Self-Evidence in the Face of Peer Disagreement
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Introduction

Ethical intuitionism is famous for the claim that some moral propositions are self-evident. Such moral truths are called self-evident because they are thought to be evident to reason. However, the optimistic output has also attracted criticisms. A common objection is that, if the basic principles of ethics are self-evident, there should be much less moral disagreement. Robert Audi has recently set out a nuanced version of intuitionism that defend the prospect of self-evident moral propositions in the face of disagreement.1 On his account, what is self-evident does not have to be obviously true. Thoughtful reflection will be needed in order to understand these propositions and yet they do not have to be readily known. In this way, Audi is able to account for why self-evident moral propositions may be compatible with moral disagreement.

A more restricted argument from disagreement concerns epistemic peers.2 In this case, the disputants are equally competent and well informed in the relevant matter. For this reason both parties are just as liable to be mistaken. The disagreement itself would thus count as evidence that you are mistaken. Consequently, you may be required to suspend belief. At least, that is what is suggested by the conciliatory view:

Conciliationism: In cases of peer disagreement generally you should suspend judgment on the disputed issue, or at least be significantly less confident in your own view.

The conciliatory view is sometimes regarded as the default position in cases of peer disagreement.3 There are, however, alternative views to be considered. Perhaps peer

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1 Audi have defended this position at several occasions, but most prominently in The Good in the Right, Princeton University Press 2005. The appeal to self-evident moral propositions has also recently been made by Derek Parfit in On What Matters, Oxford 2011, and by Russ Shafer-Landau in Moral Realism – A Defence (2003), Oxford 2009.
3 Conciliationism is advocated by Richard Feldman: “Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement” in Stephen Hetherington (ed.), Epistemology Futures, Oxford 2006; Adam Elga: “Reflection and
disagreement does not always provide a reason to alter your belief. Another way to refute the skeptical conclusion would be to deny cases of peer disagreement altogether.

In this paper, I will consider the prospect of self-evident moral propositions in the face of peer disagreement. The epistemological argument from disagreement that will be discussed is aimed at justification of beliefs in self-evident moral propositions. The discussion will draw on recent findings in the peer disagreement controversy.² Conciliatory views will thus be contrasted with alternative views on the significance of peer disagreement. In the end, I will argue that cases of peer disagreement shows that a person cannot be doxastically justified in believing a proposition in virtue of adequately understanding it. If my argument holds, self-evidence would be of next to no use in moral epistemology, since it cannot generate any moral knowledge.

In Section 1, the focus will be on Audi's notion of self-evidence. I will present the epistemological claim concerning self-evident moral principles, and explain how self-evidence is supposed to generate moral knowledge. Reflection as a justificatory method will also be introduced. In Section 2, I will explain why epistemological arguments from disagreement present a more troublesome sceptical challenge to self-evidence than metaphysical ones. The peer disagreement controversy will be introduced, before I set out the argument against self-evidence. Briefly, I will also argue that there is peer disagreement concerning the moral principles that Audi claims are self-evident. In Section 3, I will discuss the conciliatory view. Alternative views on the epistemic significance of peer disagreement will be considered, as well as the plausibility of reasonable disagreements.

In Section 4, I will discuss the prospect of denying cases of peer disagreement altogether: either by claiming that the disagreement is merely apparent, or by denying that the disputants are epistemic peers in the relevant matter. In Section 5, I will close this paper by discussing the epistemic usefulness of self-evident moral propositions. I will suggest that an account of which properties a reflection must have in order to make

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a belief justified is needed in order for self-evidence to be of any epistemic significance. Section 6 contains a summary of the main findings of this paper.

1. Audi’s Notion of Self-Evidence

1.1. Self-Evident Moral Propositions
A crucial question in moral epistemology concerns how we know right from wrong. Moral skeptics will argue that we have no such knowledge, either because there is not sufficient evidence, or a fortiori because there are no moral facts. Audi, on the other hand, argues for the possibility of moral knowledge. Like most intuitionists, he defends the foundationalist claim that we have a body of non-inferentially justified moral beliefs. A moral belief is non-inferential if it “is not – at the time it is intuitively held – believed on the basis of a premise”. However, being non-inferentially justified does not prevent beliefs from also being inferentially justified on Audi’s account. Any proposition that can be known non-inferentially can thus also be known inferentially.

Audi claims that some non-inferentially known moral propositions are self-evident. The most important reason for introducing the prospect of self-evidence is to reject the skeptical regress argument. He describes a self-evident proposition as one whose truth is in some way evident “in itself”. Analytic propositions like “all bachelors are male” are self-evident in a pure conceptual sense. The correct analysis of “bachelors” is discoverable, without reliance on anything beyond understanding the concept. Then again, not all self-evident propositions are analytic. As Audi suggests: “That nothing is red and green all over is a priori and self-evident, but is apparently not analytic”. Propositions of this kind are thus regarded as both a priori and synthetic. The claim of a priori synthetic propositions is notoriously controversial, but I cannot pursue that discussion here.

The moral principles that Audi has in mind reflect general propositions, as opposed to particular propositions. General propositions, like the Rossian obligations or the golden rule differ in kind from particular propositions. The reason why some propositions are considered more general is that subsidiary propositions could be

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7 This example can be found in: “Self-Evidence”, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13, Epistemology, 1999. Audi also elaborates and defends it in *Epistemology*, Routledge 2011, Chapter 5.
derived from them. Audi maintains that particular moral propositions are not self-evident since they are dependent on contingencies. General moral propositions, on the other hand, are knowable on conceptual grounds. Consider this example from Gilbert Harman:

> If you round a corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, you do not need to conclude that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can see that it is wrong.

In this specific case you see that it is wrong to ignite the cat. Even though this may be non-inferentially known, it would not be known on conceptual grounds. Although particular propositions may not be self-evident, Audi believes that they could help us to understand general moral propositions by intuitive induction. Witnessing many cases of animal abuse could perhaps lead us to believe the general proposition that it is wrong to “torture and kill animals”.

