Chapter 1: Conceptual Work on Disagreement

Disagreement is a perfectly ordinary phenomenon. Recently, there has been an explosion of literature on the epistemology of disagreement.¹ And for good reason: there’s a lot to think about here. My aim in this dissertation is to contribute to this literature, particularly the literature on so-called *epistemic peer disagreement.*²

Specifically, in this chapter, I want to get clearer on the notion of *disagreement.* So far as I can tell, nothing in the current literature deals exclusively, extensively and explicitly with this conceptual work. Here I do that conceptual work.

It’s certainly true that a lot has been said about disagreement in the philosophical literature, but so far as I can tell very little of it has been on what it *means* for two individuals to disagree. The conceptual work just hasn’t received a lot of attention.³ Perhaps this is because it just seems obvious what disagreement is. So, for example, one might be tempted to think that

\[(0) \text{ For any two individuals } S_1 \text{ and } S_2, \text{ any proposition } p, \text{ and any time } t, S_1 \text{ and } S_2 \text{ disagree over } p \text{ at } t \text{ if and only if } S_1 \text{ takes doxastic attitude } D \text{ toward } p \text{ at } t \text{ and } S_2 \text{ fails to take } D \text{ toward } p \text{ at } t.\]

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¹ The literature is growing rapidly. Here’s a mere sample of that literature: Peter van Inwagen (1996); Alvin Plantinga (1995); Richard Feldman (2003b); Richard Feldman (2006); Richard Feldman (2007); David Christensen (2007); David Christensen (2009); Adam Elga (2007); Adam Elga (forthcoming); Bryan Frances (2008); Bryan Frances (2009); Bryan Frances (forthcoming); Tom Kelly (2005); Tom Kelly (forthcoming); Earl Conee (2009); Earl Conee (forthcoming); Alvin Goldman (forthcoming); Jennifer Lackey (forthcoming-a); Jennifer Lackey (forthcoming-b); Ernest Sosa (2010); Ralph Wedgwood (forthcoming).

² A case can be made for doing this conceptual work apart from its (alleged) implications for the epistemology of disagreement literature. The concept of *disagreement* turns up frequently in cognitivism/noncognitivism and relativism debates in ethics.

³ As John MacFarlane says, “Philosophers have not wasted much ink on the question of what it is to disagree.” See his (2007).
Following the received tradition, believing that p, disbelieving that p, and suspending judgment about p are the only doxastic attitudes one may have toward a proposition at any time.⁴ One should resist this temptation to accept (0), though. It is false: the right-hand condition specified in (0) is not sufficient for disagreement. Consider: S2 could fail to take D toward p in virtue of not taking any doxastic attitude at all toward p. S2 may not have consciously entertained p. In such a case, it seems clearly wrong to say that S2 disagrees with S1 over p. One’s agreeing or disagreeing with someone about p entails that one has entertained p. So, we need something other than (0).

We don’t have far to look. (0) doesn’t even capture the rough and ready characterization of disagreement where two individuals are said to disagree when they take different doxastic attitudes toward some proposition. So, going with what was indicated above, we seem to be claiming that:

(1) For any two individuals S1 and S2, any proposition p, and any time t, S1 and S2 disagree over p at t if and only if S1 and S2 take different doxastic attitudes toward p at t.⁵

One might complain that (1) entails that two individuals who do not know each other, or have never met, and perhaps never will meet, could rightly be said to disagree with each other so long as they take different doxastic attitudes over some proposition at the same time. So, for example, (1) entails that my mother and, say, Richard Dawkins

⁴ See Roderick Chisholm (1966) p. 21. I’m ignoring degrees of belief for the moment. That will come up below.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga accepts something like (1) in his (1995) p. 199. There will be more on this below. In addition, Earl Conee offers a stipulation of his use of ‘disagree’ that looks something like (1) in his (forthcoming). There are apparently some differences between (1) and Conee’s stipulation. Those will be considered below, too.
disagree with each other over Jesus’ being divine though (so far as I know) they have never met. For some, that might just sound strange to say. And that strangeness, they might suggest, indicates that something like knowing each other or having met (however exactly that might be spelled out) is a necessary condition for disagreeing over a proposition.

Indeed, one might take this complaint a bit further and claim that amending (1) to include S1 and S2’s knowing each other or having met is not enough of a fix. Something more is required. Consider: Suppose my mother and Richard Dawkins met briefly during a conference they both attended. They exchanged brief pleasantries over cheese and crackers and that was it. No talk of Jesus came up at all. If one is inclined to reject (1) for the sort of reasoning followed above, then one would not be satisfied by a brief meeting unrelated to the topic of the (alleged) disagreement. Moreover, the same lack of satisfaction would hold if we add that Dawkins and my mother knew each other in the sense that they were good friends (and so in a sense that goes beyond merely meeting) and yet have never discussed Jesus’ divine status. One might conclude that what is needed for disagreement is something like a mutual awareness of the differing doxastic attitudes, a sort of confrontation over the target proposition. So what we would need to add, according to the complaint, is something like the following:

(2) For any two individuals S1 and S2, any proposition p, and any time t, S1 and S2 disagree over p at t if and only if S1 and S2 are mutually aware that they take different doxastic attitudes toward p at t.
But the above complaints don’t make for a very good objection to (1). Proponents of (1) have an extremely plausible reply. Quite simply, there is a difference between disagreeing over a proposition and being aware that one is disagreeing over a proposition. If there were no such distinction, then it would make no sense to say that one discovered or learned of a disagreement with another over some matter. But such utterances do make good sense, and so there is good reason to think that disagreeing is one thing and learning of the disagreement is another thing altogether. (1) purports to capture the former while (2) captures the latter. There is no good objection to (1) here. And so there is no motivation to accept (2).

