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How to Stand Your Ground in the Face of Moral Disagreement

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Abstract

How to Stand Your Ground in the Face of Moral Disagreement

By

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For most of your moral beliefs, there is at least someone out there who disagrees with you, but who is equally well informed and conscientious. How should you respond in situations of this kind? In my dissertation, I explain and defend a novel evaluative requirement for dealing with so-called peer moral disagreement.

The evaluative requirement calls on us to assess our reasons for taking our interlocutor to be an epistemic peer. More specifically, it says that if these reasons are equally compelling to our reasons for accepting that our epistemic peer has made a mistake, then—and only then—are we warranted to substantially revise our belief or suspend judgment in our answer.

This requirement has been ignored in the literature about peer disagreement. Without it, however, it is very difficult to make sense of our intuitive verdicts in cases of ordinary and extreme disagreement. According to the evaluative requirement, you are required to revise your belief in cases of ordinary disagreement but not in cases of extreme disagreement because in the former type of cases, but not the latter, our reasons for taking our interlocutor to be an epistemic peer are virtually equal to our reasons for accepting that our epistemic peer has made a mistake.

The evaluative requirement is especially significant when we think about the problem of moral disagreement. There are two different forms that this problem can take. The first starts from the fact that there is no independent check that would confirm your moral beliefs over the beliefs of those who disagree with you, which allegedly undermines your moral knowledge. In response to this type of skeptical problem, I argue that it delivers the wrong verdict in cases involving cross-temporal disagreement.

In the recent past, for example, there are many individuals who believed that slavery is morally permissible. This fact coupled with the independent check requirement implies that I do not know that slavery is morally wrong. Applying the evaluative requirement, I argue that our reasons for the claim that we know slavery to be morally wrong are much stronger than our reasons for the claim that we need an independent check to verify that our beliefs are true in a case of widespread moral disagreement. Thus, we should reject this independent check requirement.

I then consider a second type of problem from moral disagreement. This problem starts not from the absence of an independent check in cases of disagreement, but from the fact of disagreement itself. A natural thought about such situations is that you are warranted to revise your moral beliefs in cases in which someone who is your cognitive and evidential equal disagrees with you. I argue that there is something else you can do in these situations besides revise your first-order beliefs, namely take steps to improve your epistemic position. Specifically, you can either improve your understanding of the reasons for thinking that your peer is mistaken (e.g. through additional research or reflection); or you can significantly improve your cognitive abilities in a way that's relevant to the disputed claim. It turns out that it is easier for the novice, as opposed to the expert, to escape this problem of moral disagreement because the novice has less epistemic work to do than the expert.

The dissertation concludes by applying these lessons to the case of philosophical disagreement. Some philosophers have thought that any position like mine can be self-undermining. If, according to my position, we should substantially revise our beliefs in the face of peer disagreement, and if there are peer disagreements about views of disagreement, then we should substantially revise our belief in my position. Applying the evaluative requirement, I argue that in most cases of disagreements about views of disagreement, the individual who already accepts my position has compelling reasons for accepting it over accepting that so-and-so is her or his epistemic peer. This, of course, does not apply to everyone who accepts my position. Some might accept it for bad reasons, but this is not true of everyone who accepts it. Solving this self-undermining problem is another reason for accepting the peer evaluative requirement.

## Introduction

No doubt you have many beliefs that your friends and family members, and even strangers disagree with. For most of these beliefs, there is at least someone out there who is equally well informed and conscientious about their beliefs as you are, but he or she disagrees with you. How should you go about evaluating these disagreements? Should you always revise your beliefs in the face of such peer disagreements? Or is it permissible to be steadfast? It turns out that to answer these questions, we have to first consider our reasons for thinking that your dissenter is your equal. Once we take such considerations into account, a host of positive consequences follow. In my dissertation, I explain and defend this evaluative requirement, and further motivate it by exposing its positive consequences in cases of moral disagreement and disagreements about disagreement.

More specifically, this peer evaluative requirement states that in a case of peer disagreement between me and someone else, if my reasons for accepting that so-and-so is my epistemic peer are at least virtually equal to my reasons for accepting that my epistemic peer has made a mistake, then I am required to substantially revise my belief or suspend judgment in my answer. If they are not virtually equal, then I'm not required to revise or suspend judgment.

There are several reasons for accepting this evaluative requirement. First, this requirement captures our intuitive verdict in cases of ordinary and extreme disagreement, which is unlike other views that tell you to either always or never revise in a case of peer disagreement. In a case of ordinary disagreement, the difference between your answer and your peer's answer is reasonable. For example, you and your friend are disagreeing about how to split the bill between five individuals. You do the math in your head and come up with different answers but the answers are not that far off from each other. In an extreme disagreement, the difference between your answer and your peer's answer is unreasonable. For instance, suppose in a case of splitting the bill, your answer is \$46, but your peer's answer is \$460. In an extreme disagreement, your reasons for accepting that the answer is \$46 are going to be sufficiently higher than your reasons for accepting that your friend is your peer in this case. You might not know where your friend went wrong, but you do have reasons to think your friend went wrong *somewhere*. According to the evaluative requirement, you are not required to revise your belief in these types of cases, which captures the intuitive verdict about the case. In cases of ordinary disagreement—e.g. a case where your answer about our share of the bill is \$46 and your friend's answer is \$44—typically your reasons for accepting that your friend is your peer are virtually equal to your reasons for accepting that your friend has made a mistake. As such, the evaluative requirement says you are required to revise your belief, which again is the intuitive verdict about these types of cases.

The evaluative requirement also has important consequences for the problem of moral disagreement. In one of my chapters, I consider two different types of problems. The first one is a problem from widespread moral disagreement. According to this problem, if you are a part of a widespread moral disagreement, then this fact, by itself, implies that you are in a peer moral disagreement. In a widespread moral disagreement, it might be true that you are in fact more reliable at forming true moral beliefs, but you are never in a position to know this because there is no *independent check* that would confirm your beliefs over those who disagree with you. Thus, a crucial component of this problem is a certain type of skepticism about peers. In a widespread moral disagreement, everyone is a peer because there is no way of independently verifying your beliefs over those who disagree with you. In response to this type of skeptical problem, I argue that it overgeneralizes to past moral disagreements. In the recent past, for example, there are many individuals who believed that slavery is morally permissible. This fact coupled with the skeptical

problem from widespread moral disagreement implies that I do not know that slavery is morally wrong. I apply a similar type of evaluative principle to this problem, but instead of evaluating our reasons for our peers and comparing it to the disputed claim, we evaluate our reasons for accepting the independent check criterion and compare it to the disputed claim. I argue that our reasons for the claim that we know slavery is morally wrong are much stronger than our reasons for the claim that we need an independent check to verify that our beliefs are true in a case of widespread moral disagreement.

In another chapter, I consider a second type of problem from moral disagreement. I call it the local problem of moral disagreement. Unlike the problem of widespread moral disagreement, this problem does not begin with the observation that there are widespread moral disagreements. Rather, it begins with the observation that there are local disagreements about our moral beliefs. By local disagreements, I mean disagreements between you and those who are sufficiently close to you. Typically, these are individuals such as your family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. This problem is also distinct from the previous problem in that it does not depend on a skepticism about peers. According to this problem, whether a local disagreement is a *peer* disagreement depends on the specific credentials of your dissenter. The problem focuses on *local* disagreements because it is easier to find peers among those whom you personally know than among those who are mere strangers, which is another advantage that this problem has over the problem from the previous paragraph. After developing this problem, I introduce the peer evaluative requirement. This requirement tells us that we are required to substantially revise our beliefs in a local disagreement only when my reasons for thinking that so-and-so is my peer is virtually equally to my reasons for thinking that my peer made a mistake. I argue that in order to avoid being in that situation, one must actually do something. The problem of local moral disagreement gives rise to a practical problem. To solve this practical problem, I provide epistemic advice about how to improve one's epistemic position. You can avoid the problem of local moral disagreement by either increasing your reasons for thinking that your peer is mistaken through research or by significantly improving your cognitive abilities in a way that's relevant to the disputed claim. It turns out that it is easier for the novice, as opposed to the expert, to escape the problem of local moral disagreement because the novice has to do less epistemic work than the expert. Thus, the problem of local moral disagreement is a more pressing problem for the expert than it is for the novice.

In the last chapter, I argue that if we accept the evaluative requirement, it will help us to avoid a serious self-undermining problem against conciliatory views about disagreement. If, according to conciliationism, we should substantially revise our beliefs in the face of peer disagreement, and if there are peer disagreements about conciliationism itself, then we should substantially revise our belief in conciliationism. There is also a skeptical reiteration form of this objection that poses a deeper problem for conciliationism. In the chapter, I argue that both versions can be overcome by adopting the evaluative requirement for peer disagreements. In most cases of disagreements about conciliationism, the individual who already accepts conciliationism has better reasons for accepting conciliationism than for accepting that so-and-so is her or his epistemic peer. The reason for this depends on the *nature* of the reasons. The reasons for accepting conciliationism are direct and immediate. The reasons for accepting that so-and-so is my peer are indirect and mediated by many different things. This, of course, does not apply to everyone who accepts conciliationism. Some might accept it for bad reasons. If this story is correct about some individuals, then the evaluative requirement will not require those individuals to substantially revise their beliefs when they encounter a peer disagreement about conciliationism. This is another good reason to accept the peer evaluative requirement.

# Ch.1 - A New Look at Peer Disagreement

## Introduction

Disagreement is rampant.<sup>1</sup> Individuals are divided by political, economic, moral, religious, and even scientific ideology. Some disagreements—e.g., the belief that Coke tastes better than Pepsi—are mundane and of no significant consequence. Other disagreements, however, can have a substantial impact on how we structure our lives. An emblematic example is moral disagreement. Disparate beliefs about what one ought to do or what reasons one has to perform a certain action are consequential. Disagreement raises a *prima facie* worry about our justification, knowledge, or epistemic rationality.

Not every type of disagreement is problematic. Some disagreements are only apparent disagreements. Perhaps at bottom they rest on verbal disputes. Other disagreements, although genuine, might not pose a problem because one of the dissenters is ignorant of the relevant evidence or perhaps the dissenter is inebriated.<sup>2</sup> So then in what situation is disagreement epistemically relevant? It is at least relevant in situations where my dissenter is an *epistemic peer*. Your epistemic peer is your evidential and cognitive equal. That is, she is exposed to and familiar with the same evidence and arguments, and her intellectual virtues (e.g. open-mindedness, intelligence, honesty, thoroughness, etc.) are on par with your intellectual virtues.<sup>3</sup> Whether some individual is your epistemic peer is also context dependent. In some contexts, an individual is your epistemic peer with respect to some scientific claim, say, and in other contexts this same individual might not be your epistemic peer with respect to some non-scientific claim.

The literature on peer disagreement has been dominated by the following question:

**Peer Disagreement Question:** What should you accept, from the epistemic point of view, in the face of peer disagreement?

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<sup>1</sup> Two individuals disagree about whether P just in case one believes P and the other disbelieves P (see Feldman (2007), p. 144). According to this definition, two individuals can disagree about whether P without being *aware* that they disagree about P. In this chapter, I'm concerned with disagreements that individuals are aware of.

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, possible disagreements don't seem to pose as a serious of a challenge as actual disagreements. See Kelly (2005), pp. 181-182.

<sup>3</sup> This is the standard way of spelling out the notion of an epistemic peer (see Kelly, pp. 174-175; Christensen (2007), pp. 188-189; and Feldman (2007), p. 144). Adam Elga, on the other hand, says that an epistemic peer is someone who is as good as you at evaluating claims, and to him this amounts to thinking that "conditional on a disagreement arising, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken." In support of this notion, Elga imagines a case in which your friend is your evidential and cognitive equal, but you don't think that conditional on a disagreement you two are equally likely to be mistaken about some proposition P. According to Elga, in such a case, your friend would not be your epistemic peer with respect to P. Elga does not offer a specific concrete example, so it is difficult to properly evaluate the matter. Nevertheless, the standard notion, in practice, seems to capture Elga's notion because typically the way in which I come to judge that so-and-so is equally likely to be mistaken about P is by considering whether that person is my evidential and cognitive equal, unless she is merely parroting the correct answer. For criticism of Elga's notion of an epistemic peer, see Lackey (2014), pp. 306-309.



Two main answers have emerged.<sup>4</sup> *Conformism* claims that in the face of peer disagreement, one ought to substantially revise her belief.<sup>5</sup> For instance, on Richard Feldman's view, which is an all-or-nothing model of belief, the individual ought to suspend judgment in a case of peer disagreement. Adam Elga and David Christensen are also conformists, but they frame the problem in terms of degrees of belief as opposed to an all-or-nothing model of belief.<sup>6</sup> On Elga's "equal weight view," for instance, one ought to substantially revise her belief by giving equal weight to the members involved in the dispute.<sup>7</sup> *Nonconformism*, on the other hand, claims that in the face of peer disagreement, substantial revision of one's beliefs is not required.<sup>8</sup> According to Thomas Kelly's *Total Evidence View*, one is epistemically rational in being steadfast just in case the belief in question is *in fact* the product of correct reasoning.<sup>9</sup>

In what follows, I will assess two types of cases of disagreement: ordinary and extreme cases of disagreement. It turns out that the answer given by conformism accommodates certain cases of ordinary disagreement much better than extreme cases of disagreement. Nonconformism, on the other hand, makes better sense of extreme cases of disagreement more so than ordinary cases of disagreement. Afterwards, I will consider an objection raised against nonconformism, which will serve as an illustration of a particular confusion that I think is present in this literature; the confusion arises from neglecting to make an important epistemic distinction. Pointing out this epistemic distinction will help us to approach the problem of peer disagreement from a new and improved angle. This new look at peer disagreement will uncover an important evaluative requirement. It is a mistake for both conformism and nonconformism to neglect this evaluative requirement. I will argue that conformism can use this evaluative requirement to make better sense of extreme cases of disagreement.

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Lackey (2010) claims that her *justificationist* view is genuinely distinct from the two standard answers. She says that "peer disagreement's epistemic power, or lack thereof, depends on the degree of justified confidence with which the belief in question is held combined with the presence or absence of relevant personal information. It is for this reason that my view is *justificationist* rather than simply a blend of nonconformism and conformism" (Lackey (2010), p. 319-320). According to this view, in some cases of disagreement conformism is correct, and in other cases of disagreement nonconformism is correct. The determining factor is the *degree of justified confidence*. If A and B disagree, and A has a higher degree of justified confidence than B, then A shouldn't substantially revise her beliefs, but B should. If they have the same degree of justified confidence then they should significantly change their degree of confidence or suspend judgment. Moreover, Lackey is an externalist about justification or at least she is "enough of an externalist about justification to require that the process or faculty responsible for the production of the belief in question be reliable or otherwise appropriately truth-conducive" (Lackey (2010), p. 320). It is not clear to me, at least in practice, how this view differs from Kelly's Total Evidence view.

<sup>5</sup> Elga (2010) calls conformist views "conciliatory" views.

<sup>6</sup> See Elga (2007), (2010), and Christensen (2007).

<sup>7</sup> More fully: "Upon finding out that an advisor disagrees, your probability that you are right should equal your prior conditional probability that you would be right. Prior to what? Prior to your thinking through the disputed issue, and finding out what the advisor thinks of it. Conditional on what? On whatever you have learned about the circumstances of the disagreement" (Elga: 2007, p. 490).

<sup>8</sup> Christensen calls nonconformist views "steadfast" views.

<sup>9</sup> Lackey (2010), p. 300, calls this view the *correct reasoning view*, and Elga (2007), p. 485 calls it *the right-reasons view*. It's worth mentioning that it's not clear whether Kelly's view in his (2005) is identical to his view in Kelly (2013). One difference seems to be that in Kelly (2005) whether you're reasonable in accepting P depends only on your reasoning that led you to accept P, whereas in Kelly (2013) it includes both the reasoning that led you to accept P and the new information gained once you are confronted with the disagreement and your peer's contrary position.

## Ordinary and Extreme Cases of Disagreement

Conformism seems to provide the right answer when considering cases of ordinary disagreements. Consider the following cases:

**Mental Math:** Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It's time to pay the check, so the question we're interested in is how much we each owe. We can all see the bill total clearly, we all agree to give a 20 percent tip, and we further agree to split the whole cost evenly...I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our shares are \$43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly confident that our shares are \$45 each. How should I react, upon learning of her belief?<sup>10</sup>

**Doctor:** Suppose that my friend and I are doctors in the same practice. One of my patients is in very serious condition, and my friend and I both examine him, study his medical records, read the relevant literature and come to conflicting conclusions. There are, it turns out, just two theories that might explain his symptoms. Theory A is somewhat simpler, but theory B fits a bit better with the data. My friend has about 65 percent credence in B and 35 percent in A, while for me, the two figures are reversed. When my friend and I talk the case over as thoroughly as two intelligent people can ever discuss anything, we come to see that she is more moved by the fit with reported data, whereas I'm more moved by simplicity...How should I react to my friend's belief in this case?<sup>11</sup>

These cases raise a challenge if I at least *count* my friend in each case as my epistemic peer. That is, I take it that with respect to each case, my friend is just as intelligent as me, I have no reason to think that my friend had too many drinks, and so on. In other words, I take my friend to be my evidential and cognitive equal. If so, then in these cases, conformism seems to be the natural response because there seems to be *epistemic symmetry* between my friend and me. If there is no positive reason to privilege one's own views over the views of your epistemic peers, then it is irrational for one to privilege one's own views. Thus, my friend and I should significantly change our degree of confidence or suspend judgment in the two cases.

Nonconformism seems to give the wrong answer in the Mental Math and Doctor case. According to nonconformism, substantial revision of one's beliefs is not required in either case. Being steadfast might be inconsequential in the Mental Math case, but not so in the Doctor case. In the Doctor case, a patient's life is at stake.

Kelly argues for the steadfast response in the following way: from my perspective, you have misjudged the *probative force of the evidence*.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this attitude is consistent with counting my friend as an epistemic peer. It is consistent to hold that (1) my friend is my epistemic peer, and (2) my friend has made a mistake on this *particular* occasion. "Two chess players of equal skill do not always play to a draw; sometimes one or the other wins, perhaps even decisively."<sup>13</sup> The probative force of the evidence aims to explain the lack of epistemic symmetry in the above two cases. On Kelly's account, you are rational in being steadfast only if your belief was *in fact* the product of correct reasoning.

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<sup>10</sup> Christensen (2007), p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> Kelly (2005), p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The problem here, as Christensen points out, is that the “probative force of the evidence” is equally present in both parties.<sup>14</sup> From my friend’s perspective, I’ve misjudged the probative force of the evidence just as much as I think she misjudged the probative force of the evidence. Consider a case in which my friend and I are expert weather forecasters. And before we calculate tomorrow’s forecast, we agree that we are both equally likely to be mistaken if our conclusions differ. According to Christensen, “the explanation in terms of my friend’s mistake is no more reasonable than the explanation in terms of my mistake. And I should acknowledge this by moving my belief toward hers.”<sup>15</sup> If this is correct, then the probative force of the evidence can’t, on its own, undermine the symmetry between my friend and me, which means the symmetry argument is still intact.<sup>16</sup> Christensen identifies the following principle that underlies the disparate answers given by conformism and nonconformism in the two cases above:

**Independence:** In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another person’s belief about p, in order to determine how (if at all) to modify one’s own belief about p, one should do so in a way that is independent of the reasoning behind one’s own initial belief about p.<sup>17</sup>

According to Christensen, the divide between conformism and nonconformism is that the former accept Independence, and the latter reject it. Two notes about the principle. First, Independence, taken alone, is not sufficient for conformism. The following must be included: if, in virtue of using Independence, I conclude that (1) my dissenter is my epistemic peer and (2) our confidence in the disputed proposition p is equal, then I ought to suspend judgment about whether p. Second, the phrase “evaluating the epistemic credentials of another person’s belief about p” involves two things. First, it involves judgments about whether the dissenter is reasonable. Second, it involves judgments about the dissenter’s quality of evidence and whether the dissenter is well-informed.<sup>18</sup> Although this principle might be independently convincing, the straightforward motivation for it is that the principle provides grounds for dismissing obvious cases of question-begging and extreme cases of dogmatism.

With cases like the Mental Math case and the Doctor case, Independence seems to be plausible. However, with extreme cases of disagreement, Independence seems to fail. Consider the following case:

**Extreme Mental Math:** Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It’s time to pay the check, so the question we’re interested in is how much we each owe. We can all see the bill total clearly, we all agree to give a 20 percent tip, and we further agree to split the whole cost evenly...I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our shares are \$43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly

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<sup>14</sup> Christensen (2007), pp. 194-199.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 198.

<sup>16</sup> Kelly explicitly says that the probative force of the evidence establishes asymmetry only if we consider the matter from the perspective of the agent and not from the perspective of a neutral third-party, cf. Kelly (2005), footnote 14, p. 179. Christensen’s response here seems to rely on the assessment of a neutral third-party.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly (2013), p. 8, quoting Christensen (2009), p. 758. Also see Lackey (2013) for an extensive criticism of Independence. In her paper, Lackey examines several versions of Independence—e.g., versions that rest on likemindedness, and source and testimonial dependence—and concludes that the focus on belief independence is misleading and instead we should focus on “the overall justificatory status of the beliefs involved in peer disagreement” (p. 266). For the most part, I agree with Lackey. However, I think her view is much more compatible with Thomas Kelly’s view than she might think. And as such, I see them as mutually supportive.

<sup>18</sup> Kelly (2013), p. 11.

confident that **our shares are \$450 each**. How should I react, upon learning of her belief?<sup>19</sup>

In this extreme version, my friend's calculation leads her to believe that each of us owes \$450 (which is larger than the total bill) instead of the \$45 in the original Mental Math case.

There are many similar cases. There is the Holocaust Denier case, and the Mailman case—a case where the mailman wrongly believes that “Frederick Jacobs” lives at your house only because the mailman delivers mail to your house that’s addressed to Frederick, a person you know nothing about.<sup>20</sup> In these cases, the disagreements are extreme. As such, it seems reasonable to use the disagreement itself as evidence in favor of your position. Thus unlike conformism—where ordinary cases seem to motivate it—the cases that seem to motivate nonconformism are cases where the disagreement is extreme. These types of extreme cases seem to undermine Independence. Consequently, these cases also undermine Conformism.<sup>21</sup>

At a closer inspection, I do not think that these extreme cases undermine conformism. In order to see why, I must first uncover an important epistemic distinction. I will do this by looking at the Bootstrapping Objection, and show that the objection rests on an important epistemic distinction. This distinction will motivate a new look at peer disagreement, one in which a new evaluative requirement is introduced.

## The Bootstrapping Objection

In this section, I will consider a prominent objection by Elga against a Kelly-type of nonconformism.<sup>22</sup> My reply to this objection will highlight an important epistemic distinction that is often neglected in the debate between conformism and nonconformism.

The argument begins by building on the following case of perceptual disagreement:

**Horse Race:** You and a friend are to judge the same contest, a race between Horse A and Horse B. Initially, you think that your friend is as good as you at judging such races. In other words, you think that in case of disagreement about the race, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken. The race is run, and the two of you form independent judgments. As it happens, you become confident that Horse A won, and your friend becomes equally confident that Horse B won.<sup>23</sup>

The Horse Race case seems to elicit the same type of conformist response as the Mental Math and Doctor case. To build on the case, now suppose you and your friend judge twenty more horse races,

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<sup>19</sup> Christensen (2007), pp. 200-201, emphasis mine.

<sup>20</sup> Kelly (2013), pp. 13-19.

<sup>21</sup> In response to the Extreme Mental Math case, Christensen says that “the reasoning behind my being so confident in the falsity of this claim goes well beyond the calculations by which I arrived at \$43. My belief is also supported by my reasoning that my share is less than the whole bill. This is the sort of ‘commonsense’ check that math students in middle school are taught to use to catch arithmetic errors. On the other hand, as the case was set up, I have no reason to suppose that my friend has checked her answer in this way...No I take it that this sort of commonsense checking is much less liable to error than mental arithmetic. In fact, if I had come up with \$450 in my own calculation and then had done the commonsense check, I, like the diligent middle-schooler, would have immediately have rejected the calculation” (Christensen (2007), pp. 200-201). As a rejoinder, let us stipulate that in the Extreme Mental Math case, no one in the example in fact does anything like what Christensen calls the ‘commonsense check.’ If so, then I think the nonconformist makes better sense of the Extreme Mental Math cases. Also if I take my dissenter to be my epistemic peer, then I should have no reason to think that my dissenter didn’t also use this commonsense check.

<sup>22</sup> Elga (2007), pp. 486-488.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 486.

and the same result occurs. Moreover, there is no independent way of confirming which horse won the race each time. Also, your judgments about the races are the product of correct reasoning. Nonconformism seems to imply that in each case of disagreement, you gain evidence that you are more reliable than your friend. However, this result seems absurd. Giving your evaluation of the horse race extra weight leads to the absurd conclusion that in the course of many disagreements, you end up extremely confident that you have a better track record than your friend.<sup>24</sup>

Elga's objection against nonconformism is an analog to a famous objection against Alvin Goldman's process reliabilism. According to reliabilism one can know that P through a reliable method without knowing that the method is reliable. But knowing that P is evidence that P was produced by a reliable method. Thus, you can get evidence that, for example, your vision is reliable from merely looking at a wall. Likewise, by noting cases of disagreement and taking your friend to be mistaken, you can get evidence, or so the objection goes, that you're more reliable than your friend. But that's absurd, or so Elga says. Let's schematize the argument. Let 'E' be 'it seems to S that Horse A won', and let 'P' be 'Horse A won':

Here's some justification for this: if E is evidence for S that P, and if S is reliable iff he sees that P and P holds, then E is evidence that S is reliable.

(P1) E is evidence for S that P.

(P2) If E is evidence for S that P, then for S, E is evidence that speaks in favor of S's reliability concerning P.

(P3) Therefore, E is evidence that speaks in favor of S's reliability concerning P.

Elga doesn't provide a justification for (P2). Moreover, (P2) isn't obvious. (P2) seems to be a type of *transfer principle*. A transfer principle typically transfers some property via a material conditional. For example, the epistemic closure principle transfers knowledge from P to Q given that P implies Q.<sup>25</sup> Although these principles can be argued for, they should not be taken for granted. They need justification, and Elga does not provide any justification in this case.

I'm not claiming that (P2) is false. If I did, I would need to provide some justification for why (P2) is false. Rather, the principle doesn't seem to be independently motivated and no evidence has been provided in its favor. I'm agnostic about (P2). In order for Elga's argument to be successful, however, (P2) or a close cousin of (P2) is required.

Another thing to notice is that peer disagreement is structurally irrelevant for Elga's argument—a piece of evidence in support of this claim is that the analogous argument against process reliabilism does not require peer disagreement. If I am reasonable in believing P just in case I arrived at P through correct reasoning—this is more or less Kelly's view—then that alone can get the bootstrapping objection going. Whether there is some peer disagreeing with me is not directly relevant to the bootstrapping objection. A strong proponent of process reliabilism might not find this objection to be a reason to prefer conformism because he might think that process reliabilism

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<sup>24</sup> Presumably the conformist must claim that we get the same result in non-perceptual cases of disagreement. But this is not obvious. If we consider the fundamental differences between perceptual and non-perceptual cases, then it's not clear that we would get the same result. For instance, perceptual beliefs tend to be *basic* beliefs—beliefs that are not inferred from other beliefs. Typically, my belief that I have a hand or my belief that my faculties are reliable aren't based on an argument. Rather, they are beliefs that I find myself with; I am doxastically drawn to them. A defeater for one of my perceptual beliefs would have to be much more substantial than a defeater for my belief that I remember that I have milk in my fridge. So it is not obvious that the bootstrapping objection will carry over to non-perceptual cases of disagreements—at least more work has to be done to show that it can carry over in non-perceptual cases.

<sup>25</sup> Other examples: Transfer of Necessity Principle in discussions of theological fatalism, and Rule-Beta in discussions about free will and determinism.

has the resources to respond to the objection or that process reliabilism has its flaws but it is overall more plausible than competing views—views that have their own particular flaws. Therefore, Elga’s argument is not a direct reason against nonconformism, if it is a reason at all.<sup>26</sup> Whether you are convinced that the bootstrapping objection is a good reason against nonconformism will largely depend on some of your larger background commitments.

The lack of support for (P2) is one problem with Elga’s objection. There is another problem. The bootstrapping argument turns on an equivocation between the evidence I am currently aware of and the evidence that I am not currently aware of. It’s true that there is evidence for the claim that you’re more reliable than your friend because the example stipulates that your judgments about each horse race are the product of correct reasoning. However, you are not currently aware of this fact. From the perspective of the reader, who is aware of this fact, we can say: “You are in fact more reliable than your friend.” But from your perspective, you stick to your guns because of the probative force of the evidence, or so Kelly’s view would advise, and not because of the fact that your judgments have been correct each time. After all, given how the case has been set up, you are not aware of the fact that your judgments have been correct each time. Thus, although E is evidence for S that P, E is not evidence, *from the first-person perspective*, that speaks in favor of S’s reliability concerning P.

However, E is evidence from *the reader’s perspective* that speaks in favor of E’s reliability concerning P. We find these cases of bootstrapping objectionable because there could be cases in which you in fact reason incorrectly, but continue to be steadfast. In such a situation, you are incorrectly concluding that you are more reliable than your dissenter. However, that you are reasoning incorrectly is not a fact that you are aware of. Thus, although you are mistaken in the grand scheme of things, you are not being epistemically irrational (more on this notion later).<sup>27</sup>

## A New Look at Disagreement

Let’s take stock. Conformism can better accommodate cases like the Mental Math, and the Doctor case. On the other hand, nonconformism can better accommodate cases like the Extreme Mental Math case. Although Independence seems plausible with respect to the Mental Math case

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<sup>26</sup> In Kelly (2013), pp. 19-25, he argues that Elga takes dogmatism to be a formal vice, and claims that Elga’s argument has the following unfounded supposition: “In any case of peer disagreement, you should conclude that your peer’s opinion n% likely to be correct, and revise your own opinion accordingly” (p. 24). According to Kelly, this norm is a substantive normative assumption, and as such, it indicates that dogmatism is to be taken as a formal vice, which Kelly rejects.

