The Significance of Agreement Despite Irrelevant Factors

A point of interest in debates about the sources of disagreement are so-called *irrelevant factors*: our disagreement may not be a result of the fact that we have different evidence, but could also be explained by our different backgrounds. Whether you are a religious conservative or a secular liberal, whether you are wealthy or poor, whether your first courses in philosophy had an analytic or a continental orientation might have shaped your beliefs in various ways. But this information about your background will often be irrelevant to the *truth* of those beliefs.

Much attention has been given to cases of *dis*agreement due to irrelevant factors: whether such disagreement should be considered permissible, whether it can or should be resolved, and whether it gives rise to a form of skepticism. In this talk, I want to focus on cases of *agreement despite the presence of irrelevant factors*. Cases of this type are not rare, and their significance is established in common sense thinking: agreement between conservatives and liberals on infrastructure spending or freedom of speech can make news headlines;[[1]](#footnote-2) agreement between continental and analytic scholars may rise eyebrows among their peers. The reason for this seems to be this: we can assume that the irrelevant factors in these cases would “pull” the two sides in different directions. The fact that their beliefs nevertheless converged gives us some indication that in at least of one of the two sides the “pull” of the irrelevant factors was overcome by a “pull” of evidence in a different direction.

This points to a hermeneutical significance of agreement despite irrelevant factors: if the beliefs of a group with different irrelevant factors converge on P, this makes it more likely that those beliefs exist as a rational response to evidence rather than as a result of, for example, motivated reasoning. More precisely, if S1 and S2 are affected by *opposite* irrelevant factors, their converging beliefs cannot exclusively be a result of those irrelevant factors. Of course, their agreement may still be a result of other irrelevant factors they both share: if S1 and S2 are a conservative and a liberal, but are both very wealthy, perhaps their agreement on taxation systems is a result of that factor. But in general we can say that the more diverse the range of irrelevant factors in a group is, the more hermeneutically significant is their agreement. This line of reasoning can provide one motivation for including a diverse range of backgrounds in our epistemic practices. It also presents an interesting difficulty for permissivism: if we accept that there can be more than one rational response to a given body of evidence, then it is hard to see why the convergence in responses should be in any way epistemically significant.

1. For example: K. Foster, J. Stanley, and T. Williams: “We Disagree on a Lot of Things. Except the Danger of Anti-Critical Race Theory Laws.” The New York Times, July 5, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/05/opinion/we-disagree-on-a-lot-of-things-except-the-danger-of-anti-critical-race-theory-laws.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)