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Why We Should *Believe* Our Controversial Philosophical Views

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in Philosophy

by

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## ABSTRACT

Why We Should *Believe* Our Controversial Philosophical Views

by

R. Wolfe Randall

In this paper, I oppose the widespread acceptance of *no-belief* norms due to the fact that they would have a detrimental effect on the field of academic philosophy, because these norms allow the assertion of philosophical views based on attitudes that are weaker than belief. I also contend that *conciliationist* norms are not applicable to many cases of philosophical disagreement; therefore, we should not be required to give up our beliefs in contentious philosophical matters if we accept these norms.

## 1 Introduction

Recently, some philosophers have questioned whether it is appropriate to believe a disputed philosophical view, with Goldberg (2013b), Barnett (2019), and Fleisher (2018) each arguing that we ought to adopt alternative attitudes or states of mind toward the theses we advance in speech and print when these theses are rejected by our peers in philosophy: attitudes of *speculation, inclination, or endorsement*.<sup>1</sup>

The rejection of belief, as a necessary precondition for asserting philosophical views in public, is often motivated by an argument grounded in a purported empirical fact and a seemingly compelling normative claim. First, there is the fact of wide-ranging disagreement in philosophy. We need look no further than the 2020 PhilPapers Survey (Bourget and Chalmers 2021) to find empirical evidence of disagreement among professional philosophers on issues ranging from normative ethics to epistemic justification. Second, *conciliationism* is the plausible normative claim that we should (*ceteris paribus*) always adjust our doxastic attitudes in the face of disagreement with an acknowledged epistemic peer or peers so that our degree of belief, or credence, more closely matches that of our peer or peers.<sup>2</sup> If we combine the descriptive fact of widespread disagreement with the plausibility of conciliationist norms, we can derive a worrying normative result: as a matter of epistemic rationality, we ought to stop believing our more controversial philosophical positions.

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<sup>1</sup> For a representative sampling of this work, see too the treatments of Brennan (2010), Christensen (2014), Fleisher (2020, 2021a, 2021b), Goldberg (2009, 2013a), Kornblith (2010), and Palmira (2019, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, there is a *subjectivist* reading and an *objectivist* reading of conciliationism. On the former reading, we should always adjust our doxastic attitudes when we disagree with someone who we believe or think is an epistemic peer. According to the latter reading, we should only adjust our doxastic attitudes when we disagree with someone who is in fact a peer. I use a subjectivist conception of conciliationism throughout this paper.

As reported above, Zachary Barnett (2019) and Sanford Goldberg (2013a,b) explicitly argue that belief is an inappropriate propositional attitude to hold towards those disputed philosophical positions which we assert. And Will Fleisher (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2021b) goes further to argue that belief is inappropriate or unnecessary when advancing views in other research contexts as well. Following Jackson (2022), I call these positions *no-belief* (henceforth, NB) views.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of NB views argue that academic philosophers should follow norms of assertion according to which it is permissible for a scholar (and sometimes even desirable for her) to publish, defend, and in other ways “advance” views in philosophy and other academic disciplines that she does not believe. However, these NB proponents have rarely considered how the adoption of these norms would affect the practice and professional standing of philosophy.

My aim in this paper is twofold: first, I argue against the widespread adoption of NB norms on the grounds that this would, on balance, have a negative impact on the practice of academic philosophy because these norms entail the permissibility of asserting  $p$  on the basis of attitudes weaker than belief. Second, I argue that conciliationist norms lack applicability to many instances of philosophical disagreement, therefore we need not abandon belief in our controversial philosophical views as a result of adopting conciliationist norms.

I proceed as follows. In §2, I present a thought experiment, meant to elicit conciliationist intuitions, which has been used to motivate NB views. In §§3-5, I present, and then criticize, three recently proposed NB norms: the *speculation norm* (Goldberg 2013b), the *disagreement insulated inclination norm* (Barnett 2019), and the *endorsement norm*

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<sup>3</sup> There is a fourth proposal, developed by Palmira (2019, 2020), which is specifically applied to scientific research contexts. Unfortunately, engaging with this account is outside the scope of this current project. Additionally, Carter (2018) argues for *controversial view agnosticism*, a different version of a no-belief view, which rejects belief in favor of weaker attitudes. Carter’s proposal is general; he does not suggest an alternate attitude to supplant belief. What I say in favor of belief, in §6, -- while not aimed at Carter or Palmira in particular -- applies to both of them, insofar as their views are partially motivated by conciliationist intuitions.

(Fleisher 2018). In §6, I advance the *philosophical belief norm* (PBN), which I argue should apply to all of our philosophical positions, even the controversial ones. Instead of either giving a full account of belief or arguing for PBN from the ground up, I vindicate this norm by undermining a central motivation, given in §2, for rejecting belief in the first place. In particular, I argue that properly formulated, and suitably sophisticated, conciliationist norms do not actually force a loss of confidence in controversial philosophical positions even once the force and nature of contemporary disputes on those issues is made salient. Finally, in §7, I conclude.

## **2 Motivating Conciliationism and Rejecting Belief**

Consider the following case from the philosophical literature on disagreement:

*RESTAURANT*: Allison is dining with her friend Marc. They've been going out to dinner together regularly over the past several years. Most of the time they've calculated their respective shares of the bill, and they've been right equally often. Tonight, after having looked at the bill, Allison asserts with confidence that she has carefully calculated in her head that they each owe \$43, while Marc says with the same degree of confidence that he has calculated in his head that they each owe \$45. (cf. Palmira 2019: 83; minimally adapted from Christensen 2007: 193.)

It is intuitively plausible that Allison and Marc should be less confident in their calculations after they learn of the other party's differing results.<sup>4</sup> Since we are assuming that there *is* a fact of the matter as to the amount owed by each party, it follows that at least one (if not both) of these parties is mistaken in their judgment about the correct share of the bill they each owe. In light of their disagreement, and their shared belief in their equal liability to error, Allison and Marc should conclude that each is just as likely as the other to have gotten it wrong in this instance, and, on this basis, revise their respective degrees of belief about the exact share of the check each owes.

