Epistemic Peerhood and the Epistemology of Disagreement

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Abstract. In disagreements about trivial matters, it often seems appropriate for disputing parties to adopt a 'middle ground' view about the disputed matter. But in disputes about more substantial controversies (e.g. in ethics, religion, or politics) this sort of doxastic conduct can seem viciously acquiescent. How should we distinguish between the two kinds of cases, and thereby account for our divergent intuitions about how we ought to respond to them? One possibility is to say that ceding ground in a trivial dispute is appropriate because the disputing parties are usually epistemic peers within the relevant domain, whereas in a more substantial disagreement the disputing parties rarely, if ever, qualify as epistemic peers, and so 'sticking to one's guns' is usually the appropriate doxastic response. My aim in this paper is to explain why this way of drawing the desired distinction is ultimately problematic, even if it seems promising at first blush.

1. Introduction

Consider the following scenario:

> MEMORY: A and B go out for lunch together. One week later they meet for lunch again. A says: 'Let's get sandwiches, like last time'. B says: 'What are you talking about? We had sushi for lunch last week'. A says: 'No, I'm sure we had sandwiches'. B says: 'Well, I'm sure you're wrong'. Neither A nor B has any prior reason to suppose that either of them has an unusually unreliable short-term memory, or is presently cognitively impaired in any other way.

In this sort of situation, it seems appropriate for both parties to cede ground to the other person's view, either by suspending judgement about the disputed matter or revising their credences about it. Obviously someone is having a memory-lapse, and it would be irrationally dogmatic for either party to remain confident in the beliefs she held before the dispute came to light, unless she can find some further evidence which shows that she is not the one at fault.[1] By contrast, though, when we consider disputes about more substantial controversies – be they political, religious, ethical, philosophical, or whatever – the idea that we should cede ground to a dissenting and seemingly well-credentialed associate seems dubious. Consider the following case:

> HEALTHCARE: A finds out that her friend, B, disagrees with her views about the merits of a socialised healthcare system. In the course of their subsequent discussion A observes that B's opinions are well-informed and well thought-through. B is able to address many of the criticisms A levels against her views, and B also presents well-reasoned criticisms of A's views. In the end, A cannot point to anything in B's arguments or behaviour which demonstrates that she, A, is more epistemically well-credentialed than B with respect to the issue at hand.

In this case A is faced with a situation in which an intelligent, thoughtful, and well-informed person disagrees with her reasoned opinion about the merits of a socialised healthcare system. But surely this realisation alone should not require A to revise her position on the matter. To do so would seem altogether spineless.[2] In short: the intuitively appropriate doxastic responses in the two kinds of cases described here appear to be in tension. In one case it seems arbitrary and bullish to be unmoved in the face of disagreement with one's associate. In the other, it seems feeble and acquiescent to be swayed by someone else's dissent.

Perhaps the divergent intuitions that I've described here are ultimately misleading. One might take the view that we should always revise our beliefs if they are disputed by epistemically well-credentialed people. Alternatively, one might argue that we should never adjust (or significantly adjust) our beliefs for this reason. In either case, the view would be that the correct doxastic response to a disagreement does not depend on whether the disputed matter is a neatly encapsulated and trivial question or a complex and multifaceted controversy. However, if we want to try to accommodate the intuitions that I've described, then we will have to find a non-arbitrary distinction between the two kinds of cases, in light of

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[1] Sidgwick says something along these lines in *The Methods of Ethics* (1907, p. 342): "if I find any of my judgments… in direct conflict with a judgment of some other minds, there must be error somewhere: and if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other minds than in my own, reflective comparison between the two judgments necessarily reduces me temporarily to a state of neutrality".

[2] Phillip Pettit, for example, says it would be "objectionably self-abasing to revise your belief on matters like intelligent design or the wrongness of abortion just in virtue of finding that others whom you respect take a different view". "To migrate towards the views of others" Pettit says, "would seem to be an abdication of epistemic responsibility" (2006, p. 181). See also Elga (2007, p. 484).

which we can explain why they demand different doxastic responses. One way to tackle this problem involves an appeal to the special significance of *epistemic peerhood*. Roughly, epistemic peers are agents who are similarly or equally well-qualified to opine upon matters in a given domain.[3] Discourse in the epistemology of disagreement usually assumes that the proper doxastic response to a dispute depends crucially on whether or not the parties to that dispute are epistemic peers. So perhaps we can distinguish the two types of cases as follows. In trivial factual disagreements, like the one described in MEMORY, the opposing parties are often going to be epistemic peers within the relevant domain and so, when this is the case, ceding ground about one's belief is the correct response. By contrast, in a more substantial disagreement, like the one described in HEALTHCARE, the disputing parties rarely – if ever – qualify as epistemic peers, and so 'sticking to one's guns' is always, or nearly always, the appropriate doxastic response.

In this paper I explain why an appeal to the special significance of epistemic peerhood, although it may seem promising at first blush, is ultimately unable to reconcile the opposing intuitions described here. In §§2–3 I will present some arguments to bolster the opposing intuitions that generate the problem. Then in §§4–5 I will consider two ways to draw a distinction between idealised and complex disputes via an appeal to considerations about peerhood, and explain why both approaches fail.

