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THE SELF-UNDERMINING OBJECTION IN THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF DISAGREEMENT

Shawn Graves

Disagreements about, within, and between religions are widespread. It's no surprise, then, that there's an enormous philosophical literature on religious diversity. But in recent years, philosophers working in mainstream epistemology have done a lot of work on disagreement in general. This work has focused in particular upon the epistemology of *peer* disagreement, i.e., disagreements between parties who are justifiably believed to be epistemic equals regarding the matter at hand. In this paper, I intend to defend a thesis in the epistemology of peer disagreement from a significant objection. The thesis I intend to defend is the *Equal Weight View* (EWV). The objection, pressed by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Timothy O'Connor, Charles Taliaferro, Brian Weatherson, and Adam Elga, is that EWV is *self-undermining*. In short, I argue two things. First, I argue that EWV is not self-undermining. Second, I argue that even if it were, this would give us no reason to think that EWV is false since there are obviously true epistemic principles that self-undermine (or at least do so potentially). The self-undermining objection to EWV fails.

Disagreements abound over nearly every matter of interest and significance. This includes religious matters. Quite obviously, disagreements about, within, and between religions are widespread. As David Basinger writes, "With respect to many, if not most issues, there exist significant differences of opinion among individuals who seem to be equally knowledgeable and sincere. . . . Such diversity of opinion, though, is nowhere more evident than in the area of religious thought. On almost every religious issue, honest, knowledgeable people hold significantly diverse, often incompatible beliefs."¹ Given this contentious state of affairs, then, it is understandable why there is an enormous philosophical literature on religious diversity. There's plenty to think about here.

In recent years, philosophers working in mainstream epistemology have done a lot of work on disagreement. This work has focused primarily upon the epistemology of *peer* disagreement, i.e., disagreements between parties who are justifiably believed to be epistemic equals regarding the matter at hand. Though religious disputes in particular aren't typically the focus of this literature, the results of this work are usually taken to

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¹David Basinger, "Religious Diversity (Pluralism)," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online), 2010, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-pluralism/>.

have bearing upon so-called “real world” disputes over topics like religion, politics, and ethics.²

In this paper, I intend to defend a thesis in the epistemology of peer disagreement from a significant objection. The thesis I intend to defend is the Equal Weight View (EWV):

EWV. For any persons *S1* and *S2*, any proposition *p* and any time *t*, if *S1* and *S2* are in a peer encounter over *p* at *t*, then the opinions of *S1* and *S2* about *p* at *t* are worth the same evidentially.³

First, some terminology. Let’s say that two persons *S1* and *S2* are in a *peer encounter* over *p* at *t* just in case the following obtains: (1) *S1* and *S2* justifiably believe that they are epistemic peers over *p* at *t*, and (2) *S1* and *S2* justifiably believe that they have compared all of their notes and credence levels over *p* at *t*.⁴ We will understand *epistemic peers* here as follows: *S1* and *S2* are epistemic peers over *p* at *t* just in case they are equally fit at *t* for attaining a true belief about *p*.⁵ The *opinions* of *S1* and *S2* just are their credence levels over *p* at *t*.⁶

EWV asserts that in a rather specific context (peer encounter), the peer opinions over *p* at *t* are worth the same evidentially. We are to read this context-specific principle as a statement about the *evidential worth* or *value* of peer testimony. So, in such contexts, the opinion of my peer counts as much evidentially as my opinion. That is, in those specified contexts, my peer’s opinion is worth no more or less than my own as a piece of evidence; evidentially, it is just as potent. In short, EWV asserts *evidential parity* between peer opinions in the context of peer encounter.

It’s important at this point to distinguish EWV from another principle. This is because the two principles are often run together when evaluating EWV’s merits.⁷ Here’s the other principle:

²Two recent papers argue against the assumption that the contemporary epistemology of peer disagreement literature has direct bearing on real world religious disputes. See Nathan King, “Disagreement: What’s the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2011), doi: 10.1111/j.1933-1592.2010.00441.x, and Graham Oppy, “Disagreement,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68 (2010), 183–199.

³As far as I’m aware, the name *The Equal Weight View* was first used in Adam Elga, “Reflection and Disagreement,” *Nous* 41 (2007), 478–502.

⁴Note that a peer encounter, as I understand it, allows for encounters between two individuals who aren’t in fact epistemic peers or, for that matter, haven’t actually compared notes and credence levels over *p*. Two individuals need not *be* epistemic peers or share their notes and credence levels over *p* in order for the interesting epistemological questions about disagreement to be raised. It’s enough that they justifiably *take themselves* to be peers and to have compared notes and credence levels over *p*. Also, my understanding of peer encounter allows for both peer agreement and disagreement.

⁵This constitutes a modest departure from the usual way of understanding epistemic peerhood.

⁶I am employing the usual degrees of belief framework in this paper. Those who think that this is a mistake are invited to take out the reference to credence levels and insert references to doxastic attitudes. Nothing of substance in this paper is affected by that modification.

