

A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance

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Disagreement with others is a familiar part of our lives. Most of us find ourselves faced with friends who have radically opposing views on the war in Iraq, relatives who explicitly reject our beliefs about religion, and colleagues who dispute our conception of the nature of free will. These are just a few of the more common topics of disagreement, but there are countless others, ranging from the mundane—"That is a cat by the tree, not a small dog!"—to the extraordinary—"That I conquered my cancer was not purely a result of my chemotherapy, but was also God answering my prayers."

In some instances, disagreement can be explained by one party to the dispute being privy to more evidence than the other. You and I may have opposing beliefs about whether Jones committed the murder because only you saw the relevant DNA results linking him to the crime. Other cases of disagreement can be accounted for in terms of various kinds of cognitive asymmetries. You and I may disagree about whether the bird in the backyard tree is a starling because only I am using eyeglasses with an out-of-date prescription. Or you and I may have competing conclusions about the safety of vaccines because only you are emotionally distraught by your child's recent diagnosis of autism. Still other instances of disagreement can be explained by one member of the dispute having reason to believe that the other is epistemically inferior in some respect. You and I may have differing attitudes about whether my daughter is the best ballet dancer in her class because you believe that I am biased where my daughter's talents are concerned.¹ But adjusting our doxastic states in all of these sorts of cases does not reveal anything significant about disagreement itself, since the fact that you and I disagree drops out of the explanation of this adjustment; it is, for instance, the difference in our familiarity with the relevant evidence or the asymmetry in our cognitive capacities that does the explanatory work. In order to truly assess the

significance of *disagreement* itself, there cannot be any relevant epistemic asymmetries between the parties to the dispute to shoulder the explanatory burden; in other words, such parties should be epistemic peers.² The question at issue, then, is this: what is the significance of disagreement between those who are epistemic peers? In particular, what is the rational response to disagreement in situations where there are no relevant epistemic asymmetries between the members involved in the dispute?

There are two answers to this question found in the recent literature. On the one hand, there are those who hold that one can continue to rationally believe that *p* despite the fact that one's epistemic peer explicitly believes that *not-p*, even when one does not have a reason independent of the disagreement itself to prefer one's own belief. I shall call those who hold this view *nonconformists*. According to nonconformists, there can be reasonable disagreement among epistemic peers. So, for instance, Gideon Rosen writes:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. Paleontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs. And while it is possible that most of the parties to this dispute are irrational, this need not be the case. To the contrary, it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators. (Rosen 2001, pp. 71-2)

Similarly, Thomas Kelly claims that:

The mere fact that others whom I acknowledge to be my equal with respect to intelligence, thoughtfulness, and acquaintance with the relevant data disagree with me about some issue does not undermine the rationality of my maintaining my own view. (Kelly 2005, p. 192)

And Peter van Inwagen concurs:

I think that any philosopher who does not wish to be a philosophical skeptic—I know of no philosopher who *is* a philosophical skeptic—must agree with me that...it must be possible for one to be justified in accepting a philosophical thesis when there are philosophers who, by *all* objective and external criteria, are at least equally well qualified to pronounce on that thesis and who reject it. (van Inwagen 1996, p. 275)

According to nonconformists, then, the mere fact that there is disagreement with one's epistemic peer does not mandate any sort of doxastic revision from either party to the dispute.

Now, there are two central explanations of the nonconformist response to peer disagreement.³ First, there is what we may call the *egocentric view*. On this view, I am justified in giving my belief extra weight⁴ in the face of peer disagreement because the belief in question is *mine*. So, for instance, Ralph Wedgewood claims:

Perhaps, quite generally, it is rational for one to place greater trust in one's own intuitions, simply because these intuitions are one's own, than in the intuitions of other people. In other words, perhaps it is rational for each of us to have an *egocentric epistemic bias* in favour of our own intuitions. (Wedgewood forthcoming, Chapter 11, p. 21 of ms.)

...one should rely on other people's intuitions only to the extent that it is *antecedently* or *independently* rational for one to regard their intuitions as reliable. The fundamental asymmetry between one's own intuitions and those of other people is just that it is rational to trust one's own intuitions even if one has no antecedent or independent reason to regard them as reliable, whereas it is only rational for me to trust your intuitions if I have some such antecedent reason to regard your intuitions as reliable. (Wedgewood forthcoming, Chapter 11, p. 23 of ms.)

According to the egocentric version of nonconformism, then, the epistemic symmetry involved in peer disagreement can be broken by virtue of the extra weight afforded to my belief in virtue of the belief's being mine.⁵

The second explanation of the nonconformist response to peer disagreement is what we may call the *correct reasoning view*. On this view, I am justified in giving my belief extra weight in the face of peer disagreement because the belief in question is *in fact the product of correct reasoning*. Thus, Thomas Kelly writes:

The rationality of the parties engaged in [peer disagreement] will typically depend on who has in fact correctly evaluated the available evidence and who has not. If you and I have access to the same body of evidence but draw different conclusions, which one of us is being more reasonable (if either) will typically depend on which of the different conclusions (if either) is in fact better supported by that body of evidence. (Kelly 2005, p. 180)

So, according to the correct reasoning version of nonconformism, peer disagreement's epistemic symmetry can be broken by virtue of the extra weight afforded to my belief in virtue of its being in fact best supported by the evidence.

In contrast to nonconformists, there are those who hold that, unless one has a reason that is independent of the disagreement itself to prefer one's own belief, one cannot continue to rationally believe that p when one is faced with an epistemic peer who explicitly believes that not-p. I shall call those who hold this view *conformists*.⁶ According to conformists, there cannot be reasonable disagreement among epistemic peers. Thus, Richard Feldman claims that:

...in situations of full disclosure, where there are not evident asymmetries, the parties to the disagreement would be reasonable in suspending judgement about the matter at hand.

There are, in other words, no reasonable disagreements after full disclosure, and thus no mutually recognized reasonable disagreements. The cases that seem to be cases of

reasonable disagreement are cases in which the reasonable attitude is really suspension of judgement. (Feldman 2006, p. 235)⁷

In a similar spirit, David Christensen says that:

...in [cases of disagreement with epistemic peers], I should change my degree of confidence significantly toward that of my friend (and, similarly, she should change hers toward mine). (Christensen 2007, p. 4 of ms.)⁸

And Adam Elga writes:

When you count an advisor as an epistemic peer, you should give her conclusion the same weight as your own.... call it the “equal weight view”. (Elga 2007, p. 478)

Suppose that before evaluating a claim, you think that you and your friend are equally likely to evaluate it correctly. When you find out that your friend disagrees with your verdict, how likely should you think it that you are correct? The equal weight view says: 50%. (Elga 2007, p. 488)⁹

Conformists, then, argue that equal weight should be given to one’s own beliefs and to those held by one’s epistemic peers, and thus significant doxastic revision is required in the face of peer disagreement. What kind of doxastic revision is necessary? Answers to this question vary.

Feldman, for instance, casts the debate in terms of an all-or-nothing model of belief, and so he argues that disagreement with an epistemic peer regarding the question whether *p* requires that both parties to the dispute *withhold* belief relative to *p*. Christensen and Elga instead frame the issues in terms of degree of belief, and so they argue that disagreement with an epistemic peer regarding the question whether *p* requires *splitting the difference* in the degrees of their respective beliefs. Thus, where 1 represents maximal confidence that *p* is true and 0 represents maximal confidence that *p* is false, if I give credence 1 to the proposition that Smith committed the murder and you give credence 0 to the proposition that Smith committed the murder, our attitude towards *p* should converge in

the middle—we should give credence .5 to this proposition and become perfect agnostics with respect to Smith’s guilt. But regardless of the details, conformists all agree that when epistemic peers disagree, substantial adjustment is required in their respective beliefs.

Despite the differences between nonconformists and conformists, they appear to share a commitment to a thesis that I shall call *Uniformity*,¹⁰ which can be characterized as follows:

Uniformity: Disagreement with epistemic peers functions the same epistemically in all circumstances.

According to this thesis, it doesn’t matter whether one’s beliefs conflict with an epistemic peer’s over a confidently held perceptual experience or a dubious political conclusion, a necessary mathematical proof or a supernatural religious doctrine, simple directions to the store or a complicated philosophical view—disagreement with epistemic peers either always does or does not require doxastic adjustment.

But what, one might ask, is involved in being an epistemic peer with someone? Answers to this question typically involve requiring the satisfaction of at least the following two conditions:

*Evidential equality*¹¹: A and B are evidential equals relative to the question whether p when A and B are equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether p.

