

The Epistemic Significance of Mind-Changing

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Philosophy*



Is it ever rational to change your mind
on the basis of others changing theirs?

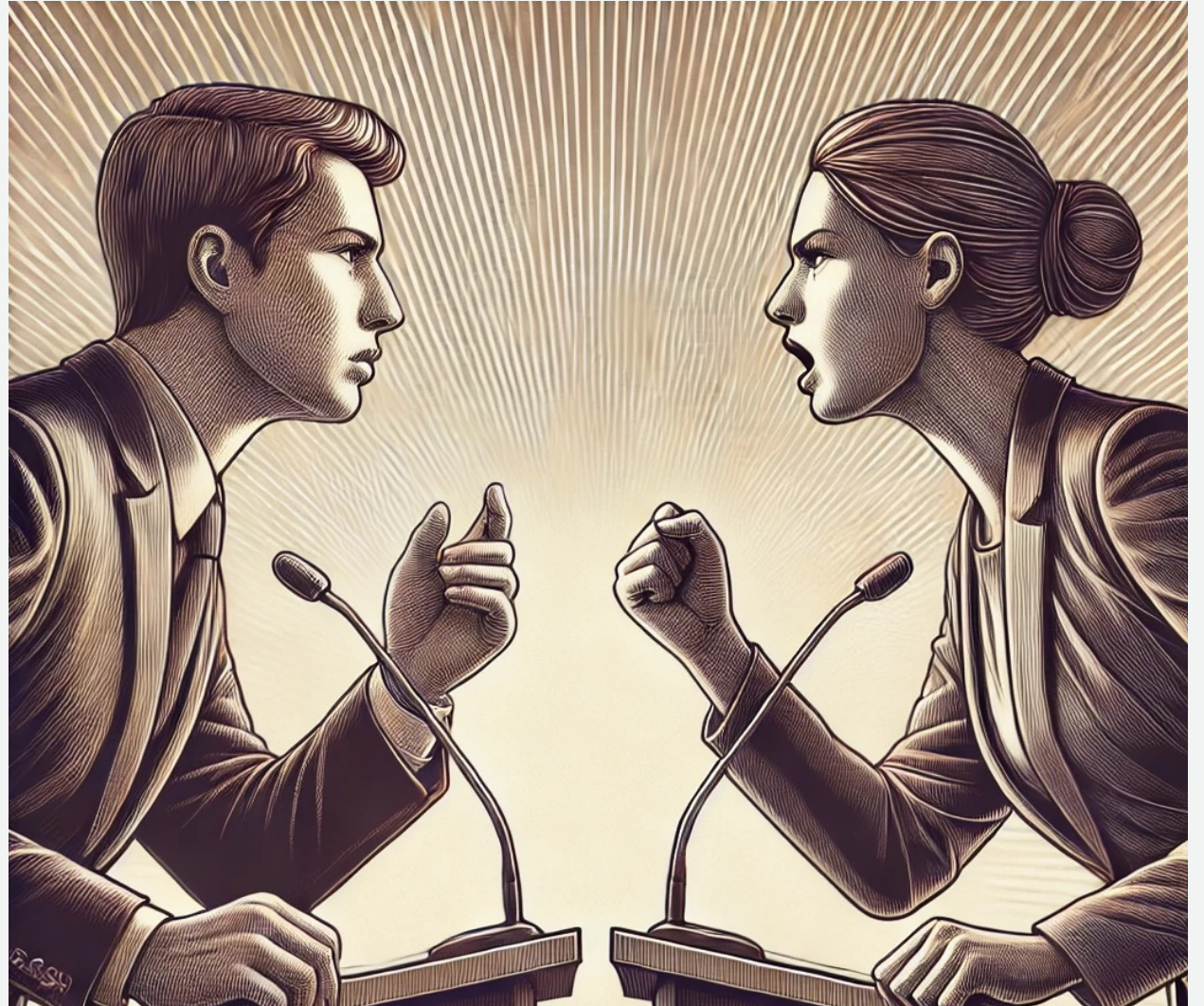
Pragmatist Dispute

Me: Against Pragmatism

You: For Pragmatism

I learn you changed your mind.

