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Nonconciliation in Peer Disagreement: Its Phenomenology and Its Rationality

Terry Horgan and Matjaž Potrč

The "nonconciliation" position concerning the problem of peer disagreement asserts that if one finds oneself in disagreement about some proposition *p* with someone whom one regards as an "epistemic peer" concerning matters like the one at issue, and one finds oneself still believing *p* and still regarding *p* as being belief-worthy in light of one's overall available evidence, then it is rationally permissible—perhaps even rationally mandatory—to "stick to one's guns" by continuing to believe *p*. (The "conciliation" position, by contrast, asserts that in such circumstances, one is rationally obligated to stop believing *p*—whether or not one is psychologically capable of doing so.) In this paper we will argue in favor of nonconciliation. On our version of this position, there is an important respect in which one can, and often should, adjust one's epistemic attitude regarding *p* in light of known peer disagreement, while yet continuing to believe *p*—viz., one can believe *p less strongly* than one did before. This fact allows our account to accommodate what is right in conciliationism, while repudiating conciliation itself. (Strength of belief must be sharply distinguished from epistemic probability.) Throughout the paper we will place heavy emphasis on matters of phenomenology—on how things *seem epistemically* with respect to the net evidential import vis-a-vis *p* of one's available evidence, and on how such phenomenology is affected by the awareness that an interlocutor whom one regards as an epistemic peer disagrees with oneself about *p*.

1. Re-framing the debate, I: Incorporating strength of belief

Among one's beliefs, one holds some of these beliefs more strongly than others. There is nothing mysterious about this; roughly, the strength of one's belief in a proposition *p* depends upon the strength, vis-a-vis *p*, of one's available evidence. Although the proposition *Washington D.C. is the national capitol of the United States of America* and the proposition *Aristotle was a teacher of Alexander the Great* are both evidentially well warranted for most of us—and are both sufficiently well warranted evidentially to be epistemically belief-worthy—nonetheless virtually all of us have *stronger* evidence for the former than we do for the latter. Accordingly, virtually all of us hold the former belief more strongly than we hold the latter. Roughly, at least, degree of strength with which one holds a belief is a matter of the extent to which the strength of the available evidence one has for that belief exceeds the strength of evidence that would suffice to propositionally justify that belief.

Strength of belief, understood pre-theoretically and common-sensically, is a qualitative notion, not a quantitative one. (Likewise for the notion of *evidential* strength.) Strength of belief exhibits comparative qualitative degrees: some beliefs are held more strongly than others. It also exhibits non-comparative qualitative degrees: some beliefs are held very strongly, others are held somewhat strongly, etc. Although a card-carrying member of the Society for Exact Philosophy might seek to refine this qualitative notion, in both its comparative and its noncomparative aspects, into a quantitative one (and might seek to do the same for the qualitative notion of evidential strength), all that will be needed for our present purposes is the qualitative notion.[1]

Strength of belief should be sharply distinguished from a distinct notion: (quantitative) *degree of confidence* in *p,* on a scale of zero to one. The difference is not just that the former notion is qualitative whereas the latter is quantitative. Rather, varying strengths that might be possessed by a belief that *p* are features that can only accrue to a *full-fledged* belief that *p*; and a full-fledged belief that *p* is a psychological state that coincides with having degree-one confidence in *p* on the zero-to-one confidence scale. On this latter scale, the psychological state that coincides with degree-zero confidence in *p* is *belief that not-p*; and for any r, $0 < r < 1$, what coincides with degree-r confidence in *p* is a psychological state in which (i) one neither believes *p* nor

[1] We ourselves believe (strongly!) that there is no sufficiently well motivated, sufficiently non-arbitrary, way to refine the qualitative notions of belief strength and evidential strength into quantitative notions—let alone any way to do so that is unique (or is unique up to linear transformations). Some of our reasons for this negative belief will emerge below.

believes *not-p* and (ii) one assigns epistemic probability r to *p*.[2]

Unfortunately, there do not seem to be any words of ordinary English that unambiguously express the distinct notions that we are here calling strength of belief and degree of confidence. One could instead employ the word 'confidence' for the latter and the word 'strength' for the former, consistently with ordinary usage. But the important thing is to recognize, and to keep well in mind, that the two notions are both intelligible and are distinct from one another. (This is something that, unfortunately, far too often is not done—not in philosophy, and not in the various disciplines that sometimes invoke epistemic probability to model behavior, decisionmaking and belief formation.) Our present use of the words 'strength' and 'confidence' should therefore be regarded as somewhat stipulative.[3]

Since a belief that *p* can be held with varying degrees of strength, while yet all the while still being held, the possibility of strength-variation is surely relevant to the current debate between advocates of conciliation and advocates of nonconciliation concerning peer disagreement. Those, like ourselves, who favor nonconciliation might very well be able to appeal to the notion of belief-strength as a way of accommodating whatever is right in the conciliation view. We will return to this theme in Sections 2, 3, and 8 below.

2. Re-framing the debate, II: The limited relevance of quantitative degrees of confidence

In philosophy and in various other disciplines, it is widely thought that belief comes in various quantitative degrees, on a scale from zero to one. The idea is that what we above called (quantitative) degrees of confidence are literally degrees of *belief*: degree-one confidence in *p* is *full* belief, whereas any other degree of confidence in *p*, on the zero-to-one scale, is a *partial* belief in *p*. In philosophy these posited belief-states, both the full beliefs and the various putative kinds of "partial" belief, typically are called "credences."[4]

Among those who construe belief this way, there are two approaches to the vast majority of those human psychological states that are ordinarily described just as beliefs, simpliciter. One group, who we will call the *soft-liners*, construes such ascriptions literally, and treats everyday so-called belief-states as having degree one on the zero-to-one confidence scale. The other group, the *hard-liners*, holds that only propositions that are certain—in some very demanding sense of 'certain'—can literally be believed with degree one; on this view, most states that are ordinarily described as beliefs simpliciter are really partial beliefs involving some confidence level that is high but also is less than one. (The hard-liners hold that only propositions such as logical truths, analytic truths, and the like can literally be believed to degree one.)

How will our argument in the remainder of this paper connect with the views of the soft-liners and the hard-liners, respectively? Consider first the soft-liners. Given their views about the nature of belief, the *primary* question at issue in the philosophical debate about peer disagreement is this: Is the correct position about rationality, in situations of peer disagreement, the conciliation view or the nonconciliation view? The question of what degree of "partial belief" one ought rationally to adopt, in a given case of peer disagreement, is a *subsidiary* question—and one that only arises if one has already opted for conciliation vis-a-vis the primary question. So, since our argument below will be in favor of nonconciliation, that argument will (if successful) render the subsidiary question moot. If indeed one normally should retain one's degree-one belief in *p*, in the face of disagreement with someone who one regards as one's epistemic peer, then the question of how one should adjust one's credence in *p* simply does not arise. One *shouldn't* adjust one's credence at all. (Perhaps the *strength* of one's belief in *p* should diminish, but that's another matter; cf. Sections 3 and 8 below.)

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[2]More about epistemic probability in Section 2 below.

[3]The element of stipulation perhaps could be lessened by adopting more cumbersome terminology. What we are calling quantitative degree of confidence (on the zero-to-one scale) could instead be called quantitative degree of *acceptance-relevant* confidence—the idea being that degree one on this scale coincides with being confident enough in a given proposition to actually *believe* it. What we are calling strength of belief could instead be called strength of *full* belief—the idea being that strength is not a feature that would attach to putative "partial beliefs" (i.e., to so-called "credences").

[4]Although it sometimes matters that so-called credences are supposed to be quantitative degrees of belief—and philosophical discussions of peer disagreement are a case where this *does* matter—at other times it really doesn't matter. The term 'credence' tends to be used nowadays as essentially just a synonym for 'epistemic probability', and in some philosophical contexts the issues under discussion are orthogonal to the question whether epistemic probability should be construed as quantitative degree of belief or instead should be construed some other way.

What about the hard-liners? First, it is important to appreciate how different the whole issue of peer disagreement looks to them than it looks to the rest of us—to those of us who maintain that the states normally called "beliefs" are states that have degree *one* on the zero-to-one confidence scale. From their perspective, the credence that a person has with respect to any given proposition *p*—unless *p* is a strongly certain proposition like an obvious logical truth or an obvious analytic truth—will be some quantity *r* that is less than 1; and, if *r* is sufficiently high on the zero-to-one confidence scale, then the person's psychological state will be the kind that the folk loosely describe just as *believing that p*. Second, the hard-liners' conception of credence at least seriously blurs, and perhaps entirely obliterates, the distinction we drew in Section 1 between strength of belief and degree of confidence. In light of these two facts, it appears to us that our discussion below will not directly engage the hard-liners, because our discussion will presuppose both (i) that the mental states commonly called beliefs simpliciter have degree 1 on the zero-to-one confidence scale, and (ii) that the distinction between strength of belief on one hand, and degree of confidence (on the zero-to-one scale) on the other hand, is both meaningful and important. By our lights, the philosophical problem of peer disagreement that arises for hard-liners is really a *different* philosophical problem than the one that arises for the rest of us, because their underlying conception of belief is so radically different from ours. And by our lights, that conception of belief is just mistaken. (One crucial mistake the hard-liners make, inter alia, is to confuse the quantitative degree of confidence that would constitute full belief—viz., degree-1 confidence—with a very demanding kind of certainty that itself is better construed as maximal *strength* of (full) belief.) So we are not directly addressing the hard-liners in the body of this paper.

