Steadfast Views of Disagreement are Incoherent

Tamaz Tokhadze

Abstract
In this paper, I argue that Steadfast Views of peer disagreement – a family of views according to which standing firm in the face of peer disagreement can be rationally permissible – are incoherent. First, I articulate two constraints that any Steadfast Views of disagreement should endorse: (i) Steadfastness’s Core (ii) The Deference Principle. I show that (i) and (ii) are inconsistent: they cannot both be true. My argument, briefly put, is that one cannot rationally treat one’s peer’s opinion as unconditionally relevant to a hypothesis, $H$, but conditional on the supposition of a disagreement, irrelevant to $H$. Because Steadfast Views endorse a set of mutually inconsistent propositions, I conclude that Steadfast Views are incoherent.

Keywords: peer disagreement, steadfast views, deference principle, conditional independence

1 Introduction

One way to frame the conundrum in the epistemology of peer disagreement is as follows. Suppose you treat your colleague, let’s call her Nina, as your epistemic peer. You think Nina is just as informed and reliable as you are to form a true belief regarding some domain. Suppose Nina, after a careful analysis of the relevant evidence, informs you that, in her opinion, proposition $H$ is highly likely to be true. At the time of Nina’s testimony, you have not thought about the issue yourself. How should you update your beliefs in light of Nina’s testimony?

It’s highly plausible that, absent any reason to call Nina’s testimony into question, you should defer to her judgment completely. That is, you should treat Nina as your epistemic advisor. More precisely, you treat a person as your epistemic advisor when the following obtains:
Let $P$ be your probability function. Let $S$ be some other epistemic agent who has probability function $P^*$. Let $H$ be any proposition. Then you treat $S$ as your epistemic advisor iff:

$$P(H|P^*(H) = x) = x,$$

if no other proposition for which $P$ has a value is probabilistically relevant to $P(H|P^*(H) = x) = x$.

The proviso specifies the condition for deferring to an advisor. The expression “probabilistically relevant” should be understood in the standard Bayesian way. Thus, for all propositions $Q$ for which you have a degree of belief, $Q$ is not probabilistically relevant to $P(H|P^*(H) = x)$ iff $P(H|P^*(H) = x$ and $Q) = P(H|P^*(H) = x$.

Now, if you treat someone as your epistemic peer, then you should also treat her as your epistemic advisor. After all, an epistemic peer is just as likely as you are to get it right. It is hard to see what is left from the concept of epistemic peerhood if we deny that peers are advisors. Your epistemic peer is defined as a person who, conditional on thinking about the issue independently, is equally likely to form a true belief on the target proposition. So, absent some relevant information that calls your epistemic peer’s testimony into question, you should defer to her judgment completely.

I take it to be uncontroversial that all views in the epistemology of peer disagreement accept that an epistemic peer is an epistemic advisor. Let’s call this the Defeasibility Principle:

**The Defeasibility Principle** (Defeasibility, for short): One should treat one’s epistemic peer as one’s epistemic advisor.

More precisely:
Let $P$ be your probability function and $P^*$ be the probability function of your peer. Then:

$$P(H|P^*(H) = x) = x,$$

if no other proposition for which $P$ has a value is probabilistically relevant to $P(H|P^*(H) = x)$.

Now let’s get back to the discussed scenario. Suppose you decide to study the relevant evidence yourself. Much to your surprise, you become highly confident that $H$ is most likely false. So, you find yourself in a
disagreement with your epistemic equal. How confident should you be in $H$, given the new evidence of disagreement?

Various answers to this question can be clustered into two general views: Steadfast Views and Conciliatory Views. According to the steadfast line of thought, once you’ve evaluated a given body of evidence, the opinion of your epistemic peer can become completely irrelevant. Nina’s opinion was informative only because it gave you a reason to think that the evidence supported $H$. Now that you have evaluated the evidence yourself and come to a different conclusion, you are no longer required to take Nina’s opinion into account. By contrast, Conciliatory Views require to decrease your original confidence in the disputed proposition after the evidence of peer disagreement has been disclosed. According to the conciliatory line of thought, you have no reason to think that you are a better judge of the given evidence than your peer. Thus, the evidence of disagreement gives you a reason to think that you have made some epistemic mistake in evaluating the evidence.

