

## Disagreement: What's the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find

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Disagreement is an obvious fact of life. With respect to topics as diverse as philosophy, religion, morality, politics, law, science, and medicine, one finds intelligent persons who are acquainted with similar bodies of evidence, but who nevertheless disagree with one another.

These disagreements give rise to several interesting philosophical questions. Among them:

- Can it be rational to retain our beliefs in the face of disagreement with an equally intelligent, equally well-informed subject (a so-called *epistemic peer*)? If so, *how*?
- How often are our dissenters our epistemic peers? And how often do we have reason to think that our dissenters are peers?

Much recent work in epistemology has addressed the first pair of questions. The second pair has gone relatively under-explored. This is a curious situation. For a prominent theme in the literature is that widespread peer disagreement mandates widespread doxastic attitude revision. This theme is perhaps most vividly expressed as an argument for a certain kind of skepticism.<sup>1</sup> The argument requires answers to *both* pairs of questions above. It goes roughly like this: (i) If one finds oneself party to a disagreement with an acknowledged epistemic peer, it is irrational to retain one's belief—one is rationally required to suspend judgment under such conditions.<sup>2</sup> (ii) We often find ourselves party to disagreements with acknowledged peers (indeed, such disagreements often concern our most cherished beliefs). Thus, (iii) it is quite often irrational for us to retain our cherished, controversial beliefs; we are often rationally required to suspend judgment about such matters—at least until further evidence comes in.

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1. Important works defending this sort of argument include Feldman (2006) and (2007), and Kornblith (2010). Christensen (2007) also argues that certain sorts of disagreement mandate significant doxastic attitude revision.

2. For defenses of this principle and others like it see the works listed in note 1. For critical discussion of such principles see Kelly (2005), Kelly (2010), Sosa (2010), and Thune (2010). Though I reject the epistemic principle expressed in (i), I do not criticize it here.

More details on this argument will follow shortly. For now, note that almost all of the current discussion of the argument has focused on (i), which is an epistemic principle about the normative significance of peer disagreement. This discussion is ongoing, and the normative significance of peer disagreement remains a topic of intense debate. Premise (ii) purports to describe epistemic conditions that we often find ourselves in. When we find ourselves in these conditions, we satisfy the antecedent of (i). In recent discussion of the skeptical argument from peer disagreement, premise (ii) is often left untouched. In effect, the discussion has assumed that we are often party to acknowledged peer disagreement.

But *are* we? In §1 of this paper, I argue that we are not. I show that peer disagreement is rare, and that we rarely have reason to think it obtains in a given case. If this is right, the skeptical argument from peer disagreement is a failure, *irrespective* of how the discussion of claim (i) turns out.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, if I am correct, participants in the current discussion about disagreement have been laboring under a false assumption. Real-world disagreements concerning issues we care about are *not* peer disagreements. Or at any rate, they seldom are. As a result, it is not clear to what extent the contemporary discussion of peer disagreement is relevant to the rational status of our most cherished beliefs.

So, in §1, I criticize an assumption that is central to the current discussion of disagreement. In §2, I sketch a positive suggestion as to how this discussion might be re-oriented. I start by noting that it would be a mistake to infer from the rarity of peerhood that disagreement poses *no threat* to our beliefs. For suppose that epistemic peerhood is rare. And suppose further that we seldom have reason to accept the higher-level claim that we are party to a peer disagreement. It is nevertheless

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3. Similar remarks apply to arguments that employ epistemic principles on which acknowledged peer disagreement mandates significant doxastic attitude revision, but does not always mandate suspending judgment. (Such principles may be stated either in terms of Bayesian credences or in terms of degrees of rational confidence.) If the main argument of §1 is correct, the antecedents of these principles are rarely satisfied, because we are rarely party to acknowledged peer disagreements.

plausible that in a wide range of cases, it is to some degree *unclear* whether we are in a better epistemic position than our dissenters. For example, in many cases it is to some degree unclear whether we have more or better relevant evidence than our dissenters. In other cases it is unclear whether we are better disposed than our dissenters to respond rationally to shared evidence. Plausibly, to the extent that such matters are unclear, the rational status of the disputed beliefs is called into question. By focusing on this kind of unclarity—rather than on the significance of acknowledged peer disagreement—epistemologists can better ensure that the results of their work are relevant to the evaluation of our cherished, but controversial beliefs. Or so I suggest.

### § 1. Acknowledged Peer Disagreement: A Rare Phenomenon

Let's begin by clarifying the kind of case upon which the literature has focused—namely, that of *acknowledged peer disagreement*. This requires, among other things, explicating the notion of an *epistemic peer*. Here is Thomas Kelly's definition:

Let us say that two individuals are *epistemic peers* with respect to some question if and only if they satisfy the following two conditions: (i) they are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on the question, and (ii) they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias. (2005, 174-5)

In similar remarks, David Christensen says:

Much of the recent discussion has centered on the specific special case where one forms some opinion on P, then discovers that another person has formed an opposite opinion, where one has good reason to believe that the other person is one's (at least approximate) equal in terms of exposure to the evidence, intelligence, freedom from bias, etc. (Such a person is often referred to as one's "epistemic peer"). (2009, 756-7)

And Catherine Elgin says,

Disagreement per se does not jeopardize epistemic standing. More problematic are cases in which opponents are, and consider themselves to be, epistemic peers. Then they have the same evidence, reasoning abilities, training, and background assumptions. (2010, 53)

These notions of *epistemic peers*, like others in the literature,<sup>4</sup> require for peerhood that the dissenting subjects have the same relevant evidence. The definitions further require that the subjects be equally disposed to respond appropriately to the shared evidence. Call these requirements, respectively, the *same evidence condition* and the *dispositional condition*. When there is a disagreement between two subjects who satisfy these conditions, we have a *disagreement between epistemic peers*.

