

IS IT SAFE TO DISAGREE?

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A new account of the epistemic significance of disagreement is offered which is grounded in two assumptions; (i) that knowledge is the norm of belief and, (ii) that the safety condition is a necessary condition for knowledge. These assumptions motivate a modal definition of epistemic peerhood which is much easier to operate on than the more traditional definitions of epistemic peerhood have been. The modal account of the epistemic significance of disagreement yields plausible results regarding cases of disagreement. Furthermore, it is able to tap into the intuitions that have motivated the conformist and the nonconformist positions and locates a fruitful middle-ground between these two conflicting positions. It will be shown that the conformist were correct in that cases of real peer disagreement force us to suspend our judgment. The reason for this is that in cases of real peer disagreement our beliefs fail to be safe. The nonconformists, on the other hand, were right in that disagreement in itself does not have any epistemic power. It is only by the grace of nature that we gain knowledge. The fact that someone disagrees with you does not mean that you do not have knowledge.

1. Introduction

What kind of epistemic significance does disagreement have? Does it have the power to destroy knowledge, undermine the rationality of our disputed beliefs or rob us of justification, or is it impotent regarding such matters? The epistemology of disagreement has mostly been framed in terms of reasonableness and rationality. The central questions have been, (i) can there be reasonable disagreements between epistemic peers, and (ii) what ought one do in the face of peer disagreement? These issues have for the most parts been studied by examining whether epistemic peers who disagree are rational in holding onto their beliefs in the face of disagreement, or whether they are justified in their disputed beliefs given that they are disclosed to the fact that an epistemic peer disagrees with them. An angle that has been somewhat neglected is whether a subject whose belief amounted to knowledge before the disagreement can retain her knowledge in the face of peer disagreement. The main goal of this paper is to examine the epistemic power that disagreement might have over knowledge. Can disagreement defeat knowledge?

To get off the ground we will make two assumptions; that knowledge is the norm of belief and that the safety condition is necessary for knowledge. While these assumptions are far from uncontroversial, many epistemologists will be inclined to accept them.¹ According to the knowledge

¹ The knowledge norm of belief has been advocated by T. Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)., M. Huemer, "Moore's Paradox and the Norm of Belief," *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics*, eds. Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007)., Sutton *Without Justification* (Cambridge: MA: Bradford Books, 2007)., A. Jackson, "Two Ways to Put Knowledge First," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90.2 (2012)., Sosa *Knowing Full Well* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011)., and Littlejohn "Xv-the Russellian Retreat," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 113 (2013). to name a few. For objections against the knowledge norm of belief see A. McGlynn, "Believing Things Unknown," *Nous* 47 (2013),

norm of belief (KNB) one should believe that p only if one knows that p . According to the safety condition one knows that p only if one could not easily have erred in one's belief that p . Given these assumptions the question that we seek to answer is this: Does disagreement undermine the safety of our beliefs? If it does, then it undermines our knowledge, and if it undermines our knowledge our disputed beliefs will fall into the realm of ignorance rather than knowledge, in which case our beliefs fail to comply with the norm of belief. If our beliefs fail to comply with the norm of belief then they fall short of what beliefs should attain.

The conclusion of this paper is that in cases of real peer disagreement both parties lack knowledge, since their contested beliefs are not safe. Full-blown skepticism is diverted since in cases of merely apparent peer disagreement one's contested belief might be safe, and thus amount to knowledge. Crucially, however the fact that one lacks knowledge in cases of real peer disagreement has nothing to do with the fact that one happens to disagree with an epistemic peer. The reason why we lack knowledge in such cases is that our beliefs are unsafe and our beliefs were unsafe even before we realized that someone disagreed with us. Disagreement does not have any epistemic power with respect to knowledge.

To reach this conclusion we will briefly characterize the KNB and the safety condition. Then we will turn to look at the definition of epistemic peerhood. After that we will examine cases of real peer disagreement and cases of merely apparent peer disagreement. Finally, we will conclude by examining how our modal approach to the epistemic significance of disagreement is situated in the conformism versus nonconformism debate.