But what is the significance of this?

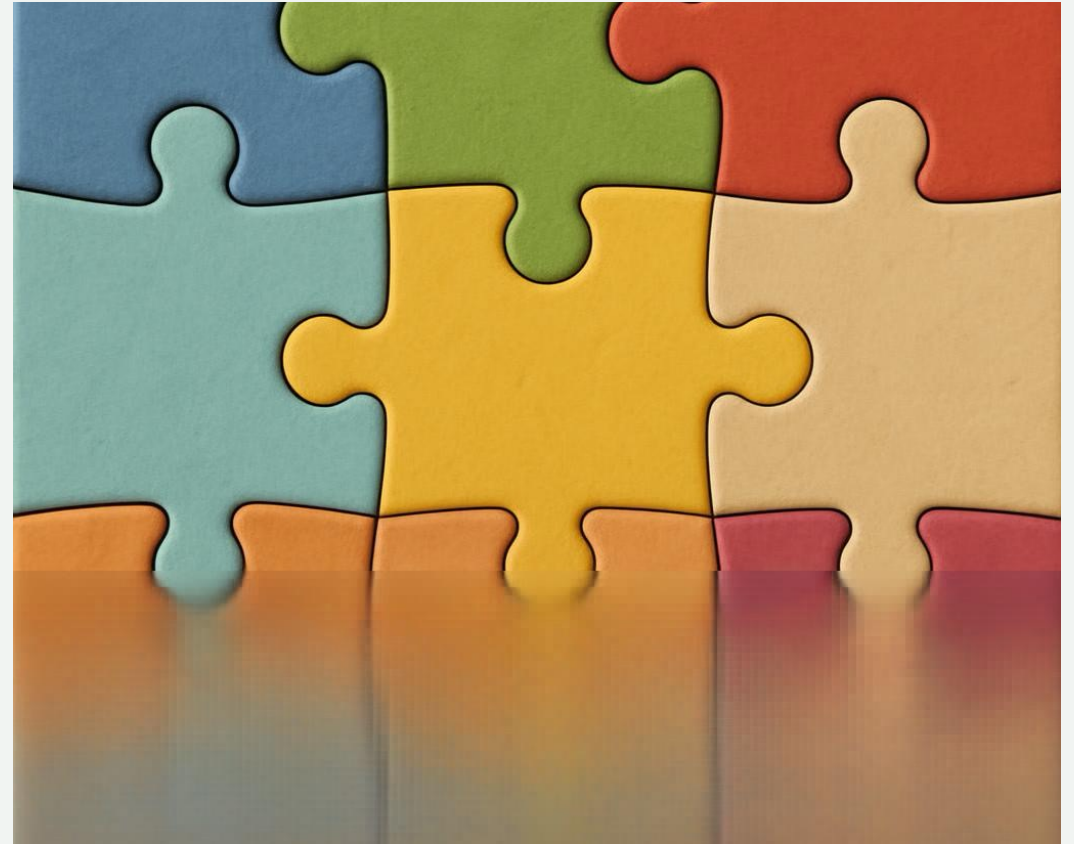


A Puzzle?

👉 On the one hand, learning that others changed their mind can be epistemically significant.

👉 On the other hand, it doesn't obviously grant us any new *evidence* or *reasons*.

Moreover, not *all* changes of mind are epistemically probative. How can we sort?



Philosophers (not) on Changes of Mind

Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Epistemology: Reasons for Neglect

Epistemology of Conversion

- Butler: the widespread conversion to Christianity, despite difficulties entailed, provides evidence of miracles.
- Berkeley asks: “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?”
- Arcesilaus asked why people converted from other schools to Epicureanism, but never vice versa.

→  Significance of seeing *others* change their minds.

Question & Answer



Q: What exactly is the epistemic significance of changes of mind?



My view: Changes of mind can constitute *reasons to investigate further* and *second-order evidence* in favor of a position.



