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The University of Southern Mississippi

Questions Concerning Reasonable Religious Disagreements

by

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A Thesis

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss Richard Feldman's article "Reasonable Religious Disagreement". In his article, Feldman argues that "reasonable disagreement" is not possible between two "epistemic peers" who have shared all of their evidence. Regardless of whether Feldman's argument is valid, the two requirements (being epistemic peers and sharing all their evidence) he sets for ruling out a disagreement as reasonable could be impossible to meet in the very situations he is writing about. I argue that in situations of religious disagreements, from the outset the parties involved have reason to judge each other not to be epistemic peers, and that there is some evidence in many religious disagreements that is both relevant to the disagreement and impossible to fully share.

Key Terms:

Epistemic Peers – two people who, given the same body of evidence, are equally likely to reach the same conclusion about a given proposition.

Evidence – internal things, such as ideas or memories, which should (epistemically speaking) influence the attitude the owner has towards belief in a given proposition.

Evidentialism – a system of belief justification that advocates belief in a given proposition if and only if that proposition is supported by the evidence.

Reasonable Disagreement – a disagreement in which the parties have reached contradictory conclusions reasonably.

Uniqueness Thesis – a body of evidence can support only non-contradictory propositions.

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Introduction

Under what circumstances can two people reasonably disagree? If I affirm some belief as true, I am logically committed to the position that anyone who believes something contradictory is mistaken. The person with whom I disagree could have come about the contradictory conclusion either reasonably or unreasonably. What if both of us have come to accept our conclusions reasonably? Richard Feldman has addressed this very issue at length. In his article “Reasonable Religious Disagreements,” Feldman assesses the possibility of reasonable disagreement.¹ He argues that when two people of roughly equal intellect and reasoning have shared all their evidence concerning a proposition, they cannot reasonably form contradictory beliefs about the proposition. Feldman’s argument hinges upon several definitions: he defines *disagreement* as a situation in which one person believes a proposition that another disbelieves. Two people are *epistemic peers* according to Feldman if they are about equal in terms of intellect, rationality, background beliefs, and are informed to about the same extent in whatever area they are to be considered epistemic peers. Feldman says that two people have *shared* their *evidence* when they have fully explained their reasons for their beliefs and withheld no relevant information.

I question whether two people who disagree on fundamental issues like the existence of God should judge each other as epistemic peers and whether they can share

¹ Feldman, Richard. “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”. *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. Ed. Antony, Louise. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 194-214.

all of their evidence in religious disagreements. It will be my position that, while Feldman's argument rules out reasonable disagreement between epistemic peers who have shared all their evidence, two people might have reason to not judge each other as peers in regards to religious beliefs when they disagree on certain things. I will also argue that two parties cannot always share all of their evidence in a religious disagreement. Cases in which peerhood cannot be established and important evidence cannot be shared avoid the argument Feldman sets forth to rule out reasonable disagreement. I will argue that religious disagreements can be examples of these problems. First, in **Section I** I will outline Feldman's argument. Next, in **Section II** I will discuss whether someone who disagrees with you about certain religious beliefs has reason to be judged as not an epistemic peer. After that, in **Section III** I will argue that evidence in religious disagreements cannot always be shared. Finally, in **Section IV** I will tie the arguments together and make a judgment about religious disagreements.

Section I

First, a good understanding of Feldman's argument is in order. Feldman's argument is simple enough, but there are many terms and ideas in his writing that deserve some explanation. Firstly, Feldman is an evidentialist. *Evidentialism* as employed by Feldman is a system of belief justification that states a person is justified in believing a proposition if and only if that proposition is supported by the evidence at the time of belief.² Evidentialism, argued for by writers such as William Clifford in his article, "The

² Feldman is precise in the way he approaches justification; he is always writing about whether someone is justified at a specific moment in time.

Ethics of Belief,” is a widely held system of epistemic belief justification.³ Feldman also supports the uniqueness thesis. The *uniqueness thesis*, as Feldman proposes it, says that a given body of evidence cannot support contradictory propositions. Given the uniqueness thesis, reasonable⁴ disagreement is not possible between two epistemic peers who have shared all the evidence. If two epistemic peers were sharing the same evidence, and only non-contradictory propositions could reasonably be supported from that evidence, then it would not be possible for either of those peers to reasonably reach a conclusion that contradicted one reached by the other. For a reasonable disagreement, at least one party would have to be withholding evidence or be making a mistake in reason. So, a reasonable disagreement between two epistemic peers who have shared all their evidence is impossible for Feldman. Two people can reasonably disagree, but never when the evidence is fully shared between epistemic peers.

