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Disagreement and Skepticism

Edited by Diego E. Machuca
1. INTRODUCTION

Richard Feldman has drawn our attention to some apparently skeptical results of considering the epistemological significance of disagreement. The skeptical force of his argument is clear and plausible: that someone just as good as you in the relevant respects disagrees appears to give you more reason to suspend judgment than to continue believing. That is, it makes the doxastic attitude of suspension of judgment the one that better fits your evidential situation than the attitude of belief. After all, when peers disagree what you know is that one of you is mistaken, but you don’t know which, and you are totally on par with one another intellectually. One reason this skeptical threat is so forceful is that it seems to rely only on commonsense assumptions, such as evidentialism. One way to avoid the skeptical results of his considerations is to bite the bullet and deny evidentialism. In this essay I endeavor to show that one can avoid the skeptical conclusion while maintaining evidentialism. Though Feldman’s argument may not strictly depend on evidentialism, I think the strongest form of it does require an evidentialist assumption. Some take sameness of evidence as a part of peerhood and some do not, or at least do not make it explicit. I explicitly want to consider the case where evidence is exactly the same. More will be said of this below.

The thesis of this paper is that it is possible for one in a disagreement with an epistemic peer—of what I take to be the most relevant sort—to rationally maintain their belief even when one knows that the other party to the disagreement is one’s peer in the relevant sense. (In fact I think it may well be common, but that is an empirical matter.) That is, a fairly robust form of epistemic and evidential peer disagreement does not in all cases have skeptical consequences. The relevant perspectival fact is the fact that certain key evidence in the kind of possible case I will consider is arrived at via introspection. I will not assume or argue that S’s own perspective can influence how to settle disagreement in S’s favor just because it is S’s. Rather, the relevant fact about introspection is that it typically (though not necessarily) provides stronger epistemic support than our source of evidence concerning others’ mental states—testimony. I don’t claim that the way I present peerhood is
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the only sensible way to do so. I do, however, believe that the way I set up the problem is one very natural way to do so, one well worth considering.

There are a few advantages of the way I will approach the problem. One is that, unlike that of others both probabilistic (Christensen, Elga) and more traditional (Audi), it avoids all special principles crafted just for the skeptical problem of disagreement. This is in keeping with what I think is a natural desideratum as well as with Feldman’s own standards. Special principles often have special problems and, even if they work, one wants them to be special cases of more general principles of rationality. My approach only appeals to quite general epistemic considerations. Though I will present it in plain English and simple examples, my approach is perfectly amenable to probabilistic interpretation. Indeed, one simple generalization of what I say is that one just “follows the probabilities.” In some cases this will require suspension of judgment, and in others it won’t. If I am right, then the general lesson of considering epistemic peer disagreement, is that there is no general lesson of considering the epistemic significance of peer disagreement.

It is also important to be clear that my thesis is antiskeptical in the sense that I explicate one kind of situation in which knowledge, or at least justified belief, is compatible with informed peer disagreement. This does not entail that there aren’t other kinds of situations in which the skeptical result will apply. In this regard, again, the upshot is that the general lesson of disagreement for epistemology is that there is no general lesson of disagreement for epistemology. Still, prima facie, it is plausible that disagreeing epistemic peers who share evidence must suspend judgment. That case is so prima facie plausible that showing that this is not necessarily the case is a worthwhile endeavor.

First, I will set the stage by stating some assumptions, attempting to convey the usage of key terms, and providing what I hope to be a very compelling characterization of the problem. Apart from my main thesis—the possibility claim—I hope that the way I characterize the problem will bring some clarity to the investigation of the epistemic significance of disagreement. Then I will apply my proposal, first informally—or at least quasi-formally—then a bit more formally—or at least a bit more quasi-formally. Finally, I will consider a plausible though inconclusive objection.

1.1 Doxastic Attitudes

There are broadly two ways of thinking about doxastic attitudes, and the literature on disagreement includes discussions in terms of both of these. There is what I will call the Triadic Notion (TN) and what I will call the Graded Notion (GN). The triadic notion is sometimes called the “all-or-nothing” view and is represented by Richard Feldman. According to TN there are three doxastic attitudes: belief, disbelief (belief that a proposition is false), and suspension of judgment (i.e. neither believing nor disbelieving). According to GN doxastic attitudes come in a continuum of degrees typically called “degrees of belief” or “degrees of confidence” or “degrees of certainty.” This
is a family of notions rather than one determinate notion. It should also be noted that there are ways of combining the insights of both views: belief itself might be an all-or-nothing affair—either you believe something or you don’t—but it might be attended by some quality which comes in degrees. It is natural to talk about the strength of a belief and illustrate this with the difference between the strength of one’s belief in, say, one’s existence and one’s belief that one will live in the same house in 10 months (or some example that suits you). So on some conceptions of GN it is incompatible with TN and on others it is not. In the literature on disagreement, GN is represented primarily by David Christensen, much of whose work is a generalization of Feldman’s. Because the skeptical threat of disagreement is posed in strongest form by Feldman, I will work with a combined notion of belief, speaking of belief as a determinate propositional attitude, but one which comes in strengths. This way of speaking is rooted in ordinary language, but everything I say can be generalized to a purely probabilistic framework.

1.2 Characterizing Disagreements

Consider the following plausible thesis:

Cancellation

Conflicting testimony by equally reliable sources with the same evidence always cancels out completely.

This thesis is extremely plausible, and that it seems to manifest itself in a strongly skeptical outcome:

SJ

We ought always to suspend judgment in cases of peer disagreement.