<sup>27</sup> Kelly has another way of responding to the bootstrapping objection. Kelly thinks that there are cases in which the relevant type of bootstrapping is epistemically permissible. He says: “According to Elga, (i) the relevant kind of bootstrapping is never rationally permissible, (ii) The Equal Weight View proscribes such bootstrapping, and (iii) no other plausible view does so. He thus concludes that The Equal Weight View is true. I hold that, on the contrary, because there are at least some possible cases in which such bootstrapping clearly is permissible, no view which generally proscribes it can be correct. Hence, on the assumption that Elga is correct in thinking that The Equal Weight View generally proscribes such bootstrapping, we have arrived at another good reason for thinking that it is false” (Kelly (2007), p. 56, unpublished version). Here is an example of a case in which bootstrapping is permissible. Kelly calls it “Case 8”: At the outset you regard your friend as your peer. Subsequently, however, many disagreements emerge. With respect to the vast majority of these disagreements, the position which you hold is in fact better supported by the available evidence than the position held by your friend. In these cases, your conviction that your friend’s position is not adequately supported by his evidence is based on your own appreciation of that evidence, an appreciation which is more accurate than his. Over time, you thus become increasingly confident that you are a better evaluator of the evidence than your friend. You thus cease to regard your friend as your peer and conclude that your initial judgment to that effect was mistaken” (Ibid, p. 54, unpublished version).

and the Doctor case, it fails in the more extreme cases. In this section, I will argue that conformism can accommodate extreme cases of disagreement.

## Two Epistemic Stances

Recall the Peer Disagreement Question, “What should you accept, from the epistemic point of view, in the face of peer disagreement?” One can ask this question from two different epistemic stances, the first-person stance or the third-person stance. As such, we can divide the Peer Disagreement Question into the following two questions:

**First-Person Stance:** What should you accept, from the *first-person perspective*, in the face of peer disagreement?

**Third-Person Stance:** What should you accept, from the *third-person perspective*, in the face of peer disagreement?

Henceforth, I will refer to the former question as the *first-person question*, and I will refer to the latter question as the *third-person question*.<sup>28</sup>

The first-person perspective is concerned with what an agent is rationally *aware of* at the time of the disagreement; this can include both that your epistemic peer disagrees, and the specific content of her disagreement. For example, in the Mental Math case, whether my friend made a mistake is a fact that I am not aware of at the time. As such, in answering the Peer Disagreement Question from the first-person stance, the fact that my friend made a mistake is irrelevant. As the reader, in order to properly answer the first-person question, one needs to take on the perspective of the agent in question. I need to put myself in this person’s shoes, and consider only the relevant facts that this person is aware of. Figuring out what one should take into account is not a trivial matter. In some cases, it will be clear what evidence one should take into account from this first-person stance, but not so with other cases. The results will differ in each case, and so one should look at the details carefully. Also, we should ask what should you accept from the first-person perspective while *exercising due care*. This prevents the worry that from the first-person perspective, whatever one happens to believe is epistemically rational. The first-person stance leaves open the possibility that one can be epistemically irrational. Being epistemically negligent is incompatible with being an epistemically rational agent, and the first-person stance can accommodate that.

I take the third-person perspective to be an abstraction of the first-person perspective. We adopt this perspective by abstracting from epistemic limitations of the parties to a given disagreement. The resulting point of view is typically one that readers take when they’re considering what’s epistemically required of the agent to do given all the information that has been stipulated. For example, in the Extreme Mental Math case, the reader is aware of the fact that my friend made a mistake, although my friend and I, from the first-person perspective, are not aware of that fact. Answering the Peer Disagreement Question from the third-person perspective is somewhat indeterminate because of the general way that I have spelled out the third-person perspective. For our purposes, this is not a problem. My main aim is to make the first-person perspective salient. The third-person perspective is a contrast-class that helps us to focus in on the notion of the first-person perspective.

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<sup>28</sup> I am not using the terminology of internalism and externalism for two reasons. First, in the context of epistemology, the internalism and externalism distinction is typically a distinction about justification. Here, I am concerned with epistemic rationality. Second, there are many versions of internalism and externalism. Given the diversity of views, if I use the internalism and externalism distinction here, it might make things less clear and more confusing.

Distinguishing the first-person stance from the third-person stance is important for two reasons. First, the distinction prevents us from falling into certain confusions: in assessing a case of peer disagreement, a common pitfall is to answer the Peer Disagreement question by unintentionally smuggling in information that either the readers have, but the individuals in the disagreement do not have, or vice versa. For instance, in the Extreme Mental Math case, my friend who is part of the disagreement is not aware of the fact that she made a mistake. The reader, of course, is aware of this fact. The first-person question and the third-person question keep things neat and orderly by forcing the evaluator to be attentive to the question of which facts are epistemically accessible to the parties who disagree. Second, the first-person and third-person distinction highlights the fact that an account of disagreement should provide *epistemic advice*. An answer to the Peer Disagreement question should offer some guidance for someone who happens to find herself in a peer disagreement because the question has practical significance.

The first-person and third-person distinctions are not foreign in the epistemology literature. In Linda Zagzebski's influential book, *Epistemic Authority*, she says:

I am primarily interested in epistemic authority from the *viewpoint of the subject*. Whether or not an authority has the right to command, am I ever justified in taking a belief on the authority of another person? Am I ever required to do so if I am rational?<sup>29</sup>

Zagzebski's "viewpoint of the subject" captures virtually the same notion that my first-person perspective captures. In fact, a few lines down—while she is discussing the two most important reasons for rejecting epistemic authority, one being egalitarianism—she uses the phrase "first-person perspective":

Egalitarianism is also implied in the adoption of the *first-person perspective* in discussing epistemological problems. The philosopher or teacher of philosophy addresses everyone, proposing that they follow her thoughts as if they were conducting the investigation themselves.<sup>30</sup>

Here Zagzebski is explicitly using the notion of the first-person perspective. She uses that notion a few times throughout her book—most notably in her chapter on moral authority, she says, "My focus has been on *first-person reasons* for accepting a moral belief on authority..."<sup>31</sup> On my characterization of things, "first-person reasons" are the relevant facts that the agent in a peer disagreement that are accessible to the subject through conscientious investigation. For example, whether I reasoned correctly is typically not a fact that I am aware of, and as such it would not be a first-person reason for me to be steadfast.

Zagzebski is not the only one who uses this distinction. Richard Swinburne is another example. Although he doesn't use the same phrasing that I use, something akin to my distinction is present in one of his books. In the following passage, Swinburne compares the notion of a belief being justified with the subjective and objective moral ought:

It should not be surprising that the notion of a belief being 'justified' is ambiguous, for the notion of an action being morally 'justified' is ambiguous and in a respect paralleled in the case of belief. Suppose abortion is wrong but that Jane does not believe that it is wrong. Is she justified in having an abortion? No, in an objective sense, for (we have supposed) abortion is wrong. But yes, in the subjective sense that she is not blameworthy for having

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<sup>29</sup> Zagzebski (2015), p. 6, emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp. 6-7, emphasis mine.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 165, emphasis mine.



an abortion, for she did not believe it wrong. We shall see that there are objective and subjective senses of the justification of belief—but in this case more than one objective and more than one subjective sense.<sup>32</sup>

Swinburne's distinction between objective and subjective senses of the justification of belief is similar to my distinction between the first-person stance and the third-person stance. However, for my purposes, I prefer the language of epistemic rationality instead of epistemic justification. For instance, asking the peer disagreement question from the first-person stance is similar to asking whether being steadfast in a peer disagreement is epistemically rational in the subjective sense.

In defending egocentric epistemic bias, Ralph Wedgwood says the following about peer disagreement cases where there is supposed symmetry between the individuals involved in the disagreement:

“In effect, perhaps these ‘symmetrical’ cases are only symmetrical from a third- personal point of view. From the point of view of each of the two disagreeing thinkers, each is still entitled to regard it as more credible that the other is the victim of the demon than that he is himself.”<sup>33</sup>

From this observation, Wedgwood goes on to defend the claim that you can assign a higher epistemic value to your own intuition in virtue of it being your own. Although I do not find such a claim plausible, the important thing to see here is the clear distinction that Wedgwood makes between a first- and a third-personal point of view.

Engaging the problem of disagreement through the first-person stance does not mean that our findings will not have wide applicability. As Roderick Chisholm puts it, “In formulating [the presuppositions of the theory of knowledge], I shall use the first person, but I am quite confident that I am speaking for others as well.”<sup>34</sup> This tradition of using the first-person goes back at least to Descartes' *Meditations*. Unwittingly shifting between perspectives can cause all sorts of confusions. Thus, the distinction is useful and ought to be used.

## Epistemic Rationality

Given how I've structured the debate about epistemic peer disagreement, epistemic rationality plays a crucial role in assessing and answering the Peer Disagreement question. On my account, the facts that one is *aware of while exercising due care* is an important aspect of epistemic rationality. What I am currently aware of is the following: my computer screen, the sentence I just typed out, my fingers typing on the keyboard, the noise that my fingers are making, and so on. The things that I am currently aware of are the things that I am currently conscious of and entertaining before my mind. What facts I am epistemically rational to accept depends on the relevant facts that I am aware of while *exercising due care*. This latter notion adds normativity. If epistemic rationality depends only on what, in fact, I am currently aware of, then whether my beliefs are epistemically rational is a trivial matter.

For example, suppose I am working on a simple algebraic equation. I quickly glance at the equation in the book and write it down on a separate piece of paper, so I can solve it. However, I was being negligent and glanced too quickly at the equation in the textbook, which caused me to write the equation down incorrectly. To make it a clear case of negligence, suppose I know that I have a bad habit of glancing at equations for an insufficient amount of time when I copy them

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<sup>32</sup> Swinburne (2004), p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Wedgwood (2007), p. 261.

<sup>34</sup> Chisholm (1982), p. 3

down. After working out the equation on a piece of paper, I reach the conclusion that  $x = 2$ . Suppose this isn't the correct answer. The correct answer is  $x = 4$ . Given that I was *negligent* in copying the equation from the textbook, I'm not epistemically rational in accepting that "the answer to the equation in the textbook is  $x = 2$ " because upon reflection, it would have been easy to notice that I incorrectly copied the equation.

If epistemic rationality depends on what, in fact, I am currently aware of, then although I was negligent, I wouldn't be epistemically irrational because at the time I wasn't aware of the correct equation from the textbook. I did have access to the correct equation, but I failed to take advantage of the access I in fact had. If epistemic rationality depends only on what, in fact, I am currently aware of, and not on what I would be aware of while exercising due care, then my status as epistemically rational would be trivial.

In the context of the algebra case, whether I was being epistemically irrational in accepting that "the answer to the equation in the textbook is  $x = 2$ " depends on the truth of the following counterfactual: if I would have looked at the equation with due care, I would have written the equation correctly. If that counterfactual is true, then I was being epistemically irrational in accepting that answer. If that counterfactual is false, then I was not being epistemically irrational in accepting that answer. Given the details of the algebra case, it is plausible to think that the counterfactual is true. Thus, it is plausible to think that I was being epistemically irrational in accepting that answer. I am epistemically rational in accepting some fact  $F$  just in case I accepted  $F$  as a result of exercising due care about what to believe. I exercise due care about  $F$  just in case I exert a reasonable amount of effort in undertaking an investigation about  $F$ . For instance, if I am a scientist and I have important data that needs to be double-checked, then I'd be negligent if I only checked the data once. It would be good if I checked them three times, but it wouldn't be epistemically required of me in that situation.

What sets these epistemic standards is a difficult question to answer. Perhaps in the science case, the epistemic standards are set by the scientific community. The experts know, perhaps from experience, that mistakes happen often in data reporting. And double-checking the data helps prevent these likely mistakes. However, suppose that triple checking the data only shows minimal positive results, and given the costs and resources wasted in a triple check, it would be unreasonable to make triple checking a standard in the scientific community.

On my account, the reasonable standards of due care are an objective requirement. They are determined by the facts of one's environment, one's epistemic position, and one's abilities and capacities. Some times we don't know what these facts are, but in ordinary cases, it isn't very difficult to figure out these facts. Typically, the relevant community has established standards that are more or less reliable. These standards are improved upon as time goes on. There are cases where it is not clear whether there is a relevant community, such as the mental math case. The standards of due care, I think, will have to rely on common sense. This leaves open many questions: what are these standards? How do we come to know these standards? To what extent are the standards of due care context-sensitive? Will differences in the pragmatic circumstances constitute a difference in the requirements of epistemic rationality? And so on. For present purposes, I will leave these questions unanswered. I do think there are legitimate common sense standards in cases like the mental math case, and we can come to know these standards. I am committed to that much. However, it is not crucial that we explore the details here.

To sum up, whether I am being epistemically negligent depends on the amount of effort I exert in thinking about and investigating the relevant question. In the mental math case, the relevant question is: what is our share of the bill? Being epistemically negligent is context sensitive. In some contexts, more effort is required of you. In other contexts, less effort is required of you. For example, at a casual dinner party with a small group of friends, less effort is required of you when

calculating our share of the bill. For instance, triple checking the math wouldn't be epistemically required of you. For one, the math involved in calculating our share of the bill is simple and undemanding, so there is no need to triple check it. Another reason is that the stakes are not high. Making a mistake in the calculation wouldn't result in anything serious. By contrast, consider a case in which you are calculating the costs of purchasing nuclear warheads from one country to another. The bill would be much larger than the bill of a dinner party among a small group of friends. The margin for error is much greater. As such, triple checking would be required of you. Also, the stakes are very high. Make a wrong calculation and war might breakout between the two countries. Thus, what is at stake constitutes a difference in the requirements of epistemic rationality.

Being epistemically negligent also comes in degrees. One can be more or less epistemically negligent. Again this depends on the context. It depends on how one exercises her powers of empirical observation and reasoning under the circumstances that in fact obtained. In order to figure out whether someone is being epistemically negligent we have to carefully look at the details of the situation. This includes the epistemic position of the agent, her abilities and capacities, her available resources, her habits, and so on. For example, the level of negligence would be higher if I were to simply guess the answer in the mental math case than to do the math quickly in my head. On the other hand, if I were Srinivasa Ramanujan—a brilliant mathematician—double checking the math would probably not be required of me. The deep context sensitivity of epistemic rationality makes figuring out the standards of due care very complicated. This should not come as a surprise. Normative questions, whether epistemic in nature or not, are difficult and complicated. However, this shouldn't dissuade us from thinking that these normative questions have answers.

## Peer Evaluative Requirement

The two epistemic stances allow us to approach the peer disagreement question from a new angle. The new angle is the perspective of the agent. Consider one possible story about what goes on in my head in the Mental Math case. Before I begin the calculation, I believe that you are my epistemic peer. After I finish the calculation, I find out that my friend, who is my peer, concluded that our shares are \$45 each, where I concluded that they are \$43 each. Upon realizing that my friend disagrees with me, I might have the following beliefs:

**Peer Belief:** My friend is my epistemic peer.

**General Disputed Belief:** My friend disagrees with me.

**Specific Disputed Belief:** My friend concluded that our shares are \$45 each.

**Confidence Belief:** My friend's confidence in the specific disputed belief is as high as my confidence in my answer.

According to conformism, if I have these four beliefs, then I should, from the first-person perspective, suspend judgment in my answer or converge. On the other hand, according to nonconformism, whether I ought to be steadfast depends on whether the answer I arrived at was produced by correct reasoning. However, there is a crucial factor that is not being considered by either view. Namely, there is no mention of the type of confidence that I have in the peer belief.<sup>35</sup> In other words, what evidence I have that my friend is my epistemic peer should play a role in how we evaluate cases of peer disagreement.

To accommodate this omission, I introduce the following evaluative requirement:

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<sup>35</sup> A couple of exceptions: Wolterstorff (2014) mentions this idea in the context of religious disagreement, and Vavova (2014), pp. 307-308, mentions it in the context of moral disagreement.

**Peer Evaluation Requirement:** In evaluating the Peer Disagreement Question, it is important to take into account your reasons for accepting the peer belief (i.e. that so-and-so is my epistemic peer), and then weigh those reasons for accepting the peer belief against the reasons for accepting the claim that my peer has made a mistake. (e.g. in the Mental Math case, this would be the belief that our shares are \$43 each).

In disagreement cases, it is often stipulated that the individuals in the case take each other to be epistemic peers. However, there is no mention of the amount of confidence one has for that claim. When a case stipulates that my friend is my epistemic peer, we should ask, how confident I am in the proposition that my friend is my epistemic peer. How much evidence or what kind of evidence do I have that my friend is my epistemic peer? If my evidence that my friend is my epistemic peer is not very strong—but perhaps it meets a certain threshold—and my friend concludes, like in the Extreme Mental Math case, that each of us owes \$450 (which is larger than the total bill), then it is reasonable to be steadfast in this situation. On my view, this is explained in virtue of the fact that my evidence for the proposition that \$450 is not the correct answer is much stronger than my evidence that my friend is my epistemic peer.

With respect to the first-person question, and in a case of peer disagreement, my view gives the following answers: I should give equal weight to the members in the dispute if my evidence for the peer belief is equal to my evidence for *my* specific disputed belief. If my evidence for the peer belief is significantly greater than my evidence for my specific disputed belief, then I should significantly lower my confidence in the specific disputed belief. Lastly, if my evidence for the peer belief is significantly lower than my evidence for my specific disputed belief, then I can be steadfast and lower my confidence in the peer belief. It is important to point out that by evidence, I mean the evidence that the agent in question is aware of while exercising due care. Also, my level of confidence picks out the amount of evidence I have while *exercising due care*.

In some situations, it's not clear what one should do from the first-person perspective. For example, in a hypothetical situation where we stipulate that my evidence that Jones is my epistemic peer is slightly lower than the disputed claim, I should probably give equal weight to Jones and me, but this is not obvious. The same could be said of a case where my evidence for the disputed claim is slightly higher than my evidence that Jones is my epistemic peer. At any rate, from the first-person perspective, an agent does not typically have a very fine-grained degree of confidence in a given belief. So in practice, these scenarios typically won't arise.

So far, I've given my answer to the first-person question. But what about the third-person question—i.e. the Peer Disagreement question asked from a specified third-person perspective? Kelly, I believe, is really answering the third-person question. According to Kelly, in the mental math case, the person who reasoned correctly should be steadfast. Let us suppose that my friend is the one who reasoned correctly. At the time of the disagreement, my friend and I are not aware of the fact that my friend is the one who reasoned correctly, even while exercising due care. Thus, Kelly's answer to the peer disagreement question is not an answer to the first-person question because it includes facts that my friend and I are not aware of while exercising due care. Thus, it has to be an answer to the third-person question.

On my view the answer to the third-person question from the perspective of the reader—the perspective of someone who is aware of all the relevant facts—is simple: (1) your belief in a peer disagreement should be the product of correct reasoning, and (2) in the process of reasoning that leads up to your belief, you should consider all the relevant available information in the case. The first part of the answer is just Kelly's view. However, I don't think the first part of the answer on its own can capture what one ought to do from the perspective of the reader.

To see why, consider the Mental Math case once more, but now suppose that the following is true: I arrived at the restaurant late, and unbeknownst to me there was an extra person, Jones, who also ordered food. However, Jones received an emergency call, and he's been gone the entire time I've been there. Moreover, no one has said anything about him coming to the restaurant, so I am not culpably ignorant of the fact that there is an extra person. To make this a standard case of disagreement, let us also suppose that my peer is also ignorant of the same facts that I am ignorant of, and my peer is also not culpably ignorant of those facts. Even if my answer is the product of correct reasoning, there would be a very important piece of information that should have been part of my reasoning process. Namely that I should be splitting the tab five-ways instead of four-ways. In this modified Mental Math case, it seems right to say that from the third-person perspective—where this is the perspective of the reader who is aware of all the relevant facts of the case—my answer should be the product of correct reasoning, *and* I should have considered all the relevant information.

It might be objected that my answers to the first-person question are equivalent to the answers that Elga's Equal Weight View gives to the first-person question. I agree that ultimately my answer to the first-person question is the same as Elga's answer. The crucial part of my view is that it points out the importances of the Evaluative Requirement—i.e. “In evaluating the Peer Disagreement Question, it is important to take into account one's confidence in the peer belief (i.e. that so-and-so is my epistemic peer), and then weigh the degree of confidence in the peer belief against the level of confidence in *my* specific disputed belief (e.g. in the Mental Math case, this would be the belief that our shares are \$43 each)” —which has been neglected by both conformist and nonconformists. The Evaluative Requirement provides an explanation of why it seems natural to say that one should be steadfast in the extreme cases of disagreement, but converge or suspend judgment in the ordinary cases of disagreement.

Here is a last bit of terminology: let's say that you are in a *good epistemic situation* just in case what you should accept from the first-person epistemic point of view is the same as what you should accept from the perspective of someone who, as a result of exercising due care, is aware of all relevant facts. Moreover, you are in a *bad epistemic situation* just in case what you should accept from the first-person epistemic point of view is not the same as what you should accept from the perspective of someone who, as a result of exercising due care, is aware of all relevant facts. It is an unfortunate fact about our finitude that we sometimes find ourselves in a bad epistemic situation. What is worse, is that we often do not know that we are in a bad epistemic situation. Sometimes we find out, but only after the fact. On my view, if one fulfills what they ought to accept while exercising due care from the first-person perspective, then they are not epistemically culpable if they find themselves in a bad epistemic situation.

Lastly, let us return to the cases that conformism makes better sense of than nonconformism: the Mental Math, and the Doctor case. Notice the way each case is presented:

**Mental Math:** Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It's time to pay the check, so the question we're interested in is how much we each owe. We can all see the bill total clearly, we all agree to give a 20 percent tip, and we further agree to split the whole cost evenly...I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our shares are \$43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly confident that our shares are \$45 each. **How should I react, upon learning of her belief?**<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Christensen (2007), p. 193, emphasis mine.

**Doctor:** Suppose that my friend and I are doctors in the same practice. One of my patients is in very serious condition, and my friend and I both examine him, study his medical records, read the relevant literature and come to conflicting conclusions. There are, it turns out, just two theories that might explain his symptoms. Theory A is somewhat simpler, but theory B fits a bit better with the data. My friend has about 65 percent credence in B and 35 percent in A, while for me, the two figures are reversed. When my friend and I talk the case over as thoroughly as two intelligent people can ever discuss anything, we come to see that she is more moved by the fit with reported data, whereas I'm more moved by simplicity...**How should I react to my friend's belief in this case?**<sup>37</sup>

The questions at the end of each case—and the strong emphasis that *I am* one of the individuals in the case—seems to be asking what I have called the first-person question, i.e. the Peer Disagreement Question asked from the first-person stance. In both cases (although it is probably more clear in the Doctor case), my evidence in the peer belief seems to be equal to my evidence in the specific disputed belief. In the Mental Math case, it is plausible to think that my evidence that my friend is just as good at basic arithmetic is equal to my evidence that our shares are \$43 each. Likewise, given that “my friend and I talk the case over as thoroughly as two intelligent people can ever discuss anything,” it seems also plausible to think there is epistemic symmetry here. Now of course one can come up with a very similar case where my evidence in the peer belief is significantly different than my evidence in the specific disputed belief. If that were the case, then the answer I gave to each case would be different. What's important to see is that the view *can* accommodate such changes.

Unlike the ordinary Mental Math case and the Doctor case, the Extreme Mental Math case stipulates that my friend in fact reasoned incorrectly (i.e. “\$450 is larger than the total bill”). The obvious answer from the third-person perspective is that I should be steadfast. The same answer should also be given, I think, from the first-person perspective because surely my evidence that \$450 is the wrong answer is much stronger than my evidence that my friend is my epistemic peer. In fact, in such a situation, I might question whether I miscounted how many drinks my friend had or some other possible explanation that is more likely.

Is my view a conformist or a nonconformist view? It depends. First we must be clear about what stance we are taking when we ask the Peer Disagreement Question. Second, we must be clear about the Evaluating Requirement: how much evidence do I have that so-and-so is my epistemic peer, and how much evidence do I have in the disputed claim? Only then can we properly assess the disagreement. In cases where my evidence in the peer belief is equal to my evidence in the disputed claim, my view gives a conformist response. In cases where my evidence in the disputed claim are significantly stronger than my evidence in the peer belief, then my view gives a nonconformist response.

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<sup>37</sup> Christensen (2007), p. 190, emphasis mine.

## Ch.2 - The Epistemic Significance of Widespread Moral Disagreement

You just finished eating dinner with your friends. You come to this same restaurant every Friday, and you've been doing this with your friends for over a year. Ever since week one, you and your closest friend, Theodore, have been assigned to calculate the tip, add everything up, and split the total bill equally among everyone. On most occasions, you both correctly arrive at the same answer. On some occasions, your friend arrives at the correct answer, but you are off by a few dollars. On other occasions, the reverse happens. Overall, you and Theodore have had a roughly equal track record of arriving at the correct answer. Today, you calculated in your head that everyone's share of the bill is \$92, but Theodore calculated it to be \$87. Once you find out about the disagreement, you recall that Theodore has arrived at the correct answer roughly the same amount of times that you have arrived at the correct answer. You also recall that you and Theodore went to school together, attended the same math classes, and your grades in those classes were roughly the same. Once you find out about the disagreement, is it epistemically rational to revise your belief and if so, should the revision be substantial or minute? <sup>38</sup>

One prominent view, *conciliationism*, says that in the above case, and in other cases of *peer* disagreement, you should substantially revise your belief.<sup>39</sup> Cases of peer disagreement are cases in which two individuals, with about the same epistemic credentials, disagree about the answer to the same question. The above case is a mundane case of peer disagreement. The answer has little to no significance to what comes after. Arriving at the incorrect answer can easily be fixed in this situation. We can find the correct answer by quickly recalculating the numbers on a piece of paper. Or if Theodore and I both got the same answer, but the answer was incorrect, surely we'll find this out once we collect everyone's share and see that we have too little or too much. However the disagreement ends up, nothing significant will come of it.

Conciliationism has recently been applied to non-mundane cases of disagreement, namely moral disagreement. In our time, there is a host of moral claims that are disputed by numerous people. Some have argued that a conciliationist view, which is a view that seems intuitively and independently plausible, leads to a particular type of moral skepticism, namely *epistemological* moral skepticism. When applied to moral disagreement, conciliationism seems to undermine a great deal of our moral knowledge.<sup>40</sup> This skeptical argument begins from the observation that there is widespread moral disagreement, and concludes that if conciliationism is true, then widespread moral disagreement undermines a significant portion of our moral knowledge.

Some have taken this result to be evidence against conciliationism.<sup>41</sup> Others have embraced the results because they either think the results are not troubling or that this is simply where the argument leads.<sup>42</sup> I take a third stance. I argue that even if conciliationism is true, widespread moral disagreement does not undermine a significant portion of our moral knowledge. I buttress this claim by arguing that genuine widespread peer disagreements about moral issues are scarce. Although

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<sup>38</sup> This sort of example is discussed in Christensen (2007), Elga (2007), Feldman (2007), Kelly (2010), Lackey (2010), Sosa (2010), and Vavova (2014b).

<sup>39</sup> Conciliationism is quite a popular view in the literature. See Feldman (2003), pp. 182-187, Foley (2001), pp. 110-111, and Cohen (2013).

<sup>40</sup> Another type of epistemological moral skepticism rests on debunking arguments. According to debunking arguments, the best explanation for our current moral beliefs is not that they are true, but rather because they are conducive to reproduction and survival. See Street (2005) for the argument.

<sup>41</sup> See Setiya (2012), van Inwagen (1996).

<sup>42</sup> See Vavova (2014b) for the former, and Feldman (2007) for the latter.

there are many widespread moral disagreements, we are not in a position to figure out that these disagreements are genuine peer disagreements. As such, they do not fall under the authority of conciliationism because conciliationism is a view about peer disagreement.

In this chapter, I will first show why we should expect widespread peer disagreement about moral issues to be scarce. Then I will consider a challenge to this scarcity claim. The challenge is posed by what I call *Skepticism about Moral Peers*. According to this challenge, in cases of widespread moral disagreement, you are not justified in believing that your dissenters are more likely to be in error than you are. I will argue that once we look at past moral disagreements, skepticism about moral peers leads to a radical skepticism about our *Moorean moral beliefs*—beliefs that are more obvious than certain claims the skeptical view makes. Thus, we should reject the dubious assumptions, and as a consequence also reject the skeptical view. I then strengthen the Moorean-shift by providing independent reasons to reject the claims that the skeptical view makes.

## The Scarcity of Peer Disagreement

The problem of widespread moral disagreement that I am concerned with is a problem about *messy real-world* issues.<sup>43</sup> These include controversial topics such as abortion, capital punishment, how much we should assist the needy, equality for others, and so on. I'm interested in issues that are *global in scale*. What I mean by that is that I am not interested in a specific disagreement between family members for example. Suppose some family is disputing about whether they should give ten percent of their total income to help the poor, and relative to the members of that family, there is a widespread disagreement about this issue. On my view, this dispute is local in that it involves a specific family and specific facts about that family (e.g. how much they make, and so on). Moreover, it is local in the sense that it involves only a few people out of the rest of the human population. I'm interested in issues that abstract away from those type of specific facts. Instead of asking what this specific family should do with their money, we can ask more generally: do we have any obligation towards the needy? If so, what are our obligations? These more general questions are what I have in mind here. The issues that are global in scale are issues that the majority of people on this planet (if they had time to think about them) would find interesting and important.

Widespread disagreements about messy real-world issues that are global in scale are a problem under the right *contingent* and *historical* conditions. The problem does not lead to a traditional type of *a priori* skepticism. Rather, it leads to a *contingent* type of skepticism. The world has to be a certain way in order for the problem to arise. The right contingent conditions must be met. Those conditions include being in a particular situation, having particular beliefs with a particular degree of strength, being surrounded by the right number of people who have particular beliefs that they too hold with the right degree of conviction. On top of it, you must also be aware of a sufficient number of these facts. If my peer and I disagree about whether capital punishment is morally permissible, but through no fault of my own, I am not aware of the disagreement, then the problem of peer disagreement is not a problem for me, at least not until I find out about the disagreement.

