**What does determining that a disagreement is not a ‘peer disagreement’ mean?**

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The south African Journal of Philosophy on 17/3/2020, available online:* [*https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02580136.2019.1710423*](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02580136.2019.1710423)

N. Gabriel Martin

Abstract:

Assessment of those with whom one finds oneself in dispute is indispensable in the epistemology of disagreement. The assessment of one’s opponents is necessary in order to determine whether a particular disagreement constitutes evidence of a likely error in one’s own understanding. However, assessment of an opponent’s capacity to know the matter in dispute is only possible when the conditions for knowledge are not themselves open to debate. Consequently, epistemic significance can only be recognised in disagreements among those who are in tacit or explicit agreement about what constitutes justification in a given case. The result is that the epistemic significance disagreement possesses is always strictly conditional upon prior assumptions. The difference between a peer disagreement and a non-peer disagreement cannot indicate whether one is or is not more likely to be right than one’s opponent in an absolute sense, only whether one is or is not more likely to be right given the presupposed conditions.

Body:

In discussions of peer disagreement, the question is whether and under what circumstances a disagreement, all by itself, has a specific sort of epistemic significance: that one’s belief is as likely to be wrong as it is to be right, and therefore that the rational response is to suspend judgment. Since peer disagreement may have such dramatic consequences, a great deal of the debate surrounding this issue is about what constitutes a peer and how peerhood is to be assessed, in particular: whether the assessment of those with whom one finds oneself in disagreement must be impartial, which is to say, must avoid presupposing the correctness of one’s own beliefs on the matter in question. It is a crucial question whether or not a disagreer (one with whom one disagrees) can be considered non-peer just because they disagree either on the question itself, or on closely related matters.

I argue that impartial assessment is impossible. Peerhood can only be ascertained on the basis of prior determinations as to what constitutes the correct procedures for arriving at true beliefs in a given domain. These constitute a set of beliefs about the relevant epistemic framework for the disputandum (the matter in question). The beliefs concerning the relevant conditions for knowledge of the disputandum are not separable from the belief regarding the disputandum itself. This means that any distinction between peers and non-peers, as well as any significance which comes from attributing peerhood to a disagreer, is conditional upon presuppositions about what is relevant to knowledge of the disputandum. In this article I will demonstrate the conditional character of the epistemic significance of disagreement, a conditionality which is neglected by those on both sides of the impartial/partial debate about assessment of peers and is crucial to understanding that significance.

    This article has four sections. The first explains how disagreement can indicate a probable error, and why determining peerhood is indispensable to doing so. The second section discusses whether or not peerhood must be assessed on neutral, impartial grounds, as well as what impartiality should mean in this context. The third section discusses whether impartiality in determining peerhood is possible. I argue, following Adam Elga and against David Christensen, that it is not. In section four I consider Robert Mark Simpson’s contention that assessment is not necessary because peerhood is to be granted by default. I argue, contrary to Simpson, that assessment is indispensable. Finally, I conclude that because impartial assessment is impossible, the inescapable contingency and conditionality of the epistemic significance of peer disagreement must be carefully recognised in order to avoid: one, misconstruing the meaning of an epistemic peer (in what sense a peer is differentiated from a non-peer); and two, the conditions and extent of the revision of one’s confidence in one’s beliefs that a peer disagreement may call for.

## 1. Likelihood of error and the necessity of evaluation

Disagreement is epistemically significant if it can tell us something about the likelihood that in a given circumstance our own belief is wrong, or likely to be wrong. A disagreement in which you are involved has epistemic significance for you if it constitutes evidence defeating, either partially or fully, or undermining, the belief at issue in the disagreement.[[1]](#footnote-1) Any epistemic significance belonging to the mere existence of a disagreement (rather than to the reasons supporting one side of the disagreement or the other) derives from the logical necessity that at least one or the other of two incompatible positions must be in error. However, the fact that in a real disagreement one or the other party must be wrong is not itself enough to make the existence of a disagreement epistemically significant. Without any further information about and evaluation of the conditions of the disagreement, it only demonstrates that one or the other side must be wrong. It remains mute on the question of whether your side (and the problems of the epistemology of disagreement always stem from the assumption that one has already taken a side in the dispute) is or may be wrong.