Based on this intuition and others like it, a more general principle has been suggested: *conciliationism* — the view that we should (*ceteris paribus*) always adjust our doxastic attitudes in the face of disagreement with a peer or purported peer so that our degree of belief or credence more closely matches theirs.<sup>5</sup>

Proponents of conciliationism often make the related claim that we should adjust our doxastic attitudes in cases of widespread disagreement among a multitude of peers, where the patterns of disputation are those manifested in philosophical debates. For instance, Goldberg (2013a: 173), Barnett (2019: 110), and Fleisher (2021: 9914) all argue that if we accept the truth of conciliationism, and we judge that conciliationist norms are applicable to instances of philosophical disagreement, it follows that (at least) some philosophers must be irrational in maintaining their beliefs in the face of philosophical peer disagreement. Here is a representative sketch of this line of reasoning, from Barnett:

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<sup>4</sup> Although, the plausibility of the alternative conclusion is essential, too. If Marc says each diner owes \$1000, Allison can rationally dismiss his answer. Some have argued that in cases of genuine “peer” disagreement, the disputing parties should suspend their judgment entirely on the issue under dispute. See Friedman (2013: 59) for discussion of suspended judgment. And for attempts to delineate “peer” disagreements from disagreements of other sorts, see Christensen and Lackey (2013) and Feldman and Warfield (2010).

<sup>5</sup> For some influential defenses of conciliationism, see Christensen (2007, 2009), Elga (2007), Kornblith (2010), and Fleisher (2021b).



*Conciliationism*: A person is rationally required (*ceteris paribus*) to withhold or adjust their degree of belief so that it more closely matches that of the acknowledged epistemic peer (or peers) with whom they disagree -- given that certain conditions are met.

*Applicability*: Many disagreements in philosophy meet the relevant conditions.

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*No Rational Belief*: Philosophers are not rational in believing many of their controversial views. (Minimally adapted from Barnett 2019: 110)

So a puzzle arises: if we accept conciliationism, are we unable to -- as a result of having conciliated with peers -- maintain sufficient levels of credence to warrant outright belief in our disputed philosophical views?<sup>6</sup> Is conciliation necessary in many cases of philosophical disagreement? Proponents of NB views answer both these questions in the affirmative, and they argue that, insofar as we hold at least *some* controversial philosophical views, the application of conciliationist norms will undermine them. If these norms are plausible or reasonable prohibitions on overconfidence, knowledge of widespread disagreement provides philosophers with good motivation to adopt a NB view. Perhaps it *is* the case that belief in a controversial philosophical position is overly dogmatic, therefore we ought to adopt different attitudes toward the controversial views we publicly advance and defend. To this end, Goldberg, Barnett, and Fleisher have proposed alternative attitudes that would allow us to

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<sup>6</sup> Positing a lower-limit on the degree of credence required for rational belief has been called the *threshold* view (Jackson 2020: 2). For a (non-exhaustive) list of different defenses of this view, see Christensen (2004, ch. 2), Frankish (2009), and van Fraassen (1995).

continue rationally asserting our controversial philosophical views after having adopted, and applied, conciliationist norms to moderate our response to disagreement with those we deem our philosophical peers.

### 3 Speculation

#### 3.1 The Proposal

Goldberg (2013b) presents an early version of an NB view. Goldberg claims, as a descriptive matter, that sometimes when philosophers hold a philosophical view, and assert and defend it in the relevant public fora, they are engaged in *attitudinal speculation* (hereafter, speculation) -- which involves a propositional attitude distinct from belief (2013b: 284).<sup>7</sup> Speculation is defined as follows:

*Speculation:* [O]ne who attitudinally speculates that  $p$  regards  $p$  as more likely than *not- $p$* , though also regards the total evidence as stopping short of warranting belief in  $p$ . (2013b: 283)

Goldberg defines ‘speculation’ in terms of a higher-order attitude. The philosopher “regards” the evidence in a certain way: i.e., she thinks of it or judges it insufficient to warrant outright belief, given the doxastic norms she brings to this judgment. It is important to note that Goldberg neither gives an exact cutoff for when we should consider  $p$  to be “more likely” than *not- $p$*  nor explains how we might justify this judgment in a context in which we think

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<sup>7</sup> There are a plurality of different belief-like propositional attitudes. For instance, logicians and philosophers of science have long distinguished belief from acceptance for sake of argument or inquiry (e.g., van Fraassen 1980: 12-13). For discussion see Stalnaker (1984), and Shah and Velleman (2005).

the evidence does not warrant outright belief in  $p$ . He suggests that speculation would be warranted in all cases where our credence is above 0.5 -- yet not strong enough for outright belief --, but he does not provide an argument for this claim (2013b: 283 fn. 6).

The above characterization of speculation is supposed to be descriptive insofar as Goldberg claims that at least some philosophers have this set of attitudes toward the views they defend and the evidence they muster to support those views. If Goldberg is correct, this suggests, in the absence of widespread self-deception, that a substantive set of *these* philosophers would acknowledge that the evidence they have for their views rarely (if ever) warrants outright belief in them.

Aside from his descriptive claim, Goldberg advances a normative claim: he argues that philosophers *should* speculate, and not believe, their philosophical views (2013b: 284). One motivating reason for Goldberg's normative claim is that he considers evidence of peer disagreement about  $p$  to be a "defeater" for one's belief that  $p$ , whether we encounter this evidence in a philosophical debate or a one-off case like *RESTAURANT* (2013b: 168). In these cases, he claims that " $S$ 's belief that  $p$  is not rationally held or doxastically justified [because]  $S$  should not (from an epistemic point of view) believe that  $p$ ." (2013b: 168). As a result, we should either conciliate as a result of this evidence from disagreement, or suspend belief entirely (2013a: 173).

Goldberg's advancement of speculation, and rejection of belief, suggests the following norm of philosophical assertion:

*Speculation Norm (SN)*: It is permissible for *S* to assert a philosophical view *p* if *S* speculates that *p* is more likely than *not-p* (in the sense of ‘speculation’ defined above).