So one can disagree with another over some proposition without realizing it. This might lead to another way one might pick on (1). A specific example of this sort of phenomenon would be the following: Suppose my mother reads one of Bertrand Russell’s works and discovers that he does not believe that Jesus is divine. Clearly Bertrand Russell is not (and was not) aware of this (alleged) disagreement. But according to the defense of (1) above, we’re okay with this—neither party needs to be aware of a disagreement in order for there to be a disagreement. So it seems like there is no basis found in (1) for denying that my mother and Bertrand Russell disagree over Jesus’ divine status. And you might think that it otherwise sounds okay to say that Bertrand Russell and my mother disagree over Jesus’ divine status.

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6 Tom Kelly calls disagreements where one (or both) is unaware of the disagreement a “weak sense” of the term. It’s the sense of disagreement he uses in his (2008a) pp. 611-633. Weak or not, disagreement does not entail awareness of the disagreement.
But here’s the rub. Notice that (1) would not allow one to say this. The time index in (1) makes a difference here. It’s simply not the case that right now (at time t) my mother and Bertrand Russell take different doxastic attitudes toward the proposition Jesus is divine. Given Russell’s death, it’s very plausible to think that right now Russell has no doxastic attitudes at all. Since the condition in (1) is not satisfied, it follows that my mother and Russell do not disagree over Jesus’ divine status after all. But they do (or so the complaint goes) and so we ought to reject (1).

A proponent of (1) might think that it’s a good thing that (1) entails that my mother and Bertrand Russell do not disagree over the proposition Jesus is divine. To put it bluntly, that’s because one cannot disagree with a dead guy. That (1) entails this is no strike against it—it’s a virtue of the proposal. Or so one might argue.

Of course, symmetry here would seem to demand that one could not agree with a dead guy either. So my mother can’t disagree with Russell, but neither can she agree with him, or Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or St. Augustine, or any other dead person on any matter whatever. And that may not be as palatable an implication.

In addition (though this is getting ahead of ourselves a bit), it seems that we would want to include within discussions of the epistemology of peer disagreement

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7 Unless one is inclined to think that post-mortem doxastic attitudes are possible, perhaps because one continues to persist and hold beliefs after death in some sort of afterlife. I’m setting that possibility aside here.

8 The example of Bertrand Russell and my mother involves only one dead individual. But, of course, we may consider cases where both parties to the alleged disagreement are dead. For example, we might think of W.K. Clifford and Soren Kierkegaard as disagreeing (right now) on the nature of the relationship (if any) between religious faith and reason.

9 One might wonder what comes of the idea that we are in a ‘conversation’ with thinkers throughout history if we jettison the notion (on pain of conceptual incoherence) that we can agree or disagree with them.
any intellectual encounter we might have with the writings of persons no longer living.\textsuperscript{10} The epistemology of such encounters seems no less interesting than the epistemology of encounters with everyday friends and colleagues. This gives us some reason to prefer an account of disagreement that conceptually allows for the possibility of having a disagreement with non-living individuals.

The problem is that it’s just not obvious how to amend (1) so as to allow for disagreements with non-living individuals. One’s first inclination might be simply to eliminate the time index in the analysis. The result would be this:

(3) For any two individuals S1 and S2 and any proposition p, S1 and S2 disagree over p if and only if S1 and S2 take different doxastic attitudes toward p.

But this does not seem to help. Take the (alleged) disagreement between my mother and Bertrand Russell over the proposition \textit{Jesus is divine}. It’s not clear that the condition in (3) is satisfied here since it’s not clear how we determine whether they take different doxastic attitudes \textit{simpliciter} (particularly if we add the incredibly plausible assumption that at some point they did not take different doxastic attitudes toward the proposition—after all, I’m sure that my mother did not always affirm Jesus’ divinity). Consequently, removing the time index doesn’t seem to help clarify things here; it seems to muddy the waters instead. Another solution is called for.

\textsuperscript{10} We need to refer to non-living individuals rather than dead individuals since it seems plausible to think that one might be neither dead nor living—one may be in a state of suspended animation. (See Fred Feldman (1994). And if we’re willing to say that we can have disagreements with dead individuals, we should be quite willing to say that we can have disagreements with individuals in a state of suspended animation, too.)
Perhaps an appeal to counterfactuals would help here. Such a move might be motivated by thinking about what doxastic attitude, say, Russell would take toward Jesus’ divinity at this time were he still alive. Since it seems reasonable to think that Russell would continue to disbelieve Jesus’ divinity were he alive right now and thinking about the matter, then an analysis of disagreement that takes this into account would be able to say that my mother and Russell disagree right now over Jesus’ divinity. And that was the desired implication. So, the resulting analysis might look something like this:

(4) For any two individuals S1 and S2, any proposition p, and any time t, S1 and S2 disagree over p at t if and only if S1 and S2 would take different doxastic attitudes toward p at t.