That is, Cancellation plausibly leads to SJ if we accept another plausible principle.

Objectivity

We should give no special status to our own testimony just because it is ours.

The “just” in Objectivity is key. Obviously we can give special status to our testimony of we have good reason to believe either (i) that we have more evidence than another or (ii) when we have reason to believe we are more reliable. Those bases for self-favoring are natural. The intuition behind Objectivity is that unless one of those two conditions is met, self-favoring is unjustified.

The theory that I will present denies Cancellation read in a flat-footed way, though I do think I do justice to the intuition which support it. It also
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denies SJ. That is, it denies that it is a necessary truth. This is important to keep in mind, for my thesis is certainly not anything like the following:

Someone subject to peer disagreement is always justified in maintaining their belief.

On the contrary, my thesis is much, much more humble. It is simply that it is possible that one may continue to reasonably believe—even if weakly so—what one came into the peer disagreement believing.

I think this outcome is just what we should expect. On the one hand, we should not expect to have to jettison all beliefs which face the opposition. On the other, we should not expect to come out of disagreement unscathed. We should expect mixed results at different times; sometimes emerging with minimal variation, others escaping by the hair of our chinny chin chin. That my approach validates this outcome is a mark in its favor.

There are two main kinds of cases in the literature used to illustrate cases of disagreement. Some are cases of basic beliefs for which no discursive reasons can be articulated. A standard example is Feldman's case (Feldman 2006) where Pro and Con are looking out across the quad and Pro thinks he sees the Dean in the quad, but Con thinks he sees no one on the quad. Others are cases of inferential beliefs the arguments or reasons for which can be articulated but are quite complex. An example of this is van Inwagen's advertizing to his disagreement with David Lewis concerning compatibilism.9 He avows that each of them has read and understood all the same arguments relevant to the issue, which is no small body of work. I'm inclined to think that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, there is not a significant difference between these two kinds of cases in terms of their impact on assessing the epistemological significance of disagreement. The reason I think this is that every discursive argument rests ultimately on a set of basic beliefs about what premises are true and what inference rules are licit.10 So I think we should think of large-scale disagreements—and of course people mention disagreements in politics and religion in this context11—not as one instance of disagreement but rather as several disagreements about one thing each. Then multifaceted disagreements can be decomposed into individual disagreements. We can focus on the basic disagreements, determining what the outcome of that disagreement ought to be, then we can construct them into natural bundles again. In other words, we ought to deconstruct large disagreements into their constituent parts, assess them, then reassemble them and assess the cumulative effect. I take this to be no small point, and I will come back to it later in the application.

1.3 Characterizing Epistemic Peers

The above comments attempt to communicate how I am thinking about disagreements. Now I'll present the notion of epistemic peerhood which I find most natural and illuminating. Though, as I say, while I do not want to suggest
that the notion of an epistemic peer I will use is the only sensible one to think
about, I do think there is reason to consider it one of the root notions, and one
more central to standard epistemic concerns than others in the literature. There
are many respects in which two individuals A and B might be epistemic peers.
Here are a few: they could be alike in respects of: (1) intelligence, (2) informed-
ness (in the relevant domain), (3) open-mindedness, (4) honesty, (5) diligence,
and surely many others. Gutting makes peers alike in “intelligence, perspicac-
ity, honesty, thoroughness, and other relevant epistemic virtues” (1982: 83).
parity of “intelligence, reasoning powers, background information, etc.”

Peerages composed of various combinations of these respects may all
interesting, but I want to consider a particular kind of peerage that might
be thought to be grounded in some of the above features but I’m more
interested in the result: that neither A nor B have any reason to think that
the probability of A making a mistake about the matter in question differs
from the probability of B making a mistake about the matter. For whatever
reason—it could be because they are peers in one or more of the above
respects—when it comes to some proposition p, the expectation of error in
p-like cases is the same for both A and B. I think this is a better way to think
about peerage than the standard virtue accounts for a number of reasons.
First, it avoids having to make such decisions, as whether peers must have
each individual virtue to the same degree or whether they just have to be
equal with respect to some organic all-things-considered summary judgment
as to overall epistemic virtue.

Second, relatedly, it could be that two individuals differ in respects of
various virtues, but nevertheless are peers in an intuitively relevant sense. So
suppose that A is more intelligent than B, but B is more intelligent? Are they
still epistemic peers? Intuitively, they could be if it “balanced out” right. But
how would we characterize this balancing out? I suggest that the most natu-
ral way to characterize it is by saying that the offsetting virtues make them
equally reliable—in terms of epistemic probability—in the present case.
Thus, though the various virtues might be more basic in that they ground
reliability, it is the reliability which, in the end, is the epistemically salient
feature of peerhood.

Finally, consider this dilemma: either considerations pertaining to vir-
tuosity make it the case that each of two peers is as likely to get it right as
another or it does not. If it does, then why not just define peerhood in these
terms as I do, if it does not, then why should it even be relevant? That
is, why should it be relevant to the question of which doxastic attitude is
justified for a proposition, which is the terms in which Feldman presents his
apparently skeptical problem.

