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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Epistemic Significance of Other Minds

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Philosophy

by

Russell Ming

Dissertation Committee:
Chancellor's Professor Sven Bernecker, Chair
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2026

DEDICATION

To

Marie Blaszczyk

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Epistemic Significance of Other Minds

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California, Irvine, 2026

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Does evidence of peer disagreement defeat a subject's justification to believe? The literature has pursued this question within an intrapersonal frame: a solitary subject, her evidence, and the coherence of her first-order and higher-order attitudes. Within that frame, the disagreeing peer is a delivery mechanism for higher-order evidence, interchangeable with an altimeter reading or a reason-distorting drug. But disagreement is ordinarily encountered between persons: we learn that another disagrees by comprehending her conflicting assertion, and we respond within a norm-governed practice of asserting, challenging, and objecting. This dissertation investigates the epistemic significance of disagreement within that interpersonal frame. Two questions organize the inquiry, both centered on the hearer's side of an assertoric exchange. When is comprehending a peer's conflicting assertion epistemically significant, and why is it significant, when it is? And when does a hearer have warrant to object? The first question belongs to the epistemology of testimony; the second to the normativity of assertion. I argue that answering both requires the same thesis: the epistemic norm of assertion (ENA), on which a speaker has warrant to assert only if she knows or has justification to believe what she asserts. The result is that conciliationism is internally unstable. Chapter 1 uncovers a conflict: since we object by asserting, ENA extends to an epistemic norm of

objecting; conciliationism is itself committed to the claim that hearers sometimes have warrant to object to peers; together, these two theses entail that such hearers both have and lack warrant to object. Chapter 2 shows that the conciliationist cannot drop ENA: the view's defeat verdicts in cases of testimony-based evidence of peer disagreement requires a presumptive testimonial entitlement that only a social norm account, in which ENA is ineliminable, can ground. Chapter 3 takes the result of chapters 1 and 2 to show that what would ground conciliationism cannot be true if the view is true. Unlike the familiar self-defeat charge, the instability charge depends on no second-order dispute about conciliationism. An epilogue argues that conciliationism is, moreover, false.

Introduction

At its heart, the epistemology of disagreement is about the peer defeat question: does evidence of peer disagreement defeat a subject's justification to believe? An epistemic peer is someone who is (roughly) as reliable as you with respect to the truth of some proposition p (Elga 2007). Suppose you have justification to believe p but then learn that someone you reasonably regard as an epistemic peer believes not- p . What should you think?

Conciliationists hold that, absent a dispute-independent reason to think you are the one who is right, your justification is defeated and you should suspend judgment (Feldman 2006; Christensen 2007; Elga 2007). Anti-conciliationists deny this: you may rely on your own assessment of the matter and remain steadfast (Kelly 2005; Titelbaum 2015). Moderate conciliationists hold that sometimes evidence of peer disagreement defeats, but whether it does in your case depends on additional factors, such as your antecedent degree of justification (Lackey 2010) or on what your total evidence supports (Kelly 2010).

The literature has explored this question through three connected debates.

- *Evidential support relations*. If a body of evidence justifies at most one doxastic attitude toward a proposition, as the uniqueness thesis has it (White 2005), then epistemic peers who have the same evidence and disagree cannot both be rational. Under such conditions, it seems that one has reason to doubt the rational standing of one's own belief. But if uniqueness is false, perhaps disagreeing peers can rationally stick to their guns (Kelly 2013).

- *Level-bridging principles.* In a disagreement over p , evidence of disagreement seems to bear on p only indirectly, by bearing on whether one has assessed the evidence for p correctly. So, the question becomes how a subject's first-order attitudes must cohere with her higher-order attitudes about her own rationality, and whether epistemic akrasia can ever be rational (Horowitz 2014). If it can, then it seems that one could remain steadfast with respect to p while accommodating the evidence that one may have mistakenly assessed what one's evidence supports (Lasonen-Aarnio 2014). But if it can't, and if subjects are required to accommodate higher-order evidence, then conciliationism seems to follow.
- *Independence principle.* Higher-order evidence is evidence that bears on a subject's rational capacities, epistemic performance, or evidential situation (Christensen 2010a; Horowitz 2022). The phenomenon has been explored through cases of disagreement, hypoxia, reason-distorting drugs, fatigue, and bias. There are many ways a subject can acquire reason to doubt her own reasoning. The central questions concern whether such evidence requires bracketing one's first-order reasoning, taking a dispute-independent attitude toward one's epistemic standing (Christensen 2011, 2019).

Notice how these debates frame the peer defeat question. The subject of study is the single believer, her evidence, and the coherence of her attitudes. The disagreeing peer is registered as a source of input, but the source as such doesn't really matter. Peer disagreement is interchangeable with an altimeter reading or a reason-distorting pill. This way of framing the epistemology of disagreement transforms it into a debate over how a mind should manage inputs.

No doubt these debates are pursuitworthy. The problem is that they do not connect with the most distinctive feature of disagreement: it is something that happens between people. We

typically learn that another disagrees because of what we are told; the evidence at issue is often acquired by comprehending a conflicting assertion. And when we learn of disagreement this way, we do not merely register it as input. We don't weigh our epistemic situation in isolation. We are challenged. We shrink from challenges: maybe we were wrong. We answer them: defending our position, sharing our reasoning, and asking for the reasoning of the disagreeing party. Sometimes we are the one who knows, and we transfer our knowledge through sharing our reasoning. Disagreement, in the way it is ordinarily encountered, is an exchange within a practice of argumentation.

This dissertation explores the literature's central question by taking that practice seriously. It is an investigation into the epistemic significance of other minds, organized around two sets of questions. Both center on the hearer's side of an assertoric exchange. The first concerns the state of comprehending another person's conflicting assertion. When is conflicting testimony epistemically significant, and why is it significant, when it is? The second concerns the act of responding to a disagreement. When do hearers have warrant to object to epistemic peers? The first set of questions belongs to the epistemology of testimony, while the second belongs to the normativity of assertion. The dissertation argues that answering both sets of questions requires the same thesis: the epistemic norm of assertion (ENA), on which a speaker has warrant to assert only if she knows or has sufficient justification to believe what she asserts. And that is bad news for conciliationism.

The dissertation proposes a shift in perspective, from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal. Instead of asking what a solitary subject should do with a new piece of evidence, we should ask what interlocutors can and should do within a norm-governed practice of asserting, challenging, and objecting. The shift comes with a surprising verdict: conciliationism is internally unstable. The view's verdicts about its own paradigm cases demand an account of when and why a peer's conflicting testimony is epistemically significant; the only adequate account posits ENA;

and ENA is incompatible with conciliationism. What would ground the view cannot be true if the view is true. The three chapters establish this result in stages: the first uncovers the conflict between ENA and conciliationism, the second establishes conciliationism's dependence on ENA, and the third puts the two results together.

Chapter 1 The Problem of Warranted Objections

Chapter 1 uncovers the conflict between ENA and conciliationism. Its starting point is the normativity of assertion. Assertions are subject to epistemic assessment. When a speaker asserts something we take to be unknown or unjustified, we may permissibly respond with "How do you know that?" or, more strongly, "You don't know that." This challenge datum is standardly taken to support ENA (Williamson 2000; Goldberg 2015; Benton 2024). The chapter extends the thought to the hearer's side of the exchange. The literature on assertoric exchanges that focuses on hearers tends to ask about when hearers may believe what is asserted (Leonard 2021), and recently about when they have a duty to object (Lackey 2018; Goldberg 2020; Aird 2026). I ask a different question: under what conditions does a hearer have warrant to object?

Objecting, I argue, is a species of the act-type challenging, distinguished from questioning by its level of commitment: to question is to request the speaker's grounds; to object is to reject the assertion, either outright or in hedged form. Since one objects by asserting, the norm governing assertion governs objections. This yields the epistemic norm of objection (ENO): one is permitted to object to *p* by asserting outright only if one meets the relevant epistemic standard *E* with respect to not-*p*, or with respect to the claim that the speaker asserted *p* without meeting *E*. The disjunction reflects the fact that hearers may challenge either the content of an assertion

or the speaker's warrant to assert it. ENO is a conservative extension of ENA. It is supported by the challenge datum, and it is backed by a general account of normative transfer: a species of an act-type is governed by a norm at least as strong as the norm governing the genus (Simion 2021). Rejecting ENO while keeping ENA thus carries a high theoretical cost.

The trouble begins by thinking about cases. In *Mental Math**, Annie and Bin reasonably regard each other as peers at mental math. They split a lunch check; Annie comes to believe they owe \$32 each; Bin, on the basis of correct reasoning, comes to know they owe \$33. Annie asserts, "We owe \$32." Bin objects: "No, that's not right; we owe \$33." Intuitively, Bin has warrant to object. Call this the warranted objections (WO) intuition: hearers in Bin's position sometimes have warrant to object to speakers in Annie's position, even though it is reasonable for them to regard those speakers as peers.

The chapter offers two arguments for the WO intuition. The first proceeds by comparison with a stronger intuition already in the literature: that philosophical assertions are sometimes warranted even under systematic peer disagreement (Goldberg 2015; Fleisher 2021). Whoever accepts that should accept WO. The second, and central, argument derives WO from conciliationism itself. Consider what Annie should think about Bin's objection. Since it is reasonable for her to regard him as reliable at such calculations, she should regard his objection as warranted, just as when a trusted informant answers a question it would be irrational to remain agnostic about whether his answer is warranted. So, if conciliationism is true, there are cases where interlocutors in Annie's position should think that hearers in Bin's position have warrant to object. If that is right, it is implausible that WO is false. So, conciliationism is committed to WO.

Now the conflict. By ENO, if Bin has warrant to object, he meets E with respect to the claim that they owe \$33, which means his justification is not defeated by the disagreement. But

conciliationism says his justification is defeated. So, ENA (via ENO) and conciliationism jointly entail that Bin both has and lacks warrant to object. And since WO is derived from conciliationism, this is not an inconsistent triad from which one may drop WO. It is a dilemma: either conciliationism or ENA must go. Call this the problem of warranted objections.

The chapter closes by arguing that the problem cannot be avoided. Retreating to hedged objections is unmotivated or self-undermining; declaring peerhood rare amounts to abandoning conciliationism as standardly held; adding a full-disclosure condition changes the view beyond recognition. Nor does ENA revisionism help. Goldberg's context-sensitive norm and Fleisher's endorsement account were built for contexts of systematic disagreement, but the problem of warranted objections arises in ordinary contexts. The problem of warranted objections is thus the generalized form of Goldberg's problem of systematic peer disagreement, and it is more formidable.

Chapter 2 Disagreement, Testimony, Assertion

Chapter 1 shows that ENA and conciliationism conflict. That alone leaves open which to abandon; a conciliationist might simply deny ENA. Chapter 2 closes off that option by establishing a dependence claim: conciliationism is explanatorily dependent on ENA.

The chapter's point of departure is an observation about testimony. The epistemology of testimony has asked when comprehending an assertion justifies forming a new belief. But testimony has a second face: comprehending an assertion can also defeat a belief the hearer already holds. The paradigmatic cases of peer disagreement live on this second face. Evidence of disagreement is often testimony-based. For example, Bin learns that Annie disagrees by

comprehending her assertion. For this central class of cases, conciliationism amounts to a thesis about the epistemic significance of a certain kind of testimony: comprehending a peer's conflicting assertion defeats the justificatory status of a hearer's belief. The chapter assumes, without endorsing, that conciliationism is true, and then presses two questions the view leaves open. When is testimony-based evidence of disagreement epistemically significant? And why is it significant, when it is?

The when question is answered by the two rival accounts of testimonial justification, each of which yields a corollary for testimony's defeat face. Reductionism yields a positive reason requirement: a conflicting assertion defeats only if the hearer has positive, independent reason to regard the speaker as at least as reliable as he is. Anti-reductionism yields a presumptive right: a conflicting assertion defeats by default, absent a positive, dispute-independent reason to think one is correct or more reliable. Only the presumptive right fits the conciliationist's verdicts. In the most common cases, where the hearer lacks access to the speaker's track record, the positive reason requirement predicts that conflicting testimony almost never defeats. The reductionist may reply that our commonsense "person-theory" supplies the needed positive reasons (Fricker 1994). But the reductionist is committed to a qualitative difference between self-trust, which is presumptive, and trust in others, which is derivative. That commitment builds in a first-person bias: in a dispute, the subject's own calculation enjoys default standing while another person's must be confirmed, and that asymmetry licenses the self-privileging reasoning conciliationism is meant to rule out (Schafer 2015). So, conciliationists must posit a presumptive testimonial entitlement.

The why question asks what grounds that entitlement. There are three candidate answers. The assurance account grounds it in the speaker's assumption of responsibility toward her addressee (Hinchman 2005; Moran 2018); but an addressee-indexed ground cannot explain a hearer-general default, since any hearer who comprehends a conflicting assertion is affected,

addressee or not. The rationalist account grounds it a priori in the truth-generating function of rational sources (Burge 1993); a priori functionalism is highly questionable, and in any case, it cannot explain why speakers have reason not to deceive when deception pays. That leaves the social norms account (Graham 2010, 2020; Greco 2020; Simion 2021): social norms and sensibilities structure the social environment so as to make testimony reliable, much as natural laws structure the physical environment so as to make perception reliable. Crucially, one of these norms is ENA. When ENA is internalized in a community, conformity to it is intrinsically motivating, which is why hearers are entitled to expect truthful, warranted assertion even from speakers who would profit by deception. The account also enjoys its rivals' virtues. Like the rationalist account, it explains why the entitlement holds for hearers generally, since it is grounded in the norm-governed practice rather than in anything indexed to a particular exchange. Like the assurance account, it captures the interpersonal character of testimony: because a speaker who asserts is answerable to ENA, hearers acquire a right of complaint against violators and may pass the epistemic buck back to the speaker when challenged (Goldberg 2015). On this account, then, the presumptive entitlement is grounded, ineliminably, in ENA.

Two clarifications about the argument. The chapter does not need to endorse anti-reductionism, and it does not need to endorse ENA. It argues that conciliationists must posit each: the presumptive entitlement is what the view's verdicts require, and ENA is what the entitlement requires. The dependence claim can be true even if anti-reductionism and ENA are false.

The conclusion is that conciliationism is explanatorily dependent on ENA. The chapter draws one further consequence. The presumptive right effectively makes epistemic peerhood the default. What matters for the conciliationist is whether the hearer has dispute-independent reason to think he is more likely to be correct, not whether he possesses positive credentials for the speaker (King 2012).

Chapter 3 Accepting Defeat

Chapter 3 assembles the conclusions from chapters 1 and 2 into a single argument. Its conclusion is the thesis of the dissertation: conciliationism is internally unstable. The argument runs as follows. (1) If conciliationism is true, then there is an adequate account of when testimony-based evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant, and of why it is, when it is. (2) Any adequate account of the when question posits a presumptive testimonial entitlement: conflicting testimony defeats by default, absent dispute-independent defeaters. (3) Any adequate account of the why question posits ENA: the entitlement is grounded in the social norms structuring the environment, above all ENA and its internalization. (4) ENA and conciliationism are jointly inconsistent. (5) Therefore, conciliationism is internally unstable.

Premise (1) is modest. The conciliationist's verdicts about cases like Mental Math are not brute. Something about the exchange makes comprehending Annie's assertion the kind of thing that can defeat Bin's knowledge, and there is an account of what that is. Premises (2) and (3) are established by elimination, along the lines developed in Chapter 2, but now with an explicit adequacy constraint: equal standing. In the conciliationist's higher-order situation, Bin has reason to think one of them is mistaken and no impartial reason to think it is Annie. He is in that position only if comprehending her assertion supports $\$32$ roughly as strongly as his own cognitive performance supports $\$33$. Only the presumptive entitlement, grounded in ENA, satisfies equal standing. ENA delivers it through the interplay of assertion and comprehension. A speaker, by asserting, represents herself as conforming to the norm of assertion. If that norm is ENA, then she represents herself as knowing or as having sufficient justification to believe. A hearer's comprehension state involves grasping that the speaker has represented herself as such

(Graham 2010). So, granted that a hearer is by default entitled to accord a speaker the standing she claims, he can acquire support for a conflicting proposition that is at least as strong as the support his own cognitive performance can provide.

Premise (4) states that ENA and conciliationism are incompatible. Since one objects by asserting, ENA delivers ENO. Take Mental Math: Annie asserts \$32; Bin, who knows they owe \$33, objects. By conciliationism, his justification is defeated at the moment he objects. By ENO, his objection is warranted only if he meets E with respect to \$33, or with respect to the claim that Annie's assertion is unwarranted. He cannot meet the first disjunct, since conciliationism says his justification is defeated. He cannot meet the second disjunct either: he has dispute-independent reason to regard her as reliable, and by the very entitlement conciliationism requires, he should regard her assertion as warranted. So, if ENA is true, Bin lacks warrant to object, and so does anyone in his position. WO is false. But, as Chapter 1 showed, conciliationism is committed to WO. The two theses are jointly inconsistent. And since WO is derived from conciliationism, the conflict is between two theses, not three.

The conflict is no accident. What generates the trouble is the very feature of ENA that made it ineliminable at premise (3). By asserting a speaker represents herself as knowing or as sufficiently justified. Comprehension can deliver, by default, support as strong as support provided by the hearer's own cognitive performance. That is why conflicting testimony can defeat without the hearer knowing anything about the speaker in particular. But the same interplay between assertion and comprehension matters for the hearer's response. A hearer who responds by objecting thereby asserts, and so represents himself in just the same way. His objection is warranted only if the representation is accurate. Conciliationism needs assertion to be strong enough to defeat. ENA is what makes it that strong. And in making it that strong, ENA makes objecting something a defeated hearer is not warranted to do.

The conclusion follows. Conciliationism must posit ENA to explain the verdicts that matter most. But if ENA is true, conciliationism is false. The instability is internal. The argument nowhere endorses ENA. It shows that the trouble comes from what the view needs to be true. This distinguishes the result from the familiar self-defeat charge (Elga 2010). Self-defeat requires a second-order dispute among epistemologists about conciliationism itself. Were epistemologists to converge on the view, the self-defeat charge would dissolve. The present problem does not depend on what anyone thinks about the view. It depends on what would ground it.

Chapter 1: The Problem of Warranted Objections

Abstract: Disagreement is common. What happens when epistemic peers disagree over some issue p , where A believes p but B believes not- p ? Conciliationism says that both A and B should suspend judgment after learning of their disagreement. But suppose A is the first to assert on the matter. B is then the first to learn of their disagreement. Does B have warrant to assert not- p in response? Answering this question leads to a surprising conclusion: the epistemic norm of assertion is incompatible with conciliationism.

Keywords: epistemology of disagreement, higher-order evidence, norm of assertion, social epistemology, epistemic normativity.

1. Introduction

Assertions may be good or bad. For example, when a speaker asserts something, it is natural for a hearer to respond by saying something like ‘You shouldn’t say that!’, ‘Glad you said so!’, ‘Why would you say that!’, or ‘No, that doesn’t seem right.’ Assertions are, generally speaking, subject to normative assessment.

Assertions may be good or bad in a distinctively epistemic way, too. For example, when a speaker asserts something we take to be unknown or unjustified, we might respond by challenging the speaker’s epistemic warrant to assert. We might respond by

saying ‘How do you know that?’, ‘Do you know that?’, or, even stronger, ‘You don’t know that’. The fact that we might permissibly respond to speakers in this way has been taken to be evidence that a robustly epistemic norm governs the speech act of assertion itself (Goldberg 2015) (Williamson 2000) (van Elswyk & Benton 2023). Call this the challenge datum. Many who work on the normativity of assertion take the challenge datum to count as evidence in support of the following view:

Epistemic Norm of Assertion (ENA)

The speech act assertion is governed by a robustly epistemic norm such that a speaker S is permitted to assert content p only if S meets some epistemic standard E with respect to p.

The epistemic standard set by E might involve being certain that p (Stanley 2008), knowing p (Williamson 2000) (Kelp & Simion 2021) (Benton 2024), or having justification to believe p (Doven 2006) (Lackey 2008) (Kvanvig 2009) (McKinnon 2013). While ENA is not universally accepted, it is the orthodox view in the literature.¹

In this paper, I shall consider the following two questions: When are hearers in a position to challenge a speaker’s assertion? How should speakers respond when hearers challenge their assertions? In this way, I shall consider the normative role of challenges

¹ See, however, Mandelkern & Dorst (2022).

in the practice of assertion rather than whether the challenge datum supports one view of the normativity of assertion over another.

Take the speaker's epistemic position. Suppose that a speaker S has warrant to assert p because S has justification to believe p. S asserts p with warrant. Suppose that a hearer H responds to S's assertion by challenging it. Does H's challenge defeat S's justification? Is S required to suspend belief in response to H's challenge?

I will focus on cases where two conditions obtain. To describe the first condition, I need to introduce some technical terminology. In particular, I will treat 'objecting' and 'questioning' as species of the act-type 'challenging'. When one challenges an assertion by questioning it, one might do so by asking something like 'How do you know?' or 'Do you know that?'. When one challenges an assertion by objecting to it, one might do so by asserting something like 'You don't know that', 'No, that's not right'. Since the issue of defeat only seems relevant when the challenge is an objection, I will restrict my focus to the act of objecting.