2. Two assumptions

According to KNB one should believe that p only if one knows that p . But in what sense of 'should'? There are at least two different ways of interpreting KNB:

- (i) in believing that p one is rationally committed to knowing that p .²
- (ii) in believing that p one is aiming to know that p ; knowledge is the epistemic standard of success for believing.³

Options (i) and (ii) are not mutually exclusive, and many would accept both of them. However, there are some epistemologists, such as Jackson, who explicitly reject (i) while embracing (ii). If (i) is true the conclusions that we will be able to draw will be somewhat stronger than the conclusions that we would be able to draw if only (ii) were true. For the sake of the argument, let us accept both (i) and (ii).

A. McGlynn, Knowledge First? (Basingstoke: Palgrave-McMillan, 2014). The safety condition on the other hand has been put forward as a necessary condition for knowledge by Steven Luper, "Restorative Rigging and the Safe Indication Account," Synthese 153.1 (2006)., D. Pritchard, Epistemic Luck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), D. Pritchard, "Anti-Luck Epistemology," Synthese 158.3 (2007), D. Pritchard, "In Defence of Modest Anti-Luck Epistemology," Sensitivity Principle in Epistemology, ed. T. Black K. Becker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), D. Pritchard, "Anti-Luck Epistemology and the Gettier Problem," Philosophical Studies 172.1 (2015)., Sosa "How to Defeat Opposition to Moore," Philosophical Perspectives 13 (1999). and Williamson, Knowledge and Its Limits. For arguments against the necessity of the safety condition see Ram Neta and Guy Rohrbaugh, "Luminosity and the Safety of Knowledge," Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 85.4 (2004)., Juan Comesana, "Unsafe Knowledge," Synthese 146.3 (2005). and Tomas Bogardus, "Knowledge under Threat," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 88.2 (2014)..² Huemer, "Moore's Paradox and the Norm of Belief," 145-46. and J. Gibbons, "Knowledge Versus Truth," Epistemic Norms, eds. C. Littlejohn and J. Turri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 101. understand KNB explicitly in this way. Williamson seems to be committed to this reading as well since he states that "If believing p is, roughly, treating p as if one knew p , then knowing is in that sense central to believing. Knowledge sets the standard of appropriateness for belief" Knowledge and Its Limits 47..

³ Jackson, "Two Ways to Put Knowledge First." endorses this reading of KNB and rejects interpretation (i) on the grounds that it places too strong constraints on rationality.

Now let's briefly look at the safety condition. The idea behind the safety condition is that in order to know that p one could not easily have erred in believing that p . To know then, is to be safe from error. But how should this condition be fleshed out? Here's a mainstream formulation of the principle:

SAFETY: a subject S 's true belief that p amounts to knowledge only if:

- (i) in all the nearby possible worlds in which S believes that p (via the same method M that she uses in the actual world) her belief will continue to be true.

But this formulation is inadequate for two reasons. First of all, we need to think about SAFETY in terms of a continuum of tolerance to epistemic risk when it comes to knowledge. Thus we cannot tolerate false beliefs in the very closest possible worlds, but do tolerate some false beliefs in nearby possible worlds that are further away from the actual world.⁴ Secondly, SAFETY is trivially satisfied in cases where the subject believes in a necessary truth or in a stable contingent truth. The reason why SAFETY is unable to deal with such cases is because it demands only that the belief that the subject *actually* formed has to continue to be true in all the nearby possible worlds where the subject continues to form that very same belief. In order to deal with such cases we simply need to globalize the notion of SAFETY to a set of propositions that the subject could easily have believed in in nearby possible worlds. Of course the relevant set of propositions will have to be restricted somehow, since we do not want to demand that in order for a subject's belief that p to be safe the subject cannot form *any* false beliefs by using the same method that she uses in the actual world. I propose that we restrict the set of relevant proposition in terms of subject matters of inquiry. All of the relevant propositions have to be roughly about the same thing, they have to be propositions in which the subject could easily have formed a belief in in her inquiries.

