

Deep Disagreements & Rational Resolution

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0. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to bring together work on disagreement in both epistemology and argumentative theory in a way that will advance the relevant debates. While these literatures can intersect in many ways, I will explore how some of views pertaining to deep disagreements in argumentative theory can act as an objection to a prominent view of the epistemology of disagreement. To do so, I will explain the Equal Weight View of peer disagreement and show how it entails that deep disagreements between epistemic peers are rationally resolvable. I will then examine a challenge to the Equal Weight View that claims that this consequence is untenable. Having motivated the challenge, I show that there is a viable response to make on behalf of the Equal Weight View. I conclude by considering and responding to several objections to this response.

1. Peer Disagreement

The epistemology of disagreement concerns questions regarding how one should doxastically respond to evidence that someone disagrees. A disagreement occurs between two people when they adopt incompatible doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition. This can be thought of in two ways. On a tripartite doxastic taxonomy, one's doxastic options are belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment; so a disagreement between two people occurs when say one believes the proposition and the other disbelieves it, or one believes it and the other suspends judgment. However, even if two individuals both believe a proposition, they may have different levels of confidence in its truth. To accommodate such a difference, we can also talk about disagreements in levels of confidence, or degrees of belief, even if this is a slightly extended sense of 'disagreement'. Here, one's doxastic options are represented by single point values between 0-1, so disagreements between two people occur when say one adopts a 0.3 degree of belief and one adopts a 0.7 or a 0.4 degree of belief in the same proposition.

In the epistemology of disagreement literature, particular attention has been paid to the epistemic significance of *peer* disagreement. Peer disagreements are disagreements with a kind of epistemic equal. Two people are epistemic peers with respect to a proposition at a time when they are in an equally good epistemic position with respect to that proposition at that time. Often 'an equally good epistemic position' is cashed out in terms of having equally good evidence, having equally good faculties, being equally intellectually virtuous, and so forth, but perhaps the key is that epistemic peers on a matter are equally likely to be correct about that matter. The advantage of focusing on peer disagreement is that it best allows us to isolate the epistemic significance of *disagreement* itself. Peer disagreements are idealizations that control for a number of mitigating factors in hopes of isolating the epistemic effects of the evidence of the disagreement itself.

Peer disagreements are often idealized in ways that go beyond the peerhood status of the parties. For instance, peer disagreements are typically taken to be two-party disagreements where neither party has any information about the views of anyone outside the peer disagreement on the disputed matter. On this construal, peer disagreements also control for any additional higher-order evidence¹ about the opinions of other parties. This idealization too is meant to help isolate the epistemic significance of the disagreement itself. In what follows ‘peer disagreement’ will refer to a disagreement between individuals who are justified in believing they are peers and that they disagree about the target proposition, and who are unaware of the opinions of anyone outside of the disagreement on the matter.²

2. Equal Weight View

There are two broad camps in the epistemology of peer disagreement. *Steadfast views* claim that it is rational to maintain one’s belief upon gaining evidence that one is party of a peer disagreement, whereas *Conciliatory views* maintain that, absent defeat, one is rationally required to make a doxastic change toward that of their disagreeing interlocutor. One prominent Conciliatory view is the *Equal Weight View* (hereafter EWV). According to EWV, peer opinions on a matter are to be given equal weight. In addition, if the peers are also epistemically well positioned on the matter, their opinions are to be given quite significant weight. EWV claims that well positioned disagreeing peers gain a reason to ‘split the difference’ on the disputed matter. So, if one peer believes *p*, and one peer disbelieves *p*, then absent defeat, each is rationally required to suspend judgment about *p*, having discovered the disagreement. On a more fine-grained doxastic picture, if one peer has a 0.6 degree of belief that *p*, and one peer has a 0.9 degree of belief that *p*, then absent defeat, each is rationally required to adopt a 0.75 degree of belief that *p*, having discovered the disagreement. The ‘absent defeat’ condition points to yet another idealization we will make regarding peer disagreements. In some cases, an individual may know that someone is her peer and disagrees with her about *p*, yet have some reason to discount this person’s view about *p* *on this particular occasion* (he is drunk tonight, overly tired, etc.). For the sake of simplicity, we will also be stipulating that parties of a peer disagreement lack such defeating reasons.

Two consequences are worth pointing out. First, according to EWV, what the peers are rational in believing upon discovering the disagreement is entirely determined by their higher-order evidence regarding the disputed proposition. One’s higher-order evidence about *p* is one’s evidence about the quantity or quality of their evidence about *p*. In this case, the peer’s higher-order evidence about *p* is comprised entirely of their evidence about their own opinion about *p*

¹ Higher-order evidence pertaining to *p* is evidence about the quantity or quality of evidence for *p*.

² For more on the idealizations in peer disagreements and their relevance for everyday disagreements, see Matheson (2014).

and their peer's opinion about p.³ Since these pieces of evidence are to be given equal weight, the view has it that both peers should split the difference regarding p.⁴ Second, if both parties follow the prescriptions of EWV then the disagreement will disappear. If both peers split the difference regarding the disputed proposition, as prescribed, then they will both adopt the same doxastic attitude toward the target proposition. So, according to EWV, peer disagreements are rationally resolvable – there is a path to agreement that is rational for both peers to take.

