

8-2-2013

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Tung-Ying Wu

*University of Missouri-St. Louis*, [timega@gmail.com](mailto:timega@gmail.com)

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## Recommended Citation

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<http://irl.umsl.edu/thesis/212>

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Epistemic Uniqueness, Permissiveness, and Peer Disagreement

Tung-Ying Wu

M.L., National Taipei University, 2009

B.L., National Taiwan University, 2005

A Thesis submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri – St. Louis in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Masters of Arts in Philosophy

August 2013

Advisory Committee

Eric Wiland

Chairperson

Berit Brogaard

Jon McGinnis

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## Epistemic Uniqueness, Permissiveness, and Peer Disagreement

Tung-Ying Wu

Disagreement is very common in controversial areas such as politics, law, religion, and philosophy, but it is also very common in daily interactions. Clearly, in every disagreement it is neither the case that one should always defer to others, nor that one should always insist she is right. Instead, one should first evaluate the credence of the dissenter's testimony. Suppose she recognizes the dissenter is her epistemic peer. In the current debate of the epistemology of peer disagreement, it is controversial whether one is rationally<sup>1</sup> required to suspend one's judgment when disputing with peers. Three different views have been proposed: (1) The Conciliatory view: we should *always* move at least a bit in the direction of the epistemic peer's. (2) The Stubborn view: we should *always* not be moved by peer disagreement. (3) The Non-Conciliatory view: in *some* cases of peer disagreement we should be moved by peer disagreement, but in *some* cases of peer disagreement we should *not* be moved by peer disagreement.

Two theses of the relationship between rationality and evidence are closely related to the question of how we should react to peer disagreement: (4) Uniqueness: for given evidence rationality fixes a unique fully rational doxastic attitude with respect to a given proposition. (5) Permissivism: for some evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Following the discussion in the epistemology of peer disagreement, I use "rational," "justified," and "reasonable" interchangeably. Moreover, following Kelly (2005), the significance of peer disagreement is not a descriptive issue, but a normative question. So sometimes I will use "should" instead of "rationally required to" in this paper for the purpose of being concise.

rationality permits a range of fully rational doxastic attitudes with respect to a given proposition.

In this paper I will carefully examine the relationship between (1)-(3) and (4)-(5) and conclude that (3) is a more tenable view than (1). In section 1 I will specify (1)-(3) about how to respond to peer disagreement. In section 2, I will introduce (4)-(5) about the relationship between rationality and evidence and examine their relationship with (1)-(3). It leads to the conclusion that (2) can be dismissed. In section 3 I will argue that (5) on the relationship between evidence and rationality is more acceptable than (4). In section 4 I will compare two combinations of (1), (3) and (5) and argue that the combination of (3) and (5) is more tenable or at least equally plausible.

## **0. Three Positions in Peer Disagreement**

Disagreement is very common in controversial areas such as politics, law, religion, and philosophy, but it is also very common in daily interactions. Clearly, in every disagreement it is neither the case that one should always defer to others, nor that one should always insist she is right. Instead, one should first evaluate the credence of the dissenter's testimony. To do this, one should consider the dissenter's possession of evidences, intelligence, reasoning ability, expertise concerning the relevant domain, and the availability of epistemic defeater for the dissenter's credibility, etc.<sup>2</sup>. If I recognize that my dissenter is epistemically superior to me

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<sup>2</sup> However, as pointed out by some philosophers, evaluating others' credibility is never an easy task. In highly contested areas such as politics, law, religion, and philosophy, our beliefs in these areas are deeply connected with each other. When

relative to a given domain, then she is my *epistemic superior* (hereafter, *superior*). If I recognize that my dissenter is epistemically inferior to me, then she is my epistemic inferior. However, if I recognize that my dissenter is epistemically equally good as me, then she is my epistemic peer (hereafter, *peer*). While in most cases one is rationally required to defer to superiors<sup>3</sup> but not to an inferior, it is controversial whether one is rationally required to suspend one's judgment when disputing with peers<sup>4</sup>.

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my dissenter disputes with me over an issue in these areas, because her belief in that issue depends on truth or falsity of many other beliefs, it might be that both of me and my dissenter's beliefs in that area are largely conflict with each other. However, since I can only evaluate my dissenter's expertise in that area in terms of my beliefs in that area, I will be more inclined to downgrade my dissenter's expertise. See Elga (2006). (However some philosophers argue that peers still can and should regard each other as reliable on the basis of their agreement on issues outside the cluster of the issue in question, see Kornblith (2010)) In addition, it has been argued that we have *psychological* tendency to treat our dissenters' evidence for the proposition in question as *misleading* evidence, so in a disagreement our beliefs about the proposition tend to be polarized. See Kelly (2008). In this paper I assume that one still can reasonably determine the credence of my dissenter's testimony in contested areas without psychological bias.

<sup>3</sup> Frances argues that in philosophy, one should defer to philosophical superiors except some specific cases. See Frances (2010). Also Elgin (2010) points out a "hyperresoluteness" view on which at least in some cases one should maintain one's beliefs even if one's dissenter is epistemic superior than oneself. For example, it is difficult to believe David Lewis's modal realism.

