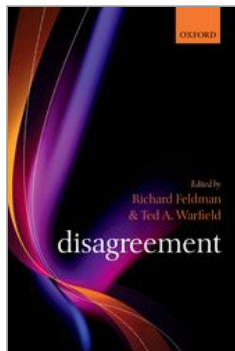


# We're Right. They're Wrong

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## Disagreement

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## We're Right. They're Wrong

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter introduces many of the central philosophical puzzles about peer disagreement. It starts with a discussion of disagreements in religion, and then extends the discussion to philosophical, political, and other disagreements. It assesses arguments for and against the skeptical view that the symmetry present in cases of peer disagreements makes suspension of judgment the appropriate attitude. The author of the chapter is unable to give up his beliefs in many of these cases and unable to accept the conclusion that his own beliefs are not rational, but is also unable to answer satisfactorily the arguments for the skeptical view.

*Keywords:* disagreement, peer disagreement, exclusivism, rationality

Discussions of “exclusivism” began with discussions of religious exclusivism. It was soon recognized, however, that, if there was such a thing as religious exclusivism, there were

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also such things as philosophical, political, and scientific exclusivism (and no doubt other forms as well).<sup>1</sup>

I shall first discuss religious exclusivism, since religion is the area in which the concept of exclusivism was first applied, and the area in which our intuitions about this concept are likely to be the most clear. When I have done that, I will look at the ways the concept might be extended to or applied in other areas.

I will not attempt to define the term 'religion,' a large project that would take us far afield.<sup>2</sup> I am going to have to assume that we all have some sort (p.11) of grasp of this term and that we all mean more or less the same thing by it. But note that in what follows I use the word 'religion' as a count-noun, not as a mass term. I speak not of some phenomenon called 'religion' but of various institutions called 'religions.'

I will, however, present some definitions, definitions of my terms of art. Let us use 'Ism' as a dummy term that can be replaced by the name of any religion. I will say that the religion Ism is *weakly exclusivist* if it requires its adherents to subscribe to the following two theses (or perhaps it would be more realistic to say: if these two theses are logical consequences of the theses that Ism requires its adherents to subscribe to):

(1) Ism is logically inconsistent with all other religions. That is to say, any system of belief or thought (besides Ism itself) that is logically consistent with Ism is not a religion. If, for example, Christianity is weakly exclusivist, then any Christian who thinks that Berkeley's metaphysic is consistent with Christianity is logically committed to the thesis that Berkeley's metaphysic is not a religion. And if, according to Hinduism, Hinduism and Islam are both religions, and if it is a tenet of Hinduism that one can consistently be both a Hindu and a Muslim, then Hinduism is not a weakly exclusivist religion.

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(2) According to Ism, it is rational to accept Ism. More precisely: it is rational for people whose epistemic situation is typical of the epistemic situations of Ismists to accept Ism. More precisely still: people whose epistemic situation is typical of the epistemic situations of Ismists and who accept the teachings of Ism do not thereby violate any of their epistemic duties; it is at least epistemically permissible for such people to accept the teachings of Ism. Two comments: (a) By someone who “accepts the teachings of Ism,” I mean someone who accepts all the theses or propositions that Ism requires its adherents to accept. Since Ism may well require other things of its adherents than that they accept certain propositions, there is obviously a distinction to be made between someone who accepts the teachings of Ism and an Ismist. And, of course, it will be possible to be an Ismist—in several senses of “be an Ismist” that I can think of—and not to accept the teachings of Ism. (b) No doubt it would be hard to find an example of a religion (or a system of belief of any kind) that did *not* have this feature. But one might imagine (one could probably (p.12) actually point to) some defiantly anti-rational religion or philosophy or *Weltanschauung* that conceded, and even gloried in the concession, that it was positively irrational of its adherents to accept its teachings. (Kierkegaard has certainly been accused—but only, I think, by those who dislike him very much—of approvingly ascribing this feature to Christianity.) In any case, if a religion does not hold that its adherents are (typically, at least) rational in accepting its teachings, that religion will not be what I am calling a weakly exclusivist religion.

It obviously does not follow from a religion's being weakly exclusivist that it requires its adherents to believe that the adherents of other religions are necessarily irrational. What does follow is that, if Ism is a weakly exclusivist religion, those who accept its teachings will (at least if they are logically consistent and capable of a little elementary logical reasoning) reach the following conclusion: “The teachings of all other religions are at least partly wrong, and it is rational for us to believe this about the teachings of all other religions.” Suppose, for example, that Christianity is a weakly exclusivist religion. Suppose that I, a Christian, consider some other religion—Zoroastrianism, let us say. Since my religion is weakly exclusivist, one of the teachings of my religion is that, given