When a possibility of error is presupposed, as is the case in general in fallibilist epistemology,[[2]](#footnote-2) further information and evaluation may become relevant. A contextual clue, such as the existence of a disagreement, cannot indicate the possibility of an error in your judgment all by itself. Rather, the reason contingent contextual factors can indicate anything about the likelihood that you have made an error is that the sheer possibility of error is already assumed. Conversely, if the possibility of error were not already assumed, the fact that a disagreement exists would not be enough to demonstrate it. Therefore, if all an actual disagreement indicates is the *possibility* that your position is wrong, then it does not contribute any new epistemic significance regarding the disputandum. All *unassessed* disagreement can tell you about the possibility that you have made an error is that there *is* such a possibility, but because this possibility is itself already presupposed that tells you nothing at all.

If the fact that there is a disagreement is to tell you anything new about the possibility of error it must be that you have evidence that what you already knew to be possible has in this case occurred, or is likely to have occurred. This is where the facts concerning a particular disagreement come in. Because only some disagreements indicate a likely error on your part, epistemic significance belongs to those alone. Evaluation of the actual disagreement must disclose the degree of probability that the error indicated by the disagreement is your own, if any degree of that probability is indeed indicated by the disagreement.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Discussion has centred on the epistemic fitness of disagreers as the most relevant indicator of the probability of error on one’s own side. There is, as far as I know, unanimous agreement that the capacity (relative to one’s own) of disagreers to have knowledge of the disputandum is the feature of the context of a disagreement most pertinent to the assessment of the particular disagreements themselves (setting aside the terms of the disagreement and the reasons supporting either side themselves). It is disagreement with those who qualify as one’s own epistemic “peers” that is epistemically significant, and therefore the question is what constitutes a legitimate basis for assessing a disagreer’s epistemic fitness or “parity.”

If the question with respect to disagreement is whether it indicates a false belief or the likelihood of a false belief, then it makes sense to use a comparison with one’s own epistemic fitness with respect to the matter in question as the qualifying measure. It provides a convenient and relevant yardstick. If the disagreer is at least as likely as you are to be knowledgeable about the disputandum, then that should be taken into account; if not, their disagreement (at least as an indicator of error) can be ignored. A disagreement with someone whose *bona fides* cannot be established provides no basis for evaluation.[[4]](#footnote-4) I call this “the peer condition,” since it is the recognition that parity (or better) is proposed as a *condition* for epistemic significance. Of course, even if you cannot establish a disagreer’s peer bona fides, you may still have grounds to seriously consider what a disagreer is arguing. However, with non-peers, the fact that your judgments are in conflict cannot, all by itself, provide you with one of those reasons.

Following Ernest Sosa (2010, 282), I define ‘peer’ in probabilistic terms as someone who is as likely as oneself to be right about the disputandum. However this objective definition leaves open the problem of how peers are actually to be discovered in the wild, as it were. How can you tell which disagreers are as likely as you are to be right? There is some, though not much, discussion about what constitute the qualifying characteristics of a peer. Gary Gutting (1982, 83) characterises a peer as someone who shares “intelligence, perspicacity, honesty, thoroughness, and other relevant epistemic virtues” in similar degrees. This definition of a peer concerns the epistemic capacities alone. However, most epistemologists of disagreement conceive peerhood in a way that concerns particular epistemic competencies in the relevant domain. Thomas Kelly (2005, fn. 3) claims that assessment should include factors such as exposure to relevant evidence and arguments. Adam Elga (2007, *passim.* and especially 493) claims that assessment must be based on the disagreer’s track record of being right about related matters. Despite providing a much looser definition of a peer (Sosa 2010, 282), it could be argued that Ernest Sosa adopts the strictest parameters for determining peerhood possible; he considers agreement on the disputandum the qualification for peerhood (2010, 293).

Deciding the grounds on which to determine peers in practice is very fraught. In section four and in the conclusion I will explain that, as long as the epistemic significance of disagreement is conceived in terms of the probability of error on one’s own part, it is essential that peer be defined as a person whose disagreement can indicate such a probability. Consequently the determination of peers must be adequate to demonstrate this significance.