*Cognitive equality*¹²: A and B are cognitive equals relative to the question whether p when A and B are equally competent, intelligent, and fair-minded in their assessment of the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether p.¹³

In addition to evidential and cognitive equality, Richard Feldman adds what he calls full disclosure to the conditions relevant to the disagreement at issue. More precisely:

Full disclosure: A and B are in a situation of full disclosure relative to the question whether p when A and B have knowingly shared with one another all of their evidence and arguments relative to the question whether p.¹⁴

Let us say that when there is both evidential and cognitive equality between A and B in situations of full disclosure with respect to the question whether p, they are *epistemic peers*.

I shall call disagreement involving epistemic peers in this sense *idealized*, which can be understood as follows:

Idealized disagreement: A and B disagree in an idealized sense if and only if, relative to the question whether p, A and B hold differing doxastic attitudes and A and B are epistemic peers.

Idealized disagreement is to be distinguished from what I shall call *ordinary disagreement*. Ordinary disagreement does not require the parties to the dispute to *actually* satisfy the conditions of evidential equality, cognitive equality, and full disclosure. In particular:

Ordinary disagreement: A and B disagree in an ordinary sense if and only if, relative to the question whether p, A and B hold differing doxastic attitudes and, prior to recognizing that this is so, A and B take themselves to be epistemic peers with respect to this question.

So, whereas idealized disagreement occurs when the parties to the dispute are, as a matter of fact, epistemic peers, ordinary disagreement takes place when such parties merely take themselves to be such peers. There are, then, two different questions that may be at issue: first, can one continue to rationally hold a belief in the face of idealized disagreement and, second, can one continue to rationally hold a belief in the face of ordinary disagreement? Which of these is the focus of the debate between nonconformists and conformists?

Given that the distinction between idealized and ordinary disagreement is not drawn in the literature, combined with the fact that some theorists seem to emphasize the former while others

rely on the latter, it is not entirely clear that there is a single answer to this question. For instance, van Inwagen's emphasis on evaluating disagreement in terms of "*all* objective and external criteria" suggests idealized disagreement, while Feldman's talk of there being no "*evident* asymmetries" between the parties to the debate indicates that he is concerned with ordinary disagreement. And some theorists appear to focus on both kinds of disagreement, but at different points in their discussion. For instance, Kelly motivates the problem of epistemic disagreement with the question, "Can one rationally hold a belief while knowing that that belief is not shared (and indeed, is explicitly rejected) by individuals over whom one possesses no discernible epistemic advantage" (p. 168), which sounds very similar to what I am calling ordinary disagreement. But when he explicitly argues against conformists, Kelly requires evidential and cognitive equality between the parties to the debate, which parallels what I am calling idealized disagreement.¹⁵ So, while both kinds of disagreement figure in the debate, they do not always do so explicitly or consistently. In what follows, I shall, when relevant, be clear that there is the distinction between idealized and ordinary disagreement and I shall specify which kind is at issue when necessary.

In this paper, I shall argue that neither nonconformism nor conformism provides a plausible account of the epistemic significance of peer disagreement. I shall first show that in some cases, nonconformism provides the intuitively correct result, and in other cases, conformism does. This leads to the rejection of Uniformity: disagreement with epistemic peers does not function epistemically the same in all circumstances. I shall then develop my *justificationist* account of peer disagreement's epistemic significance. Whereas current views maintain that disagreement, by itself, either simply does or does not possess epistemic power, my account holds that its epistemic power, or lack thereof, is explainable in terms of the degree of justified confidence with which the belief in question is held. I shall then show that my justificationist account has two central advantages: first, it is able to provide a principled explanation for why nonconformism provides the intuitively correct

result in some cases, while conformism gives the intuitively correct result in other cases and, second, it is generalizable in a way that neither nonconformism nor conformism is and thus it can handle some puzzles that arise for these rival views.

1. Nonconformism

There are two questions that are at the center of the debate between nonconformists and conformists: (1) does disagreement with an epistemic peer require substantial doxastic revision, and (2) can there be reasonable disagreement between epistemic peers? As we saw above, an answer to the former is taken to dictate an answer to the latter:¹⁶ nonconformists respond negatively to (1) and thus affirmatively to (2),¹⁷ while conformists answer affirmatively to (1) and thus negatively to (2).¹⁸ In this section, I shall begin with (1), focusing primarily on the response nonconformists have given to this question. After doing so, I shall return to a more general consideration of both of these questions.

It is not uncommon for nonconformists to support their view by appealing to areas involving contentious subject matter, ones where there is widespread and often intractable disagreement, such as philosophy, politics, and religion. For many of the debates in these areas occur between those who clearly seem to be epistemic peers, yet there are nonetheless often deep and intractable differences in doxastic attitudes. Moreover, such differences do not seem to be subject to resolution, at least not easily anyway. It is, for instance, rarely the case that one more argument or one more discussion will convert a committed determinist to a libertarian's point of view, or a Republican to a Democrat's perspective, or a theist to an atheist's position. Indeed, in some of these debates, one may very well suspect that no amount of argument or discussion will settle the disagreements. Given this, nonconformists argue that conformism—at least with respect to contentious subject matter (hereafter, contentious subject matter conformism)—will inevitably

lead to skepticism, at least with respect to contentious subject matter (hereafter, contentious subject matter skepticism). For if disagreement with epistemic peers requires withholding belief or splitting the difference in degrees of confidence—as the conformist claims—then the widespread and deep disagreement found among epistemic peers in philosophy, politics, and religion will inevitably lead to suspending judgment in these areas, i.e., it will lead to philosophical, political, and religious skepticism. Since contentious subject matter skepticism is to be rejected, then so, too, should contentious subject matter conformism be rejected. Moreover, given Uniformity—which is the claim that disagreement with epistemic peers functions the same epistemically regardless of the circumstances—conformism in general should be rejected, and nonconformism embraced.

Let us formulate the argument from the preceding paragraph, which we may call the Pro-Nonconformism Argument, as follows:

1. Contentious subject matter conformism leads to contentious subject matter skepticism.
2. Contentious subject matter skepticism is to be rejected.
3. Therefore, contentious subject matter conformism is to be rejected.
4. Uniformity is true.
5. Therefore, conformism is to be rejected.
6. Therefore, nonconformism is to be accepted.

The central problem with this argument, however, is that many conformists will simply reject premise (2), that is, they will deny that contentious subject matter skepticism should be denied. For instance, Feldman begins his defense of conformism by saying,

The conclusion I will reach is, in a sense, skeptical. But it is unlike familiar skeptical conclusions frequently addressed by epistemologists.... My conclusion will be that, more often than we might have thought, suspension of judgement is the epistemically proper attitude. It follows that in such cases we lack reasonable belief and so, at least on standard

conceptions, knowledge. This is a kind of contingent real-world skepticism that has not received the attention it deserves. (Feldman 2006, p. 217)

So, I doubt that many conformists will be motivated to switch sides simply in an effort to avoid accepting skeptical results.¹⁹ Indeed, some, like Feldman, explicitly embrace the skeptical conclusions of their position.

To my mind, a more promising line of defense for nonconformism begins, not with the highly contested, but with the mundane. Consider, for instance, the following:

PERCEPTION: Estelle, Edwin, and I, who have been roommates for the past eight years, were eating lunch together at the dining room table in our apartment. When I asked Edwin to pass the parmesan cheese to Estelle, he replied, “Estelle isn’t here today.” Prior to this disagreement, neither Edwin nor I had any reason to think that the other is evidentially or cognitively deficient in any way, and we both sincerely avowed our respective conflicting beliefs.

Now, PERCEPTION can be read as involving either idealized disagreement or ordinary disagreement. Let us evaluate these in turn.

If Edwin and I are in an idealized disagreement over the presence of Estelle, then we must be epistemic peers with respect to this question, which requires evidential and cognitive equality in a situation of full disclosure. But it is unclear how to make sense of disagreement occurring in PERCEPTION under these conditions. For recall that two people are evidential equals relative to a question when they are equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on this question. However, if I have a phenomenologically vivid experience of it seeming to me that Estelle is at the dining room table, and Edwin does not, then how could we be equally familiar with the evidence that bears on whether Estelle is present? Perhaps evidential equality could be glossed as follows: two people are evidential equals when they have an equal amount of evidence supporting their given

beliefs. So, Edwin and I need not be equally familiar with the same relevant evidence, we just need to possess equal amounts of evidence for our respective, conflicting beliefs. If this weaker notion of evidential equality is granted, however, then pressure begins to build against the plausibility of the cognitive equality condition obtaining. For at least one of us must be hallucinating or experiencing some sort of cognitive malfunction in order to plausibly explain how one of us claims to see Estelle while the other does not when we are all presumably inches from each other. It is, therefore, quite difficult to even grasp how there could be idealized disagreement between Edwin and me in this situation. For these reasons, PERCEPTION seems best understood as a case of ordinary disagreement.

