

What Should We Do When We Disagree?

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You and I have been colleagues for ten years, during which we have tirelessly discussed the reasons both for and against the existence of God. There is no argument or piece of evidence bearing directly on this question that one of us is aware of that the other is not—we are, then, *evidential equals*¹ relative to the topic of God's existence.² There is also no cognitive virtue or capacity, or cognitive vice or incapacity, that one of us possesses that the other does not—we are, then, also *cognitive equals* relative to the question at issue.³ Given this evidential and cognitive equality, combined with the fact that we have fully disclosed to one another all of our reasons and arguments relative to this topic, we are *epistemic peers* with respect to the question whether God exists.⁴ Yet despite the symmetry of our epistemic positions, we deeply disagree about the answer to this question. What response does rationality require in such a case, where epistemic peers disagree over a question despite there being no apparent asymmetries between them?⁵

There are two main answers to this question in the recent literature. First, there is the view of the *nonconformists*, who maintain that one can continue to rationally believe that p despite the fact that one's epistemic peer explicitly believes that $\text{not-}p$, even when one does not have a reason independent of the disagreement itself to prefer one's own belief.⁶ Otherwise put, nonconformists argue that there can be reasonable disagreement among epistemic peers. There are two central explanations of the nonconformist response to peer disagreement.⁷ On the one hand, there is the *egocentric view*, which holds that I am justified in giving my belief extra weight⁸ in the face of peer disagreement because the belief in question is *mine*.⁹ On the other hand, there is the *correct reasoning view*, according to which I am justified in giving my belief extra weight in the face of peer disagreement because the belief in question is *in fact the product of correct reasoning*.¹⁰ Despite these

explanatory differences, however, the bottom line is the same—the mere fact that you and I disagree does not rationally require any doxastic revision on my part, even if I cannot point to any epistemic asymmetry between the two of us. Second, there is the view of the *conformists*, who hold that, unless one has a reason that is independent of the disagreement itself to prefer one’s own belief, one cannot continue to rationally believe that p when one is faced with an epistemic peer who explicitly believes that $\text{not-}p$.¹¹ Accordingly, conformists maintain that there cannot be reasonable disagreement among epistemic peers. The underlying explanation of this view is that, in the absence of an independent reason to downgrade the epistemic status of one’s opponent, equal weight should be given to one’s own beliefs and to those held by one’s epistemic peers, thereby necessitating significant doxastic revision in the face of peer disagreement. Some conformists, such as Richard Feldman, require that both parties to the dispute *withhold* belief relative to p , while others, such as David Christensen and Adam Elga, instead require *splitting the difference* in the degrees of their respective beliefs. But regardless of the details, conformists all concur that when epistemic peers disagree, substantial adjustment is required in their respective beliefs.

I have elsewhere argued against both of these views in the epistemology of disagreement.¹² Against nonconformism, I relied on a case from Christensen (2007), which can be formulated as follows:

BILL CALCULATION: While dining with four of my friends, we all agree to leave a 20% tip and to evenly split the cost of the bill. My friend, Ramona, and I rightly regard one another as peers where calculations are concerned—we frequently dine together and consistently arrive at the same figure when dividing up the amount owed. After the bill arrives and we each have a clear look at it, I assert with confidence that I have carefully calculated in my head that we each owe \$43 and Ramona asserts with the same degree of confidence that she has carefully calculated in her head that we each owe \$45.¹³

Here I argued that in the absence of an independent reason to downgrade Ramona, such as my having evidence that she has been drinking or suffering from a cognitive ailment, the rational response is to withhold belief relative to the amount of the bill owed. For given that we are epistemic peers relative to performing simple calculations, there is nothing to break the epistemic symmetry between us that is necessary to justify favoring my own answer over Ramona's. Thus, nonconformism seems to deliver the wrong verdict in BILL CALCULATION.

Against conformism, I presented cases in which one's own belief is confidently held and extraordinarily well-justified, despite there being disagreement with an epistemic peer over whom one has no independent epistemic advantage. In addition to extreme cases of disagreement regarding whether a friend is sitting inches away or whether $2+2$ equals 4, I also raised the following sort of case:

DIRECTIONS: I have lived in Chicago for the past fifteen years and during this time I have become quite familiar with the downtown area. Of the many restaurants that I enjoy frequently dining at, My Thai on Michigan Avenue is among my favorites. Jack, my neighbor, moved into the same apartment building the very weekend that I did fifteen years ago and he, too, has become quite competent in his acquaintance with the city. Indeed, it is not uncommon for us to bump into each other at various places, My Thai being one of them. Today, when I saw Jack coming out of his apartment, I told him that I was on my way to My Thai on Michigan Avenue, after which he responded, "My Thai is not on Michigan Avenue—it is on State Street." Prior to this disagreement, neither Jack nor I had any reason to suspect that the other's memory is deficient in any way, and we both rightly regarded one another as peers as far as knowledge of Chicago is concerned.

I argued that in the face of disagreement with Jack, I am not rationally required to withhold, or to significantly reduce my confidence in, my belief about the whereabouts of the restaurant in question.

For given the substantial amount of credence and epistemic support enjoyed by my belief about My Thai's location, Jack's disagreement seems appropriately regarded as evidence that something is not quite right with him. Moreover, even when I have excellent reasons for believing that my interlocutor and I are epistemic peers, I will, in ordinary situations, often have access to *personal information* about myself that I lack with respect to my peer. I may, for instance, know about myself that I am not currently suffering from depression, nor experiencing side effects from prescribed medication, nor exhausted, nor feeling distracted, whereas I may not know that all of this is true of my opponent. Applying this to DIRECTIONS, while I do not have prior reason to question Jack's capacities, the fact of the disagreement itself, in conjunction with the personal information that I possess about myself, now gives me reason to think that there is a serious problem with his cognitive faculties. Otherwise put, this information, when it combines with the already extraordinarily high degree of justified confidence that I have in my belief about the location of My Thai, is able to serve as a symmetry breaker between Jack and me. Thus, I concluded that conformism delivers the incorrect result in DIRECTIONS.

