

Disagreeing with the (religious) skeptic

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Received: 23 September 2011 / Accepted: 15 February 2012 / Published online: 2 March 2012
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Abstract Some philosophers believe that, when epistemic peers disagree, each has an obligation to accord the other’s assessment equal weight as her own. Other philosophers worry that this Equal-Weight View is vulnerable to straightforward counterexamples, and that it requires an unacceptable degree of spinelessness with respect to our most treasured philosophical, political, and religious beliefs. I think that both of these allegations are false. To show this, I carefully state the Equal-Weight View, motivate it, describe apparent counterexamples to it, and then explain away the apparent counterexamples. Finally, I adapt those explanations to cases of religious disagreement. In the end, we reach the surprising conclusion that—even if the Equal-Weight View is true—in very many cases of religious disagreement between apparent epistemic peers, the parties to the disagreement need not be conciliatory. And what goes for religious beliefs goes for political and philosophical beliefs as well. This strongly suggests that the View does not demand an unacceptable degree of spinelessness.

Keywords Religious disagreement · Pluralism · Peer disagreement · Epistemology · Equal weight view · Conciliationism · Uniqueness · Faith

The equal-weight view¹

Some philosophers believe that, when epistemic peers disagree, each has an obligation to accord the other’s assessment equal weight as her own. Call this “The

¹ This paper was presented at the Responsible Belief in the Face of Disagreement Conference held at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, in August of 2009. Many thanks to the participants at this conference for the helpful comments, especially Jon Matheson and Matthew Mullins. Thanks also to an anonymous referee of this journal for insightful comments and objections.

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Equal-Weight View.” Recent advocates include [Elga \(2007\)](#), [Feldman \(2006\)](#), and [Christensen \(2007\)](#).

Other philosophers allege that there are counterexamples to this claim, i.e. cases of peer disagreement in which one need not give her peer’s opinion equal weight as her own. And some philosophers worry that the Equal-Weight View will demand an unacceptable degree of spinelessness, recommending that we be conciliatory with respect to a wide range of our most treasured philosophical, political, and religious beliefs, merely because our peers disagree.

I have two interests in this paper: first, to assess whether several proposed counterexamples are actually counterexamples, and second, to explore what the Equal-Weight View actually recommends in apparent cases of religious disagreement between epistemic peers. (I intend what I say about religious belief to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to political and philosophical beliefs.) To do all this, we should first get clear on just what qualifies as a case of peer disagreement.

Several conditions must be met for a case to qualify as peer disagreement. First, parties to a peer disagreement form judgments on *the same evidence*. Second, their judgments *disagree*. Third, both parties know all this, i.e. there’s full disclosure. Fourth, they’re meant to count each other as *epistemic peers*. I’ll take that to mean that each believes that she is as reliable as the other on this issue,² given what she knows about the circumstances of disagreement, but without begging the question or being unacceptably arbitrary. To avoid those vices, each party should set aside or bracket off the content of her answer, as well as her detailed reasoning (and what she knows of her friend’s reasoning) about the disputed issue (cf. [Elga 489–90](#)). As [Christensen \(2007\)](#), p.199, says, “I should assess explanations for the disagreement in a way that’s independent of my reasoning on the matter under dispute.” So for example, if Smith’s credence in p is 0.8 and Jones’ credence is 0.2, the evidence on which Smith conditionalizes should include those facts, but should of course exclude p itself, any instance of the schema $P(p) = n$, and any reasoning that led Smith and Jones to their answers.³

Such a case looks to qualify as peer disagreement. If that’s right, then the Equal-Weight View says that each party to the disagreement should give equal weight to the other’s assessment. Putting it all together, we get this:

(Equal-Weight View) For any subjects Smith and Jones, and for any p , if...

