**How to Respond Rationally to Peer Disagreement:**

**The Preemption View**

Thomas Grundmann

University of Cologne

*Abstract.* In this paper, I argue that the two most common views of how to respond rationally to peer disagreement–the Total Evidence View (TEV) and the Equal Weight View (EWV)–are both inadequate for substantial reasons. TEV does not issue the correct intuitive verdicts about a number of hypothetical cases of peer disagreement. The same is true for EWV. In addition, EWV does not give any explanation of what is rationally required of agents on the basis of sufficiently general epistemic principles. I will then argue that there is a genuine alternative to both views–the Preemption View (PV)–that fares substantially better in both respects. I will give an outline and a detailed defense of PV in the paper.

**1. Introduction**

Much of the current debate on the epistemology of peer disagreement focuses on David Christensen’s *Restaurant Case*.[[1]](#endnote-1) This case is highly idealized and, so, perfectly suitable to elucidate the underlying epistemic mechanism that governs rational responses to peer disagreement. My favorite version of the case is as follows:

[Case 1] Truthie and her friend Fawlty went to a restaurant for dinner and it is now time to pay the bill. As usual, they decide to split the bill evenly. Since there is no calculator to tell them the correct amount that each of them owes, Truthie and Fawlty do the calculation in their heads. Truthie correctly claims that their shares are of $43 each. At the same time, Faulty mistakenly claims that their shares are of $45 each. Consider how the situation looks from Truthie’s and Fawlty’s perspectives. They have been to restaurants together and have divided the check in their heads several times before. Most of the times, they agreed about the result and were both correct. When they disagreed, each of them arrived at the correct result equally often. Only one of them can be correct in the current situation. Neither of them appears to be drunk, distracted, or tired. So, there is no particular reason to think that one rather than the other has made a mistake. How should each of them behave when they learn that their peer has arrived at a slightly different result?

Most philosophers agree that even Truthie–who has made the correct calculation–should lower her confidence in the result that she arrived at, at least to some degree, once she learns from the disagreement with her peer Fawlty that she herself might have made a mistake.[[2]](#endnote-2)

There are at least three respects in which the *Restaurant Case* describes an idealized situation. First, it does not involve any semantic intricacies: when Truthie and Fawlty discover that they disagree with each other, they both know that they are not talking past each other. They know that, because they both know to be responding to the same mathematical problem. Truthie and Fawlty can do more than just ruling out that their disagreement is a purely verbal dispute. They also know that they cannot both be right. It would be possible for them to genuinely disagree while both being right, if they were disagreeing about relative truths (if there are any) as in matters of taste or humor.[[3]](#endnote-3) But it is very clear that the solutions to simple mathematical problems are not relative truths: whenever there is a genuine dispute in mathematics at most one side believes truly. Therefore, Truthie and Fawlty know that they are disagreeing substantially. Second, the *Restaurant Case* is clearly not an epistemically permissive case (if there is any) and this is clear to both Truthie and Fawlty. According to permissivism, it might be that one body of evidence permits slightly different rational responses towards some propositions (for one or more than one agents).[[4]](#endnote-4) However, two conflicting solutions to one simple problem of arithmetic cannot both be equally rational. Therefore, the *Restaurant Case* is clearly not a permissive case. Third, Truthie and Fawlty are both justified in believing that they are disagreeing with an epistemic peer. One is justified in believing that one’s disagreeing party is an epistemic peer if and only if one has sufficient reasons to believe (i) that one’s party relies on the same body of evidence as oneself and (ii) that one and one’s party are equally competent in computing the available evidence.[[5]](#endnote-5) In the *Restaurant Case*, Truthie and Fawlty share the relevant evidence, since there is no relevant evidence besides the givens of the mathematical problem itself; and they both know from their comparative track-record that they are equally good at solving analogous problems. Thus, in contrast to most messy real-world disagreements, the *Restaurant Case* is obviously a case of substantial disagreement between two parties with excellent reasons for considering each other as epistemic peers and a case that does not admit of a permissivist response. When one finds oneself in such a situation, one has reason to believe that one’s own judgment could very possibly be the result of a cognitive error, such as miscalculation.

Although all of the currently most popular views in the epistemology of disagreement agree that even Truthie should lower her confidence upon learning that she disagrees with Fawlty substantially,[[6]](#endnote-6) these views disagree about *the extent* to which Truthie must lower her confidence and they tell different stories about *why* she must revise her judgment(s). On the one hand, the *Equal Weight View* (EWV)[[7]](#endnote-7) states that Truthie ought to suspend her judgment after learning about her peer’s dissenting judgment. The same is true of Fawlty: she also ought to suspend her judgment. Proponents of EWV hold that, when that the evidence shared by two disagreeing parties justifies the belief that the parties are epistemic peers, their epistemic position is fully symmetrical. Sometimes, advocates of EWV summarize their view as the following simple rule: Whenever you discover that you substantially disagree with an epistemic peer about whether *p*, you ought to suspend judgment on *p*. On the other hand, the *Total Evidence View* (TEV)[[8]](#endnote-8) states that evidence is aggregated and never rationally ignored. So, when Truthie discovers that she disagrees with her peer, this piece of evidence becomes immediately relevant for her belief about how much their shares are. However, this is only a further piece of evidence that is added to her total body of evidence relevant for the solution of the mathematical problem.[[9]](#endnote-9) Thus, it does not follow from TEV that the positions of two disagreeing parties is symmetrical. In the case of Truthie, the relevant total body of evidence consists of Truthie’s mathematical first-order evidence and her higher-order evidence about her own and Fawlty’s judgments. The original first-order evidence tells in favor of Truthie’s initial judgment. The resulting body of evidence still supports the truth of Truthie’s initial judgment over its falsity, even though to a lower degree.