In regards to disagreement Feldman writes about attitudes towards a proposition. For Feldman, only one of three *epistemic attitudes* towards a proposition can be justified by a given body of evidence: belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment. If the body of evidence is, for example, concerning the existence of God, either there is reason enough to believe that God does exist, reason enough to believe that God does not exist, or the evidence is counter-balanced. In cases where the evidence is counter-balanced, suspense of judgment is (according to Feldman) the correct attitude. Suspending judgment means

³ Clifford, William. “The Ethics of Belief”. *Philosophy of Religion Selected Readings*. Ed. Peterson, Michael; Hasker, William; Reichenbach, Bruce; Basinger, David. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 99-104. Feldman and Clifford are both evidentialists, but they are certainly different breeds. Clifford never separated the ethics of believing something and the epistemic justification thereof. Feldman, on the other hand, is writing about two distinct things and when he writes about beliefs he is referring purely to the epistemic justification someone does or does not have.

⁴ Feldman always means “reasonable” in the evidentialist sense, as to whether the evidence supports the belief.

withholding belief one way or the other. From a body of evidence, multiple conclusions may be drawn, but none of these will be conflicting – all cases of mutual exclusivity will result in only one mutually exclusive claim being adopted. A body of evidence concerning competing cable companies might justify multiple propositions, like a belief as to which company has the lowest prices, or which company has the most channels, but never will any of these conclusions be contradictory (for instance, it could not support the propositions, “Company X has the most channels,” and, “Company Y has the most channels”).

Feldman makes his case with *religious disagreements* in mind – disagreements involving religious propositions. He aims to show that for disagreements about questions such as, “Does God exist?” there can be only one reasonable conclusion reached by two epistemic peers sharing all their relevant evidence. Specifically, if an atheist and a theist were to sit down, given the right conditions and amount of time, if they are epistemic peers and share all of their evidence concerning the existence of God, they ought to reach a point where they cannot reasonably disagree about the matter – one or both of them must change positions.

Feldman writes at length about evidence, but what does he mean by the term? In “Evidence,” Timothy McGrew writes about evidence as always being evidence of *something*.⁵ If a fingerprint is evidence, then it is evidence of something, like a murder or a robbery. Feldman writes about evidence as reason for believing something. Usually when we think of evidence, we imagine a courtroom and exhibits. When Feldman writes

⁵ McGrew, Timothy. “Evidence”. *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. Ed. Bernecker, Sven and Pritchard, Duncan. P 58.

about evidence, he means something less physical. For Feldman, *evidence* is a term for all the reasons someone has for believing a proposition. In a courtroom, a document, the testimony of an eye-witness, or a ballistics report might be considered evidence. The two uses are not synonymous. While someone may form a belief based on something like a document or the testimony of a witness, the physical document or the actual testimony of that person wouldn't really be that person's evidence for Feldman.⁶ Those things cannot be carried around everywhere and shared with other people. Instead, the memory, interpretation, or understanding that someone has of something like a document or testimony would be that person's evidence. Further, Feldman and other philosophers believe that there are different types, or orders, of evidence. In his article, "Respecting the Evidence," Feldman writes about two different kinds of evidence: first and second order.⁷ Most of our evidence is first order. Jones goes to the store and buys groceries, forming beliefs based on first order evidence along the way: he *sees* a tree, *remembers* the directions to the store, *meditates* on which brand of flour to buy, and so forth. Second order evidence is introduced when Jones gets evidence *about* his evidence, for example, when he learns that Smith *disagrees* with him on the directions to the store.

The various memories, conceptualizations, and impressions we have make up our reasons for believing things, and thus are our bodies of evidence, according to Feldman. To rule out reasonable disagreement, all the relevant evidence must be shared. "Relevant" raises a few questions. We may not always know or be able to tell what evidence is

⁶ Feldman is an internalist; for him, reasons for a belief must be internally accessible to the person in question.

⁷ Feldman, Richard. "Respecting the Evidence". *Philosophical Perspectives*. Vol. 19, Issue 1, 2005. Pp. 95–119.

relevant. Relevant evidence would be evidence that should influence our attitude towards a certain proposition. It follows, then, that evidence that should influence our attitude towards other relevant evidence would also be relevant evidence. For a given belief, a very large body of relevant evidence could be involved. It may even be the case that the body of evidence for a given dispute could be much too large to manage, or take too long to sort through as an issue of practicality. Feldman would probably say that this problem can be solved by dividing large disagreements into smaller ones and working out the smaller ones one at a time. Dividing up large disagreements into many smaller ones may not be a very practical solution, but the issue at hand is whether it would be possible. Of course whether it is a reasonable expectation in the real world is still important. Assuming enough time and effort, though, even large bodies of evidence might be worked through, at least in principle.