Any epistemic problem of peer disagreement is scarce to come by because the conditions that are suitable for the problem to obtain are uncommon. In the splitting the bill case, if Theodore majored in math, and you were not very good at math, then the disagreement between you two would cease to be a peer disagreement. Slightly changing the case changes the epistemic nature of the disagreement. This fact is especially evident in the problem of *widespread* moral disagreement

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<sup>43</sup> The phrase “messy real-world” issues is from Elga (2007), p. 493. It refers to non-mundane and important issues about morality, politics, and religion.



because the number of individuals involved in the dispute is typically high. As such, it is unlikely that the epistemic credentials of all those involved in the dispute are at the right level for a peer disagreement. If one side of the disagreement has too many experts, then the widespread disagreement is not a peer disagreement (e.g. there is a surprising number of people who believe the earth is flat but clearly the experts are not on their side).

To see why we should expect peer disagreement to be scarce, let us first list the conditions under which peer disagreement is epistemically problematic. Here are the conditions (“you” and “S” are not referring to any specific individual):

**The Conditions for the Problem of Peer Disagreement (CPPD):** Peer Disagreement is epistemically problematic when the following conditions are met: (1) you rationally believe there is someone S who disagrees with you about whether P; (2) you rationally believe that S is about as confident in their attitude toward P as you are; (3) you rationally believe that S is your epistemic peer (i.e. S is equally likely to be correct about P or that S is your cognitive and evidential equal with respect to P); and (4) you rationally believe that there are no epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors, who would tip the epistemic scale either in your favor or S’s favor.

By (4), I mean this: if there is a situation where you’re in a peer disagreement with S about whether P, but you hold that there is someone who is epistemically superior to S that agrees with you—this can be someone who is either evidentially or cognitively superior to S, or this can be someone who is an expert about matters concerning P and is thus more likely than S to be correct about P. This would tip the epistemic scale in your favor. Another example: you know that there is a large group of people who are either epistemic peers or close to it, and they believe as you do. Furthermore, you’re not aware of the existence of a similar size group of peers who agree with your dissenter. In other words, it is a situation in which you and a host of other people with the same epistemic credentials believe that P, but your dissenter stands alone in believing that not-P, or perhaps your dissenter has a few peers who agree with him but not nearly as many as those who agree with you.

Condition (4) assumes that numbers matter.<sup>44</sup> However, numbers matter only in specific types of circumstances. One such circumstance would be if each person in the group arrived at their conclusion without being completely dependent on the other individuals in the group and if the members of the group didn’t attain the information from the same source. For example, suppose my friend and I disagree about when the Super Bowl will start at a Super Bowl party. Then we find out that everyone else at the party agrees with me (assume that everyone else at the party formed their beliefs from different reliable sources). Clearly this new information tips the epistemic scale in my favor.

Notice that in the four conditions listed above, I do not specify whether you know such-and-such. Rather, I leave it open whether you have knowledge about the facts of the disagreement. The four conditions merely focus on your epistemically rational beliefs.<sup>45</sup> The problem of peer disagreement doesn’t require the individual to actually know they are in a peer disagreement. In fact, they can have a false belief about whether they are in a disagreement. For example, suppose I believe that the keys are in my pocket, and I believe that my wife is just as likely as I am to know where my keys are located. However, I mistakenly, but rationally, believe that my wife thinks that my keys are

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<sup>44</sup> Lackey (2013) persuasively argues that numbers matter in cases of disagreement.

<sup>45</sup> Compare CPPD with van Wietmarschen’s (2013) Integration principle, which he derives from Christensen (2010). One main difference is that van Wietmarschen’s Integration principle is spelled out in terms of justified beliefs. CPPD, on the other hand, is spelled out in terms of epistemically rational beliefs. I prefer the latter way of putting things, and for the purposes of this chapter, not much turns on this decision.

not in my pocket. Although I am mistaken about the existence of the disagreement between my wife and me, I am still faced with an epistemic problem: *given what I currently believe*, what would be the epistemically rational thing for me to accept? In other words, what should my reaction be to the new piece of information, namely that my wife disagrees with me. My reaction to this new piece of information can be rational even if this new piece of information is in fact misleading information and doesn't correspond to reality. Thus, peer disagreements can be epistemically significant as long as I have the relevant rational beliefs, even if those beliefs happen to be false.<sup>46</sup>

Although CPPD focuses on two unspecified individuals (i.e. “you” and “S”), the same conditions can still apply in a case of widespread disagreement with multiple individuals. This can be done by fixing *the point of reference* for both “you” and “S.” Let me explain what I mean by this. Being an epistemic inferior, peer, or superior is a *relational* fact. Sally might be your epistemic peer, but she is my epistemic superior. Being an epistemic inferior, peer, or superior is analogous to the relations “being shorter than,” “being the same height as,” and “being taller than.” Sally might be the same height as you are, but she is taller than I am. Thus, in order to see whether a disagreement is a peer disagreement, it is important to have a *point of reference* that can fix the epistemic inferiors, peers, and superiors. Here I suggest that the point of reference should be you, i.e. whoever is reading this at any given time. If *you* are trying to figure out whether a widespread disagreement is a widespread peer disagreement, then you begin by finding an epistemic peer who disagrees with you about some messy real-world issue and who is equally confident in their disagreement. In other words, you find someone who satisfies conditions (1)-(3) about a messy real-world issue that is global in scale. This person can now fix the point of reference for “you” in CPPD.

Once this is done, the difficult part is figuring out whether condition (4) obtains. This part is difficult for two obvious reasons. First, in a widespread disagreement, there is a high number of individuals on both sides of the debate, which makes the weighing of inferiors, peers, and superiors much more complicated. Second, in a widespread *moral* disagreement, the facts that are relevant for figuring out the epistemic credentials of individuals on each side of the debate are not easily discernible.<sup>47</sup>

## Are Widespread Disagreements Peer Disagreements?

The conditions listed under CPPD expose the *contingent* nature of the problem of peer disagreement. It is a problem that arises only when a certain set of contingent conditions obtain. Some of these conditions are not as common as others. In particular, condition (4)—you rationally believe that there are no epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors, who would tip the epistemic scale either in your favor or S's favor—is a condition that would be very difficult to establish in a case of widespread disagreement about a messy real-world issue that is global in scale. Finding someone who disagrees with us about a moral issue is quite easy. However, it is extraordinarily difficult to find a messy real-world and global disagreement where the numbers of individuals on each side of the debate do not epistemically favor one side over the other.

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<sup>46</sup> Frances & Matheson (2018) make a similar distinction between one's assessment of the original evidence for P, and one's assessment of the new evidence for P. They say: “...Bub's action of maintaining his confidence in his belief as a result of his new knowledge is reasonable even though his retained belief itself is unreasonable...one's action of retaining one's belief—that intellectual action—can be epistemically fine even though the retained belief is not.”

<sup>47</sup> Vavova (2014b), pp. 314-315, points to another reason why peer disagreements are hard to come by. She argues that with respect to moral disagreements, the more fundamental the disagreement is, the less significant it becomes because in a fundamental moral disagreement, there is little common ground between you and the dissenter. Without common ground, you have little reason to believe that your dissenter is your peer.

Typically, there are some inferiors, some peers, and some superiors on each side. The task of figuring out that there are roughly an equal number of them on both sides is next to impossible for two reasons. First, it's plausible that as things presently stand, there are no widespread disagreements that satisfy condition (4). Second, even if there were widespread disagreements that satisfy condition (4), there is no feasible way of figuring out the relevant information, and on top of that deciphering the information by weighing the inferiors, peers, and superiors on both sides.

This would truly be an extraordinarily difficult task to accomplish. Depending on how widespread the disagreement is, collecting the relevant information and deciphering it would likely require a group of dedicated and conscientious individuals. Even if this group gathers the relevant information and correctly deciphers it, this would only accurately describe the details of a widespread disagreement at some given period of time. However, widespread disagreements often change from time to time. Sometimes people change sides, or their confidence in a belief lowers or increases. It would be difficult to figure out the details of a widespread disagreement, let alone track the numerous changes that widespread disagreements undergo on a regular basis. Even if the group manages to accomplish all of this, it would be practically impossible in our day to do this with respect to all or many of the widespread disagreements that currently exist.

As a matter of fact, there is no such group. As far as I know, there is no group that dedicates much of its time and resources to figuring out whether widespread moral disagreements are genuine peer disagreements. It's true that such a group can be implemented. However, the contingent fact that there is no such group is important because the problem of widespread moral disagreement is a contingent problem, so we must deal with it given the contingent facts that currently obtain.

Think about a controversial moral claim that you believe. How do you know that it is controversial? Is it controversial just in your town, city, state, country, your continent, the entire globe? Typically, we are only familiar with the views of our own culture, and we typically have a vague understanding of the controversy surrounding any particular moral claim. Of course there are exceptions such as those who work in particular fields or those who are passionate about certain public policy issues. However, most of us don't even know in any great detail the basic statistics for any specific disagreements. We might have a vague memory of a friend telling us of a statistic that claims there is a 60-40 percent divide between those who think abortion is permissible and those who do not. Probably we do not know when the survey was conducted and whether it is currently outdated, let alone knowing whether the survey was scientifically rigorous.

For most of us, once we reflect on a particular widespread disagreement, we can see that our knowledge is very limited. In particular, we know very little about the epistemic credentials of those on either side of the debate. We can generally assume that with respect to heated political and moral issues, there is a good number of people on both sides of the debate who are not being conscientious, and who are not thinking clearly about these issues. We can also generally assume that a good number of people on both sides of the debate are intelligent and conscientious. However, we know very little about the specific or approximate number of intelligent and conscientious people on either side of a widespread disagreement. We know even less about their specific epistemic credentials. For all we know, in most widespread moral disagreements, one side has a significantly larger portion of individuals who are intelligent and conscientious. To show that a widespread moral disagreement is a widespread peer disagreement, we must rule those sorts of scenarios out by providing empirical evidence. However, the empirical evidence is not easily attainable.

Compare the level of vagueness found in cases of widespread moral disagreement with the splitting the bill case. In splitting the bill, Theodore is your best friend. You know that you both went to the same school, you took the same math classes, and you had similar grades in those classes. You also know that you two have been in the same restaurant situation many times before and you have kept track of your records. Most importantly, the disagreement is essentially about

basic arithmetic. It is extraordinarily simple to figure out whether someone is just as good as you are at basic arithmetic. When it comes to moral issues, on the other hand, it is not so simple. With messy real-world issues, it is difficult to know where even to begin. This fact coupled with the dearth of evidence typically surrounding the details of widespread moral disagreements makes it plausible that we are not in a position to find out that a widespread moral disagreement is a peer disagreement. Thus, at the end of the day, perhaps we have a general inclination to believe that these uncommon conditions listed under CPPD might be true about some topics, but it is next to impossible to say so for any specific topic.

## Moral Disagreements in Disguise

One reason that moral beliefs are not as controversial as we might think they are is that some alleged “moral disagreements” are not actually moral disagreements. Rather, they are disagreements about the natural or non-normative facts. That is, they are factual disagreements disguised as moral disagreements.<sup>48</sup> Consider what James Rachels says in his well known book, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*:

Cultural Relativism starts by observing that cultures differ dramatically in their views of right and wrong. But how much do they really differ? It is true that there are differences, but it is easy to exaggerate them. Often, what seemed at first to be a big difference turns out to be no difference at all.

Consider a culture in which people believe it is wrong to eat cows. This may even be a poor culture, in which there is not enough food; still, the cows are not to be touched. Such a society would appear to have values very different from our own. But does it? We have not yet asked *why* these people won't eat cows. Suppose they believe that after death the souls of humans inhabit the bodies of animals, especially cows, so that a cow may be someone's grandmother. Shall we say that their values differ from ours? No; the difference lies elsewhere. The difference is in our belief systems, not in our value systems. We agree that we shouldn't eat Grandma; we disagree about whether the cow could be Grandma.<sup>49</sup>

Detailed work has been done on the extent of the moral divide between different cultures.<sup>50</sup> The amount of moral disagreement should not be taken for granted. For all we know, a great deal of moral disagreement rest on disagreements about non-moral facts.

If we found out that our disagreement about whether we should eat animals rests on the claim that right now a loved one might be an animal, then this should significantly undermine the epistemic credentials of our dissenter. Perhaps many widespread moral disagreements rest on obvious factual or logical errors, or perhaps they rest on obvious biases.<sup>51</sup> This would undermine the epistemic significance of these widespread moral disagreements for two reasons.

First, it undermines the claim that these widespread moral disagreements are between epistemic equals, assuming that the other side is not making any obvious factual or logical mistakes. Second, it undermines the severity of the problem of widespread moral disagreement because it can be solved as easily as finding and pointing out the errors. For example, suppose there is a widespread disagreement among the university staff about whether the Dean of the university

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<sup>48</sup> Vavova (2014b), pp. 313-314, makes a similar point.

<sup>49</sup> Rachels & Rachels (2012), p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> See Moody-Adams (2002).

<sup>51</sup> Sherman (2014) argues that this is the case with the debate about marriage and gender equality. See Rowland (2016), pp. 7-8, for a response.

should be getting paid twice as much as the highest paid faculty member. Someone points out that they have misleading evidence about how much the Dean is getting paid, and that actually he gets paid ten times more than the highest paid faculty member. The original disagreement would likely dissipate because of the new information. Or maybe someone points out that those who calculated the difference of pay between the Dean and the highest paid faculty member made a mistake in their calculation. Again, this new information would likely cause the disagreement to cease or change into a different disagreement.

Likewise, if we found out that there is a case of widespread moral disagreement where the views of a high percentage of those on one side of the debate are based on either a logical error or their being misinformed about the facts, then this would be a defeater for the claim that this is a peer disagreement. Thus, whether a widespread moral disagreement rests on obvious errors about the non-moral facts can seriously undermine the epistemic significance of the disagreement. More empirical work needs to be done to show whether some of these widespread moral disagreements rest on obvious factual or logical errors.

## The Scarcity Thesis

The following claims lend good support for what I call *The Scarcity Thesis*: The Conditions for the Problem of Peer Disagreement, how the world actually is, and the contingent nature of the problem of widespread moral disagreement.

**The Scarcity Thesis:** It is now contingently true that (1) either there are no widespread peer disagreements about moral issues or if there are, we are currently not in a position to find out; and (2) if we tried to find out whether a number of widespread moral disagreements are peer disagreements, it would be next to impossible to successfully accomplish such a task.

The Scarcity Thesis is the conclusion of what has been said so far. Condition (4) in CPPD makes it next to impossible to establish that a widespread moral disagreement is a peer disagreement.

In particular, the high number of individuals involved in a widespread disagreement makes the weighing of inferiors, peers, and superiors much more complicated. Additionally, the facts that are relevant for figuring out the epistemic credentials of individuals on each side of the debate are not easily discernible when the debate is about a moral issue. Thus, if the Scarcity Thesis is correct, then we should reject the following claim: if conciliationism is true, then widespread moral disagreement undermines a significant portion of our moral knowledge. We can reject this claim without having to reject conciliationism. The Scarcity Thesis undermines the move from X is a widespread moral disagreement to X is a peer disagreement. Conciliationism is a thesis about peer disagreement. If widespread moral disagreements are not peer disagreements or if we cannot show that they are peer disagreements, then conciliationism cannot be used to undermine a significant portion of our moral knowledge.

This of course leaves open the question of whether widespread moral disagreement is epistemically significant for *other reasons*. For example, J. L. Mackie argued that widespread moral disagreement is good evidence that there are genuinely irresolvable moral disagreements, and if there are such moral disagreements then the best explanation of that fact is that moral realism—the view that there are mind-independent moral facts—is false.<sup>52</sup> What I say in this chapter does not affect Mackie-style skepticism. Moreover, some might insist that although widespread moral disagreements are not genuine peer disagreements, they should still epistemically affect our credence. I agree, and I

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<sup>52</sup> Mackie (1977).

suspect most would think this claim is uncontroversial. What is controversial is whether widespread moral disagreement *undermines a significant portion of our moral knowledge*. The most plausible way to argue for that is to show that widespread moral disagreements are peer disagreements, and then use conciliationism to arrive at moral skepticism. For reasons I've spelled out, this route is weak. There might be other routes, but it is unclear how the argument would go outside of an appeal to peer disagreement and conciliationism. We can all agree that given widespread moral disagreement, we shouldn't be as confident in our beliefs as we would otherwise, but that uncontroversial claim is much weaker than what the skeptic is claiming.

## The Problem of Widespread Moral Disagreement Revisited

Condition (4) in CPPD—i.e. you believe that there are no epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors, who would tip the epistemic scale either in your favor or S's favor—is the most troubling condition for the proponent of the problem of widespread moral disagreement. The step from that there are widespread moral disagreements to the step that these widespread moral disagreements are peer disagreements is next to impossible to establish given condition (4). In this section, I will examine a particular challenge to condition (4). If the proponents of the problem of widespread moral disagreement can show that condition (4) obtains in widespread moral disagreements, then this will undermine the plausibility of the Scarcity Thesis. The plausibility of the Scarcity Thesis is mostly derived from condition (4) in CPPD.

According to this challenge, although there might be epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors about *controversial* moral issues, we cannot know or be justified or be epistemically rational in believing that there are any epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors about controversial moral issues. If so, then condition (4) obtains in a case of widespread moral disagreement because with respect to any widespread disagreement we are always justified or epistemically rational in believing that there are no epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors, who would tip the epistemic scale either in our favor or the dissenters' favor. I call this challenge, *Skepticism about Moral Peers*. Proponents of this challenge claim that this skepticism about peers does not overgeneralize to domains that it shouldn't overgeneralize to, such as the sciences. It might generalize to politics or religion, but it should not generalize to physics or chemistry. If it does overgeneralize to domains that it should not overgeneralize to, then the problem ceases to be a problem for morality specifically, and becomes a global type of skepticism. Everyone in this debate agrees that if this problem overgeneralizes, then either it should be rejected or sent off to epistemologists who work on global skepticism. Here, we are interested in whether there is a *unique* problem of widespread disagreement that affects (or pertains to) our *moral* beliefs.

A good representative of this challenge is Sarah McGrath's formulation of the problem of widespread moral disagreement.<sup>53</sup> Her argument focuses on controversial moral beliefs. Here are some examples of controversial moral topics: abortion, capital punishment, animal rights, how much one should do to help the poor, eugenics, cloning, embryonic cell research, and so on. An example of a controversial moral belief is the belief that abortion is impermissible or that capital punishment is morally wrong. According to McGrath, controversial moral beliefs do not amount to knowledge. Here is how she states the argument:

**P1** Our controversial moral beliefs are CONTROVERSIAL.

**P2** CONTROVERSIAL beliefs do not amount to knowledge.

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<sup>53</sup> McGrath (2008). For critical responses to her argument, see King (2011a) and (2011b), and Decker & Groll (2013).

C Therefore, our controversial moral beliefs do not amount to knowledge.<sup>54</sup>

Uppercase “CONTROVERSIAL belief” is distinguished from lowercase “controversial belief” in that the latter merely picks out the answer to any contentious moral question—e.g. is capital punishment morally permissible? For a belief to be controversial, it is not enough that there is only one person who disagrees. A belief is controversial when there is *widespread disagreement* about the content of the belief.

Thus, numbers matter. Moral beliefs reach the level of being controversial when there is no serious consensus. If numbers don’t matter, then virtually every moral belief is controversial because for any moral belief, surely there is at least one person out there who disagrees with that belief. Second, if numbers don’t matter, then scientific beliefs—which are beliefs that typically share a strong consensus among the experts—would also turn out to be controversial because for many scientific beliefs, there is someone out there who disagrees. A moral belief P with a few dissenters does not pose a problem, according to McGrath, as long as there is widespread consensus concerning P.

The notion of widespread disagreement is vague. Does it matter whether there is a fifty-fifty split between those who believe P, and those who do not believe P? Presumably the answer is “no,” but it is not clear why that’s the case. If I find out that fifty one percent believe that capital punishment is morally wrong and forty nine percent believe that it is not morally wrong, then does it follow that the belief that capital punishment is morally wrong is controversial? The answer seems to be “yes,” but again it is not clear why. Why should I epistemically disregard the two percent difference—especially if a two percent difference amounts to a hundred and twenty million people in a population of six billion people. If a hundred and twenty million moral agents believe that capital punishment is morally wrong, then this fact seems to be relevant. Even if the number of people was only two or one million, this fact should still make an epistemic difference. These worries are important to think about in this context, but for now, I shall put these worries aside. The notion of widespread disagreement is a vague notion, and I’ll take it for granted that there is no strict cutoff line between when a claim is controversial and when it is non-controversial.

A controversial belief becomes CONTROVERSIAL just in case it falls under the following type of situation: you encounter a disagreement about whether P with someone who you have no more reason to think is in error about P than you are.<sup>55</sup> For example, your belief that abortion is morally permissible is a CONTROVERSIAL belief just in case you have an epistemic peer—i.e. someone who you have no more reason to think is in error about this belief than you are—who disagrees with you about whether abortion is morally permissible.

To say that a controversial belief is CONTROVERSIAL is a substantive claim because controversial beliefs might not be CONTROVERSIAL. For example, the belief that we should take measures to slow down climate change might be very contentious. However, I might hold that those who disagree with me are more likely to be in error about this belief than I am. As such, although the belief in question is controversial, it might not be CONTROVERSIAL. There has to be a story to tell about why controversial beliefs are CONTROVERSIAL.

There are two filtering conditions that might prevent a controversial belief from becoming CONTROVERSIAL.<sup>56</sup> The first is performing a logical error. Suppose a group of your intelligent friends present an interesting argument for P that has the form: if P, then Q; Q; therefore, P. You recognize the obvious fallacious reasoning, but your friends do not. A widespread disagreement

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<sup>54</sup> McGrath (2008), p. 92

<sup>55</sup> McGrath (2008), p. 91.

<sup>56</sup> See Decker & Groll (2013), p. 145.

amongst your group of friends breaks out. Although the belief in question is controversial, it is not **CONTROVERSIAL** because the reasoning in support of the belief is fallacious.

The second condition is near consensus among the experts. Suppose there is widespread disagreement about whether the earth is flat. If you have time, check out the Flat Earth Society. Although they surprisingly have a high number of followers, they do not have nearly as many followers as those who believe that the earth is not flat. Nonetheless, let us suppose that they have enough to make the belief controversial. In this situation, the controversial belief is not **CONTROVERSIAL** because there is a genuine consensus among the experts that the earth is not flat. This second condition is crucial for preventing the problem of widespread moral disagreement from overgeneralizing.<sup>57</sup>

Another way McGrath tries to avoid the overgeneralization worry is by arguing that a few reasonable disagreements are not enough to undermine our knowledge. This is why the brilliant philosophers who believe that we do not know the external world exists or that we were created, with all our memories, five seconds ago, do not undermine our knowledge of the external world or how long we've been around. A few disagreements here and there are not enough. The disagreement has to be widespread. However, why would widespread disagreement be the relevant feature? Presumably the idea here is that if there are only a few dissenters, then we have a reason to think that they are in error. But why is that the case? McGrath doesn't say so. But it seems that she is forced to accept the position that numbers matter, and that if numbers don't matter, then her argument can easily overgeneralize, which would be an unwelcome result.

McGrath's version of the argument depends on the following principle, which is a restatement of premise 2 of her argument:

**Principle of **CONTROVERSIAL** Beliefs (PCB):** If one's belief that *p* is **CONTROVERSIAL**, then one does not know that *p*.<sup>58</sup>

One can lack knowledge in numerous ways. One way is if my belief is false. If I believe that *P*, but my peer believes that not-*P*, then obviously one of us must be mistaken. If I happen to be the one mistaken, and if knowledge implies truth, then I don't have knowledge. Or perhaps I believe *P* and you believe *Q*, and both *P* and *Q* happen to be false, then clearly you and I both don't have knowledge. In either case, one lacks knowledge because the belief in question is false. Although McGrath would agree with these obvious and uncontroversial claims, her argument is not concerned with cases in which one lacks knowledge because the belief in question is false. Even if my disputed belief happens to be true, McGrath argues, I still lack knowledge because a peer disagreement undermines the *justification* or *epistemic rationality* for my belief. On the one hand, one can lack knowledge because her belief fails to be true, and on the other hand, one can lack knowledge because her belief fails to be justified or supported by sufficient evidence. McGrath's argument is concerned with justification or having sufficient evidence. It is not concerned with whether the belief happens to be true.

As an intuition pump for (PCB), McGrath presents the following ordinary case of peer disagreement. Suppose you and your friend disagree about when the train will arrive. She thinks it will arrive in 30 minutes, but you think it will arrive in an hour. Moreover, suppose—and this is the important part of the case—that you think your friend is just as likely to get the correct answer. Intuitively, it seems that you do not have knowledge in this situation because (1) you two have

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<sup>57</sup> Decker & Groll (2013), pp. 146-156, argue that this second filtering condition does not prevent McGrath's argument from overgeneralizing to the sciences. They argue that disagreements about evolution and human origin can't use the second filtering condition because the individuals on both sides of the debate disagree about who the experts are.

<sup>58</sup> McGrath (2008), p. 91.



incompatible beliefs: namely, she believes that the train will arrive in 30 minutes, and you believe that the train will arrive in an hour; and (2), you have no reason to prefer your belief over her belief and vice versa.

Now suppose you find out that ten other people around you agree with you that the train will arrive in an hour (and they believe this independently of each other). With this new information, your belief that the train will arrive in an hour is no longer controversial because the numbers are on your side. Before you found out about this new information, there was a fifty-fifty split on both sides of the disagreement: you believed P and your friend believed something incompatible with P. As far as you knew before the new information, there isn't a widespread consensus about P or not-P. After you found out about the beliefs of the ten people, your epistemic situation changes.

Let's slightly change the example one more time. Suppose instead of finding out that ten other people agree with you, you found out that five people agree with you and five other people agree with your friend. In that situation (and all things being equal), your belief continues to be controversial. McGrath claims that controversial moral beliefs are like the belief about the train. Widespread disagreement about a moral belief is a defeater for that moral belief. Thus, controversial moral beliefs do not amount to knowledge.

### McGrath's Skepticism about Moral Peers

McGrath defends premise one—i.e. “Our controversial moral beliefs are CONTROVERSIAL”—by arguing that it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish that my moral judgments are more reliable than the moral judgments of those who disagree with me. This portion of McGrath's argument is a justification for what I have called *Skepticism about Moral Peers*. She presents the example of unique green as support for this:

Unique green is that shade of green that is neither bluish nor yellowish. When asked to select the shade which is unique green, different subjects with normal color vision will select different shades. As in the case of our controversial moral views, opinion about which shade is unique green not only fails to be unanimous, but is substantially divided. Perhaps if there were relatively widespread agreement as to which shade is unique green, then the dissenting judgments of a few who possessed otherwise normal color vision could be dismissed. But the fact that the actual division of opinion is substantial suggests that human beings are not reliable detectors of the relevant property.<sup>59</sup>

It might be a fact that some people are reliable detectors of unique green. However, given this widespread disagreement, one does not *know* that she is a reliable detector of unique green. The widespread disagreement functions as a defeater and undermines your knowledge about your reliability relative to the reliability of your dissenters.

For consider how one might come to know such a fact. What evidence would establish that I am more reliable in detecting unique green than someone who disagrees with me about which shade is unique green? The evidence would have to show that I have a good track record of detecting unique green, but such evidence is very difficult, if not impossible, to come by. In order to figure out my track record, I would presumably need an *independent check*. We can tell that a car mechanic has a good track record by checking whether the mechanic actually fixed the car. With unique green, there is no analogous independent checking method. Thus, judgments about whether

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

a particular shade of green is unique green are CONTROVERSIAL, which means they do not amount to knowledge.

According to McGrath, disagreements about unique green are relevantly analogous to disagreements about controversial moral claims. If so, then we get the following argument for premise one:

- (1) Judgments about unique green are CONTROVERSIAL.
- (2) Our controversial moral beliefs are relevantly similar to judgments about unique green.
- (3) Therefore, our controversial moral beliefs are CONTROVERSIAL.<sup>60</sup>

What is important to see here is that McGrath has a particular take on what it amounts to for one to be an epistemic moral peer. On her view, since we cannot know whether I am more reliable than someone else in a case of widespread moral disagreement, I cannot know whether I am morally reliable in any way in cases of widespread moral disagreement. Thus, being a peer, for McGrath, means only that I have no reason to think that I am better at tracking truths than my dissenter. This is compatible with both of us being equally great at forming true moral beliefs or both of us being equally bad. It is also consistent with the fact that I am much more reliable at forming moral beliefs than my dissenter or vice versa. The upshot is that I am in no position to know which of those are true.

McGrath's skepticism about moral peers can be summed up with the following claim: in cases of widespread moral disagreement, we are all epistemic peers in the sense that we have no reason to think that we are better at tracking truth than our dissenters. If this is correct, then whenever there is a widespread moral disagreement, we also have a peer disagreement. This would undermine the Scarcity Thesis, and show that condition (4) in CPPD obtains in *every* case of widespread moral disagreement.

## Past Disagreements

Recall what premise two of McGrath's main argument says, "CONTROVERSIAL beliefs do not amount to knowledge." First, we need to make premise two more precise. For example, a few decades ago, it was controversial for blacks to attend white schools. Moreover, it is not an extremely uncontroversial claim to say that there were epistemic peers, in McGrath's sense, on both sides of this controversy such that this belief raises to the level of being CONTROVERSIAL.

Is the belief that blacks ought to be segregated from white schools CONTROVERSIAL *today*, or was it CONTROVERSIAL a few decades ago, but it is no longer CONTROVERSIAL today? The natural answer is that the belief in question *was* CONTROVERSIAL, but it is no longer CONTROVERSIAL. I agree that this is the natural answer. However, we need an explanation for this fact. Why is it that historical controversies between epistemic peers do not affect us now? Here is another way to put the problem, albeit a crude way to do it:

**The Radical Hypothetical:** Suppose that virtually every fully functioning adult human being that has ever lived on this planet is resurrected with the same beliefs that they held at the moment of their deaths.