⁷Here are just two philosophers who conflate these principles. In tracing the implications of his own view regarding peer disagreement, David Enoch writes, “And perhaps

The Split the Difference Principle. For any persons $S1$ and $S2$, proposition p , and time t , if $S1$ and $S2$ know that (1) they are epistemic peers about p at t , and (2) they have different credences about p at t , then it is reasonable for $S1$ and $S2$ to revise their prior credences by adopting the credence obtained by averaging their prior credences.

I do *not* intend to defend the Split the Difference Principle. EWV (as displayed above) and the Split the Difference Principle are not equivalent. Nor does EWV entail the Split the Difference Principle. Unfortunately, there's no space here to discuss at length the arguments for this claim, so I'll just have to assume in this paper that EWV and the Split the Difference Principle are logically distinct.⁸ So, successfully arguing against

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sometimes you should split the difference, as the Equal Weight View requires." See p. 994 of David Enoch, "Not Just a Truthometer: Taking Oneself Seriously (but not Too Seriously) in Cases of Peer Disagreement," *Mind* 119 (2010), 953–997. Tom Kelly is also guilty of the conflation. For example, he does this in his most recent arguments against EWV. See Thomas Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence," in *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Multiple passages express this conflation. Here are four such passages. On p. 117, Kelly writes, "When the theist and the atheist encounter one another, the response mandated by the Equal Weight View is clear enough: the two should split the difference and become agnostics with respect to the question of whether God exists." On p. 122, after discussing a case of peer disagreement where "my credence for [some hypothesis] H stands at 0.8 while your credence stands at 0.2," Kelly asserts, "According to the Equal Weight View, you and I should split the difference between our original opinions and each give credence 0.5 to H ." On p. 130, in discussing a different case where one believes an hypothesis to degree 0.7 and another believes that same hypothesis to degree 0.3, Kelly claims, "According to the Equal Weight View, one should split the difference with one's peer and believe the hypothesis to degree 0.5 at time t_2 ." In another passage, on p. 135, Kelly writes, "Against the Equal Weight View, I have argued that there is at least one type of situation in which one is not required to split the difference with a peer who disagrees."

⁸Here are just two considerations. First, consider that there is *nothing* in EWV itself about what it is reasonable to believe or about which doxastic attitude is justified in any given situation. It is *not* a claim about what's reasonable or justified. That is, EWV does not take some facts about a particular context as input and then *all by itself* yield some verdict about what's reasonable or justified. Again, it is just a statement asserting evidential parity between peer opinions while remaining otherwise silent on the precise evidential worth (if any) of the relevant peer opinion. The Split the Difference Principle, on the other hand, *is* a claim about what's reasonable or justified. Given some facts about a case as input, it *does* all by itself yield some verdict about what's reasonable or justified. Clearly, and importantly, an EWV proponent need not go along with a proponent of the Split the Difference Principle in making this additional claim about what is reasonable or justified in cases of peer disagreement. Rather, the EWV proponent can get on board with some other principle about what's reasonable or justified in cases of peer disagreement. Second, suppose we conjoin EWV with this view:

The Absolutely No Weight View. In at least some cases of peer disagreement, it can be perfectly reasonable for both parties to give no weight at all to any party's opinion, including their own opinion.

Conjoining EWV with this view, where peer testimony counts for absolutely nothing evidentially, we have the result that the original evidence E remains not only epistemically relevant, but epistemically *decisive* after full disclosure among peers. But if both EWV and the Absolutely No Weight View are true, then presumably the Split the Difference Principle is false. Surely it would be reasonable for one to violate the Split the Difference Principle in at least some cases by refraining from adopting the credence obtained by averaging the peers' prior credences on the grounds that it's perfectly reasonable in at least some cases

the Split the Difference Principle does not count as successfully arguing against EWV.

Here's how I'll proceed in this paper. I'll present the objection and then respond to it. I'll also offer a view that an EWV proponent may, but need not, accept. In short, this is the view that in standard cases of peer disagreement, in getting your peer testimony that I have made a mistake in assigning the credence I have toward the target proposition, I thereby get an (undefeated) *undercutting defeater* for my credence.⁹ I'll defend that view as well. Let's turn now to the objection to EWV and my replies.

The objection is raised (in some form or other) by a number of philosophers, including Alvin Plantinga, Timothy O'Connor, Charles Taliaferro, Brian Weatherson, and Adam Elga.¹⁰ This is the objection that EWV is *rationally self-undermining*.¹¹ Let's first present the argument and then explain it. Here's the argument:

The Rationally Self-Undermining Argument Against EWV

- (1) If EWV is rationally self-undermining, then EWV is false.
- (2) EWV is rationally self-undermining.

- (3) Therefore, EWV is false.

This is a simple, straightforward, valid argument. But why think the premises are true?

Let's consider premise (2) first. Why should we think EWV is rationally self-undermining? First, we need to note that there are multiple ways

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for one to give *no evidential weight at all* to those prior credences. Thus, it's possible for EWV to be true while the Split the Difference Principle is false. Again, they are logically distinct.

*Standard cases of peer encounter are cases where the peer testimony is neither self-defeating nor defeated by other peer or superior testimony.