My account, then, is in line with Elga’s account of peerhood as “being
as good as you at evaluating such claims” (2007: 484), and with Christ-
tensen who mentions that neither party have any reason to think that it’s
more likely that she will react to the evidence in the right way than her
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interlocutor (2007: 188), and Kelly “neither . . . he or she is more or less reliable about the relevant domain” (2010: 112). I think these accounts are on the right track (though they don’t do much by way of saying why this is the right way to think about it), but we can make this precise by applying common statistical standards regarding the accuracy of reports. Jeffrey offers the following account of peerhood in considering cases of disagreeing testimony. Let p be the proposition in dispute. Let A(p) be “A says that p” and let B(p) be “B says that p”. That is, let X(p) express that X makes an utterance the semantic value of which is p. For our purposes, we will assume that interlocutors are certain about what one another say. This is clearly an idealization, though.

\[
\Pr(A(p)/p) = \Pr(B(p)/p) = r \\
\Pr(A(\neg p)/\neg p) = \Pr(B(\neg p)/\neg p) = t
\]

Jeffrey points out that if A and B have any reliability at all, the testimony of A and B will exactly cancel out, leaving the epistemic status of p just as it was before the disagreement, iff \(r = t\), which is just what I’m assuming with peerage. This sounds very much like it supports Cancellation, a flat-footed reading of which I said I’d deny. I also said I’d uphold the intuition, and how I do so will come out below.

What we want to stipulate is that on background evidence if p were true, the probability of A correctly saying so is the same as B correctly saying so (and we’ve just denoted this value with ‘r’), and likewise on the assumptions that p is false (denoting that value with ‘t’). We will want to add the assumption of conditional independence.

\[
\Pr(A(p) \& B(p)/p) = r^2 \& \Pr(A(\neg p) \& B(\neg p)/\neg p) = t^2
\]

That the value of the conjunction of the outcomes may simply be multiplied expresses their independence, just as you’d expect with independent dice.

One nice advantage of this account of peerhood is that it easily generalizes to the case of the near-peer, which is perhaps more common in real life. So suppose we think of B as 70% as reliable as A. Then the equations change in the following way.

\[
\Pr(A(p)/p) = r; \Pr(B(p)/p) = .7r \\
\Pr(A(\neg p)/\neg p) = t; \Pr(B(\neg p)/\neg p) = .7t
\]

These equations are indicative of peerhood, but my official account of peerhood is this:

A and B are epistemic peers = df There is complete error-statistical symmetry between A and B.
This will include the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
\Pr(p/A(p) \& B(\neg p)) &= \Pr(\neg p/A(p) \& B(\neg p)) \\
\Pr(p/A(\neg p) \& B(p)) &= \Pr(\neg p/A(\neg p) \& B(p))
\end{align*}
\]

With the usual assumption that \(\Pr(p)\) and \(\Pr(q)\) are strictly between 1 and 0, the following account of probabilistic symmetry entails both pairs of symmetry mentioned above:

If \(p\) is a proposition, let \(Vp\) be the truth value of \(p\), either T or F in classical logic. Then:

\(A\) and \(B\) are peers with respect to \(p\) and \(q\) respectively iff:

\[
P(V(A(p)) = a \& V(B(q)) = b \& Vp = c \& Vq = d) = P(V(A(p)) = b \& V(B(q)) = a \& Vp = d \& Vq = c)
\]

for all truth values \(a, b, c\) and \(d\).

Under those symmetry conditions, we get:

\[
P(p) = P(q)
\]

and

\[
P(p/A(p) \& B(q)) = P(q/A(p) \& B(q)).
\]

So the joint evidence can’t favor \(p\) over \(q\) and it can’t favor \(q\) over \(p\).

In other words, they’re peers iff the relevant joint distributions exhibit the right kind of symmetry. Letting \(q = \neg p\), we get the previous principle. This may or may not capture all the relevant kinds of probabilistic symmetry, but I believe I am ready to endorse about any kind of symmetry.

I think it is an advantage that the error-statistical view of peerhood is just a special case of a more general principle of respecting all evidence (as I said above, the degree of peerhood may well be derived from things like virtues and track records: it’s just that they are important only insofar as they allow us to calculate an expectation of error). The fact is that peer testimony will always count as some kind of evidence and this evidence ought to be taken into account and weighted by the (apparent) reliability of the peer. I’ll have more to say about this below.

This completes my attempt to make as clear as I can the key terms involved in the discussion. I have canvassed briefly my understanding of disagreements, peerhood, and advertised the basics of my approach. In the next section, right before presenting my solution, I will illustrate why the problem might seem insoluble. I hope to present a forceful case for the skeptical result, for I think it has a great deal of plausibility.
1.4 Initial Illustration

Characterizing the skeptical threat of epistemic peer disagreement in the ways specified above allows us to see how initially implausible it is that anything but suspension of judgment could be justified in such situations. For consider a situation in which you have two meters M1 and M2 which are meant to detect the presence of X particles. The meters are epistemic peers in our sense: they have the same chance of false positives, etc. per above. So you take them both to your basement, turn them on, and are disconcerted to find that one reports positive for X particles and the other negative. What could be more obvious than that the two reports cancel out and you are left with no reason to favor one hypothesis over the other? It seems perfectly clear that the only justified attitude is suspension of judgment. But let’s make it more personal.

Suppose you only have one meter, but you have two kids—twins, Ted and Todd. You send them down to the basement telling them to report their findings back to you. The meter is such that it will flash a green light if there are X particles present and a red light if there are not. Ted and Todd come back upstairs and, bewilderingly, report opposite results. Ted says “red” while “green” says Todd. How odd. What are you to do? They both swear that it seems clear to them what color light went off. On your background evidence, they are equally reliable at telling colors and whatnot. Clearly, something has gone wrong in one of the kids. But which one? You have no information whatsoever to discriminate between them. It would be the height of unreasonableness to pick the answer of your favorite twin (and how bad of you to have a favorite!). What could be more clear than that the justified attitude is suspension of judgment? Now let’s make it more personal yet.

