PEER DISAGREEMENT: SPECIAL CASES

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ABSTRACT: When you discover that an epistemic peer disagrees with you about some matter, does rationality require you to alter your views? Concessivists answer in the affirmative, but their view faces a problem in special cases. As others have noted, if concessivism itself is what's under dispute, then concessivism seems to undermine itself. But there are other unexplored special cases too. This article identifies three such special cases, and argues that concessivists in fact face no special problem.

KEYWORDS: disagreement, rationality, epistemic peerhood

Suppose you believe that 1) p, that 2) Z is your epistemic peer in domain D, and that 3) p is in domain D. Then you come to believe that 4) Z believes not-p. For example, it could be that Z = your office neighbor, D = meteorology, and p = it will snow tomorrow. Does rationality require you, upon coming to believe 4, to revise anything you believe? I think that is does. Here, I will defend the concessive view against several objections arising from special cases, only one of which has yet been widely discussed.

If rationality does require you to revise what you believe, there are several options. Of course, faced with peer disagreement you may stop believing p, or at least lower your confidence that p. That is, you could modify your belief in 1. That's one option.

A second option is to revise your believe that Z is your epistemic peer. Upon learning that Z believes not-p, you might conclude that you are epistemically superior to Z, or at least lower your confidence in the claim that you two are epistemic peers about this domain. Whether you take the first or the second option would seem to depend upon how comparatively confident you were in 1 and in 2 to begin with. If you were very confident in 1, you might give up believing in 2. If you were very confident in 2, you might give up believing in 1.

Although these are the two most natural options, there are others. You might lose confidence in 3. That is, you might have thought that p was in the domain of facts about which you and Z are epistemic peers. But perhaps that's not true. Perhaps

p falls outside of that domain. You might conclude that D is narrower than you had realized, or you might just see now that matters like whether p fall outside of domain D.

The final option I'll consider is to revise your belief in 4. You come to think that Z believes not-p, but now you might be unsure whether that really is true. Perhaps you misheard or misunderstood Z. Perhaps Z misspoke. Perhaps Z was speaking sarcastically. Perhaps you are just dreaming that Z said not-p. Such things are possible. And so there are occasions where you might be less confident that Z believes not-p than you are in matters 1-3.

The lesson, here, is that if you revise your views in the face of peer disagreement, there are several different views you could revise. Often, you'll concede on the matter under dispute, but not always. You might change your view about one or other of the related matters. Different disagreements in different contexts will call for different kinds of adjustments.

Suppose that in the face of peer disagreement rationality does require you to modify your beliefs *in some way or another*. Some have tried to show that this supposition has a problem: if epistemic peers disagree specifically about whether rationality requires you to revise what you believe in the face of peer disagreement, then the peer who follows his concessive view will thus give up his concessive view, a move which in retrospect can make no sense to him.[1]

I suggest that fans of the concessive view remember their own view: in the face of apparent peer disagreement about the concessive view itself, you are rationally required to revise only either 1 and/or 2 and/or 3 and/or 4. Rationality does require you to change at least *one* of these views, but is itself silent about which. If you are concessive and you give up 1, you will be giving up your view about what to do in the face of apparent peer disagreement, thereby undercutting your grounds for your change in view. That *does* seems irrational.

But to embrace a concessive view need not require that you give up your belief in the very matter under dispute. You might instead give up your belief in either 2, 3, or 4. All the concessive view requires is that you modify *one* of your several relevant beliefs. But it does not tell you which of these several beliefs to give up. Rationality is thus in a sense wide-scoped. In the case of apparent peer disagreement, where the disputed issue is specifically what rationality requires in the face of apparent peer disagreement, this concessive view leaves you with options.

[1] The locus classicus is Adam Elga, "How to Disagree about How to Disagree," in *Disagreement*, eds. Ted Warfield and Richard Feldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 175-186.

The concessive view so understood does not require you to reject *itself* in the face of apparent peer disagreement. That *would* be crazy. It requires only that you make some relevant adjustment or other. As long as your confidence in the concessive view exceeds your confidence in one of your other relevant beliefs, you will not find yourself in a situation where following the concessive view is self-defeating.

