

The Epistemology of Disagreement;
Can Theists and Atheists Reasonably Disagree?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the phenomenon of disagreement from an epistemological point of view. In other words, this thesis explores how disagreement affects the rationality of our beliefs. In particular, I have focused on disagreements with respect to religious matters. One of the arguments I put forward suggests that in some circumstances, theists and atheists should regard one another as epistemic peers with respect to the topic of their disagreement. Next, I argue that evidence can be Permissive, meaning that in some cases, the body of evidence may support two different beliefs regarding a proposition. Finally, I argue that theists and atheists can reasonably retain their beliefs in the face of their disagreement over religious utterances, and can also view their dissenters as reasonable individuals despite their disagreement.

DEDICATION

To those with whom I disagree

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Introduction

Traditional epistemology deals with questions about knowledge and justification, such as how knowledge is gained and what constitutes justified belief for an individual. As such, traditional epistemology usually concerns individuals and their beliefs. Consequently, the discipline tended to ignore the social context surrounding individuals. But so many things changed in philosophy during the second half of the twentieth century. Among the most significant shifts was acknowledging the influence of social and political factors on what was previously deemed solely individual.

Since the turn of the century, social epistemology has grown dramatically. Several epistemological topics have recently gained attention in social epistemology, including the epistemology of testimony, the epistemology of groups, and the epistemology of disagreement. These topics take into account the fact that epistemic agents are dependent upon and affected by other agents when it comes to questions of knowledge, rationality, and justification.

Among all epistemic social factors, this thesis concentrates on the problems raised by the fact that we often disagree with one another. That is to say, we are concerned with how disagreement may affect the truth and rationality of our beliefs and whether or not any adjustments to our beliefs are consequently required. Therefore, this thesis does not aim to examine other important aspects of the topic of disagreement, such as how it affects the disputants' psychology or whether it plays an overall positive role in democratic societies. Our investigation is thus bound to epistemic questions regarding the phenomenon of disagreement.

Disagreement happens in many areas, including, but not limited to, politics, morality, science, philosophy, and religion. My focus here is on disagreements regarding religious matters,

mainly because these are the kinds of disagreements I find both interesting and significant. My interest stems from the fact that I was born and raised in a religious society under a theocratic political system. I have witnessed countless debates between religious believers and nonbelievers since a very young age. Being raised in a religious family, I am totally familiar with the reasons religious believers typically use to justify their claims. In my undergraduate studies, I encountered many students who believed differently and were willing to pay any price to oppose those religious claims. It took me many years to find my own place in those religious disputes and this topic still interests me a great deal, which is one of the reasons I chose to study it.

In addition, I have come to realize that there is something more at stake than just my own personal interests and conundrums. Debates between religious believers and nonbelievers are not limited to what is normally classified as “religious matters.” In fact, almost any societal issue can be a subject on which religious believers and nonbelievers disagree. Just take a look at one of the recent controversies in North America: the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to overturn "Roe v. Wade." Although the issue is not a religious issue in essence, one can recognize the influence of religion on at least one of the camps. This case and many others demonstrate that disagreements between religious believers and nonbelievers are numerous and often go beyond religious matters. This makes investigating such disagreements not only philosophically important, but also practically necessary.

The main argument of this thesis concerns religious disagreements between theists and atheists. But when it comes to the religious arena, there are many different views concerning the relationship between reason and belief. For the purpose of this thesis, I assume that religious belief is rational only if it is based on reason. As such, the rationality of beliefs regarding religious matters are prone to disagreement. This thesis ultimately argues that reasonable disagreement between

theists and atheists regarding religious matters is possible. That is to say, theists and atheists can hold onto their original beliefs about religious matters and despite their disagreement, remain reasonable. Additionally, I will hold that theists and atheists can *acknowledge* each other as reasonable with respect to their beliefs regarding religious matters.

Chapter 1 begins by explaining the importance of fallibilism and the necessity of occasionally revising our beliefs. It then deals with the nature of peerhood and addresses questions with respect to peerhood in religious disagreement. The chapter argues that theists and atheists *should* consider one another as peers regarding their religious beliefs. Lastly, chapter 1 discusses the rational response to peer disagreement and examines a variety of views in the literature.

Next, chapter 2 examines and defends one of the current trends in the epistemology of evidence called Permissivism, which holds that in some cases, the evidence can support more than one belief or credence with respect to a proposition. To defend this view, chapter 2 discusses the most important objections to Permissivism and tries to address them properly.

Finally, chapter 3 examines the role of evidence in adopting rational religious beliefs and examines a case of religious disagreement between a theist and an atheist. It argues that not only are reasonable religious disagreements possible, but theists and atheists can also disagree while acknowledging the reasonableness of each other.

Chapter 1

In the first chapter, I primarily review the literature on the epistemology of disagreement and I look, in particular, at religious disagreement. To begin, I highlight our fallibility and the need to occasionally review and revise our beliefs. Revising beliefs is called for specifically in cases of disagreement, and for this reason the topic deserves consideration. I demonstrate that peer disagreement is the most challenging kind of disagreement, and I focus almost exclusively on it. Further, I address some questions regarding disagreements among theists and atheists and attempt to answer them properly—questions on whether theists and atheists *are* epistemic peers, whether they *are usually considered to be* epistemic peers, and whether they *should be considered to be* epistemic peers. In some circumstances, I argue, theists and atheists should regard each other as peers in terms of their religious beliefs, and their disagreement should consequently be recognized as a possible threat to their religious beliefs. Next, I examine the reasonable response to peer religious disagreement and conclude that neither conciliatory nor steadfast views are adequate to address all cases of peer religious disagreement. Finally, I bring up the possibility of reasonable disagreement between theists and atheists. This topic will be discussed in more detail in the second chapter.

1.1 Disagreement as Evidence

We normally trust our own epistemic faculties and regard them as truth-conducive. That is to say, compared to other people's epistemic faculties, we rely on our own faculties in a more basic way (Peter 2019, 1194). However, difficulties arise when we want to justify this self-trust. As Richard Foley argues, "there is no way of providing non-question-begging assurance of the

reliability of one's faculties and beliefs" (2001, 4). That is because we have to use the same faculties to evaluate their reliability, so we cannot generate arguments independent from our faculties to defend their accuracy. This poses a serious problem for the justification of self-trust.

Another issue with trusting our epistemic faculties is that there is empirical evidence suggesting that we usually trust our faculties more than we should (Peter 2019, 1200). Unexpectedly, depressed people's self-evaluations are said to be more accurate than non-depressed people's (Elga 2005, 117). These studies provide a reason to believe that we normally overrate ourselves, so we need to be more skeptical of our self-evaluations.

However, this should not be seen as a failure in us. It is a reality we need to acknowledge since we have no other alternative faculties to trust. But we should bear in mind that this trust is not justified—at least not according to our standard theories of justification. Due to the absence of justification, Foley argues that using our intellectual faculties requires a leap of intellectual faith (2001, 20). We have to take this leap every now and then since there is no other way around it; however, there are still circumstances in which we are required to be more cautious. Fabienne Peter puts it in this way:

While there are good non-epistemic reasons to trust your epistemic faculties, these reasons do not justify trusting your epistemic faculties when there are epistemic reasons that suggest that your epistemic faculties may not be reliable—that you have trusted your epistemic faculties too much. A doxastic disagreement with an epistemic peer, however, is precisely the sort of situation that can give you an epistemic reason to reconsider your original belief. (2019, 1202)

Therefore, although it is usually practically reasonable for us to trust our intellectual faculties, disagreement can provide an epistemological reason not to continue with this trust.

Disagreement might have several sources.¹ No matter what the source of a disagreement is, it must be genuine to be epistemically relevant. There are instances of apparent disagreement, for example, when two people disagree on whether or not abortion is permissible. Those “against” it might be concerned with its moral permissibility, whereas those “for” it may think that it should not be illegal.² Another case of apparent disagreement is when people use the same word in different meanings.³ Only when disagreement is genuine should it be considered as evidence.⁴

Since we are fallible creatures, disagreement can provide a reason to suspect our beliefs. We are not ideally rational;⁵ therefore, encountering somebody who disagrees with us is evidence of our own possible error (Christensen 2007, 208). Although this evidence might be weak and misleading, it still requires consideration. As Thomas Kelly argues, “misleading evidence is evidence nonetheless, and the acquisition of such evidence will typically make a difference to what is reasonable for one to believe” (2010, 137). Here, it does not matter who disagrees with me and whether they are in a good place to judge the matter. The fact that somebody believes in proposition P is enough to give me a reason (albeit weak) to believe P myself (Foley 2001, 105).

The fact that an individual has responded to proposition P in a way rather than another is evidence of the individual’s evidence. Therefore, it is called “higher-order evidence” (Kelly 2005,

¹J. L. Mackie claims that disagreement in history and science “results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence,” while in morality, disagreement “seems to reflect people’s adherence to and participation in different ways of life” (1977, 36). In a similar light, Christensen claims that in morality, religion, politics, economics, and philosophy “disagreement flourishes when evidence is meager or poorly distributed, or when, due to our emotional or intellectual limitations, we are just not very good at reacting correctly to the evidence (2007, 214).

²Feldman cites pornography as another example (2007, 199).

³See, Feldman (2007, 199). David Chalmers describes such a disagreement as a “*mere* verbal dispute” (2011, 517). We can think of a dispute involving a term with totally different meanings (e.g., bank).

⁴Since we are concerned with religious disagreement, it is worth mentioning that although there might be some cases of apparent religious disagreements, they are not primarily—or even in large part—apparent (Oppy 2010, 197).

⁵Even if we were cognitively perfect, Christensen claims, disagreement would provide powerful evidence that we are less than perfect. (Christensen 2010, 191)

186). Let us assume that individual S believes proposition P on the basis of total evidence E. Now, the fact that S believes P is for me evidence E* to believe P myself. While E is evidence for the truth of P, E* is evidence about the character of E. E is therefore first-order evidence and E* is higher-order evidence.

It should be evident that disagreement with an epistemic superior always provides considerable evidence against one's belief for the epistemic inferior. When I encounter somebody who disagrees with me about P, and I believe that she is in a better place to judge P, this is considerable evidence against my belief with respect to P. For example, I look at the clouds in the sky and feel that tomorrow will be rainy, so, I form this belief: "tomorrow will be rainy." Then I watch the news, and the forecaster says that tomorrow will not be rainy. Obviously, I have to change my belief regarding this topic since the forecaster has more information and is more qualified to make such a judgment (Elga 2007, 479).⁶

But there is serious doubt whether disagreement with an epistemic inferior should provide a significant reason for an epistemic superior. Some philosophers believe that even a disagreement with an inferior should not be dismissed right away.⁷ Many other philosophers disagree with this evaluation. They think disagreement provides considerable evidence for an individual only when the other side is thought to be the individual's epistemic superior or peer.⁸ On this view, even if

⁶Throughout this thesis, I take it for granted that one can willingly decide to believe or disbelieve a proposition. This is of course controversial. See Wolterstorff (2014) for criticism.

⁷Christensen argues that epistemic parity is not required "for disagreement to provide substantial reasons for belief revision" (2007, 212). According to him, when the opponent's evidence is relatively smaller than mine, I still should not discount her assessment severely. In the same line of thought, Helen De Cruz thinks that disagreement between a professor and an undergraduate student provides some evidence against the professor's belief (2019, 8).

⁸Disagreement with a superior or inferior is not that epistemically interesting since the answer seems obvious and easy. However, disagreement with a peer is among the most challenging topics in recent epistemology. As Axel Gelfert puts it, "parity ... does remain an important background assumption: After all, disagreements with obvious epistemic inferiors would hardly inspire the sense of urgency that fuels the debate about disagreement among peers" (2011, 511).

disagreement with an inferior provides a (relatively weak) reason against my beliefs, it is still easily dismissed as trivial.

1.2 Peerhood and Religious Disagreement

As was observed in the previous section, although there is controversy over the epistemic significance of disagreement with an epistemic inferior, the significance of *peer disagreement as evidence against our belief* is uncontroversial. I am specifically concerned with religious disagreement in this thesis, so if it can be shown that there are cases of religious peer disagreement, these cases would provide a possible challenge to those disputants' religious beliefs.

1.2.1 Defining Peerhood

The concept of "peerhood" requires clarification as it is vague and open to interpretation.⁹ If we set the standard of similarity between peers very high, there would not be any actual peers, and if it is set too low, almost every two persons would be peers (Feldman 2009, 300). Although a complete and unanimously agreed-upon definition of peerhood is not possible, we still need to make it as explicit as possible. I will explain some of these definitions and try to come up with the best possible definition.

David Enoch understands "peer" as "someone who is, somewhat roughly, antecedently as likely as you are to get things right (on matters of the relevant kind)" (2010, 956).¹⁰ Although this definition seems to grasp the idea of peerhood, it does not say very much about what peerhood requires. In his critique of this definition, Axel Gelfert states that reducing peerhood to the mere

⁹According to Kelly, "whether two individuals count as epistemic peers will depend on how liberal the standards for epistemic peerhood are within a given context" (2005, 175).

¹⁰In a similar vein, Roger White considers those with "equal expected reliability" as epistemic peers (2009, 236).

equal likelihood to be right is a very narrow definition since it offers “no guidance as to how best to judge whether someone is an epistemic peer or not” (2011, 512). Peerhood thus needs to be defined in a way that helps to guide our judgment.

According to Adam Elga, you can count your friend as your epistemic peer with respect to a claim, “if and only if you think that, conditional on the two of you disagreeing about the claim, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken” (2007, 499). As a result, for Elga, people with relatively divergent background beliefs tend not to see each other as peers since each believes that the other person’s background beliefs are mostly mistaken.

Again, this definition, similar to Enoch’s, fails to provide any helpful way to judge peerhood. We need a definition through which we can establish whether or not two persons are peers. Equal likelihood for being mistaken does not tell us much, since it does not give us any direction on how to compare one’s likelihood of being mistaken with another’s. Secondly, it only considers minor disagreements as epistemically significant. That is because we normally think that those with whom we seriously disagree are more likely to be mistaken. Accordingly, adopting Elga’s definition suggests that we can disregard the fact that they disagree with us. However, we usually learn more from those who challenge our fundamental beliefs.¹¹ It seems almost pointless to be challenged only by people who are like us.¹² And finally, Elga’s definition makes it too easy for an individual to escape the problem of peer disagreement. All one needs to do is to count others with different backgrounds more likely to be mistaken. As Jennifer Lackey states, “there is nothing in Elga’s framework to prevent a lack of doxastic revision being required in cases of disagreement

¹¹Robert Simpson believes that “Elga here appears to condoning a form of selective, self-serving dogmatism” (2013, 573).

¹²Jennifer Lackey thinks that Elga's definition of peerhood would make the whole question of peer disagreement epistemically uninteresting (2014, 307).

simply because someone fails to count another as a peer for wholly irrational reasons” (Lackey 2014, 307-8). Our definition, therefore, should also allow those with somehow divergent background beliefs to be peers.

Lackey suggests another definition for peerhood. In her definition, “A and B are epistemic peers relative to the question whether p when A and B are (roughly) equally justified in their beliefs regarding this question” (Lackey 2014, 312). Lackey’s definition makes it possible for those with different background beliefs to be epistemic peers, which is its main advantage over Enoch’s and Elga’s definitions. However, equality in justification is vague and open to interpretations. For example, a child who believes in the existence of Santa Claus based on several testimonies (from her parents, friends, acquaintances) seems to be equally justified with a reasonable adult who does not believe in the existence of Santa Claus. Yet, we normally do not count them as peers. Therefore, our definition should not include counter-intuitive instances of peers.

Some philosophers have tried to enumerate the criteria of epistemic peerhood. Kelly, for instance, argues that there are two possible advantages that can make a person epistemically superior to another: “a superior familiarity with or exposure to evidence and arguments that bear on the question at issue,” and “superiority with respect to general epistemic virtues” (Kelly 2005, 173-4). He, therefore, considers two individuals as epistemic peers if and only if,

(i) they are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on the question, and

(ii) they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias. (Kelly 2005, 174-5).

The first criterion (evidential equality) is important because if one of the disputants possesses additional evidence inaccessible to her dissenter, the necessary equality required for peerhood between them is broken.¹³ The second criterion (cognitive equality) is also important since such epistemic virtues typically qualify a person to assess the evidence (King 2012, 258). In this context, it is important to note that peers are *roughly* on par in terms of their evidential and cognitive competencies. We cannot expect strict evidential and cognitive equality as it “characterizes epistemic clones rather than peers” (Lackey 2013, 243).