Suppose you are Todd. And change nothing else about the scenario just described. You would no doubt be aggravated at Ted, but it would be the height of unreasonableness, given that on your background evidence he is no more likely than you to make a mistake, to assume that you were the fortunate son. Failing to realize this seems like a failure to “respect the evidence” as Feldman says. One way out is to give special status to one’s view just because it is one’s own, to reject evidentialism, that is. However, I want to try to address the skeptical threat without abandoning evidentialism, which is seemingly platitudinous.

So what I have done here is move from a seemingly obvious case where suspension of belief is clearly the justified attitude by short steps to a case where it seems that peer disagreement is of a kind with the first case. This makes it very hard to see how this kind of peer disagreement could fail to lead to suspension of judgment for one who respects the evidence.

I briefly want to register my agreement with Christensen (2007) against Foley’s complaint that “it is deeply misleading to think about [conflicts of opinion] in terms of a model of neutral arbitration between conflicting parties” (2001: 79). Christensen notes “There is, I think, no reason to suppose that taking the required sort of semidetached perspective toward
my beliefs should be impossible from the first-person perspective. The first-person perspective is not the dogmatic perspective: it does not entail denying or ignoring the possibility that I have made a cognitive error” (2001: 204). I think this is exactly right, and, though I shall presently offer a solution to which the first-person perspective is essential, it is one which gives no special status to the first-person perspective per se, i.e. does not in any way license the favoring of one’s own position apart from evidential factors.

Having set out my assumptions and my understanding of key terms and framing the challenge as best as I can, I will now attempt to describe how I think considerations pertaining to one’s own perspective can settle peer disagreements in one’s favor even with the robust assumptions of identity of evidence and identity of reliability. After that, I’ll consider an objection from Feldman.

2. THE ADVANTAGE PROVIDED BY ONE’S OWN PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Informal Presentation

It will suit my purposes to introduce another example. Nothing hangs on any differences between this example and the previous one. I pick this case because it represents the kind of intuition which is both fairly common to philosophical disagreements and tunes out some of the static of other examples in the literature. Call it the Logical Languishing case. Pro thinks the principle of conditional excluded middle is true. Con thinks it false. Pro thinks the wff representing CEM is valid, Con thinks it is not. These are basic intuitions. Assume that Pro and Con are peers in our sense, and that each is certain that this is so (the approach can be generalized to lack of certainty in this, but this harmless simplifying assumption will make the math much easier).

In calculating the strength of belief one should have, there are only two kinds of values, conditional probabilities and priors. All the conditional probabilities will be the same for each of them since they are peers, and this will be so from each of their perspectives if they are certain that they are peers (again, for the purposes of the model, we’ll make the simplifying assumption that there is no doubt about what they heard the other say, though a more general account would take these kinds of considerations into account, as I will later).

The key fact is that one is in a better position to identify one’s own intuition than an interlocutors. We know what we seem to see, or remember, or intuit via introspection. And introspection, though fallible, still delivers more epistemic support than testimony in the ordinary case (There may or may not be possible cases where this isn’t so). And testimony is typically our only way of getting evidence that our interlocutor has had the results of reflection she claims to have (at least in the ordinary case. There may or may not be possible cases where we know the contents of another’s mind via
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introspection). Thus, for each of them, there will be an asymmetry of a basic epistemic probability in their favor. (Note that this is strictly a first-personal solution. A third party whose only evidence consisted in the testimony of these two peers could only rationally suspend judgment.)

For example, in the Logical Languishing case just introduced above, Pro knows via introspection that it seems to him that CEM is true. Let it be likely to degree $d$ based on this that it is true. Con testifies that it seems false to him. The conditional probability here is also $d$, but of its being false. Now that they have shared evidence it might seem like they each ought to suspend judgment. For this seems to be the result of the particle sensor model I suggested above. However, this ignores the fact that Pro will be more certain that it seems to him that CEM is true than he is that it seems to Con that it is false. Thus, the relevant possibility that they do not really disagree entails the relevant possibility that Pro doesn’t have defeating evidence from Con after all. This holds true even in the case where they objectively do disagree. This is basically what Gupreet Rattan (2009) calls “reflective suspension of equivocation.”

It’s not just that Con might be insincere—whether lying or joking—though that’s a realistic possibility, we have idealized it away for now. In philosophical disagreements there is considerable possibility that people are talking past one another, that one’s interlocutor doesn’t really have in mind the same proposition when they appear to deny what you affirm or that it is so to the extent they seem to indicate. For example, there’s some concern for Pro that Con is actually thinking about the Principle of Conditional Bivalence. It is very easy to mistake CEM for PCB, and even those familiar with the distinction can overlook it. The two principles might be conceptually connected in one person’s mind in a way they are not in another’s, and this could even be opaque to them, so they couldn’t convey it to you in testimony (this brings up a related point: we can double-check our own mental states in a way we just can’t with others. For this to be an advantage for us in no way requires infallibility in this capacity). This could affect the content of what it is they really seem to see to be true. Con could also—as far as Pro can tell—be confusing its seeming to him that CEM is false for its seeming to him that $X$ and that $X$ obviously entails $\neg CEM$ (for some appropriate $X$). This is an easy confusion to make. There are many live possibilities for the disagreement being apparent rather than real (even if it is real), and thus many live possibilities for there being no defeating evidence in the offing. Note too that prior to considering the epistemological significance of disagreement, we will have been inclined to suspect that someone disagreeing with us on a basic matter that seems clear to us is not meaning what they seem to say or not being “on the same page” somehow, even after full disclosure of the evidence. This may not seem like much, but it can be substantive, and can be enough to tip the scales in large-scale disagreements, for as we re-assemble a large disagreement out of the atomic disagreements we have broken it down to each little chance of error amalgamates with the other. Since small differences add up
to big differences, the larger and more multi-faceted the disagreement, the
greater the latitude my theory allows. (There will be lots of agreement as
well, of course, though in philosophy at least where many issues are logically
interconnected disagreement might be fairly pervasive.) This is a mark in its
favor, since pre-theoretically that seems like the right result.