2. Conformism

Conformism, as I will use the term here, is the view that when neither party to a dispute has an apprehensible epistemic advantage over the other – evidential, cognitive, or otherwise – both parties should revise their beliefs about the disputed claim towards the 'middle ground', so that their initial disagreement is either significantly diminished or eliminated.[4] The MEMORY scenario that I describe above is one of a number of examples that can be used to elicit intuitive

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[3] The term 'epistemic peer' is usually attributed to Gary Gutting. Gutting defines epistemic peerhood as equality with regards to epistemic virtues such as intelligence, perspicacity, honesty, and thoroughness (1982, p. 83). Expanding on Gutting's definition, Thomas Kelly (2005, p. 175) defines epistemic peerhood as equality with regard to such epistemic virtues as well as familiarity with the arguments and evidence relevant to a given issue. David Christensen (2007) follows Kelly, except to note that two people can have a peer-like epistemic relation to each other without being strict cognitive and evidential equals. Adam Elga takes a rather different view. He says you should regard someone as your epistemic peer if "you think that, conditional on a disagreement arising, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken" (2007, p. 487). I will say more about these alternative conceptions of epistemic peerhood in §§4-5.

[4] I borrow the term 'conformism' from Lackey (2010). Conformism as I have defined it is a close relative of what Elga calls the *equal weight view*; the view that "one should give the same weight to one's own assessments as one gives to the assessments of those one counts as one's epistemic peers" (2007, p. 484). Conformism can be applied to either an 'all-or-nothing' conception of belief (as in Feldman 2006, 2007) or a credal conception (as in Elga 2007, and Christensen 2007). The latter is probably to be preferred since

support for this view. Here are two more examples that may elicit conformist intuitions.

> ADDITION: A and B are adding up a series of randomly generated two-digit numbers being spoken aloud by a third party. A arrives at a sum of 439. B arrives at a sum of 449. Neither A nor B has any prior reason to suppose that she is better than the other at performing arithmetic.

> SIGHT: A and B are standing at the finish line of a horse race that culminates in a photo finish. A believes that horse x just beat horse y, but B believes that y just beat x. Neither A nor B has any prior reason to suppose that she or her opponent has perceptual faculties that are unusually reliable or unreliable.[5]

In each of these scenarios the proper doxastic response for the parties upon learning of their disagreement seems to be that they should become agnostic about which of them is right or wrong, at least until they find some way to independently settle the matter (and if they cannot find any way to independently settle the matter, then they should remain agnostic). The rationale for this conclusion can be stated as follows. In each case there is an apparent epistemic symmetry between the opposing parties. Neither party has reason to suppose that she has an advantage over her opponent – evidential, cognitive, or otherwise – that makes her more likely than her opponent to be in the right about the matters upon which they disagree. Rather, as far as either A or B knows in advance, the two of them are evidentially on a par and equally well-credentialed over the relevant cognitive domains (i.e. memory, arithmetic, and visual perception).[6] Given this symmetry, if A turns out to be right in a given case this will, in a certain sense, just be good luck on her part and bad luck on B's part. And it is irrational for A to think that she is in the right whilst recognising that whether or not this is the case is ostensibly a matter of luck. So A should respond to these disputes by ceding ground to her opponent; and as it goes for A, so it goes for B.

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it seems able to provide *actionable* guidance in a wider range of possible disputes. (As Kelly (2010) points out, it is unclear what guidance an all-or-nothing version of conformism can offer for an agnostic and an atheist involved in peer disagreement.) In saying that opposing parties should move towards the middle ground so that their disagreement is either diminished *or* eliminated, I want to avoid committing the conformist to the uniqueness thesis, i.e. the claim that there is one uniquely rational belief or credence that is warranted in response to a given body of evidence. There are problems that arise if we deny uniqueness (see White 2005) but I do not discuss them here, so for our purposes I think it is best to allow that conformists may accept or reject the uniqueness thesis.

[5] Both of these examples are adapted from Kelly (2010).

[6] The emphasis here on A's *prior* beliefs about her and B's relative epistemic credentials must be subject to appropriate qualifications. This is because, as Elga notes, prior to you and your friend disagreeing about some matter, you might regard your friend as your peer, while at the same time knowing that she tends to reason sub-optimally, say, during hot weather. Hence, Elga says, in responding to a dispute with your friend "you should not be guided by you prior assessment of your friend's *overall* judging ability", but rather, "you should be guided by you prior assessment of her judging abilities *conditional on what you later learn about the judging conditions*" (2007, p. 489, Elga's emphases).

Here is an argument against this view. Instead of both parties automatically moving towards the middle ground, the proper doxastic response for parties to a dispute should depend upon the fact of the matter about which belief the available evidence actually supports, and which of the disputants – if either – has responded to that evidence correctly. Thomas Kelly expresses this line of thought as follows:

> The rationality of one's believing as one does is not threatened by the fact that there are those who believe otherwise. Rather, any threat to the rationality of one's believing as one does depends on whether those who believe otherwise have good reason for believing as they do – reasons that one has failed to accurately appreciate in arriving at one's own view. (Kelly 2005, pp. 180-81)

This suggestion seems reasonable enough if we are thinking about disagreements for which the following two conditions hold: (a) we are able, without any great cost, to carefully reappraise the evidential considerations relevant to the disputed matter; and (b) when those considerations are reappraised, the judgements of the disputing parties about who appraised the evidence correctly in the first instance tend to converge.[7] Clearly, though, many of our real-world disagreements are not like this; they cannot be settled simply by asking who has done a better job at appraising the evidence. In some situations, the evidence that is relevant to the dispute may be inaccessible. For instance, in MEMORY, A and B may have no access to their original evidence vis-à-vis what they ate for lunch last week, nor any way to ascertain the fact of the matter about which one of them formed a reliable memory based upon that evidence when they did have access to it. In other cases, even if the evidence that is relevant to the dispute is accessible, there may still be no way to definitely settle a dispute about which party responded to that evidence correctly in the first instance. In the case of a hung jury, for instance, no amount of recapitulating the evidence is guaranteed to show which parties – if any – have judged the evidence wrongly.[8] As Kelly himself says, "there is no magic red light that illuminates when one responds to the evidence correctly, no warning bell that sounds when one does not" (Kelly 2010, p. 169).[9] In summary:

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[7] For example, suppose A and B are independently attempting to solve the same mathematical problem, and suppose that when they compare their solutions they also show each other their step-by-step calculations. In this scenario, if A identifies an error in B's calculations which B herself recognises upon review, then of course A should disregard B's answer and B should defer to A's result. Why? Because both A and B now have a good reason to think that A alone has responded to the problem correctly.

