Chapter 5

Skeptical-Dogmatism and the Self-Undermining Objection

There is a long history of thinking that skeptical views are self-undermining. Consider, for example, the challenge to a version of radical Skepticism that says that we ought to suspend judgement about all matters. If this doctrine is true, then it seems that we ought to suspend judgement as to whether it is true. Even a mitigated version that says that we should suspend judgement about all philosophically controversial views is also subject to the same sort of self-undermining objection. For such a Skepticism is philosophically controversial, so if it is true, then it seems to call for suspension of judgement about whether it is true. Similarly, a global version of Skeptical-Dogmatism about all contested multi-proposition disputes leads to a similar—in fact, worse—self-undermining objection: Skeptical-Dogmatism is part of a multi-proposition dispute with Dogmatism and Skepticism. So, if the global version of Skeptical-Dogmatism is true, then we should think Skeptical-Dogmatism is probably false.

An obvious move to make is to adopt a mitigated form of skepticism, one that is self-exempting. Arguably, Socrates adopted something like this strategy. Rather than advocating a radical skepticism about all wisdom, Socrates’ position appears to be a mitigated version: Socrates is wise to the extent that he does not think he knows things that he does not know—unlike so many of his contemporaries.

This chapter will explore and defend a mitigated form of Skeptical-Dogmatism in connection with a version of this self-undermining charge that has received much attention lately, namely: Conciliationists' view about peer disagreement. The disagreement arguments for Skeptical-Dogmatism in Chapters 1 and 2 make some assumptions about Conciliationism. This chapter and the next will explore exactly what is presupposed. It will be best to address the self-undermining charge against Conciliationism first before applying it to the specifics of Skeptical-Dogmatism.

Conciliationism and the Threat of Epistemic Akrasia

Answers to the question of how much one ought to reduce confidence in light of disagreement with epistemic peers fall along a continuum. At one end is the ‘Steadfastness’ response that says one may retain one’s initial confidence in light of peer disagreement, while the ‘Conciliationism’ response towards the other end is that one ought to be much less confident after revelation of peer disagreement. The most common version of Conciliationism is what is sometimes known as the 'equal weight' (hereafter 'EW') view. In a canonical binary case of disagreement, where one peer believes P, and the other peer believes not-P, the EW view recommends believing that P and not-P are equally likely, and so suspending judgment about P, and not-P. A more extreme reaction is 'Capitulationism': one should adopt the position of one's peer in a disagreement.

 Obviously, there are any number of possibilities between these three. We might think of the question of peer disagreement as one about a "force vector" on our doxastic states. If we think of these positions in their "pure" forms, then Steadfastness says there is no force, EW says the force is strong enough to land us equidistant between our original belief and our peer's belief, and Capitulationism says the force is so strong that we should adopt the doxastic attitude of our peer. As suggested, there are any number of intermediate views depending on how one conceives the strength of this force; however, for the most part we are best served by thinking of just these three "pure" types. Often in what follows I will use 'EW' and 'Conciliationism' interchangeably. Even so, we should be mindful that 'Conciliationism' refers to a family of views.

The self-undermining objection raised against Conciliationism, to a first approximation, is the thought that there is considerable philosophical disagreement amongst epistemic peers about Conciliationism, and Conciliationism requires a reduction of confidence in one’s views when faced with such disagreement. Thus, it appears that Conciliationists are rationally required to reduce their confidence about Conciliationism.[[1]](#endnote-1) The EW version of Conciliation seems to recommend that we should not believe Conciliationism: we ought to suspend judgement about Conciliationism itself. Thus, it seems that if epistemologists continue to use Conciliationist principles in their doxastic management, such doxastic management practices are unjustified by Conciliationists’ own lights. Many have concluded that Conciliationism requires of its adherents that they are epistemically akratic.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Answering this threat of epistemic akrasia has played an important role in a number of previous responses to the self-undermining objection. Roughly, responses have taken one of two routes. One is to formulate Conciliationism in some circumscribed way tailored to avoid the charge of akrasia. Adam Elga, for example, formulates Conciliationism in such a way that it is self-exempting;[[3]](#endnote-3) Bryan Frances suggests that Conciliationism can be used as a “rule of thumb” rather than believed as an epistemic principle;[[4]](#endnote-4) and Diego Machuca proposes that Conciliationism may be understood along Pyrrhonian psychological lines: a description of the psychology of how Skeptics react to disagreement, rather than a normative principle that must guide doxastic formation.[[5]](#endnote-5) The other line of response is to bite the bullet here and acknowledge that epistemic akrasia is a consequence of opting for Conciliationism, but the bullet is more palatable than the alternative.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The approach offered here differs in that I hope to show that there is an ambiguity in the notion of ‘epistemic peer’, and once this ambiguity is recognized, the self-undermining objection can be defused with no need for self-exemption, nor any admission of epistemic akrasia. Roughly the idea is that Conciliationists may consistently recognize Steadfasters as epistemic peers (of a certain sort to be described below) in first-order philosophical disputes, but deny they are epistemic peers in certain second-order disputes. So, Conciliationists are, by their own lights, not required to reduce confidence in Conciliationism.