(Smith Judges) Smith’s credence in p on her evidence E relevant to p is $n1$, and

(Jones Judges) Jones’ credence in p on E is $n2$, and

(Disagreement) $n1 \neq n2$, and

(Full Disclosure) Smith learns these three things, and

(Peerhood) Smith believes that she’s as reliable as Jones on this issue in the circumstances of evaluation, excluding the assessments themselves and any reasoning by which she and Jones arrived at them,

...then Smith should give Jones’ assessment of p on this evidence equal weight as her own.

² In this paper, to avoid a cumbersome sentence structure, I intend the admittedly strained reading of “Smith is as reliable as Jones” that entails that both Smith and Jones are reliable. I’m not concerned with cases of disagreement in which both parties are *unreliable*, but to the same degree.

³ See also [Christensen \(2011\)](#) recent discussion of the principle he calls “Independence.”

Some philosophers have apparently taken this consequent to entail that Smith should “split the difference,” i.e. she should revise her credence in p on this evidence to be (at least roughly) the average of n_1 and n_2 . And some of these philosophers have apparently assumed that one’s credence in p on one’s evidence relevant to p should equal one’s credence in p simpliciter, and therefore Smith should also revise her credence in p to equal roughly the average of n_1 and n_2 . For example, Christensen said⁴ that in cases of peer disagreement one should “come close to ‘splitting the difference’ ” (203) between the initial assessments. And—working on an all-or-nothing model of belief and speaking of peers who take equally firm but opposing stances on the disputed issue—Feldman said that after full disclosure, “suspension of judgment is called for.” (235) In this paper, I’ll be concerned with the Equal-Weight View above, and I won’t take a stand on either Elga’s general view of disagreement or a general difference-splitting rule for giving equal weight.

Motivating the view

I take it that many people believe the Equal-Weight View (or something like it) because it delivers intuitively correct verdicts in a wide variety of cases. For example:

Feldman’s quad

Suppose that you and I are standing by the window looking out on the quad. We think we have comparable vision and we know each other to be honest. I seem to see what looks to me like a person in a blue coat in the middle of the quad. (Assume that this is not something odd.) I believe that a person with a blue coat is standing on the quad. Meanwhile, you seem to see nothing of the kind there. You think that no one is standing in the middle of the quad. (223)

In this case, you and Feldman consider all and only the same evidence (namely, the scene before you and any relevant background knowledge). Feldman’s visual faculties report to him that there is a person in a blue coat in the middle of the quad; his credence in that proposition on the available evidence is high. Your faculties report otherwise; your credence in that proposition on the evidence is low. And you think your faculties are as reliable as Feldman’s. So what should you do in such a case, after full disclosure? Clearly you should revise your belief to give the report of your faculties and the report of his equal weight, just as you would do with disagreeing but equally reliable thermometers, clocks, etc. And so the Equal-Weight View delivers the right result.

The View also gives the right result in some cases involving a priori calculations. For example, Elga (492) and Christensen (193) both consider a case in which friends mentally divide a restaurant check:

⁴ The past tense in this paragraph is intentional. In light of things they’ve very recently said and written, I suspect (though I’m not certain) that Christensen and Feldman would no longer say what they then said on this issue.

Restaurant check

Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It's time to pay the check, so the question we're interested in is how much we each owe. We can all see the bill total clearly, we all agree to give a 20% tip, and we further agree to split the whole cost evenly... I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our shares are \$43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly confident that our shares are \$45 each. (Christensen, p. 193)

To differentiate this case from Feldman's Quad and others crucially involving sense perception, let's stipulate not only that all parties can clearly see the check, but that they all *know* its total. If we stipulate also that all parties think the disagreement is between peers, Christensen and Elga think that, after full disclosure, each should give the other's assessment the same weight as her own. I agree. Here again the View issues the right verdict.

I take it that concrete case intuitions like these strongly motivate the Equal-Weight View. If it weren't for this intuitive support, arguments for the View—such as Elga's Bootstrapping Argument (486–8)—would lose much or all of their force.

Earlier I mentioned that some counterexamples to this claim have been proposed. In the next few sections, I'll describe these apparent counterexamples, and explain why they are merely apparent. Finally, I'll show how these explanations can serve as models for apparent cases of religious disagreement between epistemic peers.