¹⁰See Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas Senor (Cornell University Press, 1995); Timothy O'Connor, "Religious Pluralism," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Eerdmans, 1999); Charles Taliaferro, "Philosophers without Gods: A Review Essay," *Philosophia Christi* 11 (2009), 224–230; Brian Weatherson, "Disagreeing about Disagreement," *Thoughts, Arguments, Rants* (blog), January 6, 2007, <http://tar.weatherson.org/2007/01/06/disagreeing-about-disagreement/>; and Adam Elga, "How to Disagree About How to Disagree," in *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). In Elga's paper (see fn. 4), Elga notes that he first heard of the self-undermining objection from "an unpublished early draft of Kelly (2005), which discusses the objection without endorsing it." There Elga is referring to Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 1, ed. John Hawthorne and Tamar Szabo-Gendler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Michael Thune presents the objection as a "serious concern about EWV" without explicitly endorsing the objection. See Michael Thune, "Religious Belief and the Epistemology of Disagreement," *Philosophy Compass* 5.8 (2010), 712–724.

¹¹As with Kelly's cumulative case against EWV, the target of these philosophers seems to be EWV conjoined with the Split the Difference Principle (or something like that). As we did with Kelly, we'll proceed here anyway because it will be useful to show that EWV all by itself doesn't fall prey to this objection. I'm assuming that other insights will come out as well.

for something to be rationally self-undermining.¹² David Christensen rightly makes a distinction between “principles which *automatically* self-undermine, and principles which do so only *potentially*—that is, they self-undermine only under particular evidential circumstances.”¹³ As examples of the former, consider *all universal generalizations are false*, *all propositions expressed by sentences in English are false*, and *nobody justifiably believes anything*. They self-undermine in all circumstances, under all conditions. Is EWV like that? Does EWV *automatically* self-undermine?

Pretty clearly not. And nobody seems to think it does.¹⁴ That’s just not what the rationally self-undermining objection is getting at. So, given Christensen’s distinction, if there is any rationally self-undermining problem for EWV, it must be that EWV is *potentially* rationally self-undermining. Consequently, we should read *rationally self-undermining* wherever it occurs in the argument as *potentially rationally self-undermining*.¹⁵

So now the question is: why think that EWV is potentially rationally self-undermining? In short, we should think this because EWV seems to be *actually* rationally self-undermining.¹⁶ Christensen summarizes¹⁷:

Several people have noted that, at least given the current state of epistemological opinion, there is a sense in which Conciliationism is self-undermining. For example, I, as a conciliationist, know full well that several excellent philosophers oppose my view; in fact, it seems to me that opinion

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¹²Plantinga seems to realize this when he claims that a proponent of (something like) conciliatory views “holds a position that *in a certain way* is self-referentially inconsistent in the circumstances” (my emphasis). See his “Pluralism,” 200. Here I take self-referential inconsistency to be a form of (or the same thing as) rationally self-undermining.

¹³David Christensen, “Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy,” *Philosophy Compass* 4.1 (2009), 7.

¹⁴A referee pressed that maybe it’s not so clear that EWV isn’t automatically self-undermining. So, here’s a quick argument to the conclusion that EWV isn’t automatically self-undermining. EWV is automatically self-undermining only if it self-undermines in *all* evidential contexts, under *all* evidential circumstances. But there are some evidential contexts where EWV plainly and obviously does *not* self-undermine. Take, for example, an EWV proponent’s fantasy world: a world where many of the arguments for EWV have always seemed utterly compelling (and they have always been clearly and confidently hailed to be so by everyone) and all of the objections and counterarguments to EWV have always seemed terrible (and they have always been clearly and confidently condemned as such by everyone). In that fantasy world, in those evidential circumstances, EWV clearly does not self-undermine. But then it’s not the case that EWV self-undermines under *all* evidential circumstances. Therefore, it’s not the case that EWV is automatically self-undermining.

¹⁵A quick quibble: being *potentially* self-undermining isn’t the same thing as being *actually* self-undermining. But we’ll see shortly that some philosophers think that what’s bad for EWV is that it is potentially self-undermining, whether or not it is actually self-undermining. In fact, for these philosophers, being actually self-undermining adds nothing new to the objection.

¹⁶Whether a view is actually rationally self-undermining is relativized to actual circumstances, circumstances that might not be shared by all individuals. (So, anticipating what’s coming up in the main text, *you* may have run into peers who disagree with you about EWV while *I* haven’t.) But this poses no problem since it’s sensible to think that EWV is potentially rationally self-undermining given that it is actually rationally self-undermining for *some* people.

¹⁷Note that for Christensen, EWV is a kind of Conciliationism.

on Conciliationism is presently divided roughly evenly. By my own lights, then, I should not be highly confident of Conciliationism. So in a sense, my Conciliationism is self-undermining.¹⁸

So, Christensen grants that, given the current epistemological climate, he is in a genuine case of peer disagreement over the proposition that Conciliationism is true. Therefore, since Conciliationism calls for (roughly) suspension of judgment on propositions over which there is this genuine disagreement, Conciliationism calls for suspension of judgment over the proposition asserting that it's true.¹⁹ Consequently, Conciliationism (and so EWV) is actually rationally self-undermining.