In this paper, the discussion will exclusively revolve around Steadfast Views. A Steadfast View of peer disagreement can take on various forms. However, all Steadfast Views endorse the following central principle.

*Steadfastness’s Core*: Sometimes, the evidence of disagreement makes it rationally permissible for you to ignore your epistemic advisor’s opinion completely.

More precisely:
Let $P$ be your probability function, $P^*$ be the probability function of your peer, and $D$ be the evidence of peer disagreement over $H$. Then it can be rationally permissible that:

$$P(H|P(H) = y \text{ and } P^*(H) = x \text{ and } D) = y$$

In this paper, I argue that Steadfastness’s Core and Deference are incompatible. Because Steadfast Views are committed to both, I conclude that it amounts to an incoherent position. The central argument can be summarized in the following way: endorsing Deference implies that, under certain circumstances, an opinion of one’s peer regarding some proposition $H$ is relevant to what degree one should believe $H$. By contrast, endorsing Steadfastness’s Core implies that one’s peer’s opinion can become conditionally independent of $H$, on the supposition of
peer disagreement. I show that no rational individual can undertake such commitments: one cannot rationally treat one’s peer’s opinion as unconditionally relevant to a hypothesis, \( H \), but conditional on the supposition of a disagreement, irrelevant to \( H \).

Here is how I proceed. In §2 I discuss the relationship between Steadfastness’s Core and Deference. I show that accepting both entails that your peer’s opinion is unconditionally relevant to \( H \), but conditionally independent of \( H \) on the supposition of the disagreement. In §3 I discuss various ways in which some piece of evidence can make another piece of evidence conditionally independent of a hypothesis. I argue that neither of these can account for the conditional independence of your peer’s belief. In §4 I complete the central argument of the paper, according to which one cannot, without being irrational, both accept Deference and treat one’s peer’s belief as conditionally irrelevant to a disputed proposition. Thus, after answering some objections I conclude that Steadfast Views of disagreement are incoherent.

2 Steadfastness’s Core and Deference

The central question is as follows: what should your credence in \( H \) be, given that you disagree with Nina, your epistemic peer. In symbols:

\[
P(H|P(H) = y \text{ and } P^*(H) = x \text{ and } D) = ?
\]

Where \( P \) denotes your probability function, \( P^* \) denotes the probability function of your peer, and \( D \) – the evidence of peer disagreement over \( H \).

Now Deference alone does not determine the value of \( P(H|P(H) = y \text{ and } P^*(H) = x \text{ and } D) \). This is so, because, there is a proposition, \( D \), for which \( P \) has a value and \( D \) is probabilistically relevant to \( P(H|P^*(H) = x) \) (see the proviso of Deference). To put the same thought in more vernacular terms, the evidence of disagreement calls the accuracy or rationality of Nina’s belief into question.

For this reason, there is no obvious conflict between Steadfastness’s Core and Deference. You can still treat Nina as your epistemic advisor and not defer to her opinion in this scenario. The credence that you assign to \( H \) is probabilistically relevant to \( P(H|P^*(H) = x) \). Thus, the requirement to defer is not issued by the analysis of epistemic advisorhood that I’ve put forward.

However, there is still an interesting, logical connection between Steadfastness’s Core and Deference. According to Steadfastness’s Core,
sometimes the evidence of disagreement makes the opinion of your epistemic advisor conditionally independent of the disputed proposition. We represent this in symbols in the following way:

It is sometimes rationally permissible that:

\[ P(H|P(H) = y \text{ and } P^*(H) = x \text{ and } D) = P(H|P(H) = y), \]

Where \( P \) denotes your probability function, \( P^* \) denotes the probability function of your peer, and \( D \) – the evidence of peer disagreement over \( H \).

