

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

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

- "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



My <u>assessment</u> is the result or verdict of my evaluation of the arguments and evidence



My <u>belief</u> is the cognitive attitude I hold with respect to some proposition

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

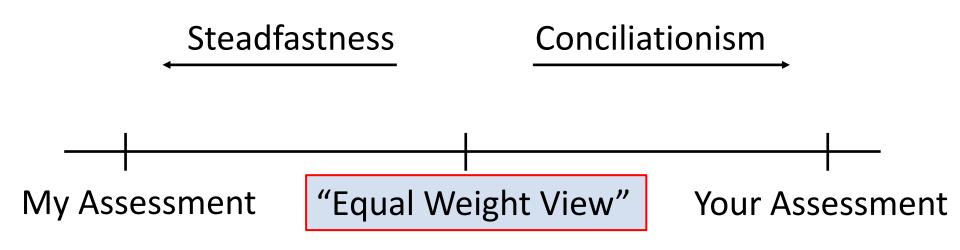
### Adding up the Bill Example

- 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?

- 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

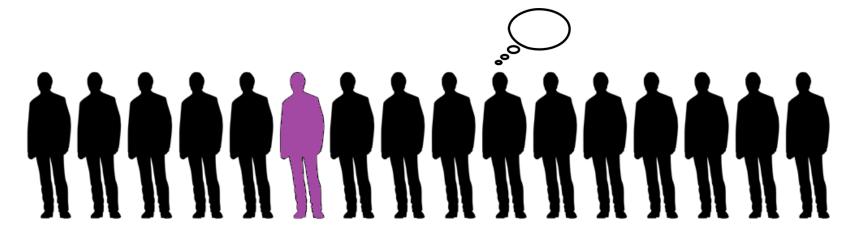
But none of these make our assessments more likely to be accurate!



#### An Illustration

"Based on <u>their</u> reading and thinking on the matter, <u>some reasonably intelligent person</u> has come to the opinion that X is probably true. Thus, I should believe that X is probably true."

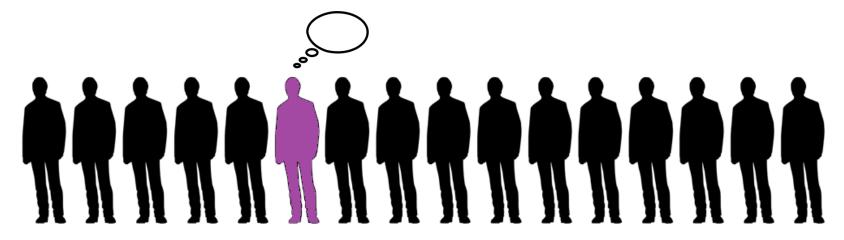
<u>Claim</u>: that is a bad reason to believe X, given how controversial it is among experts



#### 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."

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



### Assessments are Pretty Unreliable

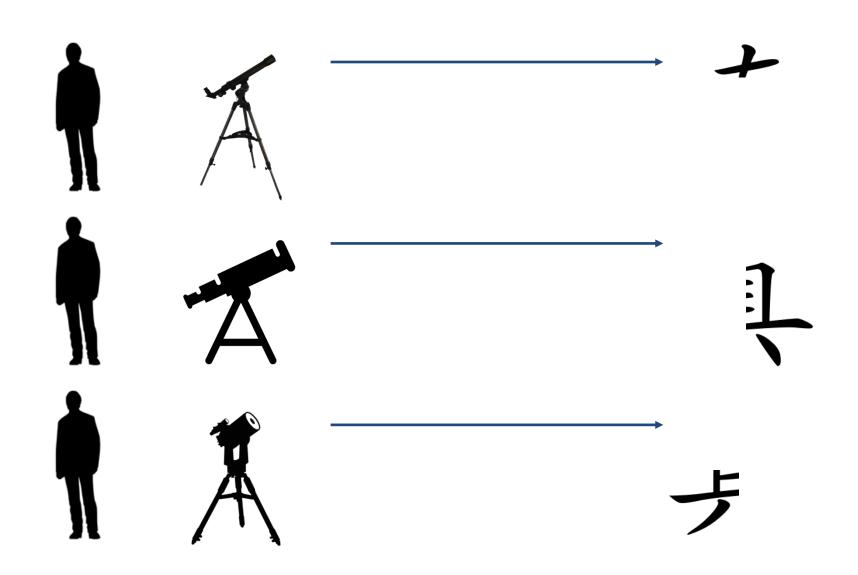
If most experts disagree, then most experts are wrong.