Naturally enough, recent discussions of peer disagreement have focused on disagreements between epistemic peers. But it is not the mere occurrence of peer disagreement that is supposed to be epistemically significant. To see why, imagine that two peers form opposite opinions regarding P, but that each is unaware of the other's existence. In such a case, it is unclear how the bare fact of peer disagreement is supposed to be epistemically relevant—for it is a fact of which the subjects are unaware. Perhaps in light of this, the cases most commonly discussed in the peer disagreement literature are those in which the relevant subjects are aware of the disagreement *and* have reason to think that their dissenter is a peer. In other words, the literature has focused on the significance of disagreement in cases where the relevant subjects (call them 'S' and 'T', respectively) satisfy the following conditions:

- (a) *The disagreement condition*: S believes P, while T believes  $\sim$ P.<sup>5</sup>
- (b) *The same evidence condition*: S and T have the same P-relevant evidence, E.
- (c) *The dispositional condition*: S and T are equally disposed to respond to E in an epistemically appropriate way.
- (d) *The acknowledgement condition*: S and T have good reason to think conditions (a)-(c) are satisfied.

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4. See, e.g., Audi (2008), Goldman (2010), and Kornblith (2010). Elga (2007) offers a related concept of *counting* another cognitive agent as an epistemic peer. Elga attempts to avoid the apparent skeptical threat of peer disagreement by noting that we may rarely count our dissenters as peers. In §1.4, I suggest a similar maneuver: we may rarely *have reason* to count our dissenters as peers. In §2, I point toward some limitations of this strategy.

5. Condition (a) in effect restricts our discussion to strong disagreements, understood in terms of all-or-nothing beliefs. Though epistemologists sometimes discuss disagreement in terms of degreed attitudes (e.g., Bayesian credences), we will not do so here. This simplification does not affect the main argument of the paper in any substantive way.

When two subjects satisfy (a)-(d), we will say that they are party to an *acknowledged peer disagreement*. Our task in this section will be to consider these conditions one at a time. We'll see that conditions (b)-(d), considered individually, are fairly difficult for two subjects to satisfy; thus, it is even more difficult for two subjects to satisfy all of the conditions together. Acknowledged peer disagreement is a rare phenomenon. But if so, the skeptical argument from acknowledged peer disagreement fails. More generally, the question, *What is the epistemic significance of acknowledged peer disagreement?* rarely arises in real-world cases.

### 1.1. The Disagreement Condition

Let's start with condition (a), the disagreement condition. Here we can be brief—often enough, it is clear that subjects satisfy this condition. For our purposes, one caveat will do. On condition (a), acknowledged peer disagreement requires that the disagreement at issue be *genuine*. The subjects must take incompatible doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition. At minimum, this means that there is no subtle ambiguity that keeps the subjects from entering into argumentative contact with each other. It is entirely possible for intelligent subjects to be mistaken about whether they satisfy this condition, even when such subjects are trained to spot subtle ambiguities. (To see this, just insert your favorite example in which two philosophers are talking past one another because they fail to see that they are using a key term in different ways.<sup>6</sup>) Such mistakes are fairly common. So, we should take more than a passing glance at the possibility that our apparent disagreements are *merely* apparent rather than genuine. When an apparent disagreement is not genuine, we do not have a case of acknowledged peer disagreement.

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6. Here is one prominent example from epistemology. William Alston has argued that participants in the debate about the nature of “epistemic justification” are simply talking past one another. Philosophers on several sides of this debate have assumed that there is some one property properly called “epistemic justification.” But on Alston's view, these philosophers are simply attaching the same label—“justification”—to different epistemically desirable properties. As a result, apparent disagreements about “justification” are *merely* apparent. See Alston (1993) and (2005).

## 1.2 The Same Evidence Condition

In some cases, it is obvious that a disagreement is genuine. For instance, there is a fact about whether capital punishment significantly deters crime. Those who believe that capital punishment *does* deter crime clearly disagree with those who think that it does not. But in order for this disagreement to count as an acknowledged peer disagreement, several more conditions must be satisfied. Next we'll look at the same evidence condition. This was the claim that:

(b) S and T are aware of the same P-relevant evidence, E.

When two subjects satisfy this condition, their evidence is *shared* in the sense that their respective bodies of evidence are co-extensive. It is no mean feat for two subjects to satisfy this condition. To see this, we'll sketch some extant accounts of evidence and consider how the same evidence condition looks on each one.

Crucially, the same evidence condition is difficult to satisfy even on conceptions of evidence that are conducive to subjects having a common body of evidence. On one historically prominent account, evidence is the sort of thing that is discursive and shareable through articulation, and is such that it can in principle provide one with a dialectical advantage over one's dissenters.<sup>7</sup> This is the *dialectical conception of evidence*. To be aware of evidence relevant to some proposition, P, on this view, is to be aware of an argument for P whose premises beg no questions against someone who currently does not believe P. On the dialectical conception, such items as sensory experiences and intuitions do not count as evidence. In this way, the dialectical conception is quite restrictive.<sup>8</sup> This

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7. Something like this notion of evidence seems to be assumed in W.K. Clifford's essay "The Ethics of Belief." For further discussion see van Inwagen ([1996], [2004], and [2010]); see also Williamson (2007), ch. 7.

8. By "restrictive" I simply mean "narrow". I am not using the term pejoratively, as though asserting without argument that the dialectical conception of evidence is overly strict. Rather, the point is that on this conception of evidence, which I have merely described, it can be quite difficult for two subjects to share a single body of evidence. For an evaluation of the dialectical conception itself, see the works by van Inwagen and Williamson referenced in the previous note.

feature of the account makes it possible for subjects to end up with the same body of evidence, at least if they are able to articulate whatever arguments they possess.