<sup>4</sup> Many philosophers find that the idea of a peer is philosophical uninteresting. To be qualified as a peer, she must have exactly the same level of intelligence, reasoning ability, expertise concerning the subject matter (call it cognitive equality), and most importantly she must possess the same evidence as me (call it evidential equality). However, this is hardly the case in actual disagreement. In real life very few people could be literally cognitively and evidentially equal. If the discussion of the epistemology of disagreement were limited to "ideal" peer disagreement, it would be unrealistic and insignificant. See Feldman (2009) and Elgin (2010). In addition, it is implausible to believe two people can have the same evidence. For example, suppose my evidence includes my own experience, how can my Peer have it? Or it might be said that my evidence at least includes a belief: "My peer believes the issue in dispute is false, while I believe it is true," but my Peer cannot hold this belief. See Frances (2010). Therefore, peers can only be said to roughly share the same body of

Here are two straightforward reasons for why one should suspend judgment in peer disagreement<sup>5</sup>: First, since my friend and I are peers, there is no reason to think that my attitude is more accurate than hers. Second, my peer's dissenting with me at least provides some evidence (Call it "higher-order evidence," which is different from "first-order evidence" upon which we formed our original judgments) that my attitude is incorrect in some respect<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, there are also three reasons why one should insist one's original judgment in peer disagreement: First, often times one has strong practical reasons to sustain her judgment in the face of peer disagreement<sup>7</sup>. Second, the existence of peer disagreement is just a contingent sociological fact. One can conceive of the existence of merely possible peers on every belief one believes. If one is rationally required to suspend judgment in peer disagreement, then it will

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evidence or have evidence comparable to the other peers', and they are roughly equally smart and competent. Also see Lackey's (2010a) distinction between "ideal disagreement" and "ordinary disagreement." Goldman also argues against the notion of evidential equality in that verbal communication cannot share all of one's various kinds of evidence, See Goldman (2010).

<sup>5</sup> "Peer disagreement" means: "Before my peer and I met, we independently evaluated the shared body of evidence E1, and we concluded and held different doxastic attitudes toward E1. After we met each other, we tried our best to fully expose, share, and discuss our reasoning and evidences for each of our doxastic attitudes to the extent that we are clearly aware of each other's reasons and evidence. At this stage we share a broader body of evidence E+, which includes the first-order evidence E1 and the high-order evidence E2." Note that I assume peers reached their original judgments "independently" (or "isolatedly"), meaning that they form their judgments without knowing the other peer's dissenting. However, in ordinary philosophical disagreements one usually forms her judgments while knows full well that one's peers deny them. In these cases one seems to be entirely rational to stick with her own view. See Frances (2010). Also see Goldman's (2010) distinction between "synchronic perspective" and "diachronic perspective."

<sup>6</sup> There are other arguments for this view. Here I will just mention the most important two reasons.

<sup>7</sup> See Moffett (2007) and Elgin (2010).

lead to an absurd consequence that one should suspend her judgment on every belief whenever a merely possible peer is conceivable<sup>8</sup>. Third, it might be argued that one's intuition on a given issue yields a strong reason why one could reasonably remain unaffected by peer disagreement<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, some philosophers deny that one should always suspend judgment, or always stick with one's view in peer disagreement. First, if one is reasonably required to suspend judgment in light of the higher-order evidence, then it leads to an oddly simple view that the higher-order evidence easily swamps the first-order evidence, and only the high-order evidence makes all the difference. Second, if my peer and I are extremely irrational when making our original judgment, it would be too easy to be fully rational by easily moving toward each other or splitting the difference<sup>10</sup>. Third, in ordinary disagreement it is easy to uncover a "symmetry breaker," which indicates that the epistemic position of one of the peers to the disagreement in question is superior to other's. For example, I know about myself that I have not been drinking, have not suffered from any recent delusions, and do not have any evidence for questioning the reliability of my memory. Such information might give me a reason to suspect the other has serious problem with cognitive faculties. Fourth, even if I encountered a peer who disagrees with me, I might meet many other peers who agree with my original judgment. If the number

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<sup>8</sup> See Kelly (2005).

<sup>9</sup> See van Inwagen (1996), Rosen (2001), and Wedgwood (2010).

<sup>10</sup> See Kelly (2010).

of agreeing peers significantly outnumbered the number of dissenting peers, then I would be reasonably right in insisting my original judgment<sup>11</sup>.

In sum, there are three different views for how one should respond to Peer:

(C) *The Conciliatory View*: When in peer disagreement, it is *always* the case that both my peer and I should move *at least a little bit* toward each other's view. In other words, this view mandates that belief revision is always required<sup>121314</sup>.

(S) *The Stubborn View*: When in peer disagreement, it is *always* the case that both my peer and I should remain steadfast. In other words, this view mandates that belief revision is always not required.

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<sup>11</sup> See Lackey (2010).

<sup>12</sup> (C) under my interpretation is broader than the split-the-difference view, which implies that peers should adopt the simple average of their credences. Elga calls the split-the-difference view "the equal-weight view," and (C) "the extra-weight view." The equal-weight view implies (C). See Elga (2008).

<sup>13</sup> As suggested by Kelly, it is better to treat beliefs as a matter of degree rather than all-or-nothing matter (believing, disbelieving, and suspending judgment) in the discussion of peer disagreement. Suppose in a peer disagreement one is a theist and the other is an atheist, then rationality requires them to be agnostics. But what if one is a theist and the other is agnostic? Moreover, if the number of theist is twice more than the number of atheist, it seems implausible that rationality require all of them to be theists simply because atheists are outnumbered. I assume Kelly's arguments are correct and will treat beliefs as a matter of degree throughout this paper.

<sup>14</sup> There is a special problem for (C): What if the proposition at issue in peer disagreement is: (a) whether the dissenter is my peer relative to the given domain, (b) the proposition at issue belongs to the domain, (c) my peer holds a different doxastic attitude from mine, and (d) whether we should adopt (C) or the other positions (so called self-undermining problem). Elga argues that there is a good independent motivation for the proponent of (C) to remain steadfast when the proposition at issue is (d). See Elga (2010). The other cases in which the proposition at issue is (a), (b), or (c) are very complicated. In this paper I exclude those cases in which (a) – (d) are the issues in debate.



(NC) *The Non-Conciliatory View*<sup>15</sup>: When in peer disagreement, sometimes both my peer and I should move *at least a little bit* toward each other's view, and sometimes we should remain steadfast. In other words, this view allows that only in some cases belief revision is required<sup>16</sup>.

## 1. The Relationship Between the Three Positions and the Two Theses

Those three positions are closely related to these two theses about evidence and rationality:

(U) *Uniqueness*: For every body of evidence and a given proposition, there is always exactly one level of confidence that it is fully rational to have in the proposition given the evidence. In other words, it is always the case that only one level of confidence in the proposition is fully rational given evidence.

