

Consider:

Uniqueness: Given a body of evidence, there is only one reasonable doxastic attitude to take towards any proposition. (Cf. White 2005, p. 445, Christensen 2007, p. 192, and Feldman 2007, p. 231)

This thesis seems to threaten the idea that two people, in possession of the same evidence, might disagree about whether p is true, and yet both be reasonable in their doxastic attitudes towards p . This possibility has seemed to some to be an element of political liberalism:

[L]iberalism assumes that ... a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime. (Rawls 1993, p. xviii)

I will not dwell on the question of whether Uniqueness really does threaten this claim (though I am inclined to think that it does). I shall argue that Uniqueness is false, and that mutually recognized reasonable disagreements are possible.

In §1 I propose an epistemological position called ‘groundless foundationalism’. In §2 I present as argument for this. In §3 I argue that if groundless foundationalism is true, then Uniqueness is false. In §4 I argue that mutually recognized reasonable disagreements are possible.

1. Groundless Foundationalism

The view I have in mind has its roots in the epistemologies of Reid and Wittgenstein, and versions of it have been defended by Michael Williams and Crispin Wright.¹ Consider the following rough formulation:

Groundless Foundationalism: For some p , (i) S ’s belief that p plays a fundamental role in determining the reasonable response to evidence, for S , and (ii) it is reasonable (other things being equal) for S to believe p , (iii) even if S ’s belief that p is not based on any evidence that supports p .²

Let us consider the three clauses of this formulation of groundless foundationalism. The **first clause** maintains that certain of a person’s beliefs serve as principles of evidence for her; they determine (at least in part) what it would be reasonable for her to believe, given her evidence. In the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Reid enumerates a set of “first principles,” propositions such as: that everything of which I am conscious exists, that

¹ See Reid 1983, pp. 247-93 (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapters 4-6), Wittgenstein 1969, Williams 1996, pp. 121-5, and Wright 2004a and 2004b. See also Strawson 1983 and [author’s paper].

² ‘Groundless foundationalism’ is an ugly name, and I confess that I couldn’t think of anything better. The view is foundationalist, in this sense: some beliefs are reasonable, even though not based on other beliefs. The view is *not* foundationalist, in this sense: that the ‘foundational’ beliefs are those from which all other beliefs are inferred. (Although it’s consistent with that outrageous view.)

memory is reliable, that sense perception is reliable, that human beings have “some degree of power over our actions, and the determinations of our will,” (1983, p. 273) and that “certain features of the countenance, sounds of the voice, and gestures of the body, indicate certain thoughts and dispositions of mind.” (p. 279) Reid writes that in most disputes “the process by which the truth of a proposition is discovered, or its falsehood detected, is, by shewing its necessary connection with first principles, or its repugnancy to them.” First principles, then, serve as a standard in reasoning about the truth and falsity of propositions that are not first principles – conformity with first principles is a reason in favor of a proposition; incompatibility a reason against. Our commitment to first principles provides a normative framework for our reasoning; “it is in vain to reason with a man who denies the first principles upon which the reasoning is grounded.” (p. 257)

This theme is continued in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, where it is maintained that certainties such as ‘I have two hands’, ‘I have never been to the moon’, and ‘The future will resemble the past’ are to be distinguished from ordinary “empirical propositions.” These certainties are “exempt from doubt,” (§341) and play a special role in our system of believing, reasoning, and responding to evidence; they “have a *peculiar logical role* in the system of our empirical propositions,” (§136) constituting a “substratum for all my enquiring and asserting,” (§83) an “inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false,” (§94) a “frame of reference,” (§162) or a “scaffolding” for my thoughts. (§211) So, for Wittgenstein, as for Reid, these privileged certainties serve as principles of evidence. For this reason, Wittgenstein maintains that “someone who doubts the existence of the earth at that time is impugning the nature of all historical evidence,” (§188) and that:

If someone doubted whether the earth had existed a hundred years ago, I should not understand, for *this* reason: I would not know what such a person would still allow to be counted as evidence and what not. (§231)

The idea here, as Wright puts it, is that these beliefs determine “our highly complex conception of what kind of thing should be taken as evidence for what kind of proposition.” (2004b, p. 42).³ I shall call beliefs of this sort **basic convictions**. So according to the first clause, the reasonable response to evidence, for a person, is determined (at least in part) by her basic convictions.