But notice that even on this conception of evidence, a lot of ordinary disagreements fail to satisfy the same evidence condition. To see this, consider the following case:

*The Typical Philosophers:* Mike and Keith are veteran philosophers who teach at different universities. Both specialize in metaphysics, and were trained at similar schools and in similar methods. Both are very familiar with the arguments in the literature on the problem of universals. There is significant (but not total) overlap in the arguments of which they are aware. Both have published fairly extensively on the topic, and are highly regarded in the field. Mike is a realist who thinks that properties are abstract universals. Keith is a trope nominalist who thinks that realism is false. While attending conferences and through correspondence, they have discussed many of the reasons for their opposing views, yet disagreement remains.

The disagreement between Mike and Keith over the truth of realism is, I think, a fairly typical philosophical disagreement. Of course, not *all* philosophical disagreements are like this. But plausibly, disagreement of this sort is widespread in philosophy and in other fields. That is, for many disagreements in philosophy and elsewhere, intelligent, similarly-trained subjects possess bodies of evidence that are overlapping but not co-extensive, *even if* we're only counting arguments (or their constituents) as evidence. Despite significant efforts to disclose their relevant arguments, Mike and Keith fall short of literally *sharing* a common body of evidence. Given the dialectical conception of evidence, they do not satisfy the same evidence condition. Thus, theirs is not an acknowledged peer disagreement.

I suspect that satisfaction of the same evidence condition is rare, even if we understand the condition in terms of the dialectical conception of evidence. To be more precise, I think that it is rare for subjects to satisfy the condition in cases where the evidence surrounding the disputed topic

is at least moderately complex.<sup>9</sup> To see why, consider the following case, a mildly fictionalized version of the well-known disagreement between Peter van Inwagen and David Lewis regarding human freedom:<sup>10</sup>

*The Scrupulous Philosophers:* Peter and David are professional philosophers of the first rank. Both exhibit a wide range of intellectual skills and virtues, and exhibit them to a great extent. Peter and David have acknowledged that they exemplify these virtues more or less equally. These philosophers are, in a word, *scrupulous* with respect to their assessment of evidence. But while many philosophers are scrupulous in the way they assess evidence, Peter and David are scrupulous in another way. Namely, they take great care to *share* their evidence with respect to the claim that <Genuine human freedom requires indeterminism>. In conversation with one another, they proceed slowly and carefully so as to ensure mutual understanding. They read the same books and journal articles, and attend the same conferences, thereby acquainting themselves with the same arguments. They carefully log time spent reading and thinking about human freedom, and end up with matching logs. Yet after all this, Peter believes that genuine freedom must be indeterminist in character, while David denies this.

Now ask yourself, is the disagreement between Peter and David typical of philosophical disagreements? Do philosophers very often take such great care to bring it about that their total dialectical evidence is the same? I doubt it. And—serendipitous exceptions aside—whenever subjects don't take such care, the same evidence condition is not satisfied. So, philosophical disagreements rarely satisfy the condition. A similar verdict would seem to be in order for disagreements in many other fields in which evidence sharing is an arduous task.

Arguably, of all the notions of evidence discussed among philosophers, the dialectical conception is most conducive to subjects satisfying the same evidence condition. If sameness of evidence is rare even on *this* notion of evidence, then surely it is even less common on more

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9. It might turn out that many disagreements satisfy the same evidence condition because the relevant subjects are new to the field in question, and are aware of very little evidence. Consider, e.g., a disagreement between two novices on the first day of Organic Chemistry 101. In such a case, it may be quite easy for the disputing subjects to share a common body of evidence—they know little about the topic, and so have little to share. Other disagreements might satisfy the same evidence condition, filled in with the dialectical conception of evidence, simply because there *are* no arguments relevant to the topic. For all I know, most disagreements are like one or the other of these cases. Thus, I refrain from claiming that evidential equality just as such is rare. Instead, I claim only that evidential equality is rare among the complex, discursive cases that drive philosophers' interest in the epistemology of disagreement.

10. The seminal works are Lewis (1981) and van Inwagen (1983). For more recent discussion of the debate see van Inwagen (2004).



inclusive accounts. In general, as an account of evidence broadens, peerhood gets more difficult to come by—for as more items get included in an account of evidence, subjects must have more in common in order to count as peers.

On some accounts of evidence, a subject's evidence includes, in addition to arguments, such items as perceptual experiences, rational insights, "seemings," or intuitions. Other accounts add *religious* experiences.<sup>11</sup> Evidence of this sort, by its very nature, cannot be shared via communication. This is not to say that subjects cannot communicate the character of their experiences or report their intuitions to dissenters. Rather, it is to say that even if they do so, this is not sufficient to bring it about that their dissenters end up with literally the same evidence. I can *account* for your experiences if you tell me about them. But it is a mistake to think that by telling me about them you thereby bring it about that we have the same evidence.<sup>12</sup> Trivially, accounts of evidence that include the items listed above make epistemic peerhood more difficult to come by than it is on the dialectical conception. For the sake of illustration, consider:

*The Scrupulous Philosophers +* : This case is the same as the original Scrupulous Philosophers case, with one exception: In addition to sharing the same dialectical evidence, Peter and David have different *intuitions* with respect to human freedom. Peter has the intuition that freedom requires indeterminism, while David has the intuition that freedom does not require indeterminism.

On accounts of evidence that include intuitions as evidence, Peter and David have different evidence. Their respective bodies of total evidence are overlapping, but not co-extensive. Their differing intuitions ensure this. Importantly, all philosophical disagreements that come down to competing intuitions are like the *Scrupulous Philosophers +* in this respect. Similar remarks apply to cases (in philosophy and elsewhere) that involve subjects with differing "seemings" and experiences.

