

A Note Concerning Conciliationism and Self-Defeat: A Reply to Matheson
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Introduction

What should we do when we discover that we disagree with a peer (i.e., someone we know to have our evidence, to be equally responsible, and to be equally intelligent)? According to conciliationism, we should be conciliatory:

CV: If (i) at time t $S1$ is justified in adopting doxastic attitude $D1$ toward proposition p and (ii) at a later time t' $S1$ becomes justified in believing that an epistemic peer $S2$ has adopted a competitor doxastic attitude $D2$ toward p , and (iii) at t' $S1$ has no undefeated reason to discount $S2$'s conclusion; then at t' $S1$ becomes less justified in adopting $D1$ toward p .

On Matheson's (2009, [Forthcoming a](#), [Forthcoming b](#)) conciliationist view, epistemic peers who discover that they disagree about whether p ought to suspend judgment on whether p unless there's some indication (apart from the disagreement itself) that there's been some sort of performance error that allows you to rationally ignore the peer's beliefs on this occasion (e.g., they disagree with you because they believe something totally outrageous). According to me, Matheson is right. We're not going to disagree about what you should do in the standard cases of peer disagreement.

There's a simple, straightforward rationale for the conciliationist view.¹ If you know someone to be a peer, you know that they're just as likely to get things right as you are. You know that they're as responsible as you, as competent as you, as informed as you, and as reliable as you. If you hadn't bothered to think through the relevant matter yourself, you would have taken them at their word. You'd benefit from a division of labor. In the case of disagreement, however, you've both given the matter consideration and you've come to incompatible conclusions. That's a sign of something. It's not just a sign that one of you made a mistake (i.e., formed a false belief); rather, it's a sign that you and your peer are out of your depths. If two equally reliable, conscientious, and informed people are driven by the evidence to incompatible conclusions where you both believe outright incompatible propositions, that's an indication that this matter isn't a matter that you hadn't *competently* thought through. The evidence cannot provide sufficient support for two incompatible propositions, so one of you has mishandled the evidence. As it's equally likely that that person is you, you would seem to have good reason to think that this is either a matter that you should have suspended on originally because you're not generally competent to settle this question with these materials or a matter you should suspend on now because of the high probability of a performance error on your part.

¹ This is a truncated version of the argument from Littlejohn (2012b).

As plausible as CV initially seems, it faces a seemingly damning objection. Critics say CV is self-referentially incoherent because CV is a view that calls for its own rejection.² Matheson thinks that a version of this objection shows that CV isn't correct. He doesn't think, however, that this objection calls for a rejection of the conciliationist approach. He thinks a modest revision of CV is all that's required. I don't think any such change is called for. Although we should be conciliatory, we should 'stick to our guns' and concede nothing to this kind of objection to CV.

The Objection and Matheson's Response

The self-defeat objection might be stated like this:

The people who believe the conciliatory view must realize that they have peers who disagree with them. By their own lights, then, they shouldn't believe their own view. This means that their view is incoherent in a particular way. Their view calls for its own rejection and such views offer inconsistent advice.

This is Elga's objection. He thinks this shows CV has to be restricted and Matheson seems to agree that CV cannot be right as stated. Elga uses this analogy to bring out the difficulty with CV:

[Imagine] that Consumer Reports began to review magazines that rated consumer ratings magazines in addition to the products it regularly reviews. He claims that if Consumer Reports concluded that a competitor review magazine was more reliable in its ratings of products, Consumer Reports could not give coherent advice. For instance, we can imagine the following scenario: Consumer Reports: Buy only toaster X Smart Shopper: Buy only toaster Y Consumer Reports: Follow the advice of Smart Shopper. In such a scenario, Consumer Reports gives incoherent advice since it tells one to both only buy toaster X and at the same time to only buy toaster Y. Since one cannot buy only toaster X and at the same time buy only toaster Y following Consumer Reports requires doing inconsistent things—no one can do everything that Consumer Reports prescribes (Matheson Forthcoming a: 6)

To deal with this sort of problem, Matheson suggests that we might appeal to some meta-rule to determine how to proceed:

The prescription to follow Smart Shopper is a higher-order prescription about what prescriptions to follow. So, it is plausible that this "upstream"

² See Elga (2011). I first heard a version of this objection from Matt Weiner.

prescription is the one to follow and that no dilemma results (Matheson Forthcoming a: 7).

