What's So Deep about Deep Disagreement?

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Philosophy

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Vienna, Austria

2022

Abstract

Much attention has been given recently to what has been termed "deep disagreement". The primary questions raised have been concerning what deep disagreements consist in and whether they are resolvable by rational means. However, these questions presuppose that there is a unified phenomenon here in the first place, something that I cast doubt on here – what distinguishes a deep disagreement from any other ordinary disagreement? Deep disagreements are thought to be disagreements over or conflicts between our most fundamental commitments. I identify two features that have been taken to be the hallmark of fundamental commitments: (1) Disagreement over a fundamental commitment generates and hence explains disagreement over a wide range of issues. (2) Fundamental commitments are where our reasons come to an end. I argue that both these claims are false in the paradigm cases of deep disagreement and so, they fail to properly distinguish fundamental commitments from any other commitment. *Contra* (1), I argue that while disagreeing parties might each justify a wide range of their conflicting beliefs on the basis of some fundamental commitment, this fundamental commitment neither necessitates nor makes it more likely that they will have a wide-ranging disagreement. *Contra* (2), I argue that, depending on how it is understood, it either cannot be true if the disagreement is to be genuine, or if true, it fails to distinguish fundamental commitments from any other commitment. On the basis of this, I conclude that although we might ordinarily refer to a variety of controversial and complicated disagreements as "deep" in various senses, we should abandon the notion used as a term of art entirely because there is no unified class of "deep disagreements" that merits treatment in such general terms.

Acknowledgements

I am and will always remain grateful to my parents for their support of my studying philosophy and doing so abroad. I am thankful also to Kati Farkas for her supervision of this work – she has been kind, supportive and critical as and when it was needed, and was always available to talk things over. I also could not have made it through this year without the company, support and civil disobedience of Darrah and Ela. Finally, to the many others who have heard my ideas at their worst and helped to shape and, I trust, better them along the way – thank you.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in the epistemology of disagreement, with one central question occupying philosophers being what the rational way to respond is when one disagrees with an epistemic peer – for instance, is it permissible to continue to believe what one does if someone in a similar epistemic position believes the opposite?[1] Alongside this, a separate issue that has garnered philosophical attention is whether some disagreements are different from others, whether they have any special features or raise distinctive philosophical problems. In relation to this, the notion of a deep disagreement or fundamental disagreement has come under particular focus: the aim of my thesis is to provide a critique of the very concept of deep disagreement and the different approaches to the subject thus far. My guiding question throughout the investigation is this: what makes a disagreement deep?

Let us start with a tentative, initial characterisation of the phenomenon. A deep disagreement is thought to be what happens when we disagree over issues that we hold to be important, like ethical, political or religious issues. These are often disagreements not just over one issue but over a range of issues – clashes in our worldviews, if you will. What makes these disagreements *deep* is that the parties to the disagreement are thought to differ in their most fundamental commitments – for instance, epistemic commitments such as what sources or methods are reliable, or metaphysical commitments concerning whether souls exist or whether miracles are possible, or conceptual commitments like what it means for something to be morally wrong or who counts as a person. The fundamental nature of these commitments is what is thought to make such disagreements difficult, if not impossible, to reason about and rationally resolve.

[1] See Matheson (2015) for an overview on the literature on peer disagreement, as well as Siegel (2013) who also connects it to deep disagreement.

A deep disagreement is typically introduced and distinguished from other disagreements in the following way. When we have an ordinary disagreement over some matter of fact, such as what the second-highest mountain is or what the criteria are for an offside offence, there is usually a straightforward way to settle it, for instance by using an agreed-upon method ("Why don't you Google it?"). However, there are (or might be) cases where the two parties fail to come to an agreement, not because either of them is irrational or committing some epistemic vice, but for systematic reasons, because of the nature of the matter at issue (for instance, they cannot agree on any method that would settle the question).

In the first chapter, I provide a brief survey of the different approaches to deep disagreement since the concept was introduced, in order to show what questions have been taken to be important, how the concept has been understood, to identify what, if anything, distinguishes deep disagreements and to briefly evaluate the current state of the art. On the basis of this survey, I argue that we need to get clearer about what exactly makes a disagreement deep. Accordingly, I motivate a certain picture of deep disagreement – that deep disagreements are, in some sense, fundamental disagreements – which I think underlies the whole discussion. This picture, which I consider problematic, forms the basis for distinguishing between commitments that are fundamental and those that are not, and hence, the basis for distinguishing deep disagreements from ordinary disagreements.

In the second chapter, I investigate the idea that fundamental commitments are at the heart of our worldviews and explain what we believe about a variety of issues. I argue that we should distinguish the claim that one justifies a wide range of beliefs on the basis of some commitment from the idea that this commitment is what generates or explains the various things that one believes. The latter claim is false, while the former claim does not give us a basis for distinguishing fundamental commitments from ordinary commitments that we do not regard as fundamental.

Finally, in the third chapter, I consider the claim that what distinguishes fundamental commitments is the fact that we are unable to reason about them because they mark the limits of one's reasons. I examine three different ways in which this claim might be understood: when our disagreement is fundamental, either we have come to a point where we differ in what we count as a good reason, or we differ in the reasons we have, or we simply have no further reasons to offer. I consider each of these suggestions in turn and argue that none of them works and so, this strategy for distinguishing our fundamental commitments also fails.

On the basis of this discussion, I conclude that the supposed distinction between those commitments or disagreements that are fundamental or "deep", and those that are not, is unmotivated. I suggest one possible reason for why it is tempting to think of some cases of disagreement as deep, but also show why this does not give us a distinct category of disagreement. Hence, we should reject the widespread approach in social epistemology of treating cases of disagreement in general and problematic terms such as "deep disagreement". Although we might ordinarily refer to a variety of controversial and complicated disagreements as "deep" in various senses, we should abandon the notion used as a term of art entirely because we have been given no reason to think that there is a unified class of deep disagreements that merits treatment in such general terms.

Chapter 1: Varieties of Deep Disagreement

My aim in this chapter is largely metaphilosophical. It is to provide a brief survey of the different approaches to deep disagreement since the introduction of the concept in order to identify what, if anything, distinguishes deep disagreements from other disagreements and to evaluate the current state of the art. While this is not an exhaustive survey, my aim is to highlight some important tendencies that have arisen in order to see whether they are after and succeed in identifying a unified phenomenon or not. On the basis of this survey, I argue that we need to get clearer about what exactly makes a disagreement deep. Accordingly, I motivate a certain picture of deep disagreement that I think underlies the whole discussion, which forms the basis for the subsequent chapters.

1.1 The discussion thus far

The notion of "deep disagreement" was introduced by Fogelin (1985). He makes a number of different suggestions in his short paper in order to characterise the phenomenon he had in mind – deep disagreements are generated by conflicts between "underlying principles", "framework propositions" or between "a whole system of mutually supporting propositions (and paradigms, models, styles of acting and thinking)", and that they "cannot be resolved through the use of argument, for they undercut the conditions essential to arguing" or are "by their nature, are not subject to rational resolution" (Fogelin 1985: 8-9, 11). In such cases, Fogelin argues that we must resort to non-rational methods of persuasion. He takes himself to be putting forward a Wittgensteinian thesis, inspired by remarks in *On Certainty* on propositions that are like hinges and on differences in what people judge to be good reasons (Wittgenstein 1972: §§341-44 and §§608-12). One example he gives is that of a disagreement over the morality of abortion because

the parties to the disagreement differ over whether a foetus counts as a person, i.e., one who has a right to life.