Feldman would not say that “all evidence must be shared.” Rather, Feldman argues that all the evidence *relevant* to the disagreement at hand must be shared. How do we know what evidence is and is not relevant? Relevant evidence *should* (epistemically speaking, not morally) influence an attitude towards the belief it is relevant to, whereas evidence that is not relevant should not. The obvious question becomes: how do we tell the difference? Here I draw a distinction between reasons and causes. It would be a mistake to conflate the two because they are not always synonymous, and Feldman is writing strictly about “reasons”. For example, consider a girl who forms a belief about God. She forms the belief due to the outside influences of her society, culture and family. When asked about her belief, she cannot name any reasons for holding the belief or cite any evidence for the belief. By her own admission, the belief was caused by forces

outside of herself. It would be safe to call her family, culture and society the *causes* of her belief, but not fair to call them her *reasons* for belief. Reasons are more than a simple causal relationship between a belief and its origin – they have justifications and indicate that a belief is true, while causes merely explain the fact of how the belief originated. Feldman, therefore, writes about reasons, not causes.

Section II

Feldman says that if two people do not judge each other as epistemic peers, they could still reasonably disagree because a discrepancy in peer status would sufficiently explain why they disagree. What exactly this peer status means, though, is not precisely stated by Feldman. Feldman says only that, “Let’s say two people are *epistemic peers* when they are roughly equal with respect to intelligence, reasoning powers, background information, and so on.”⁸ It is clear from his argument, though, what *epistemic peer* must mean in order to make his argument valid. If two people in a disagreement could share all their evidence and still disagree, there must be some reason why. Either one of them is making a mistake or they are not peers, resulting in differing conclusions. An epistemic peer is someone, who, given the same body of evidence, would (unless making an error in reason) reach the same conclusion as someone else of equal peer status. Two people are epistemic peers when they are not different enough in terms of certain factors. These factors would be whichever ones, besides error, that could result in differing evaluations of a given body of evidence. Two epistemic peers with one body of evidence necessitates that if they have reached two contradictory conclusions, at least one of them made a

⁸ Feldman, Richard. “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”. *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. Ed. Antony, Louise. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 201.

mistake in reason. This definition is the one Feldman must commit himself to for his argument to be valid. It should work, but the question that remains unanswered is what exactly constitutes those “factors” – what makes a person evaluate a given body of evidence in a certain way. “Roughly equal with respect to intelligence, reasoning powers, background information, and so on,” is not precise enough. We need to know *why exactly* the two people would evaluate the evidence in the same way, *what* about them causes them to see things similarly.

Adam Elga has written at length about the nature of epistemic peerhood. He describes peerhood as a relationship between two people that depends upon comparison of positions existing on a continuum from ignorance to expertise. He uses the example of a weather forecaster in his article, “Reflection and Disagreement,” to illustrate what would constitute an “expert” in regards to the weather.⁹ Elga states that the meteorologist is an expert (highly knowledgeable) and thusly should be deferred to by non-experts, who are not peers. Two meteorologists would be experts and peers. Two people untrained in meteorology would be non-experts and peers. Elga’s illustration brings up two interesting points. Firstly, being an epistemic peer is always in regards to something specific for Elga. Secondly, it follows that someone who is an expert on weather isn’t necessarily an expert on biology, meaning that the requirements for being someone’s epistemic peer are different depending on the situation. Now, it seems easy at first to define what constitutes an expert on weather: a degree in meteorology, experience correctly predicting the weather, and knowledge of the area one is predicting the weather for. Given Elga’s

⁹ Elga, Adam. “Reflection and Disagreement”. *Noûs*. Vol. 41, Issue 3, 2007. Pp. 478-502.

assessment of peerhood, putting someone on a continuum between ignorance and expertise on a subject is a good way to approximate that person's peer status in relation to your own. Using his weather example, I would probably defer to a weather expert, call my friend who knows as much about weather as I do a peer, and evaluate an alien who has never experienced Earth weather less than a peer.

Suppose we ask what makes someone an expert on American politics, though. Two people receive the same education and learn all the same things, but one has a conservative view while the other maintains a liberal one. Both have met the requirements of expertise, both have the same education, yet both disagree on some very fundamental propositions concerning their expertise, such as, "What system of government would best run our country?" They might disagree on the answer or even what the question means and so on.

Recall the definition of epistemic peerhood that I gave for Feldman earlier. Would a conservative and a liberal be even remotely likely to come to the same conclusion about a proposition involving American politics? No, they would not. They would likely have completely different opinions on any number of questions involving what would be best, politically, for our country. We couldn't chalk their consistent disagreement up to mere error – they have entirely different ways of seeing things. We can say now that being roughly equal in intelligence, reasoning ability, expertise, and so forth is not enough to constitute epistemic peers because two people could have all of those things in common and still be very likely to evaluate a body of evidence quite differently. Remember one term that Feldman used in his definition, "background information." "Background information" now becomes very important depending on what it means. Given everything

said thus far, I take *background information* to mean something synonymous with background *beliefs*. In other words, two people must have similar background beliefs in order to be epistemic peers. To support this assumption, I argue that it fixes the problem of the experts on politics with differing views.

