

24.805: The Epistemology of Controversy

Fall 2022

Kevin Dorst, kmdorst@mit.edu

32-D931 and <https://mit.zoom.us/my/kevindorst>, OH: Tuesdays, 4–5pm

Roger White, rog@mit.edu,

32-D924, OH: Tuesday 11–12

Class: Mondays 2–5pm

Classroom: 32-D831

Course Description: We will examine a cluster of issues in social epistemology concerning the ways that our opinions differ. We will begin by looking back at some of the influential papers on the epistemology of disagreement and the problem of “irrelevant influences” on belief. Then we’ll move on to contemporary work on bias and polarization. Some questions addressed: Under what circumstances is it rational for agents to disagree? How should the information that others I respect disagree with me affect my confidence in my views? What should I make of the fact that had I been raised in a different environment I would likely have different moral/political/religious opinions? What does it mean for an inquiry to be biased? Is bias always a bad thing? What are the factors that explain increasing political polarization? Should we expect polarization to be mitigated by increased exposure to the same body of evidence, if people are being rational?

Readings: All readings will be made available on the course website:

https://www.kevindorst.com/fa22_epistemology.html

Grading: A term paper. A *draft* must be turned in by **December 20**, to be revised with the final version turned in by **February 6, 2023**.

Disability Accommodations. If there’s any issue to touch base about, let us know! Disability and Access Services: <https://studentlife.mit.edu/das>.

Self-Care and Well-Being

Grad school is hard. So please, get into the habit of building self-care into your schedule—whether it’s in the form of exercise, time talking to friends/family, or even just to relax. Do it! You’ll find that you are much more productive if you do.

MIT also has resources to help. See <https://medical.mit.edu/services/mental-health-counseling>, or call 617-253-2916—a line that’s open 24 hours a day. For grad-student-specific resources: the Office of Graduate Education (OGE), GradSupport provides consultation, coaching, and advocacy to graduate students on matters related to academic and life challenges. Contact GradSupport at gradsupport@mit.edu or at (617) 253-4860.

Schedule

I. Disagreement

Sep. 12 (Both)

- Kelly 2005, The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement (Roger)
 - Primer on probability (Kevin)
- No reading. If you'd like more, the first two chapters of [this textbook](#) are fantastic.

Sept. 19 (Roger)

- Elga 2007, Reflection and Disagreement
- McGrath 2008, Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise

Sept. 26 (Roger)

- Elga 2010, How to Disagree about How to Disagree
- Pittard 2015, Resolute Conciliationism

II. Irrelevant Influences

Oct. 3 (Kevin)

- White 2010, You Just Believe That Because...
- Schoenfield 2017, Meditations on Beliefs Formed Arbitrarily

Oct. 10: No Class

Oct. 17 (Roger)

- Mogensen, Contingency Anxiety and the Epistemology of Disagreement
- Avnur and Kakures, How Irrelevant Influences Bias Belief
- Paul 2021, The Paradox of Empathy

III. Permissivism

Oct. 24 (Both)

- White 2005, Epistemic Permissiveness (Kevin)
- Schoenfield 2014, Permission to Believe (Roger)

Oct. 31 (Roger)

- Schoenfield, Horowitz, and Dogramaci, Are you now or have you ever been a permissivist
- Christensen, Conciliationism, Uniqueness, and Rational Toxicity

IV. Bias and Polarization

Nov. 7 (Roger)

- Rini, Fake News and Partisan Epistemology
- Worsnip, The Obligation to Diversify One's Sources

Nov. 14 (Kevin)

- Kelly 2008, Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization
- McWilliams 2019, Evidentialism and Belief Polarization
(OR McWilliams 2021?)

Nov. 21 (Kevin)

- Henderson and Gebharder 2021, The Role of Source Reliability in Belief Polarisation
- Salow 2019, The Externalists Guide to Fishing for Compliments (Section 1)
- [Something else?]

Nov. 28 (Kevin)

- Kamenica 2019, Bayesian Persuasion and Information Design
- Little 2022, Bayesian Explanations for Persuasion

Dec. 5 (Kevin)

- Wilson 2014, Bounded Memory and Biases in Information Processing
- Dallmann 2017, When Obstinacy is the Best Policy

Dec. 12 (You!)

- Student presentations