In this paper, I will assess the merits of both these views, TEV and EWV, on the basis of the following two plausible conditions of adequacy for views about how epistemic peers ought to respond in the face of disagreement:

(CA-1) A view is adequate only if it is extensionally adequate; that is, it issues verdicts about cases of peer disagreement that accord with our intuitions about these cases (extensional adequacy).

(CA-2) A view is adequate only if it has sufficient explanatory depth; that is, it provides explanations about what is rationally required of agents on the basis of sufficiently general core epistemic principles (explanatory adequacy).

I will argue that, while TEV scores poorly with respect to extensional adequacy but fares better with respect to explanatory adequacy, EWV scores poorly on both dimensions.

I will then introduce the *Preemption View* (PV) and argue that it is a genuine alternative to TEV and EWV. According to PV, evidence of a disagreeing peer typically serves as a special kind of undercutting defeater that preempts (or brackets) the original first-order evidence. Finally, after introducing PV, I will argue that it fares better than its alternatives with respect to (CA-1) and (CA-2).

I will proceed as follows. In the next section, I will assess the merits of TEV on the basis of (CA-1) and (CA-2). In particular, I will argue that this view issues verdicts that are at odds with our intuitions about what responses are rationally required in certain cases of disagreement. So, TEV turns out to be extensionally inadequate. Then, in the third section, I will assess the merits of three standard variants of EWV. It also turns out that none of them is extensionally adequate. Moreover, they do not offer satisfactory explanations about why the doxastic behavior that they recommended is rational by the lights of general core epistemic principles. In the fourth section, I will present PV and explain what happens, according to this view, in cases of peer disagreement. In the fifth section, I will present PV at work. In particular, I will argue that PV delivers adequate predictions with respect to all cases spelling trouble for TEV and EWV. I will conclude with a broader picture on PV in the epistemology of peer disagreement and beyond.

**2. The inadequacy of the Total Evidence View**

TEV states that, for every epistemic agent, S, the rationality of S’s belief that *p* at time *t* is determined by the total body of evidence relevant as to whether *p* that S posses at *t*. So, TEV is akin to evidentialism. More importantly, TEV holds that evidence is never rationally ignored. When a jury has to decide whether the defendant is guilty, the jury gathers all of the relevant evidence and, before coming to its decision, weighs the evidence, which might include reasons for and against the defendant’s guilt. Evidence for (or against) the guilt of the defendant may be marginalized or outweighed by further evidence or by the rest of the body of available evidence, but the jury should never ignore it, according to TEV. In what follows, I will articulate three objections to TEV.

The first worry for TEV is that it lacks a natural explanation of the mechanism of undercutting defeat. A defeater is a piece of evidence that removes justification. Defeaters come in two kinds. A rebutting defeater removes justification from S’s belief that *p* (at least to some degree) by providing evidence against the truth of *p*. In contrast, an undercutting defeater removes justification from S’s belief that *p* (at least to some degree) by providing evidence against *p*’s truth being sufficiently likely from S’s perspective. The current worry is as follows: aggregation of evidence can explain only rebutting defeat but not undercutting defeat, especially in light of the thesis that no evidence is rationally ignored.

As it stands, advocates of PV cannot substantiate this general worry. It is easy to see why. Consider the following standard case of undercutting defeat:

[Case 2] Jane is on a tour through a local museum that houses many contemporary art installations. She believes that a particular object in front of her is red because it looks red to her. When she is later told that this object is imperceptibly illuminated by red lights, she is no longer justified in believing that the object is red.

This is a clear case of undercutting defeat: Jane’s belief ceases to be justified, even though her testifier does not tell her anything about the object’s real color that is at odds with its being red. TEV is fit to explain this type of undercutting defeater. Jane’s initial evidence, E, is her visual red impression of the object. She later acquires a further piece of evidence, E\*, that suggests that the object is illuminated by red lights. When Jane aggregates E and E\* in one whole body of evidence, the resulting evidence does no longer justify the belief that the object is red, because her total body of evidence no longer makes that sufficiently probable: it need not be the case that an object that looks red when illuminated by red lights is actually red. This result can be explained by TEV without screening off any of the initially relevant pieces of evidence.