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

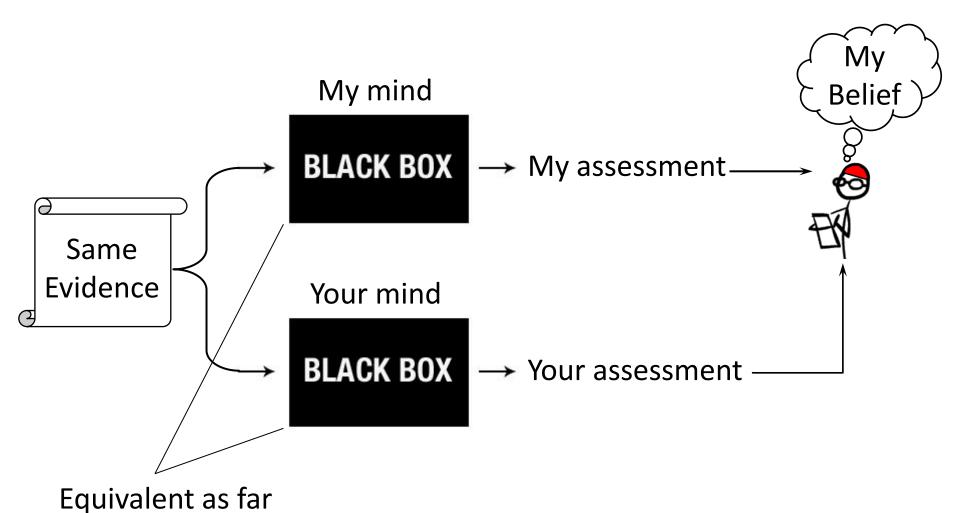
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# Why Assessments Are Useful



# Why Assessments Are Useful



as we can tell (peers)
- symmetry

### Why Assessments Are Useful

- Our assessments are relevant because they are truth-tracking to some degree
- assessments of epistemic peers are truthtracking to the <u>same degree</u> (on average)
- A <u>combination</u> 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

- 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	0.7
Number of trials	3
Number of successes (x)	2
Cumulative Probability: $P(X \ge 2)$	0.784
Probability of success on a single trial	0.7
Number of trials	5
Number of successes (x)	3
Cumulative Probability: $P(X \ge 3)$	0.83692
Probability of success on a single trial	0.7
Number of trials	9
Number of successes (x)	5
Cumulative Probability: $P(X \ge 5)$	0.90119134

### The Pragmatic Objection

**Elgin:** "It is not obvious that our cognitive objectives are best achieved by everyone's marching in lock step to the same conclusion. When he 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 <u>overconfidence</u> in our positions when evidence is weak is necessary for successful and productive discourse
- We can <u>argue a position</u> 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

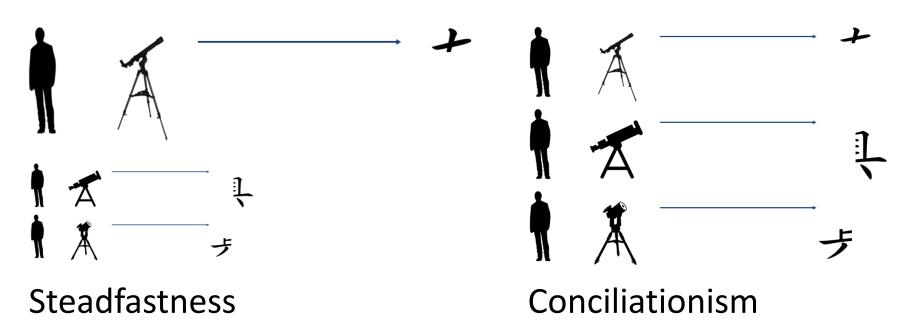
**Fumerton:** "In the final analysis there is really no alternative to the egocentric perspective. Even when my discoveries about what others believe defeat the justification I had, it is <u>my discoveries</u> that are doing the defeating. I can use the discovery of disagreement to weaken my justification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

### The Egocentric Dilemma

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 as a fuller grasp of a problem and increase our chances of having accurate beliefs. We are leveraging the cognitive capacities of others.

### **Outstanding Problems**

- 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 <u>thegodlesstheist.com</u>
- Contact me at <u>fods12@gmail.com</u>



#### The Godless Theist

A madman's reflections on religion, philosophy, history, politics, and wherever else the path to truth leads

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### How to Disagree 1

- 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

- 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