

CONFLICTING HIGHER AND LOWER ORDER EVIDENCES IN THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF DISAGREEMENT ABOUT RELIGION

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Abstract. This paper concentrates on the issue of what happens to the confidence one has in the justification of one's belief when one discovers an epistemic peer with conflicting higher and/or lower order evidences. Certain symmetries surface during epistemic peer disagreement, which tend to make one less confident. The same happens in religious disagreements. Mostly externalist perspectives are considered. The epistemology of ordinary disagreements and that of religious ones behave similarly, such that principles used in the former can be seen to apply also in the latter.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly conversation about disagreement, of late, has focused on the respective roles of higher and lower order evidence for sustaining or reducing the confidence one has in the justification of one's belief, during a disagreement with an epistemic peer. Higher order evidence is any evidence about how well lower order evidence supports a belief. Lower order evidences are all the things one is aware of that seem immediately to support a belief.¹ For example, *S* sees a large truck in the shape of a box speed by on the highway with sirens screaming, and *S* forms a belief that the truck is an ambulance and that there is an accident close by. The lower order evidence here is the awareness of all the perceptual data regarding the ambulance, the particular color of the vehicle, etc. The higher order evidence involves all the things *S* is aware of regarding how well the perceptual data support the belief, like being aware that one is not drunk, etc.

¹ Kelly, Thomas, Forthcoming, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence", in R. Feldman and Warfield (eds.), *Disagreements*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Higher and lower order evidences each come in two flavors depending on the source. If the higher order evidence comes from *S* and says something about how well *S*'s lower order evidence supports a belief, then it is personal higher order evidence. If, on the other hand, the higher order evidence comes from someone other than *S*, then it is for *S* socially-gained higher order evidence. Likewise, if the lower order evidence results immediately from the awareness of *S*'s own perceptual outcomes, then this is personal lower order evidence. And if the lower order evidence comes from someone else's awareness of their own immediate perceptual outcomes, this is socially-gained lower order evidence.

This paper concentrates on the issue of what happens to the confidence one has in the justification of one's belief when one discovers an epistemic peer with conflicting higher and/or lower order evidences. The paper argues, after considering the alternatives, for a conciliatory view both in ordinary and religious disagreements, namely, that certain symmetries surface during such circumstances which tend to make *S* less confident, a position we shall call epistemic peer reduction (EPR):

EPR: In cases of epistemic peer disagreement, the confidence in the justification of one's belief tends to reduce.

Before proceeding it would be helpful to clarify what an epistemic peer is.

Two people are epistemic peers regarding the question whether *p* when there is:

- (1) **Evidential equivalence:** Both are equivalently familiar with the relevant evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *p*.
- (2) **Full disclosure:** Both are fully apprised of each others' evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *p*.
- (3) **Sincerity equivalence:** Both are equivalently sincere in trying to find out the truth of the matter regarding the question whether *p*.
- (4) **Lower order skills equivalence:** Both are equivalently skilled at forming true beliefs bearing on the question whether *p* based on lower order evidence or experience.
- (5) **Higher order skills equivalence:** Both are equivalently skilled in assessing how well the lower order evidence/experience supports a belief.²

² In this list I have borrowed from Jennifer Lackey's and Brian Frances' formulations

NO REDUCTION NEEDED

The recognition of socially-gained evidence in epistemic peer disagreement requires social interaction with the peer. One of the main criticisms of EPR proposes that the confidence in the justification of a belief can be uninfluenced by such interaction. To clarify this issue, think more about the type of evidence we can get through social interaction. While we get first order evidence immediately from ourselves, we can't normally get it immediately from others. For example, I can't have immediate awareness of another's perceptions of color. When someone tells me what color she sees through a telescope, this evidence I have is mediated for me, though immediate for her.

For Tom Kelly a belief can remain compelling even when in the presence of conflicting higher or lower socially-gained evidence. The idea is that the personal, first order evidence for a belief can be so compelling that conflicting socially-gained evidence, whether higher or lower order, in no way reduces the level of confidence in the belief. Beliefs based on personal lower order evidence can be unmediated by any higher order evidence when the former "confirms a proposition to the effect that it is reasonable for one to hold that belief." Kelly refers to this phenomenon as upward push.³

Consider the following extreme example in order to illustrate Kelly's point. Sally, a graduate student in the social sciences, is on trial for murdering her husband. Sally believes, based on the upward push of her lower order evidence, that someone else killed her husband, possibly wanting to frame her, even though she can't think of anyone at the moment who hates her and her husband enough to do such a thing. Her testimony follows: She came home one day and found her husband lifeless on the floor in a pool of blood. In a panic she dumped the contents of her purse out on the floor looking for her cell phone in order to call 911 for the police and an ambulance. While waiting for help she desperately tried to revive her husband's body. Before the police came she noticed her personal gun had fallen out of her purse, which her husband persuaded her to carry around for protection. Soon after, the police come in the door. Sally's gun is

of what it takes to be an epistemic peer: Lackey, Jennifer, Forthcoming, "A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance", in R. Feldman and T. Warfield (eds.), *Disagreements*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Frances, Bryan, Forthcoming, "Discovering Disagreeing Epistemic Peers and Superiors", in R. Feldman and T. Warfield (eds.), *Disagreements*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Kelly, Thomas, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence".

confirmed by ballistics to be without a doubt the murder weapon. Sally realizes that the evidence the jury and the prosecutor have points to her as the perpetrator. But she holds firm in her belief, based on her compelling first order evidence, that someone else killed her husband. She isn't troubled by the conflicting socially-gained evidence presented by the prosecuting attorney even though she recognizes this attorney to be an epistemic peer. She thinks they just don't have the overwhelmingly compelling personal first order evidence she has.

Most people in this situation would remain firm in the belief in their innocence. After all, I know what I saw, and I know my faculties to be functioning properly.