We are, however, addressing the hard-liners indirectly. This is because our principal claims in this paper, and our principal line of argument, probably can be transposed into their own framework. Where we speak of various strengths possessed by full-fledged beliefs, the hard-liners could speak of very high credences all of which are at or above a degree of partial belief high enough that the folk would describe any such credence as a belief simpliciter. And our argument for nonconciliation could be interpreted by the hard-liners as an argument for the claim that often it is rationally permissible (and perhaps even rationally mandatory) to retain one's initial credence in *p*, even in the face of peer disagreement.

Before moving on, let us briefly record some of our own views about so-called "credence." (Our argument in the body of the paper will not depend on what we say in the remainder of the present paragraph.) First, for almost any proposition *p* that an ordinary person neither believes nor disbelieves, normally there will not be any psychologically real state of the person that constitutes some specific, quantitative, degree of confidence on the zero-to-one scale. Rather, at most the person will probably only have some *qualitative* degree of confidence, such as "quite likely on the evidence," "somewhat more likely than unlikely on the evidence," and the like. (Exceptions arise for cases where one has sufficient evidence to ground specific epistemic probabilities: card selections, dice tossings, coin flips, random selections of balls from urns when one knows the number of balls of each color, etc.) Second, even if such partial, quantitative confidence-states *are* often psychologically real, there is no particular reason to think that people will be especially reliable in accessing and reporting their own credence states, or that reliable third-person methods are available either. (Querying folks about hypothetical bets they would accept is problematic in various respects—inter alia, (i) because answers to forced-choice questions are apt to be somewhat arbitrarily given simply because the choice *is* forced, (ii) there is no particularly good reason to think that someone's judgment about what they would do in a hypothetical betting situation accurately reflects what they would *actually* do in such a situation, and (iii) hypothetical betting dispositions sometimes are more pertinent to strength of belief than they are to zero-to-one-scale degree of confidence.) Third, the very idea of "partial belief" is just conceptually confused, because belief is a "yes-no" kind of psychological state: either one believes *p*, punkt, or one does not believe *p*, punkt. (This observation is compatible with acknowledging that the concept of belief is somewhat vague, so that in some cases there may be no clear fact of the matter about whether someone believes that *p* or not.) In short: (1) quantitative degrees of confidence are mostly psychological mythology, (2) such putative psychological states would not be reliably measurable even if they were real, and (3) the very notion of "partial belief" is a conceptual confusion.[5]

[5]We ourselves do not construe epistemic probability as quantitative "partial degree of belief." We are inclined instead to construe it as quantitative degree of *acceptance-relevant evidential support* (on the zero-to-one scale)–the idea being that a proposition's having epistemic probability 1 coincides with it having sufficient evidential support to be propositionally justified. Epistemic probability should not be conflated with what we ourselves would call *strength of propositional justification.* Comparative and noncomparative strengths of propositional justification (which are typically

3. Dialectical dynamics and the ethics of belief

Clifford's famous paper "The Ethics of Belief" was the focus of Peter van Inwagen's seminal paper on peer disagreement (van Inwagen, 1996). The expression 'the ethics of belief' aptly captures the deontological dimension of epistemic appraisal, which has to do with matters of epistemic *responsibility* in inquiry and in belief-formation. (We leave to one side the question whether, and if so how, epistemic responsibility is related to moral responsibility.) Epistemic responsibilities accrue both to matters under an agent's voluntary control—e.g., actions one might take in the course of inquiry on an issue, such as reading certain texts on the issue—and to belief-formation itself (which most philosophers, including us, believe is non-voluntary). The imperative to be epistemically responsible, both in one's inquiry and in one's belief formation, should not be controversial; it can be, and should be, acknowledged by both "evidentialists" and "reliabilists," and by both "externalists" and "internalists." It should be common ground in epistemology.

Recent discussions of the problem of peer disagreement typically have paid scant attention to the process of dialectical exchange with an epistemic peer, and instead normally have focused (often implicitly) on the presumed *upshot* of such a process. In addressing the issue of peer disagreement, however, it is important to make explicit the fact that epistemic agents face epistemic demands to engage in epistemically responsible inquiry—and that the justificatory status of their beliefs about controversial matters will depend in part on the extent to which they have actually met such responsibilities. What constitutes epistemically responsible inquiry in a given instance, and what constitutes being justified in believing that one has *adequately honored* one's responsibilities with respect to a given issue (and in relation to a given dialectical exchange), are complex and difficult questions that we cannot pursue at any length here. But there are several points that deserve underscoring.

First, at any point in time at which one believes *p*, one ought to be justified in regarding oneself as *thusfar* having been responsible enough in one's inquiry-to-date concerning *p* that the current state of one's ongoing inquiry-process, in respects *other* than the possible known disagreement with one's peer, is not such as to constitute a defeater of one's current overall evidence in favor of *p*. (In effect, we think, something like this is typically assumed true concerning prototypical situations in which peer disagreement arises.)

Second, the *strength* of one's belief in *p* might very well go up or down in various ways during the course of inquiry, particularly when the inquiry takes the form of dialectical give-and-take with a peer with whom one disagrees about the truth or falsity of *p*. Indeed, it is very plausible on phenomenological grounds that this happens *frequently*. It is also very plausible that its happening is often rationally appropriate. In particular, sometimes what happens—and should happen—is that the strength of one's belief in *p diminishes* somewhat, at least temporarily, upon first learning of the peer's disagreement with oneself or upon first exposure to certain considerations that the peer puts forward in support of her/his opposing belief. (More on this in Section 8.)

Third, being non-dogmatic—an important aspect of epistemically responsible inquiry—involves not just a disposition to suspend or reverse one's belief in *p* should the apparent net import of the evidence come to warrant that, but also involves a disposition to believe *p* with less (or more) *strength* than one currently does, should that become rationally appropriate in the course of dialectical dynamics. And again, phenomenologically it seems clear that such modulation in belief-strength often does occur during dialectical disputation—for instance, in disputation, with philosophers one respects, about some philosophical issue.

Fourth, one can perfectly well continue to believe *p*, and continue to be justified in regarding *p* as belief-worthily supported by one's net available evidence, and continue to be justified in believing that there is nothing about one's inquiry-process-to-date that constitutes an epistemic defeater for one's current justification for believing *p*, while still believing that epistemic responsibility requires—or anyway makes highly desirable—the continuation of inquiry (including, perhaps, the continuation of a particular dialectical dispute). In general, one is not epistemically required to suspend belief until the whole discussion is over.

In what follows, we will assume that the epistemic requirements regarding responsible epistemic inquiry vis-a-vis a given controversial issue, whatever these requirements are, have been met by the agents in the situations of peer disagreement that we are discussing—and that the agents justifiably *believe* that this is so. For the most part, these assumptions will be left implicit in what we say, although occasionally we may inject an explicit reminder.

4. The phenomenology of peer disagreement

What is the phenomenology of peer disagreement? I.e., what is it like, experientially, to find oneself in disagreement about *p* with someone who one regards as an epistemic peer about issues of the kind under consideration? Our purpose in this section is to answer this question with as much descriptive accuracy as we can, guided primarily by introspective recollection: bringing to mind various disputes with respected peers that one has been party to in philosophy, and attending introspectively to one's own phenomenology as a party to such a dispute. (Needless to say, practically every issue in philosophy is subject to disputation among parties who display respect for one another.) The hope is that what we say will resonate with you the reader—will accord with your own introspective recollection about the experience of dialectical disputation with interlocutors you respect intellectually. It will emerge that the question has two quite different answers, pertaining to two distinct kinds of disagreement.

We begin with a distinction. Let a *global* epistemic peer be someone who is one's own epistemic peer with respect to a certain subject matter—perhaps quite general in scope, or perhaps fairly circumscribed—that both (i) includes the currently disputed issue as a proper part, and yet (ii) is broader in scope than the currently disputed issue. And let a *local* epistemic peer be someone who is one's own epistemic peer with respect to the currently disputed issue itself. It is important to appreciate that someone could be one's global epistemic peer, with respect to some subject matter that includes the currently disputed issue, without also being one's local epistemic peer with respect to that issue itself.

Now to our phenomenological question. Two distinct kinds of situation can be distinguished, differing markedly in their phenomenology. First are situations in which one learns that oneself and another person have differing beliefs about some specific matter, and one finds oneself regarding the other person as one's local epistemic peer. One such case, frequently discussed in the recent literature (e.g., Christensen, 2009), is where the other person and oneself each have mentally added up the items on a check after a meal and have arrived at different beliefs about the total cost of the meal. In such a situation, one is apt to find oneself regarding the other person as one's local epistemic peer with respect to mental math—i.e., not only as being one's peer in mental math generally, but also as being one's peer with respect to the specific mental-math task at hand. Accordingly, one also is apt to find oneself believing that the possibility of having made an addition error oneself is equally as likely as the possibility that the other person made an addition error—and, for that reason, one is apt to find oneself *no longer holding* one's earlier belief about the check-total (the belief one formed via mental math). This is an example of what we will call the phenomenology of *epistemic conciliation*: one finds oneself regarding the other person as a local epistemic peer, and so, since one's earlier belief conflicts with the other person's belief, one finds oneself no longer holding that belief. A key component of the phenomenology of epistemic conciliation, of course, is the phenomenology of *local epistemic peerhood*.

