Chapter 5: Bootstrapping

In the last chapter, I defended

The Equal Weight View (EWV). For any persons S1 and S2, any proposition p and any time t, if S1 and S2 are in a peer encounter over p at t, then the opinions of S1 and S2 about p at t are worth the same evidentially.

from two more objections from Tom Kelly. In this chapter, I present, explain, and evaluate two additional objections to EWV from Kelly. These fourth and fifth objections from Kelly both claim that EWV entails an objectionable sort of bootstrapping. I argue that both of these bootstrapping objections fail. Let’s consider the fourth objection now.

5. 1 The Fourth Objection: EWV Leads to Implausibly Easy Bootstrapping

Kelly notes that EWV has been associated, by proponents and opponents alike, with a broad and thoroughgoing skepticism.254 This has not been viewed as an attractive consequence of EWV. But Kelly has this to say:

What has thus far not been adequately appreciated about The Equal Weight View is to my mind a much more damning consequence. Namely, that if The Equal Weight View is true, then there will be cases in which rational belief is too easy to come by. That is, views for which there is in fact little good evidence or reason to think true can

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254See Kelly (forthcoming). Kelly cites van Inwagen, Feldman, and Elga as folks who note this alleged skeptical implication.
bootstrap their way into being rationally held simply because two
irrationally overconfident peers encounter one another and confirm
each other’s previously baseless opinions.255

Kelly offers the following case as illustrative:

**Case 5.** You and I both accept The Equal Weight View as a matter of
theory. Moreover, we scrupulously follow it as a matter of practice. At
time t0, each of us has access to a substantial, fairly complicated body
evidence. On the whole this evidence tells against hypothesis H: given
our evidence, the uniquely rational credence for us to have in H is .3.
However, as it happens, both of us badly mistake the import of this
evidence: you give credence .7 to H while I give it .9. At time t1, we
meet and compare notes. Because we both accept The Equal Weight
View, we converge on credence .8.256

Kelly finds it incredible that two individuals who start off with badly irrational views
can then arrive at rational views simply by comparing notes and making public their
positions.

There may be a variety ways of putting this objection, but perhaps the
following argument captures it sufficiently:

**The Bootstrapping Argument Against EWV**

255 See Kelly (forthcoming). Interestingly, Kelly takes it as a kind of theoretical strength of EWV that it
(allegedly) condemns the high confidence many folks seem to have in their philosophical, political,
religious, and other controversial views.

256 See Kelly (forthcoming).
1. If EWV is true, then two peers who irrationally hold the same belief can make that belief rational simply by encountering one another and confirming each other’s beliefs.

2. But it’s not the case that two peers who irrationally hold the same belief can make that belief rational simply by encountering one another and confirming each other’s beliefs.

3. Therefore, EWV is not true.

Case 5 is meant to provide support for line (1). Line (2) registers the conviction that this sort of thing cannot happen. How might a proponent of EWV respond to this valid argument?

An EWV proponent can reject line (1). Once again, as we’ve already argued, we might note that EWV, properly understood, does not have these alleged implications. To begin with, EWV (as Kelly seems to understand it) is a thesis about cases of peer disagreement, and the kind of case Kelly has in mind is not a case of disagreement at all.\(^{257}\) In Case 5, we both affirm that H is true. So it’s hard to see how we can be said to disagree over H. While we do have different credence levels for H, that alone is not enough to secure a disagreement over H. At best, the different credence levels we have for H reflects a disagreement we have over the merits of the case for H. But that’s a different claim altogether.\(^{258}\) So it’s not clear that EWV (as

\(^{257}\) See Chapter 1 for the argument.

\(^{258}\) Compare: “God exists, and the case for God’s existence is extremely strong” and “God exists, but the case for God’s existence is rather modest.” And I say that we have at best a disagreement over the merits of the case for H because we may not have even that. Consider: I may agree with you that the case for H merits, say, a .8 credence level, but be psychologically unable (for whatever reason) to reach a .8 credence level.
Kelly understands it) even applies to this kind of case. Combining this worry with the claim (argued for in the previous chapter) that there is a lot of logical space filled with varying epistemic principles between EWV and the alleged implications Kelly cites, we have excellent reason to deny that EWV implies what Kelly says it implies. So, we can reject line (1).

But let’s set these worries aside.\(^{259}\) Let’s grant that line (1) is true for the sake of discussion. The issue is now whether people can’t arrive at rational beliefs in the way picked out in the argument. That is, we might wonder whether we have good reason to affirm line (2) of the argument.

Obviously, Kelly thinks we do have good reason to affirm line (2). He offers the following kind of consideration in favor of line (2). It’s an extension of Case 5:

Suppose that another pair of peers has access to the same body of evidence. However, both of them evaluate the evidence correctly and thus give credence .3 to the hypothesis. Later, they meet, compare notes, and thus maintain their original opinions. On The Equal Weight View, their later opinion about the hypothesis is no more reasonable than our later opinion is, for their opinion is the uniquely reasonable response to their total evidence, while our opinion is the uniquely reasonable response to our total evidence. If God is rewarding people in proportion to how well their current beliefs reflect their evidence

\(^{259}\) We should particularly set aside the worry that EWV does not apply to this kind of case. As Kelly seems to understand it, it doesn’t apply (since on his understanding EWV is about cases of disagreement, and there is no disagreement here). But we’re not understanding EWV in that way. We’re taking EWV to be a thesis about peer encounter, and that includes both agreement and disagreement.
with respect to this particular hypothesis, He would have no basis for rewarding them more handsomely than He rewards us, since all four of us are doing maximally well. Again, that conclusion seems difficult to endorse.\textsuperscript{260}

I don’t find this line of reasoning compelling.\textsuperscript{261} The reason is quite simple: it’s perfectly plausible to think that two different bodies of evidence, even with significant and extensive overlap, can justify two different hypotheses. (I trust that this is obvious.) And that’s precisely the situation we have here—two different bodies of evidence with significant and extensive overlap. So it’s not crazy to think that these different bodies of evidence might justify two different hypotheses. Kelly would need to say a lot more here.