## 2. Is disagreement itself grounds for thinking that a disagreer is inferior?

The matter would be quickly resolved if anyone who disagreed with you could be deemed “subpar” merely because they disagreed with you, as those who emphasise the epistemic significance of the principle of self-trust in circumstances of disagreement claim.[[5]](#footnote-5) Self-trust is a bedrock principle of epistemology, because belief is impossible unless one believes that what one believes is true. Giving the principle of self-trust priority, Richard Foley (2001), Thomas Kelly (2005), and Ernest Sosa (2010) argue that the same reasons that support your belief in your position also support your concluding that those who do not accept (or are not cognizant of) those reasons must be epistemically inferior to you on the matter in question. Sosa writes (2010, 285): “If we think ourselves likely to be right in believing that *p*, and we know our opponent to disbelieve what we believe, are we not constrained to consider that opponent likely to be wrong, as likely to be wrong as we are to be right.” How could you think that a disagreer is your peer when the reasons you have at your disposal indicate that they *should not* disagree with you? It seems like self-trust compels you to conclude that those who disagree with you are your epistemic inferiors, that if they were well enough equipped to have knowledge of the matter they would not have arrived at the wrong position. Indeed, to fail to downgrade disagreers would be to contradict yourself; if you did not think that those who came to the wrong conclusions were epistemically inferior, then it would be inconsistent for you to think that those were the wrong conclusions.

Giving self-trust priority seems to entail that (unless both parties are wrong) there are no peer disagreements—every disagreement is evidence of an epistemic disparity. If either party has it right and they still disagree, then their epistemic positions must be asymmetrical.

A concern may emerge here. If we cannot be compelled to re-examine our positions in the face of conflict, does that mean that learning from one another is impossible? Does the principle of self-trust mean that a lack of coincidence in views between people makes the exchange of information between them impossible too? Of course not; even a disagreement which, *qua* disagreement, has no epistemic significance can be a source of evidence. Even in the case of disagreements with epistemic inferiors there may be many factors that could compel you to reconsider your position. These might include contingent factors, such as finding oneself on the minority side of some issue, but are even more likely to be some reason or argument offered by the subpar disagreer. All their epistemic inferiority means is that in such cases the disagreement itself does not constitute a reason to weaken confidence in a belief. Self-trust only means that disagreement cannot compel us to reexamine our positions, become less confident in our beliefs, or seek insight into opponents’ reasons.

The indispensability of self-trust does not have the consequences for assessment of disagreers that Kelly, Foley, and Sosa propose, however. The necessity of self-trust is confined to a particular belief. While I hold the belief that I see the Dean walking across the quad (to borrow an example from Sosa [2005, 282]), it is necessary for me to believe that belief. Trust in oneself with respect to a particular belief that one holds is necessary in order to hold any belief at all. However, there is no reason to think that self-trust should be generalized. The fact that I believed something yesterday only has limited significance to me today, and the fact that I held some belief as a teenager may not mean anything at all to me now. This is because I do not trust my teenage self. The fact that I must trust myself in the moment and with respect to the particular beliefs I am entertaining right now does not compel me to trust myself in general, nor to trust myself more than I trust other people.

In addition to the principle of self-trust, there is the principle that my assessment of evidence should be impartial, and it is not obvious that the former takes priority when the two are in conflict. It is a consequence of impartiality that I cannot use the fact that I believe something as a reason to believe it, or the fact that I disagree with someone as a reason to think that they are wrong.

In defence of impartiality, Christensen claims that assessment of candidates for peerhood must be on independent grounds. This means that your assessment of disagreers cannot be based either on the position about which you are in disagreement or on the reasons supporting that position. Towards opposite ends, Christensen and Sosa use an example of a dispute between friends over the equal division of a restaurant bill.[[6]](#footnote-6) Suppose that you and your friend disagree about what your share of an $86 bill for dinner at a restaurant, which you have already agreed to split in half, comes to. You believe that your half comes to $43, while your friend says it comes to $45.

Christensen argues that it would be unreasonable to consider your friend epistemically inferior either just because they deny that the bill comes to $43 each, or because their own answer flies in the face of your reasons for thinking that the bill comes to $43 each—say, the fact that the total bill comes to $86 and that 86 divided by two is 43. Those prioritizing self-trust would claim that the fact that they have arrived at a belief which is contrary to your belief is itself evidence that they are not your peer with respect to the matter. [[7]](#footnote-7) Christensen (2007, 194-96) points out the one-sidedness of this interpretation of the evidence provided by a disagreement. In fact, the evidence cuts both ways. Giving priority to self-trust, you ought to take into account the disagreement as evidence that your opponent’s understanding of the matter is inferior to your own. However, if their disagreement provides you with evidence that your opponent’s judgment is inferior, Christensen points out, it also provides them with evidence that *your* judgment is inferior. Considering the matter impartially, therefore, would not give you any evidence for dismissing your opponent.