Kelly's approach to disagreement reflects the main way that anti-EPR critics resist confidence reduction, namely, by asserting the ability for there to be a segregation of personal evidence from socially-gained counter evidence, and this segregation is based on an asymmetry between the two, whether the asymmetry stresses lower or higher order evidence. The segregation described here is based on what Ernest Sosa, in his work on disagreement, talks about as "the gulf between private and public domains."⁴

A second type of segregation strategy also engages the upward push. As in Kelly's upward push this strategy starts with personal, compelling evidence, only this evidence is thought to be essentially inaccessible to the other. Ernest Sosa uses as an example the belief that one has a headache. Say Sally is explaining to her boss that she can't come to work because she has a terrible headache. This reason for missing work is compelling and efficacious for Sally in a way that it isn't for her boss. Her boss is trying to figure out if she is faking it, while Sally is totally confident that she isn't. Because sometimes our evidence is not accessible to the other, Sosa recommends that we retain beliefs under such circumstances. Sally's boss takes into consideration Sally's testimony to lower order evidence that she has a headache, and he weighs this against all the other lower and higher order evidences that he has. If the boss is completely out of the ballpark in thinking she is faking it, then Sally can easily dismiss him as not an epistemic peer on this issue. Peer demotion would be appropriate if, for example, it is the first time Sally has called in sick for a health problem, since an epistemic peer would give the benefit of the doubt to the person when it is the first time calling in sick for a health problem, especially when it is so hard to know if someone truly has a headache.

⁴ Sosa, Ernest, 2008, "The Epistemology of Disagreement". A lecture given at Princeton and available at: <http://philipapers.org/rec/SOSTEO-2>.

Peter van Inwagen and Sosa talk about incommunicable insights as a basis for belief retention. And here we have a third type of upward push. Van Inwagen says he is inclined to think, though he is not certain, that public evidence and arguments, adduced in support of one's belief, don't constitute the totality of the justification for one's belief. And he is inclined to think that what justifies the retention of a belief in light of an epistemic peer holding an alternative belief is "some sort of incommunicable insight that the others, for all their merits, lack."⁵ Van Inwagen thinks both parties can rationally retain incompatible beliefs because of the evidence dimorphism between the public and private realms. For van Inwagen the state of epistemic peer conflict doesn't necessarily weaken one's epistemic position, because we often hold beliefs without basing them solely on publicly available evidence, for example in politics and philosophy. Likewise, Ernest Sosa thinks one can have "deeply hidden and undisclosable reasons" others lack, even ones immediately inaccessible to oneself.⁶

The evidence that pushes away conflicting socially-gained evidence need not just come from one's lower order evidence. Tom Kelly and Jennifer Lackey have accounts of how considerations about one's personal higher order evidence help segregate one from the debilitating effects of epistemic peer conflict, and we can call this downward push. Lackey emphasizes that we know best our own epistemic processes, how well they are functioning, and whether anything has come into play that might debilitate the knowing processes. She points out how *S* has the best access to higher order evidence regarding *S*'s knowing processes, in what she calls "personal information." For example, only *S* knows if *S* has taken psychotropic drugs that would influence the knowing process, or whether *S* is so sleep deprived that *S* can't adequately judge, or whether childhood trauma is influencing the current belief formation.⁷

A great place to see Kelly's type of downward push segregation is in how he treats the analogy of the thermometer.⁸ Consider the situation where I have an electric thermometer which is exactly the same model as that of my friend's. I form a belief, based on reading my thermometer, that it is 60 degrees. Then my friend shows up with her thermometer which

⁵ van Inwagen, Peter, 1996, "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything Upon Insufficient Evidence", in Jordan and Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of Religion Today*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 142.

⁶ Sosa, Ernest, "The Epistemology of Disagreement".

⁷ Lackey, Jennifer, "A Justificationist View".

⁸ Kelly, Thomas, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence".

reads 65. One of them is wrong, but we really don't know which one. For all practical purposes, the two thermometers look exactly alike. Just looking at the black box we can't see anything different about the two that would lead us to favor one over the other. Kelly agrees that in situations like this I should have less confidence in my belief that it is 60 degrees out. However, this is a misleading analogy, says Kelly. Unlike the black box of the thermometer, we often know what is going on epistemologically inside of us. We know even before a disagreement what our abilities are, what is in our black box. We can see how well the belief has been formed. And so the disagreement needn't precipitate a reduction in confidence simply because the personal higher order evidence can be so compelling.

EPISTEMIC PEER REDUCTION

Two of the most important deficiencies of anti-EPR segregation views are that they don't adequately appreciate the social origin and maintenance of the epistemic skills we use, on one hand, and the symmetry of those skills themselves that surfaces in epistemic peer disagreement, on the other. We will see that this dual appreciation tips the scales in the favor of EPR. The social origin of our epistemic skills means there is an inseparable link between the personal higher- and lower- order evidences, on one hand, and socially-gained higher- and lower- order evidences, on the other. Do philosophers claim to create epistemic skills and principles? For the most part, no. They discover, rediscover, articulate, or refine epistemic principles that are already in place in our lives, or should be more central in our lives. And they spend much of their time trying to show others how their intuitions about epistemic principles actually match what people ideally do, or often do, in real life situations. For example, the main reason why the problem pointed out by Gettier was so devastating is that it relies on a common, widely held view that knowledge can't come to be through a process involving excessive luck. Most twelve year olds would tell you that one really doesn't know something, if the means by which one attained the belief is fortuitous. Another example of the social origin of epistemic skills: My grandmother, raised in the country without any formal schooling, used to say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." She would apply this principle not just to lawnmower maintenance, but also generally as an approach to epistemic issues. So, for example, when I was considering whether to give up a belief in light of exposure to alternative beliefs, she would ask me if anything has come along to convince me that the belief isn't a good one. As a twelve

year old this was my first remembered introduction to what epistemologists call the principle of conservatism. Do the best philosophers writing on this principle propose that they created this principle? No. They, like me, picked it up initially from others. For most epistemic skills that we have we can trace them back, if memory permits, to where we got them from. We can think of this as a genetic link between personal and socially-gained evidences.

Nor are individuals the origin of the higher order skills for evaluating how well lower order evidence supports a belief. Since we were children we learned how to use higher order skills and how to monitor the resulting higher order evidences about how well lower order evidence supports beliefs. For example, most of us learn that intoxication tends to inhibit the quality of thinking, even before we ever become intoxicated for the first time. A person kept in a closet from day one with minimal social interaction wouldn't have these skills. Even the most important skills for evaluating personal evidence are given from others originally. For most of the epistemic skills that we have, there at least initially have been social groups out there that have excelled in the use of those epistemic skills. We would not have the skills if they were not out there.

