Against the Equal Weight View in the Epistemology of Disagreement

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Abstract

In this paper I propose an argument against the conciliatory view in peer disagreement. One of the most important grounds for conciliatory views is the assumption that the epistemic situation in peer disagreement between two peers is symmetri cal. Symmetry justifies the conciliatory views. If so, showing that the situation is actually asymmetric should count as a refutation to conciliatory views of disagreement. By appealing to the difference between the processes by which the beliefs of the two parties have been formed, I try to show that there is a difference between the reliabilities of the two beliefs. This means the asymmetrical situation between two peers in disagreement. Since the conciliatory and steadfast views are contradictory views, any argument against one of them should be considered as an argument for the other.

Keywords: Conciliatory View, Disagreement, Intuition, Vision, Asymmetry, Normative judgement.

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Introduction

In this paper a possible scenario will be proposed in which the Steadfast View may be justified in the case of peer disagreement. According to the Steadfast View, one may typically maintain one's confidence in the face of (equal) others who believe otherwise[1]. On the other hand, the Equal Weight View is the kind of theory according to which you should always give your peer's assessment equal weight and think that it is no more likely that you are right than they[2]. In other words, according to the Equal Weight View in cases of peer disagreement, one should give equal weight to the opinion of a peer and to one's own opinion[3].

Someone may understand the Equal Weight View as a thesis according to which you should consider your own belief and your peer's to be of the same degree of credence. Here I want to try to show that the latter conclusion is not justified for every disagreement. So if someone considers this conclusion the to be the same with the Equal Weight View (which may seem plausible to do so), this paper strives to show that the Equal Weight View will not be justified for every disagreement scenario[4].

1. Peer Disagreement after Full Disclosure

What should you do (from an epistemic point of view) when you learn that your epistemic peer disagrees with you concerning a proposition P? Your epistemic peer, according to the most common definition, is anyone who has the same intellectual abilities such as intelligence, rationality, etc and also has the same relevant evidence about P as you have.

Before continuing the discussion, I want to assess the concept of evidence and recognize two different types of evidence in the Epistemology of Disagreement. As I mentioned earlier, most philosophers who discuss about disagreement say

that in order for S_1 and S_2 to be epistemic peers they should be equal in respect to their intellectual abilities and their evidence concerning the proposition on which they disagree. Since equality of S_1 and S_2 in respect of their evidence concerning a proposition is not exactly clear, I want to say how I understand it.

First of all, it seems that there are two different types of evidence in general. The first type is the evidence to which one can fundamentally have direct access or possess it. I call this type of evidence "direct evidence". In a historical debate, for example, a certain related book is considered as a good sample of direct evidence. It is the kind of evidence to which both S_1 and S_2 can fundamentally have direct access and if both of them see and read the book, it seems that facts – when they are considered as evidence – can be considered as direct evidence, because everyone can fundamentally have direct access to them or at least their accessibility – when they are expressed in terms of propositions – is the same for anyone who is interested in the debate.

Intuitions or interpretations on the other hand, are considered as indirect evidence. When you – as a historian – are thinking about a historical event (for example the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo), you and your colleague can have access to the same body of direct evidence E. Can you say that both of you are equal in respect of all relevant evidence? Not necessarily. Because you may think that a certain body of direct evidence E actually supports the proposition P and your colleague, contrary to you, may think that the same body of evidence actually supports ¬P. In this case, it should be said that your colleague and you have two different interpretations or intuitions about the probative force of the same body of direct evidence E. But it is clear that you should consider your colleague's intuition (or intuitional belief) about the probative force of E as relevant evidence to the issue (in the same way your colleague should consider your own intuition (or intuitional belief) as relevant

evidence).