In contrast, higher-order undercutting defeaters defeat one’s belief by undercutting one’s proper cognitive processing of the evidence.[[10]](#endnote-10)

[Case 3] Judith performs a calculation impeccably but receives higher-order evidence of having very likely gone wrong due to the effects of a certain drug that impairs her mental capacities.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In this case, Judith’s higher-order evidence suggests that she miscalculated, although, in fact, she did not. Assume that, as it seems to me, this piece of evidence constitutes an undercutting defeater. TEV lacks the resources to explain why this piece of evidence is an undercutting defeater. Resorting to the aggregation of Judith’s original first-order evidence with the high-order evidence of having probably gone wrong in the calculation cannot issue a satisfactory explanation, because Judith’s first-order evidence is conclusive evidence for the result at which she is arrived, even despite adding the relevant piece of higher-order evidence. Undercutting defeat can only be accounted for by the view one’s higher-order evidence preempts one’s first-order evidence. In short, when higher-order evidence indicates that the target belief is not based on sufficient evidence, or is the result of cognitive error, it constitutes an undercutting defeater. For convenience, we shall call this type of undercutting defeaters ‘*higher-order undercutting defeaters*’(HOUD). The problem with TEV is that it lacks the resources to explain the presence of HOUDs despite HOUDs appear to be a rather ordinary type of defeaters.

Let us turn to another second worry for TEV. Consider my version of Christensen’s *Restaurant Case* once more. When you ask yourself how Truthie–who arrived at the correct result–ought to respond in this case, nothing short of full suspension of judgment seems rationally permissible. So, if your intuition about the case is anything like mine, it should readily become clear to you that TEV issues an unacceptable verdict in this case. To see why, let us look at the *Restaurant Case* in light of TEV. According to TEV, Truthie (but not Fawlty) has conclusive first-order mathematical evidence for her belief. This evidence is not bracketed or preempted when higher-order evidence of Fawlty’s conflicting belief is added to Truthie’s total body of evidence. In fact, regardless of how much higher-order evidence is added, the conclusive first-order evidence that Truthie has for her belief will always tip the balance in favor of Truthie’s belief.[[12]](#endnote-12) For every epistemic agent, S, the more higher-order evidence against S’s belief that *p* is added–when, for example, many of S’s peers symmetrically disagree with S about whether *p*–the more S’s conclusive first-order evidence for *p* will be marginalized. This might effectively lead to a situation in which something close to full suspension is rationally required of S. But such a situation necessarily involves S’s disagreement with several of S’s peers.[[13]](#endnote-13) TEV does not leave any room for providing an analysis of the *Restaurant Case* according to which Truthie must suspend her judgment. For this reason, TEV turns out to be extensionally inadequate, unless one is willing to bite the bullet that Truthie’s suspension of judgment is not rationally required.

Kelly seems to bite this bullet, but he is explicitly committed to the view that, in the *Restaurant Case*, Truthie is rationally required to lower her confidence at least to some degree. According to a third worry for TEV, this view cannot even explain this much. It is easy to see why: After learning that she disagrees with her peer substantially, Truthie’s total body of evidence will include the following pieces of evidence: the givens of the mathematical problem provide conclusive first-order evidence, E, for Truthie’s belief that each one’s share is $43. Then there are two pieces of higher-order evidence in Truthie’s possession: E\* is the evidence that Fawlty believes that each one’s share is $45; and E\*\* is the evidence that Truthie believes that each one’s share is $43. E\* indicates that Fawlty’s result is correct. But E\* is counterbalanced by E\*\* that indicates that Truthie’s result is correct. Kelly himself points out that this line of thought seems to suggest that the overall rational impact of Truthie’s total evidence is equal to her first-order evidence and, as such, Truthie’s higher-order evidence does not call for belief revision (Kelly 2011/2007: 202).

Kelly introduces the proportionality principle of evidence to avoid this counter-intuitive consequence of TEV (ibid.: 203). According to the proportionality principle, the evidential force of a piece of evidence in one’s possession depends partly on how much of one’s total body of evidence points into its direction. Consequently, if counterbalanced evidence is added to some evidence, E, that supports *p*, the resulting total body of evidence supports *p* to a lesser degree than E alone would. Hence, counterbalanced evidence does not neutrally contribute to a total body of evidence, but always lessens the evidential force of unbalanced evidence, for counterbalanced evidence points towards suspension of judgment.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Kelly’s proportionality principle is, however, at least doubtful. Consider the following case:

[Case 4] A jury receives mixed evidence with respect to the defendant’s guilt. Witnesses place him near the site of the crime shortly before or after the victim was raped. Other witnesses who appear not to be obviously lying claim that he was far away from that site at that time. So, the evidence for the defendant’s guilt is counterbalanced by the evidence against it. Finally, the prosecutor presents unmistakable traces of the defendant’s DNA from the victim’s body. This is conclusive evidence of the defendant’s guilt, regardless of whether there is relevant counterbalanced evidence.

This case shows that the force of a piece of evidence does not, at least not always, depend on how much further evidence points in the direction of suspension of judgment. The same conclusion is suggested by the following variant of case 2:

[Case 5] Joan is on a tour through a local museum that houses many contemporary art installations. She believes that a particular object in front of her is red because it looks red to her. When she is later told that this object is in fact white but imperceptibly illuminated by red lights, she should rationally believe that the object is white. If Joan was told that the object appeared redly not to her alone but to more than one-hundred other visitors as well, this would not have the slightest effect on the degree to which her belief that the object is white is justified.

This result is clearly in tension with Kelly’s proportionality principle. However, if this principle does not hold, Kelly cannot explain why counterbalanced higher-order evidence in the *Restaurant Case* should require of Truthie to lower her confidence.

