



Synopsis: On many important issues of science, philosophy, politics, and religion, equally knowledgeable and intelligent people often disagree with one another. In this presentation I argue that on such matters, it is not epistemically justifiable to hold firmly to the correctness of one's opinion, defined as one's own subjective evaluation of the evidence. Rather, I argue that one's opinion should receive no greater weight in constituting beliefs than does the opinion of any other equally informed person. I conclude by considering some common objections to my argument.

Philosophy Forum, November 2015

# Defining Peer Disagreement

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Disagreement between people of similar epistemic standing - those who are (roughly) equally intelligent, well informed, honest, rational, etc.



# The Core Problem

On many issues of importance, there exists considerable peer disagreement.



# Examples of Peer Disagreement

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- “God exists”
- “Objective morality exists”
- “A priori knowledge is possible”
- “Fiscal stimulus is effective”
- “The mind is computable”
- “Aid is effective in combating poverty”
- “String Theory is correct”

Question: What should I believe if I want to maximise my chances of being right?

# Assessment vs Belief

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My assessment is the result or verdict of my evaluation of the arguments and evidence



My belief is the cognitive attitude I hold with respect to some proposition

Claim: We do not need to believe our own assessments, and in many cases we should not.

# Adding up the Bill Example

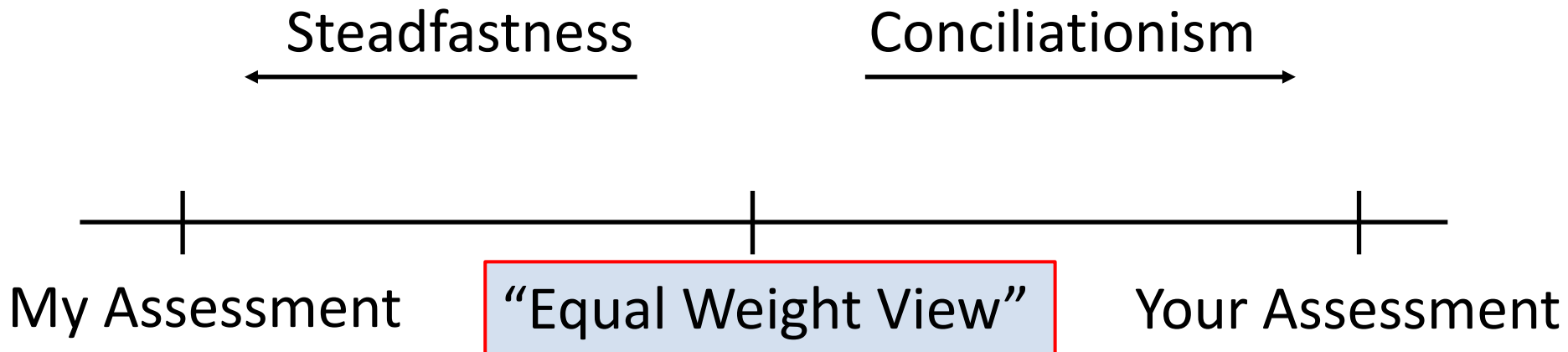
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- We are eating dinner together and the bill arrives, listing each item but no total
- We both add up the totals, checking and double-checking our calculations carefully
- We both recognise each other as being roughly equally good at arithmetic
- At the end, we find we have arrived at different amounts (our assessments)

Question: When I learn of our disagreement, how should I change my view?

# A Spectrum of Responses

When I learn of our disagreement, how should I change my view?



Equal Weight View: I have no greater reason to believe in my assessment than in yours

# Why Trust your Own Assessment?

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- I do some thinking and reading about a particular question
- On the basis of this I form a assessment about what I think the evidence and arguments show
- Question: what is the epistemic value of that assessment?
- Why should I believe that *my* assessment is the correct one?
- Of all the assessments I could pay attention to, why pick my own? Why are mine special?



