

# EPISTEMIC ABSTAINERS, EPISTEMIC MARTYRS, AND EPISTEMIC CONVERTS

Scott F. AIKIN, Michael HARBOUR,  
Jonathan NEUFELD, Robert B. TALISSE

ABSTRACT: An intuitive view regarding the epistemic significance of disagreement says that when epistemic peers disagree, they should suspend judgment. This abstemious view seems to embody a kind of detachment appropriate for rational beings; moreover, it seems to promote a kind of conciliatory inclination that makes for irenic and cooperative further discussion. Like many strategies for cooperation, however, the abstemious view creates opportunities for free-riding. In this essay, the authors argue that the believer who suspends judgment in the face of peer disagreement is vulnerable to a kind of manipulation on the part of more tenacious peers. The result is that the abstemious view can have the effect of encouraging dogmatism.

KEYWORDS: epistemology, disagreement, dialogue

Two people, Alf and Betty, disagree. Alf believes that *p*, and Betty believes that not-*p*. Suppose that Alf and Betty are *epistemic peers* – they share roughly the same evidence and neither is more intellectually capable than the other in any substantive way. Also, allow that Alf and Betty have discussed thoroughly each other's reasons, but neither has been moved.

This circumstance is troubling for Alf and Betty, and not just for *practical* purposes (perhaps they'd like to resolve their disagreement because they have plans that depend upon their agreement with respect to *p*) but also for *epistemic* purposes. For each, the fact that an epistemic peer disagrees calls into question the quality of the reasons supporting their respective beliefs. Even though neither can say precisely where the other has gone wrong, they nevertheless each hold that the other's case does not yield reason to justify the other's belief.

Richard Feldman<sup>1</sup> has argued for the intuitive view that under circumstances where one is an apparently reasonable believer and affirms a proposition that an epistemic peer denies, one should *suspend judgment*:

One of us must be making some kind of mistake or failing to see some truth. But I have no basis for thinking that the one making the mistake is him rather than me. And the same is true of him. And in that case, the right thing for both of us to do is suspend judgment on *P*<sup>2</sup>.

According to Feldman, although there *seem* to be reasonable disagreements among epistemic peers – viz., disagreements where each party is within his or her epistemic rights to hold his or her respective view – this is in fact an illusion. Consequently, in cases where it appears that one is reasonably disagreeing with a peer, one “should suspend judgment about the matter under dispute.”<sup>3</sup> Hence Feldman holds the *principle of suspension*:

**(PS)** If S disagrees with an epistemic peer about *p*, then S should suspend judgment about *p*.

The case for PS depends on a principle regulating evidence which Feldman calls *The Uniqueness Thesis*:

**(UT)** A body of evidence justifies at most one proposition of a competing set of propositions and... it justifies at most one attitude toward any proposition.<sup>4</sup>

The rationale for UT is, we think, also intuitive: A body of evidence either supports *p* or it does not. And if it does, one is justified in believing that *p* on the basis of that evidence. But if not, one is either justified in believing not-*p* (or some specific competing proposition exclusive of *p* supported by the evidence), or one should suspend judgment with regard to *p*. Feldman takes peer disagreement to place believers under an obligation to justify their preference for their own belief over their peers; consequently, disagreement among peers gives rise to extra epistemic burdens. And in cases of disagreement among peers, believers have no

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements,” in *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise Antony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194-214, and “Evidentialism, Higher-Order Evidence, and Disagreement,” *Episteme* 6 (2009): 294-312.

<sup>2</sup> Feldman, “Reasonable,” 212.

<sup>3</sup> Feldman, “Reasonable,” 212.

<sup>4</sup> Feldman, “Reasonable,” 205.

non-question-begging way to provide the required justificatory story since, by hypothesis, the disagreeing peers share all the same evidence and are equally capable cognitive agents. Consequently, Feldman holds that “a peer that disagrees with you is evidence against the view you believe.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Feldman concludes, when faced with a disagreeing peer, one must suspend judgment.

