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ARTICLE

The Epistemic Significance of Mind-Changing

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Abstract

Is it ever rational to change your mind based on learning that others have changed theirs? This paper answers affirmatively and explores the conditions under which learning about others' mind-changes should prompt you to reconsider your own. I propose that learning about others' shifts in belief can motivate further inquiry, provide information about the existence or quality of first-order evidence, and recalibrate our evaluation of the issues at stake. However, not all changes of mind are epistemically meaningful: some may be superficial, misleading, or driven by non-epistemic factors. Critical evaluation is necessary for distinguishing between cases that provide genuine insight and those that are irrelevant. By investigating these dynamics, I aim to illuminate the broader epistemological significance of mind-changing and its implications for navigating complex and contentious issues.

Keywords: Mind-changing; changes of mind; higher-order evidence; deference; intellectual virtue; belief revision; disagreement; testimony; conversion

> "What I believe" is a process rather than a finality. Finalities are for gods and governments, not for the human intellect.
>
> – Emma Goldman, "What I Believe"

1. Introduction

Is it ever rational to change your mind on the basis of others changing theirs? To start to motivate an affirmative answer, consider the following scenario. Imagine you and I are engaged in a heated dispute about whether pragmatism is a fruitful methodological approach. I'm against it; you're for it. You ask me why I oppose it. I explain that I find it superficial and unsystematic, lacking sturdy theoretical underpinnings. In response, you reveal that you can empathize: you used to think the same way! You've since changed your mind, newly convinced that those criticisms were misguided and mistaken. Even further, you judge that pragmatism is one of the most impactful intellectual developments since Hume.

Your report disarms me. Previously, your arguments in favor of pragmatism fell flat. But when I learn of our shared sympathies – or rather, antipathies – this overlap in our

intellectual biographies gives me pause. I start to worry that I may have been overly dogmatic or myopic. I begin to assess your reasons in a new light, newly open to the idea that I may be missing something.

But what is the epistemic significance of learning that you used to think the way I do? Why does this discovery act as a catalyst for me to reconsider? Moreover, should it? After all, I haven't acquired any new evidence or reasons in favor of pragmatism. All I learned is that you used to reject it, too.

Unfortunately, the epistemic significance of mind-changes is a surprisingly neglected topic within contemporary philosophy. While belief revision is central to our intellectual lives, discussions about when and why changes of mind carry epistemic weight remain sparse. Although philosophers have extensively analyzed the epistemic significance of disagreement, they have largely overlooked the value of learning about changes of mind. We might speculatively suggest both theoretical and psychological explanations for this neglect. Theoretically, epistemologists have focused on norms governing ideal epistemic agents. Yet the need to revise our beliefs already exposes an epistemic flaw. Psychologically, changes of mind serve as quiet reminders of the rift between how we think and how we aspire to think. Changing your mind typically requires admitting you were wrong. Few people, least of all philosophers, like to do that.

This modern oversight contrasts sharply with the historical attention paid to mind-changing in certain philosophical contexts. Figures like Joseph Butler, George Berkeley, and William James emphasized the epistemic value of conversion, particularly when such changes were made under adverse conditions. For example, Butler contends that the widespread conversion to Christianity among alleged witnesses of Christ's miracles, despite the difficulties this choice entailed, lends credence to the authenticity of those miraculous events (Butler 1897, 269–70). Similarly, Berkeley rhetorically asked, "If the finger of God and the force of truth converted both the one and the other from Judaism or gentileism, in spite of their prejudices to Christianity, is not their testimony so much the stronger?" (Berkeley 1732, 307). James held that conversion often involves a radical reorganization of one's intellectual and emotional commitments, driven by a perceived encounter with deeper truths. These philosophers argued that belief revisions, particularly in challenging circumstances, could serve as evidence for the strength or truth of the adopted view.

Beyond religious contexts, patterns of philosophical conversion have also attracted attention. The Academic skeptic Arcesilaus was once asked, "Why it was that pupils from all the other schools went over to Epicurus, but converts were never made from the Epicureans?" Behind the question lies an implicit challenge: Why should we become skeptics when all the skeptics become Epicureans? The query implies that patterns of belief migration demand explanation, the absence of which supports Epicureanism. Arcesilaus's caustic retort, "because men may become eunuchs, but a eunuch never becomes a man" (Laertius 1925) sought to answer the challenge. Yet, the underlying intuition remains: without such an unflattering explanation, these asymmetric conversion patterns appeared epistemically significant.

To today's largely secular (and regrettably non-Epicurean) readers, I hope there is some intuitive pull to the idea that witnessing others change their minds can seem epistemically significant. (If there's not, I'll attempt to convert you!) At the same time, there's something puzzling about using others' mind-changes as a guide to the truth. Most forcefully, the fact that someone else changed their mind doesn't seem to grant you any new *evidence* for or against the contending views. So, why would it bear on what you should believe?

This motivates a puzzle about why changes of mind should matter epistemically. On the one hand, learning that others have changed their minds exerts pressure on us to

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reconsider our beliefs. On the other hand, this discovery doesn't obviously provide new reasons or direct support for the revised position. To make matters more complicated, not all changes of mind are epistemically meaningful. Some reflect laziness, dogmatism, or self-interest, rather than genuine learning or insight. Moreover, shifters have admitted to being wrong before; why trust their judgment now?

This paper aims to resolve this puzzle by explaining when and why we should take others' change of mind seriously. While changes of mind don't provide direct first-order evidence in favor of a view, they can reveal valuable information about the evidential landscape and our epistemic position. In my proposal, learning that others changed their minds can provide us with three valuable epistemic resources: (1) higher-order evidence about our comparative reliability in evaluating the available reasons; (2) reasons to investigate further and approach the issue with renewed open-mindedness; and (3) evidence that there is more evidence out there that we haven't yet encountered or properly assessed. However, apparent changes of mind shouldn't always move you. Mind-changes should have little or no weight, at least when they are inauthentic or explained by non-epistemic factors, such as social pressure or opportunism.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines interpersonal exchanges, where we directly learn that someone has changed their mind. It argues that such mind-changers are plausibly epistemic *superiors*, given the close connections between changing one's mind and various forms of epistemic improvement. Section 3 extends this analysis to cases where we learn about changes of mind at a distance, highlighting the distinctive interpretive challenges such cases raise. Section 4 develops a framework for assessing when changes of mind are epistemically significant, focusing on the genuineness of the shift and its underlying motivations. Section 5 reflects on the practical implications of mind-change evidence and outlines avenues for further work. By developing a nuanced account of mind-changing as evidence, we can improve our ability to navigate complex and contentious issues.