So the normative proposal is that we ought to recognize and explicitly admit that our evidence, grounds, or arguments for our controversial views do not warrant outright belief in our philosophical views, and as such, we should describe ourselves as arguing in favor of our speculations.

### **3.2 The Consequences of Adopting SN**

In this subsection, I develop the claim that the widespread adoption of SN would, on balance, negatively affect the self-conception of academic philosophy. But first, we should be careful here, because Goldberg also advances the descriptive claim that *some* philosophers have already adopted weak doxastic attitudes, like speculation, when they assert and defend their preferred philosophical positions (2013b: 284). On this basis, one might object that, by claiming that academic philosophy would change greatly if SN was widely adopted, I thereby beg the question against Goldberg.

I offer the following reply to this worry. While it may be the case that *some* philosophers have adopted something like SN when they assert their philosophical views, it is not the case that this norm has been adopted by philosophers *en masse*. To see whether Goldberg is right about attitudinal speculation, we would need to see if there is a substantial subset of philosophers who would admit that the evidence and arguments they marshal to support their views is so inconclusive or non-dispositive as to preclude outright belief as rash

or overly dogmatic. While I have neither seen nor generated data on this question, I find it highly unlikely that most philosophers would admit to this practice, and this is precisely why Goldberg advances SN: whether or not we have already widely adopted SN, he argues that *we should*.

Setting aside this descriptive claim, we may evaluate the consequences of widely adopting the normative claim. First, we might be pushed to adopt SN in the interest of preserving/encouraging *cognitive diversity*, or the proliferation of various different viewpoints in philosophical discourse.<sup>8</sup> If enough philosophers adopted conciliationist norms, while also maintaining a belief norm, they would plausibly converge upon or move closer to majority opinion, as a result of conciliating. This would discourage cognitive diversity; after all, the advancement of diverse philosophical views, in tension with one another, is bound to create disagreement over various target propositions.

Second, the widespread adoption of SN might allow philosophers to evaluate views based purely on merit and not on other considerations. Maybe we philosophers would be producing papers with a higher quality of argumentation because we would just focus on asserting views, and objections to them, as objectively as possible without being saddled by dogmatism. So the widespread adoption of SN may benefit the profession in this way as well.

As for the former benefit, cognitive diversity certainly seems like a good thing to encourage in this discipline. However, I doubt that the adoption of a strict belief norm, governing the assertion of philosophical views, would actually prohibit cognitive diversity. Inquiry requires a finite slate of relevant alternatives that we “test”, and in the case of philosophy, we “test” views by considering what effects their adoption would have, as well as consider their internal coherence, overall plausibility, likely objections to which they are

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<sup>8</sup> See Kitcher (1990) for a classic statement of this concept.

vulnerable, and so on. If the set of relevant alternatives is infinite, or even extremely high in number, then inquiry becomes difficult, if not impossible. We must have some kind of limitation imposed upon philosophical inquiry; I argue that a belief norm would still allow a diverse array of philosophical viewpoints to be asserted and proliferate, while also limiting the overall set of relevant alternatives.

The other benefit I pointed out related to dogmatism: perhaps the widespread adoption of SN would decrease the level of dogmatism we philosophers have towards our asserted views. Although, again, it is unclear that a belief norm would increase dogmatic defenses of our philosophical positions. There may be some philosophers who are speculating when they assert their philosophical views and defend them in public fora, but most philosophers believe at least some of their views. It seems unfair to accuse *these* philosophers of widespread dogmatism unless they change their professional norm of assertion to SN (or something similar to it).

Turning away from possible benefits, let us consider some possible negative consequences of adopting SN. First, I would like to point out a *prima facie* tension in admitting that one's evidence falls short of some evidential bar for a strong attitude like belief that- $p$  and asserting a view as truth or publishing it without some sort of hedge. But this is exactly what is required by SN. When we speculate that- $p$ , this is tantamount to asserting " $p$  and my evidence does not warrant belief in  $p$ ", which has a Moorean-paradoxical flavor. A philosopher admitting that she does not believe in  $p$  plausibly robs her initial assertion of  $p$  (or argument for  $p$ ) of some suasive force.

Second, while it might be minimally harmful for a few philosophers to speculate when they assert their philosophical views and defend them publicly, the widespread

implementation of SN could damage the profession. We would lose some amount of our suasive force and epistemic authority if we began to consider our profession as one in which we assert  $p$  without regarding the total evidence for  $p$  as strong enough to warrant belief that- $p$ . In this way, adopting SN would weaken all philosophical assertion. An even more worrying consequence is that asserting and defending a speculated philosophical view in print, or other media, might strike those unfamiliar with philosophy as misrepresentation. If I vehemently defend  $p$  as if it is true, but when pressed admit that all of my evidence and arguments for  $p$  do not warrant belief that- $p$ , I could plausibly be accused of misrepresenting my attitude towards  $p$ .

It seems like Goldberg wants there to be a kind of background assumption amongst philosophers that the evidence we marshal for controversial philosophical views will never warrant belief because belief is “defeated” by the presence of evidence from disagreement. But we should not assume that outsiders to philosophy (and those philosophers who are not familiar with SN) hold this default assumption; for them, the straightforward inference is that a philosopher asserts  $p$  because the total evidence for  $p$  is strongly dispositive and warrants belief and not mere speculation.

Now, Goldberg could object that my concerns are unfounded because SN would actually allow philosophers to be more intellectually modest when they assert  $p$ , by admitting that they just regard  $p$  as “more likely” than *not- $p$*  rather than claiming some stronger attitude towards  $p$ . Nevertheless, I would reply that the widespread adoption of SN would actually result in a kind of intellectual immodesty precisely because it licenses the public assertion and defense of  $p$  when  $p$  is held on the basis of mere speculation. This would in turn allow the publication of our speculated views, as if we believe them, which is close to sophistry.

While I concede that Goldberg might be right in saying that there are *some* philosophers who currently speculate when they assert philosophical views, we should resist any push for this to become mainstream philosophical practice.

