PHILOSOPHICAL PEER DISAGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT: It has been widely discussed, in recent years, which is the rational doxastic reaction in the face of peer disagreement. But not much has been said about an interesting instance of that debate: *philosophical* peer disagreement. That is precisely what I will be concerned with in this paper. First, I will offer a definition of *philosophical peer* that introduces the idea of an epistemic perspective. The proposed definition allows for a doublé distinction: between Strong and Weak Peers, and between Strong and Weak Disagreements. Based on these distinctions, I will defend that different doxastic reactions are required depending on the type of disagreement at issue. On the one hand, in the face of Weak Disagreement, we should be conciliatory. Cases of Strong disagreement, in turn, shouldn't motívate a doxastic revision. In order to argue for that, some refinements into the notion of Rational Uniqueness will be needed.

KEYWORDS: peer disagreement, epistemic perspective, uniqueness

1. Preliminaries

In recent years peer disagreement has received much attention. There are basically two main approaches to the problem: Conciliationism and Non-Conciliationism. Conciliationists claim that the rational response in the face of peer disagreement demands of the agent to reduce the level of confidence in her own belief. Non-conciliationists, in turn, maintain that the correct attitude is *to stick to one's guns*. Now, one area of interest where peer disagreement may take place is philosophy. Undeniably, disagreement is common between philosophers, and moreover – it is very plausible to suppose – between philosophical peers. The question that arises is: What is rational to do in the face of cases of *philosophical* peer disagreement? One possible approach would be to suppose that whatever you think about peer disagreement in general can be applied to *philosophical* peer disagreement. In the first part of this paper I will argue that that is not the case. Philosophical peer disagreement requires finer-grained notions. In section 2, I'll present a way of treating cases of philosophical peer disagreement that differs from more general approaches to the subject. The main innovation consists in a different treatment of the notion of peer, which allows for more subtle distinctions. In section 3, I will put those distinctions to work to provide an answer to the main question of the paper: when (if at all) should we be conciliatory in cases of *philosophical* peer disagreement. In order to attain that goal, revisiting the notion of Uniqueness will be needed. In section 4, I will draw some conclusions.

2. Philosophical disagreement

The debate over peer disagreement has a particular application to philosophy. Indeed, there is disagreement in philosophy. Moreover, *prima facie*, there are philosophical peers, i.e. philosophers with equivalent philosophical credentials. Now, it may be thought that the conclusions reached in the former debate can be applied straightforwardly to the latter. I disagree, for the case of philosophy presents some peculiarities worth exploring. In this section, I'll be concerned with those peculiarities, introducing some new concepts that will help to shed light on the debate.[1]

One central notion in the debate over peer disagreement is that of *epistemic peer*. The usual characterization in the literature goes along these lines:

> **Epistemic Peer** Two agents are epistemic peers when (1) they have access to (approximately) the same evidence, and (2) they have the same epistemic virtues (they are equally intelligent, attentive, free from bias, etc).

This characterization is insufficient to capture the idea of *philosophical* peer. One of the reasons is that it fails to acknowledge a very important feature of the notion of evidence: being evidence is not a straightforwardly factual property, but a property that a proposition has only relative to some system of epistemic norms, policies, goals, and methodological commitments.[2] To see this, let me put an example. Some philosophers think that intuitions are the main philosophical evidence.[3] Other philosophers believe, to the contrary, that intuitions cannot play an evidential role. Others may believe that only theoretical intuitions can. That's why, as we'll see, it's important to change 'evidence' for 'facts' in the definition above: two philosophers with different opinions about the evidential role of intuitions may nevertheless share the intuitions themselves. So, they acknowledge the same facts (they have the same intuitions), but differ about the theoretical role

[1] I will be working, all along the paper, within the boundaries of certain philosophical assumptions. First of all, I assume that at least some philosophical theses –those we'll be concerned with– are truth-apt. In second place, I will presuppose that at least with respect to some philosophical theses, philosophers hold the doxastic attitude of *belief*, rather than mere acceptance (or some other). Only cases of the former kind will be of our interest. Finally, I will assume that philosophy is an epistemic endeavor, i.e. that the most important within philosophers' goals are the epistemic ones (there are, of course, several epistemic goals: truth, coherence, empirical adequacy, explanatory power, simplicity, among others).

[2] I will say sometimes that evidence is a 'normative' notion, meaning that what things count as evidence doesn't only depend on the facts but also on the epistemic policies one is willing to endorse.

