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The Virtues (and Vices) of Contrarianism

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Abstract

We offer a theory of contrarians such as Socrates, Martin Luther, and Thoreau, and explain how contrarianism can function as an epistemic virtue. On our view, contrarians don't just dissent from orthodoxy, but from a specific ingroup, and in a specific domain. Contrarians must also have some independent perspective that animates their dissent rather than parroting others, and they must express their dissent publicly, which will often produce alienation or reprisals. Finally, contrarianism isn't bloodless inquiry; contrarians are animated by contempt for conformism and herd-behavior. The virtues of contrarianism include the ability to disrupt epistemic bubbles and echo-chambers that have formed among our ingroup, and contributing an adversarial element to our social epistemology, familiar from the legal system. But our account also has the resources to explain how contrarianism can spill over into a vice, since it is a trait like kindness or skepticism that requires judicious application.

Keywords: Contrarianism; conformity; dissent; epistemic virtue; groupthink; social epistemology

1. Introduction

Everyone loves a contrarian – as long as he's on our side, bravely skewering our political opponents and the causes we reject. Contrarians who disagree with us, on the other hand, are cranks and eccentrics who've lost their way. We instinctually feel that there is a role for gadflies like Socrates, or Martin Luther, or Thoreau, but we're contemptuous of teenage rebels who contradict everyone and everything. Conversely, most people think that echo-chambers and conformism are bad, and yet it's obvious that reasonable people should do a great deal of conforming, say to prevailing norms of politeness, and in their scientific and historical views that they are not expert in.[1]

We have two goals. The first is to describe a version of contrarianism that is worth talking about. This is harder than it may seem, since we need to distinguish our gadfly from other dissenters like the teenage rebel, on the one side, and from an ideal epistemic

[1]For recent work on the epistemology of conformism, see Mohseni and Williams (2021) and Weatherall and O'Connor (2021).

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agent on the other. This ideal, who always updates according to Bayes' theorem, who never succumbs to motivated reasoning, and who doesn't struggle with conformism, will presumably share many of the attractions of the contrarian. This means our theory of contrarianism will have to explain what's distinctive about him in a way that doesn't collapse either into the defects of the rebel or the advantages of the ideal. Our account focuses on four elements that we think capture an intuitively appealing trait that we find in figures like Socrates: dissent, independence, public expression, and a contempt for various forms of group-think.

Our second goal is to explain how contrarianism can be an epistemic virtue and when it spills over into a vice. To do this, we don't identify an Aristotelian mean and flanking extremes; instead, we try to explain how contrarianism can benefit us collectively and individually, and when it becomes a liability. Key features of our story are the role of the adversarial process in social contexts as varied as the Socratic elenchus and the legal system, and how contrarianism can serve as a bulwark against epistemic bubbles and echo-chambers. We also emphasize the role of contrarianism in developing our most distinctive and original ideas as individuals. Finally, we conclude by considering how contrarianism can go wrong. We can praise contrarians while accepting that we should have conventional views of the Moon landing. Overall, we aim to show that contrarianism has an important role to play in our intellectual flourishing, both individually and collectively.

2. Dissent

Literal contrarianism is just a tedious enthusiasm for contradiction, familiar from teenage rebels acting out to annoy their parents. This is not the virtue we wish to defend.

The teenage rebel: indiscriminately negates whatever other people are saying.

In literature, this attitude is represented by Milton's Satan, who says, "Evil, be thou my good," and there can be a superficial appeal to such characters. William Blake, for instance, finds Satan so attractive in virtue of his energetic defiance that he suggests that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Blake 1975). *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) conveys the appeal in a pop-culture format, and who doesn't want to strike a pose like James Dean? But the attraction soon wears thin. Hrishikesh Joshi points out that a pure contrarian is unlikely to be right very often, and even when he is, his views carry so little signal relative to noise that no one will (rationally) take him seriously (2021: 19).

This makes the teenage rebel of little value to the rest of us, but there's also the question of whether this kind of contrarianism is of value to the rebel. Hume notes that traits we denominate as virtues can have either personal or social value, or both (*Treatise* 3.3.1; cp. Kawall 2002). Without courage it's hard to lead a successful life, and you're also unlikely to be of much use to the rest of us. The teenage rebel isn't especially useful to the epistemic community for the reasons Joshi notes, but there's also reason to think the trait isn't much of a personal virtue. In Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017), the protagonist stages a harmless – indeed charming – series of rebellions, but these don't seem likely to inspire anything great later in life. Teenage rebellions are typically too inconstant and insubstantial to motivate great causes. Still, the rebel gets something right – he dissents. A contrarian must, of course, dissent from some views that he encounters; this is the first feature of the contrarian gadfly we wish to highlight. The problem with the rebel is that he is overdoing it.

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There are two refinements on the dissent condition. The first is that contrarian dissent in our sense is relative to some domain. You can be a contrarian about Impressionist art, or economics, or the Battle of Gettysburg, without being a contrarian about Hitler and the atomic theory of matter. Contrarians are likely to have a temperament open to dissent, but that temperament may be more or less focused. Contrarianism is not the same thing as generalized skepticism; indeed, it's easy to imagine religious dogmatists who are contrarians about some aspect of the dogma or about other matters, like foreign policy. This refinement helps explain where the rebel goes wrong. His dissent isn't narrowly focused on a particular domain, based on a special knowledge or competence; he just fires wildly in every direction.