Applied to the case of the conciliatory view:

Evidentialism can plausibly provide the resources for deciding between these potential incompatible prescriptions of CV. After all, CV is simply a statement of how the evidence works in a particular type of circumstance—in cases where one has discovered that a certain sort of disagreement exists. So, CV only purports to be a precisification of what one's evidence supports (and how much it supports it) in one particular kind of case. As such, one might expect that evidentialism can help in determining what to do when CV gives incompatible prescriptions. And here too, one prescription is “upstream” of the other. One prescription is a higher-order prescription about what inductive method to follow. Following your evidence requires following the “upstream” prescription (Matheson Forthcoming a: 7).

If I understand Matheson's proposal, it comes to something like this:

1. If a view (e.g., CV) offers inconsistent advice in the sense that it calls for its own rejection, the advice we should follow will be provided by some meta-rule.
2. This reveals a defect in the view in question (e.g., CV), so the view has to be revised.
3. The meta-rule in the case of belief will be an evidentialist view EV that tells us that the attitudes we're justified in accepting. It will tell us what rule, given our evidence, should replace the defective view.

In the case Elga describes, Matheson says that the upstream prescription, which is the prescription we should ultimately follow, is to follow Smart Shopper. Applied to the epistemic case, the meta-rule will be this evidentialist principle:

EV: For any subject S, proposition P, time T and doxastic attitude D, S is justified in adopting D toward P at T if and only if having D toward P fits the evidence S has at T (Matheson Forthcoming a: 8).³

The revised conciliatory view that Matheson recommends is this:

CV*: If (i) at time t S1 is justified in adopting doxastic attitude D1 toward p and (ii) at a later time t' S1 becomes justified in believing that an

³ For a defense, see Conee and Feldman (2004). For systematic criticism of evidentialism and their arguments for it, see Littlejohn (2012a).

epistemic peer S2 has adopted a competitor doxastic attitude D2 toward p;
then at t' S1 gains a defeater for adopting D1 toward p.

Presumably, the move from CV to CV* will move us from an unstable view to a stable one. This revision is motivated, in part, by the desire to deal with situations in which a subject's evidence weighs strongly in favor of steadfast views that tell you that disagreement isn't itself any indication that you have a reason to refrain from believing. At best, this provides a defeater that can be defeated in turn. Thus, in keeping with CV*, you can acquire evidence that supports a steadfast view, justifiably believe it, justifiably remain steadfast as the view dictates, and do all this in a way that's consistent with the fundamental rule or meta-rule, EV.

Critical Response

I have a few concerns about Matheson's treatment of these issues. The problems that he's trying to solve aren't generated by CV, but by the evidentialist framework that he introduces to correct these problems.

Matheson thinks that conciliationism tells us specifically what we should do to conform to the evidentialist view when we acquire a certain kind of evidence. Upon learning that there's a peer who disagrees with you, you acquire new evidence that the evidentialist thinks can require some sort of belief revision and CV* tells you what sort of revision is called for. In his framework, EV is upstream from CV* and this downstream norm or principle derives its authority from what's upstream from it. It's important that the downstream principles don't generate inconsistent advice, for that would either require a revision of that principle or indicate that something upstream from it requires revision.

Matheson thinks that we needed to revise CV, in part, because he saw the relationship between EV and CV as similar to the problematic relationship between Elga's magazines, Consumer Reports and Smart Shopper. Just as Elga's magazines offered inconsistent advice, Elga and Matheson seem to think that CV offers inconsistent advice and think rightly that norms or principles that offer such advice are spurious. I'm not convinced that Matheson has quite put his finger on what the difficulty with CV is. I'm also not convinced that his prescription gets to the root of the problem. I'll explain these points in turn.