[3] They endorse an epistemic norm along these lines: If you have an undefeated philosophical intuition regarding p, believe p.

those facts play, for one of them takes intuitions to be evidence and the other don't. Thus, it seems that different epistemic perspectives may assing the status of evidence to different facts. Now, it may be thought that the substitution of 'evidence' for 'facts' is not of any help. Even granting that the concept of evidence is itself problematic, and thus should be abandoned, it seems that 'facts' is equally contentious. To see that it's not, let me say something about 'fact.' What I call the 'shared facts' consist in a core of factual (non-relative) propositions regarding which there is a widespread agreement, without any commitment about the evidential role they play. That core of commonly accepted straightforwardly factual propositions constitutes the basic consensus that is needed to have a rational disagreement. In the next section I'll say something more about the notion of fact.

Another source of relativity present whitin the notion of evidence consists in the relative weight that different agents may assing to the same piece of evidence. To continue with the previuos example, philosohers may agree in that intuitions are philosophical evidence, but disagree regarding the relative weight they have, or regarding what kind of intuitions constitute evidence (Intuitions based on semantic competence? Intuitions about counterfactual situations or thought experiments?). For example, I believe that rejecting a strong intuition comes with a high philosophical cost. But I'm sure not everybody agrees. Some philosophers consider that accounting for intuitions is important, but not *that* important. Intuitions are fallible after all, and we are not only in the business of describing and systematizing our intuitions. So I may share the evidence with another agent while endorsing an epistemic policy that confers much more weight to some part of it.

Another worry has to do with determining what we should do with the evidence; some philosophers think, for example, that we should reach a state of reflective equilibrium between all our philosophical intuitions, while others think, to the contrary, that some intuitions are basic. One final reason for acknowledging the implicit relativity present in the definition of philosophical peer is that different perspectives may come with different epistemic goals. Even assuming that all philosophers share the evidence and the idea that truth is the main epistemic goal, they may diverge with respect to the importance or relative weight of other goals (empirical adequacy, predictiveness, explanatory power, coherence, simplicity, etc.).[4] That discrepancy may explain (at least partially) the diversity of philosophical beliefs even between philosophical peers.

[4] There are philosophers that do not even share the idea that truth is the main epistemic goal. See Johnathan Kvanvig, "Truth is not the Primary Epistemic Goal," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology,* eds. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 285-295 and

The things just mentioned I call them an epistemic perspective. An epistemic perspective includes a conception of what facts count as evidence, the relative weight assigned to different kinds of evidence and what epistemic goals are more relevant, i.e. a number of normative and methodological commitments. Different epistemic perspectives may determine differences with respect to all those issues. Thus, in order to make room for the intuitions above mentioned, I propose to introduce the idea of an epistemic perspective into the definition of 'epistemic peer':

> **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.
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> **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.[5]

Let me examine each part of the new definitions. First of all, the notion of epistemic peer asks for the parties to have the same epistemic virtues. This remains the same as in the orthodox definition of peer. 'Epistemic virtue' is used in a somewhat vague manner to mean that both parties are equally intelligent, free from bias, careful, etc. The second condition, as found in the literature, usually requires the agents to share the evidence. As we saw in the previous paragraph, that condition is misguided, that's why the change of 'evidence' for 'facts' in the new definition. Here, the fundamental idea is that the property of 'being evidence' is not straightforwardly factual, but relative to the endorsement of some system of epistemic norms or policies, some privileged epistemic goals and methodological commitments, etc (what I've called an epistemic perspective).[6] Finally, I introduced the idea of an epistemic perspective. Now, the new definitions allow for finer-grained distinctions regarding philosophical disagreement. We can distinguish between at least two kinds of disagreement:

> **Weak Peer Disagreement** Disagreement between strong epistemic peers.
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> **Strong Peer Disagreement** Disagreement between weak epistemic peers.

John L. Cruz and Joseph Pollock, "The Chimerical Appeal of Epistemic Externalism," in *The Externalist Challenge*, ed. Richard Schantz (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2004), 125-142.

[5] Here it's important to point out that although I'm presenting the distinction as a clear cut one, difference or similarity in epistemic perspective plausibly comes in degrees. Thus, there is probably many intermediate states between being weak peers and being strong peers. This being said, I will continue talking in the paper, for convenience, as if there were only two possible cases.

[6] Cf. Hartry Field, "Epistemology without Metaphysics," *Philosophical Studies* 143 (2009): 249 - 290.

Disagreement of the first type is between agents with (roughly) the same epistemic perspective. This means that they share (roughly) not only the facts but also the evidence. Plus, they have (approximately) the same epistemic goals (empirical adequacy, coherence, or whatever). In those cases, I'll argue in the next section, the disagreement cannot be explained by a difference in evidence, epistemic virtues or perspective.[7] So the most plausible explanation is that one of them is misapplying their shared perspective. That is, one of them is committing a *performance error* (she does not believe what she should relative to her own perspective). In those cases, the correct epistemic policy is conciliationism. On the other hand, strong peer disagreement takes place only between weak peers, i.e. agents with different epistemic perspectives. In that case, as we'll see, there are several possible explanations for the disagreement, even granting that each party believes exactly what she should relative to her own perspective. As we will see in the next section, in those cases we need not be conciliatory.