It is only by assuming the correctness of your belief (as well as the reasoning upon which it is based) that you can take the other’s disagreement with it as an indication of their epistemic inferiority. If you were to assume, perversely, that your opponent’s belief was correct, then your disagreement would indicate your own epistemic inferiority. Of course, you do assume the correctness of your belief, and taking your opponent’s side is impossible as long as you disagree—that is what self-trust is all about. Nevertheless, drawing conclusions about your opponent’s epistemic fitness based on the disagreement itself, or on the fact that their view flies in the face of the reasons supporting your own, is circular. If the real epistemic significance of the disagreement is to be determined, it cannot be determined in a way that is relative to the person appraising it. Assessment, if it is going to be legitimate, must avoid begging the question with respect to which view is right.

## 3. Independent reasons for assessing peers

Christensen aims to bring impartiality to the assessment of disagreers, thereby reviving the possibility of discriminating legitimately between peers and non-peers. If it is to remain impartial, your assessment of your opponent must not assume the truth of the position in dispute or the soundness of your reasoning supporting that position. A meaningful assessment of the significance of the disagreement must be made on grounds that are, as Christensen says (2007, 198, “independent of my own reasoning on the disputed matter.” I will refer to this as Christensen’s “independent reasons rule.”

However, meaningful assessment of a disagreement must also be made on *relevant* grounds—the assessment must be based on qualities of the disagreer that are relevant to their capacity to know about the matter in question—and it is not clear that grounds for assessment are ever (or at least, often) available which are both relevant enough to assess a disagreer’s relative likelihood of being right, and which avoid the circular reasoning that Christensen is concerned about.

What might a candidate for an independent reason be? Christensen (2007, 199-201) offers one in a hyperbolic version of the restaurant bill dispute. He asks us to suppose that his friend comes up with a number that vastly exceeds the sum of the bill—$450 instead of $45. In that case, his friend’s obvious neglect of common sense provides him with grounds to consider them epistemically inferior without assuming that either his own position or the reasoning behind it is correct. This is because his own means of arriving at the belief that his share of the bill comes to $43 is not itself based on common sense, but on dividing $86. Common sense is thus brought in after the fact to assess his friend’s opposed belief and is independent of both Christensen’s position and his means of arriving at it. According to Christensen, this makes it possible to rely on it in order to assess his friend’s relative fitness without begging the question against them.

In Christensen’s example (2007, 201), he should deem his friend epistemically inferior because the friend’s position violates common sense. This assumes that common sense belongs to what I will call the relevant epistemic framework for justified belief on a given matter.[[8]](#footnote-8) Applying such a framework is consistent with Christensen’s independent reasons rule because he did not rely on common sense to *arrive* at his position; he arrived at it by calculation. It isn’t that common sense *must* be employed in order to arrive at knowledge of the matter, it’s that a position that violates common sense is disqualified. Christensen’s assessment of his friend’s epistemic fitness is possible because he has assumed “common sense” as a relevant factor.Common sense is part of the epistemic framework for the restaurant bill division not because it is necessary in order to arrive at a position on the question (mathematical reasoning gives Christensen that), but because it is among a set of implicit parameters the contravention of which has been determined to invalidate a position.

What an epistemic framework consists of would vary from question to question, and may include things like an understanding of mathematical principles, access to and acknowledgment of relevant bodies of facts, adequately functioning relevant faculties of perception and reasoning, and the like. Apparent disregard for the appropriate epistemic framework for a given question would justify judging a disagreer to be subpar and the disagreement to be without epistemic significance. The need to evaluate disagreers based upon the relevant epistemic framework of the disputandum (if any information about their relative epistemic capacity is to be garnered, at least) is why evaluation according to Christensen’s independent reasons rule, even though it is imposed in order to eliminate biases, also ends up dogmatically presupposing the correctness of one’s own way of thinking about the question.

Although a vague and perhaps dubious concept, common sense seems to be able to be unproblematically applied in cases such as this, where the violation of common sense is so egregious. How could someone who thinks that an equal half of a bill is more than five times the bill’s total be considered epistemically fit? The friend’s answer is clearly bonkers and is evidence of an inability to understand the matter at hand.