This is not a merely ad hoc response to the problem arising from peer disagreement about what rationality requires in the face of peer disagreement. One way to motivate modifying your belief in 2 rather than 1 is that belief in 2 is always a posteriori, while belief in 1 (in the special case where p = the concessivist view) is plausibly a priori. A posteriori beliefs are more sensitive to the acquisition of new a posteriori beliefs, such as 4, than a priori beliefs are. Now I don't want to endorse the view that we should *always* be more confident in our a priori beliefs than our a posteriori beliefs. That view is too crude. But it's no surprise that coming to learn 4 should alter some other a posteriori belief of ours, instead of altering our view about the very nature of rationality.

Avoiding the sort of self-defeat that arises from peer disagreement about peer disagreement is not the only problem that special cases pose for the concessive view. I now want to investigate *other* special cases that, to my knowledge, have not received similar attention.

Consider briefly first the case where 1=4, where p = Z believes not-p. Z's belief is thus self-referential. But this does not appear to be a coherent possibility. Spelling things out, p = Z believes that it is not the case that Z believes that it is not the case that Z believes that....ad infinitum. I seriously doubt it is *possible* for anyone to believe such a thing. At best, it's crazy to believe it. But if Z does believe it, you would again do best to revise your belief in 2, for Z no longer seems rational enough to be your epistemic peer. Thus this special case poses no problem for the concessive view. We can set this case aside.

Next consider the case where 1=3, where the matter under dispute is whether p is part of some domain D. You believe that you and Z are epistemic peers with respect to domain D. The statement p, which *you* believe, is, again, self-referential. p = this (very) statement is in D. It's a bit tough to imagine what domain D could even plausibly be. (The domain of self-referential expressions?) But it's not completely incoherent, as with the previous case.

Suppose first that in cases of peer disagreement you are never concessive. Then this case — the case where 1=3 — presents no new problem for you.

Suppose next that in cases of peer disagreement you are typically somewhat concessive. In the case where 1=3, you then will be tempted to be concessive too. So that means that you will be tempted to modify your belief that p is in D. But your grounds for being concessive *depends* upon p in fact being in D. Modifying your belief that p is in D on the grounds that p is in D just makes no sense. This special case seems to pose a problem for the concessive view.

Note the asymmetry in this case. Z does not believe that p; that is, Z does not believe that this (very) statement is in D. So the fact that *you* initially believe otherwise does not move him, because even if he thinks that you are an epistemic peer with respect to matters in D, he is not inclined to think that you are an epistemic peer on p itself. Z can thus coherently stand his ground. You, however, seem to have no coherent place to stand.

Perhaps you can escape this trap by giving up 2 or 4. The situations in which it is plausible to give up 4 are few. That is not a good general strategy. Better to think about giving up 2, the thought that Z is your epistemic peer. In fact, this now is a sensible move. Best of all, it does not seem ad hoc. For if Z doesn't agree with you about what falls under the domain in question, it seems rational to conclude that Z is not your epistemic peer in that domain after all. Thus as with the last special case, this one too poses little problem for the concessive view. We can set this special case aside too.

Consider finally the case where 1=2, the claim that Z is your epistemic peer. This is the most interesting case. You believe p: that Z is your epistemic peer in D. But Z does not believe this. Unlike with the other special cases, the matter under dispute is *not* self-referential. 2 makes no explicit mention of p.

There are multiple ways Z might disagree with you about whether you two are epistemic peers with respect to domain D. Suppose first Z believes that Z is epistemically superior to you. It seems that if you were willing to be at all concessive before, then you should be even more concessive now. You think Z is an epistemic peer, but Z disagrees, thinking he is superior to you. This does not undercut your inclination to concede; on the contrary, if anything it should strengthen it. So you change your mind and agree with Z that Z is epistemically superior to you (although perhaps not *as* superior as Z thinks). The concessive view has no trouble handling this possibility.