In place of both nonconformism and conformism, I sketched an alternate account of disagreement's epistemic significance that delivers the correct verdict in both BILL CALCULATION and DIRECTIONS. According to my *justificationist view*, the amount of doxastic revision required tracks the degree to which the target belief is confidently held and highly justified.¹⁴ At two ends of the spectrum of my view, I proposed the following principles:¹⁵

No Doxastic Revision Required (NDRR): In a case of ordinary disagreement between A and B, if A's belief that p enjoys a very high degree of justified confidence¹⁶, then A is rationally permitted to retain her same degree of belief that p if and only if A has personal information that provides a relevant symmetry breaker.

Substantial Doxastic Revision Required (SDRR): In a case of ordinary disagreement between A and B, if A's belief that p enjoys a relatively low degree of justified confidence, then A is rationally required to substantially revise the degree to which she holds her belief that p .

Given that my belief enjoys a relatively low degree of justified confidence in BILL

CALCULATION—after all, I calculated only once, in my head, the amount owed by each of five people for a fairly large bill—SDRR says that I am rationally required to engage in substantial doxastic revision in the face of disagreement with Ramona. In contrast, because my belief about the whereabouts of My Thai enjoys an extraordinary degree of justified confidence, NDRR says that no doxastic revision is required on my part in the face of disagreement with Jack. Thus, my justificationist account delivers the intuitively correct result in both cases. Moreover, on my view, there will be a spectrum of cases falling between no doxastic revision required and substantial doxastic revision being necessary. If, say, A's belief that p enjoys a moderately high degree of justified confidence, then merely some doxastic revision may be required in the face of ordinary disagreement with an epistemic peer. On the other hand, if A's belief that p enjoys a moderately low degree of justified confidence, then more doxastic revision may be required in the face of ordinary disagreement, but perhaps still not as much as withholding or splitting the difference in degree of belief.

My purpose in this paper is to develop my justificationist view of disagreement's epistemic significance in further depth and detail. To this end, I shall, first, raise additional problems for nonconformism and conformism and argue that my justificationist view has the resources to handle these difficulties with ease. I shall then consider several objections to my own account and show that, with some modifications, my view can accommodate these problems in a principled and plausible fashion.

1. Two Problems

There are two central problems facing the dominant views of the epistemic significance of disagreement, one targeting nonconformism and the other conformism. Let us begin with the former.

The difficulty facing the nonconformist is what I shall call the *One against Many Problem*. According to the nonconformist, disagreement with epistemic peers does not itself require any doxastic revision—other features do, such as the *arguments* or *reasons* supporting the beliefs in question.¹⁷ Otherwise put, peer disagreement does not by itself possess any epistemic significance. But here is the problem: even in those particular cases where nonconformist intuitions seem compelling, surely the more disagreement one faces, the more implausible nonconformism becomes. For instance, let us return to DIRECTIONS—even if I am not rationally required to adjust my doxastic states in response to Jack’s disagreement, if enough epistemic peers disagree with me in an appropriately independent fashion,¹⁸ clearly I should significantly revise my belief about My Thai’s location. For instance, if ten other people in my apartment building, all of whom know Chicago exceedingly well, independently claim that My Thai is on State Street, my confidence in my original belief should at least begin to diminish. If twenty-five epistemic peers independently claim that My Thai is not on Michigan Avenue, then perhaps I should come close to withholding. And if, say, one hundred epistemic peers independently assert with confidence that the restaurant is on State Street, then perhaps I should completely abandon my previous belief, even if it initially enjoyed an extraordinarily high degree of justified confidence. Granted, in such a situation, I may begin to worry that I am going mad, or that I am suffering the early symptoms of dementia. But it would clearly be dogmatic irrationality at its finest for me to continue to hold my initial belief, with the same degree of confidence, in the face of so much peer disagreement. So even if *one* instance of disagreement is epistemically insignificant, surely *many* independent instances of disagreement are

epistemically significant; yet the problem for the nonconformist is that such a view does not appear to have the resources to provide a principled explanation of this. For on this view, *disagreement itself is lacking in epistemic power*—all of the work is instead done by the arguments or reasons for holding the belief in question. Thus, because those arguments and reasons have not changed, it would seem to follow that one can continue to rationally retain one's beliefs, with the same degree of confidence, no matter whether hundreds or thousands of epistemic peers disagree with one. In other words, if the first instance of disagreement is accorded a 0 with respect to its epistemic significance, and the second is accorded a 0, and the third a 0, and so on, then regardless of how many instances there are, the result will still add up to be 0. Surely this is an unwelcome result.¹⁹

The difficulty facing the conformist is what I shall call the *Many against One Problem*. Intuitions supporting conformism are typically elicited by focusing on what rationality requires in the face of peer disagreement. While the nonconformist argues—on one end of the spectrum—that such disagreement, by itself, is epistemically insignificant, the conformist maintains—on the other end of the spectrum—that just *one* instance of peer disagreement is incredibly significant, necessitating substantial doxastic revision either through withholding belief or splitting the difference in degrees of confidence. But here is the problem: given the enormous power granted to disagreement on the conformist's view, what room is left for the epistemic significance of peer *agreement*? More precisely, if *many* epistemic peers independently agree with one on the answer to a question, yet only *one* epistemic peer disagrees, surely substantial doxastic revision is not required; however, it is not clear how conformism will provide a principled explanation of this. To see this, let us return to BILL CALCULATION—even if I am rationally required to adjust my doxastic states in response to Ramona's disagreement, if enough epistemic peers agree with me, I should clearly no longer do so. For instance, if ten other people at the restaurant, all of whom are reliable at performing calculations, independently claim that each of the five of us dining together owes \$43,

then my confidence in my original belief should at least be close to its original state. If twenty-five epistemic peers independently claim that it is \$43, then perhaps I should believe it with a significantly higher degree of confidence. And if, say, one hundred epistemic peers independently assert with confidence that the amount is \$43, then perhaps I should have an extraordinarily high degree of confidence in my belief. Yet in the face of all of this agreement stands Ramona's lone voice of peer disagreement. Given that she is a peer and she disagrees with me, the conformist's principles seem to nonetheless require substantial doxastic revision on my part. But surely this is the wrong result. Many voices of peer agreement against one of peer disagreement should render the dissenter's voice epistemically irrelevant. It is, however, unclear how the conformist can accommodate this intuition in a way that is not *ad hoc*.

