

FOLEY'S SELF-TRUST AND RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I'll look at the implications of Richard Foley's epistemology for two different kinds of religious disagreement. First, there are those occasions on which a *stranger* testifies to me that she holds disagreeing religious beliefs. Typically, I'm dismissive of such religious disagreement, and I bet you are too. Richard Foley gives reasons to think that we need not be at all conciliatory in the face of stranger disagreement, but I'll explain why his reasons are insufficient. After that, I'll look at those types of religious disagreement that occur between epistemic *peers*. Foley has argued for a conciliatory position. I worry that his position leads to what some in the literature have called "spinelessness." I also worry that his view is self-defeating, and vulnerable to some apparent counterexamples. I'll end the paper by sketching my own, non-Foleyan, solution to those problems.

KEYWORDS: peer disagreement, Richard Foley, equal weight view, conciliatory views, knowledge by acquaintance, skepticism

Stranger Disagreement

In Part I of his 2001 book, Foley provides an interesting and thoughtful summary of historical attempts to refute skepticism. He worries that the only way in which we could completely refute skepticism is by embracing an epistemology on which "the conditions of rational belief are conditions to which we always have immediate and unproblematic access."¹ He calls this epistemology of direct acquaintance "Russellian Foundationalism," after you-know-who. Unfortunately, he says, few epistemologists are willing to take that kind of "extreme" epistemology seriously anymore,² presumably because of the "withering attacks" of the last half-century,³ and because, as Foley says, "there is no way of providing non-question-begging assurances of the reliability of one's faculties and beliefs."⁴ So, he concludes:

¹ Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 23.

² Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 23-24.

³ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 5.

⁴ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 4.

Once we give up on [Russellian Foundationalism], we have no choice but to acknowledge that significant intellectual projects require correspondingly significant leaps of intellectual faith.⁵

And so direct acquaintance takes a back seat to self-trust for the rest of Foley's book. Giving up on an epistemology of direct acquaintance is, I think, a bit hasty, and in the final section of this paper I'll try to sell you on a more moderate cousin of Russellian Foundationalism. For now, let's focus on self-trust, which, according to Foley, explains why we generally trust the testimony of others:

The presumption of trust in others is generated out of self-trust. My opinions have been shaped by faculties and circumstances that shape the opinions of others. Thus, insofar as I trust my opinions and faculties, I am pressured to trust the opinions and faculties of others as well, even when I know little or nothing about their track records of reliability or their specific circumstances or backgrounds.⁶

Naturally, this presumptive trust may be defeated by information indicating I'm an epistemic superior. And that's not all, Foley continues:

In addition, there is an important and common way in which the prima facie credibility of someone else's opinion can be defeated even when I have no specific knowledge of the individual's track record, capacities, training, evidence, or background. It is defeated when our opinions conflict, because, by my lights, the person has been unreliable. Whatever credibility would have attached to the person's opinion as a result of my general attitude of trust toward the opinions of others is defeated by the trust I have in myself. ...[W]hen my opinions conflict with a person about whom I know little, the pressure to trust that person is dissipated because, with respect to the issue in question, the conflict itself constitutes a relevant dissimilarity between us.⁷

Let's say a *stranger* is, in my case, someone about whose track record, capacities, training, prior evidence, and background I have little or no specific knowledge. In the absence of such knowledge, Foley says, my prima facie reason to accept another person's testimony "is defeated if I have a conflicting opinion," and yet, "it nonetheless may still be epistemically rational for me to defer to the person, but only if I have special reasons indicating that he or she is better positioned than I to assess the claim in question."⁸ For example, Foley says,

⁵ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 24.

⁶ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 108.

⁷ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 108.

⁸ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 110. Though he uses the first-person, I take it that Foley here is expressing a general policy on disagreement. It's an interesting question whether Foley's own account of rationality is consistent with this or any other general policy on disagreement. Foley

specialized skills, faculties, training, or information can put one in a better position.