The second condition will be familiar to those acquainted with the literature on the epistemology of disagreement. I will only focus on cases where interlocutors reasonably regard each other as epistemic peers.² For, by inquiring into whether an epistemic peer's objection defeats, we directly connect our discussion of the normative role of challenges in the practice of assertion to the central issue of the epistemology of disagreement.

² To say that S and H are epistemic peers with respect to p, I mean to say that S and H are as likely to know p, or are as reliable with respect to the truth of p. See Elga (2007).

Now we are in a position to rephrase our question regarding the speaker's epistemic position: Supposing that (i) S has justification to believe p, (ii) S asserts p, (iii) S and H reasonably regard each other as epistemic peers, and (iv) H responds to S's assertion by objecting, does H's objection defeat S's justification? To put it less abstractly, consider the following case:

Mental Math

One day, Annie and Bin go to lunch, agreeing to split the check evenly at the end of the meal. They also agree on a 20% tip. They order, eat, and then receive the check. Annie calculates what she thinks they owe, asserting 'We owe \$32 each'. Suppose that she's justified in believing this. Bin objects by asserting 'No, that's not right. We owe \$33'. Suppose finally that it is reasonable for each to regard the other as an epistemic peer.

What should Annie believe when she learns that Bin disagrees with her? Suppose that she reasoned as follows:

- I think we owe \$32, but Bin thinks we owe \$33.
- I'm pretty reliable at these sorts of calculations, and Bin's about as reliable as me.
- Turns out, he's wrong.

Many think that Annie's reasoning is rationally flawed, but what makes it so? A popular view, conciliationism, appeals to the notion of higher-order defeat together with some version of the independence principle.³ The thought is that Bin's objection provides Annie with evidence of peer disagreement and that such evidence constitutes a higher-order defeater, undermining the rationality of her initial belief. As a result, she should suspend judgment unless she acquires a dispute-independent reason to dismiss Bin's objection. So, according to conciliationism, Annie's reasoning is rationally flawed because her dismissal of Bin's objection is based on a dispute-dependent consideration. In general, when a speaker S's assertion is objected to by an epistemic peer H, S is rationally required to suspend belief in the content asserted unless she has a dispute-independent basis for dismissing the objection.

My aim in this paper is to pose a dilemma for those who accept ENA and conciliationism. The dilemma results from turning our focus to the hearer's epistemic position: Does Bin have warrant to respond to Annie's assertion by objecting? More generally, do hearers have warrant to object to speakers who they reasonably regard as epistemic peers? What I hope to show is that if ENA and conciliationism are true, then *Bin has warrant to object* and *Bin does not have warrant to object* in response to Annie's

³ The idea, in short, is that evidence of peer disagreement defeats the rationality of one's initial belief by way of providing higher-order evidence suggesting one's likely mistakenly assessed one's first-order evidence, and the independence principle provides a constraint on the sort of considerations which may be rationally relied upon to dismiss a peer's conflicting opinion. For the notion of higher-order defeat, see Christensen (2010); for the independence principle, see Christensen (2019).

assertion. So, either ENA or conciliationism must go. Call this the problem of warranted objections.

Here's the plan. In section two, I say more about what I mean by 'objecting' and 'warranted objections'. In section three, I motivate the claim that hearers in Bin's position have warrant to object to speakers in Annie's position. In section four, I present the argument for the problem of warranted objections and consider a few ways it might be avoided.

2. Warranted Objections

When the literature on the epistemology of speech acts considers the hearer's side of an assertoric exchange, the focus is usually on the conditions under which hearers have warrant to believe what's asserted. Do hearers need to possess a positive, independent reason to think a speaker is reliable in order to be able to form a justified testimony-based belief (Leonard 2021)? That's the typical question about hearers. Recently, however, other dimensions of the hearer's side have been taken into account. For instance, Goldberg (2020), Kelp & Simion (2021), and Simion (2023) have considered under what conditions hearers have a duty to believe what a speaker asserts. Goldberg (2020) and Lackey (2018) have considered under what conditions hearers have a duty to object in response to a speaker's assertion. One might read this paper as contributing to this trend. What I hope to show is that once we reflect on the conditions under which hearers have warrant to

object, we see that the epistemology of disagreement and the normativity of assertion are directly connected.

On the point of originality, I should note that I am not the first to explore this connection between the two literatures. For example, Sanford Goldberg (2015) and Will Fleisher (2021) argue from observations about systematic peer disagreement to similar conclusions about the nature of the norm of assertion. However, whereas Goldberg and Fleisher explore the connection between disagreement and assertion in the context of systematic peer disagreements, I am interested in ordinary conversational contexts, such as the one presented in *Mental Math*. This is what motivates framing the discussion in terms of the hearer's epistemic position and focusing on whether hearers have warrant to object in response to evidence of peer disagreement. The significance of this difference in focus will become apparent in the fourth section, but for now I will just say that the problem originally identified by Goldberg (2015) is a general one, applying not just to contexts where there is systematic peer disagreement but to any context where it is reasonable for interlocutors to regard each other as epistemic peers. Recognizing this shows (among other things) that Goldberg's and Fleisher's proposals fall short of adequately addressing the issue.

Here is the plan for the remainder of this section. First, I hope to clarify what I mean by 'objecting'. Second, I motivate what I call the simple account of warranted objections.

Again, I will be using the term 'objecting' in a slightly technical manner. In ordinary usage, we might use 'objecting' and 'challenging' interchangeably. In this paper, I will

treat ‘objecting’ and ‘questioning’ as species of the more general act-type ‘challenging’. So, when an interlocutor responds by challenging a speaker’s assertion, it is an open question whether the interlocutor responds by objecting or by questioning.

What I take to be distinctive of the act of challenging is that it is the kind of act whereby a hearer informs a speaker that what’s been asserted has not been accepted. There are different ways that a hearer might successfully inform a speaker that this is the case. Consider Bin and Annie. Annie asserts ‘We owe \$33’, but Bin does not accept this, at least not on her say-so alone. So, Bin might respond to Annie’s assertion in one of the following ways:

1. ‘How do you know that?’
2. ‘Do you know that?’
3. ‘I calculated a different amount: \$32. So, one of us is mistaken.’
4. ‘Hm, I don’t think that’s right.’
5. ‘No, that’s not right.’

All (1-5), I take it, are challenges according to our ordinary usage of the term, and in each Bin informs Annie that her assertion hasn’t been accepted. Notice that in (1, 2), Bin challenges Annie by questioning her. This allows him to inform her that he hasn’t accepted her assertion but that he might if she provides further epistemic support. Not so

in (3-5). Bin challenges Annie by claiming that she is or may be mistaken, which informs her that he hasn't accepted her assertion and that he has some degree of commitment to rejecting it. I don't mean to suggest that by objecting Bin's mind couldn't be changed. Rather, what I mean to highlight is that there is a difference in the kind of commitment that a hearer makes in response to a speaker's assertion. Questioning and asserting are different types of speech acts, after all.

Notice, too, that in (5) Bin responds by asserting outright, whereas in (3, 4) he responds by offering a hedged assertion. So, one can object by either asserting outright or by offering a hedged assertion. In this way, one can manage how strongly one is committed to rejecting an assertion. Indeed, Bin's commitment to rejecting Annie's assertion in (3) is arguably just as strong as his commitment to accepting it.

This difference between outright and hedged assertions is epistemically significant for both speakers and hearers.⁴ From the speaker's epistemic position, this difference is significant because ENA applies to outright assertions but not to hedged assertions.⁵ In the case of the latter, a speaker has to meet a less demanding epistemic standard in order to have warrant to offer a hedged assertion. So, if a speaker has enough epistemic support to warrant offering a hedged assertion, it doesn't follow that the speaker has enough epistemic support to warrant asserting outright. Thus, the speaker represents herself as being in a stronger epistemic position with respect to the content offered when she asserts outright compared to when her assertion is hedged, since in the former she represents

⁴ For more on the epistemic significance of the difference between asserting outright and hedging, see Goldberg (2015), Benton & van Elswyk (2020) and van Elswyk (2023).

⁵ The kind of hedging discussed here is sometimes called 'illocutionary hedging' or 'relational hedging', where the hedge functions to change the strength of how a content is presented, not the content itself. For more, see van Elswyk (2023, fn2).

herself as meeting ENA whereas in the latter she represents herself as having some epistemic support in the content offered but not enough to warrant outright assertion.

From the hearer's position, the difference between outright and hedged assertions is epistemically significant for the following reason. On the one hand, when a speaker asserts outright, the hearer acquires a (defeasible) reason to believe that the speaker meets the epistemic standard required to assert (Goldberg 2015: 39-71). On the other hand, when a speaker offers a hedged assertion, the hearer acquires a (defeasible) reason to believe that the speaker has some epistemic support for the content offered but not enough to assert outright. So, the sort of reason that a hearer acquires by comprehending an assertion depends on the degree of commitment a speaker makes with respect to the content offered.

To see why this matters in the present context, consider again Bin and Annie. Bin's objection in (5) represents himself as being in a stronger epistemic position than his objections in (3, 4).⁶ The result is a difference in higher-order impact for Annie.⁷ When Bin objects by asserting outright he provides Annie with a (defeasible) reason that has greater higher-order impact than when he objects by offering a hedged assertion. So, if Bin's objections do defeat Annie's justification, as is entailed by conciliationism, the

⁶ I am assuming a representational theory of assertion, where assertion is an act that represents the speaker's epistemic position toward what is asserted. The ENA theory of assertion is understood to be a representational theory of assertion. See Benton & van Elswyk (2020) and van Elswyk (2023) for discussions on how a speaker's epistemic position is represented by hedged assertions.

⁷ To see this, suppose that you rationally have credence .9 in *p*. Now, there is a difference between learning that your peer has credence .9 in not-*p* and learning that your peer has credence .6 in not-*p*; the former has greater higher-order impact than the latter. For more on this, see van Elswyk (2023).

degree to which her justification is defeated will depend in part on whether he objects by offering a hedged assertion or by asserting outright.

Besides differing in degree of commitment, objections may differ in informativeness. To see this, suppose that Bin is the one who reasoned accurately. Suppose, for instance, that the total on the bill is \$55. Now, consider the following two exchanges:

Exchange 1

Annie: We owe \$32.

Bin: No, that's not right.

Exchange 2

Annie: We owe \$32.

Bin: No, that's not right. See, the tip is \$11, because when you multiply 55 by .2 you get 11. Now, add that to 55, you get a total of 66; divide that by 2, you get 33; which is what we owe, \$33.

In both exchanges, Bin objects by asserting outright. In the second exchange, he provides Annie with a justification that shows why \$33 is the correct amount owed. He does not do this in the first exchange. So, in the second exchange but not the first, Bin attempts to

rationally persuade Annie. In this way, objections may be more or less informative, depending on whether an objector attempts to rationally persuade.

It may be that speakers are entitled to informative objections (Grice 1989). For, speakers don't merely want to know that they are mistaken but how or why they are mistaken. In cases of peer disagreement, for example, objectors like Bin may need to offer a justification to enable good information to be transmitted across reliability bottlenecks (Sperber & Mercier 2017: 194). Otherwise, speakers like Annie seem likely to be left in the position where they take themselves to have good reason to believe something (e.g., that they owe \$32) but also to have good reason to think that they are mistaken about this.

To conclude this section, I shall put forth a simple account of the normativity of objections.⁸ Consider again the claim that the speech act of assertion is governed by a robustly epistemic norm:

ENA

One is permitted to assert *p* only if one meets *E* with respect to *p*.⁹

⁸ Note that since I am offering an account of the normativity of objections, it is meant to apply to objecting in general, not just to cases where hearers object to epistemic peers.

⁹ In section four, I consider non-standard versions of ENA, arguing that they are unable to resolve the problem of warranted objections. See Goldberg's (2015) context-sensitive account of ENA and Fleisher's (2021) endorsement account.

Since we object by asserting outright or offering a hedged assertion, it is natural to turn to the normativity of assertion in order to account for the normativity of objections. If we do so, we get the following:

Epistemic Norm of Objection (ENO)

One is permitted to object to p by asserting outright only if one meets E with respect to either not- p or the claim that a speaker asserted p without meeting E .

First, notice the disjunction. The reason for this is that hearers might challenge the content of an assertion or a speaker's warrant to assert (van Elswyk & Benton 2023). As a result, hearers might object to the content of an assertion or to a speaker's warrant to assert. Notice, too, that the epistemic standard required to have warrant to object is the same epistemic standard required to have warrant to assert. It is this point that makes this a simple account. Lastly, note that for the remainder of the paper, 'objections' or 'objecting' will refer to objecting by asserting outright, unless stated otherwise.

ENO is motivated by the challenge datum. To see why, consider:

Exchange 3

Claire: Tanuj was at the party.

Marie: How do you know that?

Exchange 4

Claire: Tanuj was at the party.

Marie: No, he wasn't.

Claire: How do you know that?

Just as we can challenge an assertor by questioning 'How do you know?', we can in the same way challenge an objector, as exchange 4 shows. This suggests that if the challenge datum lends support to ENA, so too it should lend support to ENO. In fact, if the challenge datum supports ENA, then ENA should govern each iteration of an assertoric exchange — for example, an interlocutor's initial assertion, an objection, a rebuttal, a further rejoinder, and so on.

One might wonder about cases where a hearer is agnostic with respect to not-*p*. For example, suppose that you and I are having a discussion and I assert *p*. Now, suppose that you have already assessed your evidence and found that it supports neither *p* nor not-*p*. So, you're agnostic on the matter. Don't you have warrant to object in response to my assertion? One might take this to be the case independent of whether you meet E with respect my epistemic position vis-à-vis *p*. If this is right, then ENO is in trouble, for it seems that you have warrant to object in cases where ENO predicts that you do not.

This is too quick. To start, notice that a lot depends on what it is reasonable for you to believe about your available evidence and on what you are in a position to presume about my epistemic position. For example, if you have reason to think that there is evidence that you do not possess and which bears on whether p is true, but you are not in a position to presume that I am not in possession of it, then intuitively you lack warrant to object.¹⁰ At best, it seems that you have warrant to question the grounds for my assertion. To see this, suppose that you and I are detectives trying to discover whether p is true, that is, whether the butler is guilty of murder. On the basis of your currently available evidence, you decide to remain agnostic regarding the truth of p . However, suppose that it is reasonable for you to believe that further evidence bearing on the butler's guilt is forthcoming, only that you aren't in possession of it yet. Finally, suppose that I assert 'The butler is guilty'. Do you have warrant to respond by asserting 'You don't know that p /aren't certain that p /aren't justified in believing that p '? Intuitively, no. If that's right, it follows that you lack warrant to object. At best, it seems that you have warrant to ask 'How do you know that?' or 'Do you know that?'. Notice that this is contrary to what was suggested in the previous paragraph. Notice too that this is in line with what ENO predicts: unless it's reasonable for you to presume that I've asserted p while possessing insufficient evidence in support of p , you lack warrant to object in response to my assertion.

Things get trickier in cases where it's reasonable for a hearer to believe that she's in possession of all the evidence that will be made available on the issue, and she's concluded that whether p is true is undecidable. Here, one may wonder about such cases

¹⁰ Ballantyne (2015) for an extended discussion of the significance of unpossessed evidence.

where hearers have warrant to object. Are they a problem for ENO? Not necessarily. It depends on what it is reasonable for a hearer to infer about her and her interlocutor's respective epistemic positions. If a hearer may infer that her speaker is in a worse epistemic position than she is, then it seems that she has warrant to object. For example, suppose that Sally is at an academic conference giving a talk to her peers, arguing that *p* is undecidable. What's more, suppose that she is one of the few experts on the issue, and she knows all those who are as epistemically well-positioned as she is. Finally, suppose that she sees me, a stranger, stumble into the room at the end of her talk, having missed the most important parts of her argument. During Q&A, I assert *p*. Does Sally have warrant to object? Intuitively, yes. Does ENO predict this? Yes. To see why, notice that even though she is initially unaware of my epistemic position vis-à-vis *p*, she knows that she is one of the few experts concerning *p* and she knows all the other experts on the issue. Since she doesn't recognize me, she may infer that she is in a better epistemic position to assess the evidence than me. Since she's judged that *p* is undecidable, whereas I've asserted *p*, she may infer that I've asserted *p* without meeting the robustly epistemic standard vis-à-vis *p*. Thus, Sally satisfies the second disjunct. So, ENO predicts that she has warrant to object.

What about similar cases where a hearer isn't in a position to infer that her speaker is in a worse epistemic position? Intuitively, a hearer lacks warrant to object.¹¹ To see this,

¹¹ Kelp & Simion's (2021, 67-69) proposal implies this. In contrast, Goldberg's (2015) and Fleisher's (2021) proposals imply that such objections can be warranted, even though the objector doesn't meet *E* with respect to the speaker's epistemic position. I side with Kelp & Simion. In section four, I argue that Goldberg's and Fleisher's proposals cannot account for the problem of warranted objections. The upshot is that these proposals are unmotivated: they purport to be motivated by the problem of systematic peer disagreement, but, since they cannot account for the problem of warranted objections, that motivation is undercut.

suppose that Sally's colleague, Hermione, asserts p during Q&A. It seems that Sally shouldn't respond by asserting 'You don't know that p /aren't certain that p /aren't justified in believing that p '. Rather, it seems that Sally should ask for Hermione to provide grounds for her assertion. This too is what ENO predicts: if Sally is agnostic with respect to $\text{not-}p$, then unless it's reasonable for her to presume that Hermione's mistakenly assessed the evidence for whether p is true, she lacks warrant to respond by objecting.

What about cases where a hearer has misleading evidence about the speaker's epistemic position? For example, suppose that unbeknownst to Sally (and the rest of her colleagues), I am a self-taught expert on the issue. So, while she reasonably thinks that she is in a better position epistemically, it turns out that she is mistaken. Intuitively, it seems that she has warrant to object in response to my assertion. Does ENO get this sort of case right? It depends in part on the correct account of E in ENO, for different views make different predictions. For example, accounts where E stands for justification to believe p (Douven 2006) (Lackey 2008) (Kvanvig 2009) (McKinnon 2013) predict that Sally does indeed have warrant to object. Proponents of the knowledge norm, in contrast, suggest that while it is reasonable for Sally to believe that she has warrant to object, she in fact does not (Williamson 2000).¹² I do not want to take a stand on whether the justification norm or the knowledge norm better explains cases of misleading evidence. All I want to suggest is that they do not pose a problem for ENO.

¹² Thank you to an anonymous referee for flagging this point.

Here is the upshot: Cases where a hearer is agnostic with respect to not- p do not pose a problem for ENO. There are four key factors that come into play when considering such cases: (i) what it is reasonable for the hearer to believe about her available evidence; (ii) what it is reasonable for the hearer to presume about a speaker's epistemic position; (iii) what it is reasonable for the hearer to infer about her and her interlocutor's epistemic positions; and (iv) what the correct account of E is in ENO.

3. Mental Math, Revisited

Mental Math has been used to motivate the intuition that evidence of peer disagreement defeats knowledge or justification. Here I shall appeal to Mental Math to motivate a different intuition.

*Mental Math**

Annie and Bin reasonably regard each other as epistemic peers. One day, they decide to go to lunch, agreeing to split the check evenly at the end of the meal. They also agree on a 20% tip. They order, eat, receive the check. The total is \$55. Annie comes to believe that they owe \$32 each. *Bin, on the basis of correct reasoning, comes to know that they owe \$33.* Annie asserts, 'We owe \$32.' Bin objects, 'No, that's not right; we owe \$33.'

Does Bin have warrant to object to Annie? Intuitively, yes. Let's call this the warranted objections intuition (hereafter, the WO intuition): a hearer H in Bin's epistemic position has warrant to object to a speaker S in Annie's epistemic position, even though it is reasonable for H to regard S as an epistemic peer. If the WO intuition is true, what follows? According to ENO, H has warrant to object only if H meets E with respect to the claim that S's assertion is false or the claim that S's assertion is unwarranted. So, given the WO intuition plus ENO, it follows that hearers in Bin's position meet E with respect to the claim that speakers in Annie's position have asserted something that is false. This is directly in conflict with conciliationism, resulting in the problem of warranted objections. I shall offer two arguments in support of the WO intuition.

First off, it is instructive to compare the WO intuition with a similar, but stronger intuition: assertions are warranted even under conditions of systematic peer disagreement. Let's call this the renegade assertions intuition:

Renegade Assertions Intuition

It is sometimes the case that S asserts that p under conditions of a systematic peer disagreement and yet S's assertion is warranted.

(Goldberg 2015: 251)¹³

¹³ I am using Fleisher's (2021) term. See Goldberg's (2015: 248-249) label, the acronym AWSPD. See also Frances (2010).

Some of the assertions covered are, of course, objections. So, just as with the WO intuition, the renegade assertions intuition claims in effect that sometimes we have warrant to object to epistemic peers. However, the renegade assertions intuition further claims that we have warrant to object to epistemic peers even when our disagreement is systematic in nature. This makes it stronger than the WO intuition. A disagreement is a systematic disagreement when three conditions obtain: it is non-localized (i.e., it doesn't just pertain to a dispute over *p* but to a range of propositions), it is widespread (i.e., it isn't between individuals but groups), it is entrenched (i.e., the disagreement remains despite each side's awareness of the other's account and counter-evidence). So, if one endorses the renegade assertions intuition, then one should endorse the weaker WO intuition.

