

Disagreeing about Disagreement

Brian Weatherson – New Year 2007

references, etc incomplete¹

I argue with my friends a lot. That is, I offer them reasons to believe all sorts of philosophical conclusions. Sadly, despite the quality of my arguments, and despite their apparent intelligence, they don't always agree. They keep insisting on principles in the face of my wittier and wittier counterexamples, and they keep offering their own dull alleged counterexamples to my clever principles. What is a philosopher to do in these circumstances? (And I don't mean get better friends.)

One popular answer these days is that I should, to some extent, defer to my friends. If I look at a batch of reasons and conclude p , and my equally talented friend reaches an incompatible conclusion q , I should revise my opinion so I'm now undecided between p and q . I should, in the preferred lingo, assign equal weight to my view as to theirs. This is despite the fact that I've looked at their reasons for concluding q and found them wanting. If I hadn't, I would have already concluded q . The mere fact that a friend (from now on I'll leave off the qualifier 'equally talented and informed', since all my friends satisfy that) reaches a contrary opinion should be reason to move me. Such a position is defended by Richard Feldman (2006a, 2006b), David Christensen (2007) and Adam Elga (forthcoming).

This equal weight view, hereafter EW, is itself a philosophical position. And while some of my friends believe it, some of my friends do not. (Nor, I should add for your benefit, do I.) This raises an odd little dilemma. If EW is correct, then the fact that my friends disagree about it means that I shouldn't be particularly confident that it is true, since EW says that I shouldn't be too confident about any position on which my friends disagree. But, as I'll argue below, to consistently implement EW, I have to be maximally confident that it is true. So to accept EW, I have to inconsistently both be very confident that it is true and not very confident that it is true. This seems like a problem, and a reason to not accept EW. We can state this argument formally as follows, using the notion of a *peer* and an *expert*. Some people are peers if they are equally philosophically talented and informed as each other, and one is more expert than another if they are more informed and talented than the other.

¹ Thanks to Ishani Maitra and Ted Sider for comments.

1. There are peers who disagree about EW, and there is no one who is an expert relative to them who endorses EW.
2. If 1 is true, then according to EW, my credence in EW should be less than 1.
3. If my credence in EW is less than 1, then the advice that EW offers in a wide range of cases is incoherent.
4. So, the advice EW offers in a wide range of cases is incoherent.

The first three sections of this paper will be used to defend the first three premises. The final section will look at the philosophical consequences of the conclusion.

1. Peers and EW

Thomas Kelly (2005) has argued against EW and in favour of the view that a peer with the irrational view should defer to a peer with the rational view. Elga helpfully dubs this the ‘right reasons’ view. Ralph Wedgwood (forthcoming: Ch. 11) has argued against EW and in favour of the view that one should have a modest ‘egocentric bias’, i.e. a bias towards one’s own beliefs. On the other hand, as mentioned above, Elga, Christensen and Feldman endorse versions of EW. So it certainly looks like there are very talented and informed philosophers on either side of this debate.

Now I suppose that if we were taking EW completely seriously, we would at this stage of the investigation look very closely at whether these five really are epistemic peers. We could pull out their grad school transcripts, look at the citation rates for their papers, get reference letters from expert colleagues, maybe bring one or two of them in for job-style interviews, and so on. But this all seems somewhat inappropriate for a scholarly journal. Not to mention a little tactless.² So I’ll just stipulate that they seem to be peers in the sense relevant for EW, and address one worry a reader may have about my argument.

An objector might say, “Sure it seems antecedently that Kelly and Wedgwood are the peers of the folks who endorse EW. But take a look at the arguments for EW that have been offered. They look like good arguments, don’t they? Doesn’t the fact that Kelly and Wedgwood don’t accept these arguments mean that, however talented they might be in general, they obviously have a blind spot when it comes to the epistemology of disagreement? If so, we shouldn’t treat them as experts on this question.” There is something right about this. People can be experts in one area, or even many areas, while their opinions are systematically wrong in another. But the objector’s line is unavailable to defenders of EW.

Indeed, these defenders have been quick to distance themselves from the objector. Here, for instance, is Elga’s formulation of the EW view, a formulation we’ll return to below.

² Though if EW is correct, shouldn’t the scholarly journals be full of just this information?