Changes of mind shouldn't move you when:

Not a genuine change of mind.

Overwhelming countervailing evidence.

Cases

INTERPERSONAL & IMPERSONAL

Pragmatist Dispute: Two Versions

Version 1: Alex and Brisa disagree about p . Always have.

Version 2: Alex and Brisa disagree about whether p .
However, Alex used to believe $\sim p$.

Claim: Brisa should be more worried in Version 2 than Version 1.



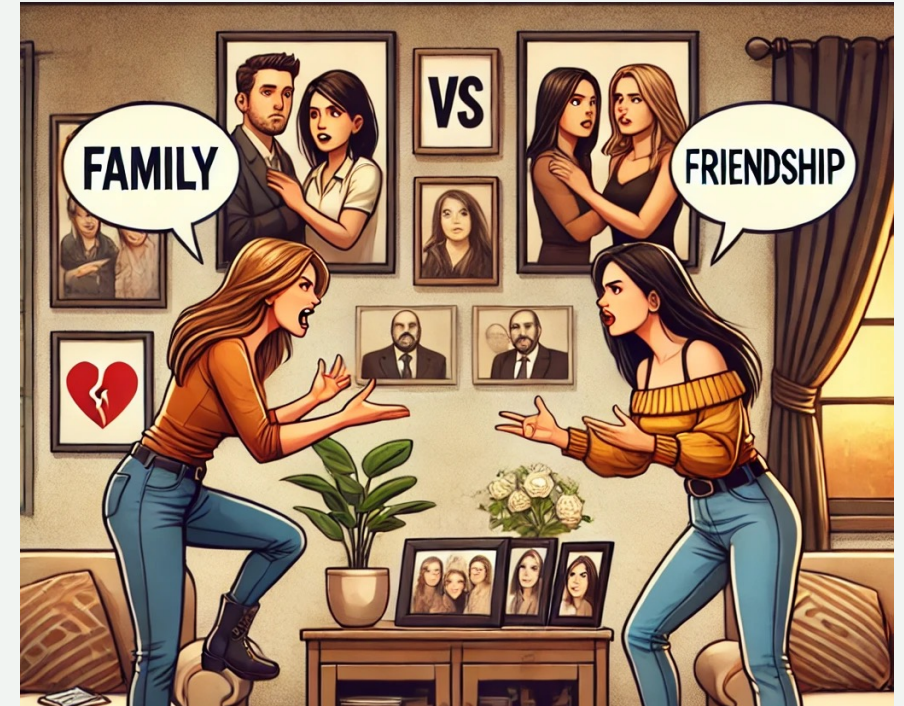
Value Dispute

Alicia and Bella disagree about whether family or friendship is more important.

Version 1: Alicia says, “It’s interesting you think that way – I’ve always felt like family is most important!”

Version 2: Alicia says, “I used to think your way too... but as you get older, you start to realize...”

Intuition: Bella should be more worried in Version 2. Why?