But that’s just a rejection of Kelly’s defense of line (2). We might wonder whether an EWV proponent can offer reasons for affirming that two persons who irrationally hold the same belief can make that belief rational simply by encountering one another and confirming each other’s beliefs. After all, the EWV proponent is

\textsuperscript{260} See Kelly (forthcoming).
\textsuperscript{261} I’m going to set aside the divine reward consideration that Kelly offers. It is multiply flawed. First, it seems to me be a distraction since it’s even a vexed question whether believing something is the sort of things that can merit reward or punishment in the first place (since it’s not at all clear that believing something is under an agent’s control in the way necessary to merit reward or punishment). Second (and echoing what is in the main text), even though each set of peers arrive at different credences, it is not at all implausible that God would reward both sets of peers equally handsomely since each set of peers is reacting to a different body of evidence. Clearly, there’s no a priori reason for supposing that the two different bodies of evidence rationally demand precisely the same credence level toward H. There’s no good objection here.
(unjustly, I’ve argued) facing the charge of licensing bootstrapping, and that is not supposed to be a good thing here. Nobody wants to be guilty of bootstrapping.262

Well, whether it amounts to licensing bootstrapping or not, it seems that a proponent of EWV can (though need not) sensibly affirm that two persons who irrationally hold the same belief can make that belief rational simply by encountering one another and confirming each other’s beliefs. This might initially sound like a remarkable claim: how can two persons accomplish such an intellectual feat? But there is another way of describing the same feat that makes it seem much more boring, and so far less incredible: two persons who irrationally hold the same belief can make that belief rational simply by getting more evidence, which is precisely what is happening when they encounter each other and confirm each other’s beliefs. Far from being an incredible sort of feat, a belief’s changing from irrational to rational by a change in the relevant evidence base is little more than epistemically routine. It’s epistemically boring, and it happens frequently. So it shouldn’t be terribly surprising that it happens (or at least could happen) here, too.

Let’s be more specific. It’s uncontroversial, I presume, that acquiring some kinds of testimonial evidence can bring about this sort of epistemic change. So take Kelly’s Case 5 and revise it in the following way:

Suppose that, after coming to believe H on the basis of E, instead of encountering and comparing notes with you, I encounter and compare

262 Consider, for example, Jonathan Vogel’s bootstrapping objection raised against reliabilism and, Stewart Cohen’s bootstrapping objections raised against theories that allow for basic knowledge. See Vogel (2000) and (2008) and Cohen (2002) and (2005).
notes with a recognized expert in the relevant field. She is my epistemic superior. She hears my case for H and uncharacteristically makes a blunder by affirming that I have made a good inference from E to H. I leave my encounter with this expert affirmed in my believing H on E.

It seems sensible to say that while my initial belief in H was unreasonable, I leave my encounter with the expert reasonably believing H. This is best explained by appealing to the change in evidence, where the only change is the acquisition of testimonial evidence from the expert. While there are genuine differences in this revised Case 5 and Kelly’s Case 5, namely the shift from a peer to a superior, it still seems sensible that acquiring testimonial evidence from a peer can bring about the epistemic change from irrational belief to rational belief. Line (2) of the argument states otherwise. So line (2) of the argument is something that a proponent of EWV can safely reject.

One more comment is in order here. It’s a bit surprising that Kelly would find it implausible that two persons could experience epistemic boost through peer testimony, regardless of their epistemic starting points, since he is certainly open to two persons experiencing a downward epistemic turn, regardless of their epistemic starting point, given peer testimony. In other words, it’s strange that Kelly endorses epistemic beatdowns but rejects epistemic boosts through peer testimony. Indeed, Kelly is more than open to such epistemic beatdowns; he explicitly claims that this can happen on his own view:
Even if one responds to the original evidence in an impeccable manner and one’s peer does not, the fact that one’s peer responds as he does will typically make it rationally incumbent upon one to move at least some way in his direction.

The fact that a peer believes differently can make it rationally incumbent upon you to change what you currently believe, even if, had the peer responded to the evidence in a reasonable manner, he too would believe exactly as you believe.263

Well, if one can start with a rational belief and end up with an irrational belief due to an encounter with a peer (thereby getting the epistemic beatdown), it’s not crazy to think that one could start with an irrational belief and end up with a rational belief due to an encounter with a peer (thereby getting an epistemic boost). But, again, that’s just to deny line (2) of the argument. So this objection appears to fail.

There’s a move that’s open to Kelly here.264 He might revise his Case 5 in the hopes of constructing a tougher bootstrapping-style objection to EWV. Here’s how the case might go:

**The New Case 5.** You and I both accept The Equal Weight View as a matter of theory. Moreover, we scrupulously follow it as a matter of practice. At time t0, each of us has access to a substantial, fairly complicated body evidence. On the whole this evidence tells against

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263 See Kelly (forthcoming). Kelly uses his Case 6 (The Mathematician and The Conjecture) to make this point, which he claims is the “Moral” of his Case 6.

