

THE CONCILIATORY VIEW AND THE CHARGE OF WHOLESALE SKEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT: If I reasonably think that you and I enjoy the same evidence as well as virtues and vices, then we are epistemic peers. What does rationality require of us should we disagree? According to the conciliatory view, I should become less confident in my belief upon finding out that you, whom I take to be my peer, disagree with me. Question: Does the conciliatory view lead to wholesale skepticism regarding areas of life where disagreement is rampant? After all, people focusing on the same arguments and possessing the same virtues commonly disagree over religion, politics, ethics, philosophy and other areas. David Christensen and Adam Elga have responded that conciliationism *does not* lead to wholesale skepticism. I argue that Christensen and Elga cannot avoid the charge of wholesale skepticism. But I also argue that if they could avoid skepticism, then the conciliatory view would become irrelevant since it would not inform us as to what rationality requires of us in every-day disagreement. Thus either way the conciliatory view is saddled with unintuitive consequences.

KEYWORDS: epistemology, peer-disagreement, conciliatory view, skepticism, David Christensen, Adam Elga

I. Introduction

Let us say that you are my epistemic peer regarding the truth-value of P if I reasonably think that you possess the same evidence and the same epistemic virtues and vices that I do. Imagine that after considering the evidence I affirm *that P is true*, while you affirm *that P is not true*. This is a case of peer disagreement, and it raises the following question: What is rationally required of me when my epistemic peer disagrees with me and there is no *obvious* and relevant asymmetry between us? Answer: I should become less confident in my belief upon finding out that you, whom I take to be my epistemic peer, disagree with me. This is the *Conciliatory View*, and it maintains that in cases of peer disagreement each party should adjust his or her credence level to bring it closer to the credence level of the other party.¹ Here are three statements from proponents of the conciliatory view:

¹ Graham Oppy, "Disagreement," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68 (2010): 189.

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Adam Elga: [O]ne should give the same weight to one's own assessments as one gives to the assessments of those one counts as one's epistemic peer.²

David Christensen: I should change my degree of confidence significantly toward that of my friend (and similarly, she should change hers toward mine).³

Richard Feldman: In situations of full disclosure, where there are not evident asymmetries, the parties to the disagreement would be reasonable in suspending judgment on the matter at hand.⁴

All proponents of the conciliatory view agree that in light of peer disagreement belief revision is called for.

However, it *seems* that the conciliatory view entails wholesale skepticism regarding important areas of life where disagreement is rampant, such as religion, morality, politics, and ethics. Take abortion for example: There are people on both sides of the abortion debate who are aware of the same arguments and counter-arguments, and who appear to share the same cognitive and moral virtues and vices. If the conciliatory view is correct, then it would seem that the proponents on either side of the abortion debate should either suspend judgment (Feldman) or split the difference with each other (Elga and Christensen); remaining steadfast would be irrational. This example can be adapted to almost any area of our life where intelligent and virtuous people disagree, and thus skepticism is called for regarding many (if not most) of our beliefs. Adam Elga nicely summarizes the worry:

[Y]our friends take a range of stances on some basic political or ethical claim. By your lights, these friends are just as thoughtful, well-informed...and intellectually honest as you. Still, it seems obviously wrong that you are thereby required to suspend judgment on the claim... To require this would be to require you to suspend of judgment on almost everything.⁵

Now any account of peer disagreement that renders much of what we believe irrational or such that we cannot rationally believe it incurs (to put it mildly) a heavy intuitive burden; many are inclined to think that *disagreement alone* should not issue such skeptical conclusions. I find this charge of wholesale

² Adam Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," *Nous* 41, 3 (2007): 484.

³ David Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* 116, 2 (2007): 189.

⁴ Richard Feldman, "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement", in *Epistemology Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 235.

⁵ Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," 492.

skepticism particularly problematic for conciliationists and will argue that both Elga's and Christensen's recent responses fail to alleviate the skeptical worries.

