
CONTINGENCY ANXIETY AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF DISAGREEMENT

BY

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Abstract: Upon discovering that certain beliefs we hold are contingent on arbitrary features of our background, we often feel uneasy. I defend the proposal that if such cases of *contingency anxiety* involve defeaters, this is because of the epistemic significance of disagreement. I note two hurdles to our accepting this *Disagreement Hypothesis*. Firstly, some cases of contingency anxiety apparently involve no disagreement. Secondly, the proposal may seem to make our awareness of the influence of arbitrary background factors irrelevant in determining whether to revise our beliefs. I show that each of these problems can be successfully accommodated by the *Disagreement Hypothesis*.

1. Introduction

In this article, I explore the phenomenon of *contingency anxiety*: the sense of unease we often feel when we discover that we hold certain beliefs due to arbitrary features of our background, such as the identity of our parents, the culture in which we were raised, our gender, etc. Given variation in these background features, we (or someone otherwise similar)¹ would have believed the contrary of what we now believe. Because the background features are arbitrary, this sense of contingency makes us uneasy: we feel some inclination to lower our confidence or revise our beliefs altogether.

The epistemology of contingency anxiety is underexplored,² but touches on a number of important issues in contemporary epistemology, including hot-button results in experimental philosophy and evolutionary debunking

arguments in ethics. In this article, I support the view that we can reduce the epistemology of contingency anxiety to another fashionable topic in contemporary epistemology. I defend the view, suggested by Roger White, that if cases of contingency anxiety involve defeaters, this will be due to the epistemic significance of disagreement.³ I call this the *Disagreement Hypothesis*.

In Section 2, I clarify some terminological issues and give a number of cases that I think are exemplary of contingency anxiety. I then consider why cases of contingency anxiety might involve defeaters. In Section 3, I show that certain natural answers to this question don't stand up to scrutiny, and I introduce the claim that whatever defeaters arise in cases of contingency anxiety are due to the epistemic significance of disagreement. I'll outline how my own proposal differs from White's. I then note two significant hurdles to our accepting the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. The first is that, while many cases of contingency anxiety do involve disagreement, some don't, and those that do can seem equally problematic if re-described in such a way that no disagreement is present. The second problem is that if we assume that whatever defeaters arise in cases of contingency anxiety are due to the epistemic significance of disagreement, this appears to leave no work for our awareness of the influence of arbitrary background factors in terms of giving us reasons to revise our beliefs. It would be highly surprising, however, if these aetiological considerations turned out to be epistemically irrelevant: they seem so salient to our unease. In Sections 4 and 5, I show that each of these problems can be successfully accommodated by the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. This is a case where the Nietzschean dictum about the things that don't kill us holds true: these phenomena, which initially seem fatal for the *Disagreement Hypothesis*, are ultimately explained by it with remarkable success.

2. Contingency anxiety

In this section, I want us to get better acquainted with the phenomenon at issue.

To begin, we should be clear on some basic definitional issues. Let us say that a condition *C* is *arbitrary* relative to *S*'s belief that *p* iff *S*'s knowing that *C* obtains provides (or would provide) no reason for *S* to believe *p*. Thus, whether I'm wearing red socks is arbitrary with respect to my belief that Istanbul is in Turkey. Let us then say that a condition *C* is a *background factor* relative to *S*'s believing *p* iff *C* contributes to the explanation of *S*'s believing *p*, but *C* forms no part of the *grounds* on which *S* bases her belief that *p*. Thus, my having been born in Denmark is a background factor relative to my belief that there is a Jutlandish dialect that allows you to construct a meaningful sentence with no consonants.

Contingency anxiety arises, as I've said, in cases where we discover that our beliefs about some topic are contingent on some arbitrary background factor, such that varying the background would yield some contrary belief at the other end. So understood, contingency anxiety does not exhaust the wider phenomenon whereby we come to feel that we ought to revise our beliefs in light of new information about their background: our topic is narrower than that. To take an extreme example, suppose I discover that I have always been just a brain in a vat. I ought now to be much less confident that there is a university in Cambridge. This, however, is not because of any worry to do with what I would have believed had I not been envatted: for all I know, I would have believed the very same. This is a case in which information about background factors should lead me to reduce my confidence, but it is not a case of contingency anxiety.

Here are some examples of the genuine article. Writing in *On Liberty* of the high confidence placed by the typical man in his own opinions and in those shared by individuals around him, J. S. Mill writes:

He devolves upon his own world the responsibility of being in the right against the dissentient worlds of other people and it never troubles him that mere accident has decided which of these numerous worlds is the object of his reliance, and that the same causes which make him a Churchman in London, would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Peking.⁴

Mill believes, of course, that this should be troubling. A similar position is taken by Jerry Cohen.⁵ Cohen enjoyed a strongly political upbringing among working-class Marxists in Montreal. He claims, plausibly, that he is a Marxist *because* of his upbringing: had he been raised in the upper-middle-class part of Montreal, his present political beliefs would not be nearly so left-wing. And this troubles him: he feels much less confident of his political beliefs, knowing that he would not have them had he been raised differently.

