Review of: "Who's Afraid of Disagreement about Disagreement?"

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The problem with disagreement about disagreements is easily stated: If it is your view that you should be conciliatory when you encounter a peer disagreement regarding some subject matter, then your view recommends being conciliatory as well when you encounter a peer disagreement regarding whether your view itself is correct. Hence, conciliatory views on peer disagreement appear to be self-undermining: they cannot, as it seems, be consistently held – despite their intuitive appeal. What, then, should we believe about conciliatory views, and more specifically, about the special case of the Equal Weight View (EW)? Weintraub critically and convincingly discusses answers from Elga, Christensen, Pittard, Weatherson and others to this question, and agrees with Weiner on a certain way of calculating the rational credences towards EW given one's and one's peer's prior credences towards this view. I do not have much to add to these discussions, except perhaps that I fail to see the point of Weintraub's third objection against Pittard's proposal. Why does it matter that my stance towards EW is 'a commitment to a *life-long* policy of responding to disagreements' (p. 5 in the pdf version of the paper, Weintraub's italics)? Surely the rational credence concerning some controversial issue does not depend on how long-lasting the consequences of adopting the credence are.

In Weintraub's paper, several idealizations can be found. For a start, the disagreements she analyses are disagreements between a proponent of EW and a proponent of absolute steadfastness (AS), not disagreements between adherents of differently strong versions of conciliationism. Even when she ascribes credences rather than determinate beliefs to respective positions, as she does towards the end of the paper, all views except EW and AS are assigned credence 0. This makes it much easier to come up with a formula for calculating credences regarding EW in cases of peer disagreement about this view. But it also renders the results less realistic. (Maybe this remark is a bit unfair, given that this idealization is commonly made in the debate on peer disagreement. However, a compelling account should generalize in some obvious way in order to encompass real-world cases, and I see no such way here.)

More importantly, disagreement about whether EW holds is viewed as disagreement between two peers about whom nothing further is being said. For instance, it is not being said whether those peers are *experts* with regard to EW: competent philosophers who have spent much time to consider all relevant arguments in the epistemological debate on disagreement. For if they are not, and if they are justified in believing that there are actual experts about EW, they should defer to the belief those experts have. (Except, of course, AS in its most radical form, according to which one should *never* change one's beliefs due to a disagreement, is correct. But, as Weintraub points out (p. 2), there is perhaps none who believes this version of AS.)

Now, actually, the situation is this: There is expert disgreement about EW. This disagreement is systematic in Goldberg's (2013) sense: it is a long-lasting disagreement between two large groups of people that extends to related areas of philosophy as well. How we should deal with such systematic disagreements among experts is a tough question. For instance, does it matter how many experts support each side, as Lackey (2013) believes? Who should count as an expert? Should we ascribe different degrees of expertise to different candidates?

Whatever the answers to such questions are, they should not be ignored when we discuss disagreement about EW. This is particularly important for Weintraub's rejection of Christensen's inconsistency argument because this rejection involves the claim that 'a disagreement about EW, even if it occurs concomitantly with a disagreement about some other proposition, takes precedence' (p. 6). So the idea is that we should first settle how to deal with disagreement about EW, and only then revise the rest of our controversial beliefs accordingly. But in figuring out what position one should rationally adopt towards EW, one surely should not ignore the actual philosophical debate. The idealized disagreement about EW that Weintraub has in mind – a proponent of EW encounters a peer who favours AS and considers revision of her view in light of this encounter alone – is a toy case that loses its theoretical relevance once we ask ourselves how we should *actually* deal with disagreement. For then it becomes relevant whether there actually is expert disagreement about EW, and even more so if the question about how to actually deal with disagreements takes precedence.

Weintraub's account is, I think, almost right regarding what our first reaction to the first occurrence of peer disagreement about EW should be. But in a second step, we should widen our scope and find out whether there is expert disagreement about EW (plus perhaps whether there is at least a clear majority for one side, if such a fact turns out to be relevant). If there is expert disagreement without a clear majority for either side, as it is actually the case, someone who initially favoured EW should suspend belief about whether EW is correct. Therefore, single occurrences of peer disagreement on EW are epistemically secondary for what we should actually believe about EW. (If, counterfactually, all experts agreed that EW is correct, then EW could – and should – be justifiably and consistently believed. Hence, EW is only *contingently self-undermining*: it is justifiably believable in worlds in which it is uncontested; see Matheson 2015, 149–153.)

Even as a first reaction to a first occurrence of peer disagreement Weintraub's account is, I think, only *almost* right. The reason is another implicit assumption: that *splitting the difference* is what EW requires us to do in a peer disagreement scenario. While this is not the place to discuss whether splitting the difference is the correct interpretation of EW (I think it is not; see my Weber 2022, p. 44–45), it is certainly worth to point out that asking the question which credence one should adopt after encountering a disagreeing peer already presupposes that there is a credence that it is rational to adopt. If peer disagreement should rather make us agnostic about what the right credence is – a view that can be modeled by imprecise probabilities (see Elkin and Wheeler 2018) – this meta-epistemological agnosticism is probably infectious in that it implies agnosticism regarding other contentious issues as well: if you should be agnostic about whether you should be agnostic about p, then you should be agnostic about p. If something along these lines is right, then what Weintraub's insightful analysis insinuates becomes even clearer, namely that disagreement about disagreement is, on the one hand, a reason not to have an outright belief that EW is true, but is, on the other hand, *not* a reason to refrain from getting agnostic when one encounters a peer disagreement.

A minor remark: In the very last paragraph of Weintraub's paper, the credences the proponent of EW should have after revising his credences in face of the disagreement must always be equal to the new credence he should have towards P (0.571 in the first case and 0.519 in the second). The slightly diverging numbers Weintraub gives, and especially the assumption that the rational post-disagreement credences towards EW and P may differ, are due to rounding and calculation errors.

Having said all this, let me close with the remark that Weintraub's paper is excellently written and enjoyable to read. Much can be learnt by working through it thoroughly, even though one should keep in mind that she discusses an idealized case.

References

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