Let us, then, regard the disagreement between Edwin and me as ordinary in nature. Now, consider the situation in question from my perspective: it clearly seems to me that Estelle is sitting at the dining room table with me—indeed, suppose that minutes earlier we were engrossed in conversation while eating our pasta. Moreover, I have never in my life hallucinated an object, I have not been drinking or taking any drugs, I have my contact lenses in, I have ample evidence of my eyesight functioning reliably when my nearsightedness is corrected, and I know all of this to be true of myself. How, then, should I rationally respond to Edwin's claim that Estelle is not dining with us? Despite the fact that, up to now, I have had good reason to regard Edwin as an epistemic peer, it seems clearly rational for me to continue to believe just as strongly that Estelle is present at the table. Indeed, even after full disclosure—where Edwin explains that he does not seem to see anything in the chair that Estelle purportedly occupies—I still seem rational in being fully convinced that she is dining with us at the table. For given the extraordinarily high degree of justified confidence with which I hold my belief about Estelle's presence, Edwin's disagreement seems best taken as evidence that something has gone awry with him, either evidentially or cognitively. In other words, I seem justified in concluding that Edwin is no longer an epistemic peer, even if he was prior

to the disagreement in question. This conclusion is further evidenced by considering whether it would be appropriate for my belief to continue to guide my responses and actions in ways paradigmatic of confident belief. Imagine, for instance, that immediately after Edwin's full disclosure of his reasons for disagreeing with me, the doorbell rings and I open the door to find Estelle's mother asking if she is at home. Surely, it would be rational for me to respond affirmatively to this question. Indeed, Estelle's mother would rightly be utterly perplexed if I were to say, "Although I can apparently see her, I really do not know if she is here since I am withholding belief in light of my disagreement with Edwin on the topic." Thus, when the disagreement in question is ordinary, nonconformism seems to deliver the appropriate intuitive response in PERCEPTION.²⁰

Similar considerations apply in the following case:

ELEMENTARY MATH: Harry and I, who have been colleagues for the past six years, were drinking coffee at Starbucks and trying to determine how many people from our department will be attending the upcoming APA. I, reasoning aloud, say, "Well, Mark and Mary are going on Wednesday, and Sam and Stacey are going on Thursday, and, since $2+2=4$, there will be four other members of our department at that conference." In response, Harry asserts, "But $2+2$ does not equal 4." Prior to this disagreement, neither Harry nor I had any reason to think that the other is evidentially or cognitively deficient in any way, and we both sincerely avowed our respective conflicting beliefs.

As was the case in PERCEPTION, there seem to be two general points that can be made about the situation described in ELEMENTARY MATH. First, when this case is said to involve idealized disagreement, it becomes rather inexplicable. How could two adults—both of whom are functioning normally—who possess equal evidence relevant to the question at hand, disagree on whether $2+2=4$? Surely, at least one of us is either confused or cognitively deficient in some way. Second, when the disagreement is ordinary, it intuitively seems quite rational for me to retain my

belief even in the face of disagreement with Harry, whom I have had very good reason to believe is an epistemic peer. For given my extraordinarily high degree of justified confidence in my belief that $2+2=4$, Harry's disagreement seems rightly regarded by me as evidence that he is not well, either evidentially or cognitively. In other words, as was the case in PERCEPTION, Harry's disagreement with me over the truth of $2+2$ equaling 4 seems appropriately taken by me as evidence that we are no longer epistemic peers, and thus nonconformism again provides the intuitively plausible response.

Of course, even when the disagreement in PERCEPTION and ELEMENTARY MATH is ordinary, rather than idealized, it may be argued that the kind of disputes in these cases is so peculiar that it is unclear whether any general conclusions about nonconformism follow from them. For instance, how often does it happen that people disagree about whether their friend is sitting in the chair next to them, or about whether $2+2=4$? So, let us consider a case that is similarly mundane, but where the ordinary disagreement in question is more likely to obtain:

DIRECTIONS: I have lived in Chicago for the past fifteen years and during this time I have become quite familiar with the downtown area. Of the many restaurants that I enjoy frequently dining at, My Thai on Michigan Avenue is among my favorites. Jack, my neighbor, moved into the same apartment building the very weekend that I did fifteen years ago and he, too, has become quite competent in his acquaintance with the city. Indeed, it is not uncommon for us to bump into each other at various places, My Thai being one of them. Today, when I saw Jack coming out of his apartment, I told him that I was on my way to My Thai on Michigan Avenue, after which he responded, "My Thai is not on Michigan Avenue—it is on State Street." Prior to this disagreement, neither Jack nor I had any reason to suspect that the other's memory is deficient in any way, and we both rightly regarded one another as peers as far as knowledge of Chicago is concerned.

What response should I rationally have to Jack's ordinary disagreement with me about My Thai's location? In particular, must I withhold, or at least significantly reduce my confidence in, my belief because a neighbor whom I believe to be an epistemic peer claims that the restaurant is on State Street? To my mind, nonconformism once again seems to give the correct intuitive result. For if I have lived in Chicago for fifteen years, know the city extremely well, frequently eat at My Thai, have not been drinking or taking any drugs, have substantial evidence that my memory is functioning reliably, and know all of this to be true of myself, then I seem perfectly justified in my confidence about My Thai's location, even after Jack fully discloses his vivid memory of the restaurant being on State Street. Indeed, given the substantial amount of credence and epistemic support enjoyed by my belief, Jack's disagreement seems appropriately regarded as evidence that something is not right with him. I may, for instance, suspect that he has been drinking, is delusional, or is suffering from some kind of memory loss; in any case, I seem rational in concluding that Jack is no longer an epistemic peer regarding the location of My Thai. Thus, as was the case in PERCEPTION and ELEMENTARY MATH, when the disagreement in question is ordinary, nonconformism seems to deliver the intuitively correct result in DIRECTIONS.

But, the conformist may object, in order for you to rationally retain your fully confident belief in the face of disagreement with an epistemic peer, there needs to be what we may call a "symmetry breaker."²¹ A symmetry breaker is something that indicates that the epistemic position of one of the parties to the disagreement in question is superior to the other's. For instance, in DIRECTIONS, I have had good reason for believing that Jack is my epistemic peer relative to My Thai's location, and thus I have had good reason for believing that our epistemic situations are symmetrical regarding this topic. In order for me to fully retain my confidence in my belief in the face of disagreement with Jack, then, there needs to be a symmetry breaker that justifies my nonconformity. Otherwise, my resistance to doxastic revision is little more than dogmatic egoism.

Here is where the ordinary nature of the disagreement is relevant. For notice: even when you and I have had excellent reasons for believing that we are epistemic peers, I will, in ordinary situations, often have access to information about myself that I lack with respect to you—let us call this *personal information*. I may, for instance, know about myself that I am not currently suffering from depression, or not experiencing side effects from prescribed medication, or not exhausted, whereas I may not know that all of this is true of you. Of course, given that I have excellent reason for believing that you and I are epistemic peers, I cannot, apart from the disagreement itself, have evidence for believing that you *are* currently suffering from depression, or that you *are* experiencing side effects from prescribed medication, and so on. But this is certainly compatible with my not knowing that these things are not true of you. Consider: two oncologists, both of whom are widely regarded as the best in the field, can surely appropriately regard one another as epistemic peers relative to cancer diagnoses, even if they do not at any given time know that the other is not depressed, not overtired, not suffering from a personal crisis, and so on. Now, applying these considerations to DIRECTIONS, note that the very disagreement at issue indicates that at least one of us—i.e., either Jack or I—is seriously cognitively malfunctioning. However, I know about myself that I have not been drinking, have not suffered from any recent delusions, and do not have any evidence for questioning the reliability of my memory. And while I do not have prior reason to question Jack’s capacities, the fact of the disagreement itself, in conjunction with the personal information that I possess about myself, now gives me reason to think that there *is* a serious problem with his cognitive faculties. In particular, my personal information, when it contributes to the already extraordinarily high degree of justified confidence that I have in my belief in DIRECTIONS, is able to serve as the requisite symmetry breaker here. Where Jack had previously seemed to be an epistemic peer of mine, I no longer regard him as one—his epistemic standing has

collapsed. This permits me, then, to retain my belief about the restaurant's location with the same high degree of justified confidence I had before the disagreement occurred.

Perhaps the conformist will here object that the above considerations reveal precisely why it should be idealized disagreement that is at issue. For stipulating that the parties to the disagreement are, in fact, epistemic peers who have fully disclosed their equal evidence effectively rules out the sort of symmetry breaker provided by personal information that contributes to an already high degree of justified confidence, thereby enabling us to focus entirely on the epistemic significance of the disagreement itself. In particular, it can be built directly into evidential and cognitive equality that both parties to the debate know of each other that there are no relevant asymmetries in their respective epistemic situations.