Philosophy, for example, is a domain where there is systematic peer disagreement. Philosophers, despite facing systematic peer disagreement, continue advancing arguments and making outright assertions. According to the renegade assertions intuition, there is nothing in principle wrong with this: philosophical assertions are not systematically unwarranted. In defence, Goldberg says the following:

Philosophizing as an activity flourishes (only?) in the context of dialogue and debate. If the practice is to flourish, we should want it to include a speech act by which one can present a proposition as true in such a way as to implicate one's own epistemic authority on the matter. In short, we have reason to want the practice to include assertions... [T]here is something slightly paradoxical, even offensive, in the thought that the flourishing of philosophical practice comes at the cost of systematically unwarranted assertions. This is a conclusion that we ought to avoid if at all possible.

(Goldberg 2015: 248-249)

In short, Goldberg suggests that the speech act assertion plays a crucial role in the practice of philosophy; we need such a speech act for the practice to flourish and achieve its aims. In light of this, we should think that sometimes such assertions are warranted.

The problem, according to Goldberg, is that the renegade assertions intuition is part of an inconsistent triad. Call this the problem of systematic peer disagreement. On the one hand, there is the thought that evidence of peer disagreement (systematic or not) defeats one's justification. On the other hand, there is the thought that assertion is governed by a robustly epistemic norm, which implies that one lacks warrant to assert when one's justification is defeated. Putting it all together, we get the result that there are cases where we may have, but lack, warrant to offer philosophical assertions; to put it another way, we sometimes have, but lack, warrant to object to our philosophical peers. Something has to give.

To resolve the tension, Goldberg (2015: 250-289) proposes that the epistemic content of the norm of assertion is context-sensitive. The idea is that different conversational contexts come with different epistemic standards on warranted assertion. In ordinary contexts, the epistemic content is said to be demanding, requiring knowledge. In other contexts, the epistemic content is said to be lax, permitting speakers to assert despite lacking justification to believe. Contexts where there is systematic disagreement are of the latter sort. So, in contexts of systematic disagreement, interlocutors may have warrant to assert even though their justification to believe is defeated.

It might seem that the problem of warranted objections consists of another inconsistent triad: the WO intuition, ENA, and conciliationism.¹⁴ If we accept all three, it follows that sometimes we have, but lack, warrant to object to epistemic peers. However, the main argument for the WO intuition appeals to conciliationism directly. If that argument is sound, the problem of warranted objections is not an inconsistent triad but a dilemma, a conflict between ENA and conciliationism. For now, it is just worth noting that if one endorses the renegade assertions intuition, one should endorse the WO intuition as well. And if one resolves the problem of systematic peer disagreement while holding onto the renegade assertions intuition, one should aim to resolve the problem of warranted objections while holding onto the WO intuition, too.

The main argument for the WO intuition appeals to conciliationism. Consider what Annie should think about Bin's objection. Since it is reasonable for her to regard him as an epistemic peer, she should regard his objection as providing her with evidence of peer disagreement. And if conciliationism is true, she should regard this as a higher-order defeater. What else follows? Should she think that his objection is warranted? Yes. The fact that makes it the case that she should regard his objection as a higher-order defeater – that is, the fact that it is reasonable for her to regard him as an epistemic peer – also makes it the case that she should regard his objection as warranted. So, if conciliationism is true and Annie should regard Bin's objection as a higher-order defeater, then she should also regard it as warranted.

To see this, consider Annie's perspective. Suppose she reasoned as follows:

¹⁴ Thank you to an anonymous referee for flagging this point.

- I think we owe \$32, but Bin said we owe \$33.
- I'm pretty reliable at these sorts of calculations, and he's about as reliable as me.
- Nonetheless, what he said is wrong.

Suppose that Annie's thought expressed by the claim 'Bin said we owe \$33' is about Bin's performance of the speech act assertion, where she takes him to have represented himself as having good reason to think that they owe \$33. In addition, suppose that Annie's assessment of Bin's objection as 'wrong' is meant to express the judgment that he lacked sufficient epistemic support to assert this. So, Annie takes Bin's objection to be unwarranted. Intuitively, this is irrational. Rather, if she considers whether he has warrant to object, she should think that he does. What accounts for this? It is the same thing that accounts for higher-order defeat: it is the fact that she thinks that he is an epistemic peer. If she thinks that he is an epistemic peer, she should think that his objection is warranted.

To sharpen the point, suppose she reasoned as follows:

- I think we owe \$32, but Bin said we owe \$33.
- I'm reliable at these sorts of calculations, and he's about as reliable as me.
- Because of what he said, I should suspend belief on the matter, even though what he said was wrong.

On the one hand, Annie responds to Bin's objection as a higher-order defeater, suspending judgment as a result. On the other hand, she responds to his objection as unwarranted, thinking to herself that Bin lacks adequate epistemic support. Intuitively, these two responses are rationally incompatible: if she thinks that his objection is epistemically significant, providing her with a higher-order defeater, then she should think that it is warranted, having adequate epistemic support. Moreover, if conciliationism is true, she should respond to his objection as a higher-order defeater. Thus, if conciliationism is true, she should also respond to his objection as warranted.

One might suggest that Annie could be agnostic instead, withholding judgement on whether his objection is warranted or not. This is mistaken. To see why, consider an analogous case. Suppose that Eylül asks Dario whether the concert starts at 7:00 or 7:30. Suppose that she asks him because she has good reason to think that he is likely to know the answer to the question. Dario responds by asserting that it starts at 7:00. Suppose she then considers whether he has good reason to think that the concert starts at 7:00; in effect, she considers whether his assertion is warranted. Could she remain agnostic after taking up the issue? Intuitively, no, she should think that his assertion is warranted unless her reason for thinking that Dario is likely to know the answer to the question is defeated. Similarly, it seems irrational for Annie to remain agnostic once she takes up the issue of whether Bin has good reason to think that they owe \$33. So long as it is reasonable for her to think that he is reliable with respect to these sorts of calculations, she should regard his assertions about such matters as warranted.

Arguably, the best explanation of this connection between what it is reasonable for Annie to think about Bin's reliability and what Annie should think about Bin's warrant to object is the WO intuition: sometimes it is the case that interlocutors in Bin's epistemic position have warrant to object to interlocutors in Annie's epistemic position. Of course, there are cases where we should regard an epistemic peer's objection as warranted even though, in fact, it is not. Nevertheless, it is implausible to suggest that there are no cases where we should regard an epistemic peer's objection as warranted and, in fact, it is. We should presume that there are such cases. The burden of proof is on one who wishes to deny this. So, absent good reason to think otherwise, we should think that the WO intuition follows from conciliationism.

4. The Problem of Warranted Objections

The problem of warranted objections results from considering, on the one hand, whether the WO intuition is true and, on the other, the conditions under which Bin has warrant to object to Annie in *Mental Math**. In regard to the former, the WO intuition follows from conciliationism. Moreover, there are independent grounds for thinking the WO intuition is true. In regard to the latter, ENO claims that in order to have warrant to object to Annie's assertion *p*, Bin must meet a robustly epistemic standard *E* with respect to not-*p* or with respect to Annie's epistemic position vis-à-vis *p*. This is where things go bad. If ENO is true and (following from conciliationism) Bin does have warrant to object, it follows that he meets this robustly epistemic standard with respect to not-*p*. That means

that his knowledge and justification to believe p are not defeated by evidence of peer disagreement. But (following from conciliationism) his knowledge and justification are defeated by evidence of peer disagreement. And if that's the case, then (following from ENO) he doesn't have warrant to object – that is, the WO intuition is false. Thus, it follows from ENO and conciliationism that Bin has, and lacks, warrant to object to Annie in Mental Math*.

One might wonder whether I've misconstrued conciliationism. For, it seems that on my account, the conciliationist cannot say that a hearer may acknowledge that a speaker is an epistemic peer and yet reckon with the possibility that the speaker has made an error in her reasoning. Raising an objection, the thought goes, allows for a hearer to make the epistemic peer explicate her grounds for her assertion, perhaps revealing an error. Doesn't my discussion preclude this possibility? Fortunately, no. To see why, recall the technical distinctions introduced in the second section: questioning and objecting are species of the general act-type challenging, and there is a further distinction between objecting by asserting outright and objecting by offering a hedged assertion. This analysis is intended to capture how a hearer may control her level of commitment in response to a speaker's assertion. A hearer may go so far as to inform the speaker that the assertion has been rejected. More mildly, a hearer may simply request a speaker to explicate her grounds for her assertion by asking 'How do you know that?' or 'Do you know that?'. I assign the term 'objecting' to the former response, while to the latter I assign the term 'questioning'. One may contest these terminological assignments. In any case, my discussion doesn't preclude the conciliationist from accounting for cases where a hearer

acknowledges that a speaker is an epistemic peer while nevertheless challenging the epistemic peer's grounds for her assertion.

One might claim that while hearers like Bin don't have enough epistemic support to have warrant to object by asserting outright, they do have enough to have warrant to object by offering a hedged assertion instead. This allows one to deny the WO intuition while still retaining part of its intuitive appeal. After all, being in a position to offer a hedged assertion is better than nothing. The problem, however, is that this suggestion is either unmotivated or self-undermining. I take it that it is motivated by a commitment to conciliationism. But, as is argued in section three, conciliationism is committed to the WO intuition. But if one is not motivated by a commitment to conciliationism, there seems to be no need to deny the WO intuition to begin with.

One might contest the relevant notion of epistemic peerhood. Some say that an epistemic peer is hard to find (King 2011) (Matheson 2014a) (Matheson 2014b) (Schafer 2015). The suggestion is that epistemic peerhood is a relation between interlocutors that is rarely, if ever, realized in our epistemic practice. So, it is unreasonable to assume that interlocutors such as Annie and Bin actually have good grounds for regarding each other as epistemic peers. In this way, one may deny the WO intuition and thereby avoid the problem of warranted objections. The cost of this suggestion involves endorsing a version of conciliationism that most others who have contributed to the debate do not endorse. So, while this technically undercuts the problem, it effectively amounts to rejecting conciliationism.

One might opt for a version of conciliationism which includes a full-disclosure condition (Feldman 2006). This condition states that evidence of peer disagreement doesn't have defeating force until both parties have tried but failed to rationally persuade one another. This means that Bin has warrant to object in response to Annie's assertion, and that his justification is defeated only once his attempt to rationally persuade Annie has failed. One problem with this revision is that the proponent of conciliationism is no longer able to appeal to Mental Math-style cases. Another is that it is unclear how one might motivate the full-disclosure condition in the first place. For if what defeats Bin's justification is the thought that he is likely mistaken, it is hard to see why Annie's assertion doesn't deliver this information. A third problem is that, it seems, if Bin observed that Annie was not convinced by his attempt to justify his view, this should serve as grounds for reassessing her status as an epistemic peer. That is, it seems to serve as evidence that she's not as reliable as he is at performing such calculations.

One might doubt ENO. For example, one might claim that while assertors need to comply with a robustly epistemic norm (e.g., justification or knowledge), objectors need only comply with a weaker epistemic norm, something which permits the absence of justification to believe. If we have reason to think that this claim is true, then we would have reason to think that Bin has warrant to object. Moreover, we would have reason to think that ENA and conciliationism are compatible. But is there any reason to think this claim is true? Is the norm of objection weaker than the norm of assertion? Goldberg's (2015) context-sensitive account and Fleisher's (2021) endorsement account may be helpful here, since both attempt to vindicate the thought that there are cases where a speaker (like Bin, perhaps) has warrant to assert something despite lacking justification

to believe it. Goldberg and Fleisher focus on assertions made in the context of systematic peer disagreement. What about objections made in the context of peer disagreement?

The context-sensitive account is not suited for the job since it allows for the epistemic content of the norm of assertion to shift between contexts but not within a context.¹⁵ What is needed is an account that explains shifts within a context. The endorsement account seems better suited for the job since it allows for such shifts. On this account, shifts depend on the purpose a speaker's assertion is meant to serve. Some assertions are meant to informatively communicate. When a speaker has this as her aim when asserting, the speaker is subject to a robustly epistemic norm, such as knowledge or justification. Some assertions are merely meant to endorse a proposition. And when a speaker has this as her aim when asserting, the speaker is subject to a weak epistemic norm, one which permits the absence of knowledge or justification. For example, a scientist might assert a hypothesis ('If fossil DNA testing returns result x, then dogs were domesticated twice' (Fleisher 2021: 367)), where the aim of the assertion is to merely endorse it; but the same scientist in the same context might assert her experimental results ('I engaged in fossil DNA testing, and it returned x' (Fleisher 2021: 367)), where the aim of the assertion is to informatively communicate. On the endorsement account, the scientists' assertions have different purposes and should be accordingly assessed differently. The hypothesis should be judged by the light of a weak epistemic standard, while the experimental results should be judged according to a strong epistemic standard. This is how the endorsement account purports to explain why it is sometimes the case that speakers appear to have warrant to assert something despite lacking justification to

¹⁵ Fleisher (2021: 374-376) makes this point.

believe it. Perhaps, we should think that objections are endorsements. Perhaps, the reason Bin has warrant to object is because the norm governing objecting is weak, and the reason for this is because objecting is no more than endorsing.

This is obviously wrong. Just consider again if Bin were to attempt to rationally persuade Annie.

Annie: We owe \$32.

Bin: No, that's not right. See, the tip is \$11, because when you multiply 55 by .2 you get 11. Now, add that to 55, you get a total of 66; divide that by 2, you get 33; which is what we owe, \$33.

Bin's response may be rude or pig-headed, but it is wrong to say that it is not meant to be informative. More generally, it is implausible that objections are a kind of assertion which don't aim at informative communication. If that's right, then Fleisher's endorsement account won't help us here.

There is a general worry for one who wishes to reject ENO. This has to do with explaining normative transfer from genus to species. A plausible account explains normative transfer in the following way (Simion 2021: 87-100): species of a genus must be governed by a norm that is at least as strong as the norm governing the genus. For example, consider the activity of preparing a meal and the activity of preparing a meal of a certain cuisine. What counts as preparing a good meal of a certain cuisine faces more

normative constraints than what counts as preparing a good meal. Similarly, consider the activity of dancing and the activity of dancing in a certain style. What counts as dancing well in a certain style faces more normative constraints than what counts as dancing well. So, if we think of objection as a species of the act-type assertion, and it seems that we should, then we should think that objection is governed by a norm that is at least as demanding as the norm governing assertion. So, on this account, if assertion is governed by a robustly epistemic norm, then objection cannot be governed by a weak epistemic norm. So, anyone who wishes to reject ENO does so at the cost of giving up this account of normative transfer.

In short, one should expect the norm governing all assertions to govern all its particular types, including objections. And as the account of normative transfer shows, ad hoc solutions come with a hidden but high theoretical cost. Thus, introducing an exception in the case of objections requires an especially compelling rationale.¹⁶

Conclusion

I have argued that ENA and conciliationism lead to the problem of warranted objections. If the argument holds, then those who endorse both views face a genuine dilemma.

The problem of warranted objections may be regarded as the generalized form of the issue identified by the problem of systematic peer disagreement. It is not just contexts

¹⁶ Thank you to an anonymous referee for the suggestion that I add this summary.

where there is systematic peer disagreement that raise trouble, but ordinary contexts as well. This means that the problem is more formidable than was previously recognized, requiring more drastic revisions than those envisioned by Goldberg (2015) and Fleisher (2021). The choice is between conciliationism and ENA. Either peer disagreement doesn't defeat, or assertion doesn't require justification or knowledge.

Chapter 2: Disagreement, Testimony, Assertion

Abstract: Reductionism and anti-reductionism offer rival accounts of testimonial justification. The debate has tended to focus on one kind of case only: cases where testimony stands to justify the formation of a new belief. Testimony has a second face. Comprehending an assertion can defeat a belief as well. The paradigmatic cases of peer disagreement live on the second face: the hearer already believes otherwise, and the question is whether a peer's conflicting testimony defeats that belief. Here reductionism and anti-reductionism come apart. This paper assumes, without endorsing, conciliationism: the view that evidence of peer disagreement can defeat a subject's justification to believe. It then asks about the conditions under which such evidence is significant, and why it is, when it is. The surprising answer is that conciliationism is explanatorily dependent on the thesis that assertion is governed by a robustly epistemic norm (ENA). Independence-based conciliationism is best explained by anti-reductionism's presumptive testimonial entitlement. And that entitlement is best vindicated, at least in part, by ENA. A speaker's conflicting assertion is epistemically significant by default, and this default is grounded, in part, in the epistemic norm governing assertion. The upshot: the three core areas of social epistemology – disagreement, testimony, and assertion – are intimately connected in a way not previously recognized.

Keywords: The epistemology of testimony; the norm of assertion; the epistemology of disagreement; social epistemology; epistemic normativity

Introduction

Two questions sit at the center of the epistemology of testimony. When is testimony epistemically significant? And why is it significant, when it is? Reductionism and anti-reductionism offer competing accounts. For the reductionist, testimony is significant only when the hearer has a positive, independent reason to trust the speaker. For the anti-reductionist, testimony is significant by default. So far, familiar ground. What has gone unnoticed is where the first question gets tested. The two views tend to be tried against one kind of case only: cases where testimony stands to justify a new belief. But testimony has a second face. Comprehending an assertion can defeat a hearer's belief as well as justify the formation of a new one.

The defeat face of testimony is the home territory of a different literature: the epistemology of disagreement. Two questions sit at the core of that literature as well. The first asks whether peer disagreement can defeat the justificatory status of a subject's belief. Conciliationists say yes, while anti-conciliationists say no.¹⁷ The second asks when it is reasonable to regard someone as an epistemic peer. The second has received less attention, but it matters arguably just as much. For, if peer disagreement defeats but is rare, it fails to pose a skeptical threat to our epistemic practice.

¹⁷ For conciliationism, see Christensen (2007; 2011), Elga (2007), Feldman (2006), and Matheson (2015). For anti-conciliationism, see Hawthorne & Srinivasan (2013), Kelly (2005), and Titelbaum (2015).

In the paradigmatic cases from the disagreement literature, evidence of peer disagreement is testimony-based. For this central class of cases, conciliationism amounts to a thesis about the epistemic significance of a certain kind of testimony.¹⁸ It says that comprehending an epistemic peer's conflicting assertion provides a higher-order defeater. In this paper, I assume, without endorsing, that conciliationism is true. I then ask what the view requires once we press two questions it leaves open. When is testimony-based evidence of peer disagreement epistemically significant? And why is it epistemically significant, when it is?

The answers are surprising. Conciliationism turns out to be explanatorily dependent on the thesis that assertion is governed by a robustly epistemic norm (henceforth, ENA). The argument has two parts. The first concerns the when question. Of the two general answers on offer, the reductionist answer carries a default first-personal bias, and that bias delivers anti-conciliationist verdicts in the most common cases where, intuitively, evidence of disagreement defeats. The reductionist therefore cannot deliver the conciliationist's verdicts on testimony's defeat face. Rather, it is anti-reductionism's presumptive testimonial entitlement that best accounts for the conciliationist data: parties to a disagreement should regard one another's conflicting testimony as epistemically significant by default, absent defeaters. The second part of the argument

¹⁸ Two caveats. First, conciliationism is standardly glossed as a view about the rational response to evidence of disagreement however acquired, not as a view about testimony. The present recasting is a claim about the paradigmatic cases, not about every formulation of the view. Second, the thesis defended here directly covers testimony-mediated disagreement. Cases where the evidence arrives non-testimonially (inferring a colleague's disagreement from her behavior, say, or bare statistical knowledge that experts are divided) fall outside its direct scope. Plausibly the significance of such disagreements is parasitic on the significance of the assertions that would express them, in which case the account extends. Establishing this is a task for another occasion.

concerns the why question: why do hearers enjoy such a presumptive entitlement? There are three potential answers: the assurance account (Hinchman 2005; McMyler 2011; Moran 2018), the rationalist account (Burge 1993), and the social norms account (Graham 2010, 2020; Greco 2020; Simion 2021). Only the social norms account withstands scrutiny. On this account, the reliability of testimony, and with it the presumptive testimonial entitlement, is grounded, in part, in ENA. Conciliationism thus inherits that dependence: it is explanatorily dependent on ENA.

The dependence claim is not that ENA is the sole ground for the epistemic significance of conflicting testimony and, in turn, the presumptive testimonial entitlement. Rather, the claim is that ENA is an ineliminable ground: any adequate account of why conflicting testimony defeats by default must appeal to ENA.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 sharpens the notion of epistemic significance and presents conciliationism. Section 2 connects conciliationism to the epistemology of testimony: it states the rival accounts of testimonial justification, derives their corollaries for the defeat face, and poses the paper's two questions. Section 3 argues that the reductionist corollary fails to fit the conciliationist verdicts in the most common cases of disagreement, leaving the anti-reductionist's presumptive entitlement as the only viable answer to the when question. Section 4 asks what grounds that entitlement, arguing against the assurance and rationalist accounts and in favor of the social norms account. According to the social norms account, ENA plays an ineliminable role in grounding the reliability of testimony and thus the presumptive testimonial entitlement. The concluding section draws some implications for social epistemology and the notion of epistemic peerhood.