I recently edited a volume of essays on a topic central to epistemology. I
am a die-hard proponent of a certain perspective. There were four individu-
als out of 15 who held the diametrically opposed view. There were four individu-
als out of 15 whose essays, when summarizing, I apparently badly misinter-
preted. I had read these essays with care many times over the course of many
months. In fact, in some cases I had discussed these views with the author
many times over several years. I hasten to add that all the essays were very
well written. The circumstances for accurate interpretation seemed nearly
ideal, yet there was considerable misunderstanding. Philosophy is hard, and
we should not underestimate the very real possibility that there is serious
misinterpretation going on even under seemingly ideal circumstances.

Two things seem intuitively right to me prior to assessing the epistemologi-
cal significance of disagreement: both that one can be rational to continue to
believe in the face of disagreement of a peer, and that one cannot do so with
the strength with which one began. Surely, I think, if rational belief survives
peer disagreement, it does so with some loss. The treatment I have offered
ratifies both these judgments. That is a point in its favor. Finally, if each party
is assumed to recognize the other as an epistemic peer and to realize that their
position is symmetric, they ought to hold the other rational as well, recogniz-
ing that from the perspective of the other, the other has better evidence that
they (the other, relative to the evaluator) have the intuition they take them-
selves to have than that their interlocutor has the intuition they claim to have.

From a probabilistic perspective, it is perfectly clear that if you intro-
duce only one evidential asymmetry—in this case, the more secure epistemic
access to a key piece of evidence: that one’s “test” returns “positive” for
valid—against a background of total error-statistical symmetry with respect
to reliability, then that one asymmetry will cause a corresponding epistemic
asymmetry in favor of the proposition supported by that key item of evi-
dence—in this case that CEM is valid. This much can be seen without any
formal apparatus. However, it may help to show how this is modeled in a
system designed for just such a situation, i.e. imperfect access to evidence. So
in the next section, I will present, as an aid, a model of how this goes within
the framework of Jeffrey Conditionalization. The reader who does not find
it helpful may skip it without loss.

2.2 Formal Presentation

The method of treating other individuals intuitions like a testing device
or sensor for features of reality has the advantage of being modelable in
probabilistic terms that are perfectly general, calling for no special prin-
principles. Recall that I have built into the notion of an epistemic peer—on the model of a medical test—equal sensitivity to both truth and falsehood. So peers are equally liable to/safe from both Type I and Type II error. I then considered a case in which there were two further salient facts about the peers in question. First, they were both generally reliable. Second, one had somewhat more reliable access to his “reading” than she did to her peer’s “reading.” I didn’t state it before, but I’m stipulating that the prior probability of the wff is .5. I do endorse a form of the Principle of Indifference, but here I will just stipulate that is the value. Given this notion of peerhood and the specification of general reliability, it is clear that against this background of probabilistic symmetry the single probabilistic asymmetry of access will tip the scales of belief in favor of the one with that greater access. While this is very easy to see on an intuitive level, it won’t hurt to walk a little ways down the probabilistic path to see how the point generalizes. In what follows, I will give an intuitive account of the formal maneuvers required for the generalization. We will not go all the way down the path to full probabilistic generality, for that would be more burdensome than the net gain would justify. However, we can see the end of the path from our stopping point.

2.2.1 Updating with New Priors on the Evidence

I will proceed as follows. To keep the math simple, I will consider the two items of evidence—again from Pro’s perspective—separately, first showing the relevance of the first item of evidence—SPV—to V and then to ~V, then showing the relevance of the second item of evidence—SC~V—to V and then to ~V. Naturally, the first item of evidence favors V for Pro and the second item favors ~V for Pro. The question, then, is Which favoring favors more? I will show algebraically that the ratio representing the degree to which SPV favors V for Pro is greater than the ratio representing the degree to which SC~V favors ~V for Pro. My use here of “first” and “second” refers to the order of exposition. For the sake of simplicity, I’m making the idealizing assumption that Pro learns of his report and of Con’s report simultaneously.

The material for the ratios to follow comes from representing Pro’s new information state after getting two items of evidence.

