Why Conciliationists Have Not Solved Their Self-Undermining Problem

(and Probably Won't Any Time Soon)

Abstract: At the core of conciliatory views in epistemology is the following claim: in almost all cases, if an agent becomes aware of the fact that an apparent epistemic peer disagrees with her about *p*, then she ought to suspend judgment about (or significantly reduce her confidence in) *p*. Call this core claim Conciliationism. Conciliationism has a well-known self-undermining problem (SUP): Conciliationism seems to entail that anyone who accepts it should, upon discovering that many excellent philosophers do in fact reject it, suspend judgment about (or have a middling credence in) Conciliationism. So it seems that conciliationists are, by their own lights, not justified in believing, or being confident in, their own view. Conciliationists have tried to defend their view against this problem. I argue that all of these attempts fail for the same reason: these defenses depend for their success upon other philosophical claims that are themselves the subject of disagreement among conciliationists' epistemic peers. So conciliationists are, by their own lights, not justified in believing (or being confident in) the claims they employ in their defenses of Conciliationism against the SUP. So conciliationists are not justified in believing that their defenses succeed. Thus, they are still not justified in believing Conciliationism. Nor is anyone else. Moreover, there is good reason to think that this problem will afflict any future defenses of Conciliationism against the SUP, given the pervasiveness of disagreement in philosophy—especially about the standards of rational belief. I conclude that conciliationists have not solved their self-undermining problem and probably won't do so any time soon.

1. Conciliationism and its Self-Undermining Problem

Conciliatory views in epistemology comprise a family of views about how agents ought to revise their doxastic attitude(s) toward some proposition *p* upon discovering 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 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] There are a variety of ways one might formulate a conciliatory view, but all conciliatory views agree on the following thesis:

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[1] Defenders of conciliatory views include Bogardus (2009), Christensen (2007, 2013), Elga (2007, 2010), Feldman (2006, 2010), Kornblith (2010, 2013), Pittard (2015), Vavova (2015).

[2] There are various accounts of epistemic peerhood, but none of them will matter for my purposes. You may import your favorite account of epistemic peerhood throughout.

CONCILIATIONISM'S CORE (credence): In almost all cases, if A becomes aware of the fact that an apparent epistemic peer, B, disagrees with her about p, then A ought to adjust her credence in p significantly in the direction of B's.[3]

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 of conciliatory views in terms of full-(dis)belief, rather than credences, then conciliatory views agree that

CONCILIATIONISM'S CORE (full-belief): In almost all cases, if A becomes aware of the fact that an apparent epistemic peer, B, disagrees with her about p, then A ought to suspend judgment about p.

Call anyone who accepts either version of CONCILIATIONISM'S CORE a *conciliationist* and call their view about peer disagreement *Conciliationism*.[4]

Conciliationism is an interesting philosophical thesis. If it is true, then we ought to suspend judgment—or we ought not to be highly confident in our views—about a wide range of topics in philosophy.[5] No matter which of the plausible accounts of epistemic peerhood is correct, and 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 in ordinary circumstances
- theism vs. atheism
- compatibilism vs. incompatibilism
- consequentialism vs. non-consequentialism in ethics
- internalism vs. externalism about epistemic justification
- internalism vs. externalism about reasons for action

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[3] Conciliationism is usually supposed to have implications for disagreement with epistemic superiors as well, but, for simplicity, I will drop this complication, as is common in the literature.

[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. Thus, I will treat Conciliationism as a single view throughout the paper.

[5] For simplicity, I will speak mostly in terms of full-belief, full-disbelief, and suspension of belief. As I've noted, many conciliationists prefer to speak in terms of credences. I will not assume that there is any systematic 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 the attitudes of full (dis)belief and credences, such that what I say in terms of full (dis)belief can be translated fairly straightforwardly into the language of credences.

and many, many other debates in philosophy. If so, then Conciliationism says that, given the current distribution of opinion among your epistemic peers on these issues, you ought to suspend judgment about them.

Conciliationism is a popular view in the epistemology of disagreement, but, unfortunately for conciliationists, it has not won universal acceptance. Some philosophers 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), Wedgewood (2010)).[6] According to steadfasters, it is rarely the case that disagreement about *p* between epistemic peers, all by itself, puts rational pressure on either peer to revise their doxastic attitude(s) toward *p*. Thus, steadfasters reject both versions of CONCILIATIONISM'S CORE. So we could add "Conciliationism vs. The Steadfast View" to the bulleted list of controversial philosophical topics above.