3. Rational Resolution

It is worth saying more about the rational resolution of disagreements before moving on. First, to say that a disagreement is rationally resolvable is not to say that it will be resolved, let alone be resolved rationally. If a disagreement is rationally resolvable then there is a rational path that each party can take to agreement, but this does not ensure that either party will take that path. Since one, or both, parties may respond to the disagreement irrationally, a disagreement being rationally resolvable does not entail its demise. Disagreements are likely to persist even if the correct view about the epistemology of disagreement has it that they should not. Second, we can distinguish between two kinds of rational resolvability that a disagreement may have. A disagreement admits of *weak rational resolution* just in case there is a way out of the state of disagreement that is rationally permitted (that is not irrational) for both parties to take. A weakly rationally resolvable disagreement has it that there is a rational course to agreement (it is rational, or at least not irrational, for both parties to adopt the same doxastic attitude toward the originally disputed proposition). So, in a weakly rationally resolvable disagreement the parties *may* be rational and agree. In contrast, a disagreement admits of *strong rational resolution* just in case rationality requires agreement from both parties. A strongly rationally resolvable disagreement has it that if the disagreement persists, at least one party is irrational in their belief. So, in a strongly rationally resolvable disagreement you *must* agree to be rational, or at least you must do your part to achieve agreement.⁵

With these distinctions in hand we can see that according to EWV peer disagreements are strongly rationally resolvable. There is but one rational doxastic response to a discovered peer disagreement, according to EWV, and that response (if followed by both parties) results in agreement. If both parties follow the prescriptions of the EWV, they will end in agreement. Again, this is not to say that if you do what is rationally required of you the disagreement will disappear. After all, the dissolution of the disagreement is a two-party affair, so one party doing what they are rationally required to do does not suffice in bringing about agreement.

³ For an argument that this is an untenable consequence of EWV, see Kelly (2014). For a response, see Matheson (2015b).

⁴ Recall that we are stipulating that neither party has a defeater for the reason to split the difference coming from their discovery of the peer disagreement.

⁵ Agreement is a two-party dance. If a disagreement admits of strong rational resolution, then you must do your part to get to agreement. Whether the agreement obtains will depend also on whether your interlocutor does their part.

However, since both parties are rationally required to do their part to move toward agreement, EWV is a view according to which peer disagreements have strong rational resolutions.⁶

4. Deep Disagreements

A challenge to the view that all peer disagreements admit of strong rational resolution comes from thinking about deep disagreements. *Deep disagreements* are disagreements concerning one's fundamental epistemic principles.⁷ Your epistemic framework is a set of principles that you endorse that gives an account of what is evidence for what, and assigns evidential weights. An epistemic principle claims that some epistemic property (justification, knowledge, warrant, etc.) obtains whenever some descriptive property obtains. Some candidate epistemic principles include:

Perception: If it visually appears to you as if p, then you are *prima facie* justified in believing p.

Testimony: If you are justified in believing that S is reliable and S asserts that p, then you are *prima facie* justified in believing that p.

Seeming: If it seems to you that p, then you are *prima facie* justified in believing that p.

Deduction: If you are justified in believing that p and that p entails q, then you are justified in believing that q.

Magic-8: If the Magic-8 Ball says that p, then you are *prima facie* justified in believing that p.

Each of these principles confers a positive epistemic status on a belief by way of certain conditions being met. Following Paul Boghossian (2006), we can distinguish the epistemic principles within a given framework in a number of ways. First, some of our epistemic principles are *generation* principles and others are *transmission* principles. Generation principles, like *Perception* and *Seeming*, concern the introduction of an epistemic property. Generation principles describe how positive epistemic states come into being. In contrast, transmission principles, like *Testimony* and *Deduction*, concern moving from one epistemic state to another. Transmission principles describe transfers of epistemic properties. Second, we can also distinguish between *fundamental* epistemic principles and *derived* epistemic

⁶ In contrast, epistemic permissivism allows for disagreements to be resolved in the weakly rational way. According to permissivism there are multiple competitor doxastic attitudes that are justified by a single body of evidence toward a particular proposition. In cases where the disagreeing parties each have attitudes within this permissible range, neither party is rationally required to adjust their doxastic attitude, but neither party is rationally forbidden from doing so either. In such a case, the two parties may rationally come to agree, but they were not rationally required to do so.

⁷ This differs somewhat from Fogelin's original account. While Fogelin (2005) claimed that deep disagreements are "generated from a clash of framework propositions" (5), he also gives moral and metaphysical propositions as examples, thus not restricting things to the epistemic.

principles. The derived principles in a framework are those that follow from other principles; they are principles that you endorse merely because some other principle in your framework prescribe endorsing them. In contrast, fundamental epistemic principles are simply basic, they are not derived from any other principle.⁸

Among the things that we disagree about are fundamental epistemic principles. Such disagreements are deep disagreements. Michael Lynch (2010) has set out four conditions of a deep disagreement: commonality, competition, non-arbitration, and circularity. For commonality to be met, both parties to the disagreement must have the goal of having a true belief. For competition to be met, the two epistemic systems must offer competitor verdicts regarding some belief (i.e. one system has it that the belief in question is justified and the other that the belief is unjustified). For non-arbitration to be satisfied, there must be no more fundamental principle that both parties accept which could be appealed to in order to resolve the disagreement. Finally, the circularity condition has it that the best type of epistemic justification that can be enjoyed by the principles in question is circular in nature (e.g. the principle is justified according to that very principle). In a deep disagreement, there is nothing 'outside' the disagreement that can be used to settle it, nor is there some deeper common ground.

Disagreements about fundamental epistemic principles, deep disagreements, have been thought to raise special challenges in both argumentation theory and epistemology. In particular, it has been argued that deep disagreements are not rationally resolvable. After all, it can be hard to see how reasons can be used to settle a dispute when the disagreement itself is about the very nature of reasons. According to Robert Fogelin, "deep disagreements cannot be resolved through the use of argument, for they undercut the conditions essential to arguing." (2005, 8) Along the same lines, Lynch has claimed the following,

".. epistemically circular arguments for the reliability of some method won't be recognized as a reason to accept that method by those challenging its reliability in the first place. In other words, the very nature of the debates themselves, together with facts about what is to give a reason, already explain the epistemic irresolvability of deep epistemic disagreements. (2010, 273)

If deep disagreements do not admit of rational resolution, then this would raise a significant problem for EWV. As we have seen, EWV has it that all peer disagreements are rationally resolvable (and in the strong sense).