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that Zoroastrianism is a religion (which we shall stipulate: that Zoroastrianism is a religion and that it is rational to believe that it is are things that can be objectively established to anyone's satisfaction), Zoroastrianism is inconsistent with my religion. And, on this matter, what my religion teaches is demonstrably right: according to the Zoroastrians, for example, evil is an uncreated power (even if, as some have maintained, this is not what Zoroaster himself believed), and, according to Christians, evil is not an uncreated power. I can easily infer from these things that Zoroastrianism teaches something false (even if I do not know that Zoroastrianism teaches that evil is an uncreated power and in fact have not the faintest idea what Zoroastrianism teaches). And, if it is rational for me to accept Christian teaching (which is implied by Christianity and which I therefore believe, if Christianity is a weakly exclusivist religion), it is rational for me to accept what it is rational for me to believe follows logically from it. If, therefore, Christianity is a weakly exclusivist religion, one of its teachings will be (or its teachings will logically imply) that it is rational for me to believe that Zoroastrianism teaches something false. The point is easily generalized: it is a teaching (p.13) of any weakly exclusivist religion (or an immediate logical consequence thereof) that it is rational for its adherents to believe that all other religions teach something false.

Now a second definition. Let us say that a religion, *Ism*, is *strongly exclusivist* if it is weakly exclusivist *and* it teaches (or its teachings entail) that, for any other religion, it is not rational for anyone who is in an epistemic situation of the sort in which *Ism*ists typically find themselves to accept the teachings of that religion.

It is consistent with *Ism* being a strongly exclusivist religion that it not require its adherents to believe that the adherents of other religions necessarily or even typically violate the norms of rationality. If Islam is a strongly exclusivist religion, its adherents must regard any Muslim who apostatizes and becomes an adherent of some other religion (and who had been in an epistemic position *typical* of Muslims) as irrational. But, consistently with Islam's being a strongly exclusivist religion, a well-informed and orthodox Muslim might regard a pagan or Christian or Jew who had never been properly exposed to the teachings of Islam (or whose knowledge of the world was in some other way incomplete) as at least possibly rational, as not *ipso facto* irrational. It could even be that a well-informed and orthodox adherent of the strongly exclusivist religion *Ism* thought that all non-*Ism*ists were perfectly rational. (He might ascribe "invincible ignorance" to

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all non-Isms, or might think that one is an Ism if and only if God has bestowed on one an infusion of grace that is entirely independent of one's epistemic condition prior to the moment of its bestowal.)

But a sterner attitude on the part of adherents of a strongly exclusivist religion toward adherents of other religions is also possible. St Paul thought that paganism—at least the paganism with which he was familiar, the paganism of the classical Mediterranean world—was epistemically permissible for no one, and such a belief is certainly consistent with strong exclusivism in religion. If a religion takes this position with respect to *all* other religions, I will call it a *very strongly exclusivist* religion. If, for example, Christianity is a very strongly exclusivist religion, then the teachings of Christianity entail that no religion but Christianity is epistemically permissible for any human being of any culture in any era. It would follow, of course, that, if Christianity is a very strongly exclusivist religion, then Christianity teaches that, before the founding of Christianity, it was not rational for anyone to (p.14) accept the teachings of any religion. (This might be called *diachronic* strong exclusivism. Refinements are possible. A Christian might think that it was rational to accept the teachings of Judaism before the Incarnation but not afterwards, and not rational to accept the teachings of any other religion at any time.)

I mention the idea of a very strongly exclusivist religion for the sake of logical completeness. I am fairly sure that there are none. I do not deny that some religions teach that *certain* religions are not epistemically permissible for anyone. (Since St Paul's attitude toward classical paganism was expressed in what Christians regard as an inspired text, it is a defensible position that Christianity teaches the epistemic impermissibility of classical paganism.) And I do not deny that individual adherents of various religions (Christianity and Islam, for example) may have believed that no other religion than their own was epistemically permissible for anyone. I do not even want to deny that for some religions (including my own) it may have been at certain points in history that all adherents of those religions then alive (or all of them who had considered the point) believed both that all other religions were epistemically impermissible for anyone and that this epistemological thesis was a teaching of their religion. What I do deny—at least I strongly doubt whether this is the case—is

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that this *is* the teaching of any religion. (It not infrequently happens that all the adherents of a religion who are alive at a certain time believe falsely of some proposition, some proposition they all happen to believe, that it is a teaching of their religion.)

The important forms of religious exclusivism are strong and weak exclusivism (or, since strong exclusivism entails weak exclusivism, strong exclusivism and *mere* weak exclusivism). Again, further refinements of these concepts are possible. One might, for example, want to take account of the fact that, according to Islam, the epistemic position of Christians and Jews, while weaker than that of Muslims, is stronger than that of Buddhists and Hindus—and was stronger before the Koran was revealed to the Prophet than it was afterward. But one must at some point leave off making ever finer distinctions, however congenial one may find that occupation to be if one is a philosopher.