In sharp contrast to such situations are ones with the following features. Although one does regard the other person as one's global epistemic peer—or perhaps even one's epistemic superior—with respect to matters that include the matter now at issue (viz., the proposition *p*), and although one knows that both parties have engaged in epistemically responsible inquiry (perhaps including extensive, mutually open-minded, mutually non-dogmatic, dialectical engagement with one another concerning *p*), nevertheless one finds oneself continuing to believe *p*, and continuing to regard *p* as evidentially well warranted by one's net available evidence—even though one knows that the other person disbelieves *p*. Furthermore, and as a corollary, one finds oneself thinking this: with respect to the specific issue about proposition *p*, the other person is somehow *epistemically skewed*—i.e., on this matter, the other person is one's local epistemic inferior. The combination of experiential features just described constitutes what we will call the phenomenology of *epistemic nonconciliation*. A key component of it is the phenomenology of *local epistemic superiority*: it seems to oneself that with respect to *p*, one's own experiential take on the net import of the available evidence is superior to the other person's, and that the other's has gone awry.

It bears emphasis that the phenomenology of epistemic nonconciliation, when it occurs in contexts of sincere and open-minded dialectical disputation with an interlocutor whom one regards throughout as one’s global epistemic peer, is not smug. On the contrary, one finds that despite one’s considerable respect for the epistemic acumen of the other person, and despite having carefully considered the considerations and arguments

that other person has put forward, one's original epistemic seemings persist concerning *p*; and because they persist, one finds oneself with a *respectful* attitude of local epistemic superiority toward the other person. This is not self-satisfied smugness; rather, it is the what-it's-like of following the evidence where it seems to oneself, upon due and careful reflection, to lead.[6]

The following is a real-life example, involving a philosophical issue on which the late David Lewis held one view and almost every other philosopher who has an opinion on the matter disagrees with Lewis. (Lewis, of course, is widely and rightly regarded as an exceptionally brilliant philosopher.) Lewis claimed that possible worlds are concrete cosmoi like the actual cosmos, and that they all are equally real ('actual' being merely an intra-world indexical). But almost all other philosophers who consider this contention find themselves thinking that it is just wildly false; also, they find themselves thinking that on this matter, Lewis somehow went off the rails epistemically—especially upon learning that Lewis held that his own view about the metaphysics of modality emerges fairly straightforwardly from wide-reflective-equilibrium reasoning aimed at systematizing ordinary, pre-theoretic, modal beliefs. "Brilliant philosopher though he was," one finds oneself thinking, "on this matter he was just meshuggina."[7]

Now admittedly, this case of the phenomenology of local epistemic superiority is an extreme one, notwithstanding the fact that it is none other than David Lewis who one finds oneself regarding as one's local epistemic inferior on the matter at hand.[8] But, in dialectical disputation about some philosophical issue, although one perhaps does not often end up regarding the interlocutor's local epistemic sensibility as downright meshuggina, nevertheless one typically *does* still find oneself thinking that the other is somehow *epistemically skewed* concerning the issue under dispute. And, for that very reason, one finds oneself assigning relatively little epistemic significance to the fact that the interlocutor does not share one's own belief that *p*. Meanwhile, one still finds oneself believing *p*, and one still experiences one's belief that *p* as being well warranted by one's net available evidence—well enough warranted to be epistemically justified. Phenomenologically, one's belief that the interlocutor is one's *global* epistemic peer (or even one's global epistemic superior) does not count for much at all with respect to one's epistemic attitude toward *p*, precisely because one is undergoing the phenomenology of local epistemic superiority vis-a-vis the interlocutor.

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[6] Here is what Putnam said about his dispute with Nozick: "What happens in such disagreements? When they are intelligently conduced on both sides, sometimes all that can happen is that one sensitively diagnoses and delineates the source of the disagreement... But what of the fundamentals on which one cannot *agree*? It would be quite dishonest to pretend that one thinks there are no better or worse reasons and views *here*. I don't think it is just a matter of *taste* whether one thinks that the obligation of the community to treat its members with compassion takes precedence over property rights; nor does my co-disputant. Each of us regards the other as lacking, at this level, a certain kind of sensitivity and perception. To be perfectly honest, there is in each of us something akin to *contempt*, not for the other's *mind* -- for we each have the highest regard for each other's mind -- nor for the other as a *person* --, for I have more respect for my colleague's honesty, integrity, kindness, etc., than I do for that of many people who agree with my 'liberal' political views -- but for a certain complex of emotions and judgments in the other... 'Respectful contempt' may sound almost *nasty* (especially if one confuses it with contemptuous respect, which is something quite different). And it *would* be nasty if the 'contempt' were for the other as a person, and not just for one complex of feelings and judgments in him. But it is a far more honest attitude than *false relativism*; that is, the pretense that there is no giving reasons, or such a thing as better or worse reasons on a subject, when one really does feel that one view is reasonable and the other is irrational." (Putnam 1981: 164-66) The word 'contempt' is a bit strong for many disputes, but still this somehow gets it, phenomenologically. "[M]oral stance taking... should be respectfully assertive." (Timmons 1999: 172)

[7] Another illustrative example, also involving Lewis as against almost every other philosopher who has considered the matter at issue, involves the probability puzzle known as the Sleeping Beauty problem. Lewis claimed that Beauty, upon having been awakened today in the sleep laboratory by the sleep researchers and then having learned from them that today is Monday, should assign epistemic probability 2/3 to the proposition that the coin comes up heads when flipped—a coin that she knows is fair, and that she now knows is yet to be flipped. Although many philosophers agree with Lewis that Beauty, after she is awakened in the lab on Monday and *before* she learns that today is Monday, has an epistemic probability of ½ for "The coin-flip comes up heads"—whereas many other philosophers claim instead that she now has an epistemic probability of 1/3 for this proposition—almost nobody else besides Lewis believes that her updated epistemic probability for "Heads," upon learning that today is Monday (and hence the fair coin has not yet been flipped), is 2/3. Brilliant philosopher though he was, and especially influential though he was on philosophical questions about probability, on this *specific* matter he was epistemically way out in left field—indeed, beyond the foul line. This is how it seems to virtually everyone who contemplates the Sleeping Beauty problem and Lewis's own views about it.

[8] Likewise for the example cited in the preceding footnote.

We submit that the phenomenology of epistemic nonconciliation, with its constitutive component the phenomenology of local epistemic superiority, is what really happens in almost all cases of dialectical disputation in philosophy in which one starts off believing *p* and one continues to believe *p.* One's belief persists because the belief seems to oneself, and continues to seem to oneself, to be well warranted by one's overall available evidence—well enough warranted to be justified. (The strength of one's belief can go down or up during the process of disputation, of course, but that is another matter.) Correlative with the persistence of the belief, and with its continuing to seem evidentially well warranted, is the phenomenology of local epistemic superiority. The reason why one does not suspend one's belief in *p*, despite knowing that the person one regards as one's global epistemic peer continues to disbelieve *p*, is that one finds oneself regarding that person as one's local epistemic inferior. Thus, nonconciliation is what *actually happens*; and we have been describing its phenomenology.

"Well and good as a description of what actually happens," you might say, "but is it *rationally permissible* to retain one's belief in *p* in such circumstances, and is it rationally permissible to regard one's interlocutor as one's local epistemic inferior?" We readily acknowledge that phenomenological description is not enough. This normative question also must be addressed.

5. The symmetry challenge

The problem of peer disagreement arises largely because of symmetry considerations. The thought is that if one regards one's interlocutor as an epistemic peer, then one should acknowledge that the interlocutor's belief in *not-p* is no less likely to be adequately well supported by the available evidence than is one's own belief in *p*; accordingly (so the thought goes), rationality requires suspending one's belief in *p*.

Assuming the accuracy of our description in Section 4 of the typical phenomenology of nonconciliation in cases of persistent peer disagreement, considerations of symmetry arise regarding this phenomenology itself. Normally, in such disputation one will justifiably believe—indeed, one will know—that one's interlocutor's belief in *not-p* is accompanied by epistemic phenomenology that parallels one's own—and hence (i) that one's interlocutor finds herself/himself continuing to believe *not-p*, (ii) that *not-p* continues to seem to her/him to be epistemically justified by the overall available evidence, and (iii) that she/he regards herself/himself as being locally epistemic superior with respect to *p* (and regards oneself as locally epistemically inferior on this specific issue). In fact, in paradigmatic situations of dialectical disagreement between persons who regard each other as global epistemic peers, there will be *common knowledge* that each party to the dispute undergoes, with respect to *p*, the epistemic phenomenology we described in Section 4.