1 Epistemic Significance and Conciliationism

To start, I should note that I will assume a modest foundationalist approach to justification. This is because some anti-reductionists model testimony on perception, and modest foundationalism is a widely accepted anti-skeptical approach to perceptual justification. Just as a perceiving subject enjoys a presumptive entitlement to move from its seeming that *p* to believing that *p*, the anti-reductionist holds that a hearer enjoys a presumptive entitlement to move from comprehending an assertion that *p* to believing that *p*.¹⁹

I should also note a couple points about ENA. The norm is epistemic in that proper assertion requires knowing or having sufficient justification to believe what's asserted (Goldberg 2015; Williamson 2000). When a speaker asserts *p*, what she does is represent herself in a certain way. In particular, she represents herself as complying with the norm, and since the norm is epistemic, she represents herself as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe. I am not assuming ENA. I am arguing that conciliationists must posit ENA to discharge an explanatory burden.

I should finally note that I will use the term “epistemic significance” in an idiosyncratic way. My usage is in order to capture the middle ground between conciliationism and anti-conciliationism, and to illuminate where the real difference lies. It is also helpful for tying together testimony's two faces.

¹⁹ See Graham (2025) for a recent defense of the epistemic analogy between testimony and perception.

I will take epistemic significance to be a threshold status: evidence is epistemically significant just in case it permits or requires a change in the subject's doxastic state. The relevant doxastic states are belief, disbelief, and suspension. Sometimes a subject's evidence permits the formation of a new belief. Sometimes a subject's evidence requires her to give up a belief she already has. Both cases involve evidence that permits or requires doxastic change, and are cases where evidence is epistemically significant.

More concretely, consider the following:

Mental Math

Bin is reliable at mental math, and it is reasonable for him to regard Annie as an epistemic peer with respect to such calculations. One day, they go to lunch, and agree to split the check evenly at the end of the meal. They also agree on a tip. They order, eat, receive the check. Bin forms the belief that they owe \$33 each. It turns out he's calculated correctly, coming to know that they owe \$33. Annie asserts, "We owe \$32 each."

Comprehending Annie's assertion provides Bin with evidence. Its significance can take two forms, depending on Bin's situation. Suppose, contrary to the case's description, that Annie had asserted before Bin performed the calculation. He would have had no attitude on the matter when comprehending her assertion. Arguably, her testimony would then have permitted him to form a belief: he could reasonably have come to believe that they

owe \$32 on her say-so, since he had reason to regard her as reliable at mental math. Call this the justification face of testimony. As the case is described, however, Bin already believes that they owe \$33. Indeed, he knows it. Here, according to conciliationism, comprehending Annie's assertion requires doxastic change on his part: Bin must suspend judgment because Annie's testimony defeats the justificatory standing of his belief. Call this the defeat face. Same source, same kind of evidence, two ways it can be epistemically significant.

Evidence can confer justification without being epistemically significant.²⁰ For example, suppose it had been predicted to rain all day today. But you go outside and notice right away that it is sunny without a cloud in sight. Through direct observation you gain sufficient justification that permits you to believe that it is not raining. But suppose that as you reenter your apartment, your partner asserts that it is raining. Suppose you are aware that her assertion is based on the weather prediction. Comprehending your partner's assertion confers *prima facie* justification for the proposition that it is raining, but it is insufficient to meet the threshold required for a change to your doxastic state; your belief formed moments ago through direct observation defeats the *prima facie* justificatory support provided by your partner's testimony.

Note that in the case of defeat, evidence simultaneously confers positive justification for one belief while defeating justification for another. For example, your direct observation confers *prima facie* justification for believing that it is not raining while

²⁰ See Bernecker (2023) and Simion (2024) on justified evidence resistance.

simultaneously defeating the prima facie justification provided by testimony for believing it is raining.

It is also worth noting that defeat can come in degrees. A defeater can also be strong enough to require suspension, in which case it is epistemically significant in the sense of the term relevant to this paper. I am interested in the kind of defeat that concerns full belief.

Now consider the disagreement between Annie and Bin. Conciliationists and anti-conciliationists can agree, minimally, that Bin's comprehension of Annie's assertion confers prima facie justification to believe that they owe \$32. The question is whether such evidence is epistemically significant, defeating his prima facie justification and requiring him to suspend belief in the proposition that they owe \$33. Conciliationists say that it is; anti-conciliationists deny this.

So, conciliationists say that Annie's testimony provides Bin with a defeater. The kind of defeater, in particular, is a higher-order defeater. What is a higher-order defeater? And what are the conditions under which higher-order defeaters are themselves defeated? Answering these two questions is necessary to understanding conciliationism.

Suppose Bin were to reason as follows upon learning that Annie disagrees.

- I think we owe \$33; Annie thinks we owe \$32;
- I am pretty good at mental math, and I thought that she was as good as me;

- Apparently not.

The conciliationist says that Bin's reasoning is irrational. Here is the idea. Bin's own calculation gives him prima facie reason to think that they owe \$33, but after learning of Annie's calculation he gains prima facie reason to think they owe \$32. Taken together, he has prima facie reason to think either he or Annie is mistaken. So, what should he think? Can he rely on his own calculation to conclude that Annie is the one who is mistaken? No, according to conciliationism: Bin should regard his and Annie's calculations impartially. Prior to the dispute, he had good reason to think that he and Annie were as reliable at mental math. The mere fact of disagreement doesn't change that. Since he lacks an impartial basis to privilege his calculation over hers, he should suspend judgment.

The justificatory status of his higher-order belief that either he or Annie is mistaken defeats the justificatory status of his first-order belief that they owe \$33. That is how higher-order defeaters work in such cases. Now, to defeat the higher-order defeater, Bin needs grounds independent of the dispute for thinking that he is more reliable. Suppose Bin knows that Annie had three glasses of soda at lunch and that soda degrades her reliability at arithmetic. Those are grounds with the right shape. They bear on Annie's reliability without appeal to the disagreement itself.

More precisely then, conciliationism amounts to the following:

Independence-Based Conciliationism

In a case where a subject H has prima facie justification to believe p but learns that another party S disagrees, and where it is reasonable for H to regard S as an epistemic peer: H's justification to believe p is defeated unless she has a positive, independent reason to think it is she who is correct or more reliable.²¹

The view states, in effect, that evidence of peer disagreement is epistemically significant, absent a dispute-independent defeater.

2 Disagreement and Testimony

Conciliationism is paradigmatically concerned with cases of testimony, as in *Mental Math*. This is not surprising: testimony is the most common route to learning what another person thinks. The debate between conciliationism and anti-conciliationism has spawned a number of related debates concerning such issues as evidential support relations (uniqueness/missivism), level-principles (epistemic akrasia), and the nature of higher-order evidence. All of these grew out of the question of whether evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant. Not many, however, have fully investigated when such evidence is epistemically significant, and even fewer have considered why it is, when it is.²² Both questions belong to the epistemology of testimony.

²¹ See Christensen (2009) and (2019) for more on the dispute-independence constraint.

²² To my knowledge, the why question has not been directly addressed in the disagreement literature. Goldberg (2015) and Fleisher (2021) come closest. There are some who have addressed the when

Start with the when question: under what conditions does comprehending a conflicting assertion defeat a subject's prima facie justification? Assuming conciliationism is true, one might say the answer is given by independence-based conciliationism as stated in the last section but formulated to cover cases of testimony: H is a hearer, S is a speaker, and the way H learns that S disagrees is through testimony-based evidence. That might seem like the end of it, but it is not. Notice the schematic clause "it is reasonable for H to regard S as an epistemic peer" in independence-based conciliationism. It is, in effect, a clause about the conditions under which a disagreeing party's testimony is epistemically significant, but it doesn't state what those conditions are. When does comprehending a speaker's assertion provide equal prima facie support to that provided by the hearer's own cognitive performance, defeating a hearer's prima facie justification and requiring her to suspend judgment? This is where the epistemology of disagreement gives way to the epistemology of testimony.

The latter has debated its own version of the question: when does comprehending a speaker's assertion confer prima facie justification for a hearer? There are two general answers: reductionist and anti-reductionist.²³ The reductionist's answer is committed to two general entitlements.²⁴ The first is a presumptive entitlement to self-trust: every normal individual is entitled, from the start of inquiry, to rely on her own basic belief-forming faculties. The second is a derivative entitlement to trust in others: our entitlement

question, often indirectly. See, for example, Christensen (2011), King (2012), Lackey (2010), and Sherman (2015). The when question is directly addressed by Schafer (2015).

²³ There are other answers, but these are the two main answers. For example, Paul Faulkner (2011) rejects both the positive reason requirement and any presumptive entitlement. So, he fits uneasily in the reductionism/anti-reductionism division. On his trust theory, uptake is rationalized by the hearer's affective trust in a speaker, an attitude that involves presuming the speaker will prove trustworthy and that gives the speaker a reason to be trustworthy. For an extended argument against Faulkner's theory, see Graham (2012).

²⁴ See Schafer (2015) and Foley (2001).

to rely on the faculties of others derives from the evidence generated by exercising the first entitlement. In other words, the justificatory force of testimony is derivative of evidence backed by first-personal epistemic sources.

Positive Reason Requirement

Comprehending a speaker's assertion that *p* confers prima facie justification to believe *p* for a hearer only if she has a positive, independent reason to regard the speaker as reliable with respect to *p*.

Comprehension is not enough, on this view. The hearer needs positive evidence supplied by her own faculties about the speaker or about the practice.

Anti-reductionism denies the positive reason requirement, positing instead a presumptive testimonial entitlement.

Presumptive Right

Comprehending a speaker's assertion confers prima facie justification for a hearer, permitting the hearer to believe the asserted content.²⁵

²⁵ I intend this to be taken as a generic statement of the principle. There are some anti-reductionists who argue comprehension suffices for permission (Burge 1993; Simion 2021); some argue that comprehension ordinarily suffices given normal background (Graham 2006; cf. Matsumoto 2025); and some argue that comprehension suffices on the condition that the asserted content is the product of one of the speaker's

Both views posit a presumptive entitlement but diverge over whether to extend one to our trust in others. For the anti-reductionist, the reductionist's positive reason requirement makes testimonial justification too demanding. Children of a certain age, for example, lack the normative psychology to back their testimonial beliefs with positive reasons, yet such beliefs can be justified (Graham 2018a). For reductionists, the anti-reductionist's presumptive right makes testimonial entitlement too cheap.²⁶ Don't people lie? How can we be sure of the reliability of testimony if not by the backing of inductive support?

As stated, the positive reason requirement and presumptive right only concern testimony's justification face. They tell us when comprehending an assertion is epistemically significant, conferring *prima facie* justification to believe the content asserted. They do not address the defeat face. In Mental Math-style cases, hearers like Bin already believe otherwise. What conditions must be met so that comprehending Annie's assertion is epistemically significant, defeating his *prima facie* justification to believe they owe \$33 and requiring him to suspend judgment?

The positive reason requirement and presumptive right naturally extend to this face as well. The reductionist ties the epistemic significance of testimony to a hearer's positive reasons, while the anti-reductionist assigns it a default standing. The respective corollaries can be stated as follows:

privileged belief-forming processes (Goldberg 2021, 76-100). Nothing below turns on which formulation of the principle is correct.

²⁶ See Patrizio (2024) for a recent response to this objection.

Positive Reason Requirement Corollary

Comprehending a speaker's conflicting assertion defeats a hearer's prima facie justification only if the hearer has a positive, independent reason to regard the speaker as (at least) as reliable as she is with respect to the matter in question.

Presumptive Right Corollary

Comprehending a speaker's conflicting assertion defeats a hearer's prima facie justification, absent a positive, dispute-independent reason to regard the speaker as less reliable than the hearer is with respect to the matter in question.

There are at least two things worth noting. First, the presumptive right corollary effectively makes epistemic peerhood the default. This may seem surprising (Christensen 2011; Matheson 2015), but it shouldn't. Nathan King (2012), in effect, argues for such a view: what matters is whether a subject has reason to think her total epistemic position renders it reasonable for her to think she's more likely to be correct. If it doesn't, then the justificatory status of her belief is defeated by evidence of disagreement. On this account, epistemic peerhood drops out of the picture.

Note too that neither reductionism nor anti-reductionism is committed to conciliationism. The positive reason requirement corollary is straightforwardly compatible with anti-conciliationism: since it states only a necessary condition on higher-order defeat, accepting it settles nothing about when defeat in fact occurs. An anti-

conciliationist can grant that hearers sometimes possess positive, independent reasons bearing on their interlocutors' reliability while denying that defeat follows when they do. The presumptive right corollary is different. It claims that comprehending a conflicting assertion is significant by default, and that that default is defeasible. The defeasibility condition has a dispute-independence constraint. The anti-conciliationist who accepts presumptive right rejects this constraint: on such a view, just as your direct observation that it is not raining defeats your partner's forecast-based testimony claiming otherwise, so too Bin's own calculation defeats Annie's testimony. So, the anti-conciliationist who accepts presumptive right needs to endorse a revised version of the defeasibility condition.²⁷

Each corollary answers the when question, providing the proponent of independence-based conciliationism with a complete account of the conditions under which testimonial evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant. The why question

²⁷ One may worry that, in light of the dispute-independence constraint, the presumptive right corollary treats the case of you and your partner and the case of Annie and Bin analogously. For example, if disagreement is significant by default, does that mean that your partner's testimony defeats your justification to believe that it is not raining? No, there is an important disanalogy. In the case with you and your partner, you were just outside and saw that it wasn't raining. Independent of the disagreement, you are aware that direct observation of the weather is stronger evidence than weather predictions. This satisfies the dispute-independence condition on the presumptive right corollary. You, it turns out, possess dispute-independent evidence, while Bin does not. So, the justificatory status of his belief is defeated while yours remains undefeated.

Another worry is disagreement-based skepticism. What if you disagree with someone who calls into question everything you believe? There would be no dispute-independent considerations available. Since conflicting testimony is epistemically significant by default, doesn't this mean that the justificatory status of everything you believe is defeated? The short answer is no. The proponent of the presumptive right corollary can appeal to hinge-theoretic considerations to deny that such challenges are epistemically significant (Pritchard 2015). In future work, I plan to show how this dissolves the worry.

follows by asking for the grounds of those conditions. It is easy to see how the reductionist answers: testimony is epistemically significant *in virtue of* the positive evidence backed by a hearer's first-personal faculties.

It is a little trickier for the anti-reductionist. Sometimes it is rational for speakers to lie in order to get hearers to believe (and do) what they want. Hearers want truth whereas speakers, it seems, only want to be believed. Given this conflict of interests, it is unclear why the testimonial default should counsel belief rather than suspicion or doubt. How can a hearer be sure that her trust in a speaker is well-placed if not by the backing of first-personal, inductive support? In section 4, I will survey three general responses: the assurance account (Hinchman 2005; McMyler 2011; Moran 2018), the rationalist account (Burge 1993), and the social norms account (Graham 2010, 2020; Greco 2020; Simion 2021). I argue by elimination for the social norms account.

3 Anti-Reductionism and Conciliationism

Anti-reductionism is independently well supported. Its motivation is partially drawn from an analogy between testimonial justification and perceptual justification. And, as Graham (2025) recently argues, the alleged disanalogies between the two sources (reliability, reason-giving force, the prevalence of negative reasons, dependence on the agency of others, gullibility) are spurious or overstated. Moreover, anti-reductionism is a better fit with empirical evidence from the developmental psychology literature. Very young children form testimony-based beliefs before they can meet reductionism's demands. If these beliefs are justified, and there is reason to think they are, then only anti-

reductionism can explain why (Graham 2018a). In this section, I shall similarly argue that anti-reductionism is the better fit with the disagreement data. If conciliationism is true, then anti-reductionism's presumptive testimonial entitlement explains why.

Consider:

*Mental Math**

One day, Annie and Bin go to lunch, agreeing to split the check evenly at the end of the meal. They also agree on a tip. They order, eat, receive the check. Bin forms the belief that they owe \$33. It turns out he's calculated correctly, coming to know that they owe \$33. Annie asserts, "We owe \$32 each." Suppose Annie and Bin have just met. So, Bin lacks a positive, independent reason to think that Annie's as reliable as he is with respect to these sorts of calculations, in the sense that he lacks access to Annie's track record. In addition, he lacks a positive, independent reason to think he's correct or more reliable.

The key difference between Mental Math and Mental Math* is that in the former it is reasonable for Bin to regard Annie as an epistemic peer, while in the latter Bin simply lacks reason to think he is more reliable. Does Annie's testimony defeat the justificatory status of Bin's belief in this case? Yes: the conciliationist's verdict here should be the same as in Mental Math. For, Bin finds himself in a similar position to the one he occupies in Mental Math. Bin's calculation gives him good reason to think that they owe \$33, but

Annie's calculation, it seems, gives him good reason to think they owe \$32. Together, then, he has good reason to think either he or Annie is mistaken. If this type of higher-order situation defeats the justificatory standing of his belief in Mental Math, the same should be true for his belief in Mental Math*. So, Bin should suspend judgment, absent dispute-independent reason to think otherwise.

Only the anti-reductionist delivers this result. By the presumptive right corollary, Annie's testimony has defeating significance, absent a dispute-independent reason to think he's correct or more reliable. Bin has no such reason. So, the justificatory status of his belief is defeated. By the positive reason requirement corollary, her testimony has defeating significance only if Bin has a positive, independent reason to regard her as at least as reliable as he is. He lacks such a reason since he lacks access to her track record. So, according to the reductionist, her testimony does not defeat the justificatory status of his belief. That is not the result the conciliationist wants. Thus, the anti-reductionist is the better fit with the disagreement data.

The case generalizes. Mental Math* describes the most common case where, intuitively, evidence of disagreement defeats a subject's justification, and it is one where subjects lack robust access to an individual's track record. This means we rarely satisfy the positive reason requirement corollary in cases where evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant.²⁸ The reductionist predicts then that evidence of disagreement hardly ever defeats. That is an undesirable result for the conciliationist. The same point holds for moral, political, and religious disagreements (King 2012), which are what drove

²⁸ See Schmitt (1999) on the challenge of satisfying the positive reason requirement.

interest in the epistemology of disagreement to begin with. A conciliationism that bears on matters of fundamental concern must say that in Mental Math* Annie's testimony is epistemically significant for Bin.

The reductionist will almost certainly be unmoved by this.²⁹ For example, the reductionist can say that Bin doesn't need access to Annie's track record to infer that she is reliable. Mature epistemic agents normally have a commonsense person-theory:³⁰ a stock of information about persons and institutions, including how reliable people generally are at things like mental math. This background knowledge enables quick and accurate reliability assessments, even without access to a particular person's track record. What is more, the role of this background knowledge is to confer justification rather than to merely filter for defeaters. If that is right, the reductionist can suggest that Bin is in position to meet the positive reason requirement corollary: the reductionist does fit the disagreement data.

It is at this point where the two faces of testimony become dialectically significant. To see why, consider Bin's perspective when he learns that Annie disagrees in Mental Math*.

- I believe we owe \$33; Annie believes we owe \$32.

²⁹ The discussion in this section is informed by Schafer (2015), who argues that reductionism carries a default first-personal bias. Schafer does not claim that this shows that reductionism is inconsistent with conciliationism. It shows that satisfying the positive reason requirement corollary is especially demanding. I am claiming that it shows that reductionism cannot explain conciliationist verdicts.

³⁰ See Fricker (1994) and Kenyon (2013).

- I am about as reliable as the next person at mental math, and Annie seems pretty normal.

This is what is available to Bin regarding Annie's reliability. He has a general impression of normality, and a background sense of how people perform at mental math. Assume the reductionist is right: Bin's person-theory provides positive reason to regard Annie as reliable at these sorts of calculations. So, the reductionist can say that comprehending her assertion confers *prima facie* justification for him. Bin thereby has good reason to think they owe \$32, and so good reason to think he may be mistaken. But the question is one of sufficiency. Is this enough for Annie's testimony to be epistemically significant, defeating Bin's justification and requiring him to suspend judgment?

The conciliationist should say yes, but the reductionist should say no. To see why, I turn to an argument presented by Karl Schafer (2015). Recall the reductionist picture is committed to a presumptive entitlement to self-trust, and a derivative entitlement to trust in others. So, the reductionist posits a qualitative difference in types of entitlement. It follows that in cases of disagreement reductionists are committed to a first-person bias: provided a subject lacks special reason to treat herself as less reliable than a disagreeing party (e.g., prior evidence of unreliability), the presumptive and derivative entitlements entail that she should give more weight to her own opinions than to the opinion of the disputant. So, in *Mental Math**, provided Bin lacks special reason to treat himself as less reliable than Annie (e.g., he drank even more soda than her), he should give more weight to his own calculation than to Annie's.

Consider the justificatory pedigree of the two calculations in Bin's perspective. The first rests on the presumptive entitlement. Bin's calculation that they owe \$33 is a deliverance of his own faculties. So, absent special reason to doubt his own reliability, he does not need positive reason for his calculation to be epistemically significant. The second calculation is grounded in the derivative entitlement. He learns of Annie's calculation through testimony. So, Annie's calculation is epistemically significant for Bin on the condition that her testimony is backed by sufficient positive evidence provided by his first-personal faculties. This means that the two calculations have fundamentally different justificatory pedigrees. Bin's calculation is epistemically significant by default, whereas Annie's calculation must earn its epistemic significance.³¹

As it stands, the evidence backing his assessment of Annie's calculation consists of two considerations: that she appears normal and that people are normally as reliable as Bin. What about the backing of the second consideration? Its justificatory status is a function of the extent to which normal people's beliefs cohere with his own. When they do, that is evidence of reliability; when they don't, that is evidence of unreliability. Here is the upshot. Since Annie's belief doesn't cohere with Bin's, and since he lacks special reason to think he's less reliable, the fact that she disagrees is evidence that she is not as reliable as normal people. So, he lacks evidence that she is as reliable as normal people. It follows that he doesn't have evidence to think she's as reliable as him. Thus, he isn't in position to satisfy the positive reason requirement corollary. As a result, Bin is rationally permitted to conclude:

³¹ Schafer (2015) considers whether the first-person bias is a problem for proponents of the presumptive testimonial entitlement. The conciliationist needs to deny that it is. Section 4.4 provides an argument to that effect.