This radical hypothetical aims to make past disagreements relevant today. This is importantly different than making merely *possible* disagreements relevant today.<sup>61</sup> There is no good reason to

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<sup>60</sup> McGrath (2011), p. 237.

<sup>61</sup> See Kelly (2005), pp. 181-185, on possible disagreements.

include merely possible individuals and their infinitely numerous differing opinions in our epistemic deliberation about these issues. The radical hypothetical—which aims to show that past disagreements are epistemically relevant today—should be taken seriously for the following reason. Consider individuals who have passed away very recently. Suppose I have a friend, John, whom I have had vigorous disagreements with about some contemporary moral issues—such as abortion, capital punishment, eugenics, animal rights, and so on. Unfortunately, John passes away. Once he passes away, do I, all of the sudden, lose the epistemic pressure from peer disagreement? Surely not. What about if John passed away a year ago, or five years ago, or ten years ago? When does he cease to be epistemically relevant? Any precise cut off would seem arbitrary.

The radical hypothetical would bring about massive scientific disagreements: some of these people would believe that the earth is flat, that there are only four elements, some would believe in the caloric theory of heat, in vitalism, in Aristotelian physics, in the Ptolemaic system, and so on. However, these disagreements would not be *peer* disagreements because we are in a better epistemic position than these historical figures were in when they formed their scientific beliefs. But what about the non-scientific disagreements, like moral and political disagreements?

Many would disagree about whether a monarchy is the best form of government. Many would disagree about whether certain women's rights are a good thing. Some would even disagree about whether slavery is permissible. Many would disagree about numerous things. In this radical hypothetical scenario, dealing with disagreements about scientific facts would be relatively easily resolved. It can be done by showing these historical figures the evidence that we now have that they didn't have before.<sup>62</sup> But disagreements about non-scientific facts are trickier to settle, especially given McGrath's skepticism about moral peers. In fact, according to McGrath, they are as tricky to settle as the disagreements about unique green. Although you might be in fact reliable in forming true moral beliefs, you have no grounds to think that you are any more reliable in forming true moral beliefs than any of these historical figures with their radically different moral beliefs.

You might think at this point: "Great! This is even more support for McGrath's argument because the skepticism is even more wide reaching than we thought." The radical hypothetical seems to show that the class of controversial moral beliefs is in fact very large: it includes moral beliefs that are not controversial in our day, such as the belief that slavery is morally abhorrent.

One response to this is to say that we have made moral progress. But how do we account for moral progress if we can't know CONTROVERSIAL moral truths? It can't be that moral progress is achieved in a society when a moral claim ceases to be controversial. There has to be another way to find out whether we have made moral progress. At present, I don't know what that way is. However, the radical hypothetical forces us to accept that there is genuine moral progress whatever the justificatory story might be. Often times, we are not in a position to communicate what justifies our belief. This does not mean that we do not have a justification for our belief. The distinction between the status of being justified and the activity of justifying a belief is important here.<sup>63</sup> Not being able to justify one's beliefs does not imply that one's beliefs are not justified. As Timothy Williamson says, "To test one's beliefs by one's ability to persuade a sceptic of their truth is to play a dangerous game."<sup>64</sup> Either we accept moral progress or we are stuck with the conclusion that we don't know a host of obvious moral truths such as the truth that slavery is morally abhorrent. However, the former seems much more obvious than the latter even if we currently cannot provide a justification for it that satisfies the skeptic.

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<sup>62</sup> Perhaps one needs to do a little more than merely show the newcomers the evidence. Perhaps, for Kuhnian reasons, one needs to also persuade them to adopt a new conceptual framework.

<sup>63</sup> Alston (2006), p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> Williamson (2004), pp.123. Also see Williamson (2007), pp. 234-241.

Perhaps we can consider the claims of those who are from the *recent* past, but it doesn't follow from this that we should consider the claims of ancient thinkers from the *distant* past, or thinkers from radically different cultures that are far removed from our culture. Although it is okay to epistemically consider our disagreements with those who have recently passed away, it is not okay to consider our disagreements with those who have been dead for a significant amount of time. But why introduce this seemingly arbitrary restriction? Perhaps one answer is that there is a significant gap between the knowledge we have today and the knowledge the ancients had in their time. This gap is significant enough that one might doubt that we can find ancients who are our epistemic peers.

This objection might be correct when applied to scientific and purely factual claims. However, it is far from obvious that the ancients are not our epistemic peers, in McGrath's sense of the term, with respect to moral or evaluative claims. Recall that on McGrath's skeptical view, in a case of widespread disagreement you are automatically considered an epistemic equal with your dissenters unless you meet the two filtering conditions, which are committing a logical error or going against the consensus of the experts. However, it is clear that if those two filtering conditions do not apply to contemporary widespread moral disagreements, then they should not apply to the new widespread moral disagreements that are generated by the radical hypothetical. Thus, there is no reason to restrict the epistemic significance of past disagreement to only those disagreements from the recent past.

## The Moorean-Shift

It is an uncontroversial fact that some moral claims are largely accepted today while the same moral claims were heavily disputed in the past, or that some moral claims are widely disputed today whereas the same moral claims were not contentious in the past. For example, in the past, societies by and large accepted that having children out of wedlock is morally wrong. Today, that is typically not the case. An example of a moral claim that was disputed in the past but is settled today is the dignity and full equality of people of color, especially blacks, in this country. Some rationalized their stance on slavery by producing various "arguments."

What should we conclude about such cases—cases in which currently there is a sufficient amount of disagreement about P, but in the past (whether the distant or recent past) P is largely accepted, and cases with the reverse features? In other words, although some moral claims are non-controversial today, they were very controversial in the past. Moreover, although some moral claims are controversial today, they were not controversial in the past. There are two routes one can take here: the skeptical and the progressive. The progressive story was briefly discussed in the previous section. According to the progressive story, there is at least some moral progress.

The other route is the skeptical one. This route embraces the strong skepticism. It embraces, for example, that we do not know that slavery is morally abhorrent. This skeptical route accepts the following principle:

**The Principle of Past Moral Disagreements:** Past moral disagreements from *any time in history* make it the case that many of our currently non-controversial moral beliefs become controversial.

This principle coupled with McGrath's skepticism about moral reliability, leads to radical skepticism about many of our current first-order moral beliefs.

Before I assess the skeptical story, let me flesh out the progressive story a little more. According to this story, our present time is lucky or at least luckier in some sense than previous times. We are epistemically privileged to be in this time because we have some sort of special

epistemic access, and not special epistemic access just about scientific matters, but special epistemic access about non-scientific matters. Perhaps—albeit it is unlikely—there is some sort of link between the two: having special epistemic access to scientific facts, somehow, and perhaps indirectly, gives us special epistemic access to non-scientific claims. Because of this special epistemic access we have in our day and age, the change of the cultural mores is not a *mere* change. Rather it is *progress*. Some, not all, of our moral codes are evolving for the better according to this story. Moreover, we are in a good position to know that something like the progressive story is true, even if it is difficult to communicate our status of justification to the satisfaction of the skeptic. If so, then we can know that we are, in some respects, more reliable in moral matters than people in previous generations. Thus, the progressive story would put direct pressure on McGrath's skepticism about moral peers.

The skeptical and the progressive hypotheses will have different implications given the radical hypothetical. Recall that the radical hypothetical asks the reader to imagine a possible world (a far removed possible world) where virtually everyone who has ever lived up to this point (not future persons, but only past persons) is brought back to life. This includes the ancient Greeks, The Persians, the Mongols, the Goths, the ancient Jewish people, the Eastern Kingdoms, the Roman Empire, and everyone before, after and in-between. The radical hypothetical asks us to imagine that these people are brought to life today with the same beliefs they had when they died. Given our knowledge of history, we can more or less figure out, with high accuracy, what these past individuals actually believed, and we know their moral beliefs were radically different than our moral beliefs.

If we accept the skeptical story, then a great deal of our current noncontroversial beliefs would become controversial. Consequently, and given McGrath's skepticism about moral reliability, these new controversial moral beliefs would become **CONTROVERSIAL**. Likewise, these newcomers would be introduced to beliefs that they have thought were noncontroversial. Thus, both groups face a skepticism that their historical time period protected them from.

One potential response to this is that these newcomers are not epistemic peers. But why is that? Consider the distinction between the novice and the learned. The novice typically has meager evidence and a very short track record. These newcomers might not be academic experts or know the current contemporary literature, but on McGrath's account of epistemic moral peers those factors are irrelevant. What is relevant is whether we can know that we are more reliable than our dissenters in a case of moral disagreement, and McGrath says, "no;" we cannot know that fact. Moreover, according to the radical hypothetical, novices are not the only ones who are being resurrected. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Hobbes, Leibniz, Hume, Mill, Russell, Mill, Anscombe, and many others will also be among the resurrected. These individuals might be novices when it comes to contemporary science (most of us are too), but they are not novices when it comes to moral and political issues.

We should reject the skeptical story in favor of the progressive story. McGrath's skepticism about moral peers leads to this radical moral skepticism. However, the fact that there is moral progress is more obvious than McGrath's skepticism about moral peers or her evidence for it. Therefore, we should reject McGrath's skepticism about moral peers. This is an instance of a *Moorean-shift*. A Moorean-shift is justified in a case where an argument implies a proposition P such that the negation of P is more obvious than the conjunction of the premises in that argument. That slavery is morally abhorrent is, to most of us, a *Moorean-fact*. According to David Lewis, a Moorean fact is "one of those things that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary."<sup>65</sup> If anything counts as a Moorean-fact, surely the claim that slavery is morally abhorrent is a Moorean-fact. What's worse is that McGrath's view doesn't only imply that

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<sup>65</sup> Lewis (1999), p. 418. See also Kelly (2005b) and Moore (2000).

we do not know that slavery is morally abhorrent, but it also implies that we do not know a host of other extremely obvious moral truths, such as that sacrificing babies for rain is morally wrong. The Moorean-shift is sufficient to motivate the progressive story, and as a result McGrath's skepticism fails.

Let us spell out the Moorean-shift in more detail. To do this, we must first present the consequences of McGrath's argument when coupled with the principle of past moral disagreement. Call this *The Skeptical Argument*:

**(P1\*)** If we have no more reason to think that our predecessors are in error about controversial moral beliefs than we are, then we do not know many obvious moral truths, e.g. that slavery is morally abhorrent.

**(P2\*)** We have no more reason to think that our predecessors are in error about controversial moral beliefs than we are.

**(C\*)** Therefore, we do not know many obvious moral truths, e.g. that slavery is morally abhorrent.

Premise (P1\*) follows from the obvious fact that if the antecedent is true, then the moral beliefs that our predecessors make controversial become CONTROVERSIAL, which means they do not amount to knowledge. Premise (P2\*) is established by McGrath's skepticism about moral peers. According to McGrath, in cases of widespread moral disagreement, we have no reason to think that we are better at tracking truth than our dissenters. The conclusion follows via modus ponens.

The Moorean-shift piggybacks on the skeptical argument by using the same premises, except for the second premise:

**(P1\*)** If we have no more reason to think that our predecessors are in error about controversial moral beliefs than we are, then we do not know many obvious moral truths, e.g. that slavery is morally abhorrent.

**(P2\*\*) We know that slavery is morally abhorrent.**

**(C\*\*) Therefore, we have more reason to think that our predecessors are in error about controversial moral beliefs than we are.**

The only difference between the Moorean-shift and the skeptical argument is the second premise. Thus, we can determine which argument is more plausible by assessing the second premise in each argument. Now I put the question to you. Which proposition do you think is more obvious, (A) or (B)?

**(A)** We have no more reason to think that our predecessors are in error about controversial moral beliefs than we are.

**(B)** We know that slavery is morally abhorrent.

I submit that the obvious answer to the question is (B). Proposition (B) is much more obviously true than proposition (A). However, proposition (A) is implied by McGrath's argument and the principle of past moral disagreement. Thus, rejecting (A) implies that McGrath's argument fails.

In Roderick Chisholm's classical work, "The Problem of the Criterion," he quotes a striking passage from Thomas Reid talking about skepticism. The passage illustrates the spirit of a Moorean-shift quite well:

The great Scottish philosopher, Thomas Reid...was serious about philosophy and man's place in the world. He finds Hume saying things implying that we can know only of the existence of certain sensations here and now. One can imagine him saying: "Good Lord!

What kind of nonsense is this?” What he did say, among other things, was this: “A traveller of good judgment may mistake his way, and be unawares led into a wrong track; and while the road is fair before him, he may go on without suspicion and be followed by others but, when it ends in a coal pit, it requires no great judgment to know that he hath gone wrong, nor perhaps to find out what misled him.”<sup>66</sup>

Like the traveller of good judgment, we should realize when the road “ends in a coal pit.” That is, we should realize when a view has taken us to an obviously wrong conclusion. If, as I have argued, McGrath’s argument leads us to the obviously false claim that we do not know that slavery is morally abhorrent, then we should conclude that McGrath’s argument is mistaken. The main problem with her argument is the motivation for premise one—namely, McGrath’s skepticism about moral peers. Thus we should reject McGrath’s skepticism about moral peers. As a result, the Scarcity Thesis is rescued from the challenge of skeptical moral peers.

In the following section, I will argue that the skepticism about moral peers is suspect on independent grounds. This will make the Moorean-shift exponentially stronger. As things presently stand, the choice between (A) and (B) should be quite obvious. However, if there are independent reasons against the skepticism about moral peers, then the choice between (A) and (B) becomes even more obvious. Consequently, the Moorean-shift becomes much more robust.

## The Peculiar Consequences of Skepticism about Moral Peers

In order for a peer disagreement to be epistemically troubling for me, I must at least satisfy the four conditions listed under (CPPD). If these conditions are sufficient to undermine our knowledge, then this leads to a type of dependence between our knowing that P and the psychological facts about our dissenters:

**Psychological Dependence:** One’s knowledge that P depends on peculiar psychological facts such as: how many people believe whether P, the degree of confidence those people have towards P, their reasons for believing whether P, and their epistemic credentials.

Let *psychological evidence* be evidence about the distribution of opinions, the degrees of confidence, and about the peer’s epistemic credentials. We can contrast that with non-psychological evidence, which is about the original and direct evidence that someone might have had for a belief. For instance, I might believe that abortion is not always impermissible because of Judith Jarvis Thomson’s violinist thought experiment. This would be non-psychological evidence. Or I might believe that abortion is not always impermissible merely because I believe that those who have done enough research on the topic believe that abortion is not always impermissible. That would be psychological evidence for a belief.<sup>67</sup>

It is not peculiar to base your belief on purely psychological evidence, if that’s all the evidence you have access to. What is peculiar is a case where you know that P because of strong non-psychological evidence, but your knowledge of P is undermined by psychological evidence of the sort we find in a peer disagreement. Another type of case that is peculiar is a case where you have zero evidence for P, but you have good non-psychological evidence against P, i.e. you have defeaters against your belief, but these defeaters are dislodged because you find out that those who believe P on good non-psychological evidence are in a peer disagreement.

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<sup>66</sup> Chisholm (1982), p. 68.

<sup>67</sup> This terminology is from Kelly (2011), p. 194.

As we have seen, McGrath's skepticism about moral peers justifies the claim that whenever a moral belief is controversial, it is also **CONTROVERSIAL**. Consequently, this skepticism about moral peers entails that no matter how strong my non-psychological evidence is for a moral belief P, this non-psychological evidence can be defeated by weak psychological evidence. I say it is weak because the psychological evidence just needs to show that P is controversial. It is quite easy to provide evidence for the claim that a moral belief is controversial. The evidence would consist in a sufficiently large list of individuals who disagree about P. The epistemic power of the psychological evidence and what the psychological evidence consists in is the heart of the peculiarity. It is very peculiar that weak psychological evidence that consists of a list of beliefs can defeat strong non-psychological evidence for a moral belief.

To see the peculiarity close up, let us consider the following thought experiment. Suppose we live in 2080, and in that year a highly sophisticated machine, called *the Peer Finder*, was released to the public. All you have to do is input a proposition, and the peer finder outputs the number of inferiors, peers, and superiors who believe P and those who believe otherwise. The reliability of the peer finder is unmatched. It is worth emphasizing that the peer finder works by directly looking at your beliefs, instead of finding public claims about your disagreements. The peer finder locates all the agents who have a doxastic stance about the inputted proposition, and it records their degree of confidence, their reasons for the proposition, and their epistemic credentials. The machine compares the epistemic credentials of those agents to your epistemic credentials, and then lists them as an inferior, a peer, or a superior relative to you.

For convenience, the peer finder has a mode that calculates and deciphers all the information, and notifies you with a red light if the conditions listed under (CPPD) are met. A green light indicates that the conditions listed under (CPPD) are not met. If the conditions are met for P, then you are faced with the problem of peer disagreement, which undermines your knowledge of P.

In its original version, the peer finder almost always returned a green light because of the reasons discussed earlier about the scarcity of peer disagreement. However, after reading McGrath, the designer of the peer finder became convinced of the challenge of the skepticism about moral peers. The designer then released a new version of the peer finder, the peer finder 2.0. This new peer finder operates in accordance with the skepticism about moral peers—namely, the claim that although there might be epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors about controversial moral issues, we cannot know or be justified or be epistemically rational in believing that there are any epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors about controversial moral issues. As we have seen, this claim justifies the premise that controversial moral beliefs are **CONTROVERSIAL**, where **CONTROVERSIAL** moral beliefs are those beliefs that we are just as likely to be in error about as our dissenters. In other words, the epistemic credentials of those in a widespread moral disagreement (a disagreement that makes a moral belief controversial) are irrelevant because in such a disagreement everyone is an epistemic peer. This makes the peer finder's job very easy. Just find widespread moral disagreements, and then flash the red light. Strong non-psychological evidence does not matter as long as the right kind of psychological evidence is present.

One day, I write a long list of my dearly held beliefs so that I can input each belief into the peer finder. I'm quite confident in these beliefs. In fact, I have strong evidence for each belief on that list. Given my evidence, the uniquely rational credence that I should have for each belief on that list is between .8 and .9, and those are the credences that I do have. Unbeknownst to me, there is widespread disagreement about every belief on that list. I start with the first belief on the list: women shouldn't be discriminated against. The peer finder assesses the information and returns a red light. Remember this means that you are in a peer disagreement because the conditions listed under (CPPD) are met, and with the peer finder 2.0 these conditions can easily be met. Thus, just



like that, with a flash of a red light, my knowledge that women shouldn't be discriminated against is undermined. Though I am disappointed, I press on. I keep going down the list of my dearly held beliefs: racism is morally impermissible, rape is morally impermissible, slavery is morally wrong, Plato's Republic is the best piece of philosophy ever written, and so on. Each time, I get a red light.

Before I used the machine, I had knowledge of several important claims. It's not that I never knew these claims and once I used the machine I realized that I never really had knowledge to begin with. Rather, in fact I had knowledge of all the claims on that list before I used the peer finder because I had strong non-psychological evidence for my beliefs (plus the other conditions for knowledge). However, after I saw a few red lights, I no longer had knowledge of any of those claims. The red light, a psychological piece of evidence that informs me of the peer disagreement, undermines my knowledge by defeating my strong non-psychological evidence.

Let us also suppose that at the same time, my next door neighbor was doing the same thing. His list is virtually identical to my list of beliefs, except he doesn't believe the claims on his list. Rather, for morally questionable reasons, he thinks that beliefs like racism is morally wrong, women shouldn't be discriminated against, slavery is morally wrong, and so on, are beliefs that no one can be justified in believing in our day and age. Furthermore, he thinks that because we can't have knowledge about these claims, it is up to us to act in any way we want. My next door neighbor has no evidence for his position. In fact, he has many defeaters against his position.

Still, he inputs the same beliefs in the peer finder machine, and he is pleased to see the red light turning on over and over. The peer finder has confirmed his position that currently the arguments from the opposing side are not sufficient to move someone from mere belief to knowledge because their knowledge would be undermined by the presence of peer disagreement. All the arguments in the world are not enough to establish or justify the truth of the claims on the list. The red light makes it such that one should either suspend judgment or converge on beliefs like racism is morally wrong.

My next-door neighbor uses the results of the peer finder to his advantage. Knowledge can sometimes regulate and restrict our actions, especially knowledge about what one ought to do or how one ought to live. But given the red lights from the peer finder, any claim to knowledge is undermined, at least to the point where we no longer know whether discriminating against women is morally wrong. Thus, knowledge can't guide or instruct our actions. Moreover, we cannot rationally argue against others that being racist is morally wrong because we do not know that being racist is morally wrong, and any argument that has the conclusion that racism is morally wrong will be undermined by a flashing red light. For my next-door neighbor and others like him, this is a welcome result.

Things get worse from here. My next door neighbor, who happens to be a mad scientist, engineers a pill that does the following: consider the noetic structure of two epistemic peers who disagree about whether P. Sally believes P, and John, Sally's epistemic peer with respect to P, believes not-P. Both Sally and John are exposed to the same evidence, they both have similar background assumptions, they both have similar cognitive abilities, and so on. The difference in this situation is that Sally concluded P after looking at the evidence, and P is based on Sally's assessment of the total evidence. However, John concluded not-P after looking at the evidence, and not-P is based on John's assessment of the total evidence. Sally's noetic structure includes the evidence that she is exposed to, her assessment of the evidence, and the fact that she believes P based on her assessment of the total evidence. The same goes for John, except with not-P. The pill that my next door neighbor engineered makes it the case that if John takes it, then John's noetic structure changes into Sally's noetic structure. In other words, it makes it such that John's overall assessment of the evidence leads him to believe P. This pill basically turns John's noetic structure into Sally's noetic

structure, which would cause the peer disagreement between them to dissipate. Moreover, this pill makes it such that John has no idea this has happened.

My next-door neighbor produces millions of these pills, and makes sure that all those who believe the things that I believe take the pill, which causes them to take on the noetic structure of a peer that disagrees with them. All this happens without anyone knowing what happened. And just like that, my next door neighbor now has psychological evidence *in favor* of his position. The psychological evidence consists in the fact that there is now a consensus about the fact that rape is not morally wrong, and so on. With a few flashes of a red light, my next-door neighbor gained strong evidence for epistemic agnosticism about his position. By making people who disagree with him eat a pill, my next-door neighbor gained psychological evidence for his morally horrendous position.<sup>68</sup>

Allowing peer finder 2.0 to function in accordance with the skepticism about moral peers leads to very peculiar and counterintuitive results about moral knowledge. For instance, it is counterintuitive for our moral knowledge to depend on facts about the number of individuals on each side of the debate. Moral knowledge should not depend on casting a vote for instance. But why should we think that these peculiar results are a problem? Doesn't quantum mechanics, for example, lead to all sorts of peculiar results? Some interpretations of certain claims made by quantum mechanics seem to lead to peculiar results. I agree that some ways of understanding particular features of quantum mechanics can lead to peculiar results.<sup>69</sup> However, these peculiarities in quantum mechanics are not seen as problematic because *given our total evidence*, we should expect these sorts of peculiarities. Given our total evidence, it is plausible to hold that at the micro or quantum level things behave drastically differently than things behave at the macro level. The same does not apply for these peculiarities about our moral knowledge. Given our total evidence, it is not plausible to think that casting a vote can undermine your knowledge or justification in the claim that women should not be discriminated against. Thus, these peculiarities, unlike the peculiarities we find in quantum mechanics, are genuine problems.

The peer finder thought experiment is a thought experiment that is far removed from the actual world. Still, it does its job, and it does it well. It shows exactly how peculiar it would be if we accepted skepticism about moral peers. It is quite peculiar that a few flashes of a red light can undermine my knowledge, and in turn provide justification for the views of my next door neighbor. Add a scientifically engineered pill, and my next door neighbor's epistemic position is bumped up even higher. Given our total evidence about moral knowledge, we have no reason to think that these peculiarities are not real problems.

The source of these peculiar results is the skepticism about moral peers—namely, the claim that although there might be epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors about controversial moral issues, we cannot know or be justified or be epistemically rational in believing that there are any epistemic inferiors, peers, or superiors about controversial moral issues. The skepticism about moral peers makes it the case that very weak psychological evidence can undermine one's knowledge because the skepticism about moral peers makes epistemic credentials irrelevant. In a dispute about a controversial moral belief P, everyone is automatically an epistemic peer in the sense that we have no reason to think that anyone is better at tracking truth than anyone else. Thus, the peer finder 2.0 just needs to find a sufficiently large group of individuals who disagree with P. That's quite easy to

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<sup>68</sup> This last claim raises all sorts of questions about the nature of justification. If the history of my belief is irrelevant to the justification of that belief, then it should follow that after consuming the pills, those who agree with me can legitimately be my epistemic peers and superiors because what matters is the evidence they have in the current time slice that the peer finder finds them in.

<sup>69</sup> A good example is superposition. However, see Albert (2000), chapter 1, for a sensible and non-peculiar interpretation of superposition.

do. These peculiar results show that the skepticism about moral peers is dubious. Consequently, the Moorean-shift is strengthened.

## Ch.3 - The Argument from Local Moral Disagreement

### Introduction

The argument from local moral disagreement begins with the observation that there are local disagreements about our moral beliefs. By local disagreements, I mean disagreements between you and those who are sufficiently close to you. Typically, these are individuals such as your family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. I argue that to overcome this argument, one must actually do something. You can either increase your reasons for thinking that your epistemic equal is mistaken through research or you can significantly improve your cognitive abilities in a way that is relevant to the disputed claim. It turns out that it is easier for the novice disagreeing with another novice, as opposed to the expert disagreeing with another expert, to escape the argument from local moral disagreement because the novice must do less epistemic work than the expert. Thus, the argument from local moral disagreement is a more pressing problem for the expert than it is for the novice.

### Filtering Conditions

Disagreement is everywhere. For virtually any of your beliefs there is someone out there who believes otherwise, even for those beliefs that we take for granted. For instance, there are people who believe that hell is on Saturn or believe in Unger-type skepticism, the type of skepticism that claims that we do not exist.<sup>70</sup> What is the epistemically rational response to these disagreements?

With respect to some disagreements, we know enough about the disagreement such that we can provide specific reasons to prefer our position over the position of our dissenter. For example, many of us know enough high school science to be able to refute those who disagree with us about whether the earth is flat. However, given that there are so many disagreements out there, we cannot investigate all of them and provide specific reasons to favor our position. As such, it would be helpful to adopt general *filtering conditions* that will sort out the disagreements that we should take seriously from the disagreements that we should not take seriously.<sup>71</sup> Disagreements that we do not take seriously are those disagreements that it is permissible for us, from the epistemic point of view, to ignore. In other words, some disagreements confront us with a *prima facie* reason against our currently held beliefs, and others do not. The ones that do, we take seriously, and the ones that do not, we do not take seriously. Filtering conditions will help us sort out these disagreements. Think of filtering conditions as gatekeepers. Imagine a gate with all the disagreements on the other side. The disagreements that we should take seriously are the ones that go through the gate, but the disagreements that we should not take seriously do not go through the gate. There are many filtering conditions that would be helpful, but I will only list four here.

The first filtering condition is *going against the consensus of the experts*. There is consensus among the scientific experts that the earth is not flat or that hell is not on Saturn. This first filtering condition is both plausible on its face, and it will do a good job of sorting out the disagreements that we should take seriously from the disagreements that we should not take seriously. Scientific experts are those who are very good at tracking the relevant scientific truths. If most of them disagree that the earth is flat, then we have good reasons for dismissing the claim that the earth is flat. However, it is likely that those who believe that the earth is flat will disagree about who the experts are.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps

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<sup>70</sup> See Unger (1979)

<sup>71</sup> See Decker, J. & Groll, D. (2013).

<sup>72</sup> Decker & Groll (2013), pp. 146-156, make this point.

they think that the people in power pay the experts to say that the earth is not flat for some reason. Disagreements about who the experts are raise thorny issues that I will not be able to settle in this chapter. However, one thing I will say is that there are perhaps higher-order experts, experts about who the experts are. Perhaps these are respectable institutions such as the university and peer reviewed journals. These institutions can help us figure out who the experts are in some relevant field. These kinds of considerations provide reasons against those who disagree about who the experts are, at least in this specific disagreement about whether the earth is flat. Of course, one can also disagree about the higher-order experts, and this is an issue that I cannot settle here.

The second filtering condition is *not being conscientious*. This condition does not allow disagreements where people are capriciously or unreflectively disagreeing to enter through the gate. That is, we do not take such disagreements seriously. The third filtering condition is *making an obvious logical error*. Suppose a group of your intelligent friends present an interesting argument for P that has the form: if P, then Q; Q; therefore, P. You recognize the *obvious* fallacious reasoning, but your friends do not.

So far, we have three filtering conditions: going against the consensus of the experts, not being conscientious, and making an obvious logical error. These filtering conditions will prevent a host of disagreements from going through the gate. They also seem *prima facie* plausible. However, they will not prevent Unger-type skepticism from entering through the gate. If you recall, Unger-type skepticism says that we do not exist. With respect to these types of philosophical issues, it is not clear whether there are genuine experts. Moreover, Unger is a conscientious thinker, and he is not obviously making any logical errors. The three filtering conditions will allow Unger-type skepticism to go through the gate. That is, they will allow the type of disagreements where there is a tiny minority, but they are intelligent and conscientious thinkers. But Unger-type skepticism, and other disagreements like it, seem to be the type of disagreements that we should not take very seriously.<sup>73</sup> For this reason, I will introduce the fourth and last filtering condition.