The question that got the most immediate attention in the subsequent literature has been whether Fogelin was right when he claimed that deep disagreements are rationally irresolvable – particularly evident in the special issue of *Informal Logic* devoted to a discussion of Fogelin's paper (Turner and Campolo 2005).[1] Lugg (1986) argued that while deep disagreements cannot be immediately resolved by ordinary procedures, nevertheless arguing, inquiry and discussion can certainly help in approaching a consensus or "equilibrium position" eventually (Lugg 1986: 48). Feldman (2005) argued that suspension of judgement also counts as a kind of resolution when argument fails to decide things one way or the other. Adams (2005) argued that since the only way to discover whether a disagreement we are involved in is deep is by arguing and attempting rational means of persuasion, we should continue to do so and reject Fogelin's recommendation of non-rational persuasion. Finally, Finocchiaro (2013) provides an overview of the different responses to Fogelin and argues that although deep disagreements are possible, Fogelin's examples do not work and so he has failed to show that such disagreements actually exist.[2]

More recently, the issue of deep disagreement, which was originally raised in the context of philosophical debates over argumentation and informal logic, has garnered interest in epistemology since it pertains to issues of justification, relativism and so on. Alongside discussion of the possibility of resolving such disagreements, some have focussed on the question of what a deep disagreement consists in, which is arguably prior to the question concerning its resolvability. There have been three main tendencies with regards to how this question has been answered, all of which can be seen to draw on Fogelin's original formulation, that deep

[1] See Vol. 25 No. 1 of *Informal Logic*.
[2] See also Aberdein (2020), who provides a useful classification of the different responses to the question of the resolvability of deep disagreements, dividing them into the pessimists and the optimists.

disagreements concern fundamental epistemic principles, hinge commitments and conceptual understanding.

An influential direction comes from Lynch who does not directly respond to Fogelin, although his position is similar to Fogelin's suggestion that deep disagreements happen when people differ in their standards for what counts as a good reason. Lynch focusses on epistemic disagreements – disagreements over epistemic principles, i.e., principles that recommend certain belief-forming methods as reliable – and labels some epistemic disagreements "fundamental" or "deep" when the parties to the disagreement affirm incompatible principles and are unable to offer non-circular reasons for their respective principles that both would accept. The example he considers is that of disagreements between a religious and a secular-scientific worldview, centrally a disagreement over the age of the earth between someone who relies on the Holy Book and someone who relies on fossil evidence and techniques like radiometric dating (Lynch 2010, 2016; Smith and Lynch 2021).

Relatedly, a few have suggested that a deep disagreement is just a way of recasting the problem of scepticism.[3] Lynch argues that sceptical challenges of, say, the reliability of induction are a "limit case of a broader phenomenon – epistemic disagreement" (Lynch 2010: 268). If our interlocutor is sceptical about our fundamental epistemic principles or sources or about the rationality of arguments, then there is little we can do to change their mind. Aikin (2021) argues that deep disagreements are a version of the regress problem or the problem of the criterion – in order to justify one's belief, one requires justification for one's justification and so on.

As a joint consequence of Fogelin's use of "framework propositions" and the independent development of hinge epistemology inspired by Wittgenstein, a popular approach to thinking about deep disagreement has been to see them as "disagreements over hinge commitments"

[3] See Lynch (2010), Aikin (2021), and Melchior (2021).

(Ranalli 2020, 2021).[4] What hinge commitments are exactly is itself a matter of controversy. However, following the metaphor of the hinge, one way they can be characterised is as playing a certain role in our worldviews and rational evaluations in that we take them for granted in reasoning and do not question them – we reason from them, rather than to them, and exempt them from doubt in considering any evidence. Examples of hinge commitments that are often given are certainties such as, "Here is a hand", "I am in pain", "The earth is older than five minutes", and so on. The commitments involved in disagreeing over abortion or the age of the earth are thought to resemble such hinge commitments in some way. In what follows, I make little mention of hinge commitments for two reasons. First, almost everyone who has written on the subject provides a different interpretation of what hinge commitments are. Hence, it will be clearer if we can say all that needs to be said without reference to such a contentious notion. Second, I think the whole discussion rests on a misinterpretation of Wittgenstein, although it would take us too far afield to argue for this claim here.

Finally, building on Fogelin's abortion example which involves different conceptions of personhood, another suggestion is that deep disagreements concern how a certain concept is to be understood.[5] However, not every disagreement over conceptual understanding – e.g., a disagreement over what a "flagrant foul" is in basketball – amounts to a deep disagreement. Rather, deep disagreements are over concepts that play a fundamental role in that they determine how other concepts are to be understood and what claims should be made. For instance, our conception of personhood also determines judgements we make regarding vegetarianism and so on (Shields 2021).

These different approaches have been developed, to a large extent, independently of one another and it is evident that they seem to pull in different directions. Are the cases of disagreement over

[4] See also Kusch (2021), Pritchard (2021) and Siegel (2021).
[5] See Godden and Brenner (2010) and Shields (2021).

abortion and the age of the earth instances of the same general phenomenon? Are the different approaches to deep disagreement competing theories of how to explain the phenomenon? Are they compatible with each other? If they are compatible, is this because they address different issues? Or is it because they identify different kinds of deep disagreement? No one has yet unified the discussion by answering these questions or showing how all these positions relate to one another.

1.2 What makes a disagreement deep?

In order to show what I take to be the deficiency in the literature, I want to make a slight detour into the existing literature on peer disagreement to draw a lesson from there and apply it to the case of deep disagreement. As I mentioned at the beginning, a central question that has garnered much attention is the following: how should we respond when we disagree with an epistemic peer? That is, may we or ought we retain our confidence in what we believe even if a peer believes the opposite? Now there are two counts on which these questions should give us pause. First, who counts as an epistemic peer? In ordinary usage, the notion of a peer is ambiguous – is it someone of the same age, same social or epistemic circle, same professional standing, someone who shares much of your beliefs, someone who trusts the same sources, or someone who has all the same evidence? Second, assuming the notion of a peer disagreement is clearly understood, should we expect there to be a general answer to the question of how one ought to respond to *any* instance of peer disagreement?

Siegel (2013) provides an overview of some prominent positions and raises doubts concerning both these issues. The main lesson he draws from the debate is that the variety of cases discussed in the literature are "significantly different and demand different treatment" (Siegel 2013: 16). There is no general answer to the question of how to rationally respond to a peer disagreement, other than to say, "It depends." It can depend on the kind of peer you are dealing with, the

weight and kind of evidence you have, how much care and effort you have invested in coming to your position, and so on. The fact that someone you regard as a peer disagrees with you arguably can be included in the total evidence in play as a reason to reduce one's confidence, but it often will be outweighed by the rest of the evidence.

My plea is that we ought to raise similar critical questions concerning deep disagreement. In this thesis, my focus is on the first sort of question: what makes a disagreement deep? The notion of the depth of a disagreement is even more obscure and ambiguous than that of a peer. In everyday life, we might use the expression "deep" in relation to a number of things like observations (where we mean insightful or profound) or emotions (where we mean that it is intensely felt). We also might naturally describe two people as disagreeing deeply, either because their disagreement is particularly persistent or because the matter at issue is central to their identities or because the disagreement pertains to their deeply held convictions. However, this does not yet amount to a distinct kind of disagreement or warrant positing a distinct philosophical category. In order to successfully demarcate a distinct kind of disagreement, we need (necessary and/or sufficient) conditions or criteria for a disagreement to count as deep – perhaps features that are present or absent in other disagreements. If this is not possible, then there must at least be an established use for the concept of deep disagreement, where indicators of an established use are an agreement on most examples, the ability to construct more examples on demand and so on.

