

CAN WE RATIONALLY BELIEVE CONCILIATIONISM?

Eric Sampson

A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Philosophy department in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Chapel Hill
2017

Approved by:

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord

Russ Shafer-Landau

Ram Neta

© 2017
Eric Sampson
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

Eric Sampson: Can We Rationally Believe Conciliationism?
(Under the Direction of Geoffrey Sayre-McCord)

Conciliationists hold that, when an agent learns that an epistemic peer disagrees with her about p , she is rationally required to suspend judgment about p . Conciliationism has a well-known self-undermining problem (SUP): Conciliationism is itself controversial among philosophers. It thus seems to entail that it is irrational for conciliationists to believe their own view. Conciliationists have argued, in various ways, that this is not so. I argue that their defenses fail for the same reason: they depend for their success on philosophical claims that are also the subject of disagreement among conciliationists' epistemic peers. It is therefore irrational, by conciliationists' lights, to believe the claims conciliationists employ in their defenses. It is thus irrational, by conciliationists' standards, to believe that their defenses succeed. So we cannot rationally believe Conciliationism. I argue, moreover, that there is excellent reason to think that this problem will afflict any future defenses of Conciliationism, too.

For Laura

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section 1: Conciliationism and its Self-Undermining Problem	1
Section 2: What's the Philosophical Significance?	5
Section 3: Why Existing Defenses Fail	6
Section 3.1: Bogardus's Direct Acquaintance Defense	6
Section 3.2: Elga's Self-Exempting Conciliationism	8
Section 3.3: Pittard's Resolute Conciliationism	12
Section 4: Pessimism about the Future	17
References	19

1. Conciliationism and its Self-Undermining Problem

Conciliatory views in epistemology comprise a family of views about how agents ought to revise their doxastic attitudes toward a proposition p upon learning that an apparent epistemic peer disagrees with them about p .¹ An agent A 's epistemic peer about p is, roughly, someone whose epistemic credentials with respect to p are approximately equal to A 's, where the level of an agent's epistemic credentials depends on how intelligent, well-informed, unbiased, honest, and so on that agent is.² Conciliatory views agree on the following thesis:

Conciliationism's Core (credence): If an agent A learns that an apparent epistemic peer, B , disagrees with her about p , then A is rationally required to adjust her credence in p significantly in the direction of B 's.

The result will often be that A and B each ought to have a credence in p somewhere in the vicinity of 0.5—maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less depending on the circumstances. If we formulate the core claim in terms of full-(dis)belief, then conciliatory views agree that

Conciliationism's Core (full-belief): If A learns that an apparent epistemic peer, B , disagrees with her about p , then A is rationally required to suspend judgment about p .³

¹ Conciliatory views are meant to apply to cases of disagreement with epistemic superiors as well, but I will follow the literature in ignoring this complication. Defenders of conciliatory views include Bogardus (2009), Christensen (2007, 2009, 2013), Elga (2007, 2010), Feldman (2006, 2010), Kornblith (2010, 2013), Matheson (2009), Pittard (2015), and Vavova (2015).

² It's often said that epistemic peers must be roughly equal in both information (relevant to the dispute) and epistemic virtue. There are various (more precise) accounts of epistemic peerhood, but none of them will matter for my purposes. You may import your favorite account of epistemic peerhood throughout.

³ For simplicity, I will speak mostly in terms of full-belief, full-disbelief, and suspension of belief. As I have noted, many conciliationists prefer to speak in terms of credences or degrees of belief. I will not assume that there is any straightforward relation between full (dis)belief and credences. I will not assume, for instance, that the attitude of having a credence of 0.5 toward p is *identical* to the attitude of suspension of belief about p . And I will not assume that there is some threshold such that once an agent's credence in a proposition rises above it, the agent has moved from suspension of belief to full-belief in that proposition. Nevertheless, I will assume that there is *some* fairly intuitive relation between

Call anyone who accepts either version of Conciliationism's Core a *conciliatorist* and call their view about peer disagreement *Conciliationism*.⁴

Conciliationism is a popular view, but it has not won universal acceptance. Some epistemologists hold a version of a competing view, known widely as the *Steadfast View* (see, e.g., Bergmann (2009), Decker (2014), Kelly (2005, 2010), Titelbaum (2014), van Inwagen (2010), Weatherson (2013), Wedgwood (2010), Weintraub (2013)).⁵ According to steadfasters, disagreement about p between epistemic peers is rarely sufficient, all by itself, to rationally require either peer to suspend judgment about p . Thus, Conciliationism is itself the subject of disagreement among excellent philosophers. This fact poses an obvious problem for Conciliationism. If, as virtually all conciliatorists admit, conciliatorists have many epistemic peers who disagree with them about the truth of Conciliationism, then it seems to be irrational, by conciliatorists' lights, for conciliatorists to believe (or be confident in) their own view.⁶ Call this the *self-undermining problem* (SUP) for Conciliationism.⁷

the attitudes of full (dis)belief and credences, such that what I say in terms of full (dis)belief can be translated into the language of credences.