# Why Trust your Own assessment?

Our own judgments:

- Are easier to access (via introspection)
- Seem to fit better with your overall worldview
- Are understood by you more intimately
- Subjectively feel very persuasive

But none of these make our assessments more likely to be accurate!



# An Illustration

“Based on their reading and thinking on the matter, some reasonably intelligent person has come to the opinion that X is probably true. Thus, I should believe that X is probably true.”

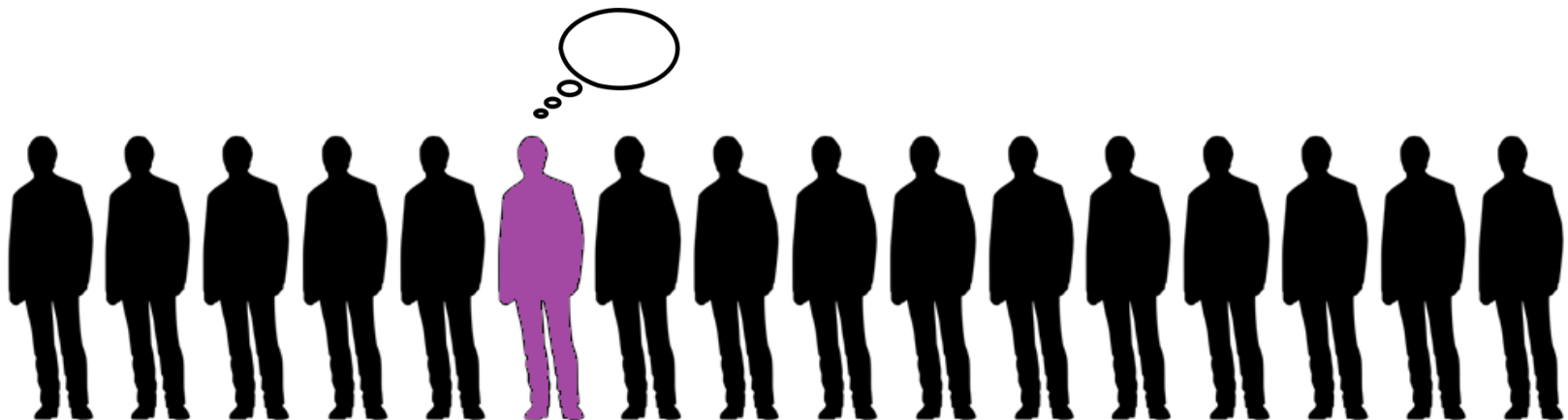
Claim: that is a bad reason to believe X, given how controversial it is among experts



# An Illustration

“Based on my reading and thinking on the matter, I have come to the opinion that X is probably true. Thus, I should believe that X is probably true.”

Claim: switching to first person does not make this any a better reason to believe X.



# Assessments are Pretty Unreliable

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If most experts disagree, then most experts are wrong.

If most experts are wrong, what's so special about our view?

# Opinions are Pretty Unreliable

## Decision-making, belief, and behavioral biases 305

Many of these ideas affect belief formation, judgment and memory decisions, and human behavior in general. They arise as a byproduct of a specific condition, when confronted with a specific situation. The deviation from what is normally expected can be characterized by

[illegible]

## Social blanca 100%

**Model of House Names was labeled as official record names**

[illegible]

## Memory errors and biases 105

**Abstract** *See page 124*

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were used: *anxiety* was defined as a state of apprehension, nervousness, or worry; *depression* was defined as a state of sadness, hopelessness, or loss of interest in life; *stress* was defined as a state of tension, pressure, or strain; *well-being* was defined as a state of happiness, health, or satisfaction; and *quality of life* was defined as a state of overall health, happiness, and satisfaction. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