5. The Problem

Deep disagreements are thought to pose a particular problem since they concern one's fundamental epistemic principles. Since a deep disagreement concerns one's fundamental

⁸ Lynch (2010) call these 'basic epistemic principles' and in Lynch (2016) 'epistemic first principles'.

epistemic principles, the parties to the disagreement have nothing more fundamental that they can appeal to in hopes of finding a deeper agreement that could be used to settle the dispute. In deep disagreements, the search for foundational common ground to build from is futile.⁹

One's view of deep disagreements will inevitably be connected to (i) what status they believe their fundamental epistemic principles enjoy, and (ii) in virtue of what those principles enjoy that status. In fact, much of the puzzle concerning deep disagreements, and whether they are rationally resolvable, boils down to what we should think about the justification of fundamental epistemic principles. It's worth briefly surveying some options here.

One possible justification for fundamental epistemic principles was already mentioned in setting out the conditions of a deep disagreement. According to this first option, fundamental epistemic principles can enjoy a kind of circular support.

Self-Support: Fundamental epistemic principles are (epistemically) justified when they meet their own standards for justification.

An epistemic principle ascribes an epistemic property to a belief when certain descriptive conditions are met. According to *Self-Support*, when one's belief that one's epistemic principle is correct meets the relevant descriptive properties, it is epistemically justified. On this account, I can be justified in believing *Seeming* when it seems to me that *Seeming* is true and that *prima facie* justification is not defeated. Motivation for *Self-Support* can come from thinking about what fundamental epistemic principles claim. If those principles are universal and true, then they must apply to themselves as well. Inductive defenses of induction, and deductive defenses of deduction both appeal to this kind of support.¹⁰ For instance, if reasoning by *modus ponens* is a good way to reason, then it is a good way to reason about *modus ponens* as well. Further, since the principle in question is fundamental it is hopeless to look for justification elsewhere.

A second option is defended by Boghossian in his response to epistemic relativism:

Blind Entitlement: We are blindly entitled to adopt an epistemic principle at least until we come across a better competitor.

According to Boghossian, everyone must start somewhere and thus is entitled to that initial framework.¹¹ To even set out to pick a fundamental epistemic principle amongst

⁹ This is not to say that the problem only applies to linear accounts of justification like foundationalism. Holistic accounts of justification, like coherentism, are equally subject to the problem. While the coherentist maintains that justification is holistic, they endorse coherentism as a fundamental epistemic principle (roughly that beliefs are justified in so far as they cohere with the subject's system of beliefs).

¹⁰ For such defenses see Braithwaite (1955), Will (1947), and Van Cleve (1984).

¹¹ This also parallels Wright (2004).

alternatives one must employ such a principle. To use criteria in selecting an epistemic framework would simply be to implement a particular epistemic framework. As such, Boghossian claims that we are entitled to the epistemic system we have, at least until we come across a better competitor system. According to Boghossian, we can evaluate epistemic systems by how well they do in terms of coherence and unity.¹² Boghossian claims that so doing isn't merely employing one's own epistemic system since coherence and unity are constitutive of epistemic systems. So, on this account, we may come across a better system along these lines, and if we do, the rational thing to do is to switch systems, but until then, we are each entitled to the epistemic system we have.

A third option is to deny that one's fundamental epistemic principles can be justified at all.

Beyond Rational: Fundamental epistemic principles are beyond rational assessment.

Here too there is an emphasis on the need to start somewhere. However, this option denies that such a need provides any kind of positive epistemic status to one's fundamental principles. According to this picture, while everyone must adopt some fundamental epistemic principles, and those principles set the framework for what other beliefs should and should not be adopted, the fundamental principles themselves are groundless. Such a broadly Wittgensteinian picture has been defended by Fogelin (2005) and Malcom (2000) among others.

6. The Problem Applied

To better see how deep disagreements may pose a particular problem to the EWV it will be beneficial to have an example before us. Lynch (2010) gives the following example of a deep disagreement:

Cain and Abel, let's imagine, are having coffee and arguing about the age of the Earth. Abel asserts with great confidence that the earth is a mere 7,000 years old. Cain, amazed, points out that Abel's claim is not justified by the evidence of the fossil record, the best explanation of which is that the Earth is far older. 'Inference to the best explanation from the fossil and historical record can work sometimes' Abel concedes, 'but the best method for knowing about the distant past is to consult the Holy Book; it overrides any other competing evidence'. Cain scoffs and rejects the book as an unreliable source for knowing about the distant past; the only reliable method, he insists, is to employ a combination of abduction and induction from the fossil and historical record. (Lynch 2010, 264).

¹² Incoherent and disunified epistemic systems would fit what Kitcher (2011) has called "chimeric epistemologies".

Cain and Abel have a disagreement about epistemic principles. Cain endorses a principle about abduction, while Able's principle concerns following the Holy Book. We can stipulate that theirs is a deep disagreement by stipulating that the each takes their epistemic principle to be a fundamental epistemic principle within their respective epistemic framework. They each adopt competitor fundamental epistemic principles, and when it comes to evaluating those principles, there isn't anything else to appeal to.

So understood, Cain and Able's disagreement meets each of Lynch's criteria - commonality, competition, non-arbitration, and circularity. Cain and Able are each trying to uncover the truth, so commonality is satisfied. They have competitor verdicts on a matter. Regarding the claim that the Earth is only 7,000 years old, Able maintains that *belief* is the justified attitude to take on, while Cain maintains that *disbelief* is, so competition is met. By stipulation, they lack a more fundamental agreement to appeal to since each individual's principle utilized to derive their verdict is taken to be fundamental in its respective framework, so non-arbitration holds as well. Finally, each can only say of his own system that according to it, it is a rational system to have. Cain must rely on the best explanation of rational beliefs to support his principle about reasoning by abduction, and Able must rely on the Holy Book claiming that one should believe the assertions contained therein. So, we can take the disagreement between Cain and Able to be a deep disagreement.