The genetic linkage that we share with others can often be seen when we are in a disagreement and both parties agree on a source to consult in order to resolve the dispute. For example, two people some time ago have a dispute about the name of a particular Southeast Asian country, and agree on what authoritative source they both will yield to. One says it is Burma, and another says Myanmar. One says it has recently been changed. The other says she would have known that it was changed. The fact that they both agree on a common source to consult shows that they have both been socialized into the same skills for deciding on what an authoritative source for consultation would be. Likewise, when in dispute with an epistemic peer over whether to use "lie" or "lay" in a sentence, I don't think that I am the authority on the matter, and I don't think that I should rely on my intuition or a deep incommunicable insight. To resolve the dispute we refer to a mutually acceptable authoritative grammar. Also, no matter how sure I am of the definition of "arthritis," ultimately the authoritative meaning of the word in my context isn't under my control, as Tyler Burge has shown.⁹ The epistemic talents we have are socially gained, and this realization means there is an inseparable link between the private and the

⁹ Burge, Tyler, 1998, "Individualism and the Mental", *Externalism and Self-Knowledge*: CSLI.

socially-gained evidence. In finding common sources of authority, peer disagreement reaches across the public/private gulf talked about by Sosa.

Continued social interaction is also vital for properly using the epistemic skills we have. The scholar tries out her ideas on peers thinking that flaws and weaknesses in reasoning will be exposed. Sometimes we feel strongly in public that our doxastic positions are right, and find that they aren't. Our peers help us avoid these very embarrassing situations. We rely on therapists to help us see different angles on an issue troubling us. The idea here is that whether concerned about intellectual or mental health, we realize that if we lock ourselves up in our own private evidential islands we will miss things important for the vital application of the epistemic skills we originally gained from social interaction. Even the best of us make mistakes, even without being distracted, inebriated, or exhausted. And we realize we are sometimes distracted by ulterior motives that prejudice us. We hold in disdain people who don't revitalize their doxastic house through responsiveness to socially-gained evidence. We call them stubborn, set in their ways, inflexible, or close minded. We can call this link between personal and socially-gained evidence, sustaining linkage.

In Richard Fumerton's view of disagreement there is a preferential option for one's ego that runs deeper than Lackey's position:

I can only use the discovery of disagreement to weaken my justification insofar as I trust *my* reasoning. Without such trust, there is no access even to what others believe. That is not to deny that trust in my reasoning ability can turn on itself—can lead me to doubt the very faculties that I trust. But when that hasn't happened, and when I can't understand exactly what is going on in the minds of others, I'll always turn back to the reasoning I understand best—my own.¹⁰

Fumerton doesn't appreciate enough that the principles by which an individual ego evaluates the beliefs of others come from a socializing process, and the ego isn't the origin either of the principles or the socializing process. The ego indeed is proximally what reduces confidence in epistemic peer disagreement, and an individual can make such a reduction only by trusting in the ego's reasoning process. But, we get our very understanding of the ego and the very reasoning processes the ego trusts in from the social environment in which we reside, or, in other words, the public domain. A child kept alive in a closet without seeing anyone and fed intravenously wouldn't have a concept of ego, and certainly wouldn't know when to trust the ego's reasoning processes. Our ability to judge whether we have used

¹⁰ Fumerton, Richard, Forthcoming, "You Can't Trust a Philosopher", Available at: <http://myweb.uiowa.edu/fumerton/>

epistemic tools properly comes from, originally, trust in principles received from the public domain. And we would expect the epistemic peer to also be knowledgeable about the socially-derived principles governing self trust. No ego is an island. In every epistemic choice that he makes, Robinson Crusoe carries with him the results of lifelong interactions with others.

The discussion of the symmetry of epistemic skills in epistemic peer disagreement is best done in the context in which those skills are used for gaining knowledge. Our skills are used to figure out if our beliefs have the justification that turns a true belief into knowledge. We will mainly focus on externalist-oriented skills for belief retention, and the following represents one:

If there are no good grounds for questioning the proper function or reliability of the belief's specific formation process, then the belief should be retained.

We can think of this also as an externalist conservatism principle, since it specifies the conditions in terms of which it is appropriate to conserve a belief. Notice this principle of conservatism isn't a license to retain every belief. The antecedent is affirmed only if no grounds come to light to question the proper function or reliability of the belief's specific formation process. Even though externalists don't think anything that we are necessarily aware of justifies our beliefs, still most externalists recognize that the beliefs we retain have to hold up to challenges.¹¹ This principle of conservatism doesn't engage in any activities offensive to externalists, since there is no need to know the reliability of the specific formation process. All that is required is that one be able to rout challenges to reliability.

Consider the following externalist conservatism frustrater for the externalist retention principle:

If subject *A* can think of no way in which *A* is better situated epistemically for a belief than *B*—who holds an alternative belief—in terms of externalist criteria like reliability, then there are good grounds for *A* questioning the reliability of her belief's specific formation process.

No externalist I know of would say that we should hold on to our beliefs no matter what, that we should trust the reliability of the belief forming process no matter what grounds for questioning the reliability are brought forward. And one reason for questioning the reliability is if two processes similar in every discernable way come up with different results. For

¹¹ Plantinga here gives an example of the revision of a basic belief with the addition of challenging new information: Plantinga, Alvin, 2000, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 343-344.

example, radically different readings of two of the same electric thermometers, one mine, certainly give me grounds for questioning the reliability of my thermometer. In this case one doesn't need to know the reliability of all the processes that took place in the two thermometers in order to question the reliability of my thermometer. So too one doesn't need to know, during epistemic peer disagreement, the reliability of the processes that produced one's belief, in order to question the reliability of one's belief-forming process. The fact, that there are two indistinguishable processes that produce incompatible results makes one question reliability.

Now we want to think about how all this talk of epistemic skills, linkage symmetries, and retention principles works itself out in a concrete example. Consider again the case of Sally on trial for murder. Think about what should happen, if anything, to Sally's confidence in her belief in her innocence given the following new developments. A psychiatrist who is an expert at psychotic breaks induced by massive stress takes the stand and explains how people in Sally's situation of extreme stress sometimes experience psychotic breaks where they don't remember what they have done. Sally was in the process of divorcing her husband of 10 years who was the father of her three children. She had given up a promising career in order to take care of their children, and she was just now getting into a graduate, social science program that she cannot afford without the support of the income from her husband's job, which she helped him get. The psychiatrist points to studies, and evidence from his practice, that suggest it is more common than we think that people in extremely stressful situations do things they don't remember doing, even people who have never had previous episodes of such lapses. In addition to the psychiatrist's testimony, the prosecuting attorney points out that Sally's father has a record of stress induced blackouts, and that this increases genetically the chance that Sally is prone to such things.