II. Elga

Conciliationism applies to cases of 'peer' disagreement and if the disputants in the cases of political, ethical, and religious disagreement are *not* epistemic peers then they are not obliged to be conciliatory. This is Elga's response. He claims that, "In the messy cases, one's reasoning about the disputed issue is tangled up with one's reasoning about many other matters. As a result, in real-world cases one tends not to count one's dissenting associates... as epistemic peers."⁶ He asks us to consider Ann and Beth who disagree over the moral permissibility of abortion. Setting aside their position on the abortion debate, does Ann think that Beth is just as likely as herself to arrive at the right answer regarding abortion? Answer: no. This is because Ann and Beth disagree over many abortion-related issues and when Ann reflects on the likelihood of Beth being right about abortion, she is going to recall all of their points of disagreement. She is going to reflect on Beth's answer to the question of God's existence, the nature of human persons, the question of values and so on, all of which she disagreed with. Since Beth holds to, from Ann's viewpoint, wrong answers regarding these abortion-related issues, Ann is not going to think that Beth is likely to get the abortion question right. Since Ann thinks that Beth is not as likely to get the abortion question right, she is not going to consider her to be her epistemic peer.

Unfortunately for Elga, this response does not hold promise. Assume that Ann realizes that she and Beth disagree over a wide swath of issues related to abortion: the nature of a human person, the status of values, the existence of God, etc. According to Elga, since Ann thinks that Beth is wrong on all of *these* issues, Ann can reason that Beth is not as likely as herself to be right about abortion. But, what if Ann and Beth were to discuss these abortion related issues? That is, what if Ann and Beth were to discuss their reasons for their respective positions regarding the abortion-related issue of the existence of God (assuming for now that it is an abortion-related issue). If Elga's response works in this case as it did in the abortion case, then Ann can recall that from her perspective Beth is wrong about many related issues (including abortion) and is thus less likely to be right about the existence of God. But here is the problem: Ann downgraded Beth's chances of being right about abortion because she thought she was wrong regarding the existence of God. Now she is downgrading Beth's chances of being right regarding

⁶ Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," 492.

the existence of God because she thought that she was wrong regarding abortion. But how is this not a question-begging dismissal on Ann's part? After all, if I disregard your testimony regarding X because I think that you are wrong about Y, it does not seem appropriate for me to discount your testimony regarding Y because I think that you are wrong about X. After all, my reason for thinking that you are wrong about X is that I think that you are wrong about Y! This amounts to me disregarding your testimony regarding Y because I think that you are wrong about Y, which is just to beg the question.

Elga could argue that Ann's discounting of Beth as an epistemic peer regarding the existence of God relies on Beth's stance on 'existence-of-God related' issues and that abortion is not such an issue; thus, Ann's dismissal of Beth's disagreement is not question-begging. Such existence-of-God related issues would include religious epistemology, arguments for God's existence, arguments against God's existence and so forth, and it is Beth's stances on *these* issues that are at issue when Ann discounts her status as a peer. Unfortunately, this response does not appear to work for all cases of real-world disagreement. Imagine that Beth and Ann disagree over the soundness of the Leibnizian cosmological argument. After discussion, they realize that Ann does not think that Hume's criticism of the principle of sufficient reason is successful, whereas Beth disagrees. Does Elga's response work? It is hard to think of related issues that they could disagree about and that would serve Ann's ability to undermine Beth's status as a peer. But more importantly, even if there are related issues, what if Ann and Beth never discussed them? That is, what if they focus solely on the arguments for and against the cosmological argument and disregard everything else? In this case, could Ann take the liberty to assume that she and Beth disagree about related issues and is therefore unlikely to be correct? This is doubtful since first, it is unclear that disagreement over one issue entails disagreement over related issues; second, this would lead to instances of improper self-trust along the following lines: I know that you disagree with me over issue X and so I assume that we disagree over other related issues; thus you are not as likely as I to be right.

But if Ann and Beth have not discussed issues related to the cosmological argument *and* Ann cannot assume that she and Beth disagree over related issues, then there is no independent grounds for Ann to downgrade Beth from being an epistemic peer; and if there is no independent ground for downgrading Beth from being an epistemic peer, then it would seem that Ann and Beth should become conciliatory regarding the cosmological argument. But, once they become conciliatory regarding this argument, it follows that they could, in principle, become conciliatory regarding other arguments for and against God's existence;

and once they become conciliatory regarding all of the arguments for and against God's existence, there is every reason for thinking that they should become conciliatory regarding God's existence. After all, what God-related issue is there that they would disagree about and give grounds for one to downgrade the other from the status of a peer? Thus, it would seem that Ann and Beth ought to become conciliatory regarding God's existence. Now, this same argument generalizes to other fields where disagreement is rampant. For example, if Ann and Beth focus on the individual arguments for and against abortion, eventually, they can come to a point where they do not disagree over abortion-related issues; in such a case, they ought to become conciliatory regarding abortion. Thus, we see that Elga's response leaves the door wide open for skepticism in every area.

