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Epistemic Peerhood and the Epistemology of Disagreement

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Abstract

The epistemic significance of peer disagreement plays a central role in social epistemology and affects many types of beliefs that we hold. For instance, religious, political and moral beliefs that are normally taken to be fairly personal and even sacred, are all potentially destabilised in the presence of peer disagreement. Conciliatory views on disagreement, in particular, argue that in the face of disagreement with someone you take as an epistemic equal, you are obligated to revise your doxastic attitudes towards the disputed belief. The purpose of this paper is to argue against Conciliatory views insofar as they assert that peer disagreements alone rationally require a person to revise their doxastic attitudes. My paper proceeds as follows: I offer an evaluation of the notion of epistemic peerhood, and conclude that utilising such notions of epistemic peerhood on Conciliatory views generates absurd results. I then propose that there should be other considerations on top of peer disagreement that should be taken into account for any doxastic revision to occur.

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1. Introduction

> For I was conscious of knowing practically nothing.
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> - Socrates[2]

Peer disagreement is an interesting epistemic phenomenon where two individuals who are identified as epistemic peers (people with the same processing powers or epistemic background) disagree on the truth of some given proposition. Thomas Kelly, in illustrating peer disagreement, brings up the example of two people checking the temperature of a room:

'You and I are each attempting to determine the current temperature by consulting our own personal thermometers. In the past, the two thermometers have been equally reliable. At time t0, I consult my thermometer, find that it reads sixty-eight degrees, and so immediately take up the corresponding belief. Meanwhile, you consult your thermometer, find that it reads seventy-two degrees, and so immediately take up that belief. At time t1, you and I compare notes and discover that our thermometers have disagreed. How, if at all, should we revise our original opinions about the temperature in the light of this new information?'[3]

As asked by Kelly at the end of his illustration, how then should an epistemic agent respond appropriately to such peer disagreements? Different philosophers have concluded differently about the epistemic significance of peer disagreement, but there are two main camps set in response to this question: Conciliatory views and Steadfast view.[4] Given a disputed proposition between two epistemic peers, Conciliationists hold that the involved peers should modify their doxastic attitudes towards the disputed proposition such that both peers move their doxastic attitudes

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[2] Plato. (2002) *Five dialogues Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo* in Georges Maximilien Antoine Grube & John M Cooper, Trans., Hackett.

[3] Kelly, Thomas. (2010) 'Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence', in Richard Feldman & Ted A Warfield, eds., *Disagreement*. essay, Oxford University Press.

[4] Matheson, Jonathan. (2015) *The epistemic significance of disagreement*. Palgrave Macmillan.

closer to the other party.[5] Proponents of the Steadfast view, on the other hand, deny that there is a need to change one's doxastic attitudes towards the disputed proposition.[6] Rather, epistemic peers involved in a disagreement are entitled to hold on steadfastly to their prior beliefs even after occurrences of disagreement. In this paper, I will argue against Conciliatory views by arguing that peer disagreement alone is not a tenable basis for constituting defeaters for an epistemic agent's beliefs. In order to show this, I first argue that the general characterisation of epistemic peerhood cannot be used to assess a potential epistemic peer. I will then argue that proposed methods of assessing epistemic peerhood as articulated by philosophers in the disagreement literature, when utilised by Conciliatory views to generate peer disagreements, yields problematic consequences. These consequences include a form of extreme unqualified dogmatism such that our beliefs can never be wrong in the face of any disagreement, and an extreme form of epistemic scepticism that entails everyone knowing 'practically nothing'. I then propose that augmenting the conditions for peer disagreement to include propositional considerations on top of pure disagreements alone would help alleviate the issues raised.

The paper will proceed as follows: In section 2, I will elaborate on the general characterisation of epistemic peerhood. I then explain that there are two main ways of assessing whether an individual is an epistemic peer – (i) through the agreement and disagreement of auxiliary beliefs and (ii) through the evaluation of relevant credibility conferring features present in a potential epistemic peer. I will then explicate Conciliatory views further. In section 3, I apply (i) to Conciliatory views and show how it yields the peculiar result of justifying extreme unqualified

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[5] See Feldman and Elga for Conciliatory views: Feldman, Richard. (2006) 'Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement', in Stephen C Hetherington, ed., *Epistemology futures*. essay, Oxford University Press; Feldman, Richard. (2007) 'Reasonable Religious Disagreements', in Louise M. Antony, ed., *Philosophers without gods: Meditations on atheism and the secular life*, Oxford University Press; Elga, Adam. (2007) 'Reflection and disagreement' *Nous* **41**: 478–502.

[6] See Kelly, Bergmann and Enoch for Steadfast views: Kelly, Thomas. (2010) 'Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence', in Richard Feldman & Ted A Warfield, eds., *Disagreement*, Oxford University Press; Bergmann, Michael. (2015) 'Reasonable Religious Disagreements', in Jonathan Lee Kvanvig, ed., *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press; Enoch, David. (2010) 'Not just a truthometer: Taking oneself seriously (but not too seriously) in cases of peer disagreement' *Mind* **119**: 953–997.

dogmatism about our beliefs. In section 4, I apply (ii) to Conciliatory views and show how it renders any beliefs for any given epistemic agent to always be uncertain. Finally in section 5, I draw from the discussions in sections 3 and 4 to conclude that peer disagreement alone is insufficient to constitute a defeater for an epistemic agent's beliefs. I then propose that instead of revising doxastic attitudes based purely on instances of disagreement themselves, an epistemic agent should also consider relevant propositional content related to peer disagreements when making doxastic revisions.