For example, if a subject believes that it is snowing outside, then, when evaluating whether she knows that it is snowing outside we need to check whether she could easily have ended up with a false belief in her inquiry. The subject matter of her inquiry is the weather outside. The relevant set of propositions will therefore comprise of propositions that describe the weather outside, such as "It is raining", "It is windy", "It is sunny", etc. In order to be safe from error the subject must not believe in any of these propositions in nearby possible worlds where the proposition in question is false. This way of restricting the relevant set of propositions allows the proponent of safety to deal with cases featuring necessary truths. If a subject forms the necessarily true belief that $12 \times 13 = 156$ by using a malfunctioning calculator that generates answers at random, she is not safe from error. Since the calculator is generating answers at random there will be plenty of nearby possible worlds where she ends up having a false belief about the product of 12 and 13. Since the subject matter of her inquiry is the product of 12 and 13, these false propositions must be included in the relevant set of propositions. Taking these points into account we get the following version of the safety condition:

GLOBAL SAFETY (GS): S knows that p (which belongs to a set of propositions P) only if

- 1) in nearly all nearby possible worlds where S believes in a proposition belonging to P (by the same method M that S uses in the actual world) S 's belief is true,

and,

- 2) in all of the very closest possible worlds where S believes in a proposition belonging to P (by the same method M that S uses in the actual world) S 's belief is true.⁵

⁴ See Pritchard, "Anti-Luck Epistemology," 292. for motivation for making the distinction between the very closest possible worlds and nearby possible worlds in this context.

⁵ For reformulations of the safety condition that are similar in spirit see D. Pritchard, "Anti-Luck Virtue Epistemology," *Journal of Philosophy* 109.3 (2012): 273, "Anti-Luck Epistemology and the Gettier Problem," 102. and Williamson

Now that we have laid the groundwork, let us take a look at cases of disagreement.

3. Peer disagreement

The epistemology of disagreement has focused on cases of peer disagreement, and this essay is no exception. But what does it take to be someone's epistemic peer on a given subject matter? Some epistemologists require evidential and cognitive equality. They claim that two persons are epistemic peers relative to the question whether p , if and only if, they are equally familiar with the evidence relevant to the question whether p and they are equally competent and reliable in assessing the evidence relevant to the question whether p .⁶ Others think that two subjects are epistemic peers on the question whether p if and only if, conditional on their disagreement they are both equally likely to be mistaken.⁷ Even though I have no argument against these definitions of epistemic peerage, I shall provide a new kind of definition, one that will be somewhat easier to operate on in the context of this essay.

A natural starting point in trying to find a definition of epistemic peerage is to note that epistemic peers should have roughly the same kind of epistemic standing in matters that they are epistemic peers. If you and I are epistemic peers regarding roman history, then we should have roughly the same amount of true beliefs regarding roman history and we should be disposed to form true beliefs about that subject matter to roughly the same degree. Furthermore, we should have roughly the same amount of knowledge regarding roman history. Assuming that GS is a necessary condition for knowledge, we can easily define epistemic peerage in a way that honors these observations.

S and S* are epistemic peers regarding a set of propositions P only if:

- (i) S and S* have true (and false) beliefs in propositions belonging to P to almost the same degree across the scope of nearby possible worlds in a similar distribution.⁸

This definition of epistemic peerhood is not existentially equivalent with Elga's probabilistic definition, since probabilities do not track the modal profile of an event perfectly. After all, winning in the lottery is an extremely unlikely event, but, provided that you have bought a ticket, it is an event that happens in a possible world that is very close to the actual world, since all that would have needed to change for you to win, is for a few coloured balls to fall in a slightly different configuration.