Later, Foley restates this claim in terms of degrees of belief:

Degrees of belief are in general best represented not by precise subjective probabilities but rather a range of subjective probabilities. Thus, my degree of belief in *P* might be best represented by the range .7 to .9. If your degree of belief lies entirely outside this range, for example, in the range .4 to .6, we have conflicting degrees of belief. Your opinion also conflicts with mine if part of its range lies outside the range of my opinion, for example, if your degree of belief in *P* is in the range .6 to .8. In both kinds of cases, the *prima facie* reason I have to trust your opinion is defeated, and hence **I have no reason to move my opinion in the direction of your opinion** unless I have special reasons for thinking that you are in an especially good position to assess *P*.⁹

So, in sum, Foley thinks the following is true:

STRANGER CLAIM:

If I know that a stranger and I have conflicting degrees of belief in *p*, and I don't have special reasons to think that she's in a better position than I am to assess *p*, then (*ceteris paribus*) I have no reason to move my opinion in the direction of her opinion.¹⁰

If STRANGER CLAIM were true, it would excuse those who, like me, politely but firmly shut the door on those pesky proselytizers on the porch. Foley's STRANGER CLAIM would license that dismissive behavior since, by our lights, these strangers have proven themselves unreliable simply by disagreeing with us. This is a relevant dissimilarity, Foley says, and entails that we have no reason to move our opinions in the direction of those strangers' opinions.

understands epistemic rationality as invulnerability to self-criticism. More carefully: Smith's belief *B* is rational just in case *B* is in accord with Smith's other reflective first-order opinions, as well as with her reflective second-order opinions about the ways she can reliably acquire opinions (*Intellectual Trust*, 28). But there are very many epistemically disordered (i.e. crazy) people out there, including unreflective people who only gently self-criticize as well as hyper-reflective people who harshly self-criticize. And so it may easily come out as Foley-rational for some hyper-self-critical Smith to defer to a disagreeing stranger even when Smith lacks special reasons indicating that the stranger is better positioned to assess the claim in question – steadfastness may not hold up to Smith's inordinately severe self-criticism. And so it looks like Foley's general principle here is inconsistent with his favored account of rationality. I believe this is also true of his other general principles discussed below, but I won't mention it again.

⁹ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 114, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ The *ceteris paribus* clause here is meant to exclude cases in which I have other, independent reasons to move my opinion in the direction of the stranger's opinion.

Counterexample

Unfortunately, STRANGER CLAIM is false, and we can't excuse our dismissive behavior so easily. Here's an example to help us see why. Suppose I know that, on average, adult humans are 85% accurate when it comes to distinguishing maple trees from non-maple trees. I've tested myself on the question, and I'm perfectly average: 85% accurate. One day I'm staring at what I'm *certain* is a maple, and an adult human stranger approaches. "What a fine lookin' non-maple tree," she says. "Yep, *definitely* not a maple!" I have very little if any specific knowledge about her track record, background, etc.¹¹ I don't have special reasons indicating she's better positioned than I am. But, as Foley's STRANGER CLAIM entails, do I really have *no* reason to be *any* less confident that it's a maple? Surely not. It's clear that I have at least some reason to at least slightly lower my confidence. (If you disagree, imagine another stranger arrives and independently gives the same testimony: "Yep, *definitely* not a maple!" And then another. And then another. Would it really be rational for me to end up with the same degree of confidence that I started with? Foley says "Yes," but intuition shouts "No!") But then STRANGER CLAIM gives the wrong verdict here, and so it isn't true. So, we'll have to look for some other explanation of why it is excusable to dismiss the opinions of disagreeing strangers.¹²

Here's my proposal: the reason I typically don't wilt when confronted by strangers who disagree with me on religious questions is that – forgive the immodesty – I believe I'm better than average at assessing those religious questions. Perhaps my degree of belief should fade slightly – but not very much, since I think I'm substantially more reliable than the average person, at least with

¹¹ Foley includes "evidence," but I've omitted it here, since I worry that it's very easy to have "specific knowledge" about someone's evidence, in which case the antecedent of STRANGER CLAIM will virtually never be satisfied. I take it Foley wouldn't want to say that my "specific knowledge" of the tree – or my experience-type of the tree, or the fact that this stranger is looking at the tree – prevents the antecedent of STRANGER CLAIM from being satisfied in this case. I should also hope that my knowledge that the onlooker is an adult human doesn't constitute enough "specific knowledge" of her background or capacities to make her a non-stranger. Otherwise, genuine strangers will be very rare indeed, and STRANGER CLAIM will be flirting with triviality.