2. Interpersonal cases

This section begins by introducing pairs of cases designed to illustrate the intuitive value of learning about others' belief trajectories. I then develop a framework for diagnosing such cases, aiming to clarify the epistemic significance of mind-changes – even for more skeptical readers.

2.1. Cases

To better motivate the epistemic significance of mind-changing, let's consider a minimal pair involving disagreement. Return to the pragmatist dispute we started with, and compare two ways it could have developed:

> **Pragmatist Dispute:** Alex and Brisa disagree about whether pragmatism is a fruitful philosophical approach. Alex thinks yes, Brisa no.
>
> **Case 1.** In the first case, Alex and Brisa have always disagreed. Neither has ever believed the opposite of what each currently thinks.
>
> **Case 2.** In the second case, Alex and Brisa still disagree. However, Alex used to share Brisa's current judgment; he's since changed his mind. In other words, Alex's past self and Brisa's present self concur.

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More schematically, compare the following pair of cases:[1]

> **Case 1:** Static Disagreement. A and B disagree about whether p: A believes p, B believes $\neg p$. Neither has ever believed the opposite.

> **Case 2:** Dynamic Disagreement. A and B disagree about whether p: A believes p, B believes $\neg p$. However, A used to believe $\neg p$ too, but has since changed their mind.

These cases are structurally similar – both involve ongoing disagreement – but differ critically in their belief trajectory. In Case 2, unlike Case 1, one party has changed their mind.

This difference in history matters epistemically. Ceteris paribus, Brisa should feel more pressure to reconsider her belief upon discovering she's in Case 2 rather than Case 1. At the very least, I can report that I would – and many others share this intuition. Whether this judgment should ultimately be endorsed depends on further details, including the interlocutor, the strength of one's independent evidence, and the nature of the shift. But all else equal, learning that someone has changed their mind seems to exert both psychological and epistemic force. Even if she maintains her belief, Brisa has a legitimate reason to worry that she's missed something important.

The relevance of mind-changes extends to practical disagreements as well. Consider a value-based case:

> **Value Dispute:** Alicia and Bella disagree about whether family or friendship is more important. As a result, they also disagree about practical matters, such as whether Bella should visit her family over the summer.

> **Case 1.** In the first version, Alicia has always prioritized family. She tells Bella, "It's interesting you think that way! I've always believed family matters most," revealing that Bella's priorities appear foreign.

> **Case 2.** In the second version, Alicia claims she can empathize, explaining: "I used to think that way too. But as you get older, you start to realize the true value of family . . . "

Intuitively, Alicia's change of mind will have more persuasive force than her steady-state conviction. If I were Bella, I would be more inclined to take Alicia more seriously in the second case than in the first. But why? The question becomes more urgent when we recognize that, in both cases, Alicia currently holds the same view. The difference lies solely in the history of her belief.

The idea that others' intellectual biographies matter to us is familiar from everyday life. When someone offers advice you're reluctant to follow, discovering that they once shared your doubts can make their counsel more compelling. A woman hesitant to try strength training may be reassured to learn that others shared her concerns about "bulking up" but revised their views in light of experience and research. A student wary of taking on extracurricular commitments, fearing disrupting their studies, might be more receptive to a mentor's advice upon finding out the mentor overcame similar skepticism. A scholar unsure whether reading beyond their area is worthwhile may be

[1]I'm grateful to Rachel Fraser for suggesting this set of minimal pairs.

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influenced by learning that others once shared that skepticism, but later came to appreciate the value of broader engagement. In each case, what lends the advice additional force is not just its substance, but the biographical arc behind it.

But why does this pressure arise? What exactly do we learn when we learn that others changed their minds?

2.2. Understanding changes of mind

To understand why others' changes of mind can be epistemically significant, we must first clarify what constitutes a genuine change of mind in the first place. Just as losing knowledge is not necessarily forgetting, not all changes in belief count as changes of mind. As Daniel Dennett puts it, "Losing is not discarding, and forgetting is not changing one's mind, but it is a way of divesting oneself of an opinion" (Dennett 2017, 308). Clarifying what it means to change your mind is important, for my central claim is that changes of *mind* – not just any belief-change – can be epistemically significant.

Following Annette Baier, Dennett emphasizes that a change of mind is a particular kind of cognitive transition, involving reflective self-correction. Bumping your head may alter your beliefs, but it doesn't amount to changing your mind. Genuine mind-changes require the exercise of agency in revising one's judgment. Following Baier, we can say that a "change of mind… is a matter of having second thoughts which are revised judgments, revised to correct faults of judgment" (Baier 1979, 168). The central idea is that a change of mind is a kind of double-check on our beliefs, designed to fix previous faults and failures: "what *we* judge *two* times is sound" (Baier 1979, 168).

This account partly explains the significance of learning about changes of mind. When we change our minds, we typically bring to bear all the initial considerations and then some. We fix errors in our previous reasoning and adjust in light of new information. In other words, there is a close connection between changes of mind and epistemic improvement. This point is not merely conceptual; it also enjoys empirical support, with studies revealing that "changes of mind often improve task performance by correcting initial errors" (Stone *et al.* 2022, 419). Thus, if you hold a particular belief while someone else arrives at a different conclusion after revising their own stance, you have reason to take their view more seriously. A genuine change of mind indicates that the agent devoted more time or attention to the issue, potentially incorporated new evidence, or improved their response to existing evidence.