(P) *Permissivism*: (This thesis is the denial of Uniqueness.) In *some* cases, for *some* body of evidence and *some* proposition there is more than one level of confidence that it is fully rational to have in the proposition given the evidence. In other words, rationality sometimes permits more than one level of confidence in the proposition given evidence<sup>17</sup>.

The relationship between those three views and these two theses is complex.

(C) seems to work with (U): in peer disagreement, if both of us know that only one

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<sup>15</sup> (NC) has many advocates. For example, the right reason view, the total evidence view, and the justificationist view. The right reason view and the total evidence view belong to Kelly (2010), and the justificationist view belongs to Lackey (2010a). Feldman (2009) also adopts a similar view. Their views are different in detail but not relevant in this paper.

<sup>16</sup> See Kelly (2010) and Lackey (2010b).

<sup>17</sup> The evidence in (U) and (P) only includes first-order evidence that is relevant to the disagreeing issue, not the correctness of an epistemic principle. I will explain more about this in section 3.

of us is fully rational, and neither of us has any reason to think that I am the one who is fully rational or my peer is the one who is not fully rational<sup>18</sup>, then each should worry about the possibility of being irrational on my part and move toward other's position<sup>19</sup>.

The relationship between (U), (P) and (NC) is not clear. First, Kelly formulates his view in the framework of (U), though he emphasizes in his paper that he is in favor of (P)<sup>20</sup>. Second, Lackey denies the existence of reasonable disagreement, namely, it is not possible that both my peer and I are reasonable. She argues that if we idealized the conditions of being peers, such as literal evidential and cognitive equality, it will make the disagreement either inexplicable or disconnected from the actual and ordinary disagreements that motivate the debate of the epistemology of disagreement. On the contrary, in ordinary peer disagreement (less evidential and cognitive equality), Lackey argues that whether one should revise her belief depends on her original degree of confidence in the proposition at issue, but she also allows cases in which belief revision is not required. It seems unclear whether Lackey endorses (U) or not<sup>21</sup>. Third, neither Kelly nor Lackey discuss whether (NC) is compatible with (P). I will come back to this issue in section 4.

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<sup>18</sup> If such reason exists, it would break the cognitive and evidential equality between peers. For example, if I have a reason to suppose that my peer is irrational, such as the fact that my peer is drunk or she misses a crucial piece of information that decisively thwarts her judgment, then I would not recognize her as my peer.

<sup>19</sup> See Christensen (2009), and Feldman (2007).

<sup>20</sup> See Kelly (2010).

<sup>21</sup> See Lackey (2010a) and (2010b).

However, (S) does not sit well with (U). It seems that if only one of us is fully rational and neither of us has any reason to suppose that only he or she is rational or not, then each should not remain steadfast. As argued above, the proponent of (S) have three reasons for it: First, often times one has practical reasons to sustain our judgment in the face of peer disagreement. Second, the existence of peer disagreement is just a contingent sociological fact. Third, it might be argued that one's intuition on a given issue yields a strong reason why one could reasonably remain unaffected by peer disagreement.

However, these reasons are problematic. First, there certainly are abundant practical reasons for one to remain unaffected by peer disagreement, but in the current debate in the epistemology of disagreement, what at issue here is an *epistemic* evaluation of whether one's holding one's belief is reasonable<sup>22</sup>.

Second, the merely possible peer disagreement argument shows that we should only focus on reasons and arguments instead of the fact of disagreement. But it cannot explain cases in which disagreements do not involve reasons, so the mere fact of the disagreement is an ineliminable part of my reason for suspending judgment. Moreover, in mathematics and formal area in philosophy there is a well-established track record that shows that the consensus of the community is reliable so we are rationally required to defer to the majority or suspend our judgment. Besides, it is difficult to imagine a possible world in which the majority of community disagrees with a mathematical proposition which is commonly accepted

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<sup>22</sup> See Feldman (2006).

in the actual world. If that is the case, their cognitive faculties must be very different from ours<sup>23</sup>.

Third, even if we have intuitions on the issue in question, there is no good reason for each of us to insist that my intuition is right or doubt that my peer's intuition is false<sup>24</sup>.

Is (S) perfectly compatible with (P)? As argued by Kelly, if there are a range of fully rational levels of confidence to have in the proposition given the evidence, and suppose that both of our opinions are within that range, why then would we be rationally required to change?<sup>25</sup> In this respect, (P) coheres with (S). However, Kelly's argument works only if there are a range of fully rational confidences to have in the proposition for given evidence, but (P) only implies this is the case for *some* evidence, not *every* evidence. (P) allows cases in which there is only one fully rational confidence to have in the proposition, and in these cases it is reasonable to suspect that my confidence in the proposition is not fully rational, so I am rationally required to revise my belief. But (S) implies that belief revision is always not required. So (S) does not compatible with (P).

How about the relationship between (P) and (C)? As argued by Kelly, if there are a range of fully rational confidences to have in the proposition given the evidence, and suppose that both of our opinions are within that range, why then would we be rationally required to change? In order to reject Kelly's argument, (C)

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<sup>23</sup> See Kornblith (2010).

<sup>24</sup> See Christensen (2007), and Feldman (2006). See Conee (2009) for more objections to incommutable intuitions.

<sup>25</sup> See Kelly (2010).

can avoid this consequence only by endorsing (U). However, it might be objected that Kelly's argument does not imply the falsity of (C) but that a stronger conjunction of claims implies it. The conjunction of claims includes: (1) rationality permits a range of levels of confidence in the proposition, and (2) it is possible that one can recognize both her and her peer's confidence in the proposition are fully rational. The proponent of (C) might argue that while (P) is true, it is not the case that I can recognize that both my peer's and my opinions are reasonable<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, (P) coheres with (C). In other words, the proponent of (C) can embrace (P), but if so she must also endorse "Doxastic Uniqueness (DU):"

(DU) *Doxastic Uniqueness*: A subject cannot rationally recognize that there are more than one fully rational levels of confidence in any proposition given any evidence, while holding any one of fully rational levels of confidence<sup>27</sup>.