Audi considers Ross’s prima facie principles to be the paradigm example of self-evident propositions and to include perhaps all of the “...everyday moral principles to which any sound normative ethics is committed”. These principles are supposed to constitute prima facie moral duties, as opposed to absolute duties. What Audi mean by “prima facie” is that following the duty is not always required. Some duties can have to be put aside when conflicting with others. For example, if we have to choose between

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9 This classic example can be found in Gilbert Harman’s: *The nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Oxford 1977, p. 4.
10 Ross had already suggested this method in *The Right and the Good*: ...we see the prima facie rightness of an act which would be the fulfillment of a particular promise, and of another which would be the fulfillment of a another promise, and when we have reached sufficient maturity too think in general terms, we apprehend prima facie rightness to belong to the nature of fulfilling a promise. What comes first in time is the apprehension of the self-evident prima facie rightness of an individual act of a particular type. From this we come by reflection to apprehend the self-evident general principle of prima facie duty. David W. Ross: *The Right and the Good* (1930), Oxford 2009, p. 33.
12 It is not to say that the principle appears to be right at first sight but might as well be wrong, which could be implied by the “prima facie” term. The term “prima facie” is therefore misleading and maybe “pro tanto” would have been a better choice, as suggested by Klemens Kappel: “Challenges to Audi’s ethical intuitionism”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 5, 2002; Berys Gaut “Justifying Moral Pluralism” in Stratton-Lake, Philip (ed.): *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-Evaluations*, Oxford University Press 2003; and Aaron Zimmerman: *Moral Epistemology*, Routledge 2010. Ross is very well aware of this fact and considers “conditional duty” as an alternative. Not only is the term “duty” out of place since there are exceptions, prima facie also suggests that the principles only seems true at face value, *The Right and the Good* (1930), Oxford, 2009 p. 19.
keeping a promise and helping a friend in need, the former duty may have to be overridden.

Audi suggests ten prima facie moral duties, which are supposed to be self-evident.13 (1) *Prohibition of injury or harm:* “We should not injure or harm people.” (2) *Veracity:* “We should not lie.” (3) *Promissory fidelity:* “We should keep our promises.” (4) *Justice:* “We should not treat people unjustly and should contribute to rectifying injustice and to preventing future injustice.” (5) *Reparation:* “We should make amends for our wrong-doing.” (6) *Beneficence:* “We should contribute to the good of other people.” (7) *Gratitude:* “We should express gratitude, in deed or at least in words of thanks, in a way that befits good things done for us by other people, where, other things equal, our obligation is stronger if what was done for us was not owed to us.” (8) *Self-improvement:* “We should develop or at least sustain our distinctively human capacities.” (9) *Enhancement and preservation of freedom:* “We should contribute to increasing or at least preserving the freedom of persons, giving priority to removing restraints over enhancing opportunities.” (10) *Respectfulness:* “We should, in the manner of our relations with other people, treat them respectfully.”14

1.2. How Self-Evidence May Generate Moral Knowledge

Not only does Audi claim that some moral propositions are self-evident, he also makes the further epistemological claim that they can provide us with moral knowledge. He describes a self-evident proposition in the following way:

...a truth such that an adequate understanding of it meets two conditions. First, in virtue of that understanding, one is justified in believing the proposition (i.e., has justification for believing it, whether one in fact believes it or not) – this explains why such a truth is evident in itself. Second, if one believes the proposition on the basis of that understanding, then one knows it.15

Two conditions are stressed:

(a) One is justified in believing p in virtue of adequately understanding it.

(b) One knows p if one believes it on the basis of that understanding.

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13 These ten principles are highly influenced by principles formulated by Ross in *The Right and the Good* (1930), Oxford 2009. For this reason Audi calls them “Rossian obligations”.
On most accounts, justified belief is a necessary condition for knowledge. In this case an adequate understanding of p would provide the justification. However, adequately understanding p does not mean that you have to believe or know p on Audi’s account. That is, you could be justified in believing p without actually believing p. Neither does adequately understanding and believing p necessarily mean that you know p. In order to know p you must also believe p on the basis of that understanding. Otherwise your belief would not be properly justified. Three elements need further elucidation; first, the notion of an adequate understanding; second, the relation between belief and understanding; and third, the need for the second, knowledge condition.

First, an adequate understanding\(^\text{16}\) involves not only comprehending what the proposition says, but also a kind of knowing how. For example, one must be able to apply it to a wide range of cases, to see some of its logical implications, to distinguish it from close relatives, and to comprehend its elements. An inadequate understanding of a self-evident proposition does not generally suffice to justify belief, nor can it be expected to generate knowledge. When the proposition at issue is complex, thoughtful reflection will be needed in order to understand it adequately. In fact, Audi maintains that the truth of general moral propositions, like the ones he suggests, cannot be known without the mediation of reflection.\(^\text{17}\) I will return to reflection as a justificatory method in the end of this section.

Second, justification does not entail belief. On Audi’s account, self-evident propositions do not have to be compelling. In other words, understanding p does not necessarily entail believing p. Audi suggests skepticism, caution, and slow uptake as explanations to delay and resistance in belief formation. Nevertheless, he still maintains that, “rational persons tend to believe self-evident propositions they adequately understand”.\(^\text{18}\) We can also initially fail to see a self-evident truth, but still come to believe it later on. The reason for this is that not all that is self-evident is obvious. For example, it is self-evident but not obvious that if all A’s are B’s and some A’s are C’s, then some B’s are C’s. In the same way not everything that is obvious is self-evident. It is obvious that Socrates is a man, but it is not self-evident, rather that would be perceptually evident.

\(^\text{16}\) David Copp discusses the fuzziness of an “adequate understanding” at some length in *Morality in a Natural World: Selected Essays in Metaethics*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 93-112.


Third, the knowledge condition (b) is not obviously entailed by the first condition (a). As I see it, the main reason for this proviso is what is sometimes called the *basing relation*.\(^{19}\) The basing relation concerns the epistemic relation between a reason and a belief. A belief is justified for a person when she possesses reasons sufficient to justify the belief, and when the belief is based on these reasons. The basing relation is important since it marks the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification. Having good reasons to believe p would grant propositional justification, while believing p on the basis of those good reasons would also grant doxastic justification. Commonly knowledge requires doxastic, not merely propositional justification. An adequate understanding of p would thus make one propositionally justified to believe p, but to know p one must also be doxastically justified. If one were to believe p on some inadequate basis, despite having adequately understood it, one would thus fail to know p. Audi himself admits that: “Whether one has a justified belief or one constituting knowledge is in part a matter of the basis of the belief, not just the grounds one has for it.”\(^ {20}\)

1.3. Reflection as a Justificatory Method

As we have seen, Audi claims that an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition puts one in a position to know it. However, since moral principles are complex, careful reflection will be needed in order to reach that understanding. To clarify the notion of reflection, Audi makes a distinction between *conclusions of reflection* and *conclusions of inference*. If a conclusion emerges from one or more evidential premises it would be a conclusion of inference. Drawing a conclusion of reflection, on the other hand, is rather a response to a pattern, than an inference from propositionally represented information. Audi compares it to responding to a painting or seeing an expressive face. By drawing a conclusion of reflection one has obtained a view of the whole and thereby characterized it.\(^ {21}\)

Audi describes different routes to a conclusion of reflection, for example intuitive induction, and comparisons with the intuitions of others. Intuitive induction can be described as a conceptual progression from supporting particular acts to believing in


moral principles. It begins with recognizing reasons to particular commitments, as keeping certain promises, and then expanding to grasping more general moral principles. The route may seem clearly inferential, since general principles are derived from premises. However, Audi claims “intuitionism does not have to view intuitive induction as inferential”. Instead he suggests that intuitive induction is essentially developmental in grasping more general moral principles. The intuitions of others are also regarded as an important factor in moral reasoning, particularly on controversial issues. Audi does consequently not conceive the opinions of others as arbitrary, and emphasizes the analogy between intuitions in ethics and perceptions in science.