The view Feldman espouses here is intuitively attractive, and is a member of a broad family of views regarding the epistemology of disagreement one may characterize as *epistemic abstemiousness*. The abstemious view is roughly that if one finds oneself in disagreement with another that is ostensibly neither better nor less informed on the issue, then one has evidence of equal weight between two inconsistent propositions. Consequently, one should abstain from belief – that is, suspend judgment. In precisely this idiom, Sextus Empiricus took disagreement to be its own autonomous skeptical mode:

According to the mode deriving from dispute, we (the skeptics) find that undecidable dissention about the matter proposed as come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers. Because of this we are not able either to choose or rule out anything, and we end up with suspension of judgment.<sup>6</sup>

Versions of epistemic abstemiousness are commonly found in discussion of theological diversity in the philosophy of religion. For example, William Cantwell Smith has argued on moral grounds that one has a cognitive duty of intellectual humility:

[E]xcept at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: ‘... we believe we know God, and we are right; you believe you know God, and you are wrong.’<sup>7</sup>

John Hick has argued similarly:

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<sup>5</sup> Feldman, “Evidentialism,” 331.

<sup>6</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), PH I.165.

<sup>7</sup> Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, *Religious Diversity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 14.

Nor can we reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst others are not.<sup>8</sup>

And Gary Gutting contends that once one has been made aware of disagreement regarding a religious belief, one's epistemic duties increase – one must not only be justified in believing, but one must be able to account for the fact of the disagreement. According to Gutting, in the face of unresolved disagreement, one must dampen one's commitment: one must withdraw *decisive assent* and extend to one's belief only *interim assent*.<sup>9</sup>

Abstemiousness has been recommended by philosophers working outside of philosophy of religion as well. Keith Lehrer has argued that disagreements between genuine inquirers are rationally impossible:

Actual disagreement among experts must result either from an incomplete exchange of information, individual dogmatism, or a failure to grasp the mathematical implications of their initial state and yet disagree.<sup>10</sup>

Crispin Wright's account of *cognitive command* entails a similar result. A discourse has cognitive command when, if given differing opinions on a matter in the discourse, one knows *a priori* the divergence must be explainable in terms of at least one of the views having an *imperfection of pedigree*. Accordingly, when cognitive command is present a "cognitive shortcoming *always* has to be at work in the generation of conflicting views."<sup>11</sup>

In contemporary discussions of the epistemology of disagreement, the connection between what Bogardus<sup>12</sup> and others<sup>13</sup> have called the *equal weight view* and the conciliatory inclinations we see in abstemiousness is widely recognized. Christensen holds that in cases of peer disagreement one should often

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<sup>8</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 235.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1982), 105.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Lehrer, "When Rational Disagreement is Impossible," *Nous* 10 (1976): 331.

<sup>11</sup> Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 147; Cf. Crispin Wright, "On Being in a Quandary. Relativism vagueness logical revisionism," *Mind* 110 (2001): 58.

<sup>12</sup> Tomas Bogardus, "A Vindication of the Equal Weight View," *Episteme* 6 (2009): 324-335.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," *Nous* 41 (2007): 478-502, Roger White, "On Treating Oneself and Others as Thermometers," *Episteme* 6 (2009): 233-50.

“split the difference.”<sup>14</sup> Earl Conee holds that when faced with a mature dispute between mutually recognized epistemic peers, even when one is one of the disputants, one must take a third-person view of the situation and reason:

Either way, we are justified in thinking that minds having equally good prospects of finding out the truth about X are on each side. In light of this, the reasons we have been given for and against X remain in balance.<sup>15</sup>

This is because, from the disinterested view, “we have no better basis for discounting opposing summary impressions than we do for our own.”<sup>16</sup>

As we have said, it is intuitive to think that when we find ourselves disagreeing with an epistemic peer, we must abstain from belief. The abstemious view seems to capture a kind of detachment requisite for rational beings and a kind of conciliatory inclination that makes for irenic discussion. Feldman’s articulation of the abstemious view seems to us the most explicit version yet proposed. But is it correct? We think not. In fact, we shall argue that, despite its initial intuitive appeal, the abstemious view yields results that are highly counterintuitive.

Return to our peers who disagree, Alf and Betty. Assume Betty accepts Feldman’s PS and so reasons as follows:

Because Alf is an epistemic peer who disagrees with me with respect to p, I must suspend judgment with respect to p.