Second, dissent only counts as contrarian in our sense when it is directed toward members of a group that the dissenter sees himself as a part of – an ingroup. I don't become a bold contrarian by denouncing some distant tribe I will never meet, when everyone I know agrees with me. Smug insiders who criticize their outgroup aren't gadflies. As a rough test, ideally, contrarianism should elicit a few shocked gasps, or at least raise an eyebrow. Contrast, for example, the French artist denouncing the bourgeoisie to his nodding peers, with a genuine contrarian pointing out the virtues of commerce to his fellow artists, who feel annoyed at this.

Sometimes the group relative to which you are a contrarian is obvious and easily identified, like a department, club, family, friend-group, or country. At other times, it will be harder to identify, as when I denounce a popular movie online. There can also be ambiguity when groups overlap. I may see myself as an artist and a Frenchman, and agree with my fellow artists about something most Frenchmen disagree with. If I direct my dissent to an audience of average Frenchmen, we may still judge this as contrarian. But complexity isn't a drawback. Often it's unclear or complicated whether someone is a contrarian, and the ingroup-condition helps us identify why things seem complicated. The important thing is not to pretend that it's contrarian of conservatives to denounce liberals to their fellow conservatives, or vice versa.

We suggest, then, thinking about contrarianism as a three-place relation between a person, a domain, and a group. It is like being tall rather than like having a certain (rest) mass. There may be reason to give special weight to certain domains and groups when dubbing someone contrarian, but contrarianism isn't, or shouldn't be, a trait that points in every direction. If your only contrary views concern the preparation of marinara sauce in your family, perhaps it would be odd to call you a contrarian full-stop, but that's just because the absence of qualification carries the implicature that you must be a contrarian about significant and salient matters.

3. Independence

Dissent alone is insufficient. The example of the teenage rebel points to the importance of having the right *grounds* for dissent, that automatic denials don't impress us. But neither does doing the opposite by parroting others. Consider the Thanksgiving Uncle who is obsessed with politics and spends all day on the internet. If the family leans left or right and the Uncle leans the other way, dinner may be full of contrarian diatribes that shock and outrage. There is a sense in which this is contrarian, of course, but suppose it turns out that the Uncle really has no independent opinions at all. He just parrots whatever his favorite internet personality says, flip-flopping from week to week with the latest politics, without critical reflection of his own. This isn't any better than the teenage

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rebel, glowering in the corner. We aim to articulate a virtue, and the Uncle doesn't seem to be exhibiting a virtue at all.

Both the rebel and the Uncle seem to be missing independently grounded beliefs. The parrot, like the rebel, simply reflects his environment (like a funhouse mirror, in the case of the rebel), rather than critically assessing and independently responding to it. If we know anything about how we should act as good epistemic agents, it's that we should think for ourselves, even if that sometimes means deferring to others after duly considered judgment, and for the right reasons (Zagzebski 2012: chs. 5, 11). Reflexively mimicking other people's judgments without consideration for whether they merit deference is of no value to us. Contrarians must, then, exhibit independence, in the sense that their views are the result of independent, critical reflection.

We can acknowledge that the Uncle may have Humean social value, if he brings new ideas to the Thanksgiving table that would otherwise be ignored. Even if he functions only as a kind of radio, amplifying other people's ideas, he could still play a useful role, even though he isn't adding to the stock of higher-order evidence available, since he hasn't done any assessing of his own (Kelly 2010). Whether he does play a useful role depends on the details, though. Amplifying misleading rumors isn't a social virtue, but amplifying probative new evidence is. And in any case, the Uncle remains defective as a personal ideal for contrarians to emulate.

The Uncle serves as a negative motivation for independence, but there is also a positive idea behind this requirement. We noted that contrarianism is usually relative to some domain, since a universal contrarian is likely to be a mere rebel or some kind of skeptic. But why be a contrarian about a particular domain, like foreign policy or *Star Wars*? Presumably because you have some independent perspective that motivates your views and that differs from the orthodox perspective. It's hard to see what else would generate domain-specific dissent besides a distinctive, independent point of view that resists conformism. Presumably, whatever has shaped the politics, aesthetics, or philosophy of our contrarian has endowed her with an outlook that isn't shared by those around her, and she isn't shy about voicing her independent stance.

4. Expression

To be a contrarian, your dissent must be expressed publicly. Martin Luther is a contrarian, in part, because he nailed his theses to the church door, not the inside of his closet. The same is true of Socrates, who pursued the elenchus in the public fora of Athens, not in a mystery cult. (Plato and Aristotle, by contrast, taught at a prudent distance from the city walls.) Perhaps publicity is already implicit in the notion of dissent, but just to be sure, we can consider

> *The secret contrarian*: radically dissents from his colleagues about matters of great importance, but smiles and nods his head in the relevant meetings. At home, he fills his journals full of ripostes he's afraid to voice out loud.