In Elga's example, we really do have a case of inconsistent advice. A single subject is told to pursue two mutually exclusive options. Here's Matheson's take on the two situations:

The case regarding Consumer Reports appears to be analogous to at least some conciliatory views, in at least in some circumstances. The alleged problem comes from the fact that one cannot do everything that Consumer Reports prescribes in the case or everything that CV prescribes in such

scenarios. Since in some scenarios CV can prescribe taking up a competitor view of the significance of disagreement, the prescriptions offered by CV can seem inconsistent. Without some meta-rule or meta-inductive method that tells one how to resolve the seeming inconsistency, we are stuck with conflicting prescriptions (7).

It's an imperfect analogy. First, if CV issues inconsistent advice, it would have to tell you to pursue two exclusive options (e.g., believing and refrain from believing the same proposition). I don't see that it does. CV says that there are some situations in which you shouldn't believe CV, which is to say that you should suspend on whether CV is correct. This is perfectly consistent advice.

Matheson might say that it does *more* than this. If you're surrounded by a sufficient number of peers, won't this create a situation in which there's tremendous pressure to believe CV is false and adopt some more steadfast view if that's the view that your peers accept? I don't see that CV says this. I don't see suspension and belief as 'competitor' attitudes in the relevant sense. It's true that you cannot *psychologically* believe and suspend on whether *p*, but might it be the case that belief and suspension aren't competitors in some *normative* sense? Might it be that you and your peers share the same evidence where this body of evidence permits belief and permits suspension? If so and you suspend on whether CV, your suspending isn't a normative competitor in the sense that both attitudes could be appropriate responses to the relevant evidence.

To show that CV can tell us to form new beliefs about what to do in the face of disagreement, it seems that Matheson would have to argue that there's rational pressure that makes it inappropriate to continue to suspend on whether CV is correct in the face of peer pressure to reject that view. I think that any such argument would have to show that there are additional principles, such as EV and some sort of uniqueness principle.⁴ It's this *larger* set of principles that would require someone who initially believed CV to go beyond suspension. If that's right, it's not clear why CV is singled out for criticism. This larger set principles generates the inconsistent advice.

Let's suppose that CV, EV, and some ancillary assumptions *did* generate the result that a subject should believe CV to be false. *Now* have we shown that these principles generate inconsistent advice? No. Just as CV doesn't tell you that it's wrong to suspend on whether CV is correct, CV doesn't tell you that it's wrong to reject CV. What CV tells you to do is conform to CV. You can do that whatever you happen to think about CV. Or so it seems. Someone can believe CV is false and they can, in the face of disagreement, suspend judgment just as CV tells us to do.

What worries Matheson is the thought that the evidential pressure might push someone to accept something like a steadfast view:

⁴ See Matheson ([2011](#)) for his take on uniqueness.

Staying Put View SPV: If (i) at time t $S1$ is justified in adopting doxastic attitude $D1$ toward proposition p and (ii) at a later time t' $S1$ becomes justified in believing that an epistemic peer $S2$ has adopted a competitor doxastic attitude $D2$ toward p , and (iii) at t' $S1$ has no undefeated reason to discount $S2$'s conclusion; then at t' $S1$ remains just as justified in adopting $D1$ toward p .

If your evidence pushes you into accepting this view, it seems that it's rational to believe this view. Once you rationally believe this view, it seems that rationality requires you to form beliefs that conform to it. And *now* don't we have our inconsistency? Somebody who rationally believes SPV is required to stay put even though CV says that they ought to suspend. It took a long time to find it, but we've finally found the inconsistent advice!

If this captures the heart of the objection to CV, the objection can be put like this:

- P1. Under certain circumstances a set of principles that includes CV tells us to (a) believe CV is false and (b) believe a principle SPV that issues advice that's inconsistent with the advice that CV issues.
- P2. If you rationally *believe* SPV, you must *conform* to SPV.
- P3. You rationally believe SPV.
- P4. You must conform to SPV.
- P5. If CV is correct, it's not true that you must conform to SPV.
- C. CV is incorrect.

We're assuming that you're in a situation in which all the available evidence points strongly in favor of SPV, so (P3) follows from this assumption and EV. We've already seen why someone would accept (P1). Does this argument show that CV is mistaken?

No. The set of principles needed to generate the inconsistent advice includes EV (and more besides), so someone who accepts CV could argue that the fault lies elsewhere. Notice, moreover, that there's a crucial premise in the reasoning responsible for generating inconsistent advice: (P2). Couldn't someone believe SPV and yet still modify their beliefs in just the way that CV says to? That's certainly a possibility. Would it be proper for them to do so?

