May 22nd, 9:00 AM - May 25th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on: Harvey Siegal's "Argumentation and epistemology of disagreement"

Robert C. Pinto

University of Windsor, Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric

Commentary on: Harvey Siegel's "Argumentation and the epistemology of disagreement"

ROBERT C. PINTO

Centre for Research on Reasoning, Argument and Rhetoric
University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario
Canada
pinto@uwindsor.ca

1. INTRODUCTION

The long version of Siegel's paper is an extremely useful overview of the literature on two aspects of the epistemology of disagreement, and I'm in complete agreement with what I take to be his main conclusions, namely

(1)   that because of ambiguities in the treatment of peerhood and the variety of different cases which require different sorts of treatment, there do not seem to be any general epistemic principles concerning *peer disagreement*, other than what has come to be called the *Total Evidence View*, and
(2)   that Fogelin is wrong in supposing or concluding that that there are disagreements "which by their nature are not subject to rational resolution."

I would however call brief attention to two aspects of Siegel's presentation about which I have reservations.

2. CRITICIZING FOGELIN'S VIEW

After an illuminating summary of Fogelin's (1985/2005) paper, Siegel reviews and endorses the criticisms of that paper offered by Andrew Lugg (1986) and Feldman (2005) – criticisms (especially Lugg's) which seem to me to be on target. But Siegel thinks that Lugg's observations don't "cut to the heart of the matter …, in that they do not engage Fogelin's Wittgensteinian epistemological stance." Moreover Siegel suggests that in order to establish that Feldman is right in his criticisms and Fogelin wrong, "we must pay more explicit attention to the Wittgensteinian epistemological views that drive Fogelin's account of deep disagreement."

However, I'm not enthusiastic about Siegel's resting his case on the criticism he mounts of Wittgenstein.[1] Though Fogelin (1985/2005) does in fact invoke themes from Wittgenstein 1969 (*On Certainty*) along the way,

---

[1] I should add that there are a host of things in *On Certainty* with which I disagree. However, that essay is a complicated (if not messy) piece, and whether it "works" as what it is (an attempt to

(a)   I'm not sure that Wittgenstein's views are all that *essential* to what Fogelin is trying to say[2] and

(b)   I fear that centering the criticism of Wittgenstein's "argument" for his view on Prichard's (2011) reconstruction invites too many quibbles about the adequacy of that reconstruction.

3. ON WHAT IS AT STAKE IN PEER DISAGREEMENT

In exploring the issue of peer disagreement, Siegel accepts the terms in which that issue is discussed in the literature devoted to it – treating it as an issue of whether and when we should continue to *believe* a given proposition in the face of peer disagreement and whether or when we should alter our *confidence* in a proposition in the face of disagreement about its truth. Given that Siegel is attempting to assess what light that literature throws on the issue, accepting the terms in which it is usually discussed is entirely appropriate.

From my perspective, however, it is a serious flaw in those discussions and in epistemology generally, to conceptualize the cognitive attitudes available to us simply in terms of belief and degrees of confidence. I continue to embrace (see for example Pinto, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010) a *qualitative* version of evidence proportionalism which recognizes a variety of qualitatively distinct cognitive and non-cognitive attitudes, type-identified by their functional roles in our mental life. In that view, whether it is reasonable for an individual to adopt one or another such attitude toward a given propositional content will depend (at least in part) on the evidence available to that individual.

Consider, for example, the question of what attitude we ought to take toward the best of our scientific theories concerning a particular domain. Given the reasonable expectation that any one of our current scientific theories is likely to be superseded by a better (more accurate and perhaps quite different) theory at some point in the future, a wise person would not adopt an attitude of outright or unqualified belief in that theory. Nor should she or he be confident but less than certain that that theory is true. What such a theory offers is our currently *best* way of understanding the domain to which it applies – and one way or another our cognitive attitude toward that theory should reflect that fact.

Recognizing that there are cognitive attitudes *not* captured by the concepts of belief, lack thereof, or some degree of confidence may turn out to be important in deciding how I ought to modify my attitude toward something I believe when I discover that a thoughtful and informed person denies it. Surely that discovery should affect my attitude, but the reasonable initial response it *might* be to treat it as something I have strong reason to believe but which is in dispute. Suppose I learn the other's

---

criticize Moore's approach to skepticism) has little or no bearing on Fogelin's claim that deep disagreements are by their nature not subject to rational resolution.