Can TEV offer any auxiliary explanation as to why Truthie should lower her confidence in the *Restaurant Case*? One might think that Kelly is wrong when he claims that Truthie’s higher-order evidence about Fawlty’s conflicting judgment is counterbalanced by Truthie’s higher-order evidence about her own judgment.[[15]](#endnote-15) After all, psychological evidence about one’s belief that *p* can hardly be considered as a piece of further evidence over and above one’s first-order evidence for one’s belief that *p*. That would amount to an illegitimate double-counting of one’s original first-order evidence. But, Truthie’s introspective knowledge about her judgment is not what counts, in this case, as additional evidence. Instead, Truthie’s knowledge that she formed that judgment *as someone who is equally competent as Fawlty* at doing mental math is what counts as additional evidence. It is clear that this is an additional piece of evidence in favor of Truthie’s judgment and, as such, it does not constitute illegitimate double-counting.

In conclusion: I argued in this section that TEV is extensionally inadequate. It cannot explain all kinds of undercutting defeaters. In particular, it has problems with accounting for higher-order undercutting defeaters. In addition, I also argued that TEV lacks the resources to explain why suspension of judgment is rational in the *Restaurant Case*. Crucially, it cannot explain why Truthie should lower her confidence in this case, not even in the slightest.

**3. The inadequacy of the Equal Weight View**

This is the core idea at work behind EWV: when disagreeing parties learn that they are epistemic peers to each other, this piece of evidence makes their positions evidentially symmetrical. Hence, neither party can put more evidential weight on her own belief than on the belief of her opponent.

EWV can be and has been spelled out in several different ways. On one of its versions, it recommends suspension of judgment for everyone in the face of peer disagreement. Other versions recommend splitting the difference with one’s peer–that is, averaging one’s degree of confidence with the degree of confidence of one’s peer. Yet other versions of EWV require of one to comply with the principle of independence in the face of peer disagreement. In this section, I will argue that versions of EWV that require suspension of judgment are inferior to versions of EWV according to which one ought to split the difference with one’s disagreeing peer; and I will argue that, in turn, the latter versions of EWV are inferior to versions of EWV relying on the principle of independence. This turns out to be of little importance, however, since all versions of EWV suffer from serious extensional inadequacies and none of these manages to explain why it is rational to revise one’s beliefs according to the requirements that it issues.

If one generalizes what seems to be the rational response in the *Restaurant Case*, one ends up with a rule like this: “Whenever you discover that you substantially disagree with an epistemic peer about whether *p*, you should always suspend judgment on *p*.” Upon reflection on the following two cases, it becomes clear, however, that this generalization is premature.

[Case 6] Peter is very confident that *p* is true. Suppose that his credence in *p* is 0.9. At the same time, Mary is weakly confident in the truth of the negation of *p*. Suppose that her credence in *p* is 0.4. In this case, suspension of judgment would not attribute equal weight to each of the two sides.

[Case 7] Several agents disagree about whether *p*. They fit into two camps: some are confident in *p* and others are confident that *p* is false. The distribution of agents in the two camps is, however, uneven. For example: two theists confront one atheist while all of them regard each other as epistemic peers. In this case, suspension of judgment would not assign the same weight to every agent’s belief.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The lesson to be drawn from these cases is that views about how to respond rationally in the face of disagreement should take into account: (i) the degree of confidence that believers have with respect to the proposition towards which they have the relevant doxastic attitude and (ii) the number of peers on each side of the dispute. This fine-grained framework nicely fits with credence-based formal epistemologies. In light of this framework, one should assign the same weight to the doxastic states of all peers. More precisely: one should add up all individual credences and divide the result by the number of disagreeing peers. This procedure operationalizes EWV.[[17]](#endnote-17) This view is often called ‘the split-the-difference view’. The view can easily explain why suspension of judgment is the rational response in the *Restaurant Case*. One just has to assume that Truthie and Fawlty believe that each of their respective results is the correct solution with equal confidence on both sides–say 0.8 and 0.2–and that there are no other epistemic peers involved in the case. We then get: (0.8 + 0.2)/2 = 0.5. All credence-based formal epistemologies agree that a credence of 0.5 in a proposition, *p*, entails suspension of judgment on *p*. Clearly, however, splitting the difference does not always entail that suspension of judgment is rationally required.

Although the split-the-difference view squares more naturally with our intuitive judgments about a broad range of cases of peer disagreement, it is not without problems. Consider the following variant of the original *Restaurant Case*:

[Case 8] Truthie and her peer Rightie calculate their shares in their heads. They do not come to conflicting results and are, in fact, both confident that their shares are of $43 each. Assume that Truthie ends up with a credence of 0.95 and Rightie with a credence of 0.91. Rightie is very confident, but just, slightly less confident about than Truthie is. How should Truthie respond to the disclosure of their disagreement?

If the split-the-difference view is right, Truthie should slightly lower her confidence in the proposition that each one’s share is $43. Indeed, Truthie should lower her credence in this proposition from 0.95 to 0.93. Intuitively, however, the opposite seems to be true.[[18]](#endnote-18) Truthie and Rightie are only weakly disagreeing with each other. They agree about each one’s share, but Truthie is more confident than Rightie. If their credences mirror how often they arrive at the correct result by doing mental math, Truthie commits performance errors in just 5% of her calculations. When Truthie realizes that Rightie–who is also highly reliable at doing mental math–agrees with her about each one’s share, this piece of evidence reduces the chance that she went wrong in the calculation. It would thus be rational for Truthie to raise her credence above 0.95 after learning that Rightie has a credence of 0.91 in the same proposition. The advice to always split the difference does not handle the boosting intuition elicited by cases of weak peer disagreement.

