

Peer Disagreement

1. Suspension of Belief (The Conciliatory View): Consider the following example:

Two Clocks: You come to on the kitchen floor. You have no idea what time it is. But the microwave clock says it's 11:47, and the coffee-maker says it's 1:26.

Are you justified in forming a belief about what time it is? Seemingly: No! You have two devices here that are giving conflicting reports about what time it is. And, having no reason to believe that one device is more correct than the other – assume that they have both been correct until today, and so on – then what you should do is suspend judgement. You should not form a belief about what time it is.

But, disagreements between *people* can be like this too. For example, consider the following case:

Split Check: You and a friend are splitting a check. You have both done this many times together, and neither of you is more prone to error than the other, neither of you is more drunk, or more tired, etc. You perform the calculation in your head, and conclude that you owe \$43. But then your friend (also mentally calculating) turns to you and says they believe you owe \$45.

Should you remain confident that you owe \$43? Seemingly: No! You are not justified in believing that you owe \$43, or \$45. So what should you do? Answer: You should suspend judgement until you can gather more information.

Here, your friend is your “epistemic peer” with respect to doing mental math. That is, they have access to pretty much the same information, and they have roughly the same skills, and come to the correct conclusions pretty much just as often as you do.

Those holding the **Conciliatory View** regarding peer disagreement maintain that, when there is epistemic disagreement between you and your peers, this undermines your justification for your belief. What you ought to do in this case is suspend judgement.

[Qualification: The claim is that you ought to suspend judgement whenever there is **substantial** division among epistemic peers. For example, if you and TWENTY friends were performing the mental math, and everyone but one person arrived at the same answer (that you owe \$43) then it seems rational to continue believing that you owe \$43. The likeliest explanation in this case is that the odd person out made a mistake. But, surely, whenever there is a sizeable split about something – plausibly, at least to 60-40 or 70-30 – then it is irrational to continue believing something regarding the matter.]

[Clarification: The Conciliatory view usually suggests that we “split the difference” when there is disagreement. By this, it is meant that we split the difference in our levels of CONFIDENCE. For instance, in Split Check, it wouldn’t make sense to conclude with confidence that you each owe \$44. NO ONE arrived at THAT number! This would entail that you BOTH calculated incorrectly. Rather, the suggestion is to assign a 50% probability to each of the two answers (\$43 and \$45). So, if you’re 50% confident that you owe \$43, and 50% confident that you owe \$45, the only rational thing to do is suspend judgement altogether; e.g., it would be irrational to say, “Whatever. I still believe I owe \$43.”]

But, if the Conciliatory View is correct, then this seems to entail that we should therefore suspend judgement about a LOT of things. For, there is very little agreement regarding religion, politics, and many core moral and philosophical issues. Consider some stats:

In the U.S.:

Political affiliation: 28% are Republican, 28% Democrat, 43% Independent

Abortion, 40% say it’s wrong, 54% say it’s permissible

Gender: 68% say man/woman is based on your sex assigned at birth, 31% say it can differ

Death Penalty: 53% support, 47% oppose

Physician-Assisted Suicide: 53% say it’s permissible, 40% say it’s morally wrong

Illegal Immigrants: 64% support a pathway to citizenship, 31% support deportation

In the world:

Religion: 29% Christian, 26% Muslim, 24% Unaffiliated*, 15% Hindu, 6% Other

* (only 7% atheist/agnostic; many of these 24% are “spiritual” in some sense)

Among philosophers (according to a 2020 [PhilPapers survey](#)):

Objective Morality: 62% Yes, 26% No

Normative Ethics: 32% Deontologist, 31% Consequentialist, 37% Virtue Ethics

Eating Animals: 48% permissible, 45% impermissible

Free Will: 59% Compatibilist, 19% Libertarian, 11% Hard Determinist

Consciousness: 52% Physicalist, 32% Non-Physicalist

Personal Identity: Survive Teletransportation? 40% No, 35% Yes

Time: 40% Eternalist, 18% Presentist, 17% Growing Block

Principle of Sufficient Reason: 36% True, 46% False

[Even worse: For disagreements over things like checks, disputes can easily be *settled* (e.g., by getting out a calculator). There, the lack of justification is only *temporary*. But, in philosophy, religion, politics, etc., there is no obvious way of settling disagreements!]