Furthermore, our definition does not demand that epistemic peers have to be evidential and cognitive equals, and this should be seen as a virtue of the definition. After all, it is doubtful whether two subjects can ever share exactly the same evidence. We are often in possession of *personal evidence* about our own epistemic status that is not available to other people (Lackey 2010, 309; Lammenranta 2011, 8-9). If you and I disagree about whether p I will most probably be able to rule out a number of possible mistakes that I could have made in believing that p that I am

"Reply to John Hawthorne and Maria Lasonen-Aarnio," *Williamson on Knowledge*, eds. P. Greenough and D. Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 325..

⁶ See T. Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, eds. T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 174-75., D. Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* 116.2 (2007): 188-89. R. Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. L. Antony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 201., J. Lackey, "A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance," *Social Epistemology*, eds. A. Haddock, A. Millar and D. Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 302., M. Lammenranta, "Disagreement, Skepticism, and the Dialectical Conception of Justification," *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 1 (2011): 5..

⁷ See A. Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," *Nous* 41.3 (2007): 481..

⁸ The true and false beliefs that S and S* have must be distributed in a similar fashion across nearby possible worlds. Otherwise S could be S*'s epistemic peer even if S had relevant true beliefs only in the very nearest possible worlds while S* had relevant true beliefs only at possible worlds that barely counted among the nearby possible worlds.

not in position to rule out with respect to your belief that $\neg p$. You might be drunk, lying, tired, have something in your eye, or you might be joking with me. I am, however, in position to know that I am not drunk, lying, tired etc.

Moreover, those epistemologists who favor the conditions of evidential and cognitive equality often focus on cases where the relevant evidence is fully disclosed in such a way that the disagreeing parties have knowingly shared with one another all the relevant evidence on the disputed question (Feldman 2007, 201). But the evidence that we have is often so subtle that we cannot cite it or bring it to focus, and thus we are often not able to fully disclose our relevant evidence (Sosa 2010, 290-91). If that is true, then there are far less interesting cases of peer disagreements out there than we originally thought.

However, I do not want to claim that the definition given above is superior to earlier definitions. Instead I merely think that it is more easily put to use given our assumption that some kind of safety condition is a necessary condition for knowledge. The reason for this is that the modal definition of epistemic peerhood has traction with other modal conditions such as GS. It will be a lot easier to evaluate whether a subject can satisfy GS given that she disagrees with her epistemic peer and we understand epistemic peerhood along the lines the modal definition of epistemic peerhood.

Now let us take a look at some paradigmatic cases of peer disagreement, with our two underlying assumptions and the definition of epistemic peerage in mind.

BILL CALCULATION:

While dining with four of my friends, we all agree to leave a 20% tip and to split the cost of the bill. My friend, Ramona, and I rightly regard one another as peers where calculations are concerned – we frequently dine together and consistently arrive at the same figure when dividing up the amount owed. After the bill arrives and we each have a clear look at it, I assert with confidence that I have carefully calculated in my head that we each owe \$43 and Ramona asserts with the same degree of confidence that she has carefully calculated in her head that we each owe \$45.⁹ (Lackey 2010, 315)

What should I do in such a situation? Should I stick to my guns or lower my confidence in my belief that we owe \$43? Christensen writes “it seems quite clear that I should lower my confidence that my share is \$43 and raise my confidence that it’s \$45. In fact, I think (though this is perhaps less obvious) that I should now accord these two hypotheses roughly equal credence” (2007, 193). Christensen’s intuition is widely shared.¹⁰ The question we need to ask is whether BILL CALCULATION is a case of peer disagreement and whether my, or Ramona’s belief, can be globally safe if one of us calculated the amount owed correctly.

First of all it seems clear that BILL CALCULATION can be a case of real peer disagreement given our definition of epistemic peerage. That is to say, it is possible that I and Ramona acquire roughly the same amount of true beliefs when trying to split bills evenly among several people across the nearby possible worlds in a similar distribution, and nevertheless disagree about the amount each of us owes. Lackey (2010, 315) has noted that the disagreement in BILL CALCULATION is rather inexplicable if it is understood as featuring two subjects who are evidentially equal, since it is hard to see how the subjects could share all the relevant evidence given their disagreement. Since we do not demand that epistemic peers have to be evidential equals,

⁹ The case is originally Christensen’s “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” 193..