Consider the liberal and the conservative again. If they had similar enough background beliefs in addition to all those other features we have discussed, then they would probably agree on propositions about American politics, *because their background beliefs are what make them liberal or conservative*. Applied to religious disagreements, the implications are straightforward: the atheist and theist would agree if their background beliefs were similar enough, *because those background beliefs are part of what made them atheistic and theistic in the first place*. The mere fact that one is an atheist and one is a theist gives each of them every reason to judge that they are *not* epistemic peers. This is not to say that either lacks in education, expertise, intelligence, reasoning, or in any other area, as I have shown that two people could have all those things in common and still evaluate evidence differently. No, an important component of epistemic peerhood *must* be background beliefs, which, when vastly different, means two parties are not peers. Since those background beliefs influence how current evidence is interpreted and evaluated, they must factor into peerhood.

Suppose, then, that an atheist and a theist have shared all their evidence and still disagree about the existence of God. Each one judges the other to be sharing all the evidence relevant to the disagreement. Each one judges the other to be equally intelligent, equally rational, and equally educated. Still, the mere difference in their background beliefs means each is justified in assessing the other as not an epistemic peer. The

definition of peerhood needed to make Feldman's argument valid results in the conclusion that two people who reach vastly different views about the world are not epistemic peers in the first place. His argument necessitates that "epistemic peers" are people who when given the same body of evidence would reach the same conclusion (barring error). But background beliefs are one such thing that could result in two people evaluating evidence differently. Therefore, two people in a religious disagreement would not be peers in the first place whenever background beliefs are involved in the evaluation of the body of evidence. So long as they deem each other not to be epistemic peers, they have every reason to assume their disagreement reasonable.

Section III

For Feldman, the reasonableness of a disagreement hinges greatly upon the sharing of evidence between the disagreeing parties. Until the relevant evidence has been shared, reasonable disagreement is still a possibility because two people working from two different bodies of evidence can conceivably reach contradictory conclusions reasonably. Once both parties have participated in full disclosure, they are supposedly working from the same body of evidence. By *full disclosure*, Feldman does not mean that two parties must share all the evidence they have about everything. It would be impractical and most likely impossible to share all of the evidence a person has. Instead, Feldman means that two parties need to share all the evidence that pertains to the disagreement (relevant evidence). By way of example, in a court hearing attorneys need only bring to trial witnesses and evidence that have to do with the guilt or innocence of the defendant and the charges that have been brought against him. Other evidence, either pertaining to someone else's guilt, or the defendant's guilt on some other issue, would be

unnecessary. The two parties are not necessarily working from the “same” body of evidence in the sense that they truly share all evidence. But they do and must share all of the evidence that either party is using to make her decision.

From here, many philosophers begin to focus on whether two people who disagree and have shared all of their evidence can remain reasonable by asking questions such as, “Should I give equal weight to my opponent’s view as I do to my own?”¹⁰¹¹¹² These arguments often hinge on the intuition that disagreement alone shouldn’t always reduce someone’s confidence in her own beliefs and are a response to the arguments that peer disagreement is enough to decrease the confidence we have in our own beliefs. A proponent of such an argument might give the example of two friends, one of whom spots someone in a crowd, but whom the other friend insists is not there. The first friend, rather than considering his friend equally likely to be right and thusly lowering his own confidence, might simply assume that he possesses some insight that his friend does not. Instead of taking this route, I would like to address questions as to whether all the evidence can really be shared in the first place. While the conversation in philosophy tends to go in the direction of asking questions about the *fact* that two people disagree, I would like to ask whether these two people can ever get to the point of working from the same body of evidence.

¹⁰ Elga, Adam. “Reflection and Disagreement”. *Noûs*. Vol. 41, Issue 3, 2007. Pp. 478–502.

¹¹ Kelly, Thomas. “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*. Ed. Hawthorne, John and Gendler, Tamar. Vol. 1, 2005.

¹² Sosa, Ernest. “The Epistemology of Disagreement”. (Forthcoming) *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*. Ed. Lackey, Jennifer and Christensen, David.

What does it mean to share evidence? Is it as simple as handing someone a file or telling that person something? Feldman does not give a specific account on this matter, but it is a very important question. Suppose that Smith and Jones disagree about whether it is six o'clock or seven o'clock. To convince Jones, Smith tells him that his watch reads, "Seven o'clock." Telling Jones that it is Seven o'clock seems like the most straightforward way for Smith to share his evidence with Jones.