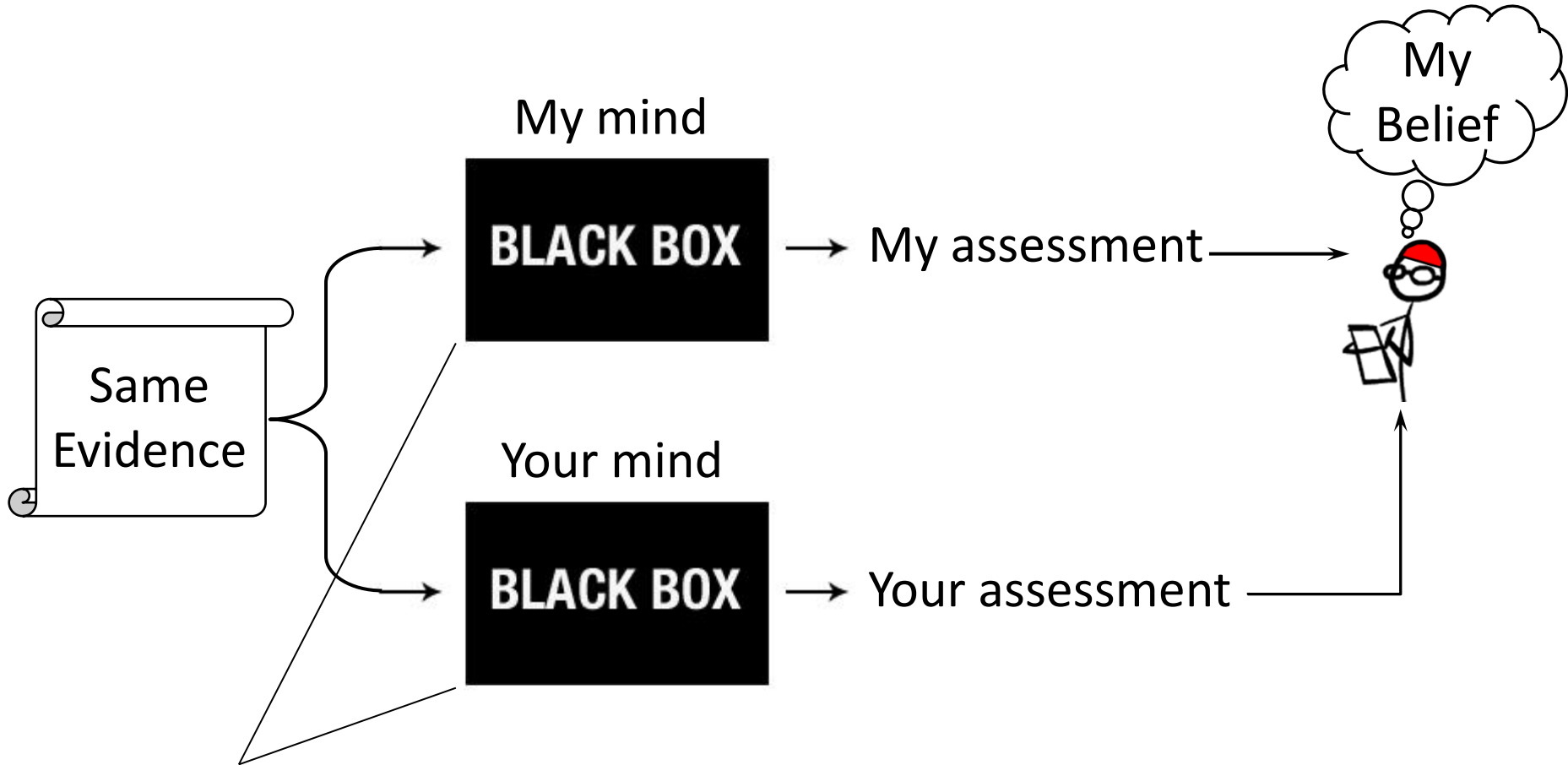
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# Why Assessments Are Useful



# Why Assessments Are Useful



Equivalent as far  
as we can tell (peers)  
- symmetry

# Why Assessments Are Useful

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- Our assessments are relevant because they are truth-tracking to some degree
- assessments of epistemic peers are truth-tracking to the same degree (on average)
- A combination of peer assessments will track truth more reliably than that of one expert alone
- Thus, we should weight our assessment equally with epistemic peers with forming beliefs