Suppose instead that Z believes that Z is epistemically inferior to you. If you weren't willing to be concessive before, nothing changes. But if you *were* willing to be concessive before, you have a problem. Do you concede, either by believing that

you are indeed at least a little superior (as Z thinks), or alternatively by simply suspending judgment about whether you are epistemic peers? But if you *are* superior, why were you conceding to (now, by your lights) your epistemic inferior about the matter in the first place? It would seem that if Z were right, such that you are in fact epistemically superior with respect to judgments like this, you should have been sticking to your guns, and hanging on to your original view.

This appears to be a big problem for concessivist views. As we saw earlier, many philosophers are worried about how to cope with the fact that philosophers disagree about what rationality requires in the face of peer disagreement. But that is a very parochial concern. A much more widespread concern is that ordinary people disagree with each other all the time about whether they are epistemic peers in the first place. And when you disagree with someone whom you regard as a peer, but who regards you as a superior, trouble emerges.

Here is one way a concessivist might try to escape this problem. Think about *when* the rules of peer disagreement apply. Do rules about what to do in cases of peer disagreement apply to you only if you *both* agree about whether you are epistemic peers? Or do they apply to you even if *only you* think that you two are epistemic peers? Those who answer the latter affirmatively will immediately run into the vicious paradox described above. But if rationality requires concessiveness only once both parties agree that they are peers, the above problem can be sidestepped.

One might wonder whether this move merely exchanges one problem for another. For it may seem objectionably ad hoc to limit concessiveness only to cases where both parties agree that they are epistemic peers. Is it really objectionably ad hoc? No. It is perfectly rational for you to take into account what Z thinks about who is his epistemic peer as you are determining whether Z is your epistemic peer *about matters of epistemic peerhood*. It is not ad hoc to base your decision upon such factors. What Z thinks about who counts as his epistemic peer is not merely relevant *higher*-order evidence. It is *direct* evidence. It would be wrong to ignore it.

To see this, suppose that before knowing Z's specific opinion about how the two of you compare, you regard Z as an epistemic peer about matters like judging epistemic competence. You already have some evidence for this view. Then you learn that Z believes that Z is inferior to you. You might rationally revise your view about whether Z is your epistemic peer about epistemic competence, but not because you are applying some view about what to do in the face of peer disagreement, but because Z's opinion here is itself *direct* evidence about whether Z is an epistemic

peer about judging epistemic competence. And since Z's opinion fails to match yours, you will revise your opinion of Z downwards. Z's opinion here affects your assessment of his judgment, but not because his opinion is specifically about *you*. Rather, it's just another piece of evidence for you to use to determine how good of a judge of epistemic competence Z is. And so you will think that Z is not as good as you had previously thought. Such a train of thought is not objectionably ad hoc.

A concessivist might bolster her defense by also adopting a partners-in-guilt approach. Consider a case where you are wondering whether to defer, not to your epistemic peer, but to someone you deem to be your epistemic superior. Even opponents of concessivist views of peer disagreement will acknowledge that it is appropriate to believe *superiors*. Now suppose that you have evidence that leads you to think that Z is your epistemic superior about epistemic competence. You are thus strongly inclined to trust what Z says about matters of epistemic competence. To your surprise, Z tells you that you and Z are epistemic peers about epistemic competence. You might then question whether Z is quite as good a judge of epistemic competence as you had been thinking! The fact that Z thinks you are as good as he is makes your doubt his abilities. And, of course, since you trust(ed) his judgement, you might accept his opinion here too. The force of both of these points is the same. Both points lead you to accept (or to move closer to the judgment) that Z is your epistemic peer, not superior, about matters of epistemic competence. So it is not only the concessivist who finds herself in the sort of predicament identified above. *Anyone* who thinks it is sometimes wise to defer to others can face this problem. The concessivist faces no *special* problem here.

The only way I see to avoid this problem entirely is to hold that no one else is as good at judging epistemic competence as you yourself are. That way, you'll never be committed to defer to someone who tells you that you are better at judging epistemic competence than you thought you were. Call this *the know-it-all response*. While the know-it-all response does not run in to the problem we have been exploring, it is patently unattractive on other grounds.

I conclude, then, that the special cases considered here pose no specific problem for the concessive view about peer disagreement.