The **second clause** says that a basic conviction that p is reasonable, other things being equal. Other things are not equal, at least, when a person has defeating evidence for p , i.e. sufficient reason to believe $\sim p$. Any belief that p (even if it’s a basic conviction) is unreasonable if the believer possesses evidence sufficient for believing $\sim p$. (See Wright 2004a, p. 183 and 191, and [author’s paper], p. 200 and 207-8.) Call this the **No Defeaters Rule**. Given this, the version of groundless foundationalism I am proposing does not maintain (as Wittgenstein sometimes suggests) that basic convictions can’t be the subject of rational scrutiny.⁴

³ Wittgenstein affirms the connection between “hinges” and what is “reasonable” a number of times; see §220, §252, §254, §323-5, and §334

⁴ This is no doubt related to Wittgenstein’s ambiguity over whether basic convictions are really beliefs at all, instead of non-propositional commitments to “rules.” See Strawson 1985, p. 17, and Wright 2004b, pp. 43-4.

The **third clause** says that the reasonableness of basic convictions does not depend on their enjoying evidential support. This idea is crucial for the application of groundless foundationalism to the problem of skepticism. Wright argues that “[s]ceptical argument purports to disclose a lack of cognitive pedigree in a targeted range of commitments” (2004b, p. 43) – failure to be based on adequate evidence, for example – but if our basic convictions never aspired to such a pedigree in the first place, then the complaint loses its bite.

This is compatible with a person possessing evidence for a basic conviction of hers. What the third clause says is that basic convictions enjoy a positive status (reasonableness) independently of any they may enjoy in virtue of evidential support. Along the same lines, this is compatible with Reid’s claim that “there are certain ways of reasoning even about [first principles], by which those that are just and solid may be confirmed.” (1983, p. 258)

This is compatible with basic convictions being the subject of rational scrutiny. The fact that my belief that p is not based on evidence doesn’t mean that I can’t consider evidence that might speak against p . To inquire after the evidential basis of a belief is one way to scrutinize it, from the epistemic point of view, but the search for defeating evidence is another way. Basic convictions not based on evidence are subject only to this second kind of rational scrutiny. (See [author’s paper], pp. 207-8.)

2. An Argument for Groundless Foundationalism

The first clause of groundless foundationalism, alone, is uncontroversial. Everyone agrees that my “background beliefs” determine what it is reasonable for me to believe, on the basis of new evidence. The sound of rustling in the bushes outside my window may bring me to believe that a burglar is trying to break into the house, if earlier I saw someone wearing a ski mask, peering at my house through binoculars from across the street. The same sound may bring me to believe that my gardener is trimming the verge, if I know that this is the day and time of day that he usually works in my yard. The reasonable response to my evidence is determined by what I already believe.

What needs defense is the conjunction of the second and third clauses. How can basic convictions be reasonable, if they are not based on evidence? Reid offered a prudential defense of the reasonableness of basic convictions:

I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes in my way; I step into a dirty kennel; and, after twenty such wise rational actions, I am taken up and clapped into a mad-house. (1983, p. 86, see also Wright 2004a, pp. 178-84)

The idea here is something like this:

- P1. Given two possible doxastic strategies, it is reasonable (other things being equal) to adopt the strategy that has better consequences, from the prudential point of view.
- P2. Believing that sense perception is reliable has better consequences, from the prudential point of view, than does suspending judgment about the reliability of perception.

- P3. Therefore, believing that sense perception is reliable is reasonable (other things being equal).

Call this **the prudential argument**. What the argument shows is that a belief can be reasonable even if there is no evidence in its favor. The fact (if it is a fact) that there is no good evidence for the proposition that sense perception is reliable does not mean that it is unreasonable to believe this, since *not* believing this would have bad consequences, from the prudential point of view. To the extent that one's basic convictions have the feature mentioned in P2 – that of being optimal vis-à-vis prudence – then they are reasonable (other things being equal).