Of course, the nonconformist could *say* that disagreement that has no epistemic significance in isolation can acquire enormous power when it enjoys company, and the conformist could *assert* that one instance of peer disagreement is significant but not when it is in conjunction with many voices of peer agreement. But surely a principled explanation would be needed of both of these claims. What might such an explanation look like? The most natural candidate appeals to the *underlying epistemic story* of the situation, which not only abandons the views of the nonconformist and the conformist, but also brings us precisely to my justificationist account.²⁰

On my view, the amount of doxastic revision required is determined by the level of justified confidence possessed by the target belief in conjunction with whether the presence of personal information is sufficient to serve as a symmetry breaker. The satisfaction of these conditions can, in turn, be affected by many factors. For instance, even if one's belief that p initially enjoys a very high degree of justified confidence, adding many appropriately independent instances of peer disagreement to one's total epistemic situation undermines the epistemic power of one's personal information, thereby eliminating the presence of a relevant symmetry breaker. To illustrate, let us

return to DIRECTIONS: upon disagreeing with Jack regarding the location of My Thai, I am quite sure that something has gone awry, either evidentially or cognitively, with one of us. The personal information that I have about myself, and lack about Jack, enables me to reasonably believe that *he* is the one who has gone awry and thus to downgrade him, which thereby breaks the symmetry between us. But when multiple appropriately independent instances of peer disagreement are added to my epistemic situation, they provide evidence that undermines the epistemic power of my personal information. That is to say, I now have good reason to think that *I* am the one who has gone awry. Without a relevant symmetry breaker, then, I must engage in doxastic revision. Similarly, even if one's belief that *p* presently enjoys a very low degree of justified confidence, adding many independent instances of peer agreement to one's total epistemic situation substantially alters the evidential support provided by one's personal information, but this time in its favor. Thus, even if my belief that we each owe \$43 in BILL CALCULATION enjoys a relatively low degree of justified confidence, adding multiple independent instances of agreement to my epistemic situation provides very good evidence for preferring my own calculation over my opponent's. Otherwise put, such agreement can substantially strengthen the epistemic power of my personal information, thereby breaking the symmetry between my opponent and me. With a relevant symmetry breaker, then, I am permitted to refrain from doxastic revision. This enables my view to explain in a principled way both why one instance of peer disagreement may be epistemically impotent while twenty-five such instances require doxastic revision, and why one instance of peer disagreement may be epistemically significant but not when combined with twenty-five instances of peer agreement.

This same point could be formulated using the framework of defeaters. Let us begin with applying such a framework to the One against Many Problem: one instance of peer disagreement regarding the question whether *p* provides me with a defeater for my belief that *p*, thereby necessitating doxastic revision. However, when I am very highly justified in holding this belief, the

personal information that I possess about myself and lack about my interlocutor can provide me with a defeater-defeater for my original belief, which enables me to rationally retain my belief that p with the same degree of credence. But if multiple appropriately independent instances of peer disagreement are then added to my epistemic situation, my personal information can itself be defeated—that is, such additional disagreement can provide me with a defeater-defeater-defeater for my original belief that p , thereby once again requiring doxastic revision. Similar considerations apply with respect to the Many against One Problem: if my belief that p enjoys a very low level of justified confidence, the strength of my personal information will not be strong enough to defeat the original defeater provided by my disagreement with a peer regarding the question whether p . However, if many appropriately independent instances of peer agreement are added to my total epistemic situation, then the strength of my personal information can be substantially bolstered, thereby providing a defeater-defeater for my original belief that p that enables me to rationally retain it with the same degree of credence.

The upshot of these considerations, then, is that nonconformists face the One against Many Problem because they radically underemphasize the epistemic significance of disagreement itself, and conformists face the Many against One Problem because they radically overemphasize its significance. But because my justificationist view holds that the epistemic significance of disagreement depends on the degree of justified confidence with which the belief in question is held, combined with the presence or absence of a relevant symmetry breaker, the variability of disagreement's significance is built directly into my account, thereby avoiding both of the problems afflicting rival views.

However, it might be objected that in order to avoid the One against Many Problem facing the nonconformist by virtue of granting no epistemic significance to a single instance of disagreement, my view commits me to saying that every instance of disagreement, no matter how

unreasonable, is accorded at least *some* epistemic significance. Now, the objection continues, suppose the all-or-nothing model of belief is rejected in favor of the degree of belief model. Suppose further that the degree to which doxastic revision is required in the face of disagreement maps the degree of epistemic significance accorded to each instance of disagreement. Won't my view ultimately turn out to be a version of conformism? For instance, imagine that I give credence 1 to the proposition that p , and there is an instance of disagreement that is accorded the most minimal significance possible above zero. Doesn't my view require at least *some* doxastic revision in such a case, even if it amounts to my giving something like credence .999 to the proposition that p ? And doesn't this simply amount to a very finely individuating version of conformism?

By way of response to this, I reject the claim that the degree to which one is required to revise the belief in question maps the degree of epistemic significance accorded to each instance of disagreement. To see this, consider the following sort of case²¹:

ELEMENTARY MATH: Harry and I, who have been colleagues for the past six years, were drinking coffee at Starbucks and trying to determine how many people from our department will be attending the upcoming APA. I, reasoning aloud, say, "Well, Mark and Mary are going on Wednesday, and Sam and Stacey are going on Thursday, and, since $2+2=4$, there will be four other members of our department at that conference." In response, Harry asserts, "But $2+2$ does not equal 4." Prior to this disagreement, neither Harry nor I had any reason to think that the other is evidentially or cognitively deficient in any way, and we both sincerely avowed our respective conflicting beliefs.