This connection between mind-changing and epistemic improvement helps explain why dynamic disagreements seem more epistemically compelling than static ones. When Brisa learns that Alex used to share her misgivings about pragmatism but now advocates for it, she can reasonably assume that Alex experienced a genuine change of mind in two senses. First, he truly underwent a change of *mind*, not just a change in belief: he initially formed one judgment, then self-consciously revised it. Second, unless she is unusually cynical, she can assume he isn't just pretending to have changed his mind to manipulate her trust – he actually experienced the shift. (Indeed, part of what I'm trying to explain is why such misreporting would be rhetorically effective in the first place!) My central claim is this: once Brisa learns that Alex has genuinely changed his mind, she learns that he has earned a kind of epistemic credential. A change of mind signals epistemic improvement along some dimensions.

Changes of mind not only indicate good epistemic hygiene but also reflect epistemic virtue, even if they're not definitive proof of it. The willingness to revise one's beliefs signals open-mindedness and rejection of dogmatism. Mind-changers sidestep criticisms of status quo bias or genealogical inertia: they clearly don't hold their views

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simply because they were raised to endorse them. They also avoid one source of epistemic criticism that many of us are guilty of: namely, that they failed to properly consider or entertain an alternative view.

Of course, not all changes of mind signify epistemic improvement or virtue. Changes can be unreflective, the result of indoctrination, or even lead to the adoption of a more close-minded and intolerant position (DiPaolo 2020). My claim is that changes of mind can serve as a valuable proxy for good belief-forming practices. However, we need to investigate further to be certain.

Beyond epistemic virtue, Matthew Shields has recently argued that changing one's mind – especially when it involves personal cost – is among the strongest indicators of a genuine commitment to epistemic goods like truth, knowledge, and understanding. As he explains, "This is because changing one's mind in this way goes as far as we can in eliminating the possibility that the agent has an ulterior motivation for their epistemic practices" (Shields 2025, 1). Belief revision can be psychologically distressing, often inducing cognitive dissonance: admitting we were wrong is painful.[2] It can also carry reputational and social costs, even in domains that reputedly prize truth over consistency. Consider, for instance, Hilary Putnam's frequent shifts in perspective, which earned him the playful but somewhat dismissive label of a flip-flopper. As one memoriam reported, "His changes of opinion were so notorious that the satirical *Philosophical Lexicon* coined a unit of intellectual time in his honor, the 'hilary'. (As in: 'Oh, that's what I thought three or four hilaries ago'.)" (Pershan 2016). Yet for Putnam, this willingness to revise reflected a deeper ideal. Praising his role model Carnap, he wrote that such a stance exemplified a commitment to placing "the search for truth higher than personal vanity" (Putnam 1988, xii). The epistemic role of cost – both psychological and social – takes center stage in §4.3.

To summarize, once we know what a change of mind *is* – and its intimate connection to epistemic improvement, virtue, and commitment – we can begin to appreciate why learning that others changed their minds holds epistemic promise for us. These relationships help explain why dynamic cases are more significant than static ones and hence why Brisa and Bella should be especially inclined to defer to Alex and Alicia upon learning that the latter changed their minds.

2.3. Epistemic standing and superiority

In effect, I'm claiming that when you learn that someone changed their mind, you acquire defeasible evidence that they are plausibly an epistemic *superior* along some dimensions. This matters because the philosophical literature on disagreement focuses primarily on *static* disagreement between epistemic *peers*: those who are "roughly equal in intelligence, reasoning ability, and background knowledge" (Feldman 2010, 201). While it's debated whether peer disagreement should prompt belief revision, it's relatively uncontroversial that recognized epistemic superiors warrant deference.

Yet determining whether someone counts as an epistemic superior – or even a peer – is often difficult. The literature highlights a range of factors relevant to assessing comparative epistemic standing (Frances & Matheson 2024). These include:

(a) evidence brought to bear;
(b) pertinent background knowledge;
(c) relevant cognitive abilities;

[2]Thanks to Carolina Flores and Michael Hannon for this connection.

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(d) time and attention;
(e) intellectual virtues and biases.

Assessing our standing on any of these metrics – let alone how they combine – is often practically challenging. However, changes of mind can offer a clue. Specifically, they can function as *meta-level indicators* of potential epistemic superiority along several dimensions. Genuine changes of mind signal that the agent may have:

1. Epistemically improved – having incorporated more evidence, corrected errors, or refined their reasoning (dimensions a, c)
2. Exhibited greater epistemic engagement – having devoted greater time and sustained attention to the issue (dimension d)
3. Demonstrated epistemic virtue – displaying open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and responsiveness to reasons (dimension e)
4. Avoided biases – such as genealogical inertia or dogmatism (dimension e)

This is not to say that mind-changers are automatically epistemic superiors. A change of mind provides defeasible evidence of superiority along specific dimensions, such as attentiveness, open-mindedness, or responsiveness to evidence. However, this evidence can be outweighed or rebutted by other considerations. For example, you might score higher on any of these metrics, for instance by possessing greater background knowledge, stronger reasoning skills, or more extensive evidence. All things considered, you may be epistemically equal or even superior to your interlocutor. While a mind-change can contribute to someone's overall epistemic standing, it does not single-handedly determine it. Alternatively, you may have reason to dismiss your interlocutor's change as epistemically irrelevant – an option I explore in §4. Still, absent defeaters, learning that someone has genuinely changed their mind should carry epistemic weight.

2.4. Empathy and shared starting points

The connection between mind-changing and epistemic superiority suggests that whenever you learn someone has genuinely changed their mind, you have a defeasible reason to take their new position especially seriously. A genuine change of mind signals engagement, reflection, and responsiveness to reasons – qualities that tend to enhance epistemic standing regardless of respective starting points. Still, learning that someone who now disagrees with you once shared your original view often feels especially significant. As the phenomenon dubbed the "narcissism of small differences" illustrates, it's often the shift of a former ally – not the steadfast opposition of a critic – that triggers the sharpest discomfort and self-doubt.[3] This reaction isn't merely psychological. Cases of disagreement involving shared starting points often carry unique epistemic significance for several reasons.