And then Betty suspends. But note that this introduces a drastic shift in the epistemic situation that obtains between Alf and Betty. Betty originally held that not-p, but *now*, just with a bit of discussion, Betty has weakened her belief that not-p to suspension with respect to p; she has become an *epistemic abstainer* with respect to p, we may say. The fact of Betty’s abstention is relevant to Alf in two ways. First, once Betty suspends judgment, Alf no longer has a disagreement with Betty of the kind that would engage PS with respect to p. So Alf can sustain his belief that p. To be sure, there is still a disagreement between Alf and Betty, but now it is a disagreement concerning whether to suspend judgment regarding p (Betty will present this new disagreement to Alf shortly). Second, note that part of what compels Betty to epistemically abstain is her observation that an epistemic

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<sup>14</sup> David Christensen, “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 203.

<sup>15</sup> Earl Conee, “Peerage,” *Episteme* 6 (2009): 315.

<sup>16</sup> Conee, “Peerage,” 322.

peer, Alf, stays adamant in his belief that  $p$ ; but if Betty must take Alf's *immovability* about  $p$  as evidence about the insufficiency of her own evidence, then Alf may likewise take Betty's *movability* as evidence in favor of the *strength* of his evidence. We imagine Alf reasoning as follows:

*If a peer's disagreement is enough to defeat one's reasons, then my peer's movement from full-bore disagreement to suspension of judgment should also be an indicator of the (insufficient) quality my peer's reasons.*

In other words, because Alf does not blink, Betty must suspend judgment; and because Betty suspends judgment, Alf may have even more evidence for his view. Once Betty suspends, Alf has one fewer epistemic peer who believes not- $p$ , precisely because of her concerns that she had no reason to hold she was not in error. And so, in following PS, Betty moves from being an *epistemic abstainer* to being an *epistemic martyr*, all because of Alf's immovability.

Something has gone awry. It seems that Alf isn't playing fair – Alf improves his epistemic position by simply waiting for Betty to weaken her view. In refusing to apply PS, Alf is being an epistemic free-rider. So let us imagine that Betty calls foul. Betty says, "*Alf, you must suspend judgment with respect to  $p$ , too!*" But notice that we now have moved the disagreement from (i) *whether  $p$*  to (ii) *what the proper propositional attitude toward  $p$  should be*. Alf holds that he is justified in believing that  $p$ , and Betty holds that Alf should suspend judgment. But, now, Feldman's view would require Betty to apply PS *to this (new) disagreement*. That is, Betty must suspend judgment about whether Alf must suspend judgment with regard to  $p$ . And so Betty must weaken her claim that Alf is breaking an epistemic rule to a suspension of judgment with respect to Alf's rule following. Additionally, it seems that because Betty and Alf disagree about the application of PS, Betty should suspend judgment about whether she should suspend judgment about  $p$ .

The discussion between Alf and Betty may then go on like this for several rounds, and potentially forever. At each level, Betty will not have a substantive reason for holding that Alf is unreasonable for sustaining his belief. And she will have reason to suspend judgment about the propriety of her previous abstemious moves. Betty, given Alf's disagreement on each level, will be unable to hold positively that Alf is wrong and she is right on any of the levels. She only can stammer in disbelief, immobilized and in a state of perpetual epistemic *suspension*. Reminding Alf of PS, if Alf is tenacious, only *deepens* Betty's martyrdom.

Meanwhile, things continue to get better for Alf. He is, by his lights at least, *prima facie* justified in his belief that  $p$ , and further, there are now no peers who dissent. So Betty, following the standing evidence and the social reflections on the

quality of that evidence, should now *come to believe p*. That is, Betty, although presently in suspense, should see that Alf believes *p* unopposed. Betty should reason thusly:

*Since dissent among peers is a defeater, the absence of peer dissent with respect to p improves the case for p.*

So Betty should come to believe that *p*. That is, if peer disagreement is enough to overturn Betty's originally well-thought out reasons, they must, absent her own defeating reasons, be good enough for warrant her assent. Feldman, remember, had argued that peer disagreement is a reason to suspend judgment precisely because the peer's contrary beliefs stand as evidence that the subject's view is false<sup>17</sup> Betty, now that there is no contrary evidence to Alf's view, as she has suspended belief with regard to *p*, now has evidence that not-*p* is true. She should proportion her belief to her evidence. And so Betty rises from her epistemic martyrdom, but now as an *epistemic convert*.