I shall offer a different argument, which appeals not to the good consequences of basic convictions, from the prudential point of view, but their good consequences, from the epistemic point of view. As Wright argues, abandoning any of one's basic convictions "would rationally necessitate extensive reorganization of – or more, might even just throw into confusion – our highly complex conception of what kind of thing should be taken as evidence for what kind of proposition." (2004b, p. 41-2) Inquiry in a given domain requires that certain propositions be believed; to disbelieve or suspend judgment with respect of these propositions would make inquiry in that domain impossible. As Williams argues, "exemption from doubt – epistemic privilege – is a matter of methodology[;] certain exemptions will be *logically* required by the direction of inquiry." (1996, p. 123) Consider the principle that perception is reliable. Disbelieving or suspending judgment with respect of this would bring make empirical inquiry (rationally) impossible. To do so would effectively cut one off from the possibility of knowledge of the external world, whereas believing this principle would have the consequence that such knowledge is attainable. (See Wright 2004a pp. 188-94) The version of this idea that I find plausible looks like this:

- E1. Given two possible doxastic strategies, it is reasonable (other things being equal) to adopt the strategy that has better consequences, from the epistemic point of view.
- E2. Believing that sense perception is reliable has better consequences, from the epistemic point of view, than does suspending judgment about the reliability of sense perception.
- E3. Therefore, believing that sense perception is reliable is reasonable (other things being equal).

Call this **the epistemic argument**. Again, the reasoning behind E2 is the idea that the strategy of belief, in this case, has the consequence that you are in a position to acquire a lot of knowledge, while the strategy of doubt has the consequence that knowledge acquisition is rationally impossible for you. The argument thus assumes that knowledge has epistemic value, and that the value of knowledge trumps (in some sense) the value of being one whose beliefs are based on evidence. The argument need not assume that knowledge is the only epistemic value, but it does assume that knowledge has a kind of priority over, at least, the value of basing one's beliefs on evidence.

So, to the extent that one's basic convictions have the feature mentioned in E2 – that of being optimal vis-à-vis knowledge acquisition – then they are reasonable (other things being equal).

The argument does not require that the connection between a particular basic conviction and its good consequences be metaphysically or logically necessary. What the argument requires is that belief would be (perhaps contingently) better than disbelief or suspension of judgment. The argument is therefore **a posteriori** in nature. (This is, I believe, an important difference between this argument and those offered by Williams and Wright.)

An ambiguity needs to be resolved. Imagine that Keri is a brain in a vat, and has a basic conviction that her faculties of sense perception are reliable. Is her basic conviction reasonable? Believing this does not, as a matter of fact, have good epistemic consequences – it does not, as a matter of fact, put Keri in a position to acquire knowledge. But it is not plausible to suppose that Keri’s belief is therefore unreasonable, at least if we wish to capture anything like our ordinary sense of ‘reasonable’. When it comes to the assessment of doxastic strategies in terms of whether they are reasonable or not, then, what matters is not their consequences, but their **apparent consequences**, their consequences by the lights of the one whose use of the strategy we are considering. (See [author’s paper], pp. 203-7.)

Recall the aforementioned anti-skeptical application of groundless foundationalism. If we turn out to be brains in vats, we will not have been unreasonable in our belief that sense perception is reliable. We will have been *wrong*, of course, and we will not have *known* anything on the basis of sense perception. But our conviction will not have been unreasonable, since, by our lights, for all we knew, to give up this principle would have cut us off from acquiring a great deal of knowledge. I therefore offer the following amendment to E1:

- E1*. Given two possible doxastic strategies, it is reasonable for S (other things being equal) to adopt the strategy that has better consequences, by S’s lights, from the epistemic point of view.

An amended version of E2, with the obvious changes, is plausible. E3 remains the same.

I do not want to suggest that the reasonableness of basic convictions depends on their being based on the epistemic argument. The argument offers an account of why basic convictions are reasonable, but a person need not appreciate this (much less base her basic convictions on this) for her basic convictions to be reasonable.

It is important to note (and it will be important later on) that the No Defeaters Rule places a constraint on what basic convictions count as reasonable. If Anna has a basic conviction that her crystal ball is a reliable source of information about the future, but the ball has been consistently inaccurate in its predictions (and Anna also is committed to the principle of induction), then her belief that the ball is reliable is *not* reasonable, even if it seems to her that abandoning that belief would make acquisition of knowledge of the future rationally impossible. And this is just because (given her commitment to induction) she has sufficient evidence to believe that the ball is not reliable.