2. Epistemic Peerhood and Conciliatory Views

Conciliatory views of peer disagreement heavily rely on certain characterisations of epistemic peerhood in order to work. In this section, I will first outline the core characteristics of epistemic peerhood as found in the disagreement literature before elaborating further on Conciliatory views. The general characterisation of epistemic peerhood is embedded within the wider peer disagreement framework, so it is to this framework first that we turn to. Nathan King proposes four conditions that accommodate most cases of disagreement within the peer disagreement literature:

1. *The disagreement condition*: S believes P, while T believes ~P
2. *The same evidence condition*: S and T have the same P-relevant evidence, E.
3. *The dispositional condition*: S and T are equally disposed to respond to E in an epistemically appropriate way.
4. *The acknowledgement condition*: S and T have good reason to think conditions (1)-(3) are satisfied.[7]

Conditions (1)-(4) cover two main areas central to generating genuine cases of peer disagreement. First, for an instance of disagreement itself, there has to be awareness on the part of both parties involved that each party holds opposing views (i.e., (1) S believes P while T believes ~P) and that both parties are aware that there is another

[7] King, Nathan. (2011) 'Disagreement: What's the problem? or a good peer is hard to *find' Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **85**: 252-253.

party holding an opposing view (i.e., (4) the acknowledgement condition). Secondly, and vitally, both parties need to be epistemic peers, King here utilises (2) and (3) to cover the general idea of how an epistemic peer should be like. An epistemic peer would need to possess the same access to the same body of evidence in relation to a disputed claim (i.e., (2) the same evidence condition) and they also need to be equally able to process the aforementioned body of evidence (i.e., (3) the dispositional condition). Analogously, Lougheed also notes that common standards used by many philosophers to characterise epistemic peerhood are, in fact, *cognitive* and *evidential* standards.[8] This aligns well with King's conditions of (2) and (3), such that epistemic peers need to have the same cognitive abilities insofar as they may possess the same epistemic virtues like reliability, honesty or having good memory, or have the same cognitive processing power whilst evaluating relevant evidence (i.e., following (3)). Epistemic peers also need to possess the same body of evidence (i.e., following (2)). King and Lougheed's survey of the general character of epistemic peerhood then yields two defining characteristics: the same evidential possession and evidential processing abilities.[9]

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[8] These citations are from Lougheed: Lougheed, Kirk. (2020) *The epistemic benefits of disagreement*. Springer; Lackey, A Jennifer. (2014) 'Taking Religious Disagreement Seriously', in Laura Frances Callahan & Timothy O'Connor, eds., *Religious faith and intellectual virtue*, Oxford University Press; Oppy, Graham. (2010) 'Disagreement' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **68**: 183–199.

[9] These two characteristics are also mentioned by Kelly, Thomas. (2005) 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement', in Tamar Z Gendler & John Hawthorne, eds., *Oxford studies in epistemology*, Clarendon Press; Matheson, Jonathan. (2015) *The epistemic significance of disagreement*. Palgrave Macmillan; Elgin, Catherine. (2010) 'Persistent Disagreement', in Robert Feldman & Ted A Warfield, eds., *Disagreement*, Oxford University Press. It however should be noted that many other philosophers require *equal* evidence or processing abilities, it does not matter that the relevant bodies of evidence possessed by two epistemic agents are different or that each have different epistemic virtues, as long as both bodies of evidences or overall cognitive abilities are *equally* good both epistemic agents are epistemic peers (See footnote 19 for more details). This is distinguished from the exact *same* evidence or processing abilities. In other words, the type of epistemic virtues, the intellectual background and the relevant body of evidence needs to be close to identical. Nevertheless, for the sake of argument I utilise *equal* conditions instead of *same* conditions, this is as I believe same conditions to be a proper subset of equal conditions. After all, if two conditions are identical (the same), they necessarily have to be equal as well. Additionally, Choo agrees with using equal instead of same conditions, he argues that 'this is because such an understanding of peerhood seems to be the driving force behind the different principles and arguments in the literature. For example, conciliationists think that one should give equal weight to one's disputant in cases where both possess the same evidence and same dispositions *because* having the same evidence and dispositions make both equally likely to be correct in that scenario': Choo, Frederick. (2018) 'The epistemic significance of religious disagreements: Cases of unconfirmed superiority disagreements' *Topoi* **40**: 1139–1147

Despite a rough consensus on what an ideal epistemic peer looks like, these characteristics are admittedly difficult to detect in an epistemic agent in real-world scenarios. After all, outside of idealised disagreements or what Elga calls 'clean' or 'pure' cases of disagreement,[10] it is practically impossible to accurately determine whether a potential epistemic peer possesses the exact same body of evidence as oneself, or if they are able to process relevant pieces of evidence at an equal proficiency as well. Even close to ideal cases of peer disagreement would not seem to suffice to allow one to accurately establish if someone is an epistemic peer. Suppose that there are two philosophy professors who disagree on some philosophical proposition, both possess the same credentials from the same university and more so work as professors in the same philosophy department. Further, both have the same number of publications in the same specialised field. Yet, even in such cases, it seems difficult to assert that both professors would possess the exact same or equal cognitive background or that both are aware of the exact same or equal body of evidence. After all, even with such circumstances in place, either professor could nonetheless have differing overall epistemic virtues or fail to have read a certain relevant publication that counts as evidence. As King notes, such cognitive standards or dispositional conditions require equality of 'reliability with respect to the relevant field of inquiry' where 'general intelligence and logical skill' must also be equal. Furthermore, 'intellectual virtues', 'epistemic virtues such as honesty, carefulness and freedom from bias', and similarity of 'background beliefs' also need to be equal.[11] The complexity of the necessary and sufficient sub-conditions of dispositional conditions/cognitive standards inevitably make it difficult, even in close to ideal real-world cases like that of the two philosophy professors, to determine who an epistemic peer is. King further notes that this complexity also extends to the characteristic of equal evidential possession. He asserts that 'for many disagreements in philosophy and in other fields … intelligent, similarly trained subjects possess bodies of evidence that are overlapping but not co-extensive',[12] and this only considers arguments as evidence. King goes on to note that evidence may also include 'such items as perceptual experiences, rational insights, 'seemings', or

