NO PARADOX FOR CONCILIATIONISM

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ABSTRACT: In a widely cited paper, Thomas Mulligan argues that conciliationism generates three paradoxes or puzzles when this theory is applied to a class of propositions related to epistemic peerhood. Mulligan claims that these three paradoxes not only pose a significant theoretical challenge to conciliationism, but that they are potentially fatal to the theory. In what follows, I argue that Mulligan's three paradoxes implicitly depend upon epistemic principles that are false or not obviously true. Since this is so, Mulligan has failed to show that conciliationism generates any paradoxical results related to epistemic peerhood.

KEYWORDS: disagreement, conciliationism, paradox

How should you respond when you discover that your epistemic peer disagrees with you about some proposition *p*, where an "epistemic peer" is someone you know who has the same evidence regarding *p*, the same cognitive abilities, and is equal in their deployment of those cognitive abilities? According to conciliationism, discovering that an epistemic peer disagrees with you calls for a doxastic revision on your part. Specifically, on conciliationism, if you discover that an epistemic peer disagrees with you with respect to some proposition *p*, you ought to downgrade your confidence level in *p*. Formally, according to conciliationism:

> Conciliationism (CV): If *S1* believes that *p* at t^1, but learns that an epistemic peer *S2* believes not-*p* at t^2, then *S1* ought to downgrade her level of confidence in *p* at t^2 by adopting a credence that is closer to *S2*'s level of confidence.

In an important and widely cited paper, Thomas Mulligan (2015) argues that CV generates three paradoxes when CV is applied to a class of propositions related to epistemic peerhood. Indeed, Mulligan claims that these three paradoxes not only pose a significant theoretical challenge to CV, but that they are potentially "fatal" for CV (2015, 77). In what follows, I argue that Mulligan's three paradoxes implicitly depend upon epistemic principles that are false or not obviously true. Since this is so, Mulligan has failed to show that CV generates any paradoxical results related to epistemic peerhood.

1. Mulligan's First Paradox:

Consider the following scenario. Suppose I'm justified in believing the proposition that *p* upon some body of evidence E, but discover at some later time t^1 that my epistemic peer, Francis, disagrees with me about the truth of *p*; I believe that *p* is

true whereas Francis believes that *p* is false. Since I regard Francis as my epistemic peer, I downgrade my confidence level in *p*, as CV recommends. But suppose further that at some later time t^2 I learn from Richard – who I regard as my peer with respect to peerhood assessment – that Francis is *not* my peer with respect to *p*. Since I regard Richard as my peer with respect to peerhood assessment, I should, says Mulligan, be less confident that Francis is my peer with respect to *p*. Accordingly, I downgrade my confidence level in the proposition that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> at t^2, as CV recommends.

Mulligan then asks: What does the downward revision to my confidence level in <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> say about my *initial* belief that *p*, which I came to believe upon evidence E? According to CV, my confidence level in *p* should go up and be restored to its initial level. But this, says Mulligan, can't be right, as I've committed two epistemic "errors" (2015, 70) – the first error being my belief that Francis was my epistemic peer, and the second error being that I should downgrade my confidence in *p*. Given these two errors, I should, says Mulligan, realize two things at t^2. I should realize:

> (i) that my epistemic faculties responsible for the production of *p* are not as reliable as I initially thought, and;
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> (ii) that I'm not a reliable judge of peerhood assessment.

But now, says Mulligan, since, as (i) says, my epistemic faculties responsible for the production of *p* are not as reliable as I initially thought, my confidence level with respect to *p* at t^2 should remain low and *not* go up. But this, says Mulligan, is "paradoxical" (2015, 70); CV recommends that my confidence level with respect to *p* should go up at t^2, but, intuitively, it shouldn't go up but rather remain low at t^2. Hence, CV generates a paradox.

Mulligan considers the following conciliationist response to the paradox: since my belief that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> has been defeated by Richard's testimonial evidence that Francis is not my peer with respect to *p*, Richard's testimony functions as "additional, higher-order evidence" (2015, 71) *for p*. Since, in other words, Richard has provided me with a defeater for the proposition that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*>, this defeater serves as positive evidence for *p*, i.e., a reason for thinking that *p* is true. Hence, I'm able to restore my confidence level in p to its initial level, as CV recommends.