Several questions need to be answered, though. Has Smith just shared his evidence with Jones? Suppose Jones doesn't speak English. In this case Smith hasn't. Jones does not understand the statement. His failure to understand a statement in a language he doesn't know could reveal a deeper problem. What about more subtle cases? What if Jones hears Smith and understands, but distrusts Smith's watch? Or, what if he "understands," but in a different way than Smith does (Some people don't read the exact time from a clock, but instead round off to the nearest hour. When Jones hears "seven o'clock," he doesn't know whether Smith really means seven or seven o' five)? People can hear one statement and derive two different understandings. If we take different meanings from the same evidence, do we really have the same evidence? Recall that when Feldman uses the term "evidence," he doesn't mean the physical watch that reads "seven o'clock." He doesn't even mean the spoken words of Smith, "seven o'clock." Feldman would call only Smith's and Jones' understanding of the watch and statement as evidence, the understanding being the only thing each of them can really have internally. What if the background experiences and evidence we use to interpret new evidence causes us to often see that evidence in different ways, then? We could be starting worlds apart from the onset, having different understandings of all the physical data we take in.

Here, Feldman would argue that Jones would be misunderstanding Smith because of background beliefs that are too different. Obviously, two people with background information too dissimilar will not be able to have an intelligible conversation of any type, which would prohibit them from resolving any type of disagreement. Feldman would say that background beliefs are part of peerhood, and that these background beliefs must be similar enough in order for them to interpret evidence the same way, else reasonable disagreement can and will occur just as I've outlined. The principle that we take away here, though, is that for sharing of evidence to occur, it takes more than a mere *account* of your evidence in order to share that evidence. The evidence must also be understood such that it results in the two parties having the same body of evidence, or at least two bodies close enough that it would prohibit reasonable disagreement.

Suppose that Jones takes the same meaning from Smith's testimony that Smith intends and has similar background beliefs. Also suppose that Jones takes the evidence as truthful. If Smith has just shared his only reason for believing the time is seven o'clock, and if Jones has no reasons for his belief (although this may be hard to imagine), Smith and Jones would now be working from the same body of evidence. If Jones is convinced by the evidence, then they have avoided disagreement altogether. If Jones is not, then they may have still avoided reasonable disagreement, as Smith may be able to demote Jones from peer status. If Smith has "sufficient reason" (what constitutes "sufficient" here is disputable) to believe Jones is incapable of understanding or properly evaluating the evidence for some reason, Smith can demote him. If Smith judges him to be a peer,

though, then suspense of judgment is the appropriate attitude they should both adopt and they have still avoided a reasonable disagreement.¹³

In the above example and in examples like it, where two people evaluate evidence in the same way, and take the same meaning from evidence, Feldman should be right in that they can only reach one valid conclusion. The evidence being shared was fully shared and shared with the same understanding of that evidence. The proposition, “seven o’clock” meant the same thing to both Smith and Jones. All beliefs formed and evaluated in this way between two parties should be easily and correctly examined. The question is whether this hypothetical example is representative of real disagreements.

Evidence can mean the same thing to anyone who has it and fully shares linguistic systems of semantics and syntax, as well as all the same background beliefs and any other factors influencing the understanding of that evidence. Just what are we really asserting when we make such a claim, though? All that this claim means is that if two people think and understand things in the same exact way, or in a “close enough” way, they will understand a specific thing in the same way. Is this not obvious, though? Imagine two people who are *exactly* alike. Of course if they are independently introduced with the same evidence they will interpret it the same way (barring random chance errors). They will do this because they are the *same* person. To interpret the same evidence differently, they would need to at least have somewhat different background beliefs or different bodies of evidence. I will argue next that given even two people with this level of

¹³ Whether and under what conditions “peer demotion” can or should occur is not a topic I will address here.

similarity, if one of the two has one type of evidence, she may be unable to share it with her peer.

What could stop someone who is a peer from being able to share evidence?

Suppose I am in a disagreement over the ontological argument and I remember that I was convinced by what Plantinga had to say about it at a philosophy convention. Now suppose that I am, in fact, able to recall what he said, and why it convinced me of his position. Finally, suppose I now try to convey this argument to my friend with whom I am in a disagreement. I am a timid speaker and my friend is imposing. Try as I might, I am intimidated by his sharp wit and self-assuredness. When I try to argue with him, I feel uneasy, and words escape me. So, despite my best efforts, my retelling of Plantinga's argument does not do Plantinga's account justice. After hearing my account, my friend decides that Plantinga's argument is not good evidence for believing the ontological argument. Have I fully shared my evidence with my friend? The answer seems to be no. For us to fully share the evidence, my friend and I need the same understanding of Plantinga. Whether it is possible for us to have an exactly similar understanding of something as complex as Plantinga's ontological argument is another puzzle entirely, so assume what is needed is a "close enough" understanding of Plantinga. By "close enough" I mean close enough so that it doesn't make a difference in interpretation or evaluation of relevant evidence. Given that, it still seems possible that I could *fail to convey* all of my relevant information. By that I simply mean that it could be possible for someone to have evidence that person would not be fully able to express. Feldman might respond that in an ideal situation, everyone involved is adequately capable of expressing

his evidence. Feldman can be granted this ideal situation with some hesitation.¹⁴ At least some religious disagreements involve two people calmly and adequately conveying the evidence in a way that does what someone else said justice.