- But maybe she's not so reliable at this sort of thing. I'll stick with my calculation.

So, Annie's testimony justifies without being epistemically significant. It confers *prima facie* justification: Bin has good reason to think he may be mistaken. What it does not do, on the reductionist picture, is defeat the justificatory status of his belief and require a change to his doxastic state.

The point is not that a hearer like Bin can never have positive reason to regard a speaker as an epistemic peer, or even a superior. The point is that for such a reliability assessment to be rationally resilient in the face of disagreement, it must rest on strong evidence. A robust track record can supply this; a first impression cannot.

Notice that the reasoning that conciliationism was meant to rule out is reasoning that reductionism counts as rational. Independence-based conciliationism issues a requirement: Bin must treat his and Annie's calculations impartially, dismissing hers only on dispute-independent grounds. Reductionism issues an incompatible permission: Bin may resolve the conflict in his own favor, and the disagreement itself may serve as grounds for downgrading Annie. From the conciliationist's side, "maybe she's not so reliable" is paradigmatically question-begging reasoning. From the reductionist's side, the same reasoning has no rational defect. On that picture, the epistemic significance of Annie's testimony was never independent of Bin's faculties in the first place, so reasoning that relies on the deliverances of his faculties does not take for granted something her testimony had independent standing to contest.

In the most common cases of disagreement, where track records are unavailable, the reductionist's first-person bias produces anti-conciliationist verdicts. That means a reductionist independence-based conciliationism fails to deliver the right verdicts in ordinary disagreements. That is a problem: the reductionist answer to the when question is thus eliminated. To answer the why question, the conciliationist will have to do so in anti-reductionist terms. And such an answer should supply what a reductionist cannot: a picture on which the epistemic significance of Annie's testimony does not depend on Bin's perspective.

4 Presumptive Right and the Epistemic Norm of Assertion

The anti-reductionist has an explanatory burden. Presumptive right states that testimony is significant by default. But people are free to lie. Indeed, it is often in their interest to do so. This suggests that testimony's default should be unreliability. So, what grounds testimony's reliability and its default significance? That is the why question for the justification face of testimony.

The defeat face inherits the why question. This is because the epistemic significance of conflicting testimony runs through its justificatory force: what generates the higher-order defeater in Mental Math is that comprehending Annie's assertion confers prima facie justification for the proposition that they owe \$32, giving Bin good reason to think one of them is mistaken. If comprehending Annie's assertion conferred

no prima facie justification, there would be no higher-order defeater. So whatever grounds presumptive right on the justification face carries over to the corollary.

But the defeat face makes the demand especially acute. On the justification face, the worry is that the entitlement permits gullibility. The defeat face raises a harder problem. In *Mental Math*, Bin knows that they owe \$33. The presumptive right corollary says that Annie's assertion defeats his knowledge in virtue of defeating his justification. The question is why a stranger's say-so should carry so much weight.

I shall consider three types of responses: the assurance account, the rationalist account, and the social norms account. I argue that the only plausible response is the last, the social norms account. Crucially, the social norms account assigns an ineliminable role to the epistemic norm of assertion to explain the reliability of testimony: once internalized, the force of ENA provides speakers with a reason to be truthful even when deception would be beneficial. If that is right, it follows that ENA plays an ineliminable role in grounding the epistemic significance of testimony. Most importantly, it means that conciliationism is explanatorily dependent on ENA.

4.1 The Assurance Account

The assurance account holds that there is something distinctive about testimony, and that distinctiveness is owed to the kind of speech act performed in a testimonial exchange: the speech act of telling (Hinchman 2005; McMyler 2011; Moran 2018). In merely asserting

that p , a speaker presents p for the hearer as one consideration among others regarding whether p . In telling an audience that p , the speaker presents herself as accountable for the truth of what she says. She is offering a guarantee, and in so doing she is taking responsibility for the hearer's epistemic situation. The speaker's overt assumption of responsibility is what gives the act its distinctive epistemic character.

From the hearer's perspective, a speaker's telling presents her with a testimony-based reason for belief that is not grounded in evidence. A hearer is entitled to believe not on the basis of the reliability of testimony. Rather, a hearer is entitled to believe on the basis of the speaker's having assumed responsibility for the truth of what she said. The source of testimony-based reasons and thus testimonial justification is non-evidential in character: it is grounded in the normative relationship the speaker establishes in the act of telling.

The assurance account is independently well motivated. It captures the intuitive difference between being told that p and acquiring evidence for p : a hearer, it seems, shouldn't treat an interlocutor's utterance in the way she treats a photograph, for example. The account also explains the intuition that hearers believe speakers themselves, not merely the propositions speakers assert. Most importantly, it explains the normativity of a testimonial exchange. Hearers have a right of complaint against speakers. Moreover, hearers can pass the buck (McMyler 2011): a hearer challenged on a testimonial belief may rightly refer the challenge to the speaker, who assumed responsibility for the claim's truth.

The assurance account provides a clear answer to the why question. Presumptive right is grounded in the speaker's assumption of responsibility. A hearer enjoys a default entitlement to believe because a speaker, in telling her that *p*, has taken on the corresponding obligation and conferred on her, the hearer, a right of complaint should *p* turn out to be false. With respect to the gullibility worry, the hearer is not simply taking a speaker at her word without grounds, but relying on a normative commitment the speaker has publicly assumed.

The assurance account falls short, however. The presumptive right corollary holds for hearers, in general: any hearer who comprehends a conflicting assertion has the justificatory status of her belief defeated by default, whether or not she was the speaker's intended addressee. But the assurance account grounds the entitlement in the speaker's assumption of responsibility to a particular audience. An addressee-indexed explanation cannot ground a hearer-general default.³²

4.2 *The Rationalist Account*

The rationalist account holds that the presumptive testimonial entitlement has an a priori basis (Burge 1993). Very roughly, the argument runs as follows. An intelligible presentation-as-true (paradigmatically, an assertion) is a *prima facie* sign that it was

³² Moran (2018) is explicit on this point: an overhearer may derive a reason to believe from an exchange (though weaker than the addressed hearer), but she has not been told anything, and no right of complaint has been conferred on her. The addressee-indexing is a key feature of the view.

produced by a rational source. Rational sources have the function of generating true content. And since functional traits reliably fulfill their function in normal conditions, rational sources reliably generate true content in normal conditions. A hearer is therefore a priori entitled to accept an intelligible presentation-as-true, absent stronger reasons not to do so. The entitlement requires no positive evidence: its ground lies in the nature of rational sources. This answers the why question directly. Presumptive right is grounded in the a priori reliability of rational sources rather than in anything the hearer has learned about the speaker.

The account is independently well motivated. It grounds testimonial entitlement within a unified, functionalist framework alongside perception and memory. More importantly, the rationalist account explains why the default should be belief rather than suspicion. The gullibility worry arises because the interests of speakers and hearers can diverge. The rationalist answer is that this is the wrong place to look: the connection between intelligible assertion and truth is grounded in the function of rational sources. Reason has the function of generating true content, and that function provides a principled, non-accidental connection to truth that an appeal to speakers' interests can't undercut.

The rationalist account has a major advantage over the assurance account: it is hearer-general. The entitlement holds (defeasibly) for any hearer of any intelligible presentation-as-true, regardless of whether she was the speaker's intended audience. The rationalist account does have a disadvantage, however. It cannot explain the interpersonal character of a testimonial exchange. What the assurance account gets right is that speakers make themselves accountable to hearers through testimony: hearers

come to hold a right of complaint, and a right to pass the epistemic buck. The rationalist appeals to the idea that speakers are rational sources, and as such they are answerable to norms of reason. So, if a speaker misleads a hearer, she has failed to do what she should do as a rational agent. The problem is that this sense of accountability is impersonal. The speaker fails to fulfill the obligations of reason, not the obligations owed to hearers.

The major problem is that the rationalist account relies on some highly questionable premises. As Graham (2018b) argues, functions do not require reliability: many biological traits have functions they fulfill only occasionally. For example, spermatozoa do not reliably fertilize eggs. Of course, some functions must be reliable. For example, a heart must reliably pump blood. The rationalist account presupposes that reason is like a heart rather than a spermatozoon. It is not obvious how to settle this a priori. Another worry is that assertion has multiple functions (Graham 2018b; Graham 2020; Simion 2021). One is epistemic: speakers intelligibly present content as true. Another is practical: speakers assert to influence hearers. When functions conflict, reliable fulfillment of one does not entail reliable fulfillment of the other. And what about when it is in the interest of a speaker to lie to a hearer? An a priori story does not seem up to the task of explaining why in such cases speakers have a reason to assert truthfully when it is in their self-interest not to. Due to these difficulties, the rationalist account does not adequately answer the why question.

4.3 *The Social Norms Account*

The social norms account holds that the presumptive testimonial entitlement is grounded in the social environment in which testimonial exchanges take place. Just as natural laws structure the physical environment so as to make perception a reliable source, social norms and social sensibilities structure the social environment so as to make testimony a reliable source (Greco 2020). A social norm is in force in a community partly in virtue of the social sensibilities of its members: their dispositions to conform to the norm, to approve of conformity, and to disapprove of and sanction violations. Some of the norms structuring the social environment have distinctively epistemic content, permitting or requiring certain epistemic behavior. One such norm is the epistemic norm of assertion, ENA: assert only what you know or have sufficient justification to believe. When interlocutors internalize ENA, conformity becomes intrinsically motivating. Once internalized, the norm supplies a standing reason to comply, a reason that remains in force even when deception would serve the speaker's self-interest (Graham 2012). The reliability of testimony then is not grounded in the reliability of rational sources. Nor is it grounded in any particular speaker's intentions or assumption of responsibility. Rather, it is grounded in the structure of the social environment itself.

The social norms account encompasses a family of views. While they agree that the social environment plays a crucial role in grounding testimony's reliability, they disagree over the particular mechanism. Graham (2010, 2020) grounds the entitlement in the hearer's faculty to comprehend: comprehension has the function of reliably producing true beliefs under normal conditions, and so in normal conditions, comprehension confers *prima facie* justification to believe what's asserted. Normal conditions refer to a social environment where ENA and similar norms are in force. Greco (2020) emphasizes

the social roles of speakers and hearers in the practice itself: testimonial entitlement flows from competent participation in a cooperative practice of knowledge transmission, structured by norms and sensibilities of a community of knowers. In virtue of occupying certain social roles, a speaker's testimony provides a hearer with *prima facie* justification to believe, relieving the hearer of the usual epistemic burden associated with acquiring *prima facie* justified beliefs. Simion (2021) grounds the entitlement in ENA directly: in virtue of the social contract, norm compliance is the default position for speakers, so hearers are by default entitled to expect compliance; and since ENA is a social norm, hearers are by default entitled to believe what speakers assert.

The social norms account provides a straightforward answer to the why question. Presumptive right is grounded in the reliability of testimony (as opposed to the speaker's assumption of responsibility), and the reliability of testimony is grounded, at least in part, in ENA. The gullibility worry was that the interests of speakers and hearers can diverge. Sometimes deception pays. So, the default, it seems, should be suspicion. The social norms account explains why that's not the case. When a hearer finds herself in a social world where various norms, including ENA, are internalized, she is entitled to expect conformity with such norms to be intrinsically motivating. That motivation sustains its grip on agents even when non-compliance is more beneficial. So, a hearer is entitled to regard a speaker who stands to gain by deception as having a strong, positive reason to assert truthfully, a reason supplied by the internalized norm (Graham 2012). Thus, testimony is reliable, and the hearer's default entitlement to believe holds, even in cases where deception would benefit the speaker. And because the entitlement is grounded in the norm-governed practice rather than by anything indexed to a particular exchange, it

holds for any hearer who comprehends an assertion, without restriction to intended addressees.

The social norms account holds major advantages over its rivals. First, like the rationalist account, it explains the hearer-generality of presumptive right. Unlike the rationalist account, the explanation does not appeal to a priori premises. Instead, the account appeals to highly plausible and widely accepted claims about the role of social norms in stabilizing the social environment. What's more, the account provides a naturalistically friendly vindication of the perception/testimony analogy (Graham 2025). Second, like the assurance account, it can explain the interpersonal character of testimony (Goldberg 2015). Because assertion is governed by an epistemic norm, a speaker who asserts is answerable to that normative standard. Any hearer aware of a speaker's violation of ENA has a right of complaint against that speaker. And any hearer challenged on a testimonial belief may pass the epistemic buck: she may refer the challenger back to the speaker, who assumed the epistemic burden by making the assertion. The main difference is that the interpersonal character falls out of ENA itself rather than out of a second-personal relation. This is as it should be: ENA can explain the interpersonal character of testimony without the cost of hearer-generality.

4.4 Equal Standing, Ineliminability, and the Defeat Face

So, the social norms account provides the best answer to the why question for the justification face of testimony. Does it provide a satisfying answer for the defeat face, too?

Recall the demand. The presumptive right corollary states that comprehending a conflicting assertion defeats a hearer's prima facie justification, absent a dispute-independent reason to regard the speaker as less reliable. In such cases, comprehending a conflicting assertion must provide a hearer with just as much support, by default, as the support her own belief enjoys. In Mental Math, Bin knows that they owe \$33. An assertion from a person he has just met is supposed to defeat his knowledge in virtue of defeating his justification. The question is this: what grounds the claim that hearers enjoy a default entitlement of that justificatory strength?

It is worth noting that the social norms account does not need to ground the independence constraint in the presumptive right corollary. The independence constraint is imposed by a general theory of epistemic rationality, governing conflicts between any two bodies of evidence, whatever their source. Its defense will rest on such issues as evidential support relations, level-principles, and the status of question-begging reasoning. What an account of testimonial entitlement must explain is something else: how comprehending a conflicting assertion provides strong enough support to generate the conflict in the first place.

Here is how the social norms account explains it. Start by considering what a speaker does by asserting something. If assertion is governed by ENA, then a speaker by asserting *represents* herself as complying with the epistemic condition in ENA. Suppose, as is widely assumed, that the epistemic condition in ENA is knowledge or justification sufficient for belief (Goldberg 2015). Then, when a speaker asserts *p*, she represents herself as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe *p*. In a social environment where ENA is in force, it is mutually known that this is what a speaker does by asserting.

In such a social environment, it is also the case that interlocutors hold one another accountable for asserting in accordance with ENA. It is also the case that they will have internalized the normative sensibilities associated with complying with and enforcing such a norm.

Consider the hearer's perspective when comprehending a speaker's assertion that *p*. She recognizes that the speaker represented himself as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe *p*. By the account established in 4.3, she is entitled to take a speaker at face value, absent defeaters. And to take a speaker at face value is to accord her, by default, the position the norm requires: knowledge or sufficient justification to believe. So, when Bin comprehends Annie's assertion that they owe \$32, he is entitled to take her, by default, to know or have sufficient justification to believe that they owe \$32. That puts him in a position where he has as strong a reason to believe that they owe \$32 as he has to believe that they owe \$33. His calculation gives him knowledge of the proposition that they owe \$33; her assertion, taken at face value, accords her the same standing with respect to the proposition that they owe \$32. So, Bin has equally strong support for inconsistent propositions, thereby giving him good reason to think one of them is mistaken. That is the higher-order situation that conciliationism cares about, and ENA plays a crucial role in generating it in cases like *Mental Math**, which happen to be representative of the most common type of disagreement where, according to the conciliationist, evidence of disagreement defeats a subject's belief.

ENA plays an ineliminable role in grounding the presumptive testimonial entitlement on testimony's defeat face. To see this, consider a social environment where the norm governing assertion is a sincerity norm instead: assert only what you believe.

Consider what a speaker does when she asserts. She represents herself as complying with the norm, so as believing the content asserted. Consider the hearer's perspective. By the account established in 4.3, she is entitled to accord her, by default, the position the norm requires. So, when Bin comprehends Annie's assertion that they owe \$32, he is entitled to take her, by default, to believe that they owe \$32. Does this by itself give Bin strong reason to think they owe \$32? No, that will depend on what he knows about Annie and her reliability at these sorts of calculations. That means that a sincerity norm won't generate higher-order situations where, as in *Mental Math**, Bin has just as strong a reason to think they owe \$32 as he has to think they owe \$33. So, a sincerity norm can't deliver the right results. What's needed is an epistemic norm of assertion, where speakers, by asserting, represent themselves as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe.³³

The point holds for each version of the social norms account. On Simion's version, the entitlement is grounded in ENA directly. On Graham's version, ENA's role is indirect. Does that mean that it is not necessary? No. For Graham, comprehension confers *prima facie* justification under normal conditions, and normal conditions include (among other things) the relevant social norms in force. ENA must be included as one of the social norms if comprehension is to confer default *prima facie* justification. As we just saw, in a

³³ Instead of a sincerity norm, one may suggest a truth norm: assert only what's true. Can such a norm ground the reliability of testimony? Not independently. Truth norms fare poorly compared with epistemic norms (especially the knowledge norm) at explaining other relevant assertion data (Williamson 2000; Benton 2024), which strongly suggests that the norm of assertion that is in force in the context of testimonial exchanges has epistemic content. Moreover, whatever truth-telling regularity would be secured through a truth norm is already secured by the most plausible version of ENA: on the knowledge norm, compliance entails truthful assertion, since knowledge is *factive*. The converse does not hold: because norm compliance figures in the content of a hearer's comprehension state, only a norm with epistemic content accords a speaker, by default, the standing of knowing or having sufficient justification to believe, which is the standing required by the defeat face.

community where only a sincerity norm is in force, comprehension results in taking at face value that the speaker believes what's asserted. Representing a speaker as believing something does not, on its own, generate a testimonial entitlement to believe what was asserted. The same holds for Greco's version. On his account, the role a speaker occupies is defined by the normative standard interlocutors hold one another to. Suppose that standard were sincerity rather than ENA. Then occupying the speaker role would accord a speaker's assertions an insufficiently strong epistemic standing to relieve hearers of the usual epistemic burdens associated with acquiring *prima facie* justified beliefs.

The upshot of section 3 was that an adequate answer to the why question must not derive the epistemic significance of testimony-based defeat from a subject's first-person perspective. The social norms account delivers that result: the default epistemic significance of Annie's testimony does not derive from Bin's entitlement to trust his own faculties; it derives from a social environment wherein ENA is in force.

Conclusion

This paper posed two questions, on the assumption that conciliationism is true. When is testimony-based evidence of disagreement epistemically significant? And why is it significant, when it is? The answer to the when question is provided by the anti-reductionist's presumptive right corollary. The reductionist grounds the epistemic significance of conflicting testimony in a hearer's positive reasons, and in the most common cases of disagreement, where track records are unavailable, its first-person bias

fails to fit conciliationist verdicts. The answer to the why question is provided by the social norms account. The rationalist account rests on implausible a priori premises, and the assurance account grounds the entitlement in a way that cannot extend to hearers generally. The remaining account is the social norms account: testimony is reliable because social norms and social sensibilities structure the social environment, and crucially one of these norms is ENA. On this account, a hearer's default entitlement to treat a conflicting assertion as providing as much epistemic support as that provided by her own cognitive performance is grounded, at least in part, in the epistemic norm of assertion. That is the conclusion of the paper: conciliationism is explanatorily dependent on ENA.³⁴

Here is one significant upshot: a deflationary account of epistemic peerhood for independence-based conciliationism. Recall the schematic clause: "it is reasonable for H to regard S as an epistemic peer." The disagreement literature has tended to treat epistemic peerhood as a status requiring independent support: do not regard a disagreeing party as an epistemic peer unless you have reason to think she is just as reliable. But if that is what is required to regard someone as an epistemic peer, then good peers will be hard to come by, and conciliationism will not be very interesting (King 2012; Schafer 2015). The present paper denies the peerhood requirement: if conciliationism is to be interesting, hearers do not need to first establish that a speaker is an epistemic peer in order for her testimony to have epistemic significance. Peerhood is the default.

³⁴ Ming (forthcoming) argues that the conciliationist cannot respond to the problem of warranted objections by rejecting ENA. The conclusion of this paper, then, seems to suggest that conciliationism is internally unstable. In future work, I plan to address this possibility. For recent work on objections and engaging in disagreement, see Aird (2025).

Here is another significant upshot: the three core areas of social epistemology are more intimately connected than has been realized. Hearers enjoy a default testimonial entitlement when they find themselves in hospitable social environments. This has obvious implications for the epistemology of testimony and the epistemology of speech acts. As I have argued, it also has implications for the epistemology of disagreement.

Chapter 3: Accepting Defeat

Abstract: Disagreement is often discovered through testimony. So, conciliationism – the view that learning of disagreement can defeat a subject’s justification – owes an account of when a peer’s conflicting testimony is epistemically significant, and of why it is, when it is. I argue that the only adequate account posits a robustly epistemic norm of assertion (ENA). The problem is that conciliationism is incompatible with ENA. Thus, conciliationism is internally unstable: it is explanatorily dependent on a thesis that must be false if the view is true.