In light of this common knowledge, the symmetry worry kicks in. Why privilege one's own epistemic phenomenology vis-a-vis *p* over the interlocutor's parallel epistemic phenomenology vis-a-vis *not-p*? Why think that one's own epistemic phenomenology is any more likely to be tracking the actual import of the pertinent evidence than is the interlocutor's parallel phenomenology?

And the symmetry worry kicks in the other way around too, of course: not only does one have no apparent good reason to privilege one's own epistemic phenomenology regarding *p* over the interlocutor's, but one has has no apparent reason to privilege her/his phenomenology over one's own.

Privileging either, therefore, now looks to be quite *arbitrary* from an epistemic point of view; the two competing phenomenologies effectively seem to "cancel each other out" with respect to the question of the justificatory status of *p* and of *not-p*. Because of this cancellation effect, it seems, one's net overall evidence no longer justifies one's belief in *p*; likewise, the interlocutor's net overall evidence no longer justifies her/his belief in *not-p*. Rationality therefore requires both parties to *suspend* their respective beliefs about *p*. Although nonconciliation may well be what actually happens in prototypical situations of dialectical disputation, and although the phenomenology of nonconciliation may well have the features we described in Section 4, nevertheless it is actually *irrational* to retain one's disputed belief in such a situation. Rationality requires suspending the belief—whether one is capable of that or not.

So goes the *symmetry challenge*, as we will call it. An adequate philosophical defense of nonconciliation must face this challenge head-on, and must somehow counter it. That is our objective in what follows.

6. Epistemic sensibility and the chromatic illumination of experience

Our strategy for addressing the symmetry challenge has two parts. First, we will argue (in the present section) that in paradigmatic cases of dialectical disputation, the phenomenology of nonconciliation is very likely to be psychologically grounded in one's own epistemic sensibility—i.e., in one's own deeply rooted standards concerning evidential-support relations. (Thus one's epistemic seemings, in such situations, are not isolated, sui generis, psychological responses of one's evidence that somehow supposedly constitute a rational basis for belief without being psychologically grounded in anything else.) Second, we will argue (in Section 7) that it is certainly rationally permissible—and perhaps is even rationally mandatory—to form beliefs in a manner that accords with one's own epistemic sensibility. (Thereafter we will return, in Section 8, to the matter of *strength* of belief and its relevance to peer disagreement.)

6.i. Epistemic sensibility and the psychology of belief, I

One's epistemic sensibility consists roughly in certain dispositions one possesses with respect to belief formation on the basis of available evidence. (The operative notion of evidence here is mentalistic: items of evidence are all possessed by the cognitive agent, as parts of the overall body of information—in a sense of 'information' that does not presuppose veridicality—within the agent's cognitive system.) The dispositions that constitute one's epistemic sensibility embody certain epistemic *normative standards*, standards pertaining to evidential support. A competence/performance distinction arises here: when one forms beliefs in a manner that accords with one's epistemic sensibility, one is exhibiting epistemic competence vis-a-vis that sensibility, whereas when one forms beliefs in a manner that does not thus conform, one is committing a performance error vis-a-vis that sensibility. One very nice philosophical discussion of what we are here calling one's epistemic sensibility—the best one we know of—is by Richard Foley in his 1993 book *Working Without a Net*; his preferred expression is 'subjective rationality'. Roughly, the judgments of belief-worthiness that accord with one's epistemic sensibility are those that one would endorse upon duly careful, duly attentive, duly unbiased, reflection.[9]

As an example of a performance error with respect to one's own epistemic sensibility, consider the infamous Monty Hall problem. Monty, the host of a game show, reliably informs the contestant that a fine prize lies behind one of three visible doors, and that there is nothing behind the other two. After the contestant chooses one of the doors, Monty reliably says to the contestant "I know where the prize is, and I will now open a door that (i) you did not choose and (ii) has no prize behind it; Monty then proceeds to do so. Monty now offers the contestant the opportunity to switch to the remaining unopened door. The question arises: Is there any advantage in switching, or is the prize equally likely to be behind either of the two unopened doors?

Almost everyone, upon being initially confronted with this problem, experiences a strong intuition that the prize is equally likely to be behind either of the unopened doors. Yet the correct answer is that the contestant is twice as likely to win by switching. Most of us can come to be persuaded that is so, if only by being walked through some mathematical reasoning deploying principles of probability theory that we can accept as intuitively correct. When that happens, one comes to appreciate that the initial intuition was mistaken and does not actually accord with one's own epistemic sensibility. The initial intuitive judgment was a performance error, by one's own epistemic lights.[10]

[9] The expression 'normative standards' has some tendency to evoke the idea of *general principles*. But there are various possibilities concerning the extent to which a given epistemic agent's epistemic sensibility is, or is not, systematizable via general principles. At one end of the spectrum of possibilities is that the agent's epistemic sensibility is fully systematizable by a compact set of highly general, totally exceptionless, principles. At the other end is the possibility that the agent's epistemic sensibility is utterly unsystematizable, so that its full articulation could only take the form of a gigantic *list*, with each item on the list being a pairing of (i) a total body of evidence and (ii) a set of propositions that the agent's sensibility deems propositionally justified (relative to that body of evidence). And there are various possibilities in between—involving, for instance, moderately general principles that (i) are hedged with *ceteris paribus* clauses, (ii) systematize the agent's epistemic sensibility partially but not fully, and (iii) must be supplemented with unsystematic list-like specifications of what the agent's sensibility would dictate in situations where *cetera* are not *paria*. This matter of "generalism" vs. "particularism" concerning the epistemic sensibilities of individual epistemic agents is orthogonal to our purposes here. We therefore mostly deploy the expression 'epistemic sensibility', rather than 'epistemic standards', because the former is connotatively more neutral about this orthogonal issue.

[10] Making the correct answer *itself* intuitively correct is another matter, though. For a discussion of the Monty Hall problem that has this effect at least for the discussion's author, see Horgan (1995).

There is little doubt that each of us humans is prone, to some extent at least, to certain kinds of epistemic performance errors vis-a-vis her/his own epistemic sensibility. Epistemic responsibility requires one to be aware of this fact, and to guard against it during the course of one's ongoing practice of inquiry in the service of belief-formation. Nevertheless, often one finds oneself in an epistemic situation in which (i) one has default epistemic justification for regarding one's own epistemic phenomenology concerning *p* as emanating from one's own epistemic sensibility (rather than emanating from a performance error with respect to one's sensibility), and (ii) one's default epistemic justification for this attitude is itself undefeated by one's overall available evidence.[11] Among the kinds of situation where this is so—indeed, somewhat *paradigmatic* among these kinds of situation—are situations in which one has engaged in careful, sustained, reflective, dialectical disputation with others who one regards as one's global epistemic peers about issues of the kind under dispute. Dialectical volleys from respected interlocutors often constitute especially powerful potential defeaters of the presumption that one's epistemic seemings really do emanate from one's own epistemic sensibility; for, those dialectical volleys might well trigger a switch in one's epistemic phenomenology vis-a-vis *p*, with the earlier epistemic seemings now being experienced as performance errors relative to one's own epistemic sensibility. If this does *not* happen—if *p* still seems epistemically well warranted by one's overall evidence, even after due consideration of the interlocutor's latest dialectical volley contra *p*—then one still has good reason to regard one's persistent epistemic seemings regarding *p* as emanating from one's own epistemic sensibility, rather than as being a performance error relative to that sensibility. (Indeed, one's justification for this attitude might now be even stronger than before.) And better still, of course, if one finds oneself able to return the opponent's volley back across the dialectical net in a way that one finds convincing to oneself—although sooner or later any specific dialectical exchange between specific disputants comes to an end, often with the disagreement still persisting.

One's epistemic sensibility, as we said, constitutes one's own normative criteria with respect to matters of evidential relevance and evidential support—in particular, one's own criteria about when any given body of evidence confers propositional justification upon any given proposition. Phenomenological introspection reveals, it seems, that normally the epistemic criteria that are operative in any given occasion of belief-formation or belief-persistence are not fully and explicitly present in consciousness. Although often one can say something vague and loose about why one's overall evidence seems to oneself to warrant *p*—e.g., “Proposition *p* seems best supported by abductive inference to the best explanation, and in relation to considerations of wide reflective equilibrium”—such remarks typically are far too nonspecific to constitute a *full* articulation of why and how one's overall epistemic sensibility and one's overall available evidence combine to render *p* well warranted (relative to one's own sensibility). To a large extent, it seems, the psychological operation of one's epistemic sensibility occurs outside of conscious awareness.

This does not mean, however, that conscious experience is *impervious* to those aspects of one's epistemic sensibility that are operative on a given occasion of belief formation/persistence without being explicitly present in consciousness. On the contrary. When one focuses reflective attention on epistemic seemings—e.g., on a specific experience of a proposition seeming to be well warranted by one's overall available evidence—one finds that such an epistemic seeming, concerning a specific proposition, will often have a quite *specific* good-evidential-warrant phenomenal aspect to it, rather than being phenomenologically generic. The expression we use, for the psychological process at work here that links (i) the operative factors that are not explicitly present in consciousness to (ii) the specific phenomenal character of the epistemic seeming, is *chromatic illumination*.