3. From Groundless Foundationalism to the Denial of Uniqueness

Reid wrote:

[I]s it not possible, that men who really love truth, and are open to conviction, may differ about first principles? I think it is possible, and that it cannot, without great want of charity, be denied to be possible. (1983, p. 258)

Wittgenstein offered an example of religious disagreement to make this point:

I believe that every human being has two human parents; but Catholics believe that Jesus only had a human mother. And other people might believe that there are human beings who no parents[.] Catholics believe as well that in certain circumstances a wafer completely changes its nature[.] And so if Moore said “I know that this is wine and not blood”, Catholics would contradict him. (1969, §239)

The basic conviction we considered above (that sense perception is reliable), it could be argued, is universally believed. Are there cases in which two people have different (incompatible) basic convictions, where both beliefs are reasonable (for the reasons offered in the epistemic argument)?

Imagine that Smith believes p , having been raised in a community in which belief that p is the norm, since this belief is part of the basic religious tradition common to members of Smith’s community, and that Jones believes q , having been raised in a different community, in which belief that q is the norm, since that belief is part of the basic religious tradition common to members of Jones’ community. (Suppose that p and q are incompatible, in some obvious way.) By now, Smith and Jones have been exposed to the same body of evidence (relevant to the truth of p and q), but their attitudes towards p are unchanged. Now imagine further that believing p commits one to the trustworthiness of a certain holy text, while believing q commits one to the reliability of a certain oracle. Smith’s belief that p and Jones’ belief that q are basic convictions, we shall therefore suppose. From Smith’s perspective, to abandon her belief that p would make the rational acquisition of knowledge (via the text) impossible, and from Jones’ perspective, to abandon her belief that q would make the rational acquisition of knowledge (via the oracle) impossible. Therefore, both basic convictions are reasonable. Smith and Jones might adopt different doxastic attitudes towards a proposition (e.g. the proposition that p is true), but both would be reasonable in their attitudes. Therefore, Uniqueness is false. Call this the **first** kind of counterexample.

There is a **second** (and more important) kind of counterexample to Uniqueness. For if the holy text says r , and the oracle says $\sim r$, it will be reasonable for Smith to believe r , but it will be reasonable for Jones to believe $\sim r$. (Given the No Defeaters Rule, we must imagine that Smith does not have sufficient evidence to believe that $\sim r$, or that the text is unreliable, or that p is false. And mutatis mutandis for Jones.) So, Smith and Jones could adopt different doxastic attitudes towards r , but both would be reasonable in their attitudes. Therefore, Uniqueness is false.

I turn now to some objections to this line of reasoning.

Roger White does not use the term “reasonable” in his formulation of Uniqueness; he says that there is “a unique *rational* doxastic attitude” to take towards any proposition, given a body of evidence. (2005, p. 445, my emphasis; see also Christensen 2007, p. 197) It could

therefore be objected that I have missed the point. Even if I am right that Smith and Jones are ‘reasonable’ (in some sense or senses) in believing as they do, at most one of them is *rational* in believing as she does. My original formulation of Uniqueness used the word ‘reasonable’ in an attempt to draw out the tension with Rawls’ claim about liberal democracy. But perhaps there is no such tension, once Uniqueness is properly understood as a claim about rationality (which is not the same as reasonableness).

This objection raises a number of difficult issues. There are five important places that the word ‘reasonable’ got used in the discussion above: (i) in the statement of Uniqueness, (ii) in the first clause of groundless foundationalism (according to which basic convictions partially determine “the reasonable response to evidence” for a person), (iii) in the second clause of groundless foundationalism (according to which basic convictions are sometimes “reasonable”), (iv) in connection with the first kind of counterexample (where Smith and Jones would both be “reasonable in their attitudes” towards p), and (v) in connection with the second kind of counterexample (where Smith and Jones would both be “reasonable in their attitudes” towards r).

We can begin by distinguishing two versions of Uniqueness:

Uniqueness-Reasonable: Given a body of evidence, there is only one reasonable doxastic attitude to take towards any proposition.