In this scenario, when you tell your colleague about your intuition, they may be merely aware of it, but cannot have direct access to your intuition because it is your own intuition and not theirs. So it seems that the force of your intuition – as a related evidence – is direct for you but indirect for your colleague (because, as mentioned earlier, you have direct access to your intuition but they, unlike you, cannot have such an access to your intuition). Generally, one can say that it is not the case that the parties in all disagreement scenarios can share all their evidence. This inability in sharing all the evidence may be caused by different factors. In the case of intuitions for example, if you and I have two different intuitive judgments concerning a proposition[5], as I said above, it is evident that we cannot exchange our intuitions but can merely be aware of each other's intuition. In another case, parties of a disagreement may have different weight functions in assessing some bodies of evidence. This difference may be rooted in complex factors relevant to one's (epistemic) environment or in one's previous beliefs[6]. In a nutshell, one can say that "it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators" [7].

Considering the above distinction, we can re-express the conditions of S_1 and S_2 in order to be epistemic peers (in respect of a certain proposition P). So S_1 and S_2 can consider each other as epistemic peers in respect of a certain field if and only if:

I)   They consider each other equal in respect of intellectual abilities such as intelligence, avoidance of error, etc.

II) They consider each other equal in respect of access to direct evidence which is related to the issue. (As mentioned earlier, in the case of direct evidence it is basically possible for S_1 and S_2 to have the same kind of access to that evidence).

III) They consider each other equal in respect of being aware of any related indirect evidence (including the related intuitions of each other).

2. The main argument

When S_1 and S_2 disagree concerning P (S_1 takes it as true and S_2 takes it as false), according to the Equal Weight View, S_1 should assume that she is confronted with two beliefs with the same degree of credence. In this part, attempts have been made to argue that S_1 should not give the same degree of credence to their own belief and their peer's at least in some scenarios of peer disagreement, and then they are justified to hold their own belief, or at least assign a higher degree of credence to their own belief (and the same is true in the case of S_2). Whether this asymmetric situation between the parties is sufficient for each party to hold their own belief is another issue. In the last section this issue shall be further discussed.

Assume that S_1 and S_2 (as epistemic peers) learn about their disagreement concerning P. S_1 continues to take P as true and S_2 continues to take P as false (or takes ¬P as true). Let's call S_1's belief that *P is true* as P_1, and S_2's belief that *P is false* as P_2. Now consider the situation of P_1 in the hierarchy of S_1's beliefs. Since S_1 has believed P_1 on the basis of the shared body of direct evidence E, S_1 necessarily has had another belief P_1^*. The content of belief P_1^* should be this proposition:

"E supports P" or "it is reasonable to believe P on the basis of E".

So P_1^* is S_1's belief about the *character* or the *probative force* of the shared body of direct evidence E.[8] It means that P_1^* is S_1's belief about the proposition for which E counts as evidence. In other words, from S_1's perspective, P_1^* is the evidence that links E to P_1 and without P_1^*, S_1 couldn't reach to P_1 despite of having access to E.

It is obvious that different people can have different beliefs about the character of a certain body of evidence. It is certainly plausible to assume that these kinds of beliefs – beliefs about the character of a certain body of evidence - are intuitive beliefs at least in some cases of peer disagreement. Intuitive beliefs are the kinds of beliefs that get their justification directly from one's Intuition as a source of justification. In the case of peer disagreement, since we assumed that S_1 and S_2 have shared all of their direct evidence and yet they continue to disagree, it will be very plausible to think that they have different beliefs about the character of the certain body of evidence E, and this difference explains their disagreement. So we can say that S_2 has a different belief (P_2^*) about the character of the specific body of evidence E, and this belief also gets its justification from S_2's intuition.

So as mentioned above, at least in some possible and rational scenarios, P_1^* is S_1's intuitional belief which links E to P_1 and also is not justified in virtue of being inferred from another justified belief. The justification of P_1^* is directly come from S_1's *Intuition Process*. Intuition Process can be considered as a source that generates justification for some kinds of beliefs, which in turn can be called *intuitive beliefs*. So from S_1's perspective, P_1^* is an intuitive belief which gets its justification directly from S_1's Intuition Process and so the degree of credence S_1 should attribute to P_1^*, depends on the reliability that S_1 attributes to her Intuition Process. In other words, S_1 usually attributes a "subjective probability of truth" to the beliefs that get their justification from their Intuition Process. The more reliability S_1 attributes to their Intuition Process, the greater degree of credence they are justified to assign to their belief P_1^*.