[8] My point here echoes Gideon Rosen's (2001, p. 71) oft-cited remark: "It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided... the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable".

[9] This remark comes from a more recent (2010) paper by Kelly on the epistemic significance of disagreement, in which he defends a qualified version of the 'correct-reasoning' view defended in Kelly (2005). On Kelly's revised account "one *should* give some weight to one's peer's opinion, even when from the God's-eye point of view *one has evaluated the evidence correctly and [one's peer] has not*" (my emphases). The reason for this, Kelly says, is simply that "one does not occupy the God's-eye point of view with respect to the question of who has evaluated the evidence correctly" (Kelly 2010, p. 138).

when a dispute arises, the fact of the matter about who has responded correctly to the evidence often cannot be used to settle the question of which disputant is in the right, and in these cases conformism (i.e. both disputants revising their beliefs towards the middle ground) seems like the correct response, assuming that there is otherwise an apparent epistemic symmetry between the disputing parties.

As another objection to conformism, one might claim that an introspective awareness of one's own reasoning processes can justify 'sticking to one's guns' in the face of disagreement with an apparently well-credentialed opponent. The idea here is that even when my opponent and I *seem* to be equals, I can trust the outcome of my own reasoning more than I can trust the outcome of my opponent's reasoning, since I have a means for checking the reliability of my own reasoning which I don't have for my opponent's reasoning, namely, my first-hand, introspective awareness of how my own reasoning has been carried out.[10] It seems to me, however, that this sort of appeal to introspection relies on an implausibly sanguine view about how dependably we can detect our own cognitive errors and mistakes in reasoning when they occur. In some cases I may correctly perceive that my memory is playing up or that I am reasoning sub-optimally, but most of the time I remain unaware of my mental errors until someone or something external to me challenges the outcome of my reasoning. Kelly's point bears repeating: there is no magic red light that illuminates when I respond to the evidence correctly and no warning bell which sounds when I do not. Granted, the same can be said of my opponent, but this just means that the two of us are equally well-credentialed in this respect as well. Unless I have some independent reason to suppose that my internal error-detecting faculties are more reliable than my opponent's, I cannot assume that I have the epistemic advantage.[11] In summary: when a dispute arises, the opposing parties' introspective awareness of their own reasoning processes – and any confidence that either one of them may derive from a *perception* that he is not in error – should not override what otherwise appears to be an epistemic symmetry between them.[12]

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[10] For instance, Jennifer Lackey (2010) argues that the epistemological significance of disagreement largely depends upon "the presence or absence of relevant personal information", i.e. "information about myself that I lack with respect to you" which can help me to judge which one of us has gone wrong when we are parties to a disagreement. Ralph Wedgwood suggests an even greater degree of deference to one's own introspectively accessible judgements. "Perhaps, quite generally", he says, "it is rational for one to place greater trust in one's own intuitions, simply because these intuitions are one's own, than in the intuitions of other people" (Wedgwood 2007, p. 261).

[11] This is not to say that there can never be 'private' symmetry-breakers that are known via introspection. Suppose in a jury case I know (a) that I have a crucial item of evidence, and (b) that the individuals who disagree with me are oblivious to this piece of evidence (i.e. they don't have the evidence themselves, and they don't know that I have it). Whilst it *would* be reasonable for me to remain steadfast when I am faced with that kind of disagreement, it would be the crucial evidence that I possess – rather than my introspective awareness of that evidence – which justifies me in doing so.

[12] Here is another objection: the conformist cannot defend his view against a relevantly well-credentialed person who considers the best arguments for conformism but still thinks it is false. This is because the conformist's *own principle* precludes him from remaining steadfast under these conditions, and tells him to

3. The unwelcome implications of conformism

It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that in many real-world disputes one party *does* have expertise or a clear cognitive advantage with regards to the disputed matter which justifies her – but not her opponent – in remaining unmoved by the disagreement. Similarly, in many real-world disputes one party has a grasp of some crucial evidence that her opponent doesn't, which justifies her alone in remaining steadfast. Conformism does not therefore require everyone to suspend judgement or become less confident about every disputed claim. It does not tell doctors to retract their diagnoses when their patients think they are wrong, or meteorologists to revise their forecasts when lay-weathermen predict rain, or palaeontologists to be thrown into doubt because some people believe that our planet is 6,000 years old. Nevertheless, there will still be many real-world disagreements – including disagreements about important questions in ethics, religion, politics, metaphysics, and so on – which are more like our simplified examples than the cases just described, in the sense that they do not pit experts against novices, but similarly intelligent and well-informed people against each other. For most of us it is straightforwardly apparent that most of our political, religious, ethical, and philosophical beliefs are rejected by others whose epistemic credentials across the relevant domains are as good as – if not appreciably better than – our own.[13] Peter van Inwagen offers a personal example that neatly illustrates this disquieting fact about our epistemic situation:

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move towards the middle ground with his opponent; and any attempt to avoid this result would be an *ad hoc* rationalisation to exempt the conformist from his own epistemic norms. Brian Weatherson has advanced this line of criticism in various unpublished papers and presentations. Alvin Plantinga makes a similar point (2000, pp. 445-46). In response, Elga (2010) denies that it is *ad hoc* to qualify conformist principles so that they allow the conformist to remain steadfast in the case of a dispute about the merits of conformism itself. This is because, roughly, policies, rules, principles, advice, etc. must be dogmatic about their own correctness on pain of incoherence.

