

# REPLY TO PALMIRA

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ABSTRACT: In “Philosophical Peer Disagreement” I argued that in order to properly account for the phenomenon of philosophical peer disagreement it is necessary to drop the ‘same evidence’ condition from the definition of epistemic peerage. The reason is the following: different philosophical perspectives might come with different commitments concerning the evidential role of the same piece of data, and it would be wrong to deny the status of epistemic peer to someone that is acquainted with the same data, even if he does not consider it plays an evidential role. However, on “On the Necessity of the Evidential Equality Condition For Epistemic Peerage,” Michele Palmira has developed some criticisms to these ideas. Here I defend my view from Palmira’s objections.

KEYWORDS: philosophical peer disagreement, ‘same evidence’ condition, Michele Palmira

In “Philosophical Peer disagreement,” I defended some ideas concerning the nature of peer disagreement within philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Back then, I contended that the notion of ‘epistemic peer’ commonly found in the literature should be modified in order to properly account for the phenomenon of *philosophical* peer disagreement. I suggested the following definitions:

**Strong Epistemic Peer** Two agents are strong epistemic peers when (1) they have approximately the same epistemic virtues, (2) acknowledge the same facts and (3) their epistemic perspectives are sufficiently alike.

**Weak Epistemic Peer** Two agents are weak epistemic peers when (1) they have approximately the same epistemic virtues, (2) acknowledge the same facts but (3) their epistemic perspectives relevantly diverge.<sup>2</sup>

The main idea is that we should drop the ‘same evidence’ condition from the definition, because whether an item counts as (philosophical) evidence -as much as the epistemic weight it has, in the case that it does count as evidence- depends ultimately on the subject’s epistemic perspective, that is, on the epistemic policies and methodological commitments endorsed by the subject. Now, these two notions of epistemic peerage give rise to two different kinds of disagreement. A Strong (peer) Disagreement is a disagreement between weak epistemic peers,

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolás Lo Guercio, “Philosophical Peer Disagreement,” *Logos & Episteme* III, 3 (2012): 459-467.

<sup>2</sup> Lo Guercio, “Philosophical Peer Disagreement,” 462.

namely, a disagreement between subjects with relevantly different epistemic perspectives. A Weak (peer) Disagreement, in turn, is a disagreement between strong epistemic peers, namely, a disagreement between subjects with a sufficiently similar epistemic perspective. Finally, I claimed that different doxastic reactions are required in each case: Strong (peer) Disagreement does not require a significant doxastic revision; in turn, Weak (peer) Disagreement requires a conciliatory response.

In a paper recently published in *Logos & Episteme*, Michele Palmira has presented some criticisms to these ideas.<sup>3</sup> Palmira begins by pointing out that in cases of peer disagreement it is relevant whether the agent involved in the disagreement believes that the other is an epistemic peer, and moreover, whether she has good reasons to do so. I cannot but grant the point here. I agree that whether an agent ought to incur in a doxastic revision in the face of peer disagreement partly depends on whether she believes (and has good reasons to believe) that the other is an epistemic peer, either a weak peer or a strong one. Having this in mind, I can reformulate my view. If an agent believes (and has good reasons to do so) that the party in the disagreement is a weak epistemic peer – namely, someone with a rather different epistemic perspective –, she ought not to significantly revise her beliefs. In turn, if the agent believes (and has good reasons to do so) that the party in the disagreement is a strong peer – namely, someone with a relevantly similar epistemic perspective – she ought to be conciliatory, that is, she ought to incur in a doxastic revision.

Now, that being said, let's move to what I take to be Palmira's main argument against my view. Consider Jennifer and Lucille. Jennifer is a professional philosopher and Lucille is a professional computer scientist. They are discussing what it takes to know a certain proposition. Faced with a Gettier example, they both have the intuition that the subject does not know the proposition in question. According to Palmira's interpretation of my view, this is enough to satisfy condition (2) of epistemic peerage, namely, that the subjects share the facts. Besides, Jennifer and Lucille consider each other equally thoughtful, intelligent, careful and honest. This means that condition (1) is also satisfied – i.e. they have (roughly) the same epistemic virtues. Finally, Jennifer takes intuitions to be philosophical evidence while Lucille does not. So, according to my view, they have different epistemic perspectives. Here the example goes a little more complex. Suppose now that Jennifer and Lucille are aware that a good conception of knowledge has to avoid the problem of skepticism. Lucille is familiar with

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<sup>3</sup> Michele Palmira, "On the Necessity of the Evidential Equality Condition For Epistemic Peerage," *Logos & Episteme* IV, 1 (2013): 113-123.

several arguments concerning skepticism. In particular, she is familiar with Putnam's 'Brain in a vat' scenario. Lucille also happens to be persuaded by Putnam's semantic solution to that problem. However, she isn't aware that Putnam's semantic solution does not affect certain versions of the 'Brain in a vat' scenario.<sup>4</sup> In turn, Jennifer is aware of this fact.

In light of this example, Palmira claims:

... I think that it would be too bald a contention to say that Jennifer takes Lucille to be her epistemic peer on the issue of knowledge. Indeed there is a clear epistemic difference between two subjects that seem to matter once we have to establish whether Jennifer shouldn't change her doxastic attitude after the discovery of disagreement with Jennifer. The epistemic difference lays in a different familiarity with the evidence about the problem of knowledge. Jennifer could (and should) maintain that her friend has underestimated the force of the skeptical challenge since she isn't aware of some crucial evidence, i.e. semantic externalism can't rule out some skeptical scenarios.<sup>5</sup>

The point of the example is that even if Jennifer and Lucille have different epistemic perspectives it still seems to be relevant whether they are acquainted with the same evidence. In the case at hand, the fact that Jennifer is aware that Lucille ignores some information relevant to assess the merits of certain conception of knowledge constitutes a good reason to deny the status of peer to Lucille.