[10] Elga 'Reflection and disagreement', 492.
[11] King 'Disagreement: What's the problem? or a good peer is hard to find', 257-259.
[12] King 'Disagreement: What's the problem? or a good peer is hard to find', 255.

intuitions' which influences a subject's doxastic attitudes in ways that cannot be fully communicated to other people in a propositional sense.[13] Thus, given the epistemic limitations of individual people and the fact that most people do not share coextensive bodies of evidences, the difficulty in assessing epistemic peers based on the characterisation of epistemic peerhood itself is thus further worsened.

How then, should an epistemic agent go about assessing a potential epistemic peer? Frederick Choo suggests that there are two main ways of assessing whether someone is or is not an epistemic peer:[14] First is a method articulated by Adam Elga, here Elga proposes that for 'messy real-world cases', the criterion necessary to assess whether a person is an epistemic peer consists of whether there is a wide-ranging agreement or disagreement of related claims to the disputed claim.[15] There is thus a sort of symmetry between epistemic peers: epistemic peers would have sets of beliefs that are largely in agreement with each other and non-peers would not. In order to illustrate this, he brings up the example of Ann and Beth who are disagreeing on the issue of abortion. For Elga, Ann and Beth have discussed closely related auxiliary claims like whether 'human beings have souls', or whether 'it is permissible to withhold treatment from certain terminally ill infants' and both disagree on all these auxiliary claims.[16] From Ann's perspective, given that Beth is wrong on these many related auxiliary claims, this gives Ann reason to dismiss Beth as an epistemic peer in relation to the disputed claim about abortion. Conversely, if there is wide ranging agreement on related auxiliary claims, Ann has reason to see Beth as an epistemic peer. Thus, Elga argues that 'with respect to many controversial issues, the associates who one counts as peers tend to have views that are similar to one's own.' and epistemic peers are those 'who agree with you on issues closely linked to the one in question.'.[17]

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[13] King 'Disagreement: What's the problem? or a good peer is hard to find', 256.
[14] Choo, 'The epistemic significance of religious disagreements: Cases of unconfirmed superiority disagreements'.
[15] Elga, 'Reflection and disagreement' 492.
[16] Elga, 'Reflection and disagreement' 493.
[17] Elga, 'Reflection and disagreement', 494.

The second method as suggested by Choo, is a relatively more straightforward method of basing epistemic peerhood on 'relevant credibility-conferring features (i.e. evidential possession and processing)'.[18] Choo does anticipate the difficulties raised above about establishing peerhood based on the general characterisation of evidential possession and processing. In response, he suggests that a potential approach to avoid such difficulties is to 'look at one's track record'.[19] In elaboration he states:

> A track record may consist of various things like testimony, institutional certification, having been right in previous disagreements, and so forth. This may tell us if our disputant has the relevant credibility-conferring features without having to identify and assess the specific features.[20]

Choo here adopts a more inductive or probabilistic approach in assessing epistemic peerhood. The level of evidential possession and processing an epistemic agent possesses is in some inductive sense antecedent to the type of track record they have. Hence, by analysing a potential epistemic peer's track record, one can get a possible picture on what their evidential possession and processing capabilities are like. Thus, if someone has a good track record that matches my own, I can take it that there is a good probability that they are my epistemic peer.

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[18] Choo, 'The epistemic significance of religious disagreements: Cases of unconfirmed superiority disagreements', 1141. It should be noted that many philosophers working in the epistemology of disagreement generally are in agreement with notion that relevant credibility-conferring features are vital in assessing a potential epistemic peer. Take for instance Thomas Kelly who argues that individuals are epistemic peers insofar as '(i) they are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on that question' and '(ii) they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness and freedom from bias': Kelly 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement',174. Richard Feldman, for example, in identifying epistemic peers asserts that 'people are epistemic peers when they are roughly equal with respect to intelligence, reasoning powers, background information, etc.': Feldman 'Reasonable Religious Disagreements', 144. Jonathan Matheson thinks if someone is an epistemic peer they will have 'distinct, but equally good, bodies of evidence' and that 'the likelihood of their processing the evidence correctly is equally high': Matheson 'The epistemic significance of disagreement' 22.

[19] Choo, 'The epistemic significance of religious disagreements: Cases of unconfirmed superiority disagreements', 1141.

[20] Choo, 'The epistemic significance of religious disagreements: Cases of unconfirmed superiority disagreements', 1141-1142.