[13] Perhaps, one might argue, the fact that people are (usually) already conscious of the disputed status of their beliefs about ethical matters (for example) means that these beliefs need not be subjected to the conformist's prescribed revisions. If an apparently competent person disagrees with me about (e.g.) what we ate when we had lunch together last week, I will be genuinely surprised to learn that this is the case. By contrast, it should not be a surprise as such to find out that there are epistemically well-credentialed people who disagree with my ethical views. An awareness of this sort of pervasive disagreement is just something that is, or should be, part of the background set of considerations in light of which all my beliefs are formed. (Oppy (2010) emphasises this point in his discussion of religious disagreement.) Notice, however, that I often will learn something important when I find myself in a real-life, person-to-person dispute with an epistemically well-credentialed interlocutor about a perennially-controversial issue. I may, in a reflective moment, assent to the notion that there are intelligent, thoughtful, and well-informed people who are moral nihilists. At the same time, though, I may secretly suspect that these moral nihilists are overlooking something, or that they are labouring under some kind of confusion, or that they are letting affective or aesthetic prejudices govern their ethical judgements. However, when I engage in some back-and-forth with a nihilist and find that she in fact has an impressive armoury of arguments, insights, and criticisms, and that she can 'argue on her feet' just as confidently and judiciously as I can (or more so), there is a sense in which I do apprehend something that I did not apprehend previously – something which, arguably, should occasion doxastic revision. If I am prompted by this kind of encounter to revise my beliefs along conformist lines, it is not because I have newly discovered that an epistemically

> How can I believe (as I do) that free will is incompatible with determinism or that unrealized possibilities are not physical objects or that human beings are not four-dimensional things extended in time as well as in space, when David Lewis – a philosopher of truly formidable intelligence and insight and ability – rejects these things… and is already aware of and understands perfectly every argument that I could produce in their defense? (van Inwagen 1996, p. 138)

Conformism says that when neither party to a dispute has an identifiable epistemic advantage over the other – evidential, cognitive, or otherwise – both parties should revise their beliefs about the disputed claim towards the middle ground. So when I know that others disagree with my views in politics, philosophy, religion, etc., I must try to identify, in a non-question-begging way, some epistemic advantage that I hold over them. But if I cannot identify any such advantage, as is often the case, then conformism apparently requires that I suspend judgement or become less confident in my beliefs about morality, religion, philosophy, and politics.

Why might this implication of conformism be regarded as unwelcome?[14] Firstly, the things that one believes about fundamental questions in life are partly constitutive of one's sense of identity. Suppose that when A is 20 he identifies as an evangelical Christian and a moral conservative, but by age 40 he is an atheist and a moral nihilist. The shift in A's worldview from ages 20 to 40 is (a) a change in who he presents himself to others as being and (b) a change in who he understands himself to be. A's social identity – how he is positioned in relation to others, in part on the basis of what he believes – is profoundly transformed in a case like this. It is not purely a figure of speech to say that the latter A is a new man. A transformation like the one A experiences is of course not automatically a bad thing, as long as it happens for the right kind of reasons, e.g. because of A's attempt to make his beliefs cohere, or his exposure to new evidence, or his concerted effort to synthesise and respond correctly to his evidence. But if A's beliefs about these matters change for the wrong reasons – say, because of social pressure to fit in, or because A develops a contrarian streak and wants to be different for the sake of being different – then the change in his identity is a regrettable thing. He has done poorly in his doxastic conduct. The worry about conformism in relation to these matters, then, is (a) that its reach is too great, since it suggests that, as things currently stand, just about everyone should undergo this kind of radical

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well-credentialed person rejects my moral realism; rather, it is because that information has been made salient to me in a way that it was not previously.

[14] Van Inwagen (1996) is one author who takes an especially dim view of this prospect. However, there are several others who don't seem to regard this prospect as being especially lamentable, contra van Inwagen and my own initial suggestion here. Christensen (2007) and Feldman (2006, 2007) both argue that conformism should extend to weighty, real-world disagreements, and they both seem to be fairly untroubled by this conclusion. Furthermore, although Kelly does not concur with these writers in their view that conformism about many contentious real-world issues would be warranted, he nevertheless endorses some part of their pro-conformist sentiments; "the suggestion that many or most of us tend to be too confident of our controversial philosophical, political, historical (and so on) opinions", Kelly says, "strikes me as having considerable independent plausibility" (Kelly 2010, p. 128).

doxastic overhaul, and (b) that it seems to invoke the wrong sort of reason for the changes it prescribes. It tells us to revise what we believe about centrally important questions in life because of what other people believe about those questions. In a certain sense then, it tells us to change who we are *because* we are different from others.[15] In this respect conformism as an epistemic principle inherits many of the negative connotations of the term 'conformism' as it is used in a more general sense. There are other related concerns. Many people regard it as a good thing that there are serious, spirited debates between people who passionately adhere to different points of view. There may be benefits in this both for individual participants and for societies at large. It is good for an individual that she is involved in a spirited debate, because being forced to offer reasons for her beliefs helps her to better understand what it *is* she believes, and why, and it also serves to hone her intellectual capacities in general. And it is good for societies that these sorts of debates happen. They help us all to become better acquainted with the arguments and evidence in favour of different ideas and belief systems, and perhaps there is also a non-trivial sense in which they make life more interesting.[16] Epistemological conformists will still share their reasons for believing as they do, but they will be much less likely to engage in spirited debates, because they will not in the end passionately disagree about many things. If conformism is right, then intellectual communities made up of similarly intelligent and well-informed people may still be interested in canvassing arguments and evidence relevant to their domains of interest, but as for what their members believe, all initial disagreements should be smoothed out into mutual endorsement of middle ground views. Conformism thus threatens the putative goods that adversarial forms of inquiry and discourse carry with them.