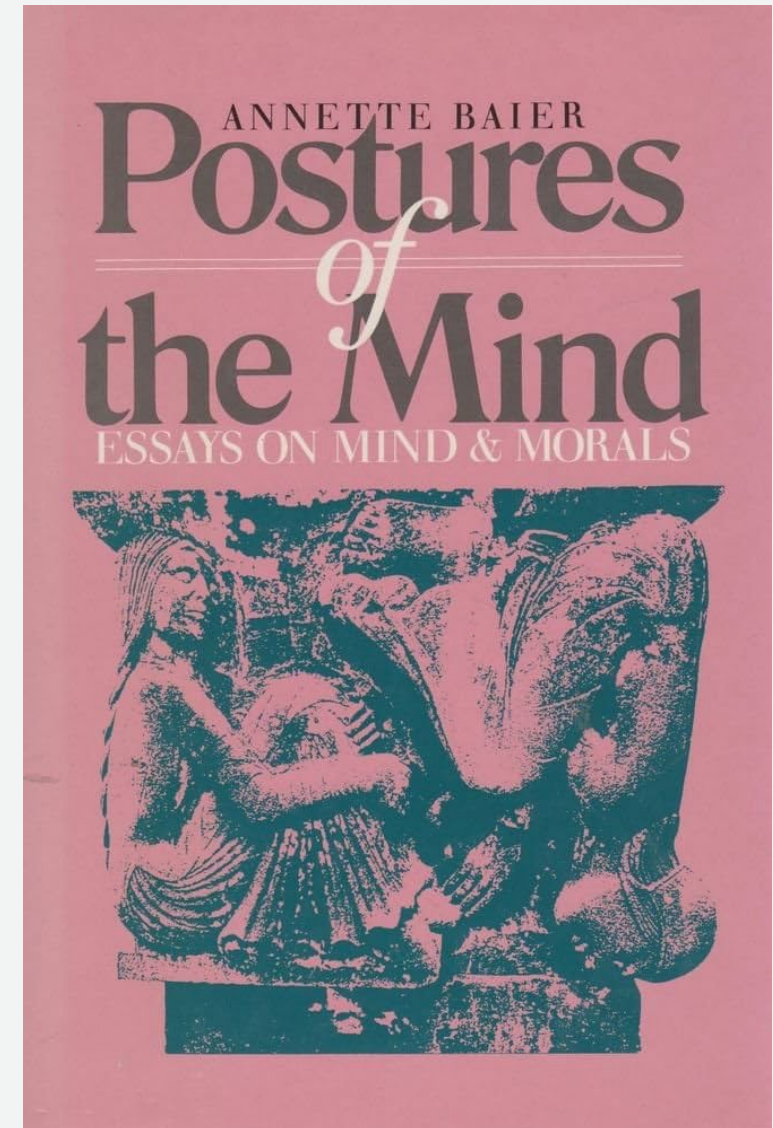
Changes of Mind

Our answer hinges in part on understanding what it means to *change one's mind*.

- **Change of Mind** $\neq$ Just any belief-revision.

“Change of mind... is a matter of having second thoughts which are revised judgments, revised to correct faults of judgment.... What we judge two times is sound" (Baier 1979, 168).

- Change of mind = a type of double-check on our beliefs.



Changes of Mind & Epistemic Improvement

When we change our minds, we typically bring to bear all the initial considerations & then some.

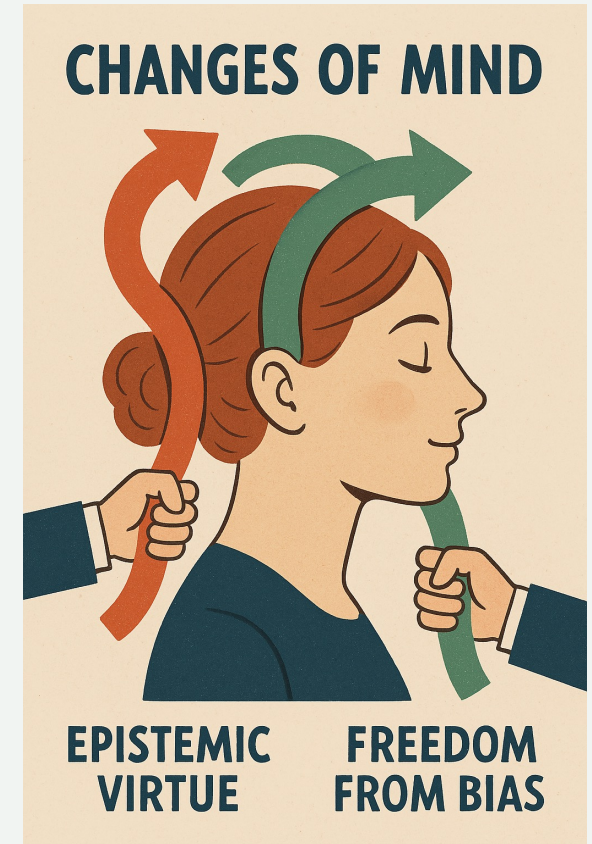
I.e., Changes of mind signal **epistemic improvement**.