Keywords: Epistemology of disagreement, epistemology of testimony, norm of assertion, social epistemology, epistemic normativity

Introduction

Disagreement is often discovered through communication. When A learns that B disagrees, A typically learns because of what B said. This mundane observation is the starting point for this paper: the type of evidence that figures in ordinary cases of disagreement is testimony-based, and testimony-based evidence is acquired through comprehending a speaker’s assertion.

I am interested in conciliationism: the view that learning of disagreement can defeat the justificatory status of a subject's belief. I will argue that conciliationism is internally unstable: it depends on a thesis that it is also incompatible with. The thesis is that assertion is governed by an epistemic norm (henceforth, ENA): a speaker has warrant to assert a proposition *p* only if she meets some robustly epistemic standard (knowledge or sufficient justification to believe) with respect to *p*. The dependence claim and the incompatibility claim have been established separately. The task of this paper is to establish them together and to draw the conclusion that they jointly support.

The argument runs as follows:

1. If conciliationism is true, then there is an adequate account of when testimony-based evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant, and of why it is, when it is.
2. Any adequate account of when such evidence is significant appeals to a presumptive testimonial entitlement: conflicting testimony defeats by default, absent dispute-independent defeaters.
3. Any adequate account of why such evidence is significant appeals to social norms and in particular to ENA: the presumptive testimonial entitlement is grounded in facts about how the social environment is structured by social norms and sensibilities, particularly ENA and its internalization.
4. ENA and conciliationism are jointly inconsistent.
5. Therefore, conciliationism is internally unstable.

The conciliationist appeals to cases of testimony to motivate the idea that evidence of peer disagreement defeats a subject's justification to believe. This appeal saddles the conciliationist with an explanatory burden. (1) expresses that burden: the view needs a comprehensive account of the conditions under which testimony-based evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant (the when question), and an account of what grounds its epistemic significance under those conditions (the why question). There are two general answers to the when question: reductionism and anti-reductionism. (2) states that anti-reductionism is the best answer: conflicting testimony is epistemically significant by default, absent dispute-independent defeaters. The anti-reductionist, in turn, has three general answers to the why question: the assurance account (Hinchman 2005; McMyler 2011; Moran 2018), the rationalist account (Burge 1993), and the social norms account (Graham 2010, 2020; Greco 2020; Simion 2021). (3) states the best answer to the why question: what grounds that default significance of conflicting testimony is the social norms and social sensibilities, particularly ENA and its internalization. Taken together, the conciliationist's explanatory burden is discharged by appeal to an account which says that conflicting testimony is significant by default and that ENA plays an ineliminable role in grounding that default. The problem is premise (4): ENA and conciliationism are incompatible. Thus, (5), conciliationism is internally unstable: what would ground the conciliationist's verdicts is a thesis that can't be true if conciliationism is true.

Here is the plan. Section 1 sets the stage for what follows, presenting ENA, conciliationism, and motivating premise (1). Section 2 defends premise (2). Reductionism

posits a positive reason requirement, while anti-reductionism posits a presumptive testimonial entitlement. Only the latter gets the conciliationist verdicts right in the cases that matter most. So, conciliationists should posit a presumptive testimonial entitlement. Section 3 defends premise (3): only the social norms account grounds that entitlement at the strength required by conciliationists, and it does so through positing ENA. Section 4 defends premise (4): it derives a contradiction from the conjunction of ENA and conciliationism. The upshot: conciliationism must posit ENA to explain the verdicts that matter most, but if ENA is true then conciliationism is false. Section 5 concludes the paper.

Two clarifications before moving on. First, premise (2) should not be read as endorsing anti-reductionism's claim that there is a presumptive testimonial entitlement. Rather, it expresses the claim that conciliationists must posit such an entitlement. Similarly, (3) should not be read as endorsing ENA. Rather, premises (2) and (3) together express the claim that conciliationists must posit ENA to explain the relevant disagreement data. That can be true even if ENA is false. This is what makes the instability in the conclusion (5) internal to conciliationism: the trouble comes from what the view needs to be true.

Second, premises (2) and (3) rest on arguments by elimination. Such arguments are as good as their coverage. If there is an adequate account that I fail to consider in response to either the when or the why question, then the argument fails. Fortunately, there isn't one.

1 Preliminaries

This section sets the stage. I will first present the thesis that assertion is governed by an epistemic norm. Then, I will present conciliationism and discuss its explanatory burden.

I shall argue that conciliationism must posit the thesis that the speech act of assertion is governed by an epistemic norm (Williamson 2000; Goldberg 2015):

ENA

A speaker has warrant to assert a proposition *p* only if she meets a robustly epistemic standard (knowledge or sufficient justification to believe) with respect to *p*.

It is contested what the epistemic standard in ENA is. Some say it is knowledge; some say justification. What matters for present purposes is only that the standard is robustly epistemic: having warrant to assert *p* is incompatible with lacking justification to believe *p*.

When a speaker asserts *p*, she does two things. She presents *p* as true, and she represents herself as complying with the norm of assertion. Given ENA, the representing act has a natural gloss: by asserting, a speaker represents herself as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe. In a social environment where ENA is in force, it is mutually known that this is what a speaker does by asserting.

Consider the hearer's side. In comprehending a speaker's assertion that p , a hearer grasps both what was asserted and that the utterance was an assertion (Graham 2010). The comprehension state hence has two components. There is a content component: a hearer grasps the proposition the speaker presented as true. And there is a representational component: a hearer grasps that the speaker has represented herself as complying with the norm of assertion. The content component fixes what the hearer is given to consider, and the representational component fixes the standing the speaker has claimed with respect to it. What standing that is depends on what the norm requires. If the norm is epistemic, then a speaker who asserts represents herself as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe, and a hearer who comprehends grasps that she has claimed as much. Note that comprehension is not acceptance. When hearers are justified in transitioning from a comprehension state to a belief state is a further question.

I should note that I will use the term "epistemic significance" idiosyncratically. Epistemic significance will be treated as a threshold status: evidence is epistemically significant just in case it permits or requires a change in a subject's doxastic state, where the relevant states are belief, disbelief, or suspension. Sometimes evidence permits the formation of a new belief. Sometimes it requires giving one up. Both cases are epistemically significant. Defeat can come in degrees, affecting a subject's rational level of confidence. I am only interested in when defeat requires suspension.

Evidence can confer justification without being epistemically significant. For example, suppose that it is predicted to rain all day today. You go out for a walk, run some errands, and return. Turns out, it is sunny without a cloud in sight. After returning, your partner asserts that it is raining. Your partner's testimony confers *prima facie* justification

to believe that it is raining, but it is defeated by your direct observation that it is not raining. Your partner's testimony, in this sense, confers justification without being epistemically significant.

Conciliationism is motivated by appeal to cases like the following:

Mental Math

Bin is reliable at mental math, and it is reasonable for him to regard Annie as an epistemic peer with respect to such calculations. One day, they go to lunch, and agree to split the check evenly at the end of the meal. They also agree on a tip. They order, eat, receive the check. Bin forms the belief that they owe \$33 each. It turns out he's calculated correctly, thereby coming to know that they owe \$33 each. Annie asserts, "We owe \$32 each."

What should Bin think after learning that Annie disagrees? Suppose he reasoned as follows:

- I think we owe \$33, but Annie thinks we owe \$32.
- I am reliable at these calculations, and Annie is as reliable as me.
- Turns out, she is mistaken: we owe \$33.

Bin's calculation provides him with prima facie justification to think they owe \$33, but Annie's provides him with prima facie justification to think they owe \$32. Taken together, they provide him with prima facie justification to think either he or Annie is mistaken. Conciliationists and anti-conciliationists can agree on this much. But can he rely on his calculation to infer that it is Annie who is mistaken? Anti-conciliationists say yes, conciliationists say no. As the conciliationist explains, prior to the dispute, Bin had good reason to regard Annie as an epistemic peer at mental math. The mere fact of disagreement does not change that. Absent an impartial basis for privileging his own calculation over hers, he should suspend judgment. The justificatory status of the higher-order belief that either Annie or Bin is mistaken defeats the justificatory status of the first-order belief that they owe \$33.

To defeat the defeater, Bin needs grounds independent of the dispute for thinking that he is the more reliable party. Suppose he knows that Annie had three glasses of soda during lunch and that soda degrades her reliability at arithmetic. These provide him with grounds of the right shape. They bear on her reliability but do not appeal to the disagreement itself.

More precisely:

Independence-Based Conciliationism

In a case where a subject H has prima facie justification to believe p but learns that another party S disagrees, and it is reasonable for H to regard S as an epistemic peer:

H's justification to believe *p* is defeated unless he has a positive, dispute-independent reason to think that it is he who is correct or more reliable.

Two things to note. First, the peerhood clause is schematically formulated. Perhaps it is reasonable for *H* to regard *S* as an epistemic peer when *H* has access to *S*'s track record? Perhaps it is reasonable by default? The conciliationist needs to fill out the details on the peerhood clause in order to provide a complete formulation of the view. Second, as stated, the view is about evidence of disagreement. Testimony-based evidence of disagreement features paradigmatically in the literature, and for good reason. In *Mental Math*, for example, Bin acquires such evidence through comprehending Annie's conflicting assertion. For this central class of cases, conciliationism amounts to a thesis about the epistemic significance of a certain kind of testimony: it says that comprehending a peer's conflicting assertion defeats the justificatory status of a hearer's belief.

This is where the explanatory burden enters. To completely state the view, the conciliationist needs to account for the conditions under which testimony-based evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant. The conciliationist claims that, sometimes, comprehending a speaker's conflicting assertion provides support equal to that provided by a hearer's own cognitive performance, strong enough to generate a higher-order knowledge-undermining defeater. But under what conditions does this occur? Is it only when the hearer has positive evidence of the speaker's reliability, or is conflicting testimony epistemically significant by default? That is the *when* question. There is a

further question: what grounds the epistemic significance of testimony under those conditions? That is the why question.

Premise (1) states that if conciliationism is true, there is an adequate answer to both the when and the why. The premise is modest. It only states that the conciliationist's verdicts about cases like Mental Math are not brute. Something about the exchange between Annie and Bin makes her testimony the kind of thing that can defeat his knowledge through defeating his justification, and there is an account of what that is.

2 Conciliationism and Presumptive Right

Testimony has two faces. On its justification face, comprehending a speaker's assertion confers *prima facie* justification, permitting a hearer to form a new belief. On its defeat face, comprehending an assertion defeats justification, requiring a hearer to suspend judgment. These are two ways testimony can be epistemically significant. The conciliationist's verdicts live on the defeat face. In Mental Math, for example, the claim is that Annie's conflicting testimony defeats Bin's belief, requiring him to suspend on the issue.

The schematic clause in independence-based conciliationism is, in effect, a clause about the conditions under which a disagreeing party's testimony is epistemically significant. It doesn't state what those conditions are, however. That is the when question.

And that is where the epistemology of disagreement gives way to the epistemology of testimony.

The epistemology of testimony has debated its own version of the when question, posed on the justification face: when does comprehending a speaker's assertion confer prima facie justification, permitting a hearer to form a new belief? There are two general answers: reductionism and anti-reductionism. The plan for this section is to introduce both, extend them to the defeat face, and assess which best accounts for the conciliationist's verdicts.

Reductionism is committed to two entitlements (Foley 2001; Schafer 2015). The first is a presumptive entitlement to self-trust: every normal individual is entitled, from the start of inquiry, to rely on his own basic belief-forming faculties. The second is a derivative entitlement to trust others: our entitlement to rely on the faculties of others derives from the evidence generated by exercising the first. On this picture, the justificatory force of testimony is derivative of evidence backed by first-personal sources.

Positive Reason Requirement

Comprehending a speaker's assertion that *p* confers prima facie justification, permitting a hearer to believe *p* only if he has a positive, independent reason to regard the speaker as reliable with respect to *p*.

Comprehension is not enough, on this view. The hearer needs positive evidence supplied by his own faculties about the speaker or the practice of testimony itself. Anti-reductionism denies the positive reason requirement, positing instead a presumptive testimonial entitlement:

Presumptive Right

Comprehending a speaker's assertion that *p* confers prima facie justification for a hearer, permitting him to believe *p*.

Both views posit a presumptive entitlement. They diverge over whether to extend one to our trust in others. For the anti-reductionist, the positive reason requirement makes testimonial justification too demanding. Young children, it seems, can form justified testimony-based beliefs, yet they don't have the normative psychology necessary to satisfy the positive reason requirement (Graham 2018a). For the reductionist, the presumptive right makes testimonial entitlement too cheap. People lie and are misleading. How can a hearer be sure that his trust is well placed if not by the backing of positive, inductive support?

The conciliationist verdicts add an important wrinkle to the when question on the defeat face. In Mental Math, Bin already has justification to believe otherwise. Indeed, he has knowledge. The question is what conditions must be met so that comprehending Annie's assertion is epistemically significant on the defeat face, strong enough to defeat

his prima facie justification and knowledge and require him to suspend judgment. The reductionist ties the significance of conflicting testimony to the hearer's positive reasons; the anti-reductionist assigns it a default standing.

Positive Reason Requirement Corollary

Comprehending a speaker's conflicting assertion defeats a hearer's prima facie justification only if he has a positive, independent reason to regard the speaker as (at least) as reliable as he is with respect to the matter in question.

Presumptive Right Corollary

Comprehending a speaker's conflicting assertion defeats a hearer's prima facie justification, absent a positive, dispute-independent reason to regard the speaker as less reliable than he is with respect to the matter in question.

Two remarks are in order. First, the corollaries are answers to the when question: each adds a substantive commitment to the schematic clause in the formulation of independence-based conciliationism. The reductionist ties the significance of conflicting testimony to the hearer's positive reasons, while the anti-reductionist assigns it a default standing, effectively making epistemic peerhood the default (King 2012). Second, neither reductionism nor anti-reductionism needs to commit to conciliationism. The positive reason requirement corollary only states a necessary condition on defeat, so an anti-conciliationist can accept it while denying that defeat occurs when the condition is met.

And an anti-conciliationist can accept a corollary of presumptive right corollary but reject a dispute-independence constraint on the defeasibility condition.

Anti-reductionism is independently well supported. Its motivation draws on an analogy between testimonial and perceptual justification (Graham 2025). What I shall argue is that it is the better fit with the disagreement data: if conciliationism is true, only anti-reductionism's presumptive entitlement explains why.

Consider:

*Mental Math**

One day, Annie and Bin go to lunch, agreeing to split the check evenly at the end of the meal. They also agree on a tip. They order, eat, receive the check. Bin forms the belief that they owe \$33 each. It turns out he's calculated correctly, coming to know that they owe \$33. Annie asserts, "We owe \$32 each." Suppose Annie and Bin have just met. So, Bin lacks access to Annie's track record, and he lacks a positive, independent reason to think he's correct or more reliable.

What should Bin think, according to the conciliationist? The same as in Mental Math: he should think that either he or Annie is mistaken and suspend judgment until he gains dispute-independent evidence that bears on the matter. This is because the two cases are in all relevant epistemological respects parallel. His calculation gives him good reason to think they owe \$33, while Annie's gives him good reason to think they owe \$32. Together,

he has good reason to think either he or Annie is mistaken. If this higher-order situation defeats in Mental Math, it should defeat in Mental Math*.

Mental Math* describes the most common type of disagreement where, intuitively, evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant: we hardly ever have robust access to an interlocutor's track record. To deny that such evidence defeats in Mental Math* is to claim that such evidence is only rarely epistemically significant.

Only the anti-reductionist can account for the conciliationist verdict in Mental Math*. By the presumptive right corollary, Annie's conflicting testimony has defeating significance absent a dispute-independent reason for Bin to think he is correct or more reliable. He has no such reason. So, his justification is defeated. By the positive reason requirement corollary, her testimony has defeating significance only if Bin has positive, independent reason to regard her as at least as reliable as he is. He lacks access to her track record. So, it seems, her testimony doesn't defeat the justificatory status of his belief that they owe \$33.

I doubt the reductionist will be moved by this. The reductionist will note that mature epistemic agents carry a commonsense person-theory: a stock of background information about persons and institutions, including how reliable people generally are at things like mental math (Fricker 1994; Kenyon 2013). This background evidence enables quick and accurate reliability assessments without access to a particular agent's track record. What's more, such background evidence confers justification rather than merely monitoring for defeaters. So, it seems the reductionist can say that Bin meets the

positive reason requirement, after all: his background person-theory gives him positive reason to regard Annie – a seemingly normal adult – as reliable at simple arithmetic.

This is where the two faces of testimony become dialectically significant. Suppose the reductionist's reply is correct: comprehending Annie's assertion confers *prima facie* justification for Bin to believe that they owe \$32. The question however is one of sufficiency: is the person-theoretic backing enough to make Annie's testimony epistemically significant, enough to defeat Bin's justification and require him to suspend judgment? The conciliationist needs a yes; the reductionist's own commitments give a no.

Here, I rely on an argument first put forth by Karl Schafer (2015). Start by observing that the reductionist posits a qualitative difference between the entitlement to self-trust and the entitlement to trust others: self-trust is presumptive, while trust in others is derivative. In cases of disagreement, this difference results in a first-person bias.

To see this, consider the justificatory pedigree of the two calculations from Bin's perspective. His own calculation is a deliverance of his own faculties. Absent special reason to doubt his reliability, it is epistemically significant by default. Annie's calculation however is delivered through testimony. It is epistemically significant on the condition that his first-personal evidence provides sufficient support. And what does that evidence come to? Two considerations: that she appears normal, and normal people are about as reliable as Bin at this sort of thing.

Notice the backing of this second consideration: its status is a function of the extent to which other people's calculations cohere with his own (undefeated) calculations. When a person's calculations cohere with Bin's (undefeated) calculations, that is evidence of

reliability; when they don't, that is evidence against it. Annie's calculation does not cohere with Bin's (undefeated) calculation. So, the disagreement itself together with her conception of normal people's relative reliability serves as evidence that she is not as reliable as normal people are. It follows that his positive reason to regard her as just as reliable at mental math is undercut. So, he is not in a position to satisfy the positive reason requirement corollary, after all. Instead, he is rationally permitted to conclude that Annie's not as reliable as he is, and that he should stick with his calculation.

On the reductionist picture, Annie's testimony justifies without being epistemically significant. It confers *prima facie* justification to believe that they owe \$32 and, together with Bin's justification to believe they owe \$33, it confers *prima facie* justification to believe that either he or Annie is mistaken. It does not however defeat his justification or require him to revise his doxastic state.

Independence-based conciliationism issues a requirement for Bin: treat the two calculations impartially and dismiss Annie's only on dispute-independent grounds. Reductionism issues an incompatible permission: resolve the conflict in your favor and rely on the disagreement to dismiss Annie's calculation. This is the kind of question-begging reasoning that conciliationism was meant to rule out.

The point is not that a hearer can't ever satisfy the positive reason requirement corollary. The point is that for a reliability assessment to be rationally resilient in the face of disagreement, it needs especially strong backing. A robust track record can supply that; a first impression cannot.

The upshot: in the most common cases of disagreement, the reductionist answer to the when question fails to fit the disagreement data, while the anti-reductionist answer fits the data well. Therefore, the conciliationist must posit a presumptive testimonial entitlement. That is premise (2).

One comment before moving on: the claim is not that conciliationism and reductionism are jointly inconsistent. A conciliationist can accept reductionism and opt to defend the idea that evidence of disagreement doesn't defeat in cases like Mental Math*.

Premise (2) settles the when question, but it leaves something out. The presumptive right corollary says that comprehending a conflicting assertion is epistemically significant, absent a dispute-independent reason to regard the speaker as less reliable. It says nothing about how much epistemic support comprehension confers. That turns out to matter.

Consider the reason that the reductionist's explanation fails. The reductionist can grant that comprehending Annie's assertion confers prima facie justification for Bin to believe that they owe \$32. What cannot be granted is that this is sufficient to defeat the justificatory status of his own calculation. To avoid the same result, the anti-reductionist needs to establish the claim that, by default, comprehending a conflicting assertion provides sufficient support to defeat the justificatory standing of a hearer's belief. To do that, the default cannot be weaker than parity of support:

Equal Standing

Comprehending a speaker's conflicting assertion that *p* confers on a hearer, by default, support for *p* at least as strong as the support his own cognitive performance confers on what he believes.

Equal standing and the presumptive right corollary answer different questions. The corollary says when conflicting testimony defeats, while equal standing says how strong the support in the default entitlement needs to be for defeat to occur. The corollary presupposes equal standing: the corollary tells Bin to set aside the fact of disagreement and to weigh his and Annie's calculations impartially, and that impartial weighing requires suspension only if it is reasonable for Bin to treat his and her calculation as providing equal support for conflicting propositions.

3 Presumptive Right and the Epistemic Norm of Assertion

Section 2 argued that the conciliationist must posit a presumptive testimonial entitlement, and that the entitlement must be strong enough to satisfy equal standing. This section takes up that issue in answering the why question.

There are three potential answers: the assurance account (Hinchman 2005; McMyler 2011; Moran 2018); the rationalist account (Burge 1993); and the social norms account (Graham 2010, 2020; Greco 2020; Simion 2021). I will argue that only the social norms

account grounds an entitlement that satisfies equal standing, and that it does so by according ENA an ineliminable role.