It might be thought that a deep disagreement could not be a disagreement between epistemic peers. If peer disagreements could not be deep disagreements, then our puzzle would be a pseudo-puzzle. Deep disagreements couldn't raise our problem for peer disagreements if no peer disagreement could possibly be deep. However, there are good reasons to believe that a peer disagreement could be a deep disagreement. For a deep disagreement to preclude being a peer disagreement, it must be that adopting different fundamental epistemic principles prevents individuals from being in an equally good epistemic position on a matter. While peerhood is already quite idealized, and being in an equally good epistemic position on a matter is already very rare, adopting different fundamental epistemic principles does not itself prevent these conditions from being met. Perhaps it is easiest to see this by starting with an ethical analogue. A consequentialist and a deontologist have different fundamental ethical principles, yet they can be equally informed, equally virtuous, equally intelligent, and have equally good track records in making moral assessments. While each makes their moral assessment for different reasons, they could be equally good at doing so. They could be moral peers even though they endorse different fundamental moral principles. Similarly, we can imagine an evidentialist and a reliabilist. Each has a different fundamental epistemic principle, but we can imagine that each is equally informed, equally virtuous, equally intelligent, and that they have equally good track records in making epistemic verdicts. If so, then the two individuals are epistemic peers despite having competitor fundamental epistemic principles. Of course, this is not to say that all deep disagreements will be between peers. Sometimes one's fundamental epistemic principle will have it that they are in a pretty poor epistemic position (eg. *Magic-8*). The point to be established here is simply that it is in principle possible for epistemic peers to be in a deep disagreement.

Having seen that peer disagreements can be deep, we must examine how the different options for assessing fundamental epistemic principles apply to deep disagreements. In particular, we must examine whether they offer the hope of a rational resolution to the disagreement, and the strong rational resolution required by EWV.

According to *Beyond Rational*, neither Cain nor Able have any reason to adopt the other's epistemic framework, though they also each lack reason to adopt their own framework as well. On this view, any framework change is groundless since one's fundamental epistemic principles are themselves groundless. Are deep disagreements rationally resolvable on this option? All deep disagreements would not admit of strong rational resolution in virtue of *Beyond Rational* since both parties would not have any reason to change frameworks and thus would not be rationally required to make any such changes. If each party has a fundamental epistemic principle according to which he is believing as he should, and neither has a reason to change their fundamental principle, both lack a reason to make doxastic change.¹³ However, all deep disagreements would be weakly rationally resolvable in the sense that coming to an agreement regarding the fundamental epistemic principles would not be forbidden by reason (even though it wouldn't be endorsed by reason either). That is, Cain could decide to adopt Able's endorsement of a fundamental epistemic principle that follows the Holy Book. In doing so, Cain and Able would now agree about the fundamental epistemic principle and neither party would have made any irrational doxastic moves. On this view, Cain lacked a reason to make such a framework shift, but since fundamental epistemic principles are themselves groundless, he also did not do anything irrational. When it comes to deep disagreements, the advice here is to switch to non-rational means of persuasion.¹⁴ So, *Beyond Rational* cannot help EWV since it, unlike EWV, denies that deep disagreements can have strong rational resolutions.

There are also additional costs with *Beyond Rational*. First, the consequence that framework changes are never rationally made is a significant cost. While *Beyond Rational* has it that rationality fails to forbid a framework change, it denies that one *ever* has an epistemic reason to make such a change. This is a significant cost that can be better seen by examining the second consequence. *Beyond Rational* also has the consequence that no framework is any better off, epistemically speaking, than any other. Since all fundamental principles are groundless, they are all epistemically on par. So, on this view, one cannot improve one's framework by changing the fundamental principles since one cannot adopt fundamental principles with an improved epistemic status. This is particularly problematic when we imagine

¹³ It could be that both fundamental principles are such that they require making doxastic change regarding the target proposition without there being a reason for changing one's fundamental epistemic principles. It could even be that the very same doxastic change is required by both competing principles. In such a case, there would be a kind of accidental strong rational resolution to the disagreement. Even there though, this would be insufficient to help EWV since such a resolution is merely accidental – there will be many deep disagreements where this is not the case. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this possibility out to me.

¹⁴ See Fogelin (19985) p.6.

someone who endorses *Magic-8* as their fundamental epistemic principle. According to *Beyond Rational*, that person's epistemic framework is no worse than a broadly scientific framework, and that individual will never have a reason to move from his current framework to such a framework. So, even apart from failing to help EWV, *Beyond Rational* has some problematic consequences.

According to *Blind Entitlement*, the rational response to a deep disagreement will depend on the details. In cases where there is a conflict in fundamental principles and one system is incoherent or disunified, then according to *Blind Entitlement*, both parties should adopt the superior system. Since incoherence and disunity each disqualify an epistemic system, in cases of conflict where one system is seen to exhibit one of these features it ought to be abandoned for a system that does not. So, according to *Blind Entitlement*, some deep disagreements admit of strong rational resolution. That said, not all do. In cases of deep disagreement where both parties have epistemic frameworks that are found to be incoherent or disunified, then *Blind Entitlement* is silent as to what either party is to do. In addition, we can imagine a deep disagreement between two parties where neither has an epistemic system that exhibits incoherence or disunity (or at least not any greater incoherence or disunity than the alternative system). In cases like this, it does not appear that either party is given a reason to make a system change, though it may not be irrational for either party to do so either. That is, *Blind Entitlement* seems to have it that all deep disagreements have weak rational resolutions, though only some have strong rational resolutions. Given this, *Blind Entitlement* cannot provide a response for EWV.