Reflection could furthermore be enhanced by reflective equilibrium. The method would consist in trying to render general moral propositions consistent with one’s judgments about particular cases. Audi also suggest another use of reflective equilibrium. Rossian principles are supposed to form middle axioms in between ultimate moral foundations, and moral theorems. As a moral foundation, he suggests Kant’s categorical imperative, therefore calling the combination between intuitionism and Kantian ethics: Kantian intuitionism. In this undertaking, both top-down and bottom-up methods can be used in justification. The Rossian middle axioms can be sustained both by reflective equilibrium with Kantian principles, and with minor theorems, and judgments concerning particular cases.

Audi’s description of reflection as a justificatory method may not be entirely illuminating. But, for the sake of the argument I will assume that a thoughtful reflection on a moral proposition may be sufficient for adequately understanding it and thus be justified in believing it. However, the provided justification is only a prima facie justification. A prima facie reason is what appears to be a good reason but might still be defeated in the light of new evidence. If so, it is merely a prima facie justification and not what is sometimes called an ultima facie justification. The main reason to make a distinction between prima and ultima facie justification is to make room for epistemic defeasibility.

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24 It is important to be aware that Audi uses the ethics of Kant as in accordance with ethical intuitionism. He does not claim either that Kant supported a form of moral intuitionism or that it necessary follows from his ethics. The important feature of Kantian ethics is in this case the categorical imperative.
Audi himself maintains that, the justification for beliefs in self-evident propositions is plainly defeasible. This means that further considerations could defeat one's initial justification for believing them. That it is not to say that the belief is no longer prima facie justified, rather it is to say that it fails to be ultima facie justified. This epistemic defeasibility implies that further considerations could defeat one's initial justification. Discovering a disagreement with someone could work as a defeater in this way. If so, you might not be justified in believing like you did at first. In fact, this is a crucial presumption behind the argument from peer disagreement that will be discussed in the next section.

2. The Challenge From Peer Disagreement

2.1. Moral disagreement

In this section I will introduce the argument from peer disagreement. But first, we will have a look at different arguments from moral disagreement. The prevalence of persistent moral disagreement is often cited in order to support skeptical conclusions about morality. Metaphysical arguments purport to establish conclusions about the metaphysics of morality: that there are no moral facts, or that moral facts are relative rather than absolute. Conclusions of some such metaphysical arguments are consistent with the existence of moral knowledge. If moral facts are relative rather than absolute, we may very well have moral knowledge. Nevertheless, moral knowledge would probably be out ruled if the argument successfully showed that there are no moral facts. Epistemological arguments, on the other hand, purport to undermine moral knowledge. Such arguments concede that there may be moral facts, but tries to show that we are not in a position to have any moral knowledge.

Metaphysical arguments from disagreement are not particularly troublesome on Audi's account of self-evidence. In fact, a ready consensus should not be expected, since self-evident propositions are not obviously true. He also suggests that philosophers and skeptics have further reasons not to accept moral principles, if accepting them entails

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endorsing their self-evidence. In the end, a proposition may very well be self-evident even though people fail to believe it. As Audi suggests: “what is self-evident for God does not have to be self-evident to us, but some propositions are still unqualifiedly self-evident”. By contrast, epistemological arguments from disagreement impose a greater threat to Audi’s notion of self-evidence. Let me explain.

Sidgwick argued that some degree of convergence would be necessary in order to be justified in believing self-evident moral propositions. In his own words:

Since it is implied in the very notion of Truth that it is essentially the same for all minds, the denial by another of a proposition that I have affirmed has a tendency to impair my confidence in its validity. And in fact “universal” or “general” consent has often been held to constitute by itself a sufficient evidence of the truth of the most important beliefs; and is practically the only evidence upon which the greater part of mankind can rely. ... And it will be easily seen that the absence of such disagreement must remain an indispensable negative condition of the certainty of our beliefs. For if I find any of my judgments, intuitive or inferential, in direct conflict with a judgment of some other mind, there must be error somewhere: and if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own, reflective comparison between the two judgments necessarily reduces me temporarily to a state of neutrality.

So, if there is disagreement on moral propositions we ought to be suspicious about eventual errors in our intuitive reasoning, and perhaps suspend judgment. Of course, Sidgwick would not have required unanimity; he was well aware of the possibilities to be mistaken. People are liable to confound intuitions with mere impressions or impulses. Neither would an extensive agreement on a moral proposition be enough to prove that it is true. Even larger numbers of people could be mistaken, and would thus not per se constitute evidence for truth.

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28 Audi believes that earlier views on self-evidence suffer from an epistemological mistake, as he elegantly puts it: not being able to see the difference between “apprehending the truth of a proposition that is self-evident and, on the other hand, apprehending its self-evidence, The Good in the Right, Princeton University Press 2005, p. 45.

29 Robert Audi: “Self-Evidence”, Philosophical Perspectives, 13, Epistemology, 1999. Still, this might be a contradicton in adjacto, since the concepts of self-evidence seems to require them to be somewhat gripping. Otherwise there seems to be no sense in separating self-evident moral propositions from non self-evident ones.


The crucial point is that the disagreement must be explained in some way, in order for you to rationally maintain your prior belief. Remaining untouched by the disagreement would entail dogmatism about your own correctness. Nevertheless, the disagreement could be explained by the fact that the disputants possess different evidence regarding the disputed matter. If you know that you are in a superior evidential position, you could rationally sustain your belief. However, this kind of explanation becomes troublesome if the disputant have the same evidence, and is equal in her reasoning abilities. In that case either of you could be the one who is mistaken. It is time to take a closer look at the significance of peer disagreement.

2.2. The Epistemic Significance of Peer Disagreement

Peer disagreement constitutes a formidable challenge to every epistemology and has therefore been frequently discussed in recent epistemological inquiries. This kind of disagreement differs from ordinary disagreement since it makes the assumption that none of the disputants is epistemically inferior to the other. Disagreement can thus not be readily explained away by apparent shortcomings on the behalf of the other disputant. Though adherents to the Flat Earth Society might be reasonable in believing that the earth is flat, we do not have to regard them as our epistemic peers. It is uncontroversial that someone in an inferior epistemic position should defer to the judgment of someone in a superior epistemic position. Matters are considerably less clear in cases of epistemic parity.