A third criterion of “disclosure” is also introduced by Richard Feldman. Full disclosure is taken place when the dissenters have thoroughly discussed the issue and know each other’s reasons and arguments (Feldman 2006, 220). As Lackey states, it is “difficult to understand how or whether this type of disagreement ever in fact obtains” (2010, 312). Feldman agrees with this point by stating that “almost any realistic disagreement is somewhere between isolation and full disclosure” (2006, 220). So, although he does not push the disclosure criterion too hard, it appears that he still thinks that the disputants, at least partially, need to have disclosure of their evidence to be peers. But this criterion only works for cases where the disputants know each other. The concept of peerhood in itself does not imply familiarity between peers. So, the criterion of disclosure would unreasonably restrict peerhood for preventing two strangers to be peers. It is, therefore, better to define peerhood only with roughly *evidential equality* and *cognitive equality*.

1.2.2 Peers in Religious Disagreement

First, it is required to clarify what we mean by “religious disagreement.” This term can refer to disagreement among practitioners of a specific religion, e.g., Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism

¹³ We should not push this criterion too hard, as sameness of evidence is hard to meet. According to De Cruz, “people who are closely matched in training and expertise, such as dissenting philosophers of religion, will not have access to the same evidence (e.g., they will have read different papers, gone to different graduate schools).” (2019, 7)

(intra-religious disagreement). It can also refer to disagreement amongst the adherents of different religions, e.g., the disagreement between Christians and Muslims (inter-religious disagreement). But by “religious disagreement,” I have a third sense in mind: *the disagreement between theists and atheists* (extra-religious disagreement).

There are, of course, several ways to define theism and atheism. Here, I use these terms in their broad sense.¹⁴ A theist is hence somebody “who believes in the existence of some sort of divine being or divine reality,” and an atheist is someone who denies “the existence of any sort of divine being or divine reality” (Rowe 1979, 335). Obviously, there are many topics over which theists and atheists disagree, but their main disagreement, according to this definition, is over the existence of a divine being or reality.¹⁵

To identify whether or not peer disagreement can be an actual threat to the rationality of religious belief, we need to investigate the relation between peerhood and religious disagreement. So, we need to go through a number of questions. For instance, in any case of religious disagreement, we can ask:

Q1) *Are the opposing parties epistemic peers?*

Q1 does not appear to be epistemically relevant, since as Nathan King states, “it is not the mere occurrence of peer disagreement that is supposed to be epistemically significant” (2012, 252). Rather, the parties need to *see* the other as a peer for a reasonable response to become necessary.¹⁶ To make his point, King gives us the example of two peers disagreeing over an opinion while each

¹⁴According to William Rowe, in its narrow sense, a theist is “someone who believes in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, supremely good being who created the world,” and an atheist, in a narrow sense, is somebody who denies the existence of this being (1979, 335).

¹⁵I will call this being “God” for simplicity.

¹⁶ Aside from believing P and believing not-P, withholding one’s belief might be a reasonable response.

is unaware of the other's existence. It is clear that in such a case, the mere fact that they are peers does not threaten the rationality of their current belief, as they do not know that any disagreement is taking place. King concludes by claiming that "[i]t is uncontroversial ... that peer disagreement is a threat to rational belief *only if the relevant subjects have reason to think it obtains*" (2012, 261-2; italics added). As a result, in order for a disagreement to constitute a threat to one's belief, one must regard the disputant as a peer.

The next question one might ask with respect to a case of religious disagreement is:

Q2) *Does each party consider the other party an epistemic peer?*

Many philosophers claim that in messy real-world cases of disagreement, disputants rarely regard each other as peers.¹⁷ These philosophers think that people rarely find a disagreeing peer in religion, ethics, and politics; or, at least, cases of acknowledged peer disagreement do not take place in these areas as often as it does in science and mathematics. Many people make recourse to error theories to explain why their opponents are making a mistake.¹⁸ It seems that we usually demote those with whom we disagree on issues we care about from peerhood. If this is true, the rationality of religious beliefs for both theists and atheists is not threatened by peer disagreement since they do not count their opposing party as their peers. Therefore, they can simply ignore their opponents and still stay reasonable.¹⁹ As a result, peer disagreement should mostly be a hypothetical threat to the rationality of religious beliefs, not a real one.

¹⁷See, e.g., Elga (2007), King (2012), Sherman (2015), and Choo (2018).

¹⁸Some theists think that atheists disagree with them because atheists are sinful, immoral, and not open to God's grace. On the other hand, theists are sometimes criticized for failing to think adequately about religion by atheists. For some atheists, religion is caused by ignorance, fear, psychological disorders, etc.

¹⁹There are also philosophers who think that demoting the other party from peerhood should not be that simple. Michael Bergmann enumerates two reasons why it is difficult for theists to demote atheists from peerhood: (2015, 50)

1. "it seems so offensive and arrogant to conclude that people who are ethical and bright are mistaken on such an important topic, especially when there is no apparent way to resolve the difficulty through rational discussion."
2. "what story does the theist have to tell about why she, the theist, is able to have the right evidence and respond to it correctly whereas the atheist either lacks such evidence or fails to respond to it correctly?"

1.2.3 The Normative Aspect of Peerhood

The fact that the disputants participating in many cases of religious disagreement do not consider the other party as a peer does not show that cases of religious peer disagreement do not or cannot take place. We are concerned with the rationality of religious and anti-religious beliefs in spite of the widespread disagreement from the opposition, and we know that cases of peer disagreement are of significance. However, the epistemology of disagreement literature has only focused on the question of reasonable response to whom we identify as our peer and has totally ignored the question of reasonable response to whom we *should* recognize as our peer. Lackey insightfully explains the issue:

questions about rationality involve not only what is required when we disagree with those whom we in fact regard as our epistemic peers, *but also what is required when we disagree with those whom we should regard as our epistemic peers*. Surprisingly, this normative question is nearly altogether absent from the epistemology of disagreement literature. (2014, 310; original italics)

Hence, to identify the reasonable reaction to religious disagreement, we need first to investigate whether or not the opposing party *should* be considered a peer. The next question with respect to peerhood and religious disagreement is this:

Q3) *Should the opposing parties consider each other as epistemic peers?*

In a normative context, we can think of two general approaches to identifying our peers:

1. *The Optimistic Approach (TOA)*: I should recognize everybody as my peer with respect to
P unless I have a reason to regard them as my superior or inferior.

Although not all theists trouble themselves with these considerations, those morally and epistemically sensitive would be more cautious when it comes to demoting atheists from peerhood. By the same lights, some atheists have trouble demoting all theists from peerhood. This is how Richard Feldman describes his situation:

To defend my atheism, I would have to be justified in accepting some hypothesis explaining away religious belief—for example, the hypothesis that it arises from some fundamental psychological need. And, while I am inclined to believe some such hypothesis, the more I reflect on it, the more I realize that I am in no position to make any such judgment with any confidence at all. (Feldman 2007, 213)

2. *The Pessimistic Approach (TPA)*: I should recognize nobody as my peer with respect to P unless I have enough evidence to prove their peerhood.

Feldman is interpreted to be defending TOA:²⁰

If the atheists or the theists ... have any reasons for thinking that they themselves, rather than those on the other side, are the cognitive superiors in this case, then they can identify and discuss those reasons. And the result will be that the evidence shows that all should agree about who the experts are, or the evidence will show that there is no good basis for determining who the experts are. If the evidence really does identify experts, then agreeing with those experts will be the reasonable response for all. If it does not, then there will no basis for anyone to prefer one view to the other. (Feldman 2007, 210)

On the face of it, TOA seems to be in agreement with some epistemic virtues like epistemic humility. However, it has its own problems. Firstly, as Sherman mentions, when we lack sufficient evidence about others' epistemic position, TOA "will leave us sometimes overestimating others and sometimes underestimating others" (2015, 310).

Secondly, this approach is at odds with the requirements of Evidentialism, according to which we are justified in believing P if and only if we have evidence supporting P. This is how Fredrick Choo criticizes Feldman: "if we lack good reason to believe X, we ought not to believe X" (2018, 7).

In this regard, it appears that TPA is preferable since it does not have us overestimate or underestimate others, nor does it contradict Evidentialism. But TPA makes peerhood a hypothetical concept which almost never happens because we can almost never have good evidence to prove cognitive and evidential equality. This makes TPA too simple a solution to the skeptical challenge provided by the literature of peer disagreement in all areas. Moreover, this idea

²⁰Ben Sherman calls Feldman's view "The Presumption of Peerhood" and defines it as follows:

"The Presumption of Peerhood: when we know of disagreement, we should presume others are our epistemic peers, until we find mutually recognizable evidence of epistemic superiority on one side or the other." (2015, 430)

of peerhood is also at odds with our everyday usage of the term.²¹ Therefore, a compromise between these approaches is demanded:

The Realistic Approach (TRA): I should recognize nobody as my peer with respect to P unless I have a reason that increases the probability of one being my peer. Only in cases where I have such a reason, I should recognize that person as my peer with respect to P unless I have a reason to consider them as my superior or inferior.

There are several reasons which can increase the probability of peerhood: two persons having roughly similar educations, training, familiarity with evidence, moral and cognitive virtues, and so forth.

TRA requires me to ask two questions regarding a person before accepting them as a peer.²² First, I should ask if I have any reason that increases the probability of that person being my peer. If the answer is negative, I should not consider that person my peer. In such a case, we are required to be pessimistic about those we do not know or have just met, as one normally lacks any reason to increase the probability of an unknown person being one's peer. Thus, similar to what TPA requires, we should not treat them as peers unless proven otherwise.²³ On the other hand, if I answer positively to the question (i.e., if I have a reason making it probable for that person to be my peer, like those mentioned above), TRA requires me to be optimistic; therefore, similar to what TOA requires, I have to regard that person as my peer unless there is a reason for me to consider that person as superior or inferior, i.e., a symmetry breaker. So, if I answer positively to the first question, I should ask another question: whether I have any reason to consider

²¹ For instance, the "peer review" process in academic journals is certainly not following TPA.

²² See, Fig. 1.

²³ In real-world cases, we usually come across evidence that increases the probability of peerhood. Thus, there is no need to worry about TRA being too strict since it only excludes two people who share almost nothing with respect to their evidence and cognition. TOA, however, suffers from this weakness; it is too lenient when it comes to two individuals with no similarities whatsoever.

this person as my epistemic superior or inferior. If my answer to this second question is positive, I should not count that person as my peer, but if the answer is negative, I should acknowledge this person as my peer. TRA does not contradict Evidentialism, nor does it dismiss the epistemic challenge provided by the literature of peer disagreement as merely hypothetical.

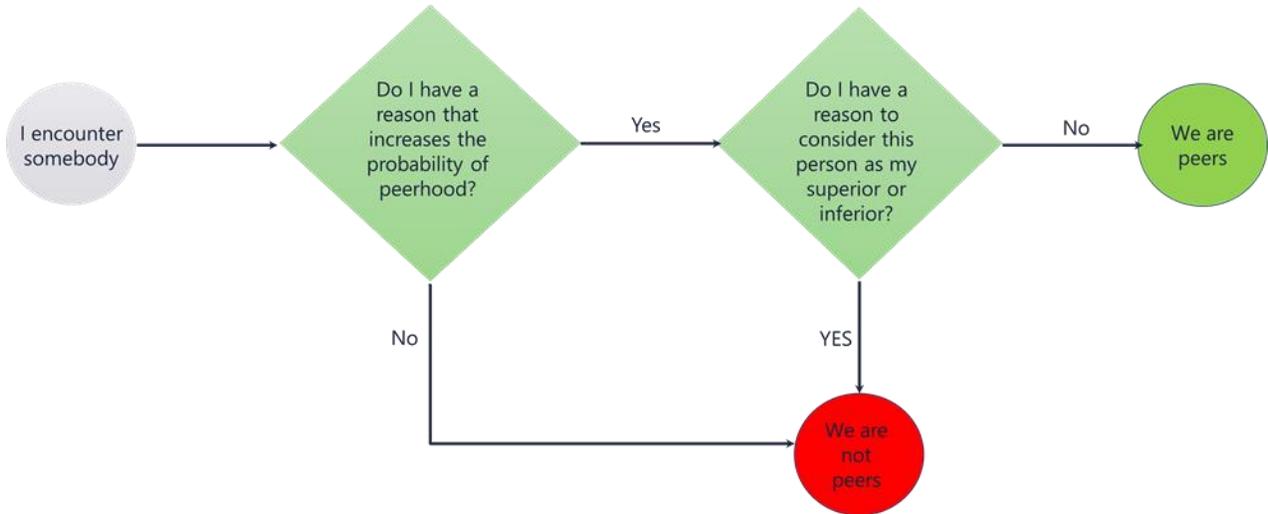


Fig. 1: The Realist Approach (TRA)

1.3 Possible Symmetry Breakers

To answer Q3, we should refer to the criteria of peerhood—cognitive equality and evidential equality. We need a *symmetry breaker* for each criterion to show that peerhood does not obtain between theists and atheists. According to Jennifer Lackey, “[a] symmetry breaker is something that indicates that the epistemic position of one of the parties to the disagreement in question is superior to the other’s” (2010, 309). If we find nothing breaking the symmetry in a case of religious disagreement, we may conclude that such disagreement is between peers.

Regarding cognitive equality, as there are morally virtuous and highly intelligent theists and atheists, there are also less morally virtuous and not nearly as intelligent theists and atheists. Therefore, depending on who the disputants are, they may or may not satisfy this criterion. What is crucial for our purpose here is that cognitive equality may, in principle, hold between a theist and an atheist. But when discussing “the asymmetry between theists and atheists,” critics usually focus on the differences in the epistemic standards between atheists and theists and on their religious experiences and seemings. I will go through both issues in what follows.

1.3.1 Epistemic Standards

The difference in epistemic standards between theists and atheists is one of the possible symmetry breakers. It can be argued that since theists and atheists have different sets of epistemic standards by which they accept different sources as evidence and evaluate them differently, their evidence is not similar and therefore, they cannot be peers.

Firstly, the argument goes, theists accept some sources as evidence that atheists totally reject. Most importantly, scripture is for theists one of the main pieces of evidence to acquire knowledge, whereas atheists do not accept scripture as a trustworthy piece of evidence. Similarly, atheists accept some sources as evidence that theists totally reject. For instance, atheists accept the philosophical arguments against the existence of God, whereas theists do not accept them as sound arguments. This difference in what each group accepts as evidence should apparently break the symmetry between these groups since peerhood requires evidential equality.

However, evidential equality requires that each side has *access* to the other side’s evidence. Having access to one another’s evidence does not require both sides to count exactly the same sources as evidence. In other words, each side should have access to all the relevant information²⁴

²⁴What I mean by relevant is what from both perspectives is considered relevant.

but might not call it “evidence” for some reason. For instance, although atheists do not accept scripture as a genuine piece of evidence, they can read it; and although theists do not accept the arguments against the existence of God admissible, they can evaluate and reject them. Thus, evidential equality is not threatened by the differences in what constitutes evidence for atheists and theists so long as they can share what they call “evidence.” According to Feldman’s definition of sharing evidence, “[w]hen people have had a full discussion of a topic and have not withheld relevant information, we will say that they have *shared their evidence* about that topic” (2007, 201; original italics). If theists and atheists have access to all the relevant information, the difference in what counts as evidence does not break the symmetry between them.

Secondly, the argument continues, theists and atheists assign different weights to each piece of evidence, which results in different doxastic attitudes toward religious claims.²⁵ For example, for a theist, testimony might be weightier than the Darwinian theory of evolution, while for an atheist, the latter is heavier than the former. There is also widespread disagreement about the force of philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God (King 2016, 137). It can be argued that this breaks the symmetry required for peerhood as pieces of evidence have different weights for each side, resulting in evidential inequality.²⁶

However, evidential equality does not require similar weight assignments for both parties. Almost certainly, there are no two individuals who assign weights to pieces of evidence exactly alike. Even if there are such individuals, they will probably never disagree with each other since they evaluate the evidence similarly.²⁷ Again, expecting peers to have totally similar weight

²⁵ This is true in other realms as well. For example, two detectives looking at the same evidence might reach different conclusions due to differences in weight assignment. (Feldman 2007, 205)

²⁶ For explanation on how bias affects our weight assignments, see, Dormandy (2018).