The fact that there are excellent philosophers on both sides of the debate about Conciliationism poses an obvious *prima facie* problem for Conciliationism. If, as virtually all conciliationists admit, conciliationists have many epistemic peers who disagree with them about the truth of Conciliationism, then, by their own lights, conciliationists ought to suspend judgment about (and therefore stop believing) their own view. Pair this conclusion with the following plausible epistemic principle

> **JUSTIFICATION:** If an agent *A* ought to suspend judgment about (or ought not to be confident that) *p*, then *A* is not epistemically justified in believing (or being confident) that *p*.[7]

and we get the result that, given the current distribution of opinion about Conciliationism among excellent philosophers, conciliationists are, by their own lights, not epistemically justified in believing Conciliationism. Call this *the self-undermining problem* (SUP) for Conciliationism.

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[6] As with Conciliationism, "the" Steadfast View is actually a family of views.
[7] This strikes me as a conceptual truth or something very near a conceptual truth.

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

> 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 on Conciliationism is presently divided roughly evenly. By my own lights, then, I should not be highly confident in Conciliationism. So, in a sense, my Conciliationism is self-undermining. (2009: 762)

Christensen replies that the mere fact that Conciliationism *potentially* self-undermines is no cause for concern for conciliationists; for any view about the epistemic significance of peer disagreement will have to grapple with that problem (2009:762). This reply seems correct, as far as it goes. 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 replies:

> 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 should not be confident in—and therefore are not justified in believing—Conciliationism.

As Christensen indicates, conciliationists are aware of this problem, but they have so far had surprisingly little to say about it. There have been several attempts to defend Conciliationism against the charge that Conciliationism offers *incoherent* advice and is therefore *false* (see Christensen (2013), Elga (2010), Matheson (2015)). I am sympathetic to these defenses. I don't think that a carefully stated form of Conciliationism is incoherent. But these defenses have little to say about whether conciliationists can be *justified in believing*—or being confident in—Conciliationism in these times when so many excellent philosophers reject it. In my view, the best defense of Conciliationism against this latter problem—what I've called the SUP—is from John Pittard (2015). Pittard, like Elga (2010) before

him, opts for a self-exempting form of Conciliationism.[8] He argues that an agent ought to significantly reduce her confidence in a proposition in the face of peer disagreement *except* when the subject of the peer disagreement is Conciliationism itself. In debates about Conciliationism, Pittard argues, conciliationists ought to remain steadfast in their endorsement of Conciliationism. This response strikes many as desperate, or, at the very least, objectionably *ad hoc*, but Pittard argues that it is neither. If this self-exempting form of Conciliationism succeeds, then Pittard will have offered an adequate response to the SUP. He will have shown that conciliationists can be confident in their view—and justifiably so—in the face of peer disagreement about Conciliationism.

In what follows, I will argue that Pittard's defense fails for the following reason: in offering his defense of Conciliationism against the SUP, Pittard appeals to philosophical claims that many of his (and our) epistemic peers reject. So, by his own lights, we ought to suspend judgment about those claims. And if, by conciliationist lights, we ought to suspend judgment about those claims (and therefore ought not to believe them), then we ought at least to suspend judgment about whether Pittard's defense of Conciliationism against the SUP succeeds.

At the same time, we ought not to suspend judgment about whether Conciliationism has at least a *prima facie* self-undermining problem. Anyone can see that Conciliationism at least seems to self-undermine and no one disagrees about that. So our situation is this: We can all be quite confident that Conciliationism has a self-undermining problem. And, as I'll argue, we cannot, by conciliationists' lights, be justified in believing that any defense of Conciliationism against this problem succeeds. So, by conciliationists' lights, we cannot be confident that Conciliationism is true. Thus, Pittard's self-

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[8] There have been many criticisms of Elga's attempts to defend Conciliationism against the SUP (Christensen (2013), Decker (2014), Matheson (2013), Pittard (2015), Weinraub (2013)). Many of these critiques have come from fellow conciliationists. I will not consider Elga's famous defense in the limited space I have because it is fairly obvious how my criticism of Pittard's view will apply to Elga's defense. Elga depends on claims that are the subject of widespread disagreement, not only among steadfasters, but among conciliationists as well. Christensen (2013), a fellow conciliationist, does a nice job of isolating Elga's crucial claims and offering reasons for even conciliationists to reject them. Since Elga's epistemic peers reject several of the crucial claims Elga employs in his defense, we are not, by Elga's own lights, justified in believing those claims. We are therefore not justified in believing that his defense of Conciliationism against the SUP succeeds.

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exempting defense of Conciliationism makes no progress in answering Conciliationism's self-undermining problem. We still ought not to believe Conciliationism.