Ex: Alex & Brisa 2.0

- Brisa can presume that Alex genuinely changed his mind: (i) not mere belief-shift; (ii) not misreporting a change.
- Indicates epistemic credentials: more time, attention, evidence, or evidence-responsiveness.

Changes of Mind & Virtue

- Changes of mind indicate epistemic virtue (e.g., open-mindedness)
- Avoid some biases (e.g. status quo bias, genealogical inertia) & sources of criticism.
- *Qualifications.*



Changes of Mind & Commitment to Epistemic Goods

Changing one's mind—particularly when it comes at a personal cost—is the best indication of a genuine **commitment to epistemic goods** (e.g., knowledge). (Shields 2025)

- Ex: Putnam / flip-flopper



The Epistemic Significance of Mind-Changing.



Epistemic Improvement



Virtue & Bias
Avoidance



Commitment to
Epistemic Goods

Epistemic Superiority & Empathy



In short: Changes of mind indicate **epistemic superiority** along several dimensions.

- Brisa should think Alex is not merely an **epistemic peer** but potentially a **superior**.

At the same time, shared starting points suggests **overlap in perspectives & standards → Empathy.**

Qualification: Dimensions & Degrees of Superiority

Changes of mind only indicate epistemic superiority along *some dimensions*.

- Many factors determine someone's epistemic position on a topic, including:
 - a) evidence brought to bear;
 - b) background knowledge,
 - c) cognitive abilities;
 - d) time & attention;
 - e) intellectual virtues & biases
- Brisa may still be epistemically superior than Alex in some or all of these dimensions.
- **Cool feature!** Epistemic position is often hard to determine; I'm offering a new *meta-indicator*, analogous to track record, credentials, etc.!

Reasons to Discount the Change

Brisa may ultimately have reasons to discount the (**apparent**) change of mind.

1. **Knows she's overall epistemically superior**
2. **Not a genuine change of mind**
 - Different doxastic shift (e.g., bumped his head)
 - Wasn't responding to *epistemic* considerations
 - Lied about the change

The Epistemic Significance of Mind- Changing



When you learn that someone genuinely changed their mind, you gain ***second-order evidence***:



- **Evidence of evidence**: Evidence that there is more evidence out there.



- **Higher-order evidence**: Evidence about the quality/reliability of first-order evidence & reasoning.



Zetetic reason to investigate further: look at the issue again; confirm that genuine change of mind!



Once you learn their reasons, you may gain **first-order evidence** too.

Resulting Picture



When we learn that someone changed their mind, we learn something else too.



We gain **defeasible evidence** that they are epistemically advantaged, at least along several dimensions.

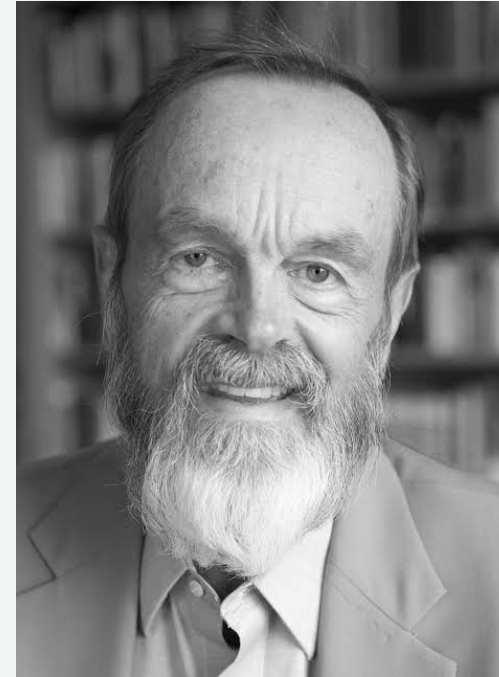


In the absence of **defeaters** (reasons to discount), you should take their change of mind seriously.

From the Interpersonal to the Impersonal

Asymmetric Epistemic Migration: more movement from view X to Y than Y to X.