Generally, Conciliatory views assert two theses: (i) When there is a peer disagreement between two epistemic peers A and B about an issue P, the awareness of the peer disagreement alone constitutes a sort of defeater for both A's and B's belief about P prior to the disagreement. And (ii) the defeater generated from the disagreement requires both epistemic peers A and B to modify or change their doxastic attitudes regarding P.[21] Regarding (i), as can be noted from the above discussion, when someone is determined to be an epistemic peer, they would be seen as a reliable indicator of the correct interpretation or inference of some given proposition. Thus, when made aware of a reliable indicator of a proposition that opposes one's own views, this should be taken as a reason (or a defeater) that one's own views may be wrong. This then motivates (ii) such that the involved epistemic peers in the disagreement are now rationally obligated to modify their doxastic attitudes to be appropriately aligned with the new available reasons on what the correct interpretation of a disputed proposition is.

Given the overview on the characterisation and assessment of epistemic peerhood, and how Conciliatory views generally work, we can then inquire about the main contention of this paper: How does the above-mentioned assessment methods of epistemic peerhood work against Conciliatory views of disagreement? Or more precisely, why is disagreement between epistemic peers untenable as a basis for constituting defeaters for disputed beliefs (i.e., Conciliationism)? It is to these arguments that we now turn to.

3. Elga's Wide Ranging Agreement/Disagreement and Conciliatory views

As mentioned, Elga's method of peer assessment relies on wide ranging agreement or disagreement on related claims or beliefs. Despite this method's simplification of the peer assessment process, it nevertheless runs into quite a huge problem when applied to Conciliatory views. Jennifer Lackey in particular points out that:

[21] Matheson 'The epistemic significance of disagreement'.

> A … problem with Elga's view here is that while he advertises it as 'conciliatory' where 'equal weight' is given to one's own belief and to that of one's opponent, it sanctions a dogmatic 'sticking to one's guns' in nearly all of the cases of disagreement that are of deep importance to us. Disagreements regarding religious, moral, political, and philosophical matters, for instance, almost invariably involve opposing views about a range of related issues that will lead the relevant parties to fail to count one another as epistemic peers. On Elga's view, then no doxastic revision is required in all of these cases. Not only is this a peculiar result for a 'conciliatory' view, it also seems epistemically wrong – surely there are some cases where at least some doxastic revision is rationally required when disagreeing about contentious matters, even when the disagreement involves a host of related questions.[22]

I believe Lackey rightly points out that Elga's views entail that for any given controversial disagreement (i.e., on religion, morality or politics), opposing parties would fail to recognise each other as epistemic peers in the first place. Unfortunately, Lackey does not elaborate further on how exactly does disagreements on a certain issue 'invariably involve opposing views about a range of related issues.'[23] In other words, there needs to be an argument elaborating exactly how a disagreement on a disputed issue would necessarily involve disagreement on many related issues as well. I propose that Elga's assessment method entails such consequences due to a presupposition of some coherence relation that holds between a disputed belief and auxiliary related beliefs. I will take it a step further than Lackey and argue that Elga's views not only leads to relevant parties failing to see each other as epistemic peers in controversial disagreements, but also in *all* disagreements. If such an argument is successful, it would demonstrate that Elga's method of assessment practically renders no one to be an epistemic peer, or that sticking to conciliatory views with Elga's assessment methods allows unqualified dogmatism.

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[22] This citation from Lackey is from Lougheed: Lougheed, 'The epistemic benefits of disagreement'; Lackey 'Taking Religious Disagreement Seriously' 308.

[23] Lackey 'Taking Religious Disagreement Seriously' 308.

As mentioned above, Elga uses the terms 'closely linked' or 'closely related' to describe the relation between disputed and auxiliary claims. Nevertheless, Elga does not clearly specify what it actually means for auxiliary claims and a disputed claim to be 'closely related' (insofar as the relation between both types of claims makes the auxiliary claims relevant for the evaluation of someone as an epistemic peer). Thus, in order to try and explicate how Elga understands the relationship between disputed and auxiliary claims, we need to turn to the examples that he raises. In elaboration of his criterion of wide-ranging agreement/disagreement, Elga uses two examples: the Ann and Beth example as noted above and the political framework example. Let's look at the Ann and Beth example first.

In the Ann and Beth example, the disputed claim here is whether abortion is morally permissible. Elga notes that 'claims *closely linked* to the abortion claim' include 'whether human beings have souls, whether it is permissible to withhold treatment from terminally ill infants, and whether rights figure prominently in a correct ethical theory.'[24] The question then arises, what exactly makes these claims closely linked to the abortion claim? Why would a certain stance taken on whether human beings have souls relate to a stance taken on whether abortion is morally permissible? The answer here seems to be that they have inferential and/or explanatory connection: a stance taken on one issue can help an epistemic agent *infer* and *explain* another stance taken on another issue.[25] For instance, if Ann holds the stance that human beings do indeed have souls, and, perhaps, assuming she also believes that human foetuses are endowed with souls, it is not hard to see why in Ann's eyes, she *infers* that abortion would be like murder. This would also allow Ann to *explain* why abortion is morally impermissible: it would be the ending of a human life.

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[24] Elga, 'Reflection and disagreement'493, emphasis mine.

[25] Of course, one can argue that the connections between auxiliary and disputed claims are not explanatory in nature. But it is hard to imagine that they are not, they seem to have some kind of semantic relationship where the meaning of a stance taken on one claim influences the meaning of the stance taken on another claim. What does humans having souls have to do with the moral permissibility of abortion? Clearly the former claim serves as a premise of sorts in understanding the answer to the latter. An objector would have to provide an argument as to why this intuitive explanatory connection is not the case between stances taken on auxiliary and disputed claims.