When Christensen dismisses his friend’s calculation of their shares of the restaurant bill because it is such a large number, he is imposing a sort of *litmus test*—he is deciding on the relevant epistemic framework for understanding the disputandum—and on that basis he is assessing his friend’s epistemic capacity. If his friend’s position (tacitly) neglects the relevant epistemic frameworks, then his assessment will show that his friend is his epistemic inferior and that he should ignore their disagreement. Determining the relevant epistemic framework requires him to unilaterally decide what can be put in question.

Christensen is, of course, making an assumption in claiming that common sense is relevant to deciding what his share of the bill is. It is, to all appearances, a fair assumption, but it may touch on what is (implicitly, so far) at issue in the disagreement. For Christensen to come to the conclusion that he is epistemically superior to his friend on the basis of what might be at issue in the disagreement is to continue to rely, in the face of disagreement, on the assumption that his own way of approaching the matter, even if not necessarily his specific belief, is the correct one. Perhaps Christensen’s friend has merely made a mental error in calculation, but it is also possible (even if unlikely), that their apparent disregard for common sense indicates a deeper disagreement about how to pay a bill at a restaurant. The superficial disagreement about each person’s share of the bill may very well rest atop a deeper disagreement about what common sense is in this case, or whether common sense is even applicable. In other words, it would be a tacit disagreement about what constitutes the relevant epistemic framework for deciding the matter. By definition, going against common sense should be enough to (at the very least) cast doubt on a belief. However, in a disagreement in which one of the positions seems to go against common sense, it is as likely as not that the disagreement goes to the validity of common sense, or to one’s own view of common sense. This means that the dismissal, as non-peer, of a disagreer on the basis of their flagrant violation of common sense is as partial as the dismissal of them based on their disagreement itself. Christensen’s independent reasons rule does not help us avoid dogmatic presuppositions in the assessment of disagreers, it only demands a broader foundation of presupposition for the assessment.

For similar reasons, it is also impossible to avoid presuppositions in the assessment of disagreers by looking to intellectual or perceptual capacities, rather than epistemic commitments. At first glance, a purely capacities-based conception of peerhood would seem to make it possible to avoid the problems caused by assessing disagreers on the basis of things that are the subject of still more fundamental disagreements. However assessing disagreers based on their capacities turns out to be just as fraught. This is because the decision that the lack of a particular capacity is crucial to knowledge of a disputed matter is an epistemic commitment that could itself be challenged. If we take the original example of the dispute between one friend who claims that the share for each of the two comes to $45 and the friend who claims it comes to $43, it may seem that in some circumstances the demonstrated lack of the capacity of thoroughness, named by Gutting as one of the conditions for epistemic peerhood, could be sufficient to disqualify a disagreer. If you have noticed that your friend has arrived at their total quickly and without much care, while you have taken out your phone and calculated your shares, this may seem to be evidence that your friend has not exercised the relevant capacities to qualify as your peer on the matter. But then, your friend could just as well counter that the calculation is so simple that thoroughness is not required for epistemic fitness in this matter, and you would once again be at an impasse.

The indispensability of founding any assessment of disagreers on relevant matters precludes any disagreement that gets to the root of epistemic frameworks from qualifying as a peer disagreement. Peer disagreements can only be superficial, not deep. This limitation is acknowledged by Adam Elga (2005), who goes so far as to claim that this is not only acceptable but renders peer disagreement on real-world controversies unlikely. He argues that it is legitimate, as well as normal, not to consider most people with whom you disagree about “messy real-world cases” (2005, 492) your peers. Unlike in idealized cases that may (he claims) concern mental aptitude alone, real-world disagreements “are tangled in clusters of controversy” (2005, 493) where disagreement about one matter is likely to correlate with disagreements about many others. Elga argues that the people with whom you disagree about a particular question will also have views that you consider wrong on related matters. Elga is entirely comfortable with the consequences of using one’s related beliefs to assess those with whom one disagrees (the consequences I worry are dogmatic): that it will be unlikely for those with whom one disagrees to be able to qualify as peers and that their evaluation will be entirely on one’s own terms, and involve the insistence on the correctness of one’s own terms.

Assessment can only be carried out on the basis of an epistemic framework that is not considered up for debate. It is by failing to fulfill the demands of that framework that an adversary can be dismissed as subpar. This means that any uncertainty about the matter in dispute cannot bleed over into uncertainty with respect to the framework that is to determine how the question should be decided. If the disagreement were allowed to sprawl in this way, then it would become a different, deeper, and perhaps broader disagreement. This second order disagreement could only qualify as epistemically significant in turn as long as some still more fundamental epistemic framework were exempted from debate.