⁴ I suspect that anyone who accepts Conciliationism's Core (credence) will also accept Conciliationism's core (full-belief) and vice-versa, but the argument of this paper will apply to anyone who accepts either thesis.

⁵ Decker (2014) doesn't actually defend the Steadfast View. Rather, he rejects Conciliationism and remains silent about which view he endorses. But the point for now is that he, like many other excellent philosophers, rejects Conciliationism.

⁶ One might attempt (somewhat desperately, in my view) to avoid the force of the SUP by insisting that steadfasters are not the epistemic peers of conciliatorists. This is not a popular strategy among conciliatorists for the following reason. In order for this strategy to succeed, one would need to adopt a very narrow conception of epistemic peerhood such that some of the very best epistemologists in philosophy do not count as epistemic peers to conciliatorists. But if one has such a narrow conception of epistemic peerhood, then the rational requirement described by Conciliationism would almost never apply to agents like us. For, given such a narrow conception of peerhood, one would almost never encounter an epistemic peer. Thus, one might attempt to avoid the force of the SUP by adopting a very narrow conception of peerhood, but one would thereby rob Conciliationism of much, or all, of its philosophical interest. Conciliationism, even if true and rationally believable, would almost never apply. And it certainly wouldn't have any implications for our moral, political, religious, and other important philosophical views, as many have thought.

⁷ I am assuming here, and throughout the paper, that conciliatorists and steadfasters are roughly equally confident in their views. It is, in principle, possible that disagreement about Conciliationism would not render it irrational for Conciliatorists to believe their view in the face of peer disagreement about it. If, for example, conciliatorists had, on the whole, very high credence in their view, while steadfasters had, on the whole, only middling credence in their view,

Here's David Christensen, one of Conciliationism's most prominent defenders, putting the problem in his own words:

I, as a conciliationist, know full well that several excellent philosophers oppose my view; in fact, it seems to me that opinion on Conciliationism is presently divided roughly evenly. By my own lights, then, I should not be highly confident in Conciliationism (2009: 762).

Christensen replies that the mere fact that Conciliationism *potentially* self-undermines is no cause for concern for conciliationists; for any plausible view about the epistemic significance of peer disagreement will have to grapple with that problem (2009: 762). But what about the charge that, given the *actual* distribution of opinion about Conciliationism among epistemologists, Conciliationism *actually* self-undermines? After all, it is this latter issue that seems most pressing for conciliationists but not for steadfasters. Christensen writes:

Indeed, it seems to me those of us who find ourselves strongly drawn toward Conciliationism in these contentious times should not be confident that Conciliationism is correct. (Of course, we may still work hard in producing and disseminating arguments for the view, hoping to hasten thereby the day when epistemic conditions will brighten, consensus will blossom, and all will rationally and whole-heartedly embrace Conciliationism.) (2009: 763)

So Christensen concedes that, given the current state of the debate, conciliationists cannot rationally believe, or be confident in, their view.⁸

then, even after conciliating, conciliationists might be rationally permitted to have a relatively high credence in Conciliationism. While this is possible in principle, I assume, along with everyone else in this debate, that, as a matter of contingent fact, credences are not distributed this way.

⁸As far as I know, Christensen has not changed his mind about this. Here he is, in 2013, four years after the passage quoted above:

Now as it turns out, I'm also aware of the current controversy about disagreement, and know that a number of epistemologists reject CV [conciliatory views] in favor of positions toward the "steadfast" end of the spectrum: they hold that one may (often, at least in large measure) maintain one's confidence in one's initial beliefs despite knowledge of disagreement by those who seem, independent of the disagreement, to be as well positioned as oneself to arrive at accurate views on the disputed matter. I also quite reasonably respect epistemologists who hold steadfast views and reject CV. Insofar as I practice what I preach, it seems that CV requires me to become much less confident in CV as well.

Other conciliationists, however, are more optimistic. These conciliationists have offered a variety of defenses of Conciliationism in the face of the SUP. The conclusion of each defense is that conciliationists are rationally permitted to believe their view, even in the face of peer disagreement about it. In what follows, I argue that all of these defenses fail for roughly the same reason: each defense depends for its success on philosophical claims that are themselves the subject of disagreement among conciliationists' epistemic peers. It is therefore irrational, by conciliationists' own lights, to believe the claims they employ in their defenses. It is therefore irrational to believe that these defenses succeed and irrational to continue believing Conciliationism in the face of peer disagreement about it.