It is not clear whether there are either necessary or sufficient conditions for a disagreement to count as deep. For instance, Fogelin (1985) took rational irresolvability to be an essential feature of deep disagreement, whereas others have argued that this is an open question (e.g., Pritchard 2021 and Ranalli 2021). Rather, it seems that different criteria that have various similarities with each other have been used in the different approaches thus far. An example of this is that different kinds of "depth" or fundamentality are at play in the different approaches – in some

cases, the matter at issue is epistemically fundamental (as in the problem of scepticism), in others, it is psychologically fundamental (as hinge commitments are).

One might argue then that deep disagreement is something like a family resemblance concept. While family resemblance concepts, like that of a game or of religion, are ordinarily unproblematic, this is because they have an established use in ordinary language. Even if we cannot precisely define a game, we have no difficulty applying the concept in different circumstances – vague cases notwithstanding. However, this is not the case with the notion of "deep disagreement". It is also unclear, on the basis of the handful of examples suggested thus far, where deep disagreements begin and where they end. Most of the literature on the subject takes either the abortion or the age of the earth disagreement as its central example. The few exceptions give examples that are structurally very similar: for instance, a disagreement between a Christian and a Muslim over whether or not Jesus was crucified (Kraft 2021). Is the class of deep disagreements co-extensive with that of religious disagreements or controversial disagreements?

It also does not suffice to say that disagreements over a certain kind of epistemic principle or a certain kind of concept make for a deep disagreement because the question still remains – what makes a disagreement over such an epistemic principle or concept *deep*? The only answer we find is that such principles and concepts are *fundamental*. But to say that deep disagreements are disagreements over fundamental commitments, say, is only to push the obscurity back one step further – what makes a commitment fundamental?

In Chapters 2 and 3, I investigate two broad strategies via which the notion of fundamentality has been treated and argue that neither is applicable in the paradigmatic cases of deep disagreement or that they fail to distinguish deep disagreements from a variety of commonplace disagreements. If my argument is successful, then the attempt to make a principled distinction between commitments, principles or concepts that are fundamental and those that are not will be

shown to be misguided and the supposed distinction between "deep" and ordinary or shallow disagreements will lack any motivation.

At the very least, I would argue for the weak conclusion that this should alter the kind of theorising that we do in regard to these disagreements: our aim should not be to look for a general theory of the nature of deep disagreement that satisfies every conceivable case, nor expect any general answer to the question of whether deep disagreements are irresolvable. However, I think we should go further and abandon the notion altogether as it is unhelpful at best and misleading at worst. It would be more fruitful to concentrate – as indeed some have done – on specific cases of disagreement that might be philosophically problematic, and ask of any specific case how we might go about resolving it, whether it motivates relativism, and so on.

1.3 The dominant picture of deep disagreement

In this section, I identify a certain picture of what is going on in the cases regarded to be central examples of deep disagreement that I think is at work in the discussion. This picture both unifies the existing discussion which seemed to pull in different directions and motivates describing them as deep or fundamental disagreements. This serves as a preliminary to what I do in Chapters 2 and 3 where I reject the two central aspects of this picture.

Consider the two main sorts of cases that have been mentioned as examples of deep disagreement – a disagreement over whether abortion is permissible owing to different conceptions of what a person is and a disagreement over the age of the earth owing to a reliance on different epistemic sources. The idea is that such cases involve a clash of worldviews, that these are disagreements over our most fundamental ways of seeing the world, our deeply held commitments and values. Further, these disagreements are difficult to resolve and, if they are

rationally irresolvable, potentially pose an epistemic problem. If any disagreements are irresolvable, deep disagreements seem to be good candidates.

Let us assume that the different approaches to deep disagreement and the different kinds of examples that have been suggested are all after the same kind of phenomenon and are not addressing different issues. Rather than viewing these as competing theories of deep disagreement, let us treat them as compatible and as demarcating roughly different kinds of deep disagreement (just as we ordinarily differentiate between different kinds of games, religions and so on).

The analysis of the discussion of deep disagreement in terms of competing theories – the hinge commitments view and the fundamental epistemic principles view – has recently become a popular point of departure – e.g., Ranalli (2021) and Lavorerio (2021). However, this is quite a misleading picture. Why are these competing theories? Is there any question over which they give incompatible answers, on the basis of which they can be distinguished? No. These theories give different, but not necessarily incompatible, answers to the question, "What do deep disagreements consist in?" or "What causes and explains the systematicity and persistence that can be observed in cases of deep disagreement?" Hence, I think a more sympathetic line would be to treat them as demarcating different types of deep disagreement.[6]

Given these assumptions, a very natural way to unify the discussion of deep disagreement emerges – I call this the *dominant picture* of deep disagreement, which runs as follows. We should distinguish between two levels at which we might have differences or disagreements: the surface level on which our everyday disagreements operate where the disagreement is over some matter of fact, and the fundamental level where what is at issue is something fundamental, something that forms the core of our worldviews. Further, the fundamental level might be preliminarily

[6] Melchior (2021) also argues for the claim that deep disagreement is a heterogeneous phenomenon and provides a partial taxonomy of three kinds of deep disagreements on the basis of his reinterpretation of some central sceptical arguments.

characterised as consisting of one's epistemic sources or principles, hinge commitments, concepts, form of life and so on. These aren't necessarily exclusive of each other – for instance, one's "form of life" might turn out to be nothing over and above one's concepts, commitments etc., epistemic principles might be subsumed under the general class of one's hinge commitments, and so on. This is admittedly rather general – this is why I call it a picture, rather than a theory, for it forms the basis for any theory we might develop.

On the dominant picture, the disagreement at the surface level is generated by and hence is to be explained with reference to differences at the fundamental level.[7] Hence, whether or not the fundamental difference is made explicit in the course of a discussion, the disagreement can be appropriately termed "deep" because it is the fundamental difference that is really at work. This is also what makes the fundamental level the root cause of other potential features of such disagreements. The two features that have been taken to be the most distinctive of deep disagreements are that these disagreements are *systematic* and *persistent* (Ranalli 2021; Lavorerio 2021). These disagreements are systematic in that it seems as if we cannot talk about a disagreement over one specific issue (say, the age of the earth), without making reference to a range of disagreements over related issues (the reliability of the Holy Book, evolution, the existence of God and so on). These disagreements are persistent in that they are hard to resolve; it might turn out that they are in principle resolvable (or it might be that they are rationally irresolvable), but the path to resolution is certainly not as easy as in ordinary disagreements.

This picture is in fact so natural that it seems to follow straightforwardly from the mere *description* of a case of deep disagreement. The case of disagreement over the permissibility of abortion was said to be *due to* different conceptions of what a person is, and whether a foetus counts as a person. The other case of disagreement over the age of the earth was said to be *due to* the parties'

[7] I speak here of *differences* at the fundamental level and not *disagreements* because it is less committal and more appropriate to the various approaches: it is unclear whether and how a difference in one's understanding of a concept, say, is really a genuine disagreement, such that at least one of the parties is mistaken.

use of different epistemic sources. It seems natural to pre-theoretically describe these cases in such causal terms, explaining one disagreement in terms of a prior disagreement. The tiered structure of the picture also motivates speaking of the "depth" of these disagreements.

Furthermore, it is not difficult to provide explanations of the different features of these disagreements. After all, if you conceive of a foetus as a person, equal in status with living human beings, it is unsurprising that you would object to abortion as murder. If you accept the Bible as an infallible epistemic source, then mustn't you deny that the Earth is older than 7000 years, that human beings evolved from now-extinct animals and so on? The systematicity of these disagreements can thus be explained as being generated by a more basic commitment. The persistence of these disagreements might be a mere consequence of their systematicity – more work needs to be done in order to reach a resolution. And if any such disagreement is shown to be irresolvable by rational means, this can be explained with reference to the nature of the fundamental level: for instance, that one's concepts or fundamental epistemic principles are held arationally, or that they are not subject to epistemic reasons or norms.

