Comments on Tom Kelly's 'Disagreement, Dogmatism, and the Burdens of Judgment'

David James Barnett, 03/27/10

1. Outline of Views

> **Self and Other:** On the basis of your relevant evidence E, you believe that P. You then learn that another person, who you otherwise have no reason to consider less reliable or competent than you are, has come to believe that not-P on the same set of evidence E.

The Equal Weight View calls for a **symmetrical** response from each party to the disagreement—each should respond with agnosticism, no matter who assessed the evidence correctly to begin with. Kelly's view calls for an **asymmetrical** response to the disagreement. If you in fact assessed the evidence correctly, then you rationally can be more confident than not that the defendant is guilty. The other juror should change her mind.

Others have advocated for a symmetrical response from the two parties, but denied that this response must be agnosticism. That is, they have said both parties can rationally be more confident of their original answers.

	Full Weight	**Extra Weight**	**Equal Weight**
Symmetrical	**(??)**	**Egocentric Bias**	**Thermometer Model**
Asymmetrical	**Right Reasons**	**Total Evidence**	**--**

2. Independence vs. Impartiality

> **Friend and Enemy:** You know that your best friend believes that P on the basis of his total relevant evidence. You then learn that your worst enemy has come to believe that not-P based on the same total evidence.

What attitude you rationally could hold towards P will depend on the details, but the following seems compelling:

> **Impartiality:** The rational attitude towards P depends solely on your "non-partisan" evidence—facts about the number of disagreeing parties, psychological facts about the beliefs or credences of the parties, facts about the general reliability, track record, etc. of the parties.

It would be perverse to show favoritism towards your friend's belief *merely* because he is your friend. Favoritism could be epistemically justified only by further evidence concerning your friend's reliability, track record, etc. In a special case where the enemy is known to be your friend's peer (and where P and not-P otherwise are equally likely for you), agnosticism seems clearly appropriate.

What is the difference between this case and that of Self and Other?

> **"Egocentric" Evidence:** The fact that you are a party to the disagreement, that you are the one who believes P, and that you are the one to whom the evidence appears to support that P.

This egocentric evidence could not justify you in putting more confidence in P than in not-P, any more than personal loyalty to your friend could.

> Wedgewood: it seems absurd for anyone to think to themselves 'I'm me, and he's not; so I'm right and he's wrong'. But [instead, the thinking is] 'He has an intuition with the content that not-p, but at least prima facie, it appears that p; so at least prima facie, it appears that his intuitions are untrustworthy on this question.'

Christensen takes this too to be objectionable:

> "Well, so and so disagrees with me about p. But since P is true, she's wrong about p. So however reliable she may generally be, I needn't take her disagreement about p as any reason at all to change my belief."

He takes this to support:

> **Independence:** In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another person's belief about P, in order to determine how (if at all) to modify one's own belief about p, one should do so in a way that is independent of the reasoning behind one's own initial belief about p (2009:758).

Kelly's asymmetric views accommodates Impartiality in a different way. In the Self/Other case, *you have evidence E*. There is nothing egocentric about taking evidence E to support your view over the other person's.

Kelly puts the point somewhat differently. He takes the underlying motivation for Independence to be: Dogmatism is a formal vice, similar to hypocrisy. Instead, Kelly says that a dogmatic response is appropriate in some cases but not in others, *depending on the strength of your evidence for P*. Holocaust denial and True Story examples.

Some difficulties for Independence: Kelly's all-things-considered judgment call and Holocaust denial examples. Is this a fundamental problem, or just a tricky matter of formulation? Here is another case: Let the subject of disagreement be the effects of sleep deprivation on one's reasoning abilities, and suppose your disagreement is with an otherwise cogent thinker who has missed a night of sleep.

Problems for Kelly: At least in the True Story case, there is no cause for concern that one has made a mistake in reasoning. Compare two friends who are taking two classes together: a logic class and a statistics class. Suppose for simplicity that their homework problems involve real life (rather than fictional) events. They each solve a homework problem independently, and their answers turn out to disagree. For the correct student, is dogmatism more appropriate for logic problems than for statistics problems?