264 Thanks to Earl Conee for suggesting this move on Kelly’s behalf.
hypothesis H: given our evidence, the uniquely rational credence for us to have in H is .3. However, as it happens, both of us badly mistake the import of this evidence: you give credence .7 to H while I give it .9. At time t1, we meet and compare notes. While comparing notes, we both soberly acknowledge that our reading of the original evidence is probably poor, and that we wouldn’t be surprised if we were wildly mistaken about the probative force of the original evidence.

The key difference in this revision is that you and I have admitted that our readings of the original evidence are probably bad. We’re sensitive to the very real possibility, indeed, great likelihood, that we badly mishandled the evidence. Given this revision, Kelly might press, it seems very clear that we don’t arrive at a rational doxastic attitude by bootstrapping on our new peer testimonial evidence. But EWV seems to say that we do. So EWV is mistaken.

There are several things to say to this objection on behalf of the EWV proponent. The first is the obvious (given how often it’s already been stated): EWV has no such implication about which doxastic attitude is justified. All EWV says is that we are to treat both bits of peer testimonial evidence equally. That is, my peer testimony is no better or worse evidentially than yours. EWV says nothing about how that peer testimonial evidence interacts with the larger, already-existing body of evidence. So we can’t pin any absurd implication about justification on EWV on the basis of The New Case 5.
Second, it’s important to attend to the details of The New Case 5. In this case, it seems like I hear from you something like “Well, given our shared evidence, I believe $H$ to the tune of .7 credence. But know this: I’m probably making a mistake here! Seriously, I’m probably wrong about all of this.” On top of that, you hear me say something like “Me too! I mean, I’m on board with $H$ to the tune of .9 credence, but I’m probably wrong about all of this, too!” This is surely bizarre testimony, and a seemingly clear departure from the standard sort of peer testimony we would get. So what are we to make epistemically of this strange peer testimony?

Well, an EWV proponent can sensibly say that in The New Case 5 my peer testimony (considered in total) defeats itself, and so does yours (considered in total). Hence, what’s rational here is still determined entirely by the original shared evidence. Here’s what I have in mind.265

Ordinarily, when I report my .9 credence and you report your .7 credence, we both get the following evidence. We both get evidence that belief (as opposed to disbelief and suspension of judgment) is called for here given the original shared evidence $E$. That is, we both get confirmation that we have formed a justified belief (even if we have the wrong degree of belief).266 Moreover, we both get evidence that we have an unjustified credence for $H$ given the original shared $E$. So, I get evidence

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265 And, once again, note that while an EWV proponent can say what follows, they need not.
266 This makes both Case 5 and The New Case 5 different from Kelly’s Case 4. In Case 4, not only did we both get peer testimonial evidence that our credence levels for $H$ were unjustified given the original shared $E$, but we both also received peer testimonial evidence that we formed an unjustified doxastic attitude (understood in a coarse-grained way). That’s not so here in Case 5 or The New Case 5. We both get defeaters for our specific credences, but we both get confirmation of our belief (understood in that coarse-grained way).
that my .9 credence for H is unjustified and you get evidence that your .7 credence for H is unjustified.

In most cases, this is where things would end. But not here in The New Case 5. And that’s why we can sensibly say that our peer testimony defeats itself (when we consider the testimony in total). When we both sincerely say something like “I’m probably making a mistake about all of this!” we are providing testimony that, in effect, takes back what we’ve just testified.267 That is, our latter testimony defeats our former testimony. It’s little different than a fuel gauge that indicates you have 2/3 of a tank of fuel left all while flashing “Gauge Malfunction” in bright red lights. Without the “Gauge Malfunction” light flashing, you’d get good evidence that you have 2/3 of a tank of fuel remaining.268 But with the “Gauge Malfunction” light flashing, you get evidence that the fuel gauge is probably wrong269, and that defeats the initial report.

Given these considerations, an EWV proponent can (though need not) maintain that there is no risk of bootstrapping to rational credences from bad evidence in The New Case 5. Consequently, there’s no good objection to EWV from any of this. This move won’t help Kelly.

267 Note that this is sincerely said (and understood by each to be sincerely said). It’s possible (perhaps usual) to say “I’m probably wrong about this!” in a way that’s meant to communicate humility or openness to other perspectives, not genuine evaluation of one’s handling of the evidence.
268 I’m assuming normal conditions. (So set aside cases where, for example, I know my gauge has been stuck on 2/3 throughout the last full year of steady driving.)
269 Here’s why the fuel gauge is probably wrong. Suppose that there are 8 fuel levels indicated on the gauge. By hypothesis, the gauge is malfunctioning, meaning that it is not responsive to changes in the actual fuel level. So, the gauge has a 1/8 chance of being right at any time. Those are not good odds. The fuel gauge is probably wrong. (Compare: The hands on a clock stop. Consequently, there are exactly two times per day that it is right. Those are not good odds. The clock is probably wrong.)
But maybe another move will. Kelly can revise the case again to press the bootstrapping charge against EWV:

The Even Newer Case 5. You and I both accept The Equal Weight View as a matter of theory. Moreover, we scrupulously follow it as a matter of practice. Suppose we face a question about a date in British history, and suppose that H is our answer—in particular, our answer is "1812". Once again, on the whole, our evidence tells against this answer: given our evidence, the uniquely rational credence for us to have in H is .3. Now, you and I happen both to do poorly at such dates—we both strongly tend to pick some date when something famous happened, no matter what the historical question. In fact, we most often choose "1812." We both show our weakness in our poor British history quiz scores. But we are "in denial" about this weakness. We wishfully dismiss our earlier efforts as bad luck. We have an unjustified high opinion of our historical dating skills. I use that high opinion to believe at .9 credence level that our latest answer is correct, and I tell you so. You are just a bit less wishfully oblivious than am I, and you initially believe our mutual answer to degree .7, before I tell you about my slightly stronger confidence in it.