Uniqueness-Rational: Given a body of evidence, there is only one rational doxastic attitude to take towards any proposition.

My goal in this paper is to defend the common sense idea that reasonable disagreement is possible – the idea that Rawls seems to be getting at in the quotation offered above, and the related idea (perhaps a corollary) that there is sometimes nothing wrong with believing p (given evidence e), even when (you know that) someone else reasonably believes that p is false (given evidence e), that it is not necessarily the case that you shouldn’t believe that p in that kind of situation. My criticism of Uniqueness-Reasonable is designed to vindicate this idea. If Uniqueness-Rational does not threaten this idea, then I am prepared to concede that it is true. What I have argued is that Smith and Jones’ beliefs might be reasonable, in the sense that they are beliefs that Smith and Jones are permitted to have, in the sense that they are beliefs that Smith and Jones ought not give up. If it is compatible with this that one or both of Smith and Jones are irrational in their beliefs, I shall concede that.

Richard Feldman, for his part, employs the terms “reasonable,” “right,” and “should” in his discussions of these matters, defending the idea that there is something wrong with believing p , if (you know that) someone else reasonably believes that p is false, the idea that you shouldn’t believe that p in that kind of situation. (See 2006, pp. 235, and 2007, p. 212.)

So my reply to the current objection is just this: my target is a thesis that appears to threaten the common sense idea that reasonable disagreement is possible. There are surely a plurality of concepts that might be picked out with the term ‘reasonable’. I am concerned with those that connect up with (what I take to be) an ordinary sense of ‘reasonable’, on which unreasonable belief is not permitted, on which it is wrong to be unreasonable, on which being unreasonable is something you should not do.

The arguments I have given employ, it seems to me, two senses of ‘reasonable’ which fit this bill. Call the sense in which basic convictions are reasonable ‘reasonable-1’. Basic convictions are sometimes reasonable-1, and I argued above that Smith and Jones are reasonable-1 in their conflicting attitudes towards p . This speaks against:

Uniqueness-Reasonable-1: Given a body of evidence, there is only one reasonable-1 doxastic attitude to take towards any proposition.

However, from the fact that Smith and Jones’ basic convictions are reasonable-1, it does not follow that they are (merely) reasonable-1 in their attitudes towards r . For the sense in which their attitudes towards r are reasonable is the sense of ‘reasonable’ that occurs in the first clause of groundless foundationalism (not the second). In general, a belief that is made reasonable by another need not inherit the kind reasonableness of the other (as it were). Let me explain what I mean. Suppose that I have myself hypnotized into believing p , for prudential reasons. My belief that p is reasonable, in the prudential sense. Suppose that I then come to believe q in some ordinary, epistemically respectable way. If p and q together entail r , and I come to believe r on the basis of p and q , it does not follow that my belief that r is (merely) reasonable, in the prudential sense. It might be a quite imprudent belief for me to have. Nevertheless, r is a reasonable belief for me to have, given my evidence and what I already believe. Let us call the sense in which it is reasonable ‘reasonable-2’. The second type of counterexample to Uniqueness speaks against:

Uniqueness-Reasonable-2: Given a body of evidence, there is only one reasonable-2 doxastic attitude to take towards any proposition.

Some are inclined to think that the sense in which basic convictions are sometime reasonable, if they are reasonable at all, is a ‘pragmatic’ sense. Even if this is so, it does not follow that a person’s evidentially supported beliefs, which are reasonable in part because of that person’s basic convictions, are thereby only reasonable in a ‘pragmatic’ sense. In other words, even if being reasonable-1 is a ‘pragmatic’ sense of being reasonable, it does not follow that being reasonable-2 is a ‘pragmatic’ sense of being reasonable. And that means that the claim that being reasonable-1 is a ‘pragmatic’ sense of being reasonable does not constitute a good objection to the line of reasoning I offered above.

This is a consequence of the first clause of groundless foundationalism: the idea is that your basic convictions (which, perhaps, are reasonable only in a ‘pragmatic’ sense) determine what it is reasonable for you to believe – but *not* in a ‘pragmatic’ sense, but in the ordinary sense described above, the sense connected with the notions of what you should and shouldn’t believe, and what it is right and wrong to believe. This is why the second kind of counterexample is more important than the first.