But notice, first, that when the case is idealized to this extent, it becomes quite difficult to make sense out of how disagreement is even possible. For if everything *even remotely relevant* to the topic at hand must be equal, then epistemic peers begin to sound much more like epistemic *clones*. It then becomes perplexing how epistemic clones relative to a question can even be engaged in a disagreement. Second, recall that two people are evidential equals relative to a question when they are equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on this question. But if in DIRECTIONS, I have numerous vivid memories of walking down Michigan Avenue into My Thai, and Jack seems to have many vivid memories of walking down State Street, then how could we be equally familiar with the evidence that bears on the location of this restaurant? Third, and related, if My Thai is in fact on Michigan Avenue, Jack and I have both lived in Chicago for fifteen years, and we have both frequented this restaurant countless times, then how can we both be cognitively functioning properly? That is to say, in light of the disagreement at hand, how could Jack and I be epistemic peers in the first place? Fourth, even if we were able to render coherent idealized disagreement between epistemic peers in DIRECTIONS, this concept has virtually no connection

to the very disagreements that breathe life into this debate. For it is very common for philosophers writing on this topic to motivate interest in it by citing debates in history, philosophy, politics, religion, and other areas where disagreement is widespread and impassioned. But these debates bear very little resemblance to the hyper-idealized scenarios under consideration here. It would rarely, if ever, happen that two people continue to disagree with one another about, say, gay marriage where there is evidential and cognitive equality with known epistemic symmetry in situations of full disclosure.²² Typically, there are all sorts of asymmetries at work, such as in the background assumptions that are being tacitly relied upon—e.g., only one party to the dispute may regard what the Bible says as relevant to social institutions like marriage—or in different character traits—e.g., only one party may be risk-averse—or in different values—e.g., only one party may value tradition more than equality, and so on. Moreover, it is even rarer for the two parties to the debate to know of one another that there are no epistemic asymmetries, particularly when personal information is at issue. How often does it happen, for instance, that I know that my colleague, with whom I disagree about the Iraq war, is not depressed, exhausted, distracted, and so on? Thus, conclusions drawn from hyper-idealized situations involving disagreement ultimately tend to have very little connection to the disagreements we face every day.²³ For these reasons, I think that, at least for the most part, ordinary disagreement ought to be the focus of this debate.²⁴

When we focus on ordinary disagreement, then, it looks as though nonconformists are correct that a negative response to question (1) above is warranted: a subject who disagrees with an epistemic peer is *not* thereby rationally required to revise her beliefs. Does this thereby necessitate, as nonconformists suggest, an affirmative answer to question (2)—that is, that there can be reasonable disagreement between epistemic peers? No.²⁵ For while all three cases above are ones where I am not required to revise my doxastic attitudes in the face of disagreement, they also involve my coming to conclude that something has gone awry—either evidentially or cognitively—with my

companion. For instance, upon hearing that Edwin is sincerely denying that Estelle is dining with us in PERCEPTION, I no longer believe that we are evidential and cognitive equals with respect to this question. Thus, the disagreement that Edwin and I have regarding this question is not a reasonable one; that is to say, it is not the case that we are equally reasonable in holding our respective beliefs.

But then is it correct to say that the nonconformist's negative response to question (1) has been defended? For if I no longer regard you as evidentially and cognitively equal in the above cases, then has it been shown that doxastic revision is not rationally required in the face of disagreement *between epistemic peers*?²⁶ In order to answer this question, recall Elga's characterization of conformism in the following passage:

Suppose that before evaluating a claim, you think that you and your friend are equally likely to evaluate it correctly. When you find out that your friend disagrees with your verdict, how likely should you think it that you are correct? The equal weight view says: 50%. (Elga 2007, p. 488)

According to conformism, then, if pre-disagreement (at t_1) A believes that she and B are equally likely to be correct regarding the question whether p, then post-disagreement (at t_2) A should believe the same. In other words, the disagreement itself should not change one's beliefs about the probability that one is right. Yet this is precisely what I, along with the nonconformist, deny in the above cases. For in PERCEPTION, ELEMENTARY MATH, and DIRECTIONS, I believe at t_1 that in the case of disagreement with my epistemic peer, the probability that I am right regarding the question whether p is 50% and then at t_2 , in light of the nature of the disagreement itself and the positive personal information that I possess, I believe that the probability that I am right is dramatically higher.²⁶ Given this, it would be more accurate to frame the original questions with which we began as follows: (1*) does disagreement with someone who, were it not for the

disagreement in question, one would regard as an epistemic peer, require substantial doxastic revision, and (2*) can there be reasonable disagreement between those who, were it not for the disagreement in question, would regard one another as epistemic peers? It should now be clear that while I have defended the negative answer given by nonconformists to (1*), I do not thereby endorse their positive answer to (2*). That is to say, disagreement with someone who, were it not for the disagreement in question, one would regard as an epistemic peer, does not necessarily require doxastic revision, but it does not follow from this that there is *reasonable* disagreement.

At this point, then, there are three conclusions that I have reached: first, there are some cases where idealizing the conditions at issue renders the relevant disagreement either inexplicable or disconnected from the very disagreements that motivate the debate; second, there are some cases of ordinary disagreement where nonconformism delivers the intuitively correct result, at least with respect to the question whether I must revise my beliefs in the face of this disagreement; and, third, personal information can contribute to the already high degree of justification held by a confident belief so as to provide precisely the symmetry breaker that is needed to explain why nonconformism seems to get it right in these cases. More will be said about these conclusions, but let us now consider whether any intuitive support can be garnered for conformism.

2. Conformism

One of the more intuitively compelling cases on behalf of conformism is provided by David Christensen, which can be presented as follows:²⁷

BILL CALCULATION: While dining with four of my friends, we all agree to leave a 20% tip and to evenly split the cost of the bill. My friend, Ramona, and I rightly regard one another as peers where calculations are concerned—we frequently dine together and consistently arrive at the same figure when dividing up the amount owed. After the bill

arrives and we each have a clear look at it, I assert with confidence that I have carefully calculated in my head that we each owe \$43 and Ramona asserts with the same degree of confidence that she has carefully calculated in her head that we each owe \$45.²⁸

Now, the first point to notice is that, as we saw with the earlier cases, hyper-idealizing the conditions in BILL CALCULATION renders the disagreement in question rather inexplicable. For instance, if evidential *equality* is required, it may be argued that I have the experience of going through a calculation that seems to support one-fifth of the bill being \$43, and Ramona has the experience of going through a calculation that seems to support one-fifth of the bill being \$45, so it is unclear how our evidence could be equal. Perhaps what is meant is merely that we have an equal *amount* of evidence supporting our different beliefs? But this surely cannot be what evidential equality requires, for there will then be countless cases where peer disagreement is explainable in terms of one party to the dispute being privy to a piece of crucial evidence that the other lacks. Moreover, full disclosure of the disagreement at issue will presumably include our sharing our calculations with one another, at least one of which is incorrect. So, after this full disclosure, what explains how idealized disagreement between epistemic peers persists in such a case?

Given these considerations, BILL CALCULATION, like the earlier cases, seems best understood as involving ordinary disagreement. Thus, apart from the disagreement at hand, Ramona and I both take ourselves to be epistemic peers with respect to the question under consideration—that is, we take ourselves to be in a position of both evidential and cognitive equality regarding the amount each of us owes and to have fully disclosed our evidence to one another.²⁹ What, then, is the rationally appropriate response to our disagreement? Christensen writes, “...it seems quite clear that I should lower my confidence that my share is \$43, and raise my confidence that it’s \$45. In fact, I think (though this is perhaps less obvious) that I should now accord these two hypotheses roughly equal credence” (Christensen 2007, p. 9 of ms.). While Christensen argues

that Ramona and I should split the difference in the degrees of confidence in our respective beliefs, Feldman's view is that each of us should withhold belief about the amount owed; in both cases, however, the conformist requires substantial doxastic adjustment in the face of ordinary disagreement with peers.

I must admit to sharing the conformist's intuitions in BILL CALCULATION. Given that I argued on the side of nonconformism with respect to PERCEPTION, ELEMENTARY MATH, and DIRECTIONS, but admit that conformism provides the correct result here, I now want to consider whether there is a principled explanation of this difference.