Your probability in a given disputed claim should equal your prior conditional probability in that claim. Prior to what? Prior to your thinking through the claim, and finding out what your advisor thinks of it. Conditional on what? On whatever you have learned about the circumstances of how you and your advisor have evaluated the claim. (Elga, forthcoming, 18n)

The fact that Kelly and Wedgwood come to different conclusions cannot be enough reason to declare that they are not peers. As Elga stresses, what matters is the *prior* judgment of their acuity. And Elga is right to stress this. If we declared anyone who doesn't accept reasoning that we find compelling not a peer, then the EW view will be trivial. After all, the EW view only gets its force from cases as described in the introduction, where our friends reject reasoning we accept, and accept reasons we reject. If that makes them not a peer, the EW view never applies. So we can't argue that anyone who rejects EW is thereby less of an expert in the relevant sense than someone who accepts it, merely in virtue of their rejection of EW. So it seems we should accept premise 1.

2. Circumstances of Evaluation

Elga worries about the following kind of case. Let p be that the sum of a certain series of numbers, all of them integers, is 50. Let q be that the sum of those numbers is $400e$. My friend and I both add the numbers, and I conclude p while he concludes q . It seems that there is no reason to defer to my friend. I know, after all, that he has made some kind of mistake. The response, say defenders of EW, is that deference is context-sensitive. If I know, for example, that my friend is drunk, then I shouldn't defer to him. More generally, as Elga puts it, how much I should defer should depend on what I know about the circumstances.

Now this is relevant because one of the relevant circumstances might be that my friend has come to a view that I regard as insane. That's what happens in the case of the sums. Since my prior probability that my friend is right given that he has an insane seeming view is very low, my posterior probability that my friend is right should also, according to Elga, be low. Could we say that, although antecedently we regard Wedgwood and Kelly as peers of those they disagree with, that the circumstance of their disagreement is such that we should disregard their views?

It is hard to see how this would be defensible. It is true that a proponent of EW will regard Kelly and Wedgwood as wrong. But we can't say that we should disregard the views of all those we regard as mistaken. That leads to trivialising EW, for reasons given above. The claim has to be that their views are so outrageous, that we wouldn't defer to anyone with views that outrageous. And this seems highly implausible. But that's the only reason that premise 2 could be false. So we should accept premise 2.

3. A Story about Disagreement

The tricky part of the argument is proving premise 3. To do this, I'll use a story involving four friends, Apollo, Telemachus, Adam and Tom. The day before our story takes place, Adam has convinced Apollo that he should believe EW, and organise his life around it. Now Apollo and Telemachus are on their way to Fenway Park to watch the Red Sox play the Indians. There have been rumours flying around all day about whether the Red Sox injured star player, David Ortiz, will be healthy enough to play. Apollo and Telemachus have heard all the competing reports, and are comparing their credences that Ortiz will play. (Call the proposition that he will play p .) Apollo's credence in p is 0.7, and Telemachus's is 0.3. In fact, 0.7 is the rational credence in p given their shared evidence, and Apollo truly believes that it is.³ And, as it turns out, the Red Sox have decided but not announced that Ortiz will play, so p is true.

Despite these facts, Apollo lowers his credence in p . In accord with his newfound belief in EW, he changes his credence in p to 0.5. Apollo is sure, after all, that when it comes to baseball Telemachus is an epistemic peer. At this point Tom arrives, and with a slight disregard for the important baseball game at hand, starts trying to convince them of the right reasons view on disagreement. Apollo is not convinced, but Telemachus thinks it sounds right. As he puts it, the view merely says that the rational person believes what the rational person believes. And who could disagree with that?

Apollo is not convinced, and starts telling them the virtues of EW. But a little way in, Tom cuts him off with a question. "How probable," he asks Apollo, "does something have to be before you'll assert it?"

Apollo says that it has to be fairly probable, though just what the threshold is depends on just what issues are at stake.⁴ But he agrees that it has to be fairly high, well above 0.5 at least.

"Well," says Tom, "in that case you shouldn't be defending EW in public. Because you think that Telemachus and I are the epistemic peers of you and Adam. And we think EW is false. So even by EW's own lights, the probability you assign to EW should be 0.5. And that's not a high enough probability to assert it." Tom's speech requires that Apollo regard he and Telemachus as Apollo's epistemic peers with regard to this question. By premises 1 and 2, Apollo should do this, and we'll assume that he does.

So Apollo agrees with all this, and agrees that he shouldn't assert EW any more. But he still plans to use it, i.e. to have a credence in p of 0.5 rather than 0.7. But now Telemachus and Tom press on him the following analogy.

³ This is obviously somewhat of an idealisation, since there won't usually be a unique precise rational response to the evidence. But I don't think this idealisation hurts the argument to follow. I should note that the evidence here *excludes* their statements of their credences, so I really mean the evidence that they brought to bear on the debate over whether p .