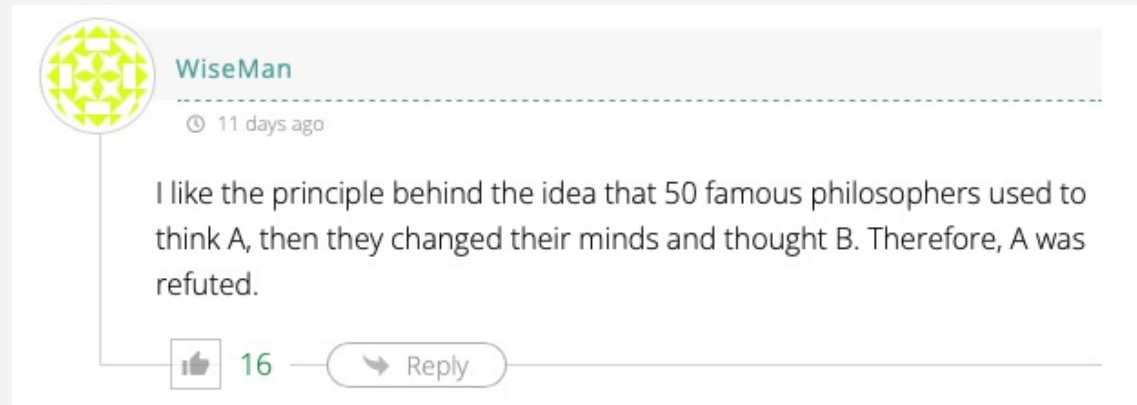
- **Example:** Pragmatist Trajectories



Asymmetric Migration

Potential Examples:

- Anti-Pragmatism to Pragmatism
- Religion to Atheism
- Liberal to Conservative
- Marxist to Liberal
- Pro- to Anti-DEI



Assessing Shifts

As we move away from interpersonal exchanges and towards reports and trends, it becomes harder to assess whether a *genuine change of mind* occurred.

Q: Was there a genuine change of mind, based on epistemic considerations?

- Some migratory patterns might not reflect doxastic changes. (**Ex:** preference cascades / DEI)
- Some doxastic changes do not reflect epistemic considerations. (**Ex:** bandwagoning)

Costs & Benefits of Shifting

Tool: Consider costs and benefits associated with putative belief changes.

- **Belief Because Benefit:** Changes that benefit are less probative
- **Belief Despite Cost:** Changes despite costs are more probative



The Epistemic Significance of Belief-Migration

Changes of mind provide (defeasible) second-order evidence in favor of the position immigrated to.

- More impersonal = typically harder it is to assess whether a genuine change of mind occurred.
- Learning about the shift gives you *reason to investigate* whether it reflects a genuine change of mind.
- May need to engage in psychologizing, sociologizing, & further inquiry to assess the shift.

The Recipe



1. Learn about a **shift**.



2. **Investigate:** Was it a genuine change of mind?

No → Dismiss.

Yes → Defeasible second-order evidence. Epistemic superiority.



3. **Investigate more:** consider additional factors.



4. **Defer:** Absent reason to discount, increase confidence in the adopted view!

Back to the Puzzle

Puzzle:

- 👉 On the one hand, learning that others changed their mind can be epistemically probative.
- 👉 On the other hand, it doesn't obviously grant us any new *evidence* or *reasons*.

We can reject/problematicize the second horn.

- Learning about changes of mind doesn't afford **first-order evidence**.
- However, it does provide zetetic reasons & **second-order evidence**.

Sorting good vs. bad: Question filtering.

Dangers & Pitfalls

Danger of Hijacking: Inauthentic Reports to Manipulate & Persuade

- Value & risk of relying on **converts** (DiPaolo 2018)
- **Polluting the Evidence Pool:** Difficulty of distinguishing valid from misleading epistemic shifts.

Pruning Epistemic vs. Non-Epistemic Motivations & Values



Conclusion

01

Changes of mind are often epistemically significant.

02

Reasons to investigate & second-order evidence

03

Critical evaluation is necessary

04

Improving epistemic practices