

This is the penultimate draft of an article which is published in its final and definitive form in *Metaphilosophy*, 2021.

The definitive version is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12501>

## **The biased nature of philosophical beliefs in the light of peer disagreement**

**László Bernáth & János Tózsér**

### **Abstract**

This essay presents an argument, which it calls the Bias Argument, with the dismaying conclusion that (almost) everyone should significantly reduce her confidence in (too many) philosophical beliefs. More precisely, the argument attempts to show that the most precious philosophical beliefs are biased, as the pervasive and permanent disagreement among the leading experts in philosophy cannot be explained by the differences between their evidence bases and competences. After a short introduction, the premises of the Bias Argument are spelled out in the first part. The second part explains why the objections to the Bias Argument are not compelling. Even though the essay does not adopt the conclusion of the Bias Argument, partly because it seems to be self-defeating, the authors know no plausible way to refute its premises. Thus, the primary aim of the essay is to clarify why the *aporetic* situation of the Bias Argument arises.

### **KEYWORDS**

Bias, conciliationism, contrastive explanation, epistemic peerhood, metaphilosophy, philosophical belief, peer disagreement, permissivism, philosophical disagreement, rationality, reducing confidence in beliefs, steadfast view, uniqueness, van Inwagen

## INTRODUCTION

All areas of philosophy are characterized by dissent. The pervasive and permanent disagreement between philosophers raises several issues. One of the most intensely discussed questions is the following: “Can  $S$  rationally stick to her philosophical belief that  $p$  if (i)  $S$  knows that some people deny  $p$ , (ii)  $S$  takes these people to be her epistemic peers, and (iii) despite her awareness of the disagreement, it still seems to  $S$  that  $p$  is true?” There are two opposing camps when it comes to this question. Proponents of *conciliationism* argue that  $S$  should suspend her belief in  $p$  or, at least, she should reassess its epistemic status. In contrast, proponents of the *steadfast* view argue that  $S$  should not suspend her belief in  $p$ —she can still rationally uphold  $p$ . Another intensely discussed question is this: “Can a given evidence basis support at most one rational doxastic attitude or can there be more than one such attitude?” There are two opposing camps here as well. According to *uniquists*, there can be at most one such attitude, whereas *permissivists* claim that there can be more than one.

In this essay, we introduce a third problem concerning the pervasive and permanent disagreement that characterizes philosophy. We present an argument with the dismaying conclusion that philosophical beliefs are biased in a disturbing way *even if* the steadfast view or any version of permissivism is correct.

Here is the gist of our puzzle. The leading experts on any philosophical issue disagree about how the issue at hand should be solved. For instance, theists believe that the Problem of Evil should be solved in a way that one can still uphold one’s belief in God, whereas atheists insist that the Problem of Evil should be solved by giving up one’s belief in God. The leading experts are epistemic peers; therefore, the disagreement cannot be explained by pointing out that one side is ignorant, incompetent, or intellectually dishonest. Something, however, has to explain why they disagree rather than establish a consensus. In other words, something has to *contrastively* explain

the fact that they disagree about what the right solution is. Now, there is only one plausible contrastive explanation of this fact. It is that the members of both camps accept a specific solution to the problem because they are heavily influenced by factors that have *nothing to do with* what the right solution to the problem is. For example, members of one of the camps *want* their solution to be true, and the members of the other camp *want* the solution that goes in the opposite direction to be true. But this contrastive explanation debunks their commitment to their favored solution as biased. And if a belief is biased, it gives a strong reason for reducing the confidence in the belief in question.

We expand the above intuition to make a more rigorous argument with an even wider scope.

We call it the “Bias Argument”:

(1) In debates about the truth of a given philosophical proposition  $p$ , those participants who are recognized as the leading experts in the field are *epistemic peers to each other* (with respect to  $p$ ), even though they have conflicting beliefs about the truth of  $p$ .

(2) If the conflicting philosophical beliefs of epistemic peers have contrastive causal explanations, then these beliefs are biased—their formation and persistence are decisively influenced by factors that do not indicate the truth of these beliefs.

(3) All beliefs (including philosophical ones) have contrastive causal explanations.

Therefore:

(C1) The conflicting philosophical beliefs of the leading experts in philosophy are biased.

Furthermore:

(4) If the conflicting philosophical beliefs of the leading experts are biased, then my philosophical beliefs that are heavily debated among experts are biased, too.

Consequently, from (C1) and (4):

(C2) My philosophical beliefs that are heavily debated among experts are biased.

And the final premise:

(5) If my philosophical beliefs that are heavily debated among experts are biased, then I have a strong reason to significantly reduce my confidence in them.

At last, the final conclusion:

(C3) I have a strong reason to significantly reduce my confidence in my philosophical beliefs that are heavily debated among experts.

The essay consists of two parts. In the first part, we elaborate on the Bias Argument—we spell out its premises and provide some general context. In the second part, we attempt to show that the Bias Argument withstands the most important objections.

We would like to make our position on the argument clear. Although we think that the premises of the Bias Argument are hardly questionable, we cannot commit ourselves to the conclusions of the Bias Argument. This is mainly because the Bias Argument has the implication that one should

reduce the confidence in the final conclusion of the Bias Argument itself, since there is no realistic hope of its consensual adoption by the leading experts in philosophy. In other words, even though we see that the argument goes against itself, we do not see which of its premises are worth rejecting and how they should be rejected. To put it bluntly, we are undertaking to show that the Bias Argument leads to an *aporetic* situation from which—so far as we can tell—no way out is seen.

## 1 | BUILDING UP THE ARGUMENT

Premise (1) of the Bias Argument says:

(1) In debates about the truth of a given philosophical proposition *p*, those participants who are recognized as the leading experts in the field are *epistemic peers to each other* (with respect to *p*), even though they have conflicting beliefs about the truth of *p*.