There is one further problem for an unqualified split-the-difference view. The view seems to suggest that splitting the difference is required every time we learn that we disagree with someone whom we take to be our peer with respect to the relevant domain of competence. This leaves unanswered the following question: on what grounds should we assess the credibility of disagreeing parties? To clarify this question, Christensen introduces the principle of independence. This principle states that one should always assess the epistemic credentials of an agent who disagrees with one about *p* independently of one’s evidence bearing on whether *p*.[[19]](#endnote-19) Ultimately, this means that Truthie should brush aside the givens of the mathematical problem in the *Restaurant Case* when she assesses whether Fawlty is epistemically inferior to her. She may, however, refer to independent information about Fawlty’s cognitive shape in the specific context. If Truthie learns that Fawlty is tired or distracted when performing the calculation, this piece of evidence warrants the demotion of Fawlty to Truthie’s epistemic inferior. Since the split-the-difference view is less than completely extensionally adequate and since it leaves unanswered the question of how one should assess the epistemic credentials of agents who disagree with one, Christensen suggests that it is preferable to articulate EWV by resorting to the principle of independence.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The principle of independence requires of us to assess the epistemic credentials of any agent who disagrees with us about *p* independently of our first-order evidence for our belief about *p*. This principle is motivated by the thought that we should avoid partial assessments of our interlocutors.

Kelly objects to this principle on the basis that it licenses mistaken verdicts about cases such as the following:

[Case 9] You disagree with David about the occurrence of the Holocaust. He is Holocaust denier. You obviously are not. He denies that the Holocaust ever occurred because he is ignorant of much of the relevant evidence. Intuitively, you should assess him as epistemically inferior to you with respect to the Holocaust simply because of his ignorance of the relevant evidence.

According to Kelly, independence takes away the resources that let you assess David as epistemically inferior to you. This is the case because to declare David’s ignorance of the relevant evidence you first have to identify what is the relevant evidence and you can only do that by relying on your evidence about the occurrence of the Holocaust. But this is precisely what is prohibited by the principle of independence.[[21]](#endnote-21)

I agree with Kelly that, intuitively, you should consider David as epistemically inferior to you because he is ignorant of much of the relevant evidence. But, at the same time, I do not see why proponents of the principle of independence are not allowed to maintain just that. Kelly’s criticism seems to rely on the thought that we can assess the relevance of evidence only after having made up our mind about the proposition, but this seems false to me. First, it gets things upside down. In fact, we surely need to identify the relevant evidence before coming to a conclusion on its basis. Second, we identify evidence as relevant with respect to *p* by selecting those pieces of evidence standing in logical or probabilistic support relations to *p* *or to its negation*. Relevant evidence thus includes evidence that supports the falsity of what we take to be true. Therefore, to identify the evidence relevant as to whether *p*, we need not already know whether *p* or not-*p* is true. Moreover, in order to discover whether any piece of evidence supports *p* (or its negation) to any degree, we need not rely on our holistic competence to assess whether *p* is true all things considered. Instead, we usually assess the relevance of individual pieces of evidence one at a time. We also need not rely on our evidence itself but can assess pieces of evidence conditionally by considering whether some piece of evidence *would* support *p* or not-*p*. For these reasons, I think that Kelly is mistaken when he says that “if I set aside my assessment that these facts strongly confirm the occurrence of the Holocaust, then I would no longer take someone’s ignorance of them to be a handicap in judging whether the Holocaust occurred.”[[22]](#endnote-22) We can assess whether some piece of evidence is relevant as to whether *p* without relying on our judgment about *p* or our evidence for that judgment. So, Kelly’s alleged counterexample to the principle of independence is not a genuine counterexample.

There is, however, a better objection to the principle of independence or, more precisely, to unqualified versions of the principle of independence. Consider the following case:

[Case 10] Harvey is quite skilled in simple mental math. One day, he calculates in his head that 13 times 13 equals 169. He is extremely confident that this is the correct result. He later finds out that Simon believes that 13 times 13 equals 159. Harvey has never checked out himself how good Simon is at doing simple math in his head. But he just overheard people saying that Simon is quite skilled in mental math.

In this case, intuitively, Harvey should come to the conclusion that Simon is seriously mistaken. If this is right, then Harvey rationally relies on the result of his calculation when he assesses Simon’s cognitive performance. But this is clearly at odds with the principle of independence. Most relevantly, while Harvey has excellent reasons for his mathematical belief, his *prima facie* reason for taking Simon to be his peer with respect to mental math is rather weak. The principle of independence is, however, insensitive to the relative weakness of this further piece of evidence.

Surely, advocates of EWV might reply to this objection that, as it stands, the principle of independence is in obvious need of revision. One might add a clause that takes care of most or even all counterexamples. However, regardless of whether one can ultimately provide an extensionally adequate version of the principle of independence, and regardless of whether this version will smack of *ad-hoc*ness, the present objection reveals a deeper structural problem that all versions of EWV share. If there is any qualified version of the principle of independence (or any other version of EWV) that is right, we want to understand *why* it is right. It is extremely implausible that there are locally autonomous epistemic principles. If there were any such principles it would be possible to infer them from some more general epistemic views of rational belief–views that are articulated in terms of evidence, reliable processes, or defeaters, for example. Unfortunately for defenders of EWV, however, all of its versions lack explanatory depth.