This version of the case differs from the others in important respects. In this case, our track records over matters pertaining to p are pretty terrible and, crucially, we

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270 Thanks to Earl Conee for presenting this version of the case to me.
justifiably believe that they are pretty terrible. But we unjustifiably refrain from
taking this to reflect at all on our historical dating skills. We unjustifiably think we’re
pretty skilled. None of this is explicitly so in the other cases. In those cases, even if
we are wildly mistaken about p this time, we have no reason for thinking that our
track records over matters pertaining to p are pretty terrible (even if they actually are).

Given these revisions found in The Even Newer Case 5, Kelly might press
that it seems abundantly clear that we don’t arrive at a rational doxastic attitude by
bootstrapping on our new peer testimonial evidence. But EWV seems to say that we
do. So EWV is mistaken. What can we say to this?

Once again, there are several things to note. The first is very familiar: EWV
does not have implications about what credence for H is justified in The Even Newer
Case 5. All EWV says is that we are to treat both of our peer testimonial evidence
equally. That is, my peer testimony is no better or worse evidentially than yours. As
already noted, EWV says nothing about how that peer testimonial evidence interacts
with the larger, already-existing body of evidence. So EWV isn’t saddled with any
absurd implications here.

But there’s more to say here. We have been defending all along the separate
view that in cases of peer encounter, the original evidence becomes (as Kelly puts it)
epistemically irrelevant and peer opinion is epistemically decisive in determining
what’s justified.271 But perhaps The Even Newer Case 5 shows that this is a mistake.

271 Here again we have a use of ‘epistemically decisive’. Recall that to say that X is epistemically
decisive is to say that X effectively decides the relevant epistemic facts. So, to say that peer opinion is
epistemically decisive in determining what’s justified, we are simply saying that peer opinion is what
Again, details matter. Note that in the case, we both justifiably believe that our track records regarding historical matters are pretty bad. This is relevant. Here’s how. When I hear from you that the reasonable response to the original evidence is .9 credence in “1812”, I get testimonial evidence from you that .9 credence is the justified response to the evidence. However, when we compare notes, I find out from you that you are nearly always wrong about such historical matters.\textsuperscript{272} You have a terrible track record. Consequently, I get a powerful defeater for your testimonial evidence. It’s as though you say to me “Hey, we should be nearly certain that “1812” is the correct answer here. That’s my take on things. Of course, I’m nearly always wrong about this stuff, but still….” That sort of testimony seems plainly self-defeating. Of course, things are precisely parallel from your vantage point. You get the same testimonial evidence and defeater from me.

Now, we have yet to attend to one detail of the case: we are both “in denial” about the significance of our terrible track records, and persist in believing (unjustifiably) that our historical dating skills are superb. Perhaps that makes a difference here. Perhaps our unjustifiably high optimism defeats the defeater acquired by admitting we are usually wrong about historical dates, and so lands us once again in the uncomfortable position of saying that we can bootstrap our way to a rational position in The Even Newer Case 5.

\textsuperscript{272} It’s important to remember that both parties compare notes to attain what Richard Feldman has called “full disclosure” in his (2006) p. 419. Presumably, very little relevant information remains concealed under full disclosure. That makes a difference (as will become clear below).
The high optimism we express does not defeat the defeater. Consider that the overall testimony I hear from you is something like this: “Hey, I’m nearly always wrong about this historical dating stuff, but I’m right this time! (And I’m actually pretty good at this historical dating thing, too!)” That is not successful testimony in favor of one’s answer. This certainly seems like defeated testimony.\textsuperscript{273} So, adding one’s (unjustifiably) high optimism about one’s historical dating skills to the overall testimony does not defeat the defeater. The testimony remains overall defeated. There is no bootstrapping here.

As we can see, The Even Newer Case 5 is little different from The New Case 5. In both cases, the testimonial evidence is defeated by further testimony. In The New Case 5, that defeat comes from an admission along the lines of “Track record aside, I’m probably wrong about things this time” whereas in The Even Newer Case 5, the defeat comes from an admission along the lines of “I’m nearly always wrong about this kind of stuff”. In both cases, there is no bootstrapping that is licensed because the peer testimony defeats itself.

Given all of this, an EWV proponent can offer the same reply to The Even Newer Case 5 that was made to The New Case 5: my peer testimony (considered in total) defeats itself, and so does yours (considered in total). Hence, what’s rational

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\textsuperscript{273} The defeat seems especially clear in isolation. Here’s what I mean. Consider: “Hey, I’m nearly always wrong about this historical dating stuff, but I’m right this time!” That seems like defeated testimony. Now consider: “Hey, I’m nearly always wrong about this historical dating stuff, but I’m pretty good at it!” That testimony is defeated, too. Conjoining the two (as we did in the main text) doesn’t seem to make a discernible epistemic difference. The overall testimony is still defeated by the admitted unreliability.
here is still determined entirely by the original shared evidence. Again, there is no
bootstrapping here.