3. When should we be conciliatory?

In this section I'll be concerned with the main question of the debate regarding philosophical peer disagreement: when (if at all) should we be conciliatory. The proposal is that we should incur in a doxastic revision only in cases where the epistemic perspective is sufficiently shared (weak disagreements). To see why, it will be very useful to revisit the notion of Uniqueness and its connections with conciliationism. However, that is not to say, as we will see at the end of the section, that strong disagreements are not interesting or fruitful.

It is usually accepted that conciliationism needs to assume the thesis of Uniqueness.[8] The orthodox enunciation of the thesis is along these lines:[9]

> **Uniqueness 1** Given one's total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude one could take to any proposition.

If the thesis is correct, there cannot be rational disagreement between agents with access to the same body of evidence: necessarily, one of them is

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[7] Of course, the disagreement could be explained by a difference in moral or religious perspective, etc. But, in this work, I will focus only on epistemic perspectives.

[8] On the conciliationist side this is defended by Feldman (Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," in *Philosophers Without God´s: Meditations on the secular life,* ed. Louise M. Anthony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 204). On the other hand, Kelly argues for the same idea (Thomas Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence," in *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings,* eds. Alvin Goldman and Dennis Whitcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 193).

[9] Cf. Roger White, "Epistemic Permissiveness," *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (2005): 446.

committing a mistake. Conciliationism needs to grant Uniqueness because if it was possible for different agents with access to the same body of evidence to have different doxastic attitudes towards the same proposition, it wouldn't be clear why they should incur in a doxastic revision only in virtue of the disagreement. It would be still an open possibility that both doxastic attitudes were rational. Now, I think Uniqueness also has to be relativized to a perspective. This follows from the previous discussion: being rational has to do with forming beliefs according to one's evidence. But what facts count as evidence depends in part on the relevant epistemic perspective. Thus, what counts as rational depends also on the epistemic perspective. The correct formulation of Uniqueness should be, then, relativized to a perspective:

> **Uniqueness 2** Given one's facts and relative to a given epistemic perspective, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude one could take to any proposition.

As I said, different perspectives may come with different commitments regarding what facts are considered evidence, or what evidence is more relevant. If that's right, it should be clear that different perspectives may allow for different rational doxastic attitudes towards the same proposition, even in the face of the same facts. So Uniqueness stands, but only relative to a perspective. Now we have the elements to ellaborate a bit more the notion of 'fact' presented in the previous section, and see the connections with the other notions I introduced. The main problem with the notion of evidence, as I have already argued, is that is itself normative, and thus relative to an epistemic perspective. This is something that makes previous definitions of peerhood confuse. In contrast, 'Fact', as I employ the term, eludes this problem. The shared 'facts,' I understand, are just a basic core of non-normative (not relative to a system of epistemic norms, or epistemic perspective) propositions regarding which there is a widespread agreement or consensus, or that are widely accepted. That core of factual, non-normative propositions are necessary in order to start a philosophical debate (or any normative debate, one might think). Thus, the shared 'facts' alluded to in the definitions of Peerhood and Uniqueness above, are only those things about which there is a basic consensus, even across fairly different epistemic perspectives.[10] So, to be sure, what is the connection between the notions of 'Facts,' 'Evidence,' 'Uniqueness' and 'Epistemic Perspective'? The facts, as I already noted, consist in a basic core of non-normative propositions that are commonly accepted, and to

[10] To be sure, the set of straightforwardly factual propositions accepted may also be determined by the endorsement of some system of acceptance procedures. But in any case, I'm assuming that they are very widely shared.

which the epistemic perspective (the normative commitments) is applied. The evidence, on the other hand, is a product of that application. Thus, the notion of 'facts' captures the idea that two agents have some very basic consensus regarding a core of straightforwardly factual propositions, while 'evidence' entails a very much stronger shared epistemic perspective. Finally, the idea to be captured in the new definition of Uniqueness is that, even given some basic facts, there are several beliefs that is rational to form, depending on the held epistemic perspective. But provided some epistemic normative commitments, is no longer relative what beliefs I should form. Similarly, if two agents agree on some basic staff and their epistemic normative commitments are sufficiently alike, any disagreement within the beliefs they formed have to come with some fault on the part of one of them. But if their epistemic perspectives are relevantly different, there is not a unique belief that is rational to form, even given the basic facts on which they agree.