According to Thomas Kelly, two subjects are epistemic peers in the relevant matter if and only if:

(1) They are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on that question, and

(2) They are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias.\(^{32}\)

Note that, an epistemic peer in one matter does not per se have to be an epistemic peer in another matter. For example, a person might be in an epistemically advantageous

position to assess mathematical problems, but need not be in an equally good position to evaluate religious matters. Neither do peers have to be fully informed and fully rational individuals, in ideal conditions. Instead, they might be equally mediocre in regards of epistemic virtues, or equally sloppy in handling the evidence. However, disagreement among unreflective and uninformed peers seems to be of less epistemic significance. I will therefore focus on expert disagreement. This does not necessarily mean that the peers have maximal information and extraordinary skill. Instead, I make the weaker presumption that the peers are adequately well informed, and epistemically gifted, to be able to adequately understand self-evident propositions.

It will be helpful to consider cases of peer disagreement as conforming to the following schema:

\begin{align*}
\text{t1.} & \text{ You gain access to evidence } E \text{ about a proposition } p. \text{ You are justified to believe that a peer } P \text{ also has evidence } E \text{ about } p. \\
\text{t2.} & \text{ You believe that } p \text{ after reasoning on the basis of } E. \text{ You are justified to believe that } P \text{ also formed a belief about } p \text{ after reasoning on the basis of } E. \\
\text{t3.} & \text{ You find out that } P \text{ believes } \neg p. \text{ The new total evidence } E^* \text{ consists of both } E \text{ and the evidence } E' \text{ offered by the disagreement.}
\end{align*}

Following this schema, the key question of peer disagreement is: which attitude towards \( p \) is justified for you at \( t3 \)? Observe that the disagreement itself will count as additional evidence \( E' \) and thus be included in your total evidence \( E^* \) at \( t3 \). For this reason your total evidence \( E \) at \( t2 \) will be different from your total evidence \( E^* \) at \( t3 \). Given that \( p \) is an appropriate response to \( E \) at \( t2 \), that belief may not be an appropriate response to \( E^* \) at \( t3 \). Since the total evidence differs between \( t2 \) and \( t3 \), it is not surprising that the justification for the relevant belief can be altered. The outcome could be described in terms of flat-out attitudes (belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment) or in terms of degrees of credence. I will primarily be speaking in terms of flat-out attitudes since the
discussion will be focusing on cases of what is sometimes called “strong disagreements”, were you believe p and your peer believes –p.\(^{33}\)

However, the key question is ambiguous since there are different standards of epistemic justification at issue.\(^{34}\) You could have evidential support to believe a moral proposition without having the proper reason for believing it. In that case, the belief would be propositionally but not doxastically justified for you. The question concerning epistemic justification could be understood to be exclusively about evidential support. On this understanding, we ask which doxastic attitude is supported by your evidence once the disagreement is revealed. Alternatively, we can understand the question to be about justified belief. On this reading, we would not only consider the evidence provided by the disagreement, but we would also consider possible effects on the reasoning behind your belief. Keep in mind that the following argument from peer disagreement will draw on justification in the sense of doxastic justification.

2.3. The Argument From Peer Disagreement

In this section, I will introduce the argument from peer disagreement and explain in which way it constitutes a threat to the justification generated by reflecting on moral propositions. If the argument holds, the notion of self-evidence would be of next to no epistemic use. The argument from peer disagreement will be outlined as follows:

**The Argument From Peer Disagreement:** In cases of peer disagreement a subject S is not doxastically justified to believe a moral proposition p on the sole basis of reflection.

The argument is an epistemological one since it purports to undermine moral knowledge. I will presume that doxastic justification is a necessary condition for knowledge. However, the scope is limited since the argument merely aims at undermining knowledge of moral propositions on the sole basis of reflection. I will not

\(^{33}\) As Thomas Kelly points out, accounting for the epistemology of peer disagreement in terms of graded belief will be crucial in cases of “weak disagreements” between believers and agnostics. Surely, suspending belief would not be a suitable compromise, since it would give more weight to the opinion of the agnostic, “Peer Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence”, Feldman & Warfield (ed.): *Disagreement*, Oxford 2010.

\(^{34}\) A comprehensive discussion of the different standards of epistemic justification concerned in the peer disagreement debate can be found in Han van Wietmarschen: “Peer Disagreement, Evidence, And Well-Groundness”, forthcoming in *Philosophical Review*.  

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defend the stronger claim that peer disagreement undermines all moral knowledge. The upshot behind the argument is that reflection as evidence is to weak to provide the right degree of certainty required for knowledge. Neither does the argument imply that we cannot be justified at all in believing moral propositions on the basis of reflection. We may still have propositional justification for believing them. What the argument implies is that justification is defeated in the sense of doxastic justification.

What typifies cases of peer disagreement has already been discussed. Now, let me explain how doxastic justification can be defeated. Remember that beliefs in self-evident propositions are only prima facie justified on Audi’s account. In this case the defeater would be your mental state after you learn about the peer disagreement. The original belief is thus no longer doxastically justified for you, granted that the absence of such a defeater is necessary for doxastic justification. Of course, if you do not believe that disagreement as evidence constitutes a defeater, you will not agree to this argument. In the subsequent section I will deal with some alternative views on peer disagreement that denies that $E’$ must compose a defeater at $t3$. Neither will this argument convince those who do not believe that a belief has to be undefeated to be doxastically justified. However, I will presume that undefeated belief is a necessary condition for doxastic justification. Those who do not agree with me will not accept the argument from peer disagreement.

The relevant disagreement concerns the truth of general moral propositions. I will argue that there is in fact revealed peer disagreement on the general moral propositions that Audi suggests. It means that the peer disagreement is out in the open: the disputants are aware of the disagreement and that they are peers in the relevant matter. Moral philosophers ought to qualify as expert peers in the relevant matter. Philosophers are in almost ideal conditions for moral inquiry.\footnote{Alexandria Plakias and John M. Doris elaborates on this thesis in “How to Find a Disagreement: Philosophical Diversity and Moral realism” in Walter Sinnott Armstrong (ed.) \textit{Moral Psychology} Vol. 2, MIT Press 2008.} They have ready access to an enormous body of relevant knowledge, and enjoy the possibility to pursue prolonged discussion. Still, moral philosophers notoriously disagree. This fact is also at display when one considers the last hundred years of theorizing about ethics. I therefore believe it fair to say that the theoretical disagreement among moral philosophers does not seem easily resolvable. Now, let us have a look at some examples.
First, a radical particularist contest that there are such things as moral principles. The general idea behind moral principles is that we should allow the same weight every time to something that matters in order to be just, independently of its context. Jonathan Dancy believes that it is possible to achieve a consistent moral position without principles of any sort. On Dancy’s account context would be given a larger role than moral principles allows. He asks why we should suppose that a feature that counts in favour in one case must count the same way in every case. For instance, according to the prima facie duty of promissory fidelity, the fact that one has promised to do something is always some reason to do it. On a particularistic view, on the other hand, this need not be a reason at all, or even a reason for not doing it.36

Second, adherents to some theories of rights holds that prima facie duties fails to capture something we think is important. On this view, a right is commonly seen as a “trump”. If so, rights alone decide what we ought to do. Any such approach is in opposition to the theory of prima facie duties. For instance, the prima facie duty of non-injury may be overridden by other duties on Audi’s account. In order to help someone in distress, you may be permitted to steal someone’s car. Surely this would cause the owner of the car harm, but the prima facie duty of beneficence could allow for this. The fact that the car belongs to someone is not a trump in this case. If duties are merely prima facie there is nothing stronger which can reasonably claim to be a trump.