Things get worse for conciliationists—or so I shall argue. There is good reason to think that the problem I am identifying for existing defenses of Conciliationism against the SUP will likely afflict any *future* defenses, too. After all, any future defense will likely appeal to epistemic principles along the way. But given the pervasiveness of disagreement in epistemology, it seems highly unlikely that any plausible defense could be carried out by appeal to all and only uncontroversial epistemic principles. If this is correct, then, not only is it *now* irrational to believe Conciliationism, it will likely be irrational for a very long time—for at least as long as anyone reading this is alive.

This puts the advocate of CV in a situation that's puzzling in a number of ways. For one thing, it would seem that, in the present epistemological climate, at least, CV has the property that one cannot rationally believe it (at least very strongly), even if it's true. But this in itself isn't obviously mysterious or deeply problematic. After all, there would seem to be other situations—ones in which all epistemologists accept CV, for instance—in which one could rationally believe in CV. So CV isn't obviously intrinsically impossible to believe rationally. The present situation might, for all we've seen so far, simply be the sort of situation we confront on all kinds of topics all the time: one in which the truth on some matter is not rationally believable, because our evidence, misleadingly, points away from it (2013: 78).

The only difference is that Christensen, in 2013, seems more inclined to downplay the seriousness of the problem for Conciliationism than he earlier did. But the concession that, in today's climate, Conciliationism cannot be rationally believed remains. And it is this point that concerns me now.

2. What's the Philosophical Significance?

If the argument in this paper succeeds, it would not entail that Conciliationism is false. Nor would it entail that we ought to reject (i.e., believe the negation of) Conciliationism. One might wonder, then, why it's philosophically significant that we cannot rationally believe Conciliationism.

First, many have found Conciliationism interesting because it seems to have clear implications for our philosophical views outside of epistemology. No matter which side of the following debates you're on, you almost certainly have an epistemic peer who disagrees with you about

- the moral (im)permissibility of eating meat
- consequentialism vs. non-consequentialism in ethics
- compatibilism vs. incompatibilism
- theism vs. atheism
- internalism vs. externalism about epistemic justification
- internalism vs. externalism about reasons for action

and many, many other debates in philosophy. If so, then Conciliationism implies that, given the current distribution of opinion among your epistemic peers on these issues, you ought to suspend judgment about them (if you haven't already).⁹ If, however, we cannot rationally believe Conciliationism, then we ought not to suspend judgment about these issues on the basis of a belief in Conciliationism. For, if it's irrational to believe Conciliationism, then it would be irrational to revise our beliefs and credences on the basis of a belief in Conciliationism.

⁹ I don't mean to be objecting to Conciliationism here. I'm just describing one significant implication the view would have if it were true and we could rationally believe it. If you're like me, you find it plausible that we ought to suspend judgment about some of these issues. But I think that we sometimes ought to suspend judgment because the first-order evidence is inconclusive. Conciliationists, however, think that, even if the first-order evidence conclusively favors one view over the other, we still ought to suspend judgment about the issue because the higher-order evidence—namely, the disagreement of our epistemic peers—rationally requires us to suspend judgment.

Second, philosophical arguments from Conciliationism to skepticism (or agnosticism) about a certain subject matter are becoming increasingly prevalent (see, e.g., Feldman (2007), Kornblith (2013), Matheson (2016), McGrath (2007), Rowland (2017), Sinnott-Armstrong (2007), Vavova (2014)). But if we cannot rationally believe Conciliationism, then we should not be moved by these arguments. Since each argument employs Conciliationism as a premise on the way to their skeptical conclusions, and we cannot rationally believe Conciliationism, we cannot rationally believe at least one of the premises in these arguments. And we should not be moved by arguments that employ premises that we know we cannot rationally believe. So these arguments cannot justify their skeptical conclusions.

In short: If the argument of this paper is sound, then *even if Conciliationism is true*, it cannot be put to much interesting philosophical use.

3. Why Existing Defenses Fail

In this section, I'll canvass three recent attempts to defend Conciliationism against the SUP.¹⁰ In each case, I argue, the proposed solution depends on controversial philosophical claims. Thus, we cannot, by conciliationists' lights, rationally believe that these defenses succeed.

3.1. Bogardus's Direct Acquaintance Defense

The most straightforward defense of Conciliationism against the SUP comes from Tomas Bogardus (2009). He argues that the truth of Conciliationism can be known by direct acquaintance on the basis of rational intuition. Thus, any apparent epistemic peer who denies Conciliationism can be demoted from the status of apparent epistemic peer on the grounds that they deny a proposition known by direct acquaintance. He writes,

[T]he antecedent of the Equal-Weight View [that some agent is an apparent epistemic peer] might not be satisfied in cases involving knowledge from that unmediated access to the truth of propositions sometimes afforded by rational intuition. And it's plausible that the Equal-Weight View is itself a deliverance of rational intuition . . . With further reflection, I think, one can come to just see the truth of the View – not only does it *seem* obvious, but upon further reflection it just *is* obvious (2009: 333).