So Elga's response, instead of mitigating wholesale skepticism, entails either that the question-begging dismissal of another's disagreement is permissible or leads to wholesale skepticism. Neither option is desirable. But perhaps the most important objection to Elga's response is that it appears as though Ann would be able to tell whether or not Beth is a reliable person with the same evidence and virtues regarding abortion regardless of her stance on related issues. As Christensen himself points out, Ann could still know that Beth has thought about the same arguments as her and displays the same virtues regarding abortion.⁷ That Ann can tell whether or not Beth possess the same evidence and virtues appears to generate the problem of peer disagreement and it is beside the point as to whether or not Ann knows that Beth and her disagree over related issues. For these reasons, Elga's response is found lacking.

III. Christensen

Christensen argues in a similar vein that the skeptical implications of conciliationism can be minimized by denying peerhood to many of the disputants of every day matters. He writes:

It's worth pointing out, however, that with respect to many of my beliefs, I do have good reason to think that I'm in an especially good epistemic position. For some beliefs, I have more evidence than the average person, and for others, I've thought more carefully... It's often hard to tell, for example, how hard another person has thought about a given matter, or whether they're tired or distracted [whereas I can rule these out for me]... So although the epistemic importance of disagreement extends far beyond cases of disagreement by epistemic peers, I will often have solid, perfectly impartial reasons for thinking that particular

⁷ David Christensen, "Disagreement, Question-Begging and Epistemic Self-Criticism," *Philosophers' Imprint* 11, 6 (2011): 16.

disagreements are more likely to be explained in a way that favor's my belief's accuracy.⁸

Christensen's response allows for the denial of peerhood along the following lines: I may know that I have thought about abortion for a long time and in detail but I do not know the same about you; for this reason I do not consider you to be as reliable as myself and thus, not my epistemic peer. Yet, it is unclear how this response precludes instances of improper self-trust. Imagine that Ann is extremely prideful regarding her stance on abortion and that she significantly overestimates her epistemic position regarding abortion. When she learns of Beth's disagreement she reasons, independently of the issue, that Beth must not have thought hard enough on the issue or gathered as much evidence as herself. Since Beth is not as likely as herself to be correct, she disregards Beth as being an epistemic peer. This problem becomes more poignant when we notice that conciliatonists often claim that a virtue of their account is that it *precludes* question-begging dismissals of others; Christensen says that the conciliationist motivation is to "prevent blatantly question-begging dismissals of the evidence provided by the disagreement of others."⁹ While Ann does not reason that "Since I am right, Beth is wrong", she does reason along similar lines. She, in her pride, reasons: "Regarding abortion, I am in a great epistemic position and it is unlikely that Beth is in as good of a position as I. Therefore, she is not as likely as I am to be correct." Such perverse reasoning is no different than assuming that the other person is wrong, which is to beg the question.

But perhaps the most important objection is that Christensen's response does not appear to minimize the skeptical implications of the conciliatory view. One philosopher discussing a topic with another, in many cases, has no independent reason for thinking that she has thought more carefully or has more evidence than the other. The same goes for religion, politics, ethics, and other such domains. This becomes especially obvious when Christensen claims that the conciliatory view is committed to the following principle:

Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation *gives* me good reason to be confident that the other person is equally well-informed, and equally likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly, I must revise my belief in the direction of the other person's.¹⁰

⁸ Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement," 36.

⁹ Christensen, "Disagreement, Question-Begging," 2.

¹⁰ Christensen, "Disagreement, Question-Begging," 15.

In many cases, we can tell that another person is equally well-informed and virtuous as ourselves. Take as an example Alvin Plantinga and David Lewis. As is well known, these two men disagree sharply over the status of properties, universals, possible worlds, God's existence, epistemology and much more. Are we to conclude that they have different evidence and/or virtues and vices? To many this will seem doubtful. Are we to believe that Lewis and Plantinga read different articles or that one possesses some epistemic virtue or vice that the other lacks? Could Plantinga have doubted that Lewis had thought just as hard as he did about modality? Certainly not. Could Lewis have reasoned as follows: "I know that when I wrote about modality I was not tired. I knew that I was alert, perceptive and intentional about focusing. But I do not know that these things are true about Plantinga. Therefore, I have reason to think that Plantinga is not as likely to be correct about modality as myself.?" Again, certainly not. The proper answer seems to be that both Lewis and Plantinga are evidentially and intellectually on par, and as Christensen says, "When those beliefs [about the other] include extensive dispute-independent evidence of intellectual and evidential parity..., the undermining power of disagreement is high."¹¹ It follows then that Plantinga and Lewis, insofar as they stick to their guns in light of their disagreement, are being irrational.¹² We can fit this example to other areas of politics, religion and morality and thus, Christensen's response does not mitigate the wholesale skepticism.