Cohen's contingency anxiety extends to his beliefs about the philosophy of language. When Cohen left Canada in the 1950s, he had to choose between attending graduate school at Oxford or Harvard. Finding the prospect of leaving for Europe more romantic, he chose Oxford. He came out of the *BPhil* believing, like his fellow Oxonians, that certain truths were analytic, others synthetic. His Crimson counterparts came out denying the existence of any such distinction. Cohen says: 'I think I can say that I believe in the analytic/synthetic distinction because I studied at Oxford. And that is disturbing. For the fact that I studied at Oxford is no reason for thinking that the distinction is sound.'⁶

Continuing in the vein of such rarefied philosophical beliefs, Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich claim that analytic philosophers' intuitions about knowledge are culturally parochial, reflecting arbitrary facets of Western social organization and/or social identity.⁷ Their work takes inspiration from Richard Nisbett's claim that Western and East

Asian subjects exhibit cognitive differences traceable to differences in social structure and social identity, in turn reflecting long-run historical differences in the economic means of subsistence.⁸ Based on Nisbett's work, Weinberg *et al.* predicted that Western and East Asian subjects would differ in their intuitions about a standard Gettier case. This prediction was apparently confirmed.⁹ Because they seem contingent on arbitrary cultural factors, the authors suggest that epistemic intuitions are not apt to play the role they have come to play in analytic epistemology.

More generally, the experimental philosophy literature is littered with cases in which people's intuitive judgments appear to vary according to some arbitrary background factor: cultural differences are correlated with differing intuitions about reference¹⁰; people's moral and epistemic intuitions about certain cases depend on the order in which they are given¹¹; some philosophical intuitions are correlated with heritable personality traits¹²; and some studies have found significant correlations between gender and philosophical intuitions.¹³

As a final example of contingency anxiety, I'd like us to consider what I call the *phyletic contingency* of our moral beliefs. Evidence suggests that human morality is, at least partly, an outgrowth of certain innate affective dispositions inherited from the last common ancestor of *Homo* and *Pan*.¹⁴ These bias our intuitions about harm, reciprocity, inequality, and a number of other topics. The biases fit the character of hominine social life. Had the conditions for the evolution of moral thought been realized in some distantly related species, their moral outlook would most likely incorporate certain fundamental differences in moral intuition, appropriate to their form of life. As Michael Ruse and E.O. Wilson put it, 'ethical premises are the peculiar products of genetic history'.¹⁵ This point was emphasized already by Darwin:

If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering.¹⁶

We could continue adding examples to this list, but I think we have enough already. I hope you feel that there exists a shared problematic running through these otherwise dissimilar cases. The question for us now is what we are to make of this phenomenon.

3. *The disagreement hypothesis*

My first task in this section will be to make the phenomenon of contingency anxiety seem more perplexing than it might first have appeared. To do so,

I'll show that certain natural explanations for why cases of contingency anxiety involve defeaters turn out to be fatally flawed.

Consider, firstly, the following principle:

Arbitrary Doxastic Defeat:

Necessarily, for any S, p : If S believes p but knows that she (or someone otherwise similar) would have believed some contrary of p had some arbitrary background factor been otherwise, S thereby has a defeater for her belief that p .

This principle might seem plausible in light of some of the cases we've considered. We might also feel some attraction to the following, closely related principle:

Arbitrary Intuitional Defeat:

Necessarily, for any S, p : If S has the intuition that p but knows that she (or someone otherwise similar) would have had an intuition whose content is some contrary of p had some arbitrary background factor been otherwise, S thereby has a defeater for believing p on the basis of her intuition.

Arbitrary Intuitional Defeat is very similar to a principle identified by Joachim Horvath¹⁷ as underlying the experimentalists' critique of philosophical intuitions:

Horvath's Principle:

'If intuitions about hypothetical cases vary with irrelevant factors, then they are not epistemically trustworthy.'¹⁸

Adam Feltz and Edward Cokely endorse this principle,¹⁹ and it seems a good fit for remarks made by Joshua Alexander and Jonathan Weinberg.²⁰ However, *Horvath's Principle*, like *Arbitrary Intuitional Defeat* and *Arbitrary Doxastic Defeat*, is clearly wrong. To see the falsity of *Arbitrary Doxastic Defeat*, consider:

Corner Shop:

Albert believes that the corner shop closes at midnight. A lover of spaghetti, Albert eats too much pasta one night, has trouble falling asleep, and goes for a walk around the block: he discovers that the corner shop is still open at 1 am. Albert realizes that if he didn't love spaghetti so much, he would still believe that the corner shop closes at midnight.

Albert's greed for pasta is an arbitrary background factor, but his knowledge that he would have believed the opposite of what he currently believes had he not loved spaghetti shouldn't shake his confidence that the shop is open past midnight. So *Arbitrary Doxastic Defeat* must be false.

Here's a case that rules out both *Arbitrary Intuitional Defeat* and *Horvath's Principle*.

My Bayesian Love:

I once studied probability theory with great passion because I wanted to impress a woman who happened to be a Bayesian. Consequently, my probabilistic intuitions are fine-tuned and avoid all the common biases. I'm asked about a hypothetical case that requires me to estimate a certain conditional probability. My intuition is that the probability would be 0.8. I know that if I hadn't been in love with that woman, my probabilistic intuitions would have been different and I would have given some other answer.

Affairs of the heart are irrelevant to the facts of probability. Still, my awareness that my intuition would have been otherwise but for my romantic inclinations – and that intuitions about hypothetical cases can vary according to whom one finds desirable – shouldn't worry me at all.

How do these cases differ from those described in Section 2? Clearly, not in respect of being cases in which some arbitrary background factor makes the difference between one's belief/intuition being one way as opposed to another. But wasn't that precisely what was supposed to be disturbing about those cases? What is really going on, then?

Here is one possible reply. There's some inclination to say that what is worrying about the case discussed in Section 2 is that one could be right only as a matter of luck. Mill homes in on the fact that 'mere accident has decided' what our beliefs should be. It might be thought that what differentiates *Corner Shop* or *My Bayesian Love* from the cases in Section 2 is that these involve a different and less disturbing form of epistemic luck. There are many varieties of epistemic luck, after all. Although knowledge excludes some forms of luck, it does not exclude all.²¹ Similarly, we might think that awareness that one could be right about some issue only as a matter of luck might be defeating, but only for certain forms of luck – those present in the cases discussed in Section 2, but not in those discussed above. This is what we should expect if our instincts are right in identifying epistemic luck as significant to the cases from Section 2.