In the next section we will look in more detail at the Conciliationism vs Steadfastness contrast before turning to the task of a more precise statement of the self-undermining objection.

Conciliationism and Steadfastness

The notion of ‘epistemic peer’ is often used in the literature to indicate those who are (approximate) epistemic equals with respect to some disputed matter Δ. Most commentators employ one (or both) of the following notions of epistemic peers:

Rationality Peers: S1and S2 are (approximately) equally likely to make a rational mistake about Δ.

Accuracy peers: S1and S2 are (approximately) equally likely to determine the truth about Δ.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Recall that we adopted the notion of an accuracy peer in Chapter 1; however, it may be that on some understandings of ‘rationality’ and ‘accuracy’ the two notions are closely related.[[8]](#endnote-8) We can ignore this complication for the most part until Chapter 7 and focus on the idea of accuracy-peers.

Often peerhood is thought to be established by equality along two dimensions of epistemic evaluation.[[9]](#endnote-9) One is the evidence available that is relevant to some dispute, Δ, between peers. The second dimension of evaluation is how well agents form beliefs about Δ. At least in the case of accuracy-peers, equality between these two epistemic dimensions might be sufficient for peerhood, but they are not necessary. Holmes and Watson might be accuracy-peers about the question of who committed the crime when Watson has more evidence relevant to the question, while Holmes is a better reasoner about such matters. The asymmetries between evidence and reasoning ability might result in them being equally likely to arrive at the correct conclusion about the identity of the culprit.

To illustrate the Steadfastness and Conciliationism response to disagreement between accuracy-peers, let us consider David Christensen’s well-known mental math example:

You and your friend have been going out to dinner together regularly for many years. You always tip 20% and split the check (with each person’s share rounded up to the nearest dollar), and you each do the requisite calculation in your head upon receiving the check. Most of the time you have agreed, but in the instances when you have not, you have taken out a calculator to check; over the years, you and your friend have been right in these situations equally often. Tonight, you figure out that your shares are $43, and become quite confident of this. But then your friend announces that she is quite confident that your shares are $45. Neither of you has had more wine or coffee, and you do not feel (nor does your friend appear) especially tired or especially perky. How confident should you now be that your shares are $43? Many people agree that in this sort of case, strong Conciliationism is called for: you should become much less confident in $43 – indeed, you should be about as confident in $45 as in $43.[[10]](#endnote-10)

It will help to walk through the reasoning involved. *Before* the waiter brings the check, you both agree that you may reason as follows: You have a high probability, 0.9 let us suppose, of reaching the truth about the shares of the tab—your track record is ample evidence of this. Given that you take your friend to be an accuracy-peer, also with a 0.9 probability of getting the total correct, you expect it is very likely (greater than 0.8) that you and your friend will agree on the total. Call the prospective assessment of your dinner companion an ‘initial accuracy-peer’. The next step involves the calculation in your head, followed by the announcement that you came up with $43. The crucial and divisive question is what to say *after* your dinner companion reveals her $45 calculation.

Suppose you retain your 0.9 confidence that the total is $43. In which case, consistency requires you demote your friend from accuracy-peer status. That is, you must hold that your friend is an accuracy inferior—less likely to have arrived at the truth than you. The reason is obvious: If you held your friend as a ‘extant accuracy-peer’—one that you hold to be equally likely to have reached the truth *after* the revealed disagreement—then you would be committed to the following probabilistic inconsistency: the probability that each share of the tab is $43 is 0.9 and the probability that each share of the tab is $45 is 0.9. So, any confidence you have greater than 0.5 after a revealed disagreement invites some accounting of the transition of your friend from initial accuracy-peer status to extant accuracy-inferior status. Contrariwise, if you hold that your dinner companion is an extant accuracy-peer, then you may have at most a 0.5 confidence that your calculation of $43 is correct.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The following argument summarizes the idea that some sort of "demotion" is required in either case:

Necessity of Demotion Argument:

1. If S initially believes P is true with greater than 0.5 confidence and subsequently discovers an extant accuracy-peer who believes not-P is true with a similar confidence, then S must reduce confidence in the likely truth of P to 0.5.
2. S initially believes with a greater than 0.5 confidence that P is true and subsequently discovers an extant accuracy-peer who believes with similar confidence not-P is true.
3. S must reduce confidence in the likely truth of P to 0.5.[[12]](#endnote-12)

So long as one agrees that one cannot consistently attribute greater than 1.0 probability to the combined probability of inconsistent claims, then there is no disputing 1. Thus, for our purposes, both the Conciliationist and Steadfaster will accept 1. This means that the disagreement between the Conciliationist and the Steadfaster resolves to the question of whether 2 is satisfied in any case. So, in the mental math example, an EW Conciliationist response advises attributing extant accuracy-peer status to one's dinner companion and so reducing one’s confidence in the truth of the $43 calculation. The Steadfastness response is to hold the $43 calculation with greater than 0.5 confidence and to reject the idea that one’s dinner companion is an extant accuracy-peer. We may summarize this by saying that the Conciliationist adopts the modus ponens argument above, while the Steadfaster response is a modus tollens on 1. That is, Steadfasters reject 3, hence reject 2. One of these two forms of demotion is rationally required.