There are also additional costs with *Blind Entitlement*. First, epistemic entitlement does not come by way of pragmatic reasons, and non-epistemic entitlement does not generate epistemic reasons. *Blind Entitlement* has it that one is entitled to the epistemic system they have, at least to start, since everyone must start somewhere. However, the fact that everyone must start somewhere provides at most a pragmatic entitlement to start where one is currently. Epistemic entitlements don't come by way of inevitability. So, the motivation for *Blind Entitlement* supports a pragmatic entitlement. However, this is a problem since a pragmatic entitlement to a system will not generate epistemic reasons. Epistemic reasons can only come from epistemic entitlements. Second, *Blind Entitlement* has it that someone can be entitled to *Magic-8* and be justified in believing things on the basis of the prescriptions of a Magic-8 ball, at least until they come across a better competitor. However, it is implausible that anyone is ever justified in believing anything on the sole basis of what a Magic-8 ball claims. So, *Blind Entitlement* also give some implausible verdicts about possible cases.¹⁵

We are left with *Self-Support*. According to *Self-Support* a fundamental epistemic principle is justified when it says that it is. Applied to our case, Able endorses the Holy Book principle because the Holy Book tells him to endorse that principle, and Cain endorses abductive reasoning because the best explanation of our rational beliefs is that reasoning by abduction is a good way to reason. Both appeal to their own system to justify itself, and for each, the

¹⁵ For more on this argument against *Blind Entitlement*, see Matheson (2012).

system of the other is unjustified by those same principles (at least we can assume). However, there are several seeming problems with *Self-Support*. First, *Self-Support* seems to have it that all (or at least far too many) epistemic frameworks enjoy this same kind of support. That is, while Cain's epistemic framework may be self-supporting, so too could Able's and the adherer to Magic-8.¹⁶ Second, and for that reason, *Self-Support* might be thought to deny that deep disagreements admit of strong rational resolution since neither party sees a reason to make a framework shift. If these problems hold, then *Self-Support* won't be up to the task of helping EWV either.¹⁷

However, *Self-Support* needn't deny that there are strong rational resolutions to deep disagreements. Such a denial requires treating all fundamental epistemic principles alike, and this needn't, and shouldn't, be the case. A refined interpretation of *Self-Support* claims that support is not given to a principle merely because the principle claims that it is, but that only *true* epistemic principles issue support for themselves (or anything else). This gives us the following:

Self-Support': Fundamental epistemic principles are (epistemically) justified when *they are true* and they meet their own standards for justification.

For instance, since *Magic-8* is false, no one gains any *prima facie* justification for believing something just because a Magic-8 Ball says so. If the Magic-8 Ball says I will have an adventurous day, this fact alone does not provide me with any justification for believing this proposition, regardless of whether I endorse *Magic-8*. And if the Magic-8 Ball says I should believe what the Magic-8 Ball says, here too I gain no such justification since *Magic-8* is simply a false epistemic principle. On *Self-Support'*, competitor fundamental epistemic principles cannot both provide support for themselves since competitor fundamental principles cannot both be correct. Something similar is true of moral principles. That a false moral principle prescribes doing an action does not give anyone a moral reason to do that action, even if they endorse that moral principle. What moral reasons we have depends upon what the true moral principles are, regardless of whether we endorse those principles.

Distinguishing the support provided by true epistemic principles from the mere purported support claimed by false epistemic principles also handles the second concern with *Self-Support*. Even if some alternative epistemic systems have fundamental epistemic principles according to which those principles are justified, this does not entail that those systems are equally well

¹⁶ For instance, we can imagine the adherer to *Magic-8* asking his Magic-8 Ball whether it should be trusted (perhaps upon being challenged), and the Magic-8 Ball responding, "It is decidedly so."

¹⁷ Here too it should be noted that *Self-Support* is consistent with a kind of accidental strong rational resolution. It could happen to be the case that both self-supporting fundamental epistemic principles each independently recommend the same course of action that results in the resolution of the disagreement. While this is a possibility, there will be many cases of deep disagreement where *Self-Support* will not offer such strong rational resolution.

justified as self-supporting systems with true fundamental epistemic principles. Again, since only true epistemic principles actually generate epistemic support, not all epistemic systems that purport to be self-supporting actually are self-supporting. So, *Self-Support* does not entail that all epistemic systems are equally well off. If we suppose that Cain's epistemic system has a true fundamental epistemic principle, and Able's has a false principle, then even if both Cain and Able appeal to their own systems to justify the adoption of their principles, their principles will not enjoy the same kind of support. In such a scenario, only Cain's principles would enjoy epistemic support since only Cain's fundamental epistemic principle is true. So, appealing to *Self-Support* shows how we can be justified in believing our fundamental epistemic principles.

7. A Deeper Problem?

However, all of this may still not be able to help regarding deep disagreements. Lynch has argued that *Self-Support* simply isn't of any help in resolving deep disagreements even though it does show how we can be justified in believing our fundamental epistemic principles. While Lynch endorses a kind of self-support in response to what he calls 'the criterion argument'¹⁸, he maintains that such a response simply has "no traction against a different problem", the problem of deep disagreements and epistemic incommensurability. (2010, 263) While Lynch maintains that endorsing a kind of circularity can allow for one to know that their epistemic principles are correct (given their truth), to be able to resolve a deep disagreement one must be able to *give a reason* to their interlocutor. According to Lynch, "where A gives a reason (in the sense intended) of some type to B for some p, it must be possible for B to recognize, from his standpoint, that it is a reason." (2010, 270) So, in this sense, one may be justified in believing that p while at the same time lacking a reason to believe p that can be given to some interlocutor. Since in a deep disagreement the parties disagree about the very nature of reasons, it is simply impossible for either party to 'give a reason' in this sense, and thus Lynch maintains that deep disagreements are nevertheless epistemically irresolvable. As he puts it, "We may well know (via an epistemically circular argument perhaps) which basic methods are reliable. But that fact has absolutely no traction when one is trying to justify employment of a method in the face of disagreement." (2010, 270) According to Lynch, then, deep disagreements are not rationally resolvable by epistemic reasons.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lynch calls the skeptical argument based on the premises that you cannot be justified in believing the outputs of your faculties without being justified in believing that your faculties are reliable, and we cannot be justified in believing that our faculties are reliable, 'the criterion argument'.