A second issue concerns the possibility of disagreements where both parties do not run afoul of the No Defeaters Rule. We had to imagine, in the case of Smith and Jones, that neither had sufficient evidence for believing that her preferred method (the text and the oracle, respectively) was unreliable. Is this plausible? One possibility, of course, is that both the text and the oracle are reliable sources of information (which have delivered different answers about the question of whether r is true). Another is that one, or both, of the

methods is not reliable, but that no evidence of this is available to Smith and Jones. For my part, I don't think there are any reliable oracles or holy texts (though I don't think that I have anything like *evidence* against their reliability). But this is where groundless foundationalism matters. The epistemic argument offers a defense of basic convictions that a person *already has*.

A third issue concerns the claim that Smith and Jones have the same evidence. If Smith and Jones have different basic convictions, it might be objected, then they do not have the same evidence. Part of Smith's evidence is the belief that the holy text is reliable, but this is not part of Jones' evidence.

This objection only concerns the second type of counterexample to Uniqueness, involving Smith and Jones' disagreement over *r*. And I think the point can be conceded. Uniqueness is still wrong, on account of Smith and Jones' disagreement over *p*. However, it seems to me that it does violence to our ordinary sense of the word 'evidence' to say that my evidence includes my unsupported commitments, like my commitment to induction, or to the reliability of sense perception, or to a certain religion.

Let us consider, finally, White's argument for Uniqueness. (I will use 'rational' and 'reasonable' interchangeably here.) White proceeds by considering a "radical rejection" of Uniqueness, according to which it is possible that someone "rationally believe P, yet it is consistent with [one's] being fully rational and possessing [one's] current evidence that [one] believe not-P." (2005, p. 447) The crux of his argument against this is the following:

If [the "radical rejection"] is correct, carefully weighing the evidence in an impeccably rational manner will not determine what I end up believing; for by hypothesis, the evidence does not determine a unique rational conclusion. So whatever I do end up believing upon rational deliberation will depend, if not on blind chance, on some arbitrary factor having no bearing on the matter in question. (Ibid. p.448)

As White concedes, this makes for a good argument for Uniqueness only if one assumes "a belief can always rationally survive learning the epistemic value of one's evidence." (Ibid. p. 450) For in the story of Smith and Jones, above, nothing was mentioned about either party being aware of reasonable alternatives to her belief. White's argument, therefore, is:

1. It is irrational to believe *p* on the basis of evidence *e* if you know that someone could rationally believe $\sim p$ on the basis of *e*.
2. If it's rational to believe *p* on the basis of *e*, and *q* is some truth about the "epistemic value" of *e*, then it's rational to believe *p* on the basis of *e* even if you know *q*.

Therefore:

3. It's irrational to believe *p* on the basis of *e* if someone could rationally believe $\sim p$ on the basis of *e*.

White's argument for (1) is stated in the last sentence of the quotation above: to believe *p* on the basis of *e*, when you know that someone could rationally believe $\sim p$ on the basis of *e*, is to know that you believe what you believe (as opposed to the opposite) on the basis of either "blind chance" or "some arbitrary factor." Along the same lines, Feldman writes that it is

“arbitrary” to persist in one of two beliefs once you recognize that “both alternatives are reasonable.” (2006, p. 224)

Why is it irrational to persist in believing something that you (know that you) believe on the basis of chance or some arbitrary factor? White compares doing so to forming a belief on the basis of chance – popping a pill which has a 50% chance of causing you to have a true belief about some subject. But from the fact that it is incoherent to *form* a belief based on factors that do not indicate its truth (as Bernard Williams has argued), it does not follow that it is incoherent to *retain* a belief based on such factors. And one reason for this is that, from Smith’s perspective, her reason for persisting in her belief *is* related to its truth.