¹² As discussed below, Foley elsewhere (*Intellectual Trust*, 110-111) says "Insofar as it is reasonable for me to regard us as exact epistemic peers with respect to the issue, it is reasonable for me to withhold judgment until I better understand how one or both of us have gone wrong." So perhaps Foley's view on peer disagreement entails that I should be conciliatory in the maple tree case, even though his view on stranger disagreement clearly entails that I shouldn't. If so, Foley's combined view is incoherent.

respect to some subset of religious questions.¹³ If my reliability were just average, I should be much more deferential towards disagreeing strangers, as the maple tree example illustrates. And when I was younger, I often took the religious disagreement of strangers very seriously, since I estimated myself to be at best average with respect to assessing those religious issues. And if, for example, a stranger at a distinguished philosophy of religion conference disagreed with me about religious issues, I would take that very seriously, since I'd have antecedent reasons to believe that she's better than average at assessing very many religious questions.

So it's not, as Foley says, that the stranger's *prima facie* credibility is defeated because, by my lights, she's proven unreliable. Rather, in at least some disagreements the stranger remains credible, depending on how reliable I antecedently believe she is compared to me. A stranger's disagreement may, therefore, provide me with some reason to significantly change my degree of belief. But then Foley's STRANGER CLAIM just isn't right.

Peer Disagreement

Now I'll lay out Foley's views on disagreement between epistemic peers. Then, I'll offer some objections to his position, and express worries that his view doesn't have the resources to answer these objections.

Foley says this about peer disagreement:

[S]uppose it is rational for me to believe that we are equally well positioned to evaluate the issue and equally skilled and equally well informed and that we have also devoted an equal amount of time and effort to thinking about the issue. ...I have no reason to simply defer to your authority. On the other hand, neither is it permissible for me simply to go on believing what I had been believing. Insofar as it is reasonable for me to regard us as exact epistemic peers with respect to the issue, it is reasonable for me to withhold judgment until I better understand how one or both of us have gone wrong.¹⁴

In the context, it is clear that Foley is working with an all-or-nothing model of belief here. And so, the last sentence in the above quotation seems to be a rough statement of an equal-weight view of peer disagreement:

¹³ I think Foley himself might agree here, since he says (*Intellectual Trust*, 119): "experts are unlikely to have reasons to think that others are in a better position than they to evaluate issues within their specialty." I'd add that experts are also unlikely to have reasons to think that others are in an *equal* position.

¹⁴ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 110-111.

FOLEY'S EQUAL-WEIGHT VIEW:

If I reasonably believe we disagree about p , and that we're equally well positioned, well informed, skilled, and diligent with respect to p , then it's reasonable for me to give your opinion on p equal weight as my own.

If, as Foley says, in such a case my opinion is p and yours is not- p , then it's reasonable to withhold judgment on p . I think that the equal-weight view has much intuitive appeal, and that it delivers the right verdict in a wide variety of cases. So enamored am I by the equal-weight view that I've even defended a version of it in print, against apparent counterexamples and against the charge of self-defeat.¹⁵

However, my defense relied on an epistemology of direct acquaintance, something in the neighborhood of Russellian Foundationalism. I worry that, since Foley has given up on Russellian Foundationalism and instead embraced an epistemology of self-trust, he lacks the resources to prevent his equal-weight view of peer disagreement from issuing absurd verdicts, defeating itself, and requiring an unappealing degree of spinelessness, which would extend to our most deeply held religious beliefs. (Serious charges indeed!)

Let me first explain the problematic cases I have in mind. Consider **Extreme Restaurant Check**: You and your friend go out to dinner, and it's time to split the check. You both know the value of the bill, and you reasonably believe that, here in the circumstances, you're peers when it comes to this sort of arithmetic. The bill total is only \$75, but, after careful and sober calculation, your friend sincerely declares that each share is \$450, a far sight over the whole tab. Intuitively, it's not reasonable to give her assessment equal weight in this apparent case of peer disagreement. But that's contrary to what the equal-weight view – Foley's version in particular – seems to recommend. So here we have an apparent counterexample.