Thus, we have a general schema for thinking about deep disagreement. This picture also provides a model on which the different approaches to deep disagreement may be united, as opposed to treating them as in competition with one another in the project of providing *the* theory of deep disagreement. There is even a potential advantage to conceptualising deep disagreements in this way in that it allows for the possibility of dealing with more complicated cases where multiple factors – conceptual differences, incompatible epistemic principles and so on – may be involved simultaneously.

However, despite the attractiveness of the dominant picture and the apparent ease with which it maps on to the cases mentioned, I think that if we spell out the implications of the picture, it can be shown to be evidently mistaken. At the heart of the picture is the distinction between the two levels and the idea that any deep disagreement involves a disagreement at the fundamental level.

Now, this approach pushes the question of what distinguishes deep disagreements from other shallow disagreements to the question of what distinguishes the fundamental level. There are two features that distinguish the fundamental level from the surface level on this picture: (1) differences at the fundamental level generate, and hence explain, disagreements at the surface level, and (2) differences at the fundamental level cannot be settled by the exchange of reasons and so, in some sense, the fundamental level marks the limits of reason.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I examine these two claims respectively and provide reasons for rejecting both. If my argument is successful, this gives us good reason to reject the dominant picture as the model on which we ought to think about the central cases of deep disagreement. Unifying the different approaches to and examples of deep disagreement in this way only serves to mislead and distort the phenomena, which might be quite different although they might have all kinds of superficial similarities. This supports my argument that it is unclear that there is a unified phenomenon that is worth talking about in such general terms as the phenomenon of "deep disagreement", and so, we would be better off abandoning the notion entirely as a term of art. Deep disagreements do not form a distinct kind of disagreement any more than the class of "controversial disagreements" or "complicated disagreements".

1.4 Two clarifications

In what follows, my discussion is limited to "genuine disagreements". This is usually used in the literature to convey two ideas. First, that the disagreement is not a mere conflict of preferences, such as when we disagree over whether to go to the cinema or to the park. In the latter case, there is no fact of the matter to get right or wrong. Neither party is *mistaken* – they simply want to do different things. Second, that the disagreement is not merely verbal. Two people might seem to disagree over some issue but might really be failing to communicate properly because they are using some term in different senses. A disagreement is genuine when two parties hold

incompatible positions – for instance, one denies what the other affirms – regarding the truth of one and the same issue.

Further, an assumption of my argument is that deep disagreements are a distinct issue from the problem of scepticism. As I mentioned above in 1.2, there exists a minority position that has argued that it is only disagreements with a sceptic that are really deep, but I do not discuss this suggestion any further for a few reasons. First, deep disagreements are generally thought to pose a potential social or political problem (Kappel 2012) – when we deeply disagree over abortion, say, this is a hindrance to drawing up public policies on the issue. All the cases discussed are hence typically inspired by real-world cases of disagreement. The problem of scepticism, however, raises no such social issues. Second, it is somewhat problematic to construe engagement with a sceptic as a genuine disagreement. This is because the sceptic has no position of their own that they support by reasons. Rather, the sceptic has a different epistemic goal – certainty or the exclusion of the possibility of error – which we do not ordinarily seek, except when in a philosophical mood. Hence, rather than holding a position incompatible with ours, the sceptic only issues a challenge and demands a certain sort of reason. Finally, if all that remains of deep disagreement is the problem of scepticism, then this only helps to justify my recommendation that we abandon the very notion of "deep disagreement" since all that would be left is the familiar and age-old epistemological problem.

Chapter 2: Where Our Worldviews Begin

In the second chapter, I investigate the idea that fundamental commitments are at the heart of our worldviews and explain what we believe about a variety of issues. I argue that we should distinguish the claim that one justifies a wide range of beliefs on the basis of some commitment from the idea that this commitment is what generates or explains the various things that one believes. The latter claim is false: our so-called fundamental commitments do not determine nor make more likely what we believe on a variety of other issues. The former claim is correct but does not give us a basis for distinguishing fundamental commitments from ordinary commitments that we do not regard as fundamental.

2.1 The priority of the fundamental level

As explained at the end of Chapter 1.3, one important feature that might distinguish the fundamental level from the surface level is that disagreements at the surface level are generated by, and hence to be explained with reference to, differences at the fundamental level. Our fundamental commitments regarding what sources are reliable, regarding what kinds of things exist or are possible, and regarding how we conceptualise the world are thought to be at the core of our worldviews and hence, have wide-ranging implications for what we will believe about various issues.

This idea is both explicit and implicit in the literature on deep disagreement. For instance, Shields writes:

> Because the concept of personhood plays this constitutive role in making sense of moral and political life for these speakers, there is no further commitment to appeal to in order to move one another. Their understanding of other concepts for making sense of moral and political life will be informed by their understanding of personhood, and their other

> commitments within this domain will be downstream from their understanding of these concepts. (Shields 2021: 1004)

Consider also Ranalli:

> To put it another way, their disagreement over the age of the earth might be thought of as *proxy* for systematic disagreement over various related propositions, propositions related to or constitutive of their world views. So, the thought here is that deep disagreements aren't isolated, but rather extend outwards, having a kind of *ripple-effect* for what one is committed to disagreeing over in other cases. (Ranalli 2021: 984)

This idea is present also in Fogelin's original suggestion that "deep disagreements are generated by conflicts between framework propositions" (Fogelin 1985: 8). Given how examples of deep disagreement are often introduced as being between different sorts of people (e.g., between the religious and scientific person), where such labels abbreviate claims about what methods they use and sources they trust, this idea seems quite natural. But let us stop to consider exactly how this is supposed to happen, i.e., how do differences at the fundamental level generate disagreements at the surface level?

In order for this to happen, there has to be a relation between the two levels, such that whatever obtains at the fundamental level either necessitates or makes it more likely that something obtains at the surface level. For example, the fact you conceive of foetuses as persons either necessitates or makes it more likely that you would object to abortion, and correspondingly, the fact that two people differ in how they conceive of a person either necessitates or makes it more likely that they would disagree over whether abortion is permissible. The reason differences at the fundamental level generate disagreements at the surface level is because if a principle, concept, commitment etc. is fundamental, then it commits you to believing certain other things. If there were no such relation, it is unclear what the purpose of distinguishing the two levels is and how the explanation of the various features of these disagreements is supposed to proceed. Call this the Concomitance claim – although strictly, it is not a claim but a schema for a claim, which can be further filled in for any case.

Strong Concomitance (SC): That *x* obtains at the fundamental level necessitates that *y* obtains at the surface level.

Weak Concomitance (WC): That *x* obtains at the fundamental level makes it more likely that *y* obtains at the surface level.

2.2 Fundamental and surface levels: a strong relation?

The first thing to note is that this is primarily a claim about belief, and only secondarily about disagreements. That is to say, it is the claim that certain features of a person's mental makeup, such as their concepts, their basic commitments and so on, imply certain things about what they believe. Now obviously this requires qualification: after all, a person might be irrational and not believe something that is entailed by something else that they believe. However, this qualification comes at no additional cost since, by definition, neither of the parties to a deep disagreement are irrational or epistemically vicious in any way.

Having noted that, I think SC can be shown to be false once the details are filled in to apply to the paradigmatic cases of deep disagreement. Consider the disagreement over the age of the earth. According to the dominant picture, the religious believer's commitment to the reliability of the Holy Book at the fundamental level commits them further to believing many other things at the surface level, including that the Earth is younger than 7000 years.

