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Conciliation without Command

A Critique of the Second-Personal Approach to Peer Disagreement

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Abstract

In the epistemology of peer disagreement, Conciliationism holds that discovering a disagreement with an epistemic peer rationally requires substantial revision in one's credence. A novel explanation for this rational requirement, Accountability Thesis (Peter 2013), argues that it is grounded in irreducibly second-personal reasons arising from a relationship of mutual accountability between deliberating agents. This essay challenges this second-personal approach, arguing in favour of an explanation that invokes no irreducibly second-personal reasons. The alternative explanation, which appeals only to third-personal evidence and first-personal norms of rationality, is argued to be explanatorily superior. It is more parsimonious and possesses greater explanatory scope, accounting for cases Accountability Thesis cannot, such as disagreement with absent epistemic peers. Furthermore, it provides a more complete account by integrating the dual evidential role of peer disagreement as both first-order testimonial evidence and higher-order evidence of one's own fallibility. The essay does not argue that there could be no procedural epistemic obligations in deliberation with epistemic peers; such a claim would rule out other plausible understandings of epistemic peerhood. Nonetheless, it concludes that insofar as argument for Accountability Thesis operates within a standard Conciliationist framework, its second-personal explanation for Conciliationism does not succeed.

Keywords: Conciliationism; Peer Disagreement; Accountability Thesis; Second-Person Standpoint; Independence Principle; Calibration Principle; Epistemic Practices

1. Introduction

The fact of pervasive disagreement is a feature of our intellectual lives. On matters of importance—in politics, religion, ethics, and philosophy itself—sincere, intelligent, and well-informed individuals arrive at opposing conclusions. This phenomenon presents a challenge to epistemology: how, if at all, should an awareness of such disagreement affect the confidence we place in our own beliefs? A prominent family of views, Conciliationism, holds that when epistemic peers-someone judged to be antecedently as likely as oneself to get things right-disagree, each ought to give some weight to the other's opinion- at least in the absence of dispute-independent discriminatory evidence.

While the debate over whether and to what extent one should conciliate continues, another fundamental question concerns the very nature of the normative force at play. When conciliation is rationally required, what is the source and character of the reason that compels it? In her paper "The Procedural Epistemic Value of Deliberation," Fabienne Peter offers a novel answer: The Accountability Thesis. This position argues that the rational obligation to conciliate in cases of peer disagreement cannot be fully explained by epistemic considerations such as accuracy. Instead, this position contends, it is grounded in an irreducibly second-personal relationship of mutual accountability between deliberating peers. On this view, the epistemic value of deliberation is not merely instrumental but procedural, and the reasons it generates are not reducible to agent-neutral facts but arise from the normative standing of the peers themselves, who can make valid claims on one another's beliefs.

This paper challenges the Accountability Thesis by advancing a competing explanation. It contends that while Conciliationism is often the correct normative response to peer disagreement, its rational underpinnings are misidentified by this approach. The normative pressure to conciliate, this paper will argue, can be fully explained by an explanation that appeals only to third-personal evidence and first-personal norms of rationality. By demonstrating that this no-second-person explanation possesses parsimony, greater explanatory scope, and unification, this paper will establish its superiority as an explanatory framework. The peer's disagreement functions not as a normative command, but as a crucial piece of evidence about one's own potential fallibility, a piece of evidence that a rational agent must process from a first-person perspective.[1]

[1] A recent criticism by Broncano-Berrocal and Carter (2020, 33) has challenged whether the procedural epistemic value of deliberation argued by Peter is genuinely epistemic or is it moral in nature- they have noted, in particular, that Peter's proposal faces a swamping problem: if the ultimate epistemic aim is truth or accuracy, it is unclear why any procedural value such as mutual accountability, should not be ultimately swamped by the value of those ends. The argument of this essay provides a defense of this objection by showing that the rational requirement to

The essay proceeds as follows. **Section 2** discusses the notions of first-, second-, and third-person standpoints as a prelude to further discussion. **Section 3** reconstructs Accountability Thesis and makes some clarifications. **Section 4** argues for explanatory superiority of first/third personal approach over second-personal approach. **Section 4.1** examines the role of the Independence Principle in governing rational responses to peer disagreement. It argues that this principle, which prohibits self-serving dismissal of peer disagreement, expresses a first-personal epistemic norm, not an interpersonal obligation. **Section 4.2** then turns to Christensen's Simple Thermometer Model, which shows that belief revision in peer disagreement is structurally identical to revision in cases involving non-interpersonal higher-order evidence, such as drug impairment. **Section 4.3** argues that Conciliationism can be motivated in disagreements with absent epistemic peers, establishing superiority of first/third-personal explanation for Conciliationism on the grounds of its wider scope. **Section 4.4** notes the dual evidential role of peer disagreement, showing that it can operate both as first-order and higher-order evidence, depending on the route it takes to prompt conciliation. When peer disagreement serves as first-order evidence, it supports conciliation in a more direct and third-personal way. Taken together, these considerations count against Accountability Thesis and in favour of no-second-personal (or first/third-personal) explanation. However, **Section 5** explores Will Fleisher's (2025) Epistemic Practices account to locate a second-personal consideration for deliberation amongst epistemic peers. **Section 6** concludes the essay.