However, it seems clear that Smith must believe that she has arrived at the truth by luck, given the fact that equally rational Jones has arrived at a false belief (by Smith’s lights). After all, Smith did not choose to be raised in the community that she was raised in, it was (in some sense) a matter of chance that she was raised in that community and not in Jones’ community. Smith must admit that her having the beliefs that she has is a matter of “some arbitrary factor.” It is surely right that if Smith believed that her belief that p was not true, then it would be incoherent for her to persist in her belief that p . The question, then is whether it is possible to coherently believe that p is true while also believing that your belief that p is the result of “some arbitrary factor.” But this, it seems to me, is just the question of whether it is possible to coherently believe that you have arrived at the truth by luck. Is this possible?

I think there is a powerful argument that it is. Consider, again, Keri the brain in a vat. Keri trusts her faculty of sense perception, she believes falsely that this is a reliable way of forming beliefs, and she forms a bunch of false beliefs on this basis. She is just as rational as I am, but unlucky, and her bad luck has left her with a bunch of false beliefs, right down to her basic convictions. It is not incoherent, I contend, for me to believe that I am *not* a brain in a vat, but that I am lucky in having this true belief, in the sense that I could have been unlucky like Keri, and believed this same thing, but have been wrong. It is possible to coherently believe that you have arrived at the truth by luck. Therefore, it is possible for Smith to coherently believe p , but also that Jones, who has the same evidence and is equally rational, has had the misfortune of believing falsely that $\sim p$. (Mutatis mutandis for Jones.)

I do not think there is a significant difference between the two cases. I am lucky to believe truly, in the sense that I would have believed falsely, were the world different (namely, if I were a brain in a vat). Smith is lucky to believe truly, in the sense that she would have believed falsely, were the world different (namely, if she had been raised in Jones’ community). There is no incoherence in my belief, and there is none in Smith’s. I conclude that (1) is false.

4. Mutually Recognized Reasonable Disagreements

I have argued that Uniqueness is false. This means, to use Feldman’s terminology, that reasonable disagreements are possible “in isolation,” i.e. it is possible for two people to be reasonable in their doxastic attitudes, and yet disagree, while remaining unaware of the fact that they disagree. But the discussion of White’s argument points the way towards a defense of reasonable disagreements that are mutually recognized as such.

Let us imagine that Smith and Jones are discussing whether r is true, and they state their respective opinions. Aware that they disagree, they inquire after the source of their disagreement. Smith offers the content of the holy text as evidence in favor of r ; Jones offers the deliverance of the oracle against. Importantly, Jones and Smith have now reached some things about which they agree. Jones agrees that the holy text says r ; she just doesn't think that the holy text is reliable; Smith agrees that the oracle said $\sim r$, but doesn't trust the oracle. Why the disagreement about the reliability of sources? Further inquiry should bring Smith and Jones to their basic convictions, in this case their religious beliefs. I submit that Smith may now think the following thought: "Jones' belief that q is false, but it is not less reasonable than my incompatible belief that p . Neither of us has any evidence in favor of our religious commitment, but both of us would be crazy to give our commitments up. Given her belief that q , it's reasonable for her to trust the oracle, and since the oracle said that $\sim r$, it's reasonable for her to believe $\sim r$. She's wrong, of course, but reasonable people are sometimes wrong." And Jones can think the same, *mutatis mutandis*.

It is also important to note that, if Uniqueness is false in the way that I have argued that it is, parties to a putative reasonable disagreement can think something more subtle than that "both alternatives are reasonable." The one alternative is reasonable *for the one party*, and the other alternative is reasonable *for the other party*. If groundless foundationalism is right, reasonableness is relative to an individual, since it is relative to an individual's basic convictions. It's true that both alternatives are reasonable, in *that* sense. But it would not be reasonable *for Smith* to believe $\sim r$, and in that sense it is not the case that both alternatives are reasonable, since it is not the case that both are reasonable *for her*. (Same for Jones.)

If the epistemic argument is sound, then it is reasonable for Smith to continue believing as she does. As conceded above, she must believe that she has arrived at the truth, in some sense, by luck. If this is to concede that her belief is "arbitrary," then we should accept that many of our (reasonable) beliefs are arbitrary.