There are two problems for this proposal, however. The first is that it is not clear that there is any form of luck that would allow one to differentiate between the two kinds of case. Consider two varieties of luck that are widely agreed to be compatible with knowledge: *evidential luck* and *capacity luck*. The former occurs when a person is lucky to have the evidence that she relies on, the latter when she is lucky to have the relevant cognitive abilities. *Corner Shop* may be thought to involve evidential luck, and *My Bayesian Love* might seem to involve capacity luck. It is not clear, however, that there is any different element of luck involved in the cases discussed in Section 2. To the extent that these involve luck, the luck seems to relate to having been granted the right evidence or the ability to respond to it correctly.

The second problem is that luck seems inessential to the cases discussed in Section 2. It cannot easily be attributed in some. Plausibly, a state of affairs is lucky only if it obtains in the actual world but not in most nearby worlds: anything lucky could easily have failed to obtain.²² Because personality and gender are to a great extent down to genetic origin, it is doubtful that one's personality or gender is a matter of luck. However, gender and heritable personality traits are potential sources of contingency anxiety, as we saw.

Once we see that luck is inessential to contingency anxiety, we can envisage modifications of those cases in Section 2 which *did* involve luck: modifications in which the element of luck is cancelled, but our unease remains. Roger White uses this strategy to rule out that Cohen's grad school case has to anything do with the fact that Cohen would have to have been lucky to have chosen the right philosophy programme. Perhaps it was highly contingent that Cohen chose Oxford over Harvard. However, White notes that this is feature is inessential:

Perhaps he couldn't have gone to Harvard. Perhaps he was blacklisted in the United States for his communist sympathies. ... [T]hat there was no real risk of his having formed different philosophical opinions seems to do nothing to alleviate the apparent problem Cohen faces.²³

White is generally skeptical that facts about the distal causes of our beliefs have any relevance to whether we should revise our beliefs in cases of contingency anxiety. He notes that such cases are likely to trigger extraneous epistemic worries, which might be doing all the work. In particular, White points to a general connection borne by cases of contingency anxiety to the phenomenon of disagreement.²⁴ As he notes, showing that one's beliefs derive from certain idiosyncrasies of personal background will generally require showing (or rendering salient) that people with different backgrounds hold different beliefs. Disagreement might of itself constitute a reason to revise one's beliefs, and this might be what makes us so nervous, rather than any facts about distal background factors.

With respect to Cohen's case, White thinks that any defeater must derive from Cohen's knowledge that Oxford and Harvard philosophers disagree about the analytic/synthetic distinction. He supports this diagnosis as follows. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Oxford and Harvard are the only graduate programmes in philosophy. In one scenario, *Correlation*, we suppose that there is disagreement about the analytic/synthetic distinction and it is distributed according to one's choice of graduate programme: the Oxonians believe in it; the Crimson do not. In *No Correlation*, there is the same level of disagreement about the analytic/synthetic distinction, but it is now randomly distributed throughout the philosophical population. Would an Oxford philosopher who endorsed the analytic/synthetic distinction have any less reason to revise her beliefs in *No Correlation* than in *Correlation*? White sees no clear reason to think that she would. We could

imagine taking a similar line on the evidence of cultural variability in epistemic intuitions put forward by Weinberg *et al.* Imagine a counterpart to the *No Correlation* scenario. Suppose Weinberg *et al.* discover that people are far more likely to reject the standard Gettier intuition than philosophers had imagined. However, they uncover no demographic variables that predict who will deny that subjects in Gettier cases lack knowledge: the Gettier-deniers are randomly distributed across cultural boundaries. Would this be any less worrying? If so, why?

My own view is that, for any case of contingency anxiety, any defeater that occurs is to be explained by reference to the epistemic significance of disagreement. I call this the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. While this view in the spirit of White's paper, White himself never affirms anything quite so strong. A more important respect in which I differ from White is the following. White treats an emphasis on disagreement as an alternative to thinking that facts about the distal causes of our beliefs enter into our reasons for belief-revision in cases of contingency anxiety. For reasons that I outline in Section 5, I do not: the *Disagreement Hypothesis* allows that our awareness of the influence of arbitrary background factors can affect our reasons for revising our beliefs. This, I think, is a virtue of my view. And it allows me to say, for reasons that I will explain, that the *Correlation* scenarios should be more worrying than the *No Correlation* scenarios.

White's discussion gives some support to the *Disagreement Hypothesis*, but there are two apparently very serious problems that must be overcome if it is to be plausible as a general account of contingency anxiety. I noted these in the introduction: firstly, any element of disagreement can easily seem inessential to cases of contingency anxiety; secondly, placing the emphasis on disagreement seems to rule out any role for knowledge of the relevance of arbitrary background factors in terms of giving us reasons to revise our beliefs. I will expand on these issues in the sections that follow, where I show that both problems can be solved.

4. *Arbitrarily absent disagreement*

Here is the first problem for the *Disagreement Hypothesis*: while many cases of contingency anxiety involve disagreement, some do not, and those that do might seem equally problematic were no disagreement involved.

First off, if we are worried by the thought that our moral outlook is parochial to hominine social life and we count this as a case of contingency anxiety (as we did), then not all cases of contingency anxiety involve disagreement. With respect to those of our moral beliefs which are supposed to reflect idiosyncratic features of our evolutionary descent, there is little or no disagreement: these beliefs are supposed to be part of human nature.