First, learning that someone used to share our view can shift how we assess their epistemic standing. Often, when we disagree with someone, we suspect – justifiably or not – that they haven't fully appreciated the reasons we find persuasive, or that they're operating from incompatible background commitments. (Think of a relativist student who has not yet appreciated the arguments against it, or a disagreement over abortion shaped by deep value differences.) But when we discover that someone once held our belief and then gave it up, we can rule out at least some of these explanations. Their trajectory eliminates certain defeaters: it shows they understand the reasons we find

[3]Thanks to Rachel Fraser for this analogy.

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convincing and rejected them anyway. That can prompt us to reclassify them as someone who began as an epistemic peer and is now plausibly a superior. Their change of mind doesn't just suggest that further evidence may exist – it suggests that such evidence is likely to be accessible and weighty for someone like us.[4]

Second, this observation complicates *permissivist* responses to disagreement.[5] If permissivism is true, then disagreement needn't pressure us to revise our beliefs, as there may be multiple rational responses to the same body of evidence. We can explain away epistemic divergence by saying, "We're both rational – we just weigh the evidence differently." But when someone moves away from our view after sharing it, this explanation becomes harder to sustain. Their divergence isn't merely due to different priors or evaluative standards; it reflects a revision within our own framework. That trajectory raises the possibility that, if we extended our own reasoning further, we might arrive at the same conclusion.

Third, this shared history of agreement suggests that the mind-changer can *empathize* with our perspective. They can understand our reasons, share our evaluative framework, recognize our values, and appreciate our perspective from the inside. Their disagreement is thus more powerful than disagreement from someone who never occupied our position.[6] They may even be willing to help guide you through the same process of reconsideration.

These factors make psychological deflection more difficult. When disagreement arises from someone who never shared our view, we can more easily attribute the disagreement to fundamentally different starting points, values, or background beliefs. But when someone shifts from agreement to disagreement, that reassurance becomes harder to maintain. We're forced to confront the possibility that the source of divergence lies not in their unfamiliarity with our reasons, but in the inadequacy of those reasons themselves.

While the epistemic significance of mind-changes is especially strong when they begin from shared starting points, they can exert epistemic pressure in other cases, too. Suppose Brisa initially suspended judgment about pragmatism while Alex affirmed it. Learning that Alex later changed his mind after deeper reflection still gives Brisa a defeasible reason to take his revised view more seriously. Conversely, when someone who once disagreed with you comes to share your belief, their shift can lend epistemic support by suggesting that your view has withstood critical scrutiny. A mind-change in your direction implies that careful reflection favors your position, reinforcing your confidence and corroborating your belief. (For instance, if an internalist reflects and ultimately adopts your externalist view, their trajectory may increase your confidence.) That said, such support may carry less weight if the reasons that moved them were already reflected in your own belief formation.[7]

2.5. Explaining the epistemic impact

We've now seen why mind-changes often feel epistemically significant, especially when they come from someone who once shared our view. We're now in a position to answer the puzzle we started with: why do such changes seem epistemically significant, even when they don't supply new first-order evidence? I propose that learning about someone's change of mind can provide three interrelated epistemic resources:

[4]Thanks to Carolina Flores and Massimo Renzo for helping me articulate this point.

[5]Thanks to Bernhard Salow for discussion.

[6]Thanks to Max Hayward for helpful discussions of empathy in this context.

[7]For a persuasive argument that agreement can still carry some weight even when not fully independent, see Lackey (2013).

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(1) higher-order evidence about the reliability of one's reasoning, (2) reasons to reopen inquiry, and (3) evidence that further first-order evidence may be available. Together, these explain how mind-changes can exert rational pressure even when no new arguments are offered.

First, changes of mind provide *higher-order evidence*: evidence concerning the reliability of reasoning or belief-forming processes, rather than direct evidence about the proposition in question. Higher-order evidence concerns facts about one's epistemic performance or rational capacities, sometimes undermining confidence even when first-order evidence remains unchanged (Horowitz 2025). When you learn that someone changed their mind while yours remained static, you gain reason to think they're epistemically superior along some dimensions. As we've seen, this higher-order evidence can be especially compelling when the mind-changer previously occupied your current epistemic position.

Second, learning about changes of mind supplies *zetetic reasons*: reasons to reopen or continue inquiry, reassess evidence, and reconsider one's beliefs with renewed open-mindedness. Higher-order evidence often gives us reason to investigate further (Palmira 2023; Staffel 2023; Yarandi 2023), though the connection may not be automatic (Falbo forthcoming). Learning about a mind-change typically creates a rational incentive to re-examine the issue at hand, especially when the agent cares about it and thinks she can improve her thinking, too. Moreover, the agent has reason to inquire not only into the first-order question at issue but also into the credibility of the higher-order evidence itself – for example, by examining whether the change of mind was genuine and driven by epistemic considerations, a diagnostic process I explore more fully in §4.

Finally, learning that someone has changed their mind often provides evidence that further evidence exists – evidence we may not yet have encountered or properly assessed.[8] Even without knowing precisely what motivated the shift, the mere fact of reflection and revision gives us a defeasible reason to suspect that additional support for their new belief may be available. Importantly, this evidence has a proleptic character: it does not directly support the proposition in question, but rather signals that such support might be found. That makes mind-change cases different from standard appeals to expert testimony, where the superior's endorsement can itself justify belief revision. Here, the appropriate response is more tentative and investigatory. A change of mind suggests the person may have epistemic advantages: it marks them as a *possible* superior, not a recognized one. However, this evidence is quite defeasible, and further inquiry is needed to determine whether that status is warranted.

To see how these components interact, return to the dynamic dispute over pragmatism. Learning that Alex changed his mind gives Brisa no new first-order evidence for pragmatism. Nonetheless, she acquires two forms of *second-order evidence*: evidence bearing on her epistemic position without bearing on the content of the belief itself. First, she gains *higher-order evidence*: reason to question the reliability of her original reasoning, at least relative to Alex's. If Alex has revisited the issue, corrected earlier mistakes, and refined his judgment, it is reasonable for Brisa to suspect that his belief is better formed. Second, she may receive *evidence of evidence*: reason to think there may be further relevant considerations she has not yet encountered or properly assessed. Second-order evidence affords her *zetetic* reason to inquire further – not only to re-examine her evidence and reasoning but also to evaluate whether Alex truly qualifies as an epistemic superior. And should she come to grasp the reasons behind

[8]This is sometimes referred to as "higher-order evidence" as well. However, it's important to distinguish between evidence regarding reliability and evidence of evidence. Taken together, we can classify them as "second-order evidence," in contrast to first-order evidence directly for or against a position.