Now the question that I want to consider is as follows:

\( (Q) \) What is it about the evidence of disagreement that makes the initially relevant information – i.e., the opinion of your advisor – entirely irrelevant to the value of \( P(H) \)?

The question has not attracted much attention in the epistemology of disagreement literature. However, as it will become evident, answering it is highly relevant for assessing the credentials of two main views on the epistemic significance of peer disagreement: Steadfast Views and Conciliatory Views of disagreement.

I propose to investigate the possible answers to \( (Q) \) by using true-and-tried methods from Bayesian confirmation theory. To do that, in the next section, I will introduce the concept of conditional independence and discuss \( (Q) \) from a Bayesian point of view.

3 \textit{Ways of Making Evidence Conditionally Irrelevant}

Epistemologists who have been using tools from Bayesian confirmation theory have been investigating the various ways of how a proposition becomes conditionally independent of some hypothesis. Conditional independence is defined as follows:

For any propositions \( A, B, \) and \( C, B \) becomes conditionally independent of \( A \) relative to credence function \( P \) iff both of the following obtains:

\( \bullet \) \( P(A|B) \neq P(A) \)

\( \bullet \) \( P(A|B \text{ and } C) = P(A|C) \)
Now, because supporters of Steadfast Views endorse both Deference and Steadfastness’s Core, they are committed to the following thesis:

In some cases, your peer’s opinion is conditionally independent of a disputed claim, on the supposition of the disagreement.

Here is why the above proposition follows from Steadfast Views. Deference entails that your peer’s belief is relevant to $P(H)$, absent the evidence of dispute (and other probabilistically relevant evidence). While Steadfastness’s Core entails that, when the evidence of disagreement is disclosed, your peer’s opinion can become completely probabilistically independent of $P(H)$. Thus, the phenomenon we want to explain satisfies the definition of conditional independence.

By adopting the concept of conditional independence, we can reformulate our original question (Q) in the following way:

(Q*) What is the explanation for your peer’s (Nina’s) belief becoming conditionally independent of $P(H)$?

Before considering some possible answers to (Q*), I will briefly discuss two well-known types of conditional independence: (i) finding out that some single factor explains both the target hypothesis and your previous relevant evidence, and (ii) acquiring the evidence that entails the target hypothesis. This brief survey prepares the ground for the forthcoming discussion and helps us to identify the distinct problem that all Steadfast Views face. As it will become clear, the evidence of disagreement is not of the same type as the evidence that commonly figures in explaining how a given proposition becomes conditionally independent of the target hypothesis.

I will begin by considering an example of (i): when one acquires knowledge about an underlying common cause.

A piece of information, $C$, makes a proposition, $B$, conditionally independent of a hypothesis, $A$, when $C$ is a common cause of both $B$ and $A$. Consider the smoking-cancer correlation. It is well-established that the likelihood of developing lung cancer is higher in smokers than in non-smokers:

$$P(\text{I will have a lung cancer}|\text{I smoke}) > P(\text{I will have a lung cancer})$$

Now suppose scientists discover the so-called “cancer-smoking gene”. It causes its carriers both to have a strong disposition to smoke and a high probability to develop lung cancer. If one has this gene, then it’s
highly likely that one will have lung cancer, despite whether one is a
smoker or not. Thus, finding out the new information should make the
smoking conditionally independent of whether one will have lung cancer.
In symbols:

\[ P(I \text{ will have a lung cancer}|I \text{ smoke and I have the cancer-smoking gene}) = P(I \text{ will have a lung cancer}|I \text{ have the cancer-smoking gene}) \]

Another type of conditional independence concerns logical entail-
ment. Suppose proposition \( B \) is positively relevant to hypothesis \( A \),
relative to a credence function \( P \). In symbols:

\[ P(A|B) > P(A) \]