Two clarifications of the necessity of demotion argument are important. First, the necessity for the Steadfaster to demote her initial accuracy-peer to extant accuracy-inferior applies only to the dispute in question. In other words, we may leave open the possibility that in subsequent disputes, the Steadfaster may treat her interlocuter as an initial accuracy-peer.

Second, the necessity of demotion argument is specifically targeted at what one must believe about the accuracy of one's opponents' views, not about the rationality of their view. Thus, if one thinks there are other norms for belief, e.g., pragmatic norms, that dominant the accuracy norm, then the necessity of demotion argument is not applicable to what one should rationally believe about one's interlocuter.[[13]](#endnote-13) We need not take a position here on the question of whether demoting one's peer to extant accuracy-inferior is consistent with acknowledging her as an extant rationality-peer. (The converse holds as well: we do not need to take a position on whether acknowledging someone as an extant accuracy-peer requires acknowledging them as an extant rationality-peer.)

Conciliationism and the Self-Undermining Charge

Suppose Connie Conciliationist believes that Conciliationism is more likely true than not. Stanley Steadfastness notes that the necessity of demotion argument above seems to apply to Conciliationism itself, since 4 and 5 below are simply instances of 2 and 3.

Accuracy version of the Self-Undermining Argument:

1. If S initially believes P is true with greater than 0.5 confidence and subsequently discovers an extant accuracy-peer believes not-P is true with a similar confidence, then S must reduce confidence in the likely truth of P to 0.5.
2. Connie initially believes with greater than 0.5 confidence that Conciliationism is true and subsequently discovers an extant accuracy-peer, Stanley, who believes with similar confidence that Steadfastness is true.
3. Connie must reduce confidence in the likely truth of Conciliationism to 0.5.

The dilemma for Connie is obvious: If she accepts 5, then she must admit that Conciliationism is self-undermining: the assumption that Conciliationism is more likely true than not leads to the conclusion that Conciliationism is not more likely true than not. If Connie rejects 5, then she must reject either 1 or 4. Given that Connie is committed to the necessity of demotion argument, and 1 is a shared premise, this leaves 4. If Connie rejects 4, then she adopts the aforementioned modus tollens strategy of Steadfastness. In other words, Stanley would be in a position to point out that if Connie rejects 4, it is because she does not consider him to be an extant accuracy-peer. But this sort of demotion is exactly what Steadfastness recommends, which means that this move by Connie would violate the reasoning (and spirit) of Conciliationism.

I shall try to show that there are good reasons to reject the idea that Steadfasters are initial accuracy-peers (of a certain sort), and so have good reason to reject 4, consistent with Conciliationism.

Steadfasters are not Accuracy-peers

For most of this chapter, I will take Cautiousness as an assumption. Recall that Cautiousness in general is understood as:

Cautiousness: W > R

We will use the same earlier modest numerical assignments for Cautiousness:

Cautiousness Numerical Assignment: R = 1.0, SB = 0.0, and W = -1.1

Recall that in Chapter 2 Skeptical-Dogmatism can make use of a weaker assumption than Cautiousness, namely, either Cautiousness or Egalitarianism is true. The assumption that Cautiousness is true is merely for the sake of illustration: many examples used in this chapter appeal to binary disputes, which, as we saw, presuppose Cautiousness. The argument of the chapter could be reformulated using the weaker assumption of Chapter 2—that either Cautiousness or Egalitarianism is true—if multi-proposition disputes were used for illustration. This would complicate the chapter without adding anything of substance, hence the assumption of Cautiousness.

Suppose Connie and Stanley played the mental math game exactly one hundred times, and they agreed in 90 instances and disagreed about the other 10. In the cases of disagreement, it was determined using a calculator that Connie was correct five times and Stanley was correct five times. Connie always suspended judgment about the total after a revealed disagreement—giving equal weight to both calculations, while Stanley always stuck to his guns and continued to believe he was correct. Given Cautiousness, Connie has good reason to assess Stanley as an accuracy inferior. The accuracy of Stanley’s beliefs in the ten cases of disagreement is -0.5[[14]](#endnote-14), while the accuracy of Connie’s beliefs is 0 in the ten cases of disagreement.

The same reasoning appears to apply when turning to philosophical disagreements. Suppose Connie and Stanley disagree about ten different binary philosophical disputes in ethics and metaphysics:

1. Pro-Choice Abortion: yes/no
2. Capital Punishment: yes/no
3. Freedom of the will: yes/no
4. Existence of God: yes/no
5. Abstract objects: yes/no

6-10: Reader’s choice yes/no

As a card-carrying Conciliationist, Connie suspends judgement on these matters, while Stanley believes he is correct in each of the disputes. If Connie holds that Stanley is equally likely as not to have determined the truth or not in each of these disputes—Stanley is likely to be correct about five out of the ten disputes—then his expected accuracy is -0.5. Since Connie suspends judgement on all ten disputes, her expected accuracy is 0.0.