It seems even the best of us should have some reduction of confidence in the justification of our belief here. Sally recognizes the psychiatrist has higher order skills that she herself uses in order to evaluate lower order skills. For Sally the psychiatrist has skills equivalent to her own for being aware of and gathering the relevant evidences and details of the case. And, Sally finds that, like her, the psychiatrist has equivalent skills for assigning different weights to different evidences. Both think, for example, that one shouldn't give much weight to the testimony of a crack addict. Sally also sees that the psychiatrist's skill of assigning weight to different sources of evidence reflects her own view that our weight giving needs to be attuned to the results of research in the field. After reading some of the works of the

psychiatrist, and after seeing how well respected he is by his colleagues, Sally cannot think of any epistemic skill either is clearly better at.

Now the thing that causes difficulty for Sally, in this situation of epistemic peer disagreement, is that the epistemic peer, given full disclosure, has taken account of the other's contrary personal evidence when weighing the total evidence.¹² In his evaluation the psychiatrist has weighed Sally's personal evidence, that is, the fact that Sally swears on her life that she distinctly remembers just coming home and seeing her husband already dead, against his vast experience with similar cases he has dealt with in the past and against evidence from relevant studies. And he made an assessment that there are better reasons for thinking there was a cognitive break. Using both higher order skills equivalent to the ones Sally uses and a wide diversity of lower order evidence from others' testimony, he has come to the view that Sally is not having the correct response to her lower order evidence. Sally has read some of the works of the psychiatrist and has come to the conclusion that his higher order skills are equivalent. The psychiatrist says that often highly intelligent people, under extreme stress, think their lower order evidence supports a belief when it really doesn't. At the very least, the skills symmetry with the psychiatrist should make Sally think it isn't as easy to judge which pieces of evidence have more weight. And if the person truly is an epistemic peer and has really impartially looked at the same body of evidence as Sally, then more than likely there is ambiguity as to how properly to weigh the personal evidence Sally has. Epistemic parity means the peer is in the ballpark, unlike in the extreme restaurant case discussed by David Christensen.¹³ When the peers are in the ballpark, neither is likely clearly to have made a mistake. But it is exactly this ambiguity that undermines the extreme confidence in the justification of belief. Because of the symmetry of skills, it is now harder for her to say that she has better reasons, than the opponent, for her belief in her innocence. Sally thinks to herself, whether she has evidence that this sort of thing isn't happening to her, and she finds, as most of us would, that she doesn't have detailed enough evidence that would distinguish, for her, between a world where she did and a world where she didn't have a psychotic break. She

¹² Earl Conee emphasizes this as well: Conee, Earl, June 28, 2009, "Peerage", Episteme Conference on Disagreement, Evanston Ill.

¹³ The extreme restaurant case: At a restaurant two peers come up with radically different conclusions as to how much each of the five people at the table owe with a 20 percent tip. The restaurant isn't a very expensive one. One peer says \$50 and the other \$500. The one who says \$50 can demote the other from epistemic peerage because she isn't even in the ballpark.

just sees that she didn't kill her husband. But of course someone who had a psychotic break would claim to just see the same thing. Elsewhere, I have called this the resolution problem.¹⁴ The resolution problem places great difficulty on the ability to affirm the antecedent of the externalist principle of conservatism. If I cannot see any discernable difference in the skills and epistemic situation of myself and the other, I tend to think I could just as easily have made the error. If an opponent is an epistemic peer, with regard to every conceivable higher order skill I have of judging how well my lower order evidence is supporting the relevant belief, then, I should think perhaps my weighing of the evidence is just as likely off. Epistemic peer disagreement makes the possibility of error more salient.¹⁵ In such cases the upward push described by Kelly is frustrated by socially-gained higher order evidence.

Jennifer Lackey is right; we do have more access than our epistemic peer to our own personal information that tells us how well our faculties are functioning. But, the peer, in full disclosure, has taken my descriptions of personal information into account, and has a good story about how it is likely that I am not responding correctly to my lower order evidence. And my peer's alternative account, of all the most fine-grained details of my personal information and lower order evidence, appeals to skills and principles that I also accept. Because there are remarkable symmetries of skills in the peer's sophisticated account of how I came into error, I recognize the peer as within the ballpark of reason. Kelly and Lackey simply don't adequately recognize the creative challenge of a true epistemic peer.

Consider an example that Lackey uses to demonstrate her point. There is a disagreement between Edwin and Jennifer about whether a certain person, Estelle, is dining with them at the table. Jennifer says yes and Edwin says no. Jennifer has checked all of her personal information. She has never hallucinated an object, she hasn't been drinking or taking any drugs, her contact lenses are in, etc. Jennifer up to this time felt Edwin to be an epistemic peer. But now she easily demotes him and remains just as confident in her belief that Estelle is dining with them. In her own words:

For given the extraordinarily high degree of justified confidence with which I hold my belief about Estelle's presence, Edwin's disagreement seems best

¹⁴ Kraft, James, 2008, "An Externalist, Contextualist Epistemology of Disagreement about Religion", *Ars Disputandi*. Kraft, James, 2007, "Religious Disagreement, Externalism, and the Epistemology of Disagreement: Listening to Our Grandmothers," *Religious Studies* 43.

¹⁵ Thune emphasizes this also: Thune, Michael, 2009, "Partial Defeaters and the Epistemology of Disagreement", *The Philosophical Quarterly*.

taken as evidence that something has gone awry with him, either evidentially or cognitively. In other words, I seem justified in concluding that Edwin is no longer an epistemic peer, even if he was, prior to the disagreement in question.¹⁶

Yet if Jennifer truly has taken Edwin to be an epistemic peer she is going to want to know why Edwin has discredited her personal lower order evidence that she sees Estelle. And at this point, if Edwin blows off her lower order evidence, and has no account, within the ballpark of reason, of how it came to be that she has incorrectly responded to her lower order evidence, then yes, by all means demote Edwin from peerage, because he hasn't adequately understood what you would expect a peer to understand, namely, that people with no history or family history of hallucination don't normally have hallucinations. But the true epistemic peer is going to have a challenging account within the ballpark of reason. Edwin could, for example, explain to Jennifer how, while he was just in the restroom, he overheard two people laughing about how they had slipped a woman a hallucinatory drug into her drink earlier, just to see what would happen. If one still is unmoved in one's confidence level after full disclosure from a true epistemic peer, it seems one is arbitrarily giving preference to one's own personal evidence just because it is one's own . . . epistemic chauvinism.