This, then, is religious exclusivism (or “alethic” religious exclusivism, religious exclusivism in the matter of the possession of truth). There are at least four “areas” other than religion in which the concept of alethic (p.15) exclusivism has obvious application: philosophy, politics, art, and science. (And I might add a fifth: everyday life.) I will say something about all four.

All philosophers would seem to be weak exclusivists as regards their own philosophical positions. Consider, for example, a representative philosopher, Phoebe, who accepts a certain philosophical position that, borrowing a device from our discussion of religious exclusivism, I will call *Ism*. Phoebe is, I shall say, a *weak exclusivist* as regards *Ism* if she believes, first, that there are philosophical positions that are inconsistent with *Ism*, and if she believes, secondly, that her own acceptance of *Ism* is rational (that her acceptance of *Ism* is rationally permissible for her). When I say that Phoebe believes that there are philosophical positions that are inconsistent with *Ism*, I do not mean only that she believes that some of the denizens of the Platonic heaven are propositions inconsistent with *Ism* and that some of these propositions count as “philosophical positions,” albeit not ones actually *held* by anyone down here in the world of flux and impermanence; I mean that she thinks that there *are* people

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who hold philosophical positions inconsistent with Ism. Note that what I have said is not in every respect parallel to what I said when I defined weak *religious* exclusivism: I have not said

Ism is logically inconsistent with all other philosophical positions. That is to say, any thesis (besides Ism itself) that is logically consistent with Ism is not a philosophical position.

Philosophical positions are not logically related to one another as religions are logically related to one another, or even as the sets of teachings of the various religions are logically related to one another, since one philosophical position can easily be consistent with another philosophical position: intuitionism in ethics is consistent with mathematical intuitionism (at least assuming that neither is a necessary falsehood), and Cartesian dualism is consistent with dualism (with the same qualification). I will not, moreover, speak of philosophical positions *themselves* as being exclusivist; I shall rather speak of *people* adopting an exclusivist *stance* or *attitude* in respect of philosophical positions they hold, for statements of philosophical positions do not generally contain clauses describing the epistemic situations of people who hold those positions and competing positions. But the fact that “philosophical weak exclusivism” and “religious weak exclusivism” (p.16) are not parallel in these two respects raises no important barrier to applying the concept of exclusivism to philosophical positions.

But why *do* I call Phoebe's position as regards Ism an “exclusivist” position? Simply because (1) logic requires her to believe that all those who accept positions logically inconsistent with Ism believe something false, and (2) she believes that she is rational in accepting Ism, she (almost certainly) believes that it is rational for her to believe that those who accept positions logically inconsistent with Ism believe something false. “Almost certainly?” Well, if Phoebe has the latter belief, she presumably got to it by an application of the following epistemological principle or one very like it: ‘If one accepts *p* and believes that one's acceptance of *p* is rational, and if one accepts some immediate and self-evident logical consequence of *p*, and accepts it *because* one sees that it is an immediate and self-evident logical consequence of *p*, one should also believe that one's acceptance of that logical consequence is rational.’ There may be reasons to reject this principle (some would say it leads to skepticism), but I will not go into the delicate issues involved in the question of whether

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one should accept this principle. I will assume without further argument the general thesis of which the following thesis is a special case:

If Phoebe is a philosopher who accepts materialism, and if she believes that her acceptance of materialism is rational, then she believes that it is rational for her to believe that anyone who accepts dualism believes something false.

(If I heard some philosopher say, “I accept materialism, and I believe that it is rational for me to accept materialism, but I do not believe that it would be rational for me to believe that all dualists believe something false,” I would certainly cast a very puzzled glance in the direction of that philosopher.)

Similar points can be made about weak exclusivism in politics, art, and science. Consider these three theses: ‘The so-called right to privacy supposedly implicit in the US Constitution was made up out of whole cloth by twentieth-century jurists as a legal rationalization of rulings they wanted to make on moral grounds;’ ‘Technical facility is not everything; Tolstoy was a greater novelist than Flaubert despite the clumsiness of his narrative technique;’ ‘Neanderthal Man was a genetic dead end; no modern human being has Neanderthal ancestors’ (this last statement, by the way, is—or at least has been—no less controversial than the (p.17) first two). Anyone who accepts any proposition of the sorts these three propositions exemplify—controversial political or aesthetic or scientific propositions—believes (1) that other people accept propositions logically incompatible with that proposition, and (2) that it is rational for him to believe that they are mistaken to accept those propositions. Physical anthropologists who believe that Neanderthal Man was a genetic dead end believe that their colleagues who think that the modern human genome contains Neanderthal genes are in error—and believe that it is rational for them to believe that those people are in error.