²⁷ Difference in assigning weights to each piece of evidence is one of the most important causes of disagreement between peers.

assignments would dismiss the problem of peer disagreement as merely hypothetical. Therefore, differences in weight assignments should not break the symmetry required for peerhood.

1.3.2 Religious Experience

Having religious experiences and seemings is also considered as a possible symmetry breaker. Many theists count their own private religious experience and seeming as evidence for their religious beliefs. Religious seeming does not “conform to the courtroom-and-laboratory paradigm of evidence” (van Inwagen 2010, 25), yet it still can be counted as evidence, as it supports one’s religious beliefs. With seeming or insight, one *feels* that one’s beliefs are correct, and this is “the phenomenology that goes with the beliefs” (Plantinga 1995, 181). Private experience, in this sense, can cause a disagreement when one side has insight and the other lacks it. Insight can also be used to explain a disagreement; for example, Peter van Inwagen explains his philosophical disagreements with David Lewis as follows:

I suppose my best guess [for the cause of the disagreement] is that I enjoy some sort of philosophical insight ... that, for all his merits, is somehow denied to Lewis. And this would have to be an insight that is incommunicable—at least *I* don’t know how to communicate it—for I have done all I can to communicate it to Lewis, and he has understood perfectly everything I have said, and he has not come to share my conclusions. (van Inwagen 1998, 30)

It can be argued that if there is such an insight, Lewis cannot be van Inwagen’s peer; therefore, the rationality of van Inwagen’s beliefs is not threatened by Lewis’s disagreement.

It is not clear why only some people claim to have religious seemings.²⁸ But when it comes to the religious arena, one’s private experience can be of a different sort, usually called “religious

²⁸According to Bergmann, ordinary theistic seemings can be triggered by “feelings of guilt or being forgiven or desperate fear or gratitude” (2015, 35). On the other hand, Plantinga thinks that people should normally have these feelings and one who does not, “has made a mistake, or has a blind spot, or hasn’t been wholly attentive, or hasn’t received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate” (1995, 182). Koehl also thinks that “[j]ust as some people have a remarkable ear for music, others might have an uncommon capacity for religious insight (Koehl 2005 quoted from Thune 2010, 719).

experience.”²⁹ But no matter how it is caused, private religious seeming and experience provide a solid reason to be satisfied with one’s religious beliefs.³⁰ For instance, it is argued that if Moses really did experience God on Mt. Sinai, he would have a strong reason not to be epistemically troubled by religious disagreement (Thune 2010, 719). Such a private experience gives an epistemic edge to the person experiencing it that breaks the symmetry necessary for peerhood.³¹ Private religious experience can also explain some theists’ “strong inclination toward theistic belief even in the face of much opposition” (Bergmann 2015, 37).

As was the case with Moses, the rationality of those who have had vivid religious experiences does not appear to be threatened by the fact that atheists disagree with them regarding religious matters. Let us assume that a theist and an atheist share their public evidence E related to the religious proposition P, but the theist has also had a religious experience. The theist’s total evidence (T*) before the disagreement would be:

E) public evidence E

T1) religious experience supporting P

And the atheist’s total evidence (A*) would be:

E) public evidence E

The asymmetry between T* and A* is obvious.³² Therefore, granted that private religious experience is evidence for one’s religious beliefs, one might argue:

²⁹ As such, religious experience is usually more epistemically reliable than what Plantinga calls “just having the feel of being right.”

³⁰ Hereafter, I use the term “religious experience” in a broad sense, including also religious insights, seemings and feelings.

³¹ We need to differentiate the degree of certitude in a person, while privately experiencing a phenomenon, and after a while the experience comes to an end. As De Cruz states, “[r]eligious experiences can be very vivid, but their memory and vividness quickly fade and leave people experiencing them unsure whether the experience was a figment of their imagination. (2019, 11)

³² Even if the theist reports his experience the asymmetry persists since reporting one’s religious experience will never bring about the same evidence as having that experience (King 2012, 257). That is because, as Stephen Reining

The Argument from Religious Experience: Theists sometimes have religious experiences that make them superior to atheists with respect to their total evidence. For its being private, religious experience constitutes inequality in the disputants' evidence.

Religious experience is thus a threat to the symmetry necessary for peerhood. The symmetry between the theist and the atheist seems to be broken by evidential inequalities. Due to its being private, the argument goes, religious experience is not communicable. So, atheists miss an important piece of evidence, according to this argument.

1.3.3 (A)religious Experience

Although “religious experiences” are usually associated with *theistic* seemings and experiences, both sides of a religious disagreement can and usually do have private seemings and experiences, which are inconsistent. Many atheists have also had private experiences that support God's nonexistence.³³ In cases in which both sides have had private experiences, a person cannot prefer her own experience over the other simply because she was the one experiencing it. She needs a reason to think that her own, rather than the other's seeming or experience, is the accurate one (Feldman 2007, 208).³⁴ Some philosophers conclude, based on the lack of a reason to privilege

explains, “reporting the experience ... does not convey all the relevant information gathered by having the experience” (2016, 407).

³³For example, Adams and Robson enumerate three possible kinds of areligious experience:

First, ... there may be experiences of the world as being inhospitable to order. Second, there may be an experience of the world as being indifferent to our hopes and concerns. Finally, there may be a feeling of ‘absurdity’ as described by certain existentialist philosophers—a feeling, that is, that life, and existence more generally, has no meaning beyond that which we give it ourselves. (Adams and Robson 2016, 60-1)

Helen De Cruz mentions another kind of areligious experience: “[t]he occurrence of evils such as the suffering of innocent children may give an atheist an experience of God's nonexistence (2019, 10).

³⁴ Similarly, in the case of van Inwagen and Lewis, we can assume that Lewis has some feeling of being correct as well. Therefore, van Inwagen's recourse to his private and incommunicable feeling cannot break the peerhood symmetry as Lewis also has such a private and incommunicable feeling, and van Inwagen has not provided any reason for his feeling being more accurate than Lewis's. Generally, as De Cruz states: “In any case, it works both ways: Lewis may have incommunicable insights about free will that are somehow denied to van Inwagen. If you have no special reasons to believe that you are less likely to be wrong, and the other seems an epistemic peer in other relevant respects, private evidence cannot break the symmetry.” (2019, 11)

(a)religious experiences, that disagreements between two sides that use their own (a)religious experiences to justify their beliefs are epistemically symmetrical. (Thune 2010, 723).

Therefore, the total evidence for an atheist (A*) before disagreeing with a theist regarding P would be:

E) public evidence E

A1) areligious experience supporting not-P

The theist's total evidence (T*) would be unchanged:

E) public evidence E

T1) religious evidence supporting P

A comparison between T* and A* demonstrates that private (a)religious experiences cannot by themselves break the symmetry required for peerhood in religious disagreement. But A1 and T1 are not necessarily symmetrical either. One's own (a)religious experience is certainly weightier for one than somebody else's, and that can cause an asymmetry. To deal with this problem, we need to change our model of religious disagreement.

1.4 Many-on-many Religious Disagreement

Another neglected fact about religious disagreement is that it is rarely a disagreement between two specific individuals. Most of the time, what challenges the rationality of our religious beliefs is not a disagreement from one specific peer but the observation that many people with comparable cognitive and evidential competencies disagree with us. As Bryan Frances states, "most of the pressing cases of religious disagreements are many-on-many, not one-on-one as is suggested by the recent epistemology literature" (2015, 187). So, we also need to discuss peerhood in many-on-

many cases of disagreement. In so doing, we need to examine the possibility of peer religious disagreement among a group of people.

I propose two arguments in this section. I call the first argument the “actual religious peerhood argument,” and it goes like this:

P1) There are some theists and some atheists who possess roughly similar cognitive and evidential capacities as I do regarding religious belief.

P2) If there are some theists and some atheists who possess roughly similar cognitive and evidential capacities as I do regarding religious belief, then I should consider these theists and atheists as my peers regarding religious belief.

C) I should consider these theists and atheists as my peers regarding religious belief.

I first discuss P2. Let us consider a group of people with roughly equal cognitive competencies and roughly equal public evidence (E). Some of them are theists who believe in the religious proposition “God exists” (P), and the others are atheists who believe in not-P. Let’s also assume that each theist and atheist has some sort of private (a)religious experience (including seemings, feelings, and insights), and they have publicly reported their private evidence to others. Now, should a member of this group count other group members (whether they agree or disagree with her) as peers?³⁵ Since they are of roughly equal competencies, according to TRA, we should regard them as peers unless we have a reason for one being superior to the others. The total evidence of a theist in the group would consist of:

E) public evidence E.

T1) one’s own private religious experience.

³⁵Note that it does not matter how many theists and atheists are in the group when we are concerned with whether or not they should be regarded as peers. Numbers matter when we have to decide the reasonable response to peer disagreement.

T2) the testimony from other theists and atheists of having (a)religious experiences.

Similarly, the total evidence of an atheist in the group would consist of:

E) public evidence E.

A1) one's own private areligious experience.

A2) the testimony from other atheists and theists of having (a)religious experiences.

All theists and atheists are aware of their disputants' evidence. Namely, a theist is aware that an atheist's total evidence is $A^* = E + A1 + A2$, and an atheist is aware that a theist's total evidence is $T^* = E + T1 + T2$. Now, according to TRA, we need to find a symmetry breaker to show that a theist and an atheist in this group are not peers. Since both are sharing the public evidence E, we can set E aside.

It appears that there is an asymmetry due to the difference between one's first-order phenomenological evidence (T1 for the theist and A1 for the atheist) and one's higher-order testimonial evidence³⁶ (T2 for the theist and A2 for the atheist). This asymmetry provides a reason for the theist and the atheist to feel superior to their disputants with respect to evidential competency. However, the asymmetry persists even when one considers only those with whom one agrees regarding P; e.g., due to the asymmetry, a theist should always feel superior to other theists because her own first-order religious experience is weightier for her than other theists' testimony of having religious experiences. This is absurd and totally counter-intuitive.

The reason that such a conclusion is reached is that we have ignored the fact that the asymmetry does not hold for only one person; rather, it holds for everybody in the group regardless of their doxastic attitude concerning P. As a result, the asymmetry almost equally exists in every group member's total evidence. In other words, theists and atheists in the group possess almost

³⁶ By "testimonial evidence," I mean the evidence obtained through another person's testimony.

symmetrically asymmetrical evidence. Hence, instead of utilizing a first-person perspective that unjustifiably favors one's own (a)religious experience, all group members should acquire a third-person perspective regarding the issue of peerhood. From a third-person perspective, the total evidence consists of:

- 1) a theist's total evidence is T*
- 2) an atheist's total evidence is A*
- 3) T* supports P
- 4) A* supports not-P

From this perspective, theists and atheists are on par with respect to their evidential competencies.

Indeed, not all members of theist and atheist communities have roughly equal cognitive and evidential competencies. So, my argument does not suggest that *all* theists and atheists *are* or *should be* peers. An atheist should not count a theist as a peer if the atheist has a reason to think that the theist is not as intelligent, or is not aware of the argument from evil. And a theist should not count an atheist as a peer if the theist has a reason to think that the atheist has a bias against theism, or has totally neglected the philosophical arguments for the existence of God.

All I have shown is that if a theist is somehow closely connected with some other theists and some atheists who have relatively similar cognitive competencies and have access to roughly similar public evidence, she *should* consider those atheists her peer with respect to P. Similarly, if an atheist is somehow closely connected with other atheists and some theists who have relatively similar cognitive competencies and have access to roughly similar public evidence, she *should* consider those theists her peer with respect to P.

But is P1 true? I think it is true for many theists and atheists. It should not be difficult for many theists and atheists to find friends, relatives, colleagues, or acquaintances in both theist and

atheist communities who are as intelligent and have roughly similar public evidence. So, the actual religious peerhood argument should work for them. But in case you find P1 false, I have a second argument called the “probabilistic religious peerhood argument”:

P1*) It is highly probable that there are some theists and some atheists who possess roughly similar cognitive and evidential capacities as I do regarding religious belief.

P2*) If it is highly probable that there are some theists and some atheists who possess roughly similar cognitive and evidential capacities as I do regarding religious belief, then it is highly probable that I have peers regarding religious belief.

C*) It is highly probable that I have peers regarding religious belief.

This argument works best for a person who is not closely connected with theists and atheists with similar cognitive and evidential competencies but still finds it probable that *there are* theists and atheists of this sort (P1*). The argument says that in such a case, it is highly probable that one has peers regarding religious belief (C*).

There are millions of theists and atheists out there that we do not know of. Most probably, a lot of these theists and atheists have roughly similar cognitive capacities as I do. Between those theists and atheists with similar cognitive capacities as mine, there are probably some who have roughly similar evidential capacities: they have more or less the same knowledge as I do regarding religious claims. So, even if P1 is not true for me, P1* should be. And P2* is nothing but stating the definition of peerhood in a probabilistic language.³⁷

Since the argument is valid, I think this much establishes C*. Of course, the challenge raised by the probabilistic religious peerhood argument is not as serious as the challenge raised by the actual religious peerhood argument. However, the rationality of one’s religious belief for

³⁷ Any definition of the form “X is Y,” can be turned into the form “if it is highly probable that X, then it is highly probable that Y.”

somebody confronted by C* is still challenged because it is highly probable that one's peers disagree on this matter. These arguments thus demonstrate that almost all reasonable theists and atheists should feel a potential threat to their religious belief from peer disagreement.

Overall, to answer Q3, I would say that there are some circumstances in which theists *should* acknowledge some atheists as their peers and vice versa. I believe that many theists and atheists find themselves in such circumstances (P1), or at least find it highly probable (P1*). In those cases, therefore, one's belief for or against the existence of God is potentially challenged by disagreement from peer opposition, and this potential challenge requires a reasonable response. In the next section, I will explore possible ways to respond to this challenge.

1.5 Reasonable Reaction to Religious Peer Disagreement

As was observed, theists and atheists can acknowledge each other as peers with respect to religious belief in some circumstances. It is now time to ask another question regarding religious peer disagreement:

Q4) How should epistemic peers reasonably react to the disagreement?

Since the reasonable reaction to disagreements with obvious superiors and inferiors is straightforward enough, we are mostly concerned here with the reasonable reaction to peer disagreement. In any case of disagreement, two options are open to the disputants: either to maintain one's belief without concession or to revise one's belief. In the following sections, we investigate which option is the reasonable reaction to religious peer disagreement.

1.5.1 Steadfast Reaction

Some philosophers (non-conformists) think that it is reasonable to stay steadfast in your belief despite the fact that a peer disagrees with you. First and foremost, they claim, it should be obvious that reasonable people can and do disagree; therefore, there is no need to revise our beliefs when disagreement occurs. In disagreements regarding philosophical issues, van Inwagen states, “it must be possible for one to be justified in accepting a philosophical thesis when there are philosophers who, by *all* objective and external criteria, are at least equally well qualified to pronounce on that thesis and who reject it” (1998, 31). For him, the mere fact that another well qualified philosopher (e.g., David Lewis) disagrees with his philosophical beliefs does not necessitate any belief revision. Van Inwagen seems to suggest that since disagreement happens all the time between peers, one is not required to revise one’s belief when confronted with a disagreeing peer.

Another argument for the reasonableness of retaining our belief in the face of disagreement suggests that disagreement is widespread in almost all areas of our lives, and if every peer disagreement required belief revision, then we would be “forced into an unacceptable degree of skepticism about controversial areas, such as philosophy, politics, and morality” (Christensen 2007, 189). Therefore, not all cases of peer disagreement should require belief revision; otherwise, we will have to be skeptical about many of our beliefs. As much as this argument correctly emphasizes the threat of skepticism, it does not show that remaining steadfast is the reasonable response to peer disagreement. While we should defend steadfastness to avoid skepticism, we cannot simply adopt steadfastness to avoid it.

Thomas Kelly has also provided an argument to defend remaining steadfast in a case of peer disagreement. According to him, when I disagree with you about P, apart from the available first-order evidence, I also count the fact that you disagree with me about P as evidence against my own belief. However, when I enumerate the reasons why I believe P, I count only the first-

order considerations supporting P, but not the fact that I myself believe that P is true. Therefore, by his lights, my evidence before the recognition of disagreement is the original, first-order evidence E, and my total evidence after finding out about the disagreement is (Kelly 2005, 190):

- 1) the original, first-order evidence E
- 2) the fact that you believe not-P on the basis of E
- 3) the fact that I believe P on the basis of E.