Consider another example Lackey discusses about a friend, Harry, she previously took to be an epistemic peer.¹⁷ But then Harry tells Jennifer that $2 + 2$ doesn't equal 4. Jennifer Lackey would immediately demote the person from peerage and think there is something wrong with his thinking processes . . . perhaps a stroke. Fumerton considers the same example and comes to the same conclusion.¹⁸ But then if Harry really is a true epistemic peer one would expect that Harry has a good way of responding to all the conflicting evidence. So, imagine that Harry gives a story from quantum physics about how Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle necessarily means that $2 + 2$ doesn't equal 4. The point, once again, is that Lackey, Kelly, and Fumerton don't see the creative challenge of a true epistemic peer.

The externalist retention principle says that one has to trust, or go without questioning, the reliability of the belief forming process, in order to retain a belief. However, the fact that it is so difficult to see any way in which one party is better situated epistemologically, and the fact that skills and linkage symmetries are present, provide a conservatism frustrater that,

¹⁶ Lackey, "A Justificationist View".

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Fumerton, "You Can't Trust a Philosopher".

in turn, negates the antecedent of the externalist retention principle. Consider again the thermometer analogy. Even the most hardcore externalist should say that, when presented with conflicting readings from a thermometer equivalent to one's own in every observable way, one should question the reliability of the belief that one formed on the basis of one's own thermometer.

Sosa claims that some reasons are efficacious for the individual and not for others, because they are inaccessible to others, such as is the case in the headache example. Yet the true epistemic peer, under full disclosure, has similar skills for judging the efficacy of reasons, fully understands the alternative assessments of efficacy, fully takes into account the fact that it is sometimes hard for others to know what is going on within another's brain, and gives a good story about why the reasons in question aren't as efficacious as the person might think. If the peer hasn't done these things, demotion is easy. It would be appropriate for Sally, for example, to demote the boss from peerage, if he is not seeing that, most of the time, people who think they have a headache, really do.

But think about a situation where the boss knows a bit of personal information about Sally relevant to the situation. In private conversation Sally told her boss how her father had a certain psychological condition where, in stressful situations, he would report headaches when he really didn't have headaches. Now let's just say Sally has occasionally been reporting headaches to her boss. The boss then says, "Maybe you just are under a lot of stress lately, and you just think you have a headache. Your father had this condition, and these things are often passed down genetically." At this point it would be very hard for Sally to rule out the possibility that this headache is just a psychological chimera produced by stress. Yes, this is an extreme example. But the point is that the epistemic peer has good reasons for the alternative, reasons which take account of the alternative lower order evidences. And if the peer truly has comparable skills, these reasons ought to be pretty good for thinking the reasons under consideration aren't as efficacious as one might think.

When linkage symmetries are added on to the skills symmetries this even more precipitates reduction, tipping the balance, even more, in favor of EPR. I am not claiming that the recognition of linkage symmetry is definitive, just that it adds to the challenge of epistemic peer conflict. And it does this by encouraging one to think about the situation from the depersonalized perspective of the common source, both parties are seen to be linked to. And this sort of checking makes one look back on one's own body of lower and higher order evidences, from the viewpoint of the au-

thoritative sources that either yielded the skills in the first place or sustain one in them. There is established an inseparable link between the peers, which closes the gulf mentioned by Sosa between the public and the private. What links us is a public domain that we drew from initially, and subsequently draw from in order to establish our beliefs. The recognition of linkage symmetries makes it more difficult to favor one's own personal evidence just because it is one's own . . . it discourages epistemic chauvinism. For example, Sally finds it odd that she and this psychiatrist take seriously the same social science journal articles, the same experts, and yet they still disagree. Both take as authoritative, for example, a study that concludes that people in extremely stressful situations have a significant chance of having a psychotic break. But this isn't so strange, since she knows that often people who refer to the same authoritative sources hold conflicting views. Yet the linkage symmetry does make one want to check one's viewpoint even more against common, authoritative sources, since we are prone to mistakes due to ulterior motives, oversight, or lack of attention. When the stakes are high, one should even more want to check one's results with others equally skilled in the relevant processes, so as to make sure that one hasn't missed anything. I wouldn't dream of sending out a letter of application for an extremely important job without getting feedback from a peer. Personal first order evidence doesn't stand on its own in the way that Kelly thinks, and isn't completely segregated from the other as Sosa sometimes thinks.

RELIGIOUS EPR, AND THE PRINCIPLE OF CONSERVATISM AGAIN

A great place to start a treatment of religious disagreement focuses on the central importance of the conservation of beliefs discussed earlier. When considering the conservation of beliefs, there are two competing interests. On one hand, it is often good to give one's beliefs the benefit of the doubt. We encounter so many conflicting alternative viewpoints in our lives that life would be very difficult indeed if we didn't give our beliefs the benefit of the doubt. At every moment we would be changing our minds or reevaluating our positions. Epistemic inertia is often a good thing. On the other hand, hardly anyone would say it never makes sense to reconsider one's position in the face of weighty counterexamples or counter-evidences. The "benefit of the doubt" can't be absolute. We often think it is a good thing to call into question even the most cherished beliefs. Most people wish the

9/11 suicide bombers had taken more seriously the views of most Muslims in the world who say that such massive violence can't be thought of as truly Muslim. And most Christians wish the KKK would listen more carefully to Christian views about how God creates all, even the Jewish and African-American people, in the image of God. Some of the most important advances in science have happened as the result of reconsidering positions in the face of challenges. It is no accident that one of the first things that a hostage negotiator does is to try to find someone the perpetrator respects, as an epistemic peer to disagree with. We reconsider our views in the face of epistemic peer disagreement because nearly all of us know we make mistakes, by overlooking or downplaying possibilities, or just by being oblivious to relevant information. What we need is a statement of conservatism that has the right condition placed on it to best incorporate these two legitimate forces.

Taking both these competing interests into account leads to what many call the principle of conservatism, which can be stated as follows, in a way consistent with the earlier formulation of it:

If there are no decisive grounds for losing confidence in the belief, then the belief should be conserved.

This conditional statement captures the two competing interests of belief conservation. The essence of this principle of conservatism, as is the case with all such principles, is absence. It recommends that one keep doing and thinking the way one always has, so long as nothing comes along legitimately to question what one has been doing and thinking. The absence of decisive grounds for losing confidence is a sufficient condition or cause for conservation. At the same time, the principle accounts for other situations that we want to acknowledge, namely, times when there is no such absence, that is, when something does come along to make one question one's belief and lose confidence in it.