None of this is sufficient to establish that conformism is a defective epistemic principle or that it leads us into irrationality. The worries I have discussed do not by themselves give us a good reason to think that a non-conformist is more likely than a conformist to (a) have true beliefs, or (b) have a coherent set of beliefs, or

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[15] Part of what is objectionable in this thought is the prospect of one becoming alienated from one's projects, one's commitments, one's uniquely-positioned outlook on the world, and so on. The danger of this kind of alienation is a recurring idea in parts of Bernard Williams' moral philosophy, see for instance "Persons, character and morality" in *Moral Luck* (1981, pp. 1-19).

[16] The benefits of adversarial debate and inquiry are famously adverted to in Mill's *On Liberty*. "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion... Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers... He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them, who defend them in earnest and do their very utmost for them... else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and removes that difficulty" (Mill 1985, pp. 98-99). More recently, the benefits of adversarial dynamics in communities of inquiry have been the focus of some contemporary work in philosophy of science (e.g. Kitcher 1993). Marc Moffett (2007) shows how this Millian idea is in tension with conformist-style theses in contemporary epistemology. For Mill, our beliefs are only justified when they have been challenged by epistemically well-credentialed agents who reject them. But for conformists these kinds of dispute, far from shoring up our beliefs, should in fact prompt us to revise our beliefs.

(c) respond correctly to her evidence.[17] Rather, the non-conformist ideas that I am trying to flesh out here stem from a basic normative attitude about how agents should stand in relation to their beliefs about certain fundamentally important issues. Roughly, the notion is when someone believes a proposition p, she should evince a robust kind of personal commitment to p. This means being prepared to defend p by stating the case in p's favour, but it also means – perhaps more importantly – making it one's business to rebut the arguments and reasons that others adduce in their cases against p. When an individual holds a belief that p, on this view, this makes her a committed stakeholder in the discourse about p. She cannot just think of herself as a spectator waiting to see how the case for or against p pans out and adjust her views as necessary. Obviously there is much work to be done if we want to incorporate these sketchy remarks into an adequately spelled-out thesis about the nature of epistemic agency and proper doxastic commitment. And even once this work is done, we may decide that the view in question is wrongheaded and that the intuitions it elicits can ultimately be ignored. But for the purposes of this paper I will suppose that there is something worth trying to accommodate in the ideas I've been discussing here. It is a cost for an epistemic principle if it says that most of us should abandon most of our opinions about foundational questions. The conformist principle, while it satisfactorily governs simple cases of disagreement, seems to say exactly that, if and when it is applied more generally to disagreements about controversial issues in religion, ethics, politics, and philosophy. Thus, as I said in §1, the challenge is to explain what is different about trivial, neatly-encapsulated disputes and complex, perennial, real-world disagreements, such that we are correct in our intuitive disposition to respond to them differently. An appeal to the special significance of epistemic peerhood is one way that such an explanation might be developed. It is to this prospect that I now turn.

4. Downgrading opponents on cognitive or evidential grounds

Conformism demands that when neither party to a dispute has an apparent epistemic advantage over the other – evidential, cognitive, or otherwise – both parties must revise their beliefs towards a middle ground view about the disputed claim. For the conformist, then, if person A is to be justified in *not* revising her belief about p in light of a disagreement with person B, A must have some reasonable grounds for supposing that when it comes to the question of whether or not p, B is not her epistemic *peer* but rather her epistemic *inferior*. In other words, if A wants to remain steadfast about p, she must have some basis for *downgrading* B vis-à-vis p.

[17] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer from this journal for pressing me to clarify this point.

On my initial definition in §1, epistemic peers are agents who are similarly or equally well qualified to opine upon matters within a given domain. What qualifies agents in this respect? A simple and *prima facie* plausible answer would be: evidence and relevant intellectual competence. On this view, two people qualify as epistemic peers with respect to a given topic if they are (a) equally familiar (or near enough) with the evidence and arguments relevant to that topic, and (b) equals (or near enough) with respect to the cognitive abilities and epistemic virtues (e.g. intelligence, thoughtfulness, freedom from bias) which are relevant to forming accurate or duly evidence-sensitive beliefs in that domain.[18] On this construal of epistemic peerhood, A can downgrade B only if she has an evidential and/or cognitive advantage over B with regard to the object of their dispute, p. In other words, if A has a superior grasp of the p-relevant evidence, A can downgrade B on account of B not being her *evidential equal* regarding p. Or if A has p-relevant expertise and/or epistemic virtues that B does not have, then A can downgrade B on account of B not being her *cognitive equal* regarding p.

Granting this conception of epistemic peerhood for the time being, let's consider the possibility that what distinguishes an idealised dispute (like MEMORY, ADDITION, or SIGHT) from a perennial real-world controversy in politics, religion, philosophy, or ethics, is just that in an idealised disagreement one *cannot* justifiably downgrade one's opponent(s) on evidential or cognitive grounds, whereas in a complex real-world disagreement, one can. The first element in this proposal seems obviously correct. In idealised disputes like those discussed thus far, one cannot justifiably downgrade one's opponent(s) on evidential or cognitive grounds. In MEMORY, for instance, neither party can assume that she has a crucial item of evidence that will resolve the disagreement, because both parties are apprised of the other's relevant evidence. And neither party has an independent reason to suppose that her memory is functioning more reliably. Consequently, MEMORY demands a conformist response. The same goes for ADDITION and SIGHT. In both cases there is a limited body of relevant evidence (the spoken numbers, the sight of the race-horses crossing the line) which is held in common by both parties. And in both cases, neither party has an independent reason to think that her cognitive capacities – the relevant ones – are functioning in a more reliable or truth-apt manner.

