



## BOOK REVIEWS

**Matheson, Jonathan.** *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 190 + xii. ISBN 978-1-137-40089-5. \$109.99.

Matheson begins his investigation with an understatement: “The world is rife with disagreement.” I doubt anyone would disagree. What is contentious, however, is how we ought to respond to disagreement; that is, how we *epistemically* or *rationally* ought to respond. Matheson puts the question this way: “how does our awareness of such [i.e., religious, political, scientific, philosophical, etc.] disagreements affect the rationality of our beliefs on these topics?” (2). His own “somewhat radical” answer is that the rationality of our beliefs on controversial matters is dramatically affected by our awareness of disagreement—so much so that “we often are not epistemically justified in holding [such beliefs] at all” (2).

After addressing introductory matters in chapter one (such as explaining his terminology and why he considers relativism a non-starter), Matheson begins his main argument in chapter two, starting with an explanation of the concept of an *idealized peer disagreement*. In such a disagreement, you would be aware of someone who holds the opposite view from you on some particular issue, and

you would be aware this person is an *epistemic peer*—that is, this person has all and only the same evidence pertinent to the issue that you have, and this person is just as intelligent, skilled in reasoning, and sincere in seeking the truth as you are (29). In such a case, there is no epistemic difference between you and your opponent in the disagreement. If you suspect such idealized peer disagreements are rare, Matheson agrees with you. In fact, he admits that “it is doubtful whether it ever actually occurs” (33, cf. 113). Nevertheless, Matheson argues that the concept of the idealized peer disagreement serves the important function of focusing our attention on the epistemic significance of the disagreement itself. By considering the highly idealized cases, he argues, we come to see that the fact of the disagreement defeats our justification for our belief, even if this defeater might itself be defeated in non-idealized disagreement cases (33). As we will soon see, however, the epistemic consequences of disagreement turn out to be rather dramatic even if there are no real-world cases of *idealized* disagreement.

After considering and rejecting hold-your-ground “steadfast views” of disagreement (chapter three), Matheson turns to the direct positive case for his own view in chapter four. The view Matheson defends is known as the Equal

Weight View (hereafter “EWV”), which belongs to the “conciliatory” family of views. These views share in common the idea that idealized disagreement gives you a reason to reduce your confidence in your own belief, such that it would be irrational of you to not do so (66). The EWV is the most demanding of the conciliatory views in the sense that it demands you to give the most: evidence you are in an idealized peer disagreement not only provides you with a reason to modify your confidence in your belief, but it gives you a reason to give equal weight to both sides of the disagreement. Though there are different ways to do this, Matheson argues you should “split the difference” between your confidence (or doxastic attitude) and that of your opponent (74). For example, if you are an atheist and discover you are in an idealized epistemic peer disagreement with a theist, you should become an agnostic—that is, you should move from the doxastic attitude of believing God does not exist to withholding judgment on the issue. If your theist opponent is also being rational, he or she should move from theism to agnosticism. (This example is my own, and assumes a scale of three possible doxastic attitudes: belief, withholding judgment, and disbelief. Matheson remains neutral on the issue of whether doxastic attitudes are more fine-grained than this; see pp. 6-7.) Matheson’s own summary statement of his version of the EWV is as follows: “In gaining evidence that you are party to an idealized disagreement about  $p$ , you gain a reason to split the difference with the

other party with respect to  $p$  that is only defeated by considerations independent to [sic] the disagreement” (83).

Why that last clause, regarding how the defeater generated by awareness of idealized disagreement might itself be defeated? Matheson is concerned here to counter the claim, made by some epistemologists, that the very fact someone disagrees with you regarding some proposition for which you have very good evidence can be a reason to believe that person is your epistemic inferior (79-80, cf. 45-46). Matheson argues the first-order evidence regarding the disputed proposition cannot be used as higher-order that evidence that your handling of first-order evidence is better than your opponent’s. Whatever higher-order evidence you might appeal to in order to make such a judgment should be independent of the immediate disagreement (106-107). Matheson responds to a variety of objections to the EWV in chapter five.

In chapter six, the everyday epistemic significance of disagreement is brought to the fore. Matheson argues that, even when idealizations are stripped away, the EWV implies many of our everyday disagreements regarding controversial propositions defeat our justification for our doxastic attitudes toward those propositions (128-131). This is because, even if we have good reason to doubt our opponents in our disagreements are our epistemic peers, we will rarely have sufficient independent higher-order evidence to judge which of us is in the superior epistemic position (128). If we cannot

justifiably make such a judgment, then we ought to treat the disagreement *as if it were* an idealized peer disagreement. Being skeptical about the status of our higher-order evidence therefore should result in skepticism toward (withholding of judgment regarding) the disputed proposition (135).