In light of the response just detailed, Kelly may have another move to make here. If what makes for defeated peer testimony in The Even Newer Case 5 is the
(justified) admission of a terrible track record, then we can revise the case so as to
eliminate just that feature. So, the case proceeds as before, except that now our
terrible track records have gone unnoticed by both of us. We haven’t bothered to look
at our history test scores, we get no relevant feedback one way or the other from our
teachers, parents, friends, etc. We’re both still terrible at this, but we just haven’t been
confronted with this harsh reality yet. When the case goes this way, Kelly might
press, we lose the defeater for our peer testimony (since we are now in no position to
confess our terrible track records). And that, Kelly may continue, allows us to
bootstrap our way to reasonable opinions in an utterly objectionable way.

Revisions rarely occur in isolation. Taking away the detail that we have noted
our dismal track records has an effect on whether our high opinions of our historical
dating skills are unjustified. They were clearly unjustified prior to the revision. Now,
it’s just not clear what their status is. But maybe we can safely sidestep this issue.
Perhaps the high opinions don’t need to play any real epistemic role here anyway. For
consider: when I hear from you that .9 credence that “1812” is the correct answer is
the way to go given our evidence, and you hear from me that .7 credence given our
evidence is the way to go, we now no longer have a defeater for the peer testimony.
After all, neither of us now has any reason (by hypothesis) to think that the other is
usually wrong about dates in history. So it’s no longer clear what makes the peer testimony unacceptable, and, as a result, it becomes less clear why bootstrapping here is objectionable. A bootstrapping objection on the basis of this revised case is not clearly successful.

Given all of this, it’s not clear that line (2) of The Bootstrapping Argument Against EWV is true. And since we had already granted that line (1) of the argument is something that we should not accept, we have good reason to think that Kelly’s objection fails. There’s no good bootstrapping objection to be found here.

While this bootstrapping objection seems to fail, Kelly offers what he takes to be a much stronger objection to EWV on the basis of bootstrapping. Let’s consider that objection now.

5.2 The Fifth Objection: EWV Leads to Even More Implausibly Easy Bootstrapping

As just noted, Kelly thinks that EWV can be pinned with a much more objectionable kind of bootstrapping than the previous objection let on. To set up the objection, Kelly has us consider the following kind of case:

At time t0, one possesses a body of non-psychological evidence that bears on some question, but one is completely ignorant of what

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274 Kelly has this to say about what *psychological* and *non-psychological evidence* amounts to: “On The Equal Weight View, the evidence which determines what it is reasonable for us to believe in cases of peer disagreement consists in facts about the distribution of opinion among the peers. Let us call such evidence *psychological evidence*. Let us call the original evidence on which the peers base their opinions *non-psychological evidence*.” In a footnote, Kelly offers different terminology for the same distinction: *doxastic* and *non-doxastic evidence*. See Kelly (forthcoming).
anyone else thinks about that question, nor has one yet formed an opinion about the issue oneself.

At time t1, one first forms an opinion about the hypothesis on the basis of this non-psychological evidence; let us suppose that one gives credence .7 to the hypothesis on the basis of the evidence.

At time t1, then, one’s total evidence consists of one’s original body of non-psychological evidence E, plus a single piece of psychological evidence, viz. the fact that one believes as one does.275

Kelly then argues that EWV badly mishandles this sort of case:

At present, however, I want to inquire about what a proponent of The Equal Weight View should say about what one is rationally required to believe back at time t1, when one knows one’s own opinion about the hypothesis but no one else’s. Does the psychological evidence swamp the non-psychological evidence even then? It would seem that the only principled answer for the proponent of The Equal Weight View to give to this question is ‘Yes’.

It seems as though the only principled, not ad hoc stand for the proponent of The Equal Weight View to take is to hold that the psychological evidence swamps the non-psychological evidence even

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275 See Kelly (forthcoming).
when the psychological evidence is exhausted by what you yourself believe.\textsuperscript{276}

Of course, if Kelly is correct here, this means that EWV entails that the distinction between believing and believing rationally collapses in cases in which one is aware of what one believes but unaware of what others believe. But that is absurd. Hence, The Equal Weight View is false.\textsuperscript{277}

Picking up on this last charge, we can capture this objection in the following argument:

\textbf{The Single Person Bootstrapping Argument Against EWV}

1. If EWV is true, then the distinction between believing and believing rationally collapses in cases in which one is aware of what one believes but unaware of what others believe.

2. But it’s not the case that the distinction between believing and believing rationally collapses in cases in which one is aware of what one believes but unaware of what others believe.

3. Therefore, EWV is not true.

What is a proponent of EWV to make of this valid argument?

\textsuperscript{276} See Kelly (forthcoming).
\textsuperscript{277} See Kelly (forthcoming).
Line (2) will not be challenged. It seems clearly true. It cannot be the case that just _however_ one responds to the original evidence in the case described above is rational. And that fact doesn’t change simply because one takes note that that is how one has responded and remains unaware of how others have responded to the original evidence. So, if EWV really does have this implication, then EWV is in serious trouble. Fortunately for the EWV proponent, they can flatly deny that their view has this implication, and for (what should be by now) entirely familiar reasons. EWV simply asserts that in cases of peer encounter, both peer opinions carry the same evidential weight, i.e., have the same evidential value. It makes no claims about how those peer opinions interact (if at all) with the original evidence so as to yield a result about justification.

But suppose an EWV proponent wants to say the sorts of things said in handling the other cases. That is, suppose an EWV proponent wants to say that in cases of peer disagreement, peer testimony is (under standard conditions) decisive in determining what’s justified.²⁷⁸ Now, Kelly thinks that it would be unprincipled and _ad hoc_ for such a proponent of EWV to deny that the psychological evidence swamps the non-psychological evidence in this kind of case since it presumably does in cases of peer disagreement. Is there trouble lurking here for an EWV proponent that wants to go this route?

