ON THE NECESSITY OF THE EVIDENTIAL EQUALITY CONDITION FOR EPISTEMIC PEERAGE

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ABSTRACT: A popular definition of epistemic peerage maintains that two subjects are epistemic peers if and only if they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues and share the same evidence about the targeted issue. In this paper I shall take up the challenge of defending the necessity of the evidential equality condition for a definition of epistemic peerage from criticisms that can be elicited from the literature on peer disagreement. The paper discusses two definitions that drop this condition and argues that they yield implausible verdicts about the instantiation of the epistemic peerage relation.

KEYWORDS: evidence, epistemic peerage, disagreement, likelihood

1. No evidential equality for epistemic peerage: the case of philosophical disagreement

A widely endorsed definition of epistemic peerage maintains that two subjects are epistemic peers if and only if they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues and share the same evidence about the targeted issue.[1] Call any definition that encapsulates the necessity of the evidential equality condition a *standard definition* of epistemic peerage.

In a recent article appeared in this journal, Nicolás Lo Guercio[2] has argued that in order to satisfactorily address the issue of philosophical peer disagreement one must take into account two distinct concepts of epistemic peerage that give up the evidential equality condition. Lo Guercio calls these two concepts **strong** and **weak** epistemic peerage. Let me quote the definitions he proposes:

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[1] See for instance Bryan Frances, "The Reflective Epistemic Renegade," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81, 2 (2010): 424, Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 1, eds. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 173-4, Jennifer Lackey, "A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance," in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Alan Millar, Adrian Haddock, and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 302.

[2] Nicolás Lo Guercio, "Philosophical Peer Disagreement," *Logos & Episteme* 3, 3 (2012): 459-67.

Strong Epistemic Peer: Two agents are strong epistemic peers when (1) they have approximately the same epistemic virtues, (2) they acknowledge the same facts and (3) their epistemic perspectives are sufficiently alike.

Weak Epistemic Peer: Two agents are weak epistemic peers when (1) they have approximately the same epistemic virtues, (2) they acknowledge the same facts but (3) their epistemic perspectives relevantly diverge.[3]

The rationale of this distinction is, roughly put, the following. As far as philosophical discourse is concerned, we'd better rule out the evidential equality condition since a certain item *i* counts as evidence only relatively to a subject's *epistemic perspective*. A subject's epistemic perspective is constituted by the subject's norms, policies and methodological commitments. To illustrate this point, Lo Guercio considers the case of intuitions: some philosophers maintain that intuitions are evidence; others say that they aren't. However, friends and foes of the evidential status of intuitions can share *the fact* of having a certain intuition. Lo Guercio contends that once we admit the possibility that two philosophers can acknowledge the same facts yet they have relevantly divergent epistemic perspectives, we should make room for two distinct responses to peer disagreement. When two subjects are strong epistemic peers, they should adopt a conciliatory stance; when they are weak epistemic peers, on the contrary, they are entitled to stick to their guns. Call any definition that drops the evidential equality condition a *nonstandard definition* of epistemic peerage.

Lo Guercio doesn't discuss (1) by contending that it is widely granted in the debate. I will follow him and leave a detailed analysis of (1) for another occasion.

The first wrinkle in Lo Guercio's argument is that there is no mention of the fact that the problem of epistemic peer disagreement arises not simply when two subjects instantiate the epistemic peerage relation but when they take themselves to instantiate it. Call this the *acknowledgment condition*.

The acknowledgement condition plays a crucial role in the issue of what doxastic attitude the individuals should adopt after the discovery of a disagreement with a peer. If one were not aware that one is in an epistemic peer disagreement, then one wouldn't even consider that disagreement could play an evidential role. To put it roughly: how can I rationally respond to peer disagreement (no matter what this response should be) if I'm not aware that I am in a peer disagreement?

In addition, it has been pointed out that one should have good reasons for thinking that one's opponent is one's epistemic peer.[4] This appears to be a

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[3] Lo Guercio, "Philosophical Peer Disagreement," 462.

plausible requirement: why should I adopt a certain epistemic practice if I don't have good reasons for thinking that the necessary condition that triggers that very behaviour is satisfied? To put the point differently, it is unclear why I should adopt a certain response to peer disagreement if I don't have good reasons to think that the subject I'm disagreeing with is my epistemic peer.