## 4 Disagreement-Insulated Inclination

### 4.1 The Proposal

Barnett takes a distinctly different approach to his NB view; he argues that philosophical views should be formed as *disagreement-insulated inclinations*, because the acceptance of conciliationist norms undermines rational belief in our philosophical views (2019: 110). He claims that, when considering a philosophical position and whether it is worth asserting and defending, we must assess all evidence minus that evidence supplied by the facts about the disagreement and agreement of peers (120). Barnett writes:

[...] we should try to reason in a way that is insulated from certain evidence, including the evidence we get from disagreement, in determining our [philosophical] views. (*ibid.*)<sup>9</sup>

Once we insulate ourselves in this fashion, we may determine what view *p* we are inclined towards and then assert and defend *p* on this basis (125). Barnett's remarks suggest the following norm:

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<sup>9</sup> Barnett himself claims that the evidence of disagreement is just *one* kind of higher order evidence from which we might plausibly insulate ourselves (2019: 119-120). However, he focuses primarily on insulation from the evidence of disagreement, so I do the same in this paper.



*Disagreement-Insulated Inclination Norm (DIIN)*: It is permissible for *S* to assert a philosophical view *p* if *p* is the view that *S* would be inclined to towards *p* were *S* to ignore the fact of disagreement.

In other words, we should specifically “insulate” ourselves from higher-order evidence which includes the intradisciplinary popularity of various philosophical views, in the hopes that we may come to hold, and thereafter assert, our positions without being influenced -- or at least unduly influenced -- by evidence from disagreement. In this way, DIIN would allow us to rationally assert a “long-shot” view, which is unpopular or considered unlikely to be true by one’s peers.

Let us imagine that *S* is researching the various accounts on offer in the literature on normative ethics. While most researchers seem to favor (broadly speaking) utilitarian, deontological, or virtue ethical normative ethical theories, *S* comes to think that there might be some real insight gained from presenting an alternate account. This view is considered unlikely by many of *S*’s peers, but -- in assessing its relative merits -- *S* attempts to bracket, or set aside, all evidence of peer disagreement and in so doing, becomes inclined towards her own account as a result of her concerted effort to self-insulate. In this way, just like SN, DIIN seems to carve a reasonable space for researchers like *S* to assert and defend diverse views without being beholden to something like a stronger belief-norm of philosophical inquiry.

#### **4.2 Consequences of Adopting DIIN**

In this subsection, I argue against DIIN because of the negative consequences which would plausibly stem from its adoption. According to Barnett,

[...] when someone is doing philosophy with the aim of determining her philosophical views, she should not be evaluating all the evidence she has.

(121)

So we must simply “bracket” -- or set aside -- higher order evidence of intradisciplinary disagreement when we form our own philosophical views. One problem, which should go without saying, is that this is more easily advised than accomplished. Despite the fact that Barnett *does* discuss bracketing in several places (cf. 2019: 120, 122-124, 132), he does not go into much detail on how feasible it would be for philosophers to widely engage in this practice.

In an attempt to motivate his view, Barnett points out that jurors often engage in this practice when exposed to inadmissible evidence in court proceedings (120-121). But while it is one thing for a jury to bracket evidence during their deliberations, it is another thing entirely for philosophers to insulate themselves from disagreement in the process of forming their inclinations towards certain philosophical positions, and then asserting and defending these views on this basis. For the DIIN to be a plausible epistemic norm for us to adopt, Barnett would need to convincingly argue that the jury case is analogous to the case of academic philosophy.

However, the manner in which philosophers would achieve such insulation from higher order evidence from disagreement seems far less clear than how jurors might do so; after all, philosophical communities are unlike juries! Philosophers defend their views and consider various sources of evidence in multiple scenarios where there often is not a clean dividing line between the context in which they assert and defend these views and the rest of

their lives. Yet, in the case of a jury, there *is* a clean line. As soon they leave the courtroom or a trial ends, jurors in a given case may readily admit that they thought the defendant was guilty while at the same time conceding that the evidence presented to them was not sufficient to sustain that verdict. By contrast, it would be bizarre if a philosopher came to a conference, asserted and defended  $p$  fervently without any hedging, but then afterwards admitted that they were merely inclined towards  $p$ . So I worry that, given the disanalogy between philosophers and jurors, the DIIN is impractical to implement which it makes it an improper norm for philosophers to widely adopt.

It is possible that Barnett could push back on this point and argue that, whether or not it is wholly practical to implement, DIIN is a norm which philosophers should still strive to adopt nonetheless. To this end, one might object that my criticisms of DIIN, an epistemic norm, on purely pragmatic grounds is misguided. Yet I would counter this objection by offering a deeper worry for the widespread adoption of DIIN: it seems plausible that philosophers should engage with the plurality of differing philosophical views taken seriously by peers or members of our community when forming their own positions. But this practice is proscribed by DIIN, which is harmful because it is by the very process of determining what is widely accepted or has advocates in the field of philosophy that we are able to survey the territory of our profession.

Compare philosophy to the sciences. Some scientists argue for minority positions or challenge widely accepted theories, but scientists have a definite idea of what the majority opinions or “relevant alternatives” in the subfields of the sciences are. When a scientist begins to theorize beyond the data available to them, they are engaging in an important part of the scientific process, although they make it clear that in so doing, they are going beyond

the evidence. In this respect, for a scientist to insulate themselves from the evidence of disagreement would be to greatly hinder the progress of science and undermine the professional rigor of scientific fields of study. I argue that the same is true of philosophy. Insulating from evidence of disagreement when forming our philosophical views is a vice -- not a virtue -- which is why we should resist DIIN's widespread adoption.

## 5 Endorsement

### 5.1 The Proposal

Fleisher (2018) argues for a more general NB norm than Goldberg and Barnett, wherein the appropriate propositional attitude to adopt is *endorsement*, which he characterizes in the following way:<sup>10</sup>

Endorsement is a doxastic attitude, but one which is governed by a different type of epistemic rationality. This inclusive epistemic rationality is sensitive to reasons beyond those to think the particular proposition is true. (2018: 2649)

Fleisher views the attitude of endorsement as superior to belief in research contexts. The latter attitude is directed at truth; it is a plausible doxastic norm that we seek to believe only those things which are true. Yet endorsement is not limited by this constraint.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Fleisher applies his endorsement account to specific issues, such as publishing, assertion, and conciliationism in his (2020, 2021a, 2021b) respectively.