⁴ Apollo is alluding here to the interest-relative view of the relation between credence and belief defended in Weatherson (2005).

Imagine that there were two competing experts, each of whom gave differing views about the probability of q . One of the experts, call her Emma, said that the probability of q , given the evidence, is 0.5. The other expert, call her Rae, said that the probability of q , given the evidence, is 0.7. Assuming that Apollo has the same evidence as the experts, but he regards the experts as experts at evaluating evidence, what should his credence in q be? It seems plausible that it should be a weighted average of what Emma says and what Rae says. In particular, it should be 0.5 only if Apollo is maximally confident that Emma is the expert to trust, and not at all confident that Rae is the expert to trust.

The situation is parallel to the one Apollo actually faces. EW says that his credence in p should be 0.5. The right reason view says that his credence in p should be 0.7. Apollo is aware of both of these facts. So his credence in p should be 0.5 iff he is certain that EW is the theory to trust, just as his credence in q should be 0.5 iff he is certain that Emma is the expert to trust. Indeed, a credence of 0.5 in p is incoherent unless Apollo is certain EW is the theory to trust. But Apollo is not at all certain of this. His credence in EW, as is required by EW itself, is 0.5. So as long as Apollo keeps his credence in p at 0.5, he is being incoherent. But EW says to keep his credence in p at 0.5. So EW advises him to be incoherent. That is, EW offers incoherent advice. We can state this more carefully in an argument.

5. EW says that Apollo's credence in p should be 0.5.
6. If 5, then EW offers incoherent advice unless it also says that Apollo's credence in EW should be 1.
7. EW says that Apollo's credence in EW should be 0.5.
8. So, EW offers incoherent advice.

Since Apollo's case is easily generalisable, we can infer that in a large number of cases, EW offers advice that is incoherent. Line 7 in this argument is hard to assail given premises 1 and 2 of the master argument. But I can imagine objections to each of the other lines.

Objection: Line 6 is false. Apollo can coherently have one credence in p while being unsure about whether it is the rational credence to have. In particular, he can coherently have his credence in p be 0.5, while he is unsure whether his credence in p should be 0.5 or 0.7. In general there is no requirement for agents who are not omniscient to have their credences match their judgments of what their credences should be.

Replies: I have two replies to this, the first dialectical and the second substantive.

The dialectical reply is that if the objector's position on coherence is accepted, then a lot of the motivation for EW fades away. A core idea behind EW is that Apollo was unsure before the conversation started whether he or Telemachus would have the most rational reaction to the

evidence, and hearing what each of them say does not provide him with more evidence. (See the ‘bootstrapping’ argument in Elga forthcoming for a more formal statement of this idea.) So Apollo should have equal credence in the rationality of his judgment and of Telemachus’s judgment.

But if the objector is correct, Apollo can do that without changing his view on EW one bit. He can, indeed should, have his credence in p be 0.7, while being uncertain whether his credence in p should be 0.7 (as he thinks) or 0.3 (as Telemachus thinks). Without some principle connecting what Apollo should think about what he should think to what Apollo should think, it is hard to see why this is not the uniquely rational reaction to Apollo’s circumstances. In other words, if this is an objection to my argument against EW, it is just as good an objection to a core argument for EW.

The substantive argument is that the objector’s position requires violating some very weak principles concerning rationality and higher-order beliefs. The objector is right that, for instance, in order to justifiably believe that p (to degree d), one need not know, or even believe, that one is justified in believing p (to that degree). If nothing else, the anti-luminosity arguments in Williamson (2000) show that to be the case. But there are weaker principles that are more plausible, and which the objector’s position has us violate. In particular, there is the view that we can’t both be justified in believing that p (to degree d), while we know we are not justified in believing that we are justified in believing p (to that degree). In symbols, if we let Jp mean that the agent is justified in believing p , and box and diamond to be epistemic modals, we have the principle MJ (for Might be Justified).

MJ $Jp \rightarrow \diamond JJp$

This seems like a much more plausible principle, since if we know we aren’t justified in believing we’re justified in believing p , it seems like we should at least suspend judgment in p . That is, we shouldn’t believe p . That is, we aren’t justified in believing p . But the objector’s position violates principle MJ, or at least a probabilistic version of it, as we’ll now show.

We aim to prove that the objector is committed to Apollo being justified in believing p to degree 0.5, while he knows he is not justified in believing he is justified in believing p to degree 0.5. The first part is trivial, it’s just a restatement of the objector’s view, so it is the second part that we must be concerned with.