The first point in my answer is the following. I do not claim that the only thing that counts in order to satisfy condition (2) – namely, that the agents share the facts – is that they have the same intuitions concerning the relevant issue. The debate over the evidential role of intuitions is a convenient example for illustrating the point that two philosophers may be acquainted with the same data while assigning a different evidential role to it, but of course intuitions seldom exhaust the data that the philosopher has in mind when forming a philosophical belief. In particular, the existence of 'Brain in a vat' scenarios where Putnam's semantic solution fails constitutes one of those facts (that if we assume, as Palmira seems to do, that intuitions have nothing to do with the relevance of 'Brain in a vat' scenarios for assessing a certain conception of knowledge – more on this below). Thus, according to my view, even if they share the intuitions concerning Gettier examples, Jennifer and Lucille do not share the whole facts, for Lucille is not acquainted with some piece information. Hence, if Jennifer is aware that

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<sup>4</sup> Crispin Wright, "On Putnam's Proof that We Are Not Brains In a Vat," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society* 92 (1992): 67-94.

<sup>5</sup> Palmira, "On the Necessity of the Evidential Equality Condition," 118.

Lucille ignores the relevant 'Brain in a vat' scenarios, she will not take Lucille to be a peer, as Palmira contends. However, this is expected under my view, for condition (2) of epistemic peerage is not fully satisfied.

The second part of my answer concerns the difference in epistemic perspective between Jennifer and Lucille. Palmira affirms that under my view Jennifer and Lucille have relevantly different epistemic perspectives. This is because Jennifer takes intuitions to have an evidential role while Lucille denies intuitions such a status. However, it seems to be implicit in the example that both Jennifer and Lucille take 'Brain in a vat' scenarios to be evidence concerning the issue of skepticism and knowledge as well as for the merits of semantic externalism. Now, the 'Brain in a vat' scenario is a mental experiment. The way mental experiments work is the following: we take intuitions concerning counterfactual situations as relevant evidence in order to assess the merits of a certain concept, in this case, the concept of knowledge. So Palmira's example presupposes that both Jennifer and Lucille agree that intuitions concerning mental experiments as 'Brain in a vat' scenarios provide evidence relevant to assess the merits of a certain conception of knowledge. That means that Palmira's example presupposes that Jennifer and Lucille share the epistemic perspective as far as the role of intuitions is concerned, contrary to what Palmira himself claims—that is, that Jennifer and Lucille does not share the idea that intuitions provide evidence.

But let's ignore this problem for a moment. Let's assume that the relevance of mental experiments such as 'Brain in a vat' scenarios does not have to do with the intuitions raised by them. Even then, granting that Jennifer and Lucille's epistemic perspectives relevantly differ with regard to the evidential role they assign to intuitions does not mean that their perspectives are not similar concerning other features, for example, the evidential role of 'Brain in a vat' scenarios.<sup>6</sup> This fact provides us a good explanation of why Jennifer would probably deny Lucille the status of epistemic peer. Jennifer assumes that, were Lucille aware of the existence of the relevant 'Brain in a vat' scenario, she would consider it relevant evidence. Thus, Lucille lacks a significant piece of evidence (even from Lucille's perspective), and Jennifer knows it. Jennifer believes that, were Lucille acquainted with this datum, she would change her mind—or at least she would take it to have an evidential import. Jennifer denies Lucille the status of epistemic peer because she believes that Lucille does not currently believe what she would were she aware of all the relevant data.

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<sup>6</sup> It seems sufficiently clear to me that two philosophers can disagree concerning the evidential role of intuitions while agreeing concerning the evidential role of other kinds of data, for example, scientific theories.

Things would be different if Lucille had a different assessment of the evidential import of mental experiments such as ‘Brain in a vat’ scenarios in relation to the conception of knowledge. If Lucille believed that results of mental experiments are hardly determinant in assessing the merits of a certain conception of knowledge, and Jennifer were aware of this, it is not clear that Jennifer would deny Lucille even the status of weak epistemic peer. The reason is that, in that case, Jennifer knows that Lucille ignores an argument that she would not see as determinant evidence regarding the relevant issue. Thus, Jennifer knows that Lucille’s doxastic state is not significantly different from what it would be if she was aware of the additional data. That is, Lucille does not ignore any significant argument (significant from Lucille’s perspective).

Finally, consider now the following passage from Palmira’s paper:

As far as I can see, Jennifer has good reasons for not taking Lucille to be her epistemic peer at all. More generally, considerations about possession of evidence or lack thereof seem to be good candidates for playing the role of those epistemic reasons one can appeal to in order to adjudicate one’s opponent’s epistemic credentials.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, my view does not entirely preclude considerations about the possession of evidence from playing a role in attributions of epistemic peerage. As long as I believe that my opponent takes certain datum to be evidence, the lack thereof becomes relevant as to whether I take him to be an epistemic peer. If the result of mental experiments constitutes determinant evidence both from my perspective and from my opponent’s, I will not consider my opponent a peer if she is not aware of the relevant mental experiments. My point is just that, if the result of mental experiments does not constitute determinant evidence from my opponent’s perspective, that she is not aware of some mental experiments is not sufficient for entirely denying her the status of epistemic peer. She would still be a weak epistemic peer.

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<sup>7</sup> Palmira, “On the Necessity of the Evidential Equality Condition,” 118.