I should be surprised if anyone were to deny that those of us who have opinions about philosophical, political, aesthetic, and scientific matters adopt a weakly exclusivist position toward them, at least in those cases in which those “opinions” are not so self-evidently true that there is no disagreement about them. I want now to turn to a more controversial question: what part does *strong* exclusivism play in philosophy, art, politics, and science? We may say that one adopts a strongly



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exclusivist stance toward one's adherence to a position in any of these areas—and we may as well continue to use the device we have been using and call this position 'Ism'—if one adopts a weakly exclusivist position toward one's adherence to Ism, and, moreover, thinks that it would *not* be rational for anyone in one's own epistemic situation to adopt or adhere to any position that is (obviously and uncontroversially) inconsistent with Ism.

Suppose, for example, that Dan is an adherent of Darwinism, of the Darwinian theory of evolution. Dan adopts a *strongly exclusivist* stance toward his adherence to Darwinism if (in addition to the requirements of adopting a weakly exclusivist stance toward this position) he believes that anyone whose epistemic situation or condition is the same as his and who accepts any thesis or proposition (obviously) inconsistent with Darwinism is irrational (that is, has adopted a position that is rationally indefensible). Suppose Dan were to read the following words, which I quote from a book by the English biologist Brian Goodwin.

Despite the power of molecular genetics to reveal the hereditary essences of organisms, the large-scale aspects of evolution remain unexplained, including the origin of species. There is “no clear evidence . . . for the gradual emergence of any evolutionary novelty,” says Ernst Mayr, one of the most eminent of contemporary evolutionary biologists. New types of organisms simply appear on the evolutionary scene, persist for various periods of time, and then become extinct. So Darwin's (p.18) assumption that the tree of life is a consequence of the gradual accumulation of small hereditary differences seems to be without significant support. Some other process is responsible for the emergent properties of life, those distinctive features that separate one group of organisms from another—fishes and amphibians, worms and insects, horsetails and grasses. Clearly something is missing from biology.<sup>3</sup>

What should Dan think about the thesis expressed in this passage, given his strongly exclusivist stance toward Darwinism? It seems that he must think that Goodwin is either ignorant of something evidentially relevant to questions about the mechanisms of evolution—something that he, Dan, knows—or else is irrational. And, since Goodwin is a professional biologist, and in fact a

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respected biologist, it is unlikely that Dan can plausibly ascribe Goodwin's position on Darwinism to factual ignorance. It would be far more plausible for Dan to contend that Goodwin has failed to believe something that any *rational* person in Goodwin's epistemic situation would believe. And I think it is evident that there are Darwinists who adopt a strongly exclusivist stance toward Darwinism. I would in fact go so far as to say that almost every Darwinist is a strongly exclusivist Darwinist. The merely weakly exclusivist Darwinist is very rare indeed. (I do not mean to suggest that very many Darwinists go about *saying* that people like Goodwin are irrational. That, after all, would not be very polite. But that, surely, is what they think, or what they would think if they applied their views with rigorous consistency.)

What happens in science certainly happens in politics. An extreme example is provided by the case of "Holocaust deniers": no one, I believe—no one *at all*—who believes that the Nazis murdered six million Jews fails also to believe that those trained historians who deny this thesis (who, say, put the figure far lower, or who attempt to qualify the word 'murder') subscribe to a thesis that is rationally indefensible. But I need not defend my contention that there are strong exclusivists in political matters by reference to an extreme thesis like Holocaust denial. Current "red-blue" disagreements in American politics have the same feature. Consider, for example, the proposition

The American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was morally and politically indefensible.

(p.19) There are many who accept this proposition and many who accept its denial. But almost no one who accepts it believes that an intelligent, rational person who was in possession of a reasonable proportion of the relevant and available facts would accept its denial. And almost no one who denies it believes that a person who was intelligent and in possession of a reasonable proportion of the relevant and available facts would accept it. In short, each "side" in the dispute regards the other side as not only mistaken (adherence to the principle of non-contradiction requires that much) but irrational (more exactly, irrational unless ignorant of relevant and available facts or so intellectually deficient as to be excused from normal epistemic obligations by the "ought implies can" principle). There are, therefore, strong exclusivists in science, history, and politics. But what about philosophy? What is the place of strong exclusivism in philosophy? I will leave aside questions about the past, questions about what may have been the attitude of philosophers in the past concerning those who took other philosophical positions than theirs, and concentrate on

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philosophy as it is now. (And by philosophy as it is now, I mean analytical philosophy as it is now. Generalizations about “philosophers” in what follows are restricted to this domain, the only domain about which I have any real information.) Are there philosophers who would endorse instances of the following schema (in this schema, *p* represents the name of some substantive philosophical thesis—‘nominalism’, ‘utilitarianism’, ‘the compatibility of free will and determinism,’ and so on):

I accept *p*, and I regard all trained philosophers who are in my epistemic position (that is, who are aware of the arguments and other philosophical considerations I am aware of) and who accept the denial of *p* as irrational. Such philosophers are in violation of their epistemic obligations. They are comparable to ordinary, educated people of the present day who believe that cigarette smoking does not cause lung cancer or that the positions of the stars and planets at the moment of one's birth determine one's fate.