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11. Van Inwagen (1996) suggests, but does not endorse, such an account.

12. In making this point, I am not defending the banal claim that it is impossible for subjects to share the same token mental states. I mean something stronger: communication alone is often insufficient to bring it about that a dissenter has the same mental state *types*. This point holds especially when the relevant types include perceptual experiences, intuitions, and the like.

If it was rare for subjects to satisfy the same evidence condition, just given a dialectical conception of evidence, then it is even less common for subjects to satisfy the condition on broader notions of evidence.

In the above paragraph, we saw that differences in experiences, intuitions, and the like can make a difference with respect to whether subjects have the same evidence—at least on accounts of evidence that include such items. We can make a similar point regarding accounts of evidence on which one’s evidence includes one’s *background beliefs*. For in that case, sameness of evidence requires sameness of background beliefs. On this picture, epistemic peerhood can be common only if it is common for subjects to have all and only the same relevant background beliefs. It is plausible to think that peerhood is extremely rare on such a conception of evidence.<sup>13</sup> I won’t belabor this point, as the general argument of this section is already clear: In suitably complex cases, equality of evidence is rare even given the dialectical conception of evidence. *A fortiori*, it is rare on accounts of evidence that include, in addition to dialectical evidence, such items as experiences, intuitions, and background beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

### 1.3 The Dispositional Condition

This condition states that:

- (c) S and T are equally disposed to respond appropriately to E.

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13. Elga (2007) makes a similar point, though on a higher level: those one *regards* as peers will tend to be those with similar background beliefs.

14. An important result of this section, which we won’t detail here, is that the so-called *Uniqueness Thesis* (UT), even if true, may apply only rarely. UT says that for any proposition P and body of total evidence, E, some doxastic attitude toward P is the one that E uniquely supports. UT is often regarded as central to discussions about the epistemology of disagreement (see, e.g., Kelly [2010]). If the main argument of this section is correct, then the application of UT to real cases of disagreement is not a straightforward matter. Of course, this is no reason to think that UT is false. For the seminal defense of UT, see Roger White (2005). For critical discussion of UT, see Kelly (2010) and Ballantyne and Coffman (manuscript).

This condition concerns the relative merits of the dissenting subjects as evidence assessors. The most important feature of such equality, I suggest, is equal *reliability* with respect to the relevant field of inquiry. For plausibly, the reason such items as intelligence and intellectual virtue are often included in definitions of “epistemic peers” is that these characteristics typically render subjects reliable as evidence assessors. Epistemic peers are (*ceteris paribus*) equally likely to arrive at a true belief, given a common body of evidence in the relevant domain. This is one reason why disagreement with an acknowledged peer is so often thought to be epistemically significant.

Depending on the subject matter, equal reliability may bring a number of things along with it. Let’s briefly catalog a few of these.

In many cases, equal reliability may require equality of such items as general intelligence and logical skill. This requirement is often in place with respect to academic disputes. In such cases it seems likely that differences in intelligence and logical skill will result in differences in reliability. This is especially plausible for cases in which the relevant evidence consists in arguments—for logical skill is central to the assessment of arguments. In such cases, we are inclined to think that in the event of disagreement between two subjects who share a common body of evidence, superiority of logical skill can make one subject more likely than the other to get things right.<sup>15</sup>

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15. Even in cases where arguments are the main relevant evidence, it can be tricky to specify the skill set that is most relevant to reliability. Suppose Fred and Frank disagree about the validity of an argument containing several counterfactual claims. Suppose that Fred is somewhat more intelligent than Frank, and that he possesses slightly more logical skill, *generally speaking*. To this point, it can look like Fred is better disposed to respond reliably to the shared body of evidence (say, the numbered premises written on the chalkboard). But now suppose that when it comes to counterfactual logic, Fred and Frank are exactly equally reliable. It is plausible that given this description, the two thinkers count as peers in the sense relevant to the dispositional condition, despite the mild disparities with respect to general intelligence and logical skill. If this is right, then in such cases, it is not equality of general logical skill, but rather equality of *relevant* logical skill, that figures in equal reliability. None of these considerations undercut the main point of this section: differences in reliability are easy to come by; and when they are present, epistemic peerhood is absent. Thanks to Fritz Warfield for helpful discussion on this point.

In other cases, however, equal reliability may require more (or less) than equality of intelligence, virtue, or logical skill.<sup>16</sup> For instance, it may require equal reliability of two subjects' sense modalities. (E.g., visual acuity is clearly relevant where subjects disagree about whether an animal viewed at a distance is a dog or sheep; logical skill, intelligence, and intellectual virtue less so). In other cases, equal reliability with respect to a subject matter may require equal reliability of very specific skills of recognition. (Consider cases in which the proposition under dispute concerns the ability to see a forced win in a chess match, the break of a lengthy putt, or the wing pattern of a rare species of pheasant).

In many cases of disagreement in academic fields, equal reliability may require equality with respect to a range of epistemic virtues such as honesty, carefulness, and freedom from bias. Suppose that one of two dissenting subjects is more careful than the other, or less biased, or more honest. All else being equal, we would expect the more careful, less biased, more honest person to be more reliable than her dissenter. Disparity with respect to intellectual virtue often brings along with it disparity of reliability.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, we should not leave our discussion of the dispositional condition without noting that differences in *background beliefs* can affect subjects' reliability as evidence assessors. In many cases, among such background beliefs are views about how evidence should be assessed. Differences here may make large differences in overall reliability in the relevant field. To take a simple example,

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16. Indeed, for disagreements over some topics, inferential abilities and general intelligence may not be relevant to assessing dispositions to respond to shared evidence. If your caddy has an IQ that is ten points lower than yours but is better at reading short putts, then (as far as the dispositional condition goes) he is your superior with respect to the claim that your five footer is going to break to the left. If his IQ is ten points lower but the two of you are equally good at reading putts, then, plausibly, you satisfy the dispositional condition despite the IQ disparity.