Finally, a moral nihilist claims that no moral propositions are true. Ryan Fanselow views this case of disagreement as especially important, since it would be a potential defeater for all our moral beliefs.37

3. Competitors to the Conciliatory View

3.1. The Extra Weight View
The argument from peer disagreement assumes a conciliatory view. Following Christensen, the main reason why a person is not justified in believing p at t3 is that she is not justified in believing that the disputants mistake, rather than her own mistake, explains the disagreement about p. Nevertheless, if you have good reason to believe that

your disputant is mistaken the conciliatory view will not hold. It could also be that, both parties are epistemically permitted to maintain their differing beliefs despite the revealed disagreement. I will consider three alternatives to the conciliatory view: the extra weight view, the apparent possibility of reasonable disagreements, and Kelly’s total evidence view. However, I will eventually argue that they should all be rejected in the relevant cases. But first, let us have a closer look at the conciliatory view.

According to the conciliatory view, neither peer is justified to believe that the other peer’s mistake explains the disagreement about p. Peers should therefore appoint equal weight to each other’s opinions in the matter:

The Equal Weight View: In cases of peer disagreement, one should give equal weight to one’s own opinion and to the opinion of those one counts as epistemic peers in the relevant matter.38

On the standard interpretation of the equal weight view, it seems to follow that if I believe p and a peer believes -p, we should both suspend judgment regarding p. However, it is not obvious why the disputants cannot give equal weight to each other’s opinions without being required to suspend judgment. Perhaps, in at least some cases of peer disagreement, one is to give no weight at all to either disputant’s opinion. In that case, both peer opinions would be getting equal weight (none) also. Nevertheless, if the equal weight view is to remain a conciliatory view, the standard interpretation is more close at hand.

A troublesome consequence of strong conciliatory positions is the one Adam Elga calls “spinelessness”. When one considers messy examples, of real-world disagreements, the equal weight view seems to lead to absurdity. Consider the following example from Elga:

...your friends take a range of stances on some basic political or ethical claim. By your lights, these friends are just as thoughtful, well-informed, quick-witted, and intellectually honest as you. Still, it seem obviously wrong that you are thereby required to suspend judgment on the claim, as the

equal weight view seems to entail. To require this would be to require you to suspend of judgment on almost everything.\textsuperscript{39}

On this perspective, the equal weight view, seem to lead to an unreasonable skepticism on almost all issues. However, the alternative must not be sheer stubbornness. If one has something to say for oneself in the face of such disagreement, skepticism must not be required. The alternative would instead be to adopt a view at the steadfast end of the spectrum, like this one:

**The Extra Weight View:** In cases of peer disagreement, one should give one's own assessment more weight than the assessments of those one counts as epistemic peers.\textsuperscript{40}

At face value, the extra weight view might seem epistemically chauvinistic. Giving your own evaluation more weight (since it is yours) seems to be a way of bootstrapping yourself into confidence. Merely noting cases of disagreement would thus be a way to become confident that you are a better evaluator than your disputants.

On the other hand, if you after careful reflection about p concluded that p, you might inter alia be justified to believe that your disponent made a mistake. In that case the disagreement does not threaten the justification for your belief that p. Nevertheless, this line of reasoning seems problematic since your reasoning about p is challenged by the peer disagreement, and the very same process of reasoning is used to establish that your disponent made a mistake. To avoid circularity we must bracket the original reasoning about p at t2, when we determine the appropriate response to peer disagreement. Otherwise, we would allow for question-begging dismissals of the evidence provided by the disagreement.\textsuperscript{41}

However, giving extra weight to your own opinion may not be necessary in order to sustain belief. The conciliatory view presumes that you must have an additional reason to remain confident in your belief in the face of disagreement. Perhaps such a

\textsuperscript{39} Adam Elga: “Reflection and Disagreement”, *NOUS* 41:3, 2007.


\textsuperscript{41} Christensen defends this position at some length in “Disagreement, Question-Begging, and Epistemic Self-Criticism”, *Philosopher's Imprint*, No. 6, 2011.
reason is not necessary after all. Why believe that anyone of you have made a mistake? Of course, it cannot be that both p and –p holds. However, both parties could perhaps still be equally reasonable in maintaining opposite beliefs. I will discuss this possibility further in the next part of this section.

3.2. Reasonable Disagreement

On a conciliatory view, both disputants are to suspend judgment on a contested proposition p. But why must this be so? Consider the following example from Shafer Landau:

Take someone who spends a career trying to solve the free will problem. She crafts a superb book (acknowledged as such even by her detectors), knowing all the while that she has nothing like a non-controversial demonstration or proof of her major claims. She is able, to her satisfaction, to respond to objections, to corroborate her diagnoses of her opponents’ vulnerabilities. Yet all of this will fail to convince many or most of her colleagues. And she knows that. But I don’t see that this reception forces her to suspend judgment on the matter she has thought so carefully about. Of course, others who have worked as hard and as well on the subject, but who disagree with her, are also justified in their views, and not all of these views can be true. But justification does not entail truth.42

Shafer-Landau claims that not only the woman who wrote the book on free will is justified in her beliefs, but also her colleagues who hold the opposite belief. In fact, similar disagreements in courts, science, and philosophy are actually quite common. This often appears to be the case when competing hypothesis meet in science. The existing body of evidence might be complex, and different conclusions on what to believe is perhaps to be expected. An alternative to the conciliatory view would thus be to regard both disputants as equally rational in retaining their initial beliefs, despite the revealed disagreement:

**Reasonable Disagreement:** In at least some cases of peer disagreement, both disputants might be perfectly reasonable even if neither gives any weight at all to the opinion of the other disputant.43

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I believe this view to be false, at least in cases concerning allegedly self-evident moral propositions. This is not to say that generally reasonable people cannot disagree in a specific case. Of course, you can regard someone as reasonable, even if she is mistaken. Neither is it to say that a people with similar evidence cannot reasonable act differently in the light of a disagreement. The question has to do with belief, not with associated behavior. Sometimes the word “reasonable” is used in a weak sense, so that anyone who is not obviously unreasonable counts as being reasonable. If this were enough for being reasonable, it would be easy to see how there could be reasonable disagreements. I have a stronger concept of reasonableness in mind. According to the stronger notion of being reasonable, a belief is reasonable only when it is justified.44

Cases of reasonable disagreements imply that there is a range of rationally permissible attitudes to take towards a self-evident moral proposition given a certain body of evidence E. In this case, reflection would provide the shared evidence. On this view, two peers would be permitted to hold opposite beliefs on p after reflecting on it. The fact that they are aware of their disagreement would not prevent them from being justified in their opposite beliefs. To reject the possibility of a reasonable disagreement, adherents to conciliationism commonly defend what is called the uniqueness thesis:

**The Uniqueness Thesis:** For any given proposition p, and total body of evidence e, there is only one unique attitude towards p that it is rational given e.