¹⁹ However, while Lynch maintains that deep disagreements are not epistemically rationally resolvable, he notes that epistemic reasons are not the only reasons we can appeal to. According to Lynch, pragmatic reasons fit the bill. Further, since at root a deep disagreement is a disagreement about which epistemic principles to employ, Lynch claims that appealing to pragmatic reasons is fully appropriate. While giving a reason, for Lynch, requires that the other party be able to recognize it as such, Lynch maintains that in a deep disagreement pragmatic reasons can be so recognized. He recommends playing 'the epistemic method game'. Like with Rawls' approach to justice, Lynch (2010, 2016) asks us to evaluate fundamental epistemic

What can be said in response to Lynch? First, it is important to stress that it is no small step from ‘reasons must be recognizable as such’ to ‘S must see R as a reason in order for R to be a reason for S’. In a deep disagreement, one party will not see the reasons given by his interlocutor as reasons, since his own epistemic framework does not categorize them as such, but this does not entail that he is unable to see them as reasons. In fact, he will be unable to see them as reasons only if he is unable to change epistemic frameworks. Epistemic reasons needn’t meet you where you are. If you have a false view about reasons, you won’t see a true reason for what it is, but it does not follow that you have not been given a reason. It also does not follow that you are unable to see it as a reason. You are only unable to see it as a reason while endorsing your current epistemic framework.²⁰

It will help to look at a parallel case regarding morality. Suppose that I am an ethical egoist. That is, suppose that I believe that the fundamental ethical truth is that an action is morally permissible just in case it produces the greatest balance of pleasure over pain for me in the long run. As such, my ethical framework only treats as a moral reason my own (actual and possible) states of pleasure and pain. Ethical egoism is false. The states of pleasure and pain had by other individuals also (at least in part) determines what it is morally permissible for me to do. Suppose further that your ethical framework recognizes this moral fact that I have missed. We then discover that we disagree about whether it is morally permissible for me to engage in some action, while perhaps agreeing that it is in my best interest to do it. You tell me that I have a strong moral reason not to do it because of the pain that it will cause others. As an ethical egoist, I do not recognize this as a reason, but I am able to recognize it as a reason. I may not be able to recognize it as a reason while being an ethical egoist, but such a demand is not merely demanding that I be able to recognize it as a reason. Even more clearly, you have given me a reason to not do the action in question, whether I recognize it as such or not. The ethical egoist cannot control what ethical reasons for action he has simply by continuing to endorse egoism!

Let’s return to the epistemic case. Suppose now we have a deep disagreement between someone who endorses a broadly scientific epistemic framework, call him ‘Smith’, and someone who endorses *Magic-8* as his sole fundamental epistemic principle, call him ‘Jones’. Smith can point out to Jones that his Magic-8 ball has a terrible track-record and that it has

principles from behind the veil of ignorance. From this perspective, we choose which epistemic principles to commit ourselves to while depriving ourselves of any information about what the nature of the world is, which belief-forming methods are reliable in the world, or what methods we may want to use. According to Lynch, “The fundamental epistemic principles to which it is practically rational to be committed are those that persons concerned to advance their interests would endorse in a position of epistemic and social equality.” (2016, 6) In particular, Lynch claims that we would have practical reason to favor methods that are repeatable, adaptable, public, and widespread. (2010, 275) For a challenge to Lynch’s view, see Kappel (2012).

²⁰ See Pryor (2004) and his account of ‘rational obstruction’ for more on this point.

even prescribed inconsistent beliefs. Suppose Jones then asks his Magic-8 ball if either of these things should be troubling, and the Magic-8 ball says 'My reply is no.' From his endorsed framework, Jones sees no reason to reject *Magic-8*, however, it seems clear that Smith has given Jones plenty of reasons to abandon his framework whether Jones recognizes them or not. The fact that Jones will not see something as a reason from within his epistemic framework does not prevent it from being a reason.

Alternatively, we can imagine a radical skeptic. According to this radical skeptic, there are no epistemic reasons to believe anything. The radical skeptic denies that there are any true fundamental epistemic principles that have it that we have any *prima facie* justification for believing anything. On Lynch's view, it is impossible to give such a person an epistemic reason, since it is impossible for that person to recognize anything as a reason from their epistemic perspective. This is intuitively the wrong result. While giving the imagined radical skeptic reasons may not be dialectically fruitful, it may not win them over, it is nevertheless possible to give them reasons to not be a skeptic.²¹ Like the egoist, the skeptic cannot control what epistemic reasons he has simply by continuing to endorse his radical skepticism!

We now have a picture of how *Self-Support* can privilege some epistemic systems over others and how even deep disagreements can be rationally resolved in the strong sense. In brief, what one should believe in a deep disagreement is what the true fundamental epistemic principles dictate that they should believe. The true fundamental epistemic principles may be distinct from the fundamental principles in one's own epistemic system, but the true principles nevertheless dictate which beliefs are justified and how they are justified. After all, they are the true principles, and the truth does not require your recognition of it to apply to you. In this way, deep disagreements are no different than other cases of disagreement. There are true principles about the epistemology of disagreement, and those principles dictate what one is justified in believing in the face of disagreement. Whether the parties of the disagreement endorse those principles or not is beside the point. If EWV is true, then both parties in a peer disagreement should split the difference, whether or not they in fact endorse EWV. On this picture, moving from more ordinary disagreements to deep disagreements does not alter how the disagreement is to be diagnosed. In both cases there are true epistemic principles that govern the situation, and in both cases individuals should believe according to those principles. If those true epistemic principles dictate that both parties of a peer disagreement are justified in believing the same thing, as EVW claims in cases of peer disagreement, then *Self-Support* has it that disagreements have strong rational resolutions to deep disagreement.²²

While *Self-Support* allows for strong rational resolutions to deep disagreements, there may be some worries regarding how well it can fit with EWV. The following section examines three

²¹ Here it is important to distinguish the state of justification from the project of justifying one's beliefs. For more on this important distinction, see Pryor (2000).