The first point to notice about the two types of cases is the degree of confidence with which the beliefs in question are held. In all of the cases supporting nonconformism, I am extremely confident in the truth of the beliefs that I hold—I am, for instance, extraordinarily sure that Estelle is sitting next to me at the table, that $2+2=4$, and that My Thai is on Michigan Avenue. In an ordinary case of disagreement, it would take a great deal more for me to adjust my doxastic states with respect to these beliefs than one person disagreeing with me, even one for whom I had, until that moment, good reason to believe was an epistemic peer. In contrast, when I divide in my head the amount of a large bill owed by five of us, I may be confident in my calculation, but I never come anywhere near the confidence that I have in my belief that a friend is currently sitting inches from me, or that $2+2=4$, or that a restaurant that I have been frequently going to for the past 15 years is on a street as unforgettable as Michigan Avenue.

To test the relevance of the degree of confidence with which beliefs are held, consider the following:

MODIFIED BILL CALCULATION: While dining with four of my friends, we all agree to leave a 20% tip and to evenly split the cost of the bill. My friend, Ramona, and I rightly regard one another as peers where calculations are concerned—we frequently dine together

and consistently arrive at the same figure when dividing up the amount owed—and we both have a clear view of the bill. After repeatedly going through the division of the amount of the bill on paper, I assert with a high degree of confidence that we each owe \$43. Ramona, who was also busy performing the division on paper, asserts with the same degree of confidence that we each owe \$45.

While some doxastic revision may still be appropriate here, I do not at all have the same conformist intuitions that I have in BILL CALCULATION. And I suspect that if the case is modified to include more and more rounds of calculation done by me on paper, or perhaps even on a calculator, we may ultimately end up altogether eliciting nonconformist intuitions, even if Ramona is busy doing the same number of calculations. For in a wide range of cases, the amount of doxastic revision rationally required by ordinary disagreement seems to diminish as the degree of confidence with which the belief in question is held increases.

But, clearly confidence, even when it is extraordinary, cannot be the only relevant feature here. For this would have the consequence that the hyper-dogmatist—who is supremely confident in all of her beliefs—is never rationally required to adjust her doxastic states in the face of ordinary disagreement with epistemic peers. This brings us to the second point about the difference between those cases that support nonconformism and those that support conformism: what PERCEPTION, ELEMENTARY MATH, and DIRECTIONS have that BILL CALCULATION lacks is extraordinary confidence that is *epistemically justified*. In the first three cases, I am in optimal epistemic conditions relative to the beliefs in question: I see my roommate of eight years sitting inches away from me in excellent lighting, I fully grasp with cognitive faculties that are not deficient in any way the truth of $2+2=4$, and I vividly remember My Thai being on Michigan Avenue, where this is the most famous street in Chicago and the restaurant is one that I have walked to countless times in the past fifteen years. Given these optimal epistemic conditions, the probability of my being wrong in

any of these three beliefs is extremely low, and thus my very high degree of confidence is clearly epistemically justified.

In BILL CALCULATION, however, the situation is quite different: I arrive at a belief after dividing in my head the amount of a large bill owed by five of us. Several features of this case render the likelihood of my being wrong somewhat high. For instance, the bill is rather large—if it were instead a \$25 bill that I was dividing equally by five, Ramona asserting that we each owe \$6 rather than \$5 would fail to clearly elicit conformist intuitions. I am also dividing the bill by five—if I were dividing a \$218 bill by two, my believing that we each owe \$109 may not intuitively require doxastic adjustment in the face of an epistemic peer's disagreement. Moreover, I am doing the calculation in my head—if I were working the math out on paper, we may be less inclined to say that I should withhold belief given Ramona's disagreement with me. Finally, I perform the calculation only once—if I had repeatedly done the math and consistently arrived at the belief that we each owe \$43, conformism no longer seems to be the clear response to the situation. What these considerations reveal is that the likelihood of my being wrong in BILL CALCULATION is significant, and thus a very high degree of confidence in my belief is unjustified. To my mind, the absence of a high degree of justified confidence is what explains the clear conformist intuitions in this case.

This provides the resources for answering a question that some readers may have at this point: why is there a symmetry breaker in the cases supporting nonconformism, but not in BILL CALCULATION? Here is the answer: personal information, when it contributes to the already high degree of justification possessed by a confident belief—such as that enjoyed by my belief that $2+2=4$ —is sufficient for breaking the prior epistemic symmetry between you and me when we disagree. But the cases that clearly elicit conformist intuitions can be different from those that intuitively justify nonconformism in various ways. First, the nature of the disagreement in the latter

cases indicates that at least one party to the dispute is seriously cognitively malfunctioning. When there is a disagreement regarding whether $2+2=4$ or a friend is sitting at the table, for instance, it is unlikely that this can be explained by appealing to ordinary errors. Second, the confidence enjoyed by the beliefs in the cases supporting conformism may not be very high. In BILL CALCULATION, for instance, it is plausible to think that I regard it as quite possible that I am wrong. After all, I calculated only once, in my head, the amount owed by each of five people for a fairly large bill. Third, even if I tend to think very well of my abilities and thereby have an unusually high degree of confidence in my belief, this high degree is surely not justified given the substantial fallibility in this situation. Given these differences, the positive support provided by one's personal information will not be adequate, when combined with the relatively low degree of justified confidence, to render ordinary disagreement with a peer epistemically benign in cases supporting nonconformism.

3. Consequences

We are now in a position to draw some conclusions about the epistemic significance of disagreement. First, the cases where nonconformism clearly provides the correct result are ones where there is a symmetry breaker between one's epistemic peer and oneself that is provided by a very high degree of justified confidence in the truth of the belief in question that is further supported by the presence of personal information. More precisely:

No Doxastic Revision Required: If A's belief that p enjoys a very high degree of justified confidence, then this can combine with A's personal information to provide the necessary symmetry breaker between A and her epistemic peer, B, thereby enabling A to rationally retain her same degree of belief that p in the face of ordinary disagreement with B.

Second, the cases where conformism clearly provides the correct result are ones where there is a relatively low degree of justified confidence such that the positive support provided by personal information is insufficient for breaking the epistemic symmetry between one and one's epistemic peer. In particular:

Substantial Doxastic Revision Required: If A's belief that p enjoys a relatively low degree of justified confidence, then rationality requires A to substantially revise the degree to which she holds her belief that p in the face of ordinary disagreement with her epistemic peer, B.

There will, then, be many cases that fall on the spectrum between no doxastic revision required, and substantial doxastic revision being necessary. If, say, A's belief that p enjoys a moderately high degree of justified confidence, then merely some doxastic revision may be required in the face of ordinary disagreement with an epistemic peer. For instance, rather than withholding belief or splitting the difference in degree of belief, A may be required to only somewhat reduce the degree to which she believes that p. On the other hand, if A's belief that p enjoys a moderately low degree of justified confidence, then more doxastic revision may be required in the face of ordinary disagreement, but perhaps still not as much as withholding or splitting the difference in degree of belief.

Third, in spite of my siding with nonconformists in some cases and conformists in others, it is a mistake to regard my view as merely a hybrid of the two. I do not agree with the nonconformist that peer disagreement is entirely without epistemic power, even when I support the intuitive results of such a view; nor do I agree with the conformist that peer disagreement possesses substantial epistemic power, even when I support the intuitive results of this view. In this sense, I reject both nonconformism (because the absence of doxastic revision in the face of peer disagreement is never justified merely by virtue of the fact that beliefs are either mine or are the product of correct reasoning) and conformism (because substantial doxastic revision in the face of peer disagreement is

never justified merely by virtue of equal weight being given to my own beliefs and to those held by my epistemic peers). Instead, my view holds that peer disagreement's epistemic power, or lack thereof, supervenes on the degree of justified confidence with which the belief in question is held, which can, in part, be determined by the presence or absence of personal information. It is for this reason that my view is *justificationist* rather than simply a blend of nonconformism and conformism.

Finally, as should be clear, I reject Uniformity. My view maintains that ordinary disagreement with a peer sometimes permits nonconformist results and, at other times, conformist results, depending on whether a symmetry breaker is provided by the degree of justified confidence enjoyed by the belief in question.³⁰ I take this to be a significant virtue of the present account, as it not only accommodates the apparently conflicting intuitions in the literature, but also provides an explanation of them.

4. Two Problems

In this section, I shall discuss two problems facing the current views of the epistemic significance of disagreement, one targeting nonconformism and the other conformism. I shall then explain how, unlike these current theories, my justificationist view has the resources to adequately handle both problems with ease.