Clearly, this defense succeeds only if the following principle is both true and can be rationally believed.

Obvious: The Equal Weight View—one version of Conciliationism—is obvious or known on the basis of rational intuition.

¹⁰ Indeed, these are the only three attempts to address the SUP of which I am aware. There have been several attempts to respond to a similar charge, namely, that Conciliationism is *incoherent* and therefore false (Matheson (2015), Christensen (2013)). But these replies have nothing to say about the charge that, given our current philosophical climate, Conciliationism cannot be rationally believed.

Let's grant, for the sake of argument, that Obvious is true. Still, if we cannot rationally believe it, then we cannot rationally demote an apparent epistemic peer from that status on the basis of a belief in Obvious. And, unfortunately for conciliationists, Obvious cannot—by conciliationists' standards—be rationally believed since it is itself controversial. Not only do many steadfasters deny Obvious, but so also do many conciliationists.¹¹

One might suggest that Obvious, too, is obvious or known on the basis of rational intuition. If this were true, then conciliationists could demote any apparent epistemic peer who disagrees with them about Obvious from the status of apparent epistemic peer. The trouble is that it is even more controversial that Obvious is obvious or known on the basis of rational intuition than Obvious itself. Conciliationism thus entails that it's not rational to believe that Obvious is obvious or known by rational intuition. One might attempt to make the same move yet again—i.e., insist that it's obvious that Obvious is obvious. But I take it that no conciliationist would want to pursue this desperate strategy. So Bogardus's defense of Conciliationism against the SUP fails because its success depends on Obvious being both true and rationally believable. But, given that Obvious is controversial among excellent philosophers (both steadfasters and conciliationists alike), it cannot be rationally believed—not even by conciliationists' standards.

3.2. Elga's Self-Exempting Conciliationism

Perhaps the most famous defense of Conciliationism against the SUP comes from Adam Elga (2010). Elga employs a self-exempting strategy to defend Conciliationism: He argues that we rationally ought to conciliate in the face of peer disagreement, *except* when the disputed proposition

¹¹ Might the conciliationist rationally believe Obvious if her initial credence in Obvious—prior to the disagreement about it—is very high? No—not given the actual credences of philosophers toward Obvious. No matter how confident the conciliationist is that Obvious is true, there are steadfasters (and even other conciliationists) who have an equally high (or roughly equally high) credence that Obvious is false. If so, then any plausible form of Conciliationism will require that the conciliationist's credence in Obvious be somewhere near 0.5 upon discovering peer disagreement about Obvious.

is Conciliationism itself. If the disputed proposition is Conciliationism, then we ought to remain steadfast in believing—indeed, have a credence of 1 in—Conciliationism. The resulting view is

Elga's Self-Exempting Conciliationism (ESEC):

- (1) Conciliationism: If A learns that an apparent epistemic peer, B , disagrees with her about p , then A is rationally required to adjust her credence in p significantly in the direction of B 's,
- (2) unless p is Conciliationism. If p is Conciliationism, then A ought to remain steadfast in her confidence—indeed have a credence of 1—in p .

Priority number one for Elga is to explain how ESEC's second clause does not render ESEC objectionably *ad hoc*. Elga's answer is that Conciliationism—ESEC's first clause—is an inductive method. That is, Conciliationism offers advice about how agents rationally ought to regulate their doxastic attitudes when confronted with certain courses of experience. And *all* correct inductive methods, Elga argues, must be dogmatic—i.e., recommend credence 1—about their own correctness. So, for *any* correct inductive method M , M will never advise an agent to stop believing M .

To further motivate ESEC's second clause, Elga borrows an example from David Lewis (1971: 55) involving the magazine *Consumer Reports*, which rates appliances and gives recommendations for which ones to buy. Elga imagines that *Consumer Reports* also rates and recommends other consumer ratings magazines. It would be incoherent, Elga says, for *Consumer Reports* to recommend a competitor magazine's ratings over itself, where a competitor magazine is one that offers contrary appliance recommendations. For if *Consumer Reports* did recommend the ratings of a competitor magazine, *Smart Shopper* say, and *Consumer Reports* advises you to buy only Toaster₁, *Smart Shopper* would advise you to buy only Toaster₂. But now *Consumer Reports* would have given conflicting advice. You cannot possibly do both of the things *Consumer Reports* has advised you to do. So, to give coherent advice, Elga argues, *Consumer Reports* must rate itself highest of all the competitor ratings. It must advise you to trust it over any other magazine.