The fourth filtering condition is that *numbers matter*.<sup>74</sup> Numbers at least matter in specific circumstances. For example, in a circumstance where the majority is merely parroting the view of one person, numbers do not matter. Suppose you were at a Super Bowl party, and there is a disagreement between you and your friend about when the game will start. You think it starts at 1pm, but he thinks it starts at 2pm. There are also five other people who agree with your friend that the game starts at 2pm. However, let us suppose that the only reason these other five people agree with your friend is because they formed the belief that the game starts at 2pm solely because of what your friend told them. In this situation, numbers would not matter. By contrast, in a situation where your dissenters are not merely parroting someone else, numbers will likely matter. For instance, suppose you and your friend disagree about the answer to a complicated mathematical equation. You then find out that there are five other people who have also worked out the equation on their own and came up with the same answer as your friend. If so, then the fact that there are six dissenters against you is epistemically relevant. If you also found out that there are five other people who have also worked out the equation on their own and came up with the same answer that you came up with, then that too would be epistemically relevant. In the former situation (before finding out the five people on your side), you have good reasons to accept the answer that your friend

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<sup>73</sup> Shouldn't we allow minority views to change things? Yes, I think so. But here we are interested in general principles that will help us to focus on particular types of disagreements that we should take seriously. It is difficult to say how exactly a minority view becomes influential and important and later becomes a majority view, and I don't have anything illuminating to say about it here.

<sup>74</sup> See Lackey (2013) for an argument for why numbers matter.

arrived at. In the latter situation (after finding out about the five people on your side), you should suspend judgment.

Does it matter whether there is a fifty-fifty split between those who disagree with you and those who agree with you? What if there were four people on your side, and five people on the side of the dissenter? Would it matter? Maybe, but if the numbers are high enough, say 40 on your side and 41 on his side, then the small difference is not epistemically relevant. It is important to keep this in mind for when we discuss widespread moral disagreements below.

These four filtering conditions often work together. Some of them are more fundamental or do more work than the others. For example, the filtering condition of not being conscientiousness does more work than the filtering condition that says numbers matter. There are many cases of widespread disagreements where the individuals involved in the disagreement are not being conscientiousness, and hence we should not take the disagreement seriously.

Now that I have laid out the four filtering conditions, what types of disagreements are we left with? We will be left with many political, moral, aesthetic, and philosophical disagreements. However, for the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on moral disagreements that make it through the gate. I will call these moral disagreements, *Widespread Moral Disagreements* (WMDs). Here are some plausible candidates of WMDs: abortion, capital punishment, animal rights, how much one should do to help the needy, human genetic enhancement, cloning, embryonic cell research.

## The Argument from Widespread Moral Disagreement

Before proceeding, it is important to point out that the argument from widespread moral disagreement that we will discuss below assumes a specific meta-ethical theory: moral realism.<sup>75</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, moral realism consists of the following three claims:

- (1) Moral claims have a truth-value.
- (2) There are true moral claims.
- (3) The truth-value of moral claims is independent of (finite) minds.

If all moral claims are false, then we cannot have moral knowledge (assuming that a necessary condition of knowledge is truth). If moral disagreements are more like disagreements about whether chocolate ice-cream is better than vanilla ice-cream, then I do not think we should take moral disagreements seriously. From here on out, I will assume moral realism in the background. The argument from widespread moral disagreement aims to undermine our moral knowledge by providing a defeater for our justification. The argument from widespread moral disagreement is compatible with there being true moral claims, but we might not know what these true moral claims are, at least the ones that are widely disputed in the sense that I will be talking about below.

The argument from widespread moral disagreement claims that widespread moral disagreements about some moral claim undermines our moral knowledge about that claim. Here is a general sketch of the argument. Below I will distinguish between two specific versions of this general argument, so keep that in mind.

- (P1) In the face of a widespread moral disagreement about x, we have no reason to think that there is no *epistemic symmetry* between the rival parties who disagree about x.
- (P2) If we have no reason to think that there is no *epistemic symmetry* between these parties, then we do not know whether x.

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<sup>75</sup> See Enoch (2011) for a defense of robust moral realism.

(C) Therefore, we do not know whether x.

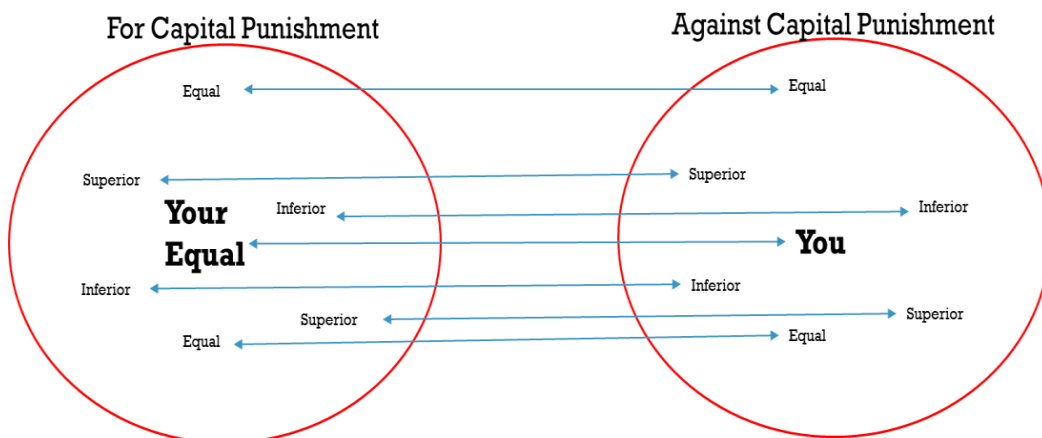
The sorts of things that will replace the variable x, are propositions of the form: abortion is morally permissible, or capital punishment is morally permissible, and so on. The key notion in this argument is the notion of epistemic symmetry. For heuristic reasons, I will first talk about epistemic symmetry among individuals, and then extend the notion to groups. Going from the individual to the group will help the reader get a better grasp of the notion of epistemic symmetry.

In the context of disagreement, epistemic symmetry between individuals is present when you and your dissenter have good reason to think your epistemic positions are roughly on par. Consider this case for a helpful illustration:

*Mental Math:* Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It's time to pay the check, so the question we're interested in is how much we each owe. We can all see the bill total clearly, we all agree to give a 20 percent tip, and we further agree to split the whole cost evenly...I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our shares are \$43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly confident that our shares are \$45 each. How should I react, upon learning of her belief?<sup>76</sup>

In the Mental Math case, you and your friend are *epistemic equals*. Epistemic equals with respect to x are just as good at tracking truths about x. Reasons that show your friend to be your evidential and cognitive equal are also reasons for showing that your friend is your epistemic equal. For instance, we can suppose that your friend has taken the same math classes and has received the same grades that you have received, your friend has had the same number of alcoholic drinks as you, etc. If so, then you would not have a reason to prefer your answer (\$43) over your friend's answer (\$45). You cannot point to the fact that you are better at doing mental math or the fact that you had fewer alcoholic drinks than your friend or some other relevant evidential or cognitive fact. The Mental Math case is a case of epistemic symmetry between individuals. The epistemic symmetry requires you and your friend to suspend judgment about whether you or your friend arrived at the right answer.

In the context of disagreement, epistemic symmetry between two groups occurs when you have no reason to accept the position of your group over the position of the group that disagrees with your group's position. Here is a helpful toy example of epistemic symmetry between two groups, call it figure 1:



<sup>76</sup> Christensen (2007), p. 193.

In figure 1, the two red circles represent two groups that disagree with each other about whether capital punishment is morally permissible. The right group, which you belong to, takes the position that capital punishment is morally impermissible. The left group, which your dissenter belongs to, takes the position that capital punishment is not morally impermissible. In the figure, equal, superior, and inferior are short for epistemic equal, epistemic superior, and epistemic inferior. Your epistemic equal is just as reliable as you are at tracking truth. Your epistemic superior is more reliable than you are at tracking truth. Your epistemic inferior is less reliable than you are at tracking truth. Notice that someone in figure 1 is an epistemic equal, superior, or inferior *relative* to you. If we were to swap you for someone else, maybe your epistemic superior, then the figure would look different. For example, relative to your epistemic superiors, your equals will be epistemic inferiors.

In the above figure, you are supposed to compare equals from one group with equals from the other group, and likewise with inferiors and superiors. Of course, this is only a toy example. In real life, there would be millions in each group, and each group would not have perfect symmetry. However, as I have briefly pointed out earlier, although numbers matter, having a 50/50 split is not necessary for epistemic symmetry. It is not clear what the necessary ratio must be for epistemic symmetry, but one thing is certain, a 50/50 split between both groups is not necessary.

Now that I have explained or illustrated what I mean by epistemic symmetry, let us return to the argument from widespread moral disagreement. I will discuss (P2) before discussing (P1) because the former is less contentious than the latter. Recall what (P2) says:

(P2) If we have no reason to think that there is no *epistemic symmetry* between these parties, then we do not know whether x.

(P2) is straightforward. A necessary condition of knowledge is justification. If there is epistemic symmetry between the rival parties, then your reason to prefer the views of one group over the views of the rival group are equal. As such, you have a defeater against your believing x, which undermines your justification, and consequently your knowledge. For example, suppose you believe that there is an odd number of particles in the universe because of theory x. I then show you that you have equal reasons to prefer theory y which implies that there is an even number of particles in the universe. This would undermine your reasons for thinking that there is an odd number of particles in the universe. For one, I can ask you, “why do you accept the belief that there is an odd number of particles in the universe rather than the belief that there is an even number of particles in the universe?” You would not be able to produce a sufficient reason to prefer one over the other because your reasons for accepting x equally support y.

## Strong vs. Weak Moral Skepticism

Now let us turn to the more contentious premise, (P1). Recall what (P1) says:

(P1) In the face of a widespread moral disagreement about x, we have no reason to think that there is no *epistemic symmetry* between the rival parties who disagree about x.

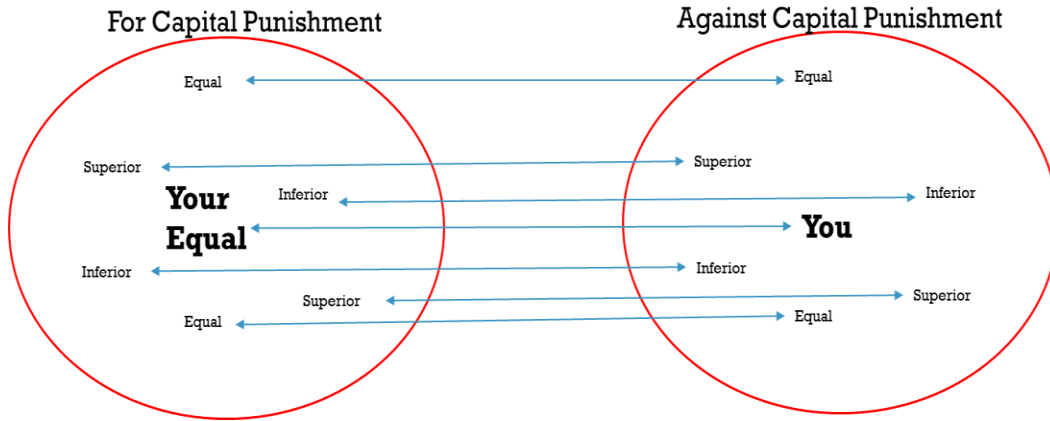
To fully understand (P1), it is important to notice the difference between the following two claims:

(1) We have no reason to think that there is no epistemic symmetry between the rival parties who disagree about x.



(2) We have good reasons to think that there is epistemic symmetry between the rival parties who disagree about x.

(P1) is making claim (1), and not claim (2). Recall figure 1:



Suppose it is a fact about the world that figure 1 is true. Figure 1 is what the world looks like from the God's-eye-view, so to speak. Now imagine two skeptics, the *strong skeptic* and the *weak skeptic*, that are attempting to undermine your moral knowledge about whether capital punishment is morally permissible. The weak skeptic accepts a slightly modified version of (P1) from the above argument:

(P1.2) In the face of a widespread moral disagreement about whether x, we have good reasons to think that there is epistemic symmetry between the rival parties who disagree about x.

The weak skeptic presents positive pieces of evidence for figure 1. Perhaps the weak skeptic interviewed people on both sides of the debate to see whether they are epistemic equals, superiors, or inferiors. This would be a monumental task. The empirical evidence that is required to show that figure 1 obtains is immense. The weak skeptic would have to interview everyone and figure out what sort of evidence these individuals have about capital punishment and see what their cognitive abilities are like. And then compare both sides to see whether there is sufficient epistemic symmetry between them.

Like the strong skeptic, the weak skeptic presents you with a defeater: your reasons for preferring your group's view over your rival group are equal. However, the weak skeptic does plenty of empirical work to show that symmetry whereas the strong skeptic merely puts the burden of proof on you to show that you are not in a situation where your reasons for preferring your group's view over your rival group's view are symmetric. I will call this, *the Weak Argument from Widespread Moral Disagreement*. This is a *weak* skeptical argument because the task of showing that (P1.2) is true is quite difficult and requires plenty of empirical work to be done. For all we know, it cannot be done in most cases of disagreement.

The strong skeptic, on the other hand, does not provide positive evidence for figure 1. Rather, the strong skeptic argues that you have no reason to think that figure 1 does not obtain. The strong skeptic uses (P1) instead of (P1.2) in the argument from widespread moral disagreement. I

will call this, *the Strong Argument from Widespread Moral Disagreement*. This is a *strong* skeptical argument because (P1) does not require a lot of work to establish.<sup>77</sup>

It is also true that you have no evidence that figure 1 does obtain. But that does not deter the strong skeptic. The strong skeptic takes an agnostic position about whether figure 1 obtains. What is important is that the strong skeptic thinks that the burden of proof is on you to provide reasons against figure 1. Unless you can show that figure 1 does not obtain, the strong skeptic concludes that you do not know whether capital punishment is morally permissible. The same, of course, applies to other widespread moral disagreements.

Why is it that we have no reason to think that there is no epistemic symmetry about whether x? In other words, why does the strong skeptic think that we cannot show that figure 1 does not obtain? To justify this move, the strong skeptic makes use of an important criterion, which I will call *the Independent Check Criterion*:

**Independent Check Criterion:** to figure out whether you or your dissenter is more reliable at tracking moral truths, you need an independent check (i.e., independent of the reasoning that led up to the dispute).<sup>78</sup>

Here is an example to help explain this criterion. Suppose there are two car mechanics, and they both propose different solutions for fixing your car.<sup>79</sup> According to the Independent Check Criterion, to figure out which mechanic is correct, we must find an independent check. In this case, it is easy to see what this independent check might be: we can follow the advice of each mechanic and see which of their recommendations fixes the problem. This would provide independent reasons to favor one solution over the other.

At this point, the strong skeptic enters, and argues that when it comes to widespread moral disagreements, we do not have an independent check to figure out whether you or your dissenter is better at tracking moral truths. It might be a fact that you are better than or worse than or just as good as your dissenter at tracking moral truth, but without an independent check, we cannot come to know that fact or have good reasons to believe that fact. The same applies to the groups. Although it might be the case that there is no epistemic symmetry among the dissenting groups, we do not have any reason to think that there is no epistemic symmetry because we have no independent check to verify whether there is or is not epistemic symmetry between the dissenting groups.

The strong skeptic provides a powerful argument for the claim that with respect to widespread moral disagreements about x, we do not have moral knowledge about x. For the purposes of this chapter, I will not provide a full response to this argument here. For a full response to this argument, see chapter 2 of this dissertation. I will briefly summarize what I say in that chapter here. I argue that the strong skeptical argument from widespread moral disagreement overgeneralizes to *past* widespread moral disagreements, cross temporal disagreements between individuals in the present, and non-identical individuals who existed in the past but no longer exist. This strong skepticism leads to a dilemma: either we reject our dearly held first-order moral beliefs, such beliefs as slavery is morally abhorrent, or reject the strong skeptical argument. I argue that given some very plausible epistemic assumptions, we should reject the strong skeptical argument.

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<sup>77</sup> For an example, see McGrath (2008).

<sup>78</sup> For formulations of Independence, see Christensen: 2009, p. 758, and Christensen: 2011, pp. 1-2. For objections against Independence, see Lackey: 2013, Kelly: 2013, and Moon: 2018. For a defense of Independence, see Christensen: forthcomingA and forthcomingB, and Matheson: 2015.

<sup>79</sup> McGrath (2008), p. 99, gives a similar example with “unique green.”

More specifically, we should reject the Independent Check Criterion because that is the source of the overgeneralization.

It is important to distinguish the argument given by the strong skeptic from the argument given by the weak skeptic. And therefore, I have spent a little bit of space briefly explaining the argument proposed by the strong skeptic. In what follows, I will no longer talk about the strong argument for widespread moral disagreement, and instead focus on the argument presented by the weak skeptic.

As it is currently stated, the argument of the weak skeptic has a serious vulnerability: it is next to impossible to show that widespread moral disagreements face epistemic symmetry. A widespread disagreement involves many individuals. It is unlikely that the overall epistemic credentials of those on both sides of the disagreement are equal. Moreover, it is next to impossible to figure out and weigh the epistemic credentials of those on both sides of the disagreement. This vulnerability is not decisive, but it dramatically diminishes the argument given by the weak skeptic. In what follows, I will present an argument from widespread moral disagreement, in the same spirit as the one presented by the weak skeptic, but one that does not fall prey to the above vulnerability. I call this argument, *the Argument from Local Moral Disagreement*.

## The Argument from Local Moral Disagreement

I will begin by giving a general sketch of the argument from local moral disagreement. This argument turns on the distinction between *local disagreements* and *non-local disagreements*. By local disagreements, I mean disagreements between you and those who are sufficiently close to you. Typically, these are individuals such as your family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. In the distant past, encountering someone who disagrees with you about important issues was not very common. Typically, a society from the distant past consisted of individuals with very similar religious and ethnic backgrounds. Outsiders were often looked at with great suspicion. Traveling was difficult and costly. Communication between different cultures was quite sparse. For these and similar reasons, most individuals from the distant past did not encounter local disagreement. Today, this is generally not the case. In our day, having different views or being from a different culture or ethnic background is not an obstacle to friendship. Whether it is in school or at work, we often encounter individuals who have different religious, political, and moral views. This is an inevitable result of being in a diverse culture. Most of us have family members, friends, or co-workers who disagree with us about many of our moral beliefs. Usually, our family members, friends, or co-workers, are individuals we went to school with or individuals whom we talk to about these issues more than anyone else. Our inner circle of friends and family members are typically individuals who are our intellectual equals. Of course, this is not always the case, but many of us have at least a few friends or family members in our inner circle who are just as intelligent and thoughtful as we are. This is explained by the fact that we tend to have friends or family members who have had a similar background and education.

Here is a helpful illustration of the distinction between local and non-local disagreements, call it figure 2:

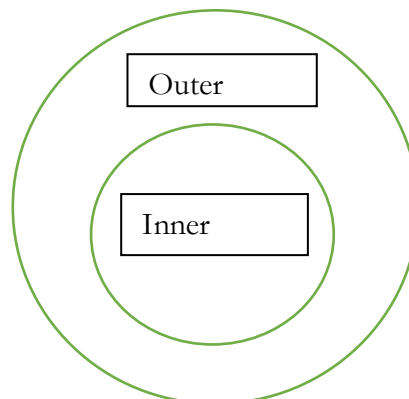


Figure 2 has two circles, an inner circle, and an outer circle. The inner circle consists of your friends, family members, colleagues, neighbors, and other individuals that you know closely. The outer circle consists of people you either do not specifically know or you are only acquaintances with. For example, you might know that there are 300 people in your church, and maybe you have seen most of them at church, but you have not really talked to them. These individuals would belong to your outer circle. Of course, there will be situations in which someone's family members and colleagues are in the outer circle rather than the inner circle, and that is fine. In those situations, perhaps you know very little about those family members or colleagues. Technically, what belongs in the inner circle are those individuals that you have a sufficiently close relationship with. These are individuals that you have a history with, you have a decent idea about their level of intelligences, their level of thoughtfulness, and so on. For the sake of simplicity, I will assume that family members, friends, and colleagues are among those in your inner circle.

Local disagreements are disagreements among those in your inner circle, and non-local disagreements are disagreements among those in your outer circle. The argument from local moral disagreement uses the notion of widespread moral disagreement that we have looked at earlier. Recall that widespread moral disagreements are those disagreements that pass through the gate, where the gatekeepers are the following four filtering conditions: going against the consensus of the experts, not being conscientious, making an obvious logical error, and numbers matter. There are widespread moral disagreements within both our outer and inner circles. The argument from local disagreement focuses on those widespread moral disagreements between us and those dissenters who are part of our inner circle. For ease of reference, I will call these disagreements, *Widespread Local Moral Disagreements* (WLMD) or *Local Moral Disagreements* for short.

With these distinctions in mind, we can now state the argument from local moral disagreement:

- (P1\*) In the face of a widespread *local* moral disagreement about x, we have good reasons to think that there is epistemic symmetry between rival parties who disagree about x.
- (P2\*) If we have good reasons to think that there is epistemic symmetry between these parties, then we do not know whether x.
- (C\*) Therefore, we do not know whether x.

The argument from local moral disagreement is identical to the weak argument from widespread moral disagreement, except the argument is about widespread *local* moral disagreements. Widespread local moral disagreements are a subset of widespread moral disagreements because the latter includes both local and non-local widespread moral disagreements. We should prefer the argument from local moral disagreement over the weak argument for widespread moral disagreement because the latter, unlike the former, faces the serious vulnerability that I pointed out above. Namely, it would be next to impossible to provide the necessary empirical evidence to show that there is epistemic symmetry between your group and the dissenting group (recall figure 1 from above).

The weak argument from widespread moral disagreement requires evidence that shows epistemic symmetry between the dissenters in our inner circle and outer circle. Finding empirical evidence that shows epistemic symmetry between the dissenters in our outer circle would be a monumental task. Not so with showing epistemic symmetry between the dissenters in our inner circle. For one, the number of dissenters in our inner circle is much smaller than the number of dissenters in our outer circle. Moreover, dissenters in our inner circle, by definition, are those whom

we are well acquainted with, so it would be much easier to figure out whether they are our epistemic equal, superior, or inferior.<sup>80</sup>

The severity of the local problem depends on your situation. Some individuals face more local moral disagreements than others. However, most of us are faced with some local moral disagreements, and as such, they should be taken seriously.

## Objections

Kieran Setiya argues that although epistemic symmetry might undermine our knowledge in cases of nonmoral disagreements, it is implausible to think it undermines our knowledge in cases of moral disagreement.<sup>81</sup> His argument is based on meeting a stranger who belongs to a homogeneous community that is just as intelligent and well-informed about non-ethical facts as your homogeneous community, but the stranger's beliefs and his community's beliefs about practical reason are "shocking" (e.g. we should be utterly selfish).<sup>82</sup> The upshot of this example is that it seems implausible to hold that one is required to suspend judgement when one encounters this disagreement.

There are a few problems with Setiya's argument here. First, it is unclear whether the stranger in the Setiya case is your epistemic equal because the disagreement is a fundamental disagreement.<sup>83</sup> A disagreement this deep raises doubts about whether the dissenter is your epistemic equal because first-order moral disagreements are inextricably tied to fundamental issues about practical reason and moral theory. If someone deeply disagrees with you about these fundamental issues, then it is difficult to find common ground to establish that your dissenter is your epistemic equal about these first-order moral issues.

The stranger, according to Setiya's own description, is a "moral monster" because his disagreement is about fundamental issues, issues that in our current society are not controversial.<sup>84</sup> This aspect of the case is doing much of the work. For consider the same case except the stranger doesn't disagree about fundamental moral issues. Rather, the stranger disagrees about whether capital punishment is permissible. With this slight alteration, the case instantly loses its force. The argument from local moral disagreement is about non-fundamental moral disagreements such as abortion, capital punishment, animal rights, and the like. These are actual widespread disagreements that most of us face often. Although the stranger case might show that we are not required to suspend judgment in the face of disagreements about fundamental moral issues, the case does not show that we are not required to suspend judgment in the face of moral disagreements about nonfundamental issues.

Adam Elga makes a distinction between cases of *messy real-world disagreements* and cases of *clean, pure disagreements*. He explains the difference in the following way:

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<sup>80</sup> There are two strategies here. First, we can simply ignore those that are in our outer circle because we have no evidence that there is epistemic symmetry among them. Second, we apply the strong argument from widespread moral disagreement to only the dissenters in our outer circle but apply the argument from local disagreement to the dissenters in our inner circle.

<sup>81</sup> Some have interpreted Setiya differently. They read Setiya as accepting the view that epistemic symmetry does not undermine our knowledge in cases of both nonmoral and moral disagreements. I do not interpret Setiya this way, and for a defense of my interpretation, see Rowland (2017), endnote 31, on p. 12.

<sup>82</sup> Setiya (2012), pp. 19-20.

<sup>83</sup> See Vavova (2014), pp. 304-305, and Rowland (2017), pp. 5-6, for this type of response.

<sup>84</sup> Setiya (2012), p. 20.

The difference is that in the clean cases one is in a position to count one's associates as peers *based on reasoning that is independent of the disputed issue*. But in the messy real-world cases, one is rarely in a position to do so. That is because in the messy cases, one's reasoning about the disputed issue is tangled up with one's reasoning about many other matters. As a result, in real-world cases one tends not to count one's dissenting associates---however smart and well-informed---as epistemic peers.<sup>85</sup>

An example of a clean disagreement is the Mental Math case discussed earlier. An example of a messy real-world disagreement are disagreements about abortion, capital punishment, and the like.

Elga's claim that one tends not to count one's dissenter in a messy real-world disagreement as an epistemic equal, or epistemic peer to use Elga's terminology, is implausible. For one, if the claim is merely descriptive, then it seems empirically implausible. I can report that I count many people in my inner circle as my epistemic equals about some messy real-world disagreements. The same is true of many friends I know. The normative version of the claim, i.e., one *should not* count one's dissenter in a messy real-world disagreement as an epistemic equal, is also implausible. Assuming that Elga is correct about the claim that we need a reason independent of the dispute to count one's dissenter as an epistemic equal, there are plenty of *general* considerations that are independent of messy real-world disagreements that can suggest that our dissenter is our epistemic equal.<sup>86</sup>

The general considerations consist of at least two things: (1) meeting a certain threshold of cognitive ability, and (2) being familiar with the same evidence you are familiar with. What determines the threshold depends on the specific content of the disagreement. The best way to grasp these notions is by looking at examples. Suppose you are a genius, and your cognitive ability is unmatched. You have a dispute with your college roommate about whether one should pull the switch in a standard trolley case. Your college roommate, on the other hand, is not a genius, but he is intellectually competent. In this case, your superior cognitive abilities do not give you an advantage in assessing the trolley case. Your college roommate does not need to be a genius to properly assess the trolley case. Increasing your roommate's cognitive abilities would not improve your roommate's ability at properly assessing the trolley case. As such, although your cognitive abilities are superior, that fact is epistemically irrelevant in this specific case.

As for the evidential requirement, it would be quite easy for your roommate to be familiar with the same evidence you are familiar with. Your roommate can meet this condition if she understands the trolley case the same way you do. This can be established by carefully reading the case and talking with each other about it. Perhaps you are familiar with some of the literature on the trolley case. If so, then if your friend is also familiar with this literature in a similar manner as you are familiar with it, then this should satisfy the evidential requirement.

If the dissenters in your inner circle meet these two general considerations (and the disagreement in question bypasses the four filtering conditions), then that should be strong evidence that they are your epistemic equals.

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<sup>85</sup> Elga (2007), p. 492.

<sup>86</sup> See Lackey (2014), pp. 306-309 for another criticism. Lackey rejects Elga's view because in some situations it does not require sexists, racists, and anti-Semites to revise their beliefs in the face of peer disagreement if they are confident in their abilities and intelligence.

## Epistemic Advice

The epistemologist should, among other things, provide advice to the individuals who are faced with local disagreements. For the advice to be genuine and helpful, the advice must be of a certain type. It must be advice about what an agent ought to believe or accept, from the epistemic point of view, *given what the agent has access to*.

Suppose I am faced with a local disagreement about whether capital punishment is morally permissible. I believe that capital punishment is morally permissible, and my friend, who is my cognitive and evidential equal, believes that capital punishment is morally impermissible. What should I epistemically believe or accept in this situation? An epistemologist might give me the following advice: whoever *in fact* reasoned correctly ought to be steadfast.<sup>87</sup> This advice is not helpful because in my current situation, I do not have *access* to that fact. If anything, my current evidence—the evidence that I currently have access to—suggests that it is equally likely that my friend also reasoned correctly. Given my epistemic predicament, I do not know which one of us reasoned correctly. Thus, this advice is useless to me.

I grant that there is a sense in which whoever reasoned correctly ought to be steadfast. However, the “ought” in question is not *the ought of advice*. What kind of ought is it then? It is likely the objective ought or the ought from the God’s eye view. Or maybe it is the ought that picks out what one ought to believe or accept *all things considered*. As readers, this ought seems natural because we *stipulate* the facts of the case, and as such know all the facts. However, the individuals in the case do not have access to all the facts. And it is an equally important question to ask: what ought these individuals believe or accept, given the facts that they have access to? This question needs an answer just as much as the following question: what ought the individual believe or accept all things considered, i.e., given all the accessible and non-accessible facts? A correct answer to the former question would result in genuine and helpful advice for the individuals facing a local disagreement. A correct answer to the latter question should be of interest too, but I do not think it will result in genuine and helpful advice. Here I am seeking an answer to the former question. I am seeking advice. More specifically, I am seeking a general strategy that an individual facing a local moral disagreement can use to avoid the sting of skepticism.

Advice must be specifically tailored to accommodate different types of disagreements. Advice for individuals facing a local moral disagreement, which is the main concern of this part of the chapter, would be slightly different than advice for those facing other types of local disagreements. The same is true for cases of disagreement between novices—those with meager evidence and a very short track record—and experts. Advice for a local disagreement between experts will be relevantly different than advice for a local disagreement between novices. Although advice should be tailored for different types of disagreements, on my view, there is a general structure that they all share:

**The General Structure of Advice:** If you are facing a local disagreement about whether P, then you ought to undergo a rational investigation, which has the following aim: (1) search for more evidence about whether P, (2) search for an epistemically rational explanation of whether you or your equal made a mistake, and (3) improve your cognitive abilities so that you can better assess the evidence for whether P.