In addition, Christensen proposes two examples in which (P) coheres with (C). First, it might be thought that fully rational belief does not require epistemic perfection. One's confidence in the proposition can be fully rational if it is close enough to the ideal confidence and the agent lacks *independent reason* for suspecting that her confidence is too high or too low. This thought allows that in some cases isolated peers' confidences are fully rational but they still should conciliate when they become aware of peer disagreement<sup>28</sup>. Second, some type of

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<sup>26</sup> See Ballantyne and Coffman (2012). Similar arguments, see Christensen (2007).

<sup>27</sup> This definition is from Cohen (2013) with some modification.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen has a similar proposal. He argues that my peer's disagreement needs not be evaluated as that evidence that my relevant belief is irrational, but it might be evaluated as the evidence of inaccuracy which exerts rational pressure for me to revise my confidence. See Cohen (2013). I will come back to this proposal later.

example might involve a view on which rational belief depends on evidential support and practical considerations. Since practical factors are relative to agents, this view clearly endorses (P). But when practical factors are equal between me and my peer, each of us still has reason to think that I misevaluated evidential support<sup>29</sup>.

In sum, (U) might be compatible with (C) and (NC), and (P) might also be compatible with (C) and (NC). However, (S) is not compatible with (U) nor (P). Therefore, (S) should be rejected<sup>30</sup>.

## 2. Uniqueness and Permissivism

Currently, the strongest argument for (U) is due to White (2005). He argues that granting (P) comes with arbitrariness – a high cost that pressures us to accept (U). He discusses three different forms of (P). This is the first one:

(EP) *Extreme Permissiveness*: There are possible cases in which you rationally believe a proposition *p*, yet it is consistent with your being fully rational and possessing your current evidence that you believe not-*p* instead.

However, (EP) is stronger than (P). (P), as I formulated in section 2, does not imply that rationality permits believing in *p* and not *p*, it only implies that in some cases rationality permits a range of levels of confidence. A proponent of (P) can rightfully reject (EP) by holding that rationality only permits a range of levels of

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<sup>29</sup> See Christensen (2009). See Ballantyne and Coffman's (2010) for why the view on which rational belief depends on evidential support and practical considerations clearly violates (U).

<sup>30</sup> What if in a peer disagreement I am a proponent of (C) and the proposition my peer and I disagree is whether we should adopt (P) or (U)? This is an interesting question but I will not explore further here.

confidence, but they are not necessarily believing or not-believing. I will not discuss (EP) in this paper.

The next form of (P) which White argues against is Moderate Permissiveness (MP). The difference between (EP) and (MP) is that (MP) implies that what is rationally permissible is a range of levels of confidence given one's evidence, so (MP) is similar to (P) as I formulated in section 2.

Here is White's argument against (MP). Suppose that in a criminal trial Smith was charged with murder, and I am a juror presented with a given body of evidence E1. Further suppose that if I have a reasonable doubt that Smith is guilty, then I should vote Not Guilty for Smith. Under (MP), suppose that the permissive range is from "definitely guilty" to "reasonable doubt," then I can vote Guilty or Not Guilty for Smith. Suppose that under the influence of a permissive epistemologist, I came to believe that (MP) applies to the matter of whether Smith is guilty. In this situation one will recognize that it is equally rational that Smith is guilty and not guilty from E1, and only non-evidential and arbitrary factors can determine what I should believe. The situation will be that I can arbitrarily choose a verdict, even if not looking at the evidence. (MP) implies that it is rational for one to have such a belief that is formed in a way similar to flip a coin. But this is an odd consequence, so, (MP) is false. However, there are some objections to White's argument.

The most straightforward objection to White's argument is due to Kelly (forthcoming). Kelly notes that, first, if we think about beliefs as a matter of degree in an increasingly fine-grained way (say, down to the hundredth or thousandth digit after the decimal point.), it is counterintuitive that rationality with respect to given

evidence requires a sharpest or narrowest graded beliefs to be fully rational<sup>31</sup>.

Second, by having different epistemic goals, it is reasonable for two subjects to have different beliefs. For example, I am more concerned about attaining truth, but my peer is more concerned about avoiding believing what's false. In this situation it is reasonable for me not to suspend judgment on what is possibly true, but it is reasonable for my peer to suspend judgment on what is possibly false. Therefore, it is possible that the uniquely reasonable response for my peer is to suspend judgment with respect to some proposition but the uniquely reasonable response for me is to believe it. In other words, two views should be carefully distinguished:

*Interpersonal Slack:* Different individuals possessing the same evidence might believe differently, and each be reasonable in believing as they do.

*Intrapersonal Slack:* For any given individual, there is a permissible range of different reasonable things for her to believe given her evidence.

Following Kelly's argument, it is possible that one can hold a view which admits Interpersonal Slack but denies Intrapersonal Slack. However, White's objections to (MP) only concerns one individual – his examples and arguments only indicate that one cannot be permitted to have a different credences without being arbitrary, that is, the denial of Intrapersonal Slack. But his examples and arguments are silent on whether Interpersonal Slack is true or false. Most importantly, the

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<sup>31</sup> Similar point, see Goldman (2010).



epistemology of disagreement only about the truth principles with interpersonal import<sup>3233</sup>.

In my view, the last point of Kelly's argument draws out the most important observation: the epistemology of disagreement only about the kind of requirement of rationality that is universal to both of my peer and me, not the kind of requirement of rationality that binds an individual. White's argument from arbitrariness only supports a weaker claim that for one individual, there is a uniquely reasonable thing for only her to believe given her evidence, but not the stronger claim that, for a given body of shared evidence, there is a uniquely reasonable thing for both of her and her peers to believe<sup>34</sup>. However, it should be pointed out that (MP) is indeed false because it only concerns about the truth of principles with intrapersonal import. But (MP) is not a correct understanding of (P). The falsity of (MP) does not imply that (P) is also false. (P) only indicates that in some circumstances rationality permits a range of levels of confidence given evidence, and the proponent of (P) can say that in those permissive circumstances it is not an individual but a group reasonably hold different levels of confidence. This

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<sup>32</sup> See Kelly (forthcoming).