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Alex's shift, these reasons may provide first-order evidence for pragmatism and furnish direct grounds for changing her mind, too.

This dynamic helps resolve the puzzle initially introduced. Learning that someone has changed their mind does more than inform us of their current belief: it provides defeasible evidence that their cognitive trajectory involved epistemic improvement. That evidence may be overridden; for example, Alex might have changed his mind hastily or for poor reasons. But absent strong defeaters, the rational response is not necessarily to defer automatically but to reflect anew. Even if we don't yet know why they changed their mind, the fact that they did gives us reason to take a second look, too.

So far, I've focused on changes of mind encountered through direct interpersonal exchanges. But what happens when we learn about such changes from a distance, such as through reports and trends? While many of the same epistemic dynamics persist, these cases also introduce distinctive challenges of interpretation, requiring greater care in assessing when a belief shift is epistemically significant – and when it is not. I turn to these cases next.

3. From conversations to trends

While interpersonal cases provide the clearest illustrations of mind-changing's epistemic significance, its value is not limited to face-to-face disagreement. Sometimes we learn that a respected figure changed their mind through a lecture, memoir, or public statement. Other times, we notice broader patterns of intellectual migration, where belief shifts appear to flow predominantly in one direction. These impersonal cases introduce distinctive interpretative challenges, as we typically lack direct access to the changers' reasoning processes, their sincerity, or the full evidential context behind their shift.

Three interpretative difficulties are particularly salient. First, authenticity assessment becomes more difficult. In face-to-face exchanges, we can often assume sincerity by default, absent specific reasons for doubt. At a distance, determining whether someone genuinely changed their mind – as opposed to strategically misreporting, confabulating, or reframing past views – requires greater interpretive efforts. Second, motivational attribution grows more complex. Even if we establish that a genuine change occurred, discerning whether it was driven by epistemic considerations or non-epistemic factors becomes especially challenging. Third, evidential weight becomes harder to calibrate. Without direct engagement, it's more difficult to judge how much epistemic pressure a reported mind-change should exert. Doing so requires assessing the agent's epistemic position, the nature of their reasoning, and how closely their evidential context aligns with our own.

Despite these challenges, the threefold epistemic significance of mind-changing developed in §2 still applies to these impersonal cases. Learning about changes of mind at a distance continues to provide second-order evidence in favor of the resulting view and reasons to investigate further. The difference lies not in whether these epistemic resources exist in impersonal contexts, but in the additional interpretive work required to access them.

The remainder of this section explores these types of cases – and the interpretive challenges they present – in more detail. First, I examine how individual reports of mind-change can be epistemically significant even when encountered indirectly. Then I turn to the phenomenon of *asymmetric epistemic migration*, where belief shifts occur predominantly in one direction.

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3.1. Individual reports at a distance

Public figures often offer narrative accounts of their intellectual transformations. To see how these accounts might inform our epistemic outlook, consider the intellectual trajectories of two prominent philosophers: Hilary Putnam and Philip Kitcher. Both initially dismissed pragmatism as philosophically inadequate, only to later champion it as among the most significant contributions to philosophy. Putnam, once a staunch realist and critic of pragmatism, famously reinvented himself as one of its most enthusiastic advocates. Kitcher, who once described pragmatists as "well-intentioned but benighted, laboring with crude tools," later ranked pragmatism alongside Kant's work in terms of its philosophical significance (Kitcher 2012, xi).

Even without direct engagement, such changes of mind can exert epistemic pressure. When a thinker with a long track record of serious engagement revises their position, we may reasonably treat that shift as epistemically meaningful, especially provided certain conditions are met. Several factors contribute to the strength of the epistemic signal. First, there is no apparent incentive for fabrication: neither Putnam nor Kitcher stood to benefit professionally or socially from falsely reporting a change of view. Second, both offered detailed, reflective accounts of their reasons, helping us assess whether the shift was epistemically motivated. Third, their reputations as careful, responsible philosophers lend additional weight to their revisions. Finally, the context matters: if pragmatism was marginalized when they embraced it, their change carries more evidential weight, since it is less likely to reflect conformity or opportunism.

Consider how these factors apply specifically to Putnam's case. Suppose you share his early criticisms of pragmatism. Learning that he later revised his stance after decades of philosophical work furnishes you with higher-order evidence, suggesting your own view might merit reconsideration. It also supplies a zetetic reason to reopen inquiry: to ask what considerations might have led a serious thinker to change his mind. Even before learning about his reasons, you gain evidence that there are more arguments available supporting pragmatism. The fact that Putnam offered detailed explanations, situated his change within a broader intellectual trajectory, maintained a strong reputation for epistemic responsibility, and made the shift despite potential professional costs all enhance the epistemic significance of his revision.

3.2. Patterns of migration

While individual reports of mind-change are often epistemically significant, they can also reveal broader patterns. Sometimes, belief revisions are not isolated events but part of a larger migration from one position to another. *Asymmetric epistemic migration* occurs when movement flows predominantly in one direction, with significantly more individuals shifting from view A to view B. Such patterns naturally prompt the question, famously posed to Arcesilaus: Why is the migration so one-sided? Although these trends may seem more epistemically compelling by virtue of their scale, they also intensify the interpretive challenge. When do such shifts reflect genuine epistemic progress, and when are they better explained by non-epistemic pressures that encourage convergence irrespective of truth?

To illustrate the phenomenon, consider again pragmatism. Suppose you discover that Putnam and Kitcher were not unique: many philosophers who initially dismissed pragmatism eventually came to embrace it, while few moved in the opposite direction. This asymmetric migration could offer defeasible evidence that pragmatism withstands critical scrutiny over time. Deeper engagement with philosophical problems may push thinkers toward the pragmatist camp. A similar thought animated Berkeley and Butler's

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defense of Christianity and even surfaced in worries about the disproportionate appeal of Epicureanism in antiquity.