The secret dissenter is no contrarian in our sense (and perhaps not even a dissenter). Part of the significance of contrarianism, as we will argue, is that we are making a move within an epistemic community, which requires publicly participating in it.

The expressive condition runs deeper than ensuring publicity. An important feature of contrarianism is that it tends to be *alienating* in virtue of such public dissent, which is precisely what the secret "contrarian" hopes to avoid. This connection is, strictly

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speaking, a contingent one. We could get lucky. Socrates might have been treated like a victorious Olympic athlete, just as he (unwisely) proposes in the *Apology*, and the Church might have thanked Luther for his helpful suggestions. But the very fact that we are challenging an orthodoxy means that we are likely to seem difficult and disagreeable. Contrarians about bagels *may* keep their friends, but if the stakes are high, alienation is a real possibility. Contrarians must be willing to pay this price, to risk alienation, even if they do sometimes get lucky.

Why is alienation a likely outcome? Contrarians contradict us, which is vexing in itself, but they also disrupt group dynamics. It's hard to move on when non-consensus is made public. (Picture a meeting in which the chair asks, "So, we're agreed, then?" followed by, "Well, I'm not so sure . . . ".) Contrarianism tends to be inhibiting; contrarians frustrate progress, tell us to go back, thwart the hard work of the group. They may make positive suggestions, but since they're usually voices in the wilderness, they are more likely to come across as blocking consensus. This in turn activates defense-mechanisms, since dissent is often interpreted as norm-violating (Carruthers 2024; Joshi 2021). Sanctions can take the form of punitive emotions like anger and outrage, or social exclusion or even ostracism (Sripada and Stich 2012), all of which produce alienation. In a literary context, one thinks of Jane Austen's emphasis on amiability as a social virtue, and how difficult it is to come across as amiable when we are contradicting others, however politely. When he dissents, the contrarian becomes disagreeable, and joins outcasts like Dostoyevsky's Underground Man or Camus' Stranger, exiled from the comforts of the drawing room.

There is also the possibility of free-riding. Others may benefit from our contrarianism and leave us to take the backlash that follows, even if they share our doubts. Indeed, others besides the contrarian may share the contrarian's attitudes on the matter. This fact is often obscured by false expectations that everyone else in the group besides us believes the same thing or expects everyone else to believe it. Such expectations contribute to the phenomenon of "pluralistic ignorance," wherein groups conform to a norm or way of thinking because they falsely believe that everyone else believes it is the thing to think or do (Miller 2023). Even when others hold the same views as the contrarian, their unwillingness to express dissent may be explained by a reduced willingness to pay the cost of speaking up. While this difference between the contrarian and the free-rider might be explained by a greater sensitivity to the risks involved in dissent on the part of the free-rider (Bicchieri 2017: ch. 5), the contrarian's expression of dissent may also occur despite a clear-eyed assessment of the risks involved. In such a case, his expression of dissent might be best explained by the fact that he cares about getting to the truth more than he does ensuring his own well-being. This care may be informed by his specific investment in the question at hand, as well as what we describe in the following section as a form of contempt for groupthink.

5. Contempt

The last feature in our account is a certain kind of disgust or contempt, which we invoke despite negative connotations.[2] This emerges naturally from the contrarian observed, as it were, in his natural habitat:

[2]For recent philosophical work on contempt, see Mason (2018), especially Pakaluk's contribution on antiquity, though he perhaps soft-pedals Socrates' contempt (Pakaluk 2018: 23–26).

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> It is yet another faculty meeting. There is a dramatic proposal from the provost that could affect what is put on your syllabus and whom you prioritize in hiring. You are surprised and suspicious, yet everyone else just nods along. There are obvious counterarguments to the proposal, and thoughtful people have passionately argued against the proposal elsewhere. You judge that your colleagues' indifference isn't rooted in critical reflection, but in conformism, as evidenced by head-bobbing whenever certain familiar pieties are rehearsed, or when influential members murmur their approval.

A natural reaction here is mild contempt. Contempt is often thought to involve the judgment that people are beneath you, as in an aristocracy's contempt for the peasantry, but this should be broadened. You can feel contempt for people and their behavior when they don't meet your standards. (This is why we can feel contempt for ourselves.) For example, we can feel contempt for bullies who seek to raise their status by putting down the weak. This might initially occasion anger at the wrong committed, but we may also feel that there is something pitiful or disgusting about succumbing to such a base temptation. We can have contempt for a lazy student who could have done better but couldn't be bothered, or for unoriginal art that apes the real thing. As Nietzsche points out, "the hour of great contempt" can be ennobling, as when it means raising our standards and despising (in his scheme) complacent happiness over achievement (Nietzsche 2006, 1.3).

In the meeting, contempt seems warranted if we are right to judge that our colleagues are succumbing to temptation for reasons like conformism and group-think. These are epistemic vices, and if we notice them at all they likely won't meet our standards. The meeting case is trivial, of course, but we think the same basic attitude is visible in, say, Herman and Chomsky's contrarian attacks on foreign policy discourse, which they seem contemptuous of for the reasons sketched (1988: ch. 1). The connection to contrarianism, then, is that contrarians seem motivated by a contempt for epistemic vices of the majority like conformism and group-think. They feel called to intervene when they see this behavior, even when doing so creates conflict and risks alienation.