In conclusion: I critically examined many popular versions of EWV in this section. I argued that EWV scores poorly with respect to (CA-1) and (CA-2). More precisely, I showed that there is no fully extensionally adequate version of EWV. And, even worse, all versions of EWV are completely unconnected to the general architecture of rational belief.

**4. Articulating the Preemption View**

PV builds upon the following rough idea: if I have sufficient reasons to believe that I substantially disagree about *p* with someone who shares my evidence as to whether *p* and is typically as competent as I am in computing evidence about the relevant domain, and if I have no reason for believing that this case licenses a permissivist response, then the likelihood that my belief about *p* is not adequately supported by the evidence is 50% or higher. When I learn that there is a greater than 50% chance that my belief about *p* is not adequately supported by my evidence, this further piece of evidence itself constitutes a higher-order undercutting defeater (HOUD). As I argued before, HOUDs preempt the original first-order evidence–the first-order evidence that previously justified my belief about *p*. For this reason, in the face of peer disagreement, one’s first-order evidence is screened off from one’s body of evidence relevant for one’s belief about *p*. Importantly, as we will see shortly, this does not necessarily imply that there is no evidence left that might be relevant for one’s belief about *p*.

To make this line of thought more transparent, one can articulate it by means of the following argument:

1. My opponent and I have conflicting beliefs about *p* such that

at most one of those is true. (substantial disagreement)

(2) My opponent and I base our beliefs on relevantly identical first-order

 evidence. (from peerness)

(3) It is impossible that one body of evidence supports more than one

 doxastic attitude, even for more than one epistemic agent. (interpersonal uniqueness)

(4) At least one of us holds a belief about *p* that is not supported

 by the relevant first-order evidence. (1, 2, 3)

(5) If one of us holds an unsupported belief about *p*, the probability that

 it is me is 0.5. (from peerness)

(6) The probability that both of us have an unsupported doxastic attitude

 towards *p* is greater than 0. (premise)

(7) The probability of my belief about *p* being unsupported by

 the relevant first-order evidence is greater than 0.5. (4, 5, 6)

(8) I am justified in believing (7) by drawing a deductive inference

 from premises (1), (2), (3), (5) and (6). (premise)

(9) If I am sufficiently justified in believing that the probability

 of my belief about *p* being unsupported by my first-order

 evidence is greater than 0.5, my first-order evidence no longer

 justifies my belief about *p*. (HOUD)

(10) My first-order evidence no longer justifies my belief

 about *p*. (8, 9)

Let me unpack some interesting aspects of this argument. First, it leads to the conclusion that the first-order evidence that initially justified my belief about *p* is preempted from serving as evidence for that belief. This does not entail that my belief about *p* becomes unjustified, for other relevant pieces of evidence currently in my possession could then justify my belief about *p*. Second, it turns out to be more likely than not that my belief about *p* is unsupported by my evidence (7). This is so because there is a non-zero chance that my opponent’s and my beliefs are both unsupported by the evidence (6). Interestingly, my first-order evidence is fully preempted only if my reasons for my cognitive error are sufficiently good reasons (9). This includes sufficiently good reasons for the peerness of my opponent.

PV explains how one should rationally respond to peer disagreement in terms of the mechanism of undercutting defeat. Defeaters of all kinds are an integral part of any general theory of rationality (or justification). As such, PV satisfies (CA-2). In the next section, I will examine whether PV is also extensionally adequate and, so, whether it satisfies (CA-1) as well. This question will in part be answered by testing whether PV issues the right verdicts about the problem cases for TEV and EWV reviewed in the previous sections.

**5. Corroborating the Preemption View**

In this section, I will argue that PV has the resources necessary to issue the intuitively correct verdicts in simple cases of peer disagreement and, more specifically, in all problem cases for TEV and EWV reviewed in this paper.

*(1) Intuitively, Truthie should suspend belief in the Restaurant Case (Case 1). Why is this the rational response according to PV?*

In the *Restaurant Case*, Truthie has excellent reasons for believing that she disagrees with a peer. According to PV, excellent reasons for peer disagreement constitute a higher-order undercutting defeater that fully preempts Truthie’s conclusive evidence for believing that each one’s share is $43. Given the absence of other relevant first-order evidence, suspension of judgment is, thus, the rational response.