Now S_1 is in a position to compare the degree of credence of P_1^* and P_2^* as two contrastive beliefs. After full disclosure stage[9], S_1 knows that S_2's belief (P_2) is based on another

intuitional belief named P_2^* and P_2^*'s content is that "E supports ¬P" or "it is reasonable to believe ¬P on the basis of E". Now it is clear that the disagreement of S_1 and S_2 over P (or ¬P) is reduced to disagreement over P_1^* (or P_2^*). It is necessary for S_1 to compare the subjective degree of credence of P_1^* and P_2^* in order to be able to make a rational reaction to peer disagreement. In this stage S_1 has direct access to P_1^* because P_1^* is their intuitive belief. So the degree of credence that S_1 should assign to P_1^* is correspondent to the reliability that she generally attributes to her intuitive beliefs. Assume that S_1 generally attributes a certain degree of credence to her intuitive beliefs. Also S_1 should assign the same degree of credence to S_2's intuitive beliefs, since S_1 knows that S_2 is her epistemic peer and this entails that S_1 believes that S_2's Intuition Process is as reliable as her own Intuition Process.

Let us assume that the subjective degree of credence that S_1 is justified to assign to P_1^*, given that P_1^* has been come directly from S_1's intuition, can be formulated as follows:

$$Pr_{S_1}(P_1^* \mid I_{s_1})$$

$Pr_{S_1}(P_1^* \mid I_{s_1})$ stands for the subjective probability of truth that S_1 attributes to P_1^*, when P_1^* is the product of I_{s_1}. I_{s_1} stands for S_1's intuition process. It is extremely important to note that $Pr_{S_1}(P_1^* \mid I_{s_1})$ should NOT be read as a formulation about conditional probability. It is only representing the degree of credence one is justified to assign to their belief in a situation in which that belief (P_1^*) is the total product of a specific process (I_{s_1}). But conditional probability is saying something about the probability of occurring an event given the occurrence of another event. This is really important here because when one says about conditional probability must respect those rules that govern conditional probability. Because, as I explicitly mentioned above, I'm not saying anything about conditional probability, calculating the probabilities according to those

rules is beside the point.

And also assume that this degree of credence (subjective probability of truth) is equal to m.

Hence,

$$Pr_{S_1}(P_1^* \mid I_{s_1}) = m \qquad (m < 1)$$

Therefore, S_1 attributes m – as the subjective probability of truth (or degree of credence) – to P_1^*.[10]

But how about P_2^*? What degree of credence should S_1 assign to P_2^*? For answering this question, S_1 should consider her own access to P_2^*. S_1 knows that S_2 is aware of P_2^* directly as an intuitive belief and then, in the full disclosure stage, transfers P_2^* as an indirect evidence to S_1 by testimony. So S_1 has access to P_2^* through two different and distinct epistemic processes. This means that two different and distinct epistemic processes must take place in order for S_1 to be aware of P_2^*. These two different and distinct processes are respectively S_2's intuiting P_2^* and S_1's being aware (having access) of P_2^* via S_2's testimony. S_1 generally attributes a certain degree of reliability to S_2's testimony[11]. Let's assume this degree equal to n (n<1).[12] This means that S_1 and S_2 should assign n – as degree of credence – to every belief which is transferred to them by testimony of their epistemic peers. So the subjective probability of truth that S_1 should assign to P_2^* is dependent only on the reliabilities that S_1 attributes to S_2's intuition process and S_2's testimony process. We can formulate the final subjective probability that S_1 assigns to P_2^* as

$$Pr_{S_1}(P_2^* \mid I_{s_2} \& T_{s_2})$$

I_{s_2} stands for S_2's intuition process and T_{s_2} stands for S_2's testimony process.