Since we are peers, Kelly argues, equal weights should be assigned to 2 and 3, and therefore they cancel each other out. As a result, we should only consider the first-order evidence E. In that sense, if your belief was reasonable based on the original first-order evidence E, it would still be reasonable to retain your belief after you realize a peer disagrees with you: “Our original evidence E does not simply vanish or become irrelevant once we learn what the other person believes on the basis of that evidence: rather, it continues to play a role as an important subset of the new total evidence”³⁸ (ibid). Hence, disagreement by itself does not give us any reason to revise our beliefs.³⁹

Jonathan Matheson criticizes Kelly’s argument by pointing out that one’s total evidence before recognizing disagreement is more than E. According to Matheson, my total evidence before disagreement is:

- E' = 1) the original first-order evidence E, and
- 2) the fact that I believe P on the basis of E.

Since E' is my total evidence before realizing the disagreement, the fact that you believe not-P should decrease my degree of certainty toward P because it adds a piece of evidence against P to

³⁸ In the literature of the epistemology of disagreement, Kelly’s view is usually referred to as “the Right Reasons View.”

³⁹James Kraft makes a similar claim: “It seems completely legitimate that when one has thought hard about an issue, has considered all the factors associate with the issue, and has given one’s reasons for a view, one doesn’t need to reduce confidence just by virtue of the fact that an epistemic peer disagrees” (2012, 126).

the whole body of evidence. As a result, Matheson concludes, “the discovery of a disagreement still mandates doxastic conciliation” (2009, 275).

There are also philosophers who do not support the steadfast reaction in general circumstances but think that the reasonable response to peer religious disagreement is to retain one’s belief. For example, James Kraft claims that “[i]n some circumstances it makes sense to give a *slight* edge to one’s own epistemic situation in a peer religious disagreement, given that it is harder to know whether there is some biasing or disabling factor in the opponent’s past” (2012, 150). In his view, since we have less (or no) access to others’ biases and past experiences, it is justifiable to give ourselves a slight edge. But Kraft is wrong since there might also be some insightful experience or enabling factor in my opponent’s past that I am not aware of and I lack, which should give her a slight edge. The *mere possibility* of enabling or disabling factors in my opponent should not give anybody an edge if I consider her a peer.

1.5.2 Conciliatory Reaction

The other possible response to peer disagreement is to revise our beliefs or their degree of confidence.⁴⁰ Conciliationism (conformism) states that the parties to a peer disagreement should revise their beliefs about which they disagree in a way that reduces the confidence in their original beliefs and increases the confidence in the beliefs of their opponents. For example, consider Christensen’s dinner story:

Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It’s time to pay the check, so the question we’re interested in is how much we each owe. We can all see the bill total clearly, we all agree to give a 20 percent tip, and we further agree to split the whole cost evenly, not worrying over who asked for imported water, or skipped desert, or drank more of the wine. I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our shares are \$43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly confident that our shares are \$45 each. How should I react, upon learning of her belief? (Christensen 2007, 193)

⁴⁰The proponents of the conciliatory view usually adopt a fine-grained doxastic picture, according to which we assign certain degrees of belief to each proposition. This approach gives them more maneuvering power than the coarse-grained doxastic attitudes we usually assign to a proposition: belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment.

Christensen suggests that they should both lower their confidence in their own judgments and raise their confidence in the other person's judgment. Since they are both peers with respect to basic arithmetic abilities, he argues, they "should now accord these two hypotheses roughly equal credence" (ibid).

Many proponents of the Conciliatory view maintain that one should grant one's peers the same probability of being right about the disputed issue as one gives to oneself. It is similar to a case where two thermometers give conflicting readings of the room temperature and we have no reason to suppose that my thermometer is more likely to give a correct reading than yours (White 2009, 233-4).⁴¹ This idea results in another view called the Equal Weight View:

Equal Weight View (EWV): "one should give the same weight to one's own assessments as one gives to the assessments of those one counts as one's epistemic peers." (Elga 2007, 484)

According to the EWV, the reasonable response for both parties to a peer disagreement is to *split the difference*. For instance, if I have 80% confidence in P and my friend (whom I believe to be my peer) has 20% confidence in P, we should both come up with 50% confidence in P after recognizing the disagreement.

However, critics believe that the EWV has major weaknesses. Kelly argues that the EWV only works when the original credences are reasonable (Kelly 2010, 123). For instance, if I am reasonably 80% confident in P and my friend (whom I believe to be my peer) is unreasonably 20% confident in P, the EWV still makes me lower my confidence in my belief, but this cannot be the reasonable response to the disagreement.

⁴¹ David Enoch criticizes this view by highlighting a first-person perspective: "You cannot treat yourself as just one truthometer among many, because even if you decide to do so, it will be very much you—the full, not merely the one-truthometer-among-many, you—who so decides" (2010, 962).

The other weakness of the EWV, according to Kelly, is that it makes rational belief too easy to come by in some cases. By this, Kelly means, “views for which there is in fact little good evidence or reason to think true can bootstrap their way into being rationally held simply because two irrationally overconfident peers encounter one another and confirm each other’s previously baseless opinions” (2010, 128). Even worse, adding more peers to the picture would reduce the weight of the original evidence.⁴² Ultimately, when you believe in having many peers with respect to an issue, the EWV suggests that what is reasonable to believe is almost entirely fixed by the opinions of your peers (ibid). This seems to be an absurd result of the EWV, as it ignores the importance of the first-order evidence, especially when it comes to religious disagreement.

Another criticism of the EWV is that it is self-defeating. Assume there are two philosophers, one endorsing the EWV and one advocating steadfastness, who regard each other as peers. In the steadfast philosopher’s view, she can easily stick to her guns in response to this disagreement, whereas the conciliationist is required to split the difference according to the EWV. As a result, the conciliationist can no longer endorse conciliationism. This, some critics argue, shows that the EWV is self-undermining because apparently, it is impossible to support it coherently.⁴³

In a coarse-grained doxastic model with only three options available (i.e., belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment), splitting the difference between two peers with opposing views about P results in suspending judgment about P on both sides. Many proponents of the conciliation view believe that suspension of judgment is the only reasonable response to those cases of peer disagreement in which one believes P and the other believes not-P (Feldman 2007, 212). Therefore,

⁴²Those peers should have formed their beliefs independently of one another. See, Christensen (2007, 198) and Elga (2010, 177-8).

⁴³For a response to this argument see, Elga (2010).

conciliationism provokes skepticism with respect to religious belief if a theist and an atheist regard one another to be peers. In this respect, both theists and atheists should give up on their (a)religious beliefs and suspend judgment considering religious belief—i.e., become agnostics.

1.5.3 Hybrid Views⁴⁴

Both steadfast and conciliatory views face difficulties as the reasonable response to peer disagreement, as was discussed in the previous sections. Two philosophers have proposed other views that are neither conciliatory nor steadfast, but in their views, can provide better reactions to peer disagreement: namely, Jennifer Lackey’s “Justificationist View” and Thomas Kelly’s “Total Evidence View.”

Lackey thinks that despite their differences, the steadfast and conciliatory views share a commitment to a thesis that she calls “Uniformity”:

Uniformity: Disagreement with epistemic peers functions the same epistemically in all circumstances. (Lackey 2010, 302)

For Lackey, conciliationists and steadfasters fail to properly respond to disagreement since they treat all cases of disagreement alike. We observed that a conciliationist response is suitable for Christensen’s case of dinner story. However, Lackey tells us, the conciliationist response does not work in all circumstances. Here is an example:

Estelle, Edwin, and I, who have been room-mates for the past eight years, were eating lunch together at the dining room table in our apartment. When I asked Edwin to pass the wine to Estelle, he replied, ‘Estelle isn’t here today’. Prior to this disagreement, neither Edwin nor I had any reason to think that the other is evidentially or cognitively deficient in any way, and we both sincerely avowed our respective conflicting beliefs. (Lackey 2010, 306)

Obviously, a proper response to this disagreement is not to give Edwin’s judgment the same weight as mine. Edwin is clearly mistaken, and his disagreement shows that something is wrong with him.

⁴⁴Lackey states that her view is not merely a hybrid of the two responses (Lackey 2010, 319). However, as we will see, her view straddles both camps in some sense.

Hence, the appropriate response to this disagreement is to retain my belief about Estelle's presence in the room but revise my belief about Edwin's being my peer on this issue (Lackey 2010, 307).

Lackey's point is that we should not treat every case of disagreement similarly. For cases similar to the case mentioned above, she suggests:

In a case of ordinary disagreement between A and B, if A's belief that P enjoys a very high degree of justified confidence, then A is permitted to rationally retain her same degree of belief that P if and only if A has a relevant symmetry breaker.

But in cases similar to Christensen's dinner story, she says:

In a case of ordinary disagreement between A and B, if A's belief that P enjoys a relatively low degree of justified confidence, then A is rationally required to substantially revise the degree to which she holds her belief that P. (Lackey 2010, 319)

So, what designates the appropriate response to peer disagreement over P for Lackey is how justified one's belief in P is and whether or not one has a symmetry breaker.⁴⁵ In this sense, steadfast and conciliatory responses only work in certain circumstances (Lackey 2010, 321).

Lackey's Justificationist View is rather similar to Kelly's Total Evidence View. Initially, Kelly held the steadfast view but later shifted away from it, recognizing that higher-order evidence also contributes to what is reasonable to believe (Kelly 2010, 139). According to Kelly's later view, "what it is reasonable to believe depends on both the original, first-order evidence as well as on the higher-order evidence that is afforded by the fact that one's peers believe as they do" (Kelly 2010, 142). Therefore, to determine the proper response to each case of peer disagreement, he tells

⁴⁵Note that if we have a symmetry breaker before regarding somebody as a peer, our disagreement will not be a peer disagreement in the first place. However, if we regard somebody as a peer and later find a symmetry breaker, we should demote that person from peerhood.

us, we must weigh the first-order evidence against the higher-order evidence.⁴⁶ As more peers are involved, the higher-order evidence will become stronger; clearly, two peers disagreeing with me has more evidential weight than one peer disagreeing with me (Kelly 2010, 143). But their beliefs must have been arrived at independently of one another. According to him, “numbers mean little in the absence of independence” (Kelly 2010, 148).

We can learn from Lackey and Kelly that we need to reject Uniformity and instead, contrast the evidential weight of our religious belief against the evidential weight of peerhood in each case to find the proper response to religious peer disagreement. So, in a case where a theist or atheist has very good reasons for her beliefs regarding religious matters but lacks good reasons to think that her disputants are her peers, she can stick to her guns. On the other hand, a person should move her religious beliefs closer to those of her opponents in a case where she lacks good reasons for supporting her religious beliefs but considers her disputants to be her peers. Therefore, it appears that no unified reasonable response to peer religious disagreement is required and possible. It is up to each individual to weigh pieces of first-order and higher-order evidence against one another to come to a reasonable judgment. But is it possible *for both sides of a dispute* to retain their beliefs in the face of the disagreement and still be reasonable in doing so?

1.6 Reasonable Religious Disagreement?

⁴⁶Feldman makes a very similar point: “What’s justified depends upon one’s overall evidence, and this larger body of evidence can offset whatever influence the evidence of peer disagreement might have” (2009, 298). Frances also similarly believes that “the crucial factor appears to be the disparity between one’s overall evidence for B [Belief] and one’s overall evidence for P [Peerhood]: when the former vastly outweighs the latter, it’s reasonable to stick with one’s belief B in the face of disagreement” (2015, 191).

As defined by Feldman, a reasonable disagreement is a disagreement in which each side “is reasonable (or justified) in his or her belief” (2007, 201). Feldman raises two questions with regards to reasonable disagreement:

Q5) *Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence have reasonable disagreements?*

Q6) *Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence reasonably maintain their own belief yet also think that the other party to the disagreement is also reasonable?* (Feldman 2007, 201)

For Feldman, the only reasonable response to a peer disagreement regarding P is for both sides to suspend judgment on P (Feldman 2007, 212). But whether or not the disputants are required to suspend their judgments or can reasonably hold onto their beliefs, Feldman thinks, reasonable disagreement is impossible. He thus answers negatively to Q5 and consequently Q6:

My conclusion, then, is that there cannot be reasonable disagreements of the sort I was investigating. That is, it cannot be that epistemic peers who have shared their evidence can reasonably come to different conclusions. Furthermore, they cannot reasonably conclude that both they and those with whom they disagree are reasonable in their beliefs. (Feldman 2007, 213)

Feldman’s argument against the possibility of reasonable disagreement is that if epistemic peers share their evidence, they can never draw different reasonable conclusions from it since, in his view, it is impossible for a body of evidence to support inconsistent beliefs. Known as the “Uniqueness Thesis” in the literature on the epistemology of disagreement, the idea is a crucial part of the ongoing discussion about whether theists and atheists can reasonably disagree. Hence, to give this thesis the attention it deserves, the next chapter is devoted to it.

Chapter 2

Two persons have reasonable disagreement if they hold different yet equally rational doxastic attitudes toward a proposition.⁴⁷ Reasonable disagreement is of course possible if the disputants have different bodies of evidence, but how about instances in which the evidence is shared? Can two agents who share their evidence reasonably disagree? In this chapter, I demonstrate that the possibility of reasonable disagreement is tightly connected with a thesis called “Uniqueness.” Accepting Uniqueness thus leads to the rejection of the possibility of reasonable disagreement when evidence is shared. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss arguments for and against this thesis. It is my intention to establish the possibility of reasonable disagreement, for which I propose arguments to explain how opponents to Uniqueness can defend their position.

2.1 Permissivism and its Variations

Reasonable disagreement amounts to the idea that it is possible for two persons (or groups) who share evidence to disagree about what doxastic attitude toward a specific proposition the evidence supports. Of course, reasonable disagreement is not possible in every debate. For instance, one cannot reasonably disagree with somebody who believes that “ $2 + 2 = 5$.” But the claim is an existential claim, not a universal one: there are cases in which people who share their evidence disagree with one another and stay reasonable.

Those who deny the possibility of reasonable disagreement usually hold on to a thesis called “Uniqueness.”⁴⁸ Richard Feldman defines Uniqueness as follows:

⁴⁷ By doxastic attitudes, I mean beliefs and/or credences.

⁴⁸ Also known as “The Uniqueness Theses” (Feldman 2007) and “Rational Uniqueness” (Christensen 2007).

This is the idea that a body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions (e.g., one theory out of a bunch of exclusive alternatives) and that it justifies at most one attitude toward any particular proposition (2007, 205).

As Kopec & Titelbaum (2016) have shown, the conjuncts do not express the same thing. The first conjunct can be understood as what they call “Propositional Uniqueness.” In that sense, Uniqueness is “a thesis about a special relationship that holds simply between bodies of evidence and propositions” (2016, 190).⁴⁹ The second conjunct, however, expresses a different thesis. Kopec & Titelbaum call it “Personal Uniqueness,” and it “brings agents to the picture” (ibid). These two senses of Uniqueness can be defined as:

Propositional Uniqueness: Given any body of evidence and a proposition, the evidence all-things-considered justifies either the proposition, its negation, or neither.

Personal Uniqueness: Given any body of evidence and a proposition, there is at most one doxastic attitude that any agent with that evidence is rationally permitted to take toward the proposition (Titelbaum & Kopec 2019, 206).

Propositional Uniqueness basically claims that it is impossible for a body of evidence to justify more than one proposition among the set {P, not-P, neither P nor not-P}. Personal Uniqueness basically claims that it is impossible for two different doxastic attitudes toward a proposition to be rational given a body of evidence.

Those who deny Uniqueness are Permissivists, and those who support Uniqueness are Impermissivists. Propositional Permissivism is thus the claim that the relation between a body of evidence and a proposition is not a two-place relation, and a third variable (e.g., interpretation) is

⁴⁹ Jonathan Matheson thinks that this is the only way to understand Uniqueness: “[Uniqueness] concerns propositional justification, rather than doxastic justification” (2011, 360).

also required.⁵⁰ Personal Permissivism is the claim that given a body of evidence, more than one doxastic attitude toward a proposition might be rationally permissible.⁵¹ Although both senses of Uniqueness and Permissivism are relevant to the debate over reasonable disagreement, I will primarily focus on their Personal senses, as they include agents and their beliefs; hence I reserve the terms “Uniqueness” and “Permissivism” to refer to those personal levels.

Permissivists may have different views about how much slack is rationally permissible between doxastic attitudes given the evidence and whether an agent can be aware that her case is Permissive. Based on the permissible amount of slack, we have:

Extreme (strong) Permissivism: There are cases in which it is rationally permissible to believe P, but it is also rationally permissible to believe not-P instead, given evidence E.