Even if there are certain people who dispute them, *they* are not the problem we're worrying about when we worry that our moral outlook exhibits phyletic contingency.

It also seems that cases of contingency anxiety which *do* involve disagreement would be equally problematic if we imagine taking out the element of disagreement, just as White imagined taking out the element of luck in Cohen's grad school case. Cohen himself makes a move in this direction. He writes:

... suppose I were to discover that I have an identical twin, who was raised not in a communist home but in a politically middle-of-the-road home, and that my twin has the easy tolerance toward limited inequality which I learned to lack. That, I confess, would disturb my confidence in my own uncompromising egalitarianism. ... That I am *in fact* twinless should not reduce the challenge to my inherited convictions which is posed by the story I've told. An entirely plausible story could be told about a *hypothetical* disagreeing twin, and it would, or should, be just as challenging as a true story, to those of us who believe what we were brought up to believe.²⁵

This suggests that disagreement can be stripped out without altering the problem: whether or not there actually exists a counterpart with a different background who disputes one's beliefs doesn't matter.

White rejects Cohen's claims on this point, saying that 'it is hard to see what threat a merely hypothetical disputant poses.'²⁶ Since we are fallible, White notes, the bare possibility of disagreement is always in play, and no more expected conditional on the truth or falsity of what we believe. Actual instances of disagreement do not follow the same pattern:

It is a *necessary* truth that it is *possible* for someone to disagree with Cohen. ... That someone *actually* disagrees is a contingent matter, and one that is more to be expected given that his arguments are not so good than that they are.²⁷

In light of White's argument, it may seem implausible that stripping out disagreement should really leave matters untouched, but it is difficult to shake the impression that Cohen is on to something.

To get to grips with this issue, I am now going to argue that there are some cases in which the world-boundaries between dissenting verdicts do not matter.²⁸ I will begin by defending and explaining this claim; I will then show how it solves our problem, and why White's reply to Cohen is irrelevant.

My view is that arbitrarily absent disagreement has the same epistemic significance as actual disagreement, all else being equal. More exactly:

The Arbitrary Absence Thesis:

Necessarily for any S_1, S_2, p : If S_1 believes p and knows that S_2 would believe some contrary of p if not for some condition C , which is arbitrary with respect to S_1 's belief that p , S_1 should be as confident of p as S_1 ought to be of p if, all else being equal, S_1 knew that S_2 does believe some contrary of p .

To see why we should endorse this principle, we'll start by considering a case of disagreement that I hope you'll agree involves defeat. I borrow this example from David Christensen:²⁹

The Restaurant Case:

You go out to dinner. There are eighteen people in your party: your seventeen companions are experts at mental arithmetic; you are only ordinarily reliable. After dinner, you decide to leave a 20% tip and otherwise split the bill evenly. You all see the bill clearly. Suppose you calculate that your share is \$43 each. Everyone else says that your shares come to \$45.

I assume your awareness that the experts disagree with you in this case is defeating. To see why we should accept that arbitrarily absent disagreement is no less worrying, consider what happens when we add some bells-and-whistles to this case. In the first instance, consider:

The Restaurant Case:*

As in the *Restaurant Case*, except that on discovering that everyone else takes \$45 to be your share, you take out your mind-changing ray-gun and zap them into agreeing with you.

Now there is no disagreement, but it doesn't seem that you should be any more confident.

Of course, it might be said that there is still disagreement with respect to your belief, albeit *located in the past*. We can overcome this problem by thinking further outside the box. Let's suppose that you have precognitive powers that allow you to predict and prevent undesirable events before they occur. Now, consider the following:

*The Restaurant Case**:*

As in the *Restaurant Case*, except that you first calculate your share of the bill to be \$43 and then wait for the maths experts to get to work. You correctly predict that they are all just about to arrive at the answer '\$45', but you pre-emptively use your mind-changing ray gun and zap them into agreeing with you. They never form the belief in question.

Intuitively your confidence that \$43 is the correct answer should be no higher in the *Restaurant Case*** than in the *Restaurant Case* or *Restaurant Case**. Although no one actually disputes your belief in this case, this is due to your own arbitrary intervention; and if a mind-changing ray-gun cannot cancel the epistemic significance of disagreement after the fact, neither can your pre-emptive effort here. This suggests that arbitrarily absent disagreement has the same epistemic significance as actual disagreement, all else being equal: if a dissenting verdict has been excluded from actuality by something irrelevant, we should proceed as if it had not been so excluded.

There is an additional line of support for the *Arbitrary Absence Thesis*: namely, that it reflects a more general phenomenon about evidence. Someone might suppose that if the *Arbitrary Absence Thesis* were true, this would tell us something important about the epistemology of disagreement: namely, that insofar as we have reason to change our view in cases of disagreement, disagreement itself is not the issue; there must be some separate, underlying factor that is doing the real work. How else could it be that we can extract the element of disagreement and leave matters unchanged?³⁰ However, the tendency of actual and arbitrarily absent disagreement to have the same epistemic significance ultimately tells us nothing special about the epistemology of disagreement, because other kinds of evidence behave exactly similarly. The generality of this phenomenon provides further support for the *Arbitrary Absence Thesis*.

Consider an analogy. Begin with this case:

Murder!

We are investigating a murder. Luckily, we have the gun that was used, and Bob's fingerprints are all over it.

Case closed. Now, compare:

*Murder!**

We are investigating a murder. We have the gun, but Bob's fingerprints are not on it. However, we know that Bob's fingerprints would be on the gun if not for the fact that the handle does not absorb fingerprints.