I doubt whether many philosophers would say anything along these lines. The more interesting question is whether philosophers generally believe things that commit them to something like this position.

And there are indeed some very plausible propositions that would seem to have this consequence. For example, (p.20)

If it is rational for a person to accept a certain proposition, it cannot also be rational for that person (at the same time, in the same circumstances) to accept its denial.

Here is one consequence of this proposition. If Alice says that Ted's belief that the St Joseph River is polluted is rational, and Winifred says that *if* Ted believed (in these very circumstances) that the St Joseph River was not polluted, this belief *would* be rational, Alice and Winifred cannot both be right.

A similar principle:

If, for some proposition, a person accepts neither that proposition nor its denial, and is trying to decide whether to accept that proposition, to accept its denial, or to continue to accept neither, it

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cannot be true *both* that it would be rational for him to accept that proposition *and* that it would be rational for him to accept its denial.

A past-tense version:

If a person has just accepted a certain proposition (has just reached the conclusion that that proposition is true), and if it was rational for that person to accept that proposition, it cannot be that it would have been rational for him to accept its denial.

These principles, are, as I said, very plausible. Why? What underlies their plausibility, I think, must be some such argument as this.

Consider any person as he is at a certain moment. That person has available to him, at that time, a body of evidence, his total evidence at that moment. Call it E. Of metaphysical necessity, E has the following property (of itself, regardless of who may have it) with respect to any proposition *p*: either (i) it would be rational for anyone to accept *p* on the basis of E, or (ii) it would be rational for anyone to accept the denial of *p* on the basis of E, or (iii) it would be not be rational for anyone to accept either *p* or the denial of *p* on the basis of E. This 'or' is exclusive. It *cannot* be that it would be rational to accept *p* on the basis of E *and* rational to accept the denial of *p* on the basis of E. Loosely speaking, a body of evidence cannot have the power to confer rationality on both a proposition and its denial. And, finally, it is rational for one to accept a proposition at a certain moment if and only if one's total evidence at (p.21) that moment bears this impersonal "confers rationality on" relation to that proposition.

This is a plausible argument, but one might find difficulties with it. Suppose that E is logically inconsistent, but in a very subtle way, and that the person whose evidence E is could not be expected to see this inconsistency. Suppose that, as a result of the inconsistency, there exist (platonically speaking) a valid derivation of *p* from E and a valid derivation of the denial of *p* from E. Might it not be that, if the person were aware of the former derivation (but not the latter), it would be rational for him to accept *p*, and that, if he were aware of the latter derivation (but not the former), it would

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be rational for him to accept the denial of  $p$ ? This objection may be met as follows: awareness of one of the derivations (if the person has it) is a part of the person's total evidence. That is, if  $E$  is a person's total evidence, and he then becomes aware that  $p$  may be validly deduced from  $E$ ,  $E$  is no longer his total evidence: his total evidence is now (at least)  $E$  plus the proposition that  $p$  can be validly deduced from  $E$ . Therefore, in the two circumstances we have imagined, the person does not have the same total evidence. (And, of course, if he were aware of both derivations, it would certainly not be true that it would be rational for him either to accept  $p$  or to accept its denial.)

If the argument we are considering is correct, it confers validity not only on "single-person" principles like those I have set out, but on the following principle:

If two people have the same evidence, and if one of them accepts a certain proposition and the other accepts its denial, at least one of them is not rational: either it is not rational for the one to accept that proposition, or (inclusive) it is not rational for the other to accept its denial.

It is not hard to see that, if this principle is correct, then weak exclusivism entails strong exclusivism.

Suppose, for example, that I am a platonic realist and that my attitude toward my platonic realism is one of weak exclusivism. And suppose that my colleague Sally is a nominalist and that her epistemic circumstances, as they bear on the nominalism-realism question, are the same as mine. (That is, she and I are aware of all the same relevant extra-philosophical facts and theories, the same facts of everyday life and the same scientific (p.22) facts and scientific theories; she and I, moreover, are aware of the same philosophical considerations that are relevant to the nominalism-realism debate: the same distinctions, the same arguments, and so on.) Can it be that Sally's position is rational? Is it rational for her to accept nominalism? If I, as I have said I do, adopt a weakly exclusivist stance toward my own acceptance of realism, and if I accept any of the epistemological principles we have been canvassing, I must say that it is not rational for her to accept nominalism. If I am a weakly exclusivist realist, then I believe that it is rational for me to accept realism. And, since the evidence relevant to the nominalism-realism dispute that is at Sally's disposal is the same as the evidence at my disposal, it cannot be—by the principle we have just set out—rational for me to accept realism and for Sally to accept