Disagreement is significant only when it is shown to be a peer disagreement on the basis of the performance of some assessment. For assessment to function, disagreement must not be allowed to sprawl in such a way that questions about how the disputandum is to be known or how the disagreement is to be decided are raised. The conditions for understanding the disputandum must not be in question themselves for an appreciation of the epistemic significance of a disagreement about the disputandum to be possible. Their acceptance (at least tacitly) of these conditions determines whether those who may disagree with you can be considered peers, and therefore whether their disagreement can be considered significant. Without a presupposed framework, there is no basis for evaluation and therefore no character which can distinguish their disagreement as significant.

The conditionality of the significance of disagreement means that it can never call into question your fundamental epistemic commitments; it can only indicate that you may have come to conclusions that are opposed to other views that are not themselves in conflict with those deeper commitments. The epistemic significance of disagreement can only provide a heuristic that indicates which opposing views not only conflict with your own but also with other, more deeply held views of yours. It gives you a reason to reject certain disagreements as insignificant because of other epistemic commitments, but that means that it the insignificance of these disagreements is completely conditional upon the truth of those epistemic commitments.

On the other hand, disagreement that does qualify according to the peer condition allows you to either: one; go back to a starting point that is not currently under consideration and to see that it is somewhat likely that your reasoning on the basis of that starting point has brought you to the wrong conclusion, or two; appreciate that because the position reached by the disagreer does not fly in the face of your epistemic frameworks you are lacking any dispute-independent grounds on which to assess their epistemic fitness.

However, neither Christensen nor Elga seem to recognize the conditionality of the assessment. Christensen claims that your assessment of disagreers provides grounds to determine which of your positions should be reconsidered, by which he means not that they reveal which positions are likely to be in conflict with your deeper epistemological commitments (which is what they do), but that they allow you to determine which of your positions are somewhat likely to be incorrect. This is where he goes wrong.

Christensen ignores the conditionality of any significance that derives from assessment, because it is only by doing so that it is possible to derive normative consequences from it. Peer assessment simply is not, as Christensen, Sosa, Foley, and Elga describe it, a way of determining which disagreements are more likely to indicate that you are *wrong*, only which disagreements indicate that you are to some degree likely to be wrong in your application of certain epistemic frameworks. All the assessment’s conclusions depend upon the rubric for assessment being *right*. If this presupposition is itself in question, there is no way to appreciate the significance of a disagreement one way or the other. A disagreement which cannot qualify as ‘peer’ is not ‘subpar’, but ‘non-peer’; it does not mean that you are more likely to be right than in the case of a peer disagreement, but that whereas in the case of a peer disagreement it is possible to make a conditional assessment of your chances of being right given certain assumptions, in the case of a non-peer disagreement your relative chances of being right are *indeterminate*.

## 4. Peerhood must be determined through assessment

Making a similar, yet still problematic, claim about the assessment of non-peers, Robert Mark Simpson (2013) attacks Elga’s claim that you are justified in remaining steadfast in your view when confronted with the disagreement of those whose positions on related controversies also seem wrong to you. He retorts that this “worldview gulf” (2013, 572) does not give you any license to take confidence in your epistemic superiority; instead, it denies you any basis on which to judge which of you is better placed to know about the controversial area, and therefore also makes you unfit to judge whether you or your fellow is more likely to be right. Simpson argues that if your disagreement is indicative of a worldview gulf then that does not mean that you are entitled to ignore the position of your opponent but rather that such a gulf leaves you without any basis on which to assess their claim to knowledge. Simpson (2013, 573) writes, persuasively: “Elga’s view tells me that when my interlocutor’s belief-system is substantially different to my own, our disagreements need not have any impact upon my beliefs. But if I find myself in disagreement with someone who has a similar belief-system to mine, the disagreements in those cases *should* impact upon my beliefs. If anything this seems back to front.”

Simpson’s argument is that in the absence of “a non-question-begging basis” (2013, 575) for dismissing the possibility that your disagreer is your peer, you must take their views as seriously as you do your own. The consequence of this view, which he calls conformism (or being pulled to the center of the debate), is a pill he thinks we have to swallow.