Here's another statement of why we should take EWV to be actually rationally self-undermining. Elga puts it like this²⁰:

Just as people disagree about politics and the weather, so too people disagree about the right response to disagreement. For example, people disagree about whether a conciliatory view on disagreement is right. So a view on disagreement should offer advice on how to respond to disagreement about disagreement. But conciliatory views on disagreement run into trouble in offering such advice. The trouble is this: In many situations involving disagreement about disagreement, conciliatory views call for their own rejection. But it is incoherent for a view on disagreement to call for its own rejection. So conciliatory views on disagreement are incoherent. That is the argument.²¹

Once again, the claim is that, given the current epistemological climate, epistemic peers genuinely disagree over the proposition that Conciliationism is true. But, as Elga puts it, Conciliationism calls for its own rejection under such conditions.²² So, Conciliationism is actually rationally self-undermining. So, EWV is actually rationally self-undermining.

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¹⁸Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence," 7.

¹⁹This doesn't exactly match what Christensen says. Here's why. Christensen says that he "should not be highly confident" that Conciliationism is true given the peer disagreement. But it's not clear that this is bad for Conciliationism. If all Conciliationism demands given the current epistemological climate is that one not be "highly confident" of its truth, then that's consistent with one remaining *confident* that Conciliationism is true given the climate. It's hard to see why that's bad for Conciliationism. Ultimately, my guess is that Christensen would be fine with my way of putting things.

²⁰Note that, like David Christensen, Elga classifies EWV as a "conciliatory view."

²¹Elga, "How to Disagree About How to Disagree," 178–179. Note that it's not obvious what it means for a view to "call for its own rejection," as Elga (repeatedly) puts it. It's reasonable to read that expression in such a way that for a view to call for its own rejection, that view must demand that one *disbelieve* that view. But Elga, in presenting the self-undermining problem, also uses the phrase "requires you to give up your view," which clearly does not entail that one disbelieve that view (since one could give up one's view by moving from belief to suspension of judgment, stopping short of disbelief). Indeed, Elga explicitly claims that a view that merely calls for suspension of judgment over itself is self-undermining. He says of such views that they "call for their own *partial* rejection." See his fn. 8. So, we'll follow Elga in using the expression "calls for its own rejection" to include both calling for suspension of judgment over itself and calling for disbelief over itself.

²²Again, we can take Conciliationism's calling for suspension of judgment over the proposition that Conciliationism is true to be a way that it calls for its own rejection. Calling for *disbelief* in that proposition is another (and perhaps more natural) way of calling for its own rejection.

Here are a few more statements of how EWV is actually rationally self-undermining. Plantinga writes²³:

Indeed, I think we can show that the [conciliationist] is hoist with his own petard, holds a position that in a certain way is self-referentially inconsistent in the circumstances. . . . [The conciliationist] realizes that many do not accept [Conciliationism]. . . . Given his acceptance of [Conciliationism], therefore, the right course for him is to abstain from believing [Conciliationism]. Under the conditions that do in fact obtain . . . he can't properly accept it.²⁴

It's the same story: given the current epistemological climate, i.e., under the epistemological conditions that do in fact obtain, epistemic peers genuinely disagree over the proposition that Conciliationism is true. But Conciliationism calls for its own rejection under such conditions. As a result, Conciliationism (and so EWV) is actually rationally self-undermining.

Finally, Brian Weatherson observes:

Many other epistemologists (Tom Kelly, Ralph Wedgewood) do not hold [Conciliationism]. So by their own lights, [conciliationists] should not believe their own view, because according to them they shouldn't believe a proposition on which there is disagreement among peers, and this epistemological theory is a proposition on which there is disagreement among peers.²⁵

There's nothing different here. It's just another affirmation of how things currently stand for Conciliationism (and so EWV): Conciliationism (and so EWV) is actually rationally self-undermining.

Things seem pretty straightforward here. All of this seems to give us clear and compelling reason for thinking that EWV is actually (and so potentially) rationally self-undermining. That is, we seem to have clear and compelling reason for thinking that premise (2) of the argument is true.

But, upon reflection, things are not so clear and not particularly compelling. EWV doesn't *all by itself* entail *anything* about justification.²⁶ So, EWV does *not* all by itself entail that EWV proponents aren't justified in believing EWV given *any* epistemological climate (actual or merely potential). Therefore, EWV is *not* rationally self-undermining *in any sense*

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²³Plantinga is arguing against a specific principle that would count as conciliatory (though he himself doesn't make that classification). I am reading him as I read Christensen and Elga: I am taking his argument to apply to Conciliationism in general, and so EWV in particular. Perhaps Plantinga would object to this way of reading him.

²⁴Plantinga, "Pluralism," 200.

²⁵Weatherson, "Disagreeing about Disagreement."

²⁶And so (*pace* the philosophers represented here) EWV isn't properly classified as a conciliatory view. Frankly, it's not a version of Conciliationism (insofar as conciliatory views all by themselves have implications for what's justified). See fn. 8 above for some relevant arguments. It's important to emphasize here that the claim I make is about what EWV *all by itself* entails, not what EWV *when asserted* entails or implies. So, even if it's true that *asserting* EWV implies that one knows, and so, for many epistemologists, is justified in believing EWV, it does not follow that EWV *all by itself* implies anything at all about justification. (Thanks to a referee for pressing for clarification on this point.)