2. Sources of Normativity

To properly frame the discussion, it is important to first clarify the three distinct normative standpoints that structure the debate. The philosophical significance of this dispute extends beyond the epistemology of disagreement, touching upon the fundamental sources of normativity itself: whether reasons are located primarily in the world, within the self, or between persons.

The third-personal standpoint locates the source of reasons in agent-neutral facts, states of affairs, or values in the world. A third-personal reason is one that exists independently of any particular agent's will, claims, or attitudes. In epistemology, this has traditionally been the default perspective. Reasons for belief are furnished by evidence: the fossil record provides a reason to believe in evolution; the testimony of a reliable witness provides a reason to believe the defendant is guilty. As Stephen Darwall (2006) explains, offering reason from third-

conciliate can be fully explained by first/third-personal reasons, thereby demonstrating that Peter's proposed procedural value is epistemically superfluous.

personal standpoint typically takes the form of offering counsel, where the authority of the reason lies not in the speaker's will but in some objective fact external to the relationship. For example, if a doctor counsels a patient to quit smoking, the reason-giving force comes from the objective medical facts about smoking and health, not from the doctor's personal authority to command the patient. Darwall argues that because the ultimate aim of belief is truth, and truth is an objective, third-personal matter, epistemic reasons are fundamentally third-personal.

The first-personal standpoint is the perspective of an individual agent engaged in rational deliberation, deciding what to believe or do. The source of normativity here is internal to the agent's own rational self-governance. Reasons from this standpoint are concerned with matters like logical coherence, instrumental rationality, and avoiding self-defeating patterns of thought. For instance, an agent has a first-personal reason to avoid holding contradictory beliefs, not necessarily because the world forbids it, but because doing so is a failure of their own rationality. It is from this perspective that an agent weighs evidence, assesses the reliability of their cognitive faculties, and strives to maintain a coherent and well-supported doxastic system. As this paper will argue, it is the first-personal standpoint-the perspective of the individual agent managing their own epistemic responsibilities in light of their total evidence-that is the true locus of the normative pressure to conciliate.

The second-person standpoint, as articulated by Darwall in the moral sphere, represents a radical alternative, locating normativity not in the world or the self, but in the relational space between agents. A second-personal reason is one whose validity is conceptually tied to the authority of one agent (the addresser) to make a claim or demand on another (the addressee). Darwall presents reason, claim, authority, and accountability as an interdefinable and irreducible circle of concepts. To have a second-personal reason to do something is for someone to have the standing to demand that you do it and to hold you accountable for compliance. The classic example is someone stepping on your foot. You can point out the third-personal reason for them to move (e.g., "Pain is a bad state of affairs"), but you can also make a second-personal demand: "Get off my foot!" In making this demand, you are not merely offering counsel; you are exercising a right and presupposing an authority to command, holding the other person directly accountable to you.

Second-personal-explanations' crucial move is to transpose this entire normative architecture into the epistemic domain. In a disagreement between peers, the position argues, the claim of the other peer—"You should believe not-p"—functions not as mere counsel about the third-personal evidence, but as a form of epistemic command. It generates a reason for belief revision that stems directly from the relationship of mutual accountability that holds between them as epistemic equals. This paper's central thesis is that this transposition is an

unnecessary and explanatorily inferior posit. The phenomenon of conciliation can, and should, be explained without it.[2]

Now, we turn to the reconstruction of Accountability Thesis.

3. Reconstructing the Accountability Thesis

Before undertaking a critical inquiry, we attempt a reconstruction of Accountability Thesis, appreciating its intuitive force and structure. The view's primary allure is that it seems to do justice to the lived, interpersonal reality of deliberation. Disagreement is not typically a sterile, parallel processing of data by isolated agents; it is a dynamic, social engagement. This thesis captures the powerful intuition that in such an engagement, we owe our interlocutors a particular kind of epistemic respect, and that failing to take their dissent seriously is not merely an evidential misstep but a relational failure. Here is a reconstruction of its main argument:

P1: *Conciliationism is often the rationally required response to peer disagreement.*

The thesis aligns with the Conciliatory View, arguing that in many cases of disagreement among epistemic peers—understood in Adam Elga's (2007) sense—rationality requires that each party give some weight to the other's opinion and adjust their own beliefs accordingly. The view contrasts this with the Steadfast View, which holds that peers can rationally hold their doxastic ground without revision.[3]

P2: *The best explanation for this rational requirement is that it stems from a relationship of mutual accountability between peers.*

This is the explanatory core of Accountability Thesis. The thesis argues that the reason to conciliate is not fully captured by an agent unilaterally responding to new evidence. Rather, it emerges from the deliberative context itself. Peter writes, "Your accountability thus involves

[2] It is crucial to note, however, that Peter, following Darwall, does not draw a sharp distinction between the first- and second-person standpoints in the way she does between the second- and third-personal. She explicitly states that "First-personal considerations, by contrast, are part of the second-personal standpoint". (p. 1259) On her view, the second-person standpoint does not reduce to the first-person, but rather serves to qualify first-personal considerations, identifying which have moral or epistemic weight in an interpersonal context. This paper's central argument, therefore, involves drawing a sharper distinction between first- and second-personal reasons, contending that the normative force of conciliation is exclusively first-personal and does not require the second-personal qualification she proposes. See footnote 7.