Let me now go back to the main question of the paper: What is rational to do in the face of weak and strong disagreement? Well, in cases of weak disagreement, Uniqueness is in order. Rational disagreement is not possible; hence we need to be conciliatory. But in strong disagreements, there is a difference in epistemic perspective. This means that each party could take a different and yet rational doxastic attitude towards a given proposition. So, rational disagreement is indeed possible, and thus we have no reasons to be conciliatory. It may be the case that in spite of holding incompatible doxastic attitudes towards the same proposition, each agent is being rational, i.e. is forming the belief she should relative to her own perspective.

Then, what are the lessons for philosophical peer disagreement?[11] Well, when faced with weak disagreement, one should be conciliatory. The reason is that the only plausible explanation I have for the diversity of opinions is an error on the part of either me or my rival. But I can't be sure that was her and not me who made the mistake. On the other hand, in a case of strong disagreement, there is no reason to be conciliatory. There are several explanations for the diversity of opinions. First of all, is not at all clear that we share the evidence; but even if we do, we may confer different weight to the same evidence. Second, it may be that we have different epistemic goals. Maybe one of us is interested in empirical adequacy, and the other in giving a prescriptive theory. Now, that would be no problem if we had a way of settling which epistemic perspective is better in an objective manner. But we don't have such a criterion at our disposal. Of course, one could say that the philosophical perspective with a better differential of truth

[11] It could be thought that this kind of proposal can be extended to areas beyond philosophy, such as science. I believe it can, though I will not argue for that in this paper.

over error on the beliefs it produces is the one we should maintain. But, first of all, we have no way of knowing which perspective is better in that sense. And second, that recommendation already presupposes an epistemic perspective.

One final remark. It's important to note that not being conciliatory only means that I shouldn't reduce the level of confidence in my belief just in virtue of disagreement, but not that I shouldn't take into account the other's perspective.[12] It follows from what I said that the second-order evidence provided by peer disagreement motivates a doxastic revision only when my opponent sufficiently shares my epistemic perspective (the facts, the evidence, the relative weight of that evidence, the relevant epistemic goals, etc). But, to be sure, that is not to say that when my opponent doesn't share my epistemic perspective I should discard the disagreement as an uninteresting one. In fact, I think that strong disagreement is a very interesting kind of disagreement. Furthermore, my position is compatible with the following situation: after considering my opponent's perspective I may change my mind. I may judge that her perspective is better for some reason, or realized that my onw perspective has some internal incosistencies. In that case, nevertheless, I wouldn't be changing my mind based on the second-order evidence provided by the disagreement, but based on my assessment of her epistemic perspective.

4. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to bring out the idea of an epistemic perspective into the debate over peer disagreement. This debate, as is currently carried on in the literature, is wrong headed, precisely because it fails to acknowledge that feature. As I argued in the first sections of this work, the idea that some corpus of evidence supports some belief p (or some level of confidence in p), as it stands, has to be rejected. The reason to reject that simplistic picture is that 'evidence' is an implicitly relative notion. That is, what things count as evidence and to which extent they support some belief (or degree of confidence in some belief) depends, at least in part, on an epistemic perspective. This simple point has a direct impact on the debate about peer disagreement. In the first place, it allows for an important and useful distinction between different kinds of peers,

[12] At this point, an objection may be raised. 'To take into account' the other's perspective can only be understood as being open to change my mind. But that is incompatible with my recommendation of being non-conciliatory. The idea is this: I shouldn't change my mind – in cases of strong disagreement – only in virtue of the disagreement. But that doesn't mean that I'm not open to revise my perspective based on a more detailed and sophisticated debate.

a distinction that has been neglected in the debate.[13] On second place, the distinction between different kinds of peers makes room for the acknowledgment of different kinds of disagreement. Thus, it is easier to account for different rational responses in the face of peer disagreements. The result is a much more elastic theory to deal with the problem.

One final remark. The particular case of philosophical peer disagreement is a good starting point, for it seems very plausible that any philosopher assumes, either implicitly or explicitly, the kind of epistemic and methodological commitments I summarize in the paper (regarding what things count as evidence, what weight to assign to that evidence, what epistemic goals are priority, etc). However, although I didn't intend to do it in this paper, I believe that the view previously sketched could be defended in general. I leave for future work the task of spelling out such a proposal.[14]

[13] An exception has to be made here. See Mark Vorobej, "Distant Peers," *Metaphilosophy* 42 (2011): 708-722.

[14] I am truly indebted to Ramiro Caso, Justina Diaz Legaspe, Alfonso Losada and Federico Pailos for their insightful comments on previous versions of this paper. I would like to thank also to the GAF group, especially to the epistemology branch, for their support and very helpful discussion on the general issues.