Moderate Permissivism: There are cases in which there is more than one rationally permissible degree of confidence one can have in P, given evidence E (White 2013, 312).

Extreme Permissivists claim that believing in P and believing in not-P are both rationally permissible in some cases, given a body of evidence. Moderate Permissivists do not accept this but claim that different degrees of confidence (credences) in P (say, 40% and 60%) are rationally permissible in some cases, given a body of evidence.

Permissive cases also differ in whether or not the agent is aware that she is in a Permissive case. A Permissive case in which the agent is aware of its Permissiveness is called an “Acknowledged Permissive case,” whereas a case in which the agent is not aware of its Permissiveness is called an “Unacknowledged Permissive case” (Titelbaum & Kopec 2019, 213).

⁵⁰ See Kelly (2013, 308-9), Kopec & Titelbaum (2016, 194), Titelbaum & Kopec (2019, 207-8).

⁵¹ See, Rosa (2012, 574).

Some philosophers embrace Permissivism only in as much as the agent is not aware that the case is Permissive. They think that it is impossible for an agent to rationally hold on to a belief while knowing that the opposite belief (or a different degree of confidence in that belief) is also rationally permissible.⁵²

2.2 Intuitive Support for Permissivism

Many philosophers think that Permissivism is *prima facie* more appealing than Impermissivism. For one thing, Permissivism seems to be in harmony with many philosophical methods, theories, and traditions. For instance, Epistemic Conservatism, the method of Reflective Equilibrium, Subjective Bayesianism, underdetermination of scientific theories, and many confirmation theories are said to be much more consistent with Permissivism than Impermissivism.⁵³ Although this does not prove that Permissivism is true *per se*, it is nevertheless an important point in favor of the theory.

Permissivism also appears to be in line with our intuition about rationality. Gideon Rosen argues:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. Paleontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs. And while it is possible that most of the parties to this dispute are irrational, this need not be the case. To the contrary, it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators. (2001, 71-2)

We often seem to think that rationality does not determine specific beliefs in every case; rational people form contradicting beliefs, or it is how it appears to us. It should be counterintuitive, at least

⁵² See, e.g., Cohen (2013).

⁵³ See, White (2005), Douven (2009), Horowitz (2014), and Jackson and Turnbull (forthcoming)

at first glance, to claim that at least one party among those careful paleontologists is being unreasonable.⁵⁴

Besides, Impermissivism becomes even more counterintuitive when we adopt a more fine-grained manner to demonstrate doxastic attitudes. Thomas Kelly claims that “as we begin to think about belief in an increasingly fine-grained way, the more counterintuitive Uniqueness becomes” (2013, 300). Suppose that the rational credence for us in the statement “tomorrow will be rainy” is 0.4562. This means that even one who has the credence of 0.4563 in this statement falls short of ideal rationality. This, however, is severely counterintuitive.⁵⁵

All and all, Impermissivists seem to have a more difficult job accounting for their position than Permissivists for the abovementioned reasons. But they still defend Uniqueness as they think Permissivism makes rational belief arbitrary.

2.3 The Arbitrariness Problem

Perhaps one of the strongest charges against Permissivism is that it makes rational belief subject to arbitrary decision-making. Inspired by this idea, Roger White devises a *reductio* argument that goes like this:⁵⁶ Assume that I am a jury member required to decide whether or not a defendant is guilty, and also that this case is an Extremely Permissive one. Since the evidence supports the

⁵⁴ Impermissivists typically respond to this argument by distinguishing between two senses of irrationality. In the first sense, one is irrational if one falls short of ideal rationality, and in the second sense, one is irrational if one is less rational than most other people. While paleontologists are totally rational in the second sense, Impermissivists argue, at least one group among them falls short of ideal rationality (Greco and Hedden 2016, 367). More on that in 2.5.1.

⁵⁵ Impermissivists might claim that the rational credence does not need to be fixed, and mushy credences are also admissible. For instance, they might say it is rational to have a credence between 0.43 and 0.47 in P. The problem remains, though, since a credence of 0.4299 in P does not meet ideal rationality, while a credence of 0.43 in P is considered ideally rational.

⁵⁶ This argument primarily attacks Extreme Permissivism. A few minor changes would make it suitable for targeting Moderate Permissivism as well.

belief that he is guilty as well as the belief that he is innocent, examining the evidence seems to be of no use. And if I have a pill that arbitrarily induces me to believe that he is guilty or innocent, I have no good reason to examine the evidence instead of just popping the pill, since in both cases, there is a 50% chance of arriving at the correct verdict. White asks, “is there any advantage, from the point of view of pursuing the truth, in carefully weighing the evidence to draw a conclusion, rather than just taking a belief-inducing pill?” (2005, 448). If the Permissive assumption is correct, White claims, carefully weighing the evidence cannot help rationally determine what I end up believing since there is no unique rational belief. Hence, my final belief will depend on some irrelevant and arbitrary factor, even if I fully scrutinize the evidence. So, why not just pop the pill? White argues that this is an absurd conclusion, which shows that the case cannot be Extremely Permissive (ibid).

The worry behind the argument seems to be that acknowledging that a case is Permissive makes epistemic factors (e.g., truth, rationality, justification, etc.) ineffective and paves the way for non-epistemic (arational) factors (e.g., taste, convenience, popularity, etc.) to play decisive roles in rational belief-formation. But Permissivists suggest strategies to escape White’s argument. The first one is to deny that any agent can ever know that a case is Permissive (Brueckner & Bundy 2012, 176). That is to say that Acknowledged Permissive cases never actually occur. But it is not clear why nobody can know that a case is Permissive if Permissive cases do occur. Besides, as Schoenfield states, accepting such a view “requires giving up on some of the considerations that motivate permissivism in the first place” (2014, 216 fn 31). The possibility of reasonable disagreement among peers is one of those considerations for us.

Permissivists can follow other strategies. For instance, they can insist on an externalist criterion upholding that rational belief should be produced through reliable methods, and therefore

deny that an agent can rationally believe P through pill-popping, even though it is rational for her to believe P.⁵⁷ They can also embrace arbitrariness and claim that pill-popping is a legitimate method to form a belief.⁵⁸ But arguably, the best responses to White's argument are presented by Thomas Kelly and Miriam Schoenfield.

2.3.1 Jamesian Goals

Kelly's first argument against White points out that epistemology does not have one particular goal; hence a difference in epistemic goals can establish different rational beliefs. This idea comes from William James. Kelly writes:

James noted that philosophers often talk about the importance of attaining truth and avoiding error, but that such talk tends to mask certain complexities. On the one hand, there is the goal of *not believing what is false*, a goal that can be successfully achieved with respect to a given issue by suspending judgment on that issue. On the other hand, there is the goal of *believing what is true*, for which suspending judgment is obviously insufficient (2013, 301).

One might end up having a different doxastic attitude from another if one assigns different weights to these cognitive goals relative to the other person. That is because "these two cognitive desiderata can pull in opposite directions" (ibid). Insisting on disbelieving falsities would make us conservative with respect to forming beliefs, whereas demanding truths would dispose us to form beliefs in a more liberal manner.

In light of this, Kelly concludes that two people can rationally hold different doxastic attitudes toward shared evidence if their cognitive goals differ:

if I learned that we differed in our cognitive goals in this way, I would be disinclined to conclude that the manner in which you are responding to our shared evidence is unreasonable, even though it differs from my own. In fact, I might even think that if you

⁵⁷ This is suggested by Brueckner & Bundy: "just because doing something would get one a rational belief does not mean that the action of pill-popping would be rational" (2012, 172).

⁵⁸ See, Brueckner & Bundy (2012, 173) and Ye (2019).

were responding to the evidence in any other way than you are, then *that* would be unreasonable, given your cognitive goals (Kelly 2013, 302).

This Jamesian argument resolves White's concern by claiming that belief-formation in a Permissive case need not be caused by arbitrary (non-epistemic) factors; rather, the weight one assigns to cognitive goals can determine what doxastic attitude is reasonable for one. As a result, although the case is Permissive, we cannot randomly choose a doxastic attitude.

One might object to Kelly's argument, saying that either only a specific weight assignment is rational or one arbitrarily assigns weights to these two cognitive goals. The former case fails to rebut White's argument, and in the latter, the problem with arbitrariness remains. In response to this possible objection, we can say that Kelly's whole point is that belief formation has an inherently subjective element that is inseparable from the process. According to Kelly, one does not arbitrarily assign weights to her cognitive goals; being subjective is not tantamount to being arbitrary. This topic will be discussed further in section 2.3.3.

2.3.2 Interpersonal versus Intrapersonal Slack

Kelly thinks that the Jamesian argument also has another import. It shows that the debate over Permissivism and Impermissivism can have two different levels:

one might arrive at a view that is *permissivist across individuals* but that is *impermissive with respect to the range of options open to any particular individual*. Someone who holds a view of this kind is prepared to countenance *interpersonal* slack (different individuals possessing the same evidence might believe differently, and each be reasonable in believing as they do), but deny the existence of *intrapersonal* slack (for any given individual, there is a uniquely reasonable thing for *her* to believe given her evidence) (Kelly 2013, 304).

Many Permissivists do not accept intrapersonal slack.⁵⁹ It is not necessary for our purposes either since interpersonal slack suffices to establish reasonable disagreement.

However, White's argument targets intrapersonal slack and not interpersonal slack. White's argument, if successful, would only show that the case is not Permissive for one jury member. His argument is, however, silent about the possibility of interpersonal Permissivism, i.e., whether two jury members can hold different but rational beliefs with respect to the same case. A Permissivist can counter White's argument by claiming that the jury member is not allowed to fix her belief arbitrarily by popping a pill since only one doxastic attitude is rational for her. Despite this, it is still possible that two jury members arrive at different but equally rational beliefs with regard to the guilt of the defendant.⁶⁰ Kelly shows that White's argument is not a problem for the Permissivist so long as she is only concerned with interpersonal slack.

2.3.3 Epistemic Standards

Miriam Schoenfield proposes another objection to White's argument. She insists on the role that epistemic standards play in our belief-formation process. According to her, "what one ought to believe depends, in part, on what epistemic standards one has. On this view, if two people with the same evidence reasonably have different opinions about whether *p*, it is because these people have each adopted a different set of reasonable epistemic standards" (Schoenfield 2014, 199). Schoenfield's argument is similar to Kelly's Jamesian argument in that both include a subjective element to the formation of beliefs, and this subjective element is responsible for the differences in the resultant doxastic attitudes. For Kelly, the subjective element is the weight one assigns to the Jamesian goals, and for Schoenfield, it is one's epistemic standards.

⁵⁹ Intrapersonal Permissivism has recently become more popular, though. See, e.g., Callahan (2019), and Jackson (2021).

⁶⁰ In White's example, it is assumed that the case is Permissive.

To examine Schoenfield's argument more closely, we need to know what she means by "epistemic standards":⁶¹

There are different ways of thinking of epistemic standards. Some people think of them as rules of the form 'Given E, believe p!' Others think of them as beliefs about the correct way to form other beliefs. If you are a Bayesian, you can think of an agent's standards as her prior and conditional probability functions. ... we can just think of a set of standards as a function from bodies of evidence to doxastic states which the agent takes to be *truth conducive*. Roughly, this means that the agent has high confidence that forming opinions using her standards will result in her having high confidence in truths and low confidence in falsehoods (ibid).

Using these epistemic standards, Schoenfield argues, agents form their beliefs, and since the standards each agent adopts might differ from that of another agent, their doxastic attitudes turn out to be different as well. But this, she tells us, does not mean that one of the agents falls short of rationality.

Our epistemic standards are caused by many external causes, such as how we are brought up. For example, if you are brought up in a religious family and community, you will have different epistemic standards than somebody who was brought up in an atheist family and community. As Schoenfield states, "the community not only caused you to believe in God, but instilled in you rational standards of reasoning that warrant belief in God" (2014, 206), and the same applies to a person with atheistic instructions.

Impermissivists, however, think this strategy just pushes back the question. Even if Schoenfield's argument can help us eliminate the arbitrariness in belief formation, they claim, it introduces another problem: the arbitrariness in epistemic standards (Feldman 2007, 206). Some philosophers show that most of our moral, political, religious, and philosophical beliefs are (at

⁶¹ Also known as "starting points" and "epistemic values" in the literature.

least partially) caused by arbitrary and arational causes such as the environment we were raised in, the schools and universities we attended, the media from which we get our information, and so forth.⁶²

This poses a *prima facie* skeptical threat to our beliefs: if I were raised in a different community, I would have different beliefs. So, how do I know that my beliefs are true? I will not discuss this problem here in particular, but it implies that we do not very often *choose* our epistemic standards in a nonarbitrary and rational manner. Therefore, resorting to these arbitrary epistemic standards fails to provide any assistance in creating nonarbitrary and rational beliefs. Impermissivists, therefore, argue that Schoenfield's maneuver does not solve the problem with arbitrariness; it just transfers the problem to another level.

Schoenfield expects this response, but she does not think that a rational agent adopts her epistemic standards arbitrarily. Contrarily, in her view, the agent must only adopt those standards she expects to be truth conducive. Schoenfield seems to suggest that if an agent finds another set of epistemic standards to be more truth conducive than her current set of epistemic standards, she must dismiss her current standards and replace them with standards that are more truth conducive.

This is how Schoenfield responds to White's argument: either the pill-popping randomly fixes a belief in the agent without changing the agent's epistemic standards, or it randomly changes the agent's standards as well. In both cases, Schoenfield argues, a Permissivist would not take the pill. In the former case, taking the pill might make the Permissivist adopt a belief which is inconsistent with her epistemic standards. We must nevertheless avoid adopting beliefs that are inconsistent with our epistemic standards. For example, if a person who is raised in a religious

⁶² See, e.g., Cohen (2000), Sher (2001), and Davis (2009).

family and acquired religious-favoring epistemic standards comes to believe that God does not exist, he will face confusion and inconsistency in his belief. That is because his epistemic standards are at odds with his religious beliefs about God. So, according to Schoenfield, if the pill does not alter one's epistemic standards, the Permissivist will refuse to take it to avoid inconsistency. In the latter case, taking the pill would make her adopt a different epistemic standard which is less truth conducive by her current lights. Again, she will refuse to take the pill since she finds her current epistemic standards to be more truth conducive (Schoenfield 2014, 201).

Schoenfield highlights the idea that our reasoning is bounded by our epistemic standards. She claims that we have no reason *independent of our epistemic standards* to think that our own standards are more truth conducive than other standards. And she thinks that this is not a weakness for Permissivism, as Impermissivists too cannot give us any reason *independent of their epistemic standards* as to why they think their standards are the uniquely rational standards. This is how she puts it:

Whether we are permissivists or not, we can never give reasons for why we weigh the evidence in one way rather than another that are independent of everything else. This is just a fact about epistemic life that we have to live with: the methods that we use to evaluate evidence are not the sorts of things we can give independent justification for (Schoenfield 2014, 202).

Schoenfield's general idea seems to be this: I form such and such doxastic attitude with respect to P given my evidence because I have so and so epistemic standards. I believe my epistemic standards to be more truth conducive than any other epistemic standards available to me. And I know that I have this belief about my own epistemic standards *because I have those standards* with which I weigh the evidence. Although this process is circular, there is no other way independent of my standards to weigh things—it is a fact about epistemic life.

Schoenfield's account appears to succeed in explaining belief-formation; however, it does not explain how her conception of epistemic standards is consistent with Permissivism, since Impermissivists may counter that if one takes his own epistemic standards to be more truth conducive than any other standards, then one should not consider another agent with different epistemic standards to be equally rational.

2.4 The Problem with Truth-Connection

In addition to arbitrariness (discussed in 2.3), there is another concern with Permissivism: that it weakens the connection between rationality and truth (accuracy) if it does not disconnect them altogether. This concern is highlighted by Impermissivists in several ways. One way to do so is to motivate a criterion for rationality called Immodesty:

Immodesty: Given a body of evidence, the doxastic attitude recommended by your own epistemic standards should uniquely maximize expected accuracy for you (Horowitz 2014, 43).

Impermissivists insist that rational agents should be Immodest with respect to their own epistemic standards, meaning that they should regard their own epistemic standards to be more truth conducive compared with any other standards. Sophie Horowitz puts it in this way:

The main motivation for Immodesty is the thought that a rational agent should be doing well by her own lights, in a particular way: roughly speaking, she should follow the epistemic rule that she rationally takes to be most truth-conducive. It would be *irrational*, the thought goes, to regard some epistemic rule as more truth-conducive than one's own, but not adopt it (ibid).