<sup>33</sup> Kelly notes a possible objection that interpersonal slack implies intrapersonal slack. For example, since a given evidence cannot support P and not-P, so it is impossible for one peer to believe p but another peer not-p. In response, Kelly argues that at least in this context the relation of evidential support should be understood as a three place relation (evidence, proposition, and agent). See Kelly (forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup> Note that both Kelly and my argument apply to the previous White's counterexamples to Extreme Permissiveness as well.

does not lead to the conclusion that White's argument is correct, but his formulation of (MP) is not a correct understanding of (P).

Before considering the final form of (P) - Subtle Permissiveness (SP), it would be better to introduce Elgin's and Goldman's views in order to appreciate what (SP) is and the point of White's objection.

According to Elgin, it is beyond our capacity to decide whether in peer disagreement we should sustain or suspend our beliefs. For given evidence, our beliefs are responsive to the evidence involuntarily and it is not our choice about what to believe. Our reaction to peer disagreement is not anything we do but is something that happens to us. Nevertheless, we still can indirectly control our or form our beliefs by learning how to weigh the relative force of evidence, argument, and expertise, and it is education that forms our process of cognitive character. Different kinds of education will result in different ways we form our beliefs in the response to given evidence. When we think it is rational to believe a belief, it is not because we are directly moved by the evidence for that belief, but because we put ourselves in a position to be so moved. The real issue about the epistemological implication of disagreement is whether we should put ourselves in a position to be moved, or to stand fast, by such disagreement<sup>35</sup>.

There are two immediate and powerful objections to Elgin's view: first, even if we follow different epistemic norms, standards, or principles, there is nevertheless objective rightness in matters of epistemic norms. Moreover, there is a

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<sup>35</sup> See Elgin (2010). Her argument leads to the consequence that the problem becomes what sort of character we ought to form. The epistemological issue of peer disagreement turns out to be a practical issue.

uniquely correct epistemic system, and all systems incompatible with this one are wrong. Therefore, in peer disagreement one of disputants might follow the epistemic norm which is objectively more correct than the other norms which are followed by the other peers, so the other peers are not fully rational.

Second, in peer disagreement peers must share the same evidence. If they are justified in believing two different conflicting epistemic norms, they must have different evidence. Since they are not evidential equal, they are not peers.

Goldman endorses the view that different education, communities, cultures, social networks, historic period, etc. have different epistemic systems (he calls it “Descriptive Pluralism”) but he defends it by proposing a specific form of epistemic relativism which incorporates the claim that some epistemic norms are objectively right and there is a uniquely right epistemic system<sup>36</sup>.

According to Goldman, it is possible that people are objectively justified in believing some incorrect epistemic systems or norms to be correct. For example, in children’s early education, the instructions they received from their teachers or parents render them objectively justified in believing that the norms so transmitted belong to a correct epistemic system. So children in different communities can still be objectively justified in believing these epistemic norms regardless of whether these epistemic norms are objectively correct. Therefore, suppose an epistemic norm authorizes believing a proposition p. When a subject is objectively justified in

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<sup>36</sup> See Goldman (2010). Note that according to this view, there is still objective epistemic fact, that is, there is objective rightness in matters of epistemic norms, standards, or principles and there is a uniquely correct epistemic system and all systems incompatible with this one are wrong.

believing that epistemic norm, she is objectively (second-orderly) justified in believing that she is objectively (first-orderly) justified in believing p. The second-order justifiedness in believing p does not entail the first-order justifiedness in believing p<sup>37</sup>. However, as argued by Goldman, it can be said that she is *iteratively* objectively justified in believing p<sup>38</sup>. So one still can be rational in believing p even if she follows an objectively incorrect epistemic norm.

Regarding the second objection, disagreeing peers might adopt different epistemic norms because they have different norm evidence, that is, the evidence concerns which epistemic norm is a correct norm. But in the current debate in the epistemology of disagreement the category of norm evidence is usually ignored. Arguably, norm evidence partially determines one's overall reasonability<sup>39</sup>.

Reconsidering the issue of (U) and (P). It is plausible to say that Elgin's view and Goldman's specific form of epistemic relativism are similar to what White called "Subtle Permissiveness:"

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<sup>37</sup> This entailment does not hold because the epistemic norm which one objectively justified believing in might be *actually* false. For example, one might be instructed an incorrect epistemic norm from a reliable source. See Goldman (2010), and Conee (2010) for similar point.

<sup>38</sup> Conee argues that when one is (second-orderly) rational in believing that she is (first-orderly) rational in believing P, then she thereby has *a reason* to believe P. This reason is that the first-order rationality intuitively bears positively on the truth of P. See Conee (2010).

<sup>39</sup> See Goldman (2010). Goldman notes that if in peer disagreement one and one's peer share the same norm evidence, then only one of us could be fully rational. In this circumstance belief revision seems to be required. In other words, if the evidence my peer and I share includes norm evidence, then (U) is true. However, norm evidence is usually ignored, so it can be said that the definition of (U) in the current debate does not include norm evidence. It only includes first-order evidence that is relevant to the disagreeing issue, not the correctness of an epistemic principle. Note that what at issue here is whether (SP) is true, not whether (C) or (NC) is true.

(SP) *Subtle Permissiveness*: There are epistemic standards that one equips to reach one's conclusion. When one equips certain an epistemic standard, only one unique option is presented to him given certain evidence. One could have adopted a different standard that would sanction very different attitudes given the same evidence. If he had accepted a standard sanctioning a belief in not-p, he would have been rational in doing so.