17. I have made this point with respect to so-called *responsibilist* intellectual virtues. Such virtues are typically construed as acquired traits of intellectual character, and are modeled on the moral virtues. A similar point holds for so-called *reliabilist* intellectual virtues, which are typically construed as reliable capacities or dispositions thereof (e.g., reliable sense modalities). In effect, I have made the latter point above, but without labeling these capacities as virtues. For more on the distinction between responsibilist and reliabilist intellectual virtues, see Greco (2002).

consider a case where two subjects have differing background beliefs about which sources of testimony are reliable. Smith believes that *The National Enquirer* is a reliable source, while Jones believes that the *Enquirer* is unreliable, opting instead for *The New York Times*. Suppose that the *Times* is in fact more reliable. If both subjects read both periodicals in an effort to possess a shared body of evidence, we would expect Jones to form true beliefs more often than Smith, and false beliefs less often. In the event that the two subjects disagree about a claim with respect to which both the *Times* and the *Enquirer* report something, Jones's method renders him much more likely to get things right. Background beliefs can clearly affect a subject's overall reliability. By virtue of this, disparity between two subjects' background beliefs can keep them from counting as epistemic peers.<sup>18</sup>

We could go on enumerating ways in which differences in subjects' general cognitive capacities, acquired skills, character traits, and background beliefs can affect their reliability as evidence assessors. We shall not do so here. The above catalog will suffice for the points we need to make. First, it is certainly not obvious that equal reliability along *any* of the dimensions discussed above is common in cases of disagreement. Second, in many cases, *several* of the items listed above are relevant to a subject's overall reliability in an area. (One thinks of scientific investigations that require the acquired skill of reading instruments, the deployment of logical skill, the application of intellectual virtue, and the guidance of background beliefs in the interpretation of data.) The matter of overall reliability becomes especially complicated in such cases. One way for subjects to be equally reliable (overall) is for them to rate equally well along *each* of the relevant dimensions (e.g., logical skill, intellectual virtue, and instrument reading). Another way subjects can be equally reliable is for them to rate disparately along different dimensions, but in such a way that these differences cancel

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18. Note, however, that considering background beliefs as relevant to whether subjects satisfy the dispositional condition need not make peerhood as rare as it would be if background beliefs were taken as relevant to satisfaction of the same evidence condition. With respect to the dispositional condition, two sets of background beliefs need only enable equally reliable dispositions in order for two subjects to satisfy the condition (at least as far as background beliefs go). The beliefs themselves need not be the same. But as noted in §1.2, if we count background beliefs as evidence, so that they fall under the same evidence condition, then subjects must hold the same background beliefs in order to count as peers.

out. Suppose, e.g., that Scott is better at logic than Tim, but that Tim is better at reading instruments than Scott. It may nevertheless be that their total relevant dispositions as evidence assessors render them equally reliable. Clearly, the path toward equal reliability is not straightforward. There are many ways in which dissenting subjects can fail to be equally disposed to respond to their shared evidence in a reliable way. Whenever they are not so disposed, they fail to satisfy the dispositional condition.

None of the above should be taken to imply that it is *impossible* for subjects to satisfy the dispositional condition on peerhood. However, it should be clear that satisfaction of the condition is in many cases a very complicated matter. It is plausible to think that its satisfaction is fairly rare. If this is right, then we should not accept uncritically the claim that two subjects satisfy it in a given case.

#### **1.4 The Acknowledgement Condition**

The final condition on acknowledged peer disagreement is the acknowledgment condition:

(d) S and T have good reason to think conditions (a)-(c) are satisfied.

Here we encounter a higher-level claim about subjects' reasons for thinking that they are engaged in a genuine disagreement with an epistemic peer. It is important to distinguish this claim from the first-order claims discussed above (§§1.1-1.3)—for the two sorts of claims have different truth conditions. Even *if* one has good reason to think that a dissenter is a peer, one might be mistaken in thinking that she is (say, because the dissenter has slightly different evidence). And one can be party to a peer disagreement without having good reason to think that one is. The latter point is central to the evaluation of disagreement-based arguments for skepticism. It is uncontroversial among both skeptics and non-skeptics that peer disagreement is a threat to rational belief only if the relevant subjects have reason to think it obtains. The mere *fact* of peer disagreement carries no significance of

its own—at least as far as epistemic rationality is concerned. Rather, reasonable belief that a peer disagreement obtains is doing the epistemic work.

In the preceding sections, we considered general arguments which, at least when conjoined, show that peer disagreement is rare. Here we'll consider the matter of subjects' reasons for thinking that peer disagreement obtains *in their particular case*. As we'll see, such grounds can be difficult to acquire. For our purposes, it will suffice to consider the difficulty of acquiring good reason to think that the *same evidence* and *dispositional* conditions are met.

As we saw above, it is not easy for two subjects to share the same evidence—even if “evidence” is construed in a narrow, dialectical sense. It can also be difficult to acquire good grounds for believing the higher-level claim that one's dissenter has the same evidence as oneself. In cases where the relevant evidence consists in arguments, getting such grounds requires that both subjects have ready access to their propositional evidence and are able to articulate it accurately and comprehensively. When the issues and arguments involved are numerous and complex, and when the subjects have not taken special measures to ensure their evidential equality, this condition is not easily satisfied. With respect to the cases discussed above, the Typical Philosophers surely lack grounds for thinking that they have the same evidence; by their own lights, their evidence isn't fully disclosed. Perhaps the Scrupulous Philosophers have good grounds for thinking that they share a body of (dialectical) evidence. But as we saw above, that case required unusual efforts on the part of the subjects involved. It is doubtful that many real-world cases resemble the Scrupulous Philosophers in the relevant respects. The upshot: even if only arguments and their constituents are evidence, subjects rarely have reason to think that their dissenters have the same evidence. *A fortiori*, it is rare for subjects to have such reason if, in addition to arguments, their evidence includes rational intuitions, incommunicable insights, “seemings”, or experiences. Indeed, if such items are included

among subjects' evidence, the subjects will often have good reason to *deny* that dissenters have the same evidence.