[3] Peter (2019) in one of her later works defend Conciliationism from Epistemic and Non-Epistemic versions of Asymmetry View—that it is prima facie epistemically or practically rational to trust one's own epistemic faculties more than those of others, respectively—which support Steadfast View. Against Epistemic Asymmetry View, she accepts that epistemic self-trust is descriptively basic (we can't help but use our own faculties) but denies that this basicness translates into a normative entitlement to believe our faculties are more reliable than others. Peter then argues that epistemic self-trust is better understood as generally involving a non-doxastic, practical commitment. It is an epistemic leap of faith that does not require a prior belief in reliability of your cognitive faculties. However, when a peer disagrees, it provides an epistemic reason that your initial leap of faith in forming your belief might have been misplaced; it is evidence of your own potential fallibility. Crucial to our discussion is her insight that evidence of peer disagreement is similar to other non-interpersonal evidence that indicate our cognitive fallibility. Further details on this point are provided in footnote 11.

the standing that you attribute to your peer in a more immediate sense". (p. 1258) The normativity is located in the relationship.

P3: *This relationship of mutual accountability generates irreducibly second-personal epistemic reasons, where the peer's claim functions as a form of epistemic command.*

This premise makes the link to Stephen Darwall's (2006) framework explicit. Peter argues that what gives an agent the reason to adjust their belief is "not the first-order evidence about the object considered but the claim of your peer". (p. 1258) This reason is "of a different kind" than reasons derived from first-order evidence. It is a reason grounded in the authority vested in the peer, an authority that one must acknowledge to respect them as a peer. This, she argues, is analogous to a Darwallian command, not mere counsel.

Conclusion: *Therefore, the epistemic value of deliberation is, in part, procedural and second-personal.*

The final step is to conclude that since the reasons for conciliation are procedural and second-personal, deliberation itself has a value that is not reducible to its instrumental capacity to produce true beliefs. Its value lies partly in the instantiation of these relationships of mutual accountability.

The error in this argument, as the following sections will demonstrate, lies in Premise 2 and its development in Premise 3. The Accountability Thesis correctly identifies a normative phenomenon—the rational pressure to conciliate—but mislocates its source. It projects a norm that governs an individual agent's relationship with their total evidence outward onto the social relationship between the deliberating peers.

Before proceeding, two clarifications are in order regarding Peter's argumentative scaffolding. First, Peter draws on both Thomas Kelly's (2010) Total Evidence View and Christensen's (2011) Conciliationist View to support Accountability Thesis, though she expresses greater alignment with the latter. Kelly's account maintains that a rational agent must weigh both first-order and higher-order evidence when forming credence about a disputed proposition. However, as Christensen (2011, 2016b) has convincingly argued, Kelly's view—as well as Jennifer Lackey's (2010) Justificationist View—faces difficulties without an additional constraint: something like the Independence Principle. Independence Principle ensures that the assessment of a peer's reliability is not contaminated by one's own reasoning about the proposition in dispute. For example, when one's first-order evidence entails a conclusion, it becomes difficult to see how higher-order evidence could rationally compel conciliation, unless one brackets that first-order reasoning in accordance with Independence Principle. Since Kelly nonetheless holds that conciliation can be rationally required in such cases, we take it that any defensible version of the Total Evidence View must incorporate

something along the lines of the Independence Principle. On that basis, this paper treats Kelly's view as functionally continuous with Christensen's, and concentrate the analysis on Conciliationism, with the discussion extending to views that share its core commitments.[4]

Second, Peter invokes the Uniqueness Thesis -the claim that a given body of evidence supports only one rational doxastic attitude- as a way of motivating Elga's (2007) Equal Weight View.[5] However, Elga himself explicitly denies that his view depends on Uniqueness (Elga 2007, 500).[6] Since the Uniqueness Thesis is neither conceptually nor dialectically necessary for defending Conciliationism, and since it does not contribute to the key premise under dispute, we set it aside in what follows.

In the next section, we argue for explanatory superiority of first/third personal approach over second-personal approach.

4. The Explanatory Superiority of the No-Second-Personal Explanation

We proceed in four parts. First, sections 4.1 and 4.2 demonstrate the account's parsimony by showing how the Independence Principle and the mechanisms of belief revision (Simple Thermometer Model) are best understood as first-personal norms of rationality requiring an agent to respond appropriately to their total body of evidence without the need of any second-personal posit.[7] Second, section 4.3 establishes the account's wider explanatory scope by showing it, unlike the Accountability Thesis, can explain conciliation with absent epistemic peers. Third, section 4.4 demonstrates the account's completeness by integrating the dual evidential role of peer disagreement, a feature that second-personal approach overlooks.