This analysis is incomplete. We need to have an antecedent to our counterfactual. Let’s try this:

(5) For any two individuals S1 and S2, any proposition p, and any time t, S1 and S2 disagree over p at t if and only if S1 and S2 would take different doxastic attitudes toward p at t if S1 and S2 were to entertain p at t.

Again, since it seem reasonable to suppose that Russell would continue to disbelieve Jesus’ divinity were he to entertain that proposition right now, and since my mother affirms Jesus’ divinity right now, then (5) seems to get the desired result that Russell

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11 I’m allowing for the sake of argument that this is a reasonable thing to say, but it seems far from obviously true.
and my mother disagree right now. Maybe this is the account of disagreement we should embrace.

I don’t think it is. (5) is false. Consider: Suppose Andy has thought hard about which NBA team counts as the greatest team in NBA history and he believes right now that the 1995-96 Chicago Bulls (who went 72-10 in the regular season and easily advanced through the playoffs, ultimately winning the NBA championship) are the greatest NBA team in history. Further suppose that my mother hasn’t thought about this at all, but (we’ll plausibly assume) were she to consider the matter now and, specifically, the claim that the 1995-96 Bulls were the greatest NBA team ever, she would shrug her shoulders and say that she didn’t know. She would suspend judgment on the matter. Now, (5) entails that before my mother has even thought about the issue at all, she and Andy disagree right now over which NBA team is the greatest ever. But that seems plainly false. Right now she clearly has no view on the matter. The problem with (5) seems to be that it conflates would-be-cases of disagreement with cases of actual disagreement. To say that two individuals would disagree is not to say that they do disagree. (5) conflates these. We should reject (5).

Maybe it’s ultimately a mistake to look for an analysis of disagreement that leaves open the possibility of disagreeing with non-living individuals. Maybe the way to think about things here is to affirm (1) and insist that it is conceptually impossible to disagree (or agree) with a non-living individual. Quite simply, agreeing or disagreeing with another individual entails (minimally) that both individuals are the sorts of things that have doxastic attitudes toward propositions. Non-living things
don’t have doxastic attitudes toward propositions, so it is not possible to agree or disagree literally with a non-living individual.

Of course, this entails that my mother and Bertrand Russell do not disagree over the proposition that *Jesus is divine*. This also entails that my mother does not agree with St. Augustine on that topic. Nor, for that matter, do we literally agree with Martin Luther King, Jr. on civil rights or disagree with Hitler on the way to treat Jews. But, it seems, we want to say these things, and making this move doesn’t allows us to do that. That was a reason for looking beyond (1) to an analysis of disagreement that conceptually allows for disagreements with the non-living.

This complaint is not decisive against (1). We might say that, while we cannot literally have disagreements with the non-living, we can do things that look a lot like disagreeing with the non-living: we can affirm what they denied, deny what they affirmed, withhold judgment on what they took a stance on, or take a stance on what they withheld judgment on. So, for example, while we cannot literally disagree with Hitler over how to treat Jews, we can (and do, I trust) deny all sorts of claims he made about how to treat Jews. And that’s probably enough to satisfy our intuitions that we are sincerely engaging with the thoughts of the non-living, though it is not enough to make for a literal disagreement.12

Another reason noted above for looking beyond (1) to an analysis of disagreement that allows for the conceptual possibility of disagreeing with the non-

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12 In the same way that we are seriously engaging with a calculating device when we come to believe that it is malfunctioning. In such a case, we are not in a literal disagreement with the calculating device, though we are denying the accuracy of its outputs.
living was that it would seem that we would want to include in our discussions of the epistemology of disagreement our intellectual engagements with the past thoughts of the now-non-living. The epistemology of such engagement seems no less interesting than the epistemology of our engagement with the living.

A proponent of (1) can agree with this and maintain that much, if not all, of what is said about the epistemology of disagreement with the living will apply straightforwardly to our engagement with the non-living, even though such engagement does not literally count as disagreement. Consequently, we need not amend our analysis of disagreement simply to accommodate that phenomenon.

There is another, related objection one might press against (1). Consider the following claim from John MacFarlane:

> When I was ten, I used to go around saying “fish sticks are delicious” (and meaning it!). Now I say “fish sticks are not delicious.” It seems to me that I disagree with my past self.13

If what MacFarlane claims here is true, then (1) is in trouble. (1) does not license the view that I can disagree with my past self since it is not true that I (understood as my current self) and my past self take different doxastic attitudes toward any p at any time t. This is because (presumably) there is no time t where both I (understood as my current self) and my past self exist. So what might a proponent of (1) say to this?

