about the epistemic credentials of our own beliefs. At least in the case of many disagreements, such a cognitive limitation should undermine my preference of my own position over that of my rival for the simple reason that I cannot determine whether my reasons for presently holding certain beliefs are rationally grounded considerations or rather prejudices, my blind acceptance of authority, certain past pleasant or unpleasant experiences, my current emotional states, or some other epistemically contaminating factor. Our ignorance of the actual origins of at least a considerable number of our beliefs

results in our taking those beliefs to have epistemic credentials that either they lack or we have so far no evidence they have. For example, as Sosa correctly remarks, to retrieve much of our evidence we rely on the operation of memory. The problem is that empirical studies on confabulation and eyewitness testimony provide abundant evidence that memory is a constructive process rather than simply a passively recording process.<sup>4</sup> This means that, in at least a considerable number of cases, the events we remember are drastically distorted or manipulated, and that we create stories that help us make sense of our attitudes and our lives.

Jennifer Lackey (2010), too, emphasizes that the asymmetry between the information one possesses about the reliability of one's cognitive capacities and the information one possesses about the reliability of one's rival's is a key part of the strategy that enables one to retain confidence in one's belief in the face of many real-life disagreements.<sup>5</sup> I will focus on two of her imaginary cases of real-life disagreement. In the first, she disagrees with her friend Edwin about whether their roommate Estelle is eating lunch with them at the dining room table in their apartment (Lackey, 2010, pp. 306–307). She first remarks that, if one considers the situation from her own perspective, then not only does it clearly seem to her that her friend is present at the table, but she has never in her life hallucinated an object, she has not been drinking or taking drugs, she has her contact lenses in, her eyesight functions reliably when her near-sightedness is corrected, and she knows all of this to be true of herself. As a result, even if prior to the disagreement she had good reason to consider Edwin an epistemic peer, it is rational for her to continue to believe that her friend is sitting at the table. She then adds that, given the extraordinarily high degree of justified confidence with which she holds her belief about Estelle's presence at the table, the fact that Edwin disagrees with her is best taken as evidence that something has gone wrong with him. It thus seems that, in the toy case under consideration, Lackey takes the high degree of justified confidence with which she holds her belief to rest, at least in

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Loftus (1979; 1993; 1997), Loftus and Pickrell (1995), and French, Garry, and Loftus (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Christensen (2011, pp. 9–10) and Matheson (2015, pp. 103–104, 118, 121–22), too, endorse the view that personal information can, in the case of real-life disagreements, legitimately function as a symmetry breaker. While Lackey and Sosa are steadfasters, Christensen and Matheson are conciliatonists. This is not surprising, for at least most conciliationists reject radical forms of disagreement-based skepticism.

## Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker

part, on both her reliable access to her current phenomenologically vivid experience and her accurate knowledge about the past and present normal functioning of her cognitive faculties. More succinctly, it seems that it is what she knows about her epistemic situation that enables her to claim that her high degree of confidence is justified.

In the second imaginary case, she disagrees with a long-time neighbour, Jack, about the location of a Chicago restaurant the two of them frequent (Lackey, 2010, pp. 308–309). Although prior to the disagreement neither of them had any reason to suspect that the other's memory was in any way deficient and they viewed each other as epistemic peers regarding knowledge of the city, she claims that she is perfectly justified in her confidence about the restaurant's location. For she has lived in the city for many years, knows the city extremely well, has eaten at the restaurant many times, has not been drinking or taking drugs, has substantial evidence for the reliability of her memory, and knows all of this to be true of herself. She then adds that, given the substantial amount of credence and epistemic support enjoyed by her belief, it is clear that her neighbour's disagreement is evidence that something is wrong with him: he may have been drinking, or be delusional, or be suffering from some kind of memory loss. Once again, it seems that, in the toy case in question, her high degree of justified confidence in the truth of her belief rests, at least in part, on what she knows to be true of herself. However, Lackey (2010, p. 309) actually regards these as two different conditions that must be met together to function as a symmetry breaker, i.e., as something that indicates that the epistemic status of one of the disagreeing parties is superior to the other's. Thus, the key to avoiding the need to engage in doxastic revision in the face of known peer disagreement lies both in the fact that one usually has information about oneself that one lacks about one's rival and in the fact that one's high degree of confidence in one's own belief is justified.