4.1 Independence and the First-Personal Norm of Rationality

A widely-used method for conceptualizing epistemic peerhood, introduced by Elga (2007), defines a peer as "someone who you take to be equally likely to make a mistake" (Peter 2013,

[4] Anyone who doubts this move may consider our arguments as directed solely at Conciliationism.
[5] For discussion of many variants of Uniqueness Thesis and their criticism, see Kopec & Titelbaum (2016).
[6] See Christensen (2016b, 584) for a survey of positions concerning relation of Uniqueness and Conciliationism.
[7] Christensen (2010) identifies a peculiar feature of higher-order evidence (HOE): its evidential import is often relative to the thinker. Imagine you and I both know the fact: I have been given a reason-distorting drug. For me, this fact has a massive bearing on how confident I should be in the conclusion of my logical reasoning. It is powerful evidence that my cognitive faculties may be malfunctioning. For you, this fact has no bearing whatsoever on how confident you should be in your conclusion to the same logic puzzle. It's information about me, not you. The evidence itself- the proposition that I have been drugged- is a public, third-personal fact that we both share. However, its evidential force or rational import is agent-relative. It only provides a reason for belief revision for the agent it is about. The same applies to peer disagreement: the fact that my peer disagrees with me is a piece of evidence whose rational import is relative to me, because it is evidence about the reliability of my thinking. Therefore, in the framework of the paper, disagreement is a third-personal reason (a piece of higher-order evidence) that, because of its agent-relative import, triggers a first-personal norm of rationality.

1255). Christensen (2016a) calls such peers "accuracy-peers" distinguishing them from "rationality-peers" whose judgments are taken to indicate conformity with norms of reasoning. When peers are modelled as accuracy-peers, their judgments are treated like outputs from thermometers: doxastic signals that indicate how the world is.[8] (Christensen 2016a, 600) As Christensen (2016b, 400-401) elaborates, peer credence of accuracy-peers are epistemically significant in virtue of being independently reliable indicators.

Peer disagreement amongst accuracy-peers raises an immediate question: When two such accuracy-peers—understood as epistemic thermometers—produce conflicting readings, that is, when their credence diverge over some proposition, how should the accuracy-peers assess each other's reliabilities to have judged correctly? Christensen (2007, 2011, 2016b, 2019) addresses this question by invoking the Independence Principle, which constrains how agents should assess a peer's reliability in disagreement cases. The core idea is that such assessments must be made independently of one's own reasoning on the disputed proposition.[9] Independence Principle is motivated to prevent the question-begging responses against the interlocutor. As Christensen (2011) explains

> The motivation behind the principle is obvious: it's intended to prevent blatantly question-begging dismissals of the evidence provided by the disagreement of others. It attempts to capture what would be wrong with a P-believer saying, e. g., "Well, so-and-so disagrees with me about P. But since P is true, she's wrong about P. So however reliable she may generally be, I needn't take her disagreement about P as any reason at all to question my belief." p. 2

However, the Independence Principle is not an interpersonal norm. It does not derive from any obligation to respect or defer to the peer. Rather, it is a first-personal epistemic constraint -a directive to treat higher-order evidence (including peer disagreement) as potentially indicative of one's own unreliability, and to avoid question-beggingly using one's disputed reasoning to evaluate its own credibility.

However, a proponent of the Accountability Thesis could argue that the Independence Principle is, in fact, a procedural rule for enacting mutual accountability. The argument would

[8] But not merely as thermometers. For a discussion on why peer's beliefs cannot be simply taken as a data point akin to thermometer readings, see Christensen (2016a, 597).

[9] Christensen has offered many precisifications of Independence Principle especially in Christensen (2016 b) and Christensen (2019). The subsequent precisifications are motivated by (a) application of Independence as a general constraint on accommodating all higher-order evidence bearing on reliability assessments, which is not limited to only situations of disagreements, and (b) Inclusion of calibration principle, i.e., the alignment between higher-order assessments and rational credence in first-order propositions. Since focus of this essay is on peer disagreement, I discuss the variants suitable for the purpose of the essay, and these variants are compatible with more general variants of Independence. Calibration Principle and Independence Principle are discussed separately for ease of exposition.

look something like this: “The very reason we are forbidden from using our own first-order reasoning to dismiss a peer's belief is that doing so would be a failure of epistemic respect. To be in a relationship of mutual accountability means acknowledging the other person as an independent source of valid epistemic claims. If I use my own reasoning about the disputed topic to demote my peer's credibility, I am failing to treat their claim as a claim from an equal. Instead, I am subordinating their claim to my own prior conclusions. The Independence Principle, therefore, is not just a rule of logic; it is the call of the second-personal obligation to take a peer's claim seriously on its own terms. It forces us out of our first-person perspective and into a shared, deliberative space where claims, not just evidence, have weight.” In this view, the prohibition against question-begging isn't an abstract, first-personal norm of epistemic risk-management but a concrete, interpersonal norm of accountability.

Despite its initial plausibility, this interpretation of the Independence Principle is inconsistent with both its original motivation and its explanatory scope. The first/third-personal explanation provides a more fundamental and comprehensive explanation. As articulated earlier, the motivation for the Independence Principle is to prevent a specific kind of first-personal rational failure: blatantly question-begging dismissals of the evidence provided by the disagreement of others. It is not fundamentally about owing a duty to another person, but about the agent's own responsibility to handle all evidence -including evidence about their own fallibility- in a non-circular manner.

More importantly, the Independence Principle is a general constraint on how to handle any higher-order evidence that casts doubt on the reliability of one's reasoning, not just evidence that comes from a peer. As Christensen (2018) notes

> …[D]isagreement is best seen as just one among many sources of doubt about the reliability of one’s thinking. (Our question about total evidence comes up equally in other cases: what bearing does my tiredness, or facts about oxygen levels in my blood, have on the question of whether a certain conclusion is true, given premises that entail that conclusion?) p.222

Consider again the reason distorting drug case. I must revise my high confidence because I have received evidence that my cognitive faculties are impaired. To rationally process this new evidence, I must apply the Independence Principle. I cannot reason, "My reasoning shows that P is true. The drug is supposed to make my reasoning unreliable. But since my reasoning is correct in this case, the drug must not have affected me this time." This would be the exact same kind of question-begging that the principle is designed to prevent.