¹⁰ See E. Sosa, “The Epistemology of Disagreement,” *Social Epistemology*, eds. A. Haddock, A. Millar and D. Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 292. and Lackey, “A Justificationist View of Disagreement’s Epistemic Significance,” 316.. The theories advanced by Elga, “Reflection and Disagreement.” and Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements.” also mandate suspension of judgment.

we are free to view BILL CALCULATION as a case of real peer disagreement rather than as a case of disagreement where two subjects merely think that they are epistemic peers.

Given how BILL CALCULATION is set up, it should be evident that I and Ramona really are epistemic peers. Now suppose that I split the bill correctly and each of us owes \$43. Should I stick to my guns, lower my confidence in my answer, or suspend judgment? To find out, let us test whether my belief could be globally safe in BILL CALCULATION.

If I and Ramona really are epistemic peers where calculations are concerned, then it seems that my belief, even if true, does not satisfy GS. After all, if we are epistemic peers, then we acquire roughly the same amount of true and false beliefs across nearby possible worlds (in a similar distribution) while doing calculations. Ramona ended up with a false belief in the actual world. Thus there is a possible world very close to the actual world where I end up with a false belief by doing a calculation. But if that is true, I will not form only true beliefs in the very nearest possible worlds regarding some subject matter and, therefore, I fail to satisfy GS. Given our assumption that GS is a necessary condition for knowledge I do not know that each of us owes \$43. What ought I to believe then? KNB tells us that I ought to believe that p only if I know that p . Therefore I should suspend judgment. My belief falls short of the aim of belief. I am rationally committed to knowing that p even though I do not know that p . That cannot be very good thing. In short, my belief is impermissible. This of course does not render it irrational, but I would clearly be better off (epistemically speaking) without my luckily true belief. So it seems that it is rational to re-calculate and suspend judgment for the time being.

Our modal approach to disagreement gives the same verdict regarding other cases featuring real epistemic peers.

HORSERACE

You and I are watching a horserace between horses Ain't Misbehavin, Batteries Not Included and Cadillac Jack. Suppose that we are epistemic peers when it comes to evaluating which horse won the race and rightly regard each other as such. The race is a close one, but we both have a good vantage point, and as we form our beliefs about which horse won the race, we are fairly confident in our judgments. But to our astonishment we disagree about the outcome. You believe that Ain't Misbehavin won, while I believe that Batteries Not Included won.¹¹

The intuition regarding this case is that we should suspend judgment on which horse won the race (Elga 2007, 486-87; Kelly 2010, 151-52; Lammenranta 2011, 5). Our modal approach to disagreement gives here the same verdict. Since you are my epistemic peer I am no better off, epistemically speaking, even if my belief happens to be true. Given that we are epistemic peers there are three possible ways that the world might be.

- (i) either both of us have a false belief regarding the winner of the race, in which case both of us lack knowledge since knowledge requires truth,
- (ii) you have a true but globally unsafe belief since your epistemic peer has a false belief in the actual world in which case we lack knowledge since knowledge requires global safety and truth,
- (iii) I have true but globally unsafe belief since I have an epistemic peer who has a false belief in the actual world in which case we lack knowledge since knowledge requires global safety and truth.

Whether option (i), (ii), or (iii) is the correct description of the situation, our epistemic standing is the same. We are in the realm of ignorance, not in that of knowledge. According to KNB we should believe that p only if we know that p . Since in all cases of real peer disagreement we lack

¹¹ Slightly modified from Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," 486..

knowledge we should not continue to hold our beliefs in the face of peer disagreement. Is this 'skeptical' result untenable? Is peer disagreement as widely spread as we suppose? Moreover, does merely apparent peer disagreement have similar consequences? In the next section I will argue that merely apparent peer disagreement does not have the same epistemological power that real peer disagreement has.