3.1 *The Assurance Account*

The assurance account holds that what is distinctive about testimony is owed to the speech act performed in a testimonial exchange. In merely asserting *p*, a speaker presents *p* evidentially – that is, *p* is presented for consideration as a factor among others bearing on whether *p*. In telling a hearer *p*, a speaker presents herself as accountable for the truth of what she says. She offers a guarantee, and in offering she takes on responsibility for the hearer's epistemic situation. The hearer's entitlement is grounded in that assumption of responsibility rather than in reliability of testimony. The reason a hearer acquires is non-evidential in character: its source is the normative relationship the speaker establishes by telling.

The account does not satisfy equal standing. Consider what Bin acquires when Annie tells him that they owe \$32. He acquires a right of complaint against her should the calculation turn out false, and a reason to believe grounded in her having assumed responsibility for the matter. Neither of these is a reason to attribute to her any particular epistemic position on the arithmetic. A speaker can assume responsibility for what she doesn't know; that she can is part of what makes her answerable when things go badly. So, the entitlement the account delivers is not, even by default, an entitlement to regard Annie as knowing or as having sufficient justification to believe.

That is decisive, given what the conciliationist's higher-order situation requires. Bin is supposed to have reason to think that one of them is mistaken, and no impartial reason for thinking that it is Annie rather than himself. He is in that position only if comprehending her assertion supports §32 roughly to the same extent his cognitive performance supports §33. The assurance account can explain why Bin is permitted to believe Annie. It cannot explain why what she has told him is a reason to believe at least as strong as the one his own calculation already gives him.³⁵

3.2 *The Rationalist Account*

The rationalist account holds that the presumptive testimonial entitlement has an a priori basis (Burge 1993). Very roughly, the argument goes as follows. An intelligible presentation-as-true is *prima facie* a sign that it was produced by a rational source. Rational sources have the function of generating true content. Functional traits (or, things with functions) fulfill their functions reliably under normal conditions. So, rational sources reliably generate true content under normal conditions. A hearer therefore is entitled to accept an intelligible presentation-as-true, absent stronger reasons not to do so. The entitlement requires no positive evidence about the speaker. It is instead grounded in the nature of rational sources.

³⁵ The account faces another major difficulty. Equal standing holds for hearers in general: any hearer who comprehends a conflicting assertion has the justificatory status of his belief defeated by default, whether or not he was the speaker's intended addressee. The assurance account grounds the entitlement in a responsibility the speaker assumes toward a particular audience. So, the account lacks resources for explaining the general significance of conflicting testimony.

Does the account satisfy equal standing? The account carries a presumption that others are rationally entitled to their beliefs: we are entitled to treat others as reliable partly because we are entitled to presume them justified in what they believe. That is a default presumption about a speaker's epistemic standing, held without information about the speaker herself, which is the sort of consideration equal standing requires. Whether it is strong enough is less clear. Burge describes the entitlement modestly. It is a *prima facie* presumption, and he grants that it is often a weaker sign of truth than empirically justified beliefs about one's interlocutor. He also treats it as a starting point for reason, one that mature communication may leave behind as context supplies more information about the relative reliability of different sources. Equal standing asks for more: what Bin acquires in comprehending Annie's assertion must be, by default, support at least as strong as that provided by his own cognitive performance. It is unclear whether the account can deliver that result.

There is a basic problem with the rationalist account: a couple of premises are independently implausible. Take the claim that functional traits fulfill their functions reliably under normal conditions. This is false as a general matter. Many biological traits have functions they fulfill only occasionally: spermatozoa have the function of fertilizing eggs, yet they very rarely achieve this. Some functions must be reliably fulfilled: a heart that didn't reliably pump blood would be a defective heart. The rationalist account requires reason to be like a heart, not like a spermatozoon. It is unclear what would settle that issue *a priori* (Graham 2018b).

The rationalist account also doesn't adequately account for the fact that assertion has more than one function. One function is epistemic: speakers assert to present content

as true. Another is practical: speakers assert to influence hearers. Where a trait has competing functions, reliable fulfillment of one doesn't follow from reliable fulfillment of the other (Graham 2018b, 2020; Simion 2021). This is where the gullibility objection bites. The rationalist account cannot explain why speakers have a reason not to deceive when it is in their practical interest to do so.

So, the rationalist account should be set aside. Even if the entitlement is strong enough to meet equal standing, its appeal to functions rests on questionable a priori premises.

3.3 *The Social Norms Account*

The social norms account holds that the presumptive testimonial entitlement is grounded in the social environment in which testimonial exchanges take place. Just as natural laws structure the physical environment so as to make perception a reliable source, social norms and social sensibilities structure the social environment so as to make testimony a reliable source (Greco 2020). A norm is in force in a community partly in virtue of the sensibilities of its members: their dispositions to conform, to approve of conformity, and to disapprove of and sanction violations. Some of the norms structuring our social environment have distinctively epistemic content, permitting or requiring certain epistemic behavior. ENA may be one such norm.

Internalization is what makes the account work. When interlocutors internalize a norm, conformity becomes intrinsically motivating, and the norm supplies a standing reason to comply that remains in force when non-compliance would serve the speaker's interests (Graham 2012). This is the account's answer to the gullibility worry. A hearer in an environment where ENA is internalized is entitled to regard a speaker who stands to gain by deception as nonetheless having a positive reason to assert only what she knows or has sufficient justification to believe. Testimony is reliable, then, not because rational sources are reliable as such, but because of how the social environment is structured. And because the entitlement is grounded in the norm-governed practice rather than in anything relative to a particular exchange, it holds for any hearer who comprehends an assertion.

The account is a family of views. Graham (2010, 2020) grounds the entitlement in the hearer's capacity to comprehend: comprehension has the function of reliably producing true beliefs under normal conditions, where normal conditions include a social environment in which ENA and similar norms are in force. Greco (2020) emphasizes social roles: testimonial entitlement flows from competent participation in a cooperative practice of knowledge transmission, structured by the norms and sensibilities of a community of knowers. Simion (2021) grounds the entitlement in ENA directly: norm compliance is by default rational for speakers, so hearers are by default entitled to expect compliance, and since ENA is a social norm, hearers are by default entitled to believe what speakers assert.

Does the account satisfy equal standing? Yes. Step one involves considering Bin's comprehension state. In comprehending Annie's assertion, Bin grasps that she has

represented herself as complying with the norm governing assertion. If that norm is ENA, then she has represented herself as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe that they owe \$32. The second step is normative. In an environment where ENA is in force and internalized, a hearer is by default entitled to expect compliance. So, Bin is entitled, absent defeaters, to accord Annie the standing she represents herself as having. Thus, Bin is entitled to take Annie to know or have sufficient justification to believe that they owe \$32. He therefore has by default equally strong support for inconsistent propositions, which is to say that he has good reason to think that one of them is mistaken. Equal standing is thus satisfied: the higher-order situation the conciliationist cares about is generated without assuming that Bin has independent information confirming Annie's reliability.

3.4 The Ineliminability of ENA

The social norms account satisfies equal standing. Does it follow that ENA is ineliminable? The conciliationist may grant that the presumptive testimonial entitlement is grounded in social norms while denying that positing ENA is necessary. This section closes that option.

Suppose the norm governing assertion is not ENA. Suppose it is a sincerity norm instead. Now consider Bin's comprehension state. In comprehending Annie's assertion, he grasps that she has represented herself as complying with the norm, so as believing that they owe \$32. Bin is then entitled to take her to believe that they owe \$32. Does this

give him support comparable to what his own cognitive performance gives him? Obviously not. The epistemic significance of comprehending Annie's assertion would then depend on Bin's dispute-independent information about Annie's reliability. But that is the positive reason requirement in another guise, and section 2 showed why such accounts deliver the wrong verdicts in cases like Mental Math*.

The point generalizes. The strength of a hearer's default testimonial support depends on the standing a speaker represents herself as having by asserting, and what standing that is depends on what the norm of assertion requires. A norm that does not impose a robustly epistemic standard leaves the strength of that support dependent on what a hearer independently knows about the speaker. So:

Ineliminability

Any account that grounds the presumptive testimonial entitlement in a social norm governing assertion, and that satisfies equal standing, must posit ENA.

One may object. What about the truth norm, assert only what is true? Can't such a norm ground the reliability of testimony? If so, couldn't it ground anti-reductionism's presumptive testimonial entitlement? Truth norms fare poorly compared with epistemic norms at explaining other assertion data (Williamson 2000; Benton 2024), which suggests that the norm in force in testimonial exchanges has epistemic content. And whatever truth-telling regularity a truth norm would secure is secured by the most

plausible version of ENA: on the knowledge norm, compliance entails truthful assertion, since knowledge is factive. The converse doesn't hold. Because norm compliance figures in the content of a hearer's comprehension state, only a norm with epistemic content accords a speaker, by default, the standing of knowing or having sufficient justification to believe. And that is the standing required on testimony's defeat face.

The ineliminability claim holds across the family of views. On Simion's version it is obvious since the entitlement is grounded in ENA directly. On Graham's version ENA figures indirectly, through the specification of normal conditions, but it figures necessarily: if the only norm in force were a sincerity norm, comprehension would confer no more than an entitlement to take a speaker to believe what she asserted. The same holds for Greco's version. The role a speaker occupies is defined by the standard interlocutors hold one another to, and if that standard is sincerity, then occupying the role of assertor claims only belief.

That completes the defense of premise (3). If conciliationism is true, there is an adequate account of why testimony-based evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant. Any adequate account must satisfy equal standing. Of the accounts on offer, only the social norms account does, and it does so by positing ENA. So, the only adequate account of the conciliationist's own verdicts posits ENA.

4 The Epistemic Norm of Assertion and Conciliationism

Section 2 argued that the conciliationist must posit a presumptive testimonial entitlement. Section 3 argued that the entitlement must satisfy equal standing, and that the only account which delivers one posits ENA. This section defends premise (4): ENA and conciliationism are jointly inconsistent.

The argument runs through the notion of an objection. Sometimes interlocutors respond to an assertion with disagreement, and sometimes they voice their disagreement. When they do, they challenge the speaker. I take challenging to be a general way for a hearer to inform a speaker that what was asserted has not been accepted. One way a hearer may do so is by objecting. I will defend three claims. The first concerns the conditions under which conciliationists should think that hearers have warrant to object. The second concerns the norm that governs objections. The third is that the two claims cannot both be true.

4.1 *Challenging, Questioning, Objecting*

I need to make a few distinctions. The first concerns the target of a hearer's challenge: one can challenge the *content* asserted ("That's false" or "Is that true?"), or one can challenge a speaker's *warrant* to assert ("You don't know that" or "Do you know that?"). Second, there are different ways of challenging a speaker: one can *question* an assertion ("How do you know that?"), or one can *object* to an assertion ("You don't know that"). Third, the strength of one's challenge can be modified. A hearer who objects can do so by *asserting*

outright (“You don’t know that”) or by offering a *hedged assertion* (“I don’t think that’s right”).

To illustrate, return to Annie and Bin in Mental Math. Upon comprehending Annie’s assertion that they owe \$32, Bin does not defer. He does not come to believe instead that they owe \$32. So, he does not accept her assertion. Based on the distinctions above, here are the ways he can challenge in response:

- A. Bin can object to Annie’s assertion by asserting outright: “No, that is not right” or “You don’t know that.”
- B. Bin can object to Annie’s assertion by offering a hedged assertion: “I don’t think that is right” or “I don’t think you know that.”
- C. Bin can question Annie’s assertion by asking: “Is that right?” or “Do you know that?”

The challenges in (A) involve objecting by asserting outright, where the first is directed at the content of Annie’s assertion and the second at her epistemic standing. Those in (B) involve hedged objection to the same two targets. Those in (C) involve questioning, again directed at the same two targets.

A final point of clarification: objections can be more or less informative. An objection is least informative when it merely denies what was just asserted. A more

informative objection denies and offers a different answer. More informative still is one that offers the answer together with the reasoning behind it.

D. Denial: “No, that is not right.”

E. Denial-proposal: “No, that’s not right. We owe \$33.”

F. Denial-proposal-justification: “No, that is not right. We owe \$33. See, the tip is \$11, because when you multiply 55 by .2 you get 11. Now, add that to 55, you get a total of 66. Divide that by 2, you get 33, which is what we owe, \$33.”

It seems reasonable for assertors to expect objectors to make their objections reasonably informative. For the remainder of the paper, “objecting” refers to objecting by asserting outright unless stated otherwise.

4.2 Warranted Objections

Suppose Bin objects to Annie by asserting outright, “No, that is not right. We owe \$33.” He denies her answer while proposing a different one. Would his objection be warranted? Does he have warrant to assert his view? Yes. At least, this is what you should say if you are a conciliationist. More generally, the conciliationist should endorse the following:

Warranted Objections (WO)

It is sometimes (and not rarely) the case that interlocutors have epistemic warrant to object by asserting their view outright in response, even under conditions of peer disagreement.

To see why, consider Annie's perspective. Independent of the dispute, she has good reason to regard Bin as an epistemic peer. According to the conciliationist, this makes it so that after he objects and she learns that he disagrees, it is reasonable for her to think that his objection defeats her epistemic standing. So, it is reasonable for her to suspend judgment in response. What else should she think about his objection? Suppose she considered whether it is warranted. Should she think that it is? Yes. Again, what makes it reasonable for her to think that his objection defeats her epistemic standing is the fact that, independent of the dispute, she has good reason to regard him as an epistemic peer. That same fact makes it reasonable for her to think that his objection is warranted. Otherwise, she would be able to reason as follows:

- I think we owe \$32, but Bin says we owe \$33.
- I am fairly reliable at mental math, and I have good reason to think he is about as reliable as me.
- Even so, what he said was wrong.

Suppose that Annie's thought "Bin says we owe \$33" is about Bin's assertion, where she takes him to represent himself as having very good reason for the proposition that they owe \$33. Suppose too that her thought "what he said was wrong" expresses a judgment about that assertion – in particular, that it is unwarranted. So, Annie concludes that Bin's objection is unwarranted. To the conciliationist, this should seem irrational, and for the same reason that Bin's reasoning is irrational in Mental Math: neither party should dismiss the other's view, because each should regard the other as reliable with respect to the proposition asserted. Annie's reasoning here takes the same question-begging form as Bin's reasoning in Mental Math, and the intuition that Bin's reasoning is irrational is what is supposed to motivate conciliationism in the first place. So, if the conciliationist regards Bin's reasoning as irrational, the conciliationist should regard Annie's as irrational too. Thus, the conciliationist should think that it is reasonable for Annie to think that Bin's objection is warranted.

Perhaps, upon considering the status of Bin's objection, Annie could be agnostic instead. Perhaps she could withhold judgment as to whether it is warranted. This is mistaken, at least the conciliationist should think so. To see why, it will help to consider an analogous case. Eylül asks Dario whether the concert starts at 7:00 or 7:30. Suppose she asks him because she has good reason to think he knows the answer. Dario responds by asserting that it starts at 7:00. Suppose that, in response, she considers whether his assertion is warranted. Could she remain agnostic after taking up the issue? No. Since she has good reason to think that he knows when the concert starts, she should think that his assertion is warranted, absent defeaters. Similarly, since Annie has reason to think that

Bin knows, or is as likely as she is to know, how much they owe, she should think that his assertion that they owe \$33 is warranted.

The analogy can be strengthened by reconstructing the hearer's side of both exchanges. Recall that, according to ENA, to assert is to represent oneself as meeting a robustly epistemic standard with respect to the content asserted. This gives us the following principle:

Representation

In asserting *p*, a speaker represents herself as meeting a robustly epistemic standard *E* with respect to *p*.

When a hearer comprehends a speaker's assertion that *p*, he grasps that she has represented herself in a certain way with respect to *p*.

We may add a second principle. This one concerns how hearers should respond to how speakers represent themselves. When a hearer comprehends an outright assertion, under certain conditions he acquires a defeasible reason to believe that the speaker meets the epistemic standard required for asserting (Goldberg 2015).

Propriety

A hearer who has reason to regard a speaker as reliable with respect to the content asserted should, absent defeaters, believe that the speaker is as she represents herself to be.

Representation restates section 1's observation about what a speaker does by asserting. Propriety is deliberately weak. It is intended to be read as common ground between the two accounts of testimonial entitlement canvassed in section 2. The argument in this section is independent of the results of the previous sections. Taken together, representation and propriety are simply meant to enable the proponent of ENA to reconstruct the hearer's side of an assertoric exchange.

Consider Eylül's perspective as she takes up the question of whether Dario's assertion is warranted.

Eylül's perspective

1. Dario asserted that the concert starts at 7:00.
2. In asserting, a speaker represents herself as meeting E with respect to the content asserted. (Representation)
3. So, Dario represents himself as meeting E with respect to the proposition that the concert starts at 7:00.

4. If I have reason to regard a speaker as reliable with respect to the content asserted, then absent defeaters I should believe that the speaker is as she represents herself to be. (Propriety)
5. I have dispute-independent reason to think that Dario knows when the concert starts, and I possess no defeaters.
6. So, I should believe that Dario meets E with respect to the proposition that the concert starts at 7:00; that is, I should believe that his assertion is warranted.
7. So, the concert starts at 7:00.

Steps (1–3) record Eylül’s comprehension of Dario’s assertion. Step (5) discharges the two conditions of propriety. At step (6) she settles the question she has taken up. At (7) she forms the belief on the basis of his assertion.

Now compare Annie’s perspective as she takes up the question of whether Bin’s objection is warranted.

Annie’s perspective

1. Bin objected to my assertion by asserting outright that we owe \$33.
2. In asserting, a speaker represents herself as meeting E with respect to the content asserted. (Representation)
3. So, Bin represents himself as meeting E with respect to the proposition that we owe \$33.

4. If I have reason to regard a speaker as reliable with respect to the content asserted, then absent defeaters I should believe that the speaker is as she represents herself to be. (Propriety)
5. I have dispute-independent reason to regard Bin as reliable with respect to such calculations, and I possess no defeaters.
6. So, I should believe that Bin meets E with respect to the proposition that we owe \$33; that is, I should think his objection is warranted.
7. But what Bin asserted conflicts with what I believe, and I have no dispute-independent reason to favor my assessment over his.
8. So, I should suspend on the matter.

The two perspectives are parallel through step (6). Each hearer, having taken up the issue of whether the speaker's assertion is warranted, should conclude that it is. Just as Eylül should think that Dario has warrant to assert, so too Annie should think that Bin has warrant to object. This is because of what each has reason to think about the relevant speaker. They diverge at step (7). Eylül, having no prior belief about when the concert starts, is in a position to believe on the basis of Dario's assertion. Annie's situation differs. Bin's assertion conflicts with what she already believes. So, lacking any dispute-independent reason to favor her own assessment or his, she should suspend on the matter.

But why, according to conciliationism in particular, is agnosticism not an option for Annie? Propriety settles the question unless she has a defeater. By stipulation, she has

dispute-independent reason to regard Bin as reliable at mental math. So, absent a defeater, she should believe he is as he represents himself to be; that is, that his objection is warranted. Withholding judgment is available to her only if she has a defeater. So, does she? Two candidates suggest themselves. The conciliationist can accept neither.

The first candidate is Annie's own belief that they owe \$32. She believes this, and she has reason to think herself reliable. The suggestion is that she may put the two together and downgrade her assessment of Bin, moving from taking him for a peer to suspending on whether he is one. The trouble is that the inference runs through a dispute-dependent reason. Annie would be relying on the very belief under dispute to withdraw her assessment of Bin's reliability, and that is precisely the inference conciliationism was introduced to rule out. So, the first candidate is unavailable.

The second candidate is Bin's own handling of the disagreement. Annie should think that evidence of peer disagreement defeats. Bin acquired such evidence when she asserted, and he objected anyway. The suggestion is that she may treat this as showing that he failed to appreciate the force of that evidence, and so as reason to think him less reliable than she took him to be. The suggestion can be pressed harder. If evidence of peer disagreement defeats, then Bin's justification was already defeated at the moment he objected. Annie could then conclude that his objection was unwarranted whatever his reliability, without downgrading him at all.

Neither version works, and both fail for the same reason: Annie cannot tell from the fact that Bin objected what his epistemic situation is. Conciliationism says that evidence of disagreement defeats unless a party has dispute-independent grounds for

favoring his own assessment. For all Annie knows, Bin has such grounds. Maybe he has taken a cognitive-enhancing drug. Maybe he found himself in the same situation yesterday and remembers what they owed. Maybe his reliability has improved since the last time they went to lunch. If he has grounds of that kind, then he neither mishandled the evidence nor asserted from a defeated epistemic position, and Annie is in no position to rule this out. So, she has no defeater. Given her dispute-independent assessment of Bin, she should think his objection warranted.

So, if conciliationism is true, interlocutors in Annie's position should regard objections from interlocutors in Bin's position as warranted. It does not immediately follow that such objections are warranted. There are cases where we should regard an epistemic peer's objection as warranted even though, in fact, it is not. But it would be implausible to take this to suggest that such objections are systematically unwarranted – that interlocutors in Bin's position never have warrant to object. Absent good reason to think otherwise, the conciliationist should think that WO is true: interlocutors in Bin's position sometimes, and not rarely, have warrant to object, even under conditions of peer disagreement.

There is also support for WO that does not run through conciliationism. Recall (F), where Bin denies, proposes, and justifies. Comprehending his reasoning would put Annie in a position to know how much they owe. Suppose she thereby comes to know. Then Bin's knowledge and justification have been transmitted through his testimony, and he cannot transmit what he does not have. So, he has the epistemic standing his objection requires. I develop this argument elsewhere. I note it here because it means that a conciliationist who hopes to reject WO has more to answer for than the derivation just given.