[2] It's worth noting that Fogelin (2005, p. 9) takes exception to what may be Wittgenstein's own use of the concept of "form of life", and that in the crucial last 4 paragraphs of the 1985/2005 paper leading up to the final sentence in which Fogelin claims that deep disagreements are "by their nature not subject to rational resolution" Wittgensteinian notions aren't appealed.

reasons for denying it and can't put my finger on anything wrong with those reasons. But suppose I know I often fail to see error's in complicated reasoning. In that case, my reasonable final response *might* be to treat it as something I have strong reason to believe and which others *appear* to have strong reasons to reject.

Another useful distinction applicable to cognitive attitudes is that between doxastic or belief-like attitudes (being certain, expecting, presuming, suspecting, doubting, rejecting) and what L. J. Cohen (1992) has called acceptance.[3] Accepting a proposition (in Cohen's sense) is being prepared to use it as a premise – and acceptance turns out to be (unlike belief) relative to context: we may be prepared to use a proposition as a premise in one context, but not another, and do so without "changing our mind". Often, I suspect, the upshot of fully informed peer disagreement about a proposition p will be joint doxastic agnosticism about p. But that still leaves open the question of whether, for certain purposes, I should employ p as a premiss.

Acceptance of a proposition is or at least can be context-relative, because it can be conditioned by and contingent upon the following sorts of factor:

(i)   the purposes for which we're reasoning in a given context,
(ii)   the practical implications of reaching a false conclusion in that context,
(iii)   the cost of failing to reach a conclusion in that context, and
(iv)   the relative costs of various ways of reaching a conclusion in that context.

Whether it is *reasonable* for an individual to accept a proposition on a given occasion depends on contextual factors because it is sensitive these four sorts of factor. And as I have pointed out on another occasion (Pinto, 2003), assessing the practical implications and relative costs of accepting of failing to accept conclusion will often depend on an assessor's nonepistemic values. In light of this latter fact, it should be easy to see how peer disagreement that leads or ought to lead to doxastic agnosticism could well lead to reasonable peer disagreement about whether a proposition should be accepted.

4. CONCLUSION

In short, I believe that the entire matter of peer disagreement needs to be rethought in terms of a more sophisticated and more realistic account of the cognitive attitudes that are at stake.

---

[3] Akin to what Bratman (1999, ch. 2) has called *taking for granted*.

REFERENCES

Bratman, M. E. (1999). *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cohen, L.J. (1992). *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Feldman, R. (2005). Deep disagreement, rational resolutions, and critical thinking. *Informal Logic*, *25*, 13-23.

Fogelin, R. J. (1985/2005). The logic of deep disagreements. *Informal Logic*, *25*, 3-11. Originally published in *Informal Logic*, 7, 1-8.

Lugg, A. (1986). Deep disagreement and informal logic: No cause for alarm. *Informal Logic*, *8*, 47-51.

Pinto, R. C. (2006). Evaluating inferences: the nature and role of warrants. *Informal Logic*, 26, 287-327. Reprinted in David Hitchcock and Bart Verheij (Eds.), *Arguing on the Toulmin model: New essays on argument analysis and evaluation* (pp. 115-144), Dordrecht: Springer.

Pinto, R. C. (2007). 'Probably' and other modal qualifiers. Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation, University of Windsor. A considerably revised but as yet unpublished draft of this paper is available under that title "Understanding 'Probably'" at http://web2.uwindsor.ca/courses/philosophy/pinto/papers.htm.

Pinto, R. C. (2009). Argumentation and the force of reasons. *Informal Logic*, *29*, 263-297.

Pinto, R. C. (2010). The uses of argument in communicative contexts. *Argumentation*, *24*, 227-252.

Prichard, D. (2011). Epistemic relativism, epistemic incommensurability, and Wittgensteinian epistemology. In S. D. Hales (Ed.), *A Companion to Relativism* (pp. 266-285), Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On Certainty*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.