*(2) Intuitively, full disclosure of substantial disagreement among peers with different confidence requires splitting the difference rather than suspension. Why is this the rational response according to PV?*

Consider *Case 6* once more. Remember that, in that case, Peter is so confident in the truth of *p* that he assigns a credence of 0.95 to *p*. Mary disbelieves that *p*, but she is much less confident that *p* is false. As a result, Mary assigns a credence of 0.45 to *p*. Suppose that Peter and Mary know to be epistemic peers with respect to the relevant domain of interest. When their disagreement is fully disclosed to Mary, intuitively, she is not only required to give up her initial belief, but she must also raise her credence in *p* to 0.7–that is, she must lend enough credibility to *p* to start believing that *p* is true. Is there anything in Mary’s evidential basis that makes this move rational? On PV, there is no first-order evidence left available to Mary that may rationalize Mary’s resulting credence. However, Mary’s first-order evidence does not exhaust all evidence in her possession that is relevant as to whether p. Mary also has higher-order evidence relevant as to whether *p* that is not preempted by her HOUD. On the one hand, there is a piece of higher-order evidence that indicates that she herself has competently formed a credence of 0.45 in *p*. On the other hand, there is further higher-order evidence that indicates that her peer Peter has competently formed a credence of 0.95 in the same proposition. Since both pieces of higher-order evidence are comparably good and point in opposite directions, the rationally required response is to split the difference. In short: on PV, not every piece of relevant evidence is preempted. Some relevant higher-order evidence is left untouched; and this evidence can adequately account for the intuitively proper response in this case.

*(3) Intuitively, full disclosure of weak disagreement among highly confident peers does require raising (“boosting”) their credences in the target proposition rather than averaging those. How does PV fare with respect to this case?*

Let us return to the revised version of the *Restaurant Case* (Case 8). Remember that in this case, Truthie and Rightie both believe that their shares are of $43 each. They just weakly disagree about the degree of confidence to assign to this proposition on the basis of their evidence. Truthie assigns a credence of 0.95 to it, whereas Rightie assigns a credence of 0.91 to it. Intuitively, Truthie should raise her initial confidence when she discovers that Rightie has arrived to the same result, even if the latter is slightly less confident. PV can rely on the resources invoked to answer question (2), when explaining why this is the rational response in the case at hand. Although the relevant first-order evidence is fully preempted in this case, Truthie possesses two further pieces of higher-order evidence that both indicate that each one’s share is $43. Indeed, agreement between independent and sufficiently reliable sources significantly reduces the likelihood of a performance error and, thereby, justifies boosting the credences of all parties involved.

*(4) Whether the principle of independence applies to a case intuitively depends on the strength of the reasons that indicate peer disagreement. If someone has strong reasons to believe that she disagrees with her peer about p, she should not rely on her reasons for her belief about p when she assesses the epistemic credentials of her opponent. However, if the same person’s reasons merely weakly support the belief that she disagrees with a peer about p, she is permitted to rely on her reasons for her belief about p to demote her opponent to epistemic inferiority. How does PV explain this intutive difference?*

The answer to this question is rather straightforward. According to PV, full disclosure of peer disagreement constitutes a higher-order undercutting defeater that preempts the prevailing first-order evidence from serving as a justificatory basis. However, defeaters come in degrees. If someone has sufficient reasons to believe that she disagrees with a peer about *p*, the first-order evidence as to whether *p* is *fully* preempted. In that case, there is no first-order evidence left to support the belief that one’s opponent is epistemically inferior. However, if one has reasons that only weakly support the belief that one disagrees with a peer about *p*, then one’s relevant first-order evidence is only *partially* preempted and, so, can partly serve as evidence to demote one’s opponent precisely due to his disagreement.[[23]](#endnote-23) In other words: the principle of independence holds only in cases of complete undercutting defeat.

As these examples shows, PV issues the intuitively correct verdicts in cases of peer disagreement. Relevantly, it fares much better than both TEV and EWV with respect to extensional adequacy (CA-1).

**6. Conclusion**

The Preemption View not only compares favorably with TEV and EWV in terms of satisfaction of the extensional adequacy condition (CA-1), but also satisfies the explanatory depth condition (CA-2). Indeed, regardless of their otherwise divergent views–their sympathies for epistemic internalist or externalist views, for evidentialism or reliabilism– epistemologists generally agree that defeaters must be rationally respected. Since the Preemption View explains rational requirements in terms of defeaters, the explanation it offers is epistemologically sound. PV squares well with our intuitions about a number of cases of peer disagreement, but further testing is required to provide conclusive support for PV. On the one hand, it remains to be observed whether what I took to be the intuitively rational response to the cases really is the response that most of us would consider to be right. In this respect, we need the help of experimental philosophers. On the other hand, I have assessed the adequacy of Preemption View only on in relation to intuitive responses to a limited number of cases of peer disagreement. In this respect, the number of such cases should be increased.

In any case, the Preemption View seems to be a genuine alternative to both TEV and EWV. In contrast to TEV, the Preemption View accepts that evidence can be rationally ignored and, thereby, preempted from serving as the rational basis for belief. This is clearly at odds with the spirit of TEV. In contrast to EWV, the Preemption View sometimes allows the epistemic agent to assess the credibility of other agents who disagree with her about *p* in light of their first-order evidence bearing on whether *p*. Impartiality need not be categorically required.

This paper leaves unanswered many other pressing questions concerning how to rationally respond to peer disagreement. It does not articulate how the mechanism of higher-order undercutting defeat works exactly. Nor does it address the question of how conclusions derived from ideal cases of peer disagreement can be applied to the messy real-world cases in which verbal disagreements, relative truths, or intrapersonal permissiveness cannot be ruled out; or cases in which it is not beyond reasonable doubt whether one’s opponent is an epistemic peer. This paper also does not examine cases in which one disagrees with someone who has equally good evidence but not exactly the same body of evidence.

