

Epistemic Modesty Defended

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1. Introduction

- A Conciliatory View (CV) on disagreement says that one should (often) significantly reduce confidence in beliefs when faced by peer disagreement.
- CV is controversial; its opponents hold Steadfast views.
- Given the current controversy, CV requires its advocates to lose confidence in CV.
- This self-undermining gives rise to a problem that threatens CV, and other expressions of epistemic modesty.

2. Self-Undermining and Instability

- Example: Connie initially confident in CV, Steadman confident in SV; Connie conciliates to .5 on CV.
- On her new view, Connie thinks she's conciliated too far.
- Natural idea: since Connie now divides her credence equally between CV and SV, her credences should reflect a mixture of CV's and SV's recommendations.
- (*) $cr(p) = cr(A) \cdot Ap + (B) \cdot Bp$
- Instability worry: Connie will be stuck with endless revisions.
- Weiner: Connie's credence in CV stabilizes at $2/3$.
- But: on closer inspection, Connie's application of (*) seems incoherent anyway.
- Provisional lesson: The instability worry flows from combining CV with a particular way of relating beliefs in general, to beliefs about what beliefs are rational.

3. Self-Undermining and the Inconsistency Argument

- Idea: Rules that recommend their own rejection are inconsistent.
- Adam Elga's argument applied to CV:
 - o CV directly recommends I lower my credence in Internalism to .52.
 - o CV also recommends that I lower my credence in CV.
 - o Once I've done that, I shouldn't follow CV completely; I should be more Steadfast and have a higher confidence in Internalism.
 - o So CV indirectly recommends higher than .52 credence in Internalism.
 - o So CV is inconsistent.

3. The Inconsistency Argument and Level-Connections

- CV itself does not entail that one should be more Steadfast if one loses confidence in CV.
- CV itself does not issue in inconsistent prescriptions
- The Inconsistency Argument depends on a Level-Connecting idea:
 - o What's rational for me to believe in general is related to what's rational for me to believe about what's rational for me to believe.
- Level-connections are plausible, and part of the motivation for CV anyway.
- So defenders of CV should not deny level-connection.

4. The Scope and Power of the Inconsistency Argument

- The Inconsistency Argument applies way beyond CV.
- It applies to Moderately Steadfast theories of disagreement.

- It applies to many highly plausible expressions of epistemic modesty.
- We should be wary of taking the sort of self-undermining that characterizes CV as grounding a decisive objection.

5. A Concessive response to the Inconsistency Argument

- Elga proposes Partially Conciliatory View (PCV).
- On PCV, one conciliates on most things, but not about PCV itself.
- Worry: seems ad hoc; Reply: no, any basic epistemic rule must be dogmatic with respect to its own correctness.
- Second worry: requires irrational views of my own reasoning:
 - o Can't rationally believe I'm particularly reliable in thinking about PCV.
 - o Can't rationally believe I'm extremely lucky in thinking about PCV.
 - o No reasonable attitude about myself coheres with extreme confidence in PCV.
- Should look for other responses to Inconsistency Argument.

6. A Defense of Epistemic Modesty

- Should we give up on epistemic modesty?
 - o No (doctor example).
- Alternative: Recognize different types of epistemic ideals:
 - o Ideals of respecting evidence of our epistemic error
 - o Ideals of level-connection
- Putting these together yields ideals of epistemic modesty.
- Ideals of epistemic modesty can apply to themselves.
- This will cause conflict with level-connection ideals.
- Proposal: Recognize that agents are sometimes forced to violate some legitimate ideal.
- Call this the Conflicting Ideals View (CIV).
 - o CIV is motivated independently of Inconsistency Argument.
 - o CIV avoids absurdity of rejecting epistemic modesty altogether.
 - o CIV avoids requiring agents to be certain of correctness of basic epistemic rule.
 - This even applies to inviolable Über-rule, if there is one
 - o CIV allows defenders of CV to acknowledge both (a) that level-connection ideals must sometimes be violated, and (b) that CV is motivated by level-connection .
 - o Also works for Moderately Steadfast views, other expressions of modesty.
- Worry: CIV obstructs us in giving theoretically tractable account of rational belief
 - o E.g., CIV will require probabilistic coherence to be violated in some cases.
 - o Reply: this doesn't preclude theorizing that takes coherence as an ideal.
 - o In fact, CIV is particularly hospitable to using formal ideals, despite cases where it seems that they should be violated.
- Worry: CIV is too permissive
 - o Reply: idea is not "anything goes".
 - o Also, we can see how conflict among ideals arises naturally from self-criticism.
- Observation: CIV abandons the idea that simple formal constraints will be satisfied by maximally rational responses to every evidential situation.
 - o Claim: given importance of rationally accommodating self-doubt, it's worth it.