While Simpson is right that in the absence of any common ground it is illegitimate to judge one’s opponent epistemically inferior, he is wrong that the consequence of this inability to assess an opponent should be to regard them as a peer, or to modify one’s own doxastic attitude. Simpson’s argument reveals an ambiguity in the epistemology of disagreement. On the one hand, there is the question of the conditions under which a disagreement attains epistemic significance. This is the question which is explicitly asked throughout the sub-field. On the other hand there is the question whether in the case of a disagreement lacking epistemic significance one is entitled to consider oneself more likely to be right. These questions must be distinguished from each other, but in claiming that an absence of grounds on which to impartially assess disagreers lends a disagreement the significance of a peer disagreement, Simpson has confused the two. A disagreement lacking any basis on which to assess interlocutors is without any significance that can be appealed to in order to determine who is more likely to be right, but it does not signify that one should diminish their confidence, as I will explain in this section.

Simpson’s rebuttal of Elga hangs on a fundamentally different conception of the peer condition and assessment of disagreers. Simpson (2013, 576) claims that “remaining steadfast in the face of a disagreement is only justified when one has some basis for thinking that one’s opponents are epistemically less well-credentialed than oneself with respect to the subject of the disagreement.” In other words, the onus is on you to find a reason to dismiss a disagreer as a potential peer. This reverses the assumption underlying the epistemology of disagreement in Elga’s view, as well as Sosa’s. For these authors, the burden is on those with whom you are in disagreement to prove their qualifications and their right to be considered your peer. This is because their demonstration of their peerhood is the condition for the disagreement to acquire epistemic significance in the first place.

This difference between their approaches to the peer condition has important consequences. Elga’s claim that peers will tend to be thin on the ground is a consequence of his assumption that peerhood must be earned. On the other hand, Simpson’s response—that a dearth of neutral grounds upon which to positively determine either the epistemic inferiority or peerhood of someone who disagrees with you requires you to remain agnostic about which of you is more likely to be correct about the disputandum (and therefore to suspend judgment on the matter)—is a consequence of his assumption that anyone who disagrees with you is a peer until proven otherwise.[[9]](#footnote-9) If it is only when those who disagree with you demonstrate their *bona fides* that you should take into account the fact of their disagreement as an indication of the likelihood of an error on your part, then one’s default position in the face of disagreement must be to remain steadfast. On the other hand, if it is incumbent upon you to come up with reasons to demonstrate that a disagreer is not your peer (because you must assume that, unless you have reasons to think otherwise, a disagreement indicates a likelihood of error on your part) then the default position when faced with disagreement must be to weaken your confidence in your belief. Whether those with whom one disagrees are assumed to be one’s peers determines whether their disagreements should be taken to have any epistemic significance in the absence of any specific and conclusive evidence indicating that they are as likely as you to know about the matter at hand. If Elga and Simpson are right (a claim disputed by Sarah McGrath [2008]) and the absence of independent evidence for (or against) peerhood is the norm, then the answer to this question is decisive with respect to whether or not we can expect to find peers among those with whom we disagree. The question of peerhood, therefore, is not so much one of assessment, but of what the baseline assumption is going in.

Fortunately, we can answer this question. Peerhood cannot be assumed, contrary to the claims of Simpson (and Ben Sherman [2015]). Presupposing peerhood would bypass the assessment which is necessary to confer epistemic significance (of the type that would call for diminished confidence) upon a disagreement, without necessarily providing any susbstitute quality which can be relied upon to bestow significance on the disagreement. As I argued in section one, because the possibility of error is already assumed, disagreement cannot indicate anything about the likelihood that you have made an error until an assessment has brought to light qualities that show that it does. Simpson’s claim that in the absence of any impartial basis for assessment a disagreer should be assumed to be one’s peer neglects assessment’s indispensable role in making a disagreement epistemically signficant.

Discriminating between peer and non-peer disagreement is essential to determining which disagreements indicate that error is likely. What must be recognised, however, is that the likelihood of error can only be determined on a conditional basis. In the absence of the foundations that make it possible to appreciate the significance of disagreement, there is no such significance.

This means that if peer disagreement indicates the likelihood of error on one’s own part, the converse does not follow. Non-peer disagreement does not indicate that it is one’s adversary that is likely wrong, only that the disagreement is not one which indicates the likelihood that one is wrong. If a disagreement is not between peers, that fact does not legitimate confidence that you are right, or even more likely to be right than in a case of a peer disagreement. It just means that the likelihood that you are right is indeterminate.