Further, suppose that another proposition \( C \) logically entails \( A \). In other
words, the conditional probability of \( A \) on the supposition of \( C \) equals
1:

\[ P(A|C) = 1 \]

And because \( C \) logically entails \( A \), proposition \( B \) becomes conditionally
independent of \( A \). In symbols:

\[ P(A|B \text{ and } C) = P(A|C) = 1 \]

Let’s consider an example. You want to find out whether Nina
studied at a university (let’s call this proposition “\( N \”) ). Suppose, at
some time \( t_1 \), you only have inconclusive evidence \( E_i \) that Nina has
attended a university. Thus, \( P_{t_1}(N|E_i) < 1 \). At some later time \( t_2 \)
you find out that Nina is currently writing her Ph.D. thesis. Thus,
\( P_{t_2}(N|Nina \text{ is writing her Ph.D. thesis}) = 1 \). In the light of the new
evidence, your old evidence \( E_i \) becomes conditionally independent of
whether Nina has studied at a university. In symbols:

\[ P_{t_2}(N|E_i \text{ and } Nina \text{ is writing her Ph.D. thesis}) = P_{t_2}(N|Nina \text{ is writing her Ph.D. thesis}) \]

It is easy to see that the evidence of peer disagreement cannot make
your peer’s opinion conditionally irrelevant to \( H \) in the above-described
ways. Firstly, consider a common causal factor scenario. Your opinion,
in all interesting situations, is not a common cause of both \( H \) being true
and Nina’s relevant credence in \( H \). The same is correct about logical
entailment. Your belief in \( H \), in all interesting cases, does not imply
that \( H \) is true (or false).
To sum up then: your credence in $H$ determines neither the truth value of $H$ nor Nina’s credence in $H$. So if we want to explain how the evidence of disagreement makes Nina’s opinion conditionally irrelevant to $H$, we need to investigate some other possibilities.

The following two provides different and more reasonable explanations of how the belief of your epistemic peer can become completely probabilistically independent of $P(H)$. I will refer to them as the A-explanation and the B-explanation.

**A-explanation:** Your relevant belief – a credence you assign to $H$ – is founded on richer available evidence than Nina’s relevant belief. Thus, your evidentially more well-founded belief makes your peer’s belief irrelevant to $P(H)$.

**B-explanation:** The disagreement entails that you and Nina adhere to different epistemic standards. Thus, the evidence of disagreement makes Nina’s credence conditionally irrelevant to $H$. This is so, because of the following epistemic norm.

*Standard Relative Deference:* In evaluating the epistemic credentials of your peer’s belief about $H$, in order to determine how (or whether) to modify your own belief about $H$, you should only take into account the peer’s opinion if she has the same probability function or epistemic standards as you endorse.

In what follows I consider both explanations and show that they cannot account why the belief of your epistemic peer is entirely probabilistically irrelevant to $P(H)$.

### 3.1 A-explanation

In many cases, a belief that is founded on richer evidence makes other, less well-founded belief irrelevant to the target proposition. Consider a quick example: detective Dan after analyzing the available evidence, thinks that Jenny did it. His reliable colleague, Sam, has also analyzed the data. However, Sam has compiled more extensive evidence in support of his verdict. Now, Dan’s belief can be conditionally independent to whether Jenny did it, on the supposition that more evidentially well-founded belief, i.e., Sam’s belief, conflicts with Dan’s.
Can we appeal to the same reasoning to explain how the evidence of disagreement makes Nina’s belief conditionally independent of $H$? We cannot. By stipulation, you and Nina have access to the same relevant evidence that bears on $H$. Thus, your belief cannot be founded on richer evidence than Nina’s belief.

The reader might be unconvinced by what I’ve just said and might think of making the following amendment to the A-explanation:

Your belief can have richer evidential support when you possess some incommunicable or private evidence which Nina lacks.