(automatically or potentially). Premise (2) is false, and so the Rationally Self-Undermining Argument Against EWV fails.

But what about an EWV proponent who wants to say something *more*, namely, that in standard cases of peer disagreement, in getting your peer testimony that I have made a mistake in assigning the credence I have toward the target proposition, I thereby get an (undefeated) *undercutting defeater* for my credence? It would seem that *that* view is (at least) *potentially* rationally self-undermining. Indeed, though it's not needed for the objection, it seems that that view is *actually* rationally self-undermining for precisely the reasons articulated above by those philosophers. It would seem, then, that we can run the above argument against *that* position, even if it leaves EWV officially untouched.

The case is much stronger here. It does seem that such a view is (at least) potentially rationally self-undermining. Consider: Suppose I take credence .7 toward the (long) proposition that, in a standard case of peer disagreement, in getting your peer testimony that I have made a big mistake in assigning the credence I have toward the target proposition, I thereby get an (undefeated) *undercutting defeater* for my credence. Suppose further that you, my epistemic peer with respect to that proposition, come to take credence .3 toward that same proposition. We do the usual—we meet and compare notes. All of our relevant evidence is shared and our respective differing credences are revealed. By my own lights, then, through your peer testimony I have just acquired an (undefeated) undercutting defeater for my position. My justification (if I had any to begin with) has just been defeated. So, that view rationally self-undermines in this case. But since this is a possible case, we have the clear result that this view is potentially rationally self-undermining.

It seems, then, that we at least have the start of a powerful objection, *not* to EWV, but to the following expanded view²⁷:

EWV*. For any persons *S1* and *S2*, any proposition *p* and any time *t*, if *S1* and *S2* are in a peer encounter over *p* at *t*, then the following obtains:

- (1) the opinions of *S1* and *S2* about *p* at *t* are worth the same evidentially,
- (2) if *S1* and *S2* justifiably believe that they disagree over *p* at *t*, then *S1*'s peer testimony yields an undefeated undercutting defeater for *S2*'s opinion about *p* at *t*, unless *S1*'s peer testimony is self-defeating or defeated by other peer or superior testimony, and
- (3) if *S1* and *S2* justifiably believe that they disagree over *p* at *t*, then *S2*'s peer testimony yields an undefeated undercutting defeater for *S1*'s opinion about *p* at *t*, unless *S2*'s peer testimony is self-defeating or defeated by other peer or superior testimony.

²⁷Given the above commentary, it should be clear that it's theses (2) and (3) of EWV* that seem to prompt the charge that EWV* is rationally self-undermining.

Whether we can finish the objection depends on whether a properly revised premise (1)—a premise targeting *not* EWV, but the expanded EWV*—is true. In other words, since we are already granting the truth of premise (2) of the following argument, whether we can finish the objection to EWV* depends on whether premise (1) is true:

The Rationally Self-Undermining Argument Against EWV*

(1) If EWV* is rationally self-undermining, then EWV* is false.

(2) EWV* is rationally self-undermining.

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(3) Therefore, EWV* is false.

So let's consider now premise (1) of this new argument.²⁸ This premise relies upon the key assumption that having the property *being rationally self-undermining* is sufficient for having the property *being false*.²⁹ As Christensen puts it (without endorsing it): "Less technically, one might just worry that there is something intrinsically wrong with an epistemic principle that would sometimes tell you that it is incorrect."³⁰ Or, as Weatherston puts it: "I think no one should accept a view that will be unacceptable to them if they come to accept it."³¹ Or, as Timothy O'Connor puts it:

How could a true (and if true, importantly true) principle of rationality be such that we cannot rationally believe it? In such a case, we would be required to try to form beliefs *in accordance* with the principle—it is by hypothesis *true*, after all—but we could not rationally reflect on such practice and form a true belief about the nature of the underlying principle. . . . Away with such intellectual devilry!³²

Or, finally, as Bryan Frances puts it (without endorsing it): "*How on earth can he rationally arrange his doxastic life around a principle that tells him that he'd be blameworthy to believe it?*" This looks pretty suspicious, which makes one think that [that principle] may well be false."³³ But why should we

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²⁸Note that the following critical discussion of premise (1) of the argument against EWV* transfers easily to premise (1) of the original argument against EWV. This is because both premise (1) of the argument against EWV* and premise (1) of the argument against EWV rely upon the key assumption about to be identified in the main text.

²⁹Recall that we're reading *rationally self-undermining* as *potentially rationally self-undermining*.

³⁰Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence," 7. Here's a minor quibble: The objection doesn't seem to be that Conciliationism (and so EWV) tells you that it is *incorrect*. Rather, the objection is that Conciliationism (and so EWV) tells you that *you can't rationally accept it*. Of course, we might be able to *infer* from this fact that it is incorrect. But that inference depends on the truth of premise (1).

³¹Weatherston, "Disagreeing about Disagreement." Weatherston does not explicitly say here anything about such views being false. But presumably this is what he is getting at: we shouldn't accept such a view *because we have good reason to think it's false*. Perhaps Weatherston would reject this way of reading him, though.

³²O'Connor, "Religious Pluralism," 175. O'Connor overstates the case here. It's not that one *cannot* rationally believe conciliatory views. It's just that one cannot *under certain conditions* rationally believe conciliatory views. But perhaps that's what O'Connor meant.

