

The Epistemology of Agreement and the Independence Thesis

Abstract:

In the epistemology of disagreement literature, certain conciliationists (e.g., David Christensen) argue that when two epistemic peers find themselves in a disagreement with each other, neither are entitled to appeal to facts about the disagreement itself as a reason to remain steadfast in their initial positions. If an agent wants to remain steadfast about proposition p in the face of epistemic peer disagreement about p , she must appeal to facts *independent* of the dispute over p . To appeal to facts about the dispute over p itself to support non-conciliationism is thought to beg the question against one's opponent. These ideas are often formulated in various principles and have come to be known as the *independence thesis*.

While epistemologists have spilt much ink over the epistemic significance of disagreement in the last 15 years or so, little has been said about the epistemic significance of agreement. I seek to remedy this by exploring the epistemic significance of the independence thesis for agreement.

Suppose Sally believes that the theory of evolution and climate change are true. She is no scientist herself and believes these things on the basis of expert agreement. Indeed, many epistemologists would say that this is a perfectly legitimate way for Sally to arrive at full-fledge knowledge of evolution and climate change. One component in all this is that Sally simply relies on *testimony* to arrive at knowledge. She comes to know what the experts say on these matters through testimony from reliable friends, professors, websites, news stations, social media platforms, etc. I'm going to assume that testimony is a legitimate way to arrive at knowledge and so I won't challenge Sally in this regard. However, there's another component to Sally's knowledge that is underexplored and very important. Part of what justifies Sally's belief is not just the fact that experts affirm evolution and climate change, but also that there is *widespread expert agreement* on these topics. While there are exceptions, the *vast majority* of scientists affirm the theory of evolution and the reality of climate change.

Do scientists arrive at these views *independently* of what others say about them? Are evolutionary scientists really affirming the theory of evolution independently of their peer's research? Are climate scientists asserting that the planet is warming entirely apart from their peer's research? While these are ultimately empirical questions, I suspect that in many (if not most) cases the answer is 'no'. But if the independence thesis is true, then this seriously weakens the epistemic significance of widespread expert agreement. It matters much less (i.e., in terms of epistemic justification), that the majority of scientists affirm evolution and climate change. In order to avoid this result, there needs to be a principled reason to deny that the independence thesis applies to agreements, even if it applies to disagreements. Otherwise, the truth of the independence thesis poses not only a sceptical threat to those beliefs we disagree over, but also those beliefs over which most experts agree.