Put concisely, when you are facing a local disagreement, you ought to search for ways to settle the matter. (3) will only be helpful in situations where you and your dissenter’s cognitive abilities have

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<sup>87</sup> See Kelly (2005) for this view.

not reached the relevant threshold and improving one's cognitive abilities is epistemically relevant in the dispute. Notice how this general advice does not advocate a search for whether you, and you alone, are correct. If it were to say that, then the advice would likely result in bias or a form of unjustified rationalization—where one finds arbitrary “evidence” that supports her position in an *ad hoc* way.

When someone is in a local disagreement, one ought to follow this general advice, i.e., one ought to follow a *diachronic duty of epistemic improvement*. That is, a duty that requires a certain amount of time to accomplish.<sup>88</sup> By contrast, a synchronic duty is a duty that one acts on and satisfies at a particular time. Perhaps in the face of a local moral disagreement, I have the synchronic duty, *right after* I encounter the disagreement, to withhold judgment, or perhaps I only have the synchronic duty to continue to hold my view, but to be open to revision. Here, I am not going to take a stand between these two options. Much has been said about what is epistemically required of you right after you initially encounter local disagreements. Here I want to say something about what is required of you after you act on your synchronic duty. What is required of you after following your initial synchronic duty is following your diachronic duty of epistemic improvement. In what follows, I will use “diachronic duty” as a shorthand for “diachronic duty of epistemic improvement.”

This advice is obviously good advice in situations like the Mental Math case. After doing the calculation, I come up with the answer that each one of us should pay \$4, but my friend, who is my equal, comes up with the answer that each one of us should pay \$45. What should I epistemically believe or accept in this situation? In this case, it seems obvious that I ought to act on a diachronic duty. Let us suppose that I ought to first withhold judgment about the correct answer (this would be following my synchronic duty), and *then* undergo an investigation to figure out the correct answer (follow my diachronic duty). This can be easily done by doing the math again or using the calculator on one's phone. The fruits of this investigation would be to settle this local disagreement.

Remember that numbers matter, but in widespread non-local disagreements they matter less, because there could be millions of dissenters on each side of the dispute. So, there might be 9 million on one side and 9.7 million on the other side of the dispute. However, it seems plausible to think that the 0.7 million difference is not epistemically relevant. Whereas with local disagreements, there might be 4 on one side of the dispute and 5 on the other side of the dispute. It might be the case that the difference of 1 is not epistemically relevant or at least not relevant enough to suggest that you are not required to suspend judgment if you are part of the side with 5 individuals. Whereas if one individual switches to the other side, and we go from 4-to-5 to 3-to-6, this might be epistemically relevant. Of course, much will depend on the nature of the switch and whether the individual that switched is an epistemic equal, superior, or inferior. And whether the switch was done for epistemic reasons (as opposed to non-epistemic reasons, e.g., to get along with friends). This shows that in many (though not all) local disagreements, the situation is delicate, and the epistemic symmetry can be dissolved if one or a few individuals genuinely change their minds for epistemic reasons.

Another thing that makes this issue delicate are the specific individuals that compose my inner circle. For example, if my inner circle agrees about whether abortion is morally permissible, but they are split about whether capital punishment is morally permissible, then this will influence my epistemic duties. It will influence it because my epistemic duties will require me to pursue the

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<sup>88</sup> This general advice solves a particular problem that arises from a specific type of local disagreement. This is the problem of spinelessness. Elga states the problem in the following way: “...the problem that an egalitarian view on how to respond to disagreement will recommend suspension of judgment on virtually all controversial issues” (Elga (2007), p. 492). On my view, in cases of local disagreement undergoing the investigation described by the general advice can dissolve the local disagreement. Thus, following one's diachronic duty helps one to avoid the problem of spinelessness.



general advice with respect to capital punishment but not with respect to the permissibility of abortion. At first glance, this might seem to be a worrisome consequence. However, my concern here is conditional: *given* that you have this or that inner circle, what should you epistemically do in response to widespread disagreements among the individuals in your inner circle? Perhaps there are other epistemic norms that speak to what kind of inner circle we should have in the first place. In this chapter, I am not going to address this issue.

## The Novice

Following the general advice is going to have different results for a novice and an expert. For the novice—someone who has meager evidence and a short track record—the general advice is typically going to produce good results. A typical person does not spend a great deal of time engaging in technical philosophical works on controversial moral topics. They might be familiar with some general reasons that one might offer for a controversial moral topic. For example, Mike and Sally—who happen to be novices about the abortion debate—are familiar with some of the general reasons given for each side of the debate. Mike and Sally are both familiar with the following two reasons for and against the moral permissibility of abortion: without having easy and safe abortions, women's freedom in society can be greatly marginalized, and mid-to-late term abortion kills a human being. Moreover, they take each other to be equally competent in assessing the evidence. That is, they take each other to be cognitive equals. Nonetheless, Jones and Sally disagree about whether abortion is permissible. This would be a case of a local moral disagreement between novices.

Following one's diachronic duty does not have to consist only in looking for arguments for or against one's position. It can also consist in finding objections to current arguments for or against one's position. It can also include one's own contribution to the debate. Perhaps you can come up with your own objection or your own positive argument for either view. Another possibility is that one can come up with a genuine explanation that pinpoints why the two disagree. This last possibility is an important one. Perhaps moral disagreements are ultimately explained by the fact that people disagree about foundational metaphysical views and the implications of those views. Pursuing this in full would take us a bit off course, so I want to merely flag it and move on.

What Mike and Sally should do in this case is this: either withhold judgment about whether abortion is permissible or continue to hold their views but be open to revising them, and then undergo a search for more evidence about whether abortion is permissible. In other words, when Mike and Sally are faced with this local moral disagreement, they ought to act on a diachronic duty the aim of which is to gain more evidence or put one in a better epistemic situation (i.e., develop better cognitive skills) to assess the evidence. A side effect of this aim is that one would typically get out of a local disagreement if the aim is successfully accomplished. This diachronic duty is an epistemic good because following such a duty in the face of local disagreement would help one in escaping from a skeptical predicament and hopefully falling into either justified true belief or knowledge.

What if Sally had to advise someone about whether to get an abortion? What should Sally tell her friend? Here I want to distinguish between what you ought to do from *the epistemic point of view*, and what you ought to do from *the moral point of view*. Typically, we associate what we ought to *believe* or *accept* from the epistemic point of view, and not what we ought to *do* from the epistemic point of view. If we are going to take *epistemic* advice seriously, then we should be open to this important distinction. Just as there are epistemic norms that govern our beliefs or other cognitive states, there are epistemic norms that govern how we should improve our intellectual life and how we should gather information. In this chapter, I am not giving *moral* advice, but *epistemic* advice. As

such, the advice I do give will not help Sally if Sally has to advise someone about whether to get an abortion.

Let us suppose that Sally—after encountering the local moral disagreement with Mike—follows her diachronic duty and begins to do some research on the topic. She comes across Judith Jarvis Thomson’s famous paper, “A Defense of Abortion.” She reads the paper very carefully and concludes that even if abortion is the killing of a human person, it can sometimes be justified. Further, let us suppose that Mike, instead of following his diachronic duty, decides to do something else: maybe watch some television, exercise, follow another diachronic duty (e.g., one about whether capital punishment is permissible), and so on. If so, then by following her diachronic duty, in an epistemically unobjectionable way (i.e., following the duty not merely for the sake of proving Mike is wrong, but for the sake of finding out whether Mike or Sally are wrong), Sally would have brought it about that she is no longer in a local moral disagreement with Mike.

What if Mike also followed his diachronic duty? Moreover, let us suppose that he too came across Judith Jarvis Thomson’s famous paper, but concluded that Thomson’s violinist example is weak because there are significant dissimilarities between the example and abortion. When Sally encounters Mike again, she would find herself in another local moral disagreement. Thus, by following her diachronic duty, Sally does not achieve the typical side effect of following one’s diachronic duty: namely, escaping the skeptical consequences from local moral disagreement. What happens then? Sally ought to act on another diachronic duty to either pursue more evidence or strengthen her cognitive abilities.

It is possible that Sally and Mike happen to be *epistemic saints*, which means that they always diligently follow their diachronic duty in a case of local moral disagreement. In such a situation, two outcomes are possible. First, it is possible that at some point in their investigation, Sally and Mike come to agree about whether abortion is permissible. Perhaps Mike finally reads some great paper defending the permissibility of abortion or perhaps he talks to a brilliant ethicist about the situation and after a long dialogue, he changes his mind. If this occurs, then both Sally and Mike would avoid the epistemic problem they faced from local moral disagreement. Given my anecdotal evidence, this possibility is unlikely. People typically do not change their dearly held moral beliefs, even after a long period of genuine searching for knowledge. Still, we should have faith that this is a live option because human beings are ultimately rational creatures, and they do respond to truth-conducive evidence.

The second possible outcome is that Sally and Mike continue to disagree about whether abortion is permissible, even while they continue to search for more evidence and continue to improve their cognitive abilities. In this situation, Mike and Sally would be continuously plagued by the local moral disagreement. If this happens, then Sally and Mike are *epistemically unlucky*. This is an unfortunate situation to be in, but it is a situation in which you ought to suspend judgment about whether abortion is permissible.

When it comes to local disagreements among novices, I accept the following empirical claim:

**Epistemic Saints are Rare among Novices:** In the actual world and in our present time, novices about P almost never pursue their diachronic duty rigorously in the face of local moral disagreement.

By pursuing a diachronic duty rigorously, I mean that the novice pursues the duty until they are no longer in a local disagreement. Depending on what your dissenter does, this could be accomplished with little effort. For instance, your dissenter might not follow their diachronic duty, but you successfully follow yours. On the other hand, your dissenter might continue to follow their diachronic duty even when you stop following your diachronic duty. In that situation, your dissenter

might become your epistemic superior. If so, then your epistemic predicament might become worse. However, given the empirical claim, it is unlikely for this to happen.

My evidence for this empirical claim is anecdotal. Virtually everyone I am acquainted with does not engage in an endless and genuine search for more evidence when they disagree locally with another novice. If the belief is an important belief, then they might engage in a search for more evidence, but only for a limited time. In fact, I would be surprised if empirical studies found that novices often look for more evidence when they encounter a local disagreement. Evidence in favor of this empirical claim is that novices about P typically do not have the time or resources to pursue their diachronic duty rigorously.

If you want to avoid the skeptical consequences of local moral disagreement, you must follow your diachronic duty. You must do something. This consequence of my view—that to avoid the problem of local disagreement, one must do some epistemic work—is not a weakness of the view. In fact, it is one of its strengths. Getting out of an epistemic predicament is not cheap or free. On my view, encountering a local moral disagreement results in a defeater for your belief just like any other defeater you might encounter. For example, a theist might encounter a defeater by finding out about the problem of evil. To defeat this defeater, one must epistemically do something. Likewise, when one encounters a local moral disagreement, one must do something about it. My general advice says: go and look for more evidence or work on improving your cognitive abilities. Thus, as an agent, typically it is not easy to overcome the problem of local disagreement because it involves epistemic work. And epistemic work is an arduous thing, so it is not likely that the novice will often pursue their diachronic duties.

## The Expert

So far, I have discussed the problem of local moral disagreement among *novices*—those who have meager evidence and a short track record. What about local moral disagreements among *experts*?<sup>89</sup> It is uncontroversial that there are experts and novices. What is typically controversial is not that there are experts, but *who* the experts are or whether there can be any experts about some topic. I will say more about this below, but for present purposes, let us assume that there are *moral experts*. A moral expert is not a novice about moral matters. This can amount to a familiarity with the current and past literature on the topic. Unlike Sally and Mike, a moral expert about abortion would know virtually every argument in the current literature on whether abortion is permissible.

I treat the disagreements between novices separately from the disagreements between experts because experts, unlike novices, typically have most or all the available evidence about the disputed belief. Moreover, experts about P are much more likely to be epistemic saints than novices about P. If someone is an expert, especially an academic expert, about whether capital punishment is permissible, say, she would likely pursue a search for evidence for as long as she is in academia. This complicates things because the general advice that I have given seems not to do much work for the experts.

For example, suppose Jack and Mary are experts about the abortion debate, but they disagree about whether abortion is morally permissible. In this situation, doing a little bit of research and reading Thomson's famous paper is not going to be sufficient to combat the problem of local moral disagreement that Jack and Mary face. For one, given that they are experts in this topic, they should already be familiar with Thomson's paper. Thus, my advice here is not going to be as fruitful for experts as it is for novices. My advice is more fruitful for novices because novices are typically

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<sup>89</sup> For present purposes, it is sufficient to work with an intuitive notion of expertise. For a more robust notion, see Goldman (2001).

not epistemic saints, and since by definition novices have meager evidence, they are able to pursue and find more evidence.

The moral expert, in some cases, should and can follow my general advice. However, following the general advice is going to look different. Jack and Mary, being experts on the abortion debate, can exercise their cognitive abilities and vast knowledge of the literature to come up with new objections, arguments, helpful distinctions, and so forth. This is in fact what experts typically do. By doing this, one can gain an edge, even if it is small and lasts for a short time. In some sense, the moral expert is in a worse epistemic predicament than the novice because the experts must do *original and groundbreaking work*.

Although there are many moral experts outside academia, I will focus my discussion on academic moral experts because there are interesting and specific cases in academia that will shed some light on what epistemic advice looks like in a concrete situation. For the sake of simplicity, I'm going to equate moral disagreements involving moral experts with moral disagreements involving academic moral philosophers ('academic disagreements' for short). It is no surprise that there is probably no special correlation between being an academic moral philosopher and being moral. A morally virtuous person might be an expert in the sense that they are very good at giving you action guiding advice about how you can live a moral life. That is not the kind of expertise I have in mind. Recall, the argument from widespread moral disagreement operates with a specific metaethical theory in the background: moral realism. If there are some true moral facts, as moral realism claims, then moral experts will be those people who have thought a lot about what reasons there are for the truth of this or that moral claim. Of course, there are many moral experts in this sense that are not academic moral philosophers, but for the sake of simplicity, I am going to focus on the latter. I am also going to focus on the latter because of the likely audience of this chapter.

It is important not to think of academic local disagreements in the same way that we think of the disagreement in the Mental Math case, for example. The first obvious reason is that academic local disagreements are much more complicated. They are not complicated in a way that a very long math problem is complicated. Rather, their complication has to do, in part, with the fact that there is not an obvious algorithm or procedure that one can apply and reapply (if the first application was done poorly) to arrive at the correct answer. Treating moral problems like math problems is both a bad comparison and highly unjustified. The defenders of the problem of moral disagreement seem to treat the two problems in the same way without providing any justification for why we should treat them that way.

Academic local disagreements also involve a mastery of the relevant literature and the relevant arguments on either side of the debate. It is more accurate, I think, to view academic disagreements as a complicated research project. Although there is fierce debate, a charitable way to view the disputes between moral philosophers is that they are all aiming to learn from one another and to get closer and closer to the truth. The image I have in mind is of a group of individuals in a room brainstorming. Sure, they disagree at times, but the purpose is to work as a group to achieve better results in the long run. Unlike the Mental Math case, where all the relevant information is in front of the individuals doing the math calculation, academic disagreements gain new insights and new relevant information from encountering disagreements. They pursue their diachronic duty to find new and original ways to help advance our knowledge. For example, a disagreement might expound our conceptual framework so that we can make better distinctions. This might require moral philosophers to withhold judgment at certain times when there is local disagreement or continue to hold one's view but be open to revising it. However, following one's diachronic duty in cases of academic disagreement would, at certain times, get one out of local disagreements.

Viewing academic disagreements as research projects—where everyone is brainstorming to advance truth—seems to produce interesting intuitions about the problem of local moral

disagreement. Consider an actual research project. Suppose there are ten academics in a room, and they all share the same goal: to figure out the most optimal healthcare system for the United States. Let us suppose that they all take each other to be epistemic equals about healthcare. Suppose someone from the group, Harry, says that a single-payer healthcare system is probably the most optimal healthcare system. Now suppose someone else, Betsy, disagrees with Harry. What should Harry do here from the epistemic point of view? Harry (and Betsy) should withhold their judgment or continue to hold their view but be open to revising it, and then pursue a diachronic duty to figure out why Harry thinks this, and why Betsy thinks otherwise.

It is important to pause here and point out that there are at least two ways to suspend judgment. On the one hand, one can suspend judgment by accepting or believing P and not-P are equally likely to be true. On the other hand, one can suspend judgment by not accepting or believing anything at all. On this second way of suspending judgment, which I will call *withholding judgment*, I withhold belief altogether instead of actively believing that the likelihood of P or not-P is the same. In cases where the disagreement can easily be resolved, I leave it open as to whether one ought to suspend judgment in this second way, or one should continue to hold one's view but be opened to revising it. The important thing is that after this initial requirement, you should act on a diachronic duty.

Let us return to the Betsy and Harry example. When a new objection is introduced, no one in the group should stop and make an epistemic judgment about their overall view before continuing. That is, when someone disagrees with a claim presented during the brainstorming session, one should not stop and make sure she takes an epistemic stance or revise her current epistemic stance on the overall topic. Rather, the natural thing to do is either continue to believe what she believes as a supposition or withhold judgment (as opposed to suspending judgment in the first sense discussed earlier). I do not need to be a machine and revise my beliefs every single time one of my equals in this group disagrees with me. One obvious reason for this is that the overall epistemic purpose of this group is shared by everyone, which is to find the optimal healthcare system. Given that this aim is a very complicated one, I should wait to revise my beliefs until a sufficient period has elapsed.

Suppose the group brainstorms for a few weeks and comes back with a split decision: five members think that a single-payer health system is the optimal system for the U.S., and the other five members think it should be a public option, where the government competes with private insurance. After a few weeks of continuous dialogue, each member of the group should be very familiar with and understand everyone's reasons for choosing as they did. What should Harry, who is still an advocate for a single-payer healthcare system, accept or believe after the group is done brainstorming? After a few weeks, it is possible that some people or all the people cease to be epistemic equals. Maybe their long conversations exposed that their disagreement is based on factual claims such that it prevents them from being evidential equals, and thus they are not epistemic equals.

Let us suppose that this likely result is not the case here. If the session ends with everyone taking each other to be epistemic equals, what should Harry accept? Harry should either withhold judgment or continue to hold his views but be open to revising them, and then act on a diachronic duty that at least aims at addressing the issues that were discussed in those few weeks. In other words, Harry should treat the results of the group's brainstorming session in the same way that he treated the objections and disagreements during the brainstorming session. On my view, when you are faced with a local disagreement, even if it is after a long process of searching for evidence and dialoguing with people who are equally competent, one should act on a diachronic duty.

Notice that I said, Harry can be steadfast in a qualified sense and act on a diachronic duty. The qualified sense means that Harry continues to believe as he does in that he takes his belief to be

a supposition or a proposed hypothesis. In science, a hypothesis is presented. Then a scientist or a group of scientists perform experiments that either confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis. In some cases, the experiment does not confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis. If so, then one should perform more experiments. If this continues to happen, then one should give up the hypothesis or present another one. Harry can continue to accept his view in this qualified sense, or he can withhold judgment and then act on a diachronic duty. If Harry had to make a choice because his job required him to make a choice, then perhaps other, non-epistemic, considerations can come into play here.

If one takes on a diachronic duty to pursue more evidence about some topic, then, in some sense, one is in a situation relevantly like the situation that Harry found himself in at the beginning of the research project. Recall, in the beginning when Harry was brainstorming with the group, Betsy disagreed with him about whether a single-payer healthcare system is the best system for the U.S. My claim rests on the intuition that I have about this case. My intuition is clear that when Betsy disagreed with Harry at the beginning, Harry was not epistemically required either to suspend judgment or to adopt Betsy's position. The explanation for this fact is that the group in question agreed to brainstorm about this topic for a certain duration of time. As such, in that situation Harry does not have an epistemic (or any other type) of duty to revise his beliefs every time someone raises an objection or disagrees with him because the whole purpose of the disagreement is to gain a better epistemic perspective on healthcare.

My intuition about the matter does not change when the group finishes their brainstorming session, and Harry takes on the diachronic duty to look for more evidence. In some sense, for Harry the brainstorming session is not over. The aim was not achieved. Harry was left in a bad epistemic position. To get out of this, Harry must continue to search for evidence. He must continue, in some sense, the brainstorming session, but on his own or with a different group of people. When Harry encounters the local disagreement at the end of the brainstorming session, he should act on a diachronic duty and be steadfast in the previously qualified sense. Being steadfast in this situation looks something like this: you find yourself accepting or believing in P either as a supposition or as a proposed hypothesis. You act on the diachronic duty to undergo an investigation that would likely be epistemically profitable. Although you continue to accept or believe that P, you can recognize that you accept that P with a grain of salt. You recognize that your diachronic duty, if you take it on in an unbiased way, can lead you to accept not-P. Your acceptance of the diachronic duty is a sign that you think more epistemic work needs to be done before you can confidently accept that P full stop. Accepting that P with a grain of salt might or might not influence your action. It will depend a lot on the specific situation in question.

Let us switch back to disagreements in academic philosophy. Here is an actual example from the history of philosophy that illustrates my point about learning from disagreement. Prior to Edmund Gettier's famous 1963 paper, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" contemporary epistemologists largely agreed that the JTB account of knowledge is a good account.<sup>90</sup> Being philosophers, however, they did not agree about everything. For example, they had disagreements about the structure of justification and what justification amounts to. However, after Gettier's paper was published, surprisingly there was wide agreement among philosophers that Gettier presented a successful counterexample to the JTB account of knowledge. This sparked a huge reaction from epistemologists who tried to respond to Gettier's argument. One notable example is Alvin Goldman's monumental paper, "A Causal Theory of Knowing."<sup>91</sup> This paper presented new and original ideas to the community.

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<sup>90</sup> Gettier (1963).

<sup>91</sup> Goldman (1967).

Given the wide consensus about the JTB account of knowledge prior to the publication of Gettier's paper, one might have predicted that philosophers would have ignored Gettier's dissenting position or discounted it. However, this was not the case. Gettier's disagreement was the catalyst for a new project in epistemology: to develop new and improved accounts of knowledge. This was the beginning of a very lively debate, which produced extremely intriguing ideas and projects. This is an example of how disagreements do not cause stagnation in the discipline, but exactly the opposite. It is true that these new ideas that emerged after the publication of Gettier's paper introduced new disagreements among philosophers. However, these new disagreements also brought forth new and original ideas.

Gettier's paper is not the only example out there. It is a good example, but there are comparable examples. For instance, Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, Harry Frankfurt's paper "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," Thomas Nagel's paper "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," among others.<sup>92</sup> I will not get into how these papers introduced new and original avenues for the philosophical community to explore. I merely point them out to show that Gettier's paper is not alone.

Although moral experts seem to be in a worse epistemic predicament than novices—as the saying goes, with more knowledge comes more responsibility—they are not epistemically doomed. First, moral experts about whether P should act on their diachronic duties, but this means that they need to use their abilities and knowledge to come up with original and groundbreaking arguments, distinctions, and objections. Doing this can get someone out of a local moral disagreement, even if it is only for a short time. Also, as Lackey (2013) has persuasively argued, numbers in disagreements matter. They matter in at least the following situation: when the individuals in question are not merely parroting each other, and they independently arrived at their conclusion through a genuinely epistemic process.

If a moral expert manages to present excellent original work, she can genuinely amass followers among their inner circle—i.e., individuals who are genuinely persuaded by the epistemic force of the arguments. A few names come to mind who have done such a thing: mostly influential people in history, like Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, Anscombe, Russell, Frege, Kripke, Davidson, Quine, David Lewis, Foot, and a host of other philosophers. It is difficult to become so influential. But another way to get out of a local disagreement is to amass followers, which requires arduous epistemic work.

Second, moral experts can avoid the skepticism of local moral disagreement by thinking of academic disagreement as research projects. Like the group in the healthcare example, moral experts should view other moral experts as their partners who are collectively searching to better understand the moral questions raised by the discipline. They all share the same goal: figuring out the truth. This might sound too idealistic and too optimistic, and it is. Therefore, this is a *charitable* way of looking at what academic moral philosophers are doing. In fact, when I was first introduced to philosophy, I was drawn to it immediately because I saw that philosophers were ready to question anything if it meant that they could get closer to the truth. There are no accepted dogmas that are beyond reproach.

My general advice for moral experts does not help them avoid the sting of local moral disagreement in every situation. There are some cases in which the sting is felt in full force. For instance, in cases where there is stagnation in the literature—an impasse—it might be difficult to pursue and fulfill one's diachronic duty at least for a certain amount of time. For example, John Martin Fischer—a very knowledgeable philosopher on the free will literature—claims that the

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<sup>92</sup> Kripke (1980), Frankfurt (1969), and Nagel (1974).

debate between the compatibilist and incompatibilist has reached a “Dialectical Stalemate.”<sup>93</sup> In that situation, it might be difficult to pursue one’s diachronic duties. However, “the darkest hour is just before dawn.” I think since Fischer’s pronouncement in 1994, there has been some interesting and lively debate on the problem of free will. One example is Wes Holliday’s original and groundbreaking paper, “Freedom and the Fixity of the Past,” which argues for a new Action-Type Argument for the Principle of the Fixity of the Past. Consequently, this new argument can simply turn into an argument for incompatibilism.<sup>94</sup> In cases where there is stagnation or a stalemate in the literature, an expert can focus on exposing that stalemate. Exposing the problem is the first step to solving it.

The argument from local moral disagreement gives rise to a practical problem. To solve this practical problem, I provided epistemic advice about how to improve one’s epistemic position. By following this advice, one can avoid the string of local moral disagreement. It will turn out that it is easier for the novice, as opposed to the expert, to follow the epistemic advice. Thus, the argument from local moral disagreement is a more pressing problem for the expert than it is for the novice.

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<sup>93</sup> Fischer (1994), p. 83.

<sup>94</sup> Holliday (2012).



## Ch.4 - The Self-Undermining Objection and Skepticism

### Introduction

Conciliationism faces a serious self-undermining objection. If, according to conciliationism, we should substantially revise our beliefs in the face of peer disagreement, and if there are peer disagreements about conciliationism itself, then we should substantially revise our belief in conciliationism. In this chapter, I argue that this objection can be overcome if we adopt a plausible evaluative requirement for peer disagreements.

### The Self-Undermining Objection

Generally speaking, Conciliationism accepts the following principle:

(A) In the face of peer disagreement, you are epistemically required to substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment.<sup>95</sup>

In later sections, we will encounter two different types of conciliatory views: partial and non-partial conciliationism. The former adds a “sometimes” in front of “you are epistemically required...” in (A), and the latter adds “always” in front of “you are epistemically required...” in (A). I purposely left out any further specifications in (A) so that conciliationism simpliciter is vague enough to allow for the type of precisification that leaves room for partial and non-partial conciliationism.

Consider the statement, *every true statement contains at least nine words*. If this statement is true, then by its own lights, it is false because the statement does not contain nine or more words. The way this statement is self-undermining is different than the way that conciliationism is self-undermining. Imagine a world in which everyone accepts conciliationism. In such a world, it could be the case that conciliationism is either true or false. Now imagine a world in which everyone rejects conciliationism. Again, in this world, it could be the case that conciliationism is either true or false. If all of the sudden half of the population comes to accept conciliationism and the other half continues to reject conciliationism, this too wouldn't imply that conciliationism is false. For all we know, those who accept conciliationism have true beliefs. Whatever the self-undermining objection aims to accomplish, it does not imply that conciliationism is false.<sup>96</sup>

The self-undermining objection aims to do to belief in conciliationism whatever conciliationism does to any belief faced with a peer disagreement. In a case of peer disagreement, conciliationism requires substantial belief revision or suspension of judgment. It requires this of you because in a case of peer disagreement, you are in a situation where someone who is just as likely as you are to be correct disagrees with you. If it is impermissible to use the disagreement itself as evidence that your peer made a mistake, then you do not have a special reason to prefer your answer over your peer's answer in this disagreement. As such, you are presented with a defeater.

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<sup>95</sup> Some might insist on another principle: (B) In the face of peer disagreement, it is epistemically impermissible to use the disagreement itself as evidence that your dissenting peer made a mistake (This is a watered-down version of Independence. For formulations of Independence, see Christensen: 2009, p. 758, and Christensen: 2011, pp. 1-2. For objections against Independence, see Lackey: 2013, Kelly: 2013, and Moon: 2018. For a defense of Independence, see Christensen: forthcomingA and forthcomingB, and Matheson: 2015). I chose not to include it because I do think there are possible versions of conciliationism that don't require (B), and I want to leave the option available. Here I am only interested in spelling out a very general and broad version of conciliationism.

<sup>96</sup> Frances (2010) considers a version of the self-undermining objection that concludes that conciliationism is probably false. Frances later rejects this argument. For another response, see also Decker (2014), pp. 1115-1119.

This defeater undercuts the link between your initial evidence and the disputed belief. For example, in a case where you disagree with your peer about our share of the restaurant bill, the link between your initial calculation of the numbers (i.e. the bill divided by the number of people eating) and your belief that each person's share of the bill is x amount is undermined.<sup>97</sup> The defeater gives you a reason to suspect that someone has made a mistake in their calculation. However, whether it is you or your peer who made the mistake, you do not know. You are equally confident that one of you made a mistake, but you have no reason to prefer your answer over your peer's answer. It is a case where your first-order evidence coupled with your higher-order evidence (i.e. finding out about the disagreement between you and your peer), and the fact that your peer has first-order evidence of her own equally supports your answer and your peer's answer. Thus, you are required to revise your belief or suspend judgment.<sup>98</sup>

Like the restaurant case, the self-undermining objection aims to undercut the link between your evidence for conciliationism and your belief in conciliationism. In the literature on the epistemology of peer disagreement, there is no consensus about any particular view of disagreement. There are equally informed experts in the field who accept opposing views about peer disagreement.<sup>99</sup> These disagreements between the experts present us with a peer disagreement about conciliationism. Given that the disagreement is between experts, we should expect that all parties are equally aware of the current evidence for and against conciliationism. Moreover, we should also expect that these experts are equally able to assess this evidence for and against conciliationism conscientiously. Once we acknowledge these peer-making facts of the disagreement, we are left in a position where we have no reason to prefer conciliationism over non-conciliationism. Therefore, we are required to either suspend judgment or substantially revise our belief in conciliationism.