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²⁷⁸ I say “under standard conditions” to set aside cases like The New Case 5 and The Even Newer Case 5 where the peer testimony is self-defeating. So, we’re to understand the claim here in this way: In cases of peer disagreement, peer testimony (when not self-defeating) effectively decides the justification facts. Note again that this does not entail a return to The Split the Difference Principle.
As a first pass, an EWV proponent might wonder why it would be unprincipled and *ad hoc* to make that move. After all, the (additional) move an EWV proponent is making here is a move for cases where there is a peer encounter and testimony.\(^{279}\) That’s it. Consequently, insofar as the kind of case Kelly offers here to motivate this objection is clearly not a case where there is any peer encounter or peer testimony, indeed, there’s no encounter or testimony of any kind, then it’s not a case where this move takes any stand. It doesn’t seem unprincipled and *ad hoc* to deny that your view has certain implications in cases where it’s not meant to apply.

But Kelly could press the point in the following way. If an EWV proponent grants that one’s own opinion has some evidential weight in cases where there is a peer encounter and testimony, then why would it *lose* (or simply fail to have) that evidential weight merely because there is no peer around to encounter? Presumably it wouldn’t, Kelly might continue. Surely if one’s opinion has some evidential weight in the midst of a peer encounter, it still has the evidential weight *outside* of peer encounters. Otherwise, there’d have to be something special about such encounters that generates evidential weight for your opinion. That’s strange. And so, in the kind of case under consideration here, one’s opinion continues to carry evidential weight and so (given that such peer testimony is epistemically decisive, i.e., effectively decides the justification facts) that opinion becomes decisive for what credence level is rationally required in the absence of a peer.

\(^{279}\) It would be tempting to say that the move here is a move for cases of peer disagreement. But that wouldn’t be quite right. Presumably, an EWV proponent who would want to make this move would also want to say that in cases of peer *agreement*, the peer testimony is epistemically decisive (i.e., effectively decides the justification facts), too. So, peer encounter is meant to cover both peer disagreement and agreement.
An EWV proponent could grant that one’s own opinion continues to carry some evidential weight even in the absence of a peer without making the additional claim that that opinion becomes *all by itself decisive* for what credence level is rationally required in the absence of a peer. Again, there’s a fair amount of logical space here to fill. We’d need to hear why we have to fill that space in just the way Kelly supposes beyond gestures at what’s unprincipled and *ad hoc*. We especially need to hear why things must be the way Kelly says they are since the view under consideration here simply states that in (standard) cases of peer encounter, peer opinion is epistemically decisive. And, as already indicated, we don’t have here a case of peer encounter. There’s no encounter of any kind.

Let’s see if we can say a bit more by way of defense of this additional view that an EWV proponent might (but need not) wish to advance. Let’s seemingly change the subject for the moment. Consider cases of forgotten evidence. Here’s an example to think about:

Last year, Sally read a story about the health benefits of broccoli in the “Science” section of the *New York Times*. She then justifiably formed a belief in broccoli’s beneficial effects. She still retains this belief but no longer recalls her original evidential source (and has never encountered either corroborating or undermining sources).

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280 For some relevant literature, see Sosa (1999); Harman (1986); Senor (1993) and (2008); Audi (1995); Goldman (2001); Conee and Feldman (2001).
Nonetheless, her broccoli belief is still justified, and, if true, qualifies as a case of knowledge.\textsuperscript{281} This sort of example has been regarded as trouble for evidentialist theories that make epistemic justification turn entirely upon evidence. Since Sally forgot (in an irretrievable way) all of her original evidence for her belief that broccoli is healthful, it would appear that such evidentialist views must counterintuitively hold that Sally’s memory belief about broccoli is unjustified.

Evidentialists have had something to say about cases of forgotten evidence.\textsuperscript{282} For example, they have said that evidentialist views can appeal to conscious properties of the memory to explain the justification of the memory belief. So, the clarity, vivacity, and power of the memorial seeming can account for the justification. Evidentialists also note that they can also point to Sally’s justified beliefs about the general reliability and accuracy of her memory to account for why her belief is justified. Justified beliefs about memory track records make a justificatory difference here.\textsuperscript{283}

Now take both of those replies. The replies seem to be that (1) the conscious properties of memorial seemings and (2) justified beliefs about memory track records are epistemically decisive (i.e., effectively decide the justification facts) in cases of forgotten evidence.\textsuperscript{284} Right now, I’m not concerned with how plausible those replies

\textsuperscript{281} The example is from Goldman (2001) pp. 214-215.

\textsuperscript{282} See, for example, Conee and Feldman (2001) pp. 245-248

\textsuperscript{283} Conee and Feldman offer both of these replies on behalf of evidentialist views in their (2001).

\textsuperscript{284} Of course, these replies can be offered in tandem. They’re consistent with each other. Also, I’m assuming that they are epistemically decisive only when under standard conditions (where, for example, there are no undefeated defeaters).
are, nor am I concerned here with the overall merits of evidentialist views of justification. But what I am concerned with here is this: Must an evidentialist who takes either of these replies to cases of forgotten evidence face a similar problem to the one Kelly raises here? That is, must an evidentialist who endorses (1) and/or (2) when facing cases of forgotten evidence also hold that those considerations are all by themselves epistemically decisive in cases where the evidence is subsequently recalled? I wouldn’t think so. Quite simply, there’s been a substantial evidential change. But then, similarly, why must an EWV proponent who takes the (additional) view that peer testimony is decisive in cases of peer encounter also hold that it is all by itself decisive in cases where there is total isolation? Hasn’t there been a substantial evidential change there as well once we subtract the fact of peer encounter and make it a case of isolation? It seems so.

