

# The Epistemology of Disagreement

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# Outline

Introduction to the Problem of Disagreement

Conciliationism

Steadfastness

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# The epistemological problem of disagreement

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- ▶ We sometimes discover that others have utterly different beliefs from ours on certain subject matter.
- ▶ This raises an epistemological problem.
- ▶ How much should your confidence in your beliefs be shaken when you learn that others hold beliefs contrary to yours?

# Epistemic peers

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- ▶ The confrontation with others is even more upsetting when they are our 'epistemic peers'.
- ▶ What is an **epistemic peer**?

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# Epistemic peers

- ▶ **First pass:** Epistemic peers on a subject matter  $s$  are ones who appear to be as well-qualified as we are on  $s$ .
- ▶ But what does it mean to say that one 'appears to be as qualified as us' on a certain subject matter?

# The notion of an epistemic peer

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- ▶ Would that suffice?

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- ▶ It does not matter.

# The notion of an epistemic peer

- ▶ Of course, somebody who may seem to be as qualified as we are at  $t$  may turn out to be less or more qualified than we are at  $t+1$ .
- ▶ It does not matter.
- ▶ The problem that concerns us is: given that we have good evidence that a person is as qualified as we are at  $t$  on a subject matter  $s$ , what should our epistemic attitude be concerning  $s$  at  $t$ ?

# The notion of an epistemic peer

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- ▶ In addition, we may want to add that for anybody to qualify as an epistemic peer, she will have to appear as intelligent, as skillful and as resourceful as we are.
- ▶ For of course, one may have the same amount of evidence we do, as make some errors in forming the relevant belief on that basis.
- ▶ So in general, an epistemic peer on domain of inquiry  $D$  is somebody that appears to be as likely as we are to get it right on a certain domain  $D$ .

# Different options

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- ▶ Should we ignore the disagreement and stick to our guns?

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# The importance and generality of the question

- ▶ The general question is a very simple one.
- ▶ How should our opinions be affected by acquiring knowledge of the opinions of others?
- ▶ This question seems to be immensely important, especially in areas where disagreement is very widespread.
- ▶ Philosophy is one example. But other important examples are ethics and politics.

# David Christensen

## Cast of Characters



- ▶ Ph.D. from UCLA in 1987.
- ▶ Professor of Philosophy at Brown University.
- ▶ Author of several articles on the epistemology of disagreement: “Disagreement and Public Controversy”, “Epistemic Modesty Defended”, “Rational Reflection”, “Higher-Order Evidence”, “Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy.”

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**Conciliationism**

Steadfastness

# Conciliationism

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- ▶ That means that we should either suspend belief, or adopt a middling credence.

# Motivations for Conciliationism

## Mental Math

You and your friend have been going out to dinner together regularly for many years. You always tip 20% and split the check, and you each do the requisite calculation in your head upon receiving the check. Most of the time you have agreed, but in the instances when you have not, you have taken out a calculator to check; over the years, you and your friend have been right in these situations equally often. Tonight, you figure out that your shares are 43, and become quite confident of this. But then your friend announces that she is quite confident that your shares are 45. Neither of you has had more wine or coffee, and you do not feel (nor does your friend appear) especially tired or especially perky.

# Motivations for Conciliationism

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- ▶ How confident should you now be that your shares are 43?
- ▶ Many people agree that in this sort of case, strong conciliation is called for: you should become much less confident in 43—indeed, you should be about as confident in 45 as in 43.

# Motivations for Conciliationism

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- ▶ So they should become much less confident in their opinions.

# Motivations for Conciliationism

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- ▶ '**independent**' here means that, for example, the fact that the other believes not  $p$ , while you believe  $p$ , is not itself a relevant reason to doubt to the other person's opinion.

# Motivations for Conciliationism

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# Motivations for Conciliationism

## Independence

In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another person's belief about  $P$ , 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  $P$ .

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- ▶ After all, one is a peer exactly if one's dispute-independent evaluation gives one strong reason to think that that person is equally likely to have evaluated the evidence correctly.

# How plausible is Independence

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- ▶ Elga has argued: not every plausible, in many controversial cases.

# Adam Elga

## Cast of Characters



- ▶ Ph.D. from MIT in 2001.
- ▶ Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University.

## Example: Abortion

### Abortion

Suppose Ann and Beth disagree about the morality of abortion. If so, they will probably disagree about a great many related moral, psychological, theological, and ordinary factual issues. But if Ann attempts to evaluate the epistemic credentials of Beth's beliefs independent of all these, she will fail: we can stipulate that to the extent that Ann abstracts from disputed considerations, there will be no fact of the matter concerning her opinion of Beth's credentials. So Ann need not take a conciliatory attitude toward Beth's belief.