The rational pressure to bracket one's initial reasoning is identical to the peer

disagreement case. The source of the higher-order evidence is a non-agential fact (a drug warning), not a person. There is no peer, no claim, no deliberation, and therefore no possibility of mutual accountability. Since the Independence Principle is clearly required in cases where second-personal relations are absent, mutual accountability cannot be its fundamental justification. A single, more general norm—a first-personal prohibition against using disputed reasoning to evaluate evidence that challenges that very reasoning—explains both cases perfectly. The mutual accountability explanation, by contrast, can only account for a subset of the cases where the principle applies, making it an explanatorily weaker thesis. In conclusion, while the second-personal approach sees the Independence Principle as a welcome feature of the Conciliatory View that supports Accountability Thesis, however it cannot be claimed that mutual accountability is its source.

Independence Principle by itself doesn't offer a recipe for credence revision. To further clarify how credence revision in peer disagreement proceeds without invoking second-personal obligations, we turn to Christensen's (2016b) Simple Thermometer Model (STM).

4.2 Credence as Measurement Under Reliability Uncertainty

Christensen's Simple Thermometer Model (STM) offers perhaps the strongest illustration of why second-personal reasons are explanatorily unnecessary. The model characterizes conciliation as a process of rational recalibration in light of evidence concerning one's own potential cognitive unreliability. Christensen (2016b) puts it as

> **Simple Thermometer Model (STM)**: in cases where the agent has reached an initial credence in C, and then gets some higher-order evidence, her final credence in C should match her independent hypothetical credence in C. p. 403

The independent hypothetical credence is the doxastic attitude a rational agent would have in a proposition if they bracketed their actual reasoning and considering their initial credence and their reliability (e.g., "I'm usually right, but I'm sleep-deprived"). It represents a calibrated belief- a thermometer reading adjusted for known distortion.

As discussed earlier, peer's disagreement is a paradigm case of what epistemologists call higher-order evidence—that is, evidence about the reliability of one's own evidence—processing or belief-forming faculties. Other examples of higher-order evidence include learning that one is sleep-deprived, under the influence of a judgment-distorting drug, or suffering from a cognitive bias. The key insight is that peer disagreement is not a unique

phenomenon requiring a unique normative framework; it is simply one instance of this broader category of higher-order evidence.

The STM models how a rational agent should incorporate such higher-order evidence. It treats an agent's doxastic states as analogous to the readings of a measuring instrument, like a thermometer. These *readings* are fallible indicators of the truth. When an agent receives higher-order evidence suggesting their *thermometer* might be malfunctioning, they must recalibrate their confidence in its reading. The structural identity of the rational response across different cases of higher-order evidence reveals that the second-personal features of the peer disagreement case are explanatorily inert. Consider the following two cases:

DISAGREEING LOGICIANS: Gargi and Maitreyi are expert logicians with equally strong track records. On a complex logical entailment task, Gargi assigns 0.9 credence to the proposition that A and B entail P, while Maitreyi assigns 0.1 credence. They deliberate, confirm shared access to the relevant premises and inferential norms, and recognize their disagreement. Gargi has no dispute-independent reason to think herself more reliable on this particular problem than Maitreyi.

DRUGGED LOGICIAN: Gargi is an expert logician with a strong track-record in solving logic problems. On a complex logical entailment task, Gargi assigns 0.9 credence to the proposition that A and B entail P. However, she learns that she has unknowingly ingested a drug known to impair the reliability of logical reasoning to 50 percent. Her past recordings under the drug's influence show that she has a 50% success rate despite assigning very high credence.

How should Gargi respond in DISAGREEING LOGICIANS? According to STM, both Gargi and Maitreyi's credences function like thermometer readings— indicators of the truth. Since both are equally reliable and no dispute-independent reason favors either, Gargi should bracket her original reasoning and update her belief based on the independent reliability of each signal. The rational response is to split the difference and adopt a credence of 0.5. The reason for this revision is not a normative command from Maitreyi, but the evidential import of the fact that an equally reliable cognitive process produced a conflicting result.

STM instructs Gargi to reassess her credence in DRUGGED LOGICIAN just as she would in the peer case. Her initial credence is 0.9, but she now has independent evidence that she is only 50% reliable on this task. STM prescribes the same rational recalibration: a credence of 0.5. This is the final rational credence for Gargi. Here, too, the credence revision is driven by higher-order evidence concerning the reliability of her own reasoning. The fact that her cognitive faculties are potentially impaired defeats the justification for her high confidence-

even though no other person is involved.[10]

These two cases have been deliberately constructed to be structurally analogous. The rational mechanism for belief revision is precisely the same whether the higher-order evidence comes from a disagreeing peer or from a non-agential source like a drug warning. In both scenarios, an agent receives information that bears on the reliability of their belief-forming process and is rationally required, from a first-person perspective, to adjust their confidence accordingly. The fact that the source of the evidence in the first case is another person is incidental to the epistemic structure of the required response.[11] This demonstrates that the entire explanatory work can be done by the concepts of higher-order evidence and first-personal norm of calibration.[12] The appeal to an irreducibly second-personal reason is an unnecessary theoretical complication. The peer's belief functions as an evidential defeater, not a normative demand.