First (first in the order of exposition, Pro learns these two things perfectly simultaneously) we’ll look at the updates for Pro after reflecting on whether she thinks CEM is valid by Jeffrey conditionalization:

Pair 1—The impact of SPV

\[ \text{ProNEW}(V) = \text{ProOLD}(V/\text{SPV}) \times \text{ProNEW}(\text{SPV}) + \text{ProOLD}(V/\neg \text{SPV}) \times \text{ProNEW}(\neg \text{SPV}) \]

\[ \text{ProNEW}(\neg V) = \text{ProOLD}(\neg V/\text{SPV}) \times \text{ProNEW}(\text{SPV}) + \text{ProOLD}(\neg V/\neg \text{SPV}) \times \text{ProNEW}(\neg \text{SPV}) \]
Next we’ll look at the updates for Pro on learning that Con thinks that ~V:

**Pair 2—The impact of SC~V**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ProNEW}(V) &= \text{ProOLD}(V/SC\neg V) \times \text{ProNEW}(SC\neg V) + \text{ProOLD}(V/\neg SC\neg V) \times \text{ProNEW}(\neg SC\neg V) \\
\text{ProNEW}(\neg V) &= \text{ProOLD}(\neg V/SC\neg V) \times \text{ProNEW}(SC\neg V) + \text{ProOLD}(\neg V/\neg SC\neg V) \times \text{ProNEW}(\neg SC\neg V)
\end{align*}
\]

To make a general assessment of the impact of the evidence, we will do well to assign some constants. So let \( r \) represent the reliability of Pro’s (and therefore his peer Con’s) intuition. Let \( x \) be the reliability of Pro’s access to the results of his intuition (which we needn’t assume is 1, though may well assume it is nearly that). Finally, let \( y \) be the reliability of Pro’s access to the results of Con’s intuition. Pro is treating herself and her peer as meters of whether \( V \), and their intuitions are the readings of those meters. But it is as though Pro has his own meter pretty much in plain sight whereas Con’s meter is off at some distance or in a darkish room or some such. This is why Jeffrey conditioning is appropriate here. Now we will relate each pair of updates to one another and then to each other.

First we will relate the first pair of updates to one another. Given our set up above we get the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ProNEW}(V) &= r \times x + (1 – r) \times (1 – x) = 2rx + 1 – r – x \\
\text{ProNEW}(\neg V) &= (1 – r) \times x + r \times (1 – x) = x – 2rx + r
\end{align*}
\]

Obviously, in this pair where the evidence being considered is SPV, \( V \) will be favored over \( \neg V \). We can represent the degree of this favoring by the following ratio:

**Ratio 1**

\[
\frac{(2rx + 1 – r – x)}{(x – 2rx + r)}
\]

Next we’ll look at the update from Pro’s obtaining Con’s testimony\(^{23}\) that that it seems to him that \( \neg V \):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ProNEW}(V) &= (1 – r) \times y + r \times (1 – y) = y – 2ry + r \\
\text{ProNEW}(\neg V) &= r \times y + (1 – r) \times (1 – y) = 2ry + 1 – r – y
\end{align*}
\]

Obviously, in this pair where the evidence being considered (considered by us, that is: Pro considers both items of evidence simultaneously) is SC~V, \( \neg V \) will be favored over \( V \). We can represent the degree of this favoring by the following ratio:
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Ratio 2

\[ \frac{2ry + 1 - r - y}{2ry + 1 - r - y} \]

So now our question is whether Ratio 1 or Ratio 2 is the greater. The two salient facts I mentioned above were that both Pro and Con are taken to be very reliable and the sole asymmetry that Pro has more reliable access to her “reading” than to Con’s. These two salient facts are represented by the following two inequalities:

**Inequalities**

\[ r > .5 \]
\[ x > y \]

From the assumption of erstwhile total epistemic symmetry, it follows from the inequalities that Ratio 1 is greater than Ratio 2, and thus Pro’s total evidence favors V over ~V. And this is so in spite of the fact they are total epistemic peers and have the same evidence. So it is indeed possible for someone in a known epistemic peer disagreement to favor their own belief without giving up evidentialism and without appeal to special principles. And it’s just the same—mutatis mutandis—for Con. So each party to the peer disagreement can favor theory belief rather than suspend judgment.

So even though Pro knows that Con is just as reliable in the matter—represented by the equality of the conditional probabilities—Pro is in a better epistemic position with respect to the evidence concerning his intuition and so his own belief comes out more probable on total evidence (and, again, the situation is isomorphic with Con).

3. SOME POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES

One advantage of my approach over similar treatments in Christensen (2007) and Elga (2007) is that it clearly respects the following intuition, which theirs do not (at least not clearly).

**TotEv**

In judging the epistemic status of a belief, the only body of evidence that’s relevant is total relevant evidence, all the relevant evidence a person has.

TotEv is very intuitive, but like many intuitive truths it can sometimes be seen better considering some negative aspect. So consider that if TotEv is false, then it’s sometimes acceptable to compute the epistemic status of a belief while ignoring some evidence. But it’s never epistemically OK to
ignore evidence. So perhaps another way to put this point is the Respecting the Evidence Principle:

**REP**

It’s never epistemically OK to ignore evidence in the calculation of the epistemic status of a belief.

This line of thought is honored by my approach. However this is not the case with Christensen (2007) and Elga (2007). In the case of Christensen, there is the troubling principle called Independence. He says “I should assess explanations of the disagreement in a way that is independent of my reasoning on the matter under dispute” (2007: 199). In a later article, he puts it this way:

**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. (2009: 758)

It is hard to imagine how belief modification independent of certain facts could fail to leave out evidence. How could one take into account a fact while reasoning independently of it? There is reason to think that Christensen wants to respect TotEv. He says “But my friend’s belief is additional evidence, which bears upon the probability that I made a mistake in my initial judgment” (2007: 209). It’s just not clear to me either from Independence itself or from his illustration in cases that “reasoning independently of X” doesn’t mean bracketing X evidentially.25 But on my view there is no such difficulty. And at any rate Independence remains obscure for other reasons and Christensen is forced to defend it against several objections in Christensen (2009) article and, more recently, in Christensen (2011).