Moreover, some form of this contempt seems essential to contrarianism. A would-be contrarian who feels indifferent about the vignette above, who thinks nothing of herd-behavior and cheerfully nods along, doesn't seem contrarian at all. A core feature of contrarianism, on this proposal, is being sensitized to and appalled by failure to think for ourselves, the all-too-human tendency to avoid conflict by converging on the opinions of those around us. An important aspect of this sensitivity is being motivated to intervene, which contempt often but not always produces. Cynics and others who bear some resemblance to the contrarian may be content to observe from afar and shrug, but contrarians, gripped by the hot emotion of contempt, are pulled toward dissent.

Socrates' ideal of the gadfly provides an illustration. Someone who feels called to sting the sluggish majority (*Apology* 30e) or deliver an electric shock (*Meno* 80a; 2012b) is animated by more than the pursuit of truth. Part of what makes Socrates seem so funny, lively, and sometimes mean, is his righteous contempt for dogmatism. Think, for example, of his banter with Euthyphro, who represents the overconfident zealot (Plato 2012a). Ironic banter expresses contempt, not for Euthyphro as a person, but for his failure to appreciate his own ignorance. Something similar is present in Nietzsche, who frequently expresses contempt for the "democratic herd," for "Englishmen," and many others who fail to be originals. Both seem to revel in slapping convention in the face. Nor is this a generic feature of philosophy. For example, Henry Sidgwick and John Rawls put

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forth radical theories of morality and justice, but we would be hard-pressed to identify contempt (or humor or joy) in these writers. In describing Socrates and Nietzsche as contrarians, we are drawing attention to the fact that they seem preoccupied not just with identifying correct philosophical theories, but with piercing comfortable clichés, with stinging us out of complacency, which annoys and amuses them. Utilitarianism may be radical, but that doesn't make Sidgwick a contrarian or a gadfly, since he seems to lack the distinctive attitude of contempt.

6. Comparison to the epistemic ideal

A worry we might have at this stage is that whatever attractions the contrarian may possess are just side-effects of more fundamental epistemic traits. If it turns out that any good epistemic agent seeking the truth is a contrarian, then the concept would lack independent interest. Examples such as Sidgwick and Rawls should reassure us, since they don't seem very contrarian despite possessing many other epistemic virtues, but it's worth being more explicit.

Consider an ideal epistemic agent. There are of course different ways of characterizing this ideal, depending on our epistemology, and we don't want to pick sides. We also don't want to insist that this person possesses all of the epistemic virtues, since we argue below that contrarianism is itself a virtue. Take, then, intellectual exemplars such as John von Neumann or Aristotle and whatever we think made them ideals, apart from contrarianism. Bayesians might emphasize correctly updating on new evidence, but others might focus on traits like curiosity or wisdom or the absence of motivated reasoning.[3] The worry can then be expressed by asking whether an otherwise epistemically ideal agent who isn't contrarian to begin with will end up as a contrarian as a mere side-effect of all his other traits.

But on reflection, the answer to this seems to be No. Certainly the epistemic ideal will occasionally dissent, and will possess a limited form of independence; he won't just parrot what's on the internet. But it's less clear that the ideal need have the kinds of convictions we associated with independence above. Contrarians are typically invested in their theories of *Star Wars* or foreign policy – they may even be fanatical – but the ideal need not follow suit. Detached neutrality seems permissible for someone exemplifying epistemic ideals, again, setting aside the virtues of contrarianism. And it certainly seems possible for the epistemic ideal not to express dissent and risk alienation. John von Neumann may just sit through the faculty meeting in detached silence. The most important difference, though, lies in the contempt condition. The whole point of contrarianism is to be allergic to herd-behavior and feel motivated to sting and shock. But none of this is required, as far as we can tell, by epistemic canons related to the bare pursuit of truth, or being curious. Nothing in Bayes' theorem entails such contempt.

This may seem inconsistent with our upcoming claim that contrarianism is a virtue. If it's such a great trait, how can it be optional? But we only mean that contrarianism isn't entailed or caused by possessing other obvious epistemic virtues. It stands on its own two feet and merits independent assessment. And we do, in fact, think that people are improved by contrarianism, with the caveat that costs like alienation mean we need not always express the virtue, and that our personalities and circumstances may affect its value. (Desert-island contrarianism isn't so valuable, nor is being the 1000th contrarian at the meeting.)

[3]For a survey of different views of epistemic traits and their value, see Lockie (2019).

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7. Social virtues of contrarianism

Being contrarian isn't epistemically neutral, like being six feet tall, or bad, like being lazy. It is a virtue that belongs to a class that includes being wise, skeptical, curious, profound, original, or learned.

Since our theme is contrarianism and not epistemology, we won't enter into controversies surrounding the epistemic virtues.[4] Nothing hangs on whether we label the beneficial traits we describe below as "epistemic virtues" or "epistemic virtues*," if we wish to define those terms narrowly. However, we will take a fairly broad view of the relevant benefits. Obviously, we are interested in traits that promote true belief and avoid error, but we also regard traits such as creativity and originality as broadly epistemic virtues, since they are traits we admire that promote our epistemic ends and our epistemic flourishing (cp. Kieran 2019: 170).