4.3 Absent Epistemic Peers

A further challenge to second-personal approach comes from cases where the disagreeing peer is no longer available for deliberation. It is worth emphasizing that the kind of case appealed to here—disagreement with an absent epistemic peer—is distinct from what has been referred to in the literature as disagreement with a merely possible or counterfactual peer. For instance, Kelly (2005, 181–185) and Christensen (2007, 208–209) discuss whether conciliation can be motivated by the mere possibility that an epistemic peer might exist and might disagree. Nathan Ballantyne (2019) alludes to the similar -but distinct- idea under the label counterfactual interlocutors. In contrast, the case of absent epistemic peers involves disagreements that did in fact obtain, but where the peer is unavailable for deliberation—due to death, distance, incapacitation, or other forms of inaccessibility. These cases are not hypothetical or merely

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[10] STM does not always prescribe splitting the difference. Christensen (2011, 3) shows that conciliatory reasoning can sometimes *increase* confidence when peer disagreement provides higher-order evidence of under-confidence. We thank the anonymous reviewer for prompting this clarification and for helping to correct our examples in line with this broader motivation of Conciliationism.

[11] Peter (2019, 1202-1203) in one of her later works seems to make a very similar claim. Here is how she puts it

> All sorts of input from the world can, and should, lead you to question the extent to which you trust your epistemic faculties and the beliefs that you formed on that basis. For example, you may have trusted your epistemic faculties in forming a belief about the comparative performance of several applicants for a job. You then remember reading about the effects of implicit bias in hiring. This gives you reason to pause and to ask yourself whether you should trust the process through which you formed your beliefs about the merits of the different candidates and, on that basis, whether you have reason to revise your original belief.
>
> *A doxastic disagreement with a peer, similarly, is one such input from the world that raises the question of whether you have leapt too far.* (Emphasis added)

Therefore, Peter's later position is completely in alignment with our no-second-personal explanation for Conciliationism.

[12] For discussion and criticism of other variants of calibration principles, see Schoenfield (2015).

epistemically possible; they are actual disagreements. The peer's judgment is no less real for their being temporally or interpersonally inaccessible.[13]

Consider a case where I come to know that an accuracy-peer independently assessed a proposition and arrived at a judgment contrary to mine. However, this peer never knew my view and had no knowledge that I was also reasoning about the same issue.[14] In such a case, no relation of mutual recognition or address ever existed between us. Nonetheless, if I recognize this accuracy-peer's symmetry to me and have no independent reason to think myself more reliable, I rationally ought to reduce my confidence. The epistemic pressure to conciliate remains intact, despite the absence of any deliberative engagement or accountability relation.

The Accountability Thesis is unable to explain this. The explanation grounds the reason to conciliate in a relationship of mutual accountability, which presupposes the possibility of reciprocal address and the making of claims. There can be no such relationship with an absent peer. The dead colleague cannot address a claim to you, cannot exercise authority, and cannot hold you accountable. Since the necessary second-personal conditions are not met, her thesis predicts that there is no second-personal reason to conciliate. The Accountability Thesis explanation fails this test case.

The first/third-personal explanation, by contrast, explains the intuition towards conciliation. The disagreement with an absent epistemic peer is a new piece of higher-order evidence. Specifically, it is evidence that a cognitive process as reliable as your own produced a contrary result. From a first-person perspective, you are rationally required to update your beliefs in light of this new evidence, just as you would in the DRUGGED LOGICIAN case. The rational pressure is entirely intact because the evidential content of the peer's belief is independent of their availability for a live, second-personal encounter. This demonstrates the superior explanatory scope of the no-second-person explanation.

So far, we've argued that peer disagreement motivates Conciliationism by providing higher-order evidence tied to concerns about reliability. In the next section, we note that peer disagreement also functions as first-order evidence, offering a more direct third-personal basis for Conciliationism.

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[13] Darwall (2006) makes similar observation. He claims:

> …[I]t is possible to respect epistemic authority entirely privately without any form of acknowledgment to others as, for instance, when someone acts on a credible stock tip he overhears while serving drinks in the boardroom. p. 12

[14] Some, such as Richard Feldman (2007) and Jennifer Lackey (2010), include a full disclosure requirement when defining epistemic peerhood. Feldman (2007) characterizes this condition as follows

> Full disclosure: A and B are in a situation of full disclosure relative to the question whether p when A and B have knowingly shared with one another all of their relevant evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether p. p. 302-03

However, Elga's accuracy-peerhood does not require presumption of full disclosure.