This somewhat metaphorical expression is inspired by the famous 1892 painting by Toulouse Lautrec, “At the Moulin Rouge,” which hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago. Various figures in the painted scene are illuminated in strikingly different ways—e.g., the women more prominently than the men, one woman by lighting to the left but outside the scene, another woman by lighting from the lower right but outside the scene, a peculiar light-induced greenish tint to some of the illuminated faces that blends with the greens in the background of the scene, etc. The presumptive sources of these distinctive features—lighting of various kinds at various positions in the presumptive wider environment, producing light with various different chromatic characteristics—are not present in the visible scene. They are not explicitly represented. Nonetheless, they are *implicitly* present in the scene anyway, in the ways that the figures in the scene are chromatically illuminated by

[11]Normally, the attitude just described will not take the form of a conscious and explicit *belief*. Perhaps it deserves to be called an implicit belief, or perhaps not; we take no stand on this question. It is, however, subject to normative-epistemic evaluation: it is the kind of cognitive state that is capable of being epistemically justified or epistemically unjustified.

those presumptive light-sources.

The directly visible scene presented in a painting—or in a photograph, or on a stage—can be taken as a metaphorical stand-in for what is explicitly present in conscious experience. By contrast, the out-of-view sources of the visible scene's various aspects of chromatic illumination can be taken as a metaphorical stand-in for what is implicitly present in consciousness—present not by being explicitly presented or depicted, but rather by virtue of how it affects the character of what *is* there explicitly. These effects, within consciousness, of items of information and/or aspects of one's normative sensibility that are not explicitly present in consciousness, are what we are calling chromatic illumination.

6.ii. Joke-getting and chromatic illumination

A good way to recognize and appreciate the phenomenon of chromatic illumination is to direct one's reflective introspection upon the phenomenon of joke-getting. For specificity, consider a cartoon by Danny Shanahan that appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine roughly fifteen years ago. Two guys are sitting in a bar, and the one who is speaking has an unhappy and exasperated expression on his face. He says to the other guy, "What I don't, like, get is how she, like, figured out I was, like, having an affair with the, like, babysitter."

Getting this joke, or any joke, is an instantaneous experience. In that instant, normally one needs to appreciate quite a wide range of pertinent background information; also, one needs to bring to bear one's own humor-sensibility, thereby appreciating why and how all this information combines, holistically, to constitute an instance of funniness. Each item of that information must be appreciated, together with the ways that all the pertinent items interact with one another to make for funniness—for, otherwise one would not be understanding the joke.

For any reasonably clever joke, typically it is possible to elaborate at some length upon the various items of background information all of which are pertinent. In the example at hand, for instance, probably the most salient such item—the item that one would mention first, in seeking to explain the joke to someone who does not yet get it—is that the practice of persistently inserting the word 'like' into one's spoken English is a distinctive feature of way *teenage girls* talked in the U.S., fifteen years ago. (Nowadays, such 'like'-talk is much more prevalent: it is the norm among college students in the U.S. when they are speaking with peers or with intimates, and it is relatively common among young adults. The Israeli philosopher Ruth Weintraub tells us, with considerable regret, that it is beginning to spread among English speakers in Israel.)

But that is just the beginning, in terms of pertinent background information that must be grasped in the instant in order to get the joke. Additional such items of information can be made salient by posing suitable questions—questions that might be asked by someone who is persistently deficient at understanding jokes. Whose children did this babysitter care for? Roughly how old is the babysitter? How did the opportunity arise for the guy to have an affair with the babysitter? Who is the "she" who figured out that the guy is having an affair with the babysitter? How did that person react, upon learning this fact? Why is the guy upset that she figured it out and reacted that way? Why doesn't he himself understand how she figured it out? And, of course—and especially pertinent to the present paper—What's so funny about all this? One could write a monograph about the pertinent background information and its holistic relevance. Also—and again especially pertinent to the present paper—one could *try* in such a monograph to address the "Why funny?" question too, although theorizing about criteria of humor is an elusive and problematic enterprise, largely because so little about such criteria ever comes explicitly into consciousness. Likewise for most any even moderately subtle joke.

In the instant of joke-getting, very little of the pertinent background information, or of one's own humor-sensibility, seems to be explicitly present in consciousness. Nonetheless, all of that information is being *appreciated* in one's conscious experience, as is the specific way that it collectively makes for funniness relative to one's own humor-sensibility; for, otherwise one would not get the joke. Thus, the information, and the holistic integration of that information via one's humor-sensibility, are *implicitly* present in consciousness, by way of the chromatic illumination of one's overall synchronic experience. Furthermore, the "getting it" aspect of experience is not some generic feature, such as experiencing oneself laughing or inclined to laugh (perhaps without knowing why). Rather, one's humor-sensibility holistically integrates all the pertinent information in a quite content-specific manner: some particular item(s) of explicitly conscious content (in this case, what the guy at the bar is saying, and his obvious consternation) is appreciated as funny, relative to one's own not-consciously-explicit criteria of funniness, by virtue of how those explicitly conscious items are relevantly interconnected with a rich body of pertinent background information. Thus, all those *specific* items of background information are

implicitly present in the conscious joke-getting experience, as are the immediately relevant aspects of one's overall humor-sensibility, by virtue of the *specific* way that the experience is chromatically illuminated.

Now admittedly, it is an empirical hypothesis that joke-getting has the features lately described. But it is a very plausible hypothesis, because it conforms so well with the deliverances of introspection: when one attends introspectively to one's joke-getting experience (albeit perhaps retrospectively via one's memory of the recent past), it does not seem that all that background information is explicitly present in consciousness, and it certainly does not seem that one's presently operative criteria of funniness are explicitly present in consciousness; yet, it also seems, upon reflection, that one would not have understood the joke without consciously *appreciating* all that information and its holistic humor-relevance—and doing so in a way that results from humor criteria that are operative in oneself without becoming consciously explicit.

6.iii. Epistemic sensibility and the psychology of belief, II

We intend our digression about joke-getting to serve three main purposes here. First, it provides an example of an experience for which it is highly plausible, phenomenologically, that the experience is richly chromatically illuminated by both (i) numerous items of specific background information that do not themselves become explicitly present in consciousness, and (ii) holistically integrative aspects of one's pertinent sensibility that also do not become explicitly present in consciousness. Second, when one considers one's own nonconciliation phenomenology in cases of disputation with someone who one considers a global epistemic peer, and one does so with the joke-getting example in mind, it becomes highly plausible, phenomenologically, that in both kinds of case—joke-getting on one hand, belief formation/persistence on the other—one's experience is chromatically illuminated by holistically integrative aspects of one's sensibility—humor sensibility and epistemic sensibility, respectively—that are not themselves explicitly present in consciousness. Third, in both kinds of case, the pertinent phenomenal character of one's experience is not generic, but instead is quite situation-specific. (Just as one does not find oneself laughing at the joke and wondering why—as though one's mirthfulness had arisen "out of the blue"—likewise one does not find oneself regarding *p* as evidentially well warranted and wondering why.)

These claims about joke-getting and about the operation of one's epistemic sensibility are the products of attentive phenomenological reflection on the pertinent kinds of experience. They are *empirical* psychological claims; and the fact that they accord with one's attentive first-person introspective judgments constitutes empirical evidence for them—*strong* empirical evidence, in our view, albeit defeasible in principle. For purposes of the present paper, this suffices.

However, we also believe that there are strong non-phenomenological grounds for embracing these claims, having to do with several interconnected morals that we think emerge from the so-called "frame problem" in cognitive science—roughly, the problem of how to quickly and efficiently update one's total belief system in response to newly acquired information. We now briefly summarize the morals that we think these difficulties reveal.[12] (Our overall argument does not require the considerations we set forth in the remainder of this subsection, although we think they strengthen it.)

First, the cognitive processing involved in belief fixation (i.e., in the generation of maintenance of a belief) typically is too subtle and too holistic to conform to tractably implementable, exceptionless, rules for manipulating explicit representations of task-relevant information—rules of the kind that could constitute a computer program. Thus, such human cognitive processes are too subtle and too holistic to constitute, or to be modelable by, *computation* on task-relevant representations.[13] Second, belief fixation and related cognitive processes typically operate, and typically must operate, in a way that accommodates much relevant information *automatically* and *implicitly*. The holistic aspects of belief fixation involve not the finding and fetching of relevant representations from memory-banks where they are stored in explicit form, and not the overt representation and comparative evaluation of large-scale alternative belief-systems. Rather, these holistic aspects are somehow implicit in the structure of the cognitive system, in such a way that temporal transitions from one occurrent total cognitive state to another accommodate the holistic aspects automatically. Background

[12]For elaboration and argumentation, see for instance Fodor (1983, 2001), Horgan and Tienson (1996), Henderson and Horgan (2011), and Horgan and Potrč (2010).