The uniqueness thesis concerns the relationship between rationality and evidence. Ex hypothesis a body of evidence cannot count both for and against a proposition, the uniqueness thesis excludes the possibility of rational disagreement between evidential twins. Remember that epistemic peers ex hypothesis share the same evidence. The fact that people with different evidence can reasonable disagree is not under dispute. Nevertheless, the uniqueness thesis is highly controversial, and it is an open question if conciliatory views are committed to this thesis.45

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45 Thomas Kelly argues that the Equal Weight View is committed to adopting the Uniqueness thesis in "Peer Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence", Feldman & Warfield (ed.): *Disagreement*, Oxford 2010. For an opposite opinion on the connection between the Equal Weight View and Uniqueness see Nathan
Positions that depart from the uniqueness thesis can be regarded as *epistemically permissive*. Roger White believes that permissiveness is an implausible position to hold. He claims that the same body of evidence cannot rationally permit you to both believe and disbelieve a proposition \( p \).\(^{46}\) However, epistemic permissiveness is not committed to such a contradiction. A body of evidence could permit you to either believe \( p \) or disbelieve \( p \), without permitting you to both believe and disbelieve \( p \). Therefore Epistemic Permissiveness is only committed to the view that one can rationally believe \( p \) or rationally believe \( \text{not}-p \) (but not both) on the basis of the same evidence.

However, following Stewart Cohen, I believe there are two uniqueness theses in play: the uniqueness thesis and what can be called “Doxastic Uniqueness”:

**Doxastic Uniqueness:** A subject cannot rationally believe there are two rational credences for \( p \) on e, while rationally holding either.\(^{47}\)

As it seems, the uniqueness thesis should not be conflated with doxastic uniqueness. In this case the uniqueness thesis is probably false, since evidence \( E \) could permit the disputants to form opposite beliefs. Especially if \( E \) is ambiguous, which is the case concerning the evidence for self-evident moral propositions. So if we look at the disagreement in purely evidential terms, conciliationism will not hold. However, granting permissive evidence does not imply granting doxastic permissiveness. The argument from peer disagreement says that when you learn about the dissensus at \( t3 \) your belief is not doxastically justified, given \( E' \). This claim holds even if the evidence per se could be permissive. But are we really required to suspend judgment based on the new total evidence \( E^* \) at \( t3 \)? Kelly believes not. I will discuss his outlook on the peer disagreement in the following.

3.3. The Total Evidence View

To avoid circularity, on the conciliatory view, we are to bracket the original evidence. This leads to that neither peer’s belief is doxastically justified at \( t3 \). However, Kelly believes this to be a mistake, since the original evidence might be extremely substantial.

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compared to the evidence offered by the disagreement. Given that E strongly favors p over –p at t2, we would expect that E*(t2) will also favor p at t3, even if not to the same degree as E does. He therefore suggests an intermediate position in between the conciliatory and the steadfast view that stresses the role of evidence:

The Total Evidence View: In cases of peer disagreement, what it is reasonable to believe depends on both the original, first-order evidence as well as the higher-order evidence that is provided by the fact that one’s peers believe as they do.” 48

The total evidence view emphasizes the difference between the initial justification and the subsequent awareness of peer disagreement. The first-order evidence consist of the original evidence E at t2, and the higher-order evidence consist of the evidence E’ that is afforded by the fact that one’s peer believes differently. On the total evidence view both the first-order evidence and the higher-order evidence counts for something. There is no general answer to which kind of evidence plays a greater role in what it is reasonable for you to believe on E*. The total evidence view may therefore support either a conciliatory or a steadfast view. Although the equal weight view prescribes splitting the difference, Kelly asks why the higher-order evidence should count for everything, and the first-order evidence for nothing.49 Consider this example:

We go to a restaurant, after dinner we decide to split the bill. After both calculating what half of the bill should be, a disagreement arises. I come up with an answer of 30 dollar each. You come up with an answer of 60 dollar each. It should be obvious to me that you are wrong since 50 dollar is close to the entire bill. Even though you have been equally reliable at math in previous cases, in this case I can completely disregard your answer because it is obviously erroneous.

Granted that we still are peers, which may seem odd since your reasoning is obviously not very good, we are supposed to suspend judgment. However, that seems absurd. Call these cases “clear cases” That is cases when it is clear to you that your reasoning at t2

must be correct. Learning about the disagreement at t3 will not change that fact. Therefore, the first-order evidence should swamp the higher-order evidence. Of course, on Kelly's view, it could also be the other way around. In less clearer cases the higher-order evidence could swamp the first-order evidence, at least if the latter is quite insubstantial compared to the former. I suspect this to generally be the case when the source of the disagreement is of a more complex nature, such as those concerning politics, religion, or ethics. In these cases we cannot easily determine whose belief is more rationally formed based on the available evidence.

When it comes to self-evident moral propositions, the first-order evidence E would be offered by a thoughtful reflection on the relevant proposition, while the second-order evidence E´ would be offered by the revealed peer disagreement. But, reflection as first-order evidence does not seem compatible with the certainty that would be required in order to disregard the higher-order evidence. On Audi’s account it takes time and careful consideration for a reflector to be justified in believing a self-evident proposition. The relevant proposition ought to be compared to other beliefs in order to attain a reflective equilibrium. For this purpose, the proposition needs to be applied to various hypothetical cases. Yet, there could be logical implications that are difficult to discern. In other words, the reflection may not be sufficient for various reasons. Therefore, I don't believe that the first-order evidence could easily swamp the higher-order evidence in this case.