So the first part of the proposal under consideration stands. As for the second part, though, it's not clear that in a dispute about a perennial real-world controversy one *is* typically justified in downgrading one's opponents on evidential or cognitive grounds. Of course, this depends upon what kind of interlocutors one tends to engage with. A brilliant and impeccably well-informed philosophy professor who endorses monism would presumably be justified in downgrading (on cogni-

[18] This conception of epistemic peerhood – or one quite similar to it – is adopted by several authors, e.g. Kelly (2005, 2010), Christensen (2007), and Lackey (2010).

tive *or* evidential grounds) any student of hers who is a dualist. Likewise, an erudite theist will be justified in downgrading unsophisticated and ignorant atheists. But disputes like these, in which stark disparities between the disputants exist, are not the kind that we should preoccupy ourselves with. If there is a threat to my belief that p, it derives not from my knowing that *somebody* rejects p, but rather from my knowing that I am in disagreement with individuals who seem to have epistemic credentials which are as good as or better than mine with respect to the question of whether p. Returning to the example just mentioned, our sophisticated theist may be able to downgrade a naïve atheist, but he would not be justified in downgrading an intelligent and thoughtful person who has carefully examined the same evidence and arguments that the theist himself has examined, but who concludes that theism is implausible on the balance of considerations. More generally, person A cannot reasonably maintain that she is cognitively or evidentially better-placed than person B to opine upon p, when as far as anyone can tell it is just as likely that the reverse is true. It may still be the case that people engaged in an idealised dispute are more likely to be cognitive and evidential equals *as a matter of fact* than parties on opposing sides of a more complex philosophical controversy. Parties to a dispute like ADDITION almost certainly will be strict evidential equals vis-à-vis the object of their dispute, whereas parties to a dispute about some political or metaphysical controversy will almost certainly *not* be, even if they have tried to share all of their evidence.[19] In a similar way, parties to an idealised dispute like MEMORY or SIGHT are far more likely to be cognitive equals over the relevant domains than individuals debating a perennial controversy in religion or ethics.[20] However, if person A is to be justified in downgrading person B, it is not enough that A and B are not equals as a matter of fact. Rather, in order for A to be justified in downgrading B, A must have a good independent reason to suppose that B is her epistemic *inferior* in the context of their dispute. Consider again HEALTHCARE from §1. A can reasonably suppose that she and B each have some relevant items of evidence that are not held in common, even if they have sought to share as much of their evidence as possible. Moreover, A can reasonably assume that she and B are not equally well-endowed with respect to every intellectual capacity that may be somehow relevant to their dispute.

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[19] The thought here is that we might simply be *unable* to provide an exhaustive account of the evidence that has played a part in our coming to hold a certain view about a certain complex question. Sometimes there may be too much evidence to recall. Other times it may be that the order in which the evidence is acquired has some significance as far as its evidentiary force is concerned, which cannot be recalled or recapitulated. Thus, as Graham Oppy says, "even if we were perfectly rational and had accessed the same full body of evidence, it might still be possible for us to disagree provided that we accessed the evidence in differing orders… and provided that our finite capacities ensured that we could not 'store' – or access – the full body of evidence all at once" (2006, p. 7).

[20] This is because simple, idealised disputes like MEMORY, ADDITION, and SIGHT are cognitively one-dimensional, whereas perennial controversies tend to exist in domains that are cognitively multi-dimensional, i.e. domains in which rational belief formation or revision requires the agent to exercise a number of adequately developed cognitive capacities (e.g. intelligence, memory, conceptual subtlety) and/or epistemic virtues (e.g. impartiality, patience, open-mindedness).

But unless A has a good independent reason to think that *her* unshared evidence is decisive, or that *her* cognitive skill-set is more likely to lead to true beliefs about the matter in question, then she ultimately must be guided by the symmetry which, as far as she can ascertain, obtains between herself and B.

In summary: we cannot distinguish perennial real-world controversies from idealised disputes by claiming that parties may downgrade their opponents on cognitive or evidential grounds in one kind of case but not the other. This calls into question any definition of epistemic peerhood that is primarily formulated in terms of evidential and cognitive equality. Parties to a dispute about any complex issue are unlikely to be strict evidential and cognitive equals in relation to the things that they disagree about, but it does not follow that either one of them can justifiably downgrade the other from the status of epistemic peer to epistemic inferior. It seems, therefore, that a different definition of epistemic peerhood is required.