This type of amendment is unsatisfactory. Even if we grant that you possess some incommunicable evidence, the same should be said about Nina as well. In such a scenario, both you and Nina would have access to the evidence that the other party lacks. Thus, the sole fact that you have access to some incommunicable evidence won’t make your belief evidentially more well-founded.

Next, let’s consider the B-explanation.

3.2 B-explanation

I think the B-explanation of conditional independence is more interesting and relatively difficult to dismiss. Some (Kelly [4], [3], Schoenfield [11]) have appealed to the notion of epistemic standards or individual probability functions to argue for Steadfast Views of peer disagreement.

In what follows, I shall argue that if we accept Deference, – the view that one should treat one’s epistemic peer as one’s epistemic advisor – we cannot account for the conditional independence of the peer’s opinion in terms of the B-explanation.

I remind the rider that B-explanation appeals to the following principle:

*Standard Relative Deference*: In evaluating the epistemic credentials of your peer’s belief about $H$, in order to determine how (or whether) to modify your own belief about $H$, you should only take into account the peer’s opinion if she has the same probability function or epistemic standards as you endorse.

Before I proceed with the argument, a couple of clarifications are in order. First, I assume that one’s epistemic standards are one’s prior
and conditional probability functions. It is a common assumption in Bayesian epistemology (see Schoenfeld [11], Kopec and Titelbaum [5], Titelbaum [13]). Explicating the notion of epistemic standards in terms of probability (credence) functions also gives us a clear, non-ambiguous criterion of identity for epistemic standards: two probability functions are identical only if they are extensionally equivalent: given the same evidence, as an input, they will yield the same doxastic output.

Now we are in a position to give the central argument of this section. I propose the following argumentative strategy. First, let’s assume that Standard Relative Deference is correct. Then let’s look at what sense can we make of Deference, on the assumption that Standard Relative Deference is true.

The original formulation of Deference is as follows:

Deference: One should treat one’s epistemic peer as one’s epistemic advisor.

More precisely:
Let $P$ be your probability function and $P^*$ be the probability function of your peer. Then:

$$P(H|P^*(H) = x) = x,$$

if no other proposition for which $P$ has a value is probabilistically relevant to $P(H|P^*(H) = x)$.

Now, given that, for the sake of argument, we endorse Standard Relative Deference, we should reformulate Deference accordingly. The new version of Deference is denoted as “Deference*”.

Deference*: Let $P$ be your probability function and $P'$ be the probability function of your peer which is identical to $P$. Then:

$$P(H|P'(H) = x) = x$$

if no other proposition for which $P$ has a value is probabilistically relevant to $P(H|P'(H) = x)$.

Because $P$ and $P'$ are identical, we can simplify the above formulation by substituting $P$ for $P'$.

Deference*: $P(H|P(H) = x) = x$
Now Deference and Deference* are significantly different principles. Deference* – unlike the original principle that we have started with – is not a principle of treating epistemic peers as epistemic advisors. Deference* is, what we might call, a principle of self-respect. It instructs one to defer to one’s own judgment when one does not have a reason to call that judgment into question.

To see more clearly that Deference* is not principally concerned with other agents, contrast it to Van Franssen’s [15] well-known Principle of Reflection. Roughly, the principle says that you should defer to beliefs of your future self. More precisely:

Let $P_{t_1}$ be your current probability function and $P_{t_2}$ be what you take your probability function to be, at some later time. Then:

$$P_{t_1}(H|P_{t_2}(H) = x) = x,$$

if no other proposition for which $P_{t_1}$ has a value is probabilistically relevant to $P_{t_1}(H|P_{t_2}(H) = x)$.

Deference* is just a weaker version of the Principle of Reflection. While the latter instructs you to defer to the judgments of your future self, the former only instructs you to defer to the judgments of your current self. For this reason, we might describe Deference* as a synchronic version of the Principle of Reflection.