With respect to the first condition, it should be emphasized that the amount of information one has about oneself is, as noted above, much more limited and inaccurate than one may like to think. It is therefore not clear that, in Lackey's toy cases, one can confidently affirm that one has never hallucinated, that one is not being delusional, or that one is not suffering from memory loss. Moreover, both our own experience and the psychological literature teach us that people in those states do not usually consider themselves to be in them, which is precisely what happens in the perception and restaurant cases, since one's rival is highly confident about the absence of one's friend at the dining room table or about the location of the restaurant, even though one thinks that there is definitely something wrong with

him. Now, if one can entertain the possibility that something has gone awry with one's dissenter and that he is unaware of it, why can one not entertain the possibility that the same has happened to one? Note also that, as already observed when examining Sosa's position, there seems to be a key symmetry between the contending parties that is dialectical but that has epistemic implications: just as I can appeal to the information I possess about myself to dismiss my dissenter's belief about the disputed matter, so too can he appeal to the information he possesses about himself to dismiss my belief about it. This symmetry can be appreciated not only from a third-person perspective but also from a first-person perspective: each disputant may become aware that both have access to their own (accurate or inaccurate) personal information and that both can reason in the same way in dismissing their rival's opinion. Such awareness is part of each party's total available evidence bearing on the disputed matter and might contribute to their adopting a humbler and more conciliatory stance. I should emphasize that my considerations against the personal-information strategy do not work only if its proponents maintain that we have *perfect* access to our own cognitive states. For my point has been that it is far from clear that we have *better* access to what is happening with ourselves than we do to what is happening with our dissenters. Hence, I think that neither version of the personal-information strategy succeeds in showing that we are entitled to be more confident in our own answers to the disputed issues.

What about the second condition mentioned by Lackey, i.e., the high degree of justified confidence in one's belief? The first thing to point out is that the two contending parties may have a high degree of confidence in their respective beliefs, so that we must find a non-question-begging way of determining which party is in fact justified in having such a degree of confidence. Lackey adopts here an externalist position. Regarding the disagreement about whether Estelle is at the dining room table with her and Edwin, she invites us to suppose that Edwin denies Estelle's presence at the table because he is hallucinating, and that his hallucination is caused by the fact that, unbeknownst to him, he was drugged by a friend. Edwin is not aware of his present state because the drug produces no discernible signs. Lackey then argues that, although she is happy to grant that, from a purely subjective point of view, Edwin is as reasonable in his belief as she is in hers, their beliefs are not equally justified inasmuch as they are not produced by processes that are equally reliable or truth-conducive: in her case the belief is the result of a veridical perceptual experience, while in Edwin's

## Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker

case the belief is the result of a hallucination (Lackey, 2010, p. 320). I confess that I do not see how externalism is useful for disputants who want to find a way of resolving the disagreement in which they are involved. Even if from the vantage point of a hypothetical external observer who is fully informed of the whole situation it is possible to determine which of the conflicting beliefs was produced by a reliable or truth-conducive process, this is much more difficult from the vantage point of the disputants themselves. I may claim that my belief was caused by a reliable or truth-conducive mechanism, but so too may my opponent. In order to legitimately affirm that he is hallucinating while my belief is the result of a veridical perceptual experience, it seems that I need to offer, not only to my disputant but also to myself, reasons for claiming that I am not the one who has unknowingly taken a drug that produces no noticeable signs. If so, then in order to resolve a disagreement of which one is part, one needs reasons for claiming that the cognitive process that caused one's belief is reliable or truth-conducive, and to do so one needs to have some sort of access to that process. Imagine that my disputant and I are both externalists. If I were to say that my view on  $p$  is correct because it was formed by a reliable belief-forming process and that unfortunately my rival's was formed by one that is unreliable, he would most probably rejoin by saying that it is his view on  $p$  that has been produced by a reliable belief-forming process and that unfortunately mine was produced by one that is unreliable. How should one react? One might well say: 'My poor fellow externalist, he doesn't realize that in this case his belief has not been reliably produced, and hence that he's got things wrong'. Alternatively, one might say: 'If it is possible that this guy has got it wrong but can't see it and believes instead that his belief has been formed by reliably functioning faculties, what's so special about myself that the same can't be happening to me?' It seems that one needs to know not only that certain cognitive processes are reliable, but also that in the specific situation in which one finds oneself one's belief is indeed the result of one or more of those processes. If disagreement poses a challenge the disputants need to meet in a way they regard as responsible or non-arbitrary, then externalism does not seem to be up to the task.