To this point we have only considered the acknowledgement condition as far as it concerns reasons for thinking that the same evidence condition is satisfied. Let us turn briefly to higher-level beliefs about the dispositional condition. For several reasons, it can be difficult to acquire good grounds for thinking that a dissenter is equally disposed to respond appropriately to relevant evidence. Consider cases in which evidence assessment requires the deployment of logical skill. In such cases, having good reason to think that the dispositional condition is satisfied requires having good reason to think that the dissenter's logical skills are on a par with one's own. For instance, it requires grounds for thinking that the dissenter is equally likely to make valid deductions from the propositions in the evidence base (where such inferences are available), and equally unlikely to make invalid deductions. It also requires grounds for thinking that the dissenter is equally likely to make strong *inductive* inferences—including inferences by enumerative induction, analogy, and inference to the best explanation—and to avoid inductively weak inferences. The most straightforward way to acquire good grounds to believe such things would be to look at track records. But these are often hard to come by.

As we saw above, the cognitive dispositions relevant to evidence assessment often include logical skills. Other acquired skills, intellectual virtues, and background beliefs may be relevant as well. We will not discuss these items in any detail here. Instead, the following must suffice: In cases where such items *are* relevant to a subject's overall reliability in a given field, fulfillment of the acknowledgement condition requires that the dissenting subjects believe with good reason that they are equals with respect to them. It is plausible that in a very wide range of cases, subjects lack such reasons. In virtue of this, they lack reason to think that they are involved in a disagreement with an epistemic peer.



## 1.5 Summary and an Objection

Let's take stock. We have considered in some detail the conditions required for acknowledged peer disagreement. There are many ways in which subjects can fail to satisfy the individual conditions, (a)-(d). Indeed, the same evidence, dispositional, and acknowledgement conditions are fairly difficult for subjects to satisfy. Taken *jointly*, the conditions are quite difficult to satisfy—so difficult that it is probably rare for two subjects to satisfy them in cases of at least moderate complexity. Perhaps there are often acknowledged peer disagreements concerning simple subjects like the rules of tic-tac-toe. And maybe acknowledged peer disagreement is common among *novices* whose evidence is meager and whose track records are short. But these aren't cases of the sort that drive the current interest in peer disagreement. When it comes to issues we tend to care about, it is rare for subjects to find themselves involved in a genuine disagreement with someone who is, and who they have good reason to believe is, their epistemic peer. An important corollary: any argument for wide-ranging disagreement-based skepticism will have to proceed from a premise other than the claim that acknowledged peer disagreement is common. For if such disagreement is rare, then the scope of its epistemic implications cannot be wide.

Before considering whether there is anything left to worry about, let's discuss a potential objection to the argument presented thus far. According to the objection, our argument requires unreasonably strict standards for acknowledged peer disagreement. With such strict standards in place, it is no surprise that this sort of disagreement is rare. It is true, the objector continues, that acknowledged peerhood requires equality of evidence, equality of evidential response capacities, and good reason to think that a dissenter is a peer. But there is significant slack in these conditions.<sup>19</sup> At

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19. Some readers will have noticed that Christensen's definition of "epistemic peers" (quoted above) inserts a hedge-word prior to laying down the same evidence and dispositional conditions. For definitions of peerhood that contain similar hedges see Conee (2010) and Goldman (2010). Below I provide some reasons why those inclined toward disagreement-based skepticism should be wary of such hedges.

any rate, there's enough slack so that on any reasonable standard, acknowledged peer disagreement will turn out to be fairly common. Perhaps "acknowledged peerhood" is a vague term; or perhaps it is context-sensitive in the way that "flat" and "solid" are context-sensitive; or perhaps both of these ideas are on the right track. On any reasonable standard, says the objector, acknowledged peers needn't be exact mental duplicates. In many cases, there will be small differences between two subjects that we may quite properly ignore when considering whether they are peers (or acknowledged peers). Thus, the objector concludes, to the extent that the arguments in §1 impose implausibly strict standards on acknowledged peerhood, they deny the prevalence of this phenomenon in a purely technical and uninteresting way.<sup>20</sup>

I have some sympathy for this objection. The objector is right about this: If acknowledged peer disagreement is rare only according to draconian standards, then those standards have to go. However, the objection is not on the whole compelling, for at least two reasons.

First, the arguments in §§1.2-1.4 do not impose overly strict standards on acknowledged peerhood. Indeed, at several points the arguments are designed precisely to *avoid* overly strict standards. For instance, recall our discussion of the same evidence condition. That discussion proceeded from the dialectical conception of evidence, the notion of evidence most conducive to subjects having the same evidence. As we saw, it is rare for two subjects to satisfy the same evidence condition, even on the dialectical conception. Likewise, our discussion of the dispositional condition did not require, for dispositional equality, that two dissenting subjects possess all and only the same relevant dispositions. Rather, the argument required only that the dissenting subjects' dispositions be equally reliable with respect to evidence assessment. We allowed that there may be different ways for

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20. Several questions arise with respect to the claim that "epistemic peers" and "acknowledged peers" are context-sensitive terms. Whose context matters? Is it the context of the dissenting subjects? The context of a peerhood attributor? And what are we to say about cases in which subjects are peers relative to strict contexts and not peers relative to lenient ones? Interesting questions, but we need not address them here. As far as I can tell, the points developed in §1 hold up even if "epistemic peers" is context sensitive, and even with respect to fairly lenient contexts, whether those of a peerhood attributor or those of the dissenting subjects themselves.

subjects to satisfy this condition. Given these features of the argument, even those who wish to construe “acknowledged peerhood” as a vague or context-dependent term should be able to appreciate the argument’s force. For it is not just relative to very strict standards or contexts that subjects are unequal with respect to their evidence and dispositions. Rather, even in many normal contexts it turns out that subjects are nowhere near equal in these respects. For many cases, we would have to fix a quite lenient standard or context in order to plausibly construe the relevant subjects as equals. If this is right, then—lenient standards and contexts aside—acknowledged peerhood is rare.