²² This entails that subject's are rational in following the true fundamental epistemic principles even if they believe that those principles are false.

such objections to pairing *Self-Support* with EWV. Some may think that such a view of *Self-Support* conflicts with epistemic internalism, conflicts with EWV, or is simply unhelpful.

8. Objections

While a similar story regarding self-supporting principles has been told before, it is often claimed to be uniquely available to epistemic externalists.²³ It is perhaps easy to see why. Epistemic externalism is best seen as a denial of epistemic internalism. Epistemic internalism claims that epistemic justification supervenes on the subject's internal states (i.e. mental states), whereas epistemic externalism denies this. Externalists often appeal to factors outside the mind such as reliability, proper function, etc. to be relevant to the subject's justification as well. According to the account given above, what matters for whether one is justified in believing their fundamental epistemic principles is what the world is like, which principles are true. So long as your doxastic life is in line with the true principles, everything is good. This may sound like the reliabilist response to external world skepticism. According to the reliabilist response, what matters for whether our external world beliefs are justified is whether they are in fact produced by reliable belief-forming processes. If they are, then we are good to go and we avoid the skeptical challenge. In contrast, internalists are known for wanting more to work with from the subject's own perspective – something that she can appeal to or can access as a reason. No one maintains that epistemic principles are internal to one's mind or that they are mental states. So, if true epistemic principles are relevant to one's justification it may be thought that epistemic internalism must be denied.²⁴ However, such a thought is mistaken. Epistemic justification supervenes on the mental so long as there is no justificatory change without a mental change. If the true epistemic principles are necessarily true, as many internalists maintain, then the supervenience thesis holds regardless of whether epistemic principles are themselves mental. For instance, if *Seeming* is necessarily true, then no two possible subjects can be alike in seeming states without enjoying the same amount of *prima facie* justification for the propositions that seem true to them. While their justification for their beliefs depends in some sense on *Seeming* being true, since *Seeming* is true always, everywhere, and for anyone (as we are assuming), the internalist supervenience thesis will hold. So, appealing to *Self-Support* is an option for both epistemic externalists and epistemic internalists. There is no conflict here.

A second objection to the appeal to *Self-Support* is that doing so is in conflict with EWV or at least principles that lie at the heart of EWV. If such a conflict exists, then even if *Self-Support* can account for strong rational resolutions to deep disagreements it will be of no help to the defender of EWV. Why might there be a tension here? Critical to the way *Self-Support* was understood is the claim that who is right matters. After all, what we should believe is a matter of the true epistemic principles, whether we endorse those principles or not. The idea that who

²³ See Sosa (2008), Lynch (2010), and Goldman (2011). It is also implied in Kappel (2012).

²⁴ See Goldman (2011) and Alston (1989) for more on this line of thinking. Goldman's concern is whether the evidential fit relation is internal to the subject, but similar considerations apply here as well.

is right matters for how one should respond to a disagreement may seem to conflict with EWV. In fact, the claim that who is right matters may seem to naturally fit with a competitor view of the epistemic significance of disagreement – the *Right Reasons view*.²⁵ According to the *Right Reasons view*, when one party of a peer disagreement correctly evaluated the evidence, she should stick to her guns and make no doxastic revision. After all, she correctly evaluated the evidence, and since what you should believe is determined by what your evidence supports, no doxastic change is necessary. In contrast, recall that EWV maintained that both parties in peer disagreement were to make doxastic change, regardless of whether one party had correctly responded to the original evidence. Some might see this as a tension between EWV and *Self-Support*. On the one hand, what matters is who is correct (Self-Support), but on the other hand, even if you were correct you are rationally required to make a doxastic change (EWV). How can it be both ways? If this account of *Self-Support* is in conflict with EWV, then appealing to it will be of no help in demonstrating how it can be that deep disagreements admit of strong rational resolution as claimed by EWV.

Here too, the alleged inconsistency is out-of-place. There is no small step from claiming that the true epistemic principles matter to the *Right Reasons view* of disagreement (or to the falsity of EWV). For one thing, defenders of EWV are defending its *truth*. Even the defenders of EWV will maintain that its prescriptions matter only if the true epistemic principles claim that they do.²⁶ The reason we should follow the prescriptions of EWV is because it is true, not because it is believed or defended. Even those who have never considered the view are bound by its prescriptions, if it is a true view. Defenders of EWV maintain that some of the epistemic truths have it that disagreement is epistemically significant, and that discovering a peer disagreement calls for doxastic revision. These consequences are not thought to hold merely because they endorse EWV or merely because EWV claims that they do (regardless of its truth); rather, these consequences are thought to hold in virtue of EWV being true. So, we can consistently say that the epistemic truth matters while saying that in cases of peer disagreement it doesn't matter whether you in fact evaluated the original evidence correctly. The reason is that one of the epistemic truths is that disagreement is epistemically significant and calls for revision.²⁷

The worry that this account does not fit with EWV can also be made by appealing to self-defeat. It may seem strange to be defending EWV by appealing to *self-supporting* epistemic principles

²⁵ See Kelly (2005).

²⁶ Things are a little complicated here. True epistemic principles may matter for following the prescriptions of EWV in more than one way. First, if EWV is itself true, then we should believe accordingly. But second, even if EWV is false, it may be that a true principle nevertheless has it that we should follow the prescriptions of EWV. For instance we can suppose that evidentialism is true, though EWV is false. If my evidence on balance supports that EWV is true, then it may be that my evidence supports believing in accordance with EWV and that this is what I should do (given the truth of evidentialism), despite the fact that EWV is false. See Matheson (2015a) for more on this line of reasoning.