Elga's political framework example seems to parallel the above sentiment. He writes that when 'a smart and well-informed friend who has a basic political framework diametrically opposed to your [the reader's] own' runs into a disputable new political claim *y*, the disagreement on the auxiliary claims (the opposed basic political framework) should allow the reader to infer that 'you [the reader] are more likely than your friend to correctly judge'[26] the new political claim *y*. How exactly does one's basic political framework affect the correctness of one's stance on the new political claim *y* in the eyes of a disputant? Again, through explanatory and/or inferential connections: if you think the basic political framework of your friend is wrong, then their stance on a disputed claim inferred from their wrongheaded basic political framework would also be wrong.

How does this relate to the coherence relation mentioned above? As it stands, explanatory connections and inferential connectedness are essential ingredients in a coherence relation. According to Noah Lemos, most epistemologists often cite at least three factors in characterising coherence relations: (i) logical consistency, (ii) explanatory connections, and (iii) conformity with norms about belief formation.[27] Laurence BonJour, a major defendant of coherentism, also echoes Lemos' assertions. BonJour argues that a coherence relation should at least contain more than logical consistency, have explanatory connections, and inferential connectedness.[28] For our purposes, only (i) and (ii) are directly relevant.[29] For (i), avoiding logical inconsistency would support the explanatory or inferential connectedness of

[26] Elga, 'Reflection and disagreement'493.

[27] Lemos, Noah M. (2021) *An introduction to the theory of knowledge*. Cambridge University Press, 73.

[28] Bonjour takes explanatory connections to be a special species of inferential connections. He holds that not all inferential connections explain things, an explanatory connection not only allows inferences to be made but it also does not leave unexplained anomalies in a set of beliefs: BonJour, Laurence. (1985) *The structure of empirical knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

[29] The reason I take (iii) to not be directly relevant is that we are trying to see how Elga's wide-ranging criterion assumes some sort of coherence relation, and (iii) does not help us see if Elga's criterion resembles a coherence relation. It is true that beliefs that are formed through epistemic vices, like beliefs formed dishonestly or through wishful thinking, would seem less coherent; However, the flouting of such epistemic norms like honesty or realistic thinking (if that is an epistemic norm) does not clearly impact an agent's agreement or disagreement on auxiliary issues with a potential peer – which is the crux of this section. As well it will be further discussed, (i) and (ii) does indeed directly impact an agent's agreement and disagreement on auxiliary issues with a potential peer.

auxiliary and disputed claims.[30] After all, logical inconsistency negates any possible explanatory or inferential connections between claims.[31] For (ii), as illustrated above, the relationship between stances taken on auxiliary and disputed claims seems well characterised as explanatory and/or inferential connections. Given this, the relation between stances taken on auxiliary and disputed beliefs would seem to require (i) and (ii), this however would minimally make it some type of coherence relation.

The issue is, if the relation between a stance taken on auxiliary beliefs and disputed beliefs is one of coherence, such a relation would be bi-directional in the sense that it would allow inferences from stances on auxiliary claims to stances on disputed claims *and vice versa*. To elaborate, if a disputant P holds a stance X_1 about disputed claim a, then P has to hold stance X_1 about related auxiliary claims b, c, and d as well. However, the opposite is also true: if P holds a stance X_1 about related auxiliary claims b, c, and d, then P has to hold stance X_1 about disputed claim a. This is as the coherence relation would require P to avoid logical inconsistency (or hold onto logical consistency)[32] for the sake of the explanatory connections between a, b, c, and d. Notice, however, if another disputant Q holds some stance X_2 (that is inconsistent with X_1) about a, the coherence relation would require Q hold X_2 about b, c, and d as well. This would entail that given some disputed claim a, where P holds X_1 and Q holds X_2 about a, P and Q would also have to hold X_1 and X_2 respectively for all related auxiliary claims b, c, and d.[33]

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[30] BonJour holds that not only should there be no logical inconsistency/logical consistency, there should be probabilistic consistency as well – such that two claims have greater coherence insofar as either makes the other far more probable. He puts the conditions as such '(1) A system of beliefs is coherent only if it is logically consistent. (2) A system of beliefs is coherent in proportion to its degree of probabilistic consistency.': BonJour 'The structure of empirical knowledge', 95.

[31] For instance, consider the Ann and Beth example again. Imagine that Ann holds a stance on auxiliary claims (i.e., humans have no souls or no rights figure in any ethical theory) that amounts to or entails the stance that abortion is in fact morally permissible, it would be hard to see how Ann's stance on auxiliary claims provides any explanatory or inferential support for the inconsistent stance that abortion is in fact *not* morally permissible.

[32] The coherence relation could also require probabilistic consistency (see footnote 33) instead. In any case, this switch does not change my argument. What I am trying to establish is that the coherence relation between stances taken on auxiliary and disputed claims provides good reason for an agent P to maintain the same stance X_1 for both auxiliary and disputed claims.

