

Epistemic Norms and Self-Defeat: A Reply to Littlejohn
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In “Are Conciliatory Views of Disagreement Self-Defeating?” I argued that we should revise how we understand conciliatory views of disagreement. Conciliatory views of disagreement claim that discovering that an epistemic peer disagrees with you is epistemically significant. In particular, they have been understood as claiming that becoming aware that an epistemic peer disagrees with you about a proposition makes you less justified in adopting the doxastic attitude that you had toward that proposition. So, if you believed *p* and became aware that your epistemic peer disbelieves *p*, then you would become less justified in believing *p*, at least so long as you have no undefeated reason to discount your peer’s conclusion about *p*. More formally, conciliationism has been understood as claiming the following:

(CV): If (i) at *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*.

I argued that conciliatory views of disagreement should be understood as making the following more modest claim:

(CV*): If (i) at *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*; then at *t'* *S1* *gains a defeater* for adopting *D1* toward *p*.

CV*, like CV, claims that peer disagreement is epistemically significant—both claim that in becoming aware that a peer disagrees you gain a reason to become less justified in your doxastic attitude toward the disputed proposition. However CV* differs from CV in one important way. CV*, unlike CV, makes no claim about what the subject is on balance justified in believing (or to what degree) at *t'*; it makes no claim about what the net effect of this reason gained via the disagreement is. While gaining a defeater for adopting a doxastic attitude toward a proposition may result in the subject becoming less on balance justified in adopting that attitude toward that proposition it needn’t. Defeaters can themselves be defeated—there are defeater-defeaters—and CV does not adequately account for this. Condition (iii) in CV does rule out some potential defeater-defeaters—it rules out *S1* having reasons to discount *S2*’s conclusion on the matter—however, there are other possible defeater-defeaters (one’s that are not reasons to believe that the peer’s conclusion is mistaken).

I. Motivation for the Change

I argued that such a modification was an improvement for several reasons, but focused on how such a modification would help conciliatory views avoid problems with being self-

defeating in offering inconsistent advice.¹ In general, the modification is important since CV is simply too strong. CV claims that gaining one piece of evidence (in a particular circumstance) is sufficient to alter what one is on balance justified in believing (and to what degree). Such a claim is implausible on any epistemic framework, but my focus was on evidentialism. According to evidentialism:

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.

Evidentialists should reject CV in favor of CV*. Evidentialism tells you that what doxastic attitude you are justified in adopting toward a proposition (and to what degree) is a matter of your total evidence. CV claims that adding one piece of evidence (in a particular circumstance) will always have a certain on balance justificatory effect. Evidentialists should reject CV, since CV makes no mention of what other pieces of evidence the subject may possess before becoming aware of the disagreement. In certain situations, the subject may antecedently possess pieces of evidence that would mitigate, or even entirely neutralize, the justificatory effect of the evidence about the peer disagreement.

Some examples will help. Suppose that at t, S1 is justified in believing that disagreement is without any epistemic significance—that finding out that a peer disagrees about p should make no difference to what you believe. If so, then it seems that learning that her peer disbelieves compatibilism about free will (while S1 believes it) will have no net justificatory effect on what S1 is justified in believing about compatibilism at t', even if we suppose that a conciliatory views of disagreement is correct. Learning of the disagreement may give S1 a reason to not believe compatibilism at t', but this reason is fully defeated by other evidence that S1 has (namely, her justified belief that disagreement is without epistemic significance). In this case, S1's defeater-defeater is misleading, since disagreement is epistemically significant, but its being misleading does not prevent it from being a defeater.

Alternatively, suppose that at t, S1 is justified in believing that rationality is quite permissive—that bodies of evidence can justify (and equally well) a number of different (and even incompatible) views. In particular, suppose that S1 is justified in believing that her body of evidence justifies both belief and suspension of judgment toward the proposition that compatibilism is true. If so, then it seems that learning that her peer disagrees with her about compatibilism (by suspending judgment about it) will have no net justificatory effect on what S1 is justified in believing about compatibilism at t'. Learning of the disagreement gives her a reason to not believe compatibilism at t', but here again this reason is fully defeated by her other evidence (namely, her justified belief that on this matter the shared evidence justifies both believing and suspending about compatibilism, and that it justifies each of these doxastic attitudes equally well).

¹ For Littlejohn's response to this charge see Littlejohn (2013) and (2014).

The general idea is that defeaters can themselves be defeated. So, even if peer disagreement is epistemically significant in that it provides you with a defeater for the doxastic attitude you have toward the disputed proposition, this is not sufficient for the defeater to have the net justificatory effect of reducing your on balance justification for adopting the doxastic attitude in question. It will matter what other evidence you have; it will matter whether you have a defeater-defeater. The defeater-defeaters mentioned here are importantly not reasons to discount your peer's conclusion (they are not reasons to think your peer is mistaken or that your peer should not be trusted on this matter or this occasion), so clause (iii) of CV does not rule out these scenarios. As such, we have reason to abandon CV and adopt CV* in its place.