Now, Deference and Deference*, as the normative principles that should regulate how to evaluate the epistemic significance of one’s peer’s testimony, are incompatible. This is so because Deference and Deference* are significantly different principles. The former is concerned with the testimonies of others, while the latter, essentially, is the principle of respecting one’s current beliefs. Deference* instructs one to take one’s peer’s opinion into account, only if one considers it to be a belief report of one’s current self. This is not only utterly bizarre but it is also incompatible with Deference. Deference – the principle of treating epistemic peers as epistemic advisors – is concerned with testimonies of epistemic others, not with the belief reports of one’s current self. But, given that we accept Standard Relative Deference, what we are left with is a version of the Principle of Reflection. From such a principle alone, we cannot derive any general norm regarding treating one’s epistemic peer as one’s epistemic advisor. So, if we reformulate the original Deference principle in accordance with Standard Relative Deference, then we are rationally required to abandon the highly plausible epistemic norm which instructs us to treat epistemic peers as epistemic advisors.
Thus, the B-explanation – the explanation of how the evidence of peer disagreement makes Nina’s opinion conditionally irrelevant to $H$ – conflicts with Deference. If we endorse Standard Relative Deference, then we are required, on pain of inconsistency, to abandon Deference. If we accept both, then, in certain circumstances, one can be required both (i) to defer to an opinion of one’s peer, even when the respective credence functions are not identical and (ii) to ignore one’s peer’s opinion completely. Because it is impossible to comply with both (i) and (ii) simultaneously, no rational person can accept both Deference and Standard Relative Deference.

To summarize, I’ve argued that the two main alleged explanations – the A-explanation and the B-explanation – are inadequate to account for the conditional independence of your peer’s opinion to the disputed proposition.

Does this show that Steadfast Views of disagreement are incoherent? Not quite. Before concluding my central argument, I need to answer the following challenge:

How do we know that there are no other explanations that vindicate Steadfast Views? In the next section, I take up the challenge.

4 The Incoherence of Steadfast Views

As the reader has seen, supporters of Steadfast Views need to explain why relative to your credence function $P$, your peer’s opinion becomes conditionally independent of the disputed proposition.

Now all the possible explanations should appeal either to the total body of evidence that you possess or to the characteristics of your credence function. This is so, because within the framework of Bayesian confirmation theory, there are no other factors that might rationally influence one’s credence in $H$, except one’s evidence (including one’s background beliefs), and one’s prior and conditional credence functions.

In what follows I show that neither of these explanations are successful.

Appeal to your total evidence won’t do, because your peer has access to the same evidence as you (this is the reason why we have rejected the A-explanation).

However, one can still respond by claiming that I’ve inappropriately neglected the fact about what evidence $E$ actually supports. According to this objection, your relevant credence in $H$ can be evidentially more
well-founded than your peer’s, if the evidence $E$ supports your credence, rather than Nina’s.$^7$

There are at least two ways to dismiss the objection. Firstly, we can deny that evidential support is a two-place relation: a relation that holds between a body of evidence and a proposition. Instead, we can claim that evidential favoring is always relative to a given credence function or epistemic standards.$^8$ This argumentative move will allow us to dismiss the talk of unqualified (or objective) evidential support as unfounded. It is obvious that if we relativize the evidential support to credence functions, then you cannot legitimately claim the epistemic advantage over Nina by appealing to what the evidence, $E$, actually or unqualifiedly supports. While it is correct to say that relative to your credence function the shared evidence supports your degree of belief in $H$, it is also true that relative to Nina’s credence function the evidence supports some different credence.

The obvious rejoinder here will be to incorporate the notion of epistemic standards into the objection, and to restate the challenge in the following manner: while evidential favouring might indeed be relative to a given credence function, there is still the fact of the matter about what the evidence actually supports, given the true or the best epistemic standards in the situation. Thus, according to this proposal, evidence can actually support the target proposition to a specific degree, relativize to the best or the most reliable epistemic standards available.