An Immodest agent would expect other epistemic standards to be less truth conducive than her own. Besides, Impermissivists add, it is irrational to adopt a set of epistemic standards which leads to doxastic attitudes with less expected accuracy (truth conduciveness). Schoenfield agrees with the Impermissivists to this degree; however, Schoenfield differs from Impermissivists in that Impermissivists stipulate that Immodesty requires that a rational agent regard other epistemic standards to be less rational since they result in less expected accuracy. Hence, an Immodest agent cannot be Permissive because Permissivism requires that the agent regards other sets of epistemic standards to be equally rational in some cases.

The argument by Immodesty also intends to demonstrate that Impermissivism better maintains the relation between rationality and accuracy than Permissivism. Impermissivists seem to connect rationality and accuracy in a clear and straightforward manner: one is rational only if one chooses the epistemic standards that lead to the highest expected accuracy in beliefs. However, Permissivists seem to have an unintuitive relation between rationality and accuracy. Christensen describes the problem as follows:

to greater or lesser degrees, it seems that almost any robustly permissive account of rationality will require an agent to think of certain others as having the following characteristics: they have all the same relevant evidence as the agent herself; their beliefs are perfectly rational given that (shared) evidence; and their beliefs are highly inaccurate. There is, one might think, something a bit odd about this combination of attitudes (2016, 590).

The oddity mentioned by Christensen concerns how Permissivists explain the accuracy of their belief and the inaccuracy of the opponent's belief while holding both beliefs to be equally rational. The Permissivist cannot explain this by differences in evidence since it is assumed that the evidence is shared between both parties. She cannot explain it by pure luck either as she gets in trouble with the arbitrariness problem. The only way for the Permissivist to explain why her belief

but not her opponent's is accurate, Christensen says, is to claim that "she has some way of forming accurate beliefs *that goes beyond reacting rationally to her evidence*" (ibid). In this sense, a Permissivist seems to suggest that, in some cases, rationality cannot determine what is an accurate belief. An accurate belief would therefore be achieved through some arational process.

This seems to pose a problem for the Permissivist since, on the one hand, she holds rational beliefs to have higher expected accuracy, but on the other hand, she seems to suggest rationality is not very helpful in pointing to accurate beliefs when it comes to Permissive cases. Along these lines, Horowitz (2019, 239) formulates two claims Permissivists should support:

Claim 1: When rationality tells us what to believe, usually what it tells us to believe is true.

Claim 2: Rationality often does not tell us what to believe.

Horowitz criticizes Permissivism for making it possible for irrational doxastic attitudes to be *more accurate* than rational doxastic attitudes. For example, assume that P is in fact true and the evidence is Permissive in a way that makes both 80% and 20% credences in P rational. Now, somebody with 70% credence in P is more accurate than another person with 20% credence in P.⁶³ However, the second person is more rational, because only having 80% or 20% credence in P is the rational response to the evidence. In such a case, Horowitz argues, Permissivists cannot explain why it is good to be rational in Permissive cases (2019, 244-5). So, this is a weakness for Permissivism since "the right theory of rationality should explain not only what rationality is, but why it is valuable for us" (Dogramaci & Horowitz 2016, 132). On the other hand, Impermissivism appears

⁶³ Credences' accuracy can be explained in the following way: if P is true, then the higher the credence regarding P, the more accurate it is.

to better explain the value of rationality. According to the Impermissivist, one should choose the rational doxastic attitude since it has the highest expected accuracy.

2.5 Defending Permissivism

In this section, I defend Permissivism by giving a definition for equal rationality that accords with Permissive ramifications. Then, I establish a Permissive connection between rationality and truth using Zagzebski's distinction between theoretical and deliberative reasons. I finally try to explain the value of rationality in a way that is consistent with Permissivism.

2.5.1 Different but Equally Rational

Let us assume that I am a scientist, and I believe P given the evidence E. I take belief in P to be both rational and true by my own lights, i.e., by my epistemic standards, S1. And I take S1 to be maximally truth conducive. Let us also assume that I have a colleague, Lucy, with whom I share E. Lucy has a different set of epistemic standards S2, that leads her to believe not-P given E. Lucy takes belief in not-P to be both rational and true, by her own lights, i.e., S2. And she takes S2 to be maximally truth conducive. In addition, for the sake of argument, suppose that P is, in fact, true. Now, Lucy has formed these two beliefs:

B1: P is false.

B2: believing not-P is rational for me (Lucy).

Clearly, B1 is false since we assumed that P is in fact, true. But what can we say about B2? I think B2 is true because Lucy takes S2 to be maximally truth conducive, and having S2 as her epistemic standards, she *blamelessly* came to the conclusion that P is false. If she otherwise believed P, her belief would be inconsistent with S2, which she takes to be maximally truth conducive. Therefore,

believing P would have been epistemically irresponsible and irrational for her. But believing not-P is epistemically responsible and rational for her since it accords with S2. Lucy should form beliefs using the epistemic standards with the highest truth conduciveness *by her own lights*. She is not supposed to form beliefs using my epistemic standards.⁶⁴

It might be objected that Lucy is irrational not *solely* for believing not-P, but for believing that S2 is maximally truth conducive, and that makes her belief in not-P irrational. I say two things about this objection. First, we usually do not know what specific set of epistemic standards are actually maximally truth conducive. There is no epistemic oracle to consult with when we adopt our epistemic standards. So, if S2 has worked well for Lucy until now, she has no reason to adopt a different set of epistemic standards.

Secondly, there is no guarantee that S1 is more truth conducive than S2. Higher truth conduciveness in one case does not guarantee more accuracy in each and every case. It is totally possible that S2 is actually more truth conducive than S1 in general but works worse in this particular case. Therefore, there is no reason to think that Lucy is being irrational neither for adopting S2 nor for believing not-P.

But can we say that Lucy and I are *equally rational*? To answer this question, we should first clarify what conception of rationality we talk about. Alvin Goldman distinguishes between two conceptions of justifiedness.⁶⁵ According to the strong conception, a person is justified in holding a belief if the belief is “formed (or sustained) by proper, suitable, or adequate methods, procedures, or processes” (Goldman 1988, 52). According to the weak conception, a person is

⁶⁴ Ralph Wedgwood writes about moral intuitions in a similar vein: “It does not seem possible for me currently to form a moral belief *directly* on the basis of *your* moral intuitions” (2010, 239).

⁶⁵ I use “justifiedness” and “rationality” interchangeably.

justified in holding a belief if the belief is “epistemically blameless” (ibid). This distinction is relevant to our discussion, for if I take myself to be rational, only those who have similar methods, procedures, or processes can be rational by my lights. Therefore, it is impossible for somebody who does not share my epistemic standards to be equally rational in the strong sense of the term.

Such a person, however, can still be rational in the weak sense, if she is rational by her own lights, i.e., she adopts her belief in a blameless manner. As Leslie Stevenson explains, I say a person who does not share my epistemic standards is rational in the weak conception of rationality if she “has lived up to her own intellectual lights and done as much as she could reasonably be expected to do in the particular cultural context and evidential situation she is in” (1999, 491). In other words, we can say somebody with different epistemic standards is rational in the weak sense if I see nothing wrong with her belief-formation process when I put myself in her shoes.

Now, I think when we talk about equal rationality, we talk about the weak conception of rationality. That is because, by the strong conception of rationality, B2 would be false in the abovementioned example. But as it was argued, B2 is true: Lucy should form beliefs according to the epistemic standards with maximum truth conduciveness by her own lights. So, we can conclude by stating that two persons are equally rational if each one is rational in the weak conception of rationality, i.e., if they are blameless in their beliefs.⁶⁶

The weak conception of rationality motivates a third-person understanding of rationality, but it should not be totally devoid of first-personal judgments. It is not enough for somebody to be rational by her own lights to be equally rational with me. Such a person should also adopt her

⁶⁶ This definition also holds true for people who have similar epistemic standards. The two conceptions of rationality have identical outcomes in such cases: two persons who are equally rational in the strong sense will also be equally rational in the weak sense.

beliefs in a blameless manner, i.e., according to her epistemic standards. But even being blameless in belief-formation is not sufficient for equal rationality because she might have adopted severely misguided epistemic standards. For example, consider an imaginary character, Jojo, who has been terribly educated by his father.⁶⁷ As a result of this education, Jojo has adopted horrible epistemic standards that usually lead him to form false beliefs. Clearly, I should not take Jojo to be equally rational with me even if he forms his beliefs blamelessly, i.e., according to his epistemic standards. Hence, it seems that I should take S to be equally rational with me if and only if:

(1) S is rational by her own lights.

(2) S has formed her beliefs blamelessly, according to her epistemic standards.

(3) I have no reason to think that S's epistemic standards are produced in and maintained by epistemically irresponsible manners, e.g., indoctrination, brainwashing, etc.⁶⁸

An Impermissivist might accept this definition for equal rationality but still claim that the possibility of equal rationality is not helpful for Permissivists since it concerns equal rationality for ordinary non-ideal agents, whereas Uniqueness is a thesis for ideally rational agents. Hence, they revise the definition of Uniqueness as follows:

⁶⁷ This character is originally made by Susan Wolf (1987) but I use it in a slightly different way.

⁶⁸ The third condition could be objected on the grounds that an individual can acquire and hold valid and truth-conducive epistemic standards through irresponsible means. Considering that this individual has truth-conducive epistemic standards, it can be argued that she should be regarded equally rational. However, rationality implies the ability to evaluate oneself. One who accepts one's epistemic standards based on irresponsible methods should not be regarded as rational even if those standards are truth-conducive. That is because the standard's validity is a result of chance and not of rational considerations.

*Uniqueness**: Given any body of evidence and proposition, there is at most one doxastic attitude that an ideal agent with that evidence is rationally permitted to take toward the proposition.⁶⁹

Viewed in this way, *Uniqueness** says there is only one doxastic attitude that an ideally rational agent would adopt, given the evidence. That doxastic attitude, the Impermissivist says, is the doxastic attitude with the highest expected accuracy.

The problem with this approach to rationality is that it makes this concept very different from “rationality” in our everyday usage of the term. To see the point, let us think of an ideally rational scientist S who performs experiments to test a well-respected scientific theory T using the best methods available in the scientific community. S performs the experiment 100 times, and each time, while waiting for the result, just for fun, tries to guess the result using a card game G. After bringing the experiments to a conclusion, it turns out that T has been accurate in 70 out of 100 experiments, while G has surprisingly been accurate in 75 out of 100 games. Now, if S is to perform the experiment and the game for the 101st time, what would be the expected accuracy of T relative to G?

In this case, it is unclear what an ideal agent would choose. We can assume S would use induction because it is a rational method. Using induction, the expected accuracy of T should be lower than the expected accuracy of G. So, ideal rationality mandates S to prefer G over T. On the other hand, it seems possible that S should prefer T over G because, for her, the success of G should be explained by chance and not by its connection to the truth. Neither choice is illogical or contrary to any norm of rationality. We lose touch with rationality in cases like this one and others

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Horowitz (2014 & 2019) and Stapleford (2018).

like it because we don't know what an ideally rational agent would do in such a situation. Whereas, if we take a non-ideally rational scientist S^* , we can say that S^* would choose T over G because S^* would not believe that G is in any way connected to the truth. This example shows that the rules governing ideal rationality are different from the rules governing rationality in the normal sense, and it is the latter that we usually value.

Besides, insisting on ideal rationality makes the Uniqueness debate almost irrelevant to the epistemology of disagreement. Our motivation to discuss Uniqueness was to see if reasonable disagreement is possible among peers. As Uniqueness* is concerned with ideal rationality, the answer should be negative since neither party would probably adopt ideal rational doxastic attitudes. This, however, robs the whole debate of any philosophical significance and appeal because by preserving Uniqueness* in this approach, almost every actual agent becomes irrational. Thus, equal rationality among ordinary agents should be relevant to the debate over Uniqueness.

This definition of equal rationality helps us to reject the arbitrariness objection to Permissivism. One need not form beliefs arbitrarily in a Permissive case; rather, one should form beliefs according to one's epistemic standards.⁷⁰ Nor are epistemic standards adopted arbitrarily. One is rationally required to adopt a set of epistemic standards with maximum expected truth conduciveness. But this does not support Uniqueness because I cannot expect others to form beliefs based on *my* epistemic standards. It would be irrational for them to adopt *mine* if they found their own epistemic standards more truth conducive. Therefore, unless there is a reason for me to think that they have adopted their epistemic standards or beliefs in a blameful way, I have no

⁷⁰ Note that this solution only addresses the problem of arbitrariness for interpersonal Permissivism, according to which two persons can have different but equally rational doxastic attitudes regarding P. Since this solution mandates the agent to form beliefs only according to the agent's epistemic standards it cannot be used to defend intrapersonal Permissivism. Anyhow, this thesis does not aim at defending intrapersonal Permissivism.

reason to believe that *I* am the only one who responded rationally to the evidence. The case *can* be Permissive, yet nothing like pill-popping would endanger one's rationality in Permissive cases.

2.5.2 Rationality and Truth

How do we judge that a belief is true if more than one belief is rational in Permissive cases? In what follows, I argue that truth judgments should be made in a totally first-personal manner. For this purpose, I use Linda Zagzebski's concepts of theoretical and deliberative reasons.

Zagzebski divides reasons into two groups: theoretical and deliberative. Theoretical reasons for believing a proposition *p*, she tells us, "are facts that are logically or probabilistically connected to the truth of *p*. They are facts (or propositions) about states of the world or experiences which, taken together, give a cumulative case for or against the fact that *p* (or the truth of *p*)" (2011, 285-6). Theoretical reasons are third-personal, according to her, which means that "they do not require a point of view to be reasons." So, these reasons are relevant from anybody's point of view.

Deliberative reasons, on the other hand, "have an essential connection to *me and only to me* in my deliberations about whether *p*. Deliberative reasons connect *me* to getting the truth of *p*, whereas theoretical reasons connect facts about the world with the truth of *p*" (Zagzebski 2011, 286). Deliberative reasons thus are only reasons for me. My deliberative reasons are not reasons for anybody else. "They are irreducibly first-personal," Zagzebski states. According to her, experience, intuition, and self-trust are examples of deliberative reasons (Zagzebski 2011, 289).

Due to their third-personal character, theoretical reasons can aggregate interpersonally. So, in case I have access to somebody else's theoretical reason, it becomes my theoretical reason as well. However, deliberative reasons do not aggregate interpersonally because of their first-personal

character. For example, your intuition does not directly give me any deliberative reason. Only if your intuition (or any other deliberative reason) *affects* my deliberative reasons, is it relevant to me: “[y]our deliberative reasons are relevant to me only in so far as they connect with *my* deliberative reasons” (Zagzebski 2011, 292).

Now, if my overall theoretical and deliberative reasons support P, I should believe that P is true, I am justified in believing P, and believing P is rational for me. Since I involve my deliberative reasons, these judgments are made in a first-personal context, and as Stevenson argues, it is impossible to reasonably believe one without believing the others in a first-personal context (1999, 478). However, my judgments about other people’s beliefs have a third-personal character: I can say that S’s theoretical and deliberative reasons support P, so believing P is rational for S. But I am not obliged to also say that P is true. From a third-person perspective, I can believe that S’s belief is rational but not true.

Therefore, in Permissive cases, I believe that my doxastic attitude, and not any other rational one(s), is the most accurate, not because it is *my* belief. Rather, I believe that my belief is the most accurate one because I have reasons (both theoretical and deliberative) to think so. Permissivists and Impermissivists are not different in that regard: both should take what their reasons support as the most accurate. Other people’s reasons do not and should not directly influence my belief-formation. Those reasons should only influence me if they influence *my* reasons. So, *my reasons* are what ultimately make me think that my belief, but not any other rational beliefs, is the most accurate belief.⁷¹ If I do not believe so, I have not responded properly to my reasons.

⁷¹ The case, however, remains to be Permissive as my reasons mandate me to believe, say, P, while somebody else’s reasons mandate them to believe, say, not-P.

2.5.3 The Value of Rationality

I have not yet responded to the Impermissivist argument that Permissivism weakens the relation between rationality and truth, thereby making it impossible for Permissivists to explain the value of rationality. It is true that Permissivism links rationality and truth less closely. But two points should be noted. First, Permissivism is an existential claim, not a universal one. Hence, Permissivists hold the same relation between rationality and truth as Impermissivists in non-Permissive cases.