The same applies to inductive methods, Elga argues. If an inductive method M is to offer coherent advice, M must advise you to trust M over any other method. So, in order to give coherent advice, Conciliationism—an inductive method—must be dogmatic about its own correctness. It must regard itself as the best method—indeed, the best possible method—for dealing with disagreement among epistemic peers. If Elga is correct about this, then he will have identified a justification, independent of merely avoiding the SUP, for conciliationists to insist on being steadfast about disagreements over Conciliationism but not about disagreements over other propositions.

But we do not need to venture outside the conciliationist camp to find disagreement about Elga's crucial claims. David Christensen has criticized Elga's self-exempting Conciliationism, and it is worth quoting him at length.

I think that there is something unsatisfying about [ESEC]... Suppose, that is, that I follow [Conciliationism] and remain absolutely confident in its correctness, despite the fact that it's rejected by many epistemologists I respect, and even rate as my superiors in philosophical skill. How should I view my own reasoning on this topic? Should I think that while I'm generally only moderately reliable when I think about philosophy, nevertheless when I think about arguments for general conciliation, and for not being conciliatory about conciliation, I'm especially immune from error? That seems extremely dubious. There is nothing about this particular topic that would make my way of thinking about it special, or especially immune from my usual sort of blunders.

Should I count myself just lucky, then? This seems more natural: given my general fallibility in thinking philosophically, it would indeed be lucky if I, rather than all those more-talented philosophers who reject [Conciliationism], am the one who is right this time. . . On what basis could I conclude that I'm the one who got lucky, rather than those who reject [Conciliationism]? . . .

Thus it doesn't seem to me that it would be rational for me to be highly confident (let alone certain) that I'm either very lucky or using especially reliable methods in thinking about the topic of rational responses to disagreement. And so [ESEC], despite fitting in a natural way with the [SUP], does not seem to me to provide a satisfactory solution to our problem (2013: 88-89).

We can glean from this passage two claims that Elga presupposes but that Christensen denies. The point of what follows is not to show that Christensen's criticisms of Elga's defense are correct (though I'm inclined to think that they are). Rather, the point is to show that Elga and others who

embrace ESEC have epistemic peers—indeed, fellow conciliationists—who disagree with them about the claims on which Elga’s defense depends.

For Elga’s defense to succeed, it’s not enough for ESEC to be true. We must also be able to rationally believe it. Perhaps Elga has given some reason to think that ESEC is more likely to be true than unrestricted Conciliationism. But, even if Elga is correct on this point, he will not have established

Rational Dogmatism (RD): It is rationally permissible to believe, or have credence 1 in, Conciliationism.¹²

Return to the *Consumer Reports* analogy. Elga may be right that, to give coherent advice, *Consumer Reports* must regard its appliance ratings as the most reliable among all existing appliance ratings. That, however, does not entail that it is rational to believe that *Consumer Reports* has the most reliable ratings. If it did, then *every* magazine would be justified in being dogmatic about its own ratings, since it is true of every magazine that, to give coherent advice, it must regard its own ratings as best. But there are clear cases in which it would be irrational for the editors of a magazine to believe that their own magazine’s ratings are best.

Imagine a magazine in the same business as *Consumer Reports* called *Darts Magazine*. *Darts* makes its recommendations by putting a photograph of each appliance on a wall, blindfolding an employee, and having them throw a dart in the general direction of the wall. Whichever photograph the dart hits on the first throw is the toaster that *Darts* rates as the best toaster. Whichever toaster the dart hits on the second throw is the one that gets rated second best. And so on for all the toasters, microwaves, etc. Now, to give coherent advice, *Darts* must regard its appliance ratings as the most reliable of all existing ratings. But that obviously does not entail that it is rational to believe,

¹² Notice that RD is not identical to Conciliationism. Rather, it is a claim about the epistemic status of belief in Conciliationism.

or to be confident that, *Darts's* advice is the best out there. *Darts's* advice is worthless and everyone knows it—even the *Darts* employees generating the ratings!

The lesson for ESEC is this: even if Elga is correct that, to give coherent advice, Conciliationism must be dogmatic about its own correctness, it does not follow that that dogmatism is rationally permissible. It may be that, just as being dogmatic about *Darts's* correctness is necessary for giving coherent advice but irrational, so being dogmatic about Conciliationism's correctness is necessary for giving coherent advice but irrational. In other words, being dogmatic about Conciliationism may help one avoid incoherence, but not overconfidence. That, I take it, is Christensen's point when he says that, in being dogmatic about Conciliationism, conciliationists are committed to thinking either that they are infallible when it comes to reasoning about peer disagreement or that they are just incredibly lucky to have happened to believe the correct view. Both suggestions are dubious. So a dogmatic conciliationist is overconfident. Such a person's credence that their view about peer disagreement is correct is irrationally high and nothing Elga says in defense of his self-exempting Conciliationism suggests otherwise.