Since clearly I_{s_2} and T_{s_2} are two independent processes on the one hand, and also both I_{s_2} and T_{s_2} must happen in order to S_1 be aware of P_2^* on the other hand, then S_1 should formulate

P_2^*'s subjective probability of truth (degree of credence) as follows:

$$Pr_{S_1}\,(\,P_2^*\,\big|\,I_{s_2}\,\&\,T_{s_2}\,) = \ Pr_{S_1}\,(\,P_2^*\,\big|\,I_{s_2}\,)\,\times\,Pr_{S_1}\,(\,P_2^*\,|\,T_{s_2}\,)$$

Because I_{s_2} and T_{s_2} are two distinct and independent processes.

Hence,

$$Pr_{S_1}\,(\,P_2^*\,\big|\,I_{s_2}\,\&\,T_{s_2}\,) = m\,.\,n$$

This means that S_1 should assign m.n as the subjective probability of truth to P_2^*. It is clear that m.n < m (because 0<m<1 and 0<n<1), and this means that S_1 should assign more degree of credence to P_1^* (her own intuitive belief) in comparison to P_2^* (S_2's intuitive belief).

Employing an example may help the reader to have a better grasp of what I mean to convey. Assume that your vision is somehow defected. This defect causes you to have some degree of error in what you see and so the probability of seeing things accurate thorough your eyes will be 0.8 for example. In this situation, if you use an optical lens which in turn causes you to see things through that lens 0.7 for instance, then these two amounts of error are independent on each other (because one of them is caused by your eyes and the other caused by your optical lens). If you use your eyes and the lens at the same time, the resulted probability of seeing things accurately will be 0.8 * 0.7 that is equal to 0.56.

Now I think it will not be very difficult to conclude that S_1 should attribute more subjective probability of truth (degree of credence) to P_1 (as her own target belief) in comparison to P_2 (as a S_2 's target belief), because the degree of credence that S_1 attributes to P_1^* is transferred to all of the beliefs that conclude from P_1^*. And it is equivalent to say that S_1 is justified to attribute more degree of credence to her own belief in peer disagreement.

It is clear that what I told about S_1 and their justification to maintain their own belief in peer disagreement is true about S_2 (mutatis mutandis) and therefore S_2 will be justified to maintain their own belief as well.

3. Objections and Responses

The first objection to the argument and its response

As we have seen, the former argument shows that while we consider the degrees of reliability of two different processes, say, intuition and testimony –when one finds herself engaged in a peer disagreement – one should assign a larger degree of reliability to their belief and therefore there would not be a symmetric situation between two peers. One – as an opponent – may say that the asymmetric situation resulted by this argument is due to the process of testimony of each persons and if they ignore the role of testimony in disagreement – or in other words, if we consider the process of testimony as a complete process with the highest possible degree of reliability – the asymmetric situation between the two peers vapors into the air and then the argument does not work anymore.

In response, one can say that the resulted asymmetry between peers is not just due to the process of testimony of each person, but the real structure of disagreement is so that when each party of disagreement wants to compare the degree of reliability of their own belief to the belief of their peer, find themselves in an asymmetric situation even if we ignore the role of testimony in disagreement. In order to cast light on this issue, consider a situation in which we ignore the role of testimony in a disagreement after full disclosure. For example, consider a world in which when people want to transfer the content of their belief to other people, they use a different kind of process rather than testimony. Imagine the people in this world have a kind of screen on their heads and whenever people want to say something to others they represent it as a sentence