Pretty much exactly what was said to the objection from apparent disagreements with the non-living, it seems. We cannot literally disagree with our

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past selves any more than we can with the non-living, though we may do things that resemble disagreement, such as denying what our past selves affirmed, affirming what our past selves denied, taking a stance on what our past selves withheld judgment on, and withholding judgment on what our past selves took stances on.

There’s not enough here in this potential objection to prompt us to abandon (1).

As was noted with critical engagement with the non-living, it may seem that we would want to preserve conceptually the idea that we disagree with our past selves since it may seem that we would want to include such (alleged) disagreements in our epistemology of disagreement discussions. So-called intellectual encounters with our past selves seems no less epistemically interesting than intellectual encounters with the non-living or the living. But, again, a proponent of (1) can happily grant that there is (some kind of) epistemic significance to intellectual encounters with our past selves while denying that they constitute genuine disagreements.

We’ve now considered objections to (1) based upon alleged disagreements with the non-living and with past selves. There’s another related sort of objection one can raise to (1). MacFarlane gestures at the view that one can have disagreements with inhabitants of other possible worlds.14 This may be reflected in a comment like “it’s possible that one disagree with me on this matter” when understood as making a

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14 MacFarlane (2007) p. 23. He imagines a scenario where Jane (an inhabitant of the actual world) seems to disagree with June (her counterpart in another possible world). I’ve extended the view to include other inhabitants of possible worlds beyond counterparts. I don’t see why there’d be anything particularly special about counterparts here. If we can disagree with counterparts, then it seems just as plausible to suppose that we can disagree with other merely possible persons, too.
claim about metaphysical possibility and not epistemic possibility. If this is so, then (1) is in trouble. (1) doesn’t seem to allow for disagreements with merely possible persons since (1) requires the disagreeing parties to have doxastic attitudes, and (presumably) merely possible persons don’t have any doxastic attitudes. So should we reject (1) on this basis?

Hardly. The easy reply is that if we are moved by this objection, then we are conflating merely possible disagreement with actual disagreement. No one really disagrees with a merely possible person. And so (1) is not in trouble for saying as much.

As before with non-living persons and past selves, there may be some impulse to preserve conceptually disagreements with merely possible persons since such (alleged) disagreements seem epistemically interesting, perhaps as much so as disagreements with actual persons. But again, a proponent of (1) can happily grant

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15 It may seem strange that anyone would actually bother to say something like this when understood as a claim about metaphysical possibility. Surely whenever that line is uttered, it is meant to be a claim about epistemic possibility. This may be so. But it remains true that one could say it and have only the metaphysical meaning in mind. Imagine, for example, a theist who is utterly psychologically incapable of thinking that there are (or ever have been or ever will be) any genuine atheists or agnostics. The theist is convinced that everybody who has ever entertained the existence of God, at bottom, believes that God exists. So she would deny that it is epistemically possible that someone denies the existence of God. That is, she would deny that it is possible, given all that she knows, that someone denies the existence of God. This theist, though, may very well grant that it is metaphysically possible that someone denies the existence of God. That is, she might very well grant that there is a possible world (perhaps a very distant world) where someone denies the existence of God. So, she may utter “it’s possible that one disagree with me on the existence of God” and have only metaphysical possibility in mind.

16 Tom Kelly makes this distinction in his (2005) p. 181.

17 Where a merely possible person is a non-actual possible person. The modifier ‘merely’ in the main text is crucial here. We all disagree with possible persons since we all disagree with actual persons, and actual persons just are possible persons. Obviously, actual persons aren’t merely possible persons.

18 Tom Kelly takes (alleged) disagreement with merely possible persons, at least in some cases, to be as epistemically significant as disagreement with actual persons. See his (2005) pp. 181-185.
the epistemic significance of intellectual encounters with merely possible persons
without granting that any such encounters are properly regarded as disagreements.¹⁹

So we can stick with (1). Or, at least, thinking about intellectual engagement
with the non-living, our past selves, and merely possible persons does not compel us
to abandon (1). But there might be other reasons for abandoning (1). For example, I
suppose another hesitancy one might have in accepting (1) would be whether S1’s
believing that p and S2’s suspending judgment about p really counts as a
disagreement. One might think that S1 and S2 must take opposing (not merely
different) doxastic attitudes toward p—belief and disbelief—in order to count as
disagreeing over p. Analysis (1) does not reflect this, so (1) should be rejected.

Indeed, in response to his question “What is it, exactly, for two parties to
disagree?” John MacFarlane claims that “the obvious thing to say” about
disagreement is that

(6) For any two parties, they disagree just in case there is a proposition
that one party accepts and the other rejects.²⁰