Two more caveats are in order. First, as we understand them, these traits are only positive other things equal, when deployed felicitously. To explain this, notice that moral and epistemic traits seem to come in grades of commendation. Some, such as being just or wise, come with built-in commendation, so that it's quite hard if not impossible to go wrong (morally or epistemically) by being just or wise. Saying someone acted justly but wrongly has an air of paradox, though perhaps a consequentialist could bring himself to say this.[5] Middle-grade traits, by contrast, have a favorable connotation, but only other things being equal, on the assumption that the traits are deployed felicitously. These are concepts like being kind or persistent, which are generally good, but can go wrong pretty easily, as when we're kind to scammers or persist in rationalizing. Lowest-grade traits carry little or no commendation relative to what we consider normal, like being capable of human interaction.

Contrarianism is a middle-grade trait in this schema, such as curiosity or skepticism. These are all like being tall or talented in basketball, which are generally positive – but not if you block your own team's shots! We only defend contrarianism as a virtue when it is deployed felicitously. The fact that it can be used infelicitously is what makes it capable of spilling over into a vice, as we discuss below.

Second, as we noted above in connection with Hume, epistemic traits admit of both personal and social analyses and differ in interesting ways along those dimensions. Being skeptical may benefit individuals in a way it doesn't benefit the epistemic commons, or at least there might be distributive effects we need to reckon with. Perhaps all of us would benefit most as individuals by being very skeptical, but perhaps the collective ideal is a lot of conformists spurred on by a few doubters. The one ideal doesn't imply the other, which has perhaps been insufficiently noted (Kawall 2002).

With that in mind, we begin with the social dimension. The core social benefit of contrarianism, we propose, lies in its contribution to adversarial systems of epistemology. Consider a few examples of adversarial systems. Philosophers will think of the Socratic elenchus, typified in dialogues like *Euthyphro*, in which views are systematically examined by sharpening them into theses that are then refuted by counter-arguments, yielding improved versions, often leading to a more fundamental refutation (Irwin 1995: ch. 2; Vlastos 1991: ch. 4). Although these dialogues are sometimes said to be aporetic, it is plausible that major insights are produced by this method – for instance those

[4]For discussion of some of the issues described below, see Zagzebski (1996: ch. 4); Alston (2005: ch. 2); Baehr (2011: ch. 6); Kieran (2019: 167–77); and Cassam (2021).

[5]This was central to Anscombe's famous criticism of consequentialism (1958). The basic idea goes back to Charles Stevenson (1937).

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embodied in the Euthyphro question – and that the driving force behind it is an adversarial approach, in which the parties to the dialogue take opposing sides and work to sustain or refute a thesis. We benefit collectively from the adversarial interaction by coming to see, e.g., that the viability of a religious approach to morality depends on clarifying the direction of explanation between religious and moral truth.

In the law, most advanced societies use some kind of adversarial mechanism in order to arrive at the truth, often by a division of epistemic labor between prosecution, defense, and a neutral arbitrator (Landsman 1984). This approach is not without its problems, and we don't mean to suggest that adversarial approaches are always better, or that there are no drawbacks, just as there can be epistemic drawbacks to skepticism and learnedness. The fact that the adversarial legal system is so widespread, though, suggests that it solves an important problem.[6] Before identifying that problem, notice that we find analogous adversarial systems in such far-flung arenas as the military, software development, and academic research. The adversarial system isn't a quirk of legal pugilism. The military uses Red Teams to role-play enemies in war games, often with surprising results that upset expectations about how conflict would play out (Zenko 2015: ch. 2). White Hat hackers try to find software vulnerabilities (Zenko 2015: ch. 5). In academia, there is an emerging paradigm of adversarial collaboration, in which skeptics and proponents of a thesis work together to test one another's models, often to address ideological bias in fields like psychology (Clark and Tetlock 2023).

In all these cases, we might wonder why adversariality is necessary. Call the person advancing the legal claims, or military plans, or software the "original party," and those challenging them the "adversary." What does the adversarial approach add over and above just having the original party do their best and check their work twice? Part of the answer seems to be the complexity of motivation. Original parties certainly want their war-plans or software to work, but they may not be *as* motivated as an adversary. This can be true if adversaries stand to gain more from finding errors than the original parties do from avoiding them. Software companies may punish coding errors less harshly than they reward hackers, or coders may move on before errors are discovered, or punishment may be diluted by collective responsibility, or insurance may introduce moral hazard. More subtly, the very division of labor whereby it's your *job* to uncover evidence for not-p can have a significant effect. But perhaps the most important factor is that groups build up biases that disincentivize dissent. This can go beyond general discomfort with challenging majority opinion. Once the brass decides on The Plan, it becomes difficult for underlings to question it. No one wants to tell management they made the wrong decision, conformism is rewarded, dissent is often punished, if only by having to start over. It requires outsiders with independent motivation, and often financing, to push for alternatives. (Academics may wish to consider how often they have told the Dean that her strategic plan was a huge mistake.)