²⁷ For a more detailed argument as to how the Right Reasons view fails to have it that the steadfast subject evaluates her total evidence correctly see Matheson (2009).

when there is a well-known literature concerning EWV (and other conciliatory principles) being *self-defeating*.²⁸ Roughly, the worry is that EWV, and like principles, are themselves quite contentious, so by their own standards we are not justified in believing them. So, far from being a self-supporting principle, EWV looks like a self-defeating principle; given its truth, we are not justified in believing EWV. Given this, it may seem puzzling, if not inconsistent, to appeal to self-supporting principles to defend EWV.²⁹

The response here is closely connected to the previous response. Considering *Self-Support* show us that the epistemic truth matters. It matters which fundamental epistemic principles are true, regardless of whether we are in the end justified in believing them or whether we even believe them at all. Now, EWV is not itself plausibly a fundamental epistemic principle. Rather, any reason to endorse EWV comes from other more fundamental epistemic principles. For instance, we could see EWV as a principle that is endorsed within an evidentialist epistemic framework, or a reliabilist epistemic framework. In either case, the reasons to endorse EWV would come from more fundamental epistemic principles. Given *Self-Support*, the only support that those fundamental epistemic principles could have, would be from what they claim and their truth. The fact that some epistemic principles can be self-supporting does not entail that we are justified in believing them at the end of the day, or that we are justified in believing any (let alone every) derivative epistemic principle in their epistemic system. So, it is a coherent account to both rely on *Self-Support* and accept that we are not justified in believing some principles, like EWV, given our awareness of the controversy surrounding them. It may even be that we are not justified in believing our fundamental epistemic principles. What the account given above is committed to is that whether we are will be a matter of what the true fundamental epistemic principles dictate, regardless of whether we endorse them or not. For instance, we can imagine a deep peer disagreement between an evidentialist and a reliabilist. At most one of them has a true fundamental epistemic principle. Nevertheless, if EWV is true, then in discovering the disagreement each party gains a reason to split the difference. This could result in each party being justified in suspending judgment as to the correctness of each fundamental principle. So, it could be that neither party in a deep disagreement is justified in maintaining their fundamental principle even if one of them is in fact true, and even if *Self-Support* is correct. The truth of epistemic principles matters, and according to EWV, they can have it that neither party to the disagreement is justified in believing their view (even if their view is EWV). So, EWV being self-defeating in this way is not in tension with the appeal made to *Self-Support*. A coherent defense of EWV can be made while both appealing to *Self-Support* and acknowledging that EWV is self-defeating.

A final concern to be addressed claims that this appeal to *Self-Support* is ultimately unhelpful. In the end, this response amounts to claiming that in cases of deep disagreement one should believe what the true epistemic principles say to believe. Such advice may be thought to be as

²⁸ For statements of the problem, see Elga (2010) and Weatherson (2013). For proposed solutions, see Bogardus (2009), Christensen (2009), Littlejohn (2013), and Matheson (2015a).

²⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

unhelpful as the ethical advice to “do what the true ethical principles prescribe.”³⁰ Put differently, we would like to know *how* to rationally resolve a deep disagreement, not just know that there *is* a rational resolution. We seek doxastic guidance, and the appeal to *Self-Support* does not do much on this front.

There are a couple of things to say in response to this charge. First, even if true, a view’s being unhelpful is not a reason to think that it is false. Such a consequence may be unfortunate, but the list of unfortunate truths is long. There being a rational resolution to a disagreement does not entail that it is easy to find. In fact, part of the datum that a successful theory of the epistemic significance of disagreement should account for is that in many disagreements it is far from easy to discover the rational way out. Second, there is nothing unique here regarding deep disagreements. Many other, more mundane, disagreements share this feature as well. It is often far from clear what the rational response to a disagreement is, particularly once we deprive ourselves of the many idealizations involved in two-party peer disagreements. Disagreement is troubling, at least in part, since it is often unclear what the rational response to it is. Discovering a truth, that all peer disagreements admit of strong rational resolution, would be an important discovery even if it were not always clear what that resolution is. A similar story applies in the ethical domain. Debates about normative ethical theories are important, we want to know what those truths are, even if it is often incredibly difficult to determine which action will have the best consequences in the long run, what a perfectly virtuous agent would do, and so forth. Finally, the response given here comes in the context of defending EWV, so it comes along with a commitment to what at least one of the true epistemic principles is. The response isn’t committed to EWV being true, but the defender of EWV has something beyond this response to say in answering the question of which epistemic principles are true. So, even if the response is unhelpful in broad outline, it is compatible with being filled out with an account of the true epistemic principles.³¹

9. Conclusion

The Equal Weight View is a prominent conciliatory view of disagreement that claims that all idealized peer disagreements are rationally resolvable. A challenge for this view comes from

³⁰ Lynch (2010, 270) makes this point.

³¹ It is important to stress that a rational resolution to a disagreement also needn’t entail resolving the issue. See Feldman (2005) for more on this point. In some cases, perhaps many cases, the rational resolution to a disagreement will be for the relevant parties to suspend judgment about the disputed issue. If all parties are rationally required to suspend judgment about the issue, then the disagreement is rationally resolved (in the strong sense), even though no one has discovered the answer. We want to know whether statements are true or false, and a justified suspension of judgment does not allow for that. When the relevant parties are justified in suspending judgment on an issue, the issue remains open and unresolved even if the disagreement has dissolved. Put differently, not all rational resolutions to a disagreement are equally satisfying. Inquirers want to resolve an issue, but not all rational resolutions to disagreement will deliver on this desideratum.

thinking about deep disagreements – disagreements about one’s fundamental epistemic principles. This paper examined the challenges posed by deep disagreements and defended an account of the justification of fundamental epistemic principles, *Self-Support*, that has it that deep disagreements are strongly rationally resolvable. We then saw that this defense is consistent with epistemic internalism and with a commitment to EWV.³²

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³² Special thanks to [blinded for review].

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