Here lies the trick, though. Is all evidence the kind of evidence that could be fully shared in an ideal situation, like repeating something said by another? Consider Smith and Jones again, who, as it turns out, are police officers. Both are narcotics agents who regularly deal with drug cases. At some point, though, Jones heads down a dark road and begins stealing evidence and selling drugs on the side, for which he ends up in jail. Smith, being Jones' good friend, comes to visit him. The two of them converse for a while, and eventually the inevitable comes up. Jones tells Smith that it is very bad being in jail. To kill time, Smith asks how bad jail is. Jones begins to go into great detail about how the prison guards rampantly violate the personal rights of the inmates. Smith is less than convinced and says as much. Indignant, Jones replies, "You have no idea what it is like on this side of the bars."

Even though Jones has gone into great detail about how the prison guards violate the personal rights of inmates, it may be the case that he has not fully shared his evidence with Smith. The thing Jones is drawing on as evidence here is his experience of living in prison. What Jones has as evidence is different than what Smith has as evidence. Jones is thinking of an event, perception, or something that happened to him. Smith is thinking about what Jones has told him, perhaps imagining being in Jones' position. Part of the evidence in play *is* the experience that Jones had in prison. Jones' experience is

¹⁴ While such a situation can be granted for the sake of argument, it is debatable as to whether under most circumstances we could actually fully and completely articulate our reasons for complex beliefs.

qualitatively different than Smith's knowledge about Jones' experience, and there is no way to change that fact. Remember again that Feldman conceptualizes evidence as an understanding of something rather than the actual thing.¹⁵ Add to this concept of evidence the fact that Smith's understanding of Jones' experience and Jones' understanding of his own experience will never be the same.

When Jones attempts to share his experience of prison, all he can really provide is a testimony about his evidence. The new evidence is introduced for Smith's sake, so that Smith can get an idea of what evidence Jones is working from. It is not, by any means, the same evidence that Jones has. We could try to state Jones' evidence as a proposition that captures its meaning for both Smith and Jones. Suppose we say, "Jones had the experience of prison guards violating the rights of the inmates," or, "Jones perceived the prison guards as violating the rights of inmates." Do we now have a statement that can capture what both Smith and Jones think? What we really have, in truth, are two different facts, neither of which captures Jones' evidence. First, from Jones' perspective, Jones *had* an experience. From Smith's perspective, he has the knowledge of the fact *that* Jones had an experience. Even though they can (perhaps) agree on the above propositions, the fact remains that they have not yet shared all the evidence. For that to happen, Smith would have to have had Jones' exact experience.

What would it take for Smith to have Jones' experience? Even two people seeing the same thing are seeing it from slightly different angles and are seeing it as two different people (peer status, background beliefs), making each experience unique.

¹⁵ Feldman recognizes experience as evidence. What is in question here is how experiential evidence is uniquely difficult to share, not whether it is evidence in the first place.

Consider a further thought experiment to illustrate. Suppose Smith ends up also stealing and goes to prison. Suppose that Smith and Jones are at the same prison, and are even cellmates. For all intents and purposes, they are experiencing close to the same thing. Maybe Smith will now agree with Jones, but maybe he won't. Why wouldn't he? Smith still wouldn't be having the same exact experience as Jones. He would be experiencing prison as Smith. That is a different experience than experiencing prison as Jones. What would it look like for them to actually share the experience? Is there a conceivable way for Smith to truly share Jones' experience? It may be that Smith and Jones cannot do that, no matter how much they may desire. Smith might try to amalgamate two of his experiences together to get some idea of what Jones' experience was like, but this amalgamation doesn't mean Smith had Jones' exact experience by any stretch of the imagination. Experiences may not be the type of thing that two people can really share.

We could try taking the thought experiment even further. Suppose that instead of going to prison with Jones, Smith tries a new experimental device that beams Jones' perceptions into Smith's brain. For a few days, Smith sits on a couch and takes in Jones' daily experience of prison. After all this, Smith may change his mind, or he may still remain unconvinced. What could explain his failure to concede? Even though Smith is now experiencing what Jones experiences, he is doing so as Smith and not Jones. He is Smith experiencing Jones in prison, which is different from Jones experiencing Jones in prison. Can the thought experiment be stretched far enough to make their experiences identical? It looks like the only way to do this would be if the machine could somehow cause Smith to stop being aware of being Smith, and think he is Jones having Jones' experience of jail. Aha! Now Smith agrees with Jones, at least for as long as he remains

unaware of being Smith! But wait! Now we have arrived right back where we did at the outset: that Smith would only certainly agree with Jones if they were the same person. *Of course* Jones and Jones would agree on Jones' experience. Apart from mind-melding, though, they could still disagree about a subjective experience. And there lies the problem with Feldman's argument. When experience becomes an essential part of a disagreement, two people would only certainly agree if they were the same person, which is already obvious. Since it wouldn't make sense to disregard any and all evidence that comes from subjective experience, that evidence really does bear on the disagreement and can force a disagreement to remain reasonable so long as it is the type that it cannot have a shared understanding.