## A Deeper Problem?

### The Charge of Incoherence

As I have spelled it out, the self-undermining objection claims that belief in conciliationism deserves the same epistemic treatment as any other belief faced with a peer disagreement. However, unlike other peer disagreements, a peer disagreement about conciliationism has a unique feature: the source of the undermining, at least in part, comes from conciliationism itself. Suppose some non-conciliationist view—one that says in the face of a peer disagreement, you are never required to revise your belief—is true. If so, and if we are to treat conciliationism the same way that we treat other peer disagreements, then we should remain steadfast in such a situation. This shows that the self-referential nature of the objection only creeps in if conciliationism is governing the peer disagreement. Take conciliationism out, and the objection is no more. Put conciliationism back in

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<sup>97</sup> A similar case can be found in Christensen (2007), p. 193.

<sup>98</sup> What is meant by 'substantially revise' my credence in my answer? This could mean that I move my credence in my answer towards my peer's credence in her answer in a way that *splits the difference*. It could mean this, but it does not have to. I have left the notion of 'substantial revision' vague. Some might insist that substantial revision occurs only when my peer and I split the difference, which amounts to reducing our credences to the simple average (for a defense of splitting the difference, see Cohen: 2013). Others might insist that splitting the difference is not always required, and what substantial revision amounts to depends on all the specific details of the case (for a case against always splitting the difference, see Moss: 2011 and 2018, pp. 160-164).

<sup>99</sup> For conciliationist views, see Feldman: 2011, Elga: 2007b, and Christensen: 2007, 2009, 2011, and forthcomingA. For non-conciliationist views, see van Inwagen (1996), Wedgwood (2007), Huemer (2011), Kelly (2005), (2011), Lackey (2010a), (2010b), and Titelbaum (2015). It's worth mentioning that within each camp, there are important differences between the conciliationists and non-conciliationists as well.

with a certain set of contingent conditions—conditions that are not merely possible, but actually obtain in our time—and the self-referential nature of the objection is back with full force.

This self-referential feature of the objection might point to a deeper problem with conciliationism. Adam Elga argues that this self-referential feature exposes a serious incoherence or inconsistency in conciliationism.<sup>100</sup> Elga's argument depends on the following claim: if a view calls for its own rejection, then that view is incoherent. For the time being, let us assume that this claim about incoherence is true. Does conciliationism call for its own rejection?

As we have seen earlier, conciliationism does not call for its own rejection in the sense that it implies or indicates its falsehood. Conciliationism does seem to call for its own rejection in the sense that given certain contingent conditions, we are epistemically required by conciliationism to either substantially revise our belief in conciliationism or suspend judgment in conciliationism. These contingent conditions are the conditions in which our belief in conciliationism faces a peer disagreement. In such conditions, conciliationism recommends its own rejection.

According to Elga, views that call for their own rejection in that sense are incoherent. Here's Elga's argument:

- (P1) If self-undermining inductive methods are incoherent, then self-undermining views about disagreement are incoherent.
- (P2) Self-undermining inductive methods are incoherent.
- (P3) Therefore, self-undermining views about disagreement are incoherent.

From the third premise, it follows that if conciliationism is self-undermining, then conciliationism is incoherent because conciliationism is a view about disagreement.

Premise one follows from the fact that there is a part-whole relationship between one's view of disagreement and one's inductive method. The former is part of the latter. An inductive method is a fundamental method that tells you how to respond to different experiences and evidence. These can be experiences about anything, including which inductive method to adopt. Given this general understanding of an inductive method, it is easy to see how views about disagreement are part of one's inductive method. A view about disagreement tells one how to respond about a particular set of experiences: namely, those that have to do with disagreements. This set of experiences are only a subset of the set of experiences that the inductive method ranges over. Whatever one's view about disagreement says, the inductive method will say the same thing. If a view of disagreement says to reject itself, then the inductive method would say the same thing because the view is part of the inductive method. Thus, if a view about disagreement is self-undermining, then so is the inductive method that the view is a part of.<sup>101</sup>

The *Consumer Reports* example aims to show that self-undermining inductive methods are incoherent.<sup>102</sup> *Consumer Reports* is a consumer rating magazine that lists recommendations for what appliances to buy. *Consumer Reports* also rates other consumer rating magazines. For example, a *Consumer Reports* magazine can have the following list of recommendations:

- Consumer Reports*: 'Buy only Microwave WX2000.'
- Consumer Reports*: 'Follow Smart Shopper's advice.'

Suppose that Smart Shopper recommends only to buy Microwave WX3000, which indicates that you should not buy Microwave WX2000. In other words, Smart Shopper recommends something

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<sup>100</sup> See Elga (2007a), and Weatherson (2013).

<sup>101</sup> See Elga (2007a), p. 180, note 6.

<sup>102</sup> Elga (2007a), pp. 180-181. This example is from Lewis (1971), p. 55.

inconsistent with *Consumer Reports*. It is inconsistent in the sense that you cannot follow both recommendations: you cannot only buy Microwave WX2000, and you cannot only buy Microwave WX3000. You can only act in accordance with one of the recommendations at best. However, *Consumer Reports* also recommends that you follow Smart Shopper's advice, which means it indirectly recommends that you should only buy Microwave WX3000. Therefore, what *Consumer Reports* recommends is ultimately incoherent because it directly recommends to buy only Microwave WX2000, and it indirectly recommends to buy only Microwave WX3000. It is impossible to act in accordance with both of these recommendations.

What is true of consumer rating magazines is also true of self-undermining inductive methods. *Consumer Reports* recommends different appliances to buy, and an inductive method recommends different ways to respond to different experiences or evidence. An inductive method provides you with a rule about what to believe when you are faced with a particular set of experiences or set of evidence. A self-undermining inductive method is one that recommends two ways of responding to a set of experiences that cannot be carried out. For example, let M1 and M2 be two different inductive methods:

M1 recommends: only believe x when faced with experiences y and z.

M2 recommends: only believe not-x when faced with experiences y and z.

These two inductive methods recommend inconsistent responses to experiences y and z. Now suppose M1 also recommends that we follow M2's advice. In that case, M1 becomes self-undermining and incoherent because it is directly recommending to believe x and indirectly recommending to believe not-x when faced with experiences y and z. Notice that M1 becomes incoherent only when we introduce in M1 a recommendation in favor of a competing inductive method, where a competing inductive method is one that recommends something incompatible with the recommendations of the inductive method it is competing against. Without this specific type of recommendation, M1 is neither self-undermining nor is it incoherent.

Elga claims that this type of incoherence plagues conciliationism, at least *non-partial conciliationist views* that do not make exceptions about when a peer disagreement requires one to substantially revise one's beliefs or suspend judgment. However, Elga does not explicitly spell out where the incoherence is specifically located in non-partial conciliationism. Elga assumes that his readers will put the pieces together from the *Consumer Reports* example on their own, and figure out how non-partial conciliationism faces the same type of incoherence as the *Consumer Reports* example. This means we'll have to take the wheel from here. In order to expose the alleged incoherence, we'll have to take a closer look at the recommendations made by non-partial conciliationism. It is clear that non-partial conciliationism recommends the following:

- (1) Substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment in non-partial conciliationism.
- (2) *Always* substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement.

It is not clear how these two recommendations are inconsistent in the same way that *Consumer Reports* and M1 are inconsistent. There seems to be an important difference between non-partial conciliationism and the examples above. The most salient difference is that in the examples above, the consumer rating magazine and the inductive method explicitly recommend a competing magazine or a competing inductive method. Non-partial conciliationism, on the other hand, does not directly recommend that we follow the advice of some competing view of disagreement.

Does non-partial conciliationism *indirectly* recommend that we follow the advice of a competing view of disagreement? Given that non-partial conciliationism recommends that we

should substantially revise our belief or suspend judgment in conciliationism, it might seem that it indirectly recommends a competing view of disagreement. However, on a closer examination, non-partial conciliationism doesn't recommend an alternative view. Suppose Theodore accepts non-partial conciliationism. When he encounters peer disagreements, he follows the advice of conciliationism by substantially revising his beliefs or suspending judgment. One day, Theodore encounters a unique peer disagreement: a peer disagreement about disagreement. Theodore discovers that his peer rejects non-partial conciliationism. In this situation, Theodore can follow the advice of non-partial conciliationism and substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in it. Notice how there are no inconsistent recommendations here that Theodore cannot act in accordance with. Moreover, notice how in this situation Theodore is not required to adopt an alternative view about disagreement. In fact, Theodore can simply be agnostic about the correct view of disagreement. There is nothing about non-partial conciliationism that says either accept it or if you must reject it, you have to accept some other view.<sup>103</sup>

Perhaps the inconsistency can be exposed in a different way. Notice again that in the peer disagreement involving Theodore, Theodore is faced with the following two recommendations: (1) substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment in non-partial conciliationism, and (2) always substantially revise your belief in the face of a peer disagreement. Theodore's reason for fulfilling the first recommendation comes from accepting non-partial conciliationism, which is the source of the second recommendation. However, Theodore's reason for fulfilling the second recommendation is blocked if he fulfills the first recommendation. Theodore is in a serious dilemma:

- (P1) Theodore should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement.
- (P2) If Theodore should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement, then he should substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in non-partial conciliationism.
- (P3) if Theodore should substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in non-partial conciliationism, then it is not the case that Theodore should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement.
- (P4) If Theodore should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement, then it is not the case that Theodore should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement (from P2 and P3).
- (P5) It is not the case that Theodore should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement (from P1 and P4).
- Therefore, (P6) Theodore should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement, and it is not the case that Theodore should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement (from P1 and P5).

The first premise comes from the fact that Theodore accepts non-partial conciliationism, and non-partial conciliationism recommends that you always substantially revise your belief in the face of a peer disagreement. The second premise is substantiated by Theodore's contingent circumstances: namely, he is in a peer disagreement about non-partial conciliationism. Premise three follows from the fact that for Theodore the source of the recommendation to always substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement comes from non-partial

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<sup>103</sup> See Decker (2014), pp. 1119-1128, who also makes a similar point.

conciliationism. Once Theodore no longer accepts non-partial conciliationism, recommendation (2) drops out. Premise four follows logically from premise two and three via hypothetical syllogism. Premise five also follows logically from premise one and four via modus ponens. The conclusion follows logically from premise one and five via conjunction introduction. The conclusion exposes the type of incoherence that Elga accused non-partial conciliationism of having. Namely, non-partial conciliationism recommends inconsistent things in the sense that one cannot act in accordance with both recommendations.

The above argument fails, however, because it does not consider the temporal features of the recommendations. In Theodore's specific case, he does not encounter the inconsistent recommendations (i.e. P6) all at once. As such, there isn't a single moment in which Theodore is faced with inconsistent recommendations. Before Theodore encounters the peer disagreement about non-partial conciliationism, he follows the recommendations made by non-partial conciliationism because he accepts it. However, after Theodore encounters the peer disagreement about his view on disagreement, he stops following the recommendations made by non-partial conciliationism because he no longer accepts it. Theodore goes from accepting that he should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement to not accepting that he should always substantially revise his belief or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement. There is no moment in which the former overlaps with the latter. Without them overlapping, there is no inconsistency strictly speaking.<sup>104</sup>

One important question remains: why would Theodore no longer accept non-partial conciliationism in the face of the peer disagreement about non-partial conciliationism? On the one hand, Perhaps Theodore no longer accepts non-partial conciliationism because he was still acting in accordance with the requirements of non-partial conciliationism right up until he gave it up. On the other hand, perhaps Theodore no longer accepts non-partial conciliationism because he sees that he

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<sup>104</sup> This is also true in a case of peer disagreement that involves more than two individuals. The cases I have in mind are cases in which the disagreements of the individuals involved are independent of each other. For example, this would exclude cases in which the individuals on one side of the disagreement are disagreeing in a way that depends on a single source (e.g. they all disagree because they're all listening to a single teacher and accepting what that teacher says purely on authority and nothing else, and they haven't reflected on the matter for themselves). We can evaluate these types of more-than-two peer disagreement cases in one of two ways. First, we can evaluate them as one single whole verse another single whole. This means that we take both sides of the debate (let's assume for the sake of simplicity that there are only two sides in this disagreement) and treat them as a single whole and evaluate one whole against another. If we evaluate the case this way, then in order for this type of disagreement to be a genuine peer disagreement, the individuals in each group, *considered as a whole*, must meet the requirements for being an epistemic peer. So if there are ten individuals in each group, this epistemic peer requirement can be met with the following combination, say: each individual in one group is the epistemic peer of each individual in the other group. Or it can be met with this other combination: five individuals of one group are the epistemic superiors of five individuals of the same group. However, the former five individuals are the epistemic peers of five individuals in the other group, and the same is true with the latter five individuals. There are many other combinations that we do not need to spell out here. I hope the examples I gave are sufficient to help one understand what this first way of evaluating a more-than-two peer disagreement case amounts to. If we evaluate the cases in this way, then we can ascribe "group beliefs" to both groups, and then what I have said earlier would apply to these group beliefs. The temporal priority would still do its job even if we are talking about group belief instead of a single individual's beliefs. The other way of evaluating such peer disagreement cases is by evaluating each individual at a time. This way of doing things is most natural in a case of disagreement where it is only me disagreeing with a number of other individuals. In such a case, I would start with one of the individuals in the other group and revise my belief, then after this revision, I would do another revision once I consider the disagreement of another member of the other group, and so on. In that situation, I would get to a point where my credence in conciliationism is so low that I should give it up. Once I get to that point, then my argument about the relevance of temporal priority would kick in. This would lead us to treat the more-than-two peer disagreement case in the same way that it would treat the only-two peer disagreement cases, at least up to the point at which my credence in conciliationism is so low that I should give it up on conciliatory grounds.

cannot consistently accept it. If Theodore were to accept non-partial conciliationism, then it would immediately recommend its own rejection. If it recommends its own rejection, then Theodore would no longer accept it because he would be acting in accordance with its requirements right up until he gives it up. However, it turns out that a view recommending its own rejection is not enough for the view to be incoherent. Rather, the view must both recommend its own rejection and either directly or indirectly recommend a competing view about disagreement. Although non-partial conciliationism might recommend its own rejection, it does not recommend a competing view about disagreement. For that reason, it is not incoherent.

It remains true that Theodore cannot rationally accept non-partial conciliationism while faced with a peer disagreement about it. As such, Theodore should substantially revise his beliefs in non-partial conciliationism. In other words, Theodore should treat non-partial conciliationism the same way that he would treat any other peer disagreement. However, Elga's argument aims to show that there is a deeper problem here: namely that non-partial conciliationism is incoherent because it recommends things that cannot be carried out. The key ingredient for incoherence is that a view either directly or indirectly recommends an agent to perform incompatible actions. This key ingredient was present in the *Consumer Reports* example and in the M1 inductive method. It is clear that this ingredient is not explicitly present in cases of peer disagreement concerning non-partial conciliationism. On a closer examination, we saw that there is no reason to suspect that it is implicitly present either. Without this key ingredient, the charge of incoherence against non-partial conciliationism falls flat. Thus, conciliationism might face problems, but incoherence is not one of them.

## Skepticism

Some have argued that conciliationism leads to a radical type of skepticism.<sup>105</sup> With respect to many philosophical, political, religious, and ethical questions, there is someone out there who is at least as well equipped as you are in answering one of these questions, but this person disagrees with you.<sup>106</sup> Conciliationism seems to recommend that you substantially revise your philosophical, political, religious, and ethical beliefs because of these disagreements.<sup>107</sup> This is a serious problem that plagues conciliationism, but it is not the type of skepticism that this section is concerned with. The skepticism that this section is concerned with is skepticism about whether one can successfully respond to the self-undermining objection.

The skepticism has the following form. Let A and B be two different individuals talking about the self-undermining objection:

A: conciliationism should be rejected because it faces the self-undermining objection.

B: Wait a minute. A proponent of conciliationism can respond to the self-undermining objection with X (for present purposes it doesn't really matter what X is).

A: X cannot be a good response to the self-undermining objection because X itself or an important component of X faces a peer disagreement, and given conciliationism, we should substantially revise our belief or suspend judgment in X or that X is a good response to the self-undermining objection.

B: Hm. That's an interesting point. But have you considered Y. I think Y is a good enough reason to reject what you're saying.

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<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Carey & Matheson (2013).

<sup>106</sup> van Inwagen (1996) rejects conciliationism precisely because it has this skeptical consequence.

<sup>107</sup> Elga calls this the 'problem of spinelessness' (Elga: 2007b, p. 492).

A: Y cannot be a good enough reason because Y itself or an important component of Y faces a peer disagreement, and given conciliationism, we should substantially revise our belief or suspend judgment in Y or that Y is a good response to what I have said.

The pattern should be apparent at this point. Whenever you respond to the self-undermining objection or whenever you respond to a rejoinder to your response to the self-undermining objection, the skeptic argues that at least some part of what you are saying faces a peer disagreement, and if you truly accept conciliationism, then you should either substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment in your response or your rejoinder. This skepticism exposes a deeper problem in conciliationism than the self-undermining objection from section two. The deeper problem is that conciliationism cannot defend itself because (1) a defense of conciliationism typically makes use of philosophical premises or principles, and (2) like many things in philosophy, these premises and principles likely face a peer disagreement. If so, then conciliationism recommends that you either suspend judgment in your defense of conciliationism or you substantially revise your belief in the defense.<sup>108</sup>

Notice that this skepticism does not require non-partial conciliationism to work. Partial conciliationism is the view that one should substantially revise her beliefs or suspend judgment in the face of a peer disagreement, but not when the peer disagreement is about conciliationism itself.<sup>109</sup> Partial conciliationism is tailor-made to avoid the self-undermining objection. If partial conciliationism does not have jurisdiction in cases of peer disagreement about conciliationism, then the self-undermining objection cannot use partial conciliationism to undermine itself. In a sense, partial conciliationism is a response to the self-undermining objection. The main motivation for partial conciliationism is that it avoids the self-undermining objection.

Partial conciliationism has been charged with being ad hoc. The way partial conciliationism is defined seems contrived. It makes, arbitrary restrictions for the sole purpose of avoiding a serious problem. The proponents of partial conciliationism respond by arguing that the view is not ad hoc because

the real reason for constraining conciliatory views is not specific to disagreement. Rather, the real reason is a completely general constraint that applies to any fundamental policy, rule, or method. In order to be consistent, a fundamental policy, rule, or method must be dogmatic with respect to its own correctness.<sup>110</sup>

A fundamental policy, rule, or method is one “whose application is not governed or evaluated by any other method.”<sup>111</sup> This claim, that conciliatory views are a fundamental policy, rule, or method is itself a claim that faces a peer disagreement. Jonathan Matheson claims that evidentialism, rather than conciliationism, is a more fundamental rule. Evidentialism is a meta-rule that tells us which inconsistent advice we should follow. That is, this meta-rule orders advice in a hierarchy, where one piece of advice is “upstream” of the other piece of advice.<sup>112</sup> The upstream advice is higher-order advice that tells you to follow this or that inductive method. Recall the *Consumer Reports* example again. In that example, *Consumer Reports* recommends that we only buy a certain Microwave, and that we should follow the advice of Smart Shopper. The latter advice indirectly leads to a recommendation that is incompatible with the advice given by *Consumer Reports*. Evidentialism comes

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<sup>108</sup> For an example of this type of skepticism, see Sampson (2019). Decker (2014), pp. 1112-1113, says things that suggest this type of skepticism but not so explicitly and not to the same extent.

<sup>109</sup> Elga (2007a) argues for partial conciliationism in response to the self-undermining objection.

<sup>110</sup> Elga (2007a), p. 185.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, note 11.

<sup>112</sup> Matheson (2015), p. 151.



in as a meta-rule that governs the advice given by *Consumer Reports*, and according to evidentialism the latter advice, the higher-order advice from *Consumer Reports* about what consumer magazine to follow, trumps the former advice because higher-order advice is logically antecedent to lower-order advice.<sup>113</sup> Thus, evidentialism blocks the incoherence. Even if non-partial conciliationism leads to two incompatible recommendations (I've argued that it doesn't, but suppose it does for the sake of this example), evidentialism orders these recommendations in a hierarchy, so that an agent knows that the higher-order advice is the one to act on, and the lower-order advice should be ignored because it conflicts with the more binding higher-order advice.

I am not going to spell out Matheson's view in great detail because that is beside the point. The important thing to see here is the following structure:

Elga: The self-undermining objection is a reason to give up non-partial conciliationism, and adopt partial conciliationism.

Interlocutor: Partial conciliationism is ad hoc, so we can't avoid the self-undermining objection by adopting it.

Elga: Partial conciliationism is not ad hoc because it is a fundamental rule, and generally speaking fundamental rules, whether they're about disagreement or not, should be dogmatic about their own correctness.

Matheson: Partial conciliationism is not a fundamental rule. Evidentialism is a more fundamental rule that governs the inconsistent advice given by conciliationism.

At this point, the skeptic enters and claims that the disagreement between Matheson and Elga is a peer disagreement. Moreover, if you're faced with a peer disagreement about whether conciliationism is a fundamental rule, then you must either substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment in the claim that conciliationism is a fundamental rule. This is true both according to non-partial and partial conciliationism because strictly speaking, the peer disagreement is *not* about the correctness of conciliationism itself but about whether conciliationism is a fundamental rule. If you substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment in that claim, then you can no longer claim that partial conciliationism is not ad hoc, at least not for the reason that it is a fundamental rule. Consequently, Elga's response to the self-undermining objection, i.e. abandoning non-partial conciliationism and accepted partial conciliationism in its place, fails because the means of showing that the response is not ad hoc must be abandoned *for conciliatory reasons*.

## Response: The Peer Evaluative Requirement

So far, we have seen that conciliationism faces a self-undermining problem. Conciliationism should be treated like any other belief that faces a peer disagreement, and it is a contingent fact that conciliationism faces peer disagreements. Moreover, we have seen that there might be a deeper problem for conciliationism. In the literature, the deeper problem is often located in some type of incoherence with conciliationism. Conciliationism leads to incoherent recommendations. I've argued that that is not the case. Rather, the deeper problem is located in an iterative type of skepticism that applies conciliationism to any defense of conciliationism or any defense of the defense of conciliationism.

In this last section of the chapter, I will argue that there is a way of responding to the self-undermining problem and the deeper skeptical problem. The response requires us to adopt an evaluative requirement that governs our assessments of peer disagreements. If this evaluative requirement can get the job done, then I take this to be a strong motivation for accepting it. There

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<sup>113</sup> Matheson (2015), p. 152.

are other reasons for accepting this evaluative requirement, but I will not discuss those here. If the evaluative requirement provides some plausible pushback against the self-undermining problem and the deeper skeptical problem, then that is enough to take the evaluative requirement seriously.

## What is the Peer Evaluative Requirement?

The evaluative requirement, or its full name: *The Peer Evaluative Requirement*, requires one to take one's reasons for accepting that so-and-so is your epistemic peer into serious consideration when assessing a peer disagreement. This requirement is often neglected in the literature.<sup>114</sup> In a standard peer disagreement example, we are told that your dissenter is your epistemic peer, but we are not told whether your reasons for accepting that your dissenter is a peer is very strong, mediocre, or weak.

This requirement is not only for cases of peer disagreement with a single dissenter. It is equally important for cases with multiple dissenters. However, for the sake of simplicity, I'll state it in the context of a disagreement with one dissenter:

**The Peer Evaluative Requirement:** In a case of peer disagreement between you and someone else, you should take into account your reasons for accepting the peer belief (i.e. that so-and-so is my epistemic peer), and then weigh those reasons for accepting the peer belief against the reasons for accepting the claim that my peer has made a mistake.

First, notice that this evaluative requirement only ranges over cases of peer disagreement, and it does not say anything explicit about cases where your dissenter is your epistemic superior or inferior. According to this evaluative requirement, in order to properly assess your reasons for the belief that so-and-so is your epistemic peer, disagreement cases need to include information about how and why you believe that so-and-so is your epistemic peer. For example, in the restaurant bill case from section two, we can add the following information: you and your friend who disagrees with you went to the same school, took the same math classes, had similar grades, had the same number of drinks, and so on. If this information is not sufficient, we can add information about the reasons we have for accepting those claims as well. Perhaps my reasons for accepting that my friend and I had the same number of drinks are murky, and I'm not extremely confident in the claim. Or perhaps I thought my friend and I received the same grades, but I'm not sure whether I'm confusing my friend for someone else. In other words, not only are your reasons for accepting that so-and-so is your peer, but also your reasons for accepting *those* reasons are also relevant. This type of information can play a crucial role in evaluating the case, especially if the evaluation is done by the agent who is facing the peer disagreement.

As it is currently stated, the evaluative requirement should not be all that controversial because it does not say *how* one should weigh the reasons for accepting the peer belief against the reasons for accepting the claim that my peer is mistaken. The peer evaluative requirement, as it is currently stated, is compatible with different views about how one should weigh the two sets of reasons. However, in order to add more substance to the evaluative requirement, I will add two constraints about how one should weigh these two sets of reasons:

**Equal Constraint:** *In a case of peer disagreement* involving me and someone else, if my reasons for accepting the peer belief are at least virtually equal to my reasons for accepting

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<sup>114</sup> I've only encountered two quick mentions of it: Wolterstorff (2014), and Vavova (2014), pp. 307-308.

that my peer has made a mistake, then I am required to substantially revise my belief or suspend judgment in my answer.

**Unequal Constraint:** *In a case of peer disagreement* involving me and someone else, if my reasons for accepting the peer belief is substantially weaker than my reasons for accepting that my peer made a mistake, then I am not required to substantially revise my belief or suspend judgment in my answer.<sup>115</sup>

How do we weigh reasons for and against two different propositions against each other? The two different propositions in question are: (1) My dissenter is my peer (call it P), and (2) my dissenter has made a mistake (call it Q). The way to do it is to connect the propositions. The more reason I have for accepting P, the more reason I have for rejecting Q. Why? Because if my confidence in P is high enough, then I should think that it is unlikely that my friend made a mistake rather than me. This follows from the already agreed upon connection between an epistemic peer and the disputed proposition. In a peer disagreement, it is often said that the fact that your *peer* disagrees with you is what gives you reason to think that you and your dissenter are equally likely to have made a mistake. Thus, the connection between P and Q is R: your peer is just as likely as you are to get the correct answer. I take it that there is a strong connection between P and R. Perhaps to be a peer just is to be just as likely to be correct. So whatever reasons you have for P are also reasons for R. The more reason you have for R, the less reason you have to accept Q. The more reason you have to accept Q, the less reason you have to accept R. Whether I should accept that my dissenter is mistaken depends, at least in part, on my reasons for accepting that my dissenter is my epistemic peer. For consider why I would be in a position to think that I have no reason to think that my dissenter or I have the correct answer. Part of the story is that I have sufficient reason for thinking that my peer is just as likely as I am to get the correct answer. If my reasons for that claim are pretty low and my reasons for thinking my dissenter made a mistake are pretty high, then surely that should affect whether I think my dissenter made a mistake.

If we are going to add constraints to the evaluative requirement, these two constraints are good options to begin with. There might be other plausible constraints that we can include, but for present purposes I will only work with these two constraints. In what follows, I will talk about the evaluative requirement as if it includes these two constraints.

A good way to see the evaluative requirement at work is by looking at and contrasting cases of ordinary disagreement and cases of extreme disagreement. First, let us consider a case of ordinary disagreement, the ordinary restaurant case from section two. In this case, I am out with my friends at a restaurant. When the time comes to split the bill, another friend and I do the calculation in our heads and come up with slightly different answers, perhaps only off by two or three dollars. My friend and I have attempted to split the bill many times before, and we almost always come up with the same answer. My friend and I also went to the same school together, took the same math classes, and had similar grades. Once we figure out that we disagree, conciliationism requires us to either substantially revise our beliefs or suspend judgment. The evaluative requirement, understood with the two constraints above, mirrors the answer that conciliationism gives us: my friend and I should either substantially revise our beliefs in our answers or suspend judgment. The reason being is that my reasons for the peer belief are at least virtually equal to my reasons for thinking that my peer has made a mistake. In the ordinary restaurant case, my reasons for believing that my friend is my peer

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<sup>115</sup> For present purposes, I will leave the phrases “virtually equal” and “substantially weaker” vague. We generally have a reasonable grasp of those notions in straightforward cases, and any further specification of those notions will go beyond the scope of this chapter.

are quite good, and my reasons for believing that my peer made a mistake are not good at all, so the Equal Constraint is met.

Now consider a case of extreme disagreement, the extreme restaurant case. This case is very similar to the ordinary restaurant case, except my answer about how much we owe is nowhere close to my friend's answer about how much we owe. To make this example more forceful, let us suppose the total bill was \$244, the tip is supposed to be *about* fifteen percent, and there are a total of six of us. I get the answer that each of us owes \$47, and my friend gets the answer that each of us owes \$146.<sup>116</sup> In this extreme disagreement, my reasons for thinking that my friend is *somehow* mistaken are very good. I might not know exactly where my friend made the mistake and what explains the fact that he made a mistake—perhaps my friend had more drinks than I thought he had, or perhaps he glanced at the bill too quickly or perhaps it is something else. Nevertheless, my reasons for thinking that my friend made a mistake are very good. However, since this case is like the ordinary restaurant case, my reasons for thinking that my friend is my epistemic peer are also quite good. Remember, we have done this sort of thing many times before and we have come up with the same answer. So should we substantially revise our beliefs or suspend judgment in this case of extreme disagreement as it is reasonable to do in the case of ordinary disagreement? In order to answer this question, the Unequal Constraint requires us to answer the following question first: are my reasons for the peer belief *substantially weaker* than my reasons for thinking that my friend made a mistake? Although 'sufficiently weak' is a vague notion, it seems clear that the answer to the question is 'yes.' My reasons for thinking the peer belief is substantially weaker than my reasons for thinking that my friend made a mistake. Thus, according to the Unequal Constraint, I am not required to substantially revise my belief or suspend judgment in my answer.