¹⁹ It may seem strange to think that we can encounter merely possible persons. And that is strange. I
doubt we can. But there’s no need to understand this literally here.
²⁰ MacFarlane labels this position “Accepts/Rejects”. By accepts and rejects, MacFarlane explicitly
has in mind belief (assertion) and disbelief (denial). He thinks that one way to reject a proposition is to
believe a proposition that is incompatible with it. He’s open to there being other ways to reject a
proposition. See MacFarlane (2007) p. 22. Now, it’s not clear to me whether he would count
suspending judgment on a proposition as one way of rejecting a proposition. I must admit that rejecting
a proposition seems to me to be stronger than, to go beyond, merely suspending judgment on it.
Rejecting a proposition certainly sounds like passing judgment on that proposition. Obviously,
suspending judgment on a proposition isn’t passing judgment on a proposition. But maybe MacFarlane
sees things differently than I do and he would count suspending judgment as one way of rejecting a
proposition. Anyway, it should be noted that MacFarlane denies (6), but for reasons other than those
indicated here.
This view seems to be suggested in several comments that appear in the epistemology of disagreement literature. For example, Richard Feldman explicitly offers this view of disagreement: “Let’s say that two people have a *disagreement* when one believes a proposition and the other denies (i.e., disbelieves) that proposition.” Elsewhere, Feldman seems to put forward a view like (6) when he says, “I will assume throughout this essay that the cases of apparently reasonable disagreement are cases of genuine disagreement. That is, I am assuming that the people really do disagree, that one person affirms a proposition that the other person denies.” Elsewhere, Feldman says this: “In saying that there were disagreements among the students I am saying only that there were propositions that some of them affirmed and some of them denied.” Finally, in another work, Feldman alludes to a (6)-like view by seemingly equating *disagreeing* with *disbelieving what another believes*. He presents a case and then comments:

Of course, in this sort of case there is no particular proposition such that one person thinks that it is true and the other thinks that it is false. And it is the existence of reasonable disagreements about the truth value of a proposition that is under discussion here. These two examples suggest that the real point of asking whether reasonable people can disagree is to ask whether it can happen that one person

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22 See his (2006) p. 218. Feldman is clearly not offering an analysis here, but the remark is suggestive.
23 See his (2007) p. 199. Again, I hesitate to say that Feldman is presenting us with an analysis here. However, the remark is suggestive.
believes a proposition and the other person believes the denial of that proposition, yet both people are reasonable in their beliefs.\textsuperscript{24}

A bit later, Feldman makes an even more explicit appeal to (6). After presenting another case, he has this to say:

This is not a case in which people really disagree about p; that is, it is not a case in which one believes it and the other disbelieves it. Instead, one believes it and the other merely suspends judgment about it.\textsuperscript{25}

Feldman is not alone here. David Christensen seems to gesture at something like (6) as well when he writes, “Suppose I find out that my friend disagrees with me about P: she has moderately high confidence that it’s true, and I have moderately high confidence that it’s false.”\textsuperscript{26}

Similarly, Bryan Frances says this:

Recently there has been some illuminating work on the epistemic problems of peer disagreement. Two people disagree regarding P (i.e., one believes it while the other believes its negation) even though they are equal in intelligence, biases, and intellectual care—both generally and with regard to the topics surrounding P.\textsuperscript{27}

Furthermore, Tom Kelly, in setting up the epistemological issues surrounding peer disagreement, writes: “On the other hand, I am very much aware of the fact that, with respect to each issue, there are many others who not only do not share my belief, but

\textsuperscript{24} See his (2003a) p. 182.
\textsuperscript{25} See his (2003a) p. 187.
\textsuperscript{26} See his (2007) p. 188. Again, Christensen isn’t (I take it) offering an analysis here, but the remark seems suggestive.
\textsuperscript{27} See his (forthcoming). Again, I doubt that his remark amounts to an analysis of disagreement, but it is suggestive.
in fact, take a diametrically opposed position. Of course, the mere fact of disagreement need not be problematic….\textsuperscript{28}  Kelly continues with a central question for his paper:

Can one rationally hold a belief while knowing that that belief is not shared (and indeed, is explicitly rejected) by individuals over whom one possesses no discernible epistemic advantage? If so, what assumptions must one be making about oneself and about those with whom one disagrees?\textsuperscript{29}

These comments seem to suggest a view like (6), as does this passage from Henry Sidgwick that Kelly quotes: “the denial by another of a proposition that I have affirmed has a tendency to impair my confidence in its validity…. And it will be easily seen that the absence of such disagreement must remain an indispensable negative condition of the certainty of our beliefs.”\textsuperscript{30} All of these comments suggest that taking opposing doxastic attitudes (i.e., belief and disbelief) is what is meant by ‘disagreement’ and its cognates.\textsuperscript{31} So, since (6) follows suit, and (1) does not, perhaps we should reject (1) and embrace (6) instead.

