

# Belief Revision, Uniqueness and the Equal Weight View

## Abstract

Thomas Kelly has argued that the Equal Weight View of peer disagreement is committed both to belief revision and to the Uniqueness Thesis, which claims that for any hypothesis  $H$  and a total body of evidence  $e$ , there is some one-doxastic attitude that is uniquely rational to adopt towards  $H$ . I rebut both theses and I also defend the view that in Kelly's case the Uniqueness Thesis doesn't require belief revision.

In recent times, epistemology has paid great heed to the problem of epistemic peer disagreement. The problem, in a nutshell, is the following. Suppose that you disagree with someone who is your epistemic peer, that is, someone who has the same evidence you have and has the same general epistemic virtues (thoughtfulness, carefulness, intelligence and so on) you have. A popular view (see for instance Christensen, D. (2007) "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News", *The Philosophical Review* 116/2: 187–217) maintains it that peer disagreement counts as defeating evidence that leads the subjects to adjust the degrees of confidence they initially have towards the truth of a given hypothesis in order to come close to what the other says. The *Equal Weight View* (henceforth EWW) regulates the epistemic weight of peer disagreement thus:

In cases of peer disagreement, one should give equal weight to the opinion of a peer and to one's own opinion.

(Kelly 2010: "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence", in *Disagreement*, (eds.) R. Feldman and T. Warfield, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 111–74. P. 187.)

Various authors (see Christensen 2007, Feldman, R. (2006) "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement", in *Epistemology Futures*, (ed.) S. Hetherington, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 216–36) have noticed a close relationship between the Equal Weight View and the *Uniqueness Thesis* (henceforth UT):

(UT) For any hypothesis  $H$  and a total body of evidence  $e$ , there is some one doxastic attitude that is uniquely rational to adopt towards  $H$ .

Thomas Kelly has argued that (EWW) is necessarily committed to (UT). Let me quote his argument (pp.118-9):

### (KELLY'S CASE)

At time  $t_0$ , my total evidence with respect to some hypothesis  $H$  consists of  $E$ . My credence for  $H$  stands at 0.7. Given evidence  $E$ , this credence is perfectly reasonable. Moreover, if I was slightly less confident that  $H$  is true, I would also be perfectly reasonable.

At time  $t_0$ , your total evidence with respect to  $H$  is also  $E$ . Your credence for  $H$  is slightly lower than 0.7. Given evidence  $E$ , this credence is perfectly reasonable. Moreover, you recognize that, if your credence was slightly higher (say, 0.7), you would still be perfectly reasonable.

At time  $t_1$ , we meet and compare notes. How, if at all, should we revise our opinions?

Kelly's answer to the question is in three steps (pp. 119 and ff.). First step: he claims that from (EWW) it should follow that I am rationally required to decrease my credence while you are rationally required to increase your credence. And yet (second step) that seems awkward, for we both acknowledge the rationality of our respective doxastic attitudes. So (third step), a proponent of

(EWV), in order to motivate our doxastic change, has to encapsulate (UT), which says that a body of evidence rationalizes only one doxastic attitude.

In my view, the first step of this argument is unwarranted. (EWV), stated as it is, doesn't offer any prediction about the rationality of our doxastic attitudes. To see this, consider the case of two subjects whose doxastic attitudes are irrational. (EWV) just says but they should give the same weight to both opinions no matter whether they are rational or not. That is, (EWV) should be interpreted as regulating the evidential force of peers' opinions. Since peers' opinions count as evidence, (EWV) says that they are worthy of being equally considered as evidence. Hence (EWV), taken in Kelly's own definition, doesn't need belief revision.

At any rate, one may argue that the idea that disagreement counts as evidence fosters the thesis that the peers had better change a little bit their doxastic attitudes, for if evidence acts as a defeater then it lowers the confidence one has towards H. Hence, (EWV) can be seen as a principle that is compatible with belief revision. I believe, though, that this compatibility isn't relevant for the case at stake. Belief revision is called for if rationality is threatened; that is, if my confidence towards H isn't rational, then it is rational to lower or increase my confidence. But Kelly stipulates that the peers acknowledge that both attitudes are rational. So, there is no pressure to revise our doxastic attitudes, for they are both rational. I thus conclude that since (EWV) isn't committed to belief revision, this view is not even compelled to adopt (UT).

There is a last wrinkle to notice in Kelly's argument. In the diagnosis of the case, Kelly maintains that belief revision is required in order to satisfy (UT). And yet, there is a plausible reading of (UT) that is compatible with Kelly's case and with the idea that the subjects should not revise their doxastic attitudes in order to satisfy it. In the formulation I gave above, (UT) says that the uniquely rational response to a body of evidence is a single credence that can be represented with a single probability function. However, as Christensen and Mark Kaplan (2007: fn. 9; Kaplan: 1996 *Decision Theory as Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 23 ff.) have pointed out, there is a more liberal reading of (UT) which instead of taking a single probability function takes sets of these functions as representing the rational attitude to have. Thus, instead of saying that a probability function must have a single value between 0 and 1, one can pick out a subinterval of the interval [0-1] and say that a doxastic attitude is rational if it is represented by a function that takes values from that particular subinterval. Once this reading is adopted, it is possible to claim that little differences in credences don't involve a violation of (UT), for if the values are so close as to be in the same subinterval that counts as rational (as it is plausible to think in Kelly's case), then (UT) isn't violated.