Before moving on to discuss the epistemic significance of the unpossessed information about one's opponent epistemic standing, I would like to address two objections to my case against the personal-information strategy.

The first objection maintains that, if you disagree with your friend about whether a third person is sitting at your table and conversing

with both of you, antecedently improbable possibilities – such as that one of you is lying or have taken a hallucinogen – become germane. Even if unconditionally you started out roughly equally confident that both would be honest and that neither took LSD, conditional on one of you lying, it is natural to be more confident that it is the other person, for you can generally tell when you are. Likewise, conditional on one of you having taken LSD, it is natural to be more confident it is the other person, for you generally remember whether you took a drug.<sup>6</sup>

In reply, I should first note that I do not deny that your friend may be lying or may have taken LSD, and that you may have independent evidence on the basis of which you can justifiably conclude that such is the case – you know that your friend likes pulling your leg or that he likes taking LSD from time to time. However, if, unbeknownst to you, you have been drugged by someone, you will not remember having taken LSD. And if you have taken LSD and thereby hallucinate that someone is sitting with you and your friend at the table and conversing with you, then, in reporting this experience, you will not be lying, for you do believe that the experience is veridical. Of course, if you can successfully rule out the possibility of having been inadvertently drugged or the possibility of having a psychotic break, then you may have justified confidence that your cognitive faculties are functioning properly. The problem is, I think, that once you realize that people in those situations are typically unaware that they are delusional, the fact that someone whom you antecedently consider an epistemic peer disagrees with you seems to give you a weighty reason for taking the above possibilities seriously. After all, you think that it is real possibility that your epistemic peer is delusional without his realizing that he is; and, once again, what is so special about yourself that you can confidently discount the possibility that that is what is happening to you?

The second objection maintains that the trust in the deliverances of one's own cognitive faculties is unavoidable and that there is a significant asymmetry between the level of one's trust in oneself and the level of one's trust in others. Since self-trust is not a matter of empirical adjudication but a requirement for a lot of our cognition to even get it to do what we need it to do, the empirical studies to which I had recourse above do not hold all that much weight against it.<sup>7</sup> This objection is in line with David Enoch's (2010) argument against conciliationism (the Equal Weight View in particular), which is based on

<sup>6</sup> This objection was raised by an anonymous referee.

<sup>7</sup> This objection was raised by a second anonymous referee.

## Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker

the ineliminability of the first-person perspective and the self-trust that comes with it.<sup>8</sup>