So, Connie has reason to reject the claim that Stanley is an accuracy-peer when it comes to the Conciliationism vs Steadfastness dispute. From Connie’s perspective at least, Stanley overestimates his ability to determine the truth in the ten disputes, which puts Connie in a position to rank him as an accuracy-inferior. Hence, Connie is in a position to reject 4 above from the self-undermining objection, and so need not accept 5. Hence, the self-undermining argument is defanged.

Objection: This Proves Way Too Much

There is a serious problem for the argument as stated: it seems to prove too much—way too much. The reasoning that leads us to dismiss Stanley as an accuracy-peer when it comes to the Conciliationism vs Steadfastness issue appears equally applicable to the ten philosophical disputes in ethics and metaphysics. That is, since Connie expects to have a higher accuracy than Stanley in these ten disputes, it seems that she is in a position to claim Stanley is an extant accuracy-inferior. In which case, the stated reason to conciliate—that they are accuracy-peers—is absent. Imagine Connie reasoning through this process, “I know that Stanley is anti-choice in the abortion debate. But since he emainns Dogmatic (because he is a card-carrying Steadfaster) his expected accuracy is lower than my expected accuracy when I suspend judgment. So, my reason to conciliate with him has vanished, since I now know he is an accuracy-inferior. So, at least when it comes to disagreeing with Stanley, since I am not obligated to conciliate with an accuracy-inferior, I am not required to reduce my confidence in my pro-choice position.”

Something has clearly gone wrong in this line of reasoning. It seems only to reinforce the self-undermining nature of Conciliationism, but from a different direction: it seems to suggest that Conciliationists have good reason to be brazen Dogmatists. But such brazen Dogmatism goes against the spirit of Conciliationism. Hereafter, I shall refer to this as the “way too much” objection. I hope to show that progress can be made here by accounting for the aforementioned ambiguity in ‘accuracy-peer’.

Doxastic and Epistemic Power Peers

It seems obvious that people can be truth-indicators in non-doxastic ways. Suppose, while sleeping, your partner shivers when it gets below 15 Celsius. Let us suppose your partner has no beliefs about the matter, but nevertheless functions as a truth-indicator about the ambient temperature.

Two different versions of the mental math example show another way that people might be truth-indicators in non-doxastic ways: Suppose your dinner companion in mental math is Self-Effacing Effie. She tends to severely underestimate her mental math abilities. *Before* you announce your calculation of the tab, she says, “I bumbled along as usual and came up with $45 each.” Suppose you know from experience that she believes there is only a 10% chance she is right. However, your long track record of playing the game suggests that her chances of being correct are about the same as yours: 90%. Suppose another dinner companion who also enjoys the mental math competition is Hubristic Hubert. He tends to severely overestimate his mental math abilities. *Before* you announce your calculation of the tab, he says: “I came up with $45 each.” Suppose you know from experience that he believes with absolute certainty that he is correct. However, your long track record of playing the game suggests that his chances of being correct are about the same as yours: 90%.

One more example: Imagine Effie and Hubert are also Connie's birding partners. The three have adopted the convention where the first person to sight a bird says “\_\_\_\_?” where the blank is filled in by one’s initial identification attempt. So, for example, one might yell out, “Black-Chinned Hummingbird.” Suppose Connie estimates Effie and Hubert’s reliability in initial identification is the same as hers: all three of them get it right about 90% of the time. Connie knows from long experience that Self-Effacing Effie, true to her name, does not usually believe that her initial identification is correct. She thinks she has, at best, a 10% chance of being correct. Hubristic Hubert, of course, fervently believes his initial identification report, and, true to his name, holds the belief with absolute certainty.

Given that the goal is accuracy, clearly it would be wrong to conciliate with what Self-Effacing Effie and Hubristic Hubert *believe*. In the mental math case, treating Effie as an extant doxastic accuracy-peer would result in little reduction of Connie's initial estimate of $43. Treating Hubert as an extant doxastic-accuracy-peer would result in a reduction of confidence in Connie's initial estimate that $43 is the correct total, down from 0.9 to 0.45. Intuitively, if one is a Conciliationist, then both doxastic revisions appear wrong: the former too high, and the latter too low. The same reasoning applies to the birding example.

A more plausible alternative is to conciliate with the expected accuracy of their epistemic powers. By ‘epistemic powers’ I mean whatever it is about them that makes it correct for Connie to treat them as good truth-indicators about the disputed matter. In thinking about Effie, the relevant epistemic power in the mental math case is that she has good mental math abilities. In the birding case, the relevant epistemic powers include good eyesight and a knowledge of bird types. Effie’s epistemic shortfall is when it comes to forming her beliefs: she severely underestimates her epistemic powers. Obviously, a similar story should be told, *mutatis mutandis*, for Hubert’s hubristic self-assessment of his epistemic powers.