Extreme disagreement

Christensen (193) introduces the following problematic variation of Restaurant Check:

Extreme restaurant check

Consider an (admittedly unrealistic) variant on the restaurant case, in which my friend becomes confident that our shares of the check are \$450—quite a bit over the whole tab. (Christensen, p. 199)

In this extreme case, after full disclosure, it seems obvious that Christensen should not accord his friend's assessment equal weight as his own. But this is contrary to what the Equal-Weight View apparently recommends. So this looks to be a counterexample to the Equal-Weight View.

However, despite appearances, I believe that Extreme Restaurant Check is not a counterexample to the Equal-Weight View. I think that, in any such extreme case, one of the antecedent conditions of the View won't be met (and so it won't issue the counterintuitive verdict), or the antecedent will be met but the verdict won't then be counterintuitive. Let me explain.⁵

Sometimes I see that p is true by seeing that some other proposition q is true. For example, I see that the water is 75°F by seeing that the mercury's meniscus is at the "75" hash mark. Here we say that the mercury level reports, represents, or indicates

⁵ For more detail on this point, please see Bogardus (2009).

that the water is 75°F. And I see that there's a computer before me by attending to my visual experience, which (many philosophers say) reports, represents, or indicates that there's a computer before me. In the normal restaurant check case, my belief that each share of this check is \$43 is a report of a cadre of cognitive faculties, including (in my case at least) mental images and memory. In this case, I see that each share of this check is \$43 by seeing that q , where q is a long conjunctive proposition concerning the reasoning process I remember undergoing.

In all these cases, I see that p by seeing that q , and I gain what we may call *knowledge from reports*. p itself is not part of my evidence—rather, it is a report from my faculties, based on my evidence q . But there are other cases in which I just see that p , directly. Occasionally—it's said—we just see that p , with our eyes. Here “just see” is used in a literal sense. Looking down, one might say “I just see that I have hands—there they are, directly in front of me.” On other occasions we metaphorically just see that p , without the aid of our eyes. For example, we just see that no prime minister is a prime number, and that $2+2=4$. It is this metaphorical sense of the ordinary English expression “just see” that interests me for the rest of this paper.

When I just see that p in this metaphorical sense, I gain what we may call *knowledge from direct acquaintance*, and p itself is part of my immediately accessible evidence—I have immediate and unproblematic access to the truth of p . Extreme Restaurant Check is one of those cases: there, I just see that each share of this check is not \$450. I just see that my friend's answer is wrong. This proposition isn't a report from my faculties, based on my evidence. No, this proposition is *part* of my immediately accessible evidence.⁶

Now, in Extreme Restaurant Check, my apparently disagreeing friend Jones either shares this evidence, or she doesn't. If she doesn't, then **Jones Judges** isn't met. If she does, then either there's merely apparent disagreement,⁷ or she just sees the truth of a proposition and yet believes that it's false. If the former, then **Disagreement** isn't met. If the latter, then she's suffering from cognitive dysfunction, and so here in the circumstances of disagreement she's not as reliable as I am on this issue.

Full Disclosure and **Peerhood** require that I believe certain things. If I reason in the sensible and straightforward way described in the previous paragraph, then—depending on which possibility I deem more credible—I'll reject some belief such that either **Full Disclosure** or **Peerhood** isn't met. If I don't undergo this sensible and straightforward reasoning, then while the antecedent of the Equal-Weight View may be met, the conciliatory verdict won't be counterintuitive. (After all, on this supposition I will take myself to disagree with what I believe is an epistemic peer.) Either way, then, Extreme Restaurant Check is not a counterexample to the Equal-Weight View.