<sup>11</sup> N.B. Fleisher makes a brief mention of restricting endorsements to those claims which are not subject to overriding moral considerations. This is to preempt objections relating to the endorsement of minority theories like the denial of anthropogenic climate change (2018: 2655 fn. 14).

In fact, Fleisher stipulates that we are permitted to endorse a view  $p$  in a given research domain even in the face of peer disagreement or other contrary evidence (2018: 2653). So in order to permissibly endorse, and on this basis assert,  $p$  we need only have some minimal credence in its truth in order to “promote healthy inquiry” about  $p$ .<sup>12</sup> This makes endorsement more “resilient” than belief, where the former attitude is not subject to being undermined by the adoption of conciliationist norms (2020: 9916-9917).

As a descriptive matter, Fleisher claims that “at least some” researchers, including academic philosophers, who advance controversial claims endorse *those claims* in the sense he has defined, but they do not believe them (2018: 2655). As a normative matter, Fleisher argues that this is as it should be; in other words, the appropriate attitude to have towards our preferred theories -- in philosophy, science, etc. -- is often endorsement, as he defines it, rather than belief (*ibid.*). So consider the following normative principle, suggested by Fleisher’s analysis:

*Endorsement Norm (EN):* It is permissible for  $S$  to assert a philosophical view  $p$  if  $S$  endorses  $p$  (in the sense of ‘endorsement’ defined above).

## 5.2 Consequences of Adopting EN

Before discussing the possible positive and negative consequences of widely adopting EN, I again want to clear away a *prima facie* worry that I beg the question; after all, Fleisher claims that some philosophers are likely already “endorsing” the views they assert. Here I repeat my

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<sup>12</sup> More fully, Fleisher gives the following conditions for this attitude: “ $S$  endorses  $p$  in a research domain  $d$  only if: 1.  $S$  is disposed to assert that  $p$ , or otherwise express commitment to  $p$  (in  $d$ ); 2.  $S$  takes herself to be obligated to defend  $p$  (in  $d$ ); 3.  $S$  treats  $p$  as a premise in her further reasoning (in  $d$ ); 4.  $S$  shapes her research program in  $d$  (in part) based on  $p$ ; 5.  $S$  is resiliently committed to  $p$  (in  $d$ ); 6.  $S$  takes  $p$  to be a live option (i.e., she does not know  $p$  is false); 7. In endorsing  $p$ ,  $S$  aims to promote healthy inquiry.” (2018: 2652)

claim from §3.2: it is *not* the case that philosophers are already endorsing *en masse*, which is exactly why Fleisher offers EN -- because he argues that researchers in general (including philosophers) *should* endorse their held views, or research positions, rather than believe them. Therefore, my own argument against Fleisher is not question-begging.

Having set that initial worry aside, we may survey some of the potential consequences of widely adopting EN. First, on the positive side, EN -- like SN -- seems to create a reasonable space for increasing cognitive diversity in philosophy. Let us again use normative ethics as an example field of study: Imagine that *S* is researching a minority position in the literature on normative ethics which we will call  $p_{\text{norm}}$ . *S* herself rejects  $p_{\text{norm}}$ , but she also realizes that the existing objections to  $p_{\text{norm}}$  are not that strong; moreover, she has even considered creative ways of strengthening  $p_{\text{norm}}$  to withstand the current objections. In light of these considerations, perhaps *S* should assert  $p_{\text{norm}}$  in order to contribute fruitfully to the public debate about normative ethics. This is precisely the approach to research prescribed by EN, which permits us to either assert minority philosophical positions without having to hold some stronger attitude (e.g., belief) towards them. Thus, *S*'s assertion of  $p_{\text{norm}}$  would contribute to philosophy's cognitive diversity, which might (arguably) benefit the profession, whereas a strict belief norm might prohibit such behavior.

According to this picture, the philosophical debate surrounding  $p_{\text{norm}}$  would resemble something like sophistry, a complex rhetorical exercise or game, where each disputant asserts and defends a given thesis in the hopes that their contribution to the debate moves the original discussion forward. Were this to become widespread practice, EN would go from being a mere normative proposal to a description of the very practice that philosophers take themselves to be engaged in (and take themselves to be beholden to), *qua* academic

philosophers. For example, we would be entitled to ask *S*: “Do you really *believe*  $p_{\text{norm}}$ ?”.

And her answer would have to be “I merely *endorse*  $p_{\text{norm}}$ ”, because any “belief-talk,” when reporting her pro-attitude towards  $p_{\text{norm}}$  would violate EN.

But, again, I worry that this conception of the practice of academic philosophy would have negative consequences were it to be widely implemented. For one, EN neither requires any strong confidence in the truth of the theories for which we advocate nor does it require any hedging of our philosophical assertions to indicate our confidence level in them. So if *S* has a 0.5 credence in the truth of  $p_{\text{norm}}$  and a 0.1 credence in an alternate view,  $p_{\text{norm}*}$ , EN licenses her to assert and defend each of these publicly. Even though there is a discrepancy in her relative confidence in these two theses, her assertions of each would appear identical when advanced in public fora.

It is not too much of a stretch to imagine that many (if not most) philosophers today fashion themselves as those who are seeking truth or understanding, rather than those who plump for views which they have little confidence in.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, lawyers often take up the cause of clients whose innocence they doubt; they “endorse” (in an ordinary language sense) the view that their client is not in the wrong (or at least not as fully culpable as the plaintiff’s counsel alleges), and they defend this position publicly. Yet, in private, they may readily admit that their client *is* in fact culpable for wrongdoing. It seems that *S*’s endorsement of  $p_{\text{norm}}$  is similar to a lawyer taking on a client; *S* asserts  $p_{\text{norm}}$  and defends it publicly, although when pressed she might admit that she has very low credence in its truth.