[13] There is at least one noncomputational framework for cognitive science that looks promising as a way of coming to terms with the frame problem—viz., that framework described by Horgan and Tienson (1996), which they call *noncomputational dynamical cognition*.

informational content and background epistemic normativity that are thus accommodated automatically and implicitly, without first getting explicitly represented either consciously or even unconsciously, constitute what Horgan and Tienson (1996) call *morphological content*.[14]

The second moral of the frame problem pertains to two distinct aspects of the cognitive processing involved in belief fixation. First, various disparate items of specific background information need to be automatically operative during belief fixation in the form of morphological content—in the same manner as there need to be various specific items of background information whose appreciation is required to undergo an instantaneous experience of joke-getting. Second—and more directly pertinent to the present paper—those aspects of the cognitive agent's normative epistemic sensibility to which a given instance of belief fixation conforms must *themselves* be automatically operative during belief fixation in the form of morphological content; for, it would be massively intractable for the applicable aspects of the agent's epistemic sensibility first to become explicitly represented themselves, and then to get explicitly applied both (i) to explicit representations of all evidentially relevant background information, and (ii) to explicit representations of alternative potential large-scale belief-systems.

In short, one important lesson of the frame problem in cognitive science—one aspect of the second main moral—is that the psychological operation of one's epistemic sensibility, in the course of belief fixation, normally occurs very largely *outside of conscious awareness*. This is so not because the applicable aspects of one's sensibility get represented explicitly and yet unconsciously, but rather because they do not become explicit at all: instead they are operative automatically and implicitly, in the form of morphological content.

The upshot is that the frame problem in cognitive science provides strong grounds, over and above the evidence of direct phenomenological introspection, to believe that the psychological operation of one's epistemic sensibility, in the course of belief fixation, occurs very largely outside of conscious awareness. What can be expected to show up in consciousness is chromatic illumination: an epistemic seeming as-of proposition *p* being evidentially well justified, and moreover as of its being well justified in an evidentially specific manner. Such epistemic seemings are not isolated aspects of conscious experience that somehow arise psychologically “out of the blue,” Rather—and apart from occasional performance errors—these seemings are the conscious effects of one's own epistemic sensibility.

6.iv. Three ways one's global epistemic peer might be locally inferior

In Section 4 we described the phenomenology of nonconciliation in cases of peer disagreement, which normally includes the phenomenology of local epistemic superiority vis-a-vis a disputant who one regards as one's global peer. In light of our discussion earlier in the present section, three distinct kinds of possibility arise concerning ways that a disputant might be locally epistemically inferior to oneself. (Combinations of these are possible too.)

First, the disputant might be *informationally impoverished*—i.e., might lack some crucial item of evidence that one possesses oneself. One's overall pertinent evidence might include specific information that is operative in one's own belief-fixation processes without being explicitly represented consciously—perhaps operative in the form of morphological content. This could be so even if one is not able to readily bring that information to mind, or articulate it.

Second, the disputant's experiential seemings, concerning the epistemic import vis-a-vis *p* of the available evidence, might be the product of a performance error, relative to the disputant's own epistemic sensibility. I.e., the disputant's epistemic phenomenology might be nonveridical by the disputant's own evidential standards, without the disputant being aware of this.

Third, the disputant's epistemic sensibility itself might be *locally skewed*—i.e., it might be issuing a verdict about the epistemic status of *p* given the available evidence, that differs from the verdict about *p* that would arise, given the same evidence, from an *objectively accurate* assessment of the net import of that evidence vis-à-vis *p*.

It can vary from case to case which of these possibilities, or which combination of them, applies to one's disputant in any given dialectical disputation. But perhaps the most interesting cases—and the ones for which the

[14] Horgan and Tienson (1996) describe a way of construing morphological content, within their proposed “noncomputational dynamical cognition” framework for cognitive science. This construal involves the high-dimensional topography of *dynamical systems*—mathematical objects that can characterize, for instance, the overall potential-temporal-evolution profiles of neural networks. See also Potrč (1999).

problem of peer disagreement seems most pressing—are those in which neither party to the dispute suffers either from informational impoverishment or from a performance error, but instead the two parties' respective epistemic sensibilities yield conflicting epistemic verdicts about the issue under dispute. In such cases, at least one of the disputants' epistemic sensibilities must be locally skewed.

7. Responding to the symmetry challenge

"The preceding discussion is well and good as a description of the likely role of one's own epistemic sensibility in dialectical disputation with those one regards as global epistemic peers," you might say, "but doesn't the symmetry challenge arise all over again? When one knows that a dialectical opponent who one regards as an epistemic peer has epistemic seemings regarding *not-p* that are parallel to one's own epistemic seemings regarding *p*, isn't it just irrational to privilege one's own epistemic sensibility over that of one's opponent?" We will now take up this version of the symmetry challenge.

The allegation is that nonconciliation in such circumstances is irrational. In response, we will consider five potential versions of the challenge, and for each of these we will argue that the allegation does not stick.

Epistemic rationality, we take it, is a subjective matter: it involves, in one way or another, doing well *by one's own lights* in one's epistemic endeavors—in particular, doing well in one's belief-formation with respect to the goal of believing a proposition only if, given one's total evidence, that proposition is *objectively highly likely to be true*.[15] Hereafter we will call this *the epistemic goal*. (The operative notion of evidence here is mentalistic: items of evidence are all possessed by the cognitive agent, as parts of the overall body of information—in a sense of 'information' that does not presuppose veridicality—within the agent's cognitive system.)

7.i. Sensibility-based rationality and the symmetry challenge

One way of doing well by one's own lights, with respect to the epistemic goal, is to believe *p* if and only if, given one's total evidence and *according to one's own epistemic sensibility, p* counts as likely enough to be true that *p* is belief-worthy. After all, satisfaction of this criterion constitutes one's *subjective best take* on which propositions are *in fact* quite likely to be true (given one's total evidence). So, forming beliefs in accordance with this criterion constitutes one kind of epistemic rationality; we will call it *sensibility-based* rationality.

Suppose that the symmetry challenge pertains to sensibility-based rationality. The advocate of conciliation thus is asking, in effect, "How could it be sensibility-based rational to privilege the epistemic status accorded to *p* (given one's own total evidence) by one's own epistemic sensibility over the differing epistemic status accorded to p by some other epistemic sensibility that might be possessed by someone who one regards as a global epistemic peer?" Well, the answer is straightforward: forming beliefs in accordance with one's own epistemic sensibility is what *constitutes* sensibility-based rationality. The challenger's question, so construed, turns out to be trivial to answer. So the symmetry challenge, so construed, is easily parried.

7.ii. Experiential rationality and the symmetry challenge

Another way of doing well by one's own lights, with respect to the epistemic goal, is to believe *p* if and only if, after a course of inquiry regarding *p* that seems to oneself to have been duly responsible, one finds that (i) *p* seems to be true, and (ii) *p* seems to be sufficiently likely to be true, given one's total evidence, to be belief-worthy. Satisfaction of this criterion constitutes one's subjective best take on whether or not belief in *p* would, in fact, exhibit sensibility-based rationality; thereby, satisfaction of this criterion also constitutes one's *second-order* best take on which propositions are in fact quite likely true (given one's total evidence). So, forming beliefs in conformity with this criterion constitutes another kind of epistemic rationality; we will call it *experiential* rationality.

In good cases where one is not subject to some performance error with respect to one's epistemic sensibility, experiential rationality coincides with sensibility-based rationality. In bad cases, however, the two can come apart: a belief that is experientially rational can fail to possess sensibility-based rationality, and a belief that is not experientially rational can nonetheless happen to possess sensibility-based rationality.

Suppose that the symmetry challenge pertains to experiential rationality. The advocate of conciliation

[15] In general, we would claim, objective likelihood of truth is a matter of qualitative degree, rather than being some objective kind of quantitative probability. See our remarks in the final paragraph of Section 3 above, and in note 5.

thus is asking, in effect, "How could it be experientially rational to privilege the epistemic status accorded to *p* (given one's own total evidence) by one's own epistemic seemings over the differing epistemic status accorded to p by the epistemic seemings possessed by someone who one regards as a global epistemic peer?" Well, once again the answer is straightforward: forming beliefs in accordance with one's own epistemic seemings, in circumstances where one seems to have been epistemically responsible in one's prior inquiry, is what *constitutes* experiential rationality. The challenger's question, so construed, once again turns out to be trivial. So the symmetry challenge, so construed, once again is easily parried.

7.iii. The experiential pull of symmetry considerations

A third construal of the symmetry challenge is to view it as a direct appeal to one's own epistemic experience, and thereby as presumptively a direct appeal to one's own underlying epistemic sensibility. When one carefully ponders the pertinent symmetries that arise with respect to *p* in dialectical disputation between oneself and someone who disagrees with oneself and who one regards as a global peer, doesn't there arise *in oneself* an epistemic seeming to the effect that these symmetries constitute evidence that undermines one's *previous* epistemic seemings regarding *p*? Doesn't it now seem to oneself, epistemically, that one's *total* evidence fails to render *p* highly likely to be true? And shouldn't one therefore suspend belief in *p* (whether or not one is psychologically capable of doing so)?