IV. The Irrelevance of the Conciliatory View

I have pointed out that the conciliatory view *can* avoid the skeptical implications if it can be denied that the persons disagreeing in the areas of philosophy, politics, religion and morality (among others) are peers. I have shown that both Christensen and Elga's attempts along this route are highly problematic. But setting my criticisms aside, let us assume for the moment that they are correct and that persons disagreeing in these areas are *not* epistemic peers. If this were the case, then the conciliatory view does not cover disagreement in these real-life areas and wholesale skepticism would be avoided. But if this is so, this raises a problem for conciliationists: while they may have avoided wholesale skepticism,

¹¹ Christensen, "Disagreement, Question-Begging," 16.

¹² It may be objected that since Plantinga and Lewis disagree over practically everything that they write, they do not have dispute independent evidence of epistemic peerhood. However, they can both come to know that they have the same evidence by looking at the others' list of references and they can know that they have the same virtues, such as thoroughness, courage, etc. just by reading the others' work.

they have rendered their view largely irrelevant. This is because disagreement is interesting *precisely because it is a pervasive part of our communal life*. Given its pervasiveness, we want to know what rationality requires of us, and the conciliatory view tells us nothing. Historically the interest in peer disagreement arose out of debates concerning religious diversity. Philosophers were trying to determine whether or not religious disagreement served as an undermining defeater for one's properly basic belief in God.¹³ This naturally expanded to disagreement in other areas and in order to focus attention, philosophers narrowed in on the notion of 'epistemic peerhood.' The question became, what does rationality require in cases of 'peer disagreement'? This change in focus was intended to clarify the questions surrounding disagreement in general and it was hoped (and assumed) that an answer to 'peer disagreement' would generalize to real-life disagreement.¹⁴ But as we see, if conciliationists avoid wholesale skepticism, this is because their account does not generalize to real-life cases of disagreement and thus their account becomes irrelevant to the questions that initially gave rise to the literature.

Conciliationists could challenge the overarching assumption that an account of what rationality requires in cases of 'peer disagreement' would generalize to cases of real-life disagreement. But such would be a hollow victory since peer disagreement is highly idealized and divorced from our social lives. We are left with the original questions that gave rise to the literature (religious, political and ethical disagreement) unanswered and without any indication of an answer; all conciliationists can say is that many cases of real-life disagreement are not cases of peer disagreement and therefore conciliationism is not called for. We are left in the dark as to what rationality requires in these real-life cases of disagreement! Thus, even if Elga and Christensen are correct in claiming that the conciliatory view does not entail wholesale skepticism, it follows that their view becomes uninteresting and irrelevant to real-life.

¹³ In response to Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff co-edited book, *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), and Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," *Nous* 15, 1 (1981): 41-51, Phillip Quinn raised the problem of religious disagreement in "On Finding the Foundations of Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, 4 (1985): 469-486.

¹⁴ Richard Feldman applies his conciliatory view to religious disagreement in "Reasonable Religious Disagreements" in *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular*, ed. Louise Antony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 194-214.

V. Conclusion

Either the conciliatory view leads to wholesale skepticism regarding politics, religion, philosophy and other areas, or it does not. If it does, then this is certainly an intuitive burden for the view, since it seems obvious to many that there can be rational disagreement in these areas.¹⁵ For most, this skepticism will be too high of a price to pay for a theory. Thus, it is not surprising that defenders of the conciliatory view try to deny or mitigate the skepticism. I have argued that Elga and Christensen's recent attempts to dissolve the skeptical worry fail. But, I have also argued that *if* they had succeeded, then they would have undermined the motivation for their view in the first place. Disagreement in religion, politics, morality and philosophy are what we are seeking an account of, and if Elga and Christensen are correct, the conciliatory view would have nothing to say. Thus, I conclude that conciliationism either entails wholesale skepticism or is uninteresting to real life disagreement. Either is unpalatable.

¹⁵ See Peter Van Inwagen, "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence," in *Philosophy of Religion: the Big Questions*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (New York: Blackwell, 1999): 273-284.