The point, then, is this: if Christensen is correct, then the claim that Elga relies on to immunize Conciliationism from the SUP—RD—is false. And its falsity undermines the case that Elga makes for ESEC. But ESEC is in trouble even if Christensen's diagnosis is mistaken. Even if RD can be defended against the case Christensen makes against it, RD is itself the subject of controversy among excellent philosophers. It is therefore irrational to believe RD, even by Elga's lights. So, it would be irrational to believe that Elga's defense of Conciliationism against the SUP succeeds.

There is another controversial claim on which Elga's defense depends. As the long quote from Christensen above suggests, one of the central motivations for embracing Conciliationism is that it captures the intuitive thought that we are fallible reasoners. Our best efforts to discover the

truth often fail, even after we check our reasoning over, and over, and on that basis feel confident that we are correct. But, if one accepts Elga's reply to the SUP, then one escapes the force of the SUP only by abandoning this motivating thought. As Christensen notes, in order to accept Elga's reply, one must think either that one is infallible when it comes to reasoning about peer disagreement, or just incredibly lucky to have hit upon the correct view. But neither of these seems plausible, and neither is consistent with the considerations that make Conciliationism an attractive view in the first place. But, it seems clear that, in order for Elga's defense to succeed, it must not give up on the central motivating thought behind Conciliationism—namely, that we are fallible reasoners. Thus, Elga's defense depends on

Motivation: ESEC is consistent with the central motivations for embracing Conciliationism in the first place.

Elga's reply to the SUP succeeds only if Motivation is true and we can rationally believe it. But, by Elga's own lights, we cannot rationally believe it, since there is peer disagreement about that proposition. Christensen, and certainly many others—both steadfasters and conciliationists—deny it. So, even if Motivation is somehow true, Elga's defense of Conciliationism against the SUP fails, since, by his own lights, neither he nor we can rationally believe Motivation.

3.3. Pittard's Resolute Conciliationism

John Pittard (2015) employs a self-exempting strategy, too. He begins by noting that Conciliationism's central requirement is to demonstrate some sort of deference to one's epistemic equals and superiors (449). He argues that when a conciliationist faces peer disagreement about Conciliationism itself, a conciliationist may show deference to her interlocutor in two different ways. She may conciliate either at the level of her *credence* or at the level of her *reasoning*.

To illustrate, suppose that Connie the conciliationist and Steph the steadfaster disagree about whether Conciliationism is true. Conciliationism says that Connie ought to conciliate. Connie might conciliate by significantly reducing her confidence in Conciliationism, thereby conciliating at the

level of her *credence*. (This is the standard way conciliationists have recommended we show epistemic deference to our epistemic peers.) Alternatively, Connie may conciliate at the level of her *reasoning* by adopting a steadfast's rationale—the rationale her dissenting interlocutor endorses—for responding to peer disagreements. Pittard argues that this latter form of conciliation (i.e., at the level of reasoning) represents a kind of epistemic deference no less than conciliation at the level of credence. When Connie conciliates at the level of reasoning, she refuses to rely on a rationale for belief revision that her epistemic peer contests. In this way, Pittard argues, she also shows epistemic deference. Thus, conciliation at the level of reasoning is consistent with the motivation for accepting Conciliationism in the first place. But notice that conciliating at the level of reasoning (by adopting a steadfast's rationale) would result in Connie's remaining resolute in her endorsement of Conciliationism at the level of her credence. After all, Steph, with whom Connie disagrees and to whom Connie defers, would advise Connie to remain steadfast in the face of peer disagreements. Thus, Pittard argues, Connie is rationally permitted to remain resolute in her belief in Conciliationism. And this resolute Conciliationism, he argues, is neither objectionably *ad hoc* nor vulnerable to the SUP.

If we can rationally believe the claims Pittard employs, then his defense will succeed in showing that conciliationists are rationally permitted to believe their own view, even in the face of peer disagreement about it. But there are two claims that we must be rationally permitted to believe in order for Pittard's defense to succeed. And neither are rationally permissible, according to Conciliationism.

By hypothesis, Connie is a conciliationist. She therefore rejects steadfast reasoning. And yet Pittard believes that it is both psychologically possible and rationally permissible for Connie to retain her belief in Conciliationism on the basis of a steadfast's rationale. Thus, Pittard presupposes that it is both psychologically possible and rationally permissible for an agent to form (or retain) a belief

on the basis of a claim that she does not believe, or on the basis of reasoning that she rejects. Here, then, is the first controversial claim:

Possible: It is psychologically possible for an agent to form (or retain) a belief on the basis of a claim that she does not believe, or on the basis of reasoning that she rejects.

Given what we know about philosophers, it seems likely that many of them (would) reject Possible.

This is because the following principle seems quite plausible

Acceptance: Necessarily, if A comes to believe (or retain a belief in) x on the basis of y , then A actually believes or accepts y —i.e., A takes y to be true, or correct, or valid, or the like.