4. Apparent peer disagreement

In cases of apparent peer disagreement two subjects believe falsely that they are epistemic peers and disagree about the truth value of some proposition, say p . Such cases are easy to construct. For example in an altered version of BILL CALCULATION you think falsely that Ramona is a competent calculator, while in fact she is poor at such tasks. In an altered version of HORSERACE you believe that I am good at judging horseraces and that my perceptual abilities are in working order, while I actually suffer from bad sight and have forgotten my spectacles at home. Does the modal approach to disagreement give the same kind of results regarding apparent cases of peer disagreement and real cases of peer disagreement? In order to tell, we need more details. Is your disputed belief true? If it is, can it satisfy GS?

There is no reason to suppose that your belief could not satisfy GS if it is true. After all, you and your apparent peer do not share the same modal profile regarding the relevant set of propositions, so the fact that her belief is false, does not mean that you could easily have formed a false belief. Merely apparent peer disagreement does not defeat the safety of your contested belief.¹² Therefore, you can have knowledge in the face of apparent peer disagreement, and thus you can remain steadfast in your belief if it is globally safe.

However, if we fill the details of such cases in a different way, then the modal approach will give a different answer. If your disputed belief is false, or globally unsafe, then you should abandon your belief. That is what KNB tells us.

So the modal approach to disagreement gives different results in cases of real peer disagreement and in cases of merely apparent peer disagreement. This is not all that strange. Even though many epistemologists tend to think that it does not matter whether the disputants really are epistemic peers as long as they believe that they are (Sosa 2010, 283; Christensen 2007, 188-89), it is important to note, that many epistemologists think it does. For example, Kelly (2005, 174-75; Kelly 2010), Feldman (2007, 201) and Elga (2010, 175-76) frame the discussion in terms of subjects who really are epistemic peers. It would not be altogether surprising if cases featuring merely apparent epistemic peers and cases featuring real epistemic peers would mandate different doxastic attitudes. Sure, such cases might be indistinguishable from each other from the subject's perspective, but so are Gettier cases and genuine cases of knowledge and yet KNB tells us that our beliefs in Gettier cases are impermissible.¹³

¹² Maria Lasonen-Aarnio "Unreasonable Knowledge," *Philosophical Perspectives* 24.1 (2010). has defended the view that beliefs retained in putative defeat cases are not always unsafe. She argues that this does not undermine the claim that safety is a necessary condition for knowledge. I am very sympathetic this line of thought, though it should be admitted that the view is controversial. Baker-Hytch and Benton "Defeatism Defeated," *Philosophical Perspectives* (forthcoming). argue also for the conclusion, that knowledge can be retained in the face of cases of putative defeat.

¹³ But should this not be seen as a strike against KNB? After all, surely the beliefs of Gettier subjects are just as rational and permissible as the beliefs of those subjects who have not been Gettiered. The defenders of KNB can deal with such an objection by appealing to a distinction that has been drawn by defenders of the knowledge norm of assertion. This is the distinction between the primary and secondary propriety of assertion Keith DeRose, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Context," *The Philosophical Review* 111.2 (2002), Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* ch. 11.. An assertion is primarily proper if it conforms to the norm of assertion. An assertion is secondarily proper if the subject can reasonably believe that she has met the norm of assertion. In Gettier cases the assertions that the subjects make are primarily improper, since they lack knowledge but they are nevertheless secondarily proper since the subjects can reasonably believe that they know what they assert. Thus the proponent of the knowledge norm of assertion can explain the intuition that the assertions of Gettier subjects are proper in some sense. Now, since it is overwhelmingly plausible that

Moreover, it is interesting to note that by giving a different diagnosis regarding cases featuring real epistemic peers and cases featuring merely apparent epistemic peers, we have effectively found a fruitful middle-ground between the conformist and the nonconformist. The conformists claim that we should give equal weight to our own beliefs and to those held by our epistemic peers.¹⁴ Thus the conformists think that in cases of peer disagreement significant doxastic revision is called for. The nonconformists on the other hand think the mere fact that you disagree with an epistemic peer does not mandate any doxastic revision on either side of the disagreement.¹⁵ According to the modal approach the conformists get the right result in real cases of peer disagreement, but deliver the wrong result in cases of apparent peer disagreement, while the nonconformists give the wrong verdict regarding cases of real peer disagreement, but give the correct verdict regarding cases of apparent peer disagreement. Thus by adopting the modal approach we can tap into the intuitions of both conformists and nonconformists.