Nonetheless, not all trends are epistemically meaningful. Migration patterns may be shaped by factors unrelated to truth-tracking: institutional incentives, professional conformity, reputational pressures, or broader cultural fashions. Belief shifts can reflect convenience as much as conviction.

Contemporary examples from the popular imagination illustrate this point:

(i) Religious belief appears to have decreased over time, though some individuals may convert on their deathbed.
(ii) A common refrain holds that individuals tend to become more conservative as they age.
(iii) Academic Marxism appears to have declined, perhaps with many former adherents transitioning to Rawlsian liberalism.[9]
(iv) In the United States, a growing backlash against DEI initiatives has recently emerged across political and educational institutions.

These examples depict what asymmetric epistemic migration might look like, but not all are even *prima facie* epistemically significant. To determine whether these patterns reflect genuine epistemic progress, we need to ask critical questions regarding the genuineness of the change and the motivations undergirding it. I turn to this task next.

4. Diagnosing changes of mind

To determine whether these patterns reflect genuine epistemic progress, we need to ask two key questions. First, did the individuals in question truly *change* their minds, or did they merely update what they *report* to believe? Second, were these shifts driven by epistemic considerations or non-epistemic motivations, such as social trends, political pressures, or personal gain? The section develops a framework for addressing these questions, evaluating both interpersonal and impersonal cases.

4.1. Assessing genuineness

The first diagnostic task is to determine whether a reported shift reflects a genuine change of mind. This task is relatively tractable in direct interpersonal exchanges, but grows more difficult in impersonal cases and group trends.

When groups appear to shift en masse, proponents of the new position may have become more vocal, while dissenters have grown silent or less influential. What looks like a shift may be better explained as a change in reporting norms. For instance, the recent surge of public opposition to DEI may partly reflect a *preference cascade*: individuals who already harbored skeptical views feel newly empowered to express them once the social costs decline. In such cases, public opinion hasn't really changed; instead, what people feel entitled to express has.[10] That said, preference cascades can themselves

[9]See Joseph Heath, "John Rawls and the Death of Western Marxism," https://josephheath.substack.com/p/john-rawls-and-the-death-of-western. Aptly, in an ensuing Daily Nous discussion, one commenter replied: "I like the principle behind the idea that 50 famous philosophers used to think A, then they changed their minds and thought B. Therefore, A was refuted." See: https://dailynous.com/2024/08/26/the-collapse-of-academic-marxism/.

[10]Conversely, those who reject the dominant view may be excluded by institutional and social structures. Consider the fate of Marxists fired during McCarthyism. Thanks to Carolina Flores for this point and illustration.

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prompt genuine reconsideration among some agents, shifting the Overton window and opening space for genuine belief revision. For example, questioning DEI policies, previously unthinkable among liberals, may become a topic open for reflection and potentially changing one's mind.[11] Moreover, some migratory trends arguably do reflect genuine changes in belief, not merely changes in expression; consider, for instance, shifts in public support for same-sex marriage.

At the individual level, there are also risks of strategic misreporting. For example, during the 2025 U.S. confirmation hearings, several controversial nominees – including Tulsi Gabbard, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and Pete Hegseth – abruptly reversed prior positions in ways that seemed tailored to secure Senate votes (Axios 2025). Gabbard, long suspicious of Section 702 surveillance authorities, suddenly endorsed the program; Kennedy, a longtime critic of vaccines, proclaimed his support for the polio vaccine; and Hegseth, once opposed to women in combat roles, affirmed his support for their service (Axios 2025). These cases vividly illustrate how reported belief changes can reflect reputational or strategic pressures rather than epistemic reevaluation.

Even sincere reports may call for careful interpretation. Psychological research suggests that individuals often confabulate rational narratives to explain what were actually emotionally or socially driven shifts (Stammers & Bortolotti 2020). As Julian Barnes observes in his reflective essay series, *Changing My Mind*, memory is not like a left-luggage office that returns neatly preserved experiences when we present the right claim ticket. Instead, remembering is a process of continual reinvention: "We constantly reinvent our lives, retelling them – usually – to our own advantage" (Barnes 2025, 11). Each time we recall a past event, we subtly reshape it. So too, when individuals recount the story of a mind-changing event, they may unconsciously reshape what they believed, or whether they ever truly held the prior view at all. As Barnes wryly notes, "We always believe that changing our mind is an improvement . . . It seems to make us stronger and more mature; we have put away yet another childish thing. Well, we would think that, wouldn't we?" (Barnes 2025, 4). We reconstruct a narrative of progress, potentially obscuring the real motives and reasons behind our belief shift.

In some cases, what appears to be a change of mind is better understood as a mischaracterization of one's earlier attitude. As Ian Leslie reflects, people often mistake emotional reactions for considered positions:

> Ed's reframing made me change my mind about the issue: I now support a decision I was previously against. But actually, I hadn't really been against the decision at all. I'd had an adverse reaction to a story about the decision, and against the people telling that story. That had hindered my ability to think the decision through. (Leslie 2025)

Leslie's example illustrates an important point emphasized by Baier: to change your mind, you must first have made up your mind (Baier 1979, 161). A genuine change of mind requires an initial commitment: an act of judgment that can later be revisited or revised. Where no clear belief was held, there is no real mind-change to report.

Together, these examples illustrate the fragility of mind-change reports. Without critical scrutiny, we risk mistaking changes in expression, framing, or social allegiance for genuine reconsideration of belief. While these risks are lower in cases of sincere reports, they are not eliminated.

[11]Thanks to Al Prescott-Couch for helpful discussion.

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4.2. Epistemic versus non-epistemic reasons

Even when a genuine change of mind occurs, we must ask whether it was epistemically motivated. As Simone Weil cautions, "Ideas are changeable; they are influenced by the passions, by fancy, by fatigue" (Weil 2003, 62). The Dadaist Francis Picabia put it more playfully: "Our heads are round so that our thoughts can change direction."[12] These remarks suggest a more temperamental or instinctive explanation for belief revision than the well-known line: "When the facts change, I change my mind."[13] Not all mind-changes reflect careful reconsideration in light of new evidence; some are driven by mood, social pressure, or convenience.