4.3 *The Norm Governing Objections*

What is the norm governing objections? Since one objects by asserting outright, the natural place to look is the norm governing assertion. Doing so yields the following:

Epistemic Norm of Objection (ENO)

A hearer has warrant to object to p by asserting outright only if he meets E with respect to not- p , or with respect to the claim that the speaker asserted p without meeting E .

Two comments. First, the disjunction reflects the two targets distinguished in 4.1: a hearer may object to the content asserted or to a speaker's warrant to assert (van Elswyk & Benton 2023). Second, the epistemic standard required for warranted objection is the same standard required for warranted assertion. This is what makes the account simple. ENO introduces no new normative content. It is what ENA says when the assertion in question happens to be an objection.

ENO is motivated by the same data that motivate ENA. Most proponents of ENA appeal to the challenge datum (Williamson 2000; Benton 2024): when a speaker asserts something we take to be unknown or unjustified, we may permissibly respond by

challenging her epistemic warrant to assert. Notice that we may respond to objections in exactly the same way.

Annie: We owe \$32.

Bin: No, that's not right.

Annie: How do you know that?

Just as we can challenge an assertor by asking “How do you know?”, we can challenge an objector in the same way. This suggests that if the challenge datum lends support to ENA, it lends the same support to ENO. Indeed, if the challenge datum supports ENA, then ENA should govern each iteration of an assertoric exchange: an initial assertion, an objection, a rebuttal, a further rejoinder, and so on. Nothing in the datum singles out the opening move.

There is a more general reason to accept ENO, having to do with normative transfer from genus to species. A plausible account runs as follows (Simion 2021): for a normative item that is species of a genus, the norm governing the species must be at least as strong as the norm governing the genus. Consider the activity of preparing a meal and the activity of preparing a meal of a certain cuisine. What counts as preparing a good meal of a certain cuisine faces more normative constraints than what counts as preparing a good meal, not fewer. Or consider dancing and dancing in a certain style. Similarly, objecting is a species of the genus asserting. So, the norm governing objecting is at least as demanding as the

norm governing asserting. If assertion is governed by a robustly epistemic norm, objection cannot be governed by a weaker epistemic norm.

So, ENA delivers ENO. A hearer who objects thereby asserts, and the norm on assertion applies to what he does.

4.4 *The Incompatibility Argument*

We now have what we need. Take Mental Math. Annie asserts that they owe \$32. Bin, who has calculated correctly and knows that they owe \$33, objects by asserting outright that they owe \$33.

Start with what conciliationism says about Bin's epistemic position. Independence-based conciliationism says that a subject's justification is defeated when he learns that someone he reasonably regards as an epistemic peer disagrees, unless he has a positive, dispute-independent reason to think that it is he who is correct or more reliable. Mental Math satisfies each condition. Bin has justification to believe that they owe \$33 – indeed, he knows it. It is reasonable for him to regard Annie as a peer with respect to such calculations. He learns that she disagrees by comprehending her assertion. And he has no dispute-independent reason to think he's the one who is right. So, his justification is defeated. And since he learns of the disagreement in comprehending her assertion and objects in response, his justification is defeated at the moment he objects.

Now take what conciliationism says about objections. Section 4.2 argued that conciliationism is committed to WO. So, it is sometimes, and not rarely, the case that interlocutors in Bin's position have warrant to object.

Now apply ENO. If Bin has warrant to object, then he meets E with respect to the proposition that they owe \$33, or he meets E with respect to the claim that Annie asserted that they owe \$32 without meeting E.

Take the first disjunct. E is robustly epistemic: meeting E with respect to a proposition is incompatible with lacking justification to believe it. So, if Bin meets E with respect to the proposition that they owe \$33, then his justification to believe it is undefeated. But conciliationism says that his justification is defeated. So, he does not meet E on the first disjunct.

Take the second disjunct. Meeting E with respect to the claim that Annie's assertion is unwarranted requires that Bin know, or have sufficient justification to believe, that she asserted without meeting E. He does not. The argument of 4.2 runs in both directions. Bin has dispute-independent reason to regard Annie as reliable with respect to such calculations, and by propriety he should therefore believe that she is as she represents herself to be – that is, that her assertion is warranted. Neither of the two considerations that might license agnosticism is available to him, and for the same reasons they were not available to her. He cannot appeal to his own calculation without relying on a dispute-dependent reason. And he cannot infer from the fact that she asserted that she has mishandled evidence of peer disagreement, since when she asserted she had

no such evidence to mishandle. So, Bin should regard Annie's assertion as warranted. He is in no position to meet E with respect to the claim that it is not.

Both disjuncts fail. So, if ENO is true, Bin lacks warrant to object. And the same holds for any interlocutor in his position, since nothing in the reasoning turned on features peculiar to the case. So, WO is false.

But conciliationism entails WO. So conciliationism, together with ENA/ENO, entails both WO and its denial. The two theses are jointly inconsistent. That is premise (4).

It is worth being clear about the shape of this result. It is not an inconsistent triad, with WO as an independent third member that one might drop while maintaining the other two. WO is derived from conciliationism. So, the conflict is between two theses rather than three, and it is not a conflict the conciliationist can resolve by denying WO.

It is also worth being clear about why the conflict arises. It is no accident. What generates the trouble is the very feature of ENA that made it ineliminable in section 3. ENA is what allows comprehension to deliver, by default, support as strong as a hearer's own cognitive performance: a speaker who asserts represents herself as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe, and a hearer is by default entitled to accord her the standing she claims. That is why the presumptive entitlement satisfies equal standing, and it is why conflicting testimony defeats without the hearer needing any information about the speaker in particular. But the same representational fact runs in the other direction. If asserting is representing oneself as knowing or having sufficient justification to believe, then a hearer who objects represents himself in the same way by objecting, and

his objection is warranted only if the representation is accurate. Conciliationism needs assertion to be strong enough to defeat. ENA is what makes it that strong. And in making it that strong, ENA makes objecting something a defeated hearer is not warranted to do.

Sections 2 and 3 argued that the conciliationist must posit ENA. The result of this section is that if ENA is true, conciliationism is false. That is the instability.

5 Accept Defeat?

The argument is complete. If conciliationism is true, there is an account of when testimony-based evidence of disagreement is epistemically significant, and of why it is significant, when it is. The only answer to the when question that fits the conciliationist's verdicts posits a presumptive testimonial entitlement. The only answer to the why question that grounds a sufficiently strong entitlement posits ENA. But ENA and conciliationism are jointly inconsistent. So, conciliationism is internally unstable: what would explain its verdicts cannot be true if the view is true.

This result resembles a more familiar one. Conciliationism has long faced the charge that it is self-defeating: applied to disagreement about itself, it calls for its own rejection (Plantinga 2000; Elga 2010). The difference is in the source of the problem. The self-defeat problem requires a second-order dispute, in that if epistemologists agreed that conciliationism is true, the self-defeat charge would itself be defeated. The problem is thus *external* to the view. The present argument delivers a result that is *internal* to the view.

It doesn't depend on what epistemologists think about the conciliationism itself. It depends on what would ground the view.

So, accept defeat? The conciliationist doesn't have much room. One option is to restrict the view to highly idealized cases, denying the analogy between Mental Math and Mental Math*. Another option is to show why the rationalist account's implausible premises aren't as implausible as they seem. A last option is to retreat to a claim about degrees of confidence rather than about suspension. None of these options seem very promising.

Conclusion

This dissertation asked the disagreement literature's central question. Does evidence of peer disagreement defeat a subject's justification to believe? Its answer was pursued by investigating the epistemic significance of other minds. Two questions organized the inquiry, both centered on the hearer's side of an assertoric exchange. The first concerned the state of comprehending a peer's conflicting assertion: when is it epistemically significant, and why is it, when it is? The second concerned the act of responding: when does a hearer have warrant to object? The first question belongs to the epistemology of testimony, while the second belongs to the normativity of assertion. Pursuing them together yielded the conclusion that conciliationism is internally unstable.

The argument unfolded in three steps. Chapter 1 uncovered a conflict. Because we object by asserting, the epistemic norm of assertion extends to an epistemic norm of objection. Conciliationism, meanwhile, is committed to WO, the claim that hearers like Bin sometimes have warrant to object to speakers like Annie. Together, ENA plus conciliationism entail that such hearers both have and lack warrant to object. Since WO is derived from conciliationism, the conflict is a dilemma between the two theses: either peer disagreement doesn't defeat, or assertion doesn't require knowledge or justification. Chapter 2 showed that the conciliationist cannot resolve the dilemma by dropping ENA. The view's verdicts concern the defeating power of a peer's conflicting testimony, and they hold in cases where hearers lack track-record access to their interlocutors. Only a presumptive testimonial entitlement fits those verdicts, and only the social norms account grounds an entitlement of the required strength, an account on which ENA plays an ineliminable role. Conciliationism is explanatorily dependent on ENA. Chapter 3 put the two results together. What would explain the conciliationist's verdicts cannot be true if the view is

true. Unlike the familiar self-defeat charge, this problem does not depend on any second-order dispute about conciliationism. Rather, it depends on what would ground the view. The instability is internal.

The dissertation is a step toward reorienting the literature. The question of peer defeat has been pursued within an intrapersonal frame. The focus has been on a solitary subject, her evidence, and the coherence of her first-order and higher-order attitudes. Within that frame, the disagreeing peer is a delivery mechanism for higher-order evidence, interchangeable with hypoxia or a mind-clouding drug. The dissertation's results suggest that this frame fails to capture the full story. The evidence at the heart of the paradigm cases is testimony-based. The significance of testimonial evidence is, on the best account, grounded in social norms governing assertoric discourse. Once that is in view, it is natural to wonder what such norms have to say about the question of peer defeat.

The shift from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal provides a new frame for the literature's question. It changes what an answer ought to look like. A view about the rational response to disagreement is, in its central cases, a view about the epistemic significance of conflicting testimony, and it should therefore cohere with the best accounts of testimony and assertion. Conciliationism, I have argued, fails that test.

Epilogue: Denying Defeat

If ENA is true, then conciliationism is false. But if ENA is false, the conciliationist's verdicts about its own paradigm cases are left unexplained. The conciliationist's best option, it seems, is to deny ENA while accepting that its verdicts are ungrounded. This epilogue argues that this option isn't available. Why? Conciliationism is false. Evidence of peer disagreement does not defeat the justificatory status of a subject's belief.

Consider Mental Math. Suppose Bin responds to Annie's assertion by offering an informative objection:

Bin: No, that's not right. We owe \$33. See, the tip is \$11, because when you multiply 55 by .2 you get 11. Now, add that to 55, you get a total of 66; divide that by 2, you get 33, which is what we owe, \$33.

Annie: Ah, I see. You're right.

It is reasonable to suppose that Annie comes to know that they owe \$33 by comprehending and accepting Bin's argument-backed assertion. Arguably, her belief is testimony-based, and Bin's knowledge and justification are transmitted to her. But a speaker cannot transmit what he does not have. So, if Bin's epistemic standing is transmitted to Annie via testimony, Bin's epistemic standing was not defeated by the disagreement. Thus, conciliationism is false.

More precisely:

- (1) Annie learns how much they owe by comprehending Bin's argument.
- (2) Annie's source of knowledgeable, justified belief is testimony.
- (3) Bin's knowledge and justification are transmitted via testimony.
- (4) Bin's knowledge and justification are not defeated by evidence of peer disagreement.
- (5) Thus, conciliationism is false.

(4) follows from (3), and (5) follows from (4). (2) and (3) need defense. I take these in turn.

Start with (2). Annie's belief is formed by the standard three-stage process for testimony-based belief: a speaker produces an assertoric utterance; a hearer comprehends it; the hearer forms a belief on the basis of comprehension. At stage one, Bin testifies. At stage two, Annie employs the psychological processes used in comprehending testimony. At stage three, her belief is formed on that basis.

But does Bin really testify? Doesn't he argue for his view? It depends on what type of speech act testifying is. In the sense that matters to epistemologists, testimony is assertion. This is the speech act speakers typically perform in uttering declarative sentences in the indicative mood, and it is the main vehicle for the spread of knowledge (Goldberg 2015). So, the question is whether Bin asserts his argument. He does. Goldman (1999) assumed that speakers assert their arguments, and in argumentation theory it is a standard view that arguments are a type of assertion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984). Arguments also have a natural place in Bach and Harnish's (1979) taxonomy of constatives: the act-type arguing can be construed as a confirmative. The distinction between an argument-backed assertion that *p* and a bare assertion that *p* is a difference between types of assertion, not a difference between assertion and something else.

The point can be sharpened by attending to how speakers represent themselves by asserting. A speaker who makes a bare assertion that p represents herself as knowing or as justifiably believing p . A speaker who hedges represents herself as having some but inconclusive support for p . What about an argument-backed assertion? I want to suggest that a speaker who makes an argument-backed assertion represents herself as having rationally grounded knowledge that p : knowledge backed by reasons she can produce. The difference between types of assertoric utterances is the quality of epistemic standing the speaker represents herself as having.

But doesn't Annie exercise her capacity to reason at stages two and three? If so, doesn't that make her capacity to reason, rather than testimony, the source of her belief? Compare two versions of the case.

Competent.

Bin: No, that's not right. We owe \$33. See, the tip is \$11, because when you multiply 55 by .2 you get 11. Now, add that to 55, you get a total of 66; divide that by 2, you get 33, which is what we owe, \$33.

Annie: Ah, I see. You're right.

Incompetent.

Bin: No, that's not right. We owe \$33. See, the tip is \$12, because when you multiply 55 by .2 you get 12. Now, add that to 55, you get a total of 66; divide that by 2, you get 33, which is what we owe, \$33.

Annie: We owe \$33, though I think you meant that the tip is \$11, not \$12.

In both cases, Annie comes to know that they owe \$33. In Competent, Bin competently shares his reasoning and Annie accepts it. In Incompetent, he fails to provide a route to knowledge, but she catches his error and reasons her way to the correct calculation anyway. Intuitively, her bases for belief differ in the two cases. In Competent, she believes on the basis of testimony while in Incompetent she believes on the basis of the exercise of her capacity to reason. The exercise of her capacity to reason is thus different in the two cases. In both, it monitors for error, but only in Incompetent does it catch an error and guide her to the correct calculation. When Annie accepts Bin's competently shared argument, she forms a testimony-based belief; when Annie's acceptance of the calculation is based on the exercise of her own reason, she forms a reason-based belief. That is premise (2).

Now premise (3). Are Bin's knowledge and justification transmitted to Annie? Two notions of transmission are relevant, one thin and one thick. On both, transmission involves a speaker passing epistemic goods to a hearer through testimony. On the thick notion, there is more to it. Premise (3) is compatible with both.

The thin notion is illustrated by the bucket brigade. For the brigade to work, each person must pass the bucket to the next, and to do that, each must have it. Likewise in a testimonial exchange, a speaker must have the epistemic goods to pass them on. The exchange between Bin and Annie worked. She gained knowledge and justification through testimony. So, on the thin notion, Bin had the knowledge and justification to transmit.

The thick notion adds that something distinctively social makes transmission work. Greco (2020) holds that transmission essentially involves cooperation and the exercise of joint agency: speakers and hearers share the intention of sharing knowledge, which relieves hearers of the usual epistemic burden of acquiring it for themselves. This is compatible with (3). Joint actions are often

extended, involving clarifications, challenges, and arguments as well as one-off assertions, and that is what Annie and Bin's exchange looks like. More importantly, Bin's argumentative performance relieves Annie of the burden of working out for herself how much they owe. His argument puts her in a position to know without having to redo the calculation. Moran (2018) grounds transmission instead in the speaker's assurance: the speaker's overt, voluntary assumption of responsibility binds speaker and hearer together. This too is compatible with (3). Moran focuses on bare assertions, but the account extends naturally. A speaker who offers reason R in support of p assumes responsibility for p, for R, and for R's supporting p. An argument-backed assertion wagers more credibility, not less. There are other ways of unpacking the thick notion, but if (3) is compatible with Greco's and Moran's versions, there is strong *prima facie* reason to think it is compatible with the thick notion as such.

As far as I can tell, the only serious ground for denying (3) comes from the debate over whether testimony can generate, rather than merely transmit, epistemic goods. Perception and reasoning are generative sources. It is disputed whether testimony is too. Someone moved by the prior plausibility of conciliationism might read Annie's case as one of generation. Her knowledge is produced by her own capacity to comprehend, not passed on from Bin. The model would be Lackey's (2008) case of the persistent believer. Millicent has perfectly functioning vision, but a neurosurgeon has falsely convinced her that implants are making her visual cortex malfunction. She continues to trust her eyes anyway. Leaving the office, she alone sees a badger in Big Bear Field, and later tells her friend Bradley, saying nothing about the neurosurgeon. Millicent's perceptual belief is defeated. Yet Bradley, who has good reason to trust her, plausibly comes to know that a badger was there. If so, the epistemic standing of his belief is not transmitted through her testimony. It is generated on his side of the exchange. The proposed analogy would go as follows. Bin's epistemic standing is defeated by Annie's conflicting testimony, but by maintaining

his belief he retains the information that they owe \$33. When he argues, Annie's comprehension turns that information into knowledge, just as Bradley's did.

The analogy fails. To start, Millicent and Bin are not in analogous epistemic positions. Suppose Millicent, after telling Bradley about the badger, recalls her defeater. She should retract: "Actually, I'm not even sure that's what I saw. My doctor told me my visual cortex is malfunctioning." Her retraction would be apt. Now suppose Bin tried to retract his reasoning. Annie should protest: "No, no, you're right. We owe \$33." Arguably, the reason Bin should not retract his reasoning is because it is not a proper target of epistemic criticism. This shows that Millicent and Bin are not in analogous epistemic positions. Moreover, in generation cases there is typically something abnormal or defective on the speaker's side of the exchange, or something off in the environment. That is true of Millicent, whose belief survives only by forgetting that the deliverances of her perceptual system are defeated. The same is not true of Bin. It is precisely the competence of his cognitive and argumentative performance that explains why Annie comes to know. To insist, in spite of this, on an epistemic asymmetry between them, where Bin is ignorant and irrational while Annie is knowledgeable and rational, is more counterintuitive than denying conciliationism. Whether testimony can ever generate epistemic goods is beside the point. In this case, they are transmitted.

What accounts for the counterintuitiveness of attributing an epistemic asymmetry between Annie and Bin at the end of their testimonial exchange? Consider what it would mean for the connection between the practice of justifying beliefs and a belief's being justified. Bin's case is paradigmatic of successfully and competently justifying one's belief. In general, when there are two interlocutors disagreeing over an issue, where one knows and the other doesn't, the epistemically desirable outcome is where the one who knows gets the other who doesn't into a position to come to know. That is exactly what Bin does by competently arguing for his view. The counterintuitiveness of positing an epistemic asymmetry between Annie and Bin, I want to

suggest, is explained by the fact that it would imply a radical divergence between the practice of justifying beliefs and a belief's being justified, in that whether an interlocutor was in a position to hold a belief wouldn't tell us anything significant about whether she was in a position to justify it if challenged.

To clarify, I am not suggesting that the social practice of justifying beliefs is constitutive of the justificatory status of a belief. Rather, I am making a point similar to one made by William Alston (1988).³⁶ The social practice of justifying beliefs plays a key role in explaining why we care about having justified beliefs in the first place. For that reason, we should presume that the conditions on justified belief are partly informed by the social practice itself. Minimally, the conditions on when a belief is justified should not radically diverge from the conditions on when a subject has, or is in a position to, successfully and competently justify a belief.

But what about the inference from (3) to (4)? There are two ways a conciliationist might try to undercut it. The first appeals to unreasonable knowledge (Lasonen-Aarnio 2010). On this line, the disagreement defeats Bin's justification but not his knowledge. So, he transmits knowledge but not justification. In reply, the same divergence point holds here. It is counterintuitive to say that after competently reasoning to the correct answer and then competently arguing for it, Bin is in a worse epistemic position than his audience. Bin's knowledge is not unreasonable. It is rationally grounded.

The second treats Annie's acceptance as a defeater-defeater. On this line, Bin's epistemic standing is defeated when he learns that Annie disagrees. But when she withdraws the disagreement, the disagreement-defeater is defeated. This means his argumentative performance

³⁶ Alston argued that the social practice of justifying our beliefs explains why we have the concept of being justified in the first place. We want justified beliefs because we need to be able to defend them in the face of challenges and disagreements. Alston also argues that the content of our concept of being justified was influenced by the social practice itself. That is why, Alston claims, our concept of being justified includes an accessibility condition.

simultaneously transmits epistemic goods to Annie while repairing Bin's epistemic standing. In reply, it is surely right to say that Annie's acceptance bolsters Bin's epistemic standing (Goldberg 2021). When one observes a competent hearer accept an assertion, arguably one's epistemic position is enhanced. It doesn't follow though that Annie's acceptance restores his epistemic standing. The suggestion conflates what follows from successful transmission with what successful transmission requires. If Bin's argumentative performance successfully transmits epistemic goods, then he must have epistemic goods prior to performing the speech act required for transmission.

So, we should think that the inference from (3) to (4) is valid. Bin's knowledge and justification are not defeated by evidence of peer disagreement. Thus, conciliationism is false. The main argument of the dissertation established that conciliationism is internally unstable. The argument of the epilogue establishes that the view is false. Both results fall within an interpersonal frame of the epistemology of disagreement.

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