But this is too quick. We can plausibly imagine a number of religious believers who are committed to the reliability of the Holy Book and do not believe that the Earth is younger than 7000 years. *A* might reason that the Holy Book is not in the business of making empirical claims about the age of the earth and that the genealogies therein serve a different function just as other parts of the Holy Book are poetic, philosophical and so on. *B* might reason that even though the genealogies seem inconsistent with the Earth's being ancient, it is unclear how much time passed prior to them during, say, creation and whether that account is to be taken literally. We can also imagine a religious believer who does believe in a young Earth *and* does not reject the results of

radiometric dating. *C* might reason that even though the Earth appears to be ancient, this is because it was created *ex nihilo* to appear that way with rocks and fossils that seem to be many billion years old and so on, inspired by Philip Gosse's strategy in *Omphalos* (Gosse 2004).

Now some of these positions might be less thought out than others, and all of them might raise further questions that we might reasonably expect them to answer. However, the purpose here is not to evaluate them but to point to the rather obvious fact that the claims of the Holy Book require interpretation and, insofar as it is taken to be a reliable source, the scope of its reliability, the domains to which it applies and does not apply, and the manner and extent to which it applies in a given domain are all up for grabs. Hence, when filled out in this way, SC is seen to be false: accepting the reliability of the Holy Book does not commit you to saying anything about the age of the earth. Hence, it is quite conceivable that one party accepts the reliability of the Holy Book and finds agreement on a large number of issues with someone who rejects the Holy Book.

There are three objections that might be raised against my response, and an answer to these objections will also help to clarify both my position and what exactly is going on in the dialectic. First, one might object that this response simply misses the point: even if someone might accept the Holy Book and consistently reject the claim that the Earth is young, the case that we were originally interested in was one where a religious believer *did* believe in a young Earth *because* they took it to be what the Holy Book claimed. The original case was one wherein a wide range of beliefs was justified by appealing to a single epistemic source; it does not do to respond by pointing to other cases where the same epistemic source does not result in the same set of beliefs. However, recall that the claim we are considering is whether we can distinguish the fundamental level from the surface level on the basis of the fact that it determines what one believes at the surface level and hence, generates disagreements over a range of different issues. My point is that it is *this* claim that gets things backwards: we should not mistake the fact that an

agent justifies a range of beliefs by appealing to a single source for the mistaken claim that belief in this source determines what they will believe on a range of issues.

Another tempting response here would be to say that we need to modify the content of the fundamental commitment here. Modify it in what way? A typical answer when it comes to epistemic principles is to qualify the reliability of a source with respect to a given domain: so, the central case of deep disagreement then involves a religious believer committed to the reliability of the Holy Book *with respect to facts about the distant past.*[1] However, this response does not work in two ways.

First, this is obviously a simplification: it would be a strange religious believer indeed who trusted the testimony of the Holy Book *only* with respect to facts about the distant past. So, for the majority of cases, we would have to say that the believer is committed to the reliability of the Holy Book with respect to domains D_1, D_2, D_3…, where D_1 is the distant past and so on. However, this significantly diminishes the explanatory power of the dominant picture. The dominant picture was, in part, attractive precisely because it promised to explain a range of disagreements as stemming from a fundamental difference; however, the more such qualifications are added, the less the two levels seem really distinct from each other.

Second, and more importantly, the three imaginary religious believers we just considered *are* all committed to the reliability of the Holy Book with respect to facts about the distant past: for instance, one of them might take the story of Abraham to be literally true in all its detail, but still reason that the Earth is not younger than 7000 years. Does this mean that we need to qualify the principle even further? Should we then say that in the original case, the religious believer is committed to the reliability of the Holy Book with respect to the age of the earth? This increasingly begins to look implausible and the fundamental level explanatorily redundant. Even

[1] Lynch (2010, 2016) and Ranalli (2021) frame their examples in this way.

in this case, *A* would hold that the Holy Book *would* be reliable with respect to the age of the earth *if* it had anything to say about it, which is itself a matter of interpretation.

A final objection is that although my response applies to this particular example, this only shows that this is not a good example. However, despite the specificities of the different possible positions that agents may rationally occupy which I discuss here, the point is perfectly general. The necessitation of SC requires that there be an entailment relation between the content of the two levels. However, merely an entailment relation is incapable on its own of generating a variety of beliefs, and hence disagreement, over a wide range of issues and so, the dominant picture – or at least its central claim that the systematicity of deep disagreements is to be explained with reference to differences at the fundamental level – turns out to be false.

This gives us good reason to doubt whether SC applies to the young Earth case. A similar approach will show that this is true of the abortion case as well. It is simply false that conceiving of a foetus as a person entails that a rational person will object to abortion. Consider Judith Thomson's influential defence of abortion wherein she grants that the foetus *is* a person and therefore, has a right to life, and argues that nevertheless, abortion is permissible, using the now-famous example of the unconscious violinist to motivate her view (Thomson 1971). One can hold that the foetus has a right to life and still reason that this does not make abortion permissible because there are many situations where someone with a right to life may be permissibly killed.

It is worth noting that a person's concepts do, in one important way, determine what they can rationally judge, insofar as these judgements follow from the meaning of the concept. So, conceiving of an animal as a person would necessitate that an agent judge that animals have a right to life, given that they possess the appropriate concept (of a person). However, this is true of *any* concept and does not give us a basis for distinguishing between concepts like "person" that are fundamental and concepts like "flagrant foul" that are not – anyone who understood the

concept of a flagrant foul would count any unnecessary and excessive contact as an instance of the same. Further, this is a different claim entirely from saying that conceiving of a foetus as a person commits a rational agent to objecting to abortion, which is simply false. Thus, we may conclude that Strong Concomitance does not hold in the central cases of deep disagreement.

2.2 Fundamental and surface levels: a weaker relation?

What about WC, i.e., the claim that one's fundamental commitments at least make it more likely that one will have certain beliefs at the surface level? First, in what sense does the fact that a rational agent relies on the testimony of the Holy Book make it "likely" that they will believe in a young Earth or anything else? One way to make sense of this suggestion is as an empirical claim that we often find that these go together, i.e., those who believe in the Holy Book tend to deny an ancient Earth. This will need to be shown, but evaluating this claim is beyond the scope of philosophical interest. However, even if this is shown, all it demonstrates is that most religious believers consider a belief in a young Earth a core belief, such that they take a rejection of a young Earth to be a rejection of their faith entirely. That is to say, it shows that most religious believers take the Holy Book to make infallible claims about the age of the earth. It does not on its own show that a reliance on the Holy Book makes it more likely that one will believe in a young Earth.

An analogy may help to make my point clearer. Consider the claim that the use of soft drugs like cannabis make it more likely that one will end up using and abusing alcohol, opioids and other hard drugs. Even if one finds a correlation here, it will not suffice to explain the latter as a result of the former without appealing to other factors that explain cases where the correlation does not occur. Similarly, a reliance on the Holy Book does not on its own explain a believer's views on the age of the earth, although what might explain the correlation – if there is one – is simply the widespread belief that one cannot be a genuine believer unless one also affirms a young

Earth. As a historical parallel, consider how the thesis that the earth revolves around the sun was once considered heretical, where it was defined as being contrary to the Holy Scripture (McMullin 1998: 272-73), and how this is not the case today. This illustrates how it is not very illuminating to say that one's fundamental commitments make certain beliefs at the surface level any more or less likely.