Intuitively, our knowledge in this second case provides no worse evidence for Bob's guilt: arbitrarily absent fingerprints incriminate just as well as actual fingerprints. *Murder!** plausibly stands to *Murder!* as the *Restaurant Case*** to the *Restaurant Case*. However, we are not led to suspect, by comparison of the first pair, that fingerprints are not *really* evidence of guilt: that conclusion is obviously absurd. If anything, the fact that arbitrarily absent fingerprints are strong evidence of guilt is parasitic on the tendency of actual fingerprints to incriminate: if fingerprints were not evidence of guilt, knowing that Bob's fingerprints would have been on the gun would be no evidence of guilt either. By parity, that actual and arbitrarily absent disagreement have the same epistemic significance should not imply that disagreement does not *really* provide grounds for belief-revision. As with fingerprints, we should expect that the epistemic significance of arbitrarily absent disagreement is parasitic on the epistemic significance had by actual disagreement. Thus, if I should suspend judgment in the *Restaurant Case*** this is because I should suspend judgment in the *Restaurant Case* in light of the disagreement occurring there.

It should now be easy to see how adopting the *Arbitrary Absence Thesis* solves the first problem I've noted for the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. The

problem was that cases of contingency anxiety seemed equally problematic if we imagined taking out the element of disagreement. This can be fully accommodated while maintaining the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. In cases of contingency anxiety, I, or someone otherwise like myself, would have believed the contrary of what I now believe had some arbitrary background factor been otherwise: if the arbitrary background condition did not hold, you would get a belief that opposes my own. By the *Arbitrary Absence Thesis*, it follows straightforwardly that whether this dissenting verdict is actualized is irrelevant: since it is known that it would occur but for some arbitrary condition, its epistemic significance is the same whether it is actual or absent. Thus, the *Arbitrary Absence Thesis* vindicates Cohen's claim that discovering he has an identical twin raised to tolerate inequality should be no more worrying than his awareness that he could have had such a twin, so long as we are allowed the plausible assumption that the conditions that would keep Cohen from having an identical twin raised in this way are entirely arbitrary.

As for White's reply to Cohen, we can see, I think, that White is actually arguing for the entirely plausible, but strictly irrelevant, claim that *merely possible* disagreement can never be a cause for concern over and above our awareness of our own fallibility. White speaks in terms of 'a merely hypothetical disputant'.³¹ I think the term 'merely' diverts our attention from what is really at issue. In the *Restaurant Case*, if I have my eyes closed in order to concentrate and have just arrived at \$43 as my answer, I might note that there is some possible world in which all of my dinner companions have arrived at a contrary result. That sort of disagreement is aptly described as 'merely possible'. In the *Restaurant Case***, where I know that everyone else would have arrived at a contrary result, it seems infelicitous to describe this as disagreement that is 'merely possible'. It seems rather more than that. In light of our fallibility, the mere possibility of disagreement is, as White says, never more to be expected conditional on the truth or falsity of what we believe. The same cannot be said about arbitrarily absent disagreement. In the *Restaurant Case***, where I know that all of my companions would have arrived at a contrary result, this is not something that I should have expected in any case: it is more to be expected conditional on the falsity of my view. Once we make clear that we are concerned with the epistemic significance of arbitrarily absent disagreement and *not* merely possible disagreement, White's counterargument should not worry us.

Finally, by considering the analogy with *Murder!* versus *Murder!**, we should not think that the epistemic significance of disagreement is irrelevant in cases of contingency anxiety simply because it is possible for disagreement to be extricated from these cases without reducing our sense of unease. This is entirely compatible with the claim that any defeater arising in cases of contingency anxiety derives from the epistemic significance of disagreement: the epistemic significance of disagreement explains the presence of any defeaters

in these stripped-down cases, just as our evidence for Bob's guilt in *Murder!** depends on the evidentiary significance typically had by the discovery of a person's fingerprints on a murder weapon. We just have to say that if disagreement does not occur in some case of contingency anxiety, any defeater that does occur is due to the epistemic significance that such disagreement would have had, had it occurred. The epistemic significance of disagreement is still doing the work, albeit with help from the *Arbitrary Absence Thesis*.

5. *The role of arbitrary background factors*

Here is the second problem that I noted for the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. We may worry that if any defeaters arising in cases of contingency anxiety derive from the epistemic significance of disagreement, this rules out that facts about the role of arbitrary background factors contribute to our reasons for revising our beliefs: all the work is being done by disagreement. This would be surprising: awareness of the relevance of arbitrary background features seems so central to our unease. It would be remarkable if our anxiety turned out to be so misplaced.

To bolster this problem, consider another example discussed by Cohen. He asks us to imagine that identical twins are separated at birth: one is raised to be a devout Presbyterian; the other is raised to be a devout Roman Catholic. Later in life, they meet and get into a religious argument. The considerations put forward in the argument are familiar to both, and neither is sufficiently impressed by these to alter her opinion. But that is not the end of the story:

Then each of them realizes that, had she been brought up where her sister was, and vice versa, then it is overwhelmingly likely that (as one of them expresses the realization) *she* would now be Roman Catholic and her sister would now be Presbyterian. That realization might, and, I think, should, make it more difficult for the sisters to sustain their opposed religious convictions.³²

There seems to be some added kick in that realization. As I'll now argue, the *Disagreement Hypothesis* is compatible with this intuition. It allows that our awareness of the influence of arbitrary background factors can contribute to our reasons for revising our beliefs.

When we disagree, it matters why we disagree: the epistemic significance of disagreement is modulated by our explanatory knowledge (or lack thereof) regarding the causes of disagreement. Consider the following:

Macroeconomics:

We disagree about whether immigration decreases the wages of low-skilled workers, but I know that this is because you have not seen the latest paper from the Policy Think Tank.