Now, while the disagreement between Harry and me over whether $2+2=4$ is indeed a piece of evidence and is thereby accorded some epistemic significance, it does not require *any* revision, however small, of my belief that $2+2=4$. This is so because the extraordinary evidence that I have for believing that $2+2=4$, along with the personal information I possess about myself and my

recognition of the fact that Harry and I are in disagreement, serve as good evidence that Harry is not my epistemic peer on this matter after all.²² In this sense, the disagreement itself *does* have epistemic significance, though this does not translate into the need to revise the mathematical belief in question—instead, it leads to doxastic revision regarding my belief that Harry is an epistemic peer. Thus, the possession of epistemic significance by an instance of peer disagreement does not always amount to doxastic revision of the target belief being necessary. Of course, if it should turn out that many people I regard as epistemic peers tell me that they, like Harry, disagree with me regarding the claim that $2+2=4$, the epistemic significance of the disagreement would change. In particular, this would be sufficient to at least weaken the strength of my personal information. At a minimum, I should begin to doubt that Harry and the others are epistemically inferior to me; rather than having reason to believe that *his* cognitive faculties have gone awry, I now have reason to suspect that *mine* may not be functioning as they ought to be. Consequently, I would be rationally required to at least weaken the degree to which I believe that $2+2=4$. It should be clear, then, that the justificationist account I have sketched is able to give a principled explanation for when disagreement requires doxastic revision and when it does not, and, further, it should also be clear that it would not be accurate to describe the view as conformist in any reasonable sense.

There is one final point I should like to make on behalf of my justificationist view: it may be argued that the particular conformist views developed by Adam Elga and David Christensen have the resources for providing a principled explanation to the Many against One Problem. Let us begin with the former. Consider Elga's response below to a case of extreme disagreement, such as the kind found in ELEMENTARY MATH:

...according to the equal weight view, your probability that you are right should equal your prior probability that you would be right, *conditional on what you later learn about the circumstances of the disagreement*. And one circumstance of [this extreme] disagreement is that you are

extremely confident that your advisor's answer is wrong—much more confident than you are that your answer is right. Indeed, her answer strikes you as obviously insane. So in order to apply the equal weight view, we must determine your prior probability that you would be right, conditional on these circumstances arising.

To do so, think of your state of mind before [the disagreement]. We have assumed that, conditional on the two of you disagreeing, you think that your advisor is just as likely as you to be right. But it is also natural to assume that, conditional on the two of you disagreeing *and your finding her answer utterly insane*, you think that you are much more likely to be right. If so, then when that circumstance arises the equal weight view instructs you to favor your own answer. That is the intuitively correct verdict about the case.

What makes the above answer work is an asymmetry in the case. You find your advisor's answer insane.... (Elga 2007, p. 491)

Given this, perhaps Elga could respond to the Many against One Problem as follows: suppose that you are in a situation where one epistemic peer disagrees with you, and 25 epistemic peers agree with you. This fact is a relevant feature that you learn about the circumstances of the disagreement, one that affects the probability you assign to your being right when such a situation arises. In particular, conditional on you and your peer disagreeing *and there being 25 other epistemic peers who agree with you*, you think that you are much more likely to be right. Thus, on Elga's specific version of conformism, it may be argued that no (or minimal) doxastic revision is required in such a case, which accords precisely with our intuitions.

There is, however, reason to find Elga's response here on behalf of conformism unsatisfactory. The central worry with his proposal can be put in the form of what I shall call the *false advertising dilemma*, consisting of the *dogmatism horn* and the *justificationist horn*. Let us begin with the former. On the one hand, Elga may be saying that the mere fact that you are extremely

confident in your answer and the mere fact that you find your advisor's response insane serve as relevant symmetry breakers, regardless of whether these assessments are epistemically justified. But then symmetry breakers are not only available in countless instances of peer disagreement, they are also present in cases where intuitively they shouldn't be. Many people on either side of the abortion debate are extremely confident in their views, many atheists find the views of their opponents insane, and many evangelical Christians regard the moral permissibility of gay marriage as patently false. Yet surely doxastic revision is rationally necessary in at least some of these cases. Indeed, extraordinary confidence and knee-jerk skepticism regarding the views of others are paradigmatic reactions of supreme dogmatists. So, if these psychological responses are sufficient, without any epistemic backing, to serve as symmetry breakers between you and your epistemic peer, then the door is opened to rampant dogmatism. For so long as you adopt a general policy of extreme confidence and dismissive skepticism with respect to others' views, you are always in possession of a symmetry breaker. Thus, this kind of dogmatism can ultimately lead to the strongest version of nonconformism, where peer disagreement never, or least rarely, requires doxastic revision. This reading of Elga's version of conformism, then, succumbs to the dogmatism horn of the dilemma, which in turn reveals precisely why the problem at issue involves false advertising: if a conformist view that pitches itself as requiring that equal weight be given to one's own views and to those of one's epistemic peers, and claims that substantive doxastic revision is required in such cases, turns out to have a clause whereby rampant dogmatism and extreme nonconformism follow, then surely the view in question was falsely advertised.

On the other hand, the passage quoted above from Elga may instead be read as saying that the extreme confidence that you have in your answer and your finding your advisor's response insane serve as relevant symmetry breakers only insofar as these assessments are epistemically justified. This, however, leads to the second, justificationist horn of the dilemma. For now the

notion of epistemic justification must be brought in to underwrite the relevant circumstances of the disagreement that thereby affect the probability assignments that one is likely to be right in the face of such peer disagreement. But then considerations about disagreement and equal weight are not doing the work in question—justification is—and conformism begins to sound an awful lot like my justificationist view. This reading of Elga’s version of conformism again reveals why the central problem here involves false advertising: if a conformist view that pitches itself as requiring that equal weight be given to one’s own views and to those of one’s epistemic peers, and claims that disagreement itself requires substantive doxastic revision in such cases, turns out to have a clause whereby what is really doing all of the work in question is instead epistemic justification, then surely the view in question was falsely advertised.