5. Downgrading opponents because of a 'worldview gulf'

As an alternative to the 'cognitive/evidential-parity' account of epistemic peerhood, Adam Elga posits a 'likelihood-of-error' definition. On his view, you ought to regard someone as your epistemic peer if "you think that, conditional on a disagreement arising, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken" (2007, p. 487). When epistemic peerhood is defined this way, a distinction between idealised and complex disputes based on cognitive and evidential asymmetries (as discussed in the previous section) evaporates. But then, this just leads us back to our initial concern, namely, why shouldn't the conformist implications of idealised disagreements apply across the board to cover all our moral, political, religious, and philosophical disputes? Elga attempts to differentiate the two kinds of cases as follows:

> In the [idealised] cases of disagreement… the disputed issues are relatively separable from other controversial matters. As a result, the agents in those examples often count their smart friends and associates as peers about the issues under dispute. But in the messy real-world cases, the disputed issues are tangled in clusters of controversy. As a result, though agents in those examples may count their associates as thoughtful, well-informed, quick-witted, and so on, they often do not count those associates as peers. (Elga 2007, p. 493)

The distinction that Elga attempts to draw here can be illustrated using our two examples from §1. On one hand, in a dispute like MEMORY, when A evaluates her and B's relative epistemic credentials in light of what she knows about how well they have both remembered things in the past, A's judgment is based on a body of evidence that has no inherent self-bias. That is to say, A may or may not judge her own memory to be more reliable than B's memory. A's judgement to this

end will depend on what she knows about how well herself and B have remembered things in the past, and A's view on *this* question is more or less independent from her views regarding other controversial matters. By contrast, in a dispute like HEALTHCARE, when A evaluates her and B's relative epistemic credentials in light of what she knows about how they have both responded to social policy issues in the past, A's judgment is based on a body of evidence which *does* have an inherent self-bias. That is to say, in thinking about their responses to issues that are relevantly similar to HEALTHCARE, A cannot help but conclude that her own past performance has been better than B's. Why? Because individuals who disagree about one controversial political issue tend to also disagree about other related political controversies. Thus, in our example, when A considers B's past performance in opining upon issues that are related to HEALTHCARE, it will *of course* seem to A that B often gets things wrong. And so, in HEALTHCARE – unlike MEMORY – the body of evidence that A draws upon when judging whether or not B is her epistemic peer within the relevant domain is one that will, in typical cases, encourage A to downgrade B.

By distinguishing between idealised disputes and perennial controversies in this way, Elga manages to insulate political, religious, ethical, and philosophical controversies from the unwelcome implications of conformism. At the same time, though, the distinction that he draws seems to condone dogmatism in a different form. For if, as Elga suggests, individuals who disagree about something like HEALTHCARE can evaluate each other's relative epistemic credentials on the basis of their responses to HEALTHCARE-related controversies, it seems more or less inevitable that they will both perceive an epistemic inferiority on the other person's behalf, and hence that they will both confidently stick to their guns. This cannot be right. 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. Relatively minor disagreements that arise within my circle of like-minded associates should occasion belief-revision, so Elga would have it, but more profound disagreements with people whose beliefs are very different to mine may be safely cordoned-off. Thus, as I suggested above, Elga here appears to condoning a form of selective, self-serving dogmatism.

Anticipating this objection, Elga considers whether it might be more appropriate for people who disagree about a cluster of issues in some field to treat that cluster as a matter of dispute in its own right. For example, instead of A trying to evaluate her and B's epistemic credentials vis-à-vis HEALTHCARE specifically, perhaps A could try to evaluate her and B's epistemic credentials in relation to, say, political and ethical issues more generally. But the problem with this approach, according to Elga, is that when A is trying to judge whether or not B is her epistemic peer within this more broadly-circumscribed domain, all that A can go by is an evaluation of their respective cognitive abilities in domains that are independent of

politics and ethics. Ergo, A must set aside any considerations pertaining to her opponent's and her own political and ethical views. But then, once A has set so many considerations aside, Elga says, A has no adequate basis for making *any* judgement about whether or not she and B are peers within the contentious domain. The question, Elga says, has "no determinate verdict" (2007, p. 496).[21] Consequently, since there is no determinate verdict about how A ought to judge B's and her own epistemic credentials in politics and ethics *per se*, A has no choice but to base her judgement of B's and her own epistemic credentials vis-à-vis HEALTHCARE on their disagreements about other controversial social policy issues. And thus – if the disagreement between A and B runs deep (as is often the case when two people hold opposing views about a perennial controversy in politics, religion, ethics, or philosophy) – A will be able to downgrade B in relation to HEALTHCARE. Thus, Elga concludes, conformism does not require us to suspend judgement about contentious views in politics, or in other complex, controversy-prone domains.

Elga's argument here seems to me problematic on two fronts. Firstly, when I set aside my own reasoning and my opponent's reasoning about a complex array of controversial issues, it does not necessarily follow that there will be no common ground from which I can form a reasonable opinion about my opponent's epistemic credentials in the domains to which those issues belong. I know that the disagreement between me and some of my associates about certain religious questions runs deep. However, among these associates there are some whose religious views I am inclined to wrestle with more seriously, insofar as I know these individuals to be particularly intelligent, thoughtful, insightful, well-informed, and so on. The suggestion, then, is that there may be a suite of epistemic virtues and/or cognitive abilities that transcend specific intellectual domains. My associate and I might have divergent views about the rationality of religious belief, or we might be at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Nevertheless, I may still regard my associate as an epistemic peer in those domains, so long as I have reason to believe that she is equipped with these domain-transcendent epistemic virtues.

But suppose that Elga is right and I am mistaken about the previous point. In other words, suppose that when I set aside everything that my associate and I disagree about concerning, say, religion, there is simply no fact of the matter (or 'no determinate verdict') about whether I should consider my associates to be my epistemic peers vis-à-vis religious claims. Even if this is the case, it does not follow, as Elga's view would suggest, that I can justifiably suppose that my associate is

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[21] Elga illustrates his claim here with an example of two friends, Ann and Beth, who disagree about the moral permissibility of abortion and who are generally 'at opposite ends of the political spectrum'. "Consider the cluster of issues linked to abortion... Ann does not consider Beth a peer about that cluster. In other words, setting aside her reasoning about the issues in that cluster, and setting aside Beth's opinions about those issues, Ann does not think Beth would be just as likely as her to get things right. That is because there is no fact of the matter about Ann's opinion of Beth, once so many of Ann's considerations have been set aside" (Elga 2007, pp. 495-96).

