



Bridgewater State University

Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University

Philosophy Faculty Publications

Philosophy Department

2016

[Review of the book Disagreement by Brian Frances]

James Pearson

Bridgewater State University, james.pearson@bridgew.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/philosophy_fac



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Virtual Commons Citation

Pearson, James (2016). [Review of the book Disagreement by Brian Frances]. In *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. Paper 56.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/philosophy_fac/56

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Disagreement. By Bryan Frances. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014. Pp. x + 214. Paper \$22.95, ISBN 978-0-7456-7227-4.



Reviewed by **James Pearson**
Bridgewater State University
james.pearson@bridgew.edu

Attention to the question of whether testimony is a distinctive source of knowledge is a comparatively recent development in Western epistemology. Does being told that p constitute reason for you to believe that p , independently of what you empirically establish about the speaker's reliability, sincerity, and evaluative position? Still more recently—in just the last decade—Western epistemologists have become occupied with related problems concerning disagreement. What is the rational response, for instance, to discovering that an epistemic peer disagrees with you about p ? In the battery of new articles that explore this question, various fine-grained distinctions have been proposed to accommodate cases where it seems that disagreement ought to shake our confidence that p and cases where we appear entitled to remain steadfast. Inevitably, there has been some overlap and redundancy between these rapid-fire proposals. An unfortunate consequence of the shifting structure of our burgeoning terminological framework is that disagreement is a difficult topic to teach effectively. Confronted with the proliferation of fascinating but increasingly esoteric test cases in recent articles, students often find it difficult to see the forest for the trees. This is a shame, as the topic is fresh, practically relevant, and packed with the potential to excite undergraduates.

Bryan Frances' accessible textbook is therefore a welcome addition to the literature. *Disagreement* is exceptionally well paced, introducing material over twenty-eight short and engaging chapters. The fifty-five problem cases (or "stories" [pp. ix–x]) that Frances provides are carefully explained and sequenced, allowing students to gradually refine their understanding of the need for terminological subtlety. By inviting readers to puzzle over his stories, and by both admitting that his own views have changed and pointing out where his current position is tentative, Frances successfully conveys the youth of this branch of Western epistemology. Readers are made to feel that their own innovations could advance philosophical understanding of this topic, which would be a great motivation in the classroom.

Instead of critiquing views defended in the current literature, many of which he finds "premature" (p. 6), Frances uses his stories to guide readers through the central ideas underlying contemporary debates. Throughout, he emphasizes the practical question of what philosophy can teach us about everyday disagreements, even going so far as to lay out a decision procedure for how to resolve them (p. 110). This approach allows him to touch on many of the issues that undergraduates find most interesting, although I found it disappointing that he omits discussion of intrapersonal disagreement. (My students have enjoyed reflecting upon the rationality of their

own changes of mind, and when they should have trusted their initial judgment.) Similarly, although he writes that the “ethics of disagreement” is beyond the scope of his book, he misses the opportunity provided by his approach to relate epistemology to political theory (p. 76). A chapter examining the link between disagreement and collective agency (how should a group whose members disagree decide to act?) would also have been appreciated.

Nevertheless, Frances expertly forestalls a number of journeys down blind alleys that, in my experience, students are apt to tread when first confronted with this material. Of particular note in this respect are Frances’ distinction between how we typically *behave* when faced with disagreement (when splitting a dinner check, for example, we may amicably accept our friend’s calculation rather than quibble over a few dollars) and what the standards of *rationality* require of us in such situations (p. 75); his surfacing of key “disagreement factors,” such as the background knowledge and cognitive ability of disputants, which often ground intuitions about how seriously we ought to take particular disagreements (p. 26); his contrast between the rationality of *retaining* one’s belief in a case of disagreement and the rationality of one’s *retained* belief, and his subsequent explanation of their independence (p. 80); his attention to the differing demands of disagreements between solitary disputants and groups of disputants (pp. 94–98); and, perhaps most of all, his characterization of disagreement not just as the problem of whether or not to believe *p*, but as the problem of achieving reflective equilibrium between three beliefs: (a) that *p* is true, (b) that our interlocutor believes *p* false (and so, that our disagreement is genuine), and (c) that our interlocutor counts as an epistemic peer (p. 117).