There is no such ambiguity in the case of Elga, however. His approach explicitly involves “*bracketing off or setting aside* certain considerations . . . we remove or extract . . . information from your current state of belief” (2007: 489). The result is that “the disputed reasoning has been extracted” (2007: 490). This sounds like a situation which could be described by Independence, and Elga and Christensen’s views are quite similar in many respects. This lends some support to the idea that, like Elga (2007), Christensen (2007) is also failing to respect TotEv. That my approach does respect TotEv, and does so clearly, is a consideration in its favor.

There is a related advantage my Jeffrey-esque approach has. I have already noted that Independence is obscure and subject to many objections and interpretive dilemmas. Elga is also the source of a special principle concerning disagreement:
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**Equal Weight View**

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. (2007: 490)

There ensues a discussion of some nuances of the phrase “circumstances of disagreement” the individuation of which must—he says—be at just the right level of granularity for his view to be plausible. There are many concerns about this view raised in Jehle & Fitelson (2009). In general, special principles about disagreement create special problems, and, it seems to me, more confusion than clarity. My position is that the relevant question concerning any target proposition p is simply “What is the probability of p on my total evidence?” My evidence might include or even be limited to my own experience and the reported contrary experience of an apparent peer. There is nothing about this case, though, which is in any way substantively special: it’s just evidence of one kind rather than another. And the attempt to provide special principles for dealing with it will either be false, true-but-confusing, or mere consequences of the most general epistemological principle to believe in accordance with your total evidence. The approach I have advocated above begins and ends with this platitude.

A final advantage I will mention along these lines is that by treating the epistemology of disagreement only by adverting to the probability on total evidence I avoid confusions about special principles for belief modification in the face of disagreement such as the “split the difference view” (which is frequently confused with the Equal Weight View). As Christensen makes clear “Much work would have to be done to refine . . . a certain kind of special case into a general principle for disagreement-based belief-revision” (2009: 766 n.11). He goes on to note at least six major complications such a disagreement-specific principle would have to account for. On my pure probabilist approach, all these factors just fold into the calculation of the probability, no special principles needed.

4. **IS IT ENOUGH?**

Feldman considers a line of thought similar to what I have offered here and dismisses it quickly:

However, I think that the prospects are really quite bleak. This is because, in fact, the doubts about the existence of the (apparent) insights or intuitions of the conversational partner are really extremely minimal, far
too weak to make one’s overall evidence have the desired characteristics. (2006: 224)

I have admitted that the evidential differentials in atomic cases may not be large. However, I have also urged that they are greater than Feldman seems to indicate here. I have described a case above which illustrates how these doubts can be non-trivial. And, as pointed out earlier, the most interesting potential skeptical consequences of epistemic disagreement involve skeptical threats to some of our core beliefs: religious and political beliefs, likely ones which guide much of our action. But such disagreements are composed of many of the kinds of atomic disagreement I’ve treated here. And the cumulative effect of small favorings can add up to a significant favoring.

Furthermore, in the context of a discussion of justified belief, the “desired characteristics” seem to be limited to justifying belief. So the substantive question is whether the evidential differential, the modicum of doubt that there really is any disagreement and thus doubt that there is any defeating evidence arising from a disagreement is significant enough to allow for justified belief (which is obviously consistent with doubt). What’s interesting in this regard is that Feldman’s statement above appears to contradict what he says elsewhere when he endorses the following principle.

EC Believing is the justified attitude when the person’s evidence on balance supports a proposition, disbelieving is the justified attitude when the person’s evidence on balance supports the negation of a proposition, and suspension of judgment is the justified attitude when the person’s evidence on balance supports neither a proposition nor its negation. (Conee & Feldman 2004: 102, emphasis added)

It seems to me that the earlier Feldman is correct in this disagreement for if the evidence on balance supports p, how could suspending judgment possibly be the more fitting attitude than belief, even if it is weak belief? At any rate, Feldman’s prior avowals affirm the significance of my result.

Above, I advocated breaking large disagreements down to basic beliefs. This puts the “clash of intuitions” at the base where they belong. I have modeled my analysis above only in cases of these basic clashes. However, disagreements on philosophical issues—such as the frequent example concerning free will—involves the aggregation of very many such intuitions. Thus, the “reflective suspicion of equivocation” will also aggregate. This will ramify the degree of reflective suspicion of equivocation considerably. Thus the degree to which the considerations I’ve urged have a preserving effect on belief will vary by case. At the level of the clash of intuitions, one’s grip remains, but remains very tenuous (that it does remain, though, distinguishes my position logically from skeptical views. If I am right, such theses are false). At the aggregated level of large-scale philosophical, political, or
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religious disagreements, the combined effects of little possibilities of equivocation can become much more significant.

In the end, it is better to endorse believing—albeit weakly—than to endorse a general skepticism, and this is what my model offers. In fact, pre-theoretically, this is what we should expect. That is, we should expect peer disagreements to frequently result in weakened belief. That is a happy medium between dismissing peer disagreement as it might seem Kelly (2005) does or fully succumbing to it as it might seem in much of Feldman’s work. And this is, of course, only the two-person case. My approach supports, in the n-person case, averaging over each person’s credence weighted by their reliability on my evidence. Thus the first-person perspective generalizes to an acceptance of consensus, which also seems reasonable. All of what I have said is generalizable to cases of disagreement on who the experts are.

5. CONCLUSION

I have argued that considerations pertaining to one’s own perspective allow for at least one kind of non-skeptical peer disagreement. I have not claimed that this is how it will work in every case. There are plausible models where it goes the other way. So the answer to the question “What is the epistemological significance of disagreement?” is “It all depends.”