According to Mulligan, however, this response isn't available to the proponent of CV since "Richard has made no judgment whatsoever about *p*; not that *p* is true, not that it is false, nor anything else" (2015, 71). Given that Richard has made no judgment about *p*, it would, says Mulligan, be "odd" (2015, 71) for the proponent of CV to claim that Richard's providing me with a defeater for

<Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> somehow counts as positive evidence *for* p. But now, says Mulligan, since Richard's providing me with a defeater doesn't count as evidence for *p*, it's not possible for *p* to regain its positive epistemic status. Hence, it's not possible for my confidence level in *p* to be restored to its initial level, contrary to CV. Hence, the paradox remains.

The proponent of CV has a straightforward response to this paradox. Let's grant Mulligan the claim that Richard has made no judgments about *p*. Indeed, let's assume that Richard has no expertise whatsoever with respect to *p*. It doesn't follow from this, however, that my belief that *p* fails to be justified at t^2, as Mulligan claims. This is because the original body of evidence that led to the formation of *p*, viz., E, can *restore p*'s positive epistemic status at t^2. Since this is so, my confidence level in p is able to return to its initial level, just as CV recommends. Mulligan appears to assume that, if an agent *S* justified in believing that *p* on the basis of some body of evidence E, but *p* subsequently loses its positive epistemic status, then, in order for *p* to regain its positive epistemic status, it's inappropriate for *S* to ground or support *p* by way of the original body of evidence that led to the formation of *p* (viz., E), and must instead be supported by an evidential source that is *independent* from this original body of evidence. Formally, it appears that Mulligan believes that CV is somehow wedded to the following epistemic principle:

> EP1: If *S* is justified in believing that *p* upon evidence E at t^1, but *p* loses its positive epistemic status at t^2, then, in order for *p* to regain its positive epistemic status, *S* must support *p* by way of evidence that is independent from E.

EP1, however, is false, and goes against a widely accepted account of how a proposition regains its positive epistemic status. To illustrate, suppose at t^1 I believe upon your normally reliable testimony the proposition that <Your name is Bob>. But suppose at some later time t^2 I acquire from Jones a defeater for the proposition that <Your name is Bob>. Specifically, I acquire from Jones the undercutting defeater that <You are a pathological liar>. Accordingly, I downgrade my confidence level in <Your name is Bob>. But now suppose even further that at some later time t^3, I acquire evidence showing that Jones is mistaken and that you are *not* a pathological liar. Suppose, that is, I come to acquire a defeater-defeater for the proposition that <You are a pathological liar>. In such a scenario, this newly acquired defeater-defeater serves to neutralize the defeating effects of the defeater I acquired at t^2 thereby facilitating a *restoration* or *reinstatement* of the testimonial evidence I initially acquired at t^1. Since, in other words, this newly acquired defeater-defeater neutralizes the defeating effects of the defeater I acquired at t^2, the testimonial evidence that I acquired at t^1 *becomes effective again* (Sudduth 2008; Kelly 2014). Consequently – and this is the key point – the proposition that <Your name is Bob>

regains its positive epistemic status, and I am thereby able to restore my confidence level in this proposition.

Mulligan's EP1, therefore, is false. In order for *S*'s belief that *p* to regain its positive epistemic status, *S* need *not* support *p* by way of evidence that is independent from the original body of evidence that led to the formation of *p*. Rather, *p*'s positive epistemic status can be fully restored by way of the original body of evidence that led to *p*.

But now, if EP1is false, then, in order for *my* belief that *p* to regain its positive epistemic status at t^2, I need not support *p* by way of Richard's testimonial evidence, nor by way of an evidential source that is independent from the original body of evidence that led to the formation of *p*, as Mulligan suggests. Rather, *p*'s positive epistemic status can be fully restored at t^2 by way of the original body of evidence, viz., E that led to the formation of my belief that *p*. itself. But if that's so, then I'm able to restore my confidence level in *p* to its initial level, just as CV recommends. Hence, Mulligan's first paradox for CV vanishes.

2. Mulligan's Second Paradox:

Mulligan claims that a second paradox arises out of scenario one because, says Mulligan, it is a consequence of CV that "I lose confidence in my ability to judge epistemic peerhood" (2015, 73) when faced with disagreement about my epistemic peerhood judgments. The second paradox goes as follows.

According to Mulligan, when I learn of Richard's disagreement about the proposition that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> at t^2, CV implies that:

> (i) I ought to be less confident in the proposition that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*>;
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> (ii) I ought to regain my confidence in *p*, and;
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> (iii) I ought to downgrade my confidence in my general ability to assess peerhood.[1]

But since (as (iii) says), I ought to downgrade my confidence in my general ability to assess peerhood – since, in other words, I'm realize that I'm fallible with respect to peerhood assessement – Mulligan claims that I now ought to be *less* confident that Richard is my peer and *more* confident that Francis is my peer with respect to *p*.[2] But now, says Mulligan, CV has the bizarre consequence that I ought

[1] As Mulligan puts it, I ought to realize that "I am not as good as assessing peerhood as I thought" (2015, 73).