Key Claim: Conciliation will help us to believe more true things and fewer false things



# Statistical Illustration

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- Suppose we have 10 epistemic peers, each with a 70% chance of being right in some domain
- Suppose they all form their assessments independently of each other
- Method 1: form our own assessment and adopt that as our belief (steadfastness)
- Method 2: take a 'vote' and go with what the majority of experts say (equal weight view)
- Claim: method 2 is correct more often

# Statistical Illustration

## Binomial distribution with $p=0.7$

Probability of success on a single trial

Number of trials

Number of successes (x)

Cumulative Probability:  $P(X \geq 2)$

Probability of success on a single trial

Number of trials

Number of successes (x)

Cumulative Probability:  $P(X \geq 3)$

Probability of success on a single trial

Number of trials

Number of successes (x)

Cumulative Probability:  $P(X \geq 5)$

# The Pragmatic Objection

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**Elgin:** “It is not obvious that our cognitive objectives are best achieved by everyone’s marching in lock step to the same conclusion. When the reasons favouring each side of a dispute are sparse...or the evidence is equivocal...it may be better for the epistemic community as a whole that some of its members continue to accept each position.”

# The Pragmatic Objection

- This pragmatic consideration moves outside the framework of 'truth maximisation' I set out
- It is not clear to me that overconfidence in our positions when evidence is weak is necessary for successful and productive discourse
- We can argue a position even if deep down we aren't especially confident about it



The pragmatist knows that doubt is an art which has to be acquired with difficulty.

(Charles Sanders Peirce)

# The Egocentric Dilemma

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**Fumerton:** “In the final analysis there is really no alternative to the egocentric perspective. Even when my discoveries about what others believe defeat the justification I had, it is my discoveries that are doing the defeating. I can use the discovery of disagreement to weaken my justification only insofar as I trust my reasoning.”