Here’s another reply along these lines. Consider the epistemology of testimony.\textsuperscript{285} Suppose one endorses the view that S1 can get defeasible though justifying reason for thinking that some proposition is true on the basis of apparently sincere, credible testimony from S2. This view seems plausible enough. But if this view allows that S1’s acquiring testimony that p from S2 can yield justifying reason for S1 to believe p, isn’t it unprincipled and \textit{ad hoc} for a proponent of this view to deny that S1’s \textit{own} testimony that p can yield justifying reason for S1 to believe p? It certainly seems not.

\textsuperscript{285} For more on the epistemology of testimony (and an extensive corresponding bibliography) see Adler (2008).
Moreover, if S2’s apparently sincere credible testimony that p can yield justification for S1’s belief that p, isn’t it unprincipled and ad hoc for a proponent of this view to deny that S2’s own testimony that p can yield justifying reason for S2 to believe p? Again, it seems not.

The point here is that if there’s nothing unprincipled and ad hoc about these stances in the epistemology of testimony, then it’s not clear why one should follow Kelly and claim that it would be unprincipled and ad hoc for one to think that peer testimony is epistemically decisive in cases where there is a peer encounter yet deny that it’s decisive in cases of isolation. In short, it’s not unprincipled and ad hoc in the one case, so it’s not here either.

Kelly might reply that the crucial difference here is that in the routine epistemology of testimony cases, the testimonial evidence is defeasible whereas in the peer testimony cases the testimonial evidence is decisive (and so not defeasible). After all, that’s Kelly’s complaint here: the psychological (peer testimonial) evidence is decisive (utterly swamping). And that, he thinks, is a clear mistake.

But this objection misunderstands what it means to be decisive. To say that the peer testimonial evidence in cases of peer encounter is decisive is not to say that it is indefeasible. Peer testimonial evidence is defeasible. This much was granted in discussing The New Case 5 above where the peer’s testimony is defeated by the peer’s own concession that she almost surely made a mistake. It might be that peer testimonial evidence is far more resistant to defeat than other types of evidence,286

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286 This point is taken up in the next chapter.
but it is certainly not in principle indefeasible.\textsuperscript{287} So this kind of reply on Kelly’s behalf won’t stand.

Here’s another kind of reply altogether to Kelly’s original charge of illicit bootstrapping. A proponent of EWV might point out that it’s not just EWV that grants some evidential weight to one’s own opinion in cases of peer encounter.\textsuperscript{288} Kelly’s own considered view, The Total Evidence View, has this feature as well.\textsuperscript{289}

Presumably, then, that evidential weight is not lost on Kelly’s view when one has no peer present. And so Kelly has to face the potential objection that once one reflects on the matter and realizes that one thinks as one does, that fact becomes epistemically relevant, carries evidential weight, changes the state of the evidence, and so changes which credence level is justified from what it was prior to that introspective reflection. And presumably that justified credence level will change depending on what one’s credence level happens to be. I suspect Kelly will have some things to say to this, whether he wants to avoid that consequence or claim that it’s not a bad

\textsuperscript{287} Keep in mind that the normal routes for defeat are by hypothesis ruled out for peer testimony. The very conception of \textit{epistemic peers} rules out reason to think that the peer is suffering from some epistemic disadvantage. I tackle this at length in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{288} It’s worth noting that this is on the assumption that EWV does assign evidential weight to peer opinion. Again, The Absolutely No Weight View (where peer opinion has no evidential weight) is consistent with EWV.

\textsuperscript{289} Here’s Kelly’s presentation of The Total Evidence View: “Rather, what it is reasonable to believe depends on both the original, first-order evidence as well as on the higher-order evidence that is afforded by the fact that one’s peers believe as they do. For this reason, it seems appropriate to call the view on offer \textit{The Total Evidence View}.” See Kelly (forthcoming). Now, Kelly’s Total Evidence View explicitly retains the position that in cases of peer disagreement one’s total evidence still includes the fact that one has such-and-such an opinion on the matter. Consider: In discussing a case, he claims that, after the peers compare notes, “our new total evidence” includes “the fact that I am quite confident that H is false”. I take it that including one’s own opinion in the total evidence, thereby giving one’s own opinion evidential status, just entails (or is synonymous with the view) that one’s own opinion has evidential weight.
consequence after all. It’s not clear why a proponent of EWV couldn’t borrow (at least the substance of) Kelly’s response, whatever it might be.

Kelly offers another reason for thinking that line (1) of the argument is true. He notes “an interesting general feature of The Equal Weight View and how it makes for trouble in the present case.” Kelly notes the distinction between having a “general competence for assessing relevant evidence and arguments” and “actual performance”. There’s no doubt that this is a genuine distinction. For example, I may have a strong competency with respect to mathematical calculations and still make a mistake every now and then. It’s this distinction that Kelly thinks EWV botches. This is the “interesting general feature” Kelly referred to:

Notice that it is characteristic of The Equal Weight View to credit the views of others in proportion to their general competence while abstracting away from facts about actual performance. What it is reasonable to believe in cases of peer disagreement is in effect determined by taking the average of peer opinion; crucially, in this calculation, the opinions that have been arrived at via the commission of performance errors will count for just as much as those opinions that are appropriate responses to the shared evidence. Bare truths about who has in fact manifested their underlying competence and who has not make no difference in cases of peer disagreement.