Such a move also prevents conciliatory views from giving conflicting prescriptions. If the defeater gained from the discovery of the disagreement could not itself be defeated, then a conciliatory view could tell you directly to believe *p*, while telling you indirectly to not believe *p* (by telling you to believe a competitor view of disagreement which tells you to not to believe *p*). For instance, in our case above where the subject is justified in believing that disagreement is epistemically insignificant, we can suppose that our subject is justified in believing this because of what CV claims (in virtue of meeting the right kind of epistemic peers). In such a scenario, CV (directly) claims that S1 is less justified in believing compatibilism and CV (indirectly) claims that S1 is not less justified in believing compatibilism (by claiming that S1 should not believe CV but should believe that disagreement is epistemically insignificant). CV* avoids this problem by not making any proclamations about what S1's total evidence supports at *t*'. It claims that S1 gains a particular sort of reason, but does not make any claims about how that reason fits in with the other reasons S1 has. Thus, the move to CV* from CV also avoids the self-defeat charge that has been leveled against conciliatory views.

II. Evidentialism and Conciliatory Views

While this discussion takes place against the backdrop of evidentialism, I think the same lessons apply with or without that assumption. For instance, we can suppose that reliabilism is correct (that a belief is justified just in case it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process). A reliabilist could still adopt a conciliatory view of disagreement and claim that in learning that a peer disagrees, one gets a defeater for one's justification for adopting the relevant doxastic attitude toward the disputed proposition. However, like the evidentialist, the reliabilist should want to resist the claim that such a defeater always has a certain net justificatory effect. After all, the reliabilist too must account for the existence of defeater-defeaters, and must allow for the possibility that our subject possess one that mitigates, or even entirely neutralizes, the defeater gained from learning of the peer disagreement. So, regardless of which particular epistemic backdrop we assume, the move from CV to CV* is well motivated.

III. Littlejohn's Complaint

Littlejohn claims that the problems I'm trying to solve aren't problems with CV, but with the evidentialist framework I am working with. Thus, he claims that my proposed solution fails to get at the root of the issue. In fact, Littlejohn (2014) maintains that there

is no real problem here for CV since the objection requires incompatible assumptions (110).

Here's how Littlejohn (2014) frames the objection to CV:

- P1. Under a certain set of circumstances a set of principles that includes CV tells us to believe CV is false and believe that an epistemic norm (EN)² that issues advice inconsistent with CV is true.
- P2. If you rationally believe EN, then you must conform to EN.
- P3. You rationally believe EN.
- P4. You must conform to EN.
- P5. If CV is correct, it is not true that you must conform to EN.
- C. CV is incorrect (109).

P1 is plausible since we can suppose that evidentialism is true and that your evidence supports believing CV is false and that EN (a competitor epistemic norm) is true. That's one way that one's evidence could be.

P2 is a statement of what Littlejohn calls 'the *enkratic* requirement'—a requirement to bring our first-order beliefs in line with our higher-order beliefs. Littlejohn claims that if the *enkratic* requirement is a requirement of rationality, then anyone who rationally believed EN would need to conform to EN as well³ (109-10).

P3 just stipulates that someone is in the set of circumstances laid out in P1. Since this set of circumstances is possible, it is possible that someone be in them. P4 follows from P2 and P3.

P5 is motivated by the idea that rationality does not require you to follow inconsistent advice. So if CV is correct, you should conform to it, not to its competitor EN. C follows from P4 and P5.

Littlejohn claims that we should not be worried by this argument since evidentialism is inconsistent with the *enkratic* requirement. Since Littlejohn's construction of the objection to CV was motivated by way of both evidentialism and the *enkratic* requirement, the objection utilized inconsistent motivation and we are thus left without reason to endorse the conclusion—all the reasons for endorsing the premises cannot be jointly true.

The first thing to note here is that even if evidentialism and the *enkratic* requirement are inconsistent (we will examine that claim below) this would not give us a good reason to reject the above argument. While we can use evidentialism to motivate P1 and P3 we needn't do so. P1 and P3 are plausible premises regardless of what one takes as the fundamental epistemic framework (evidentialism or some competitor). For instance,

² I have altered Littlejohn's argument here to simply refer to a general competitor epistemic norm rather than the particular competitor Littlejohn references.