How do these examples connect with contrarianism? The idea is that contrarianism yields the benefits of adversarial systems, even when they aren't institutionalized the way the legal system is. A gadfly is useful in a faculty meeting or in the State Department because having something like a Red Team test and challenge prevailing wisdom of the group is much more likely to find mistakes than just hoping the group itself is motivated and honest enough to find them. Of course, if contrarianism were just teenage rebellion

[6]In our generic sense of "adversarial," both common law systems like the British and American, and inquisitorial systems like the French, are adversarial, since the latter still involves specialized functionaries whose job is to prove or rebut the charges.

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this wouldn't hold true. But as we've characterized the contrarian, he's well-positioned to play the role of Socratic gadfly or of White Hat. The contempt of the contrarian complements the motivational deficiencies that tend to plague groups that have fallen into conformity or complacency, and expressing their independent views means that they can help surface assumptions that have gone unchallenged. If nothing else, they can remind us why we disagree with them. JS Mill warns of the complacency of unchallenged dogmatism as a ground for free speech, and contrarianism plays a similar role (1859: 38–39).

We can be more specific. Contrarians can help with filter bubbles and with echo chambers, two of the biggest epistemic challenges of the internet age. An epistemic bubble can be described as a "structure in which some relevant voices have been excluded through omission," while in echo-chambers "other relevant voices have been actively discredited" (Nguyen 2020: 142; cp. Jamieson and Cappella 2008). Both involve belief polarization, in which groups with divergent and often increasingly extreme beliefs form isolated epistemic communities with little moderating influence.

Echo chambers are especially interesting in C. Thi Nguyen's thoughtful analysis. Examples include cults or far left- or right-wing political discourse, in which mere exposure to alternative ideas is not enough, because the echo chamber contains self-reinforcing defense mechanisms. The normal correctives for bubbles don't work in these structures, since outsiders have been preemptively discredited as "part of the system" or otherwise corrupt. And they may even backfire, since attempts at intervention may be registered as attacks that call for circling the wagons (Nguyen 2020: 147). (The cult-leader gives an impassioned speech to be vigilant; MSNBC or Fox News hosts warn against "bad" platforms featuring heretical views.)

It may even be worse than this. Some philosophers have argued that belief polarization can be rational, however tragic. This might be true if bubbles and echo chambers arise from path-dependent features of our starting position and of our networks (Baumgaertner and Justwan 2022; Kelly 2008). On this view, small initial differences in our belief-states, network effects influencing how we get our evidence, along with greater openness to those who share our views, can be enough to generate the problem. In a variation on this theme, echo chambers arise from demoting those who disagree with us to sub-epistemic-peer status, and then discounting their evidence (Begby 2024). In fact, "seeking the bulwark of this echo chamber might be crucial to shielding us from misinformation and deception" (Begby 2024: 535). If you turn on Channel 6 and everyone is spouting nonsense, naturally you tune out, but iteration may lead you to a (rational) echo chamber.

In this context, the advantage of contrarianism is that it usually involves epistemic *insiders* issuing *narrow* dissent. By "insiders," we mean members of the group being criticized – the Church, the academy, Yankees-fans. Recall that we described contrarians as contrarian relative to some ingroup. (It's not contrarian to criticize the Chinese Communist Party in the White House.) This means that contrarians come with insider status that makes it hard, though not impossible, to dismiss them. We're more likely to disrupt a bubble or echo chamber from within the walls, since we haven't yet been discredited as outsiders. One reason for this is that being an insider means you can sincerely espouse the core values and beliefs of the group, and join in deriding the outgroup, while smuggling in, as it were, ideas that haven't gotten a fair hearing. This is crucial because it means that insiders can maintain the epistemic trust accruing to insiders; they need not go over to the enemy camp in order to introduce ideas that might otherwise arouse suspicion. A contrarian can function as the loyal opposition, or even as a kind of benign Trojan horse.

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Insiders are also less likely to issue wide dissent that criticizes all or many features of the relevant group, which again makes them harder to dismiss. You are unlikely to belong to the group you are dissenting from if you have comprehensive disagreements with it. It's possible to reject everything about Catholicism as a Cardinal, but unlikely. It's more likely that you disagree about some narrower features that require internal reform. Running into a contrarian isn't like turning on Channel 6 and hearing a comprehensively confused worldview; it's more like running into an otherwise-trusted colleague who disagrees about "this one thing." This makes it harder to demote the contrarian to sub-peer status on grounds of being generally unreliable.

Finally, recall the discussion of pluralistic ignorance from section 4. In many epistemic environments, there will be individuals who disagree with the beliefs espoused by the group at large, but who refrain from voicing these beliefs for fear that they are the only ones who hold them and may therefore face considerable sanctions for their dissent (Miller 2023). The contrarian, by giving voice to these beliefs, lowers the threshold for other individuals to come forward and express their own dissenting opinions. He does this by challenging two crucial expectations in the broader epistemic community (Bicchieri 2017). First, he challenges the empirical expectations in the community: these are expectations that individuals have about what others in the community will do, or in the epistemic context, what they will believe.[7] Second, he challenges the normative expectations in the community: these are expectations about what others in the community believe others should do or believe. By expressing dissent, the contrarian demonstrates that there may be substantive disagreement in the community about the relevant topic and challenges the normative expectation that others should not dissent. While this alone is insufficient for epistemic change in the broader community, it has the potential to change the epistemic context into one in which people are more comfortable expressing dissenting opinions.