White objects that the same arbitrariness arises again when choosing epistemic standards if no matter which standard we choose we will rationally believe in p or not-p. Suppose choosing an epistemic standard is a matter of education, and I know that if I attended, say, MIT, I would believe in p, but if I attended, say, Berkeley, I would believe in non-p. Which school I choose will be a matter of weather, location, faculties, etc., but these factors are all arbitrary and outside of the evidence for or against p. So why not just randomly believe p or not-p before I entered any school, since it will not be better if I spend a lot time and trouble on it. Since this conclusion is absurd, (SP) is false<sup>40</sup>.

There are two objections to White's argument against (SP). First, as argued above, the job of the epistemology of peer disagreement is to investigate the kind of rationality which prescripts how a *group* of peers should react when they disagree. White's objection might indicate that the availability of a different but equally reasonable epistemic norm that authorizes opposite beliefs leads to one's irrationality. But that is a kind of rationality which concerns only an individual, not

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<sup>40</sup> See White (2005).

how a group of peers who endorse different epistemic norms or systems should react to the peer disagreement.

Second, White's objection depends on an assumption (X):

(X) One can arbitrarily choose any one of beliefs that are fully rational on some permissive evidence.

According to the definition of (SP), it implies (ESU):

(ESU) *Epistemic System Uniqueness*: When one equips certain an epistemic system only one unique option is presented to him given certain evidence.

I argue that (X) is false:

- (1) By (ESU), the epistemic system one adopts determines only one rational belief.
- (2) By (X), one can arbitrarily choose any one of beliefs that are fully rational on some permissive evidence.
- (3) By (1), if one chooses a different belief, she must adopt a different epistemic system that sanctions it.
- (4) But one cannot adopt a different epistemic system that sanctions it.
- (5) By (3) and (4), one cannot arbitrarily choose a different belief.
- (6) (5) contradicts with (2).
- (7) Therefore, either (ESU) is false or (X) is false.

Here is a defense of (4). What epistemic system one is justified believing in depends on one's norm evidence. But one cannot turn a blind eye on the norm evidence she has already possessed. Indeed, it is metaphysical possible for one to adopt a different epistemic system, but it is not *epistemic* possible for one to do so –

it is beyond one's control to abandon one's norm evidence and adopt a different epistemic system.

So if this argument is successful, either (ESU) is false or (X) is false. However, if (ESU) is false, then the epistemic system one adopts determines more than one beliefs. This amounts to Intrapersonal Slack, which is the denial of (U). The proponent of (U) certainly does not want this result. So (X) is false. Therefore, White's argument fails<sup>41</sup>.

I have already showed White's argument from arbitrariness fails. Here are two objections to (U). First, White only raises several objections to (P), but he does not propose any argument for (U). As indicated above, (U) excludes epistemic relativism, which is a recently very interesting theory in epistemology<sup>42</sup>. In other words, accepting (U) comes with significant costs. So it calls for a strong argument

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<sup>41</sup> There is an objection to the distinction between Interpersonal Slack and Intrapersonal Slack, but I will address it here since I have introduced the theory that makes Interpersonal Slack true but Intrapersonal Slack false. Here is the objection: Assume (SP) is true. Suppose that in the actual world I have a certain level of confidence in a proposition p. I can imagine a possible world in which I adopt a slightly different epistemic system because, say, I went to a different graduate school. Suppose that the slightly different epistemic system sanctions me to have a different level of confidence in p. Since this is easily conceivable, it is implausible to say that I in the actual world and I in that possible world are different individual, so, the principle of Interpersonal Slack does not apply to this situation. Nevertheless, the situation makes Intrapersonal Slack true, since I, an individual, can possibly hold a different level of confidence in p. So (SP) entails Intrapersonal Slack.

In reply, since the theory endorses (ESU), the above line of reasoning does not imply Intrapersonal Slack is true, but a weaker claim that, for any given individual, there is a permissible range of different reasonable thing for her to believe given her evidence *on the condition that she adopts different epistemic system*. This claim is certainly weaker than Intrapersonal Slack since the latter implies that I can hold a permissible range of levels of confidence in p no matter what epistemic system I adopt. So the theory does not entail Intrapersonal Slack.

<sup>42</sup> White admits that there are some theories incompatible with (U), such as subjective Bayesianism and coherent theory of rational belief.

for (U) in order to accept it, but none of it has been proposed in current debate<sup>43</sup>. Second, (U) implies that in peer disagreement, only one party is rational. However, in cases of mature disagreement in which the debates have been ongoing for a very long time, such as the debate between pro-choice and pro-life, realism and anti-realism, theism and atheism, and materialism and anti-materialism, one does not want to say the other party is irrational or terribly mistaken. Indeed, it is implausible to think that so many scholars are irrational or make a terrible mistake for many generations.

Taken together, White's argument from arbitrariness fails because it overlooks Interpersonal Slack and relies on a false assumption, and since currently there is no good argument for (U), (P) is more acceptable than (U) since it excludes many interesting theories in epistemology and predicts a significant proportion of disagreeing scholars are irrational. So only two possible combinations of theories left: (C) with (P), and (NC) with (P).

### **3. The Conciliatory View and The Non-Conciliatory View**

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<sup>43</sup> (U) does not only exclude epistemic relativism, subjective Bayesianism, and coherent theory of rational belief, but also a wide and populous epistemological territory. See Nathan Ballantyne and EJ Coffman (2011) for a detailed explanation on why (U) is so strong by examining possible bundles of theories of epistemic rationality and evidence.



In this section I will compare the combination of (C) with (P) and the combination of (NC) with (P). In the beginning I will examine several arguments for the combination of (C) and (P), and then consider the merit of (NC) and (P)<sup>44</sup>.

As argued above in section 2, recall that one of Kelly's argument shows that the conjunction of these two claims entails the denial of (C): (1) (P): rationality allows that some evidence permits a range of level of confidence in the proposition, and (2) it is possible that one can recognize both of her and her peer's confidence in the proposition are fully rational. However, as argued above, the proponent of (C) can reject Kelly's argument without affirming (U) by endorsing (1) but rejecting (2). The denial of (2) equals to Doxastic Uniqueness (DU):

(DU) *Doxastic Uniqueness*: A subject cannot rationally recognize that there are more than one fully rational level of confidences in any proposition given any evidence, while holding any one of fully rational levels of confidence.