Surely Betty will find this abstention-to-martyrdom-to-conversion experience puzzling. And we do, too. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how such contortions could be a sign of epistemic responsibility (to say nothing of psychological health). The simple fact of Alf's tenacity produces for Betty a sufficient reason for her to adopt his view. Thus Betty's epistemic virtue must succumb to Alf's epistemic vice.

Perhaps then we should rule out free-riders by revising Feldman's view to say that PS applies only in cases in which *both* parties to a disagreement reciprocally suspend judgment. This requirement of reciprocity among epistemic peers may avoid the dizzying shift from martyr to convert; however, it also suggests that PS cannot serve as a response to all cases of disagreement between epistemic peers. In particular, it fails in just those deep disagreements that generate the problem of peer disagreement in the first place. Deep disagreement arises when neither party can agree on the proper attitude to take towards *p* or how to further arbitrate what divides them. In such cases, it will not help if one of the parties suspends judgment with regard to *p*, because this will simply relocate the disagreement: What was once a disagreement about whether *p* becomes a disagreement about whether to suspend judgment with respect to *p*. As we have already seen, one can remain committed to PS in such cases only on pains of becoming an epistemic martyr and ultimately a convert.

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Feldman, "Evidentialism," 331.

Epistemic martyrdom occurs in cases in which PS is applied *asymmetrically*, but something similar occurs even when PS is applied *symmetrically*. If *both* sides apply PS when a second-order disagreement arises, all believers will be martyred to suspense, for suspenders dictate the epistemic requirements in the situation for all involved. To see this, let us view the second order disagreement from the perspective of Charles. Charles disagrees with Betty about *p*, just like Alf does. And Charles disagrees with Betty over the propriety of belief or suspension with regard to *p*. However, with this second-order disagreement, he *abides by PS*. So Charles suspends judgment with regard to suspending judgment with regard to *p*. But it seems to Charles that *this is simply to suspend judgment with regard to p*. He reasons that one could not both believe that *p* and suspend judgment with regard to whether to suspend judgment with regard to *p*. According to PS, then, any believer must suspend belief in the face of any peer who suspends judgment. One could avoid this worst-case outcome only by denying that Charles must suspend with regard to *p* when he suspends with regard to suspending about *p*. But this seems inconsistent with overtly holding that *p*: if Charles thinks he is holding that *p* justifiably, he would not suspend judgment about whether he should suspend judgment. That is, he should think it *false* that he should suspend judgment. But since he has suspended judgment about whether he should suspend judgment, he, it seems, has undone his belief.

In short, if everybody plays by Feldman's rules, or those articulated by the broader versions of epistemic abstemiousness, those who suspend judgment with regard to any issue will dictate the epistemic duties of all their peers. Imagine a group of epistemic peers who all believe that *p*. Now introduce to that group an epistemic peer who suspends judgment with regard to *p*. On Feldman's abstemious principles, the entire group must now suspend judgment, regardless of how deeply held the belief is. To Charles, this has the appearance of submitting his deeply held beliefs to the whims of those who suspend their beliefs at the first whiff of disagreement. For better or worse, all is not lost for the believers. Simply add to the group an epistemic peer who ignores this application of PS and stalwartly continues on with her belief that not-*p*. For reasons we provided above, the entire group would now have reason to convert to the stalwart's view. So Feldman's epistemically reasonable believers become martyrs, and the tenacious win easy converts. The trouble with PS, and abstemiousness more broadly, is that, in spite of its broad-minded intentions and overtly anti-dogmatic aim, it recommends dogmatism.

This is indeed a troubling result. PS is intuitively appealing precisely because the alternative of dogmatically holding on to one's belief *in spite of* peer



disagreement seems unreasonable. One need not be an unscrupulous epistemic free-rider in search of easy converts, however, to think that dogmatism is preferable to becoming an epistemic martyr. The requirement that one subject oneself to epistemic martyrdom – or even worse, conversion – simply because of peer disagreement seems far too demanding. Our deeply held beliefs are not the sorts of things that we can simply give up on at a moment's notice. We suspect that part of what belief is to be committed to it in way that prevents one from seeing it as so easily disposable. It is hard then to be committed to PS while maintaining one's *integrity* as a believer. We are concerned that this is the case for abstemious commitments across the board. But our cautionary tales above suggest that Feldman's PS – and perhaps epistemic abstemiousness as such – is deeply at odds with how we view ourselves as cognitive agents.