Kelly seems to suggest this for Christensen's Mental Calculation case:

> if in fact you reasoned impeccably in arriving at your original answer, then the facts from which you reasoned (that the total bill is n dollars; that m people have agreed to divide the check evenly, etc.) literally *entail* the correct answer. So if such facts are among the evidence you have to go on in evaluating my belief, then they would seem to provide a basis for discounting my opinion entirely.

Intuitively, the epistemic significance of peer disagreement is that is suggests you made a mistake with respect to your first-order evidence. It's hard to see how you could weight these two sets of evidence against one another.

3. Bootstrapping Objections

Elga objects that the Egocentric Bias (or Extra Weight) view leads to bootstrapping:

The crux of the argument is Elga's assumption, for sake of *reductio*, that:

> whenever you and your friend disagree, you should be, say, 70% confident that your friend is the mistaken one.

Kelly says, plausibly, that this is not absurd in the case where you consistently have better supported views than your friend does:

> [I]n some ways it would make our cognitive lives much easier if there were genuine [formal] norms of the relevant kind. … one would be in a position to know what credence one is rationally required to have, *without* needing to make a substantive judgment about what one's total evidence now supports, a type of judgment that is highly fallible, especially in the kind of "hard cases" that are salient in this context.

This is what Kelly calls the "burden of judgment." We all know that having true beliefs isn't always easy. On Kelly's view, the same goes for having rational beliefs.

Kelly then turns the tables on Elga, saying that in some cases, including his Seminar case, one's concluding that someone is not one's peer seems intuitively correct:

> The possibility of rationally downgrading someone from the status of peer in this way will be especially apparent in cases in which one's initial judgment that the other person is a peer was itself based on relatively insubstantial evidence.

But this seems like the sort of case where even the Thermometer Model says you should downgrade the other person. If an arbitrary person is not a fool, then even if he no genius, he still will agree more often with geniuses than he will with fools. So if you can be pretty sure that you are no fool, the Thermometer Model licenses a growing suspicion that some enemy is a fool the more often you disagree.

Call it a draw?

4. Right Reasons vs. Total Evidence

Kelly's earlier Right Reasons view said that peer disagreement is more or less irrelevant. After learning of your disagreement with a peer, the rational attitude toward P is whatever it was given your initial evidence E. The Total Evidence view is supposed to be more moderate, preserving the asymmetry but allowing for disagreement to be of some epistmic significance. The idea is that even if E supported P to a high degree, your updated total evidence includes:

1) E

2) I believe that P, and it appears to me that E supports P

3) My peer believes that not-P, and it appears to him that E supports not-P.

An initial worry: Shouldn't 2 and 3 just cancel each other out, such that one's total evidence now supports that P to the same degree that E did?

Consider for comparison the Friend and Enemy case. Let Cr- be your rational credence that P—i.e., the credence supported by your evidence—before you learn that Friend and Enemy have arrived at conflicting views about P. and let Cr+ be your rational credence posterior to learning about their disagreement. We want to say:

Cr-(P) = ½, then Cr+(P) = ½

But how should this generalize? It seems like it should be:

Cr-(P) = n, then Cr+(P) = n, and therefore Cr-(P) = Cr+(P)

After all, the fact that two peers disagree about whether P tells you nothing about whether P is true. The fact that one of them thinks P is some evidence for P, and the fact that the other thinks not-P is counterbalancing evidence against P.

Problem: If we accept Impartiality, then this implies the Right Reasons view which Kelly wanted to reject. Egocentric evidence aside, don't you have the same evidence in both cases? (Unsuccessful response: "Two heads are better than one.")

In another paper, Kelly seems to suggest an alternative generalization—even for cases like Friend and Enemy where you learn of a disagreement between two other people. Where initially your evidence favors P,

Cr-(P) > Cr+(P) > ½

Does this rest on a confusion of expected reliability with known reliability? Example of widespread disagreement among a peer group.