Now consider **Extreme Skepticism**: You're at the restaurant again, and you reasonably believe your friend to be a peer on questions about what happened within the last hour in this restaurant. But then the bill arrives, and your friend sincerely, soberly, and triumphantly announces that you need not pay the bill, since the world popped into existence a mere five minutes ago with the appearance of age, including this bill and the food in your stomachs. Intuitively, it's not reasonable to give her assessment equal weight in this apparent case of peer disagreement. But that's contrary to what the equal-weight view – Foley's

¹⁵ Tomas Bogardus "A Vindication of the Equal-Weight View," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 6 (2009): 324-335.

version in particular – seems to recommend. So here too we have an apparent counterexample.

Finally, consider the charge of **Self-Defeat**: Critics of the equal-weight view point out that its advocates know of epistemic peers who disagree strongly enough for the equal-weight view to recommend giving itself up. And so, the critic concludes, if the equal-weight view is true, we shouldn't believe it. And of course if it's false we shouldn't believe it either.

A moderate version of Russellian Foundationalism supplies satisfying responses to the above cases. We need not subscribe to Foley's extreme construal of Russellian Foundationalism, namely that we *always* have immediate and unproblematic access to the conditions of rational belief. As long as we occasionally have this access, the problems of the previous paragraphs may be avoided. Let me explain.

When you take your faculties to be as reliable as your friend's, and each of your faculties are given the same inputs, it is clearly unacceptably arbitrary to dismiss the report that p from your friend's faculties on the basis of the report that not- p from your own faculties. But if you're relying not on a *report* from your faculties, but rather on your immediate and unproblematic access to the fact that not- p , steadfastness is clearly called for. And this is just what happens in **Extreme Restaurant Check**. On that occasion, you have – via what some philosophers have called “rational intuition” – immediate and unproblematic access to the fact that *each share of this check is not \$450*. Or so I claim.¹⁶

This reasoning can be extended to the problem of **Self-Defeat**. In the last paragraph, we learned how steadfastness may be called for in cases involving knowledge from that unmediated access to the truth of propositions sometimes afforded by rational intuition. And it's plausible that the equal-weight view is itself a deliverance of rational intuition. Even Thomas Kelly, a prominent opponent of the equal-weight view, admits that “reflection on certain kinds of

¹⁶ And, importantly, you may demote your friend from peerhood in a way that doesn't presuppose the truth of your answer or the falsity of your friend's answer – thereby respecting the central motivating insight of the equal-weight view – since you may reason in roughly this way: I have immediate access to a pertinent piece of evidence. Either my friend also does, or she doesn't. If she doesn't, I have relevant evidence she lacks, so she's not a peer. If she does have this access, then either there's merely verbal disagreement (and so this isn't a case of peer *disagreement*), or she genuinely disbelieves something that she has immediate and unproblematic access to. If so, she's cognitively malfunctioning, and so not a peer. In any event, then, and even setting aside the truth-values of our answers and the reasoning that got us to them, this isn't a case of peer disagreement.

cases can make it seem almost trivial or obviously true.”¹⁷ With further reflection, I think, not only does it *seem* obvious, but it just *is* obvious. Its non-adherents have, for all their virtues, failed to fully appreciate this. And if an adherent of an equal-weight view does have immediate and unproblematic access to its truth, steadfastness will be called for in the face of a disbeliever. And so, under those circumstances, the view won’t be self-defeating.

Now for **Extreme Skepticism**. It is clearly unacceptably arbitrary or question-begging to respond to an apparent case of peer disagreement in this way: “My friend’s faculties report that *p* is true. But, given the same inputs, my faculties report that *p* is false. So my friend’s faculties are malfunctioning, and so she’s not a peer.” But it is clearly not unacceptably arbitrary to demote your friend from peerhood if you have immediate and unproblematic access to a fact of the form *my friend’s answer here indicates malfunction*. This may happen if, for example, your friend claims that she is the messiah.¹⁸ And this is relevant to Extreme Skepticism. There, your friend’s answer isn’t obviously false, as it is in Extreme Restaurant Check. Rather, what’s immediately apparent is that your friend’s answer here indicates cognitive malfunction, just as it would if she had sincerely claimed that she’s a pony. In light of your immediate and unproblematic access to the impropriety of your friend’s answer, steadfastness is called for.¹⁹