2.3 A few lessons

I want to draw a distinction on the basis of the preceding discussion between a wide-ranging and a systematic disagreement. A disagreement between two parties can be wide-ranging, i.e., they might disagree over a variety of issues, without being systematic. While deep disagreements have often been taken to involve a kind of systematicity, the preceding criticism of SC shows us that we would be saying too much if we say that the central cases involve systematic disagreement. It suffices to say that the disagreement is wide-ranging, and it requires a further argument to show that the disagreement is systematic. If we recall the rough way in which "systematicity" was characterised – "it seems as if we cannot talk about a disagreement over one specific issue (the age of the earth), without making reference to a range of disagreements over related issues" – the argument against SC shows that we *can* talk about such an issue independently of other issues too and so, this feature is not to be explained by the nature of the subject matter. Hence, the wide-ranging nature of this disagreement is incidental to the parties involved in this specific case, and hence requires an explanation in these terms.

Another lesson of this chapter is that it gives us a different strategy for resolving these disagreements, one that has not, to my knowledge, been mentioned in the literature and is probably far more effective in real-world cases. Alongside reasoning about whether or not a foetus is a person or has a right to life – whether this is possible forms the subject of the next chapter – we can also question whether the inference from this right to life to the

impermissibility of abortion is warranted. Similarly, alongside reasoning about the infallibility of the Holy Book, we can also question whether the Holy Book really does make a claim about the age of the earth and whether this is the most plausible way to interpret it. In the real world, where people tend to be dogmatic about such controversial issues, they might see permitting abortion as tantamount to denying the sanctity of life and see denying a young Earth as tantamount to denying the authority of the Holy Book; hence, an interesting and perhaps more fruitful approach to resolving these disagreements would be to question this assumption.

In conclusion, let me say how we should think of the relationship between one's so-called "fundamental" commitments and one's surface beliefs. Of course, I do not mean to deny that there is *any* relationship between the two: one may be taken to be a reason for the other, as indeed *any* belief might be taken to be a reason for believing something else. Rather, what I am disputing is the attempt to make a principled distinction between commitments that are fundamental and those that aren't on the basis of the explanatory or justificatory priority of the former. Kinzel and Kusch argue for what they call "situated judgements", as opposed to brute and rule-governed judgements, as being of central importance in cases of real-life disagreements. While brute judgements, such as some particular judgements of taste, might be entirely independent of reasons, rule-governed judgements are just particular applications of general rules (Kinzel and Kusch 2018). My argument here is in agreement with this picture: our judgements, including those at the "surface", are neither brute nor rule-governed, i.e., they are neither independent of the so-called "fundamental" commitments nor are they determined by them.

It is important not to mistake the fact that I cite a single source or reason to justify a wide range of beliefs for the fact that my reliance on this source is what generates or explains this wide range of beliefs.[2] The argument of this chapter aimed at separating these two claims insofar as they have often been made together. What is true is that an agent might cite a commitment such as to

[2] Thanks to Dajan Plačković for his comments on this chapter that helped me clarify this point.

the reliability of the Holy Book or to the personhood of foetuses as their *reason* for a variety of their beliefs. For instance, they might say that (i) the Holy Book is infallible in its claims *and* that (ii) one of its claims is that the earth is around 7000 years old, that there was a great flood and so on. They might have more reasons for these beliefs or only this one, but even in the latter case, both claims (i) and (ii) might be challenged. But this is generally true of any disagreement: I might justify a number of my beliefs on the basis of having read them in *The Local*, and in any case, I can be challenged in a number of ways. I might cite some person as my source to justify all sorts of beliefs, and you might cite some other person as your source. But this does not make for a separate class of disagreement; on the contrary, this looks like quite a run-of-the-mill disagreement that we come across regularly and can easily settle. What might then be thought to distinguish the former sort of reason as *fundamental* is that it is difficult to reason about and marks the end of one's reasons, in some sense – we can reason about the reliability of *The Local* but not about the Holy Book nor about the claim that the foetus is a person. This second strategy for distinguishing the fundamental level from one's surface beliefs is the subject of Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Where Our Reasons End

In this chapter, I consider another strategy for distinguishing our most fundamental commitments, namely, the suggestion that our reasons come to an end here. When our disagreement is fundamental, either we have come to a point where we differ in what we count as a good reason, or we differ in the reasons we have, or we simply have no further reasons to offer. I consider each of these suggestions in turn and argue that none of them works and so, this strategy for distinguishing the fundamental level also fails.

3.1 What counts as a reason?

A tempting line of thought that arises given the way deep disagreements are often introduced (e.g., Aikin 2021) is that while ordinary disagreements are over some issue or another, i.e., over whether *p*, deep disagreements are over what counts as a reason in favour of or against *p*. So, after splitting the bill, even if we disagree over what each of us should pay – I say €15 and you say €17 –, we still agree that working it out together on paper or using a calculator would easily settle the difference. However, the two parties disagreeing over the age of the earth disagree on what they take to be good reasons for any position on the topic: the one counts the testimony of the Holy Book as a reason, while the other does not.

However, this is not quite correct. An adolescent might trust her father and believe everything he tells her, but any adult who knows him might regard him as a liar. In such a case, both parties do agree on what makes for a good reason – the word of a competent and sincere person, say – but disagree in their assessment of the father's character. In the abortion case, both parties agree that *if* the foetus was a person and had a right to life, this would be a reason – even if not a decisive reason – against abortion, but they disagree over whether the foetus is a person. Likewise, both

parties would agree that *if* (i) the Holy Book were infallible in its claims and (ii) made a claim about the age of the earth, then this would be a good reason – even a decisive reason – for believing in a young earth. So, there is an agreement on what they count as a good reason and only a disagreement in how they assess the character of the Holy Book.

In fact, I would argue that a part of what it is to understand a claim, at least any claim that has truth-conditions and over which we can potentially have a genuine disagreement over, is understanding what would count in favour of or against that claim. If someone said that even an infallible source testifying that *p* was not a reason to think that *p*, we would not understand them and regard them as incoherent or ask them to explain why they are not contradicting themself.

Suppose we encounter a community that takes the fact that a belief is useful to have, or that one has a pragmatic reason to believe something (e.g., to believe that one's son is alive because it would bring one comfort), to also be an epistemic reason, i.e., a reason to think that belief *true*.[1] This imaginary community would look incoherent – we simply would not understand them. We do not count the fact that something would be useful to believe as a reason to believe it. But then we discover that they think that their deities make it the case that any belief that is useful to have is also true – depending on for whom it would be most useful – and therefore, the fact that it is useful to believe it is a reason to think it true. Given this story, we now understand them and have a basis on which to disagree with them. Although this is a rather bizarre scenario, I hope it illustrates how mutual intelligibility here requires an agreement on what a reason is.

So, we must agree on what counts as a reason for or against a claim in order to even have a genuine disagreement over that claim. One might then say that when it comes to fundamental disagreements, either over whether the foetus is a person or over whether the Holy Book is infallible, reasons come to an end here and *this* is what makes it a fundamental or deep

[1] For a good account of the distinction between epistemic and pragmatic reasons, see Hieronymi (2009).

disagreement. In what way do reasons come to an end here? There are a few different suggestions that have been made and that I consider here:

1) The parties to the disagreement disagree over what would count as a reason at the fundamental level or simply do not know what would count as a reason (no shared conception of reasons).
2) They have no reason that the other would accept (no shared reasons).
3) They believe what they do independent of any reason, i.e., their belief is basic for them (no further reasons).

3.2 No shared conception of reasons

Consider first the infallibility of the Holy Book. According to (1), the parties to the disagreement have no consensus over what makes for a reason either for or against this claim, perhaps because they simply disagree over this matter or because they do not know what would count as a reason. This idea can be found in some of the passages that Fogelin quotes from *On Certainty* concerning what different people consider to be a "good ground".[2] Lynch also raises the question: "How do I give you reasons for my very standards for what counts as a reason?" (Lynch 2016: 249). If (1) is true in this case, then argument over the infallibility of the Holy Book would be impossible and Fogelin's thesis that deep disagreements "cannot be resolved through the use of argument, for they undercut the conditions essential to arguing" (Fogelin 1985: 8) would be vindicated.