In reply, it should be noted that, just like myself, my rival will probably appeal to self-trust. From my own first-person perspective, I then become aware both of the dialectical symmetry resulting from the fact that both my rival and I appeal to self-trust in an attempt to show that one is entitled to stick to one's own view in the face of disagreement, and of the fact that I regard my rival's view as incorrect or unjustified despite his relying on self-trust. Such awareness seems to undermine self-trust as a reliable source of true or justified beliefs: I can regard a rival as holding false or unjustified beliefs about many of the issues regarding which we disagree despite his relying on self-trust. I thus become aware that self-trust is no guarantee that my beliefs about controversial issues are true or justified. For what is so special about myself that, unlike my rival, I cannot be mistaken or unjustified despite relying on self-trust? If at most one of the disagreeing parties may be correct, then self-trust does not prevent at least one of them from getting things wrong: my rival got things wrong despite his trusting his own opinions, or I did despite my trusting my own opinions, or maybe both did despite trusting our respective opinions. If this is so, then I may be unable to eliminate the first-person perspective and unable not to rely on self-trust when making decisions particularly about practical matters, but I may still be able, from my own first-person perspective, to call into question self-trust as a reliable source of knowledge or justification. Ineliminability entails neither infallibility nor reliability: the fact that we cannot but use our cognitive faculties when inquiring does not entail that these faculties are either infallible or reliable, or that they are less fallible or more reliable than the cognitive faculties of our opponents. For instance, I may be unable not to rely on my memory, but this does not entail that it is infallible or reliable, or that it is less fallible or more reliable than my opponent's.

### 3. Real-Life Disputes and Unpossessed Information

The notion of epistemic peerhood is sometimes understood as implying perfect epistemic parity or symmetry between the disputants. As some authors have emphasized, such a way of framing the discussion

<sup>8</sup> For other views that appeal to self-trust to justify steadfastness in the face of (certain cases of) peer disagreement, see Foley (2001, pp. 79, 108–112), Wedgwood (2010), Pasnau (2015), and Schafer (2015).

of the epistemic significance of acknowledged peer disagreement faces the problem that, given that it is artificial or idealized, the conclusions arrived at in that discussion cannot be carried over to real-world controversies – which are (or should be) those we are interested in resolving.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, may two persons be perfect epistemic equals? That is, may they both be fully acquainted with all the same available evidence bearing on the disputed matter, possess the same cognitive capacities, and reliably employ these capacities when examining the matter at hand to the same degree? It seems that the only reasonable answer is an emphatic ‘No’. But even if the answer is ‘Yes’ and there exist epistemic equals, is it possible to determine that any two individuals are epistemic equals so that one can legitimately talk about a peer disagreement that is acknowledged to be so by the disagreeing parties? It does not seem very likely. Alternatively, even though two individuals differ in one or more of the three respects mentioned above, may they both be, on the whole, equally good at evaluating the matter under consideration? This seems more likely, but I am unsure whether two individuals can be equally good at evaluating a given matter. But granting that there exist epistemic equals in this less stringent sense, is it possible to determine that any two individuals are such that one can legitimately talk about a peer disagreement (again, in a less stringent sense) that is acknowledged, recognized, or known to be so by the disagreeing parties? Though this seems more likely than determining that two individuals are equals in the three respects mentioned above, it is no easy task when it comes to real-life situations.

If we tend to reply to the foregoing questions in the negative, it seems that conciliationism – with its narrow or wide-ranging sceptical implications, depending on the version adopted – could at most be a position one should embrace in the face of a kind of disagreement – acknowledged peer disagreement – that is merely fictional. However, even if we set acknowledged peer disagreement aside and focus instead on actual controversies with all their complexities, scepticism is not out of the picture, but becomes even more threatening. Real-world disputes offer a particularly fertile ground to scepticism. Notice, first, that even if it were granted for the sake of argument that reliable self-assessment is possible because our self-knowledge is extensive and mostly accurate, one’s (partial) lack of information about the quality of one’s opponent’s evidence, the general reliability of his cognitive capacities, and the functioning of these capacities in the specific circumstance of the disagreement poses a serious problem

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Lackey (2010, pp. 303–305), King (2012, pp. 251–66; 2013, pp. 199–201), and Sherman (2015, pp. 426–28).