[33] For clarity's sake, consider a question like 'what kind of existence do numbers have?' an eliminative physicalist may answer that numbers have concrete existence while a Platonist may answer that

However, given the above argument, Elga's criterion would entail that for any given disagreement about some disputed claim a where disputants P and Q have differing stances on a, P and Q would then have good reason to infer that either party would also disagree about a wide range of related auxiliary claims to a. Notice, however, that this would have the unsavoury consequence of allowing any epistemic agent involved in any disagreement to dismiss any person disagreeing with them as an epistemic peer. This, as Lackey notes, 'is … a peculiar result for a 'conciliatory' view' and that such a consequence 'seems epistemically wrong' insofar as it justifies a sort of extreme unqualified dogmatism that does not require any doxastic revisions to our beliefs even in the face of disagreements.[34] In fact, such a method of assessing epistemic peerhood leaves Conciliatory views practically irrelevant, as given Elga's criterion, there would be no genuine cases of peer disagreement generated at all. Nevertheless, there is a possible objection lurking. Notice that we have been discussing peer disagreement in a normative sense, such that we have been assuming that epistemic agents would act rationally in accordance with certain rational norms (i.e., consistency). It can, however, be argued that human behaviour regarding their beliefs is not at all aligned to what the coherence relation (i.e., consistency) rationally requires them to do. In reality, humans are irrational, humans are not descriptively beholden to consistency or things like the coherence relation where if one belief is wrong, it is likely a related held belief is also wrong. Human beings frequently hold contradictory beliefs regarding a wide range of related issues; People actually or realistically use beliefs that they do have (i.e., inconsistent beliefs) rather than beliefs that they should have (i.e., consistent beliefs) to discern epistemic peers. Thus, it can be the case that people may be right about one issue, but are wrong about many related issues.

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numbers have an abstract existence. It would very well be fair for the physicalist to infer from the Platonist's answer that the Platonist likely believes that physicalist positions on other philosophical areas are false – this is as strong or eliminative physicalism is committed to only items of concrete existence and Platonism is committed to the existence of abstract objects. This is what I mean when I say that the stance taken on auxiliary claims relating in an explanatory way to a disputed claim *explains* why a certain stance is taken on a disputed claim.

[34] Lackey 'Taking Religious Disagreement Seriously', 308.

In this sense, Elga's criterion of similar auxiliary beliefs can be interpreted descriptively, such that when people discern out epistemic peers, it just so happens to be the case that there is a positive correlation between someone being a peer (having many agreed upon related claims) and agreement on a disputed claim. There is no coherence relation involved, and consequently even when there is a disagreement between peers regarding a certain issue, it does not mean that either has to be wrong on related auxiliary issues as well. How can we respond to this objection? As mentioned above, we have been discussing peer disagreements normatively, this however is because Conciliatory views themselves are normative insofar as they obligate epistemic agents to *do* something about their doxastic attitudes. Conciliatory views when applied to the real world still seem to require an acceptance of logical consistency about beliefs in order for them to work. This is as Conciliationism holds that when there are two conflicting stances on a single issue, both cannot be completely right as they are inconsistent. Consequently, due to this inconsistency, epistemic peers in conflict need to revise their doxastic attitudes towards their own respective beliefs. However, if logical consistency is unnecessary in real life, then Conciliationism would fail to have any obligatory strength to motivate epistemic agents to revise their doxastic attitudes in the first place.

Thus, given that (a) the relationship between auxiliary beliefs and the disputed belief is one of coherence (which includes consistency), and that (b) under Conciliatory views, human beings have to be beholden to the epistemic virtues of consistency or coherence etc. when it comes to holding a set of beliefs (even in real life). Both (a) and (b) together entail that given any disagreement between two people, even if both people seem to be epistemic peers through *prima facie* shared auxiliary beliefs, both parties are also justified in thinking that if the other party comes to a different stance on some disputed claim, they must have gotten something wrong about their stances on auxiliary claims due to the logical consistency of their set of beliefs (and thus cannot be epistemic peers even if it *prima facie* seemed to be the case originally). But, since Elga's criterion of epistemic peerhood seems to assume (a) and Conciliationism requires (b), this entails that any disagreement over a disputed belief would still

allow involved epistemic agents to justifiably dismiss the disagreeing party as an epistemic peer.

4. Credibility-Conferring features, Track Records and Conciliatory views

Recall that the second method of assessment discussed in section 2, as elaborated on by Choo, involves looking at a potential epistemic peer's track record to get a significant enough sensing of their relevant credibility-conferring features. This seems like a promising enough method, yet, this method too runs into some serious difficulties. In order to understand this difficulty, we first have to see why there seems to be no need for any presently existing actual peers for peer disagreements to possess any epistemic significance. Kirk Lougheed brings up the following thought experiment as an illustration:

> Suppose that Peter van Inwagen and David Lewis are the only two experts on evidence for compatibility of free will and determinism. They alone are epistemic peers with each other, at least with respect to the question of whether free will and determinism are compatible. Imagine that they are both flying together to a conference where they will give competing presentations on whether compatibilism is true. But the plane malfunctions and crashes into the ocean. Lewis is the only survivor and manages to swim to a small island. Now that van Inwagen has perished Lewis has no actual peer with respect to compatibilism … Lewis was aware that only van Inwagen was his peer and they disagreed about compatibilism. Surely, Lewis cannot reasonably dismiss the significance of peer disagreement simply by pointing out van Inwagen does not exist anymore. Therefore, the epistemic significance of peer disagreement, whatever it may be, does not require that an actual peer presently exists.[35]

Lougheed's thought experiment does satisfy King's four conditions for genuine peer disagreement as discussed above. Yet, it does have the implication that there is no

[35] Lougheed 'The epistemic benefits of disagreement', 42.