At this point, we may worry about whether or not philosophy would lose either its vigorous passion or its seriousness as a field if EN were to be widely adopted. Fleisher could

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<sup>13</sup> Data from the PhilPapers 2020 survey indicate that the vast majority of respondents identified one or both of these as the aim(s) of philosophy (Bourget and Chalmers 2021: 7, 40).

certainly counter here, maintaining that lawyers still *seem* to conduct themselves with passion, even if they sometimes have minimal credence in the innocence of their clients. Clearly law is still taken seriously as a field, so there must be some other reason to resist the adoption of EN.

One straightforward way for me to respond is by maintaining that we should not desire for academic philosophy to be similar to law. In an ideal sense, the aim of law is something like the pursuit of truth or justice. But we all know how often that is undermined by a variety of factors unrelated to what is “just”, or fair. If philosophy plausibly aims at truth or understanding, this might be undermined by a norm which allows us to proliferate our field of discourse with many different asserted positions whose truth we doubt. This would in turn take away some of the seriousness and passion in philosophical debates, which in itself is a reason to reject the widespread adoption of EN.

More generally I claim that, without a belief norm for asserting and defending our philosophical views, there would be improper limitations on philosophical discourse. If we again compare philosophy to law, we find that there is a sense in which the scope of relevant alternatives in any given legal case is more or less dialectically limited, because the courts *themselves* establish who has the burden of proof. In US criminal cases, this burden falls upon the prosecution; the defense may win a case without presenting any evidence of innocence -- they need only establish that the prosecution fails to make a case for guilt to the appropriate standard (i.e., beyond a “reasonable doubt”). This standard is not always co-extensive with ascertaining the “truth” (e.g., whether a defendant *X* committed the criminal act with which they are charged), because our courts seek to avoid punishing the innocent. In law this seems appropriate, but not so in philosophy; after all, the “costs” of



being wrong in a philosophical debate are much lower than the relevant stakes in a legal case. Thus, we should strive for “truth” in philosophy and proceed with proper limits on philosophical discourse, where what is needed is some limitation on how and when we are permitted to assert our philosophical views.

Returning to our earlier example, if  $S$  is permitted to assert and defend  $p_{\text{norm}}$ , which she does not think is a particularly credible position, there is little to stop her from inventing or coming up with many more positions (like  $p_{\text{norm}^*}$ ,  $p_{\text{norm}^{**}}$ , and so on) and mapping all of the potential alternatives to her account of normative ethics. This risks turning philosophical inquiry into something more similar to sophistry, an (albeit complex) rhetorical exercise or game, rather than a serious field aimed at attaining truth or understanding. However, if  $S$  adopted a belief norm for asserting her philosophical views, things would be different. We would not question whether or not  $S$  asserts  $p_{\text{norm}}$  because she merely wants to add something on to an existing debate. Instead, we could be confident that  $S$  asserts  $p_{\text{norm}}$  because she believes in its truth, and as such she intends to move the debate on normative ethics "forward" in a real way: i.e., in the direction of the truth.

Thus far I have been addressing whether or not it should be permissible for a  $S$  to assert a philosophical position  $p$  -- where this entails  $S$  publishing an assertion of  $p$ , giving conference talks defending  $p$ , etc. -- on the basis of merely “endorsing”  $p$ . But we should also consider the perspective of those people, i.e., referees, commentators, or editors, who *evaluate*  $S$ 's assertions and decide whether to accept her paper to a conference or journal, or cite her work. I lack space in this project to develop this point fully, but I would like to note that there is a real argument to be made that referees should discourage work in which it is clear that the author is making a merely clever point that they cannot be serious about

asserting. If *S* asserts an incredible, yet clever, claim that no one would reasonably believe then she is engaged in something akin to sophistry which would detract from the professional seriousness of philosophy. For a referee or editor, this is a plausible reason against accepting a paper where *S* advances such a view.

In sum, while it may be true that EN might increase the value given to creativity and novelty *for the sake of novelty* in forming views, its widespread adoption would diminish the value of these new arguments. Instead, the profession would be rewarding novelty for its own sake rather than novelty in service of the overarching goal of trying to push "forward" (i.e. towards the truth) what look to be intractable debates whose relevant alternatives are well established because they are all credible. According to EN, we should instead be coming up with incredible alternatives, rather than trying to come up with something that will push the dialectic on the narrower range of actually believed alternatives. By adopting EN, our profession would become less workmen-like, more like poetry and less like science. It would become more creative, more like art, but less serious. Any potential gains in cognitive diversity that might be had by the adoption of EN are not worth this potential cost to the profession.

## **6 The Philosophical Belief Norm**

### **6.1 The Proposal**

In this section, I argue that when we engage in academic philosophy and assert our positions we should be reporting or expressing our beliefs -- not mere speculations, inclinations, or endorsements. This is in tension with the alternate norms that we have examined thus far, i.e.,

norms whose adoption would permit us to rationally assert our philosophical views on the basis of doxastic attitudes weaker than belief. Consider the following norm:

*Philosophical Belief Norm (PBN)*: It is permissible for *S* to assert a philosophical view *p* only if *S* believes that *p*.

I neither intend to give a full account of belief in this section, nor argue for PBN from the ground up. Rather, I show that one of the central motivations for rejecting belief-norms is wrongheaded: namely, I argue that conciliationist norms lack applicability to many instances of philosophical disagreement because -- unlike *RESTAURANT* -- they rarely involve a simple disagreement on a target proposition, and even when this is the case, there often exist different candidate explanations as to the root of a philosophical disagreement that do not entail that one's disputant is just as likely to be correct.

## **6.2 Philosophical Disagreements are Unlike *RESTAURANT***

Towards the end of §2, I presented a simple argument for rejecting belief, which hinges on the strength of two claims: 1) *Conciliationism* and 2) *Applicability*. Given that conciliationism is a widely influential normative claim, I do not impugn its plausibility here; rather, I take issue with *Applicability*. To this end, I aim to challenge the purported analogy between cases like *RESTAURANT* and many instances of philosophical disagreement. If we deny the applicability of conciliationist norms in the latter cases, then we are not required (by our endorsement of conciliationist norms) to adjust our levels of credence in our philosophical views when faced with disagreement. Therefore, we may rationally continue to

maintain belief in our philosophical views in spite of this evidence from disagreement. And if this is the case, then we have no motivation to reject PBN.