We use the terms “those participants who are recognized as the leading experts in the field” and its shorter version “the leading experts” rather loosely, without any robust theoretical implication. By these terms, we simply refer to those philosophers who are more or less consensually regarded by the community of philosophers as the ablest participants in the debate concerning *p*. The notion of an “epistemic peer” plays a key role here, so we have to clarify it. Our point of departure is Peter van Inwagen’s much-quoted rumination on the disagreement between him and David Lewis:

I still think that the Consequence Argument shows that free will and determinism are incompatible. I find I can’t help thinking that. But why doesn’t Lewis see that if it’s true? Was Lewis stupid? Lacking in philosophical ability? Intellectually dishonest? I certainly can’t believe any of those things. Look, it’s David Lewis we’re talking about

here. . . . But, however many arguments were involved in our debate, we both knew about them all and both fully grasped every one of them. Our situation was therefore more nearly symmetrical than I have been making it out to be. I believe that I fully understood all the arguments that constituted Lewis’s evidence (primary and secondary) for the proposition that free will and determinism are compatible, and that I therefore “had” the evidence on which his belief that free will and determinism are compatible was grounded. And, of course, I was not convinced by those arguments. There was, therefore, a certain body of evidence—it comprised the Consequence Argument and all the other arguments that figured in our debate—such that Lewis and I both had this evidence and such that, on the basis of this one body of evidence, I accepted a certain proposition and he accepted its denial. (van Inwagen 2010, 25–27)

It is obvious that van Inwagen refers here to the *widest possible range* of philosophically relevant evidence and abilities. On the one hand, he thinks that not only arguments but any kind of experience or insight can be a piece of evidence for or against the truth of *p*. That is, van Inwagen regards *everything* that raises or lowers a rational epistemic agent’s credence in *p* as evidence. Further, he believes that any of the agent’s abilities may be relevant, insofar as it contributes to an appropriate assessment of whether and to what extent something counts as evidence for or against *p*. In what follows, we call these philosophically relevant abilities *competences*.

The quote above also mentions a third factor, namely, the notion of “intellectual dishonesty.” One can distinguish two kinds of intellectual dishonesty. On the one hand, one may be intellectually dishonest *consciously*—this is the case when someone lies about what she believes. On the other hand, one may be intellectually dishonest in an *unconscious* way—this is the case when the agent deceives herself and fails to follow the evidence where it leads. Since, in our view, conscious intellectual dishonesty is uncommon in philosophy, we focus on those unconscious cognitive

mechanisms that result in biased assessment of the evidence. Such bias mechanisms are deeply problematic from an epistemological point of view. They should not influence belief-formation processes that aim at truth, because they neither indicate what the truth is nor contribute to the proper assessment of what indicates the truth.

Note that it is not van Inwagen's main intention to suggest that he and David Lewis perfectly have the same evidence bases, competences, and intellectual characteristics. Rather, the important point of van Inwagen's argumentation is that whatever the differences between their evidence bases, competences, and intellectual virtues are, they are irrelevant in this context because they do not explain their disagreement regarding the philosophical issue at hand. From these considerations, the following notion of epistemic peerhood emerges:

#### *Epistemic peerhood*

Two epistemic agents are epistemic peers to each other in relation to the truth of  $p$  if and only if their evidence bases, their competences, and the strength of their resistance to irrational influences differ only insignificantly in those regards that are relevant to the inquiry about the truth of  $p$ ; that is, iff the difference between their evidence bases, their competences, and their resistance to biases fails to explain their disagreement about the truth of  $p$ .

So far as we are concerned, this definition is fine for the purpose of investigating the pervasive and permanent disagreement among philosophers. Nevertheless, we have to admit that one can conceive of cases in which the applicability of the definition is debatable.

Suppose that Bill knows only one philosophical argument, Thomas Aquinas's Fifth Way, and his belief in the existence of God is based merely on this argument—beyond that, he is totally incompetent in philosophy. Suppose also that Bill is lucky: he is right to think that only the

existence of God can explain the seemingly teleological nature of our world. Is Bill an epistemic peer to Richard, who knows not only Aquinas's Fifth Way but also the standard atheist arguments and commits himself to atheism based on those?

Take another, similar case. Christoph has a reliable evidence base but accepts a certain true proposition because he is heavily influenced by his desires. Is Christoph an epistemic peer to Isabel, who disagrees with him and has a reliable evidence basis but assesses it incompetently? Or take the following tricky case: Edmund has a fallibly justified true belief  $p$ , but he is a Gettier victim, while Alice accepts  $\neg p$  on the basis of a misleading evidence basis. Are Edmund and Alice epistemic peers?

It is hard to judge these cases because the relevant intuitions are weak. Insofar as one regards these pairs of characters as epistemic peers, our definition of epistemic peerhood does not work in their cases. This is because their disagreements can be explained by the difference between their evidence bases, their competences, and the strength of their resistance to biases.

We are convinced, however, that one can *set aside* such cases if one would like to explain the conflicting beliefs of the leading philosophical experts. For no one can seriously think that the conflicting beliefs of the leading philosophical experts could be explained in the way one can explain the conflicts in the tricky cases just mentioned. In other words, it is rather implausible that the disagreements between the leading philosophical experts in general could be systematically explained by saying that those philosophers are victims of *different types* of epistemic defects that happen to have *the same degree* of negative epistemic impact. For example, it would be ridiculous to say that a debate about the truth of  $p$  takes place because one camp of the experts is in a Gettiered situation and the other camp has, unfortunately, a misleading evidence basis.

Let us move on to premise (2) of the Bias Argument:



(2) If the conflicting philosophical beliefs of epistemic peers have contrastive causal explanations, then these beliefs are biased—their formation and persistence are decisively influenced by factors that do not indicate the truth of these beliefs.

First and foremost, we have to clarify what precisely we mean by “biased beliefs” in the present context and what type of factors can, *in principle*, produce such beliefs. Let us quote van Inwagen once again:

[O]f all the forces in the human psyche that direct us toward and away from assent to propositions, only rational attention to relevant evidence tracks the truth. Both experience and reason confirm this. And if you assent to a proposition on the basis of some inner push, some “will to believe,” if I may coin a phrase, that does not track the truth, then your propositional assent is not being guided by the nature of the things those propositions are about. If you could decide what to believe by tossing a coin, if that would actually be effective, then, in the matter of the likelihood of your beliefs being true, you might as well do it that way. (van Inwagen 2010, 27)

For the sake of simplicity, take the “will to believe” to be a *desire* for some proposition  $p$  to be true. Then, using van Inwagen’s suggestion, the disagreement between epistemic peers can be explained by the fact that one of them desires that  $p$  be true, while the other desires that  $p$  be false. Since  $S$ ’s desire that  $p$  does not indicate the truth or falsity of  $p$  (it indicates rather that the truth of  $p$  serves  $S$ ’s interests, or whatever), the desire cannot be regarded as an evidence for the truth of  $p$ . So, if  $S$  believes  $p$  because she desires that  $p$  be true (and not because her desire has somehow led her to conclusive evidence for  $p$ ),  $S$ ’s belief in  $p$  is biased—regardless of the truth or falsity of  $p$ .