[2] Mulligan's sub-argument for the claim that I should more confident that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> goes as follows: although, says Mulligan, Francis' peerhood was initially undermined by Richard's opinion at t^2, I now realize that I'm not a reliable judge of peerhood. This shows, says

to be *less* confident that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> at t^2 and *more* confident that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> at t^2 (2015, 73). But that's contradictory. Hence, says Mulligan, CV generates a second paradox.

Recall that, on Mulligan's analysis, when I learn of Richard's disagreement at t^2, CV recommends that I downgrade my confidence level in <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*>. Moreover, says Mulligan, once I've downgraded my confidence level in <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*>, I ought to also (as Mulligan's (iii) makes explicit) downgrade my confidence in my *general ability to* assess peerhood. Since, in other words, I realize that I've made a mistake with respect to the proposition that <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> at t^2, I ought to downgrade my confidence level in the *further* proposition that <I am a reliable judge of peerhood assessment>. Indeed, Mulligan claims that we ought to downgrade our confidence in our ability to make judgments within *any* domain – perceptual, memorial, inferential, and so on – if we make a mistake, even a single mistake, within that domain. As Mulligan puts it, if "we make a mistake in some domain, we ought to lose confidence, if just a little confidence, in our abilities in that domain" (2015, 74). Generalizing, Mulligan appears to be suggesting that if an agent *S* is justified in believing that *p* within some domain D, but subsequently discovers that *p* is false, then *S* must not only downgrade her confidence level in *p*, but also downgrade her confidence level with respect to any proposition within D. Formally, it appears that Mulligan believes that CV is wedded to EP2:

> EP2: If *S* is justified in believing that *p* within some domain D at t^1, but subsequently discovers at t^2 that *p* is false, then *S* must not only downgrade her confidence level with respect to *p* at t^2, but also downgrade her confidence level with respect to any proposition within D at t^2.

EP2, however, is false or at least not obviously true. If *S* has made a "mistake" in some domain D, it's not obvious that *S* must *automatically* downgrade her confidence level with respect to D, as EP2 states. For example, suppose that, while looking at what appears to be a bottle of mustard in the fridge, you come to believe the proposition that <I am looking at a bottle of mustard>. Suppose further, however, that your friend Bob, who you know to be a notorious prankster, informs you that there is no mustard in the fridge, but that he slipped you a pill that has the effect of momentarily producing in you a mustard bottle-like visual impression. Accordingly, you now believe that it's *false* that <I am looking at a bottle of mustard>. Does it follow from this single false belief that you ought to downgrade your confidence

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Mulligan, that my downgrading of <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> at t^1 wasn't necessary in the first place. Hence, my confidence level in <Francis is my peer with respect to p> should return to its initial t^1 -level.

level with respect to *all* of your subsequent beliefs that arise from vision, as EP2 recommends? It doesn't seem like it. It seems like the sensible response would be for you to retain your confidence level in your general ability to identify objects by way of vision, but realize that you've been the unwitting victim of a perceptual illusion.

Or suppose that Smith is a world-renowned birder and is able to reliably identify a wide range of species of Pacific Northwest birds. More exactly, suppose that Smith has a statistical probability of correctly identifying a Pacific Northwest bird 90% of the time. Let's add that Smith is aware of the fact that she's not perfectly reliable with respect to Pacific Northwest bird-identification. She's knows that she's not *infallible* with respect to bird-identification. Nevertheless, Smith knows that she has a very strong track record of correctly identifying Pacific Northwest birds and only rarely misidentifies them. Accordingly, Smith assigns a high level of confidence to the proposition that <I am generally reliable with respect to identifying Pacific Northwest birds>.