So, let us think of 'doxastic accuracy-peers' (hereafter 'DAP') as those who you estimate are as likely as you to form true beliefs about some dispute Δ. We will understand 'epistemic power peers' (hereafter 'EPP') as those who you estimate to have epistemic powers that are equally likely as you to determine the truth of some dispute Δ qua truth-indicator.

It is often the case that estimates of DAP and EPP of individuals will coincide.[[15]](#endnote-15) Suppose Connie's friend Baylee also plays the mental math game and is also an avid birder. Connie estimates Baylee to be correct 90% of the time in these activities, and Baylee has a similar self-assessment of her performance: she forms beliefs to the effect that she is correct 90% of the time. Here, estimates of DAP and EPP do not pull apart like they do with Effie and Hubert. There are a number of examples where estimates of DAP and EPP may differ, other than character tendencies to hubris or self-effacement. Here's one: your friend Suri does not suspect that people have been invited over for her surprise party that is scheduled to start in half an hour. She startles and then laughs and says, "I thought I heard voices just outside the window. Of course, there is no one around tonight—it must have been the wind." While you did not hear anything, you may have good reason to think that she is an EPP in terms of people detection, and perhaps she did hear voices, although it may have just been the wind. Conciliating with her epistemic powers you form a 0.5 confidence that there were people sneaking around outside, arriving unexpectedly early. If you treated Suri as a DAP on the question of whether there are people sneaking past the window, your probability assessment would have to be much lower (since Suri takes it that it is very unlikely she heard someone). The difference here between the EPP and DAP evaluation of Suri is a result of a difference in unshared evidence about the surprise party.

As reflective agents, it may often be the case that part of our belief formation process involves some reflection and assessment of our own epistemic powers. In Effie and Hubert's case, this self-assessment contribution acts as a negative epistemic power—one that we have reason to suppose works against the accuracy of their beliefs. This provides reason to demote them from DAP status, even while holding that they are EPP.

This is not the place to explore further the relationship between DAP and EPP—even though a lot more could be said. It is sufficient for our purposes to note that there are occasions where Conciliationists may have reason to conciliate with others qua EPP but not DAP.

Philosophical Epistemic Power Peers

We are now in a position to apply this to the way too much objection. The proposed response is that Connie is correct to dismiss Stanley as a DAP, but wrong to dismiss him as an EPP. The reasoning for the former is perhaps apparent: Stanley is the philosopher’s version of Hubert. Indeed, it is time for the big reveal—brace yourself—Stanley and Hubert are one and the same; hereafter, we will refer to him as ‘Shubert’. Shubert overestimates his ability to discover deep philosophical truths, and so Conciliationists are correct to not conciliate with Shubert’s doxastic attitudes.

However, Connie may consistently recognize Shubert as an EPP even while disavowing that he is a DAP. To show in detail what acknowledging him as an EPP amounts to would require a plausible story about the epistemic powers involved in doing philosophy. This is not the place to do so in detail. Rather, let me provide the crudest summary of one such conception. According to this conception, “intuition” and “reasoning” are two important epistemic powers in philosophy. There are of course huge questions involved in explicating these notions, but however they are spelt-out we might suppose that Connie thinks her epistemic powers along these dimensions—intuitions and reasoning—are, in general, equal to that of Shubert’s, when these powers are directed at philosophical matters that do not involve doxastic management. So, for example, suppose Connie reads one of Shubert's arguments for the existence of God. If she treats him as an EPP on this dispute, she will find that Shubert's argument (comprised of intuition and reasoning) is as likely to determine the truth about the existence of God as her argument (comprised of intuition and reasoning) for the non-existence of God.

We can reformulate the necessity of demotion argument to account for conciliating with EPP as follows:

EPP version of the Necessity of Demotion Argument:

1a. If S initially believes P is true with greater than 0.5 probability and subsequently discovers that an extant EPP indicates that not-P with a similar probability greater than 0.5, then S must reduce confidence in the likely truth of P to 0.5.

2a. S initially believes P is true with greater than 0.5 probability and subsequently discovers that an extant EPP indicates that not-P with a similar probability greater than 0.5

1. S must reduce confidence in the likely truth of P to 0.5.

As before, Connie accepts the modus tollens argument. Shubert uses modus tollens on 1a to reject 3. That is, since Connie accepts 2a, she must demote confidence in her position with an extant EPP Shubert. Since Shubert rejects 3, he must demote Connie to extant EPP inferior.

EPP and the Self-Undermining Objection

It seems now that the dialectic has swung back too far in the opposite direction. Let us think of first-order philosophical disputes in terms of the examples listed above. The Conciliationism/Steadfastness question before us is often referred to as a ‘second-order philosophical dispute’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Applying the foregoing reasoning seems to suggest that if Connie conciliates with Shubert's epistemic powers on first-order questions, then she should conciliate with Shubert's epistemic powers on second-order questions. The argument might be summarized as follows:

EPP version of the Self-Undermining Argument:

1a. If S initially believes P is true with greater than 0.5 probability and subsequently discovers that an extant EPP indicates that not-P with a similar probability greater than 0.5, then S must reduce confidence in the likely truth of P to 0.5.