Perhaps surprisingly, some cases of religious disagreement are analogous to Extreme Restaurant Check, and so the same considerations will apply. I'll discuss that in the final section. In the next section, I'll examine a second kind of problematic case for the Equal-Weight View, a case which cannot be resolved by any appeal to one

⁶ N.b., I'm not claiming that a proposition of the form *it seems to me that p* or *I have the intuition that p* is part of my evidence here. Rather, p itself (in this case, the negation of my friend's answer) is part of my evidence.

⁷ E.g. she's dishonestly reporting, or honestly misreporting, or I've misunderstood her report.

party's just seeing the truth of her answer (or the falsity of her friend's answer). This variety is new to the literature, and will also shed light on religious disagreement.

Disagreeing with the skeptic

Here's a story, adapted from Kelly (2010), which through further specification may generate interesting cases of disagreement:

Horse race

I believe that Jones and I are equally intelligent, attentive, and well-sighted individuals, and I believe that she's completely honest. We stand side-by-side at the finish line of a horse race. The race is extremely close—it's a photo finish between Horse A and Horse B. At time t_0 , just as these first horses cross the finish line, I come to believe that p on the basis of the scene before my eyes. At time t_1 , an instant later, I ask Jones whether she agrees about p .

Before I introduce the troubling elaboration of this story, I'll first consider straightforward specifications. I intend to apply lessons learned from the easy cases to the troubling case. So consider first this elaboration of the above story:

Classic disagreement

Upon viewing the end of the race, I judge that *at t_0 , Horse A finished the race ahead of Horse B*. When I ask Jones whether she agrees, she replies "No, I disagree. At t_0 , Horse B finished the race ahead of Horse A."

Now, in this case, it would be question begging or unacceptably arbitrary to reason this way: " p . Yet Jones judges not- p . So she's wrong, and so she's malfunctioning, and so she's not a peer." Or this way: "Jones judges not- p . But my reasoning supports p . And I'm me, so I win. Therefore, p ." Rather, a central insight motivating the Equal-Weight View is that one should set aside the content of her answer and her reasoning. That is, when evaluating whether or not **Peerhood** is met, one should not reason anywhere in the neighborhood of this way: "How likely is it that she's a peer, given that she judged not- p whereas p is true?" This is what is meant by the exclusion clause of the **Peerhood** condition of the Equal-Weight View.

In Classic Disagreement—as in Feldman's Quad and Restaurant Check—the content of my answer is not part of my immediately accessible evidence—I don't just see the truth of my answer. Rather, in Classic Disagreement my answer is the *report* of my visual faculties based on the evidence I've considered, as Jones' answer is the report of her faculties based on that same evidence. And if someone has two reports from sources she takes to be equally reliable, she ought to give the reports equal weight. Since that seems to be the case here, I should give her assessment equal weight. And this is just what the Equal-Weight View recommends. So far, so good for the View.

Now consider another easy expansion of the above story:

Drunk disagreement

My judgment is the same as before, i.e. that at t_0 Horse A finished ahead of Horse B. But this time Jones reports in this way: “Maybe it’s the pint of moonshine talking, but I think Horse B won the race.”

Here it seems obvious that I should not give her assessment equal weight as my own. Why not? Well, I’ve learned something about my friend Jones: she’s not functioning properly, due to alcohol. Her answer indicates that she’s been cognitively impaired by the demon drink. Conditional on that relevant fact I’ve learned about the circumstances, would I think she’s a peer? No. So the Equal-Weight View will not recommend giving her assessment equal weight.

Now, according to the Equal-Weight View, when assessing whether Jones is a peer, I am meant to set aside or bracket off her answer. But it was her answer that indicated to me that she was likely drunk, and on that basis I demoted her from peerhood. So how might my demotion of Jones from peerhood in Drunk Disagreement be consistent with the exclusion clause of the **Peerhood** condition? Well, Jones’ answer was equivalent to a conjunction: “I’ve drunk a pint of moonshine, and I think Horse B won the race.” While my belief that Jones is cognitively malfunctioning is based on what Jones said about the moonshine, my belief that she is malfunctioning does not assume that her judgment of the horse race is false. While I conditionalized on the fact that *Jones answered that $p \& q$* , I conditionalized on neither q nor *not- q* . When evaluating whether or not Jones is a peer, I did not assume that her judgment about the race was false or that my answer was true. And so it is not question-begging or unacceptably arbitrary for me to demote her on this basis; my demotion of her is consistent with the exclusion clause of the **Peerhood** condition.⁸