Now, suppose that, upon seeing what appears to be a Chestnut-sided Warbler, Smith comes to believe the proposition that <The bird I am now looking at is a Chestnut-sided Warbler>. Suppose, however, that Smith doublechecks by consulting her bird-identification app and discovers that the bird she is looking at is *not* a Chestnut-sided Warbler, but rather the deceptively similar looking Bay-breasted Warbler. Does it follow from this single false belief that Smith ought to subsequently downgrade her confidence level in the proposition that <I am generally reliable with respect to identifying Pacific Northwest birds>, as EP2 recommends? Does it follow from this single mistake, in other words, that she ought to regard herself as somehow *less* reliable with respect to bird-identification? It doesn't seem like it. All that follows is that Smith ought to reconsider her confidence in her ability to identify a *particular kind* or *species of* Pacific Northwest bird, viz., the Chestnut-sided Warbler. As such, it seems that Smith can sensibly retain her confidence level in the proposition that <I am generally reliable with respect to identifying Pacific Northwest birds>, despite the fact that she's made an error on this particular occasion.

Mulligan's EP2, therefore, is false or at least not obviously true; If *S* is justified in believing that *p* within some domain *D*, but subsequently discovers that *p* is false, then *S* need not downgrade her confidence level with respect to any proposition within D. But now, if EP2 is false, then I need not downgrade *my* confidence level in my general ability to assess epistemic peerhood after learning that I've made a single mistake with respect to epistemic peer assessment, as Mulligan claims. Hence, and contrary to Mulligan, the second paradox for CV vanishes.[3]

[3] But let's suppose that I'm wrong and that I ought to downgrade my confidence in my general

3. Mulligan's Third Paradox:

Here is Mulligan's third paradox. Suppose that I regard Jimmy as my epistemic peer with respect to epistemic peerhood, but that Jimmy informs me that he is not my peer with respect epistemic peerhood. Here, says Mulligan, there is an "impossible tension" (2015, 75). On the one hand, when someone whom I regard as my epistemic peer disagrees with me about some proposition, I ought to lose confidence in that proposition. So, says Mulligan, my confidence in the proposition that <Jimmy is my epistemic peer> ought to be downgraded, as CV recommends. On the other hand, since my confidence level in <Jimmy is my epistemic peer> has been downgraded, Mulligan says that I now possess a reason to *dismiss* Jimmy's judgments regarding epistemic peerhood. Hence, my confidence in <Jimmy is my epistemic peer> should go up. But now, says Mulligan, CV leads to a paradox, as it recommends that I ought to both downgrade and *not* downgrade my confidence level in the proposition that <Jimmy is my epistemic peer> (2015, 75). Hence, says Mulligan, CV generates a third paradox.

As we've just seen, on Mulligan's analysis, if I believe that <Jimmy is my epistemic peer>, but later learn that he is not my epistemic peer, CV recommends that I ought to downgrade my confidence level in <Jimmy is my epistemic peer>. Moreover, says Mulligan, once I've downgraded my confidence level in <Jimmy is my epistemic peer>, I ought to also *dismiss* Jimmy's subsequent judgments regarding epistemic peerhood. Generalizing, Mulligan's suggestion here seems to be that, if an agent *S1* believes that *S2* is her peer with respect to some domain D at t^1, but *S2* claims at t^2 that she is not *S1*'s peer with respect to D, then *S1* must not only downgrade her confidence level in <*S2* is my peer with respect to D>, but also dismiss *S2*'s subsequent judgments regarding D. Formally, it appears that Mulligan thinks that CV is somehow wedded to EP3:

> EP3: If *S1* believes at t^1 that *S2* is her epistemic peer with respect to some domain D, but learns at t^2 that *S2* is not *S1*'s epistemic peer with respect to D, then *S1* must

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ability to assess peerhood after making a single mistake, as Mulligan claims. Again, there is no paradox. If, as (iii) says, I ought to downgrade my confidence in my general ability to assess peerhood, then, it seems, I now possess a defeater for anyone that I regard as my peer. But if I possess a defeater for anyone that I regard as my peer, then, surely, the possession of such a defeater will apply not just to Richard, but to *Francis as well*. Since this is so, my confidence level in <Francis is my peer with respect to *p*> ought to remain low. But if my confidence level in <Francis is my epistemic peer with respect to *p*> ought to remain low, then, contrary to Mulligan, CV doesn't entail that I ought to be *less* confident that <Francis is my peer with respect to p> and *more* confident that <Francis is my peer with respect to p>. Hence, once again, there is no second paradox for CV.

> dismiss or ignore *S2*'s subsequent judgments regarding D at t^2.

EP3, however is false or at least not obviously true. It doesn't follow from *S1*'s downgrading of <*S2* is my peer with respect to D> that, as EP3 says, *S1* ought to dismiss *S2*'s subsequent judgments regarding D. It doesn't follow, in other words, from <so-and-so is not my peer with respect to D> that <I can dismiss so-and-so's judgments regarding D>. It doesn't follow because I might think that, although so-and-so might not be my peer with respect to D, they are still an otherwise *reliable source of beliefs* with respect to that domain. Accordingly, I should still take seriously their pronouncements regarding that domain.