However, I think we *do* have a good idea of the kinds of things that make for good reasons both for and against the infallibility of the Holy Book, indeed the infallibility of *any* epistemic source. For example, we can imagine a number of scenarios in which we would not hesitate to say an epistemic source is not trustworthy or that something it said is blatantly false. In the case of the

[2] §§608-12 in Wittgenstein (1972), which is cited in Fogelin (1985: 9).

Holy Book, if it were shown that the people who authored the texts were ordinary people, not inspired in any divine way, this would be a reason to doubt that the Holy Book is infallible in the way it is often claimed to be, i.e., in a way such that error is *impossible*. Moreover, if it, or any epistemic source, makes a claim that contradicts our everyday experience – for instance, if it claims that every living person has a duck on top of their head that everyone can see – could we take it seriously? Of course, the Holy Book in fact makes no such claim, but the point is that if it did, we would count this to be a reason to regard it as not only infallible but mistaken. Hence, we do have a shared conception of what makes for a good reason here.

Now, what if the believer does not count any of these as reasons against their creed? They should at the very least see the conflict between the two claims. If they do not, as I argued in the previous section, this would be grounds to think that we have failed to understand what they mean in some way: for instance, we might not have correctly understood their claim that the Holy Book is infallible. We should then inquire what they would consider a reason to think that some epistemic source is infallible or has made an error, and this will give us a better idea of what they mean. Once they give us examples of what would show that some source is not infallible, we will be able to judge whether they are using "infallible" or some other term in a different sense than we do. And here we have only a failure of communication rather than a genuine disagreement, let alone a distinct kind of disagreement.

Another worry is that, in the face of such a conflict, a believer can simply explain away the apparent conflict. They might argue that the falsehood is not something that the Holy Book actually claims or that it is not meant to be an empirical assertion but serves some other function. This is quite right; in fact, this has happened. For centuries, the thesis that the sun revolved around the earth was thought to be the testimony of the Holy Book, but few would hold this view today – the overwhelming consensus is that the passages that suggest this thesis belong to sections of the Holy Book that contain poetry and a variety of philosophical reflections, and so,

we have little reason to take this as an empirical claim. So even the question of how to interpret the claims of the Holy Book is one that we can and do reason about. And if there is no reason to take it as anything other than an empirical claim, this would count against the epistemic source.

In general, whenever we have two commitments that apparently come into conflict, there is always a question of how to either bring them into accord by explaining away the apparent conflict in this or some other way (and the plausibility of the explanation can also be debated) or else the question of which one we ought to reject and which we ought to prioritise. Similarly, when it comes to the question of the age of the earth, there are a number of ways in which we might reason about this. For instance, just as there is overwhelming evidence against geocentrism, we can point to how the technique of radiometric dating has been used innumerably many times to predict the age of various rock materials, whose age we can confirm through other means like historical sources. The reasons here might not be as overwhelming as in the geocentrism case, and the believer might question the predictive success of radiometric dating or the veracity of the other historical sources, but for every such doubt, we have a shared understanding of what counts as a good reason both for and against any position, which indicates that we are talking about the same thing in the first place.

What if, in the face of a conflict between some claim *p* and our shared perceptual experience, someone reasons that we ought to give priority to the claim and reject what everyone can see? In such a case, I am inclined to say that this would either amount to irrationality or scepticism. If they reject what everyone can see only in this particular case, but generally hold that perception is otherwise reliable, and offer no explanation for why we should think this particular case is different, then they are just refusing to reason and are being irrational. If they mean to reject perception generally, then we would realise that we are probably talking with a sceptic, someone who has different epistemic goals – that of certainty – than us. (If this were not the case, we would ask them for reasons for why they reject perception generally.) However, then the

supposed problem of deep disagreement would reduce to the problem of scepticism. Recall that I argued in Chapter 1.4 for the requirement that deep disagreements be distinguished from the problem of scepticism.

Coming to the abortion case, what do reasons for or against the claim that the foetus is a person look like? If it is less obvious than in the previous case, I think this is more indicative of a lack of understanding of what the claim even amounts to than anything else. If we were to translate this claim into other terms, for instance, into the claim that the foetus is like us, i.e., like ordinary human beings, then this is clearly not correct and we can reason about the ways in which the foetus is and is not like us. If the claim is that the foetus has a moral right to life, then, depending on how this further claim is understood, the kinds of reasons that are relevant will also become clear. For instance, the fact that people who have *rights* also have *responsibilities* counts as a reason against the claim because the foetus has no such responsibilities. And to the extent that it is unclear what would be reasons either for or against any claim, I think this indicates either a lack of understanding of what exactly is being claimed or that the claim is not being put forward as something that is true and that we can reason about.

Another issue here is that the question of whether a foetus is a person or has a right to life seems to be very different from the question of whether some epistemic source is infallible. The latter is a straightforward empirical claim that has relatively clear truth-conditions, whereas the former is not. In fact, questions about moral rights and responsibilities, indeed what is going on in *any* case of moral disagreement is a matter of controversy and has garnered significant debate in metaethics.[3] For instance, is there a fact of the matter about whether some act, like abortion, is right or wrong? In other words, in any moral disagreement, is at least one of the parties necessarily mistaken or are moral disagreements more like conflicts between preferences?

[3] See van Roojen (2015) for an introductory discussion on the different metaethical approaches to moral disagreement.

Treating these sorts of disagreements alongside those over epistemic sources as both instances of the same phenomenon – deep disagreement – risks treating what might be very different sorts of disagreements in the same terms.

3.3 No shared reasons

The second suggestion is that although each of the parties might have reasons for what they believe, they have no reason that the other would accept. According to Lynch, an important condition that, when satisfied, makes an epistemic disagreement deep, is what he calls *non-arbitration*: when "there is no further epistemic principle, accepted by both parties, which would settle the disagreement" (Lynch 2010: 265). For instance, although both parties would agree that time travel would be a good way to ascertain the age of the earth since this is in fact not an available option, there is no further reason that either of them can appeal to. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to disagreement over the infallibility of the Holy Book. The believer might justify their belief in the infallibility of the Holy Book on the basis of divine revelation or their *sensus divinitatis*, but Lynch says that "it is difficult to see how one could defend one's claims to reliably speak for, or perceive, God without appealing either to the book, or to mystic perception again" (Lynch 2010: 267). The best one can offer are circular reasons, but these will be of little help when disagreeing with someone who does not already accept one's reasons.

The issue with this suggestion is that even if we grant that neither party *presently* has a reason for their position that the other would accept, this is true of all sorts of mundane disagreements that we might have and so, it is unclear whether this is sufficient to distinguish the category of deep disagreement. For instance, just as one person might believe different things on the basis of religious experiences that someone else has not had, this is true of just about any ordinary experience. Recall the example of the adolescent who has no reason not to trust her father on the basis of her experience with him. She has reasons that someone else, who has on every

occasion found her father to be a liar, does not. And just as the testimony of each of them also might be counted as a relevant reason in this case, the testimony of the religious believer is also a potential reason for trusting in the Holy Book – however, whether we take it as a good reason or not depends on our assessment of the character of the believer and also our beliefs about the nature of purported religious experiences.