on their head screen. In this situation, S_1 should look at S_2's head screen in order to be aware of S_2's belief. In this world, however, we actually ignore the process of testimony as the means of transferring the content of beliefs, it is clear that the same argument can be formulated again. In this world as well, S_1 has access to the content of their belief through a one-phase process while their access to the content of S_2's belief will be through a two-phase process. Actually, in the first phase the process of S_2's intuition produces ¬P and then S_1 will have access to ¬P through her own visual capacity (actually through reading the content of ¬P on the S_2's head screen). On the other hand S_1 still has a direct and immediate access to the content of her own belief viz. P. This example tries to show that there is a kind of asymmetry in having access to one's own belief and to one's peer's belief in different normal worlds. But still a world is possible in which the access of one party to the content of her own belief and to the content of her peer's belief is the same. Imagine that the brains of S_1 and S_2 are connected to each other in a way that each one has a direct and immediate access to the content of beliefs and intuitions of the other. In this situation the access of one party to the content of her own belief and to the content of her peer's belief will be the same. Each one actually finds her own belief and her peer's belief directly and immediately and therefore the argument doesn't work anymore but it is not surprising at all. It seems that in this situation the problem of disagreement between two persons turns out to be a disagreement between one epistemic person and herself in two different times t_1 and t_2. It seems that one person has two contradictory intuitions which support two different beliefs P and ¬P with the same force. Other things being equal, it seems that in this situation the most appropriate response for this person would be to suspend their judgment concerning P and ¬P. But it is not the original problem of peer disagreement that we are interested in.

The second objection and its response

It may be said that there are cases in the real world in which the conclusion of the argument does not seem acceptable. Suppose that I am at home now and want to know whether my teacher is in her room in the university. Suppose further that for knowing this I have just two ways. I can go to the university myself and take a look at my teacher's room and know whether he is there or not. On the other hand, I can call one of my friends that I know is in university and ask her to go and take a look at my teacher's room and call me back and tell me whether he is there or not. Assume that my teacher is in his room and whichever way I use, I will form the belief that 'my teacher is in his room right now'. Now it may seem that I should assign the same degree of reliability to my belief independent of the way by which it has been formed. In the first way my belief has been formed through one process which is my visual capacity while in the second way my belief has been formed by two different and separate processes which are my friend's visual capacity and my friend's testimony. As I said earlier, it seems that despite these two different routes to my belief, it will be plausible for me to assign the same degree of reliability to it at the end of the day.

I think the circumstances illustrated in this case are compatible with the previous argument and therefore this case shouldn't be considered as a counterexample to the argument. In explaining the compatibility one can say when the degrees of reliability of two process (here vision and testimony) are extremely near to each other, and are extremely near to the maximum degree of reliability (viz. 1), we will not be in a position to be able to distinguish the two degrees. In other words, we are psychologically unable to distinguish two extremely near degrees of each other. So in this case, despite the real difference between the objective reliability of the two ways through which the concluding belief is resulted, we assign

the two ways the same degree due to our psychological inability for distinguishing between them. For example assume that I am justified to assign the degree 0.999 to my own visual capacity. This means that the beliefs resulted from my vision enjoy 0.999 degrees of reliability. Since I consider S_2 as my epistemic peer, I should assign the degree of 0.999 to her vision too. On the other hand, suppose that I am justified to assign the degree 0.998 to S_2's process of testimony. In this case I should assign the degree 0.999. 0.998 to the belief resulted from S_2's processes of vision and testimony. It is clear that 0.999 is greater than 0.999. 0.998 and therefore I should assign the greater degree of reliability to the belief resulted from my vision compared to the belief resulted from S_2's vision and testimony. But as I noted earlier it seems plausible to assign the same degree to both beliefs due to my inability to distinguish between the two beliefs. In other words, in this situation the difference between the two degrees of reliability is more fine-grained to be recognizable by my psychological capacity.