To see this, consider the following example, which parallels Mulligan's third paradox. Suppose that Alice and Alex are graduate students enrolled in a logic course, and that Alice regards Alex as her epistemic peer with respect to logic – she believes that Alex is equally intelligent, equally well-informed, and possesses the same evidence and reasoning abilities with respect to logic. Suppose further that Alice and Alex are attempting to determine whether the proposition that <not necessarily p is logically equivalent to possibly not-p> is true, and that, after some discussion, Alex (who is known self-deprecation) says to Alice "*Look, Alice, I think you're quite a bit stronger at logic than I am. It's probably best that you ignore my thoughts about whether this proposition is true*". Alice then downgrades her confidence level in the proposition that <Alex is my peer with respect to logic>.

Let's ask: Does it follow from this instance of downgrading that Alice ought to *dismiss* Alex's subsequent judgments regarding logic, as EP3 recommends? It doesn't seem like it. Although Alice has downgraded her confidence in the proposition that <Alex is my peer with respect to logic>, it doesn't follow that Alice ought to dismiss Alex's subsequent judgments, as Alex could be Alice's *epistemic near-peer* regarding logic, where we can define a "near peer" (Biro and Lampert, 2018, 385) as follows:

> ENP [*Epistemic Near-Peer*]: *S1* and *S2* are epistemic near-peers with respect to *p* iff they have approximately the same evidence concerning *p*, approximately the same cognitive abilities in general, and are approximately equal in their deployment of those cognitive abilities with respect to *p*.

If Alex is Alice's epistemic near-peer with respect to logic, then Alice still ought to give Alex's judgments regarding logic considerable weight; she still ought to take Alex's subsequent judgments regarding logic *seriously* and not reject them without giving them proper consideration. This is because Alex may still be an otherwise reliable source of beliefs with respect to logic. Hence, Alice need not dismiss Alex's judgments regarding logic, as EP3 recommends, despite the fact that she's downgraded her confidence level in <Alex is my peer with respect to logic>.

Mulligan's EP3, therefore, is false or at least not obviously true; It doesn't follow from *S1*'s downgrading of <*S2* is my peer with respect to D> that *S1* ought to dismiss *S2*'s subsequent judgments regarding D.

But now, if EP3 is false, then it doesn't follow from *my* downgrading of <Jimmy is my epistemic peer> that I ought to dismiss Jimmy's judgments regarding epistemic peerhood assessment, as Mulligan suggests. This is because Jimmy may still be my near-peer with respect to epistemic peerhood assessment. As such, I should still take seriously Jimmy's pronouncements regarding peerhood assessment.

4. Conclusion

As we've seen, Mulligan claims that CV generates three paradoxes when CV is applied to a range of propositions related to epistemic peerhood. Indeed, Mulligan claims that these three paradoxes are potentially fatal for CV. But Mulligan's claim appears to be unwarranted. As I argued above, each of Mulligan's three paradoxes implicitly depend upon epistemic principles – viz., EP1, EP2, and EP3 – that are false or not obviously true. Since this is so, Mulligan has failed to show that CV generates any paradoxical results related to epistemic peerhood.

A final comment. It's important to note that CV generates Mulligan's three paradoxes only if one *conjoins* CV with EP1, EP2, and EP3; it's the *conjunction* of CV & EP1, EP2, and EP3 that generates Mulligan's three paradoxes. But demonstrating that there are paradoxical entailments of (CV & EP1 – EP3) doesn't *by itself* show that CV is a mistaken account of disagreement, unless it can be shown that CV is wedded to EP1 – EP3. But, and this is the key point, Mulligan fails to provide any reasons for thinking that CV is wedded to these epistemic principles. Mulligan, that is, fails to provide reasons for thinking that an acceptance of CV *entails* an acceptance of EP1 – EP3. Since this is so, it appears that the proponent of CV can safely reject EP1 – EP3. The burden of proof, therefore, lies with Mulligan. In order for Mulligan to generate each of his three paradoxes, he must provide an argument demonstrating that an acceptance of CV entails an acceptance of EP1 – EP3. In the absence of such an argument, however, we must conclude that the proponent of CV need not accept these epistemic principles. Accordingly, Mulligan has failed to show that CV generates any paradoxical results related to epistemic peerhood.[4]

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