4a. Connie initially believes with greater than 0.5 confidence that Conciliationism is true and subsequently discovers an extant EPP, Shubert, who indicates with a similarly greater than 0.5 probability that Steadfastness is true.

1. Connie must reduce confidence in the likely truth of Conciliationism to 0.5.

Of course, if this argument is successful, then it reinstates the original self-undermining objection spelled-out in terms of EPP where the original assumed DAP.

No Universal Steadfastness When It Comes to Accuracy

Before responding to the revised self-undermining argument, we need to clarify something. Although we started out thinking that the dispute is about Steadfastness versus Conciliationism, both Shubert and Connie agree that Connie should not adopt Steadfastness. The reason is that while Shubert thinks that Steadfastness is the correct view for himself, he cannot consistently recommend Steadfastness for Connie as well—at least given the goal of accuracy. The necessity of demotion argument shows that if Shubert endorses Steadfastness when he disagrees with Connie about first-order disputes, then Shubert must recommend Capitulation to Connie. That is, if Shubert holds that he is more likely right about his first-order views, then he cannot consistently recommend that Connie adopt Steadfastness for her contrary first-order positions (given his advice is about accuracy). His recommendation must be that she adopt Capitulation for the first-order disputes.

As an epistemic advisor to Connie, we can imagine Shubert summarizes the dialectic thus:

*We both accept that your doxastic goal is accuracy, so my recommendation is that you adopt Capitulation. I know that you think that I overestimate my abilities, and so you will not conciliate with my belief that you should adopt Capitulation. Nevertheless, consistency demands that you conciliate with me qua EPP about the question of whether you should adopt Capitulation, just as you did with first-order philosophical disputes. So, you should suspend judgement about whether Capitulation or Conciliationism is the correct doxastic management practice for you to maximize your expected accuracy. But this is just to say that Conciliationism is self-undermining.*

Shubert's summary might be thought of as something like a reductio: If Connie is correct to adopt the doxastic management proposal of Conciliationism with greater than 0.5 confidence, then Connie should not adopt a greater than 0.5 confidence in Conciliationism.

Socratic Epistemic Powers

The crucial claim in Shubert's argument above is the "consistency demands" point. What should we make of this? I hope to show, on the one hand, that the claim is not well-motivated, and on the other, there is an argument to reject it.

Shubert's argument seems to rely on an inductive inference: Connie conciliated with Shubert qua EPP in ten philosophical disputes. Hence, consistency demands that she recognize his EPP status for any philosophical dispute, including the Conciliationism versus Capitulation dispute. Clearly, however, this conclusion is a little hasty. Suppose their eleventh dispute involves a disagreement about some interpretation of Spinoza. Shubert's knowledge of Spinoza is limited to reading one blogpost on Spinoza written by an undergraduate, while Connie wrote her PhD on Spinoza. So, despite assessing Shubert as an EPP on the previous ten philosophical disputes, it would seem that Connie has good reason to reject Shubert as an EPP in this case.

Even in a subject area that Connie might think she and Shubert are generally EPP, there may be a specific reason to think Shubert is not an EPP on some particular question. Imagine Connie and Shubert are on a graduate admissions committee together. Connie has conciliated with Shubert qua EPP in the last ten disputes about candidates' rankings in terms of their writing sample. Suppose Connie refuses to acknowledge Shubert as an EPP when it comes to the eleventh candidate. With just this information in hand, could we immediately conclude that she acted inconsistently? Imagine the eleventh candidate is Shubert's daughter. Here the fact that Shubert's daughter is "near and dear" means that Connie rightly would be more cautious in accepting the equality of Shubert's epistemic powers when it comes to evaluating his daughter. In not recognizing his EPP status there is no reason to attribute malfeasance to Shubert. It is generally recognized that unwittingly we might be biased in such cases even if we work hard to put aside such biases. Thus, we generally accept that we ought to recuse ourselves in such cases. Presumably Connie too would recuse herself if her daughter were applying to the same program, for exactly the same reason.

To make Shubert's inference more robust he needs an additional premise to the effect that the Conciliationism versus Capitulation dispute is relevantly similar to the previous ten disputes where Connie conciliated with him qua EPP. Of course, this is the very question before them: is the Conciliationism versus Capitulation dispute relevantly similar to the first-order disputes? As it stands, Shubert has not defended this premise.

We can use this line of thought as an element of support in the following argument:

Socratic Epistemic Powers Argument:

1. If EW Conciliationism requires that Connie conciliate with Shubert about Conciliationism versus Capitulation, then Connie must have sufficient reason to acknowledge that Shubert is either a DAP or EPP about Conciliationism versus Capitulation.
2. Connie does not have sufficient reason to acknowledge that Shubert is either a DAP or EPP about Conciliationism versus Capitulation.
3. EW Conciliationism does not require that Connie conciliate with Shubert about Conciliationism versus Capitulation.