4.4 Dual Evidential Role of Peer Disagreement

Philosophers have recently argued that epistemic significance of peer disagreement lies in its dual evidential roles. Christensen (2019, 17) emphasizes that while it's common to distinguish first-order from higher-order evidence, a more careful approach focuses on how evidence bears on belief. In cases of peer disagreement, evidence can function in both ways: it can directly support or undermine a belief in usual testimonial way (first-order) and also raise doubts about one's cognitive faculties (higher-order). Yan Chen and Alex Worsnip (2025, 231-232) echo Christensen by showing that peer disagreement also functions as first-order testimonial evidence- a peer's belief in ¬P is itself some evidence for ¬P, just as it would be in ordinary testimony.[15]

Suppose my epistemic peer and I are independently solving a complex multiple-choice mathematics problem, with four options: 23, 25, 28, 29. After careful reasoning, I conclude the answer is 28. I then learn that my peer, equally reliable, conclude the answer is 25. The fact of our disagreement functions as higher-order evidence that my cognitive faculties may have malfunctioned. This discovery rationally requires me to reduce confidence in my answer. However, peer's *testimony* that the correct response is 25 is also evidence that the correct answer is 25 and I should now have a higher credence in it than either 23 or 29, for which I have no testimonial evidence.[16]

By understanding peer disagreement as a testimonial evidence, we can explain the epistemic pressure to conciliate without appealing to second-personal standpoint. First, as already discussed, the fact of disagreement is higher-order evidence that bears on the reliability of one's own reasoning. But second, the reliable peer's belief that P is also straightforward, first-order testimonial evidence that P is true. If a reliable meteorologist tells you it will rain, their testimony is direct evidence for the proposition "it will rain", much like the reading of a reliable instrument. Similarly, if your epistemic peer believes P, their belief itself provides some third-personal, testimonial-style evidence for P, by virtue of their general reliability as an epistemic agent.

This dual role poses a problem for the second-personal framework. Since the second-personal approach ignores the first-order testimonial component of peer disagreement, the approach is incomplete. Insofar as a peer's belief does function as testimony, the authority it carries is third-personal, grounded in the peer's track record of reliability, just as it is in any

[15] Also see Hedden and Dorst (2022).
[16] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the example to sharpen the argument.

standard case of testimony.[17, 18]

The first/third-personal explanation suffers from no such incompleteness. The peer's belief is a piece of first-order evidence for the disputed proposition and a piece of higher-order evidence against the reliability of one's own initial conclusion. A rational agent, from a first-person perspective, can weigh both of these evidential inputs to arrive at a final rational credence. The proposed explanation thus provides a more unified and complete explanation of the total epistemic impact of disagreement.

Thus, the discussion in the previous sections shows that no-second-person explanation is superior to Accountability Thesis on three main grounds: it is more parsimonious, it has greater explanatory scope, and it offers a more complete and coherent account of the phenomenon. First, the strength of the no-second-person explanation is its simplicity. It explains the rational pressure to conciliate using higher-order evidence and the first-personal norms the consideration of such evidence invokes. The Accountability Thesis, in contrast, introduces an additional layer of normativity: irreducibly second-personal reasons that arise from a relationship of mutual accountability. Second, no-second-person has wider explanatory scope as it explains conciliation with absent epistemic peers, where second-personal explanation struggles. Finally, the no-second-person explanation provides a more complete and unified picture by accounting for the dual evidential role of peer disagreement.

The explanation—that the reason for belief revision in peer disagreement is not second-personal—risks presenting an overly individualistic picture of epistemology, one that ignores the deeply social and dialogical nature of scientific and public inquiry. Such a critique would

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[17] Peter (2013) contends that peer disagreement occupies a middle space between testimony and practical deliberation. (p. 1262) In testimony, the speaker's authority is third-personal and grounds a second-personal reason for the listener to adjust belief. In the practical case, authority is irreducibly second-personal. Peer disagreement, by contrast, involves mutual accountability: both parties have epistemic authority and reason to consider each other's views, similar to practical case. However, peers are not merely accountable to each other but also to truth, similar to testimony. Thus, while second-person standpoint is necessary and sufficient to ground authority in the practical case, and neither necessary nor sufficient in testimony, it is necessary to ground epistemic authority in peer disagreement case. As we have argued, the argument overlooks the first-order evidential bearing of peer disagreement on the disputed proposition.

[18] Ripley Stroud (2025) has recently argued that when my peer demands that I respect their epistemic authority, the valid core of their demand is that I properly value this third-personal fact about their reliability, which functions as higher-order evidence. The authority is thus grounded on a third-personal, evidence-tracking relationship, and not that to the irreducible second-personal address. The second-personal demand for respect, as Stroud argues, is a moral consequence of recognizing this third-personal authority, not the source of the epistemic reason itself. Therefore, while a live disagreement may carry additional moral weight, the epistemic authority grounding the reason for belief revision remains third-personal.

It is important to note that our no-second-personal account of Conciliationism remains compatible with the existence of moral reasons for conciliating. Per Stroud (2025), individuals have a moral duty to conciliate with an epistemic peer in cases of disagreement, on pain of failing to respect the peer's epistemic authority. Moreover, Stroud argues that conciliation with an epistemic peer is also morally virtuous, and therefore preferable. By contrast, our position holds that the epistemic grounds for conciliation are more adequately explained in terms of first- or third-personal considerations rather than second-personal ones. Consequently, insofar as an agent conciliates with a peer solely based on such first- or third-personal considerations, they have fulfilled their epistemic obligations. Nevertheless, if this act of conciliation is not accompanied by the corresponding matching attitudes of respect or the moral virtue of open-mindedness, the agent thereby fails to discharge their moral obligations and to realize what is morally preferable, respectively.

be a mischaracterization. The strength of the first/third-personal explanation is not that it denies the existence of interpersonal norms in our epistemic lives, but that it is more precise about their nature and domain. In next section, we engage with Will Fleisher's epistemic practices account to make a plausible case for second-personal obligations in deliberations with peers.