A number of prominent contemporary epistemologists presumably would answer "Yes" to these questions; these are the advocates of conciliation. We ourselves, however, would answer "No." Our negative answer rests primarily on our empirical claim, set forth in Section 4 above, that the epistemic phenomenology that typically *actually arises,* in dialectical disputation with those who one regards as global epistemic peers, is the phenomenology of nonconciliation. In concrete dialectical disputation, one's awareness of experiential symmetries between oneself and one's interlocutor just *doesn't* get experienced as evidentially undermining one's own belief that *p*; rather, since one finds oneself still believing *p*, and *p* still seems to oneself to be well warranted given one's total evidence, one also undergoes the phenomenology of local epistemic superiority: one finds oneself believing that with respect to *p*, one's global peer is somehow epistemically skewed.

Thus, as might be expected, we ourselves also experience the phenomenology of nonconciliation specifically with respect to the issue at hand—viz., the dispute between advocates of conciliation and advocates of nonconciliation. To us it seems that the advocates of conciliation are somehow epistemically skewed with respect to this issue itself. Specifically, when they ponder this issue, their own experiential seemings assign more evidential significance to considerations of experiential symmetry than such considerations deserve.

We do acknowledge that there is a genuine experiential "pull" toward regarding symmetry considerations as defeaters for one's evidential justification for believing *p*, in cases of peer disagreement.[16] Were this not so, the conciliation/nonconciliation issue would not be so hotly debated. But we believe that succumbing to that pull would be a performance error—not only with respect to the epistemic sensibilities of us two authors, but probably also with respect to the epistemic sensibilities of those in contemporary philosophy who advocate conciliation. One reason, inter alia, to think this about the philosophers who advocate conciliation is that they typically don't practice what they preach, but instead continue to hold on to their beliefs while engaging in dialectical disputation with other philosophers—including, of course, dialectical disputation about the conciliation/nonconciliation issue itself.[17]

So the charge that nonconciliation is irrational because of symmetry considerations, when construed as an attempt to engage the reflective epistemic seemings of those who expose themselves to argumentation by advocates of reconciliation, fails to achieve its goal for those who find themselves reacting to the charge as we ourselves do—viz., by experiencing the phenomenology of nonconciliation vis-a-vis the conciliation/nonconciliation debate itself.

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[16]For an especially clear-headed articulation of this pull, parlayed into a prima facie plausible-seeming argument for conciliation, see Feldman (1993).

[17] In principle, one could engage in vigorous dialectical philosophical disputation while adopting no more than an attitude of *hypothetical acceptance* toward the propositions one seeks to defend; and in principle, one could find oneself strongly motivated to do so vis-à-vis certain philosophical propositions even without believing them. But we ourselves find it very plausible—once again, largely on the basis of our own phenomenological introspection—that in practice this happens at best very rarely in philosophy. Likewise, mutatis mutandis, for peer disagreements outside of professional philosophy—for instance involving politics or social policy or religion.

7.iv. The Smugness Objection

At this dialectical juncture, the advocate of conciliation might yet invoke symmetry considerations, by arguing that it is just *irresponsibly smug* to rely on one's epistemic seemings vis-à-vis *p* in a situation where one knows that someone who one regards as a global epistemic peer believes *not-p*. The argument goes as follows.

> Reliance on one's epistemic seemings, in such a situation, *insulates those very seemings from proper critical scrutiny*—and, thereby also underwrites an illegitimate attitude of local epistemic superiority over one's interlocutor. There are actually two layers of unduly un-critical self-insulation here: first, in relying on one's epistemic seemings one insulates oneself from duly responsible consideration of the possibility that those very seemings are the product of a performance error, relative to one's own underlying epistemic sensibility; and second, even in situations where one's seemings do reflect one's epistemic sensibility, in relying on those seemings one insulates oneself from duly responsible consideration of the possibility that one's epistemic sensibility itself is locally skewed vis-à-vis *p*. If one instead adopts a duly responsible self-critical attitude toward one's epistemic seemings and one's epistemic sensibility, then one will realize that one's own epistemic seemings and those of one's interlocutor nullify one another evidentially; and thus, will realize that only epistemically responsible doxastic attitude toward *p* is the attitude of suspended judgment. Persisting in believing *p*, in the face of known disagreement about *p* with someone who one regards as a global epistemic peer, is therefore irrational.

Now, in order to be dialectically effective, this argument must somehow engage the actual epistemic sensibility of anyone at whom it is directed. Can it? We would say yes. This can happen as long as the argument resonates with some *portion* of one's overall epistemic sensibility—perhaps, say, with certain meta-level criteria of adequacy that implicitly constrain what can count, by one's own lights, as an acceptable first-order epistemic sensibility—criteria that one would endorse oneself upon due reflection.

Speaking for ourselves, however—and for many others too, we suspect—the argument does not thus resonate, because conciliatory meta-level criteria seem to us to be misguided. It is true enough, and important, that in situations of known disagreement about *p* with someone who one regards as one's global epistemic peer, epistemically responsible inquiry requires one to be open both to the possibility that one's epistemic seemings vis-à-vis p are performance errors relative to one's epistemic sensibility, and to the possibility that one's epistemic sensibility itself is locally skewed regarding the net import vis-à-vis *p* of one's total available evidence. But epistemically responsible openness to such possibilities is a matter of pursuing one's ongoing dialectical inquiry regarding *p* in a manner that seems to oneself to make it sufficiently likely that *if* there is a high objective likelihood that one of these possibilities actually obtains with respect to one's belief in *p*, then one will come to recognize this fact in the course of the inquiry itself. If one has indeed conducted one's inquiry in that manner (with due consideration to the arguments against *p* put forth by one's interlocutor), and nonetheless no such recognition-experience has occurred, then one is *not* required to treat those possibilities, in combination with the known disagreement about *p*, as undermining one's justification for believing *p*.

Performance errors underlying one's own epistemic seemings can get revealed to oneself in the course of responsible dialectical exchange, and sometimes do. (For instance, one exposes oneself to a mathematical argument that deploys Bayes' theorem to demonstrate that the correct answer to the Monty Hall problem is that the probability of winning by switching doors is 2/3, and one thereby comes to appreciate that one's initial epistemic-seeming that the answer is ½ was the product of a performance error.) Portions of one's epistemic sensibility can get revealed to oneself to be defective relative to other, more firmly entrenched, portions of that sensibility; and this can lead to revisions in one's overall epistemic sensibility—in the manner of Neurath's boat. (For instance, one is confronted with persuasive evidence that one has done no better than chance over the years at predicting fluctuations in the stock market; one thereby comes to appreciate that one's past belief-forming procedures deployed predictive models that "over-fit" past stock-market data, thereby conflating "signal" and "noise" (Silver 2012); and thereafter, one eschews the use of such conflationary models.) In principle, *large* portions of one's epistemic sensibility can get displaced this way, in a manner analogous to building an entire new boat while positioned in the old boat's life-raft. (For instance, one summer while studying German in Munich, an earnest young student from Oral Roberts University becomes convinced, on the basis of conversations with his intelligent and articulate new German girlfriend from the University of Munich, that numerous authority-based belief-forming procedures he has relied upon all his life are highly unreliable;

forthwith he jettisons those procedures, and also jettisons numerous of his former beliefs—his former fundamentalist religious beliefs, his former far-right political beliefs, and his former anti-scientific beliefs about such matters as evolution and global warming.)

Paradigmatically, these kinds of diachronic repudiation of one's prior epistemic seemings occur in contexts of responsibly conducted dialectical inquiry, in which one open-mindedly and non-dogmatically exposes oneself to considerations against *p* that are being put forward by someone who one regards as a global epistemic peer (or a global epistemic superior). In the paradigm cases, the result of such exposure is certain *new* epistemic seemings that undermine one's erstwhile justification for believing *p*—e.g., an epistemic seeming whose content is that one's earlier epistemic seeming was (or probably was) the product of a performance error—or an epistemic seeming whose content is that one's earlier epistemic sensibility was (or probably was) locally skewed with respect to the net import of one's available evidence vis-à-vis *p*. Although it is indeed epistemically appropriate in such circumstances to stop believing *p*, the crucial point is that this appropriateness arises not because one ceases to be doxastically guided by one's epistemic seemings, but because one is now being guided by new epistemic seemings that displace the earlier ones. One has bootstrapped one's way past those earlier seemings, all right—but one has done so by relying on further, more recent, epistemic seemings. Non-smugness in one's belief-forming inquiry is a matter of open-mindedly exposing oneself to sources of evidence that one justifiably believes have a reasonable *likelihood* of engendering this kind of change in one's doxastic phenomenology, and then seeing whether or not that actually happens. If one does so but it doesn't happen, then one is not being irresponsibly smug in holding on to one's belief that *p*. On the contrary: one's epistemic seemings, in situations where one justifiably believes that one has been responsible in one's inquiry procedures, are one's subjective best take on the objective net import of one's available evidence.

7.v. The Charge of A Priori Knowable Objective Irrationality

One further way that the advocate of conciliation might invoke symmetry considerations would be to argue as follows.