Consider one final easy instance of the Horse Race story:

Crazy disagreement

My judgment is the same as before, i.e. that at t_0 Horse A finished ahead of Horse B. But this time Jones’ report is very peculiar: “I disagree. I myself am a horse, and I won the race.”

Here, we disagree over whether Jones is the horse who/that won the race. And as in Drunk Disagreement, it seems obvious that I shouldn’t give Jones’ answer equal weight as my own. Why not? Well, what I learn in this case is that Jones thinks she’s a horse. And, in this case at least, thinking oneself a horse is a clear sign of cognitive malfunction. Her answer gives me reason to believe that there’s a screw loose up there.

⁸ If it isn’t, then the Equal-Weight View falls to a rather trivial counterexample, since even here, where it should be uncontroversially legitimate to demote Jones from peerhood, the View won’t allow it. So, I think the most charitable interpretation of the Equal-Weight View allows it to license demoting Jones from peerhood here, on the basis of what she said, without assuming that her answer is false.

An earlier problem reemerges: according to the Equal-Weight View, when assessing whether Jones is a peer, I am meant to set aside or bracket off her answer. But it was her answer that indicated to me that she has lost her mind, and on that basis I demoted her from peerhood. So how might my demotion of Jones from peerhood in Crazy Disagreement be consistent with the exclusion clause of the **Peerhood** condition? In this way: as in Drunk Disagreement, though my belief that *Jones is cognitively malfunctioning* is based on the fact that *Jones answered that she's a horse*, my belief that she is malfunctioning does not assume that her answer is false (or that my answer is true). I have not reasoned in the vicious way described above: "How likely is it that she's a peer, given that she answered that she's a horse, whereas she's not a horse?" No, rather, I have reasoned in this way: "How likely is it that she's a peer, given that she thinks she's a horse and I can just see that it would be *irrational* for one to think she's a horse in this situation, on this evidence?" In Extreme Restaurant Check, I showed how the fact that one just sees that her friend's answer is wrong can license demotion from peerhood in a way that is consistent with the exclusion clause of the **Peerhood** condition. Here, one does not just see that her friend's answer is wrong; instead, one just sees that the answer is *irrational given the evidence*. One just sees the lack of support offered to the answer by the evidence. And the line of reasoning that allows one to legitimately demote Jones from peerhood in Extreme Restaurant Check can be straightforwardly adapted so as to allow one to legitimately demote Jones from peerhood in Crazy Disagreement.

Such reasoning does not violate the exclusion clause of the **Peerhood** condition—I'm not relying on my judgment that she's not a horse to dismiss her judgment that she is, and I'm not favoring my reasoning process in an unacceptably arbitrary way. Since I won't think she's a peer conditional on the fact that she's cognitively malfunctioning, the antecedent of the Equal-Weight View won't be met, and so the View will not recommend giving Jones' assessment equal weight.⁹ If the demotion of Jones is actually illegitimate on the Equal-Weight View, then the View will be refuted by relatively trivial counterexamples. And so we ought to accept this more charitable interpretation of the View, an interpretation which doesn't stumble on such straightforward examples.

Now here's the genuinely troubling case I promised to discuss, a case that may appear to be a significant counterexample to the Equal-Weight View:

Skeptical disagreement

My judgment is the same as before, i.e. that at t_0 Horse A finished ahead of Horse B. Jones reports that she disagrees with me: "You're wrong," she says. "Nothing happened at t_0 —the universe came into existence a moment ago, with the mere appearance of age."

On the basis of our shared evidence, I'm highly confident that something happened at t_0 . Jones disagrees. But the question is: Should I give her assessment equal weight as my own? It seems obvious that I shouldn't.