This observation gains additional support when we examine how nonconformists and conformists have argued for their respective positions. The nonconformists often claim that there is some symmetry breaker (not necessarily independent of the disagreement itself) that allows one of the disagreeing parties to demote the other, so that she no longer counts as an epistemic peer. Kelly writes that:

Whether your demoting me is reasonable will typically depend on such things as whether my best attempts to parry objections are weak and unresponsive as you take them to be, or whether your conviction that they are weak and unresponsive is due (for example) to your being so dogmatically committed to the opposite conclusion that you fail to appreciate the merits of what I say (2010, 165).

So what matters for Kelly is whether your reasons for demoting your opponent are true. In other words: what matters is whether she *really* is your epistemic peer or not. The cases that nonconformists appeal to, tend to be ones where the disagreeing parties consider one another to be epistemic peers, but in the face of the disagreement end up demoting the epistemic status of their opponent. If the reasons for reasonable demotion have to be true, as Kelly suggests above, then you never really were epistemic peers to begin with. Therefore it seems that nonconformists have actually focused on cases of apparent peer disagreement.

belief is the inner analogue of assertion Williamson, Knowledge and Its Limits 255-56., it seems that the same distinction can be put to use when defending KNB. Gettier subjects fail to conform to KNB and thus their beliefs are improper in the primary sense. However, they might reasonably believe that they have met the norm of belief and thus their beliefs can be proper in the secondary sense. How does this reflect to cases of real and apparent peer disagreement? If you remain steadfast in your belief in cases of real peer disagreement then your belief will be improper both in the primary and secondary sense. If you remain steadfast in your belief which amounts to knowledge in the face of apparent peer disagreement, then your belief will be proper in the primary sense, since it conforms to KNB, but might be improper in the secondary sense, since you might not be in position to reasonably believe that you know what you believe.

¹⁴ Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News.", Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement." and Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements." argue for the conformist position.

¹⁵ Kelly "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement.", T. Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence," Disagreement, eds. R. Feldman and T. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)., R. Wedgwood, "The Moral Evil Demons," Disagreement, eds. R. Feldman and T. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). and Sosa "The Epistemology of Disagreement." argue for the nonconformist position, which is nowadays the default position in the literature. Wedgwood supports a version of epistemological egoism, according to which it is rational for us to place greater trust in our own intuitions, while Kelly advocates a view which he calls the total evidence view. According to the total evidence view what is rational to believe in the face of peer disagreement is determined by one's total evidence. The total evidence view therefore mandates steadfastness in the face of peer disagreement in some cases, whereas in others it requires us to suspend judgment since in some cases of peer disagreement the total evidence will not favor either side of the dispute.

Lackey thinks that this is indeed the case. She argues that the disagreement literature has actually focused on cases of apparent peer disagreement (which she labels ordinary disagreement) and that the nonconformists in particular draw support from such cases. According to Lackey the conformists should insist that we ought to focus on cases of real peer disagreements (which she labels idealized disagreement), since in such cases the conformist-view gives the correct verdict. After all, if we focus on such cases, the possible symmetry breakers will be ruled out, and there will be no reasonable ground for demoting your epistemic peer. However, since Lackey defines epistemic peerhood in terms of evidential and cognitive equality, she thinks that cases of idealized disagreement are almost impossible or at least very rare and that the conformists are therefore ill-advised to focus on cases of idealized disagreement (2010, 310-11). However, since we do not require that epistemic peers have to be evidential and cognitive equals, we need not think that real peer disagreements are next to impossible or even rare. Therefore we are in position to claim that the conformists get the right result in cases of real peer disagreement, and that such cases do not have to be rare, but might very well be quite common. If we accept the modal definition of epistemic peerhood we do not have to think that real cases of peer disagreement happen only in hyper-idealized conditions, as we would have to if we accepted the conditions of evidential and cognitive equality.