need for any actual peers in order for peer disagreements to have epistemic significance. Thus, under Conciliatory views, epistemic agents may need to revise their doxastic attitudes even if there is no actual peer present that disagrees with them. How is this a problem for the track record method? Consider first, as Nathan Ballantye points out, that there could be counterfactual versions of us that arguably know far more about a subject than our actual selves.[36] Take philosophical disagreements as an example, Ballantye argues that 'we know that we regrettably do not have all the arguments, distinctions, and objections that the counterfactual philosophers would have devised.'[37] Lougheed further agrees with Ballantye here, asserting that this shows that 'counterfactual peer disagreement is just as epistemically significant as actual peer disagreement.'[38] Consequently, it is quite plausible to take counterfactual versions of ourselves to minimally have a similar total epistemic position as compared to the actual versions of ourselves. In terms of the track record assessment method, it is easy to imagine a counterfactual version of us in a nearby possible world that, while possessing a similar track record as compared to the actual us, holds onto differing relevant opinions. As mentioned earlier, Choo suggests that 'a track record may consist of various things like testimony, institutional certification' or 'having been right in previous disagreements.'[39] Consider me as an example, I currently am working towards a bachelor's degree in philosophy. Perhaps, my friends and professors think I have some decent ability in philosophy, and this has been demonstrated in previous classes and conversations. Here, I would have a certain level of institutional certification, testimony from friends and professors, and having instances of being right (sometimes) in previous disagreements in class etc. Nevertheless, it is clearly logically possible that there is a counterfactual version of me that has attended another university also majoring in philosophy, taken similar modules as the actual me, my friends and professors also think I am decent in philosophy, and I also have

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[36] Ballantyne, Nathan. (2014) 'Counterfactual Philosophers' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **88**: 368–87.

[37] This citation is from Ballantye is from Lougheed: Lougheed 'The epistemic benefits of disagreement'; Balllantye 'Counterfactual Philosophers' 368.

[38] Lougheed 'The epistemic benefits of disagreement',43.

[39] Choo, 'The epistemic significance of religious disagreements: Cases of unconfirmed superiority disagreements', 1141.

proven so in class. Yet, it is entirely logically possible that counterfactual me holds differing opinions on many philosophical topics as compared to the actual me.[40] If Lougheed and Ballantye are right and 'counterfactual peer disagreement is just as epistemically significant as actual peer disagreement',[41] then for every philosophical belief that I have, I am required under Conciliatory views to constantly revise my doxastic attitudes to be less certain about my beliefs. This is as there is always going to be a counterfactual version of myself with a similar track record but opposing beliefs about any given philosophical issue. Crucially, this results in an untenable skepticism about my philosophical beliefs, as for every new belief P I might take on or modify, I will have to immediately revise my doxastic attitude towards P. I would consequently end up 'knowing practically nothing.'

This counterfactual conundrum that the track record method faces, strikingly extends beyond just philosophical beliefs or counterfactual versions of ourselves. It would seem that if Conciliatory views and counterfactual peer disagreement are both acceptable, then this would fundamentally destabilise all our beliefs. Given that for any belief that we might hold, there can be a counterfactual peer (whether ourselves or someone else) that has a similar track record and opposing views. This would entail that for any new belief Q pertaining to literally anything, under the track record method, I would have to yet again constantly revise my doxastic attitudes towards Q, or any new beliefs I take on to replace Q. Again, an untenable skepticism arises, this time pertaining to all our beliefs.

5. Further significance of peer disagreement on doxastic attitudes

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[40] Due to some feedback from an anonymous reviewer, I should further elaborate/clarify this point. It is possible to conceive of a counterfactual version of me who despite having a similar track record – say going to the exact same university as actual me, demonstrating a similar level of philosophical skills, taking the same ethics classes as actual me – comes to a plausible view that is different from my own. Say, I hold abortion to be morally permissible, yet counterfactual me despite having a similar track record holds that abortion is not morally permissible. If counterfactual me is considered a peer, this would under conciliationist views, require me to revise my doxastic attitudes towards my belief that abortion is morally permissible.

[41] Lougheed 'The epistemic benefits of disagreement', 43.

I have argued above that both the methods of assessing epistemic peerhood are indeed quite problematic when used alone to establish the epistemic significance of peer disagreement (i.e., Conciliatory views). Given this difficulty, it can then be asked, what should the epistemic significance of peer disagreements be like for epistemic agents? Recall that Conciliatory views hold that the presence of a genuine peer disagreement *alone* constitutes a sort of defeater for disputed beliefs that interlocutors in the disagreement.[42] I think in answering the previous question, a broader approach that is more sensitive to surrounding contextual factors of a given peer disagreement is necessary. Alvin Plantinga in discussing the nature of defeaters asserts that:

> Defeaters depend on and are relative to the rest of your noetic structure, the rest of what you know and believe. Whether a belief *A* is a defeater for a belief *B* doesn't depend merely on my current experience; it also depends on what other beliefs I have, how firmly I hold them, and the like.[43]

Plantinga's point here can be contextualised with an example of his. Consider the famous mathematician and philosopher Gottlob Frege. As Plantinga writes, Frege once believed that:

> (F) For every condition or property *P*, there exists the set of just those things that have *P*.[44]

Bertrand Russell then famously wrote Frege a letter pointing out serious issues in (F), one of Russell's famous paradoxes, that show how (F) if true, generates consequences that prove (F) itself to be false. As Plantinga notes 'before he realised this problem with (F), Frege did not have a defeater for it. Once he understood

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[42] There are generally two types of defeaters – rebutting defeaters and undercutting defeaters. For rebutting defeaters, these are defeaters that rebut a belief in some proposition *p*, such that it shows *p* to be false and therefore rationally inconsistent to continue holding onto *p.* Undercutting defeaters, on the other hand, undercut your justification or grounds for believing in *p*, thus instead of showing *p* to be false, undercutting defeaters show that there is no reason to take *p* to be true. Depending on the specific Conciliatory views peer disagreement can generate defeaters of either kind: Matheson' The epistemic significance of disagreement'; Plantinga, Alvin. (2000) *Warranted Christian belief*. Oxford University Press; Bergmann, Michael. (1997) 'Internalism, externalism and epistemic defeat' (dissertation), University of Notre Dame.