On the other hand, if the total evidence view was to be seen as a view on evidential support the outcome might be different. My evidence may still support p in the sense that it is rational for me to believe p, and I may in fact also believe p. Yet, my belief would fail to be doxastically rational. In this case, it will fail because my doxastic justification for believing p is undermined by the peer disagreement. The original reasoning, on the basis of E, is no longer doxastically rational from the total evidence E* now available to you. A rational reasoning must also respond to the evidence E´ offered by the disagreement as a potential defeater. This leads us to another strategy in defending belief in the face of controversy. If we deny that the disputant is an actual peer we no longer have to believe that we are equally liable to be mistaken. I will explore this possibility in the following section.
4. Denying Cases of Peer Disagreement

4.1. Apparent Peer Disagreement

In this section I will discuss the possibility of dismissing cases of peer disagreement altogether. If you are not justified to believe p at t3 a further belief seems required in order to overlook the evidence E’ provided by the disagreement. Downgrading a disputant’s opinion just because she disagrees with you would be unreasonable without a further belief to support this. Neither does the first-order evidence offered by reflection seem strong enough to swamp the higher-order evidence provided by the revealed disagreement. Perhaps, a more promising defense would consist in denying cases of peer disagreement. There are two possible lines of defense: (i) denying cases of peer disagreement, or (ii) denying cases of peer disagreement. In the first line of defense, it would be denied that what appears to be a disagreement is an actual disagreement. In the second line of defense, it would be denied that the disagreement concerns epistemic peers.

Let’s begin with exploring the first line of defense. Peer disagreement on moral propositions could be superficial in the sense that it would be resolvable under ideal epistemic circumstances. Perhaps, the disputes are merely semantic. In many cases, the sentence uttered by one person seems to contradict the sentence uttered by another person. But the proposition one person intends to assert do not necessarily have to contradict the proposition the other person intends to assert. An explanation may be that the terms are being used imprecisely. In that case what appears to be a disagreement on a self-evident moral proposition may not be an actual disagreement.

For example, one peer might believe that we have a prima facie duty of veracity, while the other peer believes otherwise. However, this duty could be conceived in different ways. One peer may assume that the duty of veracity expresses the principle: “we should not lie”, and believe it dependent on that understanding. But, suppose that a peer, who disagrees, does so because he believes that the duty is equivalent to the closely related principle “tell the truth”. In this case, the peers may not actually disagree, since both peers could agree on veracity in the sense that “we should not lie”, but also believe that avoiding telling the truth may not be wrong. In that case, the disagreement would be merely semantic.
Cases like this indicates that the sentences we utter are imperfect guides to the propositions that we intend to assert. However, I do not believe that all cases of peer disagreement could be explained in this way. Remember that expert peers are epistemically gifted, and have given the evidence careful reflection. Besides, to presume that all disagreements among peers can be explained by conceptual confusions seems somewhat question begging. For example, it remains to be explained on what semantic misunderstanding the disagreement on moral principles between Audi and Dancy depends on. Moreover, the discrepancy between sentences and propositions does not show that there is less disagreement than there appears to be. In fact, apparent peer agreement could also be misleading in the same way. Audi believes that self-evident moral principles appear:

...in different formulations, not only in Kant’s treatment of his examples and in Ross’s principles of duty, but also among the Ten Commandments, in Aristotle, in Aquinas, in Hume, in Mill, and in such a major international statements as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.\(^{50}\)

The same propositions are supposed to appear “in different formulations” in various ethical statements. But it can also be the other way round. For example, the sixth commandment “thou shalt not kill”, as it is formulated in King James Version of the Bible, might seem to be a different formulation of a Rossian principle. However, on some interpretations of the Old Testament, this applies only to the Israelis. Consequently, the genocide of Canaanites was not considered as a wrongdoing. A defender of Rossian principles may assent to this sentence only because he is mistaken about which proposition is intended. If this kind of misunderstandings is common, there may actually be more disagreement than there appears to be. In the end, the problematical relation between uttered sentences and intended propositions does not show that there is less disagreement than it appears to be.

4.2. The Ambiguity of Peerhood

The other line of defense would consist in denying cases of peer disagreement altogether. In fact, the ambiguity of peerhood opens up for this possibility by not accepting other disputants as true peers. The conception of “peerhood” can be

understood in at least three different senses. Someone could in fact be a peer, be believed to be a peer, and be justifiably believed to be a peer. The mere fact that you take someone to be a peer does not necessarily entail that he is an actual peer. Neither does merely believing someone to be a peer necessarily make you justified in believing so. In other words, believing someone to be a peer on default grounds would not be a good reason to alter one’s conviction. You must therefore have adequate reasons to believe someone to be a peer. Still, this does not mean that the disputant is an actual peer.

Audi argues that it takes much information and extensive reflection in order to know if someone is an epistemic peer. The complexity and quantity of evidence needed for establishing peer-hood are vast, and it is difficult to avoid error in the assessment. However, this skepticism seems exaggerated, since less information ought to be enough in order to be sufficiently justified in believing someone to be a peer. Perhaps extensive and complex information is required for being certain that someone is an actual a peer. But, for the purpose of being sufficiently justified in believing that someone is a peer, less information will do. In cases of disagreement, even a weak justification for believing someone to be a peer ought to be enough for you to scrutinize your belief.

Another reason to be skeptical about whether the disputant is an actual peer or not, could be the disagreement in itself. The mere fact that someone disagrees with you might be a good reason to doubt if he is a full-scale peer in the matter. Elga argues that peers tend to have views that are similar in controversial issues. He offers this example to illustrate the improbability of two disputants disagreeing on a controversial issue and yet considering each other as peers in the matter:

Consider Ann and Beth, two friends who stand at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Consider the claim that abortion is morally permissible. Does Ann consider Beth a peer with respect to this claim? That is: setting aside her own reasoning about the abortion claim (and Beth’s contrary view about it), does Ann think Beth would be just as likely as her to get things right? The answer is “no”.

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The reason why Ann and Beth cannot consider each other as peers, according to Elga, is that the abortion claim is tangled in a cluster of related issues. For that reason, it seems unlikely that they would consider each other as peers in the matter. A disagreement could also reveal to persons who antecedently considered each other as peers that they probably are not. The revealed disagreement may therefore be reason in itself to believe that the disputant is not an actual peer.

Whether two individuals counts as epistemic peers will depend on how liberal the standards for epistemic peer-hood are. If the standards are sufficiently demanding, it might be that no individuals ever qualify as epistemic peers. There may always be some slight difference in epistemic virtues, or in information. Indeed, it is perhaps impossible to establish if two individuals are actual peers, but for the purpose of putting one’s opinions under scrutiny, less demanding standards will do. I also suspect that this is what Sidgwick had in mind when he referred to “the very notion of Truth that it is essentially the same for all minds”. Although not everyone can be believed to be peers, neither should peer-hood be considered as abstruse as Audi takes it to be.