The second minor qualm I have about Lo Guercio's proposal targets his explanation of the notion of evidence. Lo Guercio claims that "being evidence is not a straightforwardly factual property, but a property that *a proposition* has only relative to some system of epistemic norms, policies […]."[5] Lo Guercio maintains that two people can be strong epistemic peers if they have the same perspective; having the same perspective amounts to taking the same "facts" as evidence; intuitions are such facts. As far as I can see, the only reading of "fact" that is compatible with the satisfaction of (2) in both definitions of epistemic peerage has it that subjects acknowledge that they have the same intuition. In my view, having the same intuition means that both subjects have the occurrent, attitudinal mental state of intuiting that *p*. The talk of sameness of facts is accounted for at the level of *types* of facts, as it were. Although subjects can't literally have the same token experiential mental states, i.e. they can't literally have the same intuitions, these tokens are of the same experiential mental type. If we don't share an epistemic perspective, the intuition doesn't count as evidence; if we do share the perspective, we both take our intuitions to be evidence. More specifically, what we do is to take the mental state of intuiting that *p* to be evidence about a certain philosophical problem. And yet, this is inconsistent with the claim made by Lo Guercio and cited above to the effect that evidence is a property of propositions. For given the second condition of epistemic peerage proposed by Lo Guercio, evidence should be a property of mental states, i.e. the intuiting that *p*.

Having said that, let us move on to canvass the tenability of the distinction between weak and strong epistemic peers. As far as I can see, the concept of weak epistemic peerage should allow us to establish that disagreement between philosophers who don't share an epistemic perspective yet have the same intuitions can be safely regarded as a disagreement among epistemic peers. To assess this idea, let us avail ourselves of Timothy Williamson's example of the two

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[4] See for instance David Enoch, "Not Just a Truthometer: Taking Oneself Seriously (but not Too Seriously) in Cases of Peer Disagreement," *Mind* 119, 476 (2010): 973, Nathan L. King, "Disagreement: What's the Problem? Or a Good Peer is Hard to Find," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, online first: DOI: 10.1111/j.1933- 1592.2010.00441.x (20111): 13, Lackey, "A Justificationist View," 304.

[5] Lo Guercio, "Philosophical Peer Disagreement," 460, emphasis mine.

epistemologists who disagree about the import of the Gettier cases.[6] The example goes as follows. A philosopher thinks that the *Gettier intuition*, viz. the intuition that a subject Gettier-related to a proposition *p* has a justified true belief in *p* that doesn't amount to knowledge, shows that knowledge isn't equivalent to justified true belief; the other thinks that what Gettier cases show varies depending on cultural and socio-economic background. They disagree on the evidential role of the Gettier intuition though they both have that intuition. To put it in Lo Guercio's lingo, they share the fact of intuiting that a subject in a Gettier scenario has a true justified belief in *p* without knowing it, yet they disagree about the thesis that this psychological fact is an epistemic fact. That is, they disagree on the thesis that this intuition plays an evidential role. On closer inspection, the only epistemic component of both definitions of epistemic peerage offered by Lo Guercio that is satisfied in such a case is (1), that is, the idea that subjects have approximately the same epistemic virtues. To see this, notice that philosophers don't share the epistemic perspective, and notice also that the second condition, i.e. sharing the fact of intuiting that *p*, is an admittedly non-epistemic component of both definitions.

Let us pause on the claim that philosophers who share these general epistemic virtues are (weak) epistemic peers. The first thing that must be emphasised is that this idea also emerges from Gary Gutting's definition of epistemic peerage. Gutting contends that two individuals are epistemic peers if they are equals with respect to factors such as "intelligence, perspicacity, honesty, thoroughness, and other relevant epistemic virtues."[7] Therefore, the notion of weak epistemic peerage proposed by Lo Guercio collapses into Gutting's once we deal with a case of two philosophers who disagree on the evidential import of the Gettier intuition because of two different epistemic perspectives.[8]

Having clarified this, let us see whether this strategy successfully undermines the necessity of the evidential equality condition.

Consider the following scenario. Jennifer and Lucille are talking about what it takes to know a certain proposition. Jennifer is a professional philosopher, whereas Lucille is a professional computer scientist. Both Jennifer and Lucille, when presented with Gettier cases, have the intuition that gettiered beliefs don't amount to knowledge. Jennifer and Lucille regard with esteem each other: they

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[6] Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 211.

[7] Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1982), 83.

[8] To forestall misunderstandings, I'm not claiming that Lo Guercio's definition always collapses into Gutting's.

take themselves to be equally thoughtful, intelligent careful and honest. Therefore, Jennifer and Lucille satisfy conditions (1) and (2) of weak epistemic peerage. And yet, Jennifer takes the Gettier intuition to be evidence about the problem at stake, whereas Lucille doesn't. More generally, their respective epistemic perspectives seem to relevantly diverge.