THE CONSERVATISM FRUSTRATER AND THREE RESPONSES TO IT

It is undeniable that so much hinges, for the conservation of our beliefs, on whether or not the antecedent of the principle of conservatism, with its peculiar absence, is fulfilled, yielding a sufficient cause for conservation. This being so, it makes sense to pay careful attention to conditions where the antecedent isn't fulfilled. Some of the biggest challenges to the fulfill-

ment of the antecedent are situations of symmetry, where one epistemic situation can't decisively be distinguished from the other. As two alternative positions share more and more of the same epistemic qualities, it becomes harder and harder to affirm the antecedent of the principle of conservatism, since such symmetry provides grounds for losing confidence in a belief. To the extent that each side appears to have gone through a similar process for coming to the belief, to this extent there are externalist grounds for losing confidence. Symmetry frustrates conservation.

We can capture this frustration in what can simply be called, appropriately, the conservatism frustrater. This version of the principle is consistent with, and at the same time streamlines, the one given earlier:

If one finds there is no way in which one is better situated epistemically, for the belief, than the other, in terms of reliability or supporting reasons, then there are decisive grounds for losing confidence in the belief.

Any circumstances that lead to the rejection of the antecedent of the principles of conservatism are conservatism frustraters. And this is exactly what epistemic symmetry does. It isn't necessarily the only thing that frustrates the conservation of beliefs, nor is it the case that there can be no conservation in the face of symmetry. After all, the absence talked about in the antecedent of the principle of conservatism is just one possible sufficient cause of conservation. Such symmetry simply frustrates one very important pathway for conserving one's belief. This conservatism frustrater shouldn't offend any externalist sensibilities. No demand is made that the externalist prove her belief to be more reliably formed, or that one even bring to mind, for evaluation, all the reasons or processes contributing to reliability, or lack thereof. I can't think of any externalist who would say there would be no grounds for losing confidence in the reliability of a belief-forming process, if two indistinguishable processes produce incompatible results.

There are three possible responses to the conservatism frustrater, during religious disagreement among epistemic peers:

- 1) Resignation to it.
- 2) Detour around it.
- 3) Refutation of it.

The resignation response thinks its antecedent is fulfilled during epistemic peer disagreement, the consequent follows, and, consequently, the antecedent of the principle of conservatism isn't fulfilled. The conditional

statement expresses a true relationship between the antecedent and consequent. The word “resignation” is carefully chosen here because both its meanings apply. The word refers to situations where we intentionally, if reluctantly, accept what is happening or what one is going to do or believe. In this case what is reluctantly accepted is that the symmetry present yields decisive grounds for reducing confidence in a belief. We want to pick up on another sense of “resignation” present when one resigns from a job. Often people resign so as to avoid being fired. In any case there is often a certain loss in a resignation. The woman who resigns her baby to an adoption agency experiences a tremendous loss. The person who resigns herself to the conservatism frustrater experiences the loss of an unqualified acceptance of the particular religious belief in question, and the loss of a sense that her beliefs are supported either through internalist or externalist means. The detour strategy says that the conditional statement itself is just fine; it represents a correct relationship between the antecedent and the consequent. If the antecedent were fulfilled, then the consequent must also occur. But, as a matter of fact, the antecedent isn’t fulfilled. The refutation response insists that the conservatism frustrater is complete rubbish; it doesn’t express a correct relation between its antecedent and consequent. This strategy shows the conservatism frustrater to be false, by giving counter examples of when its antecedent is fulfilled and the referent of the consequent doesn’t follow. The refutation response is important and interesting, but we will focus on the other two responses, since space is limited.

DETOUR STRATEGIES

A detour strategy accepts the legitimacy of the conservatism frustrater, and detours around it claiming its antecedent not fulfilled. There are at least two ways to detour, one using internalist, and another externalist, strategies. Externalist detour strategies insist there is no symmetry between epistemic processes in epistemic peer disagreement about religion, and so no loss of trust in the reliability of one’s belief forming process. We can see how the externalist detour strategy works by looking more closely at Alvin Plantinga’s response to the challenge of religious diversity. Plantinga accepts both the principle of conservatism and the conservatism frustrater. He uses the detour strategy, in his insistence that there are no good grounds for thinking the opponent’s faculties are functioning just as well. He acknowledges, for the sake of argument, internalist parity, but refuses to admit externalist parity, since he thinks the Christian can easily refer to

the reliable sense of the divine faculty, as providing the needed symmetry breaking. The sense of the divine is a “disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances.”¹⁹ Plantinga thinks the sense of the divine (*sensus divinitatis*) is generally functional, especially in those who honestly and intensely seek after the truth, and who are moral. Laziness and sin can prevent it from manifesting itself. Plantinga says,

According to the extended model, we human beings typically have at least some knowledge of God, and some grasp of what is required of us; this is so even in the state of sin and even apart from regeneration. The condition of sin involves *damage* to the *sensus divinitatis*, but not obliteration; it remains partially functional in most of us. We therefore typically have some grasp of God’s presence and properties and demands, but this knowledge is covered over, impeded, suppressed.²⁰

Detour strategies like Plantinga’s concentrate on a certain kind of upward push in that the immediate results of the faculties can be taken as yielding basic beliefs that inform any other epistemic considerations on the table, whether originating from higher or lower order skills. Recall the earlier treatment of higher and lower order evidences within ordinary, non-religious disagreements, and Thomas Kelly’s view that the results of the faculties can provide an upward push helping one retain one’s belief during disagreements.

As exemplified in Plantinga’s approach, the upward push externalist strategy can be very effective for holding people in their beliefs during disagreements. Like Plantinga, many point to a trust in properly functioning or reliable processes that induce the belief in one, and this is the source of the justification, without having to give reasons. This could be trust in the reliability of a testimony that one received, trust in training, or trust in an experience that one had. The experience, the feeling, the sense of connectedness, the intuition, the results of testimony and training all seem so real, trustworthy, and immediately compelling that it doesn’t make sense to question the beliefs that result from them. Furthermore, sometimes a belief wasn’t formed by some relatively passive mechanism such as enculturation or osmosis. Often beliefs are the result of intense awareness and unusual circumstances. Sometimes the circumstance of belief formation can be so unusual, meaningful, and intensely vivid that it lives on and decisively informs one later, in peer conflict, helping one to retain the belief. There can be a special or unusual event that the peer hasn’t experienced, for whatever

¹⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

²⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 210.

reason. Here the belief cannot be due to a generally reliable faculty, since, if it were, my peer would discover it too. Upward push externalist strategies can be very effective indeed.