Second, the main argument of §1 is charitable even to those who might be most inclined to resist it: namely, disagreement-based skeptics. Suppose, for instance, we agree that “epistemic peers” is context sensitive. Suppose further that we insist on fixing contexts that are lenient enough to make acknowledged peerhood common. The most natural way to do so is by allowing evidential and dispositional differences to be consistent with subjects remaining equals in the sense relevant to acknowledged peerhood. (We might, for instance, ignore small differences in evidence, or carve off differences in general intelligence that are not salient in a given case). However, to the extent that we loosen the requirements for acknowledged peerhood, it becomes less clear that disagreement with a peer always has the epistemic significance that skeptics claim for it. As we noted in the introduction, philosophers who argue from peer disagreement to skepticism do so by conjoining two claims:

- (i) If one finds oneself party to a disagreement with an acknowledged epistemic peer, it is irrational to retain one’s belief—one is rationally required to suspend judgment under such conditions;
- (ii) We often find ourselves party to disagreements with acknowledged peers.

If the skeptic demands that we loosen the requirements for acknowledged peerhood so that (ii) comes out true, she may thereby render (i) vulnerable to counterexamples. If, for instance we loosen the requirements so that peerhood is consistent with small differences in evidence, there may be

cases in which a small evidential difference between subjects makes a *large* difference in what it is rational for the subjects to believe. A single piece of evidence may in some cases be the *key* piece. (Consider a murder case with respect to which two detectives, Holmes and Mason, share all but one piece of evidence. Suppose this one piece of evidence—which Holmes has but Mason lacks—is the crucial clue that establishes the defendant’s guilt. Holmes believes that the defendant is guilty, but Mason believes the defendant is innocent. Surely Holmes’s additional piece of evidence can make it rational for him to retain his belief in the face of Mason’s disagreement. This is so even if the two detectives count as epistemic peers on some relaxed notion of “epistemic peers”.) In order to avoid such counterexamples, the disagreement-based skeptic will want to keep to a fairly strict notion of peerhood. But if she does, she must face our argument that acknowledged peerhood is rare.

## § 2. What *is* the Problem?

If the arguments in §1 are sound, acknowledged peer disagreement is a rare phenomenon. Thus, the argument from peer disagreement to skepticism fails. But it would be a mistake to infer from this that disagreement-based skepticism is out of business. It doesn’t follow from the claim that there’s no wide-ranging problem about *peer* disagreement that there’s no widespread problem about disagreement of any kind. Moreover, even upon learning that acknowledged peer disagreement is rare, one may have a lingering sense of puzzlement or dismay in the face of disagreement. Could there really be *no* problem here? That seems too good to be true. But if *peer* disagreement isn’t the problem, what is?

The first thing to say is that there may be *several* problems. In what remains, we’ll sketch some of these in a preliminary way. We can begin to formulate the problems by considering what

the disagreement-based skeptic (or other revisionist) really needs.<sup>21</sup> She needs a plausible epistemic principle whose antecedent specifies epistemic conditions that we often find ourselves in, and whose consequent says that our beliefs aren't rational (or aren't fully rational, or don't amount to knowledge) in such circumstances. The argument from acknowledged peer disagreement aimed to satisfy this need, but we've seen that the argument is not promising—the antecedent of the relevant principle is rarely satisfied.

I suggest that skeptics and other revisionists can make progress toward formulating the needed principle if they follow this advice: *focus more on what's unclear in typical cases of disagreement, and less on what is disclosed*. Peer disagreement cases are alleged to be epistemically significant because of the information one gets when one learns that a peer disagrees. As we've seen, we rarely get such information. But arguably, in many familiar cases, disagreement makes us aware of a different kind of information: it makes us aware of the higher-level fact that our evidential and dispositional circumstances are less than ideal—perhaps far less than ideal. In many such cases, it is clear that our dissenters have different evidence, or different methods or capacities for evidence assessment. What may be *unclear* is whether *our* evidence is more extensive or representative of the total available evidence than that of our dissenter.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, it may be unclear which of us (if either) is better disposed to respond to evidence in a rational way; or which of us (if either) has in fact responded rationally to our evidence. This kind of unclarity<sup>23</sup> is worrisome, at least on its face. Consider one

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21. For present purposes, “revisionism” is simply the view that certain specified sorts of disagreement mandate doxastic attitude revision; e.g., a reduction of confidence in the target proposition. Some varieties of revisionism require only minor attitude revision in the face of disagreement. The main skeptical variety of revisionism discussed in this paper mandates revision to the point of withholding belief. This sort of skepticism entails, but is not entailed by, revisionism.