³ Littlejohn also uses the *enkratic* requirement as a premise in a larger argument in Littlejohn (2012).

reliabilists will agree that under certain circumstances a set of principles that include CV will tell us to believe CV is false and believe that EN is true. The relevant set of circumstances that a reliabilist will cite as relevant will differ from the set of circumstances given by the evidentialist (or at least the salient features of those circumstances will differ), but there are many ways of endorsing P1 and P3 without endorsing evidentialism. The argument needn't utilize evidentialism in motivating its premises. So, even if evidentialism is inconsistent with P2 we have not yet seen a problem for the argument. P1 and P3 are plausible prior to, and independent of, any commitments regarding what the fundamental epistemic norms are.

Second, it is not clear that there is an inconsistency between evidentialism and the *enkratic* requirement. Why think that evidentialism is inconsistent with the *enkratic* requirement? Littlejohn notes that evidentialism could have it that one is required to disbelieve evidentialism and even to believe a competitor epistemic norm. In such circumstances, Littlejohn claims that the *enkratic* requirement has it that the subject must now conform to this competitor norm. However, if there are any cases where evidentialism does not hold (cases where you should conform to a competitor norm), then evidentialism is false. Thus, Littlejohn argues, evidentialism and the *enkratic* requirement are inconsistent principles.

Is there a tension here? It depends upon how we understand the *enkratic* requirement. On some ways of unpacking the requirement it is inconsistent with evidentialism, but on other ways of unpacking the requirement it is not. In addition, the ways of unpacking the requirement that are inconsistent with evidentialism have it that the *enkratic* requirement is not a true requirement of rationality. So, the *enkratic* requirement is either true and consistent with evidentialism, or false and inconsistent with it. Let's look at why.

Let's suppose that evidentialism is true. Let's suppose further that Sue's evidence is such that it supports disbelieving evidentialism and believing that reliabilism is true. Given the truth of evidentialism, Sue is rational or justified in believing reliabilism. What follows? Should she *conform* to reliabilism? Well, that depends upon what it means to conform to a norm. Should she follow the prescriptions of reliabilism? It doesn't seem so. Consider two scenarios. First, suppose that Sue knows, or is justified in believing, that her belief that p is produced by a reliable belief-forming process. If so, then her total evidence supports that her belief that p is justified, even if she lacks direct evidence for p. After all, her total evidence supports reliabilism and that the reliabilist conditions for a justified belief are met in her belief that p. Sue has a simple valid argument for p and she is justified in believing both of the premises.

- P1. I am justified in believing all beliefs with feature F.
- P2. My belief B has feature F.
- C. I am justified in having B.

Having B puts Sue's first-order beliefs in line with her higher-order beliefs. Since those higher-order beliefs are justified (by stipulation) and she is justified in making the connection between them and her first order belief B, Sue is also justified in having B.

Second, suppose that Sue forms a belief that *q* that is in fact formed by a reliable belief-forming process, though she has no evidence of this fact nor does she have evidence that supports *q* directly. Should Sue believe *q*? No. Sue should believe reliabilism is true, but only because evidentialism is true and her evidence supports believing reliabilism. Being justified in believing reliabilism does not make reliabilism true, and it does not make any belief of Sue's justified merely in virtue of being formed by a reliable belief forming process. It is only the true epistemic norms that matter, and by assumption evidentialism is true.⁴ Sue should follow her evidence—always (at least on the supposition that evidentialism is true). That evidence may lead her away from believing evidentialism, but it will never make her such that she should not believe in accordance with her evidence.

At times, Littlejohn unpacks the *enkratic* requirement as the requirement to bring one's first-order beliefs in line with one's higher-order beliefs. This interpretation of the requirement seems correct. This interpretation provides one way of explaining why Sue is justified in believing *p* in the first scenario. However, this interpretation is by no means in conflict with evidentialism. In fact, certain views about higher-order evidence and its justificatory effects when coupled with evidentialism seem to entail it.⁵

At other times (and in the argument itself) Littlejohn unpacks the *enkratic* requirement as the requirement to conform to/follow norms that you are justified in believing. On this interpretation, the *enkratic* requirement is in conflict with evidentialism. This is apparent in the second scenario envisioned above. However, on this interpretation, the *enkratic* requirement appears quite implausible. In fact, the motivation that Littlejohn gives for accepting the *enkratic* requirement only applies to the first interpretation, since it is concerned with aligning one's first-order beliefs with one's higher-order beliefs, so there appears to be little cost in denying the second interpretation.

So, a good way out of the self-defeat objection as formulated by Littlejohn is to deny P2. P2 requires the second interpretation of the *enkratic* requirement and we have seen reason to believe that it is false. Moving from CV to CV* is consistent with this move, and respects the first interpretation of the *enkratic* requirement at the same time. Thus, the move from CV to CV* is an improvement for conciliatory views of disagreement.

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⁴ For a defense of this claim, and that it is consistent with epistemic internalism, see Matheson (2012).

⁵ For a defense of this claim, see Feldman (2005) and Matheson (2009).

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