This qualification is unsatisfactory. By definition, there simply does not exist the best epistemic standard in idealized cases of peer disagreement. To see this, recall the definition of epistemic peerhood. Epistemic peers are equally reliable at evaluating a given body of evidence. Because epistemic peers are equally reliable, their respective credence functions should be equally reliable or truth conducive, as well. You cannot, without being irrational, both regard Nina as your epistemic equal and believe that, generally, your epistemic standards (i.e., your prior and conditional credence functions) are more reliable than hers. Because in the idealized peer disagreements, the respective epistemic standards are equally reliable, we cannot reasonably consider one set of standards to be any better than the other.

There is still another, more straightforward way to respond to the challenge from the purported facts about the actual or true evidential support. Even if we accept that evidence $E$ unqualifiedly or uniquely supports some one credence in $H$, you have no reason to think that it is your credence, rather than Nina’s, that the shared evidence uniquely supports. It’s reasonable to believe that, in order to rationally dismiss
your peer’s opinion, you need some evidence that it is your peer who has made some epistemic mistake. However, by stipulation, you possess no such evidence.

I take it that the above-given reasons suffice to neutralize the objection: the shared evidence cannot explain why your peer’s opinion becomes conditionally independent of the disputed proposition.

As for the appeal to your credence function: maybe some relevant characteristics of your credence function justifies ignoring your peer’s opinion, after finding out about the disagreement.

Now, we have already seen that the sole fact that you and Nina endorse different credence functions is not a sufficient reason to ignore her opinion completely. If you are rationally required to defer only to opinions of the peers with the same credence functions as you have, then Deference – the principle of treating epistemic peers as epistemic advisors – should be rejected. Thus, given that we endorse Deference, we cannot appeal to the non-identity of the relevant credence functions to explain why your peer’s opinion can be justifiably ignored.

One might agree that it is not the fact that you and Nina have different credence functions that license standing firm in the face of the disagreement. What is relevant, according to this proposal, is that you have some special reason to think your credence function is more reliable than other relevant alternatives (e.g., Nina’s credence function).

This qualification is also unsatisfactory, for the reasons that I have already given. To remind the rider: you and Nina are epistemic peers. So, your respective credence functions must be equally reliable. This directly follows from the definition of epistemic peers: epistemic peers are equally likely to get it right. Thus, you cannot discount Nina’s opinion by merely appealing to the alleged relative superiority of your credence function.

To wrap up the above: all respectable explanations of why your peer’s opinion becomes conditionally independent of the disputed proposition should appeal to either the evidence that you possess or to the probability function that you endorse. I’ve argued that neither of these explanations are satisfactory.

This concludes the central argument of my paper.
5 Conclusion

The paper aimed to expose the inconsistency in Steadfast Views of peer disagreement. First, I’ve put forward two principles that all Steadfast Views should endorse:

**Steadfastness’s Core**: Sometimes, the evidence of disagreement makes it rationally permissible for you to ignore your epistemic advisor’s opinion completely.

**Deference**: One should treat one’s epistemic peer as one’s epistemic advisor.

I’ve argued that the above two principles are inconsistent: if we endorse Deference, then, contrary to what Steadfastness’s Core entails, it is irrational to treat your peer’s opinion as completely probabilistically irrelevant to a disputed proposition, on the supposition of peer disagreement.

It is worth mentioning that the denial of Steadfast Views – Conciliatory Views of peer disagreement – do not suffer from the same defect. This is so, because, all Conciliatory Views endorse what we might call Conciliationism’s Core.

**Conciliationism’s Core**: For any agent $S$, if at $t_1$ $S$ assigns some credence in $H$ and at $t_2$ $S$ has the evidence of a peer disagreement over $H$, then at $t_2$ $S$ is rationally required to revise her original credence in the direction of her peer’s credence.

It is a direct consequence of Conciliatonism’s Core that the evidence of peer disagreement cannot make your peer’s opinion conditionally independent of the disputed proposition. This is so because according to the Conciliatory Views, one is never justified to ignore the opinion of one’s epistemic peer completely.