Nevertheless, the proponent of (C) does not offer any argument that (DU) is true, but just takes it for granted. Why can't a subject know more than one fully

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<sup>44</sup> It might be objected that since I have already endorsed (P), why should I be bothered by the disagreement between (C) and (NC)? After all, it could be that both proponents of (C) and (NC) are fully rational. However, there are still some reasons to pursue the discussion in this section. First, it could be that those proponents of (C) and (NC) share the same norm evidence and adopt the same epistemic system. If this is the case, then the debate between (C) and (NC) will not be a reasonable disagreement. Second, if both proponents of (C) and (NC) are peers and fully rational, it appears that the proponent of (C) will be inconsistent. On the one hand, if she recognizes that both she and the proponent of (NC) are fully rational, why should belief revision is rationally required for her? On the other hand, (C) mandates that in peer disagreement belief revision is always required for her. So it seems that the requirements of (P) and (C) are incoherent for her. The proponent of (C) must propose a solution to accommodate the seemingly inconsistency of (P) and (C).

rational level of confidences? The most obvious reason would be that there is only one fully rational level of confidence, but this amounts to endorsing (U). So the proponent of (C) cannot use this reason. Or, she might assume (SP) and argue that there is more than one fully rational levels of confidence with respect to a given proposition and evidence, but one cannot know it because within her epistemic system only one level of confidence is fully rational. However, as argued above, it might be that another different level of confidence is rational for another agent. One can know a different level of confidence is rational for another agent without rationally holding that different level of confidence. Or, the proponent of (C) might appeal to White's argument from arbitrariness and argue that if one can know other fully rational levels of confidence while rationally holding either, it would be arbitrary for her. But as argued in the previous section, White's argument from arbitrariness is implausible. Since there is no good reason to accept (DU), affirming (DU) is no better than accepting (U).

Even if there are some good reason to accept (DU), the proponent of (C) still cannot accept both it and (P). The reason is that (P) implies the falsehood of (DU). To see this, consider the negation of (DU):

(Non-DU)     *Non-Doxastic Uniqueness*: A subject can rationally recognize that there are more than one fully rational levels of confidence in some proposition given some evidence, while holding any one of fully rational levels of confidence <sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Non- Doxastic Uniqueness is similar to Ballantyne and Coffman's formulation of "Possible Recognition," but different. Possible Recognition indicates that one can recognize a peer's belief in p is equally rational, but Non- Doxastic Uniqueness

Now, in order to reject Kelly's argument, the proponent of (C) takes the approach that endorses (P) but rejects (Non-DU). Recall (P):

(P) *Permissivism*: In some cases, for some body of evidence and some proposition there is more than one level of confidence that it is fully rational to have in the proposition given the evidence. In other words, rationality sometimes permits more than one level of confidence in the proposition given evidence.

Suppose a subject S recognizes that (P) is true. If she recognizes it is true, she also recognizes that there is some evidence that justifies more than one fully rational levels of confidence in some proposition. Since these different levels of confidence are fully rational in believing some proposition, she can recognize it while holding one of them. But this is exactly what (Non-DU) predicts. Therefore, (P) entails (Non-DU). The proponent of (C) cannot affirm (P) and (DU) together.

Next consider Christensen's two proposals for the combination of (C) with (P). First, he argues that rational belief depends on both evidential support and practical considerations. Since practical factors are relative to agents, this view clearly endorses (P). But when practical factors are equal between me and my peer, each of us still has reason to think that I have misevaluated evidential support.

However, this proposal is different from (C)'s original implication. (C) implies that if one held a doxastic attitude toward a proposition P but later learns that her peer who shares her evidence holds a different attitude toward P, then S and her

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indicates that one can recognize more than one level of confidence of beliefs in p are rational, those different beliefs need not be possessed by peers. See Ballantyne and Coffman (2012).

peer should move *at least a little bit* toward each other's view. Nevertheless, Christensen strengthens the antecedent of (C). His proposal implies that if S held a doxastic attitude toward a proposition P but later learns that her peer who shares her evidence *and equal practical interests* holds a different attitude toward P, then S and her peer should move at least a little bit toward each other's view. However, simply adding more descriptive facts to the conditions of (C) will not suffice to yield true principles. Even if peers have equal practical interests, and share each other's evidence, they still can reasonably disagree. For example, suppose that philosophers have one and the same practical interest to pursue philosophical theories - they do it out of a research interest. However, it is rational to choose and develop a theory while knowing that it is denied by one's peer because the only way to find out whether a philosophical theory is right is for researchers wholeheartedly to accept it and push it to its limits. There is nothing wrong to choose and develop a philosophical position that is denied by many peers for the research. Therefore, one and one's peer can still reasonably disagree, even if they share the given evidence and practical interests<sup>46</sup>.

By all means, the proponent of (C) needs to add more and more conditions to the situation and strengthen the antecedent of (C) in order to make sure that certain epistemic value of peer's dissenting opinion always obtain. However, it is doubtful

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<sup>46</sup> It might be objected that philosophical methods are unreliable, so none of these philosophers can be justified in believing any philosophical positions (if distinctive philosophical methods are employed). See Goldberg (2009). However, I use philosophers' research as a vivid example since the readers will be philosophers. My example can be modified to other possible researches in other academic discipline without affecting my point I made here.

whether a finite number of conditions will yield a true principle. For example, one might need to add that peer's answer is not too crazy<sup>47</sup>, the disagreement is not merely a verbal issue<sup>48</sup>, one and one's peer had considered the epistemic consequence of being not moved by one's peer, or one does not know she has many peer *agreement*, etc. It is always possible there will be more and more conditions. Even if a long list of conditions will sufficiently yield a true principle of (C), it amounts to nothing but defining one's principle true. Moreover, the more conditions that are added to the antecedent to the principle (C), the less interesting and realistic the epistemology of disagreement will be. It will be very difficult to encounter a real case in which all of these additional conditions of (C) obtained. Even if one can imagine such a case, the lesson of peer disagreement will be insignificant.