³³Bryan Frances, "The Reflective Epistemic Renegade," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81 (2010), 419–463.

think any of this is true? That is, why should we think premise (1) of the argument against EWV* is true?

Elga makes the most thorough case for why one should accept premise (1).³⁴ But it seems to me that we don't need to consider his case at all.³⁵ Here's why. There are clear and compelling counterexamples to the claim that having the property *being rationally self-undermining* is sufficient for having the property *being false*. And if there are clear and compelling counterexamples to that claim, it follows that any defense of that claim must be flawed. Most importantly, it also follows that the key assumption behind premise (1) of the argument against EWV* is false.³⁶

Let's consider those counterexamples now. Consider the following epistemic principle:

EP1. For any person *S*, any proposition *p*, and any time *t*, if *S*'s belief that *p* at *t* is *entirely* the result of a hunch, wishful thinking, a blow to the head, a serendipitous brain lesion, or a blast from an Alpha Centaurian's ray gun, then *S*'s belief that *p* at *t* is not justified.

EP1 seems clearly true.³⁷ Indeed, it seems *necessarily* true.³⁸ But EP1 is clearly a principle that is potentially rationally self-undermining. Consider: Suppose I believe EP1 entirely on the basis of a hunch, wishful thinking, a blow to the head, a serendipitous brain lesion, or a blast from

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³⁴Elga, "How to Disagree About How to Disagree."

³⁵But I will anyway in fn. 47 below.

³⁶As noted in fn. 28 above, premise (1) of the original argument against EWV relies upon the same key assumption as premise (1) of the new argument against EWV*. Consequently, genuine counterexamples to that key assumption show that premise (1) of both arguments is false. So, we are in a good position to reject both the argument against EWV* and the argument against EWV. I will refrain from making this point again during my discussion of each proposed counterexample. But it is worth keeping in mind.

³⁷At least I hope it seems clearly true. It's a principle of doxastic justification (or well-foundedness) that seems to follow (given plausible assumptions) from the following principle (endorsed by Richard Feldman and Earl Conee): "*S*'s belief that *p* at time *t* is justified (well founded) iff (i) believing *p* is justified for *S* at *t*; (ii) *S* believes that *p* on the basis of evidence that supports *p*." This formulation comes from Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 46. But for more discussion of this principle, see Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Of course, one need not be an evidentialist to endorse EP1. Plenty of non-evidentialists, Alvin Plantinga and Alvin Goldman, for example, endorse it as well.

³⁸One might object to this modal claim as follows. Why couldn't God set up a world where *all* of our beliefs are caused by (beneficent) blasts from an Alpha Centaurian's ray gun? It's at least not *clear* that no one's beliefs would be justified in such a world. (Thanks to Tom Flint for raising this possible objection.) Here's my brief reply. Maybe it's not clear, but it still seems to me that in such a world, none of our beliefs would be justified. After all, if all of our beliefs were *entirely* the result of ray gun blasts, then none of our beliefs are even *partially* based upon good reasons (where "good reasons" is understood here broadly enough to include the justifiers for properly basic, non-inferentially justified beliefs, such as relevant perceptual experiences, memorial seemings, rational insight, etc.). But our beliefs are justified only if they are at least partially based upon good reasons. So, in such a world, none of our beliefs are justified. (Happily, the argument of this paper does not turn at all on whether EP1 is necessarily true.)

an Alpha Centaurian's ray gun.³⁹ It immediately follows from EP1 that my belief that EP1 is true is not justified. To use the language Elga uses above in describing conciliatory views as rationally self-undermining, in these circumstances EP1 calls for its own rejection.⁴⁰ Or, to use Plantinga's language, accepting EP1 under the conditions that obtain makes it so that EP1 says of itself that I can't properly accept it. Or as Weatherson puts it, EP1 becomes unacceptable to me upon accepting it (under these conditions). Consequently, EP1 is potentially rationally self-undermining. But EP1 is nevertheless true. So EP1 serves as a counterexample to the claim that having the property *being rationally self-undermining* is sufficient for having the property *being false*. The key assumption behind premise (1) of the argument against EWV* is false, and so we may safely reject the argument.

We could stop here, but let's bolster the point.⁴¹ Here's another counterexample:

EP2. For any person *S*, any proposition *p*, and any time *t*, if *S* does not have good enough reason to believe *p* at *t*, then *S*'s belief that *p* at *t* is not justified.

We have the same story here. EP2 seems clearly true.⁴² Indeed, it seems necessarily true. But EP2 is also an epistemic principle that potentially rationally self-undermines. For consider: Suppose I believe EP2 but fail to have good enough reason to believe it.⁴³ It immediately follows from EP2 itself that my belief that EP2 is true is not justified. That is, EP2 calls for its own rejection, i.e., demands that we don't accept or believe it, under these conditions. Consequently, EP2 is potentially rationally self-undermining. But EP2 is still true. So we have another counterexample to the principle that having the property *being rationally self-undermining* is sufficient for having the property *being false*. But that's the assumption

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³⁹Pick your favorite epistemic malady.