2. Moral Implications of the Conciliatory View: If the Conciliatory View is correct, then it has implications not just for knowledge, but for morality as well. To see why, consider:

Car Crusher Vlad is at the junkyard crushing cars. He's about to crush the next one when his friend Lola screams that she has just seen her daughter climbing into it. Meanwhile, Vlad's other friend Marco assures Vlad that he's been watching, and he hasn't seen anyone climbing into the car. [*This case is Matheson's. Cosker-Rowland gives a similar one, involving target practice.*]

The first question is an **epistemic** one: *What should Vlad believe?*

Answer: **Vlad should suspend judgement.** That is, he should neither be confident that Lola's daughter IS in the car, or that she IS NOT in the car.

The second question is a **moral** one: *What should Vlad DO?*

Answer: Given that he's UNSURE as to whether proceeding to crush the car would be morally permissible, or super wrong (a murder!), and given that NOT proceeding is clearly permissible, **Vlad ought NOT to proceed.** He should not crush the car.

That seems correct. But then, there will be LOTS of other moral implications of Conciliation. For example, consider the statistic on eating meat, above.

Delicious Burger Chad, a professional philosopher, is about to order a delicious all-beef burger. Just then, the PhilPapers Survey results come out, indicating that 45% of professional philosophers believe that eating meat is morally wrong, while 48% believe that it is morally permissible.

What should Chad believe? According to the Conciliatory View, he ought to suspend judgement. He should be UNSURE as to whether ordering the burger is permissible, or impermissible, given that his epistemic peers are pretty even split over the matter.

What should Chad DO? Apparently, he should STILL refrain from ordering the burger, since he's unsure whether it's permissible or not, while NOT ordering the burger is clearly permissible. (There's no moral controversy regarding eating falafel, for instance.)

In short, the Conciliatory View seems to entail that **eating meat is immoral!** Similarly, Matheson claims, due to widespread disagreement,

- **Abortion is immoral**, since we are not justified in believing it's permissible.
- Donating to **famine relief is morally obligatory**, for the same reason.

In argument form, it would go something like this:

1. (According to the Conciliatory View of peer disagreement) when there is significant disagreement among your epistemic peers regarding the belief that $\langle P \rangle$, then you are no longer justified in believing that $\langle P \rangle$.
2. For any action, A, if you are not justified in rejecting the belief that A is seriously morally wrong, then, if *not* performing A is clearly permissible, you ought to refrain from performing A.
3. For each of the following actions, there is serious moral disagreement among your epistemic peers, regarding whether or not that action is seriously morally wrong; and refraining from these actions is clearly permissible:
 - eating meat
 - abortion
 - failing to donate to famine relief
4. Therefore, regardless of whether you personally disagree, or believe otherwise, you *still* morally ought to refrain from eating meat and having abortions, and you morally ought to donate to famine relief.

3. Continued Belief (The Steadfast View): But, perhaps the Conciliatory View is false. Many philosophers argue that we should *not* respond to peer disagreement by abandoning our beliefs, or lowering our confidence in them. Rather, we should go on believing just as we did before. Why?

Opponents Can BOTH Be Justified: Imagine that two people examine the exact same evidence, and reach two different conclusions. The Conciliatory View assumes that neither person can be justified in this case, because they seem to think that **opponents can never both be justified** (when they are epistemic peers). The Steadfast View rejects this assumption, proposing that, in some cases, BOTH opponents can be justified in maintaining their belief.

[Consider: Surely it is at least possible for two epistemic peers to examine the same evidence, and reach the same conclusion but be justified in adopting two different CREDENCES (i.e., levels of confidence). For example, say one jury member is 75% confident that the butler is guilty, while her peer is 95% confident. Would it be absurd to suggest that they should either (a) Become agnostic about whether the evidence supports the guilt of the butler with either 75% or 95% confidence, (b) Split the difference and BOTH become 85% confident of the butler's guilt. What do you think?]

Especially if You Took Great Care: Imagine a case of peer disagreement where you have taken great pains to be very careful in your verification of your belief. E.g., imagine that, in Split Check, you've carefully done the math on paper and on a calculator (and so has your friend). Some suggest that you'd both be justified in maintaining your belief. The disagreement shouldn't undermine your belief that much (if at all) in this case.

[How would you react? Would you be justified in remaining steadfast? If so, why would that be? Your friend has ALSO used a calculator to double-check their work. What makes it rational to disregard my peer's careful calculation?]