5. Epistemic Obligations Beyond Evidence

The claim that epistemic peers are mutually accountable to one another and that this accountability grounds second-personal epistemic reasons appears overstated when peerhood is narrowly construed in Elga-style terms, where parity of reliability suffices. One can update on a peer's view without ever recognizing them as a normative agent- just as one updates on drug warnings. But perhaps this conception of peerhood is too narrow. If we instead begin with the thought that epistemic peerhood is not merely a descriptive label but a role—one defined by participation in a shared epistemic practice—then the norms governing disagreement might appear in a different light.

Will Fleisher's (2025) recent account of epistemic practices offers an instructive account here. On his view, both epistemic norms (how one ought to believe) and zetetic norms (how one ought to inquire) are best understood as constitutive standards *internal* to social practices oriented toward truth. These epistemic practices—scientific inquiry, public deliberation, historical interpretation—are cooperative undertakings in which agents are bound by norms and standards—for example standards for justified belief, proper inquiry, and plausibly responsible engagement—that define the activity itself. Importantly, these norms and standards have *categorical force* and not merely instrumental force. Participants are not bound by them *only* insofar as they reliably track truth; rather, they are bound by them in virtue of what it is to participate in the practice at all. When two agents are engaged in such a practice—say, co-authors of a paper, members of a scientific subfield, or citizens deliberating policy—their responsibilities to one another are not exhausted by what rational belief revision demands. Instead, their shared roles may entail standing claims to epistemic engagement. Each has the right to be answered, not merely considered.

This opens the door to a conception of epistemic peerhood where mutual accountability is categorical -owed not because it is useful in an instrumental sense, but because it is what one agent may demand of another within the terms of their joint commitment to norms and standards of epistemic practices. If so, the refusal to deliberate, or to respond norm-appropriately to disagreement, would not simply be a failure to respond to evidence, but a failure to honour a role-based normative relation. It would be, in this sense, a second-personal

failure. These obligations may stretch beyond norms of proper belief revision to norms of interpersonal epistemic conduct- e.g., giving uptake to objections, responding to peers, and remaining open to criticism.[19]

Such a view need not oppose evidential insights. It may instead extend them: one might agree that disagreement provides higher-order and first-order evidence and still hold that in some contexts- most plausibly in scientific inquiries, and any domain governed by discursive norms- peers also stand under obligations to deliberate, to explain, to revise in response to the other. These obligations, if they exist, would not be reducible to the value of truth, nor conditional on expected epistemic gains.

Whether such a conception is appropriate for all epistemic interactions is a further question. But Fleisher's framework makes space for it. If epistemic practices can generate role-based norms with categorical authority, and if epistemic peerhood is defined by participation in such practices, then second-personal epistemic obligations may follow—not by fiat, but as the natural outgrowth of the roles we assume in practices of shared inquiry. On this conception, the vision of mutual accountability does not stand in tension with the evidential ground of peer disagreement, but rather offers a complementary axis of normativity, grounded in our participation in practices.

6. Conclusion

This paper began by framing the debate over peer disagreement as an explanatory challenge: what is the best explanation for the rational pressure to conciliate? The Accountability Thesis provides an answer, positing an irreducibly second-personal reason for belief revision grounded in the mutual accountability of deliberating peers. This paper has argued that this explanation, while intuitively appealing, is inferior to an alternative explanation invoking no second-personal reasons.

First, the essay argued that Conciliationism could be fully explained by more fundamental principles. The Independence Principle, a key constraint on conciliatory reasoning, was shown to be a norm of first-personal rationality aimed at preventing question-begging, not an interpersonal duty. The Simple Thermometer Model demonstrated that the rational process of conciliation is structurally identical to belief revision in the face of non-agential higher-order evidence, such as a drug warning, revealing that the second-personal features of the peer case are explanatorily superfluous. Second, it advanced the positive case for a no-second-person explanation, highlighting its wider scope and completeness- for instance, its ability to address the absent peer problem and to integrate disagreement's dual role

[19] Fleisher draws on -amongst others- Longino's (1990) practice-approach to philosophy of science. Peter (2013, 1264), too, draws on Longino's (2002) proceduralist social epistemology.

as both testimony and higher-order evidence. The no-second-person standpoint thus offers a parsimonious, wide-ranging, and unified account of Conciliationism.

Yet, a more expansive view of epistemic peerhood—one that understands peers as participants in shared epistemic practices—may vindicate a different kind of second-personal accountability. Drawing on Fleisher's account, the essay suggested that such practices might entail categorically binding interpersonal norms, including duties of uptake and answerability. On this view, peerhood could be understood not just as a matter of comparative reliability but as a role-defined relation embedded within collaborative epistemic enterprises. While this conception moves beyond the assumptions of the thesis's original argument, it points to a distinct axis of normativity that may ground second-personal epistemic obligations, not within Conciliationism as such, but in the broader ethos of responsible inquiry. The evidential and relational dimensions of peer disagreement need not compete. Rather, they may each mark distinct ways in which epistemic agents are bound to one another.

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