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290 See Kelly (forthcoming).
291 See Kelly (forthcoming).
292 See Kelly (forthcoming).
Kelly contends that this general feature of EWV gives us reason to think that line (1) of the argument is true:

However, once facts about general competence are privileged in this way in multi-person cases, it seems arbitrary and unmotivated to continue to maintain that actual performance makes a significant difference in single person cases (i.e., cases in which a single individual arrives at an opinion on the basis of the non-psychological evidence that he possesses). Rather, on the suggested picture, if I am generally competent in the way that I respond to evidence (and I know that I am), then this should be enough to guarantee that I am reasonable in responding to my evidence in whatever way I do.\textsuperscript{293}

But, Kelly continues, known general competence does not guarantee reasonable responses. So EWV is wrong for seemingly suggesting otherwise.

There’s a very plausible reply to this objection. I think that appealing to some facts in the epistemology of testimony may help the proponent of EWV here. Considering the following pair of cases may help make the point:

\textbf{Testimony 1.} Bob is at his physician’s office. Bob’s physician has an excellent track record at diagnosing ailments, is quite competent medically, and Bob knows this (or at least has no reason to think otherwise). Bob’s physician runs some tests, considers the full range of symptoms, displays impeccable medical reasoning, and pronounces to

\textsuperscript{293} See Kelly (forthcoming).
Bob that Bob has ailment X. And she is right about this. Bob does have ailment X. Bob believes that he has ailment X on the basis of his physician’s testimony.

**Testimony 2.** Bob is at his physician’s office. Bob’s physician has an excellent track record at diagnosing ailments, is quite competent medically, and Bob knows this (or at least has no reason to think otherwise). Bob’s physician runs some tests, considers the full range of symptoms, but makes some mistakes in medical reasoning along the way. She pronounces to Bob that Bob has ailment X. And she is right about this. Bob does have ailment X. Bob believes that he has ailment X on the basis of his physician’s testimony.

In both of these two cases, Bob’s physician has strong medical competency and Bob knows it (or has no reason to doubt it). But Bob’s physician’s actual performance differs in these cases. Bob’s physician manifested that competence in the first case but not in the second case (in virtue of making mistakes in reasoning along the way).

Now, the relevant issue for us here is the epistemic status of Bob’s belief that he has ailment X on the basis of his physician’s testimony. It seems to me that Bob is *equally* justified in both cases in thinking that he has ailment X on the basis of his physician’s testimony.\(^{294}\) This is because the facts that are relevant to justification are the same in both cases: he has every reason to believe that he has received sincere

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\(^{294}\) This isn’t to say that Bob is at all justified. It’s just that there’s no difference in justification between the two cases. (As a matter of fact, though, it seems perfectly reasonable to say that Bob is justified in these cases.)
testimony from a source he has every reason to trust on this particular matter. And even though his physician made a mistake in the latter case, Bob has no reason to think she did. Crucially, he has no more reason to think she made a mistake in the latter case as he does in the former case. From Bob’s standpoint, things are identical in both cases. Consequently, so is the justification of Bob’s belief.295

The reason for considering these two cases is that Kelly’s commentary on the general features of EWV seem to apply straightaway here. In our commentary on these two cases, we glossed over the actual performance of Bob’s physician and privileged facts about Bob’s physician’s general competence. And that seemed to be the correct way of handling these two cases. Now, applying Kelly’s commentary on EWV here, Kelly would seem to think that taking this stance on these two cases commits us to taking the view that actual performance doesn’t make a significant epistemic difference in single person cases. But there’s no reason at all to suppose that we are thereby committed to such a position in single person cases. Take, for example, Bob’s physician in the latter case, Testimony 2. It seems quite plausible to say that Bob’s physician’s belief is not justified in light of the mistakes in reasoning she made along the way. Actual performance makes an epistemic difference here, and that’s so even though we glossed over it entirely when it came to handling Testimony 2. There’s nothing arbitrary or unmotivated about any of this. Rather, this all seems to

295 To say that there is no difference in justification between the two cases is not to say that there are no epistemic differences in Bob’s belief between the cases. There are some epistemic differences here. For example, it’s reasonable to think that in Testimony 1, Bob knows he has ailment X while in Testimony 2 he does not know that. Testimony 2 may plausibly be regarded as a Gettier case. But this epistemic difference is not relevant to the point at hand: from the standpoint of justification, Bob is just as much justified in thinking he has ailment X in Testimony 2 as he is in Testimony 1.
be the correct way to think about things. Consequently, it’s not at all clear why a proponent of EWV couldn’t take the same line. In cases of peer encounter, general competencies make the epistemic difference, but in single person cases (i.e., isolation cases), actual performance makes the epistemic difference.\textsuperscript{296} Kelly’s defense of line (1) fails.

Given all of these considerations, it seems that an EWV proponent could sensibly resist line (1) of the argument. EWV all by itself certainly doesn’t license objectionable bootstrapping in cases of isolation. And an EWV proponent who makes the additional claim that peer testimony is epistemically decisive (i.e., effectively decides the justification facts) in cases of peer encounters doesn’t seem stuck with saying that objectionable bootstrapping is implied in cases of isolation, either.

This chapter, then, defended EWV from two more substantive objections from Kelly. These objections raised bootstrapping worries for EWV. The next chapter continues the defense of EWV by considering two additional objections from Kelly.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{296} Indeed, this result shouldn’t be too surprising since the epistemology of peer encounters just seems to be a species of the epistemology of testimony in general.}