More importantly, the relationship between rationality and truth should not always be as strong as what Impermissivists maintain. Rationality does not guarantee truth. As Schoenfield states, “sometimes, rational credences are terribly inaccurate. Which credences are rational, after all, depends only on the agent’s *nonfactive mental states*. Which credences are accurate, however, depends on facts about the world” (2019, 293). One need not be a Permissivist to agree with Schoenfield—any fallibilist endorses this. Thus, holding a less robust relationship between rationality and truth is not a weakness in and of itself. Impermissivists like Horowitz would accept this, but do not find it convincing as an explanation, because “for permissivism, it turns out that rationality is still not a very good way to get to the truth. (It is the best we can do, according to this argument, but the best we can do is not great)” (Horowitz 2019, 244).

So, Permissivists should still say something about the value of rationality: why is it good to be rational in a Permissive case if it is possible that a rational doxastic attitude is highly inaccurate? I think Permissivists would be better off if they provided a contrastive explanation for why rationality is valuable. A contrastive explanation is an argument that does not merely explain why A; it explains why A rather than B. So, the Permissivist might not be successful in explaining

why rationality is valuable *per se*, but she can succeed in explaining the value of rationality by arguing that it is better than irrationality.

For this purpose, we need to explain why irrationality is bad: it is bad because although it is possible for an irrational belief to be accurate, irrational beliefs are usually highly inaccurate. Therefore, it is better to have rational doxastic attitudes because irrational doxastic attitudes commonly miss the mark. This is similar to how Ralph Wedgwood explains the relationship between rationality and accuracy:

the general connection between rationality and correctness [accuracy] is this: if your way of thinking is irrational, that is *bad news* (according to what these mental states are ‘telling you’ about the world) about how correct this way of thinking is; and the more irrational this way of thinking is, the *worse* the news is about this way of thinking’s degree of correctness (2017, 213).

Therefore, Permissivists can argue that rationality is valuable since it protects us from holding very risky beliefs. While rational beliefs by no means ensure accuracy, it is safer to hold rational ones than irrational ones. This explanation may not be to the liking of those Impermissivists who want to elevate rationality to the highest level. Our task was, however, to explain why rationality is valuable, not to praise it for its greatness.

I hope to have demonstrated that Permissivism can be defended against the arguments such as arbitrariness and truth-connection. Accepting Permissivism can pave the way for allowing reasonable disagreement in some cases in which the evidence justifies more than one doxastic attitude toward a specific proposition. The next chapter will focus on this topic.

Chapter 3

Since Permissivism is an existential claim, proving it true does not tell us what particular cases are Permissive. In some cases, there is consensus that a body of evidence justifies only one doxastic attitude toward a specific proposition. However, in controversial matters such as religion, such agreement is rare, and we cannot indubitably say whether a case is Permissive simply by studying it. For these reasons, we can never prove that a particular case is Permissive; we can only say it *appears* to be Permissive. Despite this, we needed to defend Permissivism in chapter 2, because Uniqueness is at odds with the very idea of theists and atheists having reasonable religious disagreements while sharing their evidence. After demonstrating the possibility of Permissive cases, we can now discuss the possibility of reasonable disagreements in cases that are supposedly Permissive.

This chapter discusses the possibility of reasonable religious disagreements between theists and atheists. First, I examine the role of evidence in matters of religious belief and how it affects our discussion of reasonable disagreement between theists and atheists. Following that, I concentrate on a concrete case of religious disagreement between a theist and an atheist to illustrate what reasonable religious disagreements can be seen to be. Ultimately, I argue that theists and atheists *can* reasonably disagree and acknowledge each other's reasonableness.

3.1 Evidence and Religious Belief

In the first two chapters, I implicitly maintained that religious beliefs should be treated in the same manner as other beliefs. That is, to be held justifiably, religious beliefs should meet the same requirements as ordinary beliefs in terms of being responsive to evidence and reason. Nonetheless,

this is by no means an agreed-upon position toward the justification of religious beliefs. There are at least two other stances with regard to the relationship between evidence and religious beliefs. One, attributed to fideists such as Kierkegaard, claims that we should not base religious beliefs on evidence, and the other, articulated by Plantinga, claims that although one might have evidence supporting religious beliefs, what ultimately justifies such beliefs is not evidence. Each of those two views regarding the relationship between evidence and the justification of religious beliefs can make our discussion about Permissivism and Impermissivism of the evidence uninteresting, if not utterly futile. After all, if evidence plays no major role in the justification of religious beliefs, or even worse, if it has a destructive role, the possibility or impossibility of religious disagreement between theists and atheists should be sought elsewhere—not in the realms of evidence and reason. What follows discusses these two peculiar stances, but not in an effort to prove or disprove them. In light of the fact that our somewhat evidentialist approach to religious belief is not the only one available,⁷² my goal here is to explore the possibility of reasonable religious disagreement when theists refuse to rely on evidence to justify their religious beliefs.

3.1.1 Fideism

According to Plantinga, fideism is “exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth” (1983, 87). He distinguishes two grades of fideism: “moderate fideism, according to which we must rely upon faith rather than reason in religious matters, and extreme fideism, which disparages and denigrates reason” (ibid). What is important for our discussion is that according to a religious fideist, one’s religious beliefs should be based on faith rather than evidence

⁷² According to McAllister, religious evidentialism requires that “the doxastic stance one takes towards a religious doctrine should reflect the level of evidential support one has for that doctrine” (2019, 270).

and reason. Accordingly, religious beliefs should be treated differently than non-religious beliefs from this point of view. This extraordinary treatment of religious belief indeed requires justification to be further examined in what follows.

I will not discuss the arguments for fideism in depth, but instead outline Soren Kierkegaard's arguments for fideism, as explained by Robert Adams (1977). According to Adams, Kierkegaard's first argument (the approximation argument) does not disapprove of evidence, in general, as the basis for religious beliefs, but rather focuses on historical evidence, in particular. Kierkegaard claims that no historical evidence excludes the possibility of error. That is to say, we can never be absolutely certain about historical evidence, and some possibility of error (albeit very small) should always be taken into account considering such evidence. However, Kierkegaard argues, with regard to "an infinite passionate interest *no* possibility of error is too small to be worth worrying about" (1977, 230). For him, religious belief is pertinent to the idea of eternal happiness, so it cannot rest on the shaky basis of historical evidence. As a result, Kierkegaard concludes, historical evidence "is wholly inadequate" as a basis for religious belief.

In his second argument (the postponement argument), Kierkegaard states that authentic religious belief by nature requires total commitment, i.e., "one must be determined not to abandon the belief under any circumstances that one recognizes as epistemically possible" (1977, 233). The requirement for total commitment is thus what differentiates religious belief from non-religious belief, according to him. But if one's belief is entirely based on evidence, Kierkegaard argues, one cannot have a total commitment to that belief since there is always the possibility that future investigation will destroy that objective basis. In light of this possibility, one has no choice but to postpone one's total commitment to the belief. Hence, according to Kierkegaard, religious belief

should not be *entirely* based on evidence as it results in the postponement of one's total commitment to that belief.

Kierkegaard's third argument (the passion argument) prevents us from basing religious belief on any evidence that makes it probable. According to him, "the most essential and the most valuable feature of religiousness is passion, indeed an infinite passion, a passion of the greatest possible intensity," and such an infinite passion "requires objective improbability" (1977, 236). No great passion can be raised from believing a statement that is highly supported by evidence, Kierkegaard tells us, so we should refrain from basing our religious beliefs on evidence as evidence would rob us of passion for religious beliefs by making those beliefs probable. Unlike the first argument, which concerns only historical evidence and the second argument, which merely asks us to refrain from basing religious beliefs *entirely* on evidence, the third argument has a general form: it dismisses *any* evidence that makes the belief probable as a basis for religious belief.

3.1.2 Sensus Divinitatis

Based on Aquinas and Calvin's ideas, Plantinga develops a model (A/C) to demonstrate how religious beliefs can be justified without being supported by any other belief or evidence. This externalist model of justification is based on Calvin's claim that "there is a sort of instinct, a natural human tendency, a disposition, a *nisus* to form beliefs about God under a variety of conditions and in a variety of situations" (Plantinga 2000, 171). According to Calvin, there is a faculty in humans responsible for producing such instincts, tendencies, and the like in some specific circumstances.⁷³

⁷³ Following Calvin, Plantinga enumerates some of these circumstances: "the marvelous, impressive beauty of the night sky; the timeless crash and roar of the surf that resonates deep within us; the majestic grandeur of the mountains; the ancient, brooding presence of the Australian outback; the thunder of a great waterfall" (2000, 174).

The faculty is called *sensus divinitatis* or sense of divinity, and according to Plantinga, possession of this faculty can warrant one's religious beliefs produced by it:

According to the A/C model I am presenting here, theistic belief produced by the *sensus divinitatis* can also be *properly basic with respect to warrant*. It isn't just that the believer in God is within her epistemic rights in accepting theistic belief in the basic way. That is indeed so; more than that, however, this belief can have warrant for the person in question, warrant that is often sufficient for knowledge. The *sensus divinitatis* is a belief-producing faculty (or power, or mechanism) that under the right conditions produces belief that isn't evidentially based on other beliefs (2000, 178-9).

Since *sensus divinitatis* provides warrant for religious beliefs in certain circumstances with no need of being based on any evidence, Plantinga's A/C model is meant to demonstrate that the rationality of religious beliefs does not require evidence.

3.1.3 The Role of Evidence

It is important to investigate the role evidence plays in reasonable disagreement over religious matters. Following our discussion about basing religious belief on faith or *sensus divinitatis*, we need to ask whether both sides of a religious disagreement have to base their beliefs on evidence for that disagreement to be a reasonable disagreement. As was defined in §1.6, a reasonable disagreement is a disagreement in which both sides are reasonable or justified in their beliefs. If basing religious beliefs on faith or *sensus divinitatis* is epistemically responsible (which is, of course, highly controversial), then it seems that *the rationality of a theist's religious beliefs is not harmed if they are being based on faith or sensus divinitatis*. Therefore, not basing one's religious beliefs on evidence does not by itself make reasonable religious disagreement impossible.

However, it appears that not basing religious beliefs on evidence does make *acknowledged* reasonable disagreement impossible. Reasonable disagreement is acknowledged when both disputants take the other side's belief as equally rational with respect to the disputed proposition.

Atheists believe that God does not exist, so for them, having faith in the existence of God is not a valid basis for any belief. In their opinion, there is no *sensus divinitatis* either. Therefore, for atheists in general, beliefs based on faith or *sensus divinitatis* instead of evidence have been acquired irresponsibly. Consequently, the atheists would not take those theists whose beliefs are not based on evidence as equally rational regarding religious matters. As a result, acknowledged reasonable disagreement is impossible if theists' religious beliefs are not based on evidence. Next, we will discuss how religious disagreement can be reasonable if both parties to the dispute base their beliefs on evidence.

3.2 Religious Disagreement: A Concrete Case

In this section, I explore the possibility of reasonable disagreement between theists and atheists if their beliefs are based on a shared body of evidence. For this purpose, I investigate a concrete case of religious disagreement between theists and atheists, and then apply the theoretical framework outlined in the first two chapters to that case. It is worth mentioning that examining concrete cases of religious dispute and demonstrating that they appear to be Permissive cannot by itself *prove* Permissivism to be true. A robust Impermissivist would still claim that those cases that *appear* to be Permissive are, *in fact*, Impermissive. In any case, showing that given the evidence, two different doxastic attitudes seem to be equally rational, is not enough to prove Uniqueness wrong. The Impermissivist need not even go into the trouble of showing which disputant has formed an irrational doxastic attitude with respect to the disputed proposition. Nor is she obliged to designate a specific mistake in the reasoning of one side or the other. She might simply hold onto Uniqueness for epistemic or meta-epistemic considerations.

That being so, the case presented in this chapter should not be viewed as a counter-instance to Uniqueness, as neither Impermissivism nor Permissivism are falsifiable theories. Discussing this case, however, is not totally devoid of any import. First and foremost, as was briefly mentioned in §2.2, examining these cases can lend intuitive support to Permissivism, which accordingly, places the burden of proof on the Impermissivists. Secondly, they can demonstrate the feasibility of the framework provided by previous chapters of this thesis.

The following briefly discusses the philosophical debate over whether the evidence for evil significantly supports atheism. It is a debate between an atheist philosopher and a theist philosopher. Needless to say, the disagreement between them goes beyond the argument from evil. However, I limit the discussion to this argument for the sake of brevity.

3.2.1 The Evidence from Evil

In his seminal paper “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” William Rowe lays out an argument in support of atheism. The argument is an evidential argument from evil and is articulated as follows (1979, 336):⁷⁴

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

⁷⁴ There are two sorts of arguments from evil intended to support atheism. The first one is “logical,” “deductive,” or “a priori” and the other is “evidential,” “inductive,” or “a posteriori.” Rowe’s argument is of the second sort. See Mackie (1955) for a logical argument from evil. To read more about the distinction between logical and evidential arguments from evil see Howard-Snyder’s introduction to his (2008) edited volume.

3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

God in theistic traditions is described as omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good, so Rowe's argument is intended to show that the theistic God does not exist.

Rowe claims that premise (2) accords with our basic moral principles that are shared between theists and atheists. That is to say, a wholly good being would only permit intense suffering, either if the suffering leads to some greater good or if it helps prevent equally bad or worse evil. According to Rowe, this is a necessary condition for an omniscient, wholly good being, so premise (2) must be accepted.

To support premise (1), Rowe provides us with an example of intense suffering. He invites us to suppose that a distant forest goes into fire, and a fawn trapped in the forest horribly burns and suffers for several days until it dies. Now Rowe claims:

So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse. Nor does there seem to be any equally bad or worse evil so connected to the fawn's suffering that it would have had to occur had the fawn's suffering been prevented. ... An omnipotent, omniscient being could have easily prevented the fawn from being horribly burned, or, given the burning, could have spared the fawn the intense suffering by quickly ending its life. ... Since the fawn's intense suffering was preventable and, so far as we can see, pointless, doesn't it appear that premise (1) of the argument is true[?]" (1979, 337)

Instances similar to that of the fawn abound, and Rowe's point here is that these instances of suffering *seem to us* as pointless and totally preventable by an omnipotent, omniscient being. However, as Rowe himself states, "the case of the fawn's apparently pointless suffering does not *prove* that (1) is true" (ibid). All we can say is that the fawn's suffering *seems pointless to us*, but this does not entail that the fawn's suffering *is actually pointless*—i.e., it leads to no greater good and it prevents no worse evil. Therefore, Rowe's aim is not to establish the truth of (1).

Instead, Rowe wants to show that there is *rational ground* for believing (1) to be true. In other words, he wants to show that (1) is highly probable. He asks if it is “reasonable to believe that there is some greater good so intimately connected to that suffering that even an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have obtained that good without permitting that suffering or some evil at least as bad?” (ibid). For Rowe, the answer is certainly negative—even though it might be reasonable to believe that some evils are not pointless, according to him, it is not reasonable to believe that *all* the instances of suffering lead to greater goods or prevent evils at least as bad. Thus, Rowe argues that it is rational to believe (1). Since (2) is true and the argument is valid, Rowe claims, “it seems that we have *rational support* for atheism” (1979, 338).

Rowe's evidential argument from evil proved to be highly influential, and as expected, it elicited many reactions from the theists' camp. Among the criticisms, the one that Rowe himself found the most challenging was that of Stephen Wykstra (1984). Wykstra accepts Rowe's second premise, but since the rationality of premise (1) in Rowe's argument rests on *the appearance* that the fawn's suffering is pointless, he proposes a condition for the rationality of such claims (i.e., it appears that p). It is called “the Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access” (CORNEA) and is described as follows:

On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim “It appears that p” only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her (Wykstra 1984, 85).

Based on CORNEA, therefore, one is justified in claiming that “It appears that p” only if one reasonably believes that the situation would likely have been different if p were not the case.

In Wykstra's view, CORNEA's application to the fawn's case clearly shows that Rowe is not entitled to claim (1). One of the implications of taking (1) to be rational, as Rowe does, is that

“there is no outweighing good within our ken served by the fawn's suffering” (Wykstra 1984, 87). So, to pass CORNEA's test, we should be able to answer whether an outweighing good, if there was, would have been apparent to us in the case of the fawn.