The difficulty facing the nonconformist is what I shall call the *One against Many Problem*. According to the nonconformist, disagreement with epistemic peers does not by itself require any doxastic revision—other features do, such as the *arguments* supporting the beliefs in question.³¹ But even in those cases where nonconformist intuitions seem plausible, surely the more disagreement one faces, the more implausible nonconformism becomes. For instance, let us return to DIRECTIONS—even if I am not rationally required to adjust my doxastic states in response to Jack's disagreement, if enough epistemic peers disagree with me, I clearly should significantly revise

my belief about My Thai's location. For instance, if ten other people in my apartment building, all of whom know Chicago exceedingly well, claim that My Thai is on State Street, my confidence in my original belief should at least begin to diminish. If twenty-five epistemic peers claim that My Thai is not on Michigan Avenue, then perhaps I should come close to withholding. And if, say, one hundred epistemic peers confidently assert that the restaurant is on State Street, then perhaps I should completely abandon my previous belief, even if it initially enjoyed an extraordinarily high degree of justified confidence. Granted, in such a situation, I may begin to worry that I am going mad, or that I am suffering the early symptoms of dementia, but it would clearly be dogmatic irrationality at its finest for me to continue to hold my initial belief, with the same degree of confidence, in the face of so much peer disagreement. So the problem for the nonconformist is that even if *one* instance of disagreement is epistemically insignificant, surely *many* instances of disagreement are epistemically significant, yet nonconformism does not appear to have the resources to provide a principled explanation of this. For on this view, *disagreement itself is lacking in epistemic power*—all of the work is instead done by the arguments or reasons for holding the belief in question. Thus, because those arguments and reasons have not changed, it would seem to follow that one can continue to rationally retain one's beliefs, with the same degree of confidence, no matter whether hundreds or thousands of epistemic peers disagree with one. Surely this is an unwelcome result.

The difficulty facing the conformist is what I shall call the *Many against One Problem*. Intuitions supporting conformism are typically elicited by focusing on what rationality requires in the face of peer disagreement. While the nonconformist argues—on one end of the spectrum—that such disagreement, by itself, is epistemically insignificant, the conformist maintains—on the other end of the spectrum—that just *one* instance of peer disagreement is incredibly significant, necessitating substantial doxastic revision either through withholding belief or splitting the difference in degrees of confidence. But here is the problem: given the enormous power granted to

disagreement on the conformist's view, what room is left for the epistemic significance of peer *agreement*? More precisely, if *many* epistemic peers agree with one on the answer to a question, yet only *one* epistemic peer disagrees, surely substantial doxastic revision is not required; however, it is not clear how conformism will provide a principled explanation of this. To see this, let us return to BILL CALCULATION—even if I am rationally required to adjust my doxastic states in response to Ramona's disagreement, if enough epistemic peers agree with me, I should clearly no longer do so. For instance, if ten other people at the restaurant, all of whom are reliable at performing calculations, claim that each of the five of us dining together owes \$43, then my confidence in my original belief should at least be close to its original state. If twenty-five epistemic peers claim that it is \$43, then perhaps I should believe it with a significantly higher degree of confidence. And if, say, one hundred epistemic peers confidently assert that the amount is \$43, then perhaps I should have an extraordinarily high degree of confidence in my belief. Yet in the face of all of this agreement stands Ramona's lone voice of peer disagreement. Given that she is a peer and she disagrees with me, conformists seem to nonetheless require substantial doxastic revision on my part. But surely this is the wrong result. Many voices of peer agreement against one of peer disagreement should render the dissenter's voice epistemically irrelevant. It is, however, unclear how the conformist can accommodate this intuition in a way that is not *ad hoc*.

Of course, the nonconformist could *say* that disagreement that has no epistemic significance in isolation can all of sudden acquire enormous power when it enjoys company, and the conformist could *assert* that one instance of peer disagreement is significant but not when it is in conjunction with many voices of peer agreement. But surely a principled explanation would be needed of both of these claims. What might such an explanation look like? The most natural candidate appeals to the *underlying epistemic story* of the situation, which not only abandons the views of the nonconformist and the conformist, but also brings us precisely to my justificationist account.

On my view, disagreement with one's epistemic peers is one piece of information among many, and rational agency requires viewing it in relation to all of one's other evidence. Thus, even if one's belief that *p* initially enjoys a very high degree of justified confidence, adding many instances of peer disagreement to one's total body of evidence regarding the question whether *p* radically changes the evidential support enjoyed by one's belief by significantly lowering the likelihood of its truth. Similarly, even if one's belief that *p* presently enjoys a very low degree of justified confidence because of an instance of peer disagreement, adding many instances of peer agreement to one's total body of evidence regarding the question whether *p* substantially alters the evidential support enjoyed by one's belief, but this time in its favor. This enables my view to explain in a principled way both why one instance of peer disagreement may be epistemically impotent while twenty-five such instances require doxastic revision, and why one instance of peer disagreement may be epistemically significant but not when combined with twenty-five instances of peer agreement.

Otherwise put, nonconformists face the One against Many Problem because they radically underemphasize the epistemic significance of disagreement itself, and conformists face the Many against One Problem because they radically overemphasize its significance. But because my justificationist view holds that the epistemic significance of disagreement supervenes on the degree of justified confidence with which the belief in question is held, the variability of disagreement's significance is built directly into my account, thereby avoiding both of the problems afflicting rival views.

5. Applications

Many of the cases discussed thus far in connection with nonconformism and conformism involve situations where the disagreement at issue is neither deeply entrenched nor difficult to resolve. In DIRECTIONS, for instance, the disagreement that Jack and I have regarding My Thai's location is

somewhat superficial and easily settled—today is the first time we have disagreed on this topic and we can simply walk over to Michigan Avenue together and see whether the restaurant is there or on State Street. Similarly, in BILL CALCULATION, Ramona and I have not been debating for months or years the amount of the bill that each of us owes, and we can simply pull out a calculator to determine who is correct. But many disagreements among peers, especially the ones that breathe practical urgency into this topic, are not at all like this. Disagreements about universal healthcare, wartime strategies, capital punishment, the problem of evil, and medical diagnoses—to name just a few—often involve deep-rooted debate over matters that frequently appear irresolvable. So as to provide a more complete account of the epistemic significance of peer disagreement, then, I shall now briefly apply my justificationist view to a case that involves debate of this more difficult to resolve sort, and then I shall flesh out how these considerations generalize.

To begin, consider the following:

DIAGNOSIS: Dr. Haggard and Dr. Wolf are both impeccably educated and highly respected physicians with fifteen years of practicing medicine under their belts. Ruby, who has been thoroughly examined by both doctors, has been suffering for months from extreme fatigue, swollen joints, muscle pain, memory loss, sensitivity to light, and persistent fevers. After running the same tests and receiving identical results, Dr. Haggard is quite convinced that Ruby has chronic fatigue syndrome, and Dr. Wolf is just as convinced that she suffers from lupus.

Now, in DIAGNOSIS, we have a clear case of disagreement between epistemic peers: both doctors are equally educated, esteemed, and experienced, they are privy to all of the same data about Ruby's condition, and yet they nonetheless arrive at different diagnoses. What does my justificationist view say about this sort of case?

The first point to notice is that it is doubtful that my account would require no doxastic revision whatsoever in such a case. For given that all of Ruby's symptoms are at least compatible with both chronic fatigue syndrome and lupus, it is unclear what would justify extraordinary confidence—especially of the degree enjoyed by the beliefs in PERCEPTION, ELEMENTARY MATH, and DIRECTIONS—on the part of either doctor. So, unless there are unusual circumstances, my justificationist view will require *some* doxastic revision.³² How much?

This brings us to the second point: the answer to this question will depend in large part on how the details of DIAGNOSIS are filled out. For instance, suppose that it just so happens that Dr. Haggard has treated only a handful of patients suffering from lupus while he has had dozens with chronic fatigue syndrome, and it is exactly the reverse for Dr. Wolf. Moreover, suppose that these contingent differences in their experiences account for their competing diagnoses, i.e., Dr. Haggard is more likely to “see” chronic fatigue syndrome in a patient with Ruby's symptoms while Dr. Wolf is more likely to “see” lupus. In this case, no matter how convinced the doctors are of their respective conclusions, they should significantly lower their confidence levels in the face of disagreement since their perspectives are distorted by their past experiences. In other words, this distortion renders the doctors unjustified in being firmly convinced of their respective diagnoses.

On the other hand, suppose that Dr. Haggard is very confident that Ruby has chronic fatigue syndrome because it is very rare for a patient suffering from lupus to not have a skin rash. Indeed, in his fifteen years of practicing medicine, Dr. Haggard has never seen a lupus patient without such a rash. While Dr. Wolf is aware of this information, he accords a lower weight to the statistical unlikelihood of a lupus patient not having a rash than his colleague does, and thus takes a more holistic approach to his diagnoses. In such a case, Dr. Haggard may be quite reasonable in regarding the probability that Ruby has lupus as low, and thus he may be highly justified in his

chronic fatigue syndrome diagnosis. Here, then, my view allows for Dr. Haggard to revise only minimally his belief in the face of disagreement with Dr. Wolf.