Moreover, there are questions about what appropriately figures into the circumstances of the disagreement, thereby affecting the probability assignments that one is likely to be right in the face of the peer disagreement at issue. In the passage quoted above, Elga gives us a couple of candidates: “you are extremely confident that your advisor’s answer is wrong” and “you find your advisor’s answer insane.” But how inclusive is the list of circumstances relevant to the disagreement under consideration? For instance, does your being moderately confident that your advisor’s answer is wrong qualify, and does finding her answer rather implausible count? If so, the class of peer disagreements where doxastic revision is required continues to shrink, to the point where the account is hardly accurately described as an Equal Weight View. If not, what principled explanation is there for regarding the factors mentioned by Elga as relevant, and deeming these as irrelevant?

Similar considerations apply to Christensen’s response (2007) to cases such as DIRECTIONS and ELEMENTARY MATH. According to Christensen, I do not have to engage in doxastic revision in the face of peer disagreement so long as the best explanation I can offer of the disagreement lies with an error made by my interlocutor rather than with one made by me. But

there are two readings of this. On a subjective reading, so long as the best explanation *from my subjective point of view* of the disagreement in question lies with an error made by my peer, no doxastic revision is required. This reading, however, opens the door to the dogmatism horn of the false advertising dilemma. For so long as one is egocentric or biased enough, one can always convince oneself that the best explanation of a given instance of peer disagreement lies with errors made by one's interlocutors. In BILL CALCULATION, for instance, I could be so dogmatic about my calculations that it just seems obvious to me that the best explanation of my disagreement with Ramona lies with reasoning errors on her part. This is obviously an unwelcome result. Given this, an objective reading of Christensen's clause may be more promising, according to which no doxastic revision is needed so long as the best explanation *from an epistemic point of view* of the disagreement in question lies with an error made by my interlocutor. But this reading succumbs to the justificationist horn of the false advertising dilemma. For instance, what makes Jack's error the best epistemic explanation of our disagreeing over the location of My Thai is the extraordinary degree of justified confidence I have in my belief that it is on Michigan Avenue, which thereby enables the personal information that I have about myself to serve as a symmetry breaker. If both this level of justified confidence and personal information were removed, it would be utterly mysterious what would make Jack's error the best epistemic explanation of our disagreement over the restaurant's location. Thus, on this reading of Christensen's clause, the best epistemic explanation of the disagreement in question just bottoms out in a combination of justified confidence and the presence or absence of relevant personal information.

The upshot of these considerations is that the addition of the clauses found in the views of Elga and Christensen deviates from the spirit of the conformist view in radical ways. If an account finds itself needing to add such a clause, this is probably good reason to think that the view in question is fundamentally misguided. Given that my justificationist account of disagreement can

handle both the One against Many Problem and the Many against One Problem in a principled, plausible way, while invoking only the original justificatory resources of the theory, my account has a strong advantage over its rivals.

2. Protecting Beliefs

At the heart of my justificationist view is the thesis that the amount of doxastic revision required in the face of peer disagreement tracks the amount of justified confidence present: the more justified and confident a belief is, the less doxastic revision is required, and the less justified and confident a belief is, the more doxastic revision is required. In particular, my account includes the No Doxastic Revision Required (NDRR) principle and the Substantial Doxastic Revision Required (SDRR) principle presented earlier. There is, however, an immediate problem with these principles, which can be seen by considering the following:

BIRD: While reading in the library with my friend Eva, I glance out the window, catch a glimpse of a bird flying by, and on this basis hastily form the belief that a magpie just flew by. After saying to Eva, who was looking out the window at the same time, that I enjoyed seeing the magpie that just flew by, she responded, “Nothing flew by the window.” Prior to this disagreement, neither Eva nor I had any reason to think that the other is evidentially or cognitively deficient in any way, and we both sincerely avowed our respective conflicting beliefs.²³

The first point to notice about BIRD is that my belief that a magpie just flew by the library window enjoys a relatively low degree of justification. For in the absence of unusual circumstances—such as magpies being the only birds in the area—a glimpse of a bird flying by the window does not provide me with a high degree of justification for concluding that it is specifically a magpie, no matter how confidently it is held. The second point here relevant is that it is arguable that I am rationally

entitled to continue holding my magpie belief in BIRD with the same degree of credence, despite Eva's disagreement with me. The reasoning underlying this verdict parallels that adduced when considering DIRECTIONS: if I look out a clear, nearby window, have my contact lenses in, have not been drinking or taking any drugs, and know all of this to be true of myself, then Eva claiming that nothing flew by the window does not seem to give me any reason at all to revise my belief that it was a magpie that flew by. Instead, given that Eva was looking out the window at the same time as me, such a disagreement seems appropriately regarded by me as evidence that something is not right with her, either evidentially or cognitively. If this is correct, then BIRD may be thought to undermine not only the letter of my justificationist view, but also the spirit of it as well. For here would be a case where a belief with very little justified confidence requires no doxastic revision at all, thereby falsifying the Substantial Doxastic Revision Required principle above. Even more importantly, it now looks as though the amount of doxastic revision needed does not track the level of justification possessed—which is the denial of a thesis that lies at the heart of my justificationist view.

Upon further reflection, however, it becomes apparent that BIRD not only fails to undermine my justificationist view, it also provides further support for it, albeit for a slightly tweaked version. To see this, let us ask: what is it about the nature of the disagreement in this case that renders it intuitively rational for there to be no doxastic revision on my part? At least *prima facie*, one answer is that the disagreement in question seems outrageous. Sure, the bird may have instead been a starling, a grackle, or a red-winged blackbird, and so I may be wrong in my belief that it was a magpie. It may also be possible, though very unlikely, that it wasn't a bird at all that flew by but, rather, was an extremely large insect or a bat that forgot it was nocturnal. Disagreements of either of these sorts—i.e., regarding whether it was a magpie or a bird—elicit quite different intuitions regarding doxastic revision. But as BIRD is described, *something* clearly flew by and so Eva's

disagreement with me on the grounds that nothing flew by seems so outrageous that it lacks the epistemic significance it might otherwise have had.