Now, either EW is true, or it isn’t true. If it is true, then Apollo is not justified in having a greater credence in it than 0.5. But his only justification for believing p to degree 0.5 is EW. He’s only justified in believing he’s justified in believing p if he can justify his use of EW in it. But you can’t justify a premise in which your rational credence is 0.5. So Apollo isn’t justified in believing he is justified in believing p . If EW isn’t true, then Apollo isn’t even justified in believing p to degree 0.5. And he knows this, since he knows EW is his only justification for

lowering his credence in p that far. So he certainly isn't justified in believing he is justified in believing p to degree 0.5. Moreover, every premise in this argument has been a premise that Apollo knows to obtain, and he is capable of following all the reasoning. So he knows that he isn't justified in believing he is justified in believing p to degree 0.5, as required.

The two replies I've offered to the objector complement one another. If someone accepts MJ, then they'll regard the objector's position as incoherent, since we've just shown that MJ is inconsistent with that position. If, on the other hand, someone rejects MJ and everything like it, then they have little reason to accept EW in the first place. They should just accept that Apollo's credence in p should be, as per hypothesis the evidence suggests, 0.7. The fact that an epistemic peer disagrees, in the face of the same evidence, might give Apollo reason to doubt that this is in fact that uniquely rational response to the evidence. But, unless we accept a principle like MJ, that's consistent with Apollo retaining the rational response to the evidence, namely a credence of 0.7 in p . So it is hard to see how someone could accept the objector's argument, while also being motivated to accept EW. In any case, I think MJ is plausible enough on its own to undermine the objector's position.

Objection: Line 5 is false. Once we've seen that the credence of EW is 0.5, then Apollo's credence in first-order claims such as p should, as the analogy with q suggests, be a weighted average of what EW says it should be, and what the right reason view says it should be. So, even by EW's own lights, Apollo's credence in p should be 0.6.

Replies: Again I have a dialectical reply, and a substantive reply.

The dialectical reply is that once we make this move, we really have very little motivation to accept EW. There is, I'll grant, some intuitive plausibility to the view that when faced with a disagreeing peer, we should think the right response is half way between our competing views. But there is no intuitive plausibility whatsoever to the view that in such a situation, we should naturally move to a position three-quarters of the way between the two competing views, as this objector suggests. Much of the argument for EW, especially in Christensen, turns on intuitions about cases, and the objector would have us give all of that up. Without those intuitions, however, EW falls in a heap.

The substantive reply is that the idea behind the objection can't be coherently sustained. The idea is that we should first apply EW to philosophical questions to work out the probability of different theories of disagreement, and then apply those probabilities to first-order disagreements. The hope is that in doing so we'll reach a stable point at which EW can be coherently applied. But there is no such stable point. Consider the following series of questions.

(Q1) Is EW true?

Two participants say yes, two say no. We have a dispute, leading to our next question.

(Q2) What is the right reaction to the disagreement over Q1?

EW answers this by saying our credence in EW should be 0.5. But that's not what the right reason proponents say. They don't believe EW, so they have no reason to move their credence in EW away from 0. So we have another dispute, and we can ask

(Q3) What is the right reaction to the disagreement over Q2?

EW presumably says that we should again split the difference. Our credence in EW might now be 0.25, half-way between the 0.5 it was after considering Q2, and what the right reasons folks say. But, again, those who don't buy EW will disagree, and won't be moved to adjust their credence in EW. So again there's a dispute, and again we can ask

(Q4) What is the right reaction to the disagreement over Q3?

This could go on for a while. The only 'stable point' in the sequence is when we assign a credence of 0 to EW. That's to say, the only way to coherently defend the idea behind the objection is to assign credence 0 to EW. But that's to give up on EW. As with the previous objection, we can't hold on to EW and object to the argument.

4. *Summing Up*

The story I've told here is a little idealised, but otherwise common enough. We often have disagreements both about first-order questions, and about how to resolve this disagreement. In these cases, there is no coherent way to assign equal weight to all prima facie rational views both about the first order question and the second order, epistemological, question. The only way to coherently apply EW to all first order questions is to put our foot down, and say that despite the apparent intelligence of our philosophical interlocutors, we're not letting them dim our credence in EW. But if we are prepared to put our foot down here, why not about some first-order question or other? It certainly isn't because we have more reason to believe an epistemological theory like EW than we have to believe first order theories about which there is substantive disagreement. So perhaps we should hold on to those theories, and let go of EW.