In fact, consider how much of what we believe is on the basis of the testimony of others and how any instance of learning something via testimony involves one party who has a reason that the other presently does not have, and might accept or reject. I do not mean to deny that things are more difficult when it comes to religious experiences, since they are significantly less common and hence, less understood. But all sorts of disagreements can be difficult to settle because we presently lack enough evidence to decide things one way or another – for instance, a disagreement over how to assess the character of some controversial historical figure. So, I am sceptical that the class of disagreements in which we presently differ in the reasons we have – which is what the suggestion we are considering amounts to – make for an interesting philosophical category.

If we focus on the other side of the disagreement, is it true that the religious believer lacks reasons to rely on techniques like radiometric dating and the testimony of geologists and scientists in this regard? Lynch says that the believer does not deny the reliability of such methods, but that what they deny is that this is the most reliable method for forming beliefs about the distant past – in this case, they take the Holy Book to have priority (Lynch 2010: 267). But surely, we are owed an explanation for why such techniques which are otherwise reliable fail us here? If the believer denies that such an explanation is required, this begins to look more like dogmatism and irrationality. More plausibly, they might reason that although they are not able to explain it, there *must* be an explanation – as when they concede, in response to the problem of evil, that the divine purposes in allowing suffering to occur in the world transcend our

understanding. Again, this isn't particularly unique to these cases: when faced with the suggestion that someone we regard highly is not to be trusted, depending on how certain we are in our prior conviction, we might reason that there must be an explanation for this apparent evidence to the contrary, although we presently lack one. In such cases, the extent to which this kind of reasoning amounts to irrationality depends, among other things, on the strength of our reasons for our prior conviction.

3.4 No further reasons

The final suggestion is that when it comes to the infallibility of the Holy Book and the moral status of foetuses, we have arrived at the most fundamental level of commitment where the disagreeing parties believe what they do for no further reason. These commitments are fundamental not only because they justify a range of their beliefs on the basis of them, but because these are *basic* for them. What makes a commitment basic is that "the best epistemic reasons for them are epistemically circular" (Kappel 2012: 9-10). We have a deep disagreement when we disagree over commitments, such as epistemic principles, that are basic (Lynch 2010 and 2016; Kappel 2012).

It is important to distinguish this suggestion from the foundationalist idea that certain beliefs are epistemically basic or non-inferentially justified. In dealing with cases of disagreement, what we are interested in is not what reasons are actually good but in the reasons that the agents involved *take* to be good. Hence, basicness is an agent-relative notion: what might be basic for one agent might not be for another who has further, non-circular reasons to offer (Kappel 2012: 11-12).

However, as with the previous suggestion, all sorts of ordinary beliefs might be basic in this sense. For instance, there are many beliefs that we hold for which, when asked for a justification, we would not be able to provide one because we have forgotten the source of and the reasons

for the belief. I might think that *The Local* is a reliable newspaper, but not remember why I think so and yet continue to believe it, convinced that there was a good reason although I cannot remember it.

An objection to thinking of this belief as basic in the sense defined above is that even though I do not have any non-circular reasons at present, can I not at the very least, imagine all sorts of better reasons that *can* be given? Then it isn't the case that this is the *best* epistemic reason. Note that on this understanding of what makes a belief basic, all that is then needed to make a belief non-basic is being able to say what would count as a better or worse reason for the belief even if one does not have any such reason at present. However, if we interpret Kappel's definition of "basic" in this way, then even commitments like the infallibility of the Holy Book and the personhood of foetuses turn out not to be basic: as I argued in section 3.2, we do have a good idea of what would count as reasons for and against these claims and this is something that goes along with simply understanding what these claims amount to.

So, we have a dilemma: depending on how we understand Kappel's notion of "basic", either all sorts of commonplace beliefs turn out to be fundamental, and the disagreements we have over them deep, or neither these nor those beliefs involved in what are regarded as paradigmatic cases of deep disagreement are really basic. I hope the undesirability of taking the first horn is evident, for it amounts to taking something like a disagreement over whether *The Local* is reliable as a deep, and potentially irresolvable, disagreement if neither party can remember why they believe what they do! It is unclear then why deep disagreement poses a problem and merits philosophical consideration. Further, I am not aware of any alternative suggestion for what makes these commitments basic and so, we are owed an explanation for how the dilemma can be avoided. Hence, I do not think this strategy for distinguishing fundamental commitments from non-fundamental commitments works.

3.5 A concluding diagnosis

In this chapter, I considered a popular general strategy for distinguishing the fundamental level of one's commitments from one's surface beliefs – that the fundamental level marks the limits of one's reasons. I considered a few alternative ways in which the idea that reasons come to an end at the fundamental level has been understood and argued that none of them works. On the one hand, if the disagreement is to be genuine, the parties to the disagreement must have a shared conception of what counts as a good reason. On the other hand, if what makes a commitment fundamental is the fact that they only *presently* differ in or lack reasons, then all sorts of ordinary commitments turn out to be fundamental. So, this general strategy fails; if it were successful, then we would have an answer to what makes a disagreement deep, namely, when the subject of disagreement is fundamental. Hence, I conclude that the question of what distinguishes the subject of deep disagreements from any other disagreement remains unanswered.

Even though the two strategies I have discussed do not successfully demarcate the class of fundamental commitments, you might still have the conviction that there is something different about these disagreements that makes it appropriate to call them fundamental or deep. I can only offer one suggestion that might get to the heart of this conviction and show why it is both tempting and wrong. In ordinary life and in ordinary debates, we take a number of things for granted. Suppose I am expressing my beliefs regarding the President to someone, and then my interlocutor suddenly questions whether such a person even exists. Or suppose that we are walking around the natural history museum, learning much about our planet and history, and someone begins to protest that the earth is no more than 7000 years old. Undertaking any activity involves taking certain things for granted, and it can be unsettling if we discover that someone disputes what we are taking for granted – after all, putting these things in doubt undermines the activity we are engaged in. However, that is not to say that we cannot reason about them merely because we often take them for granted.

It is natural to say that the one disputing what we take for granted disagrees with us on a deeper level. But this does not make for a separate class of disagreement. All that has happened is a change of topic, perhaps a change to a topic that may be more difficult to reason about. From talking about dinosaurs, we might begin discussing the infallibility of the Holy Book. However, any difficulty in actually reasoning about the latter in the real world comes from our contingent, limited epistemic situation – we might not have enough evidence at the moment in order to decide the matter. But then I don't have enough evidence to decide whether my parents are presently at home or not. So, although it can appear quite natural to think of issues like the reliability of the Holy Book or the moral status of foetuses as fundamental, I do not think this makes disagreements over them of a different kind.

Conclusion

My plea in Chapter 1 was that we ought to raise critical questions concerning deep disagreement, just as has been done concerning peer disagreement. In this thesis, I asked: what makes a disagreement deep? The notion of the depth of a disagreement is even more obscure and ambiguous than that of a peer. To say that a disagreement is deep when the subject of the disagreement is fundamental is to push the obscurity back to the notion of a fundamental disagreement or a fundamental commitment. In Chapters 2 and 3, I investigated two broad strategies via which the notion of fundamentality has been treated and argued that neither is applicable in the paradigmatic cases of deep disagreement or that they fail to distinguish deep disagreements from a variety of commonplace disagreements.

Hence, I think we ought to abandon the very notion of deep disagreement as a term of art. The disagreements over abortion and the age of the earth are different in a number of ways, and while they certainly are both controversial issues today, I am sceptical that there is anything philosophically interesting about these cases and reject the idea that they are instances of the same supposed phenomenon of "deep disagreement". The current approach in the literature risks making the same mistake as the debate over peer disagreement, namely, treating what are probably quite different cases together in general terms. In ordinary life, we respond to disagreements on a case-by-case basis because they require sensitivity to a range of different factors that may be involved. And this is how we *should* discuss and respond to disagreements, both in philosophy and beyond.

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