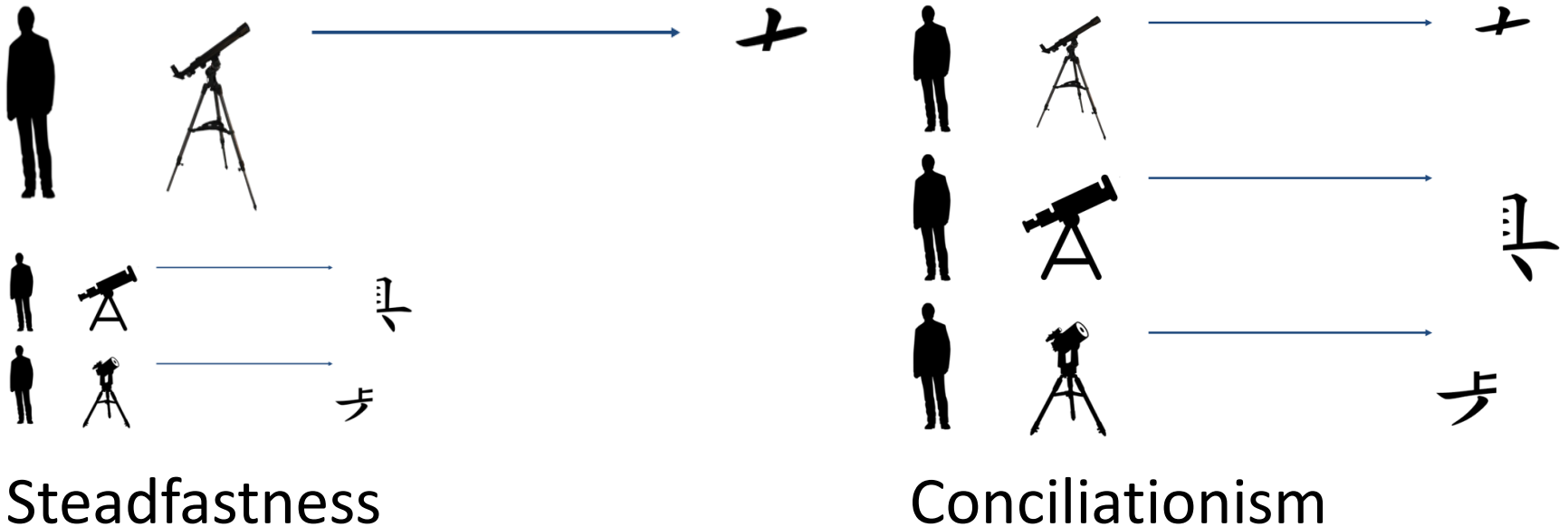
# The Egocentric Dilemma

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**I DON'T CARE WHAT  
YOU THINK OF ME.  
UNLESS YOU  
THINK I'M  
AWESOME.  
IN WHICH CASE,  
YOU ARE RIGHT.**

# Response to the Dilemma

Our beliefs are egocentric, but truth is not.



Key Claim: Conciliationism will give us a fuller grasp of a problem and increase our chances of having accurate beliefs. We are leveraging the cognitive capacities of others.

# Outstanding Problems

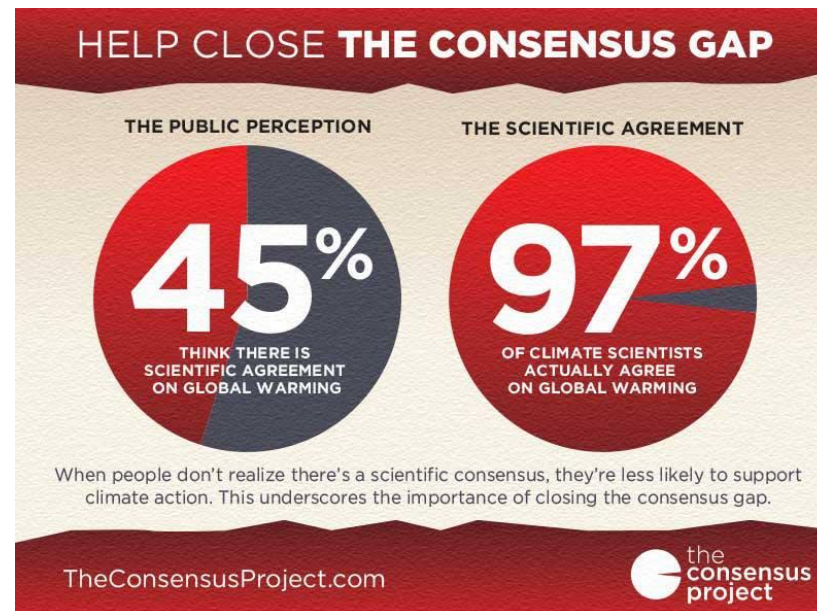
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- Defining and identifying epistemic peerhood
- Dispute-independence
- Rational Uniqueness versus Permissiveness
- Collating expert opinion
- Independence of opinions
- Past and future opinions
- Judging bias



# What is to be Done?

- Look for expert consensus
- Where experts disagree, remain agnostic
- Frequently engage in meta-reasoning
- Don't make yourself into the world expert
- Seek disconfirming evidence and viewpoints



# Shameless Self-Promotion

- Check out my blog at [thegodlesstheist.com](http://thegodlesstheist.com)
- Contact me at [fods12@gmail.com](mailto:fods12@gmail.com)



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# How to Disagree 1

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- Not everyone is your epistemic peer
- Ensure that your dispute is not merely semantic
- Try to understand their position well enough to argue it for them
- Try to break the argument down into very specific items of disagreement, identify those that are worth pursuing, and push those in depth
- Don't get sidetracked by minor points

# How to Disagree 2

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- Figure out what evidence could determine who is right
- Identify underlying assumptions (e.g. worldview differences) contributing to the disagreement
- Don't try to defend your position at all cost; try to work out exactly why you disagree
- Ideas don't need respect, but people do