This account fits canonical contrarians who have been effective in disrupting what were arguably echo chambers. Martin Luther began as an internal reformer, not as a critic from outside the church. Socrates was a lifelong Athenian calling out his hometown's defects. Of course, contrarians won't stay insiders for long once they express their views and become alienated or literally excommunicated. But at least to begin with, they carry credibility since they emerge from within, and yet bring an outside-perspective. The fact of the Reformation is a testament to how effective this can be even in a tightly controlled, hierarchical religious setting. Modern examples include contrarians of the political left smuggling in right-leaning ideas about the dangers of overregulation, or of the political right, incorporating left-leaning ideas about government support for families.[8]

8. Individual virtues

Next, we turn to individuals. It's important not to confuse the moral virtues contrarians may display, like courage, with genuinely epistemic virtues, however broadly conceived. In fact, it may seem obscure why contrarianism would be particularly useful for

[7]Since Bicchieri's framework treats empirical expectations as expectations about what people will *do*, based on the evidence they observe, it may be most natural to gloss the empirical expectations involved in epistemic contexts as expectations about which beliefs people will avow.

[8]See recent debates within the American left concerning housing and environmental regulation (Klein and Thompson 2025), and within the right, concerning child-support subsidies (Miller 2025).

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promoting the agent's own epistemic good. Why would dissenting from groupthink, however noble, be helpful to the dissenter?

We think the answer is that contrarianism can benefit individuals by directing them toward more original and impactful ideas. This benefit isn't directly truth-related, but is widely acknowledged to be important, as in Frost's maxim of taking the road less traveled by. We interpret this to mean pursuing unpopular or neglected ideas that have been passed over by the group without receiving their due, and which are therefore more likely to turn out to be distinctive and original, and to make an impact, as measured by their influence on others. Of course, sometimes the road less traveled goes off a cliff, and we must weigh risks and rewards appropriately, but contrarianism does seem to position us to reap the benefits when they are available.

To make money as an investor, you need to find assets the market has mispriced; it's not enough to find assets whose value is widely known and therefore priced-in. We take something similar to be true in the realm of ideas. Truth alone is not enough to fix our aims as epistemic agents. Consider the difference between adding another (true) digit to pi versus working (accurately) on a new branch of mathematics; or writing the 1000th paper on a familiar theme in philosophy versus exploring an idea long-dismissed but defensible. Our point is not that the latter strategy is always correct under conditions of uncertainty. Contrarianism, like skepticism, must be deployed judiciously and not at random. But sometimes skepticism is warranted, and it's then valuable to possess that virtue, and the same goes for contrarianism.

We might wonder why we can't obtain these benefits simply by being original, without contempt, alienation, and the rest. Another New Englander, Thoreau, urges us to "Be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought" (1854: 300), but why can't we do that in silence at our pond? However, the very example of Thoreau shows why. A certain contempt for the herd sensitized Thoreau to the pitfalls of the "common sense" of his time, which included support for slavery that he resisted in the Underground Railroad. And publishing his thoughts, for example, defending John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry, constituted expression of his dissent, inevitably followed by alienation, even from friends like Emerson, whose eulogy dismisses him as "captain of the huckleberry party." It's hard to see how he could have attained the status of classic, which we take to be a result of developing the best, most original ideas he had, without contrarianism. If creating *Walden* counts as intellectual flourishing, then contrarianism seems like a plausible contributor.

Or consider scientists pursuing contrarian approaches, say Peter Mitchell's unpopular insistence that the ATP energy molecule was produced by chemiosmosis, facilitated by a molecular machine (Prebble 2013). You can have original scientific ideas without being contrarian, and we don't want to attribute detailed motivation to someone whose biography isn't available to us. But absent a little contrarianism, it doesn't seem easy to feel the attraction of an unpopular research program, pursue it for years while being derided by rivals, all the while maintaining a chart of when they capitulate ("Mitchell's ideas were ignored, regarded with hostility, dismissed as mildly insane"; "Mitchell even maintained a chart showing the dates when his rivals 'converted', to their fury," Lane 2005: 130, 134).

We should emphasize that even in a scientific case, the benefits of contrarianism aren't alethic. The mathematician adding another digit to pi and Mitchell explaining the fundamental nature of the cell both have true beliefs. If all we want are true beliefs, we can just keep adding digits to pi. What contrarianism is adding when it prompts us to

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"think different" are goods like originality and impact – finding the most distinctive and interesting contributions we have to make. We can't pursue this point in detail, but what this suggests is that we want our epistemic endeavors to involve not only the pursuit of truth, but of truths that *matter* (cp. Piller 2009: 415).