The point I am making here is similar to the one I made in **Section II**. Two epistemic peers would evaluate the same body of evidence in the same way. On a fundamental level, though, the body of evidence can change depending on the person experiencing it. This experience, if it does make a difference, cannot be ignored, and Smith and Jones have reason to believe they are involved with different bodies of evidence by virtue of the fact that they are two different people, even though they are two different people experiencing the same thing. Smith experiencing prison is different than Jones experiencing prison. The atheist's experience of reality is different and not interchangeable with the theist's experience of reality.

Can't much of our experiential evidence be shared, though? After all, it is very often the case that we hear those words of encouragement, "I know how *that* feels." Do we usually doubt such comforting words? We do when we doubt the person speaking them really understands or can relate to the experience we have had, but often we feel

that other people really do know what it is like to feel how we feel. As long as the understanding is “close enough,” maybe we could still be working from the same body of experience. Feldman might say that while the experience cannot be shared, an account could be given of that experience which could convey all the necessary information. Suppose that Smith and Jones are male and female, respectively. Smith complains to Jones about how he is tired of how women complain about how much harder it is to compete for jobs in today’s world. In reply, Jones says something like, “You don’t know what it is like to be a woman in today’s world.” Doesn’t Jones have a point? Maybe the only way for Smith to know what it is like to be a woman, is for Smith to be a woman. If Smith were to take classes in women’s studies, read a few books on the civil rights movement, listen to Jones’ description of being a woman and in general learn what prominent women have written down in books about their experience, but could still learn something new by becoming a woman, there may be something to say for experience as being unique as evidence. If no amount of physical information can fully account for the difference in Smith and Jones’ experience, then their evidence can never be fully shared in matters where experience is a decisive factor.

In cases where someone claims to know “how *that* feels,” usually some similar experience of the person making the claim is involved. If Smith is downtrodden because his parents are getting a divorce, Jones might say that she knows how Smith feels because Jones’ parents also got divorced. Their experience is at least similar. But when Smith tries to relate to Jones’ experience of being a woman, he draws a blank. Save really being a woman, there is no experience close to Jones’.

How experiential evidence applies to religious disagreements has to do with whether the experiences that religious people have can be related to by those who are not religious, and vice versa. In our prison thought experiment, it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that if Smith and Jones were in prison together, their experience of prison life would be close enough that they could agree on what does and does not go on in prison. In other situations, like knowing "what it is like being a woman," the situation is not so clear-cut because unlike prison, someone cannot simply become a woman in order to share the experience. Are religious experiences more like the former or the latter? Is disbelief in God like going through a rough breakup and belief like falling in love, something that most people can relate to? Or, are belief and disbelief in God more like being male or female; are they experiences that, despite great effort, cannot be manufactured for the sake of a disagreement? Religious beliefs, by their very nature, are often beliefs formed about and around and to explain the meaning of experiences had. They are also quite often very personal. They aren't necessarily always going to be formed in that way, of course. At least in theory, I can imagine someone who, for instance, believes in the existence of God based entirely upon the cosmological argument. Suppose this person meets an atheist who also knows and understands the cosmological argument. These two people could probably sit down and discuss the evidence for and against the cosmological argument, what the argument does and does not show, and rule out reasonable disagreement. All of the evidence the believer had about God would be evidence that could be fully shared with the atheist. At least in this example, all the evidence could be shared. But such a case doesn't seem to be the norm – many people hold religious beliefs on the grounds of other things besides classical arguments.

Belief in God is formed in different ways, making matters tricky. People believe in God for a variety of reasons: some are taught as children to accept that God exists as a matter of fact and have only the testimony of those they trust as evidence. Some say that belief in God is formed on a very basic level, and that to cease believing the individual needs to be proven wrong. Some claim their belief in God is entirely to do with arguments for God's existence, such as the cosmological argument. Some may claim that something like the Bible proves that God exists. Some even claim to have experienced miraculous events that have radically changed their perceptions of reality and belief in God. Most would probably cite some other form of less exciting experiential evidence like encountering the presence of God or feeling a deep oceanic sensation that convinces the person having the experience that God is real.