## Conclusion

Simpson responded to a prejudice in favour of one’s own beliefs in Elga and others, and his response was to go as far as he had to go in order to eliminate question-begging from the determination of peers. Simpson’s mistake was to try to eliminate the conditional character of this determination. The discrimination between peers and non-peers is always going to be made on the basis of one’s own beliefs, and it is a mistake to think, as Simpson did, that this form of self-trust can be eliminated. It is important to be concerned about dogmatic presuppositions, as Simpson is, but the solution is not to try to eliminate them—that is futile and misguided—it is to acknowledge them.

Opening the rolls of peerhood, rather than recognising the contingency of the whole category, is a mistake for two reasons: for one, it can encourage the continued perception that the distinction between peer and non-peer can indicate an objective distinction between disagreers on the basis of their likelihood of being right, whereas because of the conditionality of assessment it requires it indicates no such thing; and two, to mistake the most important question with respect to disagreement—which party is right—for the question that epistemology of disagreement is equipped to provide an answer to—under what conditions does disagreement have any significance. The significance, always conditional, that disagreement can have when it is between peers never has anything to say about which party is likely to be right.

    This does not mean that all disagreements call for sceptical suspension of judgement, or even some milder doxastic modification. The fact that you are in disagreement already means that you believe yourself right and your opponent wrong, and the impossibility of determining the relative likelihood of error in the case of non-peer disagreement does not take away one’s right to confidence in one’s beliefs. The conditionality of the peer qualification just means that the fact that a disagreement is not peer does not give you any additional grounds for that confidence.

References:

Christensen, David. 2007. “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” *The Philosophical Review* 116(2): 187-217. doi: 10.1215/00318108-2006-035.

Elga, Adam. 2007. “Reflection and Disagreement,” *Noûs* 41(3): 478–502. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0068.2007.00656.x.

Feldman, Richard. 2006. “Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement.” In: *Epistemology Futures*, edited by Stephen Hetherington, 216–236. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fogelin, Robert. 2005. “The Logic of Deep Disagreements,” *Informal Logic* 25(1): 3–11. Doi: 10.22329/il.v25i1.1040.

Foley, Richard. 2001. *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gutting, Gary. 1982. *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Kelly, Thomas. 2005. “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement,” in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology, Volume 1*, edited by John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler, 167–196. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGrath, Sarah. 2008. “Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise,” *Oxford Studies In Metaethics*, Vol. 3, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 87–108. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schoenfield, Miriam. 2014. “Permission to Believe,” *Noûs* 48(2): 193–218. doi:10.1111/nous.12006.

Sherman, Ben. 2015. “Unconfirmed Peers and Spinelessness,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45(4): 425–444. Doi: 10.1080/00455091.2015.1090896.

Simpson, Robert Mark. 2013. “Epistemic Peerhood and the Epistemology of Disagreement,” *Philosophical Studies* 164(2): 561-577. doi: 10.1007/s11098-012-9869-8.

Sosa, Ernest. 2010. “The Epistemology of Disagreement,” in *Social Epistemology*, edited by Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar and Duncan Pritchard, 278-297. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. See Kelly (2005, 170) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is noted in Feldman (2006, 221–22). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. What this means is not probability in the sense of “better than even odds” but in the sense that there is some indication that the chance that there is an error in your thinking is greater than the mere possibility of an error already renders it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Simpson (2013) is something of an exception here, because in this article Simpson argues that rather than having to prove their peerhood, it is assumed by default. Later I will explain why this neglects the necessity of assessment. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The principle described here is the subject of Foley’s study of trust in oneself (Foley 2001). For more discussion of self-trust see Ben Sherman (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Sosa (2005, *passim*, andespecially 292–5), and Christensen (2007, *passim*, and especially 193). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Foley (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Schoenfield (2014) uses the term “epistemic standards” to describe the conditions under which an agent will reasonably form a belief. By “epistemic framework” I instead intend the particular capacities which permit the formation and assessment of knowledge of a given question. I am not using the term in the sense used by Robert Fogelin (2005) to refer to a non-epistemic foundation of beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Simpson’s position that peerhood should be assumed is shared by Ben Sherman (2015). Sherman makes the role and consequences of the question of self-trust versus trust in others explicit. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)