Consider again the idea that people tend to grow more conservative with age. This could reflect accumulated wisdom; but it could equally reflect changing material interests, decreased appetite for change, or comfort with stability. As Barnes catalogues:

> Some people, as they get older, become more conservative: over the years, among my friends and acquaintances, I've sometimes heard the familiar soft-shoe shuffle to the right. Those idealistic principles they had in their twenties have been rubbed away by exposure to the realities of life. Or they've now got more money than they did and want to protect it, and hand it on. Or, they start hating young people's principles because they are remarkably similar to the ones they held in their own youth, principles they now realize are foolish delusions. Or, they simply don't want any more change in their lives, thank you very much. (Barnes 2025, 26–27)

Of these explanations, only the third might plausibly reflect epistemic reconsideration; the others reflect convenience or complacency.

Changing one's mind can also be socially, not just personally, incentivized. When a group collectively shifts its views on issues like DEI or Marxism, individuals often face social pressure to conform. Some may only *appear* to change their minds for social or professional gain; others may genuinely undergo a transformation. Some may even "fake it until they make it," initially performing acceptance before internalizing the new view.

In other cases, people shift their views alongside changes in their personal or social incentives and later reconstruct reasons to justify the change. Here, the risk of confabulation re-emerges: individuals may retrospectively invent epistemic reasons for a shift that was in fact driven by non-epistemic factors. Even when someone's mind has changed for practical reasons, they may cite epistemic considerations instead. This makes it especially difficult to assess whether a reported change of mind is genuinely epistemically motivated, since we cannot fully trust people's stated explanations.

Finally, emotional experiences can transform a person's perspective without altering their evaluation of reasons. As Barnes observes, "We change our minds about many things . . . Love, parenthood, the death of those close to us: such matters reorient our lives, and often make us change our minds" (Barnes 2025, 5). In such cases, it is not that the facts have changed, but that new aspects of the world – emotional, experiential, and existential – come into view. Evaluating the epistemic significance of these cases is a delicate matter. On the one hand, learning that a change was motivated by practical or affective considerations is often a reason to discount the change. On the other hand, practical changes and emotional experiences can justifiably shift which considerations one finds salient and intelligible, enabling one to respond to genuine reasons they had

[12] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/arts/design/francis-picabia-the-playboy-prankster-of-moderism.html.

[13] Although this quote is often attributed to economist John Maynard Keynes, it appears to express the spirit, but not the letter, of his speech: https://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/07/22/keynes-change-mind/. The source may be something to change your mind about!

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previously overlooked. Assessing how epistemic and practical considerations interact in prompting a change of mind is ultimately crucial for evaluating its significance; it remains a task for further inquiry.

4.3. Costs and benefits

Given these challenges, how can we assess whether someone genuinely changed their minds for epistemic reasons? One important diagnostic tool is to examine the costs and benefits associated with retaining or changing one's beliefs versus merely appearing to do so. The basic idea is this: mind-changes that come with costs are more likely to reflect genuine epistemic engagement; those that yield benefits are more suspect.

Hence, we should ask: did the agent have incentives to misreport a change, or to switch sides for non-epistemic reasons? For instance, mass conversions to a religion are less epistemically significant if they occurred under coercion or threat of death. Similarly, when adopting a new view brings professional advancement, social approval, or other extrinsic rewards, we should be cautious about treating the migration as epistemically meaningful. Suspiciously convenient shifts invite special scrutiny. The costs of re-entry apply too: if it's costly to switch back, then the fact that someone stayed in their new position is less probative.

Broadly, we can distinguish between two types of cases:

Belief Because Benefit: When someone changes their mind because doing so benefits them – materially, socially, or psychologically – the change is less probative.

Belief Despite Cost: By contrast, when someone changes their mind despite facing significant costs for doing so, the shift is more epistemically significant and more plausibly motivated by strong reasons.

We've already seen cases of the former: for instance, the tendency for individuals to become more conservative as they age may reflect growing material interests. To illustrate the latter, recall Berkeley and Butler's contention that conversion to Christianity was especially evidentially weighty when it involved great personal sacrifice. Similarly, if pragmatism was unfashionable or marginalized in mid-twentieth-century philosophy, then Kitcher's and Putnam's later embrace of it carries greater epistemic force. Furthermore, if changing one's mind is often costly – as Shields suggests – then it's an even stronger signal. Interestingly, this may complicate any revisionary proposals for our intellectual practices. On the one hand, the epistemic value of mind-changing might suggest that we should reduce the social costs of changing one's mind, so that more people feel comfortable doing so. On the other hand, part of what makes mind-changes so epistemically powerful is precisely that they are often costly.

Of course, not all costly belief changes are epistemically sound, just as not all convenient beliefs are misguided. Consider cases where someone joins a cult or adopts a fringe ideology: the shift may involve genuine and striking social and material costs, yet still be epistemically suspect. In such cases, the apparent costs may be outweighed by subjective or affective benefits that render the change attractive from the agent's perspective.[14] These examples underscore two points. First, cost alone is an unreliable indicator of epistemic improvement. Second, evaluating costs and benefits requires

[14]Thanks to Carolina Flores for this observation.

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attending to how the agent themselves encodes and experiences those trade-offs, not just how they appear from the outside.

These cost-benefit considerations apply across both interpersonal and impersonal contexts. However, they are especially crucial in evaluating broad migratory patterns, where direct access to individuals' reasons is minimal. To fully assess the epistemic import of changes of mind, we must engage in psychological and sociological inquiry, paying close attention to the possibility of non-epistemic contamination.

4.4. Further tools

Our assessment of authenticity, motivation, and costs connects to the dimensions of epistemic standing introduced in §2.3. By examining these connections, we can identify several additional factors that help determine when changes of mind should exert epistemic pressure.

One factor is evidential independence. When multiple individuals independently revise similar beliefs – especially those from different backgrounds or methodological approaches – this convergence provides more substantial evidence for the revised position than do causally connected changes. Independent convergence suggests that the destination position better accommodates the total body of evidence, while changes spreading through social networks are more likely to reflect preference cascades than epistemic improvement.