It is not difficult to see, though, that the explanation at work here does not bottom out in mere outrageousness. For what explains the outrageousness of the disagreement in question is that I have an extremely high degree of justification in my confident belief that something flew by the window. And while this is not the target belief of the disagreement, it can “protect” my belief that a magpie flew by from Eva’s disagreement. To flesh out what it means for a belief to be protected in this sense, consider the following modified version of the No Doxastic Revision Required principle:

No Doxastic Revision Required* (NDRR*): In a case of ordinary disagreement between A and B, if (N1) A’s belief that p enjoys a very high degree of justified confidence, or (N2) A’s belief that p is “protected” by a belief that enjoys a very high degree of justified confidence, then A is permitted to rationally retain her same degree of belief that p if and only if A has personal information that provides a relevant symmetry breaker.

Protected: A’s belief that p is protected by A’s belief that q if and only if both A’s belief that p and A’s belief that q are members of a subset of A’s beliefs, each of which is challenged by the same instance of ordinary disagreement with B, and where A’s belief that q meets condition (N1) above (which thereby justifies A in downgrading the epistemic status of B).

Given this, we can also propose the following modified version of the Substantial Doxastic Revision Required principle:

Substantial Doxastic Revision Required* (SDRR*): In a case of ordinary disagreement between A and B, if (S1) A’s belief that p enjoys a relatively low degree of justified confidence, and (S2) A’s belief that p is not “protected” by a belief that enjoys a very high degree of justified confidence, then A is rationally required to substantially revise the degree to which she holds her belief that p .

Now, let me explain how my magpie belief in BIRD is protected. When Eva claims that nothing flew by the window, she is challenging not only my belief that a magpie did, but also my belief that a bird did, that a living creature did, that a small living creature did, that something did, and so on. In other words, there is a subset of my beliefs, each of which is challenged by Eva's claim that nothing flew by the window. At least one of the members of this subset satisfies condition (N1) by virtue of enjoying a very high degree of justified confidence; namely, my belief that something flew by the window. The very high degree of justification had by this belief enables me to downgrade my opponent's epistemic status in the same manner found in DIRECTIONS. This results in protection for my belief that a magpie flew by the window, and thus no doxastic revision is required in the face of my ordinary disagreement with Eva. Contrast this with a disagreement where doxastic revision is intuitively required, such as one involving Eva responding to my assertion about the magpie with, "It was a starling that flew by, not a magpie." In such a case, Eva is challenging not only my magpie belief, but also a subset of my beliefs, at least one of which is my belief that the bird that flew by was in the crow family. But none of these beliefs satisfies (N1), and so clearly at least some doxastic revision is necessary on my part. Notice, moreover, that this is precisely why a high level of justification is needed, in addition to the presence of personal information, in order for it to be permissible to not engage in doxastic revision in the face of peer disagreement. For in the case where Eva responds to my magpie assertion with a claim that a starling flew by the window, I may still know about myself that I am not currently suffering from depression, nor exhausted, nor feeling distracted, and so on. If, however, there is neither a target nor a protecting belief enjoying a high degree of justification, then this personal information is insufficient to break the symmetry between Eva's epistemic situation and my own.

It should also be noted that target beliefs can be protected from more specific sorts of challenges as well. For instance, suppose that everything is the same in BIRD except that Eva

responds to my magpie assertion with, “It was a swan that flew by the window, not a magpie.” Here, my target belief about a magpie having just flown by faces a more specific challenge from Eva’s claim that it was instead a swan, rather than the more general challenge posed by her previous claim that nothing flew by. Yet, there is nonetheless the clear intuition that no doxastic revision is required on my part, no matter how flimsy the initial level of justification possessed by magpie belief is. Once again, my view can handle this problem with ease through the protection clause of my account. In particular, my belief that a medium-sized, black and white flying creature flew past the window is a protecting belief, one that is also challenged by the disagreement in question but is one for which I have a very high degree of justification. Thus, on my view, this highly justified belief protects the target magpie belief, thereby leading to no doxastic revision being required.

The upshot of these considerations is that the relationship between beliefs—both in terms of their being supported and challenged—is complex. One instance of disagreement can challenge multiple beliefs, and a challenge can be answered for multiple beliefs by the high level of justification for one of them. This should come as no surprise, as the factors contributing to the justification of a given belief can be complex and varied. Given the justificationist nature of my view, then, one should likewise expect the same when it comes to the epistemic significance of disagreement.

3. Applications

Many of the cases discussed thus far in connection with nonconformism and conformism involve situations where the disagreement at issue is neither deeply entrenched nor difficult to resolve. In *DIRECTIONS*, for instance, the disagreement that Jack and I have regarding My Thai’s location is somewhat superficial and easily settled—today is the first time we have disagreed on this topic and we can simply walk over to Michigan Avenue together and see whether the restaurant is there or on State Street. Similarly, in *BILL CALCULATION*, Ramona and I have not been debating for

months or years the amount of the bill that each of us owes, and we can simply pull out a calculator to determine who is correct. But many disagreements among peers, especially the ones that breathe practical urgency into this topic, are not at all like this. Disagreements about universal healthcare, wartime strategies, capital punishment, the problem of evil, and medical diagnoses—to name just a few—often involve deep-rooted debate over matters that frequently appear irresolvable. So as to provide a more complete account of the epistemic significance of peer disagreement, then, I shall now briefly apply my justificationist view to a case that involves debate of this more difficult to resolve sort, and then I shall flesh out how these considerations generalize.

To begin, consider the following:

DIAGNOSIS: Dr. Haggard and Dr. Wolf are both impeccably educated and highly respected physicians with fifteen years of practicing medicine under their belts. Ruby, who has been thoroughly examined by both doctors, has been suffering for months from extreme fatigue, swollen joints, muscle pain, memory loss, sensitivity to light, and persistent fevers. After running the same tests and receiving identical results, Dr. Haggard is quite convinced that Ruby has chronic fatigue syndrome, and Dr. Wolf is just as convinced that she suffers from lupus.