\textsuperscript{28} See his (2005) p. 168.
\textsuperscript{29} See his (2005) p. 168. Once again, I’m not pinning (6) on Kelly. But his remarks, as with the others, seem suggestive. In his (2008a) Kelly uses “disagree” in the following way: “you and I disagree about some issue just in case we hold opposed views about that issue.” See p. 611. I’m not sure how to understand “opposed views” here. It seems most natural to take “opposed views” to mean belief/disbelief. When one suspends judgment while another believes, it’s not clear that the one who suspends judgment has taken an \textit{opposing} view. Indeed, you might think that he’s taken no view at all, opposing or otherwise—he is, after all, suspending judgment.
\textsuperscript{30} This passage, from Sidgwick (1981), is quoted in Kelly (2005) p. 169.
\textsuperscript{31} It’s hard to tell, but Adam Elga’s work is modestly suggestive of the view that disagreement amounts to opposing doxastic attitudes. In (2007) he often refers to cases of disagreement as cases where “opposing judgments” are taken. In (forthcoming) Elga opens the paper with a description of a disagreement: “You become confident that the claim is true. But then you find out that your friend—
But a proponent of (1) has something plausible to say here on the side of (1)’s sufficiency (and so against (6) for requiring opposing doxastic attitudes). It’s clearly true that taking opposing doxastic attitudes (in the way specified in (6) above) is sufficient for disagreement. Following Alvin Plantinga, we might call this kind of disagreement *contradicting*. Yet, contradicting doesn’t seem to be the only way to disagree. It certainly seems that anytime one can truthfully say “I’ve thought about that, and I don’t take your view on the matter” or “I’ve considered that, too, and I just don’t go along with you there” we have a case of disagreement, too. And when S2 suspends judgment over p while S1 believes p, S2 can truthfully say those things to S1. S2 can truthfully say to S1, “I’ve thought about p, and you think it’s true, but I don’t agree with you here. I don’t think p is true.”

This is why it seems intuitively correct to think, for example, that atheists and theists are both in disagreement with agnostics over the claim that God exists. An atheist can truthfully say to an agnostic, “You’ve considered the claim that God exists, and you don’t think it’s false. Well, I don’t agree with you: it is false.” A theist can truthfully say to the agnostic, “You’ve considered the claim that God exists, and you don’t think it’s true. Well, I don’t agree with you: it is true.” And an agnostic can...
truthfully say to the atheist and the theist, “You two have thought about the claim that God exists. You, atheist, think it’s not true. I don’t agree. And you, theist, think it is true. I don’t agree.” This exchange certainly seems like a disagreement. Again, following Plantinga, we might call this kind of disagreement dissenting.\(^{34}\) (1) allows for dissenting as a kind of disagreement. (6), on the other hand, does not. Consequently, (1) doesn’t seem guilty of counting too many things as disagreement, but (6) does seem to be guilty of not allowing enough to count as disagreement.

It’s worth noting here that rejecting (6) for the reason offered here should prompt us to reject what MacFarlane claims “captures the core of the idea of disagreement”\(^ {35}\):

(6)* Two parties disagree just in case (a) there is a proposition that one party accepts and the other rejects, and (b) the acceptance and the rejection can’t both be accurate.\(^ {36}\)

Again, it’s not necessary for disagreement that there be rejection; suspension of judgment is enough for disagreement.

There’s an objection one might raise at this point.\(^ {37}\) In the example above regarding the atheist, theist, and agnostic, I claimed that it is intuitive to think that there is disagreement between the three of them. I seemed to support that claim by

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\(^{34}\) See his (1995) p. 199.

\(^{35}\) See his (2007) p. 25. I’m not sure why MacFarlane thinks that (6)* captures the core idea of disagreement since he explicitly claims that it is multiply flawed as an account. It’s one thing to think that it’s the best thing we currently have to say about disagreements, and quite another to say it really does capture the core of disagreement.

\(^{36}\) See his (2007) p. 24. To be fair, MacFarlane doesn’t endorse (6)* (or what he labels “Can’t Both Be Accurate”). He worries that it isn’t necessary for disagreement, but for reasons other than the one mentioned here.

\(^{37}\) Thanks to Rich Feldman and Earl Conee for raising this potential objection.
suggesting that each of them can look at the other and truthfully say, “You’ve considered the proposition that God exists, and you have arrived at your position. Well, I don’t agree with you: I take this other position.” But, the objection continues, there is a clear difference between not agreeing and disagreeing. So, it’s no support of the claim that there’s disagreement here between the atheist, theist, and agnostic to point out that there’s a failure to agree.

There’s a good response to this objection. First, the objection is right to point out that there’s a clear conceptual difference between not agreeing and disagreeing. Indeed, this very point provided the basis for objecting to analysis (0) above. In objecting to that analysis, I argued that S1’s failing to take the same doxastic attitude toward p as S2 is not sufficient to make it true that S1 disagrees over p with S2. That’s because S1 may take no doxastic attitude at all toward p in virtue of not entertaining p. In that kind of case, it’s clearly true that S1 and S2 do not agree, but it also seems clearly true that there’s no disagreement between S1 and S2, either.

But this isn’t what’s going on in the atheist, theist, and agnostic case. In that case, all parties have entertained the relevant proposition, and none of the parties share the same doxastic attitude toward that proposition. In other words, all parties have entertained the proposition God exists, but it’s not true that any two of them believe the proposition God exists, disbelieve the proposition God exists, or suspend judgment over the proposition God exists. So, contra the objection, it’s not true that I supported the claim that there’s disagreement between the atheist, theist, and agnostic by merely pointing out that there’s no agreement here. That wouldn’t provide the
necessary support. Rather, the support came by pointing out that all the parties have both entertained the proposition and fail to agree. And, as asserted above, it seems quite plausible that anytime one can truthfully say “I’ve thought about that, and I don’t take your view on the matter” or “I’ve considered that, too, and I just don’t go along with you there” we thereby have a case of disagreement. The objection does not give us reason to think otherwise. The objection fails.