more likely to be mistaken than I am when a disagreement in that domain arises between us. To see why, let's fill in the details of our current example. My associate and I have known each other a long time, and we have spent many afternoons arguing back and forth about the religious claims that divide us. I know from our discussion that my associate is well-informed. She has heard and understood all of the arguments and evidence that I can muster against her view. Moreover, I know that my associate is no intellectual slouch. I know this from our conversations on religion and on other topics. The only discernible thing that divides us is the gulf in our worldviews. In light of the relevant arguments and evidence, she regards certain religious claims as eminently plausible, while I consider those claims to be quite implausible. Under these circumstances, Elga's account allows me to downgrade my associate and remain steadfast. Why? Because, he says, there can be no determinate verdict about whether or not my associate is my epistemic peer with respect to religious claims. Given the depth of our disagreement, too many of my opinions and assumptions will have to be set aside for me to be able make such a judgement. But if that is right, won't I then be in a position under which I ought to *withhold* judgement about which one of us is epistemically superior? Epistemological norms are not suspended in situations of doubt. If I don't have any decisive grounds for believing p over not-p, I cannot just opt to believe one or the other as a matter of preference. Rather, under such circumstances I should withhold judgement, or alternatively, assign an intermediate credence value to p. This general epistemological precept undermines Elga's claim. If I find that a profound divergence between myself and an associate renders me unable to arrive at a judgment about which one of us is epistemically better-credentialed in relation to the things that we disagree about, then I should remain agnostic about which of us is in fact better-credentialed.

Elga wants to say that in this situation all I can be guided by is the fact that, from my point of view, my associate seems to get things badly wrong when it comes to matters of religion. But this just seems like special pleading. To recap: I am trying to determine whether my associate is my epistemic peer or my epistemic inferior, but in the spirit of non-dogmatism, I am also trying to approach this question in a way which does not pre-emptively settle things in my favour. Ergo, I have to bracket off the immediate content of our dispute, k. *Of course* I think my epistemic performance is better in relation to k, or there would be no disagreement. Instead, therefore, I turn to consider who has a better epistemic track-record on issues that are relevantly similar to k. However, I soon realise that this approach would also pre-emptively settle things in my favour. The views my associate holds about k are part of a family of beliefs, and the same goes for me. The basic structure of our disagreement in k will just be repeated in all the k-related issues I might consider. At this point I realise that I have no adequate, non-question-begging basis for making *any* judgement about the relative epistemic credentials of me and my opponent in relation to this subject. Elga's mistake, however, is to claim that once I reach this point, I am entitled to stick to my guns. If I have no non-question-

begging way to appraise the relative epistemic credentials of me and my opponent in relation to the subject at hand, and if conformism is correct, then I should bite the bullet and revise my beliefs about this subject towards the middle ground – even if this policy would, if applied consistently, imperil many of my beliefs about all sorts of important things.

In summary, Elga has not provided us with a good reason to think that the conformist implications of idealised disputes can be quarantined so that they do not infect our moral, political, religious, and philosophical disagreements. The general thrust of the discussion here, as in the previous section, is 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. When I am engaged in a dispute about some perennial controversy, I am probably justified in thinking that my opponents and I are not in every respect *equally* well-qualified to opine upon the things that divide us. But if I am going to remain steadfast, that is not enough. Rather, in order to remain unmoved, I need to be able to identify, in a non-arbitrary, non-question-begging way, some factor that gives me the upper hand and which allows me to positively downgrade my opponents. In fields like politics, religion, ethics, and philosophy, most of us are party to disagreements in which we are unable to identify these kinds of decisive advantages that we hold over the people who disagree with us. Therefore, irrespective of whether we have any firm basis for making judgements about whether our opponents are our epistemic peers in such cases, the unwelcome implications of conformism will still loom as a threat to our beliefs in those domains.

6. Conclusion

On its face, a conformist response to simple cases of disagreement, like MEMORY, ADDITION, and SIGHT, seems correct. But when it comes to complex real-world controversies, conformism seems to go too far by enjoining a viciously acquiescent response to disagreements about some of life's most important questions. One way to differentiate the simple and complex cases, and thus resolve this tension, is to say that opposing parties in simple disputes typically *are* epistemic peers, whereas opposing parties in complex disagreements typically are not, so that a conformist approach is required only in the former cases. I have argued that this attempt to resolve the tension is unsatisfactory. In order to remain steadfast in one's beliefs in the face of disagreement, one needs good reasons for not only (a) doubting that one and one's opponent are in fact epistemic peers, but also (b) thinking that one's opponent is positively *less well-credentialed* than oneself in the relevant domain. It may be that people engaged in disagreements about complex and perennially controversial questions are unlikely to be strict evidential and cognitive equals relative to the subject of their disagreement. However, the mere

likelihood of this inequivalence does not – when, to all appearances, the parties are similarly well-credentialed with respect to the topic at hand – license either party in downgrading their opponent from the status of epistemic peer to epistemic inferior (see §4). Parties engaged in this sort of dispute might, on the other hand, simply be unable to arrive at a non-question-begging judgement about whether they are in fact epistemic peers. But again, this position of uncertainty does not give either party a good reason to think that their opponent is *less* well-credentialed with respect to the subject at hand (see §5). So the tension remains. If we want to maintain that people can hold firm to their beliefs in politics, religion, philosophy, etc., even when their beliefs are disputed by others who, to all appearances, are similarly well-credentialed epistemic agents with respect to the disputed topics, it remains for us to explain how this view does not permit an irrationally dogmatic response in cases like MEMORY, ADDITION, and SIGHT.

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