Finally, it can be argued that other relevant variables could explain the disagreement. Being epistemic peers does not necessarily make two individuals equally reliable as moral evaluators. Audi maintains that there could be potentially influential background theories distorting the judgment of a disputant. For example, skepticism could enhance the tendency to withhold belief, even though the reasons are not conclusive. If the disputant holds prejudicial beliefs or have certain loyalties, this could create disagreement per se. Furthermore, normative conceptions might affect assessment unconsciously. Audi believes the reading of powerful works, as Crime and Punishment, may affect our conceptions of emotion and motivation, of guilt, forgiveness etc. These qualifications suggest that even though people can be equally rational and consider the same evidence equally conscientiously; they are still liable to disagree.54

Still, in order to believe that I have reflected adequately on a proposition, while the dissenter has not, I need further belief. The disputant might very well be distorted by influential background theories, but it remains to be explained in which way they have affected reflection. If I cannot provide such a further belief, suspending judgment in accordance with the equal weight view might still be required. However, these

considerations imply that an account on what makes a reflection adequate becomes important in the light of peer disagreement.

5. Epilogue: The Epistemological Uselessness of Self-Evidence

I believe that Audi’s theory on self-evidence does an excellent job in explaining moral disagreement, while it fails at resolving it. The elusiveness of self-evidence is instrumental in explaining why self-evident moral propositions are not readily known. In this way Audi avoids the objections concerning dogmatism that were symptomatic for earlier intuitionist theories. However, the strength of self-evidence is at the same time its weakness. Since self-evident moral propositions are far from obvious, time and extensive reflection will be needed in order to justifiably believe them. In this way, self-evident propositions appear increasingly inaccessible. If they provide justification at all, they only do so in a very weak sense. As we have seen an adequate understanding of a proposition may yield propositional but not doxastic justification.

In order to be of any use in epistemology self-evidence ought to be instrumental in providing us with moral knowledge in virtue of adequately understanding them. Otherwise it would not make sense to separate self-evident from non self-evident moral propositions. Even though some moral propositions may be self-evident, they do not seem to be knowable in virtue of their self-evidence. Support for this conclusion is offered by the argument from peer disagreement. Granted that there might be an initial reason to believe a self-evident moral proposition on the basis of reflection, this reason is defeated in the face of peer disagreement. The prima facie justification for believing a self-evident moral proposition is thus too weak to provide the doxastic justification required for knowledge. Therefore, I believe that the notion of self-evidence, as outlined by Audi, is of next to no significant epistemic in moral epistemology.

As I see it, a fully worked-out theory on what makes a reflection adequate will be needed in order for Audi’s notion of self-evidence to be instrumental in the pursuit of moral knowledge. The weakness of reflection as a justificatory method becomes apparent in cases of peer disagreement. When two peers disagree on the truth of a moral proposition there seems to be no way to tell which reflection is the adequate one. For this purpose, an account of which properties a reflection must have to make a moral belief justified is required. The need for such a theory arises because not just any
reflection will do. Perhaps, a reflection must be careful and long enough, not be distorted by backgrounds theories, and so on. But I cannot pursue that discussion here.

6. Conclusion

This paper has undertaken an investigation of Audi’s notion of self-evidence in the face of peer disagreement. I have argued that the doxastic justification for believing moral propositions on the basis of reflection is defeated by the awareness of peer disagreement. The evidence provided by reflection is not strong enough to grant moral knowledge. As a consequence, I believe that the notion of self-evidence, as outlined by Audi, is of next to no significant epistemic use. That is, there is no point in separating a self-evident from a non self-evident moral proposition. My main findings are summarized below.

A proposition is self-evident provided that an adequate understanding of it is sufficient for being justified in believing it. One knows the proposition if one believes it on the basis of that understanding. However, self-evident propositions need not be readily known since they are not obviously true. Reflection as a justificatory method is required in order to understand them adequately. Even though reflection might justify belief, the provided prima facie justification would still be defeasible. That is, the belief could still fail to be ultima facie justified in the light of new evidence.

Epistemological arguments from moral disagreement constitute a larger threat to Audi’s notion of self-evidence than metaphysical ones. In cases of peer disagreement, the disputants are equally competent and well informed in the relevant matter. The argument from peer disagreement implies that you are not doxastically justified in believing moral propositions on the sole basis of reflection. Even though an adequate understanding of a proposition may be sufficient for propositional justification. Theoretical disagreement among moral philosophers indicates that there is actual peer disagreement on the general moral propositions that Audi defends.

There are several competing views on the significance of peer disagreement. A strong conciliatory view suggests that suspension of judgment is required. However, endorsing this view could lead to an unreasonable skepticism that could be avoided if a steadfast view were adopted instead. An alternative would thus be to give our own opinion extra weight. Then again, a further reason would be needed in order to believe
that we have evaluated the evidence better than our peer. It would be question-begging to cite the disagreement as an additional reason for sustained belief. For this reason we should bracket the original evidence when responding to peer disagreement.

Another alternative would be to accept that peers could disagree and yet remain rational in sustaining their original beliefs. Agreeing to disagree seems to violate the uniqueness thesis. However, the uniqueness thesis should not be conflated with doxastic uniqueness. In this case the uniqueness thesis is probably false, since the evidence could very well be permissive. However, granting permissive evidence does not imply granting doxastic permissiveness. Even though the evidence may lead the disputants to hold opposite beliefs, these beliefs are not doxastically justified in the light of their disagreement.

A third alternative would be to argue that the original evidence might be extremely substantial compared to the evidence offered by the disagreement. What is reasonable to believe would depend on both the original, first-order evidence as well as the higher-order evidence that is provided by the fact that one’s peers believe as they do. The first-order evidence could therefore swamp the higher-order evidence. However, I argued that reflection, as a justificatory method, does not seem compatible with the certainty that would be needed to disregard the higher-order evidence in this case.

Cases of peer disagreement could also be denied altogether. Either by denying cases of peer disagreement, or denying cases of peer disagreement. I argued that not all cases of peer disagreement seem to be due to conceptual confusions. Even so, that could also indicate that there is more peer disagreement than it appears to be. The ambiguity of peer-hood could perhaps indicate that who is believed to be a peer is not an actual peer. However, I argued that a less demanding standard for who should count as a peer would do for the purpose of putting one’s belief under scrutiny. I granted that there could be other relevant variables that could explain the peer disagreement, but suggested that it remains to be explained in which way they could influence reflection.

In the end, Audi’s theory on self-evidence does an excellent job in explaining moral disagreement, while it fails at resolving it. For self-evidence to be of any significant epistemic use, a fully worked-out theory on what makes a reflection adequate will be needed. Perhaps, reflection must be careful and long enough to make a moral belief justified. However, if these properties are not specified we will have no way to separate
an adequate reflection from an inadequate one. Even though such a qualification may be possible, the work remains to be done.
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