⁴⁰Recall what was noted above (in fn. 21 and fn. 22) that we are to understand that a view that "calls for its own rejection" can do that by either calling for suspension of judgment over itself or calling for disbelief in itself.

⁴¹Let's be clear here. Only one genuine counterexample is needed. So it's no objection to say that some but not all of my proposed counterexamples are genuine.

⁴²Read the principle in such a way that immediately justified beliefs (or properly basic beliefs, or non-inferentially justified beliefs) *do* have good enough reasons supporting them. For EP2, reasons don't have to be other beliefs (or even the sorts of things that have propositional content, if you are of that persuasion). Furthermore, read the principle in such a way that one who has genuinely supporting reasons for believing *p*, but also has acquired an undefeated defeater, does not have good enough reason to believe *p*.

⁴³Tell your favorite story here of how this could be. Here's one story. I read EP2 in the latest edition of my favorite tabloid (a tabloid that I know to be utterly unreliable in all of its pronouncements). I believe EP2 as a result. I then run into a fellow that I know to be a world-class epistemologist. I pass EP2 by him. He looks at it and then clearly and firmly pronounces it to be false. I know he is being quite sincere. I dismiss his expert testimony. I continue to believe EP2.

premise (1) of the argument against EWV* relies upon. So we may reject premise (1).

Here is one more example. It comes from the existing literature. Christensen presents (something like) the following principle⁴⁴:

Minimal Humility. If *S* has thought casually about *p* for 10 minutes, and has decided that it is correct, and then finds out that many people, most of them smarter and more familiar with the relevant evidence and arguments than *S*, have thought long and hard about *p*, and have independently but unanimously decided that *p* is false, then *S*'s belief that *p* at *t* is not justified.⁴⁵

Christensen then adds the following commentary: "Clearly, Minimal Humility will self-undermine in certain evidential situations. Given its evident plausibility, we should be cautious before taking potential self-undermining as showing a principle false."⁴⁶

Christensen is right that Minimal Humility will rationally self-undermine in certain conditions. To see this, simply make *p* in the principle the proposition *Minimal Humility is true*.⁴⁷ But it does seem that Minimal

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⁴⁴Bryan Frances, in his "The Reflective Epistemic Renegade," presents a very similar principle as a counterexample to this key assumption behind premise (1) of the argument. His principle involves what he calls "an extreme epistemic renegade," i.e., someone who knowingly believes in the face of nearly unanimous opposition from numerous epistemic superiors and peers. Oddly, on p. 457, Frances claims that this response tells us that "there probably is something wrong with the Self-Application Objection, although this little argument isn't conclusive and doesn't tell us where the flaw is." I'm not sure why Frances makes this claim. As far as I can tell, it *does* tell us where the flaw is. The flaw is with the assumption that having the property *being rationally self-undermining* is sufficient for having the property *being false*. Furthermore, it seems to me that a genuine counterexample is about as conclusive an objection to a thesis as we could hope to find. I'm not sure what else Frances wants from a reply.

⁴⁵Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence," 8. I revised Christensen's principle to read "S's belief that *p* at *t* is not justified" rather than "become less confident in *P*." Maybe that makes the humility less minimal. However, as I've already suggested above in fn. 19, a principle that merely demands that we become less confident of its truth doesn't seem so rationally self-undermining.

⁴⁶Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence," 8

⁴⁷Here's a story. Suppose I am confronted with Minimal Humility during an introductory philosophy class. The principle is presented and explained to me. No stance on Minimal Humility is endorsed in class. I spend about ten minutes thinking casually about Minimal Humility before class is dismissed. I leave class believing that Minimal Humility is true. When I get back to my room, I decide to do some further research on Minimal Humility. So, of course, I look it up online. During my browsing, I go to a site I know to be highly reputable and reliable in its reporting on academic affairs. On that site, I read about a very recent academic philosophy conference where fifty professional philosophers doing high level work in fields other than epistemology were taken to a large room and placed in fifty isolated cubicles. In their individual cubicles, each philosopher was individually provided with a dense handout presenting and thoroughly explaining Minimal Humility and the best current arguments both for and against Minimal Humility. Each of the fifty philosophers was asked to spend the next three hours thinking carefully about the material and told to determine whether Minimal Humility is true. During these three hours, none of the fifty philosophers was permitted to collaborate with any of the other philosophers. At the end of the three hours, each philosopher reported his or her verdict on Minimal Humility by secret ballot. According to the site, all fifty professional philosophers independently

Humility is still true. So we have another counterexample to the claim that having the property *being rationally self-undermining* is sufficient for having the property *being false*. Premise (1) of the argument depends upon that assumption. So premise (1) is false. The Rationally Self-Undermining Argument Against EWV* fails.

So EWV* is in no danger from this objection. Premise (1) in the argument is a claim we can reject. The fact that EWV* is rationally self-undermining provides no basis for thinking it is false.⁴⁸

The same result holds for EWV. I argued above that EWV is not rationally self-undermining. But even if it were, that yields no basis for thinking

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conclude that Minimal Humility is false. I am shocked. But I promptly ignore their professional opinion and stick to my undergraduate intellectual guns. I continue to believe Minimal Humility is true.