Yet, however obvious is the trust in the reliability of feelings, of intuitions, of religious experiences, of faculties of connectedness to the divine, of testimonies, in a disagreement with a true epistemic peer things aren't so clear, as we have seen in ordinary disagreements. An epistemic peer demonstrates similar epistemic skills for gaining truth, and shows signs of skillfully interpreting processes like testimony, intuition, and religious experience. The peer's skills are just as sophisticated for evaluating such processes of belief formation, and the peer has sincerely considered the opponent's perspective, along with the reports of exclusive experiences. Yet the peer doesn't agree, and thinks, using those similar skills, that the reports of exclusive experiences are inconclusive. And peers sometimes have had vivid and unusual experiences that lead to the opposite conclusion. As we saw in ordinary disagreements, so we see in religious disagreements: The true epistemic peer has skills of evaluation on the same level, and so it is curious that the person comes to a different result, using such similar skills. One wants to have trust in the reliability of the belief forming process, but here we have an indistinguishable process yielding a conflicting belief. One process is probably functioning properly, but it is hard to trust one over the other. Externalist-oriented conservatism abhors such symmetries, since they erode the trust in reliability (or proper function) needed for smooth belief conservation. Recall Sosa's motive for belief retention during epistemic peer disagreement, based on the individual having exclusive access to experiences. The peer is aware of the fact that the individual usually knows best whether she has a headache. Yet the peer also knows that sometimes people, because of neurological or psychological conditions, can think they have a headache when they really don't. Likewise, the epistemic peer takes seriously the person's report of a decisive, exclusive religious experience. But the peer also knows that sometimes people are disastrously wrong about such things, because of psychological or neurological problems, or something else. Think of David Koresh, Paul Hill, or Jim Jones, to name only three.

What results in religious disagreement among epistemic peers is what I call the resolution problem (which we have partially described earlier), whereby neither has the level of discrimination of details—resolution—needed to distinguish between the two conflicting belief-forming processes, when trying to decide whose belief forming process is more likely truth conducive. The skills the other is using are so similar to one's own, that it

is difficult to tell the difference. The word “resolution” is important here for the externalist. A lens of a telescope has a certain resolution built into it. Similarly, each of us has a certain level of awareness of the details surrounding the processes that bring us our beliefs. It isn’t that we are aware of the reliability or proper function built into the processes, just that we have a certain awareness of the details of the processes. Yet, to be able to refrain from questioning one’s belief forming process, to be able to have the required trust in it, one must find that there is some difference between one’s own epistemic situation and that of the opponent. This trust is frustrated in religious disagreement among epistemic peers, where one doesn’t have the adequate resolution needed in order to distinguish between the two positions. Think of an equivalent situation where there are two radically different readings of two of the same electric thermometers, one being mine. I can’t see that there is any difference between my own thermometer and my peer’s, and this ought to make me suspicious of my own reading. My thermometer might have all the reliability in the world. My opponent’s thermometer might have experienced a freak manufacturing error in an otherwise extremely reliable manufacturing process. That being so, I no longer can trust in the reliability of my thermometer. Consider a defense lawyer trying to clear her client of murder charges. If a witness takes the stand, claiming he saw her client at the scene of the crime committing the murder, the lawyer must convince the jury that there is some symmetry-breaking difference favoring her client’s testimonies. And she doesn’t necessarily have to prove her client’s testimony to be reliable; rather she can discredit the witness’s.

In a chess match between grandmasters, so equally skilled that it is extremely difficult to say who is better, it is not certain whether an individual win is due to a mistake, luck, or a slight advantage in skill. With respect to each particular win, perhaps grandmaster *A* made a poor move that *B* didn’t anticipate just because it was such a bad move, and the mistake ironically gave *A* an advantage in the particular game. Or perhaps grandmaster *A* just got lucky in a particular game. Or perhaps grandmaster *A* won because she has slightly better skills overall. Because each is so evenly matched, any one particular game doesn’t have adequate resolution for distinguishing between luck and slight skill advantage. Because no one game is decisive, more than one game has to be played to determine who has slightly better skills. A very similar thing happens in disagreement among epistemic peers, from an externalist perspective. The two are so evenly matched, the two situations are so similar that one cannot immediately resolve the epistemic differences. One of the two probably has a slight advantage in terms

of reliability; but there is no way of resolving the differences in order to know which one has the slight advantage. Did Allah actually appear to the person saying that the Qur'an is the definitive word of God, or is that person just influenced by the culture in which she was raised, as the epistemic peer maintains. Is it luck or slight extra skill? The two peers are so evenly matched that it is hard to tell, and there often is no way of repeating the process in order to gain more resolution, as in the chess example.

We saw earlier how the upward push is frustrated in true and ordinary disagreements among epistemic peers, due to considerations deriving from socially-gained evidences, and now we can give examples of how this happens in religious disagreements. Lower order evidence isn't divorced from higher order evidence. Consider a situation that parallels the one discussed earlier with Sally, the woman accused of killing her husband. Let's say they are getting a divorce because of Jamal's newfound religious conversion to a religion that advocates extreme celibacy, except only for the explicit purpose of having children. Say this is some extreme variety of Hinduism. Jamal's understanding is that he just became blessed, by God coming into his life. He has had religious experiences which confirm his beliefs, very vivid ones at that. He wants to praise and worship God all day, with a deep feeling of being loved by God. It feels something like what Plantinga thinks of as the sense of the divine. Here we have an upward push. At a first glance, it seems reasonable to Sally that God would single someone out, since this has often been said to have happened in the history of her religion.