Now, in DIAGNOSIS, we have a clear case of disagreement between epistemic peers: both doctors are equally educated, esteemed, and experienced, they are privy to all of the same data about Ruby's condition, and yet they nonetheless arrive at different diagnoses. What does my justificationist view say about this sort of case?

The first point to notice is that it is doubtful that my account would require no doxastic revision whatsoever in such a case. For given that all of Ruby's symptoms are at least compatible with both chronic fatigue syndrome and lupus, it is unclear what would justify extraordinary confidence—especially of the degree enjoyed by the beliefs in DIRECTIONS and ELEMENTARY

MATH—on the part of either doctor. So, unless there are unusual circumstances, my justificationist view will require *some* doxastic revision.²⁴ How much?

This brings us to the second point: the answer to this question will depend in large part on how the details of DIAGNOSIS are filled out. For instance, suppose that it just so happens that Dr. Haggard has treated only a handful of patients suffering from lupus while he has had dozens with chronic fatigue syndrome, and it is exactly the reverse for Dr. Wolf. Moreover, suppose that these contingent differences in their experiences account for their competing diagnoses, i.e., Dr. Haggard is more likely to “see” chronic fatigue syndrome in a patient with Ruby’s symptoms while Dr. Wolf is more likely to “see” lupus.²⁵ In this case, no matter how convinced the doctors are of their respective conclusions, they should significantly lower their confidence levels in the face of disagreement since their perspectives are distorted by their past experiences. In other words, this distortion renders the doctors unjustified in being firmly convinced of their respective diagnoses.

On the other hand, suppose that Dr. Haggard is very confident that Ruby has chronic fatigue syndrome because it is very rare for a patient suffering from lupus to not have a skin rash. Indeed, in his fifteen years of practicing medicine, Dr. Haggard has never seen a lupus patient without such a rash. While Dr. Wolf is aware of this information, he accords a lower weight to the statistical unlikelihood of a lupus patient not having a rash than his colleague does, and thus takes a more holistic approach to his diagnoses. In such a case, Dr. Haggard may be quite reasonable in regarding the probability that Ruby has lupus as low, and thus he may be highly justified in his chronic fatigue syndrome diagnosis. Here, then, my view allows for Dr. Haggard to revise only minimally his belief in the face of disagreement with Dr. Wolf.

Although countless other permutations of DIAGNOSIS can be envisaged, it should be clear that my justificationist view of peer disagreement will be capable of providing a principled explanation of why doxastic revision is, or is not, required in each of them. Moreover, the view

easily generalizes to any sort of disagreement.²⁶ Whether epistemic peers are debating abortion, God's existence, or art, the degree of doxastic revision required will be determined by the level of justified confidence with which the beliefs in question are held. And both the degrees of justification and confidence enjoyed by a given belief can be influenced by countless factors. Thus, my view may require very little doxastic revision when two epistemic peers are engaged in a debate regarding the Iraq war, and yet may require substantial doxastic revision when two other epistemic peers are disagreeing about this same topic. Of course, as noted above, some areas of dispute are such that it is extremely unlikely that extraordinary justified confidence—at least of the sort that requires no doxastic revision—will ever be enjoyed by the beliefs of the parties to the debate. Can one, for instance, ever be as justifiedly confident that God exists as one is that a frequently visited restaurant is on a particular street? This is unlikely. But if it happens—if you actually have a vivid and authentic experience of God and become justifiedly certain of his existence—then my account has the resources to explain why you can rationally retain your belief in the face of disagreement with your peers. And this strikes me as a welcome feature of my view.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have developed my justificationist view of the epistemic significance of ordinary disagreement among epistemic peers. Such an account not only provides a coherent explanation for nonconformist and conformist intuitions that otherwise appear to be in conflict, it can also handle both the One against Many Problem and the Many against One Problem in a principled and unified way.²⁷

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¹ I borrow this term from Christensen (2007).

² More precisely, A and B are evidential equals relative to the question whether *p* when A and B are equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *p*.

³ More precisely, A and B are cognitive equals relative to the question whether *p* when A and B are equally competent, intelligent, and fair-minded in their assessment of the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *p*.

⁴ I borrow this term from Thomas Kelly (2005) who, in turn, borrows it from Gutting (1982).

⁵ I have elsewhere argued (forthcoming) that the focus of this debate ought to be on what I call "ordinary disagreement," which can be characterized as follows:

Ordinary disagreement: A and B disagree in an ordinary sense if and only if, relative to the question whether *p*, (1) A and B are aware that they hold differing doxastic attitudes, and (2) prior to recognizing that this is so, A and B take themselves to be roughly epistemic peers with respect to this question.

Ordinary disagreement should be distinguished from what I call “idealized disagreement,” which can be characterized as follows:

Idealized disagreement: A and B disagree in an idealized sense if and only if, relative to the question whether p , (1) A and B are aware that they hold differing doxastic attitudes, (2) prior to recognizing that this is so, A and B take themselves to be epistemic peers with respect to this question, and (3) A and B are epistemic peers.

Henceforth, then, disagreement should be understood as ordinary disagreement.

⁶ Proponents of various versions of nonconformism include van Inwagen (1996 and unpublished), Rosen (2001), Kelly (2005), Moffett (2007), and Wedgewood (2007).

⁷ When I speak merely of “peer disagreement,” I mean disagreement between *epistemic* peers.

⁸ I borrow the phrase “extra weight” from Elga (2007).

⁹ See Wedgewood (2007). There are passages in Fumerton (unpublished) that also echo egocentric nonconformism. For instance, he writes: “I do know how I reason better than I know how others reason. It is important to keep firmly in mind that in the final analysis there really is no alternative to the egocentric perspective. Even when my discoveries about what others believe defeat the justification I had prior to those discoveries, it is *my* discoveries that are doing the defeating. I can only use the discovery of disagreement to weaken my justification insofar as I trust *my* reasoning. Without such trust, there is no access even to what others believe. That is not to deny that trust in my reasoning ability can turn on itself—can lead me to doubt the very faculties that I trust. But when I can’t understand exactly what is going on in the minds of others, I’ll always turn back to the reasoning I understand best—my own” (Fumerton unpublished, pp. 10-1 of ms.).