Christensen's second proposal is motivated by the thought that fully rational belief does not require epistemic perfection. Recall that according to this theory, one's confidence in the proposition can be fully rational if it is close enough to the ideal confidence and the agent lacks independent reason for suspecting that her confidence is too high or too low. This thought allows that both one and one's peer's beliefs are fully rational before they become aware of peer disagreement, but requires conciliation since peer disagreement provides independent reason for suspecting that one's confidence is too high or too low.

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Christensen's "Extreme Restaurant Case." See Christensen (2007).

<sup>48</sup> See Sosa (2010).

What kind of independent reason does peer disagreement provide? As argued above, since I can recognize that both my peer and I are fully rational, there is no good reason for me and my peer to conciliate. But it cannot be just a brute fact that there is always a good reason. The proponent of (C) has to explain where the independent reason originates.

Cohen has a proposal that might provide a source of such reason. He suggests that we have rational pressure to make our beliefs more accurate. Suppose that we treat credences of 1 for an *in fact* true proposition, and 0 for an *in fact* false proposition and they represent perfect accuracy. The higher one's credence for an *in fact true* proposition, the more accurate one's belief is. Similarly, the lower one's credence for an *in fact false* proposition, the more accurate one's belief is. Since the proposition can only be in fact true or false, peer's different credence can be an evidence that my credence is inaccurate. Therefore, my peer and I have a good reason to revise our credence<sup>49</sup>.

I have three objections to this proposal. First, it is implausible to distinguish full rationality and ideal rationality. To say that there is an ideal credence is simply to say that there is a unique right credence, that is, it assumes (U). But this proposal is an attempt to accommodate (C) with (P), not an attempt to revive (U).

Second, to separate full rationality and ideal rationality only makes the former sound less rational. I agree there are less rational beliefs with respect to a given proposition, and it is reasonable that one should defer to more rational peers. However, if the distinction between being fully rational and being ideally rational

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<sup>49</sup> See Cohen (2013).

pose a reason, why does only peer disagreement make me suspect my credence is too high or too low? If I know my belief is not ideally rational, I can always suspect that my belief is not perfectly rational by, say, reflection or meditation. So I should suspend my belief *even in the absence of peer disagreement*. The issue in the current debate in the epistemology of disagreement is to uncover the principle that governs under what condition my peer and I should conciliate, not the global skepticism principle that doubts human being's flawed rationality that suffices to give up all our beliefs without peers to disagree with us. In consequence, the source of rational pressure to revise our beliefs on Christensen's view is not from peer disagreement, but from the doubt that our rationality is not perfect enough. What at issue here is what rationality requires us to do when both my peer and I are equally rational to the highest degree, and there is no space for us to doubt that I am less rational or my peer is more rational.

Third, a peer's dissenting opinion cannot be evidence of inaccuracy. If rationality requires me to revise my belief, it is expected that my credence will be more rational than my original belief, so it can be said that for the proponent of peer disagreement as evidence of inaccuracy the reason why we should revise our beliefs in peer disagreement is to make our beliefs more accurate. However, (C) indicates that we should revise our beliefs by averaging our credences, or increasing my credence if my peer's relevant credence is higher and decreasing my credence if my peer's relevant credence is lower. But the method of revising beliefs proposed by the proponent of (C) will not always make our beliefs more accurate. Suppose my peer and I disagree about a proposition  $p$ , and for the evidence we share rationality

permits credence 0.6 to 0.8 is fully rational. Suppose my credence is 0.8, and my peer's credence is 0.6. If  $p$  is *in fact* false, that is, credence 0 represents perfect accuracy, then my belief will be more accurate if I revise my belief in the way the proponent of (C) suggests (my credence should be revised to somewhere between 0.6 and 0.8). However, if  $p$  is *in fact* true, that is, credence 1 represents perfect accuracy, and I revise my belief as the proponent of (C) suggested, my credence will not be more accurate. It will be farther away from the credence 1. Of course, both my peer and I do not know whether  $p$  is actually true or false and there is no reason for both of us to think that my original credence is closer to the perfect accuracy, but simply averaging our credences or moving toward each other will not make our belief more accurate. The method of revising beliefs suggested by (C) undermines the motivation to make our beliefs more accurate.

I have considered several arguments for the combination of (C) with (P) but none of them are successful. In contrast, (NC) coheres well with (P). The difference between (C) and (NC) is that the latter allows cases in which my peer and I are not rationally required to revise our beliefs. So the proponent of my peer can say that some of those cases involve permissive evidences and both of my peer's and my beliefs are within the range of permissible credences. In these cases, my peer and I know both of our beliefs are reasonable, but we do not see any reason why we should move toward each other. (NC) perfectly allows this situation so it sits well with (P)<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Under what condition (NC) predicts belief revision is rationally required? As argued above, I believe the condition is that the shared evidence is not permissive *and* my peer and I share the same norm evidence.



In sum, I have examined the relationship between (P) and two views in the epistemology of peer disagreement. Though there are some arguments for why (C) can be combined with (P), these arguments are implausible. On the contrary, (NC) can allow some cases that perfectly match the rational consequence of (P). In this respect it shows that (C) is less tenable than the other when considering its relationship with (P).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper I introduced three possible views on what rationality requires when in peer disagreement, and two theses on the relationship between rationality and evidence. I then explained why (S) is inconsistent with both (U) and (P) and should be rejected. Next I argued that (P) is better than (U), because the latter is too strong unless a strong argument for it is proposed. Finally, I argue that no theory can successfully accommodate (C) and (P), so it is not clear how (C) could be compatible with (P). On this picture I do not show which view or which thesis is determinedly correct or incorrect, but that (C) is no better than (NC), so (C) should not be treated as the default position in the current debate of the epistemology of peer disagreement.



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