His wife is fine with him finding a new religion and practicing it. But, there is one thing she can't stomach. The problem is that this newfound faith goes against her understanding of marriage. Jamal believes his newfound religion requires him to be celibate, except for the explicit attempt to have children. Sex is a pollution necessary only for the purpose of having children who will praise God. Sally, on the other hand, believes love making is extremely important for marriage because it is all about establishing connections and deepening them. Sex isn't just for procreation. In her view Jamal betrayed the trust of marriage, and if she can't trust him on this matter, she might as well not continue with the marriage. When she met Jamal he was searching for a religion. She believes his new choice of religion isn't an accident. It was precipitated by his severe abuse as a child, in which he witnessed unpleasant things happening to his father as a result of his father's sex addiction. And his mother was also abusive. If she stays with him, she will either have to be celibate (since they already have all the children they want) or promiscuous, neither option being what she considers part of a legitimate marriage. Add to the story that both see the other

as highly intelligent, and thus similarly matched on a wide variety of skills and intellectual processes. Sally thinks it possible that someone can be appeared to by God in the ways that Jamal describes; it is just that she thinks the slightly better view is that his past bad experiences with sexuality have influenced him to choose the religion that puts sex in such an unfavorable light. Sally even admits to herself that she would probably think the way Jamal thinks, if she came to believe she had experiences similar to Jamal's. And Jamal can see how there is a good point behind Sally's view of the influence of the past. Only Jamal feels his experiences are so vivid that he thinks he is influenced directly by God to engage in his new spirituality. And he feels that God has revealed to him that he has actually been graced, by God giving him such a difficult childhood, so that he could experience better the futility of sex and of all sense gratification in this world. The process of reasoning that brought Jamal to his thoughts seems reasonable to Sally, since Sally thinks God does allow terrible things to happen to people so that they can learn from them, though she has a hard time thinking God would purposefully allow this to happen to a child.

The point of this example is that as each, in recognizing the other as an epistemic peer, finds in the other more and more similar processes, each consequently has a harder time distinguishing between one epistemic situation and the other, and, so, the confidence of each reduces. Now either Sally or Jamal can think of the other as an epistemic inferior, and then there certainly isn't any reduction in confidence. But, if each sees the other as an epistemic peer there is a resolution problem. And this makes it hard to distinguish between a situation in which Jamal is truly blessed by God—which would be lucky in the sense that Jamal didn't ask for this or bring it about on his own—with a difficult childhood, just so that he could fast-track his salvation, versus a situation in which Jamal just has some kind of psychological impairment due to his traumatic childhood, perhaps something like post traumatic stress. What would be great would be if we could have a controlled environment in which there are multiple tests of the reliability of the skills of each, just as is done in a grandmaster tournament with a number of matches. The one with the slight advantage in skill would prevail. But, of course, we can't have, in many cases of religious disagreement, such a controlled environment. Lacking a way of gaining more differentiating details about each situation, more resolution, we are stuck with a humility-producing symmetry. It isn't necessarily the case that each needs to give up their beliefs. Rather, there is just a decisive loss of confidence, such that the antecedent of the principle of conservatism isn't fulfilled. An important sufficient, but not a necessary, condition for

conservation, has been lost. Sally can believe that Jamal is being influenced by his traumatic childhood in his desire to be celibate; it is just that she isn't so confident in her view and periodically has anxiety thinking that possibly she is wrong. Jamal, on the other hand, believes God has graced him with such a traumatic childhood, but he has a decisive loss of confidence and periodically has anxiety thinking it possible that he is just suffering from the debilitating effects of child abuse.

RESIGNATION

It is always possible in a religious disagreement to demote the person from peerage, or to refuse to acknowledge symmetry of epistemic situations, whether driven by internalist or externalist concerns. Many detour strategies do just this. Yet peer belittlement just isn't appealing for many who rigorously take religious diversity seriously. My heart and mind tell me positions like Plantinga's simply don't take the intelligence, creativity, and rigorous truth-seeking skills and motives—not to mention moral fortitude—of alternative religious practitioners seriously enough. Plantinga and Craig, like Lackey, Sosa, Fumerton, and Kelly, don't adequately acknowledge the creative challenge of the true epistemic peer. The Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu friends I have searched so honestly and intensely after the truth, are so careful about attending to the evidence, have criteria for evaluating evidence so similar to mine, are so good at explaining how people who disagree with them have fallen into error, are so good at accounting for conflicting lower and higher order evidences, share so many linkage and skills symmetries with me, and are so morally upright, that I find it problematic to think that a generally reliable faculty is functioning improperly in them making them come up with wrong beliefs. My friends' backgrounds are similar to mine; they read many of the same journals, and attend the same conferences. I cannot say what epistemic skill I have that they lack. With respect to any of the cognitive and environmental conditions I am aware of, for reliably forming true beliefs, I don't find that I have a clear advantage over my religious, epistemic peers.

This essay isn't necessarily recommending that people give up their religious beliefs just because there either is, or probably is, some epistemic peer out there who believes the opposite. It is good to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt using the principle of conservatism. But this should be tempered by our understanding that we make mistakes (David Christenson), that we want to make sure we have taken everything into con-

sideration (David Basinger), that we are often influenced by our history and culture in ways that we often don't recognize (Robert McKim), that the human ability to know important things, like the origin of the universe or what happens after death, is quite limited. The conservatism frustrater only yields a sufficient reason not to affirm the antecedent of the principle of conservatism. And the antecedent of the principle of conservatism only shows one sufficient condition for conservation; it isn't a necessary condition. All this means that one can have conservation without the absence spoken about in the antecedent of the principle of conservatism; it is just that if the absence is not present we don't have one important pathway to conservation. One can even think that one has internalist or externalist sources of support for one's belief; it is just that those sources aren't efficacious enough in epistemic peer disagreement to hold back the conservatism frustrater. The conservatism frustrater frustrates, but doesn't necessarily destroy, conservation. People can maintain their beliefs during epistemic peer disagreement, only in doing so there should be a marked loss of confidence in internalist or externalist sources of support. And since these sources of epistemic support are very important for many people, the resignation strategy truly does entail a sense of loss.

In light of the disadvantages of the detour and refutation strategies, the resignation strategy seems appealing. With the resignation strategy one can truly recognize the other as an epistemic peer, acknowledge honestly the limited ability of humans to know, and admit the incredibly creative challenge of the religious other. Yet there is a definite loss in the resignation position. We resign ourselves, in disagreement among epistemic peers, to taking a religious or non religious position, without decisive assurances from epistemic sources of support. When we resign from a job something is lost; so too here something is lost: the unqualified confidence that one is justified, whether that confidence in justification is internalist oriented around better reasons, or externalist oriented around trust in reliability or proper function.

Whether one is a literalist about the stories of Adam, Eve and Job, or not, the message is timeless: we know very little for sure about ultimate reality, and to the extent to which we strive to know beyond our abilities, to that extent comes folly. I often believe that God appreciates the humility that Job came to when he realized that he can't presume to know completely the mind of God. When I observe some evangelists and preachers act as if they know with absolute certainty every square inch of God's plan for all people, I can't help but think God would often appreciate a little more of Job's type of humility.