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nominalism. Here is a second argument for this conclusion, an argument that appeals to a “single-person” principle. It is rational for me to be a realist. It would, therefore, be rational for Sally to be realist, since the evidence she and I have that is relevant to the nominalism–realism question is the same. (Here I appeal to the principle: if it is rational for a person whose total evidence is  $E$  to accept  $p$ , then it would be rational for anyone whose total evidence was  $E$  to accept  $p$ . But this principle is, I believe, obviously correct.) But if it is rational for Sally to accept nominalism (on the evidence she has), then it would be both rational for her to accept nominalism *and* rational for her to accept realism on the same evidence. And this is ruled out by the “single-person” principles. Therefore, it is not rational for Sally to accept nominalism. The conclusion of this argument is easily generalized: if any of the epistemological principles we have laid out is valid, then weak exclusivism entails strong exclusivism. And, I remind you, almost all philosophers adopt a weakly exclusivist stance toward the philosophical propositions they accept.

Let us look at the consequences of this fact. Suppose you are a philosopher who accepts various philosophical propositions that are rejected by other trained philosophers. (And this is the normal case. Very few of the philosophical propositions that are accepted by some philosopher are accepted by all philosophers.) Let  $I_{sm}$  be any such proposition and let  $N_{ism}$  be its denial. If you accept any of the above principles, you must, after due reflection on the fact that they imply that weak exclusivism entails strong exclusivism, reach one of the following conclusions. (p.23)

- (1) It is not, after all, rational for me to accept  $I_{sm}$ .
- (2) It is not rational for any trained philosopher to accept  $N_{ism}$ .
- (3) Some trained philosophers who accept  $N_{ism}$  are in epistemic circumstances that are inferior to mine in the matter of deciding what to believe about  $I_{sm}$  and  $N_{ism}$ .
- (4) Some of the philosophers who accept  $N_{ism}$  are less intelligent than me (or labor under some other relevant cognitive disadvantage; lack of philosophical talent, perhaps).

Let me make some remarks about (3) and (4).

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If I accept option (3), I must conclude that at least some of the philosophers who accept Nism are unaware of or have not fully grasped some relevant argument or analysis or distinction I am aware of and understand. And I must suppose that the fact that they are in some such inferior epistemic circumstances is not something for which they can be blamed, that their condition is not a result of their having failed to fulfill some epistemic obligation. (Here is an analogous situation in ordinary life: you believe that Jane is honest, and I think she is a crook. Up till a moment ago, you and I had the same evidence in this matter, and we both believed, rationally, given this evidence, that she was honest. A moment ago I stumbled, by merest chance, upon a well-hidden document that demonstrates beyond any possibility of doubt that she has been defrauding her employers, a document that no one could blame you for not being aware of.)

As to (4), if I accept this option, I shall not believe that (all) the philosophers who disagree with me are irrational. I shall, however, excuse them from the charge of irrationality, only because of my allegiance to the “ought implies can” principle. Although each of these philosophers is laboring under the burden of some cognitive deficiency, each of them is doing the best he can according to his own dim lights. And this same deficiency, in each case, blinds the philosopher who labors under it to the fact that he is in this respect, cognitively deficient.

In any real situation, all these options can seem extraordinarily unappealing. I will mention a case that I have used for similar purposes on other occasions. I ask you to consider the case of David Lewis and me and the problem of free will. I am an incompatibilist and David was a compatibilist. David and I had many conversations and engaged in a rather lengthy correspondence on the matter of compatibilism and incompatibilism, and, (p.24) on the basis of these exchanges—not to mention his wonderful paper “Are We Free to Break the Laws?”—I am convinced beyond all possibility of doubt that David understood perfectly all the arguments for incompatibilism that I am aware of—and all other philosophical considerations relevant to the free-will problem (philosophical distinctions and philosophical analyses, for example). It seems difficult, therefore, to contend that, in this matter, he was in epistemic circumstances inferior to mine. What, after all, could count as the ingredients of a

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person's epistemic circumstances (insofar as those circumstances are relevant to philosophical questions) but that person's awareness of and understanding of philosophical arguments (and analyses and distinctions and so on)? If philosopher A and philosopher B are both investigating some philosophical problem, and if each is aware of (and understands perfectly) all the arguments and distinctions and analyses—and so on—that the other is aware of, how can the epistemic position of one of these philosophers vis-à-vis this problem be inferior to that of the other? And one could hardly maintain that David was stupid or lacking in philosophical ability or that he labored under any other cognitive deficiency relevant to thinking about the problem of free will. (Not, at any rate, unless all human beings labor under this deficiency.) At the same time, I am unwilling to say that my own allegiance to incompatibilism is irrational. I can only conclude that I am rational in accepting incompatibilism and that David was rational in accepting compatibilism. And, therefore, we have at least one case in which one philosopher accepts a philosophical proposition and another accepts its denial and in which each is perfectly rational. It is, moreover, a case in which the epistemic circumstances of neither philosopher, as they touch on the question whether to accept this proposition or its denial, are inferior to the epistemic circumstances of the other. (And in which neither philosopher labors under the burden of any cognitive deficiency from which the other is free. I know that David labored under no such deficiency. I like to think that I do not.) And, therefore, the epistemological principles I have laid out, the principles that allowed us to deduce strong exclusivism from weak exclusivism, must be wrong.