Now here’s the problem for Foley: he’s no fan of anything in the neighborhood of Russellian Foundationalism. As he says, “there is no way of providing non-question-begging assurances of the reliability of one’s faculties and beliefs.”²⁰ So I don’t think he’d accept even my more moderate version of Russellian Foundationalism. Instead, he opts for an epistemology of intellectual trust in oneself and others. But – and here’s my central worry for Foley – how will such an epistemology circumvent the absurdity and self-defeat that lie in wait for conciliatory views of peer disagreement? On what basis may I explain the

¹⁷ Thomas Kelly, “Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence,” in *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111-174.

¹⁸ David Christensen, “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 187-217. See page 198 for discussion of the messiah case.

¹⁹ And, importantly, you may demote your friend from peerhood in a way that doesn’t presuppose the truth of your answer or the falsity of your friend’s answer, thereby respecting the central motivating insight of the equal-weight view. Your friend *may* be right about the universe popping into existence five minutes ago – her claim is broadly logically possible, and compatible with all appearances. Nevertheless, that she believes so in this case is an obvious sign of cognitive malfunction, even setting aside the truth values of your answers and the reasoning that got you to them.

²⁰ Foley, *Intellectual Trust*, 4.

disagreement in Extreme Restaurant Check in terms of my friend's error, if all that I have access to are the report of my faculties and the report of my friend's faculties, both of which, by hypothesis, I trust equally? If Russell's direct acquaintance is off the table, how will my preference for the report of my faculties fail to be unacceptably arbitrary, how will it fail to be the unpalatable *I'm me, so I win!* response to peer disagreement?

It seems to me that, if direct acquaintance is off the table, we'll be in the position of a man with disagreeing reports from two thermometers that he takes to be equally reliable. Since conciliation is called for in the thermometer case, I think Foley is committed to saying that conciliation is also called for in Extreme Restaurant Check and Extreme Skepticism. And this would extend to our most deeply held religious beliefs as well. But that's the unhappy "spineless" result we'd like to avoid. For similar reasons, I don't see how Foley can avoid the charge of self-defeat.

This isn't a knock down argument against Foley's epistemology – I'm failing to see how it might survive rather than successfully seeing that it can't. Rather, this is an invitation for Foley to say more about how his epistemology eludes those absurd, spineless, and self-defeating results.

I think these considerations give us a strong reason to take another look at an epistemology that countenances direct acquaintance. Such an epistemology can endorse the intuitively attractive equal-weight view, while at the same time accommodating our intuitions in Extreme Restaurant Check, Extreme Skepticism, and Self-Defeat.

And those explanations I've given have interesting and far-reaching consequences for religious disagreement. A few of our religious disagreements will be similar to Extreme Restaurant Check: cases in which we can just see the falsity of our friend's answer.²¹ A few more of our religious disagreements will be similar to Extreme Skepticism: cases in which our friend's answer is a clear sign of cognitive malfunction.²² The equal-weight view will not commit us to conciliation in any such cases, for reasons given above. And of course a vast swath of our religious disagreements will not be with epistemic peers at all, since it's very rare indeed to perfectly share the relevant evidence, talent, diligence, etc. with another person. And then there are the "close questions," as jurists say, between bona fide epistemic peers. Such cases, though not impossible, will be extremely rare. And so

²¹ For example, disagreement with a Hindu who tells you that all is one, so she is you, and you are π , etc.

²² For example, friends of Reformed Epistemology might think it obvious that belief in God is properly basic, and that atheism – like solipsism – is a clear sign of cognitive malfunction.

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the religious disagreement we actually find around us will be significantly less concerning to an epistemology that countenances direct acquaintance, e.g. mine.²³

²³ For more on why the equal-weight view, properly understood, does not require spinelessness when it comes to very many of our religious beliefs, see Tomas Bogardus, "Disagreeing with the (Religious) Skeptic," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (forthcoming).

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