Things get worse for Conciliationism—or so I will argue. The problem I am identifying for Pittard's defense of Conciliationism against the SUP will likely apply to any *future* defenses of Conciliationism. Any future defense against the SUP will probably need to appeal to philosophical claims that are not obviously true. And given the pervasiveness of disagreement among excellent philosophers about virtually every philosophical claim—especially claims about the standards of rational belief—it is highly likely that conciliationists will have epistemic peers who disagree with them about whatever philosophical claims they employ in their future defenses of Conciliationism against the SUP. So it is unlikely that conciliationists will be able to offer a defense of Conciliationism against the SUP that appeals to all and only claims that we are, by conciliationst lights, justified in believing. Such claims would need to be nearly universally agreed upon among excellent philosophers—or, at the very least, among conciliationsts' epistemic peers. Thus, the conclusion seems to be this: that conciliationists have not solved their self-undermining problem and probably will not do so any time soon.

2. Clarifying the Problem and Why it Matters

It's worth pausing briefly to be very clear about what I take the self-undermining problem to be and why it is important. If my argument succeeds, then I will have shown that, given not only the current but any likely future distribution of opinion about Conciliationism among excellent philosophers, conciliationsts are not *justified in believing* or are not *justified in having a high degree of confidence* in their own view. I will not have shown that Conciliationism is *incoherent*, or that Conciliationism is *false*, or that we *ought to reject* (i.e., believe the negation of) Conciliationism. As we know, a proposition may be true even if we are not justified in believing it or having a high degree of confidence in it. And the fact that you are not justified in believing *p* does not entail that you ought to believe the negation

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of *p*—only that you ought to refrain from believing *p*. So I do not claim to refute Conciliationism. I claim only this: whether Conciliationism is true or not, virtually no one is justified in believing it.[9]

Some conciliationists have expressed to me a certain degree of optimism about the fact that the SUP does not show that Conciliationism is incoherent, or false, or worthy of outright rejection. The SUP, they say, is just a contingent problem for Conciliationism, not a "deep" problem. I suppose they are right that the SUP is not a deep problem in one sense of "deep"—again, the SUP doesn't refute Conciliationism. But the SUP seems important enough to have interesting philosophical implications. Many philosophers have found Conciliationism an interesting thesis because of the implications it (supposedly) has for other areas of philosophy besides epistemology (e.g., ethics, politics, metaphysics, philosophy of religion). Arguments from Conciliationism to skepticism or agnosticism about a certain subject matter are becoming increasingly prevalent (see, e.g., Feldman (2007), Kornblith (2013), McGrath (2007), Sinnott-Armstrong (2007), Vavova (2014)). But if we are not justified in believing Conciliationism in the first place, then we should not be moved by these arguments. Since each of them employs Conciliationism as a premise on the way to their skeptical conclusions, and we are not justified in believing Conciliationism, we are not justified in accepting one of the premises in these arguments. And we should not be moved by arguments that employ premises that we know we are not justified in accepting. Thus, such arguments cannot establish their skeptical conclusions. And that, I take it, is why the SUP is a very big problem for Conciliationism, even if it isn't a deep problem, in one recognizable sense of "deep". If what I have argued is correct, then *even if Conciliationism is true*, it cannot be put to any interesting philosophical use.

At this stage, the basics of my argument are on the table. If you're going to defend Conciliationism against the SUP, you had better not do so by appealing to claims that you, by your own lights, are not justified in believing. But, given the current distribution of opinion about the claims

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[9] The qualifier "virtually" is there to account for those people (if there are any) who accept Conciliationism but are neither aware that it is rejected by many of their epistemic peers, nor such that they epistemically ought to be aware of this fact.

that conciliationists employ in their defenses against the SUP, conciliationists are forced to do precisely that. So their current, and likely future, defenses against the SUP fail. Conciliationism still self-undermines.

In the next section, I will use Pittard's defense of Conciliationism against the SUP—the best defense in existence, in my view—as a case study to demonstrate how Pittard's and other existing defenses of Conciliationism against the SUP (e.g., Bogardus (2009), Elga (2010)), fall to the same objection. I will briefly sketch Pittard's defense and identify the crucial claims on which he depends. I will then show that these claims are the subject of disagreement among excellent philosophers. If I am correct, then by conciliationists' lights we ought to suspend judgment about those claims. So we ought (at least) to suspend judgment about whether Pittard's defense of Conciliationism against the SUP succeeds, and therefore about whether Conciliationism is true. In section four, I make some remarks about why we ought to be pessimistic that any future defense of Conciliationism against the SUP will fare any better than Pittard's.

3. Case Study: Pittard's Resolute Conciliationism

Recall that Pittard employs a self-exempting strategy. He argues that we ought to reduce significantly our confidence in some proposition in the face of peer disagreement *except* when the proposition under dispute is Conciliationism itself. Priority number one for Pittard, then, is to explain how self-exempting Conciliationism is not objectionably *ad hoc*, since at first glance it certainly seems to be.

Pittard begins by noting that the motivating thought behind Conciliationism is that one ought to demonstrate some sort of epistemic 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 at the level of her *credence*, or she may conciliate at the level of her *reasoning*.