NOTES

2. That is, one of them is mistaken about whether p. The necessity of one them making a mistake in their general assessment of the evidence depends on the Uniqueness Thesis. For an able explication and defense, see Matheson (2011).
4. I am of the opinion that justification skepticism is far more significant than knowledge skepticism.
5. For example, some Orthodox Bayesians eschew any notion of all-or-nothing belief. Others define it in terms of degrees of belief over some (possibly context-sensitive) threshold (see Weirich 2004). Yet others provide a substitute notion not related to degrees of belief (for this last option, see Kaplan 1996).
7. I shall be assuming a propositional theory of evidence. For a defense, see Williamson (2000) and Dougherty (2011), though see also Dougherty and Rysiew (forthcoming).
8. There is a bit of a puzzle in one case, when the problem of disagreement is considered from the perspective of the tripartite division of doxastic attitudes—belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment (which, for Feldman, means simply neither belief nor disbelief). If A believes p and B suspends judgment, then SJ would have B “winning by default.” At this point, the most
promising line of thought regarding this seems to me the possibility that there is a fourth attitude which differs from suspension of judgment insofar as this fourth attitude is not reflective of an assessment of a degree of evidence but, rather, indicative of a wholesale inability to make such a judgment, a “null” verdict, as it were. For explorations along these lines, see Friedman (forthcoming a) and for a generalization of that see Freedman (forthcoming b). Kelly (2010) notes the oddity, too. It might have been better to formulate the cases in the literature as “Epistemic Conflict” since the conflicting attitudes don’t always represent explicit disagreement. It is, however, too late for that, and the central cases are clear.


10. It is not necessary for an agent to represent the rules of inference to themselves with a very high degree of awareness in many cases, else we’d land in Carroll’s Paradox. Another way to express this point—I think it’s the same point—is that every discursive argument has some corresponding conditional which, but for medical limitations, we could entertain in such a way that, given our constitution, would either appear to us valid or not as a basic judgment. At any rate, in a disagreement methods of inference are liable to come up in full disclosure.

11. Indeed, Feldman’s first publication on the topic was in the context of religion (Feldman 2003) and he recounts how he early came to think about this topic in the context of religion in Feldman (2007).

12. Sometimes one encounters people who think that peerage with respect to total evidence is not interesting because, surely, no two actual individuals ever share total evidence. One reason this kind of peerhood might be interesting is that it is the kind relevant to proposed counterexamples to the form of evidentialism which entails the thesis that any two individuals exactly alike in respects of evidence are exactly alike in respects of justification. Another reason is that if it is not possible for total-evidence-peers to rationally disagree, then it seems that people who differ only slightly with respect to evidence cannot rationally differ greatly, and, surely, some near-peers differ in their conclusions more than they differ in their evidence.

13. Because I am addressing the question from the first-person perspective, the relevant question for the subject is “In light of this disagreement, what should I believe?” Thus epistemic peerhood should be in terms of epistemic probability. So A is a peer for B with respect to p =df B’s total evidence supports that A is as reliable as B with respect to p.

14. Of course they will be relevant to the assessment of someone’s moral character. Intellectual virtues, despite their name are still character traits. Or they might be relevant to assessing a person’s overall flourishing. It’s just that there is special epistemic salience for reliability in that it pertains directly to the issue of justified doxastic attitudes.

15. For another criticism of virtuosity accounts of peerhood see Elga (2007: n.21).

16. Elga adds a proviso in his note 21 which I will not address, but he notes that it’s nonstandard.

17. In one of his main examples Christensen mentions that “I know that our skills, education, and track records are equally good” (2007: 197), but I take it that his account is more akin to mine than the virtue accounts of peerhood and that the items he mentions there could simply serve as the basis for the kind of peerhood I endorse.

18. Jeffrey (1992: 110). I have changed the equations a bit to make it more perspicacious how they are working. This explains why I skip ‘s’ and go right to ‘t.’

19. That is, we will idealize and assume that it is certain both that X has made the phonetic utterance in question and that that utterance has p as its content.
We can further assume that the contextual conditions are known for sure to pick out the speech act as a simple assertion of $p$.

20. It is important for me to note that Jeffrey is here considering clear testimony. This is what makes his statement here consistent with what I later borrow from Jeffrey to break the tie.

21. The false positive rate above would be $1 - t$.

22. And if there is some relevant kind of epistemic symmetry I have failed to specify, I hereby predict that I will be happy to endorse it.

23. We will idealize and assume that Pro knows with complete certainty that Con uttered “It seems to me that CEM is not valid” in a context where it is certain that the utterance is a sober assertion.

24. It might be morally OK to do so in some strange cases. It might also be pragmatically OK to do so, as when one needs to believe the unjustified proposition that they will survive an ordeal in order to increase the probability of surviving it.

25. Christensen has confirmed in conversation that he is bracketing evidence.

26. See Matheson (2009) for a nice treatment of these issues.

27. Many thanks are due Richard Feldman for detailed comments on the original ancestor of this paper in his 2009 graduate epistemology seminar; to Clayton Littlejohn and Jon Matheson for very helpful comments on the penultimate version; to the audiences of the 2009 International Disagreement Conference in Amsterdam, the 2010 Formal Epistemology Workshop at Konstanz, and the 2010 Midwest Epistemology Workshop, Purdue University, and to Yoav Isaacs for copious correspondence on the best way to represent the formal aspect. Naturally, all the mistakes are due only to me.

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