This is a clear case of philosophical disagreement, for two subjects are disagreeing about a philosophical problem, i.e. the definition of knowledge. The question that needs to be raised, to my mind, is whether Jennifer and Lucille take themselves to be epistemic peers at all, no matter how weak the sense of epistemic peerage could be.

To address this question, let us suppose that both Jennifer and Lucille are aware of the fact that a good conception of knowledge has to avoid the threat of external world scepticism, viz. the thesis that we don't know whether there is an external world. Lucille is acquainted with some of the most famous issues revolving around the problem of scepticism. She knows the difference between Cartesian and Humean scepticism; she knows the difference between scepticism and idealism; and she is also aware of Hilary Putnam's nowadays-famous thought experiment of the brains in a vat. The brain in a vat scenario is a typical sceptical scenario: it stipulates that brains in a vat (henceforth BIV) would have qualitatively identical thoughts to those unenvatted. When a BIV says "There is a hand before me", there is in fact no hand before him, only a simulated hand produced by the supercomputers that stimulate the envatted brains. Putnam offers a semantic solution to this sceptical challenge: accordingly, if we adopt semantic externalism, it turns out that the sentence "We are brain in a vat" is false. Lucille is persuaded by Putnam's argument. Therefore, she thinks that Putnam's argument carries the day against the BIV hypothesis and avoids scepticism. However, Lucille isn't aware of the fact that the argument from semantic externalism does not affect certain versions of the BIV scenario. Take the following case.[9] Suppose that my brain was removed from my body last night and is now, for the first time ever, in a vat, with appropriate virtual reality hookups. In this case, semantic externalism cannot avoid scepticism. The take home message is that we can reproduce a sceptical scenario no matter what theory of reference we endorse. By contrast, Jennifer is aware of this piece of evidence that bears on the problem of scepticism which is also evidence on the problem of knowledge, for she is a professional philosophers and is acquainted with all data bearing on this philosophical issue.

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[9] See Crispin Wright, "On Putnam's Proof That We Are Not Brains-in-a-Vat," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 92 (1992): 67–94.

In light of this example, I think that it would be too bald a contention to say that Jennifer takes Lucille to be her epistemic peer on the issue of knowledge. Indeed there is a clear epistemic difference between two subjects that seem to matter once we have to establish whether Jennifer shouldn't change her doxastic attitude after the discovery of disagreement with Jennifer. The epistemic difference lays in a different familiarity with the evidence about the problem of knowledge. Jennifer could (and should) maintain that her friend has underestimated the force of the sceptical challenge since she isn't aware of some crucial evidence, i.e. semantic externalism can't rule out some sceptical scenarios.

This is a concrete example where, in order to establish the instantiation of the epistemic peerage relation, two subjects should look at considerations concerning evidential equality. Moreover, since subjects should have good reasons for taking themselves to be epistemic peers, this example shows that Jennifer had better not take Lucille to be her epistemic peer since she has a reason for doing so. The reason is that Lucille is ignoring an evidential datum in the assessment of how the problem of scepticism bears on the definition of knowledge. Notice moreover that the example is independent of whether Lucille and Jennifer have similar epistemic perspectives. Indeed, even if they both took the Gettier intuition to be evidence, Lucille still wouldn't have access to an important piece of evidence on the problem of knowledge.

As far as I can see, Jennifer has good reasons for not taking Lucille to be her epistemic peer at all. More generally, considerations about possession of evidence or lack thereof seem to be good candidates for playing the role of those epistemic reasons one can appeal to in order to adjudicate one's opponent's epistemic credentials. By contrast, it's by no means clear how a definition epistemic peerage that rules out evidential equality manages to satisfy the plausible requirement that subjects should have reasons for taking themselves to be epistemic peers. I surmise that enemies of the necessity of the evidential equality condition could parry this concern by claiming that the only reason subjects should look at is the track record of success. However, this contention relies on the unwarranted assumption that we can really get to a comparison between track records of success in philosophy. And yet, it is far from being obvious to maintain that history of philosophy is the history of a progress that, time to time, moves closer to the truth and to say that there is a well-established track record of progress in philosophy. I can't fully address this topic in this paper. Therefore, I content myself with saying that the appeal to track record of success isn't easily available in domains of discourse like philosophy.

In my view, the foregoing analysis provides sufficient grounds to reject Lo Guercio's nonstandard definitions of epistemic peerage.