⁹ Christensen (2007, p. 198) discussion of the Messiah case suggests that he agrees here.

Philosophers sometimes speak of belief in the reality of the past as properly basic, i.e. rational even in the absence of propositional evidence. But more plausibly this general belief is not itself properly basic, but rather is based on and entailed by other beliefs that are properly basic. (For example, that belief is based on and entailed by my properly basic belief that I had dinner last night). The interesting phenomenon that I mean to point out here is that, at some point of generality, some beliefs we hold that are based on and entailed by properly basic beliefs are immune to defeat by disagreement. If the Equal-Weight View recommends conciliation here, then we have a genuine counterexample to the view.

But I think the View will not recommend conciliation, for reasons analogous to those given with respect to Drunk Disagreement and Crazy Disagreement. In Skeptical Disagreement, I learn something relevant about my friend in the circumstances of evaluation: she's not functioning properly. I can't just see the falsity of her answer, but I *can* just see that it's improper, given this evidence. In this context, Jones' answer indicates cognitive malfunction, just as it did in Drunk Disagreement. And the fact that *Jones answered that not-p on this evidence* obviously indicates malfunction, just as it did in Crazy Disagreement.¹⁰ So it will be legitimate to demote Jones from peerhood on the basis of her answer, as it was in Drunk Disagreement and Crazy Disagreement. And so the Equal-Weight View will not recommend giving her assessment equal weight. And so this apparent counterexample is merely apparent.

And yet skepticism is not necessarily irrational. Surely there are some bodies of evidence on which skeptical views are warranted. But if that's right, then in *some* cases the reasoning above would not license my demotion of the other party from peerhood, cases in which the relevant body of evidence does warrant skepticism. And so such cases might pose a significant threat to the Equal-Weight View. Let's consider one such case, which is a variation of Skeptical Disagreement.

Informed skeptical disagreement

The set-up is the same as before, and our answers are the same as they were in Skeptical Disagreement. But this time, the common body of evidence on which Jones and I make our judgments is expanded to include some skeptical philosophical literature. This literature is a dense jungle of arguments both for and against the reality of the past, and formidable objections to those arguments.

If our body of evidence includes enough of this skeptical literature, it's no longer clear that *Jones answered that not-p on this evidence* indicates malfunction. After all, highly rational people in the history of philosophy have reached skeptical conclusions on such an expanded body of evidence. Since it's no longer clear that Jones' skeptical judgment indicates malfunction, she can't sensibly be demoted from peerhood

¹⁰ I take it (Plantinga 2000, p. 185) would agree: "I read Bertrand Russell and see that it is possible (in the broadly logical sense) and compatible with appearances that the world popped into existence just five minutes ago, complete with all those apparent memories, crumbling mountains, and dusty books; as a result, I withhold the belief that I am more than five minutes old. In these cases, my failure to believe is a sign, not of exemplary epistemic caution, but of cognitive malfunction..."

for that reason. And so it's natural to assume that the antecedent conditions of the Equal-Weight View would be met in this case. And if so, then the View would recommend that I be conciliatory here. If this result is counterintuitive, then we have here a significant counterexample to the Equal-Weight View.

But, I think, the result is not counterintuitive. Upon viewing the skeptical philosophical literature and finding an epistemic peer who is skeptical about the reality of the past in light of that literature, my credence in the reality of the past *conditional* on my expanded body of evidence that includes that literature should diminish—it seems obvious that I should give Jones' credence in her answer *on this evidence* equal weight as my own. Maybe I misread the evidence, after all. So just as I ought to be conciliatory in Restaurant Check, so too I ought to be conciliatory here. And that's what the Equal-Weight View as written above recommends: its consequent suggests that Smith should give Jones' assessment of *p* **on this evidence** equal weight as her own.