If Acceptance is correct, then Possible is false and it is psychologically impossible for Connie, or any conciliationist for that matter, to continue to believe Conciliationism on the basis of steadfast reasoning.

While I'm inclined to think that Acceptance is true and Possible is false, the larger point is that, given what we know about philosophers, we can be highly confident that there are excellent philosophers who reject Possible (perhaps because they endorse Acceptance). If that is correct, then even on Pittard's resolute brand of Conciliationism we ought to suspend judgment about Possible. But since Pittard's defense succeeds only if we can rationally believe Possible, and, by Pittard's lights, we rationally ought to suspend judgment about Possible, we cannot rationally believe that Pittard's defense succeeds.

But even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that it is psychologically possible for an agent to come to believe (or retain a belief in) a proposition on the basis of a claim that she does not believe, or on the basis of reasoning that she rejects, one might reasonably deny that it is *rationally permissible* for an agent to do so. Thus, Pittard's defense also depends on

Permissible: It is rationally permissible for an agent to form (or retain) a belief on the basis of a claim that she does not believe, or on the basis of reasoning that she rejects.

Again, I'm inclined to believe that Permissible is false. (Just imagine how you would react to someone who reports that they believe that p on the basis of q but they also reject q .) However, even if Permissible is true, it is nevertheless a highly controversial claim we can be confident that many excellent philosophers (would) reject. If that is correct, then, once again, conciliationists will have peers who disagree with them about one of the claims on which Pittard's defense depends. By Pittard's own lights, then we cannot rationally believe that crucial claim. Thus, by his own lights, his defense of Conciliationism against the SUP fails.

It might be suggested that, though Pittard's defense fails in its current form, there is a way of developing his strategy that succeeds. Imagine Connie making the following speech upon discovering her disagreement with Steph.

Notice, Steph, that, if your view (the Steadfast view) is correct, then it is rationally permissible for me to confidently hold my belief in Conciliationism in the face of peer disagreement about it. So, even if you're right and I'm wrong about how to correctly respond to peer disagreement, I'm rationally permitted to believe Conciliationism.

In other words, Connie is reasoning hypothetically. She is supposing, for the sake of argument, that her interlocutor's view is correct and deriving the conclusion that she is rationally permitted to believe her view in the face of peer disagreement about it. One might think, therefore, that, if Connie's belief is rational even if her dissenting interlocutor's view is correct, then Connie is rationally permitted to believe her own view. If this is the proper way to understand Pittard's defense, then it does not require Connie to believe (or retain her belief in) Conciliationism *on the basis* of a steadfast's rationale. It only requires a bit of hypothetical reasoning. Thus, none of the above criticisms of Pittard's defense would apply.

Conciliationists should not be comforted by Connie's speech or the proposed revision to Pittard's defense. It is true that, if the Steadfast View is correct, Connie is permitted to believe Conciliationism in the face of controversy about it. But if the Steadfast View is correct, then

Conciliationism is false. So Connie is rationally permitted to retain her belief in Conciliationism only if her view is false. Moreover, we should not forget: Connie is a conciliationist. So we should ask: What if your view is correct, Connie? What follows about the rational permissibility of believing Conciliationism then? The answer is the same as before: if Conciliationism is true, then, given the controversy about it, Connie is not rationally permitted to retain her belief in Conciliationism. So it is still true that, by Connie's *own* lights, she is not rationally permitted to believe her view. Thus, there are only two possibilities for Connie: either Conciliationism is false but she can rationally believe it, or Conciliationism is true and she cannot rationally believe it. Neither possibility is good news for conciliationists.

Furthermore, once Connie is aware that these are the only two possibilities—either Conciliationism is false or it is irrational to believe it—it no longer seems rationally permissible for Connie to retain her belief in Conciliationism. For, no matter which view about the epistemology of peer disagreement is correct, believing Conciliationism would amount to believing a defective view. So, no matter which view about how to rationally respond to peer disagreement is correct, it is still not rationally permissible for Connie to retain her belief in Conciliationism—not even on the proposed revision to Pittard's defense. Conciliationists will therefore need some *other* defense against the SUP to come to the rescue in order for them to rationally believe their own view.