2. Replacing Evidence with Likelihood

Another account of epistemic peerage that rejects the necessity of the evidential equality condition may be derived from the work of Adam Elga. Let me start off with quoting his definition of epistemic peerage:[10]

> You count your friend as an epistemic peer with respect to an about- to-be-judged claim if and only if you think that, conditional the two of you disagreeing about the claim, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken.[11]

Elga does not mention evidential equality and intellectual virtues because he emphasises the connection between the beliefs held by two subjects and the notion of mistake. That is to say, his definition aims at capturing the relation between belief and truth without pausing on the epistemic features that may secure this tie, e.g. evidential support.

Elga's nonstandard[12] definition of epistemic peerage makes a more general case for the rejection of the necessity of the evidential equality condition for epistemic peerage than Lo Guercio's does, for it isn't narrowed to a single area of discourse. To understand better the import of Elga's definition, Ernest Sosa has suggested to the effect that Elga and Kelly's definitions collapse into one if we interpret the notion of being equally likely to be mistaken as relying on the evidence and the epistemic virtues enjoyed by subjects.[13] That is to say, if the notion of likelihood were relative to the conditions posited by the standard definition, then the two definitions would *de facto* state the same conditions.

However plausible Sosa's interpretation may be, I take it that the real virtue of accepting Elga's conception springs from a different conception of likelihood, that is, a conception that interprets this notion only relatively to the notion of truth. Furthermore, Elga explicitly says that his use of epistemic peers is nonstandard by thus differentiating his notion of epistemic peerage from the standard one proposed, for instance, by Thomas Kelly. Therefore, it seems to me

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[10] David Enoch endorses a somewhat similar definition. He claims to follow Elga's definition. See Enoch, "Not Just a Truthometer," 956.

[11] Adam Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," *Noûs* 41/3 (2007): 499 fn. 21

[12] Notice that Elga explicitly uses this label, see Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," 499, fn. 21.

[13] See Ernest Sosa, "The Epistemology of Disagreement," in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Millar, Haddock, and Pritchard, 278–297.

fair to say that Elga is really proposing a different definition of epistemic peerage that doesn't encapsulate the necessity of the evidential equality condition.

Elga's definition opens up an important issue concerning the nature of epistemic peerage. In my view, if we adopted Elga's definition, the notion of epistemic peerage would merely rely on the external tie between subjects' beliefs and their probability of being mistaken or, conversely, right. That is, peerage depends on the fact that subjects' beliefs are equally connected, i.e. have the same likelihood, to truth or falsity. To put it differently, it's the equal degree of truth-conduciveness that guarantees the satisfaction of the peerage relation irrespective of subjects' evidence and intellectual virtues. By contrast, the standard definition puts to emphasis on aspects that pertain the subject's *internal* condition, viz. the evidence and the intellectual virtues she possesses.

Having said that, let me quote Elga's defense of this nonstandard definition:

> 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 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. You think that on the supposition that there is disagreement, she is more likely to get things wrong.[14]

To my mind, this defense is not completely exempt from criticism. To illustrate my concern, let us unpack Elga's defense a little. One goes from the supposition that there is disagreement, to the conclusion that her friend is more likely than oneself to be mistaken. It must be stressed that Elga does not invoke the idea that the subject has independent reasons for thinking that her opponent, although equally intelligent and informed, is more likely than her to be mistaken. That is to say, it isn't required here that the subject has some evidence for the claim that her opponent is more likely than her to be mistaken.

As far as I can see, Elga's defense is flawed because it's not sufficient to think that the other is more likely to be mistaken in order to demote his epistemic condition: one needs reasons for claiming that the opponent is not a peer. Otherwise, this way of demoting one's epistemic condition would be totally arbitrary. So, I contend that even a proponent of the nonstandard definition advanced by Elga has to supply reasons for demoting the opponent's epistemic credentials. What could these reasons be? It seems to me that a supporter of Elga's account has little room of manoeuvre here, for since she doesn't appeal to evidence, she could only appeal to a comparison between track records. By

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[14] Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," 499, fn. 21.

contrast, a supporter of the internal conception of epistemic peerage has more than one arrow to her bow, for she could appeal to issues bearing on the possession of certain pieces of evidence; or to the different familiarity with that same evidence; or to the lack of a certain intellectual virtue that is particular salient in the targeted domain and so on and so forth.