[Side Note on Identifying Peers: On the Conciliatory View, our epistemic peers are often defined as those who are just as likely to be correct on some issue as we are. But, in order to know THAT, we'd have to independently know what the correct answer IS already. Perhaps the best we can do is defer to experts, then. For example, if you and I disagree about a math problem, then we should defer to our instructor. Over time, if she tells me that I am wrong a lot, and you are always correct, then we can come to know that we are not actually epistemic peers when it comes to math. (Rather, you are my epistemic *superior* in this case.)

Similarly, if you and I disagree about the shape of the Earth, then we look to see what the experts are saying about it. As it turns out, the overwhelming majority of experts say that the Earth is round. That should settle the matter.]

But, I Often Have No Perfect Peers, and the Experts are Unknown: Perhaps you're wondering, Can there ever REALLY be peer disagreement? Especially with complicated issues like moral and political ones. No two people have the same life experiences. So, no one REALLY has been presented with exactly the same information as I have. Therefore, I can dismiss the disagreement of others, chalking it up to variations in life experiences which have led them to either be presented with different evidence, or interpret the evidence differently, or acquire certain biases, etc.

Furthermore, there ARE NO obvious experts to defer to here. Are they supposed to be the academic philosophers, the religious leaders, and the politicians, etc.? If so, then note that there is widespread disagreement among those communities.

So, for issues where it is not clear who the true experts are (if there even ARE any), and where I don't have any TRUE epistemic peers, it's justified for me to just remain steadfast in my views.

Conciliatory Reply (What gives YOUR biases preferred status?): But, you have no independent reason to think that YOUR set of experiences, or interpretation-idiosyncrasies (aka biases) are better suited to access the truth than those of your "peers". Sure, everyone processes evidence in their own idiosyncratic way. But, you can't be sure that YOUR process delivers truth more reliably than that of your (roughly) epistemic peers who disagree with you. For all you know, YOU might be the one who is mistaken. If you can't rule out this possibility, then you should suspend judgement. And that is even MORE obvious in cases where there are no obvious experts to defer to.

Steadfast Rebuttal (This is Radical Skepticism!): But, we're talking thorough skepticism here. Like, suspending belief about every controversial moral issue, as well as the existence of God, free will, the nature of consciousness, and perhaps even belief in the external world. Even science is at risk. There are flat-Earthers, Young-Earth Creationists, climate change deniers – each claiming to have their own experts that they appeal to. Apparently if we have no independent way to verify whether OUR experts are THE real experts, we must suspend belief about ALL of this. This is near total agnosticism about everything that is important. Surely that's absurd. ...Right?

More Rebuttal: Conciliation is Self-Defeating!: If you endorse the Conciliatory response to peer-disagreement, note that you also have epistemic peers who hold the Steadfast view. So doesn't your OWN view entail that you should give up the Conciliatory View? In light of the existence of epistemic peers who disagree with you, your own view entails that you are no longer justified in holding that view. In short, the Conciliatory View is **self-defeating**.

Reply: The Absurdity of the Steadfast View: But the Steadfast view basically saying, "Wow, my epistemic peer looked at exactly the same evidence as I did and got it totally wrong! Meanwhile, I got it totally right!" Think about what you're saying! How can you possibly maintain the position that someone is your epistemic PEER (or at least, nearly your peer?) while simultaneously thinking that your peer is systematically mistaken and you are correct? This is supremely arrogant, and totally irrational.

Conciliation is Repugnant! On the Conciliatory View, it seems like, if half of society suddenly started believing that we were morally obligated to torture innocent people for fun, then apparently I'd no longer be justified in believing that torture is immoral. MAYBE it is. MAYBE it's not. That is absurd. I KNOW it's immoral. No amount of disagreement will ever sway me otherwise.

Imagine that we're living in the deep South, circa 1880. I believe that interracial relationships are permissible, and have fallen in love with someone of another race. Yet, many of my neighbors believe that such relationships are immoral. The Conciliatory argument presented above entails that it would be *immoral* for me to enter into this relationship – since apparently I can't be justified in rejecting the belief that it's immoral (due to the disagreement among my peers), while the alternative (refraining from entering into the relationship) is clearly permissible. So, I'm obligated to refrain. Ew, that's repugnant. Basically you're saying everyone in 1880 was obligated to be a racist.

Want more? See Catherine Elgin's 25 minute course, here: [part 1](#) and [part 2](#) and [part 3](#).

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