Here, we disagree, but since I know that you lack some relevant evidence, I have no reason to change my mind. Note that the explanatory significance of the difference in evidence is key. Compare:

*Macroeconomics**:

We disagree about whether immigration decreases the wages of low-skilled workers, and I know that you have not seen the latest paper from the Policy Think Tank. I also know that giving it a look wouldn't change your opinion: you would think the paper riddled with errors and continue to dispute my opinion.

Plausibly, I have less reason to remain steadfast in *Macroeconomics**. And, plausibly, this is because, although you lack the same piece of evidence in both cases, only in the latter does this explain our disagreement. Similarly, consider:

Violin Recital:

We are listening to your daughter play the violin. I judge that she is only mediocre in ability, but you think she is talented. I know that you are generally biased in favour of your daughter.

Plausibly, I should not be moved by your contrary assessment here, because I know that you are generally biased in your daughter's favour. This requires, however, that the bias explains your verdict. To see this, consider:

*Violin Recital**:

We are listening to your daughter play the violin. I judge that she is only mediocre in ability, but you think she is talented. I know that you are generally biased in favour of your daughter. However, I also know that this bias does *not* explain your verdict in this case.

Here, it is much less obvious that I should remain steadfast.

Finally, I want us to consider the following case, due to Jennifer Lackey:³³

Lunchtime Hallucination:

Estelle, Edwin, and I, have been room-mates for the past eight years. During lunch, I ask Edwin to pass the wine to Estelle, and he replies, 'Estelle isn't here today'. It seems to me clear as day that Estelle is sitting to my right. Prior to this, neither Edwin nor I had any reason to expect that the other is prone to hallucinations or psychoses.

About this case, Lackey says: 'it seems clearly rational for me to continue to believe just as strongly that Estelle is present at the table.'³⁴ I don't share the intuition that my confidence should remain *entirely* unfazed in this case, but I do feel that I can continue to believe, with reasonably confidence, that Estelle is at the table and Edwin is hallucinating. This may seem to challenge the following principle, proposed by Christensen:

Independence:

'In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another's expressed belief about P, in order to determine how (or whether) to modify my own belief about P, I should do so in a way that doesn't rely on the reasoning behind my initial belief about P.'³⁵

In dismissing Edwin's contrary verdict, it might seem that I have to rely on my own conclusion that Estelle is present: I have no other grounds for supposing that he is hallucinating. However, as Lackey³⁶ and Christensen³⁷ note, there is an alternative diagnosis available, consistent with *Independence*. When I discover that Edwin and I disagree in *Lunchtime Hallucination*, it's clear that one of us is suffering from a major psychological malfunction. Independently of my own verdict, I should be significantly more confident that any such malfunction would be on Edwin's side, because I know a great deal more about myself: for example, I can be more confident in ruling out that I have recently suffered a blow to the head. There are many explanations for why we disagree that I can rule out in this way by virtue of my privileged self-knowledge. We can, however, vary the details of *Lunchtime Hallucination* so as to eliminate this feature:

Lunchtime Hallucination:*

As in *Lunchtime Hallucination*, except that Edwin and I are craniopagus conjoined twins, and so I know him exactly as well as I know myself.

Here, I cannot rely in the same way on privileged self-knowledge to be more confident in ruling out explanatory hypotheses which place the hallucination on my side as opposed to his. I should be significantly more conciliatory in this case.

With these points in mind, let's now return to the problem that we noted for the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. We were worried that if any defeater arising in cases of contingency anxiety derives from the epistemic significance of disagreement, this would leave no role for our knowledge of the explanatory relevance of arbitrary background factors. We can now see, I hope, that this worry is misguided. The epistemic significance of disagreement, we know, is modulated by our explanatory knowledge (or lack thereof) regarding the causes of disagreement. Granting the *Disagreement Hypothesis*, it should then be unsurprising if the explanatory discoveries that typically enter into cases of contingency anxiety *do* affect our reasons for revising our beliefs.

As an illustration, I want us to go back to a question I posed in Section 3. Suppose Weinberg *et al.* had discovered that people are far more likely to reject the standard Gettier intuition than philosophers had imagined, but uncovered no demographic variables that allow them to predict who will deny that subjects in Gettier cases lack knowledge: the Gettier-deniers are randomly distributed throughout the population. I asked: would this be any less worrying?

It would. My reasoning here is by analogy with *Lunchtime Hallucination* versus *Lunchtime Hallucination**. If there are no demographic variables predicting Gettier-denial, then we don't know why the deniers deny. There would be a number of uneliminated explanatory hypotheses in whose disjunction we might place reasonable confidence: Gettier-deniers might be inattentive; they might lack some degree of conceptual competence or expertise, etc. Hypotheses like these have been proposed to account for Weinberg *et al.*'s results: much has been made of the claim that philosophers possess expertise that Gettier-deniers lack.³⁸ It seems to make a real difference, therefore, that Weinberg *et al.* purport to find not only more disagreement than we might have expected, but disagreement that is predicted and explained by Nisbett's work on the cognitive differences fostered by Western and East Asian cultural backgrounds.³⁹ And it seems to make an added difference that Nisbett traces these cognitive differences to something so arbitrary as matters of social identity, economics, and ecology. To the extent that we believe that these factors explain the disagreements in intuition reported by Weinberg *et al.*, we seem to lack independent reasons by which to dismiss the contrary verdicts of Gettier-deniers. And we might reasonably expect that this requires us to be more conciliatory.