6 is a consequence of the fact that EW Conciliationism is specifically a doctrine about what to do in response to peer disagreement. The point is obvious but crucial for the present controversy because it highlights the fact that Conciliationism is silent about what to do when one disagrees with those who are not peers. EW Conciliationists are not inconsistent if they refuse to conciliate with a three-year-old in a dispute about the nutritional value of a MacDonald's happy meal, nor if they adopt Capitulate in light of disagreement with God in the mental math game.

Two lines of thought can be used to support 7. First, there is the point just noted, that it does not follow necessarily that if one conciliates on some philosophical disagreements one must conciliate in all philosophical disagreements. Second, Connie is in a position to offer a positive argument for 7, namely, Connie may attribute to herself superior "Socratic epistemic powers" when it comes to Conciliationism versus Capitulation. In terms that Socrates might approve of, Connie thinks she is wiser than Shubert to the extent that she realizes that she is not wise about so many philosophical disputes, whereas Shubert thinks himself wise when he is not. Thus, Connie thinks she better honors the imperative of the Oracle of Delphi to know thyself. And the Conciliationism versus Capitulation dispute essentially involves a large self-assessment of one's epistemic prowess.

In the terms developed here, Connie believes she has better epistemic powers when it comes to the self-evaluation of her epistemic powers than Shubert. Furthermore, as noted, Connie holds that Shubert is epistemically hubristic, and Connie believes that Shubert's hubris interferes with Shubert's exercise of his self-evaluation of his epistemic powers. As suggested above, his hubris acts as a negative epistemic power when it comes to belief formation: it reduces the expected accuracy of his beliefs. Whenever this hubris is operative, Connie has reason not to treat Shubert as an accuracy-peer. Thus, the reason that Connie treats Shubert as an EPP in first-order disputes, but not the second-order dispute about Conciliationism versus Capitulation, is that Conciliationism versus Capitulation involves a far greater degree of self-evaluation of one's epistemic powers than the typical first-order dispute. Connie "backs off" this hubris in first-order disputes by acknowledging Shubert as an EPP but not a DAP. This same strategy of simply backing off Shubert's hubris by treating him as an EPP but not a DAP does not work with the Conciliationism versus Capitulation dispute, since the very subject matter of the Conciliationism versus Capitulation dispute essentially involves doxastic self-evaluation. This is exactly the area that Connie thinks she has superior epistemic powers.

The forgoing allows us to explain why the self-undermining objection may seem plausible. We can approach this by considering an addition to our birding example. Suppose social psychologists survey birders about their perceptions of their accuracy and that of their peers. The (predictable) answers of Connie and Shubert are below.

 <Insert Table 5.1 about here>

Suppose Shubert says that consistency demands that Connie conciliate with Shubert about his level of accuracy and Connie's level of accuracy, since the survey is "just another birding disagreement.” Connie will object that this is not "just another birding disagreement.” It is one thing to treat Shubert as an EPP when it comes to bird identification, it is quite another to treat Shubert as an EPP when it comes to assessing his birding epistemic powers. Comparatively speaking, Connie thinks that Shubert has equally good bird identification epistemic powers, but lousy epistemic powers when it comes to knowing his epistemic powers.

Similarly, Connie should object to treating the Conciliationism vs Steadfastness dispute as just another dispute. It is a philosophical dispute that essentially involves self-assessment about one's epistemic powers and doxastic attitudes—something that she has reason to suppose that Shubert is neither her EPP nor DAP about. The proof of this is the argument above that Steadfasters have lower expected accuracy.

"But,” it may be objected, "isn't this just the view that Conciliationism is self-exempting?" Answer: no. As noted above, Conciliationism is a view about the force vector of disagreement. The EW version of Conciliationism is a view about what to do when one acknowledges an extant accuracy-peer. Conciliationism does not say that we should acknowledge everyone, or all our philosophical colleagues, etc., as extant accuracy-peers. This requires additional theorizing about the epistemic status of one's interlocuters. Connie's theorization leads to the conclusion that Shubert is not a DAP or EPP on this question.

Transition to Part II

In this section I shall try to summarize what I hope to have established in Part I, and to survey Part II.

I have offered three lines of arguments for Skeptical-Dogmatism about many of our cherished philosophical beliefs. The disagreement argument played out in two different ways in Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, I argued that a consequence of holding Dogmatism in a multi-proposition dispute is that one must conceive of oneself as a ÜES to one’s disagreeing colleagues. To the extent that one holds a more modest self-conception, this is an argument against Dogmatism and for Skeptical-Dogmatism. In Chapter 2 it was argued that people would, on average, do better to adopt Skeptical-Dogmatism rather than Dogmatism if they hope to improve the accuracy of their philosophical beliefs. The fact that people do not, and very likely will not, suggests that our world is exactly as described in the quote from Plato in Chapter 2: “And, again, among the virtues, is it not especially to wisdom that the largest number of people lay claim, puffing themselves up with quarrels and false pretensions to would-be knowledge?[[17]](#endnote-17) Skeptical-Dogmatism is the antidote to such mass hubris.