Yet it's not unreasonable for my credence in the reality of the past *simpliciter* to stay high. And the Equal-Weight View—or at least my statement of it above—does not rule otherwise. For, again, its consequent only recommends that Smith be conciliatory with respect to a certain *conditional* probability: Jones' assessment of *p* **on this evidence**. As I said above, it seems obvious that, at a high enough level of generality, some of our beliefs entailed by properly basic beliefs are themselves immune to defeat from disagreement. It's not unreasonable to stick with these beliefs, even in the face of Informed Skeptical Disagreement.

So, in this case of peer disagreement, I should downgrade my credence in *p/E*, where *p* is the proposition that Horse A finished ahead of Horse B and E is my body of evidence expanded to include the skeptical literature. But I need not downgrade my credence in *p* simpliciter. And the Equal-Weight View—as I've stated it above—does not recommend otherwise. So, on my view at least, this apparent counterexample is merely apparent. (But, I should add, Informed Skeptical Disagreement does make serious trouble for the Equal-Weight View as several other advocates of have stated the View.¹¹ So much the worse for those versions, I think.)

To sum up: an examination of the above cases reveals that, even if the Equal-Weight View is true, it is occasionally legitimate for Smith to demote Jones from peerhood on the basis of what Jones said, so long as Smith's demotion does not assume that Jones's judgment on the disputed question was false or that Smith's judgment on the disputed question was true. One can set aside the truth or falsity of Jones's judgment on the disputed question, and still realize that her answer is indicative of cognitive malfunction, as happens in Drunk Disagreement, Crazy Disagreement, and—I think—Skeptical Disagreement.

¹¹ Other philosophers have seemed to assume that one's credence in *p* on one's evidence relevant to *p* should equal one's credence in *p* simpliciter. If that's right, then if I must give Jones' assessment of *p* on this evidence equal weight, then I must revise my credence in *p* simpliciter as well. I think it's false that one's credence in *p* on one's evidence relevant to *p* should equal one's credence in *p* simpliciter. I think, for example, that my available evidence does not provide a decent argument for the reality of the past—my credence in the reality of the past on my available evidence is not at all high. Yet my credence in that proposition simpliciter is high, and that's above reproach.

Now, such an understanding of the Equal-Weight View has profound implications on religious, political, and philosophical disagreement since, I believe, many such disagreements will be closely analogous to the cases already discussed, in which the antecedent is not, despite appearances, satisfied. Let's turn to a discussion of these implications.

Disagreeing with the religious skeptic

In this final section, I'd like to apply the lessons learned from the cases of disagreement we examined above to cases in which apparent epistemic peers disagree over religious matters. Of course, in very many cases, parties to a religious disagreement do not form their judgments on a shared body of evidence. I'm thinking especially of religious believers who base their beliefs at least in part on private religious experiences they've had. The Equal-Weight View glides silently over that vast ocean of cases. So, for all the View says, it's reasonable to maintain one's religious beliefs in such cases of disagreement.

Yet there may be other cases of religious disagreement in which the parties apparently form their assessments based on a common body of evidence, or near enough for skeptical worries to kick in (cf. King, forthcoming). Now it *may* be that some people just see the truth of their religious views, as we just see that each share of this check is not \$450 in Extreme Restaurant Check. This isn't as implausible as it first seems. *If* the ontological argument for God's existence is sound, for example, then it's plausible that it *may* serve as a means by which one could just see—in that metaphorical sense of “just see” explained above—that God exists.¹² If various atheological arguments for the incoherence of the concept of God are sound, they too may plausibly serve as a means by which one could just see that God does not exist. Some religious people have claimed to me that distinctness is an illusion, all is one, and therefore I am you, and I am 38 (not 38 years old, but actually the number 38). This is plausibly a view that one can just see is false. And as we learned in Extreme Restaurant Check, if a party to an apparent peer disagreement does just see the truth of her view, it's natural to assume that the antecedent of the Equal-Weight View won't be met, and therefore won't recommend conciliation. So here we have another substantial subset of religious disagreement about which the Equal-Weight View will not recommend conciliation.