There is another way in which truth need not be at stake in contrarianism. So far, we have stressed contrarianism in propositional domains, but sometimes it is natural to describe non-propositional work in the arts as contrarian as well. Consider an impressionist painter confronted with rigid orthodoxies of the French Académie and a never-ending series of conformist paintings observing them. An original is likely to develop contempt for this pattern and seek out exciting, new techniques to challenge it. This will then have a contrarian flavor when he sets up an exhibition (despised by academic critics), even though he isn't engaged in literal dissent. We can, if we like, imagine our artist articulating his disagreements propositionally, but we propose allowing the exhibition itself to count as dissent in a slightly extended sense.

On the other hand, we must preserve the ingroup aspect of contrarianism. If the exhibit is only open to fawning dissident-artists who nod along, there will be nothing contrarian about it. Contrarian art must be directed toward an ingroup that rejects it, and yet one the artist still sees himself as a part of – perhaps art lovers in general. Ideally, the audience will then greet the work with cries of hate, which is the measure of contrarian success. Examples include Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which prompted jeering, tumult, and scathing reviews at its premiere, and Bach's organ music, which produced complaints and disciplinary action from church authorities.

9. Vices

We think that we have described a familiar trait, recognizable at a small scale in faculty meetings and family dinners and famous in Martin Luther and Thoreau, and we have argued that this trait is a virtue when aptly deployed. But we recognize that contrarianism and various traits in the neighborhood can go wrong. In this, contrarianism is like kindness or skepticism or persistence, which can become liabilities when misused.

We can divide problems with contrarianism and nearby traits into quantitative and qualitative dimensions. The quantitative problems emerge when we consider that all of us should be doing a great deal of conforming. At any given moment, the odds that we should be going with the flow are high. On the whole, we should enter through the door and not the window, we should accept the findings of scientific experts, we should assume Shakespeare was good at poetry. Clearly, then, we can fail as contrarians by overdoing it. If we're dissenting everywhere all the time, something has gone wrong. Likely causes include indulging the thrill of contradicting others, especially if we have status or power, striving to impress, or lacking humility.

These are examples of individuals going awry, but there are also social vices of contrarianism. Sometimes, there are simply too many contrarians in the group, even if each is acting appropriately. Groups cannot function if skeptics and contrarians impede all progress by constantly questioning everything and denying all the premises of group action. We should admit that the marginal value of an additional contrarian in the group may go negative at some point, just as having a board of directors who are all very kind is unwise.

Contrarianism can go wrong qualitatively as well. Directing our dissent toward the wrong group at the wrong time is an example. Contradicting the eulogy at a funeral, which involved harmless generalizations about Nanna, would not be a heroic display of

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virtue. It's not that this isn't genuine dissent from an ingroup, we may assume, but this isn't the right occasion, like applying persistence and originality to rationalizing.

A more serious mistake involves directing our dissent toward an outgroup rather than our ingroup. We've argued that denouncing your outgroup to applause shouldn't be considered contrarian at all, but there is a flaw or temptation in the neighborhood that contrarians should worry about all the same, and a common trajectory is worth detailing by way of conclusion.

The general pattern is that our in- and out-groups change over time, but we continue dissenting from what is now an outgroup, while imagining that we remain contrarians, with all that that entails. Take a rock band – Rage Against the System, say – that begins in the garage, denouncing the suburban wasteland of their parents and neighbors whom they still see themselves as grouped with and alienated from. Years later, they are successful millionaires at the center of a media empire. If anyone is the establishment, it's them. But they still direct their rage at some distant enemy they no longer have anything to fear from or identify with, while shamelessly indulging the worst impulses of their audience, which has become their ingroup. They have, in effect, become poseurs. Something similar happens to politicians who ascend as student protesters fighting the power of some group they are a part of (their school, their city), but once they are in office they dissent only from the opposing party, which may be to the good, but isn't contrarian.

We think there is a real danger here. At some point, we need to turn in the leather jacket for the sweater vest. Refusing to accept that we're no longer the bold contrarians we style ourselves – a painful epiphany, to be sure – can be disastrous. Accepting that we are part of the establishment and all of the dreary, dull responsibility that may entail is an important part of society functioning coherently. If congressmen, deans, and editors see themselves as rebels rather than establishment leaders whom *others* should be dissenting from, then they are unlikely to promote establishment policies. These leaders should work on things like defending the status quo, explaining why it's good, forging consensus, and making embarrassing compromises, but these aren't things contrarian rebels like to work on. Contrarianism, like skepticism, tends to be inhibiting rather than enabling, but responsible leadership should usually do a lot of enabling. A great deal of what Socrates, Martin Luther, Thoreau, and the Impressionists did was to give the middle finger, so to speak, to the establishment, but that is not how establishment leaders should behave, and someone needs to be the establishment! If this sounds inconsistent with our earlier praise of contrarians, we should remember that the contrarian need not be *you*, with the consolation that we can always be contrarians in other domains in which we are better suited to that role.

Our core idea, then, is not that everyone should be a contrarian constantly raging against the system. On the contrary, if we do, we'll likely end up as poseurs. It is rather that contrarianism, properly understood, is an overlooked virtue for both groups and individuals, but we need to think quite carefully about how to wield it wisely.

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