Of course, desire is not the only factor that can bias belief-formation processes; any influence can qualify as a biasing factor if it does not constitute evidence and does not contribute to an appropriate assessment of the evidence. For instance, if  $S$  believes  $p$  *merely* because  $\neg p$  is inconsistent with her ingrained beliefs (and her ingrained beliefs do not contribute to the proper assessment of evidence), then  $S$ 's belief in  $p$  is biased, since the fact that she was nurtured in a specific way indicates neither the truth nor the falsity of  $p$ .

Furthermore, a belief is also biased if it can be sufficiently explained by the agent's epistemic character traits. For if  $S$  believes  $p$  *merely* because, say, she is epistemically bold (and, once again, it is not the case that her epistemic boldness contributes to the proper assessment of evidence), that is, if  $S$  is ready to commit herself to the truth of  $p$  based on equivocal evidence, then  $S$ 's belief in  $p$  is biased—since the fact that  $S$  is epistemically bold does not indicate the truth or falsity of  $p$ .

Note, this incomplete but colorful catalogue of biases can help explain the disagreement between epistemic peers—different biases influence agents' belief-forming processes in different ways, leading to doxastic conflict. For example, if Theophilus is a theist because he *desires* that God exists, whereas Thomas is an atheist because he *desires* that God be a mere illusion, then their beliefs are *biased to the same degree*—even if Theophilus and Thomas happen to be epistemic peers; that is, even if there is no significant difference between their evidence bases, their competences, and the strength of their resistance to biases.

We have to stress that we use the term “bias” in a somewhat technical way. In many cases, especially in sociological or political contexts, biases imply moral wrongness. By contrast, in the present epistemic context we regard biases as epistemological factors or mechanisms that make belief-forming processes non-truth-conducive because they neither indicate the truth nor contribute to recognizing what indicates the truth in the question at hand. As a result, one can say that biases produce beliefs that are biased in the sense that they are not truth-conducive, but this fact does not

imply any negative moral value. These factors, however, are not only irrelevant with regard to the truth of  $p$  but also have a general tendency to produce beliefs that better fit the whole mind-set of epistemic agents (including their set of desires, characteristic traits, inherited and other beliefs, and so on).

At this point, it is worthwhile to explain another key notion of the argument, the notion of contrastive causal explanation. A contrastive causal explanation is a causal explanation that explains why  $A$  is the case rather than  $B$  (Hitchcock 1999, 586). The examples above suggest that if a factor that neither indicates the truth of  $p$  nor contributes to the proper assessment of what indicates the truth of  $p$  provides a contrastive causal explanation for why  $S$  believes in  $p$  rather than  $\neg p$ , then  $S$ 's belief is irrational in the sense that it is a product of a causal influence that *should not* have a major influence on the belief-formation process regarding the truth of  $p$  precisely because it does not indicate what the truth is with regard to  $p$  in either a direct or an indirect way. For instance, Theophilus seems to be irrational because the contrastive explanation of why he believes in God rather than disbelieving in Him is that he desires that God exists. The aptness of this explanation is clear in the context of his disagreement with Thomas. Thomas is an almost perfect epistemic counterpart of Theophilus except that he desires that God does not exist, and his description indirectly shows that if Theophilus did not desire that God exists, then Theophilus would not have a belief in God. Thus, Theophilus's belief in God is heavily based on his desire for God even if Theophilus believes that his belief in God is solely based on the evidence and his mastery of assessing the full body of evidence. That should not be the case, however, because it is epistemically problematic if one's belief in  $p$  is based on something that does not indicate the truth of  $p$  or does not contribute to the proper assessment of what indicates the truth of  $p$ .

Let's now turn to the substantive content of premise (2): Why are the conflicting beliefs of philosophical epistemic peers biased if their disagreement and the involved conflicting beliefs have contrastive causal explanations? The reason is simple. If one attempts to give a contrastive

explanation for why  $S$  disagrees with her epistemic peer about the truth of  $p$  rather than reaching a consensus, then their evidence bases, their competences, and the strength of their resistance to biases cannot do the job, because they are practically the same. If, however, these factors cannot provide a contrastive causal explanation for their disagreement, it has to be something else that does not indicate the truth of  $p$  and does not contribute to the assessment of what indicates the truth of  $p$ . In other words, the causal contrastive explanation for their disagreement has to be something that should not have a heavy influence on their belief-forming process with regard to  $p$  from an epistemic point of view, because it does not indicate the truth-value of  $p$  in a direct or indirect way. Thus, one has to explain the disagreement in terms of biases. Moreover, the explanation should be symmetrical in the sense that it should attribute the same degree of bias to their belief-forming processes of  $S$  and her epistemic peer because epistemic peers are victims of biases to the same extent. At the end of the day, if there is a contrastive explanation for the disagreement of epistemic peers, then there is only one plausible candidate for this explanatory role: namely, it is the explanation according to which some biases have nudged their belief-forming processes in different doxastic directions. Of course, this explanation reveals that their conflicting beliefs in  $p$  and  $\neg p$ , respectively, are the product of biases to a non-negligible degree. And this result is relevant even if one focuses on assessing the epistemic status of their beliefs instead of explaining their disagreement.

Let's move on to premise (3) of the Bias Argument:

(3) All beliefs (including philosophical ones) have contrastive causal explanations.