When we find ourselves in any disagreement, we should begin by asking ourselves what the best explanation of the relevant disagreement is. In this way, we begin a process of determining *why* we are in a given disagreement. Often, we assess this via abduction, a form of inferential reasoning, which is often taken to be synonymous with “inference to the best explanation”. Here is a representative gloss on this concept, from Gilbert Harman:

In making this [an abductive] inference one infers, from the fact that a certain hypothesis would explain the evidence, to the truth of that hypothesis. (1965: 89)

Using Harman’s definition, we can examine the role that abductive inference plays in *RESTAURANT*, where Allison believes that she and Marc each owe \$43 whereas Marc believes they both owe \$45 on their bill. Their answers are both reasonable, so each of them may infer that the best explanation for their disagreement is a localized lapse in mathematical ability, i.e., one of them made a mistake in his or her calculations. Because of this, their joint acceptance of conciliationist norms (or abhorrence of excessive dogmatism) and judgment of epistemic peerhood leads them to either conciliate or suspend belief entirely.

Nevertheless, I contend that cases of philosophical disagreement are unlike *RESTAURANT*: in the former cases, there are often multiple candidate explanations as to the source of a disagreement which do not entail that our opponents are as likely as us to arrive at the correct answer, after having assessed the available evidence. Once we make this

abductive inference, and we judge that these candidate explanations cannot be ruled out, it no longer makes sense to apply conciliationist norms.

In order to bring out the disanalogy between *RESTAURANT* and many philosophical disagreements, it is useful to turn to some recent empirical data. We now have resources, such as the PhilPapers Survey, which detail a number of the major points of contention in contemporary philosophy (Bourget and Chalmers 2021). For example, the latest PhilPapers Survey asked respondents to select a preferred normative ethical view from a list of options (2021: 10). Virtue ethics was the “plurality” held view, although only thirty-seven percent of total respondents favored it. Imagine that *S* is a deontologist. If she accepts conciliationist norms, and thinks that the other respondents to this survey are just as likely as her to be correct, it follows that she should revise her degree of belief in whether or not deontology is the correct approach to normative ethics because to do otherwise would not be rational.

But *S* rushing to conciliate, when faced with intradisciplinary disagreement, seems a bit rash. After all, these data are limited because they only provide a ranking of which philosophical positions the respondents prefer; in other words, the PhilPapers Survey results do not detail disagreement over a target proposition in the same way that *RESTAURANT* does. Instead, the data tell us whether or not philosophers prefer one approach over another with respect to a given field or subfield of philosophy. Furthermore, on the subject of preferred normative ethical theories, eighteen percent of respondents selected “other” which indicates that there is confusion over how the relevant theoretical space should be carved up in this subfield. Moreover, nearly all PhilPapers Survey questions have a category titled “other” or “unspecified” with a substantive subset of respondents indicating that their held view does not align with the way the survey construes the question. This shows us that a

number of the parties to a given philosophical disagreement think that their opponents are possibly not even disagreeing with them about the truth of any particular proposition, *per se*. Rather, they are miscommunicating or confused or talking past each other in some other way. So these survey data merely detail broad disagreement between various orientations or approaches to substantive philosophical questions (e.g., “What is the most promising approach to normative ethics?”).

As such, this information does not drive us towards the acceptance or implementation of conciliationist norms, which would only be applicable when the following conditions obtain: there is a particular proposition whose truth we disagree about; we are convinced that we disagree on the same proposition (i.e., one’s disputant is denying what you assert); and that same disputed proposition has a truth value (either it is true or it is not). Of course, conciliationists would argue that philosophy is made up of many disagreements that meet these conditions, so conciliation is therefore required in *those* cases.

Returning to our example from §5, let’s say that *S* has come to believe that  $p_{\text{norm}}$  is the correct normative ethical theory, and following PBN, she asserts and defends  $p_{\text{norm}}$  in the relevant public fora of philosophical discourse like journals, conferences, etc. Nevertheless, there are many other philosophers who disagree with her. The first question *S* must ask herself is “*Why* do we disagree?”. If the obvious answer to *that* question is that either *S* or those whom she disagrees with made a brute error in calculation, and her background belief is that she and her disputants are just as likely to have made this sort of error, then the case is relevantly like *RESTAURANT* and *S* should conciliate. Failing to do so would amount to a dogmatic insistence on the accuracy of her calculation in comparison to someone whom she believes to be just as skilled in this arena. But in many philosophical instances (including this

imagined disagreement about  $p_{\text{norm}}$ ) the competing views are not the products of calculation in any obvious way, and no disputant has any great insight into which of the many possible objections or differences in orientation account for the particular disagreement she has with those in her field.

The possible explanations for a philosophical disagreement are inevitably manifold, because there is a sense in which philosophy is unavoidably vague. For example, the disagreement about  $p_{\text{norm}}$  is not even about a single proposition; it is unclear whether  $S$ 's statement of  $p_{\text{norm}}$  is vague or admits of multiple interpretations; and, even if  $S$  and her interlocutors emerged from a thorough process of clarification with their disagreement intact, it is unclear that they would agree on enough to consider themselves peers on the issue at hand.

Now, one might object that there must be *some* cases in which a disagreement has been so well established and long-standing that the "ground-clearing" has been done over the course of months or years and what remains has been reduced to a disagreement over a single target proposition. One could insist that -- in these cases -- there must be some pressure to conciliate. Consider a real case: David Lewis and Peter van Inwagen famously debated over whether *incompatibilism* is true (van Inwagen 1998: 34). This instance of disagreement was sustained over the course of years; certainly, it seems plausible to assume that they did all the relevant ground-clearing: mapping each other's arguments by situating them in the broader context of the free-will debate, carefully considering each possible position, and so on. Here, one could compare Lewis and van Inwagen's disagreement to Allison and Marc in *RESTAURANT*, and insist that either one or both of these philosophers should adjust their

confidence in their positions or suspend judgment entirely with respect to the target proposition.