A general principle at work here is that revision is required when neither subject can reasonably explain why there is the disagreement in question. *A fortiori*, neither subject can explain why she has an advantage over the other; hence, there is no symmetry breaker in this type of case. In the first case above, if the doctors were brought into conversation on the case, each would have to acknowledge both the strength and the weakness of the other's epistemic position, and would also have to acknowledge that these are comparable to the strength and weakness of his own position. In the second case, however, Dr. Haggard may take himself to have an epistemic advantage over Dr. Wolf by virtue of according what he takes to be the proper weight to Ruby's lack of a rash.

Although countless other permutations of DIAGNOSIS can be envisaged, it should be clear that my justificationist view of peer disagreement will be capable of providing a principled explanation of why doxastic revision is, or is not, required in each of them. Moreover, the view easily generalizes to any sort of disagreement.³³ Whether epistemic peers are debating abortion, God's existence, or art, the degree of doxastic revision required will be determined by the level of justified confidence with which the beliefs in question are held. And both the degrees of justification and confidence enjoyed by a given belief can be influenced by countless factors. Thus, my view may require very little doxastic revision when two epistemic peers are engaged in a debate regarding the Iraq war, and yet may require substantial doxastic revision when two other epistemic peers are disagreeing about this same topic. Of course, as noted above, some areas of dispute are such that it is extremely unlikely that extraordinary justified confidence—at least of the sort that requires no doxastic revision—will ever be enjoyed by the beliefs of the parties to the debate. Can one, for instance, ever be as justifiedly confident that God exists as one is that a friend is sitting at

the table? This is unlikely. But if it happens—if you actually have a vivid and authentic experience of God and become justifiedly certain of his existence—then my account has the resources to explain why you can rationally retain your belief in the face of disagreement with your peers. And this strikes me as a welcome feature of my view.

There is one further point I would like to revisit: near the end of section 1, I emphasized that while my arguments up to that point revealed that a subject who disagrees with an epistemic peer is not necessarily required to revise her beliefs, this does not thereby show that there can be reasonable disagreement between epistemic peers. For in all of the cases supporting nonconformism that I considered in that section, I ultimately concluded that something had gone awry—either evidentially or cognitively—with my companion. But, one might ask, according to my justificationist view in general, can there be reasonable ordinary disagreement between epistemic peers? Here is my answer: if it is possible for there to be a case of ordinary disagreement where both parties to the dispute hold their respective beliefs with a very high degree of justified confidence, then my view has the result that there can be such reasonable disagreement. Discussing whether or not the antecedent of this conditional claim is true or not, however, must await another occasion.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended a justificationist view of the epistemic significance of ordinary disagreement among epistemic peers. Such an account not only provides a plausible explanation for why nonconformism delivers the intuitively correct result in some cases of peer disagreement while conformism provides the right response in others, it can also handle both the One against Many Problem and the Many against One Problem with relative ease. These are significant virtues that the present view has over its rivals, as it reveals that my justificationist view is a fully generalizable

account of disagreement's epistemic significance that provides principled and unifying explanations of intuitions that would otherwise appear to be in conflict.³⁴

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¹ Of course, I am not really biased in my holding this belief!

² I borrow this term from Thomas Kelly (2005) who, in turn, borrows it from Gutting (1982). I shall later give a more precise characterization of what is involved in being epistemic peers.

³ When I speak merely of "peer disagreement," I mean disagreement between *epistemic* peers.

⁴ I borrow the phrase "extra weight" from Elga (2007).

⁵ There are passages in Fumerton (unpublished) which also echo egocentric nonconformism. For instance, he writes: "I do know how I reason better than I know how others reason. It is important to keep firmly in mind that in the final analysis there really is no alternative to the egocentric perspective. Even when my discoveries about what others believe defeat the justification I had prior to those discoveries, it is *my* discoveries that are doing the defeating. I can only use the discovery of disagreement to weaken my justification insofar as I trust *my* reasoning. Without such trust, there is no access even to what others believe. That is not to deny that trust in my reasoning ability can turn on itself—can lead me to doubt the very faculties that I trust. But when I can't understand exactly what is going on in the minds of others, I'll always turn back to the reasoning I understand best—my own" (Fumerton unpublished, pp. 10-1 of ms.).

⁶ In other words, the conformist claims that one cannot downgrade the epistemic status of one's peer merely because of the disagreement in question itself; one must have an independent reason for so downgrading.

Thus, Adam Elga writes,

Suppose that...you and your friend are to judge the truth of a claim, based on the same batch of evidence. Initially, you count your friend as an epistemic peer—you think that she is about as good as you at judging the claim. In other words, you think that, conditional on a disagreement arising, the

two of you are equally likely to be mistaken. Then the two of you perform your evaluations. As it happens, you become confident that the claim is true, and your friend becomes equally confident that it is false.

When you learn of your friend's opposing judgment, you should think that the two of you are equally likely to be correct. The reason is...[i]f it were reasonable for you to give your own evaluation extra weight—if it were reasonable to be more than 50% confident that you are right—then you would have gotten some evidence that you are a better evaluator than your friend. But that is absurd.

[T]he absurdity is made more apparent if we imagine that you and your friend evaluate the same long series of claims. Suppose for *reductio* that whenever the two of you disagree, you should be, say, 70% confident that your friend is the mistaken one. It follows that over the course of many disagreements, you should end up extremely confident that you have a better track record than your friend. As a result, you should end up extremely confident that you are a better evaluator. But that is absurd. *Without some antecedent reason to think that you are a better evaluator, the disagreements between you and your friend are no evidence that she has made most of the mistakes.* (Elga 2007, p. 487, emphasis added)

⁷ Full disclosure, according to Feldman, occurs when the parties to the disagreement "...have thoroughly discussed the issues. They know each other's reasons and arguments, and that the other person has come to a competing conclusion after examining the same information" (Feldman 2006, p. 220).

⁸ In particular, he argues that when faced with peer disagreement, "(1) I should assess the explanations for the disagreement in a way that's independent of my reasoning on the matter under dispute; and (2) to the extent that this sort of assessment provides reason for me to think that the explanation in terms of my own error is as good as that in terms of [your] error, I should move my belief towards [yours]" (Christensen 2007, pp. 16-7 of ms.).

⁹ Even more precisely, Elga writes:

Equal weight view: Upon finding out that an advisor disagrees, your probability that you are right should equal your prior conditional probability that you would be right. Prior to what? Prior to your thinking through the disputed issue, and finding out what the advisor thinks of it. Conditional on

what? On whatever you have learned about the circumstances of the disagreement. (Elga 2007, p. 490)

¹⁰ A possible exception is van Inwagen (1996), who focuses specifically on disagreements that are “matters of interminable debate” (p. 141), such as those found in philosophy, politics, and religion. Also, Christensen (2007) writes: “Does the disagreement of an epistemic peer always mandate withholding (supposing just a two-person case)? I think probably not. Suppose that my friend has a degree of confidence barely sufficient (given the context) for rational belief that not-P, but that I have a degree of confidence much greater than that required for believing P. It might be that even if I split the difference in degrees of confidence with my friend, I’ll still have enough confidence in P for all-or-nothing belief. In some such cases, it will be rational for me to maintain my (all-or-nothing) belief. Nevertheless, it seems to me that disagreement in all-or-nothing belief should often lead to suspension of belief by both sides” (pp. 37-8 of ms.). Thus, Christensen here seems to be espousing Uniformity with respect to splitting the difference in degrees of confidence of belief in the face of peer disagreement, but not with respect to withholding belief.

¹¹ I borrow this term from Christensen (2007).

¹² Christensen calls this “Cognitive Parity.”

¹³ Adam Elga offers an alternative characterization, according to which you count someone as an epistemic peer if “...you think that, conditional on a disagreement arising, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken” (2007, p. 487). Elga defends his “nonstandard” usage of “epistemic peer” on the following grounds:

On more standard usages, an epistemic peer is defined to be an equal with respect to such factors as “intelligence, perspicacity, honesty, thoroughness, and other relevant epistemic virtues” (Gutting 1982, 83), “familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on [the relevant] question”, and “general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias” (Kelly 2005). In defense of my use, suppose that you think that conditional on the two of you disagreeing about a claim, your friend is more likely than you are to be mistaken. Then however intelligent, perspicacious, honest, thorough, well-informed, and unbiased you may think your friend is, it would

seem odd to count her as an epistemic peer with respect to that claim, at least on that occasion.