4. Pessimism about the Future

How likely is it that future defenses of Conciliationism against the SUP will overcome the problem I've identified for existing defenses? This is a bit speculative—we are now considering defenses of Conciliationism that do not exist yet!—but it seems to me that the answer is: not very likely. Think about what such a defense would have to be like. It would need to establish that conciliationists can rationally believe Conciliationism in the face of disagreement from excellent philosophers by appealing to, and presupposing, all and only claims that are not themselves the subject of disagreement among excellent philosophers. This is a tall order. After all, the SUP is a fairly obvious problem for Conciliationism. If the solution to it were easy and straightforward, it probably would have been noticed by now, given the number of excellent philosophers invested in the peer disagreement literature. But it hasn't. Thus, any future defense of Conciliationism against the SUP will likely require some fancy philosophical footwork. That is, it will likely appeal to, or presuppose, philosophical claims that are not obviously true. And non-obvious philosophical claims will likely be the subject of controversy among excellent philosophers. We know that (near) consensus among philosophers about *any* interesting philosophical claim is exceedingly difficult to come by. Achieving near consensus about matters concerning the fundamental standards of rational belief seems entirely hopeless.

Perhaps the best hope conciliationists have to escape the force of the SUP is not by means of a philosophical defense of Conciliationism, but rather by a change in sociology. If, over time, all or most excellent philosophers convert to Conciliationism, then there would be no peer disagreement about it. So Conciliationism would not undermine itself and conciliationists could

rationaly believe their own view. But such a mass conversion is not likely to happen any time soon.¹³ Thus, if the line of reasoning presented in this paper is correct, then we cannot now rationaly believe Conciliationism and this will likely be so for a very long time—for at least as long as anyone reading this is alive.

¹³And if the mass conversion was made irrationally (e.g., by brainwashing), and you know this, then, plausibly, even a mass conversion would not insulate Conciliationism from the force of the SUP.

REFERENCES

- Bergmann, M. (2009). "Rational Disagreement After Full Disclosure". *Episteme*, 6 (3):336-353.
- Bogardus, T. (2009). "A Vindication of the Equal-Weight View". *Episteme*, 6 (3):324-335.
- Christensen, D. (2009). "Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy". *Philosophy Compass*, 4 (5):756-767.
- Christensen, D. (2007). "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News." *Philosophical Review*, 116 (2):187-217.
- Christensen, D. (2013). "Epistemic Modesty Defended", in David Christensen & Jennifer Lackey (eds.), *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*. Oxford University Press.
- Elga, A. (2010). "How to Disagree About How to Disagree", in Ted Warfield & Richard Feldman (eds.), *Disagreement*. Oxford University Press
- Elga, A. (2007). "Reflection and Disagreement". *Noûs*, 41 (3):478–502.
- Feldman, R. (2006). "Epistemological Puzzles About Disagreement", in Stephen Hetherington (ed.), *Epistemology Futures*. Oxford University Press, 216-236.
- Feldman, R. (2010). "Reasonable Religious Disagreements", in Louise Antony (ed.), *Philosophers Without Gods*. Oxford University Press.
- Decker, J. (2014). "Conciliation and Self-Incrimination". *Erkenntnis*, 79 (5):1099-1134.
- Kelly, T. (2005). "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement", in John Hawthorne & Tamar Gendler (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Volume 1.
- Kelly, T. (2010). "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence", in Alvin I. Goldman & Dennis Whitcomb (eds.), *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*. Oxford University Press.
- Kornblith, H. (2010). "Belief in the Face of Controversy", in Richard Feldman & Ted A. Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*. Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, D. (1971). "Immodest Inductive Methods". *Philosophy of Science*, 38(1): 54-63.
- Machuca, D. (2016). "A Neo-Pyrrhonian Response to the Disagreeing About Disagreement Argument". *Synthese*: 1-18.
- Matheson, J. (2009). "Conciliatory Views of Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence". *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, 6 (3): 269-279.
- Matheson, J. (2015). "Are Conciliatory Views of Disagreement Self-Defeating?". *Social Epistemology*, 29 (2):145-159.

- Matheson, J. (2016). "Moral Caution and the Epistemology of Disagreement". *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 47 (2):120-141.
- McGrath, S. (2008). "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise", in Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* Vol. 3. Oxford University Press: 87-108.
- Pittard, J. (2015). "Resolute Conciliationism". *Philosophical Quarterly*, 65 (260):442-463.
- Rowland, R. (2017). "The Epistemology of Moral Disagreement". *Philosophy Compass*, 12 (2) 1-16.
- Titelbaum, M. (2014). "Rationality's Fixed Point", in Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Volume 5.
- van Inwagen, P. (2010). "We're Right. They're Wrong", in Richard Feldman & Ted A. Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*. Oxford University Press.
- Vavova, K. (2014). "Moral Disagreement and Moral Skepticism". *Philosophical Perspectives*, 28 (1): 302-333.
- Wedgwood, R. (2010). "The Moral Evil Demons", in Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*. Oxford University Press
- Weatherson, B. (2013). "Disagreements, Philosophical and Otherwise", in *The Epistemology of Disagreement*, (eds.), David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey, Oxford: OUP, pp. 54-75.
- Weintraub, R. (2013). "Can Steadfast Peer Disagreement Be Rational?". *Philosophical Quarterly*, 63 (253): 740-759.