Therefore, the central conclusion of this paper implies that Conciliatory Views, other things being equal, should be favored over the Steadfast Views of disagreement.

**Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their instructive comments and scrupulous reading of the text.
Notes

1 More fully, I define epistemic peers in the following way:

\begin{quote}
Epistemic Peers: For any two agents \(S\) and \(S^*\) and bodies of evidence \(E, S\) and \(S^*\) are epistemic peers relative to \(E\) iff conditional on evaluating \(E\) independently, they are equally likely to evaluate \(E\) correctly.
\end{quote}

The definition is similar to the one given by White [16]. While I think that the central argument of this paper can be formulated in terms of some alternative definitions of epistemic peerhood, it would be helpful for the reader to have the above definition in mind when evaluating the central claims of the paper.

2 See Kelly [1, 2, 4], Lackey [6, 7], Pasnau [10], and Schoenfield [11].

3 The given formula is only true when propositions \(B\) and \(C\) have a non-empty intersection. If \(P(B \text{ and } C) = 0\), then the relevant conditional probability is undefined.

4 Of course, we can devise highly artificial and unrealistic scenarios, where your belief in \(H\) somehow causes \(H\) to be true; or scenarios where Nina’s relevant belief is somehow caused by what you believe. However, such situations are utterly irrelevant to finding out the epistemic significance of disagreement.

5 The Bayesian approach to the notion of epistemic standards can be summarized in the following way: one’s epistemic standards are one’s credence function that assigns prior and conditional credences to any proposition one considers. This idea is usually explicated by an elegant mathematical theorem according to which, if (i) an agent’s credences (degrees of beliefs) satisfy axioms of probability and (ii) the agent updates her credences via conditionalization, then there is at least one function – a hypothetical prior (\(Pr_H\), for short) function – that uniquely determines one’s credences at any time, given one’s evidence at that time. More precisely:

As this theorem makes explicit, the hypothetical prior remains constant and does not change as the agent gains more information about the world. Thus, \(Pr_H\) codifies non-evidential factors that influence how one evaluates any given body of evidence.

6 The reader might retort that the requirement of the sameness of relevant probability functions – the requirement which is built into the definition of Standard Relative Deference – is too strong. Instead, we might think of these standards as not strictly identical but – equally reliable. Thus, according to this suggestion, we should endorse the following principle:

\begin{quote}
Equal Reliability (ER): In evaluating the epistemic credentials of your peer’s belief about \(H\), in order to determine how (or whether) to modify your own belief about \(H\), you should only take into account your peer’s opinion if your respective probability functions are equally reliable.
\end{quote}

I have no issue with ER. However, we cannot substitute ER for Standard Relative Deference. Here is why. By stipulation, epistemic peers have equally reliable probability functions. And according to Conciliatory Views of peer disagreement,
one should modify one’s belief about $H$ upon encountering the peer disagreement over $H$. Thus, ER, unlike Standard Relative Deference, is compatible with Conciliatory Views. Therefore, one cannot defend Steadfast Views by simply appealing to ER. By contrast, Standard Relative Deference, if correct, mandates staying firm in the peer disagreement when disagreeing parties have non-identical credence functions. Thus, Standard Relative Deference, unlike ER, can provide an explanation for peer’s opinion becoming conditionally independent of the disputed claim. This is why the B-explanation is articulated by Standard Relevant Deference, and not by – ER.

7 The similar point has been made by Kelly [2] and Titelbaum [14]. They have endorsed what is usually referred to as the Right Reasons View of peer disagreement. According to this position, one can justifiably retain one’s original credence in $H$ in the face of peer disagreement, if the shared evidence, $E$, supports what one believes.

8 Meacham [8], Peels and Booth [9], Schoenfeld [11], Simpson [12]; Kopec and Titelbaum [5], Titelbaum [13]) all claim that evidential favoring is relative to some third relatum. In his more later writing, Kelly [3] also adopts the view that evidential support is relative to an agent’s epistemic goals.

References