> There are certain facts about objective evidential-support relations that are necessarily true and are a priori knowable by humans of normal intelligence. Such facts constrain the class of epistemically legitimate forms of subjective epistemic sensibility—even though some humans have epistemic sensibilities that violate those constraints. Any subjective sensibility that violates these constraints is therefore *knowable a priori to be objectively irrational*—whether or not someone who has such a sensibility appreciates that this is so. Among such a priori constraints are certain obvious logical and mathematical truths, and also the following principle (or some similar one). (It is labeled (C), for *conciliation*).
>
> (C) Let person 1 and person 2 be two interlocutors such that (a) person 1 initially believes *p*, (ii) person 2 initially believes *not-p*, (iii) they regard one another as global epistemic peers on issues including the issue about *p*, and (iv) they have common knowledge of (i)-(iii).
>
> If (a) they have conducted mutual dialectical disputation about *p* in a manner that seems to both of them to be epistemically responsible, and (b) the upshot is that *p* still seems epistemically justified to person 1 and *not-p* still seems epistemically justified to person 2, and (c) they have common knowledge of (a) and (b),
>
> then each person is objectively just as likely as the other one to be undergoing epistemic seemings regarding *p* that do not reflect the objective import of the available evidence.[18]
>
> Thus, any epistemic sensibility that permits conciliation in cases of the kind specified in principle (C) is *objectively* irrational, and is *knowably* so a priori—in the same way as would be, say, an epistemic sensibility that permits rampant violations of the inference rule *modus ponens* or of the laws of probability theory.

Once again, in order to be dialectically effective this argument must somehow engage the actual epistemic sensibility of anyone at whom it is directed. Can it? We would say Yes. This can happen as long as the argument resonates with that component of one's overall epistemic sensibility that classifies certain principles—once they are well understood and subjected to careful reflective assessment—as necessary and a priori.

[18] 'The available evidence' should here be taken to mean the sum of the pertinent evidence available to person 1 and that available to person 2. Informational impoverishment is possible, in either direction or perhaps both.

Speaking for ourselves, however—and for many others too, we suspect—the argument does not thus resonate—mainly because it effectively conflates two importantly different epistemic perspectives on matters of peer disagreement. On one hand is the epistemic perspective of a *subjectively rational third party behind a veil of ignorance*: someone who (a) knows that person 1 and person 2 disagree about some proposition *p* in a way that satisfies all the conditions specified in principle (C), but (b) knows nothing further about what proposition *p* is or about the nature of the available evidence regarding *p* possessed by either person 1 or person 2. We are happy to agree that some principle along the lines of (C) probably deserves to qualify as both necessarily true and a priori by humans, provided that the principle explicitly builds in the third-person, veil-of-ignorance, perspective. Such a principle might look like this:

(C*) Let person 1 and person 2 be two interlocutors such that (a) person 1 initially believes *p*, (ii) person 2 initially believes *not-p*, (iii) they regard one another as global epistemic peers on issues including the issue about *p*, and (iv) they have common knowledge of (i)-(iii). Also, let person 3 be someone who knows all this about person 1 and person 2, but does not know what proposition *p* is.

If (A) Person 3 knows that (a) persons 1 and 2 have conducted mutual dialectical disputation about *p* in a manner that seems to both of them to be epistemically responsible, and (b) the upshot is that *p* still seems epistemically justified to person 1 and *not-p* still seems epistemically justified to person 2, and (c) persons 1 and 2 have common knowledge of (a) and (b), and
(B) Person 3 does not know anything else about persons 1 and 2, or about what *p* is, that is relevant to the evidential status of *p*,

then relative to the evidential perspective of person 3, person 1 is just as likely as person 2 to be undergoing epistemic seemings regarding *p* that do not reflect the objective import of the available evidence.

The reason to regard this principle as necessary and a priori is that person 3, under the conditions specified, has absolutely no apparent evidence that could favor the epistemic seemings about *p* of person 1 over those of person 2, or could favor those of person 2 over those of person 1.

On the other hand, however, is the very different—and much more evidentially enriched—epistemic perspective of a person *within* the scenario specified in principle (C)—either the perspective of person 1 or that of person 2. From either of those perspectives, we contend, it is *very far* from obvious —let alone obvious a priori—that any principle along the lines of (C) obtains. On the contrary: from either of those perspectives, what's likely true is this: "My epistemic seemings regarding *p* accurately reflect the objective import of the available evidence, and the other person's epistemic seemings fail to do so."

Of course, at least one of these two perspectives is skewed with respect to the actual evidential import vis-à-vis *p* of the available evidence—and, in paradigmatic cases of global peer disagreement, persons 1 and 2 both know that this is so. But the fact remains: each person's epistemic best take concerning the objective import vis-à-vis *p* of the available evidence is that person's own *residual epistemic seemings* about this matter. Persons 1 and 2 should both acknowledge this fact, and should both expect this fact to be honored on both sides. Neither party should consider it rationally appropriate for *either* party to suspend judgment about *p* simply on the basis of common knowledge that (a) they disagree about *p*, and (b) they regard one another as global epistemic peers about issues that include their dispute about *p*. Rather, each person is subjectively rational in regarding herself/himself as the one who most probably is accurately tracking the objective import of the available evidence; and each person is subjectively rational in regarding the other as most probably being somehow epistemically skewed with respect to *p*. That is how philosophers (and others) actually do regard one another in dialectical disputation with those who they regard as global epistemic peers—and how they should.

7.vi. Potrč's principle

The upshot of our discussion so far in the present section is that none of the five versions of the symmetry challenge to nonconciliation succeeds, given our claims in earlier sections about the psychology of belief-fixation and the phenomenology of peer disagreement. If there is some other kind of rationality challenge that could be launched against nonconciliation on the basis of symmetry considerations, it is up to the advocates of conciliation to spell out such a challenge, and to explain why and how it evades the kinds of response we have given here to the five challenges we have addressed. Or they might seek to locate some serious flaw in our arguments above. Meanwhile, the dialectical ball is in their court.

Peter van Inwagen, in his seminal paper on peer disagreement—also a seminal defense of nonconciliation—cites a contention from William Clifford that van Inwagen dubs “Clifford's Principle”:

Clifford's Principle: It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.

Van Inwagen also sets forth another principle that he thinks is also defended, in effect, by Clifford, which van Inwagen dubs “Clifford's Other Principle”:

Clifford's Other Principle: It is wrong always, everywhere, for anyone to ignore evidence that is relevant to his beliefs, or to dismiss relevant evidence in a facile way.

Clifford's Principle is a negative injunction: it concerns beliefs that one should *not* adopt. Although van Inwagen deliberately formulates Clifford's Other Principle in such a way as to be grammatically parallel to Clifford's Principle, in effect this second principle is a positive injunction, by virtue of the linkage between the two negative terms 'wrong' and 'ignore': this principle really concerns beliefs that one *should* adopt. Van Inwagen embraces both principles; and he expresses his belief that often in dialectical disputation with a respected peer, one really does have sufficiently good evidence for one's own belief—even though the peer remains unconvinced, and even if both disputants have heard each other out and have responded and counter-responded to another to such an extent that neither person has much more to say. We side with van Inwagen on this matter, and we do so largely on the basis of considerations of phenomenology. We also agree with him that one should strive to conform one's beliefs to both of Clifford's principles. One's most epistemically responsible way of so striving, we suggest, is to form beliefs in accordance with the following principle:

Potrč's Principle: It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to form beliefs, or fail to, in ways that go contrary to her/his ***experiential best take*** on the net import of the available evidence.

8. Epistemic good faith and the strength of belief

Belief-fixation in accordance with Potrč's Principle is aptly describable as *good-faith* belief-fixation, whereas withholding belief in *p* when one's total evidence seems to render *p* sufficiently likely to be belief-worthy would be a form of epistemic *bad* faith. Epistemic responsibility certainly at least permits—and arguably even requires—that one exercise good faith in belief-fixation and eschew bad faith. Thus, Potrč's Principle is an aspect of the “ethics of belief,” alongside the epistemic imperative to engage in responsible inquiry—even though belief-fixation presumably is not under direct voluntary control.

This still leaves room, however, to honor part of the spirit of conciliationism. For, often enough in the course of inquiry and dialectical disputation, if one encounters opposition from someone who one considers one's global epistemic peer, then it can be appropriate for the strength of one's belief in *p* to diminish, at least temporarily, *for that very reason*—even though the belief itself persists. We readily acknowledge that this is so; someone whose strength of belief is highly impervious to dialectical waning in contexts of peer disagreement is apt to be dogmatic.

It bears emphasis, however, that dialectical disputation with a respected global peer can sometimes lead, appropriately, to a *strengthening* of one's own belief in *p*, notwithstanding persistent denial of *p* by the disputant. One way this can happen is that one finds oneself with a plausible-seeming explanation—or partial explanation, anyway—of why and how the disputant's experiential take on the net import of the evidence might have arisen via a performance error—perhaps quite a subtle one, rather than some silly elementary blunder. Another way it can happen is that the disputant's arguments and objections can force one to further develop one's own position, and/or to give further (albeit probably still partial) articulation to one's overall evidential rationale for one's position, in a way that quite legitimately renders one's belief in *p* stronger than it was before, relative to one's own epistemic sensibility.

Diachronic waning and waxing in the strength of belief is a familiar, and epistemically appropriate, feature of dialectical disputation with those who one regards as one's global epistemic peers. To this extent, there is an element of truth in conciliationism. But conciliationism itself is mistaken—and a good thing too, among other reasons because it threatens to put philosophers out of business.

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