This final group that points to miraculous events or religious experience has experienced something that creates an epistemic gap. In these cases, experience that cannot be shared is central to the argument. In some cases, perhaps the atheist used to believe and claims to have had a similar experience to the theist. While at first glance this experience seems to solve the problem, it really just reintroduces it. Now, the atheist has an experience that the theist cannot relate to: having ceased to believe in God, or, experiencing something that caused belief based on experience to end. The theist might say something like, "experiencing what I do now, I cannot fathom what it would be like to cease believing in God or what the experience that could cause such a change in belief would be like." The two are in the same boat they were in before, then, and reasonable disagreement is the only avenue.

For the most part, though, when the theist explains having had some sort of religious experience that is convincing enough to be a reason for belief in God, how does the atheist relate? If the experience is as described, then it seems the atheist would change beliefs if the atheist also had the experience. But accepting that at face value would be unsatisfactory because in most situations the atheist probably cannot imagine such a feeling or experience, and certainly has not had a similar experience – the atheist cannot relate to the theist in any way. Here, the theist has evidence that is central and crucial to the belief the theist has in God, and the evidence cannot be shared with the atheist. The atheist can try to imagine what it must be like for the theist to have had such an experience, but such an imagination is different than the actual experience of the theist because the atheist has no idea whether his interpretation is accurate. Even if the atheist wants desperately to know what the theist experienced, that information is nontransferable. The two are left with only the option of reasonable disagreement. The theist does not know whether the experience would change the atheist's evaluation of the evidence and neither does the atheist because to know that, the atheist would have to have that experience. Maybe having the experience would change the atheist's mind, maybe it wouldn't, but without that knowledge, reasonable disagreement is the best option. This problem could be generalized to other disagreements, but it is especially true of cases like religious disagreement. In everyday life we have experiences that can be related to one another, but in cases like religious experience, one person has an experience the other simply cannot relate to.

Section IV

Feldman wrote his article in response, at least to some degree, to the puzzling nature of the disagreements he witnessed between his own students. He reasoned that if his students were epistemic peers and shared all their evidence then they shouldn't be able to hold the sort of common sense position they had that they were all being reasonable, because the uniqueness thesis rules out such a conclusion – someone has to be wrong.

Feldman's mistake is not necessarily that if his students are peers and share their evidence they should change their attitude – he could be granted this, in my opinion, because the implications are so limited. His students are not epistemic peers and they are not able to share all the relevant evidence they are using to form their beliefs. Some of the students might not be peers by virtue of their respective intelligence or education or ability to evaluate evidence. Some of the students might be unintentionally withholding evidence, omitting something that is affecting held beliefs. Some of their asymmetry cannot be avoided, though. Many of the students have reason to judge each other as not being epistemic peers, not because one is smarter than the other, but rather because their starting points are too vastly different to be compatible – they aren't on the same "page". Many of the students also have evidence they cannot share with their peers. Any evidence that is experiential in nature will change as it changes hands – becoming a testimony of something the peer has never experienced and cannot relate to. This exchange isn't a real sharing of evidence and cannot be one.

Interestingly, Feldman gives an account of what an “apparent” reasonable disagreement might go like:

After examining this evidence, I find in myself an inclination, perhaps a strong inclination, to think that this evidence supports *P*. It may even be that I can’t help but believe *P*. But I see that another person, every bit as sensible and serious as I, has an opposing reaction. Perhaps this person has some bit of evidence that cannot be shared, or perhaps he takes the evidence differently than I do. It’s difficult to know everything about his mental life and thus difficult to tell exactly why he believes as he does. One of us must be making some kind of mistake or failing to see some truth. But I have no basis for thinking that the one making the mistake is him rather than me. And the same is true of him. And in that case, the right thing for both of us to do is to suspend judgment on *P*.¹⁶

My argument is that as long as either party has reason to believe that someone has possession of “some bit of evidence that cannot be shared,” there is good reason why two peers could disagree. Further, so long as two people disagree on *P*, even if they are “every bit as sensible and serious” as each other and of equal education, they have good reason to believe they are not epistemic peers if they have differing background beliefs, which could contribute to why they disagree on *P* in the first place. So long as they do not judge each other to be epistemic peers, there is good reason why they disagree on *P*.

Feldman argued that his students could not reasonably disagree if they were epistemic peers and shared all of their relevant evidence. He concluded: “I cannot make good sense of the supportive attitude my students displayed.”¹⁷ I argue that his students are not really epistemic peers because they have different background beliefs and that

¹⁶ Feldman, Richard. “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”. *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. Ed. Antony, Louise. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 194-214. and *the Secular Life*. Ed. Antony, Louise. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 212.

¹⁷ Feldman, Richard. “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”. *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. Ed. Antony, Louise. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 213.

they cannot share all of their evidence because much of it is experiential. I conclude that Feldman is wrong in that his students may very well call their disagreements reasonable.

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