## A global example of disagreement

*Suppose that someone earnestly challenges virtually all of my belief, including the beliefs that my general cognitive processes are reasonably reliable. Independence now enjoins me to evaluate the epistemic credentials of his beliefs in a way that abstracts even from my taking myself to be a reliable thinker. It seems that I cannot cite any dispute-independent reasons for thinking that my beliefs are more likely to be correct, if only because, given the breadth of the territory under dispute, I cannot cite dispute-independent reasons for much of anything at all.*

# Question

- ▶ Does Conciliationism now force me to near-global skepticism?

# Outline

## Conciliationism

### One kind of Conciliationism

# The Equal Weight View

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- ▶ But how conciliatory should one be depends on the kind of conciliationism you embrace.
- ▶ One particular kind of conciliationism says that you should assign **equal weight** to your peer.

# One implementation of The Equal Weight View

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# One implementation of The Equal Weight View

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- ▶ The **Split the Difference View** says that if you have credence .9 in  $p$  and your peer has credence .4, the rational response is to lower your credence from .9 to .65.
- ▶ In other words, you should subtract the two credences, and divide the result by two.

# Objections to Splitting the Difference View

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- ▶ The Split the difference view says that if you have credence .9 in  $p$  and your peer has credence .4, the rational response is to lower your credence from .9 to .65.
- ▶ Does it sound like a reasonable thing to do?

# Objections to Splitting the Difference View

- ▶ That one should split the difference implausible in some cases.

## Objections to Split the Difference View

*Suppose, for example, that I am a doctor determining what dosage of a drug to give my patient. I'm initially inclined to be very confident in my conclusion, but knowing my own fallibility in calculation, I pull back a bit, say, to 0.97. I also decide to ask my equally qualified colleague for an independent opinion. I do so in the Conciliatory spirit of using her reasoning as a check on my own. Now suppose I find out that she has arrived—presumably in a way that also takes into account her fallibility—at 0.96 credence in the same dosage.*

# Objections to Split the Difference View

- ▶ Here, it seems that the rational thing to do is for me to increase my confidence that this is the correct dosage, not decrease it as difference-splitting would require.

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# Motivations against Conciliationism

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- ▶ But it looks that is going to happen pretty often!
- ▶ Moreover, in some cases a less Conciliatory approach seems to be totally appropriate.

## Careful Checking

The situation is as in Mental Math, but this time you do not do the arithmetic in your head. You do it carefully on paper, and check your results. Then you do it in a different way. Then you take out a well-tested calculator and use it to do and check the problem a few different ways. Each time you get 43, so you become extremely confident in this answer. But then your friend, who was also writing down numbers and pushing calculator buttons, announces that she has consistently gotten 45!

- ▶ In this sort of case, many feel that very little, if any, conciliation is called for.

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- ▶ Don't you think?

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- ▶ Consider the following thesis:

## Uniqueness Thesis

No body of evidence E justifies more than one doxastic attitude (believing, disbelieving, withholding) on any given question.

## Questions for discussion

- ▶ How plausible is the Uniqueness Thesis?

# Against Uniqueness

*It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with the same body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. (Gideon Rosen)*

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- ▶ Figuring out what to believe is a matter of weighing various considerations as we try to fit all the pieces together.
- ▶ Difficult cases like this tend to produce sharp disagreement even among the most diligent inquirers.
- ▶ Some may be tempted to give up and conclude that there is no telling who's right.

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# An Argument Against Uniqueness

- ▶ But many of us retain our conviction that having earnestly wrestled with the evidence our conclusions are correct.
- ▶ Now a proponent of Uniqueness will have to insist that those who disagree have failed to respond to the evidence rationally.
- ▶ For if the parties in the dispute have the same evidence, and one's total evidence uniquely determines what one can rationally believe, then they should all be in agreement.

# Permissivism

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- ▶ The reason why **Uniqueness Thesis** strikes many as implausible is that many evidential situations leave room for more than one completely reasonable doxastic response.
- ▶ If you think that the Uniqueness Thesis is implausible, then you may believe that your epistemic attitude toward  $p$  is as legitimate in a certain situation as your peer's opposite attitude towards  $p$ .

- ▶ If you deny the **Uniqueness Thesis**, you are a **Permissivist**.

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- ▶ If you deny the **Uniqueness Thesis**, you are a **Permissivist**.
- ▶ But if you are a Permissivist, you may as well think that, in face of disagreement, you may as well stick to your guns.
- ▶ After all, according to Permissivism, both your belief and your peer's opinion may be right, in face of disagreement.