(Elga 2007, p. 499, fn. 21)

Now, even if Elga's criticism of the standard use of "epistemic peer" is correct, it would not apply to my characterization in the text since I specify that A and B are both evidential and cognitive equals *relative to the question whether p*. Thus, according to my use of "epistemic peer," two people could not be evidential and cognitive equals with respect to the question whether p and yet deviate in their likelihood to be mistaken regarding this question.

There are, however, independent reasons to question Elga's nonstandard use of this term. For on his account, two people could radically differ in both their evidential backgrounds and their cognitive abilities with respect to the question whether p, yet nonetheless turn out to be epistemic peers regarding this question. For instance, I may be a complete novice with respect to identifying birds of prey, and you may be an expert ornithologist. When I am sober and you are highly intoxicated, however, we may be equally likely to be mistaken about whether the bird flying overhead is an osprey. On Elga's account, then, you and I would be epistemic peers with respect to this question, but this strikes me as quite a counterintuitive result.

¹⁴ It is unclear whether full disclosure for Feldman includes that A and B both *know* that all of the evidence relevant to the question whether p has been shared, but I will assume that this is the case at this point. Later in this paper, I will consider the epistemic significance of less idealized forms of disagreement.

¹⁵ This may lead one to wonder whether there is a certain amount of talking past one another taking place in this debate.

¹⁶ At the end of this section, I shall argue that this assumption is, in fact, incorrect.

¹⁷ For instance, recall that Rosen says, "It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence...it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators" (Rosen 2001, pp. 71-2).

¹⁸ Recall, for instance, that Feldman writes, "...in situations of full disclosure, where there are not evident asymmetries, the parties to the disagreement would be reasonable in suspending judgement about the matter

at hand. There are, in other words, no reasonable disagreements after full disclosure....” (Feldman 2006, p. 235).

¹⁹ In a similar spirit, Christensen responds to the charge that conformism leads to philosophical skepticism as follows:

It seems obvious to me that in philosophy—and in certain other disciplines as well—even the best practitioners make mistakes pretty frequently. And if one is part of a discipline whose methods are so clearly vulnerable to error, should one not take this as powerful reason for using precautions against unfounded confidence? It seems to me that such precautions, when available, are a good thing. The *fact* of disagreement is old, but bad, news; it is bad because it indicates the relatively benighted conditions under which we work. But adjusting our beliefs in the direction of those peers with whom we disagree should be welcomed as a valuable strategy for coping with our known infirmities. After all, I want my own beliefs to be those best supported by the evidence. So if the beliefs of other decent, yet imperfect, inquirers turn out to serve as partial checks against my falling short of this goal, that strikes me as being pretty good news. (2007, p. 40 of ms.)

²⁰ It is of interest to note that proponents of conformism often appeal to analogies with non-agential instruments in an attempt to show the absurdity of nonconformist results. For instance, Christensen provides the following example:

I look at my watch, a one-year-old Acme that has worked fine so far, and see that it says 4:10. Simultaneously, however, my friend consults her watch—also a one-year-old Acme with a fine track record—and it reads 4:20. When she tells me this, it clearly gives me new evidence that her watch is fast: I should not trust her watch as much as I would have before finding out that it disagreed with mine. But just as clearly, I’ve just gotten new evidence that my watch is slow, and this should diminish my trust in it. In this case, it’s obvious that the fact that one of the watches is on my wrist does not introduce an epistemically relevant asymmetry. (2007, p. 13 of ms.)

Feldman (2006, p. 234) makes a similar point appealing to different thermometers. The intuition we are invited to share by conformists here is that, without a reason independent of the disagreement in question for

doing so, it is just as absurd to prefer my belief over my peer's as it is to prefer the time my watch says over that of my friend's. But notice: there are cases analogous to PERCEPTION involving non-agential instruments. Consider the following:

WATCH: Sonya and I eat lunch together at a restaurant at noon, take a long walk around the lake, shop at multiple stores, and read at the bookstore café for several hours. I look out the window, noticing that the sun is setting, and say, "It is 7:45 PM, so we should get going," after which Sonya responds, "My watch says it is only 1:15 PM."

It seems clear to me in WATCH that, despite not having an *independent* reason to prefer the time my watch says over that of Sonya's, I am rational in regarding hers as the inaccurate one. For it is simply not at all plausible to think that we could have eaten lunch, walked around the lake, gone shopping, and read for several hours at the bookstore café in an hour and fifteen minutes, nor is it likely that the sun would be setting in Chicago at 1:15 in the afternoon. Thus, I take it that conformists fail to garner the intuitive mileage that they hope to on behalf of their view from these sorts of non-agential cases.

²¹ I borrow this phrase from Nathan Christiansen.

²² Perhaps this is why Kelly claims that "to uncritically assume that things are perfectly symmetrical with respect to all of the epistemically relevant considerations...is...to subtly beg the question in favor of the skeptical view" (2005, pp. 178-9).

²³ Alvin Goldman makes a similar point in his (unpublished).

²⁴ Henceforth, when I speak merely of "disagreement," I mean ordinary disagreement.

²⁵ I shall briefly revisit this answer at the end of this paper.

²⁶ It should be noted that there are two probabilities that need to be kept distinct: there is (i) the subjective probability that *p* is true, and (ii) the subjective probability that I am correct in my belief regarding *p*. Earlier in the paper, the discussion focused on (i), but now I am emphasizing (ii). It should be clear, however, that (i) and (ii) are intimately related for the conformist. For instance, recall David Christensen's claim that, upon discovering that I disagree with an epistemic peer, "(1) I should assess the explanations for the disagreement in a way that's independent of my reasoning on the matter under dispute; and (2) to the extent that this sort

of assessment provides reason for me to think that the explanation in terms of my own error is as good as that in terms of [my epistemic peer's] error, I should move my belief towards [my epistemic peer's]" (Christensen 2007, pp. 16-7 of ms.). Here Christensen is saying that in cases of peer disagreement, to the extent that I am willing to assign a 50% probability both to my being correct in my belief regarding p and to my epistemic peer's being correct, I should split the difference with my epistemic peer in the degree to which I believe that p . Thus, the probabilities assigned with respect to (ii) directly determine the probabilities that should be assigned with respect to (i).

I should make one further point: Christensen claims in (1) above that I should assess the explanations for the peer disagreement in question in a way that's independent of my reasoning on the matter under dispute. But as we saw in PERCEPTION, ELEMENTARY MATH, and DIRECTIONS, when the nature of the disagreement itself calls into question an epistemic peer's evidential or cognitive situation, my reasoning on the matter under dispute is critical in determining what my response ought to be. Thus, these sorts of cases show precisely why condition (1) should be eliminated from Christensen's account.

²⁷ A further defense of conformism frequently found in the literature appeals to the following:

The Uniqueness Thesis: A body of evidence, E , justifies at most one doxastic attitude—i.e., believing, disbelieving, suspending judgment—toward any particular proposition.

Indeed, Kelly (forthcoming) argues that "a commitment to The Equal Weight View carries with it a commitment to The Uniqueness Thesis" (forthcoming, p. 11 of ms.). For proponents of this thesis, see White (2005), Feldman (2006 and forthcoming), and Christensen (2007). While it lies outside the scope of this paper to discuss The Uniqueness Thesis, let me say that none of the arguments I make depend directly on its truth or falsity.

²⁸ See Christensen (2007, pp. 9-10 of ms.). I have slightly modified inessential details of Christensen's case, but all of the elements central to the conclusion about disagreement are the same.

²⁹ I am assuming that Ramona and I each asserting that we have carefully performed the relevant calculations in our heads suffices for us to have reason to believe that full disclosure has taken place. I should say, however, that the condition of full disclosure itself can be fleshed out in more or less idealized ways. For

instance, at one end of the spectrum, it may be required that each of us provides all of the details of our respective calculations to one another. In this case, we again face problems making sense of the possibility of the disagreement. For if we have each gone step by step with one another through our fairly elementary calculations, what room is left for us to continue to disagree about the amount owed? At the other end of the spectrum, full disclosure may require nothing more than each of us asserting that we have arrived at the conclusion in question. But then this does not add anything significant to the initial disagreement. Thus, I think it is best to understand full disclosure as falling somewhere in the middle, which is what I have built into BILL CALCULATION.

³⁰ Thus, I reject premise (4) of the Pro-Nonconformism Argument discussed in Section 1.

³¹ See, for instance, Kelly (2005).

³² By “unusual circumstances,” I mean something like one of the doctors possessing an extraordinary ability to detect lupus, or to diagnose patients, and so on.

³³ It is worth noting that some disagreements may be, in whole or in part, non-factual. My justificationist view, then, should be understood to account for whether doxastic revision is required in light of factual disagreement with an epistemic peer.

³⁴ For helpful comments on this paper, I am grateful to Richard Fumerton, Blake Roeber, and, especially, to Baron Reed.