Frances avoids defending controversial views in his textbook. His prose is accordingly more explanatory than argumentative. He carefully signals the few places where he is giving his own account, most often in opposition to Richard Feldman (pp. 128, 185, 191–195). But even here, he sketches rather than details his arguments for believing, contra Feldman, that there may be reasonable and mutually recognized disagreements between epistemic peers after each has come to appreciate the other’s evidence. The interested reader must seek out the relevant articles for herself. Frances also opines that there is, in general, no uniquely reasonable way to assess the evidence for *p* (p. 186); that upon discovery of a disagreement one may legitimately cite one’s original evidence as a reason for steadfastly retaining belief in *p* (p. 188); and that recent attention to “conditional peers”—those of whom we judge that *if* we disagree we are equally likely to be correct, as opposed to those to whom we grant peer status only because we anticipate that they would agree with our judgments—is of little help in evaluating real life cases (p. 190). I disagree with this last point: Frances’ worry that we are seldom justified in judging someone a conditional peer misses the point that some of our most intractable disagreements are with people we judge to be conditional peers, justified or no. But whatever one’s own view, any of these issues could serve as a prompt for an undergraduate research paper, and Frances’ lucid discussion may inspire such a project.

I can envisage at least three undergraduate courses that would benefit from adopting this stimulating text. First, *Disagreement* could be used in a global philos-

ophy course. With some notable exceptions (see the contributions of Matilal and Chakrabarti 1994), Western scholars have largely neglected the long history of non-Western thought regarding testimony and disagreement. Although Frances does not buck this trend, his discussions are self-standing and so would not require an extended digression into the methodology of Western epistemology. Furthermore, certain parts of his book (such as the material on religious disagreement [pp. 157–170]) invite comparative study. Paired with an introductory text to non-Western thought on the reliability of testimony (such as Phillips 2012), *Disagreement* could certainly ground a unit on epistemology.

Second, the text is appropriate for an introduction to philosophy course. I generally allot epistemology three to four weeks in such classes, and after a historical introduction to Descartes' skeptical method, I have hitherto sought to give students a taste of contemporary work by discussing the Gettier problem and experimental philosophy. Armed with this book, however, one could easily swap out these topics for disagreement. Frances conveniently trifurcates his basic material with summaries of key results, which could correspond to three class meetings. (The closing twenty-five pages ease transition to further literature, and could be omitted.) Non-majors would find his stories engaging, and if his tone is occasionally judgmental (as when he classifies those who have yet to reflect upon the challenge posed by religious pluralism as at an earlier "stage" [p. 164]), it is never unkind. Finally, and to my mind most importantly, Frances models both the labor and the benefit of critically thinking about a philosophical problem by refining his epistemic principles in light of the new considerations that his stories raise. *Disagreement* presents a pedagogical opportunity to introduce students to both philosophical content and method.

Third, and perhaps most obviously, Frances' book is suitable for an upper-level epistemology course. Advanced undergraduates could cover the material in a week or two, and would be very well positioned to pursue their own research agendas with more challenging articles. In his final chapter, "Study Questions and Problems," Frances probes the boundaries of his book with questions that could stand as term paper topics. His curated guide to further reading is also helpful (pp. 208–211).

Students in any of the three classes just described have much to gain from Frances' masterful treatment of his subject. Overall, *Disagreement* is an extremely useful resource that I recommend to any scholar interested in addressing the topic in his or her own courses.

References

- Matilal, Bimal Krishna, and Arindam Chakrabarti, eds. 1994. *Knowing from Words*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Phillips, Stephen. 2012. *Epistemology in Classical India: The Knowledge Sources of the Nyāya School*. New York: Routledge.