Second, the domain-specific expertise of the mind-changer matters. Changes of mind carry more weight when they occur in domains where the agent possesses relevant background knowledge and where methodologies for evaluating evidence are robust. Putnam changing his mind about pragmatism after decades of philosophical engagement carries more epistemic significance than if he had revised views in areas where he lacked specialized knowledge. By contrast, when novice philosophy students move from untutored moral realism to moral relativism, the shift carries little weight; indeed, with further training, they are likely to revise their views again to a more sophisticated position.

Third, when available, we should consider the mind-changer's track record. Suppose someone has a history of moving from true beliefs to false ones, or of shifting views erratically without discernible improvement. In that case, their changes warrant significantly less epistemic weight.[15] Frequent reversals might reflect fickleness, not intellectual virtue (DiPaolo 2018; Woodard 2020). At the same time, part of what makes mind-changing so attractive as a heuristic is that we often lack independent access to the truth of the target belief. In such cases, changes of mind function as valuable meta-indicators, especially in the absence of more direct means of assessing reliability.

Lastly, to assess the epistemic significance of someone else's mind-change, we must also reflect on our own position. We may possess epistemic advantages they lack, such as broader evidence, more reliable methods, or sharper reasoning skills. We may even have engaged in our own reconsideration process only to reaffirm our initial beliefs – much like A. J. Ayer, who reportedly said, "My second thoughts on existentialism are the same as my first."[16] Genuine reconsideration, not merely changing one's mind, matters. Moreover, changes that persist through continued engagement often deserve more epistemic weight than transient shifts, insofar as this suggests they are resistant to counter-evidence and withstand critical engagement. At the same time, reaffirming a belief is not the same as adequately scrutinizing it. Without serious reflection,

[15]Thanks to David Enoch for this point.

[16]Unfortunately, this reference remains apocryphal. See https://ksetiya.substack.com/p/reverie.

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reaffirmation risks entrenching dogmatism under the guise of intellectual stability. Even if we stand by our original view, we should often remain alert to the possibility that we've overlooked something.

These additional dimensions complement earlier considerations of authenticity, motivation, and costs versus benefits. Though they may not exhaust the epistemic landscape, together they help us navigate the complex terrain of mind-changing evidence, distinguishing epistemically valuable signals from misleading noise. While learning that someone changed their mind doesn't automatically provide direct first-order evidence, it can supply valuable epistemic resources: higher-order evidence about the reliability of belief-forming processes, zetetic reasons to investigate further, and evidence that more evidence exists. When carefully assessed using the framework developed in this paper, changes of mind can serve not merely as psychological curiosities but as valuable guides for improving our beliefs and navigating complex issues.

5. Conclusion

We began with a puzzle: how can changes of mind be epistemically significant when they don't provide first-order evidence for the position in question?

The solution lies in recognizing that changes of mind provide distinctive epistemic resources beyond direct support for a view. When someone changes their mind – especially when they once shared our starting point – we gain three types of epistemic resources. First, we acquire higher-order evidence about the reliability of belief-forming processes, prompting us to question our own reasoning. Second, we gain zetetic reasons to reopen or continue inquiry, encouraging us to reengage the issue with renewed seriousness. Third, we receive evidence that additional considerations may exist, even if we haven't yet encountered them.

However, as we've seen, not all mind-changes are created equal. Critical evaluation is essential. To responsibly respond to shifts, we must distinguish epistemically probative shifts from irrelevant ones. Changes of mind merit attention but also scrutiny.

The stakes of this account extend beyond resolving a theoretical puzzle. In practice, knowing when to take others' changes of mind seriously can significantly improve our epistemic practices. If we become too skeptical of mind-changes, dismissing all revisions as irrelevant or motivated, we risk closing ourselves off from important insights. Conversely, if we treat all reported changes as automatically probative, we risk being misled or manipulated. Political figures frequently report convenient "evolutions" in their thinking to match changing electoral landscapes. The diagnostic framework developed here helps us navigate between these extremes. By attending to the sincerity, motivation, cost, and epistemic context of belief revisions, we can better discern which changes of mind warrant epistemic deference and which do not.

Like any epistemic tool, mind-change evidence can be misused or distorted. People may misreport their own or others' mind-changes to gain trust, manipulate audiences, or signal alignment with dominant trends. Converts – individuals who have seriously occupied both sides of a disagreement – are especially persuasive, and thus especially susceptible to strategic co-optation (DiPaolo 2018). Their epistemic authority stems from the perception of reflection and inside knowledge, but that very authority makes the role attractive to bad actors. My account helps explain why such tactics are effective in the first place: mind-changes, especially from perceived insiders, exert distinctive epistemic pressure. When such changes are poorly motivated or performed

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disingenuously, they pollute the shared epistemic environment, making it harder to distinguish genuine shifts from rhetorical performance.

Finally, this framework presents several promising avenues for further inquiry. First, it highlights the difficulty of disentangling epistemic from practical, emotional, or social motivations. Many belief changes are influenced by personal identity, affective commitments, or social context. This relates to a broader question: should the question "What should I believe?" be answered solely by reference to epistemic considerations, or can non-epistemic values legitimately shape belief? It's not obvious that such values can – or should – be entirely screened off. At the same time, we should at least be alert to the risk of non-epistemic influences seeping into our thinking involuntarily. Clarifying the boundary between these influences is a valuable task for future work.

Second, my argument raises deeper questions about what it takes to understand a view fully. Sometimes, understanding may require more than detached reflection; it may involve temporary or exploratory belief. Augustine's and St. Anselm's dictum, "I believe in order to understand" and recent defenses of exploratory believing (e.g., Aronowitz 2021) suggest that adopting a belief, even provisionally, may be necessary for appreciating its appeal (Augustine 1988; Anselm 2001). This invites further investigation into changes of mind not just as consequences of understanding, but as potential routes to it.

I'll end with a cheeky suggestion. If most people who reflected on the ideas presented here came to accept them, perhaps after some initial hesitation, that would constitute another small point in their favor.

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