Of course, none of this means we should go with (1). It’s not obvious we should accept it since the condition specified in (1) is not obviously necessary for disagreement. That is, it’s not clear that S1 and S2 need to take different doxastic attitudes toward p in order to count plausibly as disagreeing over p. The reason has to do with degrees of belief (assuming that there are degrees of belief). Consider: Suppose I believe very, very strongly that God exists while you also believe, but very, very weakly, that God exists. That is, I am nearly psychologically certain that God exists while you are just barely persuaded that God exists. Or, to put this in terms of credence levels: I have credence level .95 in the proposition that God exists while you have credence level .55 that God exists. In such a case, by hypothesis we take the same (coarse-grained) doxastic attitude toward p—believing p—and so according to (1) there is no disagreement here. But, one might claim, there seems to be a real sense in which we do disagree over the matter of God’s existence. It seems that taking different credences toward a proposition is sufficient for disagreement, and (1) does not recognize this. That, one might complain, is a strike against (1).

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Assume for the sake of discussion that .55 is sufficiently high to count as believing. If that assumption worries you, then pick the lowest credence level that still counts as believing.
Allowing degree of belief conflicts to count as a kind of disagreement has some support from the epistemology of disagreement literature. For example, Earl Conee has this to say about disagreements:

Finally, people and their doxastic attitudes disagree about a proposition when their doxastic attitudes toward the proposition differ. Disagreements, in this sense, go beyond belief versus disbelief. They include a suspension of judgment on a proposition by one and belief or disbelief in the proposition by another. They also include differing strengths, or degrees, of belief in the same proposition, if belief varies in that way.39

Alvin Goldman says this:

Instead of confining disagreement to cases of one person believing a proposition and another disbelieving it, let the term “disagreement” apply to any case of two people holding contrary, or incompatible, credal attitudes toward the same proposition. This includes one person believing the proposition and the other suspending judgment. And instead of restricting the range of doxastic attitudes to the tripartite categories of belief, disbelief, and withholding, let us include graded beliefs or subjective probabilities among the set of categories, either

39 See his (forthcoming). It’s worth noting this again: Conee here is not offering an analysis of disagreement. Rather, Conee explicitly calls this account a “terminological stipulation”.
point probabilities or interval probabilities (i.e., partial beliefs that are somewhat fuzzy).\textsuperscript{40}

Tomas Bogardus labels “\(n_1 \neq n_2\)” as “Disagreement” where \(n_1\) and \(n_2\) represent the different credences of different subjects.\textsuperscript{41} And, finally, David Jehle and Branden Fitelson, in identifying ways some might disagree, say this: “More generally, \(S_1\) and \(S_2\) might assign \textit{different credences} to \(p\).”\textsuperscript{42}

In addition, the vast majority of the epistemology of disagreement literature considers as relevant cases where two individuals believe the same thing, but to varying degrees. This might prompt us to think that degree of belief conflicts count as a kind of disagreement. (1), as it is understood here, does not count degree of belief conflicts as a kind of disagreement.\textsuperscript{43} Perhaps this is a good basis for rejecting (1).

I’m ultimately not moved by this objection to (1). Take the example used above. So suppose I believe very, very strongly that God exists while you also believe, but very, very weakly, that God exists. The complaint presented above is that (1) does not recognize our (alleged) disagreement over God’s existence. But, I contend, this complaint is ill-founded since there simply is no disagreement (‘real’ or otherwise) over the proposition ‘God exists’ here. At most, there is an indication of a

\textsuperscript{40} See his (forthcoming). It’s not clear Goldman is intending to offer an analysis here.

\textsuperscript{41} See p. 325 of his (2009).

\textsuperscript{42} See p. 280 of their (2009). In addition, Alastair Wilson seems to take having different credences over a proposition to be sufficient for disagreement over that proposition. See his fn.2 in his (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{43} Conee, in the passage cited, seems to think that having different degrees of belief counts as having different doxastic attitudes. (1) is not to be understood this way. So long as the degrees of belief under consideration fall under the same coarse-grained category (belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment) we have the same doxastic attitude. So, for example, on (1), credence levels of .8 and .9 both count as the same doxastic attitude and .3 and .2 do as well.
disagreement between you and me over the strength of the case for God’s existence.\textsuperscript{44} But that’s a different proposition altogether, though one that is in the same neighborhood, we might say.\textsuperscript{45} And (1) does not entail in this case that there is no disagreement in the neighborhood. That is, (1) is consistent with the view that there is disagreement over some neighborhood proposition. (1) simply entails that there is no disagreement here over the proposition ‘God exists’. And upon reflection that seems correct.

But at this point a familiar objection might be raised. As already noted, in the epistemology of disagreement literature, ‘disagreement’ is clearly used in a broader way so as to cover cases where two individuals share the same doxastic attitude but to varying degrees. So, the epistemology of disagreement literature is intended to cover cases where, say, I believe very strongly that JFK was assassinated by government operatives and you believe very weakly that that is so. Since (1) does not count this kind of case as a disagreement, this might be seen as a strike against (1).