Feldman discusses the view that I have proposed here, considering "the idea that people can come to disagreements with different 'starting points'." (2006, p. 224) He objects to this on the grounds that "once these [basic convictions] are brought out into the open, they are every bit as open to rational scrutiny as anything else is." (Ibid. p. 226) But this is what the second clause of groundless foundationalism denies: basic convictions are different from beliefs whose reasonableness derives from evidential support, in precisely this respect. The reasonableness of basic convictions doesn't depend on their evidential support, so they are not "every bit" as open to rational scrutiny as other beliefs. Evidentially supported beliefs can be criticized on the grounds that their evidential support is inadequate; basic convictions can't. This is why, when Smith and Jones discover the ultimate source of their disagreement, they can coherently and reasonably cease their argument. If both are prepared to admit that they have reached the bedrock of their respective systems of belief, then the search for justifying evidential reasons has come to an end. They may, of course, continue their discussion by searching for defeating evidence for their respective basic convictions. The view I have proposed, therefore, does not maintain that "starting points are not amenable to rational evaluation." (Ibid. p. 225)

Given the No Defeaters Rule, it might be objected that the existence of a disagreement with a equally reasonable party, in possession of the same evidence, is a defeater for a basic conviction. But the No Defeater Rule that I proposed above says that a belief is unreasonable if you possess sufficient evidence to believe its negation. That Jones disagrees with Smith about p is not sufficient reason to believe $\sim p$.

5. Conclusion

The case of Smith and Jones is unrealistic. This doesn't constitute a problem with the argument so far, but I would like to conclude by presenting a real case.

The tilma of San Juan Diego, housed for many years in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, north of Mexico City, is believed by many to possess miraculous properties. They believe (among other things) that an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared on the tilma (a kind of cloak) without anyone painting or dyeing the cloth, that the tilma was miraculously impervious to an anarchist bombing in 1921 (which destroyed the shrine in which the tilma was kept), and that the image on the tilma has inexplicably lasted for 500 years without repair or restoration.

I don't believe any of that. But I also don't believe that anyone with my evidence would be unreasonable in believing some or all of it. A devout Catholic, for example, who believes that God manifests himself in the world in the form of miracles, might believe all those things about the tilma, and I don't think he would be unreasonable in so believing. I think he would be wrong, but I don't think there's any incoherence or inconsistency in his view, and his view isn't obviously in conflict with the kinds of basic convictions that everyone has – about the reliability of sense perception, or the principle of induction, or whatever. Does he have sufficient evidence to believe that the tilma survived a bombing, in some way that a normal cloth wouldn't? Lots of pious and honest people say that the tilma survived a bombing, and there was a bombing, and the tilma was in the Basilica at the time. Is that sufficient evidence to believe that the tilma survived a bombing, in some way that a normal cloth wouldn't, i.e. in a miraculous way? It seems to me that the answer to that question depends on what you already believe, and if you're an atheist like me, then it surely isn't enough evidence to believe that. The people are wrong, the bomb wasn't as powerful as they think, maybe the tilma was in a different shrine that day, maybe the tilma just got lucky, whatever. But if you're a believer – or a certain kind of believer, a kind of believer that seems perfectly possible – then it's not at all obvious that the evidence isn't enough for you to believe that the tilma is miraculous. If I had to give a *reason* for why I don't think the tilma is a miracle, the best I could come up with is that I don't believe in miracles. And if I had to give a reason for that, I'm really not sure I could say anything.

Ask yourself whether you really think that everyone who disagrees with you is irrational. Wittgenstein supposed that people were inclined to think that way, saying that “[w]here two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic.” (1969, §611) My approach to the epistemology of disagreement is based on the hope that we can do better than that. But I think that groundless foundationalism gives us a theoretical framework within which we can see *how* we can do better than that. I find Rawls' liberal claim attractive, I find it pretheoretically attractive, I think it is a part of our contemporary common sense, and if it really is required

for political liberalism, then there is strong reason to accept it on those grounds as well. All this speaks *against* deducing the impossibility of reasonable disagreement from an epistemological theory. Theories should be chosen based on whether they fit our common sense intuitions, whether they are pretheoretically attractive, whether they fit with our commitments in other areas of philosophy. This is why contemporary epistemologists prefer anti-skeptical theories of knowledge to skeptical theories of knowledge. We should be doing the same with the case of disagreement. Here I have tried to offer an attractive account that vindicates common sense and jives with our extra-epistemological commitments.

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