⁴⁸A referee raised the following objection. Let's grant that having the property *being rationally self-undermining* is not sufficient for having the property *being false*. It still seems that EWV* is in trouble. Here's why. It's clear that having the property *being incoherent* does entail *being false*. And it seems that EWV* offers incoherent advice in some situations. After all, in cases of peer conflict over EWV* itself, it seems that EWV* advises, "Accept me as the truth about peer disagreement, but in light of this current peer conflict over me, don't accept me as the truth!" That's obviously incoherent advice, and that gives us reason for thinking that EWV* is false. That's the objection. (And this objection can be found in Adam Elga's "How to Disagree," 179–182.) Now, before I offer my brief replies to that objection, it seems important to note that this is only an objection to EWV*, *not* EWV. EWV remains untouched since, as we saw above, it offers no advice at all in any case. It merely asserts evidential parity between peer opinions, making no claim about how that peer opinion functions evidentially (if at all—recall the Absolutely No Weight View presented in fn. 8) within a broader body of evidence. So, since EWV offers no advice, it doesn't offer incoherent advice. EWV is untouched. Now here are my brief replies on behalf of EWV*. First, it's just not true that EWV* offers incoherent advice in any situation. Contrary to the objection, and contrary to Elga in "How to Disagree," EWV* does *not* advise anyone in any case to accept it. Whether we should accept EWV* ultimately depends on what one's total evidence is with respect to EWV*. (Those who don't share these evidentialist sympathies are invited to apply here their own theory of epistemic justification.) So, if EWV* were to advise us to reject EWV* in some particular case of peer conflict, there is no incoherent advice issued since EWV* doesn't also advise us to accept it in that same case. Second, suppose we reject that first reply and continue to insist that EWV* *does* advise us to accept it in all cases. We might do so because we might, with Elga, insist that "views on disagreement must be dogmatic with respect to their own correctness" on the grounds that "in order to be consistent, a fundamental policy, rule, or method must be dogmatic with respect to its own correctness." (See Elga, "How to Disagree," 185.) Taking this view, it now does seem that EWV* would offer incoherent advice in some cases of peer conflict over EWV* itself. But is this good reason for thinking that EWV* is false, as the objection maintains? No, it isn't, unless we are prepared to give the same verdict to principles like EP1, EP2, and Minimal Humility. And I don't think we are so prepared. Take principle EP2. Surely it has as good a claim as EWV* for being "a fundamental policy, rule, or method." So, following Elga, we should think both that EP2 "must be dogmatic with respect to its own correctness" and, consequently, that EP2 commends itself in all cases. But as we've already seen, there are cases where EP2 clearly (and correctly) advises us to reject EP2. (See fn. 43 above.) So EP2 offers incoherent advice in some cases. But if a view's offering incoherent advice in some cases entails that that view is false, it follows that EP2 is false. But it obviously isn't false. EP2 is clearly true. Therefore, if we continue to insist that views like EP2 must be dogmatic with respect to their own correctness, advising us to accept them in all cases, and we acknowledge that views like EP2 can sometimes call for their own rejection, then we have good reason to reject the inference from *this view offers incoherent advice to this view is false*. But without this inference, the objection against EWV* fails. EWV* withstands this objection.

that EWV is false. Having the property *being rationally self-undermining* is not sufficient for having the property *being false*. Both EWV and EWV* withstand this self-undermining objection.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹In Tomas Bogardus, "A Vindication of the Equal-Weight View," *Episteme* 6 (2009), 324–335, Bogardus defends EWV from the self-undermining objection in a different way than I do here. Briefly, he thinks that EWV is the deliverance of *rational intuition*—one can just *see* that EWV is true. Consequently, we can run the following argument. Folks who claim that EWV is false are either (1) seeing the truth of EWV or (2) they aren't. If (2), then proponents of EWV have evidence these folks lack (and so this is not really a case of peer disagreement and, as a result, EWV does not call for its own rejection). If (1), then either (a) there's merely apparent disagreement (and so there's no peer disagreement, and so EWV doesn't call for its own rejection), or (b) these folks see EWV's truth but disbelieve it anyway (and so those folks must be suffering from some cognitive malady that renders them not my peers, and so EWV does not call for its own rejection). No matter which way we go, EWV does not call for its own rejection, and so EWV is not rationally self-undermining. (See 331–333.) There may be several objections to this clever defense, but here's a quick, and to my mind compelling, worry: my guess is that (we have justifying reason for believing that) these folks can comparably claim that they just *see* (via rational intuition) either the falsity of EWV directly or, instead, the truth of some proposition from which they can just *see* (via rational intuition) the entailed falsity of EWV. Given that this is so, this dispute over rational sight then becomes a parallel case to disputes over *literal* sight. And, as Bogardus himself strongly affirms (see 325–326), cases where there is dispute over literal sight are cases where suspension of judgment is clearly called for. (See Feldman's Quad cases presented in Richard Feldman, "Epistemological Puzzles About Disagreement," in *Epistemology Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 414–445 and Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," in *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise M. Antony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194–214.) Thus, *contra* Bogardus, EWV would still call for its own rejection and thereby be rationally self-undermining. As I said, there may be other worries to raise, but that one seems significant enough to me to prefer my reply.

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