However, it might still be the case that the most interesting cases of disagreement are not cases of real peer disagreement, but rather cases of apparent peer disagreement. Controversy abounds in politics, morality, science, religion, and, of course, in philosophy. Are the disagreements that arise within these fields between real or merely apparent epistemic peers? That of course depends on who disagrees with whom about what. No unified answer can be given here, nor should it be expected. Nevertheless the modal approach advocated here does not rule out the possibility that we could retain some of our controversial beliefs in these fields. It really depends on whether we can gain knowledge within these fields, and I think that there is no reason to suppose that we cannot.

But perhaps the reader will not be satisfied with such a vague response. After all, are we not interested in knowing when an apparent peer disagreement is merely apparent? According to the account sketched above, a subject cannot know that she is in an apparent peer disagreement with someone, at least without gaining further evidence. After all, if *S* is in an apparent peer disagreement with *S**, she will believe (albeit falsely) that she disagrees with her epistemic peer. Of course *S* might gain evidence in the future that makes her realize that *S** is not in fact her peer. This could of course happen in various ways.

That said, it is possible that the attributor of knowledge knows that an apparent peer disagreement is merely apparent. As an outside perceiver the attributor of knowledge could have more information than the disagreeing parties. She could, for example, know that *S* is less reliable than *S** in assessing the relevant evidence, and hence know that *S* and *S** do not have true and false beliefs in the relevant set of propositions to almost the same degree across the scope of nearby possible worlds.

But discerning whether a given disagreement is between real or apparent peers is a difficult task. In order to evaluate whether two subjects are epistemic peers we have to have a lot of information which we often lack. Since the modal account of the epistemic significance of disagreement allows us to hold onto our beliefs in cases of apparent peer disagreement, full-blown skepticism is nevertheless avoided. Knowing whether a disagreement is between merely apparent or real epistemic peers is then not as crucial as we might have originally thought.

5. Conclusions

The modal approach to disagreement does not lead to outright skepticism. It even allows us to hold onto some of our cherished opinions regarding moral, philosophical and political matters, provided that the world is such that our cherished opinions are safe. If they are globally safe, then they might

amount to knowledge, and if they amount to knowledge we are entitled to hold onto them even if someone whom we take to be our epistemic peer disagrees with us. This, I think, is a most welcome result.

Are we home and dry then? Not exactly. We have not yet answered our main question, “what kind of epistemic power does disagreement have over knowledge?” True enough, we have shown that only real cases of peer disagreement undermine knowledge, but this way of putting the issue is somewhat misleading. The reason for this is that in real cases of peer disagreement knowledge was never attained by the disagreeing parties. Remember that their beliefs were globally unsafe, and thus did not amount to knowledge. What prohibited them from knowing that p or that $\neg p$ was simply the way the world was; their beliefs could very easily have been false. The fact that they disagreed had nothing to do with the fact that they lacked knowledge. They lacked knowledge even before they realized that they were in disagreement with an epistemic peer.

Disagreement, then, does not have the power to destroy our knowledge. The nonconformists were right in this respect. Disagreement in itself does not have any epistemic power over our knowledge. Or at least, given the framework that we are operating in, we have found no reason to suppose that disagreement has such power. Of course, if GS does not give the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge it might be that some other condition, which is necessary for knowledge, is undermined by the mere fact that one disagrees with someone whom one takes to be one’s epistemic peer. But in order to examine whether such a condition is undermined by apparent peer disagreement we would have to know what that condition is. Alas, we have not yet managed to give a satisfactory analysis of knowledge.

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