More generally, when we find that others disagree on certain fundamental issues – issues on which we are likely to invest great confidence in our own opinions – increasing awareness that the differences between us are traceable to arbitrary background factors will tend to decrease our propensity to downgrade their epistemic credentials, by crowding out explanations which place some obvious cognitive mishap or epistemic demerit on their side.

As this shows, our second problem, like our first, is ultimately no problem at all for the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. We can readily accommodate and explain the phenomenon in question. We should not see the *Disagreement Hypothesis* as an alternative to the view that knowledge of the arbitrary distal factors responsible for our beliefs can affect our reasons for belief-revision in cases of contingency anxiety. Rather, the relevance of these explanatory discoveries can be subsumed under the epistemic significance of disagreement: the former serve to modulate the latter.

6. *Why we should accept the disagreement hypothesis*

At this point, the *Disagreement Hypothesis* looks to be in good shape. It has seen off what appeared to be its most serious problems, proving itself able to explain and illuminate those phenomena that it seemed least likely to accommodate. This theoretical resilience strengthens the case in its favour.

The *Disagreement Hypothesis* can also readily explain why the cases in Section 2 were more worrying than those in Section 3 (*Corner Shop*, *My Bayesian Love*). By the *Arbitrary Absence Thesis*, what is known in *Corner*

Shop or *My Bayesian Love* about what would have been believed but for some arbitrary background factor should be equivalent in epistemic significance to the discovery of some actual dissenting verdict, like that in *Macroeconomics* or *Violin Recital*, where it could be known, prior to discovering the fact of disagreement, that one's interlocutor lacks some crucial piece of evidence or the ability to respond appropriately to that evidence. Disagreements of that kind plausibly provide no reasons for us to change our minds. By contrast, the disagreements – actual or arbitrarily absent – discussed in Section 2 are of a kind that we plausibly cannot dismiss quite so easily if Christensen's *Independence* principle is correct. I am not here insisting that this principle *is* correct. Indeed, part of what I like about the *Disagreement Hypothesis* is that it may be thought to explain why we are merely uneasy in cases of contingency anxiety, rather than straightforwardly inclined to suspend judgment. We are ambivalent, I think, because we are uncertain about the epistemic significance of disagreement.

With these successes in mind, I think we ought to assign significant credence to the *Disagreement Hypothesis*. Nonetheless, some may feel that my argument has fallen short.

According to the *Disagreement Hypothesis*, defeaters arising in cases of contingency anxiety are explained by the epistemic significance of disagreement, actual or arbitrarily absent. It may be objected that I haven't gone beyond defending the weaker claim that defeaters occur in cases of contingency anxiety iff such cases involve actual or arbitrarily absent disagreements of a kind that provide or would provide reasons for belief-revision. I have failed to show that the direction of explanatory priority runs from right to left in this biconditional.

Someone pressing this objection might propose the following rival interpretation. In cases of contingency anxiety, any defeater that occurs is due ultimately to the knowledge that one's belief can be outfitted with a certain kind of explanation involving arbitrary background factors. Knowledge about disagreement may provide evidence that one's belief can be outfitted with this kind of debunking explanation. Hence, when defeaters occur in cases of contingency anxiety, facts about disagreement can provide reasons to change one's view, but these are always subsidiary and indirect, being ultimately reducible to concerns about the explanatory relevance of arbitrary background factors. Why should we prefer the *Disagreement Hypothesis* over a view of this kind?⁴⁰

As I see it, the rival view described here provides an inaccurate account of the epistemic significance of disagreement. According to the rival view, in cases of contingency anxiety, knowledge about disagreement serves merely to highlight the relevance of explanatory factors that are debunking in and of themselves. This is not so.

In arguing against this suggestion, I will sketch a plausible account of the epistemic significance of a particular kind of arbitrarily absent disagreement,

relevant to one of the cases of contingency anxiety noted in Section 2. I emphasize that what I offer here is a sketch: there sadly isn't room in the remainder of this article to provide a more detailed treatment of the pertinent issues.⁴¹ Nonetheless, I believe the account I describe here enjoys sufficient *prima facie* plausibility to allow us to favour the *Disagreement Hypothesis* over the rival view sketched earlier.

As noted in Section 2, there is reason to suppose that the moral intuitions of human beings reflect our place on the tree of life: had the conditions for the evolution of moral thought been realized in some distantly related species, their moral outlook would most likely incorporate certain fundamental differences in moral intuition, appropriate to their form of life. Assuming that moral cognition does not evolve by selection for truth-tracking,⁴² we may infer that we are dealing here with arbitrarily absent disagreement. We know that arbitrarily absent disagreement has the same epistemic significance as actual disagreement, all else being equal. To decide whether evidence of phyletic contingency is defeating with respect to our moral beliefs, we therefore need to determine the epistemic significance of discovering that others disagree with us due to brute differences in intuition, knowing that our differences are ultimately traceable to arbitrary phyletic contingencies.

Here is my preferred explanation for why moral disagreements that reduce to brute conflicts in intuition require suspension of judgment, assuming we have no independent reason to favour our own view. Let's grant that by virtue of having the intuition that *p*, I have *prima facie* justification to believe *p*, even if I have no positive evidence for the reliability of my moral intuitions. Given the extent to which our moral judgments are governed by our intuitions, supposing otherwise would arguably require a wide-ranging skepticism about ordinary moral beliefs, rendering any concern about the debunking power of evolutionary considerations otiose.⁴³ Since we trust our own intuitions without evidence of their reliability, we cannot reasonably withhold the same kind of trust from the moral intuitions of others: we are not entitled to presume that we alone are uniquely privileged when it comes to knowing right from wrong. Hence, when we encounter brute conflicts in intuition, the opposing intuition should provide as good a reason to reject the disputed proposition as our own intuition provides for accepting it. Unless we have some independent reason to regard our own intuition as more credible, the considerations for and against are then equally balanced.⁴⁴

We have here a plausible account of how conflicting moral intuitions can provide defeaters. The account makes no reference to the ability of conflicting intuitions to highlight the explanatory role of arbitrary background factors.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the type of disagreement at issue here is precisely the kind whose epistemic significance should guide us in assessing whether evidence of phyletic contingency is defeating with respect to our moral beliefs.