[43] Plantinga 'Warranted Christian Belief' 360.

[44] Plantinga 'Warranted Christian Belief' 361.

Russell's letter, however, he did; and the defeater was just the fact that (F) … entails a contradiction.'[45] Here it can be assumed that both Russell and Frege are roughly epistemic peers, both are famous mathematicians/philosophers working in the same era and in the same field of mathematics and logic. Yet, applying Plantinga's point here, it is not the mere peer disagreement of the truth of (F) between Russell and Frege that caused Frege to change his mind about (F), rather it is the propositional content of the disagreement between Frege and Russell. It is the argument or reasons provided by Rusell as an epistemic peer that ultimately provided the impetus for Frege's change of mind about (F). In other words, Frege's change of mind is due to the sort of propositional interaction between his previous beliefs in his noetic structure about (F) and the arguments or reasons provided by Russell against (F).[46]

What I am suggesting here is that there should be other conditions on top of just peer disagreement alone that constitutes a defeater for a person's belief. From section 3 and 4, we can see that if epistemic peerhood alone is both the necessary and sufficient conditions for disagreements to have epistemic significance, deeply problematic issues can arise. Therefore, I propose that at least another necessary

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[45] Plantinga 'Warranted Christian Belief'.

[46] A potential issue here is that, one could point out that if Frege was unaware of Russell's paradox, then Frege and Russell would not have possessed the same evidence anyway. Thus, Frege and Russell were not epistemic peers to begin with. Two things can be said here. First, as discussed in section 2, the condition of same/equal evidential possession is incredibly difficulty to determine practically, and is therefore quite untenable in determining who an epistemic peer is. Therefore, if we relegate to assessing epistemic peers with the methods as suggested by Choo, we can still conclude that Frege and Russell should roughly be considered as epistemic peers. Secondly, even if we concede that for someone to be identified as an epistemic peer they must have the same evidence base, recall from footnote 8 that the condition for *equal* evidential possession is preferred over the condition for the *same* evidential possession. Frege and Russell could have very well *equal* evidence bases even though they do not have the *same* arguments. Therefore, even if Frege did not possess Russell's argument against (F), he could have possessed arguably equally good arguments for (F). Nevertheless, it is only when Frege became aware of the propositional content of Russell's argument against (F) which (let's assume) is as good as his own arguments for (F), that Frege chose to revise his doxastic attitudes toward (F). Notice, that the basis for this doxastic revision necessarily includes a potential defeater's propositional interaction with a person's noetic structure. It is not based on pure disagreement alone, but instead on the propositional interaction between Frege and Russell's evidence bases. In the same way, Russell could have possibly chosen to revise his doxastic attitude towards (F) instead, given some argument Frege could have made. For instance, Russell's argument has been rejected propositionally by many Neo-Fregans: Hale, Bob, and Crispin Wright. (2001) *The reason's proper study: Essays towards a neo-Fregean Philosophy of Mathematics*. Oxford: Clarendon.

condition for generating genuine defeaters should be paired alongside epistemic peerhood, namely, the propositional content related to the disagreement should be given central focus. Epistemic peerhood provides a marker of credibility insofar that the propositional content of a potential disagreement with a peer should be taken seriously. For example, if a young child, a friend and a physics professor tell me a plate can float, I am inclined to not take the reasons the young child offers seriously, as I do not count them as a peer. But, if it were instead my friend or the professor (epistemic superior), I would be inclined to listen carefully to the reasons they give and ultimately base any doxastic revision on those reasons offered. If propositional content is taken to be as the central focus of the epistemic significance of peer disagreements, the problems raised in section 3 and 4 either evaporate or are mitigated. Let us consider each, for section 3, the main issue being extreme unqualfied dogmatism. If propositional content is allowed to contribute to the epistemic significance of peer disagreement, then for any possible disagreement, it is first and foremost the propositional content of the reasons given by an individual that should have an impact on my doxastic attitudes. If a child tells me she sees someone dangerous in the bathroom even though I did not notice anyone around, I still take what she says with a level of doxastic weight (even if she is not my peer), and thus change my doxastic attitudes towards the idea that there might be someone in the bathroom. It is the propositional content of that claim that seems entirely coherent (given interaction with my noetic structure) and consequently possible, therefore I would decide to entertain the claim. I might not put as much doxastic weight onto a child's testimony as compared to a peer, but nevertheless, I still do due to the testimony's propositional content's relative consistency with my noetic structure. As for section 4, counterfactual peer disagreement lacks any actual propositional content, for we would not know what exact arguments a counterfactual peer would have for disagreeing with us. Thus, with propositional content, counterfactual peer disagreements would no longer yield an untenable scepticism.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that both characterisations and assessments of epistemic peerhood run into serious epistemic difficulties when used in Conciliatory views, suggesting that peer disagreement alone is insufficient for contributing significant epistemic significance for any doxastic revisions. Of course, there are other possible accounts of epistemic peerhood that are not covered in this paper, but I believe that I have covered most accounts of peerhood in at least broad strokes. Thus, my arguments hopefully have a wide resonance against most Conciliatory views.[47]

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