However, even if we grant that Lewis and van Inwagen's debate can be boiled down to a disagreement about the truth of a single proposition, without any vagueness or unclarity affecting their dialectic, there still exist candidate explanations as to the root of their disagreement which do not entail that either should conciliate. After all, van Inwagen is a theist; he has strong, dispositive reasons to believe that "free will" and determinism are incompatible! Lewis, by contrast, has strong non-theistic motivation to defend compatibilism. In this instance, neither of these philosophers should feel pressure to conciliate because of these extant candidate explanations as to the root cause of their disagreement. If we compare this example to *RESTAURANT*, where the best explanation for Allison and Marc's disagreement is a brute error in calculation, it becomes clear that the two cases are disanalogous. So, even if a philosophical disagreement can be narrowed down to a disagreement about the truth of a single proposition, there still exist plausible best explanations which do not entail that either party should conciliate.

At this point, we might wonder whether we can alter *RESTAURANT* in order to make it more similar to the complexity of a real philosophical debate, so that we may elicit the right intuitions. Let us imagine *RESTAURANT\**, where twenty different diners have eaten together. Unlike *RESTAURANT*, in this case there are eight different bills and it is unclear how many people ate from which dishes, and it is unclear who is supposed to be paying whom for which bill. Allison and Marc are just *two* of the twenty diners, and they are trying to figure out how much each party owes. This scenario is bound to create disagreement. And all this unclarity and confusion might boil down to one being misaligned with another diner



on *any* of the relevant propositions. Before Allison or Marc would even consider conciliating, they would need to make sure that they had been very careful in their *own* calculation and they would want to confirm that their disputant had also carefully calculated their own amount owed (e.g., by determining how many people ate from each dish at each table and whether those people were on the same bill). The upshot of *RESTAURANT\** is that there would be so much mapping of the relevant terrain in this “debate”, before we would be even able to reduce it down to individual disagreements over the truth of various propositions.

Yet one might counter that, in *RESTAURANT\**, Allison and Marc should each stop asserting  $p$ , once they have (at the very least) identified that  $p$  is subject to disagreement, even if they have not gone through all of the (most likely) explanations of this disagreement. Perhaps it would be better for them to withhold their belief in  $p$ , and not assert  $p$ , until they determine the exact nature of their disagreement with the other diners. After all, this variation is much more complex than Christensen’s original *RESTAURANT* case: Allison and Marc are no longer assessing each other solely on the basis of how good their arithmetical skills are; instead, they are assessing each other on the basis of how adept each of them are at solving the much more complex problem of figuring out a bill to be split twenty ways where there is confusion at every step of this process.

So, in *RESTAURANT\**, it is harder to tell if each interlocutor or disputant is a peer, or if their position should be taken seriously, because it is not a mere question of calculation. Now Allison and Marc must assess whether each of them, and the other diners, are as good at defining the problem at hand. There are two obvious ways we can imagine this complex disagreement playing out. In one case, Marc has decided that each diner owes  $X$  amount,

despite having not done much to be certain that he has identified exactly how many diners have eaten on which bill and who owes what sum of money to whom. This would be like if Marc, being very new to a philosophical debate, suddenly took up a strong position before realizing that this particular field of discourse is much more subtle than he previously thought -- maybe his disputants interpret the given question differently than he does -- so Marc should not be so confident in his original stance. Therefore, Marc should plausibly lower his credence in  $p$ , and stop asserting  $p$ , because either he has not done enough mapping of the relevant positions in this debate or he suspects that his disputant *has* done more “research”.

We can also imagine a different version of *RESTAURANT\**, in which Allison has put a lot of time and energy into mapping all of the relevant alternatives in the dispute about their shared bill. She has weighed the evidence for and against her position in a way that is more similar to the Lewis/van Inwagen debate, so she should feel confident that -- at least with regard to her particular set of interlocutors -- she has done more work than them in terms of defining the question or understanding the terrain of their debate. Allison cannot rule out the live possibility that her interlocutors are confused on the nature of their disagreement, or that maybe they reject her position because it does not align with their intuitions about the proper analysis of  $p$ , and so on. Of course, Allison should not say these things aloud to her disputants, but they are rational possibilities for her to entertain. And when she is engaged in this process of assessing competitor candidate explanations, she should feel no pressure to either withhold her assertion of  $p$  or conciliate to her disputant's position.

At this point, one might object that, if my insight about abductive inference and candidate best explanations in philosophical disagreements is so intuitive, it seems odd that other philosophers have not already made a similar observation. While I cannot conduct a

poll and determine exactly why the role of abductive inference in disagreements has been overlooked, I can offer one possible diagnosis: the philosophical literature has been overly focused on whether or not disagreements are between “peers” in some technical sense, as a prerequisite condition established prior to conciliating. “Peerhood” is not a sufficiently refined category. What occurs in cases of disagreement is more like a general assessment of how likely our disputant is to be incorrect versus how likely we are to be incorrect on a target issue and those likelihoods have to do with *explaining why* you disagree, which is a complex matter in cases of philosophical disagreement. When we entertain the various explanations for our disagreement, and semantically ascend and look back down at these debates, it seems rational (just like it does in science) to apply inference to the best explanation, and that might *not* lead us to adjust our degree of belief in light of the disagreement. The judgment, of whether they are a peer or not, does not enter into it -- at least not in the technical sense often stipulated by the philosophical literature on disagreement.

## **7 Conclusion**

The general lesson of this paper is that the widespread adoption of NB norms would be risky for the profession of academic philosophy. I have tried to give an assessment of the possible risks of a substantial number of philosophers asserting theses they do not believe.

Furthermore, I have argued that we need not be driven to abandon belief by the application of conciliationist norms because many philosophical disagreements are disanalogous to cases like *RESTAURANT* where these norms *do* plausibly apply. Thus, we may rationally retain PBN and continue asserting our controversial philosophical views on the basis of belief.

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