However limited the scope of this paper may be, it is worth noting that preemption of evidence through disclosure of disagreement is also present in cases of disagreement with epistemic inferiors and superiors. For example, it is exceedingly plausible that when we compare our beliefs with those of superiors who share our evidence but disagree with us, we are justified in believing that most likely the available evidence does not support our beliefs. The relevant mechanism at work in this kind of examples is similar to the one that governs our responses to peer disagreement.[[24]](#endnote-24) But that is a story for some other time.

**Acknowledgements.** An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop on Knowledge, Understanding and Explanation at the Technical University of Dresden in November 2017. Very helpful comments and intense discussions with the following colleagues enabled me to work out the final version of this paper: Dominik Balg, Elke Brendel, Jan Constantin, Anna-Maria Eder, Christoph Jäger, Steffen Koch, Francesco Praolini, and Chris Ranalli. I also would like to thank Lisa Mirachi and Megan Feeney for the smooth operation of the editorial process. Finally, I am grateful to the German Research Foundation (DFG) for supporting my research on the topic of this paper as part of the project “Disagreement in Philosophy. Semantic and Epistemic Foundations.”

**References**

Christensen, David (2007). Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News. *Philosophical Review* 116 (2), 187-217.

Christensen, David (2010). Higher-Order Evidence. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81 (1), 185-215.

Christensen, David (2011), “Disagreement, Question-Begging and Epistemic Self-Criticism”, in: *Philosopher’s Imprint* 11: 1–22.

Conee, Earl and Feldman, Richard (2004). *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Constantin, Jan & Grundmann, Thomas (forthcoming). Epistemic Authority: Preemption Through Source Sensitive Defeat. *Synthese.*

Elga, Adam (2007). Reflection and Disagreement. *Noûs* 41 (3), 478-502.

Enoch, David (2010). “Not Just a Truthometer: Taking Oneself Seriously (but not too seriously) in Cases of Peer Disagreement”. *Mind* 119, 953-997.

Feldman, Richard (2009). Evidentialism, Higher-Order Evidence and Disagreement. *Episteme* 6 (3), 294-312.

Kelly, Thomas (2005). The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 1, 167–196.

Kelly, Thomas (2011/2007). Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence. In: Alvin I. Goldman & Dennis Whitcomb (eds.), *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 183-221.

Kelly, Thomas (2013a). Disagreement and the Burdens of Judgment. In: David Christensen & Jennifer Lackey (eds.), The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 31-54.

Kelly, Thomas (2013b). Evidence Can Be Permissive. In: Matthias Steup & John Turri (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 298-312.

Kelly, Thomas (forthcoming). Historical Versus Current Time Slice Theories in Epistemology. In: Brian McLaughlin and Hilary Kornblith (eds.), *Goldman and His Critics*, John Wiley & Sons.

Kölbel, Max (2003). Faultless Disagreement. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104, 53-73.

Lasonen-Aarnio, Maria (2014). Higher-Order Evidence and the Limits of Defeat. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88 (2), 314-345.

MacFarlane, John (2014). *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University.

Matheson, Jonathan (2015). *The Significance of Disagreement.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schoenfield, Miriam (forthcoming). Permissivism and the Value of Rationality. A Challenge to the Uniqueness Thesis. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.*

Thune, Michael (2010). “Partial Defeaters” and the Epistemology of Disagreement. *Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (239), 355-372.

White, Roger (2005). Epistemic Permissiveness. *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (1), 445-459.

Zagzebski, Linda (2012). *Epistemic Authority*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. See Christensen 2007: 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, e.g., Kelly 2011/2007:198. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Kölbel 2003 and MacFarlane 2014 for sophisticated defenses of relativist theories of truth. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See White 2005 for a critical discussion of epistemic permissivism. See Kelly 2013b and Schoenfield (forthcoming) for a defense of the view. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Kelly (2005: 174). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. All currently most popular views are conciliatory in nature according to this general sense of conciliationism. Among the further views are the Right Reason View (e.g., Kelly 2005) and the Extra Weight View (e.g., Enoch 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Elga 2007, Christensen 2007, Matheson 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Among its main proponents are Kelly 2011/2007 and Feldman 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Kelly 2011/2007: 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Christensen 2010 and Lasonen-Aarnio 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For more of this type of cases see Christensen 2010 and Lasonen-Aarnio 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Kelly 2011/2007: 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Kelly 2011/2007: 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Matheson (2015: 86) argues that this principle would imply that adding irrelevant evidence (which necessarily supports suspension of judgment) to the total body of evidence would always diminish the justification of any belief. This seems absurd. Kelly might reply to this objection that his principle applies to *relevant* evidence only. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. This is suggested by Christensen 2011: 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Kelly 2011/2007: 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Here I ignore the complexities that might arise when the parties involved in the dispute do not form their beliefs independently of each other. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See also Christensen 2011: 3, fn. 3; Kelly 2013: 35, fn. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Christensen 2011: 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Christensen 2011: 3, fn. 3. It is not entirely clear to me whether Christensen classifies his own view as a version of EWV. He often claims to be a proponent of conciliationism. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See Kelly 2013: 40-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Kelly 2013: 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See Thune 2010 for a discussion of partial defeaters. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Zagzebski 2012, Constantin & Grundmann (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)