The strongest argument for premise (3) is this. There is good reason to accept *doxastic involuntarism*, the thesis that agents do not voluntarily choose their beliefs. If we do not choose our beliefs voluntarily, then the beliefs we end up with are the products of their mental and other

external causes. And if beliefs are not too heavily shaped by chance (some chanciness is compatible with contrastive causal explanation [see Lipton 1990; 1991; Hitchcock 1999]), then their mental and other external causes *contrastively* explain why *S* believes *p* rather than lacking the belief *p*. Hence, insofar as one has good reasons to accept doxastic involuntarism and the claim that belief formation is not a mere matter of chance, one has good reason to accept the universal contrastive causal explicability of beliefs too.

From premises (1), (2), and (3), the first conclusion of the Bias Argument emerges:

(C1) The conflicting philosophical beliefs of the leading experts in philosophy are biased.

But let us go further. If the philosophical beliefs of the leading experts are biased (with respect to some philosophical proposition *p*), then it is hard to deny that *everybody else's* beliefs concerning the truth-value of *p* are biased too. Without some mystical access to the deep structure of reality, or some philosophical superpower that would allow one to make the best of the available evidence without being influenced by biases, no agent can be in a better epistemic situation than the leading experts in a given philosophical area. And so anyone without such mystical insight or superpower (that is, everyone) is just as biased, in terms of her philosophical beliefs, as the leading philosophical experts.

There are only two things that can save philosophical beliefs from being biased. One is being *uninformed*. Insofar as *S* does not know of the evidence against *p*, and this lack of knowledge is the reason she believes that *p*, it could be that *S's* belief in *p* is unbiased despite being uninformed. Another relevant case is *incompetence*. If *S* does not have the required skills to assess the evidence against *p*, then, once again, it could be that her acceptance of *p* is unbiased. We suspect, however, that few people take comfort in denying the fourth, supplementary premise of the Bias Argument by admitting ignorance or incompetence:

(4) If the conflicting philosophical beliefs of the leading experts are biased, then my philosophical beliefs that are heavily debated among experts are biased, too.

If someone accepts conclusion (C1) *and* refuses to deny premise (4) by professing ignorance or incompetence but not professing to have philosophical superpowers, then she has to accept the second conclusion of the Bias Argument:

(C2) My philosophical beliefs that are heavily debated among experts are biased.

Now, let us see what the epistemic consequence of (C2) is. Whether one should give up the belief at issue depends on what the correct view about the nature of rationality is and the content of related epistemic norms. It may be the case that all philosophers—regardless of whether they support conciliatory, steadfast, unquiver, or permissivist views—are able to provide relatively plausible theories of rationality that permit agents to stick to their biased beliefs. There is one thing, however, that seems to be hard to deny: namely, if a belief is biased, it provides one with a strong epistemic reason for significantly reducing one's confidence in that particular belief. In other words, if an agent is aware of the fact that one of her philosophical beliefs is biased, she should reduce her confidence in the belief.

Theories of rationality (such as the permissive and steadfast approaches) are able only to mitigate the normative force of being aware of having a biased belief; they cannot make it negligible. This is because if one is aware of the fact that one's belief is biased, it, first and foremost, casts doubt on the *accuracy* of the belief at issue. It is a rather straightforward implication because being aware of the fact that belief *p* is biased is the same as being aware of the fact that the belief *p* is mainly based on factors that neither indicate the truth of *p* nor contribute to the proper

assessment of what indicates the truth of  $p$ . That is, biased beliefs are not the product of truth-conducive cognitive processes, and even if they happen to be true, it is due to sheer epistemic luck, not their expected accuracy. The problem with the accuracy of biased beliefs is present regardless of whether it is rational to sustain them for some reasons. It is like the case of a sharpshooter aiming at a distant target who knows that she can hit it only if the wind blows from the north to the south. There is, however, a great variety of ways the wind can blow from the north to the south, and the sharpshooter does not have objective reasons to favor this or that specific version of the north-to-south wind, because she has no clue about the exact location of the target. In this situation, she should reduce her confidence in her successfully hitting the target, since the direction of the wind has nothing to do with the position of the target. This is right even if it is rational for the sharpshooter to try to hit the target in these circumstances. Likewise, even if it is ultimately rational for someone to form beliefs that are biased in one way or another (either because there is no other way to find the truth or because a finite rational agent cannot exercise her rational capacity without forming these beliefs), she has to reduce her confidence in her beliefs about hitting her target (insofar as she is aware of the fact that these beliefs are biased). Accordingly, the following and last premise of the Bias Argument seems to be right:

(5) If my philosophical beliefs that are heavily debated among experts are biased, then I have a strong reason to significantly reduce my confidence in them.

If one puts together all of the above, one arrives at the final conclusion of the Bias Argument:

(C3) I have a strong reason to significantly reduce my confidence in my philosophical beliefs that are heavily debated among experts.

Before addressing possible objections to the premises, we would like to add three clarifications.

First, we do not deny the existence of philosophical beliefs that are shared by the whole community of philosophers. For example, there seems to be a wide consensus among philosophers that the following claims are true: “If proper names are rigid designators, then there is a posteriori necessity”; “Presentism has the virtue of being consistent with the phenomenology of time, but it has a hard time finding adequate truth makers for propositions about the past”; “Not all true propositions are analytic.” That is to say, philosophers have already reached a consensus about certain conditional statements and about the cost-benefit profile of some philosophical theories, and they even agree that some philosophical theses are false.

Now, we must see that the Bias Argument shows only that *substantive* and *positive* philosophical beliefs are biased because these beliefs of philosophers are in persistent conflict—it does not say anything about the philosophers’ non-substantive and negative philosophical theses on which there is consensus. So, the Bias Argument does not imply that one should reduce one’s confidence in them. Of course, this is only an apparent restriction, since it follows from the premises of the argument that do not concern beliefs on which the leading experts in philosophy agree. Moreover, this feature of the argument does not significantly reduce the relevance of the Bias Argument, because the philosophers’ philosophical beliefs often (perhaps much more often than not) do not only concern the logical implications and cost-benefit profile of theories but also the *truth* of heavily debated substantive, positive philosophical propositions. And perhaps we do not err in suggesting that substantive, positive philosophical beliefs are the most important philosophical beliefs for philosophers.