This, then, is Matheson's "somewhat radical" result: the EWV results in skepticism toward controversial propositions, and especially controversial propositions in politics, religion, science, and philosophy (135). Does this make the EWV self-defeating? After all, the propositions that compose the EWV are, themselves, currently controversial propositions in philosophy; therefore, by his own reasoning, Matheson should suspend judgment regarding whether the EWV is true. Matheson addresses this (and other) objections to the skeptical implications of the EWV in chapter seven, where he admits the higher-order evidence of philosophical disagreement about the EWV is, indeed, evidence that supports withholding judgment regarding the view (152-153). However, he argues, this does not make the view self-defeating, since this doesn't imply the view is *false*. At most, it just implies one would not be epistemically justified in believing the view is true—it does not imply competitor "steadfast" views are correct (154-156). In other words, the fact the EWV has the consequence of recommending withholding judgment about its own truth is not evidence it is not true; therefore, it is not self-defeating.

But this reply doesn't explain what justifies Matheson (or anyone else) in believing the EWV is true and commending it to others—as he clearly does. After all, it would seem he has admitted he lacks epistemic justification for believing the EWV. Perhaps he would respond by pointing out that, since the EWV is only a view about how epistemic reasons support or fail to support *synchronic* epistemic justification (how your epistemic reasons support your doxastic attitude at a particular moment in time), it does not entail there are no other kinds of "epistemic goods" *besides* the good of having synchronically epistemically justified beliefs (nor, for that matter, does it entail there *aren't* other kinds of reasons—pragmatic, moral, religious, etc.—that are also relevant to one's "all things considered" justification for belief) (144). Perhaps the *communal* epistemic good of discovering truth and avoiding falsehood over time *diachronically* justifies individual persistence in believing and publically advocating for a controversial view (144-145). Consequently, you can have reasons, and even epistemic reasons, that justify advocating a particular view that does seem true to you, in spite of your awareness of disagreement from (possible) epistemic peers. So perhaps Matheson regards himself as not having synchronic epistemic justification for believing the EWV is true, but he does regard himself as having diachronic justification for his belief and advocacy—even if he shouldn't claim to *know* the view is true. Indeed, he concludes his book by stressing the

importance of intellectual humility, and stating, “I do not claim to know many of the claims contained herein” (166).

Matheson has written an engaging book that not only argues for a the EWV regarding the epistemic significance of disagreement, but also presents the reader with a helpful guide to the various positions currently taken by the philosophers debating the issue and the arguments that have been used to defend their various views. Polanyi scholars will be particularly interested in the discussion in chapter seven regarding the skeptical implications of the view, and limiting factors on that skepticism. As we have seen, considerations regarding distinctions between kinds of reasons, and even kinds of epistemic reasons, become important in understanding the rationality of belief in controversial matters. Interesting work could be done bringing Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* into the current debate regarding the epistemic significance of disagreement, and specifically into conversation with Matheson’s book.

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**Trepanier, Lee and Eugene Callahan, eds. *Tradition v. Rationalism: Voegelin, Oakeshott, Hayek, and Others*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018. Pp. 265 + xviii. ISBN 1-4985-7172-2. \$105.**

What distinguishes humans from other animals? Some focus on our ability to make tools. Others assert that it is our capacity for language. Neurological investigations indicate that these capabilities are located in our left hemisphere. But isn’t it the case that other animals make tools and communicate with each other? Some distinguish us from other animals by drawing our attention to the capabilities of our right hemisphere. While our left hemisphere (which is attentive to predation) re-presents our awareness, our right hemisphere (which is attentive to predators) generates our contextual awareness. These emergent capabilities do not replace earlier abilities, they are built over our lizard brain, our mouse brain, our monkey brain, and so forth. The expansion of our frontal cortex in each hemisphere enhances our capacity to reflect creatively on our immediate experience, but in a different way. Each comprehends the world differently. Our right brain hemisphere is more dominant. Or at least it should be. McGilchrist, in *The Master and his Emissary* (2009), claims Western culture (since the Enlightenment and possibly from the beginning) has become too left-brained—which is another way of saying that it has become too rationalist.