Therefore, we should reject the rival view sketched earlier: it is *not* the case that those disagreements relevant in cases of contingency anxiety can provide reasons to revise our beliefs only by highlighting information about arbitrary background factors.

7. Conclusion

I have defended the view that if cases of contingency anxiety involve defeaters, this is to be explained by reference to the epistemic significance of disagreement. I began by arguing that certain natural explanations for why cases of contingency anxiety involve defeaters fail; I then introduced the *Disagreement Hypothesis*, presenting a handful of considerations in its favour drawn from prior work by Roger White. I addressed two apparent problems for the *Disagreement Hypothesis*, showing it to be well-placed to explain the problematic phenomena in question. Finally, I summarized the considerations in favour of the *Disagreement Hypothesis*, outlining why it represents the most promising framework by which to make sense of the phenomenon of contingency anxiety.

Of itself, the *Disagreement Hypothesis* leaves open whether any of the cases discussed in Section 2 involve defeaters. The *Disagreement Hypothesis* merely says that if they do, this is due to the epistemic significance of disagreement. I have said a little about how we should think about moral disagreements that reduce to brute conflicts in intuition. There is arguably more to be said about this issue and a great deal more to be said about disagreement more generally. Thus, there are many important questions still to answer if we are to fully understand how we should respond when we discover that our beliefs are contingent on arbitrary features of our background.⁴⁶

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NOTES

¹ One might well think that having different parents is a metaphysical impossibility: see Kripke, 1980; Salmon, 1982.

² Pace Cohen, 2000; Elga, .; Kramer, 2009; Schechter, .; Sher, 2001; White, 2010.

³ White, 2010.

⁴ Mill, 1869, *On Liberty*, Chapter II, Paragraph 4.

⁵ Cohen, 2000, ch. 1.

⁶ Cohen, 2000, p. 18.

⁷ Weinberg, Nichols and Stich, 2001.

⁸ Nisbett, 2003.

⁹ However, there have to date been at least three failed attempts to replicate the results obtained by Weinberg *et al.*, 2001. See Boyd and Nagel, 2014.

¹⁰ Machery, Mallon, Nichols and Stich, 2004.

¹¹ Liao, Wiegmann, Alexander and Vong, 2012; Schwitzgebel and Cushman, 2012; Swain, Alexander and Weinberg, 2008.

¹² Feltz and Cokely, 2012.

¹³ Buckwalter and Stich, 2014.

¹⁴ de Waal, 1996, 2006; Flack and de Waal, 2000; Haidt and Craig, 2004; Sripada, 2008.

¹⁵ Ruse and Wilson, 1986, p. 186.

¹⁶ Darwin, 2004, p. 73. Cf. Ruse and Wilson, 1986, p. 186.

¹⁷ Horvath, 2010.

¹⁸ Horvath, 2010, p. 448.

¹⁹ Feltz and Cokely, 2012.

²⁰ Alexander and Weinberg, 2007.

²¹ See Unger, 1968; Pritchard, 2005; Zagzebski, 1999.

²² Pritchard and Smith, 2005. This is far from being the only available philosophical conception of luck. For example, some philosophers define luck in terms of what lies beyond an agent's control: see Nagel, 1976; Statman, 1991. I cannot hope to address the wider debate about the nature of luck here, but I believe that the Pritchard and Smith account is preferable.

²³ White, 2010, p. 599.

²⁴ White, 2010, p. 576.

²⁵ Cohen, 2010, pp. 8–9.

²⁶ White, 2010, p. 578.

²⁷ White, 2010, p. 579.

²⁸ For a similar view, see Kelly, 2005.

²⁹ Christensen, 2007.

³⁰ See Kelly, 2005, pp. 181–182.

³¹ White, 2010, p. 578.

³² Cohen, 2000, p. 8.

³³ Lackey, 2010.

³⁴ Lackey, 2010, p. 307.

³⁵ Christensen, 2011, pp. 1–2.

³⁶ Lackey, 2010, pp. 309–310.

³⁷ Christensen, 2011, pp. 8–11.

³⁸ See Weinberg, Gonnerman, Buckner and Alexander, 2010; Williamson, 2011.

³⁹ Not everyone agrees that such findings are predicted by Nisbett's work. See Boyd and Nagel, 2014.

⁴⁰ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

⁴¹ For a more detailed treatment, see Mogensen, 2014.

⁴² Joyce, 2006; Street, 2006.

⁴³ On the primacy of intuition in ordinary moral thought, see Haidt and Craig, 2004.

⁴⁴ For similar views, see Besong, 2014; McGrath, 2008; Setiya, 2012, pp. 23–35; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2002.

⁴⁵ I don't mean to deny, of course, that explanatory factors can play a role in how we should respond to disagreements of this kind. Ignorance about why our intuitions conflict may allow us to treat such disagreements as analogous to *Lunchtime Hallucination*.

⁴⁶ I am grateful to Krister Bykvist, Roger Crisp, John Hawthorne, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, and an anonymous referee at this journal for critical comments on earlier drafts of this article. The term 'contingency anxiety' is inspired by 'genealogical anxiety', as coined by Amia Srinivasan (2011).

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