The third objection and its response

The response given to the second objection opens the way to the third objection. One may say that assessing the degrees of reliability concerning the different beliefs, we shouldn't consider the difference of degrees which we are unable to recognize. Whatever cannot be recognized should not be entered in calculations of degrees of reliability. This means that the reliabilities of the two different beliefs (those beliefs with the same content) are the same for me and if so you and I are in a completely symmetric situation in the disagreement. This response seems to be committed to a claim according to which all the factors that can affect the epistemic situation of my belief are those that are recognizable for me. It is equivalent to say that those factors that are not recognizable for me won't have any epistemic impact on my beliefs (and also on none of

my epistemic mental states). It is to say that some epistemic effects on my beliefs are due to the normative judgments and analyses to which I have access or know. Suppose that two propositions P and Q are so that it is not possible for me to know which is more justified. Both of them *seem* to be precisely equally justified but I know something that rationally suggests that one of them *should* be considered as more justified compared to the other. In this case I know that I should assign two different amounts of justification to the propositions although the justificatory difference is not recognizable for me. As an example, assume that I am looking at a pencil which is in a glass of water. The pencil seems broken. According just to the recognizable factors I should be justified to believe that the pencil is broken. But I know that the pencil is not broken despite the fact that it seems to me that it is. Consider the Muller-Lyer illusion as another example. In this visual illusion the length of one of two arrows seem to be shorter than the other but really this is not so. The length of the two arrows are actually the same. This is an illusion. Knowing that makes us justified to believe that the length of the two arrows are the same despite the illusionary appearance we still have. We can say, in the same way, that despite the fact that the two beliefs seem to be equally justified for me, I have epistemic access to a normative judgment (the normative judgment here is the argument for the asymmetry) that makes me justified to believe that one of the beliefs (my own belief that is resulted through a direct and immediate process) should be considered as more justified compared to the other.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that the epistemic situation between two parties in a peer disagreement is not symmetric when seeing things from the perspective of one of them. On the other hand the conciliatory view is based on the assumption that the situation is symmetrical. Therefore we can conclude that the

one of the main routes to conciliatory view will be closed. In the absence of another argument for the conciliatory view, we are justified to believe the steadfast view as an alternative. What was said above may be an argument against the Equal Weight View at least in some scenarios of peer disagreement. According to equal weight view, when S_1 and S_2, as two epistemic peers, disagree over P, the evidential situation for both of them is symmetrical and therefore they have to split the difference. The argument of this paper, if acceptable, shows that in some cases of disagreement, the evidential situation is not symmetrical for both parties of debate and therefore splitting the difference is not always the rational response to peer disagreement.

Endnote

1 . Christensen, 2009.

2 . Elga, 2007.

3 .Kelly, 2010.

4 . Fitelson and Jehle   2009. Fitelson and Jehle have showed that if you consider EVW precisely, there will be some different interpretation of that. Here, it would suffice for the purposes of this paper to consider a rough and intuitive interpretation of the Equal Weight View which can be found in philosophers who defend it or in the views who defend a sort of of conciliatory view.

5. The role of intuition in justifying some beliefs may be considered in two different ways. In one way intuition is considered as a distinct epistemic faculty - like perception - that can produce and justify some specific beliefs. In this reading, intuition – as a faculty - is separated from the beliefs and is actually considered as the source of justification for those beliefs. In the other way, we don't talk about intuition as a distinct faculty but just talk about intuitive judgments as a special kind of judgment that enjoy immediate justification. For this distinction see Bengson 2015, pp.1-2. It is worth noting that both of these readings are consistent with the main argument of this paper.

6. For a rather detailed explanation of this case see: Cohen 2000, pp.16-18.

7. Rosen 2001, P.71

8.By the character or the probative force of a specific body of evidence, I mean the proposition(s) that the body of evidence support.

9 "In full disclosure stage S1 and S2 have thoroughly discussed the issues and know each other reasons and arguments and that the other person has come to a competing conclusion after examining the same information." Feldman (2006).

10 "An intuitional report is the verbal report of a spontaneous mental judgment. In principle, the verbal report of an intuition can be erroneous, either through imperfect self-knowledge, verbal error, or insincerity". This direct quotation from Goldman and Pust shows why S1 should consider m less than 1. See Goldman and Pust, P.179

11 Here I have assumed that S2 's testimony is considered as a standard testimony and includes the properties such as sincerity and seriousness.

12 On the other hand, S1's testimony also should be n-degree reliable for S2.

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