## Personal Information as Symmetry Breaker

of its own. For this means that we are in the dark about information that might be crucial for accurately evaluating the controversial issue, and that it is no easy task to determine which of the disagreeing parties is in the better epistemic position.<sup>10</sup> My partial or total ignorance about my opponent's epistemic standing should make me wonder whether he may not possess relevant evidence that I lack,<sup>11</sup> whether he may not have higher cognitive abilities, or whether he may not be employing such abilities in assessing the disputed matter better than I do. To my mind, none of these possibilities can be easily discarded, at least in a great many cases of disagreement. If so, then it might be argued that one should refrain from confidently affirming that, regarding many controversial issues, one can legitimately downgrade one's opponent on the basis of one's self-knowledge despite one's full or partial ignorance about his epistemic credentials. To appreciate this, try to remember those occasions in which you demoted an opponent because of your high degree of confidence in how smart, well informed, meticulous, and objective you were in your analysis of the disputed matter, just to later realize that you were mistaken and that you should have been more open-minded and intellectually humble: your opponent turned out to be smarter or better informed or more thorough or less biased. If you never found yourself in such a situation, then you are extremely lucky, or unbelievably intelligent, or terribly stubborn, or blind by your self-conceit.

Secondly, if we accept that people know much less about their evidence, cognitive competence, and performance than they think – and hence that their lack of substantial information is not restricted to the epistemic standing of others – then there would be even more information about which we are in the dark. It would then be extremely difficult to establish with the required precision what my epistemic

<sup>10</sup> A similar point is made by King (2012, pp. 251, 267).

<sup>11</sup> Here it is useful to keep in mind the influence of the rule that psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2011) calls WYSATI (what you see is all there is), which refers to our tendency to jump to conclusions or make judgments on the basis of limited evidence: 'You cannot help dealing with the limited information you have as if it were all there is to know. You build the best possible story from the information available to you, and if it is a good story, you believe it. Paradoxically, it is easier to construct a coherent story when you know little, when there are fewer pieces to fit into the puzzle. Our comforting conviction that the world makes sense rests on a secure foundation: our almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance' (2011, p. 201). It therefore seems that, in the face of disagreement, one had better remind oneself of paying attention to both available and *unpossessed* evidence. On this issue, see also Ballantyne (2015).

status is in relation to that of my rival – and it would be equally difficult for him to make that decision. If I cannot justifiably affirm that I am epistemically superior to my opponent, and *vice versa*, then it appears that for both suspension of judgment is called for. If so, then it is not the case that scepticism represents a real threat provided one restricts oneself to idealized disagreements, where all the epistemically relevant aspects are artificially stipulated to be perfectly symmetric.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It may be argued that, once we realize that epistemic peerhood understood in an idealized way has nothing to do with real life inasmuch as it is unreasonable to think that there can be full epistemic parity between any two persons, we lose one key reason to be conciliatory. Given that in real-life controversies we do not have as much information about our opponent's epistemic situation as we do about our own, in those cases in which we have direct introspective access to our current phenomenology or in which we know that our cognitive capacities are functioning properly, we have a symmetry breaker that enables us to dismiss our opponent's view and stick to our own. However, first, since all the parties to a disagreement may appeal to the same manoeuvre and each party is aware of this fact from their own first-person vantage point, there seems to be a dialectical-cum-epistemic symmetry between the disagreeing parties. Secondly, there are strong reasons to suspect that the introspective access to our own current conscious experience is far from reliable. Thirdly, given that we have limited access to the evidence and reasons on the basis of which our judgments are formed, we cannot exclude the possibility that a great many of our beliefs are the product of epistemically contaminating factors. Fourthly, even if one sets idealized disagreements aside and focuses instead on real-life controversies, and even if one grants that one has reliable personal information, one's partial or total lack of information about one's opponent's evidence, cognitive abilities, or performance means that, quite often, one is not able to determine who is in fact in the better epistemic position *vis-à-vis* the disputed matter. Lastly, the difficulty in making such a determination is of course much higher when one combines the unpossessed information about one's opponent's actual epistemic situation with the unpossessed information about one's own.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> This paper began life as part of a longer paper on the epistemology of disagreement that was presented at Northwestern University in September

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## Diego E. Machuca

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