The Noetic Skepticism argument of Chapter 3 for Skeptical-Dogmatism invites us to extrapolate from our particular place and time to view our cognitive prowess *sub specie aeternitatis*. If we don’t kill ourselves off, our culturally or biologically more advanced descendants will likely see many of our current philosophical views as mistaken. To think otherwise is to image that our current views overlap with a godlike, or a more godlike, conception of our world and our place in it. This should strike us as very unlikely—so long as we are willing to stow our hubris for a moment.

The radical underdetermination argument of Chapter 4 says that our hubris affects our assessment of what can be established empirically about our world. A non-hubristic conception of our cognitive capacities indicates that we cannot use our senses to establish the metaphysical structure of our world, and we cannot establish the metaphysical structure of our world a priori. Given the number of competitor views for our preferred metaphysics, 1MWH, we should think the 1MWH is probably false. As I hope to show in Chapter 10, this is a different claim from suggesting that our senses cannot provide reliable information about our environment.

So, one thing to notice about these three lines of argumentation is that they do not support a global form of Skeptical-Dogmatism—one that says we are probably wrong about all our beliefs. These three arguments individually or collectively do not challenge the claim that we are justified in believing, for example, that 2 +2 = 4, or that we are not justified in believing the conclusion of a modus ponens argument given the truth of the premises. At best they establish a non-global form of Skeptical-Dogmatism, that is, a mitigated Skeptical-Dogmatism. I’ll say a bit more about mitigated Skeptical-Dogmatism in Chapter 12.

Still, this piecemeal approach establishes a fairly impressive (or, depending on your perspective, “depressing”) mitigated Skeptical-Dogmatism: it suggests that we are probably wrong about many of our philosophical beliefs, including the nature of the good life, the just society, beliefs about divinities, the metaphysics of our local environment, etc. Thus, even a mitigated form of Skeptical-Dogmatism can be quite troubling.

This chapter has dealt with one self-undermining objection to Skeptical-Dogmatism. In the next chapter we will look at what Skeptics might say about Skeptical-Dogmatism, and how Skeptics react differently to Conciliationism. Chapters 7 to 9 examine Dogmatists’ responses to Skeptical-Dogmatism.

Notes

1. The objection has been formulated in a variety of ways. For some discussion see Adam Elga, “How to Disagree about How to Disagree,” in *Disagreement*, vol. Feldman, R. and T. Warfield, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 175–86. David Christensen, “Epistemic Modesty Defended,” in *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 77–98. Jason Decker, “Conciliation and Self-Incrimination,” *Erkenntnis* 79, no. 5 (2014): 1099–1134. Stefan Reining, “On the Supposed Dilemma of Conciliationism,” *Episteme* 13, no. 3 (2016): 305–28. David Christensen, “Akratic (Epistemic) Modesty,” *Philosophical Studies* 178, no. 7 (2020): 2191–2214. Below I will provide a more precise statement of the challenge. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Christensen, “Akratic (Epistemic) Modesty.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Elga, “How to Disagree about How to Disagree.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Bryan Frances, “The Reflective Epistemic Renegade,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81, no. 2 (2010): 419–63. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Diego E. Machuca, “A Neo-Pyrrhonian Response to the Disagreeing about Disagreement Argument,” *Synthese*, no. 194.5 (2017): 1663–80. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Christensen, “Epistemic Modesty Defended.” See Christensen, “Akratic (Epistemic) Modesty.” for a more complete survey of ways authors have sought to avoid the self-undermining objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. As Christensen points out, these two different conceptions have not always been distinguished: Christensen, “Epistemic Modesty Defended.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Some versions of reliabilism, for example, may allow that there is very little light between these two. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Christensen, “Akratic (Epistemic) Modesty.” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. David Christensen, “Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy,” *Philosophy Compass* 4, no. 5 (2009): 756–67. P. 757. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The different totals are of course contraries. If we allow for contraries fallibilism, that is, the possibility that both parties are mistaken, then you might hold with less than 0.5 confidence both the $43 and $45 estimates. For sake of economy of exposition, I will ignore contrary fallibilism until the following chapter and often assume that disputes are about contradictories. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Strictly speaking, the argument should say 'at most 0.5' assuming the disagreement is about contraries rather than contradictories. Again, we shall ignore this complication as irrelevant for present purposes. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Cf*. William James, *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Longmans, Green, and Company, 1896).A similar point applies, *mutatis mutandis*, if epistemic permissiveness is used to explain how the two incompatible doxastic attitudes might both be rational. These views are discussed in Chapters 7 and 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. (5 x 1) + (5 x -1.1) = -0.5 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Self-assessments that pull apart epistemic powers and doxastic states tend to go together. And when they don't, one road leads to versions of neo-Moorean absurdities. E.g., my epistemic powers indicate that it is raining, but I don't believe that it is raining. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Alternatively, this is sometimes referred to as a 'higher-order' dispute. See, for example, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio, “Higher-Order Evidence and the Limits of Defeat,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88, no. 2 (2014): 314–45. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, *Plato Complete Works*, 1997. 48e-49a. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)