Second, we can make a distinction between two kinds of philosophical problems. One kind includes problems regarding which *there is truth simpliciter*: that is, things are a certain way *independently* of any kind of our (linguistic or mental) *representations*. We call them *factual* philosophi-



cal problems. These problems are mostly ontological ones, so they concern the types of entities that there are and their natures.

Problems of that sort certainly include the following: “Is there a God?”; “Do the past and the future exist along with the present?”; “Are there abstract entities?”; “Are there multi-located entities?”; “Are there worlds that are causally and spatiotemporally disconnected from ours?”; “What is the connection between our conscious experience and our brain states?”; “Is it true that our actions were not predetermined by the universe’s initial conditions (plus laws) but are not accidental either?”; “Are there mind-independent moral facts?” These metaphysical issues concern *matters of fact*. Still, they fall within the scope of philosophy. One cannot answer them by doing natural science, or, at any rate, we have good reason to think that one cannot.

The other kind of philosophical problems includes those that exclusively tend to concern the best way to *conceptualize* certain things, the best way to understand or make sense of some phenomena. We call them conceptual philosophical problems. When it comes to these problems, we have no good reason to think that things are a certain way independently of the epistemic agent’s (linguistic or mental) representations of them. Not even God can know the mind-independent facts in these cases, because there are no such facts. Typically, what happens is that the operative concepts do not refer to anything external; the things under investigation are the results of conceptual activity.

This category includes questions like the following: “What is the definition of art?”; “What is modernity?”; “How should we classify speech acts?”; “What is the difference between science and pseudo-science?”; “To what extent does the correct interpretation of a literary text depend on the intentions of its author?”; “What does civil disobedience consist in?”; “How can we define the concept of labor?” It is highly implausible to think that these questions concern matters of fact.

We do not doubt that the distinction between factual and conceptual philosophical problems is somewhat vague—obviously, it is often hard to decide where a given philosophical problem be-

longs. Still, in our view it cannot seriously be denied that factual philosophical problems exist. In other words, it cannot be seriously thought that every philosophical problem is conceptual.

We introduce this difference in order to clarify that the conclusions of the Bias Argument do not concern our beliefs about conceptual philosophical problems. This is not because there is an established consensus on the issues in question (there is, of course, no such consensus) but rather because when it comes to conceptual problems in philosophy, there are no truths *simpliciter*; no truths independent of the epistemic agents' perspectives. The truths in question are agent relative in the sense that they depend on an agent's worldview. Conceptual debates have nothing to do with the truths of reality; rather, they are about which proposition best fits into this or that system of propositions. That is, even if these conceptual beliefs are biased in the technical sense above, one does not need to reduce one's confidence in them, because the bias does not make it less likely that the conceptual belief is *true simpliciter*, since, to begin with, such beliefs do not aim at the *truth simpliciter*.

Thus, we do not deny that philosophical beliefs about conceptual matters can be unproblematic in light of the issues related to the Bias Argument. Our claim is that the Bias Argument brings into question the *accuracy* of our substantive, positive, and factual philosophical beliefs—because in their case what is at stake is *the truth or falsity simpliciter* of our beliefs. And if one has a strong reason to call into doubt the accuracy of these beliefs, one should reduce one's confidence in them.

Third, it may seem to be the case that we forgot to countenance the possibility of being agnostic about the truth-value of a philosophical proposition  $p$ . There is a type of agnostic who does not have any beliefs concerning the truth-value of  $p$  and does not even have a position about what kind of doxastic attitude one should have toward  $p$ . Of course, her belief about the truth-value of  $p$  cannot be biased, because she does not have any philosophical position about the truth-value of  $p$ . There is, however, another type of agnostic, an agnostic who does have a philosophical position about the truth-value of  $p$ , and the Bias Argument is aimed at her. This type of agnostic thinks that

everyone should suspend his judgment about  $p$  because of insufficient evidence. Granted, this essay treats philosophical debates as debates between two camps, one of which upholds some philosophical proposition  $p$  which the other camp denies. One can, however, do justice to the latter type of agnostic stance even in this framework, since agnostics of this breed have a meta-level debate with the camps whose members commit themselves to the truth or falsity of  $p$ . This kind of agnostic commits herself to the *falsity* of some second-order proposition  $p'$  (something along the lines of “Epistemic agents are justified in committing themselves to the truth or falsity of  $p$  based on the available evidence”), while those engaging in the first-order debate—those who deny or accept  $p$ —believe that  $p'$  is true.

## 2 | QUESTIONING THE PREMISES

We believe that the clarification of premise (2) and its key concepts have made it rather straightforward why the biased nature of the conflicting beliefs is the sole serious contender for the explanation of real peer disagreement in the context of permanent debates. Furthermore, premise (4) seems to be obvious. Thus, we need to examine the counter-arguments against premise (1), (3), and (5). In what follows, we attempt to explain why we do not regard these counterarguments as promising.

### 2.1 | Objections to premise (1)

One can undermine premise (1) in two ways. First, one can claim that there is, in fact, *no good reason* for regarding the leading experts as epistemic peers to each other in most cases. Second, one

can, instead, claim that there is, in fact, *good reason* to deny that the leading experts are epistemic peers to each other in most cases.

Let us consider the first strategy. Some argue that there is no good reason to suppose that the leading experts in philosophy with conflicting beliefs are epistemic peers because there is no good reason to suppose that they have the *same* evidence bases and competences (see esp. King 2012; Sticker 2017). Due to these apparent and significant differences between philosophical experts, one does not have sufficient reason to rule out that the philosophical experts with conflicting beliefs are not peers of each other after all.

The main problem with this strategy is that it does not provide a real solution to the problem raised by the Bias Argument. Rather, it pushes the problem further down. If debates among the leading experts in philosophy can be explained by saying, for example, that they have different evidence bases, the question arises as to why they have different evidence bases. Nathan King proposes the answer that they simply have different intuitions about the plausibility of philosophical propositions. And Martin Sticker positively claims that they have different background beliefs and worldviews, so these differences explain why they have different evidence bases. If, however, one asks why they have different intuitions and worldviews, King and Sticker could reply in two ways. They could (though we are rather sure that they would not) answer that the difference between their evidence bases is due to the fact that the members of one of the camps are intellectually more virtuous than those of the other. That is, they are epistemically superior to the members of the other camp. The second answer could be that neither the competences nor the strength of resistance to biases explain the difference between the evidence bases; the difference is in the fact that they have different epistemological character traits, inherited beliefs, desires, and so on. In other words, the difference of the evidence bases can ultimately be explained by factors that have nothing to do with what the truth is about *p*, also known as biases. So, if one keeps asking what the ultimate explanation of the disagreement between the philosophical experts is, one either has to arrive at the

(first) conclusion of the Bias Argument or has to claim that the members of one of the camps are epistemically superior to the members of the other.