Next, consider that some religious believers behave vis-à-vis some of their religious beliefs as we all behave vis-à-vis our belief in the reality of the past. They just find themselves with these beliefs, and they regard these beliefs as obvious, in the way we all regard the reality of the past as obvious. If you've never met such people, I invite you to visit the American Midwest and South. But of course theists are not the only ones who behave this way vis-à-vis their religious beliefs; I've met many atheists, especially in Scandinavia and Western Europe, who take atheism to be perfectly obvious.

¹² St. Anselm, for example, thought that his ontological argument proved not only that that than which a greater cannot be thought must exist, but even further that no one who understood what God is could even successfully doubt his existence. See the third and fourth chapters of his *Proslogion*.

Such a religious believer (or non-believer) will take certain cases of disagreement to be analogous to Skeptical Disagreement—that her disagreeing friend judges thusly on the basis of their shared evidence will, in her mind, clearly indicate malfunction. *Given how things seem to our believer*, demoting her friend from peerhood on that basis seems like a perfectly reasonable move. After all, we’re supposing that her religious beliefs strike her as obvious in just the same way as her belief in other minds or in the reality of the past; perhaps this cresting confidence *should* not persist, at least after sincere rational inquiry and disagreement, but we’re supposing for the moment that it does. And if it does, why should our believer not demote her disagreeing friend from peerhood just as we all would in Skeptical Disagreement? But of course if she does demote her friend from peerhood, the Equal-Weight View will not recommend conciliation.

When philosophers disagree over religious questions, the case may be less like Skeptical Disagreement and more like Informed Skeptical Disagreement. I take it that the philosophical literature concerning religious belief is akin to the philosophical literature concerning the reality of the past, or the external world, or other minds. What we find in this literature is a tangled morass of arguments for and against religious belief, and many strata of objections to every argument. Someone who takes her religious beliefs to be reasonable even in the absence of compelling argument or evidence will treat disagreement with an apparent philosophically informed epistemic peer as analogous to Informed Skeptical Disagreement. She may therefore maintain a high credence in her religious beliefs, though she may be (and I think she ought to be) conciliatory with respect to the *conditional* probability of her religious beliefs on the evidence. The former is consistent with the Equal-Weight View, and the latter is directly prescribed by the View as I’ve understood it.

Finally, let’s consider that subset of religious peer disagreement in which it seems most natural to assume that the Equal-Weight View will recommend conciliation with respect to one’s religious beliefs simpliciter. I’ll be a party to such a disagreement only if I don’t take myself to just see the truth of my view, or take the other party’s disagreement to clearly indicate malfunction, or take my view to be reasonable even if the conditional probability of my view on the evidence is not high. Such a religious disagreement will be closely analogous to Restaurant Check or Classic Disagreement: the issue will be somewhat obscure (a “close question” as jurists say), and the other party’s answer must not be obviously false or obviously improper.

No doubt such disagreements will be rare, and yet I believe I have been caught up in more than one. For example, I have very bright and well-informed friends with whom I’ve disagreed over whether the Problem of Evil is a cogent objection to theism. I’m fairly confident that the antecedent of the Equal-Weight View has been met in at least some of these disagreements, and I’ve found myself being conciliatory on this question as a result. I think that’s the right attitude to take, and it’s the attitude that the Equal-Weight View recommends.

And so some religious disagreements may be over close questions with shared evidence—the Equal-Weight View will therefore recommend conciliation. But the sky is darkened by the swarm of cases in which the antecedent of the View will not be met. And so we reach the surprising conclusion that—even on the Equal-Weight View—in many cases of religious disagreement between apparent epistemic peers, one need

not be conciliatory. Similar considerations will apply *mutatis mutandis* to our political and philosophical beliefs—in those areas too the Equal-Weight View will call for conciliation far less often than we might have thought. This casts serious doubt on the claim that the Equal-Weight View requires an unacceptable degree of spinelessness. To a great extent, then, that objection to the View is neutralized.

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