¹⁰ See Kelly (2005).

¹¹ Proponents of different versions of conformism include Feldman (2006, forthcoming, and unpublished), Christensen (2007), and Elga (2007).

¹² See my (forthcoming).

¹³ See Christensen (2007, p. 193). I have slightly modified inessential details of Christensen’s case, but all of the elements central to the conclusion about disagreement are the same.

¹⁴ I shall modify this characterization later in this paper, but for present purposes, this rough formulation should suffice.

¹⁵ I should emphasize that these principles fall out of my justificationist account of disagreement's epistemic significance, rather than constituting my view.

¹⁶ By a belief enjoying "a very high degree of justified confidence," I mean a very confident belief that is highly justified.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Kelly (2005).

¹⁸ For a discussion of what appropriate independence amounts to here, see my (unpublished).

¹⁹ What if the nonconformist were to argue as follows: individual instances of disagreement might lack epistemic power, but a consensus among many peers might not. To see that disagreement and consensus are two different things, consider a case where many of my epistemic peers disagree with me about the location of My Thai, but they also disagree with one another, e.g., one claims that it is on Dearborn, one claims that it is on Ohio, and so on. In such a case, there are still many instances of disagreement, though no consensus among them, and it is not intuitively obvious that I should engage in substantial doxastic revision in such a case. Given this, even if disagreement itself is epistemically impotent, the nonconformist can appeal to consensus to handle the One against Many Problem. (I am grateful to Roald Nashi for this point.)

By way of response to this point, I shall make two points. First, I do not share the intuition that one should not engage in substantial doxastic revision when there are many instances of peer disagreement without consensus among these instances. But even if I did, the distinction between disagreement and consensus could not underwrite it. For in the case above, despite the fact that all of my epistemic peers disagree with one another, there is nonetheless consensus among them that My Thai is not on Michigan Avenue. So if consensus is doing the epistemic work in such a case, I should engage in doxastic revision, which is contrary to the intuition supporting the objection. Second, consensus cannot by itself be doing the work in question. For there is consensus when two people agree and when twenty five people agree, and yet radically different epistemic responses are called for in such cases. So more than mere consensus has to be at work here.

²⁰ Indeed, theorists on both the nonconformist and the conformist side move in the direction of my justificationist view as they respond to objections and flesh out their accounts in further detail. See, for instance, Kelly (forthcoming) and Elga (2007), respectively.

²¹ I discuss this case in more detail in my (forthcoming), though not in relation to the objection under consideration here.

²² If, however, I no longer regard Harry as my epistemic peer, then is this sort of case relevant to the debate? Yes. To see this, recall that conformists maintain that unless one has a reason that is independent of the disagreement itself to prefer one's own belief, one cannot continue to rationally believe that p when one is faced with an epistemic peer who explicitly believes that not- p . Consider Elga's characterization of conformism in the following passage:

Suppose that before evaluating a claim, you think that you and your friend are equally likely to evaluate it correctly. When you find out that your friend disagrees with your verdict, how likely should you think it that you are correct? The equal weight view says: 50%. (Elga 2007, p. 488)

According to conformism, then, if pre-disagreement (at t_1) A believes that she and B are equally likely to be correct regarding the question whether p , then post-disagreement (at t_2) A should believe the same. In other words, the disagreement itself should not change one's beliefs about the probability that one is right. Yet this is precisely what I deny in the above case. For in ELEMENTARY MATH, I believe at t_1 that in the case of disagreement with my epistemic peer, the probability that I am right regarding the question whether p is 50% and then at t_2 , in light of the nature of the disagreement itself and the positive personal information that I possess, I believe that the probability that I am right is dramatically higher. Given this, it would be more accurate to frame the question at issue as follows: does disagreement with someone whom, were it not for the disagreement in question, one would regard as an epistemic peer, require substantial doxastic revision?

It should also be noted that the requirement that the reason for preferring one's own belief be "independent of the disagreement" at issue is meant to include both independence from the belief in question and from the reasoning grounding this belief. Without this requirement, begging the question would presumably be an appropriate way to respond to a case of peer disagreement—e.g., one could settle a dispute

over the question whether p by appealing to p itself. Moreover, since any instance of disagreement will provide one disputant with a reason to believe that the other has failed at some point in her reasoning, parties to a dispute would never qualify as epistemic peers if appealing to the reasoning grounding the belief in question were permissible.

²³ I owe this example to Richard Feldman.

²⁴ By “unusual circumstances,” I mean something like one of the doctors unknowingly possessing an extraordinary ability to detect lupus, or to diagnose patients, and so on.

²⁵ Does this difference preclude Dr. Haggard and Dr. Wolf from being epistemic peers? Given my emphasis on ordinary disagreement, I am inclined to think that it does not. But for those who disagree, the case can easily be modified.

²⁶ It is worth noting that some disagreements may be, in whole or in part, non-factual. My justificationist view, then, should be understood to account for whether doxastic revision is required in light of factual disagreements with an epistemic peer.

²⁷ For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to Larry Bonjour, David Christensen, Sean Ebels Duggan, Jeremy Fantl, Richard Feldman, Richard Fumerton, Tamar Szabó Gendler, Jon Kvanvig, Matt McGrath, Roald Nashi, Ram Neta, Nikolaj Jang Pedersen, Blake Roeber, Andrew Rotondo, Ernie Sosa, Peter van Inwagen, Crispin Wright, audience members at the University of Washington, the Social Epistemology Conference at the University of Stirling, the Disagreement Conference at the University of Calgary, the 2007 meeting of the Eastern APA in Baltimore, Wheaton College, Brown University, the University of St. Andrews, and, especially, to Baron Reed.