Seeing that the mere skepticism about epistemic peerhood of the leading philosophical experts collapses into the second strategy, which precisely claims that there are good reasons to attribute epistemic superiority to oneself and/or one of the camps of leading philosophers, it is time to turn to this way of denying premise (1).

An epistemic agent can do this in several ways. She can say that her evidence bases, along with the evidence bases of those experts who agree with her, are more reliable. Or she can claim to have better intellectual abilities, or to be more resilient to biases. Van Inwagen thinks (or thought) that he is justified in assuming his own epistemic superiority because he has some incommunicable yet decisive evidence that is inaccessible to his opponents (such as David Lewis). As he put it: “I suppose my best guess is that *I enjoy some sort of philosophical insight* (I mean in relation to these particular theses) that, for all his merits, is somehow denied to Lewis” (1999, 30; our italics). Adam Elga even provides an additional reason for why one has the epistemic right to attribute epistemic superiority to oneself and those experts who agree with one in a permanent philosophical debate: namely, if one’s interlocutors have opposing views regarding many *other* related issues, it is—so the argument goes—rational to believe that they have many false beliefs and are inaccurate epistemic agents concerning both the truth of *p* and the related issues (2007, 493).

It is easy to see why such strategies are problematic. If one participant is justified in denying the epistemic peerhood of some of the leading experts *based solely on* the fact that they disagree with her about the issue at hand (van Inwagen’s proposal) or related issues (Elga’s suggestion), then *all* participants of the debate have the epistemic right to do so. From this, however, it follows that the mutual devaluation of the opposing camp will make many participants stick to a falsehood. What is even worse, *one will have no clue* who is justified in devaluing her interlocutors; that is, one will have no clue who are, in fact, epistemically superior to their dialectical rivals. Just think

about it. If they followed van Inwagen's and Elga's suggestions, the opposing camps would devalue each other not because something directly indicates the epistemic inferiority of the opposing camp but because it better fits the mind-set of the members of the camp. This maneuver has every feature of a biased belief-formation process.

Of course, one can reply something like this: "I am justified in thinking that I and the group of philosophers who agree with me are epistemically superior to members of the other camp because I have knockdown arguments for  $p$ , and I am justified in thinking that philosophers in the dissenting camp are epistemically inferior to me because they can't see how compelling those arguments are."

But this "defense" does not help too much—the problem is, *mutatis mutandis*, the same as in the previous case. *Each* participant can say that her arguments are the compelling ones and that her interlocutors are epistemically inferior because they can't feel the force of those arguments. Not to mention that the fact of pervasive and permanent philosophical disagreement is rather strong evidence for the *nonexistence* of knockdown arguments in philosophy.

Only one thing could break this stalemate: if one of the participants has empirical evidence for the inferiority of her opponents, *independently of her views that are closely related to the philosophical issue at hand*. For example, evidence that her interlocutors have lower IQs, or know the literature less, or have a tendency to jump to conclusions would provide good reasons to take her interlocutors to be epistemically inferior. No such cognitive differences obtain between the leading experts in philosophy, however, so this escape route is hopeless.

In short, we believe that *no one* can attribute epistemically superior status to herself in a philosophical debate; thus no one can regard all dissenting philosophers as epistemically inferior. Therefore, no one can reliably pick out those philosophers who are epistemically superior to everyone else, and hence no one can deny (1) in a way that helps to reestablish confidence in the substantive, factual, positive philosophical beliefs.

## 2.2 | Objections to premise (3)

Rejecting premise (3) is tantamount to claiming that some substantive, positive, and factual philosophical beliefs lack a contrastive causal explanation. In order for this claim to undermine the Bias Argument, it must entail that not all philosophical beliefs are *decisively* formed by causal processes. For example, the proponent of this line of counterargument could say that *doxastic involuntarism* is false because the *will* determines whether one believes in  $p$  or  $\neg p$ , while the direction of the will is a mere matter of chance without any causal explanation. Being a product of a strongly chancy process does not help a lot, however. If it is a matter of mere chance whether one accepts or rejects  $p$ , then the main root of belief in  $p$  has nothing to do with the truth of  $p$ , in the same way as the main root of a biased belief has nothing to do with it. So, even if chancy beliefs are not biased because they are not the results of processes that tend to produce beliefs that fit the epistemic agents' overall mind-set, it can be said that they are *biased-like* beliefs, since their formation is based on something (namely, sheer luck) that neither indicates the truth of  $p$  nor contributes to the appropriate assessment of what indicates the truth of  $p$ .

Many libertarians argue that undetermined free decisions are not necessarily a matter of mere chance, because agents exercise enhanced control over them, and some of them cannot be contrastively explained in causal terms for one of two possible reasons. The first is that these decisions do not have prior objective probabilities (as follows from noncausal libertarianism [Ginet 2007]; Lockie 2018 can be interpreted in a way that gives a detailed account of this kind of libertarianism with regard to beliefs [see Pundik 2019]). The second possible reason is that the open alternatives have the same prior objective probabilities. For the sake of argument, suppose that some libertarian theory can explain the possibility of highly controlled decisions that are not a

matter of mere chance and cannot be contrastively explained by previous events either. Still, even in this case, the main problem of the Bias Argument remains unsolved.

The main difficulty is the following. If the evidence  $e$  permits overall both the rational acceptance and the rational rejection of  $p$ , and whether  $S$  accepts or rejects  $p$  is ultimately based on whether  $S$  wants to accept or reject  $p$  rather than what the evidence indicates (since it does not indicate, after all, the truth of  $p$  rather than  $\neg p$ ), then  $S$ 's belief is ultimately based on something (on the will of the agent) that has nothing to do with the truth of  $p$ , in the same way as in the case of biased beliefs. Thus, even if free decisions are not chancy in the causal sense, the beliefs they produce are chancy in an epistemic sense; hence, they are *biased-like* beliefs.