22. On the theme of evidence one does not possess, see Nathan Ballantyne, “The Variability Problem” (manuscript).

23. “Unclarity” is a clunker. However, most of the relevant synonyms (“uncertainty,” “indeterminacy,” “dubitability”) have their own established uses, some of which are connected to philosophical problems that are not under discussion here. In order to avoid the distracting connotations that may attend these synonyms, we'll stick with “unclarity”.

kind of case in which it arises. Suppose I disagree with you while recognizing that we have different evidence or different methods of evidence assessment. It seems that under such conditions, I need some reason to think that *my* evidence or methods are better than yours. If I have no such reason, how can I rationally retain the belief that is supported by my methods and evidence? Plausibly, this sort of question arises for more of our beliefs than the corresponding question about peer disagreement. By focusing on the former (unclarity) question, the skeptic may have better luck in formulating the epistemic principles she needs. To put the point differently, she may have better luck developing a disagreement-based argument that threatens many of our disputed, cherished beliefs.

We won't explain in detail the skeptical arguments that arise from disagreement and unclarity. However, attempts to do so should take note of several points. First, the relevant kind of unclarity is *higher-order* in nature. It can arise even if one has more and better evidence than one's dissenter, and even if one is better than one's dissenter at assessing evidence. Indeed, it can even arise if *on the occasion of disagreement*, one has in fact assessed one's evidence correctly and one's dissenter has not assessed *her* evidence correctly. For all these advantages, it may be unclear whether one's evidence or dispositions are superior, or whether one has on this occasion assessed one's evidence appropriately. When these higher-order matters are not settled, it is plausible that one's attitude toward the target belief is defeated, at least partially.<sup>24</sup>

Second, higher-order unclarity comes in at least two *varieties*, both of which themselves come in degrees. This is what gives us several problems about disagreement, rather than just one. The varieties of unclarity concern, on the one hand, one's *actual* higher-order attitudes about one's

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24. Cases of disagreement aren't the only ones in which higher-order matters can affect the rational status of the target belief. Consider a case in which you believe that P solely on the basis of testimony, but later learn that the testifier is only 50% reliable. In such a case, the latter (higher-order) information clearly renders your belief less rational than it would otherwise be. Indeed, the higher-order information seems to make withholding with respect to P rationally required for you. See Bergmann (2005) for helpful discussion of this sort of point.

epistemic position with respect to the target belief, and one's *reasons* for these attitudes, on the other. Call the conjunction of one's evidence, dispositions, and actual performance in evidence assessment one's *total epistemic position* with respect to the target belief. The first variety of unclarity concerns what one actually thinks about one's total epistemic position. For instance, one might be less than fully confident that one's position is superior to that of one's dissenter; or one might withhold with respect to this claim. In such cases, it is plausible that one's higher-order attitudes defeat one's attitude toward the target proposition, at least partially. (For instance, it is hard to see how one's belief that P can be rational if one considers, but withholds concerning the claim that one's total epistemic position renders one more likely to be correct than one's dissenter, who believes  $\sim P$ ).

But suppose that one firmly believes that one's total epistemic position is superior to that of one's dissenter. There's still the matter of one's *reasons* for holding this attitude. This is where the second sort of unclarity comes in. Here again, unclarity comes in degrees. One's reasons might make it rational to doubt the superiority of one's position; or they may fail to deliver knowledge of one's superiority; they may even fail to make it more rational to believe that one's position is better than to withhold with respect to this claim. In all these cases, it is plausible that disagreement is to some degree epistemically significant.<sup>25</sup> It is also plausible that the epistemic significance of disagreement is different in some cases than others.

This discussion suggests some epistemic principles that may be of use to the skeptic:

(SK1) If S believes P and is aware of some other subject T who believes  $\sim P$ , and S has no reason to think S's total epistemic position with respect to P renders S more likely to be correct than T, *then* S is not rational in believing P.

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25. It is important to note that higher-order unclarity is also salient in cases of acknowledged *peer* disagreement. Even when it is obvious that one's dissenter is a peer, there's still the matter of which subject has in fact assessed the shared evidence correctly. This theme has become increasingly prominent in the peer disagreement literature (See, e.g., Kelly [2010] and Christensen [2009]). What has thus far gone under-emphasized is the extent to which higher-order unclarity attends cases in which subjects are not, or have no reason to think that they are, epistemic peers.

(SK2) If S believes P and is aware of some other subject T who believes  $\sim$ P, and S has no reason to think S's total epistemic position with respect to P renders S more likely to be correct than T, *then* S does not know P.

The first principle implies that rational belief in the face of disagreement requires that one have reason to think that one's total epistemic position is better than that of one's dissenter. The second principle implies that knowledge in the face of disagreement requires such a reason. These principles are plausible, and they appear better suited to the skeptic's purposes than the principle about peer disagreement discussed above. For it is plausible that the antecedents of (SK1) and (SK2) are more often satisfied than are the antecedents of principles which feature the conditions for acknowledged peer disagreement.

## **Conclusion**

Several issues remain. First, *are* the antecedents of (SK1) and (SK2) often satisfied with respect to our disputed, cherished beliefs? We have suggested that they are satisfied more commonly than the conditions for acknowledged peer disagreement. They might nevertheless be satisfied only rarely. That they are *often* satisfied is a substantive claim for which the skeptic must provide support. Second, what can legitimately count as a reason to think that one's total epistemic position is better than that of one's dissenter? Must such reasons be independent of the topic under dispute? Must such independence be complete, or may it be partial? Third, how strong must such reasons be in order for a subject to retain knowledge or rational belief in the face of disagreement? These are difficult questions. But skeptics and non-skeptics alike need to address them. Those in the former group must do so in order to refurbish the case for disagreement-based skepticism. For those in the latter group, the goal will be to rebuild the case for skepticism in order to finally defeat it. Either way, reflection on the rational significance of higher-order unclarity seems likely to yield results that are relevant to the rational status of our disputed, cherished beliefs. Or at any rate, such reflection



seems more likely to yield these results than is continued reflection on the epistemic significance of acknowledged peer disagreement.<sup>26</sup>

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