Again, though, this is no reason to reject (1). As noted above in response to a similar objection, a proponent of (1) can agree with all of this and maintain that much, if not all, of what is said about the epistemology of disagreement will apply straightforwardly to encounters with individuals who believe what we believe but to a different degree, even though such encounters do not literally count as disagreement.

\textsuperscript{44} I say ‘at most’ since there need not be a disagreement over the strength of the case, either. Indeed, it’s not clear that there need be any disagreement at all here. You might agree with me about the strength of the case for God’s existence but just find yourself psychologically incapable of believing the proposition as strongly as I do.

\textsuperscript{45} Compare: ‘I believe that God exists’ and ‘I believe that the case for God’s existence is virtually conclusive’. These seem like neighborhood propositions. Note that I don’t have (and don’t need) an analysis of \textit{neighborhood propositions}.\footnote{I say ‘at most’ since there need not be a disagreement over the strength of the case, either. Indeed, it’s not clear that there need be any disagreement at all here. You might agree with me about the strength of the case for God’s existence but just find yourself psychologically incapable of believing the proposition as strongly as I do.\footnote{Compare: ‘I believe that God exists’ and ‘I believe that the case for God’s existence is virtually conclusive’. These seem like neighborhood propositions. Note that I don’t have (and don’t need) an analysis of \textit{neighborhood propositions}.} \cite{Gibson2016}
Consequently, we need not amend our analysis of disagreement simply to accommodate such encounters.

There’s another objection to (1)’s necessity that we might raise. In presenting (6), MacFarlane says this:

> I will assume that one way to reject a proposition is to accept a proposition incompatible with it—where two propositions are incompatible iff there is no circumstance of evaluation at which both are true.\(^{46}\)

This remark suggests the following sufficiency condition for disagreement:

\[(6)** \quad \text{For any time } t \text{ and any incompatible propositions } p \text{ and } q, \text{ if } S_1 \text{ believes } p \text{ and } S_2 \text{ believes } q, \text{ then } S_1 \text{ and } S_2 \text{ disagree over } p \text{ (or } q).\]  

\(^{47}\)

It seems like there’s quite a bit going for (6)**. Suppose James believes that Saturn has 3 moons and Bill believes that Saturn has 8 moons. They believe incompatible propositions, and it seems clear that they disagree. If (1) says that they don’t disagree, then so much the worse for (1), the objection might go.

Setting aside James and Bill, it does seem that (6)**, if true, makes trouble for (1). (1) requires that S1 and S2 take different doxastic attitudes toward p at t in order to count as disagreeing. But (6)**, if true, shows that this isn’t necessary. It’s enough that S1 and S2 affirm incompatible propositions, and they might do so without even entertaining the other incompatible proposition. That is, the antecedent of (6)**

\(^{46}\) See his (2007) p. 22 fn. 3.

\(^{47}\) I’m not suggesting that MacFarlane would endorse (6)**. Indeed, so far as I can tell, he doesn’t (but for different reasons than those mentioned below).
might be satisfied even when S1 fails to entertain q and S2 fails to entertain p. That’s supposed to be bad for (1).

Fortunately for a proponent of (1), there’s good reason to deny (6)**. It seems sensible to suppose that one might have inconsistent beliefs. So, it seems sensible to suppose that S1 and S2 might both believe both p and q but fail to realize that p and q are incompatible. This seems especially plausible when the incompatibility is rather subtle and detectable only through extremely sophisticated mental work, work that exceeds S1’s and S2’s capacities. Granting that this is indeed possible, then S1 and S2 might both believe p and q. In such a case, it seems strange to say that they disagree over p (or q). But (6)** says that they do anyway. So (6)** is false.

Perhaps we have no business assuming that one might have inconsistent beliefs. Even so, there’s still reason to deny (6)**. We can go with a far weaker assumption: one can believe a proposition p without thereby entertaining all of p’s logical consequences. This assumption seems clearly true. So, in the kind of case under consideration, S1 might believe p but fail to entertain q. Indeed, perhaps S1 can’t even entertain q due to psychological limitations of one sort or another. The same holds for S2: S2 may believe q but fail to entertain p. Consequently, we have a case where S1 believes p and S2 doesn’t even entertain p, and S2 believes q but S1 doesn’t even entertain q. This doesn’t seem like a case of disagreement. In fact, it was this very judgment that prompted us to reject analysis (0) above. It should prompt us to reject (6)**, too. There’s no cause for worry here for (1).
So (1) remains standing as a plausible way of thinking about disagreement. I suggest we go with it. For ease of reference, I’ll rename (1) and display it here:

**Disagreement.** For any two individuals S1 and S2, any proposition p, and any time t, S1 and S2 disagree over p at t if and only if S1 and S2 take different doxastic attitudes toward p at t.

It seems reasonable to endorse Disagreement.

So, in this chapter, I considered and rejected a number of different potential analyses of disagreement suggested in the relevant literature. Eventually, I settled on the above analysis as a plausible way to think about disagreement. In the next chapter, I continue the conceptual work relevant to the epistemology of peer disagreement by looking at the notion of epistemic peers.