In order to deny premise (3) in a way that helps to evade the dismaying conclusion of the Bias Argument, it is not enough to say that philosophical beliefs do not have contrastive causal explanations. In addition, one has to claim that (true) philosophical beliefs can be non-contrastively and noncausally explained in some mysterious way by what indicates the truth (ruling out the possibility of any causal influence with high impact on the belief-formation process). Even though it is a conceivable position, we have no clue how one could plausibly defend it.

### **2.3 | Objections to premise (5)**

The most obvious way to deny that one should reduce one's confidence in biased beliefs is to argue that biased beliefs can be rational, and if they are rational, one has no reason to reduce one's confidence in them. According to permissivists, if the evidence basis permits more than one rational doxastic attitude toward itself, and the epistemic peers with conflicting beliefs appropriately form their beliefs in accordance with their different epistemic preferences (Rescher 1985), prephilosophical convictions (Lewis 1983, x), global outlook (Sticker 2017), or epistemic standards (Schoenfield 2014), and so forth, then epistemic peers can rationally uphold their beliefs even if



they ultimately believe what they believe due to factors (such as inherited preferences/prephilosophical convictions/global outlook/epistemic standards) that have nothing to do with the truth of  $p$ . According to some who do not support permissivism but accept steadfast-style responses to the problem of philosophical disagreement, there are epistemic norms that entitle an epistemic agent to attribute more weight to first-order evidence than to the evidence that other rational agents disagree with her (Huemer 2011; Wedgwood 2010); thus, the rationality of (some) philosophical beliefs is *independent of* whether they are biased or what their etiology is.

We do not deny that these theories can give a plausible account of why biased beliefs in the (somewhat technical) sense above can be rational. Rather, we argue that the Bias Argument poses a challenge that is *independent of* this issue of rationality with which most of the literature on disagreement is engaged. Based on the Bias Argument, it is not the mere fact of disagreement between leading experts in philosophy who are most probably epistemic peers to each other that casts doubt on the epistemic appropriateness of the interlocutors' doxastic attitudes. Instead, the Bias Argument points out both that the most plausible explanation of their conflicting beliefs is that they are biased to the same extent in different directions, and that this explanation casts serious doubt on whether any of the participants of the debate can have a high confidence in the *accuracy*—rather than the *rationality*—of their beliefs (see Christensen 2016 for differentiating accuracy-related issues and rationality-related issues with regard to conciliatory arguments for suspending debated beliefs). Since, however, beliefs aim at truth, if one has strong reasons to reduce one's confidence in the accuracy of belief  $p$ , then one has strong reasons to reduce one's confidence in that particular belief  $p$ , regardless of whether belief  $p$  conforms to the relevant norms of rationality and whether the evidence basis permits more than one rational doxastic attitude.

So far as we can tell, most proponents of permissivist or steadfast-style defenses of philosophical beliefs do not address the accuracy issue with philosophical beliefs that are independent of the rationality issues (to be fair, even those who attack permissivism based on the

accuracy issue do not stress the difference between them; see the Arbitrariness Argument in White 2005; Christensen 2007; Feldman 2007). In all likelihood this is because they tend to suppose that the main implication of the accuracy problem, according to which one should significantly reduce one's confidence in  $p$ , implies or means that the epistemic agent should give up belief  $p$ . That is, one cannot rationally uphold the belief in  $p$  if there is a significant accuracy issue with philosophical beliefs. This kind of presupposition is obviously present even in Miriam Schoenfield's paper "Permission to Believe," which is one of the few works that attempt to address the accuracy issue of philosophical beliefs in detail. She describes the TRUTH INDEPENDENCE principle, which we may regard as being at the very root of the accuracy problem with philosophical (and other) beliefs. "TRUTH INDEPENDENCE: Suppose that independently of your reasoning about  $p$ , you reasonably think the following: 'were I to reason to the conclusion that  $p$  in my present circumstances, there is a significant chance my belief would not be true!' Then, if you find yourself believing  $p$  on the basis of your reasoning, you should significantly reduce confidence in that belief" (Schoenfield 2014, 206). Then a little later she says: "So, as a matter of fact, if TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is correct, there are no permissive cases. Any time you try to have a belief in a permissive case, TRUTH INDEPENDENCE will tell you to give it up" (207). We claim, however, that, as a matter of fact, even if TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is correct, there can be permissive cases and (philosophical) beliefs can be rational; especially, if you accept TRUTH INDEPENDENCE based on the Bias Argument.

Let us suppose that you are an expert on the topic of free will and you have the firm conviction that free will is incompatible with determinism. You are almost 100 percent sure about the truth of incompatibilism because you have a solid argument why libertarian free will is the only *real* free will and you have carefully analyzed all notions of determinism. You are surprised that many other philosophers do not accept your final conclusion, though it seems that most well-known experts understand your arguments. At that point, you learn about the Bias Argument. All the premises, and

thus the conclusion, seem to be rather plausible to you. How much should you reduce your confidence in the belief in incompatibilism? If you attributed 100 percent probability to all premises and the conclusion, then you should reduce your confidence in incompatibilism to 50 percent, since if it is 100 percent certain that your belief is ultimately based on factors that have nothing to do with the truth of incompatibilism, you are not in a better position than you would be if your belief were based on a coin toss. It is unreasonable, however, to attribute 100 percent probability to all the premises and the conclusion. Even if it seems to be baseless to suppose, it may be the case that your camp of experts is epistemically superior to the other camp. Moreover, there is a chance that there are no epistemic obligations in any meaningful sense, and premise (5) is illusory. We could continue the list. So, it seems to be unreasonable to be absolutely sure about the truth of the premises of the argument. In this case, however, you should not reduce your confidence in incompatibilism to 50 percent (because it would be the case only if you were 100 percent sure about the truth of the premises). Rather, you should attribute higher probability to the truth of incompatibilism (depending on how sure you are about the premises of the Bias Argument). Of course, insofar as permissivism and/or other steadfast-style accounts are correct, and if there is a compatibilist who is in the same dialectical situation, she may attribute more than 50 percent probability to the truth of compatibilism even if she finds the Bias Argument persuasive but not absolutely certain.