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To illustrate these two kinds of conciliation, 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 reducing significantly her confidence in Conciliationism, thereby conciliating at the level of her credence. Alternatively, she may conciliate at the level of her *reasoning* by adopting a steadfaster's rationale—the rationale that her dissenting interlocutor endorses. Pittard argues that this latter form of conciliation (i.e., at the level of reasoning) exemplifies a kind of epistemic deference no less than conciliation at the level of credence. 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 steadfaster'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, would suggest that Connie remain steadfast in the face of peer disagreements. Thus, Pittard argues, Connie is rationally permitted to remain resolute in her belief in Conciliationism. This resolute Conciliationism, he argues, is neither objectionably *ad hoc* nor vulnerable to the SUP.

This is an ingenious reply to the SUP. If we are justified in believing the claims Pittard employs, then his defense will succeed and conciliationists may rejoice that they are rationally permitted to believe their own view. But I will now identify two claims that we must be justified in believing in order for Pittard's defense of Conciliationism to succeed and argue that both are the subject of disagreement among excellent philosophers. The result is that we are not, by conciliationist lights, justified in believing these claims. So, unfortunately for conciliationists, Pittard's defense against the SUP does not succeed.

By hypothesis, Connie is a conciliationist; she rejects steadfast reasoning. And yet Pittard believes that it is both psychologically possible and rationally permissible for Connie to believe Conciliationism *on the basis* of a steadfaster's rationale. Thus, Pittard presupposes that it is both psychologically possible and rationally permissible for an agent to form a belief on the basis of a claim

that she does not believe, or on the basis of reasoning that she rejects. So here is the first controversial claim:

> **PSYCHOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE:** It is psychologically possible for an agent to form 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, many excellent philosophers (would) reject PSYCHOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE because the following principle seems quite plausible.

> **MUST ACCEPT:** Necessarily, if A comes to believe 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 MUST ACCEPT is correct, then PSYCHOLOGICALLY 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 MUST ACCEPT is true and PSYCHOLOGICALLY 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 PSYCHOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE. If that is correct, then even Pittard's resolute brand of Conciliationism would have us suspend judgment about PSYCHOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE. Since Pittard's defense succeeds *only if* we are justified in believing PSYCHOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE, and, by Pittard's lights, we ought to suspend judgment about PSYCHOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE, we ought to suspend judgment about whether Pittard's defense succeeds. So we ought to suspend judgment about Conciliationism until we can be confident that the SUP can be solved by means of some other defense.

Even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that it is psychologically possible for an agent to come to believe 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. Pittard's defense depends on the claim that it is rationally permissible for conciliationists to keep

believing Conciliationism on the basis of a steadfaster's rationale—reasoning that, by virtue of being conciliationists, they reject. Thus Pittard's defense also depends on

> **RATIONALLY PERMISSIBLE:** It is rationally permissible for an agent to form 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 RATIONALLY PERMISSIBLE is false.[10] But, even if it isn't, it is certainly a highly controversial claim, and we can be confident that many excellent philosophers (would) reject it. If that is correct, then, once again, there will be peer disagreement about one of the claims that Pittard depends on in his defense. So, by Pittard's own lights, we ought to suspend judgment about—and therefore ought not to believe—that crucial claim. Thus, by his own lights, Pittard's defense of Conciliationism against the SUP does not succeed. Conciliationists will therefore need some *other* defense against the SUP to come to the rescue in order for them to be justified in believing their view.

4. Pessimism about the Future

How likely is it that future defenses of Conciliationism against the SUP will be able to overcome the problem I've identified for Pittard's defense? This is a bit speculative, I realize—we are now considering defenses of Conciliationism that don't 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 establish that conciliationists are justified in being confident in Conciliationism in the face of disagreement from excellent philosophers. And it would have to do so 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. And remember that 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. But it hasn't. So any

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[10] Imagine how you would react to someone who reports that they believe that p on the basis of q but that they also reject q.

future defense of Conciliationism against the SUP will likely require some fancy philosophical footwork. It will likely have to 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. After all, we know that (near) consensus among excellent philosophers about *any* interesting philosophical claim is exceedingly difficult to come by. Achieving consensus among excellent philosophers about matters concerning the fundamental standards of rational belief seems hopeless.

In my view, the best hope conciliationists have to escape the force of the SUP is not that they will be saved by some philosophical defense of Conciliationism, but rather that they will be saved 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. In those circumstances, Conciliationism would not undermine itself and conciliationists could justifiably believe their own view. While this is the best hope conciliationists have for escaping the force of the SUP—in my view, at least—such a mass conversion is not likely to happen any time soon. Thus, if the line of reasoning presented in this paper is correct, then conciliationists have not solved their self-undermining problem and probably will not do so any time soon.

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