However it may be, let us evaluate Elga's definition for its ability to handle cases in which we would be inclined to attribute epistemic peerage to the individuals. Jennifer Lackey objected to Elga's definition by proposing the following case:

> (BIRDS)
> June may be a complete novice with respect to identifying birds of prey, and Jill may be an expert ornithologist. When June is sober and Jill is highly intoxicated, however, we may be equally likely to be mistaken about whether the bird flying overhead is an osprey.[15]

Lackey's case emphasises the blindness of this definition to factors that may pertain to the appraisal of the subjects' epistemic credentials. Let us try to enhance this line of criticism by thinking at the following scenario.

Suppose that Herman, son of a famous clairvoyant, under certain conditions that usually obtain, is an unwitting reliable clairvoyant weather forecaster. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Herman forms the belief that it will rain tomorrow morning in Paris, though he has no evidence either for or against his belief. Consider now Paul. He is a professional weather forecaster. He knows all the observational systems, he is aware of the best forecasting techniques, numerical forecast models and so on. Considered all the evidence and the best available techniques for analysing it, he forms the belief that it will rain tomorrow morning in Paris. Suppose now that Herman and Paul know each other as experienced weather forecasters; suppose moreover that in the majority of cases they are in agreement, and when they disagree, Herman is right as often as Paul is. Hence, Paul counts Herman as epistemic peer, for they are equally likely to get things right. And yet, this strikes me as an awkward result, for there is a glaring epistemic asymmetry between them. Indeed, whereas Paul can warrant his judgments by arguing for them relying on his competent analysis of the evidence, Herman cannot warrant his judgments unless we grant him an inductive or abductive strategy that appeals to his track record of success. Intuitively, besides inductive or abductive ways of warranting his predictions, Herman doesn't have any reason for making the

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[15] Lackey, "A Justificationist View," fn. 17.

judgments he makes about weather forecasting. He does not have internal reasons for supporting his own claim, for he does not possess any evidence in favour of his predictions.

The problem we are facing is the following. If the peerage relation is established on the basis of an external relation only, that is, if the individuals are peer only if the same degree of truth-conduciveness obtains, then we should take Herman and Paul as to be epistemic peers. And yet, it seems *prima facie* plausible to claim that Herman and Paul are in two very different epistemic conditions, for Paul can disclose his own evidence in favour of the judgments and competently explain what kind of reasoning has led him to conclude that *p*. It is worth stressing that nothing of what I've said so far is meant to argue against the idea that Paul and Herman enjoy the same degree of truth-conduciveness. As far as I can see, it could well be the case that they are equally likely to be mistaken as in Lackey's case about birds, but this equal likelihood stems from two very different epistemic conditions. These epistemic disparities can be reflected in their epistemic practices. Suppose indeed that Paul and Herman are in disagreement about a prediction and come to a situation of full disclosure in which they have to explain why they've reached opposite conclusions about whether it will rain tomorrow. Well, it seems clear that Paul is better equipped than Herman when a defense of their weather predictions is concerned. For Paul can cite his measurements, data, and reasonings about the issue. By contrast, Herman would admit his total absence of evidence on the problem and his inability of defending his predictions. At any rate, if we embraced Elga's definition, all these plausible considerations wouldn't have any weight on how to establish the instantiation of the epistemic peerage relation. For what is relevant for epistemic peerage is the likelihood of being right; since Herman and Paul are on a par with respect to this aspect even after full disclosure, Paul couldn't stop counting Herman as his peer simply by arguing that Herman has no evidence whatsoever about weather forecasting. Why do these considerations are not available to the supporter of the nonstandard definition of epistemic peerage advocated by Elga? If they were, the notion of likelihood should be interpreted in the way suggested by Sosa. And yet, if this were the case, we should conclude that the standard and the nonstandard definition collapse into one another.

The foregoing discussion allows me to claim that in order for Paul to have good reasons that allow him to properly evaluate Herman's epistemic credentials and not regard him as an epistemic peer, considerations about evidence are necessary.

Conclusion

The main purpose of the paper was to discuss two attempts of defining epistemic peerage that don't take evidential equality to be a necessary condition for epistemic peerage. In my view, both attempts fail to yield highly plausible and intuitive verdicts about the acknowledgment of the instantiation of the epistemic peerage relation in some scenarios. I've tried to show that correct verdicts are yielded once we acknowledge that the notion evidence plays a crucial role in the evaluation of subjects' epistemic credentials. In my view, the nonstandard definitions advocated by Lo Guercio and Elga don't succeed in undermining the contention that evidential equality is a necessary condition for epistemic peerage.[16]

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[16] I am grateful to Fernando Broncano-Berrocal for helpful comments and discussion.