To put it more generally, we argue that it is crucial how high a probability you reasonably attribute to the claim according to which were I to reason to the (philosophical) conclusion that  $p$  in my present circumstances, there is a significant chance my (philosophical) belief would not be true. If you attribute around 100 percent probability to the claim based on *your evidence basis and standards* that you are in a dire epistemic situation, then you cannot rationally sustain your philosophical belief. If, however, you attribute less (but still rather high) probability to the truth of this based on *your evidence basis and standards* that are relevant with regard to the assessment of your current situation, then you still have to reduce your confidence in  $p$ , but if you had a high confidence in it

before, you can rationally maintain the philosophical belief in question. (For a similar and technically much more advanced explanation of why personal epistemic standards and assessment of the evidence have a crucial role in whether one can coherently and rationally uphold the belief in a permissive situation, see Palmira 2021).

Nevertheless, we still insist that the premises of the Bias Argument are rather plausible; thus, we stick to the idea that one should significantly reduce one's confidence in one's philosophical beliefs in the light of the argument. So, if one has a rather weak philosophical belief, one should suspend it in the face of the Bias Argument because the plausibility of its premises practically reduces the subjective probability of the weak belief to 50 percent. In the light of the Bias Argument, one can stick only to those philosophical beliefs in which one could firmly believe if one took into account only the first-order evidence.

### **3 | SUMMARY**

We have presented and defended an argument concerning the pervasive and permanent disagreement in philosophy. The final conclusion of the argument is that one should significantly reduce one's confidence in all substantive, positive, and factual philosophical beliefs. On the one hand, we do not see which premise of the argument should be denied; on the other hand, we find the conclusion unacceptable. Even though we do not see any loophole in the Bias Argument, we believe that one should do more than simply acknowledge the aporia or give some flippant but ultimately useless response. The confidence in substantive, positive, and factual philosophical beliefs is theoretically and practically too important for us to brush this problem aside. We cannot take such beliefs to be biased, nor can we ignore the fact that they seem to be.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We would like to thank Boldizsár Eszes and Dániel Kodaj for their suggestions and the stimulating exchanges we had on many occasions. We owe special thanks to three anonymous reviewers. The essay would be much different without their contribution. The first reviewer helped us to streamline the structure of the essay; the objections of the second reviewer offered reasons for introducing the notion of “contrastive explanation” instead of “determinism”; and the third reviewer’s helpful comments catalyzed our putting the notion of bias at the center (instead of irrationality), which was indispensable for formulating the Bias Argument. We also have to thank Otto Bohlmann for his comments and we are grateful the audience of the *Meta-theories of Disagreement* conference at the Research Centre for the Humanities in Budapest in 2019. László Bernáth was supported by János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (code: BO/00432/18/2), the ÚNKP-19-4 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology (code: ÚNKP-19-4-ELTE-1202), and the OTKA (Hungarian Scientific Research Fund by the National Research Development and Innovation Office) Postdoctoral Excellence Programme (grant no. PD131998). The research leading to this essay was supported by OTKA grant no. K132911, K123839, and the Higher Education Institutional Excellence Grant entitled *Autonomous Vehicles, Automation, Normativity: Logical and Ethical Issues* and affiliated with the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University.

## REFERENCES

- Christensen, David. 2007. “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News.” *Philosophical Review* 116:187–217.
- Christensen, David. 2016. “Conciliation, Uniqueness and Rational Toxicity.” *Noûs* 50:584–603.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12077>

- Elga, Adam. 2007. "Reflection and Disagreement." *Noûs* 41:478–502.
- Feldman, Richard. 2007. "Reasonable Religious Disagreement." In *Philosophers Without God*, edited by Louise M. Antony, 197–214. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ginet, Carl. 2007. "An Action Can Be Both Uncaused and Up to the Agent." In *Intentionality, Deliberation and Autonomy: The Action-Theoretic Basis of Practical Philosophy*, edited by Christoph Lumer and Sandro Nannini, 243–55. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Hitchcock, Christopher. 1999. "Contrastive Explanation and the Demons of Determinism." *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 50, no. 4:585–612.
- Huemer, Michael. 2011. "Epistemological Egoism and Agent-Centered Norms." In *Evidentialism and Its Discontents*, edited by Trent Dougherty, 17–33. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- King, Nathan L. 2012. "Disagreement: What's the Problem? Or a Good Peer is Hard to Find." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 2:249–72.
- Lewis, David. 1983. *Philosophical Papers*. Vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lipton, Peter. 1990. "Contrastive Explanation." In *Explanation and Its Limits*, edited by Dudley Knowles, 247–66. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lipton, Peter. 1991. *Inference to the Best Explanation*. London: Routledge.
- Lockie, Robert. 2018. *Free Will and Epistemology: A Defence of the Transcendental Argument for Freedom*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Palmira, Michele. 2021. "Permissivism and the Truth-Connection." *Erkenntnis*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-020-00373-7>
- Pundik, Amit. 2019. "Can Self-Determined Actions Be Predictable?" *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 15, no. 2:121–39. <https://doi.org/10.31820/ejap.15.2.6>
- Rescher, Nicholas. 1985. *The Strife of Systems: An Essay on the Grounds and Implications of Philosophical Diversity*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

- Schoenfield, Miriam. 2014. "Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism Is True and What It Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief." *Noûs* 48:193–218.
- Sticker, Martin. 2017. "Peer-Disagreement About Restaurant Bills and Abortion: A Conciliationist Response to Peer Disagreement Does Not Lead to Scepticism in Ethics." *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 94:577–604.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 1999. "It Is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence." In *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray, 29–44. Oxford: Blackwell.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 2010. "We're Right. They're Wrong." In *Disagreement*, edited by Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield, 10–28. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- White, Roger. 2005. "Epistemic Permissiveness." *Philosophical Perspectives* 19:445–59.
- Wedgwood, Ralph. 2010. "The Moral Evil Demons." In *Disagreement*, edited by Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield, 10–28. Oxford: Oxford University Press.