Wykstra believes that we are not in the epistemic position to judge such matters since if there is a God, “his wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human's is to a one-month-old infant's” (1984, 88). Hence, it is as likely for us to discern the outweighing good in instances of suffering as it is for an infant to discern her parents' reasons for allowing her to suffer pain. Wykstra concludes that “for any selected instance of intense suffering, there is good reason to think that if there is an outweighing good of the sort at issue connected to it, we would not have epistemic access to this” (ibid). For Wykstra, CORNEA is not satisfied in the fawn's case, which means Rowe cannot reasonably believe (1).

In response to Wykstra, Rowe (1984) acknowledges that CORNEA is true but claims that the fawn's case still passes CORNEA's test. This is how he responds to Wykstra's argument:

If [God] exists it is indeed likely, if not certain, that [God]'s mind grasps many good states of affairs that do not obtain and which, *prior to their obtaining*, are such that we are simply unable to think of or imagine them. That much is reasonably clear. But the mere assumption that [God] exists gives us no reason whatever to suppose *either* that the greater goods in virtue of which he permits most sufferings are goods that come into existence far in the future of the sufferings we are aware of, *or* once they do obtain we continue to be ignorant of them and their relation to the sufferings (Rowe 1984, 98).

According to Rowe, Wykstra's analogy works if either of these conditions is met: either the good states of affairs can only be realized far in the future, or they remain beyond our ken even after they are obtained. Nonetheless, he argues, we have no reason to suppose that any of these conditions are met in all instances of suffering. Accordingly, Rowe revises Wykstra's idea in this way: If God exists then the outweighing goods in relation to which some sufferings are permitted

by God are, *antecedent to their obtaining*, beyond our ken (ibid). This, however, does neither imply that the outweighing goods will remain beyond our ken after they are obtained, nor that they will only obtain in the distant future.

Applying CORNEA to the fawn's case is, therefore, unhelpful for defending God's existence against Rowe's original evidential argument from evil, because, according to Rowe, Wykstra has not provided any justification to prevent us from claiming that "it appears that the fawn's suffering is pointless."

Wykstra (2008) does not accept Rowe's response to his objection. To argue against Rowe's "noseeum" argument,⁷⁵ he once again uses the parent analogy. According to Wykstra, when considering whether there is a good in the considerable future that justifies inflicting pain upon a child, we need to take into account "the parents' intelligence, character, and ability" as we do not consider the child's life situation to be the result of mere chance (2008, 143). Wykstra's point is that if we know that the suffering is caused by intelligent, benevolent, and caring parents, then the likelihood that there is an overall good justifying the suffering increases dramatically. Applying this analogy to the case at hand, Wykstra claims that:

if our universe is the result of the blind atomic processes, which have no grasp of the future at all, which are entirely indifferent to both remote and immediate goods or evils, suffering or happiness, and which have no power to act intentionally at all, then it is extraordinarily unlikely that many sufferings will serve outweighing goods at all, much less that if they do so, such goods would often be in the distant future. The likelihood of this increases if the world is the result of some being with intelligence and benevolence, and it increases more as we raise our estimate of this being's grasp, caring, and ability with regard to the realization of future goods (2008, 144-5).

⁷⁵ Rowe's argument is called a "noseeum" argument by Wykstra because it is based on the premise that we see no outweighing goods in many instances of suffering, and derives that there are no such goods (Wykstra 2008, 126).

Rowe (1984) argued that there is no reason to think that the outweighing goods should remain beyond our ken or be obtained only in the distant future. Wykstra in response claims that what Rowe says is acceptable only if one adopts a naturalist point of view, but if one believes in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient God, one would find the idea of the outweighing goods being beyond our ken or in the distant future much more likely, because God by definition is intelligent, benevolent, and caring. Although we see no outweighing good in the case of the fawn's suffering, Wykstra argues, Rowe is not entitled to claim that there appears to be no such good. That is because once we accept the existence of an intelligent, benevolent, and caring God, the likelihood of there being an outweighing good beyond our ken or far in the future in the fawn's case increases drastically.

In response to Wykstra, Rowe (2008) points out that there are several disanalogies between the case of God permitting suffering on his creatures and a parent permitting suffering on her child. To begin with, Rowe claims, a one-month-old infant has not yet developed the concepts necessary for comprehending that good purposes may justify parents in permitting pain, whereas, human adults already have that capacity to recognize different kinds of goods and compare them with one another. Additionally, in many instances, a parent does not prevent her child's suffering because she is unaware of the cause, incapable of stopping it, or because she has other things to do. However, since God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, offering similar reasons can never justify his allowing us to suffer (Rowe 2008, 275-6).

Apart from these disanalogies, the following reason is considered by Rowe to be the strongest reason why Wykstra's analogy fails:

What happens when a loving parent intentionally permits her child to suffer intensely for the sake of a distant good that cannot otherwise be realized? In such instances the parent attends directly to the child throughout its period of suffering, comforts the child to the best

of her ability, expresses her concern and love for the child in ways that are unmistakably clear to the child, assures the child that the suffering will end, and tries to explain, as best she can, why it is necessary for her to permit the suffering even though it is in her power to prevent it (Rowe 2008, 276).

Briefly put, Rowe argues that in the instances of the child's suffering, the parent does all in her power to soothe the child and show the suffering infant love and protection. However, in the case of the fawn, and other evils that occur to humans every day, God is not present and does not give us any assurance that the evils we endure are in the service of some goods that are beyond our ken. Had God showed us comfort and love through our sufferings, Rowe claims, Wykstra's analogy would work. For all these disanalogies, Rowe concludes that "if there is a God, the goods for the sake of which he permits horrendous human suffering are more often than not goods we know of" (ibid). As a result, according to him, we have no reason to think that if there is a God, the goods for the sake of which he permits suffering on us are beyond our ken.

Here, Rowe raises another closely connected topic in the philosophy of religion, namely, that of divine hiddenness. I will not go into that debate as it is a relatively independent issue. Although Wykstra does not continue his debate with Rowe, it seems to me that he could still defend his analogy against Rowe's criticism. Accordingly, as with most debates between theists and atheists, this one between Rowe and Wykstra does not have an undisputed winner. In the next section, I apply the theoretical framework outlined in the first two chapters to the religious debate we just discussed.

3.2.2 Applying the Theoretical Principles

Peerhood

The first step is to ensure that the dispute between Rowe and Wykstra is a case of peer disagreement. As we discussed in chapter 1, the concept of peerhood has two main components:

1) being roughly equal with respect to “familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on the question;” and, 2) being roughly equal “with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias” (Kelly 2005, 174-5). In addition, these components should be applied to concrete cases by using The Realistic Approach (TRA), which claims:

I should recognize nobody as my peer with respect to P unless I have a reason that increases the probability of one being my peer. Only in cases where I have such a reason, I should recognize that person as my peer with respect to P unless I have a reason to consider them as my superior or inferior.

In terms of the first component of peerhood (i.e., equal familiarity with evidence), Rowe and Wykstra have a reason to consider each other peers. They share all the relevant evidence and arguments: Rowe’s evidential argument from evil, the case of the fawn burning in the forest, and Wykstra’s CORNEA. They both have total access to the evidence and neither has any reason to think of himself as being superior or inferior with respect to the evidence. Therefore, they meet the first criterion for peer status.

Secondly, there is a reason for Rowe and Wykstra that increases the probability of them being peers regarding the second criterion of peerhood (i.e., equality in possessing epistemic virtues): They are both renowned philosophers of religion who have had considerable training in the field and have published in top academic venues. So, they are both highly intelligent and thoughtful. Again, neither one has any reason to think of oneself as being superior or inferior with respect to epistemic virtues. Hence, the second criterion is also met, which leads us to conclude that they *should* regard each other as epistemic peers in their debate on whether the existence of

evil significantly supports atheism. Their debate is, therefore, a case of religious peer disagreement.

Permissivism

Next, I show how the debate between Rowe and Wykstra can be understood as a Permissive religious case. Assume proposition P to be the assertion that “God exists.” Given the body of evidence E (i.e., Rowe’s evidential argument from evil, Wykstra’s CORNEA, and the fawn’s case) Rowe and Wykstra hold different beliefs regarding P. Rowe believes not-P and Wykstra believes neither P nor not-P,⁷⁶ and both philosophers think that E justifies their own doxastic attitude regarding P. If this is true, then the case is Permissive. However, it is not my aim to prove that the case is Permissive. Rather, I intend to explain how it makes sense if we take it as Permissive.

As discussed in §2.3.1, Kelly argues that the weight one assigns to the Jamesian goals of *not believing what is false* and *believing what is true* can make a difference in how two agents form rational doxastic attitudes based on their shared evidence (Kelly 2013, 301). Here, Wykstra seems to put more emphasis on *not believing what is false*. So, he does not find the evidence compelling enough to make him change his mind. Rowe, however, seems to give more weight to *believing what is true*; as a result, he believes that the fawn's suffering supports atheism.

In addition, it seems that these two philosophers differ in their beliefs about P due to differences in their epistemic principles and standards. First, although both philosophers accept CORNEA, they have different opinions about its implications. Particularly, they dispute over whether we are in a suitable epistemic position to judge matters of the sort “it appears that the

⁷⁶ Wykstra is a theist, so he ultimately believes P because of some other evidence. However, he believes that the body of evidence we are discussing does not support P or not-P.

fawn's suffering is pointless." They, therefore, disagree about how lenient we should be when applying CORNEA to the fawn's case. Second, their assessment of our relationship to an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being differ. While Wykstra thinks that our epistemic position compared to God's is similar to the epistemic position of a one-month-infant to that of her parents', Rowe disagrees.

It can be claimed that either Rowe and Wykstra's dissimilarity in assigning weights to the Jamesian goals, or their disparity in their epistemic standards, or both, have caused them to form different yet equally rational beliefs regarding P, given E. Hence, their dispute can be viewed as a Permissive case of peer religious disagreement.

Reasonable Religious Disagreement

In §1.6, we discussed two questions that Feldman (2007, 201) brings up in relation to reasonable disagreement:

Q5) Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence have reasonable disagreements?

Q6) Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence reasonably maintain their own belief yet also think that the other party to the disagreement is also reasonable?

In what follows, I shall try to answer these two questions by referring to the religious dispute between Rowe and Wykstra.

If we accept Permissivism over Uniqueness, we are entitled to the claim that in some cases, evidence justifies more than one doxastic attitude with respect to P. In that regard, our response to Q5 should be positive, i.e., epistemic peers can have reasonable disagreements in Permissive cases. Accordingly, because it is possible for two people to hold dissenting yet equally reasonable

beliefs in Permissive cases, if we accept the Rowe-Wykstra dispute as a Permissive case, then we have a case of reasonable religious disagreement.

Q6 comprises two parts, and each part requires separate treatment. First, we need to discuss whether it is reasonable for Rowe and Wykstra to maintain their initial beliefs in the face of their disagreement. In §1.5, several views on the reasonable reaction to peer disagreement were offered. Among them, the hybrid views (presented by Kelly (2010) and Lackey (2010)) appeared to be the most promising. According to these hybrid views, there is no single reasonable reaction to peer disagreement, and the reasonable response depends on the specific case at hand. Based on the hybrid views, if the disputants' initial doxastic attitudes are based upon low degrees of justification, then disagreeing with a peer enforces substantial belief revision. Nevertheless, if the dissenters' initial doxastic attitudes enjoy relatively high degrees of justification, then remaining steadfast is the reasonable course of action for the disagreeing parties.

As a result, in the dispute between Rowe and Wykstra, the level of confidence these philosophers have in their initial beliefs about P determines the reasonable reaction to the peer disagreement. Because both philosophers have devoted much thought and effort into their disputed matter, it appears fair to say that their initial beliefs have high levels of justification, so maintaining their beliefs appears to be the reasonable response to their disagreement.

The second part of Q6 concerns whether Rowe and Wykstra can count one another as reasonable despite the fact that they disagree about P. To answer this question, we should refer to the conditions discussed in §2.5.1 for equal rationality. The following are the conditions under which I should take S to be equally rational with me:

- (1) S is rational by her own lights.

(2) S has formed her beliefs blamelessly, according to her epistemic standards.

(3) I have no reason to think that S's epistemic standards are produced in and maintained by epistemically irresponsible manners, e.g., indoctrination, brainwashing, etc.

While Rowe and Wykstra are the only ones who can definitively apply these conditions to the case of their dispute, it seems that each philosopher meets these conditions from the other's point of view. First, both philosophers confidently support their claims with reasons, so each party should be viewed as rational by their own lights. Second, since both philosophers have put forth valid arguments in support of their beliefs, we can conclude that both have been blameless in forming their beliefs. And finally, neither Rowe nor Wykstra seems to have any reason that the other party's epistemic standards are produced in and maintained by epistemically irresponsible manners. As a result, Rowe and Wykstra should regard one another as being equally rational with respect to their beliefs about the disputed matter.

Our response to Q6 should then be positive as well because these epistemic peers can reasonably maintain their beliefs in the face of their disagreement while thinking that the other party is also reasonable. The religious disagreement between Rowe and Wykstra can thus be understood as a peer disagreement over a Permissive case that constitutes reasonable religious disagreement, in which the dissenters should maintain their original beliefs and count each other as reasonable.

To sum up, reasonable religious disagreements are possible if the case is Permissive and the disputants form their beliefs in justifiable manners. Moreover, it is essential that both the theist and the atheist base their beliefs on their shared evidence in order to have an acknowledged reasonable disagreement.

Conclusion

If what I have said throughout this thesis is correct, then even though theists and atheists normally do not count one another as peers, they are rationally required to do so in some circumstances. Those are circumstances in which theists and atheists find or can think of others with roughly similar intelligence, competence, and familiarity with evidence agreeing or disagreeing with them. This shows that peer disagreement should be considered as *prima facie* defeater to one's religious beliefs.

There are several views about how peers should reasonably respond to the fact that they disagree with each other. In this thesis, I favored the hybrid views that argue for a holistic view of evidence when considering the reasonable course of action in response to disagreement. According to such hybrid views, if the initial belief of a dissenter has a low degree of justification and, on the other hand, the evidence from disagreement is strong, then the dissenter has to conciliate. However, if the dissenter's initial belief has a high degree of justification and the evidence from disagreement is relatively weak, then the dissenter should maintain one's belief.

In the second chapter, I argued for Permissivism which claims that in some cases, the body of evidence supports more than one doxastic attitude toward a proposition. If the disagreement between the theist and the atheist establishes a Permissive case, then the evidence from disagreement is weak, because in a Permissive case, two agents can have rational disagreeing beliefs. In that case, the fact that one agent has a different opinion does not amount to strong evidence against the other's belief.

As a result, given that the religious case we are focusing on is Permissive, according to hybrid views, the evidence from peer disagreement is relatively weak. Therefore, if their original

beliefs enjoy high levels of justification, theists and atheists should remain steadfast in the face of their disagreement. In other words, the *prima facie* defeater caused by religious disagreement should not be used as an argument for compelling atheists and theists to conciliate in every situation.

All of these lead us to accept that reasonable religious disagreement between theists and atheists is possible. So, my answer to the question in the thesis title is positive. In addition, I argued that it is possible for theists and atheists as epistemic peers to reasonably maintain their own beliefs while thinking that the other party to the disagreement is also reasonable.

My discussion of reasonable religious disagreement, however, may raise some eyebrows as it seems that I have succumbed to relativism. In order to address this concern, some clarification is needed. At least two senses of relativism are relevant to this topic: alethic relativism (relativism about truth) and epistemic relativism (relativism about rationality). Alethic relativism claims that what is true for one (individual or group) might not be true for another (individual or group). Epistemic relativism, on the other hand, claims that what is rational for one (individual or group) might not be rational for another.⁷⁷

As this thesis makes no claim regarding the relativity of truth, my position is not even close to alethic relativism. Theists and atheists can reasonably disagree and even look upon each other as equally reasonable, yet still believe that only one belief can be true. Acknowledging the possibility of reasonable disagreement does, however, go hand in hand with epistemic relativism. In the absence of a rational resolution of their dispute, theists and atheists are rationally bound to

⁷⁷ See, Baghramian and Carter (2020).

their beliefs based on their underlying epistemic frameworks. As such, reasonable disagreement leads to epistemic relativism but not alethic relativism.

In addition to the epistemic conclusions drawn from the topic of reasonable religious disagreement, some practical benefits can also be inferred from this discussion. For one thing, the possibility of extra-religious practical collaboration is reinforced when theists and atheists regard one another as equally reasonable. Accordingly, the epistemic setup suggested in this thesis could pave the way for pragmatic investigations regarding religious disagreements.

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