The evaluative requirement, understood as including the two constraints, adds another layer of investigation. It is not enough to say that so-and-so is my peer. More has to be said about my reasons and degree of confidence in the belief that so-and-so is my peer. Cases that typically meet the Equal Constraint are cases of ordinary disagreement that are like the ordinary restaurant case. Cases that typically meet the Unequal Constraint are cases of extreme disagreement that are like the extreme restaurant case. In what follows, I will argue that it is plausible that many, if not all, cases of peer disagreement about disagreement are cases that do not meet the Equal Constraint, and probably do meet the Unequal Constraint.

## Reasons for Accepting Conciliationism

The first part of the solution to the self-undermining problem is the Peer Evaluative Requirement, which I just talked about. The second part has to do with how those mature believers who already accept conciliationism come to be convinced of it and continue to be convinced of it. I will argue that given the way we come to be convinced of conciliationism, our reasons for accepting conciliationism will almost always be significantly stronger than our reasons for accepting the belief that so-and-so is our epistemic peer who disagrees with us about conciliationism. If so, then the peer evaluative requirement can do the rest of the work. According to the Unequal Constraint, in a situation where your reasons for accepting that so-and-so is your epistemic peer is significantly weaker than your reasons for accepting that your peer made a mistake, you are not required to substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment.

How do we come to be convinced of conciliationism? Typically we become convinced of conciliationism by looking at specific cases of peer disagreement. The ordinary restaurant case seems to have a clear intuitive verdict, and that verdict is that one should substantially revise her beliefs or

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<sup>116</sup> This case is similar to the case in Christensen (2007), pp. 200-201.

suspend judgment in that case. What is driving these intuitions is *epistemic symmetry*. There is epistemic symmetry between the following two propositions: (1) you made a mistake in your calculation, and (2) your peer made a mistake in his calculation. In other words, you have no epistemic reason to prefer your answer over your peer's answer.

One might push back here and argue that this is not the case. One of you does have an epistemic reason to prefer one answer over another. Whoever in fact reasoned correctly is the one who has an epistemic reason to prefer his answer over his peer's answer.<sup>117</sup> Notice that this response points to something that neither you nor your peer is aware of at any time before or right after you find out about the disagreement. It would be great if you or your peer grasped the fact that one of you reasoned correctly. However, from your point of view and from your peer's point of view, you have no idea who reasoned correctly.<sup>118</sup> In fact, part of the story about why you have no epistemic reason to prefer your answer over your peer's answer is precisely that you or your peer have no idea who reasoned correctly.

Secondly, we can stipulate that you *both* reasoned incorrectly. Or perhaps we can change the example into a dispute about something that has two different correct answers (though you and your peer don't know this), and you and your peer both reasoned correctly to the different answers. Again, in both of these situations, the fact that you both reasoned incorrectly or correctly is a fact that we, the ones who stipulated the case, are aware of, but it is not a fact that the two agents involved in the disagreement are aware of. Thus, right after you and your peer find out about the disagreement, you and your peer face an epistemic symmetry about who made the mistake: you, your peer, or both? There is no reason to prefer one or the other, and whether one of you in fact reasoned correctly or both of you in fact reasoned incorrectly or correctly does not break the relevant symmetry.

The claim—if there is an epistemic symmetry in a case of peer disagreement, then one should substantially revise his beliefs or suspend judgment—seems to be strongly supported by philosophical intuition. It is the type of belief that we find doxastically appealing upon reflection. Also, this claim does a good job of explaining our intuitions about a host of cases like the ordinary restaurant case. However, these supports for the claim might become weakened when we consider other types of cases of peer disagreement. Namely, cases of extreme disagreement.

Recall the extreme restaurant case from the previous section. In that case, you and your friend, whom you take to be your epistemic peer, were calculating each one's share of the bill, and your peer's answer was much larger than your answer, but your answer was something closer to what someone might expect the right answer to be by quickly glancing at the bill and the number of people that need to pay. Someone whom you take to be your epistemic peer has mentally calculated the same thing you calculated but came up with a radically different answer. These types of cases seem to put pressure on our previous strong intuitions. First, we look at ordinary cases of disagreement, and our intuitive verdict strongly suggests a conciliatory response. But once we look at cases of extreme disagreement like the extreme restaurant case, this is no longer the case. Hence, whether the claim—i.e. “if there is an epistemic symmetry in a case of peer disagreement, then one should substantially revise his beliefs or suspend judgment”—is strongly supported by intuition depends on the type of peer disagreement case we are considering.

The obvious response here is that these types of cases of extreme peer disagreement are not cases with epistemic symmetry. For example, David Christensen locates the asymmetry in what he calls a ‘commonsense math check.’<sup>119</sup> He says that unlike your dissenter, you have a reason

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<sup>117</sup> This is the verdict of the right-reasoned view. See Kelly (2005).

<sup>118</sup> Thomas Kelly's new modified view, the Total Evidence view, has conceded this point. See Kelly (2011).

<sup>119</sup> Christensen (2007), pp. 200-201.

independent of the disagreement that justifies your answer, namely you have a ‘commonsense’ math check. By using this commonsense math check, you can immediately recognize that your dissenter’s answer is wrong.

However, this response by Christensen fails because we can construct another case, one that is very similar to the original case, but both of you perform the commonsense math check. Or perhaps we can stipulate that in fact no one performs the commonsense math check in order to preserve symmetry. Thus, this type of response is not adequate because it relies heavily on the fact that there is some dispute-independent reason present in the case. Once we change the facts of the case so it will no longer include these types of dispute-independent reasons, then either the problem reemerges or we need a new explanation of why the new case does not contain epistemic symmetry. If this new explanation also relies on the specific internal details of the new case, then we can construct another extreme case that excludes those specific details, and so on and so forth. Thus, we need a different explanation of why cases of extreme disagreement are not cases with epistemic symmetry.

The peer evaluative requirement provides this type of explanation. The peer evaluative requirement forces us to examine peer disagreements more closely. It is not enough to simply assert that so-and-so is a peer, although that might be enough to call the case a case of peer disagreement. More needs to be done. Most importantly, the reasons for accepting the peer belief, the strength of those reasons, and the strength of the reasons for accepting that your dissenter has made a mistake, all need to be explicitly stated and evaluated in a peer disagreement case.

In the extreme disagreement case we are considering, the asymmetry would be located in the fact that your reasons for accepting that your peer made a mistake are significantly stronger than your reasons for accepting that your friend is your epistemic peer. In other words, your reasons for accepting that your friend is your peer put epistemic pressure on you insofar as your reasons for accepting that your peer made a mistake are at least virtually equal to your reasons for accepting that you made a mistake. In the above extreme disagreement, given that your reasons for accepting that your friend made a mistake are significantly stronger than your reasons for accepting that your friend is your peer, you can be content with concluding that *somewhere* your friend made a mistake. This can refer to a number of things: it could mean that perhaps your friend had much more to drink than you thought she did (after all your reasons for accepting that she’s your peer aren’t that strong when compared to your reasons for accepting that she made a mistake), or it could mean that your friend might have glanced too quickly when she looked at the bill, or a number of other things could have happened. You don’t actually have to know what in fact happened. The mere fact that your reasons for accepting that your friend made a mistake are significantly stronger than your reasons for accepting that your friend is your peer permits you to rationally adopt the stance that *somewhere* your peer made a mistake.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Does this mean that the disagreement itself gives you reason for accepting that your peer has somewhere made a mistake? In other words, does the Unequal Constraint violate the principle often referred to as Independence? It depends on how you parse out the things that fall under the category of dispute-independent. If your reasons for accepting that so-and-so is your epistemic peer are dispute-independent, then the answer is ‘no, the Unequal Constraint does not violate Independence.’ If those reasons are not dispute-independent, then the answer is ‘yes.’ There is another level of complexity in answering this question. The reasons you have for accepting that so-and-so is your epistemic peer are only *part* of the explanation. The other part consists of your reasons for thinking that your peer made a mistake. This other part will likely fall under the dispute-dependent category no matter how you parse that category out. Hence, at best, we can say that perhaps part of the explanation is dispute-independent, which means that part does not violate Independence. Whether that is sufficient for the *whole* explanation not to violate Independence, I do not know. I will leave that up to the proponents of Independence to judge for themselves. See Christensen (2009), p. 758, and (2011), pp.

The peer evaluative requirement provides us with a better explanation. The requirement adds an extra layer of testing that can screen off cases of extreme disagreement. In some cases, there might not be enough information for the evaluative requirement to do its job. In that situation, we have to ask for the additional information. If it turns out that in a case where someone is your peer, and the reasons for accepting the belief that so-and-so is your peer are at least virtually equal to the belief that your peer made a mistake—that is, the case satisfies the Equal Constraint—then we can be confident that the case is a peer disagreement with relevant epistemic symmetry such that you are required to either substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment.

Call cases that satisfy the Equal Constraint, *genuine peer disagreements*. With that in mind, let us spell out this new version of conciliationism that allows peer disagreement cases to be filtered through the Equal Constraint:

(A\*) In the face of a *genuine* peer disagreement, you are epistemically required to substantially revise your belief or suspend judgment.

Unlike (A) (without the asterisk) in the beginning of section two, (A\*) restricts conciliationism's domain to genuine peer disagreements. Much of the disagreement about conciliationism in the peer disagreement literature is about which cases of peer disagreement are cases that call for belief revision or suspension and which cases do not call for belief revision or suspension. Even proponents of views that are meant to be non-conciliatory hold that there are cases of peer disagreement that call for belief revision or suspension, so there is no serious dispute about whether there are some cases of peer disagreement that call for substantial belief revision or belief suspension.<sup>121</sup> These non-conciliatory views realize that to do anything else would be highly counterintuitive. There are clear cases of peer disagreement that require belief revision or suspension. It is difficult to get around that. The real issue is about cases that do not seem to require belief revision or belief suspension like the extreme restaurant case. Here I have shown that these types of cases are not genuine cases of peer disagreement, and hence they fall outside the scope of conciliationism understood as (A\*). Thus, conciliationism, understood this way, does not lead to these counterintuitive results.

No doubt, epistemologists will continue to disagree about conciliationism, understood as a view that accepts (A\*). However, I take it that virtually anyone who accepts (A\*) will hold that a peer disagreement about (A\*) is not a genuine peer disagreement. In other words, a peer disagreement about (A\*) is one where the Equal Constraint is not met. Recall that Equal Constraint says:

*In a case of peer disagreement* involving me and someone else, if my reasons for accepting the peer belief are at least virtually equal to my reasons for accepting that my peer has made a mistake, then I am required to substantially revise my belief or suspend judgment in my answer.<sup>122</sup>

The disagreement will not meet the Equal Constraint because those who accept (A\*) will take (A\*) to be a truth that they are extremely confident in. Of course, we can quibble about specific cases, but notice that the quibble here isn't about (A\*) but about whether the cases in question are genuine cases of peer disagreement or not. Rather, someone who disagrees about (A\*) would have to hold

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1-2, for what Independence exactly says. For criticism, see Lackey (2013), Kelly (2013), and Moon (2018). For a defense, see Christensen (forthcomingA) and (forthcomingB), and Matheson (2015).

<sup>121</sup> In Kelly (2011), p. 208, he explicitly claims that his Total Evidence View, a form of non-conciliationism, does require substantial belief revision in a peer disagreement case about a horse race.

<sup>122</sup> See section 4.1.

that in cases with epistemic symmetry—remember we might not know with certainty which cases these are—one can have reason to prefer her answer over the answer of her peer.

If you accept (A\*) and are confronted with someone you take to be a peer who rejects (A\*), then your reasons for accepting (A\*) are going to be substantially weightier than your reasons for accepting that so-and-so is your peer with respect to this issue. Like the extreme restaurant case, you do not have to know where the mistake lies. Perhaps your peer does not see something that you see. Perhaps your basic and fundamental intuitions about the matter or your intuitions about certain cases that lead you to accept (A\*) are different than your peer's intuitions about the matter. The important thing to see is how you come to be confident in conciliationism and how you come to believe that so-and-so is your peer concerning (A\*). In the next section, we will look at two models of the *type* of reasons one might have for accepting (A\*).

## Two Models: Intuitionism and Reflective Equilibrium

In this section, I will consider the type of reasons one might have for accepting an abstract epistemic principle such as (A\*). The first obvious candidate is intuition. On this view, certain epistemic principles are intuitively appealing upon reflection.<sup>123</sup> Another candidate, which is compatible with the first candidate, is reflective equilibrium. We consider different concrete cases and develop an epistemic principle that plays an important role in explaining these cases.<sup>124</sup> I call the first candidate, Intuitionism, and the second, Reflective Equilibrium.<sup>125</sup>

According to Intuitionism, if you accept conciliationism at all, you would accept it because you think it is a truth that you can *just see* or a truth that you have direct access to.<sup>126</sup> By contrast, the type of reasons you would have for accepting that so-and-so is your peer are indirect and not immediate. The way you might come to develop reasons for accepting that so-and-so is your epistemic peer would involve empirical investigation of a certain sort. And typically we are not active in undertaking such an investigation. Rather, our judgements about who is an epistemic peer are based on our experiences and relationships with other people, including those who have documented credibility (e.g. a degree in the relevant field). The way you might grasp the truth of conciliationism is very different than the way you might come to belief that someone is your peer.<sup>127</sup> And because of this difference, it is likely that a disagreement about (A\*) will not be a genuine peer disagreement, i.e. a disagreement that satisfies the Equal Constraint.

According to the Reflective Equilibrium model, someone who accepts (A\*) accepts it because it makes good sense of a range of cases. The epistemic principle (A\*) does a good job of explaining the important features that are found in cases of peer disagreement. (A\*) tells us to substantially revise our beliefs or suspend judgment in cases of genuine peer disagreement. As we have seen, cases of genuine peer disagreement are cases that have epistemic symmetry. Hence, in essence, (A\*) is telling us that we should substantially revise our beliefs in cases of epistemic symmetry. (A\*)'s verdict on such cases matches our intuitive verdicts about the cases to a great extent. The case in which conciliation seems the wrong strategy are those that involve what I have

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<sup>123</sup> A defender of this position in epistemology is Bealer (1998).

<sup>124</sup> A possible defender of this view in epistemology is Chisholm (1989).

<sup>125</sup> There are probably other candidates that are closely associated with these two candidates. For example, perhaps a principle can be justified by some type of inductive or abductive method. A principle that successfully predicts things that happened in the past might be justified on the basis of such predictions. Similarly a principle that explains or best explains a set of cases is one that has a lot going for it. I think the inductive and abductive approach can be included in the reflective equilibrium approach, at least I will take it that this latter approach includes these sorts of considerations.

<sup>126</sup> For a defense of how we can come to grasp these truths with our intuition, see Bengson (2015).

<sup>127</sup> Bogardus (2009) also defends the claim that we come to accept conciliationism by direct acquaintance.



called, extreme disagreement. But since (A\*) allows the Unequal Constraint to filter cases of peer disagreement, (A\*) does not have a problem with such cases of extreme disagreement.

Whether you find Intuitionism or Reflective Equilibrium to be more plausible (also remember that the two are not mutually exclusive), a person who accepts (A\*) and runs into a peer disagreement about (A\*) they will likely be in a position that mirrors the structure of a case of extreme disagreement rather than a case of ordinary disagreement. Intuitionism explains this by pointing to differences in the *type* and strength of reasons for accepting (A\*), on the one hand, and for accepting that so-and-so is my epistemic peer, on the other hand. The difference in reasons is that the former are immediately grasped and have a strong doxastic appeal whereas the latter are not immediately grasped nor do they have the same type of doxastic appeal. On the Reflective Equilibrium model, one's reasons for accepting (A\*) will likely be based on the plethora of cases that support it, as we have seen above. Here, the difference between one's reasons for accepting (A\*) and one's reasons for accepting that so-and-so is one's epistemic peer is not a difference in the type of reasons, but a difference in the strength of the reasons. The explanatory power of (A\*) has much more going for it than my reasons for accepting that so-and-so is my epistemic peer.

Given what I have said, is it impossible for one to be in an epistemic position where they are in a genuine peer disagreement about (A\*), i.e. in a peer disagreement about conciliationism that meets the Equal Constraint? It is not impossible. Here is a possible situation in which this might happen: you just encountered conciliationism for the first time, so you don't yet know much about it, but from the little you know, you find it appealing. However, your friend whom you intellectually respect and have known for a long time encounters it too for the first time but is strongly inclined to reject it. In this situation, you are likely in a genuine peer disagreement. However, this is not a genuine peer disagreement that you cannot escape from. You can escape from it by looking into conciliationism more deeply until your reasons for accepting it sufficiently outweigh your reasons for thinking your friend is your epistemic peer in this area. Is it possible to be in a genuine cases of peer disagreement about conciliationism even after looking into the matter extensively? Yes, it is possible, but highly unlikely. For example, perhaps God told you that your friend is actually your perfect epistemic peer, and his intuitions are exactly as reliable as your intuitions and his assessment of cases are exactly as plausible as yours. Suppose further that your reasons for accepting that this experience of God is veridical are extremely strong. If so, then in this situation your reasons for accepting that your friend is your epistemic peer are extremely high, and thus might meet the Equal Constraint. However, this sort of scenario and others like it are highly unlikely.

It is important to keep in mind that what I have said so far should be understood as giving *epistemic advice* to an agent who already accepts (A\*). I'm not suggesting that from the God's eye-view, what I have said so far, shows that conciliationism is obviously true and anyone who disagrees is mistaken. It is compatible with what I have said that conciliationism is in fact false and that those who disagree with it are correct. What I have tried to do is analyze the type of reasons someone who already accepts (A\*) might have for accepting it, comparing them with the reasons that same person might have for thinking that their dissenter is their epistemic peer. Typically, the reasons for accepting (A\*), at least from the perspective of the individual who already accepts (A\*), are going to be significantly stronger than the reasons for accepting that so-and-so is one's peer. And this claim is justified by looking at the way we come to be confident in conciliationism understood as (A\*). If you accept conciliationism, you do so because it is either doxastically very compelling to you or it makes very good sense of a host of peer disagreement cases (or both). The same could be said about other basic epistemic principles or philosophical principles more generally. That's not typically the case with the reasons one might have for accepting that so-and-so is one's epistemic peer. If so, then one will not likely find oneself in a genuine peer disagreement concerning (A\*). Thus, the self-

undermining objection will not get off the ground for those who encounter peer disagreements about conciliationism that do not meet the Equal Constraint.

## Skepticism Revisited

Recall the skepticism from section 3.2. This skepticism seemed to expose a deeper problem with the self-undermining objection. Whenever someone tries to defend conciliationism, the skeptic argues that the defense itself faces a peer disagreement, and so it should be rejected on conciliatory grounds. Now suppose the skeptic enters and argues that there are people who reject that I come to believe (A\*) the way that I have described it in either of the two models from section 4.3. If so, then my defense of (A\*) faces a peer disagreement and should be rejected on conciliatory grounds.<sup>128</sup>

(A\*) has the tools to combat this type of skepticism. With Intuitionism, what is doing the work in a case of peer disagreement about (A\*) is the doxastic first-personal experience I have when I accept (A\*). Someone who accepts (A\*) finds (A\*) doxastically very compelling. I certainly do. This person is drawn to accept (A\*) in a way similar to the way that one might be drawn to accept complex, but conceptually true principles. Now this type of person is confronted with another peer disagreement, but this time it is a peer disagreement about the defense of (A\*) from section 4.2. Whether this peer disagreement will require that we substantially revise our belief or suspend judgment will depend on whether it is a genuine peer disagreement. That is, it will depend on whether it satisfies the Equal Constraint.

It does not satisfy the Equal Constraint. On the one hand, I have a skeptic who assures me that there are peers who disagree with my defense from section 4.2. And on the other hand, I can reflect and immediately notice this strong doxastic experience I have towards accepting (A\*). It is difficult to see how the Equal Constraint can be met in this situation. Not only that, but it seems that the Unequal Constraint is met in this situation. Surely my reasons for accepting that (A\*) is doxastically very compelling are significantly stronger than whatever reasons I might have for accepting that those who disagree with me about the defense in section 4.2 are my epistemic peers with respect to that.

With Intuitionism, the situation the skeptic presents me with is similar (though not identical) to the following situation: I look down and see that I have hands, so I instantly believe, with great confidence, that I have hands. The skeptic then tells me that there are people who disagree about the way that I came to believe that I have hands. It is easy to see in that situation that my reasons for accepting the belief about the way I came to believe that I have hands are much stronger than my reasons for accepting that these people who disagree with me about the way I came to believe that I have hands are my epistemic peers. It's true that I might not know where they went wrong (maybe they have a different experience of the matter and infer that my experience is like their experience), but that does not change the fact that my internal experience is stronger than the skeptic's testimony about the existence of these peers that disagree with me.

The skeptic can of course apply another layer of skepticism. The skeptic can tell me that there are people who are my peers who might disagree with what I have said in this section. Again, this too will not pass the Equal Constraint, and as such will not be a genuine peer disagreement. I suspect the same thing will happen no matter how many layers of skepticism the skeptic brings forth.

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<sup>128</sup> The skeptic can also reject the evaluative requirement. However, I think this will not work either because I have defined (A\*) in a way that includes at least one of the constraints, the Equal Constraint. So rejecting it would be tantamount to rejecting (A\*) itself, which is understood in reference to the Equal Constraint.

With the Reflective Equilibrium model, the same thing could be said. I have to weigh the plethora of cases that I have in support of (A\*) against my reasons for accepting that so-and-so is my epistemic peer. It is likely that the explanatory power that (A\*) has from these many cases will win out. However, what is there to say to the skeptic when he applies another layer of skepticism to the cases themselves. The skeptic might say, 'but people disagree with you about whether (A\*) does a good job of explaining these cases.' At this point, it will be difficult to be confident that these disputes about whether the cases are well explained by (A\*) are not cases of genuine peer disagreement. This seems to be the weakest point for the proponent of the Reflective Equilibrium. However, one thing the proponent of the Reflective Equilibrium model can say is that my cumulative intuitions about these cases and the fact that (A\*) can explain them so well are substantially stronger than my reasons for accepting that so-and-so is my epistemic peer when it comes to disagreements about our intuitive verdict regarding these cases. Although I think this response is not as clear cut as the response that the proponent of intuitionism might have, it can still work.

## Conclusion

The self-undermining objection against conciliationism claims that we should treat conciliationism the same way we should treat any other peer disagreement because there are peer disagreements about conciliationism. Some have argued that because of the self-referential feature of this objection, there is a deeper problem here. Adam Elga claims that the deeper problem is that conciliationism is incoherent because it recommends competing advice. In response, I argued that the key ingredient that is needed to show incoherence is present in Elga's *Consumer Reports* and M1 inductive method examples, but it is not present in what conciliationism recommends. The deeper problem is located elsewhere. The deeper problem is an iterative type of skepticism that applies conciliationism to any defense or any defense of a defense of conciliationism.

In the remainder of the chapter, I argued that if we adopt the peer evaluative requirement—a requirement that puts one's reasons for accepting that so-and-so is one's peer in the spotlight—then we can properly respond to the self-undermining objection and the deeper skeptical problem. Once we adopt the peer evaluative requirement, the next step is to see how we come to be confident in accepting conciliationism. If one accepts conciliationism, then one accepts it because it is doxastically very compelling or it makes good sense of many cases. From the perspective of someone who accepts conciliationism, a peer disagreement about conciliationism will not be a disagreement that passes the Equal Constraint from the evaluative requirement. According to the Equal Constraint, belief revision or suspension is required if one's reasons for accepting that so-and-so is one's epistemic peer are at least virtually equal to one's reasons for accepting that one's epistemic peer has made a mistake. In fact, it is likely that such disagreements will meet the Unequal Constraint, which means we would not be required to substantially revise our beliefs or suspend judgment in those cases. Given how one comes to accept conciliationism, one's reasons for and confidence in conciliationism will be significantly greater than one's reasons for and confidence in the belief that so-and-so is one's epistemic peer. Lastly, I argued that the iterative type of skepticism can be avoided by the strategy outlined in section 4.4. If the peer evaluative requirement can do this much work for conciliationism, then it should be accepted as a principle for evaluating peer disagreements.

## Dissertation Conclusion

Disagreements are rampant, and they come in many different shapes and sizes. How we should epistemically respond to disagreement is an important question for two reasons. First, it is important because it is something we face daily. It is part of our contemporary society to face disagreement from our friends, family, colleagues, and even strangers we encounter through social media. Second, it is important because at least some disagreements impact our epistemic standing with respect to the disputed proposition.

Not every type of disagreement poses an epistemic problem. Some disagreements are only apparent disagreements. Perhaps at bottom they rest on verbal disputes. Other disagreements, although genuine, might not pose a problem because one of the dissenters is ignorant of the relevant evidence or perhaps the dissenter is inebriated. So then in what situation is disagreement epistemically relevant? It is at least relevant in situations where my dissenter is an epistemic peer. Your epistemic peer is your evidential and cognitive equal. That is, she is exposed to and familiar with roughly the same evidence and arguments, and her intellectual virtues (e.g., open-mindedness, intelligence, honesty, thoroughness, etc.) are on par with your intellectual virtues. Typically, I come to believe that my friend and I are just as likely to be correct about some question Q because I believe that my friend and I are evidential and cognitive equals with respect to Q. Thus, I take it that having sufficient evidence that your friend is your evidential and cognitive equal with respect to some question Q is also evidence that you and your friend are equally likely to answer Q correctly.

A case of disagreement between epistemic peers is a case of peer disagreement. Peer disagreement cases naturally give rise to the following question:

**Peer Disagreement Question:** Are you epistemically required to substantially revise your belief in the face of peer disagreement?

There are three answers to this question: (1) you are always required to substantially revise your belief in the face of peer disagreement, (2) you are never required to substantially revise your belief in the face of peer disagreement, and (3) you are sometimes required to substantially revise your belief in the face of peer disagreement. I shall refer to these three answers by the following labels: Always-Revise, Never-Revise, and Sometimes-Revise. Always-Revise and Never-Revise face *the problem of intuitive adequacy*. The problem facing Always-Revise is that it cannot account for the intuitive verdict of cases of extreme disagreement, and the problem facing Never-Revise is that it cannot account for the intuitive verdict of cases of ordinary disagreement.

The problem of intuitive adequacy assumes a modest desideratum for assessing answers to the peer disagreement question:

**Intuitive Adequacy:** A view must reliably track the clear intuitive answers to peer disagreement cases.

This desideratum is a minimal requirement that any plausible view about peer disagreement should meet. A plausible view should to some extent track our clear and strong intuitions. Although this desideratum might not be sufficient for a view to be plausible, it would be difficult for a view to be plausible if it completely failed this desideratum. Also, views can meet this desideratum with different levels of intensity. It is not an all-or-nothing type of requirement. However, I take it that

failing to account for certain types of cases is a serious cost to a view. And this is a serious problem for Always-Revise and Never-Revise.

What makes cases of disagreement ordinary is the specific content and context of the disagreement between the individuals involved. Typically, the divergence between my belief and the rival belief is very small and reasonable. For example, in the Mental Math case, in the first chapter, there is only a two-dollar difference between my friend's answer and my answer. In the Horse Race case, from the first chapter, the horses were "side-by-side," and the race was "extremely close." The beliefs of the individuals involved in an ordinary disagreement are not obviously implausible. The best way to grasp the distinction between cases of ordinary and extreme disagreement is by looking at and contrasting different examples.

Sometimes-Revise, on the other hand, must provide an adequate answer to the following question: in what situation are you required to substantially revise your beliefs and in what situation are you not required to substantially revise your beliefs? A plausible answer to this question comes to us by implementing constraints on the peer evaluative requirement, which I argued for in the first chapter. The peer evaluative requirement tells us to focus on the reasons we have for thinking that our dissenter is our epistemic peer and compare those to the reasons for thinking that our dissenter is mistaken.

From these considerations about disagreement more generally, I turn to *moral* disagreement, specifically widespread moral disagreement and whether these kinds of disagreements undermine our moral knowledge. One argument for moral skepticism begins with the observation that there are many widespread moral disagreements. There are widespread moral disagreements about abortion, capital punishment, how much we should help the needy, animal rights, euthanasia, the ethics of immigration, and many other topics. It is then argued that widespread moral disagreements are peer disagreements. A peer disagreement is a disagreement that epistemically requires the individuals involved in the disagreement to suspend judgment. Thus, widespread moral disagreements undermine a significant portion of our moral knowledge.

The problem of widespread moral disagreement faces a serious vulnerability: either widespread moral disagreements are not peer disagreements or if they are, it is next to impossible to show that widespread moral disagreements are peer disagreements. First, a widespread disagreement consists of many individuals. It is unlikely that the overall epistemic credentials of those on both sides of the disagreement are equal. Moreover, it is next to impossible to figure out and weigh the epistemic credentials of those on both sides of the disagreement. Second, it is quite difficult to identify the evidential and cognitive facts that are relevant in assessing one's epistemic credentials in a widespread moral disagreement.

For example, in a disagreement about splitting the restaurant bill, the relevant facts in assessing one's epistemic credentials would be one's ability to do basic math. In a moral disagreement, the relevant facts in assessing one's epistemic credentials are not as easily discernible. This vulnerability is not decisive, but it dramatically weakens the problem of widespread moral disagreement. In chapter three, I developed a problem from moral disagreement that does not face the same vulnerability. Unlike the problem of widespread moral disagreement, this problem does not begin with the observation that there are widespread moral disagreements. Rather, it begins with the observation that there are local disagreements about many of our moral beliefs. By local disagreements, I mean disagreements between you and those who are sufficiently close to you. Typically, these are individuals such as your family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. I argued that to avoid this problem, one must do something. The problem of local moral disagreement gives rise to a practical problem. To solve this practical problem, I provide epistemic advice about how to improve one's epistemic position. By following this advice, one can avoid the problem of local moral disagreement. It will turn out that it is easier for the novice disagreeing with

the novice, as opposed to the expert disagreeing with the expert, to follow the epistemic advice. Thus, the problem of local moral disagreement is a more pressing problem for the expert than it is for the novice. However, the expert is in a better position to make important progress regarding some questions, and this should motivate us not to quit our investigations when we encounter disagreements, even disagreements that result in stagnation.

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