This conclusion seems to me to be inescapable—if one's epistemic circumstances (those relevant to philosophical inquiry) are indeed defined entirely by the “philosophical considerations” (arguments, distinctions, and so on) one is aware of and understands. A moment ago, I asked, (p.25) rhetorically, “If philosopher A and philosopher B are both investigating some philosophical problem, and if each is aware of (and understands perfectly) all the arguments and distinctions and analyses the other is aware of, how can the epistemic position of one of these philosophers vis-à-vis this problem be inferior to that of the other?” If it seems to one that this rhetorical question is unanswerable, this must be



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because one regards evidence, the stuff of which one's epistemic condition is made, as essentially *public*. It must be because one regards evidence as “evidence” in the courtroom-and-laboratory sense. And, in matters philosophical, public evidence is that which is expressible in language. A piece of evidence for a philosophical proposition, if it is public evidence, is something that could be expressed as a bit of text (a part of an essay or book or letter), and one who had read and understood the bit of text that embodied it would “have” that piece of evidence; it would be a component of his or her epistemic condition.

It is, however, reasonable to suppose that this conception of “evidence” (if evidence is indeed the stuff of which one's epistemic condition is made, if A and B are in the same epistemic condition just in the case that they “have” the same evidence) is overly restrictive. One of the reasons that constitute the reasonableness of supposing this is that there seem to be plausible examples of “having evidence” that do not conform to the courtroom-and-laboratory paradigm of evidence. I sometimes know that my wife is angry when no one else does, for example, and I cannot explain to anyone how I know this—I cannot give what Plato would call an “account” of what underlies my conviction that she is angry. It seems to me to be plausible to say that in such cases my belief that my wife is angry is grounded in some body of evidence, evidence that lies entirely within my mind and that I cannot put into words. A second example is provided by the case of the chicken sexer, beloved of epistemologists in the far-off days of my graduate studies. (Can anyone tell me whether there *are* chicken sexers? Those of my students who were raised on farms have given conflicting testimony on this matter.) Mathematicians are often intuitively certain that some mathematical proposition is true, although they are unable to prove it. (Gödel, I understand, was convinced that the power of the continuum was  $\aleph_2$ .) Since they often later do discover proofs of these propositions, it seems likely that, prior to their discovery of the proofs, they had some sort of evidence for the truth of those propositions. (p.26)

There are, therefore, arguments by example for the conclusion that, in everyday life, at least, and perhaps in mathematics, evidence is not always of the public sort, that some evidence is not *exportable*, that some evidence cannot be passed from one person to another. And what is true of “everyday” evidence

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(and perhaps of “mathematical” evidence) may also be true of the evidence that grounds philosophical convictions. Some “philosophical” evidence, too, may not be exportable. I can give an argument for the thesis that some philosophical evidence has this feature. The argument takes the form of a dialectical challenge to any philosopher who denies it. Consider, for example, the body of public evidence that I can appeal to in support of incompatibilism (arguments and other philosophical considerations that can be expressed in sentences or diagrams on a blackboard or other objects of intersubjective awareness). David Lewis “had” the same evidence (he had seen and he remembered and understood these objects) and was, nevertheless, a compatibilist. If I know, as I do, that David had these features (and this feature, too: he was a brilliant philosopher), that he had these features is itself evidence that is (or so it would seem to me) relevant to the truth of incompatibilism. Should this new evidence not, when I carefully consider it, lead me to *withdraw* my assent to incompatibilism, to retreat into agnosticism on the incompatibilism/compatibilism issue? This is a question I have discussed elsewhere. Here I will offer only the following brief argument. One's evidence is supposed in some way to direct the formation of one's beliefs. If it was rational for David to be a compatibilist, therefore, it must be that his evidence did not direct him *away* from compatibilism. If it did not direct him away from compatibilism, it did not direct him *toward* incompatibilism. But my evidence is his evidence. It must therefore be that *my* evidence does not direct *me* toward incompatibilism. How then can it be rational for me to be an incompatibilist?

The difficulty of finding anything to say in response to this argument, taken together with my unwillingness to concede either that I am irrational in being an incompatibilist or that David was irrational in being a compatibilist, tempts me to suppose that I have some sort of interior, incommunicable evidence (evidence David did not have) that supports incompatibilism.