This would seem to depend upon whether we're required to follow the enkratic requirement, the requirement to bring our first-order beliefs and higher-order beliefs about which beliefs are required into line with each other.⁵ If the enkratic requirement is a genuine requirement of rationality, anyone whosoever rationally believes SPV would

⁵ For discussion of the enkratic requirement, see Broome (2013). The requirement plays a role in my argument that there cannot be false, justified beliefs about what you ought to do in Littlejohn (2012a). It's interesting that Feldman (2005) appears to accept a version of the requirement since it seems that it's inconsistent with EV. See Coates (2012), Lasonen-Aarnio (MS), Littlejohn (MS), and Titelbaum (Forthcoming a and b) for discussions of the enkratic requirement and EV.

be required to form beliefs in conformity to this principle. If, however, the requirement is spurious, we could simply reject (P2) and block the argument that way.

Critics of CV might think that the enkratic requirement is quite plausible and see no harm in deploying it as an assumption in an argument such as the one just sketched, but it should be noted that the requirement is incompatible with EV and some harmless assumptions about evidence and evidential support. As Matheson notes, it seems that it should be possible to have evidence that provides sufficient support for believing false propositions including false propositions about the requirements of rationality. ('Sufficient' should be read as sufficiently strong, not sufficient to ensure that there is justification to believe, but sufficiently strong. In an evidentialist framework, evidence provides sufficiently strong evidence for p if it provides support that is at least as strong as the support someone has for a rational/justified belief.) Just as it seems possible for someone to have sufficient evidence to believe SPV even if SPV is false, it should be possible for someone to have sufficient evidence to believe the following pragmatist view:

PV: If (i) S has no evidence for p or against p , (ii) has good reason to think that no such evidence will be forthcoming, and (iii) S knows that believing p would confer a significant practical benefit that couldn't be had unless p is believed, S is rationally required to believe p .

If someone believed such a view on sufficient evidence EV says that this belief would be justified/rational. The enkratic requirement would say, in turn, that they'd be required to form beliefs that would be practically beneficial even though they're not supported by the evidence.

If this is right, the objection to CV doesn't go through. We need EV to and the enkratic requirement to generate the inconsistent advice, but it turns out that these assumptions are incompatible with one another.

It's worth noting that EV generates the same kind of inconsistent advice that CV is alleged to generate:

- P1. Under certain circumstances EV tells us to believe EV false and believe instead PV.
- P2. If you rationally *believe* PV, you must *conform* to PV.
- P3. You rationally believe PV.
- P4. You must conform to PV.
- P5. If EV is correct, it's not true that you must conform to SPV.
- C. EV is incorrect.⁶

⁶ I discuss PV and the problems it poses for standard evidentialist approaches to justification in Littlejohn (Forthcoming).

Evidentialists think that if you believe on sufficient evidence PV, you'd rationally believe PV, so they have to accept that (P1) and (P3) could both be true. If they also accept the enkratic requirement and accept (P2), their view would be shown to issue the kind of inconsistent advice that CV is alleged to issue.

Evidentialists could of course try to save EV by rejecting the enkratic requirement. The downside is that rejecting the enkratic requirement comes with costs few want to pay. Suppose you thought that you knew EV was correct and you had sufficiently strong evidence for believing these (possibly false) propositions:

- PV is correct and PV requires me to believe p because of its practical benefits.
- There's sufficient evidence to believe p because p is supported to such and such a degree and that's a sufficient level of support.

If the enkratic requirement is false, you could rationally believe such things even if they're false. According to EV, you'd be rationally required to believe that a specific proposition is one that you're required to believe *and* EV would require you not to believe it. The upshot would be that EV would tell you to refrain from believing p even though it sanctioned believing this belief to be rationally required. Most of us see this as irrational.⁷

Conclusion

The objection to CV turns out to be an objection to EV. I've given you the evidence that EV is mistaken. You should believe me and abandon that view. I'm giving you the consistent advice that EV cannot.

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⁷ For an interesting recent discussion of the requirement, see Horowitz (Forthcoming).

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