If I succumb to this temptation, if I allow even that it is possible that I have such evidence, then the above demonstration that weak exclusivism entails (p.27) strong exclusivism fails. I can, consistently, believe that it is rational for me to accept Ism and rational for other philosophers to accept Nism. I can, without logical inconsistency, maintain

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that the Nismists are, through no fault of theirs, in epistemic circumstances that are (vis-à-vis the Ism/Nism question) inferior to mine. Owing to some neural accident (I might say) I have a kind of insight into the, oh, I don't know, entailment relations among various of the propositions that figure in the Ism/Nism debate that is denied to the Nismists. I *see*, perhaps, that  $p$  entails  $q$  (although I am unable to formulate this insight verbally) and they are unable to see that  $p$  entails  $q$ . And this insight really is due to a neural quirk (to borrow a phrase Rorty used for a different purpose). It is not that my cognitive faculties function better than theirs. Theirs are as reliable as mine. But theirs are not identical with mine, and, in this case, some accidental feature of my cognitive architecture has enabled me to see the entailment that is hidden from the Nismists.

In the end, though, this idea, tempting as it is to me, is hard to believe. After all, I accept *lots* of philosophical propositions that are denied by many able, well-trained philosophers. Am I to believe that in every case in which I believe something many other philosophers deny (and this comes down to: in every case in which I accept some substantive philosophical thesis), I am right and they are wrong, and that, in every such case, my epistemic circumstances are superior to theirs? Am I to believe that in every such case this is because some neural quirk has provided me with evidence that is inaccessible to them? If I do believe this, I must ask myself, is it the same neural quirk in each case or a different one? If it is the same one, it begins to look more a case of “my superior cognitive architecture” than a case of “accidental feature of my cognitive architecture.” If it is a different one in each case—well, that is quite a coincidence, isn't it? All these evidence-providing quirks come together in just one person, and that person happens to be me.

It seems more plausible to say (to revert to the example of David Lewis and myself) that David and I have the same evidence in the matter of the problem of free will, and to concede that this entails that either we are both rational or neither of us is.

The position that we are both rational, however, is hard to defend. If I suppose that we are both rational, I hear W. K. Clifford's ghost whispering an indignant protest. Something

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along these lines (Clifford has evidently (p.28) acquired, post mortem, a few turns of phrase not current in the nineteenth century):

If you and Lewis are both rational in accepting contradictory propositions on the basis of identical evidence, then *you* accept one of these propositions—incompatibilism—on the basis of evidence that does not direct you toward incompatibilism and away from compatibilism. (For, if it did, it would have directed *him* away from compatibilism, and it would not have been rational for him to be a compatibilist.) But of 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.

Here I confess my predicament—as a philosopher who holds particular views, as a citizen who casts his vote according to the dictates of certain political beliefs, as an adherent of one religion among many. (For, although I have been talking about philosophy for some time now, what I have said is equally applicable to politics and religion.) I am unwilling to listen to the whispers of Clifford's ghost; that is, I am unwilling to become an agnostic about everything but empirically verifiable matters of fact. (In fact I am unable to do that, and so, I think, is almost everyone else; as Thoreau said, neither men nor mushrooms grow so.) And I am unable to believe that my gnosticism, so to call it, is irrational. I am, I say, unwilling to listen to these whispers. But I am unable to answer them.

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Notes:

(1) The “exclusivism” discussed in this chapter has to do with truth. A religion is exclusivist in this sense if it represents itself as the only religion that has the truth. But other forms of religious exclusivism are possible. Some call a religion exclusivist, for example, if it regards itself as the only possible path to salvation. In this sense, only a religion can be exclusivist, at least if ‘salvation’ is understood to pertain to spiritual matters. But there are analogues of this second sort of exclusivism in philosophy and science. According to Marxism, not only does Marxism provide the only correct account of the historical unfolding of societies and cultures, but all philosophies with which it is in competition are mere repressive “ideologies,” systems of ideas whose existence is to be explained not on intellectual grounds but in terms of their economic function (which is to conceal from the economically oppressed the fact of their oppression). Some philosophers and scientists—Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, for example—see any world view that is inconsistent with the Darwinian account of evolution as not only factually wrong but as dangerously delusive.

(2) I have reservations about the concept of a religion. An account of them can be found in my “Non Est Hick,” in Thomas D. Senor (ed.), *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 216–41. The paper is reprinted in Peter van Inwagen, *God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), and in Kelly James Clark (ed.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2008). I cannot discuss these reservations within the confines of this chapter. I record my conviction that if the argument of this chapter were rewritten so as to accommodate them, that argument would not be weakened—although it would be much longer.

(3) Brian Goodwin, *How the Leopard Changed its Spots: The Evolution of Complexity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), pp. vii–ix.

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